



Lori Blondeau &
Michelle Sound
Smokes, Sings Loud

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grunt gallery

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Lori Blondeau and Michelle Sound

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Whess Harman
Curator's Introduction

As one might expect, choosing a focus from grunt's archives which has collected thirty-five plus years of performance video, exhibition documentation, and all of its associated ephemera was a moving target with far too many places to start. We were clear on one thing, though: what we *didn't* want to do was haul out decades' worth of material that would amount to a series of dry-as-toast wall didactics explaining the history of the organization.

Our conversation began to focus on the unsung and unseen hands that are needed to create, present, and preserve work. Holding the camera for the documentation of Lori Blondeau's *Bleached* (1999) is Mike MacDonald; the photographs were shot by Merle Addison. When the camera turned back towards the crowd we found ourselves captivated by all of the familiar faces and voices that appeared not only on stage, but in the audience as well; many of whom we still have the privilege to work with to this day. The work itself is cared for by our archives manager, Dan Pon, and *Bleached* has recently been captioned by Jamie Loh. These names, as much as the artists, have proliferated extensively throughout our archives and reveal a much more nebulous community

than what we see on the surface of an exhibition itself. These unsung and unseen hands speak to the many figures whose work so often goes under-acknowledged, but whose work is integral to maintaining and holding our communities' spirits together. The NDN Auntie is one such figure.

She's there in artists like Lori Blondeau, Tania Willard, Skeena Reece, and Rebecca Belmore, she's there in Florene Belmore, who's always supporting the work somewhere; she's Aiyana Maracle, whose frank and unflinching explorations of trans identity has beckoned an entire generation of young Indigenous trans women. We love Auntie because Auntie isn't afraid to ask questions or throw down. Auntie goes all out, vamped up, and is never shy about getting loud. Auntie is a gay icon. Sometimes Auntie *is* gay; but what Auntie is really *about*, regardless of gender or sexuality, is taking care of the community.

To link our past and present together, Michelle Sound was the natural choice. Michelle, in her roles at various universities, has become the NDN Auntie to a whole new generation of Indigenous artists; helping us navigate colonial institutions, and the fraught and anxious early years of our careers. For any Indigenous folks

who grew up in big families, you'll know that us kids tend to move in packs. Auntie points us in the right direction and Michelle does just that; making us a family away from home. And somehow, being the magnificent woman that she is, she continues her own art practice, creating work that holds up a generation of NDN Aunties before her, honouring them in her series, *Deadly Aunties* (2021).

Auntie is the archetype my generation aspires to be; upholding the roles and the values of those who took care of us. The NDN Auntie may appear to be a singular community figure, but she transcends that. Auntie connects worlds together and sews them up tight, making sure that we can wear these skins for as long as we need them. It's what the best in our communities strive to do.



Collectively as the curators, we would like to thank Lori and Michelle for dreaming these works into the world and to the original curator, Lynn Hill, for bringing *Bleached* to LIVE at the End of the Century; to Mike whose work lives on and is appreciated in our archives; to Merle for all of his persistent work behind the scenes over the years; and to our grunt team,

Kay, Meagan, Katrina, Sebnem, Keimi, Jessica and Jamie for helping pull this show together. Looking at grunt's archives, one thing that is absolutely clear is that what matters the most is the love that's been put into it, and the desire to preserve what's held us together.







and kinanâskomitinâwâw
to all
the uncles
that try
and the
aunties
that do

though, let's
be clear that
trying is
not the
same as
doing

—Dallas Hunt, “kinanâskomitin”¹

1 Dallas Hunt, “kinanâskomitin,” *Malahat Review*, Winter 2016, <http://www.malahatreview.ca/excerpts/197files/hunt.pdf>.

Samantha Nock

Art Aunties

I could spend a lot of time trying to explain to you the ways in which nêhiyaw âpihtaw'kosân kinship ties are defined both linguistically and culturally, but honestly I just want to tell you about my Aunty Rita.

Rita, my mom's older-younger sister, is the affectionate energizer bunny to my mom's reserved sternness. Together, they form a whole berry bush. Spending the night at Aunty Rita's meant eating snacks that I didn't get at home and watching movies late into the night.

"Sammy baby girl," she calls me, and I always push back with: "Aunty, I'm not a baby girl anymore." Her reply is always the same; "Yah, but to me, you'll always be my Sammy baby girl."

When I think of what an "Aunty" is, I think of Rita and her raspy laugh. I think of the picture of her and my mom as teenagers in my kokum's kitchen: my mom's curly hair frames her laughing face, and Rita, with the perfect '70s feathered bob, smiles at the camera with the same amused look in her eye that she still has today.

So, no. I'm not going to explain kinship terms to you because our kinship is lived.

To have an NDN Aunty is to understand what laughter is; it's to understand tough love followed by a big hug; it's to understand trauma; it's to understand the power of a leather fringe jacket and hoop earrings; it's to understand love spilling out onto the sidewalk.

Aunty

No matter how young or old, sober, half-cut or gone

she'd fluff the pillows, spread and tuck her homemade quilts under my chin [...]

—Gregory Scofield, "Aunty"²

I first encountered Lori Blondeau's work in 2018 when I was asked by Salia Joseph,³ a true Sḵw̓xwú7mesh powerhouse and language leader, to be part of an event that she was organizing with the Western Front and Recollective: Vancouver Independent Archives Week. Salia's event, *Past is Prologue: 20 Years of COSMOSQUAW, A Reply in Three Parts*, was a response to and a conversation about Blondeau's iconic *COSMOSQUAW* (1998) performance that she had

2 Gregory Scofield, "Aunty," in *The Broadview Introduction to Literature: Poetry – Second Edition*, ed. Lisa Chalykoff, Neta Gordon, Paul Lumsden (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1999), 421–422, lines 1–8.

3 In true NDN Aunty energy, I asked Salia how she'd like to be described in this essay and she said: "Stunning, hilarious." Salia is truly stunning and hilarious.

presented at Western Front, twenty years earlier. In her response to the performance, Joseph explains the power of Blondeau's work perfectly: "... when I watch *COSMOSQUAW* I see myself, and I know that it was created with me in mind; laden with small gifts for Indigenous people, for Indigenous women, to see themselves. It gives me the room to see whole parts of myself, imperfect, humorous, big cheeked, and all."⁴

Blondeau's ability to create a reflective mirror through her work is carried forward in *Bleached* (1999). *Bleached* asks us to uncover some of our deepest hurts: colourism, internalized racism, lived trauma, but it also shows us where we find moments of connection and laughter, even in these pains, just like an NDN Aunty does. In her performance, Blondeau tells us a story about how her grandmother used to get her aunts to search her head for nits, knowing full well that she didn't have any. It was, as she explains, "...a way for her to be intimate with her children."⁵ This story brought me right back to being a little kid when I was constantly being searched for lice. It felt like almost daily that the elementary school I went to would accuse me (and the other Native kids) of having lice. If I ever scratched

my head in front of my kokum, she'd say: "Maah, come sit down in front of grandma. I'll check yous for lice." She'd put on her glasses with the thickest lenses, get a Rat Tail comb, and go to town, carefully parting and searching each inch of my scalp. I hated and loved getting my head searched. On the one hand, I felt dirty, like there was something wrong with me, but on the other hand, it felt nice to have so much touch and attention.

Lori Blondeau tells us that her grandmother explained to her the ceremony of nit picking as a way that the girls were welcomed home from Residential School. Even when there were no nits to pick, the process of checking their heads was a way to invite them back, and to experience a physical intimacy that they were robbed of for months while they were gone.

It is after this moment that Blondeau tells us that picking nits "...has nothing to do with hygiene."⁶ The complexity between hygiene and our perceptions of ourselves as Indigenous peoples is the point of tension in *Bleached*, and just as an Aunty does, Blondeau shows us that sometimes seeing yourself is to be held in complexity.

- 4 Salia Joseph, "Salia Joseph:" in *Past is Prologue: 20 Years of COSMOSQUAW, A Reply in Three Parts*, (Vancouver: Vancouver Independent Archives Week, November 2019), 2–3. https://archivesweek.ca/content/about/samanthanock-saliajoseph_wf_response2018.pdf.
- 5 Lori Blondeau. *Bleached* (grunt gallery, October 19, 1999). <https://vimeo.com/401470088>.
- 6 Lori Blondeau. *Bleached* (grunt gallery, October 19, 1999). <https://vimeo.com/401470088>.

At the beginning of her performance, Blondeau opens with the line: “I come from a long line of women who use bleach.”⁷ Immediately, I think of my mom washing the floor with bleach every night. The smell of bleach became a comfort that I associated with my childhood. It’s also a smell that leaves me nauseated. Blondeau shares with us how bleach became a tool and symbol of internalized racism and holds a mirror up to the audience to have a conversation about colourism and internalized racism in our communities. Even here, in this story that holds so much complexity, Blondeau reminds us that it has never been about hygiene, as the violence of white supremacy knows no bounds. Blondeau also reminds us that there are shared connections even in struggle, and that shared experiences, no matter how painful, have the power to bring us together. NDN Aunties tell it like it is, spare no emotion, and teach us that sometimes, we need to explore the hardest parts to find the softest places.

Lori, dancing with Patsy is a traditional coming of age ceremony that moniyawak don’t understand. you remind me of my mom and aunties, black leather jackets with the fringe (of course) with big teased hair, red lips, and

gold hoops getting ready to go out;
go to the bar
go to Bingo
go be young women in their late twenties,
carrying the burden of being young of being a woman
of being otipemisiwak from sakitawak in their pockets.

—Samantha Nock, “Vicks”⁸

There’s a photo of Michelle Sound and I from early on when we had first met each other. The picture is all teeth, big cheeks, and glasses. I remember looking back at the photo after it was taken and feeling such a sense of home in Michelle who looks like so many of my family members. This feeling of warmth and familiarity is the same feeling that I get looking at Sound’s drums. Her works stretch our understanding of ceremony, drums, and belonging. To look at these drums is to see your mom, yourself, your sibling, your aunty, your kin. Jas M. Morgan, a Cree-Métis-Saulteaux writer, artist, and professor, explains it best in their essay on Sound’s exhibition *okāwīsimāk nawac kwayask itōtamwak/ Aunties do it better* held at daphne, an Indigenous artist-run centre in Montréal: “I see aunties throwing their heads back and creating sonic

7 Lori Blondeau. *Bleached* (grunt gallery, October 19, 1999). <https://vimeo.com/401470088>.
8 Samantha Nock, “Vicks,” in *Past is Prologue: 20 Years of COSMOSQUAW, A Reply in Three Parts*, (Vancouver: Vancouver Independent Archives Week, November 2019), 8, lines 17-27. https://archivesweek.ca/content/about/samanthanock-saliajoseph_wf_response2018.pdf.

sovereignties with their laughs that fill up spaces and the crevices of their nieces, nephews, and niblets' hearts. I see aunties driving trucks down dirt roads, aunties in shades, aunties who love metal, and aunties who carry the weight of their communities wherever they are in the world."⁹

To be an NDN Aunty does not mean existing within the binary of aunty and uncle; in fact, NDN Aunty breaks the binaries of coloniality. Sound's neon pink fur, leather fringe, animal print, and studded denim drums remind us of any NDN who embodies an NDN Aunty spirit and that NDN Aunty is sacred, campy, and luxurious.

Visually, I am drawn to the largest drum in the exhibition which is a large drum covered in black fur, surrounded by more colourful drums in its orbit. To me, this centre drum, in all of its loudness, is a reminder that NDN Aunties still deserve to be held in complexity and wholeness. Like Lori Blondeau has taught us, sometimes seeing yourself reflected back to you is to see the hurt. It's a reminder that we are still an ever-healing people; it's to be reminded that we are, in fact, people, and that even our pain we can hold in our own sort of luxury and beauty.

As Jas M. Morgan states; "Together, the drums are a force to be honored and revered. The drums tower over you. The drums are beautiful but unplayable, much like the tough NDN women who inspired Sound to make them."¹⁰

like I've said before
even Métis women
get the blues, sometimes.

—Rita Bouvier, "even Métis women get the blues"¹¹

Together, Lori Blondeau's *Bleached* and Michelle Sound's *Deadly Aunties* (2021) create a whole berry bush, just like Aunty Rita and my mom. Both of these artists ask us to look in the mirror, but they also challenge us to hold ourselves and our kin through space and time. Sound and Blondeau are NDN Art Aunties, who give us a place to lay our heads in their worlds. Carving out space, holding up their communities, and continuing to unapologetically refuse, be loud, and be gentle in their work creates homes for all Indigenous people. Like Salia Joseph said in her reflection on *COSMOSQUAW*: "Anything that helps Native people walk through the world a little safer, perhaps a little more seen, is ultimately welcome."¹²

- 9 Jas M. Morgan, "Michelle Sound – Okāwīsimāk Nawac Kwayask Itōtamwakł Aunties Do It Better," daphne, March 8, 2022, <https://daphne.art/Michelle-Sound>.
- 10 Jas M. Morgan, "Michelle Sound – Okāwīsimāk Nawac Kwayask Itōtamwakł Aunties Do It Better," daphne, March 8, 2022, <https://daphne.art/Michelle-Sound>.
- 11 Rita Bouvier, "even Métis women get the blues," in *papīyāhtak*, (Saskatoon: Thistledown Press, October 25, 2006).
- 12 Salia Joseph, "Salia Joseph:" in *Past is Prologue: 20 Years of COSMOSQUAW, A Reply in Three Parts*, (Vancouver: Vancouver Independent Archives Week, November 2019), 2-3. https://archivesweek.ca/content/about/samanthanock-saliajoseph_wf_response2018.pdf.

NDN Aunties rule my world; they are my governance: NDN Aunty at the party telling me to get home safe; NDN Aunty on the bus asking me where I'm from; NDN Aunty in line at No Frills with a smile that reminds me of northern roads; NDN Aunty making art calling me home; NDN Aunty writing us into being with their poetry; NDN Aunty on the phone calling me "Sammy Baby Girl." Blondeau and Sound's works invoke in us a call to embrace and embody being an NDN Aunty. As I transition into a new stage of life, their work reminds me that it's my turn to be Aunty. To be Aunty in uncertain times is to carve out the space for the next generation to dream their futures and to fiercely protect that space. To be Aunty in these times is to have so much unconditional hope for the future because now you are in charge of loving the next generation just as fiercely as our Aunties loved us.



Michelle Sound is a Cree and Métis artist, educator and mother. She is a member of Wapsewsiipi Swan River First Nation in Northern Alberta. Her mother is Cree from Kinuso, Alberta, Treaty 8 territory and her father's family is Métis from the Buffalo Lake Métis settlement in central Alberta. She was born and raised on the unceded and ancestral home territories of the x^wməθk^wəy^{əm} (Musqueam), Skw^xwú7mesh (Squamish) and səlilwətał/ selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Simon Fraser University, School for the Contemporary Arts, and a Master of Applied Arts from Emily Carr University Art + Design. Michelle is currently an Indigenous Advisor at Douglas College and has taught workshops as a guest artist at the Richmond Art Gallery and the Contemporary Art Gallery.

She has exhibited her artwork in *Moving Throughlines* (Seymour Art Gallery) and *Winter Pandemic* (SoLA Contemporary Los Angeles). Public art pieces include a utility box art wrap for the City of Vancouver and a painted mural exhibition in Ottawa (2018) *nākateyimisowin|Taking Care of Oneself*, curated by Joi Arcand. Michelle was a 2021 Salt Spring National Art Award Finalist and has upcoming exhibitions at the Art Gallery of St. Albert, Neutral Ground ARC (Regina) and daphne art centre (Montréal).

Lori Blondeau is Cree/Saulteaux/Métis from Saskatchewan, Canada. Since the 1990s, Blondeau's artistic practice in the fields of performance, photography and installation, along with her curatorial work and activities as co-founder and Executive Director of the Indigenous art collective TRIBE, has proved decisive to the ever-increasing centrality of Indigenous art and knowledge production in Canada. With her performances, which include *Are You My Mother?* (2000), *Sisters* (2002) and *States of Grace* (2007), and photographic work, including *COSMOSQUAW* (1996), *Lonely Surfer Squaw* (1997) and *Asinîy Iskwew* (2016), Blondeau's practice both as a solo artist and in collaboration with fellow visual artists demonstrates a clarity of focus which is remarkable for its precision, humour and strength. Her photographic and installation work has been exhibited in group and solo exhibitions. Her performance pieces have been showcased at Nuit Blanche (Saskatoon and Winnipeg), VIVO (Vancouver), the Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto) and the 2007 Venice Biennial. Blondeau has participated in panel discussions and given lectures at the AGO, the University of Saskatchewan (Saskatoon), the IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts (Santa Fe) and the 2020 Sydney Biennale. Since 2018, Blondeau is an Assistant Professor of Indigenous Art at the University of Manitoba School of Art. Blondeau was a recipient of the 2021 Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts.



Images:

Front Cover

Lori Blondeau, *Bleached* (detail), 1999. Image by Dennis Ha.

Pages 2&3

Smokes, Sings Loud, 2022. Installation view. Image by Dennis Ha.

Page 4

Michelle Sound, *Deadly Aunties* (detail), 2021. Image by Dennis Ha.

Pages 8&9

Michelle Sound, *Deadly Aunties*, 2021. Installation view. Image by Dennis Ha.

Page 10

Michelle Sound, *Deadly Aunties*, 2021. Installation view. Image by Dennis Ha.

Page 17

Lori Blondeau, *Bleached*, 1999. Performance documentation. Photos by Merle Addison.