

On Meryl McMaster's *Wanderings*

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There are many points of entry into *Wanderings*, Meryl McMaster's most recent collection of photographs: Indigenous, feminist, fine art photography, performative, sculptural, interdisciplinary, Surrealist, self-portrait, land-based, anthropomorphic, craft/material arts, post-literate. The offspring of Plains Cree and European bloodlines, McMaster weaves her bi-cultural experience into compelling self-portraits that leave the temporal behind but that manage to stay grounded, earthy. In her carefully constructed and staged photographs, McMaster is wholly present. The skilled hand of a craftsperson is evident in every frame, not only in the photographic execution but through hand-stitched garments; accoutrements of ropes, rags, fabric braids; headgear made of antlers, birds, bees, sticks, and moss; and the signifying device of a red thread recurring through the images. She often dons whiteface, evocative of Kabuki theatre and reflecting the winter landscape of the photos, but appearing neither confrontational nor decorative. Renouncing ego and judgement, she enacts a reinvented personal history of indigeneity and navigates a cusp of past and future, a realm of both being and becoming.

In McMaster's photographs the colonial gaze has been disrupted. In the words of Artspace Director Jonathan Lockyer, curator for McMaster's exhibitions in Peterborough and Santa Fe: "McMaster's work, in exceptionally subtle ways, creates spaces for the viewer to consider difficult questions concerning identity, history, colonialism and Indigenous self-determination. The work in *Wanderings* allows for an oscillation between identities, and puts forward an assertion that for Indigenous people, identity has never been static...[R]ather than allow herself to become lost or disempowered within the spaces between contrasting identities," he observes, "McMaster creates a visual narrative of empowerment."

In contrast to Cindy Sherman's staged self-portraits, McMaster's tableaux appear less as a form of self-aware play acting or identity dress-up than as a means to fully inhabit her own multidimensional self. Exploring the complex aesthetics of Indigenous self-image through media and performance-based art, McMaster is in sync with contemporary artists like Rebecca Belmore, Dana Claxton, James Luna, Shelley Niro, or Lori Blondeau. She embodies the idea of survivance through prisms of identity, portraying herself as both mythic icon and pilgrim and always as inextricable from the natural world.

Dr. Gerald McMaster, recently appointed Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Visual Culture & Curatorial Practice at OCAD University, is McMaster's father. In his research he asks "How can Indigenous artists engage with the non-Indigenous world while maintaining their difference?" Meryl McMaster answers that question on many levels, heartfully, unambiguously, without a saying a word.