

Practices of Learning

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I am learning about learning. This process of learning about learning has both shifted and clarified my focus. It began this way in 2016 when my research was profoundly changed when my uncle passed away. Unexpectedly, in the days that followed, I found myself thinking about how his life and the lives of others in my family had not only made space for me to do the work that I have undertaken, but that they have provided me with a foundation of knowledge upon which I now build today. I was moved in a new way by the work of Indigenous writers such as Margaret Kovach who have emphasized the importance of situating oneself within research as Indigenous researchers (2009), and I thought more deeply about my own position as one that is located within a lineage of thought that is rooted in the values and ideals of my family and community. At present, this is what knowledge looks like for me. I am increasingly and intimately interested in how knowledge gets performed, where it might be inherited, how it is sought, and where it can be found. In particular, I have been thinking about family and community as a site of knowledge production, of cultivation, and of sharing and I am drawn to look back at the work of artists who have engaged in similar practices of looking through and with family to investigate value from a space of personal and political consciousness.

In 2013 I organized an exhibition for the Thunder Bay Art Gallery with artist Duane Linklater who is Omaskêko Cree from Moose Cree First Nation in Northern Ontario. While working on the show, *Something About Encounter*, which featured a series of short videos of different wildlife encounters within urban spaces that Duane¹ had taken on his phone, he had asked me about the collection of the gallery and if we could collaborate on selecting a few pieces

1 It is a convention to refer to individuals referenced in texts such as this by their last names—a formality which, to me, denotes distance. I am wondering if I need to do this in all cases because I am looking at the experience of relatedness. I have decided to try something different. The individuals whose works I reference in this text are people who I have come to know in various ways, some better than others and some more recent than others and all in ways that I am grateful to have experienced. They are known to me and I am telling you a story about how I have come to know them.

to include. Intrigued at the possibilities for upturning convention, I entered into this collaboration in which we selected several works by Benjamin Chee Chee, an Ojibway artist from Temagami, Ontario who Duane was familiar with from a print that had once hung in his childhood home. The works we selected were abstract and geometric in form, which are unlike the artists' more well-known figurative drawings and paintings. Hanging these works within the exhibition brought an unanticipated element into the exhibition which I have long considered and yet have only here put into words. Through this act of curation and collaboration the exhibition turned into a space that could refer to the artists' formative years, inviting knowledge from that space into the new one formed within the gallery by the artist and their works.

This gesture can be understood more deeply in conversation with another exhibition that Duane had opened at Susan Hobbs Gallery in Toronto that same year called *Learning*. Among the items and images found in the room: a re-photographed likeness of Nirvana's frontman Kurt Cobain, another of a Mohawk warrior, Richard Nicholas, from the resistance at the Pines in 1990 (often referred to today as the "Oka Crisis"), and the print by Chee Chee, titled "Learning," which was the print that once hung in Duane's home. While seemingly disparate, these objects become linked under the framework provided by Chee Chee's title, calling them together as pedagogical forms through which new knowledge takes form, as we might consider all influences from popular culture and politics today. The trajectory of this and the previous exhibition positions Duane's 2016 show *From Our Hands*, which was first staged at Mercer Union in Toronto in 2016, as a site of knowledge production and exchange that comes from within the family. The show centres upon the work of Ethel Linklater, Duane's grandmother, whose leather and beadwork had been included in an exhibition—also called *From Our Hands*²—that had toured Ontario between 1983 and 1985. Individual pieces from this exhibition now reside within the permanent collection of the Thunder Bay Art Gallery, where Linklater loaned the work of his grandmother for the show. Also included within the exhibition was a claymation video by Duane's son, Tobias Linklater. Duane's own sculptural forms supported and surrounded the objects, contextualizing them and pointing to the institutional processes, such as the loan agreement, which were now necessary in bringing their work together in this space. As such, *From Our*

2 For more information see the exhibition catalogue for this show, *Michichiwi oshichikan: From Our Hands: an exhibition of native hand crafts*.

Hands cultivated a space in which the intergenerational connections between these works were highlighted, as were the structures which now characterize their encounters, speaking to at times incongruous forms of knowledge that ascribe value within or from outside of systems of relation. Like *Something About Encounter, From Our Hands* broke with conventions of display within solo exhibitions by opening up that space to make known the relational dialogue which enables and shapes each artist's works.

Due to longstanding traditions in Western European imaginings of Indigenous peoples, exhibition spaces have been historically inlaid with systemic practices of misrepresentation and omission, such that the museum itself has become another site in which such systems of knowledge are found to be in tension for Indigenous people. Historically speaking, the types of knowledge produced in these spaces have not been in the service of Indigenous lives. These frames of knowledge have been intended to erase Indigenous people—if not physically, then cognitively within the public imaginary. *Peter Morin's Museum*, a project of Tahltan artist Peter Morin, confronts these moments of tension directly while calling for a new type of space for knowledge-production to take place from an Indigenous perspective. His museum decidedly rejects Western conventions of display, with a manifesto that outlines the etiquette of the space. His museum, it states, is a space of laughter, of shared food and drink, it is a space for children, for community belonging, and for Indigenous knowledge, among many other things. The project granted agency to objects as teaching tools and as active participants in the transmission of knowledge: in *Peter Morin's Museum*, “[t]he objects are philosophy. The objects are the organized structures which support the transfer of Tahltan knowledge. You have to read the objects in order to understand Tahltan history.” In his recent presentation for the speaker series *Expansive Approaches to Indigenous Art Histories* at OCAD University in Toronto, Peter discussed this project, explaining that at his mother's house the hallway is filled with photographs of the family, and that if she likes you, she will give you a tour and tell you about the photos (2018). To access these stories is to learn about the things that matter to her, from her perspective as a Tahltan person, as a mother, as a relative and friend to many—information which is prioritized and privileged in *Peter Morin's Museum*. From this I understand Peter's mother as a revered teacher, one whose tutelage must be earned in order to gain the particular knowledge of space and time which she offers as a mother, a partner, a relative, a friend. Perhaps this is something that many are familiar with from their families, where the setting of this knowledge transmission

remains contained within the space of the home and reserved for only those who are invited to enter. It might also be something that gets taken for granted. In *Peter Morin's Museum* this context is transgressed. Peter borrowed the photographs from his mother's home and invited her to provide a curator's tour of the photos in the exhibition. By privileging something which is commonly intended only for smaller, select audiences within the context of the home, Peter both invokes the space of the home in the gallery while elevating the knowledge that his mother has to offer as important and valuable source material for understanding Tahltan history and knowledge.

Peter has also worked with his mother in a more recent work and collaboration with artist Ayumi Goto, who is of Japanese ancestry, for the exhibition *how do you carry the land?* which was held at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2018. This exhibition, curated by Tarah Hogue, was imagined by Peter and Ayumi to answer a series of questions that they developed together: "How do I honour your ancestors? How do we make a space for our ancestors to meet and to work together? How do I honour your mother? How do we make a space for our mothers to meet and to visit together?" (Hogue 2018, 11). Hogue describes the imperative driving Peter's work as one invested in documenting and intervening "with his body in performance, laying claim to spaces and concepts that have sought to exclude, to [belittle] and to erase" (2018, 12). She writes about Ayumi's practice as "an effort to enact a non-possessive being-in-relation to land and to engender non-objectifying relationships of mutual learning with Indigenous artists" (2018, 13). Together, Peter and Ayumi's collaborative work can be said to acknowledge and tend to each other's ancestral histories and to their present realities, seeking new forms of understanding through acts of mutual and reciprocal knowledge-building. The artists' engagement with their mothers extended beyond their position as subjects of the work, to locate them as the primary audience as well: in conversation with Ayumi's partner Ashok, I learned about a tour that the artists had organized for their mothers and Tarah's mother during the exhibition run, a move which Ashok framed as altering the conventions of art spaces by prioritizing the mothers' visits and requiring all others to wait while this took place (Mathur 2018). Taking this time with those individuals who have inspired the work and whose labour and lives are honoured by the artists' guiding questions enacts a kind of accountability to this source of knowledge—one that both governs their practice and suggests new models for engaging family-based knowledge through artistic research.

These kinds of frameworks for understanding ourselves in relation to an idea of knowledge that comes from families, and from communities, is one which also

acknowledges forms of pedagogy which come from knowledge keepers within various communities. In Tanya Lukin Linklater's video *The treaty is in the body*, viewers are witness to a moment of teaching and learning in Tanya's living room between Omaskêko Cree knowledge keeper Jennifer Wabano and participants Ivanie Aubin-Malo, Gwen Iahtail, Sassa Linklater, Lauren Pizzale, Keisha Stone, Iris Sutherland, Lorraine Sutherland, and Tanya herself. The camera focuses on the faces and bodies of those in the room. While seated, their movements perform quiet acts of learning through small gestures: the direction of their gaze, their facial expressions, and other slight articulations which signify the act of listening. While the video plays silent, without the voices of those speaking made audible, the exchange and transmission of knowledge is made known in other ways through these moments. In the next scene Ivanie, a Maliseet choreographer, is seen dancing with the two girls, Sassa and Keisha, Tanya's daughter and cousin. Juxtaposed with the footage in the living room, this dance scene appears to reflect an act of embodied practice of that which was imparted and shared in the previous scene. Still silent, the video illustrates the translation of that knowledge into movement. This is an act of knowing that, like in the first scene, is understood only truly by Sassa and Keisha. As audiences we are not privy to the specifics of their interpretation and translation, knowing only that the continuity of knowledge is living through these girls in ways that they animate within their lived experiences and realities. Both this and the living room scene reflect an idea of knowledge which is not only related between bodies, but that is also embodied within individuals and made dynamic through individual interpretation and expression.

My encounters with the projects outlined on these pages is the thread which brings me to tell you about them here. It is by no means a comprehensive overview of works that engage with family as a source of knowledge production, cultivation, and sharing, and in assembling these works here I do not intend to occlude those examples. I recognize that there are other ways of thinking about all our relations beyond the idea of the immediate family, and that there are works of art which represent this much broader conceptualization of relatedness that have been, and will continue to be, a rich site of research.³ Through the works which I have highlighted here I am looking at new ways of parsing the idea of learning as a practice, one which can be undertaken in a variety of different means—some of which have been more readily recognized within established

3 For more on this subject see Lindsay Nixon, "Art is 2017: A View from Turtle Island," *Canadian Art*, December 28, 2017.

systems of education—in much the same way that practices of teaching have been examined through pedagogical studies. What these works show me is how others are looking to their relatives in order to assess and convey information to others, how the site of the family can operate as an important foundation upon which to source and grow knowledge, and how this is a place from which to speak about self, about community, and about learning from one another. At a recent conference organized by the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective, a panel was convened on the subject of working within non-Indigenous institutions as Indigenous cultural workers. One of the panelists, Jaimie Issac, Curator of Indigenous Art at the Winnipeg Art Gallery from Sagkeeng First Nation, spoke with eloquence about being in a meeting where she was asked a question by a colleague to which she answered that she would have to check with her Nana—with the sense that this somehow changed the usual processes of that space, which might have been used to working more quickly, to accommodate the knowledge that Jaimie felt was needed at that moment. To me this is a way of performing knowledge, one which signals that another way of doing things has arrived, and it brought company.

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