Nadia Myre: Making, Connections

Nadia Myre's beaded "Indian Act" and her half birch bark, half aluminum canoe ("History in Two Parts" 2002) are iconic Aboriginal Canadian art works. "Indian Act" (1999-2002) consists of all 56 pages of that federal statute transliterated into beads. White seed beads displace letters while red ones occupy the ground, suggesting that the government's words are racially 'white', the colonist's language. These passages can also be read as blanks, mute absences punctuating red territory.

Tempting as it is to read post-colonial 'Indian' meanings into every gesture First Nations' artists make, Myre might be assumed to also express content beyond that one matrix. Taken as a whole, the primary theme of her oeuvre is not Aboriginal but a delicious and acid relationship with language, people and environment. It is not just colonial prose that tastes both sweet and bitter to her tongue, but also (not knowing) the Algonquin language, masculine words, the language of power, of intimate relations, visual language, and so on. Myre struggles with signification, the desire to mean but not be consumed, to express but not be taken only at her word. She seems to suffer from logophobia and logophillia simultaneously: a drive to speak and a fear of saying the wrong thing.

Myre is a poet who wants to make something trustworthy of text, something tactile, a tangible material that can be held between thumb and forefinger, pieced by a needle, re-formed and made mute to literal meaning and open to affect. Because of the hundreds of hours she and her assistants put into hand crafting the "Indian Act", her enterprise seems more transfiguration than deconstruction, more loving than iconoclastic. It is as if she wants to meticulously replace the old words with new ones but is uncertain what to say. She wants to coax, not command—make over words into speechless texts. Images are speechless texts; they are mute without viewers to give them tongue. Writing in white, these spaces are now fill-in-the-blanks where interlocutors can craft their appropriate meanings.

Of "Journey of the Seven Fires," Myre explains, "this series borrows ideas from the Seven Fires Prophesy Wampum Belt, which speaks about the destruction of the earth if we do not shift from materialism to spirituality." These large pieces consist of beaded logos of "companies whose practices cause or have caused environmental damage and who have a dubious or difficult relationship with First Nations people." Like the "Indian Act," the gesture is time consuming and loving, a form of magical thinking that imagines a transformation of consciousness and a better relationship founded on care. She is not despoiling these logos but ritualistically making them over, needling them. The action is shamanic rather than a shaming. It is an exercise of the belief that tiny, personal, repetitive gestures have the power of prayer.

The new series resembles a Surrealist picture poem—suggestive visual puns that both invite and resist reading. The titles ("Pet Cock," "Try Cock," "Automatic" and "Lubricator") are gleaned from piping and instrumentation diagrams. Myre may be offering a critique of the masculinization of industries, but given her other tactile poems, she may also be demonstrating the erotics of the workplace—how sites usually thought to

repress desire actually embed “Desire Schematics” in the fabric of its discourses. The tone of these works is earnest amusement—the pleasure of making connections and playing.

Aboriginal artists often have their every gesture read as an echo of their culture in ways that mainstream artists are less likely to face. Some succumb to the script and play to expectations within ‘Indian’ tropes. Others, like Myre, have a bit of fun being incomplete and imperfect ‘Indians’. By combining industrial design and Aboriginal beading, she invites but does not quite satisfy ‘Indian’ association. She knows that some people will think the pipe images have Algonquin meanings. Such play is funny but also melancholic, an acknowledgement of a loss.

Many Aboriginal artists have an anxious relationship with their culture. In order to signify in the contemporary artworld, they had to learn to speak the dominant language, know its history and ways. It is extremely difficult to be competent in both systems. This sounds like a choice, when in fact it is a negotiation with the assimilationist project. Some artists are very clever about opening a space between the cultures where they mumble new selves into shape.

Myre has an allergy to sentences that attempt to engineer people and a love of the poetic, the suggestive, the seductive, the malleable and mis-taken. “There are many ways from which to look at the work but for the most part they all come down to grappling with things I don't understand.” There is throughout her work a desire to signify, to come into presence but also to be imprecise and uncapturable, of having a self beyond words, being present but escaping comprehension.

David Garneau