

Survival/Zhaabwiiwin

By

Gina Adams

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Chairperson Norman Akers

Marshall Maude

David Cateforis

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The Thesis Committee for Gina Adams

certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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Chairperson Norman Akers

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Abstract

There is a connection to what the ancient ones taught my ancestors, as this information was passed down generation to generation. I consider my work and its process to be a spiritual endeavor, and the process of making to be a ritual component it. I decided to learn how to make objects in order to have a better understanding of who my ancestors were and how perhaps I am similar to them. The process of making gives me an identity and an ancestral connection. In this I feel that I have been creating work that recontextualizes the sense of the sacred and the ritual object.

There is a drum beating in my heart, a river running through my veins, a wind that lifts my spirit. Blood that was spilled on plains scores of moons ago continues to course through me and here, before you, is my own story. It came to me from my grandfather and his grandfather before. Our story is in the drum, the river, the wind and is given life by the deer and elk who gave theirs. Their hides provide a permanence that my forefathers were robbed of. A structure, something I call “Survival/Zhaabwiiwin.”

My grandfather's story is one that's shared by millions of Native Americans. In truth, my own history of assimilation and my grandfather's forced Carlisle boarding school experience aren't unique in this country. Nor are the emotions surrounding them. They have been burned into our familial DNA's becoming part of our genetic heritage. In my case, I felt the emotions but did not completely understand them. I undertook this work as a personal quest to map my own ancestors' many stories of assimilation, the 'whitewashing' of everything native where children were forced to learn and speak only English and to deny their native tongue. My grandfather, like so many other children, lost much more. To accomplish this quest, I delved into a personal place and time, reaching back to touching moments I shared with my grandfather. He transformed skinning deer in my native Maine into an art form and lovingly tanned the hides by hand. That memory inspired this body of work which required me to challenge myself by using a new medium and material I was unaccustomed to handling with a goal of bridging abstract ideas and blending them into concrete forms.

At the root of my work is my mixed heritage: I am Native American, Lithuanian and Irish Immigrant American. What happened to my grandfather, though, nearly robbed me of ever knowing about my history with the Hawk Clan, the Ojibwa Nation. When he was just eight, my Native grandfather was physically removed from his homeland and sent off to the Government Carlisle Indian Boarding School. He was virtually stolen from his home and sent away. I cannot imagine that horror; from his own perspective and his parents'. Over the past two years, I have been reading post-colonial theory which has shed some light on what grandfather must have experienced. Much of what I have read has dealt with indigenous people trying desperately to reclaim their rights and their identities. And, underscored throughout is the critical importance of what happens here and now: that the survival of the Indigenous people must be given priority. Transgressions done to natives in the past must stay in the past. History cannot be repeated.

I did not grow up with Native American culture, or community. In fact, the lack of it has given me the drive and the passion to research my past and my own native culture in order to find vision in my creativity. In this search and through my research travels to the epicenter of my ancestral native bloodlines, I have found many others who have related histories. Prior to graduate school, I was completely immersed with the conceptual ideas behind the work. My paintings were really about the effect of color and light, and were very much about their surface. Now I know that in order to continue to survive as an artist, my work must be clear and must hold within it a vision of what I want it to say to the viewer.

In this work, I wanted to create a sense of home or structure. And, honoring my native background, I wanted to incorporate 'home' with something that would be movable, similar to a Tipi or Wickiup. I also yearned to make this more of a 'universal' theme and envisioned something more timely, more contemporary. I chose to create three tents and assembled them uniquely in the gallery. They are physically flipped upside down to visually symbolize discord. Those, combined with a recording of coil pots smashing to the ground signify to the viewer that something violent has just occurred. The implied meaning in the overturned structure and their positions of upheaval in the gallery space speak directly to Historic Cultural Trauma and blood memory. I want the viewer to feel that they are part of what has just happened; to feel the raw emotion. I used multiple tents: two to speak to the crushing of community and one to speak to a greater notion of Survival.

I think about the search for home, and this inner yearning and the searching has compelled me to look for sensory materials. This gathering signifies building roots, spreading wings of experiences and ideas that feed the work that is done in the studio. I started to think about the notion of Survival, and read Gerald Vizenor's notion of "Survivance." This word is and was termed by Vizenor for example of how Native Americans bring a better understanding to enduring what has been imposed upon them over centuries of assimilation and abuse. Even though the word is not officially in the dictionary, it gives the foundation that we can evolve past the loss, degradation and turmoil. Somehow the word Survivance is comforting to me; I seem to understand that it has deeper meaning when placed in a context of Survival.

Themes or concepts of discussion around my work have been hybridity, historical trauma and blood memory; specifically how the blood defines those of us who have a similar identity and shared story to tell. Throughout this process, the word "Unidentified" has created layered

meaning, and in the forefront of these are the post-colonial and the universal. Artists I have been looking at are Shahzia Sikander, Brian Jungen, Bonnie Devine, Jeffrey Gibson, Kent Monkman, Sarah Sense, Janine Antoni, Rebecca Belmore, James Luna, Truman Lowe and Erika Lord. What these artists share is an attention to a common theme: intersecting the divide between races and cultural ideas, all the while gathering identity from the unconscious. And, adding to this research, I have examined elements of my own experience; of my artistic training, my learning of my native languages, and discovering ancestral knowledge: lost and gained.

Being of mixed heritage presents many challenges. I, personally, wrestle with ways to keep these separate identities alive and sharp without drowning one another in the mix. My identities represent polar opposites of one another: Native and European American. Throughout history, they have been pitted one against the other. Blood has spilled many times, in many lands from my ancestors of both identities. But I must reconcile the two under my own roof. One way that I have done that is through language. I have found my Native identity in learning my Native languages of Ojibwa and Lakota. They help me better understand and better piece together the oral traditions first told to me by my grandfather. His richly woven stories have been my guide in my studio process. The connection to what the ancient ones passed down from generation to generation, their native language and their oral stories have fueled my interest in and understanding of the cultural spirit: it is truly alive in me! And, inside my studio, humming songs in my native tongue and diving into the ritual of creating in the ancient ways, I am connected to my ancestors. I have learned that it takes a delicate strength to handle the clay while making the coil pots that my ancestors made. And, as they did moons before, I experience tremendous healing in the making of coil pots. My art is their art. My blood is their blood.

During my studio process I deliberately attempt to describe, enact, translate creatively and consider my ideas of what it means now, in 2013, to be of an Indigenous cultural heritage. I have been actively thinking about the following characteristics while developing my thesis work: reclaiming history, renaming, educating, de-colonizing, activating thought, and recognizing perspectives from an Indigenous center. Additionally, I have been contemplating the recognition of Indigenous pedagogy, and indigenous intellect. In learning to do the work of my ancestors, I have purposely closed the gap, bringing their emotions and their experiences full circle back to me.

In the ceramics studio, I feel an excitement of what this circle actually means. Each coil

that I place, one on top of the other, is evidence of my ancestral heritage. The pot holds my breath, it is a portal for life and in creating the coils I am creating this volume of life. When all the coil pots are in the room they become a community, and the monotony created in the space becomes a regular rhythm which signifies the moving of the body in an act of repetitive nature. I came to realize that when I incorporate these ancient practices, they are connected to everything I do. The coil making takes me back to the community, back to my native culture, back to my native land.

So too does another ancient art, an art I associate solely with childhood memories of my grandfather. When you are a child you are wide open to sensory experiences and I was in complete spellbound awe of my grandfather. I would literally run to him, to hear his voice, smell his tobacco, and gaze into his piercing eyes while he told me stories of his past, and of our oral tradition. It was like being in the middle of a heartbeat. My whole life has been motivated by experiencing his death at an early age, and I have held onto this heartbeat of remembrance. When you know that death is permanent, people become very beautiful and extremely fascinating, and you realize that life is short and can fade like a flower; and it makes you realize that what you had you can never have again. I want to prolong life; this moment, this breath, the eternal heartbeat, as even though I may not have my grandfather or his people, I do have the continued remembrance of their words and the longing of what once was is ever present in my mind. This work is about honoring my ancestors by giving to the future my experience of Survival. That survival comes in the form of deer skin and the artful way my grandfather transformed it into a critically useful commodity: hide.

I learned the art of hide tanning as it was done by my ancestors in the centuries before me. The actual tanning process is rigorous and time consuming, and for my ancestors, tanning a hide equaled survival on the land and was their way of life. Deer and Elk hides are not square or perfectly shaped, and you have to respect the individual and unique qualities which include holes and rough spots. I wanted to incorporate this tradition into a living piece of art that can help educate others. I decided to create what you now see in the Gallery. I started the long process of piecing the hides together and sewing patches into the places with holes, and while sewing, I saw evidence of the many paintings I presented when I applied to graduate school. I purposely constructed the hides together in a way that would have imbedded meaning. My thoughts led to the idea of creating a new post-colonial structure that was a combination of a tipi and a

contemporary backpacking tent. I wanted a simple backpacking tent which represented my artistic ideas coupled with my experience of backpacking off the grid and in different wilderness environments. My family and I spent considerable time backpacking and camping in tents, so it made perfect sense that I would create this duality between two worlds. The Tipi represents the ancient, and my only experience with setting one up happened several years ago during a language immersion program at the Turtle Mountain Reservation. It required eleven other Native women to help raise that Tipi! That was an important lesson: it literally takes a village, a community of women in the tribe to succeed.

I decided that I would create what I could by myself, but would call in my own village to help with other parts I could not do alone. The idea of community is an ancient one, and I would have never gotten to this part of my life without community. Without community I would not have reached the places of understanding, learning language, working with elders, connecting to distant family and gathering medicinal knowledge and permission to be on sacred lands. To succeed, I followed through with the Seven teachings, I asked the universe to provide for me, I burned sage in honor of the gifts I have been given, and most importantly I trusted that all I needed would be given to me. And I was given everything, and everyone I needed.

I deliberately chose a manufactured tent on which to sew hides. To me, this represents the merging of the colonial and industrialized worlds. One would not normally see hides sewn onto a light weight tent. But, as an Artist and person of Indigenous heritage, the combination signifies not only these two worlds coming together but my own duality of living between worlds. Inside the tents are balancing points that connect to the floor and hold the overturned tents up. These 'poles' are made up of red maple, collected, de-barked, dried, and carried from Maine. I created them to be divination staffs to honor my ancestors and as a sign of my connection to the land. This is my Indigenous reference: they are made out of natural and gathered materials such as wood, paper, sinew, milkweed twine and beeswax.

My ancestral memory, and the oral stories told to me by my family have imprinted my soul map and created who I am today. Learning to tan deer hides traditionally came from a place of wanting ancestral knowledge....learning to make coil pots came from the same yearning to recreate the past in order to grasp a sense of identity for the future. This work is about prolonging life....this moment...this breath...and tying it to the eternal heartbeat. Although physically I have not met those who came before, their blood runs through my veins, their drum beats in my

heart and I have the continued remembrance of the words and the longing of what once was. You never lose the longing; it grows stronger and becomes like a heartbeat whose rhythm is a constant presence. For me this work is about survival of the Spirit: my spirit and that of my grandfather's people and their heartbeat that beats within my own body, mind and soul.

