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A *bead, a breath* is an exhibition that thinks through caregiving, motherhood, stories, and intergenerational connections, with two videos *My Moon* (2022) and *Our Hands, Our Body, Our Spirit* (2022), and sculptural work, *BEADZ* (2023). Video, animation, and sculpture are grounded in the ongoing and ancestral technology of beadwork—set to ambient scores by Jessie Beier. Continuing generations of Indigenous women’s labour, beadwork mirrors both craft and new media practices in its repetition, rhythm, and storytelling. Carrie Allison says, it “is an act of care, of giving time to, and getting to know; beading is spending time with your ancestors through the shared gesture of sewing and beading.”[i]

At once solitary and shared, the practice of beadwork, like many laborious practices undertaken by women, is done both collectively and in isolation. Through past community projects, such as *The Shubenacadie River Beading Project* (2018-2019) and its sister project *The Lake Nipissing Beading Project* (2020-Present), Allison has initiated exercises “in building treaty relations between settler and Indigenous nations, and humans to mother earth.”[ii] Guided by the Peace and Friendship Treaty that still governs the land of the Mi’kmaq, The Shubenacadie River Beading Project brought together Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants to collectively bead a map of the river.[iii] Allison reflects that such activities “foster storytelling, sharing, engagement, and collective making[,] activating Indigenous research methodologies.”[iv]

With the birth of her child in 2021, Allison turned to beading as a solitary practice, a strategy that carried her through the experience of new motherhood during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. *My Moon* is a stop-motion animation of the artist’s beading, set to an audio recording of her newborn’s breath. Through this video, she invites us to join her in exploring ‘a bead, a breath’ as a meditative approach to working through anxiety. As the world slowed, so did she. Combining images “in a painstakingly laborious way, each bead is laid, stitched, a photo taken, then edited, and finally placed in sequence with the sound of my child’s breath.”[v] This breath, along with the in-utero heartbeat, is mixed by Jessie Beier with a number of sources to build the ambient soundtrack. She says, “With each breath and each bead added the growing circle shifts slightly, mimicking the individuality of a breath and the passing of time.”[vi] Could the meticulous act of beadwork be slowed any further than by stopping to document each singular bead? Perhaps only with its own undoing, evidenced in the second video in the exhibition.

Our Hands, Our Body, Our Spirit (2022), documents a three-hour performance by the artist at Middle Cove in Ktaqmkuk (Newfoundland) during a land-based residency through Eastern Edge (an artist-run centre in St. John’s, NL). For the performance, *The length of my body beaded in a circle on a visited land* (2019), Allison carried rocks up a bluff from the beach below to position them in a circle with a diameter the length of her body. As if untying each bead, she then returned the rocks to the beach, leaving behind an imprint of the rocks—her body, her labour—on the land. “What is the sense of duty that pushes [land artists] to create on spaces that have already been created and lived on? Is it homage? Fascination? Hubris? Perhaps all three? ...Is it simply to say, I too was here?”[vii] Providing a critical antidote to Western notions of ‘Land Art’—the capitalized canon of historically

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white (often male) artists’ works in the landscape—Allison’s tender imprint makes no more permanent a mark than a footprint.[viii] Her performance isn’t a challenge to nature’s obedience, nor is it a monument to her power. She marks her body on the land, knowing that she *is also* the land.

The video record of this performance is overlaid with a hand-drawn animation of two hands stitching a bead. Moving in a call and response, the hands’ wavelike motion is reminiscent of the sea below the bluff. The accompanying sound parallels this rhythm and that of her performative gesture—climbing, descending, back and forth. The stones reiterate the shape of the beaded circle in *My Moon*, her placement of them echoing the stitching of the beads. She says, “The emotional labour and craft-based labour of Indigenous beadwork artists and caregivers are similarly undervalued, and by bringing together these linked elements of land art and beadwork, I create systems of value according to Indigenous concepts of stewardship.”[ix]

Accompanying these video works are large sculptural *BEADZ*, which invite the audience, child or adult, to play or rest as they watch the videos. Speaking to her about the process of carving the foam shapes for the beads, I hear her frustration with the slow, messy process of this unpleasant material. Ultimately covered in sewn black fabric, the beads become playful and safe for kids, and once again, her labour is quietly disguised. Their scale adds both humour and humility, putting us in our place, and inviting us to play, rest, and be cared for.

In a *bead, a breath*, the repetition of the circular form roots us back not only to the bead but to its repeated shape in the land—a circle of beaders, arms around a child, floral centres, the physics of an ocean wave, the moon in our planetary orbit. It is a motif often repeated in Allison’s beadwork. With *First Family* (2019/20), she made circular beaded depictions of medicinal plants from the area of her maternal roots. With *Roses for Elsie* (2022), she returned the same approach to her grandmother’s garden to depict the centres of the roses she tended to. In the augmented reality work, *Hold Your Circle Close* (2021), a single circle of orange beads appears to be suspended in space using the tension of their own stitching.[x] A circle carries many references, but given the global context of the making of this work, I can’t help but draw a connection to Ruth Cuthand’s *Trading Series* (2008–2009), about which she writes, “beads and viruses

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With gratitude as uninvited guests, Access is located on the unceded and ancestral territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

Access additionally recognizes its location in Vancouver’s Chinatown, an area for the gathering of predominantly Cantonese-speaking Chinese labourers, settlers, and businesses since the nineteenth century. Our gallery borders the site of Hogan’s Alley, an important home to Vancouver’s Black population until their forced displacement through the construction of the Georgia viaduct fifty years ago.

Established as a non-profit artist-run centre in 1991, Access Gallery is a platform for emergent and experimental art practices. We enable through new configurations of audience, artists, and community. www.accessgallery.ca

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go hand-in-hand.”[xi] Cuthand beaded circular images of the pathogens that infected Indigenous populations as a result of colonization. Carmen Robertson writes, “... this relationship to the circle can also be understood as a means of resistance to assimilation and genocide—a symbolic acknowledgement of the rebuilding of Indigenous communities and an embodiment of the land.”[xii] A circle, like Indigenous land stewardship, has no beginning and is unending—a rectangle by contrast, like an imaginary delineation of a parcel of land, starts and stops.

As I draft this text, the SpaceX rocket ship exploded three minutes into its unmanned test flight.[xiii] The relationship between the future and technological advancement to ‘better’ worlds remains a fundamentally Western invention, “And we know how that future not only led to but is based on the colonization of other peoples’ worlds, including their particular perception of technology, humanity, and the environment.”[xiv] As billionaires dream of bringing humans to Mars, and colonization looks to the moon, Carrie Allison’s work invites us to imagine the moon without conquering it. Centring intergenerational care, craft practices, and the land, the work’s connection to Indigenous Futurisms is underscored with Beier’s soundscapes. The composition for *Our Hands, Our Body, Our Spirit* could score a sci-fi story, pulling us into the slipstream, and releasing us again in waves of atmospheric music.

In each of Carrie Allison’s works, time spent honours anxiety, labour, resistance, and tenderness, connecting her to a lineage of mothering—whether that is caring for a child, taking care of our bodies and communities, attending to our practices, or stewarding the land. We have an opportunity as witnesses to her work to take this time—to watch her carry the stones, to bead collectively through their accumulation, to play, travel through space and time, to breathe alongside her child—and in so doing, resist.

Katie Belcher, curator

NOTES

[i] Artist’s website, *First Family*

[ii] Artist’s website, *The Shubenacadie River Beading Project*

[iii] The project culminated in ten metres of beaded pieces that were auctioned off in April 2019 to raise funds for Stop Alton Gas’ legal funds. This final auction and support was requested from the community.

[iv] From the artist’s website

[v] Artist’s notes, 2023

[vi] Artist’s notes, 2023

[vii] Asenap, Jason. “Hubris in Art Form: Land artists insist on making their mark on the ancestral grounds of Indigenous people.” *ALTA Journal* 21 December 2022 <https://www.altaonline.com/culture/art/a42042641/land-art-jason-asenap/> (accessed 20 April 2023)

[viii] This balance calls to mind BUSH Gallery’s manifesto, which proposes to “trace our impacts on the land in search of balance amidst our inherent selfish humanity.” *C Magazine* Issue 136 1 December 2017 <https://cmagazine.com/articles/bush-manifesto> (accessed 21 April 2023)

[ix] Artist’s notes, 2023

[x] The title for this work references the following quote by Sherry Farrell Racette “Reach deep. Stand tall. Take a breath and tighten that circle around the little and not-so-little ones. It’s all we can do.” on June 24, 2021, following the remains of 215 bodies of children found at Kamloops Residential.

[xi] Cuthand, Ruth, from her website <https://www.ruthcuthand.ca/trading-series/> (accessed 20 April 2023)

[xii] Robertson, Carmen, “Land and Beaded Identity: Shaping Art Histories of Indigenous Women of the Flatland” *RACAR: revue d’art canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 42 (2017) 2: 13–29, p.23

[xiii] Amos, Jonathan “SpaceX Starship: Elon Musk’s big rocket explodes on test flight” *BBC.com* <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-65334810> (accessed 20 April 2023)

[xiv] Pedro Neves Marques, from interview with Grace Dillon, “Taking the Fiction Out of Science Fiction: A Conversation about Indigenous Futurisms” *e-flux Journal* Issue #120 <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/120/417043/taking-the-fiction-out-of-science-fiction-a-conversation-about-indigenous-futurisms/> (accessed 21 April 2023)

BIO

Carrie Allison is a nêhiyaw/cree, Métis, and mixed European descent multidisciplinary visual artist based in K’jipuktuk, Mi’kma’ki (Halifax, Nova Scotia). She grew up on the unceded and unsundered lands of the Sḵw̓xwú7mesh (Squamish), Stó:lō and Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) and xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Nations. Her maternal roots and relations are based in maskotewisipi (High Prairie, Alberta), Treaty 8.

Allison holds a Master in Fine Art, a Bachelor in Art History, and a Bachelor in Fine Art from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, and has been featured in *Canadian Art*, *Elle Quebec*, *Esse* and *Visual Arts News*. She was the 2020 recipient of the Melissa Levin Award from the Textile Museum of Canada and was long-listed for the 2021 Sobey Art Award.

THANKS

Thank you to Canada Council and Arts Nova Scotia for supporting this work. Thank you to Jessie Beier, Carr Sappier, Aaron Elliot, Anne McMillan, and April Beattie for your time and energy. Thank you to IOTA for your support and guidance. Mostly thank you to my family, especially my love Shy, and his endless curiosity and joy.

Access additionally thanks Alex Muir for technical assistance with the installation.

WORKS

Our Hands, Our Body, Our Spirit, 2022

Animation and video

15:19:00

Artist: Carrie Allison

Videographer: Aaron Elliot

Editor: Carr Sappier

Sound Design: Jessie Beier

Technical Help: Anne McMillan

Management: IOTA Institute

Thank you to Canada Council for the Arts for financially funding this work and to Eastern Edge Gallery for giving me the space to dream up the beginnings.

BEADZ, 2023

Upholstery foam and fabric

6”x6” and 1’x2”

My Moon, 2022

Beaded stop-motion animation

7:14:00

Soundscape by Jessie Beier

EVENTS

OPENING RECEPTION:

Saturday 22 April 2023 from 2 to 4pm

Join us for the opening reception of *a bead, a breath*.

Carrie Allison will be visiting from Halifax. Children are welcome! Masks are required to be worn by adults at all times, unless actively snacking.

PLAY Q & A:

Wednesday 26 April from 3 to 5pm

Visit the gallery while the artist is present, for casual conversation, a chance to ask questions, and spend some playful time with large sculptural beads. Children are welcome to attend with their parents, and you can come and go as you need to.