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Abstract

When a Frenchman trades with them [the Indians], he takes into his services one of their Daughters, the one, presumably, who is most to his taste; he asks the Father for her, & under certain conditions, it is arranged; he promises to give the Father some blankets, a few shirts, a Musket, Powder & Shot, Tobacco & Tool; they come to an agreement at last, & the exchange is made. The Girl, who is familiar with the Country>, undertakes, on her part, to serve the Frenchman in every way, to dress his pelts, to sell his Merchandise for a specified length of time; the bargain is faithfully carried out on both sides.

ANNE COLLETT

Nadia Myre: A History of Unequal Halves

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Montreal in September. It's raining. An ancient elevator clanks its way to somewhere near the top of the building. I step out into a dark hallway and wait for Nadia. This is her studio. She takes me into a space shared with others and into the small space she calls her own. A canoe takes up much of that space. Suspended from the ceiling it is for me yet another strange encounter in a strange world. Half aluminium half birch-bark, Nadia comments on the strange affect the different materials produce — the distortion of proportion. [fig. 1] The wooden half is dominant. Crafted from traditional material (birch bark, cedar, ash, spruce root and gum), the knowledge and skill of centuries forms the stern, in



effect ensuring the canoe travels on course in recognition of 'where we have come from'. The gleaming aluminium of modernity forms the bow, from which position the paddler steers the canoe out of immediate danger. Tradition and modernity work together to direct and ensure safe passage. The piece is titled 'History in Two Parts'. Seamed at the centre, the two halves create a whole whose viability is utterly dependent on the proof of that join. [fig. 2] The canoe is symbolic of Nadia Myre's hybrid status and the history of relationship between aboriginal and settler nations in Canada: it is an artistic representation of the attempt to hold dissimilar halves in viable union. Each half is distinct and each half is beautiful. One half is modern and one half traditional; but the illusion of disproportion should not be forgotten for it too is symbolic. It represents two positions — one forced and one chosen — the 'Indian' half having been given disproportionate weight in a history of racial discrimination and attendant

suffering, and the other is a personal choice to give disproportionate weight to First Nations allegiance and the revaluation of tradition as an important determinant of future direction.

Born in Montreal, Quebec in 1974, Nadia Myre's maternal family is from Algonkin (Kitigan Zibi Anishnabeg) territory. She studied at Camosun College (Victoria, BC), the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design (Vancouver) and recently completed her Master of Fine Arts in sculpture at Concordia University, Montreal. Her work has been exhibited at the Woodland Cultural Centre (Brantford, Ontario), the Museum London (London, Ontario), the Lieutenant Governor's suite, Queen's Park (Toronto, Ontario), Grunt Gallery (Vancouver, BC) and Oboro gallery in Montreal. She is the recipient of grants from the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation, the Canada Council for the Arts, the *Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec*, the Dumaui Foundation, and is one of this years recipients of the prestigious Eiteljorg fellowship. Pages of 'Indian Act' (2000–2002) are on display in the permanent collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec.

'Indian Act' is comprised of 56 beaded, framed pages of the [Canadian] Indian Act [fig. 3] — the act that since the nineteenth century has legally defined 'Indian' status and all that such status entails, inclusive of land rights, political rights, educational rights, religious and cultural rights — may of which the Act denied. When, for example, First Nations' religious and cultural practices like the Potlatch and Sundance were deemed unacceptable and uncivilised by the colonising power, the Indian Act was the instrument by which they were banned. The Act was also used to forcibly remove First Nations children from their families in order to educate them — an inhumanity that hastened the fragmentation and disintegration of indigenous communities, similar to the terrible impact of white assimilation policy on what has become known as 'the stolen generation' of indigenous people in Australia. A significant and provocative part of Myre's larger work entitled, *Cont(r)act*, 'Indian Act' was a communal project that involved the beading over of the Act's print text. White beads are sewn over White words, Red beads over White spaces. The White man's words are replaced by the Red woman's beads — partially obscuring, and indeed making non-sense of the legal document. [fig. 4] This act of beading is both creative and destructive; it takes possession of the Act whilst simultaneously mocking its status as a document of authority. Like graffiti, it is a public act of defiance and contempt that refuses the right of the Canadian 'nation' to command authority over a group of unwilling 'citizens', and as such it is also an a/Act of political solidarity. The red and white beads deliberately evoke the colours of racial definition and discrimination. Replacing the words that established and enforced inequality and injustice, the beads effectively act to defy legal authority and social judgement, for the Act, now 'Red' can no longer be 'read'. [fig. 5]

'Cont(r)act' refers to the enforced relations of the euphemistically termed first 'contact' between First Nations and invaders, and is also a reference to the

various contracts negotiated in good faith that were often documented in the form of wampum belts. The Red man's 'bead on leather' was equivalent to the legal documentation of the White man's 'word on paper'. The term *wampum* or *wampumpeag* comes from one of the Algonkin languages of New England (North America) and refers to beads carved from marine shells native to the coastal waters. The whelk and quahog shells were harvested, shaped and drilled into white and purple beads respectively by the coastal peoples; the beads were then either strung or woven into belts for ceremony and ritual purpose. Value attached to wampum by the indigenous peoples before European 'contact' appears to have been primarily cultural rather than economic. After 'contact', negotiation between First Nations and the settler-invaders increasingly centred upon the exchange value of wampum: it became legal tender — both in terms of bead-coin, but also being contractual in nature — the belts taking the form of a legal text such that the symbolic pattern of beads could be read or interpreted like a written document. These belts, many of which now reside in museums throughout North America, are the material evidence of negotiated relationship that speaks of First Nations generosity, political and social acumen, and a sophisticated understanding and use of contractual documentation. Each belt records, in symbolic and material form, the stipulated terms of exchange entered into between 'brothers' and 'nations'. This is not a record, at least initially, of unequal power relations, but a record of diplomatic exchange entered into between civilisations.

Of the many belts that have gained prominence and political significance in recent years, the belt known as 'Two-Row' is perhaps the most clearly demonstrative of aboriginal understanding of the basis upon which they would accept the European peoples on their land. The belt apparently records one of the earliest treaties made between the North American and European nations. It is made up of two rows of purple (or black) wampum, separated by a width of sold white wampum — hence the colloquial name, 'Two Row'. According to *Turtle* (The Native American Center For the Living Arts Quarterly Edition Newspaper) and translation by Huron Miller on the Mohawk Nation website, *Miketben*, The Two Row Wampum Belt [gus-when-ta] 'symbolizes the agreement under which the Iroquois/Haudenosaunee welcomed the white peoples to their lands,' thus:

We will NOT be like father and son, but like brothers. These TWO ROWS will symbolize vessels, travelling down the same river together. One will be for the Original People, their laws, their customs, and the other for the European people and their laws and customs. We will each travel the river together, but each in our own boat. And neither of us will try to steer the other's vessel.

According to the treaty as documented on this site, 'the Whiteman said': 'I understand, I confirm what YOU have said, that this will be everlasting as long as there is Mother Earth. WE have confirmed this and OUR generation to come shall never forget what WE have Agreed.'

Steadily driven west, corralled onto Native Reserves whose territorial expanse was gradually but irrepressibly and irretrievably diminished; impoverished, alienated and incarcerated by the economic, religious, legal and governmental attitudes and policies of powerful colonial and colonising peoples, there is little evidence of adherence to original contractual agreement between self-governing, self-constituted, independent nations. After more than three hundred years of 'bad faith', attempted restitution of indigenous rights and re-negotiation of equitable relationship between indigenous and settler nations has been initiated through the determined actions of First Nations peoples. The wampum belts of Nadia Myre's artistic project, *Cont(r)act*, are a significant contribution to this political and cultural work in progress. The project features two 'Two-Row' wampum belts. 'Monument to Two-Row, Revised' is a twenty-first century revision of 'Two-Row'. [fig. 6] Fabricated from pink and white glass beads and synthetic fibre, it is mounted on canvas and encased in an aluminium metal frame (reminiscent of the canoe). In the tradition of war monuments, it is monumental in size and, like those monuments, is a memorial to lives lost and, in this case, a trust betrayed. Like the names, traditionally etched into stone, of those who gave their lives in the White man's wars, each bead might be seen to be representative of the single unit of the individual life that is now woven into a belt of Red community. It might even be said that a belt of faith has become a belt of condolence. This belt insists upon remembrance of contractual agreement between nations — it has a presence that is very difficult to ignore — but in the nature of its shiny, sharp and beautiful solidity it is not only a belt of mourning but also a celebration of original treaty and speaks to the possibility of re-negotiation of equitable relations between nations and peoples. It is the original belt given twenty-first century form, thus it is a belt that connects original peoples to contemporary life. It remembers history whilst refusing consignment to the past.

The companion piece to 'Monument' is a sombre reminder of the suffering attendant on European 'settlement' of North America. [fig. 7] Fabricated from paint on canvas and imitation sinew, this belt is skeletal in appearance — its two rows reminiscent of the human spine. As such it might be read as the skeleton and the scarring that lies beneath the smooth pink surface flesh of 'Monument Revised'. The title of the belt, 'Portrait as a River, Divided', is reminder of the river down which the two nations of the original contract were to travel in peace — 'separately together'. The history of relations since that contract would suggest not only a confederacy of nations divided against each other — a river divided — but the creation and growth of a terrible internal division in the Canadian children of mixed descent like Nadia Myre. 'Portrait as a River, Divided' is as much a poignant self-portrait of division as it is a portrait of a divided national community. Yet Nadia Myre's work has a strength that refuses the comfort of nostalgia or self-pity. Its strength lies in the solidity and vibrancy of sculpture that creates links between past and present, tradition and modernity, individual and community. Although

the two halves of her inheritance might be unequal, she would fix them together such that the single canoe might travel whole and intact; but two such disparate materials join uneasily. The proof of seal lies in the quality of workmanship — the faith, the skill and the perseverance — of the joining.

Two men make a bargain whose seal of faith is born by the woman — she is the join but she was not asked nor did she consent to be that join ... and yet the bargain is described as 'faithfully carried out on both sides': is this the ire in Nadia Myre's desire?²

NOTES

¹ Sieur de Diérevelle, *Relation of the Voyage to Port Royal in Acadia or New France, 1699–1700*, quoted in Olive Patricia Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times*, OUP, Toronto, 1997, p. 144.

² Reference is made here to a painting in which Nadia Myre articulates the ire in desire, an image of which is unavailable for publication.

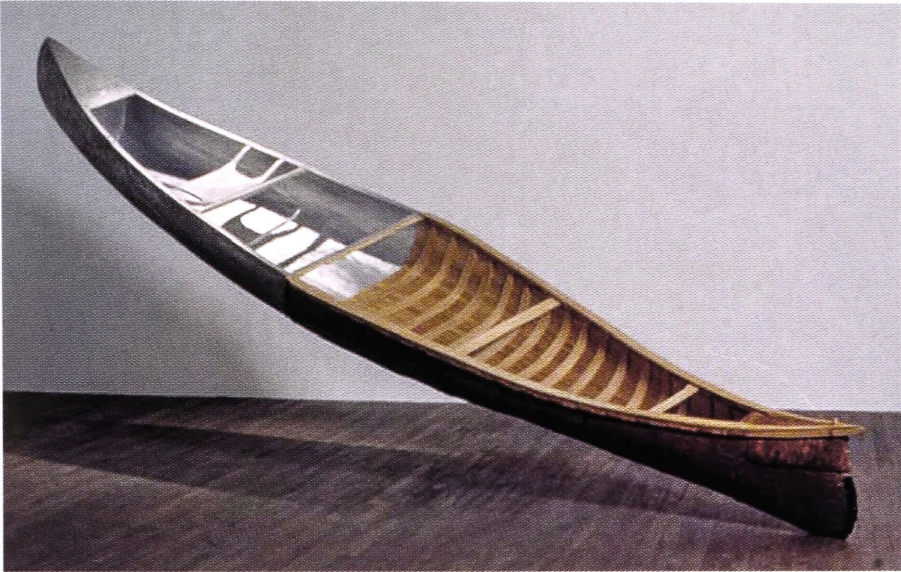


Figure 1. 'History in Two Parts',
Birch bark, cedar, ash, spruce root and gum, aluminium, 14' x 4' x 3', 2001

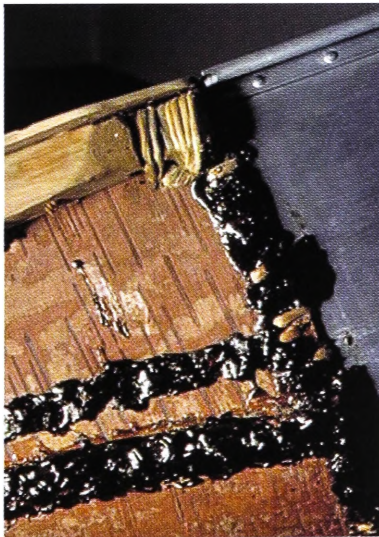


Figure 2. 'History in Two Parts', detail

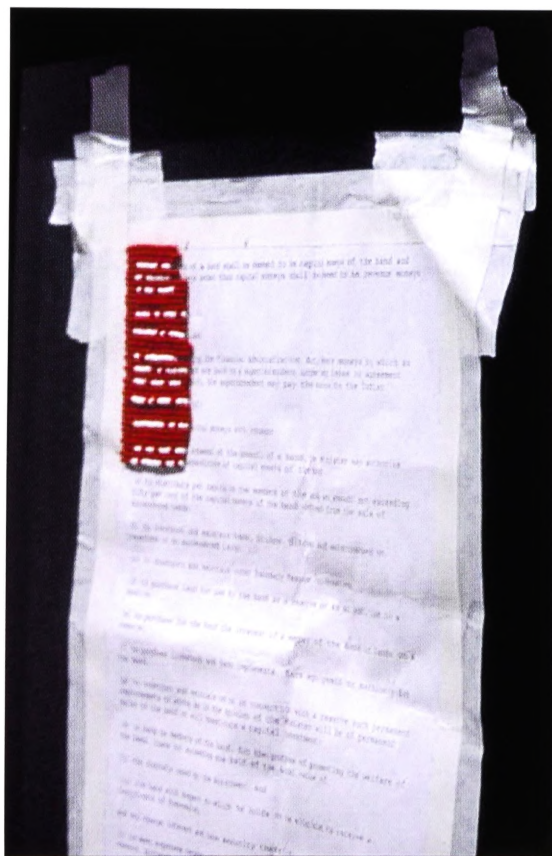


Figure 4. 'Indian Act', detail of page 28

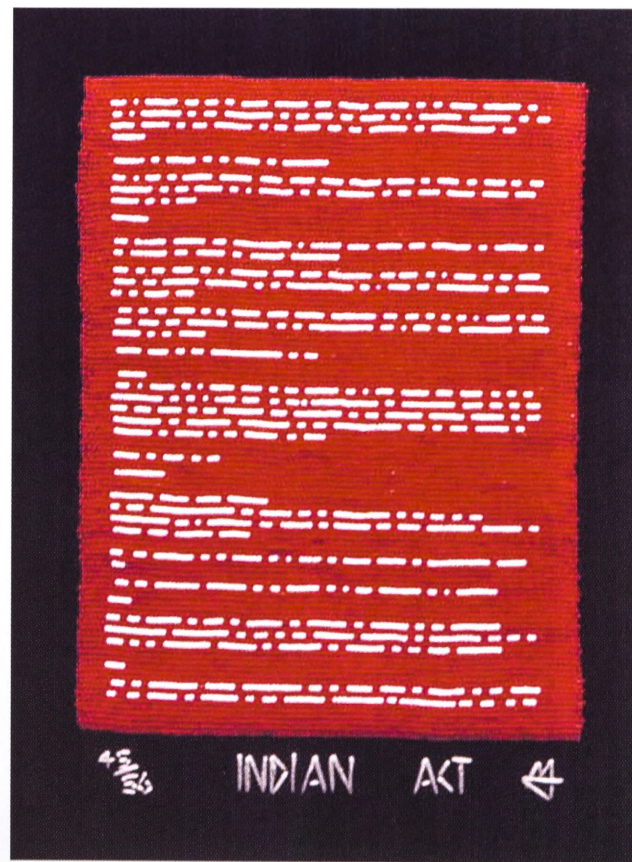


Figure 5. 'Indian Act', detail of page 45



Figure3. 'Indian Act' (all 56 pages),
Stroud cloth, Indian Act, beads, thread, wood frame 4' x 2" x 40' (1 page: 18" x 2" x 15") 2000–2002

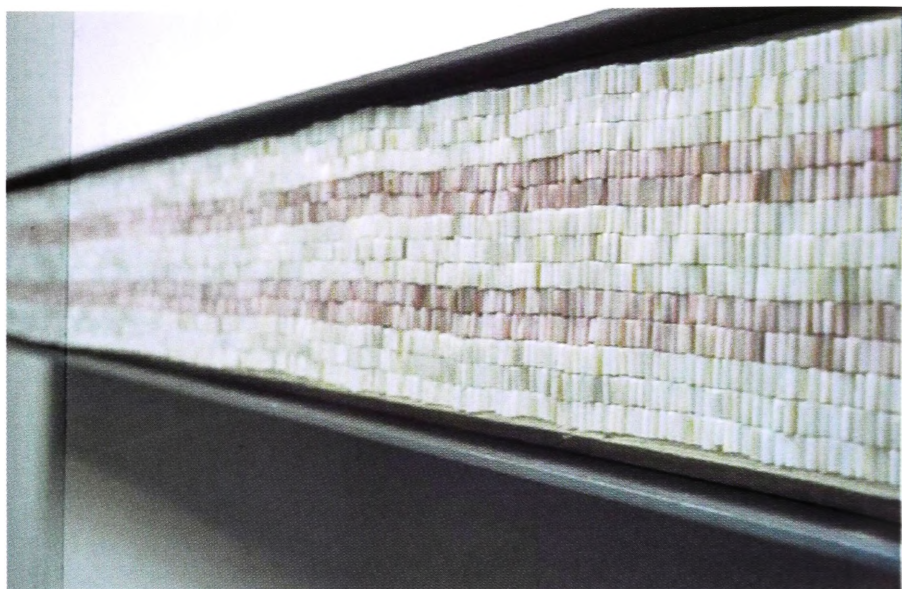


Figure 6. 'Monument to Two-Row, Revised'
Wampum, imitation sinew, aluminium frame, 4' x 2" x 3.5', 2002

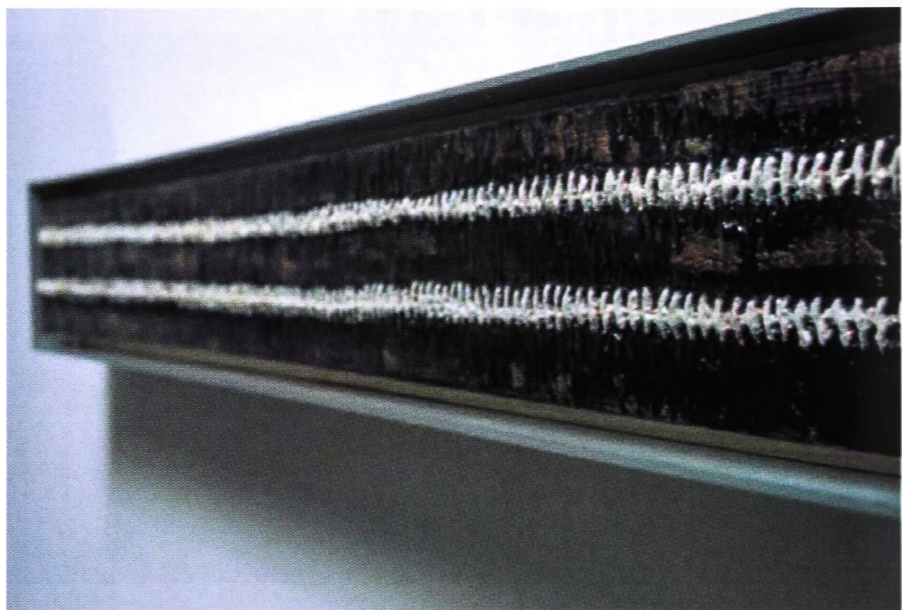


Figure 7. 'Portrait as a River, Divided'
Canvas, acrylic, oil, resin, imitation sinew, aluminium frame, 4' x 2" x 3.5', 2002