10,000 Drowned: Commemorating the Caribou

A Comprehensive Support Paper for the Exhibition

10,000 Drowned

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By

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Margaret Grace Orr, candidate for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts, has presented an Exhibition titled, 10,000 Drowned, and a Support Paper titled, 10,000 Drowned: Commemorating the Caribou, in an oral examination held on November 29, 2019. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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Committee Member: Prof. Leesa Streifler, Department of Visual Arts

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Chair of Defense: Dr. Kathleen Irwin, Faculty of Media, Art, and Performance
ABSTRACT

This exhibition commemorates a caribou herd that drowned during their fall migration in 1984. The disaster occurred when Hydro-Quebec opened the Caniapiscau reservoir spill gates two hundred and seventy miles upstream from Limestone Falls on the Caniapiscau River. This caused the river level to rise and send a torrent of water towards the Ungava Bay. At their traditional river crossing, thousands of caribou were swept over the falls and drowned. This paper supports my MFA graduating exhibition, *10,000 Drowned*, installed in The Fifth Parallel Gallery from November 25 to December 6, 2019.

*10,000 Drowned* is an installation of six large oil paintings representing the land, sky, water, fire, four directions, and the migration of caribou. There are also four large ceramic vessels representing air, water, land, and fire, and one hundred ceramic antlers representing the lost caribou. In addition, a video installation shows the caribou’s point of view as they travel over the land and then drown. The exhibition is my delayed response to my anguish over this disaster.

I grew up on the land situated around the Chisasibi River in Northern Quebec. Through my Cree and Inuit relatives, I absorbed a lot of knowledge about how to live with the land and animals; how to survive using only basic of tools. These teachings come from how we relate with the natural environment and with one another. This paper describes my life and community. This background is essential to understanding the meaning of the caribou and this event in our lives. Through stories and by reflecting on my research process, I hope to offer insight into how contemporary forms of Indigenous art-making continue from traditional Cree knowledge practices. I returned to the site of the drownings many times. I mapped the caribou migration territory from a bird’s-eye view. I talked to elders and others about this event. But it was only...
when I took this experiential research method to a deeper embodied level that I got close to the meaning of this event. Only by submerging myself in icy water, feeling what drowning was like, was I able to complete my connection with these beings.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are quite a few people who guided and helped me while I explored my thesis and worked on my research, art practice and paper writing process for the two and a half years it took to complete my MFA at the University of Regina. Thank you people and faculty.

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I am grateful for the Aboriginal Centre organizers for creating a positive place to be in to study, write, visit and exchange Indigenous ways of knowing and news, listen to guest speakers, and to eat a good meal or two.

I will never forget my dear friends and colleagues I met during these past few years. It was quite the emotional and intellectual journey we went through together as we explored, created and dialogued the many facets of art making.
DEDICATION

For my dear friend, Anne Marie Awashish, who I spent many a day conversing about caribou, caribou hunting and hunters, politics and sociology of hunting, days past, present and future, and everything else. She encouraged me to continue on with this project when I felt like discontinuing because I wanted to go home so badly. Now she is with her ancestors, dancing with the caribou and the northern lights. When the caribou again number in the hundreds of thousands we will feast and give thanks.
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INTRODUCTION

In late September of 1984, ten thousand caribou drowned while trying to cross the Caniapiscau River near Limestone Falls, Quebec. They perished because Hydro-Quebec opened the reservoir spill gates two hundred and seventy miles upstream. The resulting torrent of water swept the caribou over the falls. Water entering their lungs causing embolisms. The rocks at the bottom of the falls broke their bones. More than thirty years have passed and the emotional impact persists. My children are grown and I finally have time to commemorate the loss. This paper supports my MFA graduating exhibition, 10,000 Drowned, installed in The Fifth Parallel Gallery from November 25 to December 6, 2019. It describes my feelings about the tragedy, the plight of the caribou, why this tragedy had such a profound impact on the people and how it is tied to colonization. I will then describe the exhibition and its making in detail. I will also explain my experiential research methodology, how I use embodied empathy to discover, create, and broadcast emotional meaning.

10,000 Drowned is an installation of six large paintings, four large ceramic vessels, one hundred ceramic antlers, and a projected video showing the caribou’s point of view as they travel over the land and then drown. For the six paintings: “Land Water” is an aerial view of the Caniapiscau River and Limestone Falls, “Water Sky” depicts the vastness of the water and the feeling that it blends into the sky, “Painted Hide” is a painted detail of a design on a painted caribou-skin coat, “Land Fire” is a painting of land as though on fire, “Caribou” shows a caribou in front of a design that is on an ancient painted caribou-skin coat, and “Caribou Travel” shows a herd of caribou traveling. The ceramic antlers are almost life size and hint at the magnitude of the disaster. The large ceramic vessels represent the four elements: water, air, earth and fire. The video installation has three sequences that show walking around on the land, being under water
in a rapids, and swimming under still water. Over these sequences is my voice reciting my poem, “I am Caribou.” I am an activist responding to environmental crises by giving visual voice to the animals who cannot describe their plight. I want everyone to see, hear and feel how Quebec’s hydro-electric project affected and continues to affect the caribou and people who live in the Caniapiscau region.

My painting, sculpture, writing and photography are guided by experiential research. My research consists of frequent visits to my home territory, consultation with elders and knowledge keepers, and physical embodiments at the site of the drowning. Even in the studio, I try to put myself in the mindset and bodies of my ancestors and these animals. I try to see the land as they do. My research and studio work reaffirms my connection to the land and the caribou. Through my work, I affirm our existence on land that has sustained us since time immemorial. My research and art are ceremony for the caribou, ourselves and for others. Shawn Wilson explains that research is ceremony:

In our cultures an integral part of any ceremony is setting the stage properly. When ceremonies take place, everyone who is participating needs to be ready to step beyond the everyday and to accept a raised state of consciousness. You could say that the specific rituals that make up the ceremony are designed to get the participants into a state of mind that will allow for the extraordinary to take place. As one Elder explained it to me: if it is possible to get every person in a room thinking about the exact same thing for only two seconds, then a miracle will happen.¹

What makes my project a ceremony? The very fact that I acknowledge the caribou and everything that sustains it is ceremony. Appreciating the sacredness of life is a ritual, a ceremony giving thanks for a good life, no matter what trials and errors I encounter along the way. When I research the caribou, land and people I take a sacred journey. I dig deeper into a subject I already know. When something reveals itself to me this opens up my consciousness to become more

aware of what is beneath a surface I only skidded over before this research. When I acknowledge this revealing and am grateful for it, this is a ceremony. That is what we do when we have a feast. It is a ceremony to thank the caribou for revealing itself to the hunter so that others may live.

The processes of reacting to my research by making paintings, sculpture, film and poetry are also ceremony. They are sacred acts that bring to life an object for everyone to see. For me, it is a process that comes from within my creative realm and out through my body. Because I am alive, what I choose to share with others is ceremony. What they see in my work, I hope revitalizes an awareness about the interconnectedness between the caribou, land and Indigenous people. Exhibitions are ceremonies in the way that they bring people together and works to raise the viewer’s consciousness.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND AND INSPIRATION

I grew up beside the Chisasibi River in Northern Quebec. My Cree and Inuit relatives, taught me how to live with the land using only the most basic tools. We have close connections with our environment, and our art shows these connections. The patterns and designs on snowshoes, clothing, spiritual items, and tools reflect what we experience and show our respect to the animals. These traditions are passed from generation to generation. As a child, I watched my mother. From her hands came beautifully adorned objects, such as embroidered leather moccasins and leather bowls. I watched colors form shapes and lines of flowers, leaves, animals, trees, people, sun, moon, stars, and water. Her name is Gracie Snowboy Herodier. Many know her work. She was paid for her embroidery and bead work in money, wild meat, hides, and furs. She was also an excellent drawer, depicting scenes of traditional life in India ink. Nature was her
inspiration, and, nature is where she came from. Through my mother, I learned how the land and all the creatures are beautiful. As often as she could, she took us canoeing, walking, swimming, fishing, berry picking, hunting, and camping. We lived on the land. Our meat and fish came from the environment we lived in. And it was good.

I travelled many miles by canoe and foot, but not as many as my mother. Her family travelled hundreds of miles for food and work. They took canoes and dog teams back and forth between Richmond Gulf, Whapmagoostui and Chisasibi. Her father, Ernest Herodier, provided for his family by hunting, trading, working construction, interpreting, and guiding up and down the coast of James Bay, Hudson Bay, the Hudson Strait, Ungava Bay, and the interior of Northern Quebec, and Labrador. I asked him if he ever saw the Atlantic Ocean. He said that he did one time by canoe. I looked at the river systems on a map. Sure enough, one can travel about one thousand and seven hundred kilometres from Whapmagoostui, Quebec to Northwest River, Labrador by canoe. Grandfather could speak Cree, Inuktitut, French and English. Mom’s Inuit mother, Mina Fleming, spoke and read only Inuktitut but learned to speak Cree when she moved to Chisasibi with her husband. She spoke no English or French. I grew up speaking Cree and English, but not Inuktitut. In school, I learned French. My Scottish father, John Patrick Orr, spoke and read English and Gaelic. He played the accordion, and excelled at leather work. My mother spoke and read Cree and English and a bit of Inuktitut. Oral narrative is a prominent feature of my mother’s family and community. I liked what I learned about land, incredible feats of survival, legends of heroes and tricksters, lives of animals, and changes of weather, water, land and seasons.

From 1967 to 1981, I lived in the isolated Cree village of Fort George. In Cree it was called Minshtuk (island) and is on the Chisasibi River. The island is a sandbar covered with
spruce, pine, and willows. There were hardly any trees in the village and no fences separated neighbors. In the summer, we spent a lot of time cycling, swimming, climbing trees, fishing, and playing games. In the fall, we went by boat to the mouth of the river, and along James Bay to pick berries, fish, and hunt birds. In the winter, we played in snowstorms, went sliding and skating, explored the other side of the river, got Christmas trees, and hunted rabbits and ptarmigan. Larger game animals were left for the adults. In the spring, we played in the water from melting snow, went ice fishing, hunted snow buntings with sling shots and nets, forgot to come home in time for meals, and watched the ice break on the river. Our village had no television. Movie nights at the Parish Hall, or the R.C. Mission, were good places to meet friends. Someone opened a hamburger joint with a juke box. We’d go there to eat and listen to classic rock and country music.

I have a lot of cousins. We had sleepovers, sometimes at our grandparent’s house. My grandfather had the last dog team on the island. I helped feed the dogs. In the village, there were weddings, feasts, and dances to live fiddle music until early morning. There was story telling by elders in a meechuap (tipi). Sometimes the meechuap was so full that those listening outside stuck their heads between and under the canvas tarps hoping to catch sight of the storyteller physically animating the story. After a rainstorm, people gathered along the riverbank to watch the sunset. At night, we watched the northern lights and falling stars. I used to lie still on the ground to listen to nature all around me. Walks with my mother were educational. She pointed out the different plants and animals. One time, she said as she touched a leaf on a willow bush, “You don’t have to go to church to pray. God is all around us.” These are the things that influenced my earlier artwork. I only made work about the beauty of nature.
My paintings are mostly images of land, water, sky, people and animals. As a child, I was always making something. I was eleven the first time I tried oil paints. My uncle Gilbert, my mother’s younger brother, stayed with us for almost a year before he married and got a house of his own. He used to live in Montreal. He worked for the National Film Board and studied at the National Theatre School of Canada. Gilbert had oil paints and a small easel and showed me how to use them. I made a painting of a duck floating amongst the reeds and gave it to him. He still has it. He also showed us children how to do improve games, skits, and make up our own plays. Other than what I was already doing with drawing, watercolors, plasticene and clay, this was my introduction to another realm of the creative arts.

To this day, in the spring and autumn, Cree families leave the communities to hunt, cook, and eat together at centuries old campsites. We hunt geese during their migration. I love the seasonal change. There is a communal meechuap with an open fire. Spruce boughs are laid on the ground to keep our clothing dry and the cooking utensils and food clean. Fragrant spruce boughs are also laid in our canvas tents. A wood stove keeps us warm. In the mornings, we wake to sounds of birds chirping. If one is lucky, someone has already made a fire and a pot of tea. Sometimes the weather is clear. The bright warm sun shines over the land and the saltwater bay. The air is as fresh and clear as the water we drink from the spring. These are the things I am reminded of when I recreate the Canada goose in paint. People from my territory like to have artwork that represents geese because it reminds them of the same things. In elementary school, I saw so many drawings and paintings of geese flying, landing, and swimming. To make art about the natural environment is a ceremony about life.

The 1970s brought big changes. Hydro-Quebec came to our territory. They dammed the Chisasibi River. This causes rapid land erosion and destabilizes the winter ice, making travel
unpredictable. So, in 1980, we had to move the village of Fort George from the island to the mainland. The village is now called Chisasibi. After then, we were told not to eat the fish. The dam flooded the lands bringing high levels of mercury into the water which then builds up in the food chain.

I read and watched the news. I learned that these things were happening all over the world. I started to make art about these terrible things. An early drawing was about the electrical currents we could feel as we drove beneath the massive power lines that stretch from LGI to Montreal. One time, I asked the driver to stop the truck and we got out. We could hear the power lines whine. I could feel my body vibrating. I didn’t like the feeling, so I got back in the truck and told the driver to get us out of there. I imagined animals and people affected by this and while we were driving I drew a grotesque form with a human body and a fish tail, rotting and hanging from the tip of a spear that was thrust into the ground. In the background is a sunset and spruce trees.

Figure 1. Margaret Orr. *Untitled.* (Pen, watercolor, 4” x 6”, 1996).
Around 1988 I began getting public art commissions. I was especially honored to paint on a boat that was brought from Whapmagoostui to Chisasibi by dog team in the early spring of 1990. It was an Odeyak—a canoe/kayak—made by a seventy-year old Inuit man to protest the damming of the Whapmagoostui River. An Inuk artist from Whapmagoostui and I painted a band of rainbows on its sides. We also painted some of the animals who live in the territory of the river and were directly affected by the flooding. We had only four days to finish it before its trip. It went to Ottawa by road, and then was paddled from Ottawa to New York City by way of the St. Lawrence Seaway.

Later, the Odeyak journeyed around Vermont with Cree and Inuit leaders teaching people about all the damage the damming of the Whapmagoostui River would cause. On March 28, 1992, New York governor, Mario Cuomo, intervened in negotiations between New York Power Authority and Hydro-Quebec. The contract was cancelled. Cuomo said they didn’t want to put money into the project due to the catastrophic effect it would have on the environment. It was bad enough that other mighty rivers in Northern Quebec were already destroyed by hydroelectric dams. Painting on the Odeyak was an opportunity for me to contribute to the fight to protect the environment. I was very pleased knowing this.

In the winter of 1992, I was asked to paint murals for the LG2 airport. I hesitated, but my people use the airport too, so I accepted the job. My original submission sketches were about land and water. The final paintings were a little different. They included a tipi, cooking pots and a loon decoy. When the Société Development de la Baie James (SDBJ), asked why I didn’t stick to my submission drawings, I answered that I felt like I had to give a place back to my people. The land was taken from them. I used to feel like an alien in my own territory when I was in the LG2 airport. Other people felt the same way. Later, SDBJ asked me if I would show my work in
New York City. They would cover my travel, accommodations, and expenses. I declined. I knew
that they wanted to use me as a public relations tool. I didn’t want to represent a company who is
destroying the land.

CARIBOU DROWNING

I learned about the damming of the Chisasibi River in the mid-1970s when I was 12. The
students and teachers assembled in the auditorium to hear our leaders tell us about the James Bay
Project. It was signed and soon many strangers would arrive on our territory. James Reilly, our
lawyer, explained that they tried really hard but could not stop the project. Everyone was silent
and shocked. Nobody moved. I didn’t know what I was feeling. I was confused because I had
never been to such a meeting before. It felt like someone everybody knew had died suddenly. At
the fishing camp later that year, we sat around in the tent after breakfast. My grandfather spoke
to the boys and young men. I was sitting behind him and could see everybody looking at him
with big eyes. He was really upset. He said that the dam would change many things. I never
heard him so angry. He kept saying “fuck.” I thought only young people said that word. I was
shocked but knew that what he was talking about was really serious. I never forgot his pain he
was expressing to us. When I was 14 years old our teacher took my class to visit the LG2 dam.
Standing on the sighting platform overlooking the dam, I remembered his pain and I began to
feel sick.

Since then, I have witnessed devastating changes to our environment. When the reservoir
gates are opened the Chisasibi River current is so strong that it is too hard to paddle a canoe
upstream. I have to walk my canoe along the shore to get home. The current changes often and
quickly, sometimes over the course of one afternoon. Erosion causes large tracts of land to fall
into the river; causing more silt to be washed downstream and deposited at the mouth of the river. The dramatic increase of fresh water flowing into James Bay has lowered the salinity of the bay, affecting the eelgrass that many animals depend upon.

In the summer of 1989, when my children were little, my mother wanted to set her fishnet in the shallow waters at the mouth of the river, beside Governor’s Island. She used to catch a lot of fish there before she got married. One morning, we went by motor canoe to set her fishnet before the tide got high. At the end of the day, when the tide was low again, we went to check the net. The current was very strong. We had a hard time finding the net because it had been dragged under water by dirt and dead vegetation brought there from upriver. My cousin had to help me because the net was so heavy from all the debris. There were no fish. Mom was silent for a long time. She had tears in her eyes. She said that the river is no longer the same because of the dams. Later that week, she told me that her cousin, Noah, had stopped setting nets there a long time ago because of the strong current and debris. He also said that they don’t hunt there anymore either; the animals don’t come because the eelgrass is gone.

One of the more devastating catastrophes to happen was the drowning of the caribou on the Caniapiscau River. Interviewed by Sports Illustrated Magazine about the scene, French biologist Didier Lehenaff remembered:

That evening they made camp just below the point where the Caniapiscau flows into the larger Koksoak River. Limestone Falls was 30 miles upstream. During the night Lehenaff noticed the body of a caribou floating in the middle of the river. He thought it strange that the carcass had drifted this far, but figured the river was high enough to carry a caribou a good way. The next morning as the sun came up Lehenaff awoke to find “beaucoup, beaucoup” [many] carcasses afloat in the Koksoak.  

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I remember, when I heard about this news on CBC radio. I was so shocked that I dropped to my knees and cried. The radio was saying that Hydro-Quebec claimed, “It was an act of God. It had rained a lot.”³ I thought, “God didn’t open the spill gates.” I was angry and wished I could do something about this lie. A lot of people knew it was a lie and talked about it. Some even wrote about it. In *Voices of the Odeyak*, Michael Posluns mentions what Jim Higgens, an environmentalist from Vermont, said about Hydro’s excuse,

I happened to be in Ungava just before that happened… I know that when I was up there, on the George, people were saying that the river was so low that the salmon had not come up to the fishing camps. Then suddenly, Hydro-Quebec was saying that there had been torrential rains all through September, which really was not true. It would have taken many days’ rain to raise the river levels because of the retention capability of the ground cover of sphagnum moss. Hydro-Quebec had just finished their dikes on the Caniapiscau reservoir.⁴

I wanted to visit the site, but I could not because I had three young children and no financial resources. I wanted to do something to help bring awareness to the situation, but at that time I didn’t know what to do. Life went on and, being a single mother, I had to work hard to put a roof over our heads and put food on the table. Later, I pursued a career in education which led to doing a Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of Regina. It was in Regina that I was finally able to research and make art about this incident.

**THE EXHIBITION**

There are six paintings in the exhibition. On the gallery’s south wall hangs “Land Water” and “Painted Hide.” “Sky Water” and “Land Fire” hang on the west wall. All four paintings are 5’ x 5’. The north wall features four smaller panels titled “Caribou Travel,” (2 @ 32” x 40”, 2 @

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³ These are the words I remember being said on the radio. They never left me.
16” x 20”). Next to it are “Caribou,” (4’ x 5’). All are oil on canvas. Further down that wall is a video projection, “10,000 Drowned,” with a poem, “I am Caribou,” narrated over it.

Four large ceramic vessels are arranged on the floor to correspond with four of the paintings. These vessels, “Air,” “Earth,” “Water,” and “Fire,” represent the four elements. The smallest vessel is about 11” wide and 14” high, and the largest is 24” wide and 21” high. Three vessels sit on a pedestal beside the painting it corresponds with. “Earth” sits on the floor between “Land Water” and “Painted Hide.” On the floor in the middle of the gallery is “Antlers”: one hundred antlers representing the ten thousand caribou who drowned.

The exhibition is not a display only about the terror of drowning and the sad aftermath. I also want people to feel the beauty of the animals, earth, and Cree culture. Will they feel empathy for the caribou who struggle to survive? Will they see how Indigenous people are connected to the land and the caribou? I hope they gain insight into a big part of being caribou and will feel compelled to learn more about the devastating effects caused by large hydro-electric projects.

**Paintings**

“Land Water” describes the Caniapiscau River at the Limestone Falls area. Using a very small brush and semi-transparent brown, green, and blue glazes I replicate the intricate topography of that area as seen from a bird's-eye view. While I was painting *Land Water*, I remembered the land around Chisasibi and other places in Eeyou Istchee that I traveled over that has old mountain bedrock, swamps, lakes, rivers, trees, and tundra. In the painting, we can see where the tundra is barren of trees, creating a clear path that leads to Limestone Falls for the caribou to follow. The river shoreline is red, representing water as the earth’s bloodline and also the drowning of the
caribou. At Limestone Falls, the water has a glaze of red paint to represent the blood of the wasted caribou.

“Painted Hide” is a close up of one of the centuries old caribou-skin coat decorations. The coats were painted to thank the caribou for giving their lives so people could live. After the arrival of European trade systems in Northern Quebec (1668), the art of Indigenous painting on caribou-skin coats gradually switched to sewing on leather with embroidery thread and beads. I
found a book about painting on caribou hides\textsuperscript{5} and realized that the designs my mother sewed onto her duffel and leather work are similar to the designs in the book. I made the connection of the switch from painting to sewing. Through practice, my work wants to reverse this shift where I go back to painting the designs; using contemporary materials for now and someday using caribou skin and the original paints as made by my ancestors.

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Margaret Orr. \textit{Painted Hide}. (Acrylic on canvas, 5’x5’, 2018).}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{5} Dorothy Burnham. \textit{To Please the Caribou: Painted Caribou-skin Coats Worn by the Naskapi, Montagnais, and Cree Hunters of the Quebec/Labrador Peninsula}. Toronto, Ontario: Royal Ontario Museum, 1992.
There are thousands of ponds, lakes, creeks and rivers in Northern Quebec. I depict the vastness of water in this area in “Water Sky.” The painting is covered with a glaze of light blue so that the white gesso shows through. The light and free flowing crisscrossed brushstrokes are like bodies of air and water interacting with each other. Where the paint overlaps, the blue looks darker. There is a feeling of motion. Barely visible are light blue geese flying in the bottom right corner. One can view this painting as if from above looking down on the water, or as if from below looking up to the sky. I wanted to create a feeling of floating.

Figure 4. Margaret Orr. Water Sky. (Oil on canvas, 5’ x 5’, 2018).
“Land Fire” is painted with yellows, orange, red, and a reddish black. Rather than paint fire itself, I painted the land and sky alive with movement of fire on earth and the sun. I used big brushes, palette knifes and quick applications of paint. Fire provides the heat and light necessary for all things to grow and survive. The land is on fire. Above the horizon of the flames, there are five crossing in front of the sun but they are barely noticeable. I lino cut printed them onto the canvas using very light pink acrylic paint. When this was dry, I painted yellow lightly over them so they almost disappear. This is how things look when they are in front of the sun.

Figure 5. Margaret Orr. *Land Fire*. (Acrylic on canvas, 5’ x 5’, 2019).
The sun is fire, it warms the Earth and provides light to help plants grow. Fire is also utilized by people for warmth, cooking, and light. When there is a ceremony, like the Walking Out Ceremony, a fire is lit inside the centre of the meechuap before any of the participants are allowed to enter. This fire is kept burning the whole day until nightfall. Before anyone eats, a small portion of every dish is put into the fire to thank the animals and Creator. This is only one example of how fire is used in ceremonies that bring people together. I gave my children their walking out ceremonies, and that is how we did it.

“Caribou Travel” shows a small herd of caribou travelling over the tundra at night. The sky is black and the land has different values of light blue. There are four panels, two big ones, 32” x 40”, side by side in the middle and two smaller ones, 16” x 20”, on each side of them. There is a male white caribou on the left big panel, and a female white caribou on the right big panel. Each caribou has the aura of yellow around them and ahead of each are two white and yellow circles. On the smaller panels there are three white and yellow circles, representing the rest of the herd. The circles are inspired by what Emily Matthew told me, when I went to visit her in Chisasibi. She said that her mother and grandmother told her that the dots on the painted caribou skin coats represent people. To me, caribou are people too. This is supported by my Cree language where they are not “what”, but are “who.”

Figure 6. Caribou Travel. Margaret Orr. (Oil on canvas, 2 @ 32” x 40” and 2 @ 16” x 20”, 2019).
“Caribou” also has a close up of a design that was painted on a caribou-skin coat. The design is a circle with a cross in the centre of it representing the four directions. There is a white caribou in front of it, walking, like it is entering into the space occupied by the design. For me, this represents the spirits of the caribou entering into the land of the living and travelling into the four directions of north, south, east, and west.

Figure 7. Margaret Orr. Caribou. (Acrylic and oil on canvas, 4’ x 5’, 2019).

Antlers:
One hundred antlers are placed on the floor in the middle of the gallery to symbolize the drowned caribou found lying along the riverbanks. The drowning was unprecedented. At first,
people didn’t know what to do with the bodies. Their antlers were sawed off. Then, in batches of ten, the corpses were tied together by their hind legs, hoisted up into the air by helicopter, and dropped where they would not contaminate the river.

Figure 8. Margaret Orr. Antlers. (Ceramic, 11’ x 11’, 2019).

Vessels

The four elements—air, water, earth, and fire—are essential for life. I created four ceramic vessels to symbolize these elements. Clay is earth, water is in clay, and oxygen in air is needed to make fire to transform the clay into a substance hard enough to contain water and other edible objects needed to stay alive. Archaeological sites in Northern Quebec have uncovered shards of ceramic vessels that date long before the arrival of Europeans.

The first vessel is “Water.” Water is in a constant state of movement. It is hot, cold, frozen, gaseous, rushing, calm, full of food or not full of food, full of oxygen or not full of
oxygen. All living things need water. Some need more than others. Water is home for many animals. Because most fish have scales, I made clay circles like scales and attached them together in the shape of a vase and painted it blue. The water vessel stands upright on a pedestal.

Figure 9. Margaret Orr. Water. (Ceramic, oil, 14” x 11” x11”, 2019).

Next is “Air.” I thought about the composition of air, how we need the oxygen in it to breathe. Rain needs air; it is what holds up the clouds. Birds and insects need air to fly and fire needs oxygen to burn. Even the earth needs air. Elements in the air regulate how much sunlight and heat reach the earth. What kind of vessel could I make to symbolize air? Birds fly through
air, so I made clay wings and attached them together in the shape of a vase and left it white. This vessel stands upright on a pedestal.

The biggest vessel is “Earth.” It is the planet we live on. It holds minerals essential for life. It is covered with water and land, sheltered by air and heated by fire. It is always changing. It is hot, cold, dry, wet, safe, dangerous, and full of food, not full of food, sheltering or barren, dark,
light, and always here. I embossed willow and pine branches into slabs of clay and attached them together in the shape of a vase and painted it brown and green. This vessel sits on the floor.

“Fire” was the most challenging vessel to make. How does one symbolize fire with clay?

Fire keeps us warm. It burns away old plant growth and new plants grow in their place. The sun is fire and makes light and heat. It evaporates water into rain. It helps plants grow. I have seen a lot of forest fires. They cause destruction but also rebirth. I remember times I was so cold when winter temperatures dropped all of a sudden. Fire in a wood stove saved me from hypothermia.
The vessel is made of different sizes of clay slabs which stand upright like flames and are covered with white slip. White because when fire is really hot, the flames are white. The white flames are nestled in black flames that spread out sideways. These black ceramic flames represents burnt matter from a fire. The black is made using acrylic paint.

Figure 12. Margaret Orr. Fire. (Ceramic, acrylic, 19” x 23 ½” x 17”, 2019).

**Video**

Footage for the video, “10,000 Drowned,” was filmed in Northern Quebec. The video starts with scenes of walking through the bush and on bedrock on top of an old mountain. After a
few minutes into this scene, the voice over is my poem where at first the caribou introduces itself and its travel. When the caribou starts describing its drowning, the scene changes to being underwater in a rapids. When the voice over stops, the last scene is of swimming under still water.

The first sequence was shot in a new growth forest on top of an old mountain in Nemaska. I tried to record the impression of walking over the land from the caribou’s point of view. The underwater sequence was shot at a small rapids near Nemaska. I slowed down the video to see the movement and hear the sound of the water as it sped past the camera. I wanted to capture what it must have looked like for the caribou as they were drowning. I filmed the third sequence in still water. Snorkeling with the camera, I imagining myself as a caribou’s spirit swimming under the water after it drowned. The voice-over narration is a poem that portrays the caribou travelling over land and drowning. I wrote it during the first month of my MFA. I thought about caribou herds and the sound their hooves make when they are running. At first, the only thing I could hear in my mind was that “chilk” sound their hooves and antlers make when they’re knocked together. I started my poem with that word I made up, and the rest of the poem just poured out. The caribou describes itself, where it travels, the drowning, and those who caused it. I originally thought of the poem as an audio loop. While walking on the land in the summer of 2018, I realized the poem belonged in the video.

SOME EXAMPLES OF THE INSPIRATION AND PROCESS BEHIND MY IDEAS

Idea for Vessels
I got the idea to make the ceramic vessels while talking with my friend Brenda Danbrook about Indigenous ceramic vessels and pit firing. I told her about the clay I found along the shores of Champion Lake in the summer of 2017 and made six small bowls from it. Two were made with just the clay. The other four included sand for strength. The clay was fine and sticky; very different from store bought clay. I fired the pots on top of an old mountain in a natural sand pit. A recent forest fire conveniently provided burnt jack pines right beside where I dug the firing pit. I made a big fire to dry out the pit and then placed the dried bowls onto the embers. After covering the bowls with pine needles and cones, I built a big fire over them and kept it going for four hours. I picked blueberries, never wandering too far away from the fire. Once the fire died to embers, I covered the pit with plywood. The next morning, the pit was still hot. I left it uncovered to cool until late afternoon, then I pulled out the bowls. All survived but one.

Brenda and I talked about the shapes of Indigenous vessels and how they would have been used. I carried the conversation further by saying the vessels can also symbolize something and that I was going to make vessels to symbolize the four elements. Brenda looked at me in surprise and said she had never thought of that before. I went on to explain that all living things need the four elements to survive. Those who know this, hold all these elements close to their knowledge. Also, these elements are used to make ceramic vessels. Without them, there can be no vessels and vessels help people survive.

Idea for Antlers

Brenda and I often talked about our ideas and methods while we worked in the ceramic studio. I told her I was making caribou antlers to represent the caribou who drowned at Limestone Falls. She said it reminds her of Amanda Strong who had one thousand little bison.

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6 Brenda Danbrook is a University of Regina, MFA graduate in ceramics. She had her graduating exhibition, A Way of Knowing, December 1 to 9, 2018, at the McKenzie Art Gallery in Regina.
skulls made to represent all the buffalo slaughtered when colonial settlers came to the prairies. I remembered seeing Strong talk about the making of her little buffalo skulls for her film “Four Faces of the Moon” during an Art for Lunch presentation at the University of Regina on February 16, 2018. I acknowledged Brenda’s comment and went back to work. I saw Brenda a few weeks later, and was she ever surprised to see I was making them nearly life-sized. I had picked up caribou antlers many times and marvelled at their texture. I wondered about the males’ big antlers and how it must be difficult to walk through a thick forest of trees without getting them stuck. Female antlers are smaller. I thought about all the tools that people make with antlers.

While I was doing my research I realized that what I learned as a child, adolescent, and young adult living closely with the land, animals, and people the traditional ways of my ancestors surfaced. I realized that I had absorbed a lot of knowledge about Indigenous ways of knowing without intentionally seeking it out. Being aware of this helped me pull together the resources I needed to create 10,000 Drowned and write this paper. I just had to sort out my findings in a logical order. Shawn Wilson explains:

What it involves is our whole lifelong learning leading to an intuitive logic and way of analysis. I think it’s especially true for participant observation and action research. It just can’t be thought of in a linear or one-step-leads-to-another way. All of the pieces go in, until eventually the new idea comes out. You build relationships with the idea in various and multiple ways, until you reach a new understanding or higher state of awareness regarding whatever it is that you are studying.7

In my lifetime of fifty-seven years, there have been many environmental disasters caused by industrial megaprojects in Canada: oil spills, mine tailing ponds breaking, mercury poisoning, nuclear waste contamination, clear cut forests, paper and lumber mill pollution, herbicides,

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pesticides and fertilizers in agriculture, and hydro-electric dams. These human-made environmental disasters hurt many living things. While colonization is not my focus, it permeates my work. Industrialization on land extorted from Indigenous people—hydro-electric dams built in Northern Quebec included—is a part of colonization. I witnessed, and still witness, the devastation it causes. The environmental destruction in the north benefits people in the south who seem to have little consideration for the living beings who are displaced from their homes.

**EXPERIENTIAL RESEARCH**

In Northern Quebec, inland from the James Bay coastal communities of Chisasibi and Whapmagoostui, the Caniapiscau River turns into Koksoak River. Following this river system, one can travel north east by canoe to the Inuit community of Kuujjuaq and the Ungava Bay. It looks easier to travel to Kuujjuaq from Chisasibi than it does from Whapmagoostui as there is a simple river system to follow. Whapmagoostui people travelled that direction too, though their route is more difficult as they would have to navigate through a whole bunch of interlocking lakes that are part of the river system. Knowing the currents, which way to go, avoiding dead ends all takes great skill. I heard tell of *kaakusaapihtiik* (the person who goes into the shaking tent) who used shaking tents to help find the way. Richard J. Preston, an anthropologist who lived with Cree people in Waskaganish and witnessed shaking tent ceremonies conducted by elder John Blackned, reveals that,

> The ability of conjurors...to fly in the air or send projectiles over great distances actually suggests to me a comparative ease in shifting from what in Western culture is called physical (corporeal) object to the category (again Western) of incorporeal mind/soul/spirit.⁸

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A conjuror could also meet with another conjuror outside of their corporeal selves to exchange information. I think they just had a sense when it was time to go into the shaking tent. The shaking tent ceremony is not as common today as it used to be.

Once this waterway system knowledge was established, it was passed down orally from generation to generation. Students learned how to navigate with stars, river currents and landmarks. Caribou, when they travel over their homeland, learn the way by following the leader. Leaders learned by following their leader. This continues until it becomes ingrained in their memory and body cells so that the leaders know to follow their instinct and their memory from previous travels. This helps them when they travel from their northern birthing grounds to their southern wintering grounds and back again. They know to follow the glacial escarpment, so they can avoid the swampy and dense bush lands as much as possible. They know which direction to go so that they cross over the rivers at the same places year after year. I have heard my elders talk about this many times.

The dammed rivers and the gigantic reservoirs now cover a lot of the territory caribou traveled since time immemorial. Because of these manmade barriers the animals become confused. If I was a caribou, I would have been really upset if my route was blocked and I can’t see land on the other side of the human-made lake. I would have to find ways to go around it. This wastes my precious time. I need to get south before winter, or north in the spring so I can birth my calf in our traditional birthing place. And then, I would show my calf how to travel over the land. Since caribou have no oral language to pass on their knowledge, they would have to travel the new routes, show their calves the way, and over time add this to their memory. There are other animals affected by the flooding of land. Elder John Petagumskum of Whapmagoostui...
knows them and when the Cree and Inuit were standing up against Hydro Quebec to stop the
damming of the Whapmagoostui River (Great Whale River) he explained:

The caribou migrate from the east to southwest reaching the Chisasibi hunting grounds. The herds then travel west until they reach the bay and then go northwards along the
coast. There are calving grounds around Bienville Lake…There are more islands than
you can count in the Bienville Lake area. If the water levels are dammed up, many of the
islands will be flooded. If the water levels rise during the nesting period, this will destroy
the young. The porcupine which inhabits the forests along the river valleys is another
source of food for the Cree families. Should the water level rise, its only choice will be to
climb a tree. When the waters from the dikes and dams rise above the trees in the river
valleys, it will die. The animals will have nowhere to go if the river valleys are flooded,
because up there, there is little vegetation useful to the animals outside the valleys.⁹

Video

I don’t remember the date I started making short films. I know that when I was a little girl
I inherited an understanding of film making from my father when he used to make home movies,
often directing us what to do. He set up the projector in the living room and we watched
ourselves on the big screen. A lot of times, he used to bring classic movies home for us to watch
before others got to watch them. I learned how to run the projector and how to repair the film if it
broke. It was very exciting when I got my own movie camera and learned how to edit my
footage to tell stories. Years passed and I got to work with professional film maker Dianne
Oulette¹⁰ on a short film while we were camping at Grasslands National Park in the spring of
2017. We were both enrolled in Cultural Landscapes class for our MFA and had to come up with
an artistic response to Canada’s 150th anniversary of Confederation. Being Indigenous, I didn’t
feel like making anything celebratory to commemorate this year. Finally, I had the idea for
Dianne to film me improvising on my violin in different areas of the Grasslands. I am not a very

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¹⁰ Dianne Oulette is Metis independent film maker with years of experience. She is an MFA Media Production student at the University of Regina where she is also currently employed.
good violinist but I like to have fun with it. We settled on me playing “O Canada” while sitting on top of a hill. After playing, I improvised a poem about being on the land. We titled it “Land of the Free.” It premiered at the Fifth Parallel Gallery for our group class exhibition, *Marking the Land*. A couple of people likened my version of “O Canada” to Jimi Hendrix’s version of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Our film was also screened in New Zealand in 2018.

In the summer of 2018, I decided to make a video based on imagining myself as a caribou. I recorded the land sequence using my iPhone and my GoPro. On a mountaintop near Nemaska, I walked from the bushes onto bedrock and far in the distance I could see the lake and more mountains. I pretended I was a caribou moving and looking about. I’m not a caribou and I know that my movements, while filming, are not precisely their movements. However, I know the caribou and their territory. We walked the same ground. Caribou often eat as they travel. They keep their head close to the ground to grab a morsel of food as they go along, stopping now and again to look around. I tried walking this way with the GoPro camera lens set at wide angle. I saw big sky and clouds and felt the wind. The atmospheric conditions of the early evening sky created all kinds of colors. It was there, while looking onto the distant body of water in the valley, that I knew my poem, “I Am Caribou,” belonged in the video. I got excited about this idea. While I was filming, I remembered the story line of my poem, but not word for word every line of it. Here is an example of one verse:

Chilk my hooves bite the turf
Zing my hooves on patches of bedrock
Swoosh through the mossy swamps
I am caribou

Being on the land with the intent to research my thoughts and make something from what I learned at these sites, made me experience the land from a different perspective than when I
was younger and was not thinking about making a film. As I walked along riverbanks, in valleys, and on mountain tops; as I looked at vast expanses of land, sky, water, and closely at plants, flowers, and berries; and as I watched insects, I felt that the world is bigger than my humble human experience. At times it seemed like everything I observed was magnified. Sometimes there was the roar of rapids beside me or the quiet sounds of small waves rolling over the shore. When the winds were silent, I could hear a flying insect buzzing by and the call of a bird in the distance. At times the wind sounded fast going through the trees as it rustled leaves and branches and blew past my camera microphone.

In order to convey the feeling of drowning, I filmed in various rivers and lakes. At Nemaska, Champion Lake, my grandson and I found some tiny tadpoles. I captured them, digitally, as they fled from my giant hand and GoPro. In the deeper water, I swam with the camera attached to my snorkel and goggles. When I played back the recording, it was amazing to hear what was going on underwater. The camera’s microphone recorded bubbles, small waves, the camera bumping into blades of grass, my snorkeled breathing, and even water pushed by a tadpoles legs. This inspired me to record underwater movement and sounds to create a sense of being in that world.

I am not able to swim in swift water, so in the rapids I dipped the camera in as I stayed above on the dry bedrock. I captured the feeling of what it looks like under swiftly moving water, like the caribou would have seen it while they were swept away by the torrent of water at Limestone Falls and drowning. Next, I felt I needed to film as I swim under calm water for a long period of time. I found a place with a rocky shoreline and trees and still water. I attached the GoPro camera to my snorkel and walked into the water. Gasping from the cold, I hesitated, wondering if it was a good idea. But, the water was calm and the sun was out. I stretched my
scuba geared body flat over the sharp rocks and slid forward into the clear water. The water was so cold that I didn’t want to be too far from shore should I begin to feel faint. I was cold, but I had to see how long I could last without succumbing. I had to know what it is like to drown in the cold water. Having bare skin and not the insulation of hair to cover me like a caribou does, I lasted only ten minutes. I got out of the water and lay on a warm rock for five minutes. I shivered for what felt like hours. Later, I realized that if I had caribou hair I wouldn’t have gotten so cold, plus I wouldn’t have been able to swim underwater with caribou hair because the hairs are hollow and help keep the caribou buoyant as they swim. I realized how strong the current at Limestone Falls must have been to make the caribou drown. And then I realized that my filming under the still water would be like the spirit of the caribou being trapped under water after they drowned.

**HOME LAND**

Doing a Master of Fine Art degree in Regina is not my first time away from home. I studied in different academic institutions across Canada.11 Being away from Quebec gave me firsthand experience into what other Indigenous people in Canada face, and how artists portray this. I attended ceremonies, conferences, lectures, and pow-wows in many places. I learned by listening. In cities, I found grassroots Indigenous people hanging onto what my people back home and I live every day: our culture, language, and close interactions with nature. But there is no hunting and gathering in cities. Even southern reserves lack vast expanses of land where people are free to live, where there are no fences and no ‘no trespassing’ signs telling us to

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“beware or else.” In south and central Saskatchewan fenced farms are everywhere. Even the provincial parks have fences. Only in Northern Saskatchewan are Indigenous people free to travel, hunt, and gather. I can see why artists in Central Canada are concerned about identity. Without ancestral lands they have only their memories and stories of how things once were.

Lewis Cardinal states:

…we have an intuitive factor and Lionel Kunuwa’s work talks about a molecular memory…we have a deep connection to these Indigenous roots…what I do see is that when you have the young people within the cities or even within the reserves who do not have connection to their culture and traditions, they look for these connections…I think that there’s an intuition here that factors in that helps the individual look for that Indigenous foundation through their cultural foundations.12

People are now ensuring that their children learn who they are, where their home is and the language of their people. This is survivance.13 To keep a head above the deep waters of colonial acts of suppression and domination, one must get out of the water or forever tread in place and freeze. Jeanette Armstrong, an Okanagan academic, teacher and elder from Penticton, explains,

The ability to bring imagination into physical being through action is the creative process. All action has the potential of tremendous power. The ability to choose the result is the gift of the human. It is a sacred power of the human to choose. A word in Okanagan, xaxa?, refers to the meaningful essence of all creation. The word has been translated to mean “the sacred aspect” of being. This word is applied to humans, as beings with the power to acknowledge or act in ways which seek to maintain the principle of harmony with creation and yet continue to make new choices for survival. We are sacred and precious. In knowing this we become xaxa? And our full creative power as humans is to know this and express this through all actions.14

There is much to be learned to achieve aspects of being. First one must understand how things have changed if we are to restore harmony. While we cannot return to pre-contact world,

we can find balance. I would like to see the dams in the James Bay and Ungava territory dismantled, the reservoirs drained and for the rivers to return to their natural flow. It would still take a long time for the land and the forests to support wildlife once again. People will again be able to travel and live in their ancestral lands and to eat the fish without worrying about mercury poisoning.

For the James Bay Cree of Northern Quebec, fifty years after signing the James Bay Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA), the change has been dramatic. In some ways, my people also struggle to keep their identity. Change is due to the mega-project, which includes a reservoir so large that one cannot see to the other side of it. I have yet to see the other side of the reservoir. I hear it is heartbreaking to those whose families who lived on that land for hundreds of years. It was heartbreaking enough for me to see the LG2 dam upriver. I never returned.

So, why do I not live at home? I left Chisasibi to go to university. I gave up my house to a family who really needed a home. Now, I am once again on the waiting list for a house. It might be a long wait. My sister, my two brothers and their families, and I used to live with my mother in her house. Family was very important. I noticed that the extended family unit is not as valued as it used to be. Younger people want their own place with only their nuclear family living in it. Extended family units are breaking down. Residential school has done its damage. In the book, *The Land We Are*, artist Leanne Simpson explains:

...the effects of residential schooling on familial relationships strike at the heart of Indigenous sovereignty: “Families are the core of our governance and our political system,” she explains, “breaking that was the point of residential schools” (“Restoring”). Moreover, Simpson argues, the family violence that stems from residential schools helps maintain and reproduce colonial power. 15

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The federal government’s plan to take away the land by killing the Indian in the child, so that the family unit will fall apart, and the community is weakened and unable to defend their territory from colonization, was effective.

I long for home. Maybe if I get out of Regina to the countryside and be with Nehayawak and horses for a week or two, I might get out of this place I feel trapped in. I have a connection with horses and I need to feel the land, unfettered by concrete pavement and buildings, and hear only the sounds of the wind and the animals. I need to see all the stars in the sky at night, to lie there and look at them for long minutes. I need to feel the freedom of my body as it loosens up in response to the energy of nature. I guess I am somewhat like Alaskan artist Joseph Senungetak, when he drew his self-portrait for an assignment while at the San Francisco Art Institute. Paul Chatt Smith quotes Senungetak and explains of his plight,

“When I thought about myself, I [was] spiritually and emotionally still back home.”

Back, that is, in Alaska, where issues concerning oil exploration, Native hunting rights, land use, the effects of technology on traditional lifeways, and near despair were swirling throughout the Native world of the Arctic. And so, he rendered his questioning face in the calm center of that blizzard.16

The story I just told, about being without a house to go home to, is similar with the history of colonisation and broken promises. Aboriginal people were displaced from their lands that were taken away from them, and treaties were made up along with written promises. Many treaties and promises were broken. Family units were torn apart by residential schools. Cultural practices and values weakened. More land was taken. Land was exploited for industrial development and still is to this day. Animals of all kinds were and continue to be negatively affected by these exploits. Now there is the process of reconciliation happening all over Canada. It is good to

address and bring to surface the dark history of Indian Residential Schools and the intergenerational trauma that stems from it. It is good to hear the accounts from the victims of residential school. It is good to have the process of healing begin. But, what many Indigenous writers and thinkers are saying is that,

…reconciliation often works as a “pacifying discourse,” demanding that Indigenous people become “reconciled with imperialism”. Instead, [Taiaike] Alfred argues, what should be pursued is a politics of restitution of Indigenous lands and of Indigenous traditions of governance. In a compelling analysis, Alfred puts resurgence and redress, not reconciliation, at the centre of his project.’ 17

To further support this statement,

In a “Fact Sheet” on the treaty process, the Government of Canada explains how “certainty about the existence and location of Aboriginal rights creates uncertainty with respect to ownership, use and management of land and resources. That uncertainty has led to disruptions and delays to economic activity in BC. It has also discouraged investment” (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada). Reconciliation, with its focus on closure and a unified nation, seeks certainty by placating social unrest while simultaneously reinforcing the image of the state as making every effort to address Indigenous concerns. Indeed, there exists convincing evidence that the federal government developed a policy of reconciliation as a means to manipulate negotiations with Indigenous peoples away from issues of land and restitution.18

Reconciliation can’t start until there is conciliation first says Jesse Wente during a talk he gave at Mount Allison,

One of my challenges with the word ‘reconciliation,’ just as a word, is that it suggests we’re repairing a once-functioning relationship. I’m not sure that’s what we’re really doing. I would suggest that we’ve never really had a functioning relationship so what we need is conciliation, the building of that functioning relationship, not repairing what was there.19

18 Ibid. 7-8.
There were many treaties made in Canada with Indigenous people, but treaties have been broken and continue to be broken. One example of this caused breaking news around the globe. This was during the Oka crisis. I remember when it was in the news. We had come to the village from our summer fish camp to bring in fish we caught and to get supplies. My big brother was in the house and the television was on, explaining what was going on at Oka. It made me stop in my tracks. I could hardly believe that the army was sent in to “calm down” the Mohawk people, who were protecting their land rights. This event stayed with me all summer, and I thought when the time came that I would do the same to protect our land.

Lives are changed by the effects of human-made environmental disasters. Even industries that have shut down leave behind residual contaminants and it will take decades for life to regenerate. We wait patiently for nature to revitalizes itself. While we wait, some of us stand to protect our land from more harm. We speak for our own homeland and the home of our neighbors. When one person stands and speaks aloud, many often follow and speak. Together our words and actions are strong. Strong enough to protect the land. After he read an article in the Canadian Press describing how five chiefs from Ontario First Nations said that they’ll defend treaty rights over their traditional territory and are ready to die defending their land, Matthew Mukash from Whapmagoostui, Quebec, wrote:

To die to protect your homeland - with which you are intimately connected because it has sustained your Ancestors since the beginning of time so that you, in turn, can have life - is the most honourable thing to do for a leader. The world should hear the statement of these 5 great men to protect their traditional homeland.20

Mukash was one of the Cree protestors who lead the fight against the damming of the Whapmagoostui river system. In 1992, the Cree won. They protecting the river from being

dammed. Altogether, there would have been eight rivers diverted in that project, and it would have affected an ecosystem the size of France. Mukash and other people from Whapmagoostui, paddled from Ottawa to New York City to be there for Earth Day demonstrations at Battery Park. They asked for the people of New England and New York not to buy power. Power that Quebec wanted to sell them from power generated if the Whapmagoostui River got dammed. It was a long journey for the Cree people at this time, and the people of New England and New York listened to them and did not buy the hydro-electric power from Quebec.

**INFLUENCES**

Travis Shilling, an Ojibway artist from the Rama Reserve in Ontario, paints animals surrounded by flood water. In an interview for *Muskrat* magazine, he explains how he began his series of paintings that focus on this subject,

One day I was watching the news, and I saw a flood somewhere, I forget where it was, but it flooded this particular area in the forest, and there was a helicopter getting footage in different areas and it zeroed in on a deer, which was travelling along its path, and it’d come to all this water, and the deer was walking around in circles, because suddenly it didn’t know which way to go, cause everyday he knew to go down that path, that was his environment, that was his nature, that’s all he knew. And suddenly this chopper had this footage of him, just kind of walking in circles, cause it didn’t know to go back, all it knew was to go forward.  

Deer are a lot like caribou in their travels. Dr. Alexander W.F. Banfield, a professor at Brock University and a leading expert on caribou describes their migration behavior: “Caribou are very traditional and return year after year to certain river crossings and to narrows in lakes to cross,” Banfield explains what I have heard my elders say many times.

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I connect with Shilling’s work. The way he describes what he saw the deer doing and how it affected him is like the way I think about flooding affecting the migration of caribou. In his oil painting of dark somber colors, “Elk and Refuge,” 2011, a young elk is surrounded by water to its neck. Floating beside it is a small empty sailboat. The people are gone; the elk is too big to get into the boat. To me, it symbolizes the catastrophic effects of land flooded by water is to the animals.

I am also drawn to Battle for the Woodlands, an installation by Anishinabek/Ojibway artist Bonnie Devine that depicts the colonization of Canada. On one wall, Devine painted animals on an old colonial map of Upper and Lower Canada and the Great Lakes. She painted animals fleeing from there to another wall that represents the West. On the wall hangs leather warrior cloaks representing chiefs Tecumseh, Pontiac, and Crazy Horse who hold the colonizers back. On the floor stands three tall shapes made of woven reeds and willow that look to me to be the shape of shaking tents. To Devine, the shapes are contemporary Indigenous people who “are alive today and need to make a stand now.”

Like Devine, I painted an animal, the caribou, who have to live with the effects of colonization and will flee from whatever disturbs their habitat. I too have a map, the one I painted of the Limestone Falls area of the Caniapiscau River. On the floor of my installation I also have sculptures that represent the context of my work.

Another Indigenous woman I feel works in a similar way to me is Nadia Myre. Myre lives in Montreal and is an Algonquin of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabek in Quebec. Her installations consist of two and three-dimensional artwork. TOUT CE QUI RESTE –

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SCATTERED REMAINS, Myre’s 2017 solo exhibition at The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, is an installation of photographs, sculpture and video work she made over a period of seven years. These twenty pieces talk about the resistance of Anishinabek to colonization by bringing traditional Anishinabek culture into a contemporary context. For example, Myre takes photographs of beads in wampum belts and shards of clay pipes and prints them larger than life size. A red fishnet hangs from a ceiling in a conical shape by attaching the ends to rocks and spreading them out in a circle. Twenty pages of the Indian Act have red and white beads sewn over them, where the white beads replace the letters on the pages. These are hung together in rows.

Lately, Myre is experimenting with ceramics where she makes large cylindrical beads and weaves them together is the shapes of birch trees and birch bark containers. The eighteen-foot-tall stand of birch trees, *Tree of Shifting Forms*, is lit up inside and juts out of a wooden bench.

These two artists I feel a connection to. Their utilization of floor and wall space to represent Indigenous land rights is similar to the way I think. Their work looks at nature, animals and has elements of Indigenous ways of knowing.

**FOLLOWING PROTOCOLS**

I study the way animals think and move. I like to pretend I am them as I do things and move about. I know what the animals from my home territory look like under their skin because I prepared, and watched others prepare the animals for cooking. We believe that the animal willingly gives itself to us; that is why we are able to catch it.
The Cree and Naskapi men who hunted in the Caniapiscau region used to wear caribou hide coats made with great care and skill by the women. It was not just a craft, it was an art.

Explain Dorothy Burnham, a museum textile curator who studied painted caribou-skin coats:

This is not craft work on a small scale, it is a major art creation…Hunting was a ‘holy’ occupation, and these coats could be considered to be holy vestments, one of the ritual elements that would ensure the success of the hunt. The hunters believed that the Lord of the Caribou would send the animals out from the Magical Mountain where they were believed to live, and that the caribou would be pleased to give themselves to the hunters. The hunters would treat the slain caribou in a correct manner, so that their spirits could return to the Magical Mountain and be released again for a future hunt. This extreme simplification of a very complex set of beliefs and observances gives some indication of the reason for expending the time and effort necessary to create one of these special coats.24

When we are respectful to the animal and the land, when we follow protocols, we find animals in abundance. When we are content with what we are doing, animals are more willing to give themselves to us. Such is the way with my cousin Lloyd, who was taught by his father and his uncles. He never went to high school and instead followed his father on the land. Moose and caribou always find him. Lloyd does not kill everything he sees. For instance, in the winter of 2018 when he was traveling by skidoo over a rocky escarpment, he found a young caribou who had fallen and was trapped in a crevice. With the help of a friend, Lloyd pulled the caribou up out of the crevice and set it free. If he had driven his skidoo a few feet over, he would not have seen the caribou and it would have died. The next day, Lloyd killed one moose and two caribou. Because of his kindness more animals came and gave themselves to him. He always shares his food with other members of the community. He is indeed generous and is rewarded with abundance of animals.

I tell this story to show the sacredness of having a true connection with the land and the animals, and why it is important to respect and protect them. When I say them, I also refer to the land, air and water. They are also alive and animate. Professor Donald L. Fixico, of Seminole and Muskogee Creek ancestry, explains:

All of the interrelationships are a system called the Natural Order of Life for the American Indian who knows his or her traditional beliefs. Their perception is defined and determined by their natural environment in a type of Natural Democracy, for they treat all things with respect. This democracy is based on respect. In this belief, all things are equally important. Where a native person grows up is relevant to how one understands all things around him or her. One’s natural environment is pertinent to how things are perceived, and this set of surroundings become fixed in the mind like reference points for later in life, especially as one travels to distant places away from one’s home space or homeland.²⁵

When I read this, I was very pleased with how I manage to retain my beliefs even when away from home. It is the actions of living and the feel of the land of my home that I am missing. I sometimes wonder if being away from home affects the way I made 10,000 Drowned. Would I be able to portray the land and the caribou better if I was home?

Telling the story of Lloyd and the caribou reminds me of what my mother said one time when we had just finished setting our fishnet and she was shaking out the blanket that was used to wrap the fishnet. This shaking of the blanket over the water is a way of finishing the act of preparing to catch the fish and leaving the rest to the fish when they come to the net. She said that her brother, Alan, after he set his fishnet said he is going to catch a lot of fish. She said that she told him, “Now you are going to scare away the fish from your net because they are going to see you under water beside your net with your mouth open, showing them your really big teeth!” I could just imagine Uncle Alan under water with really big teeth and the fish swimming as fast

as they could away from him and his net. My mother didn’t have to tell me directly not to be greedy and that I have to be respectful and grateful for what I am able to do.

We must continue to practice these values. At the time, I did not know that what I was learning was sacred. Now that I am older, and have learned and experienced the negative effects of colonization and industrialism, I can truly appreciate my traditional teachings. Some of the teachings that my mother and her parents learned are recorded in books written by anthropologists who came to our territory. Some of them gathered information only through interviews and did not relate with the people during their day to day activities. Only through participant observation does one get a true sense of some of the realities of the people. The observer lives with the family over an extended period of time and participates with them. If the anthropologist only interviews people without living with them, then the anthropologist does not truly understand the people’s ways of knowing. It is interesting to read anthropological writing about us. For example, Adrian Tanner is an anthropologist from Memorial University in Newfoundland who lived with the family group of Willie Jimikin for 18 months at the end of 1960s to the beginning of 1970s. Jimikin’s family stayed in the Nichicun area near Caniapiscau during the winter and at the Mistissinni Post during the summer. Mistissinni is part of the James Bay Cree territory and is south of Chisasibi. I know some families in Mistissinni, and it was interesting to see how they did things when they lived in the bush. It is much like how Chisasibi people did things.

CONCLUSION

Memories of the James Bay territory of Northern Quebec came back to me while I was making the work for 10,000 Drowned - Commemorating the Caribou. I remembered joy,
sadness, anger, tranquility, pain, comfort, hunger, thirst, love, exhilaration, death, challenge, exhaustion, curiosity, knowing, acceptance, danger, revelation, safety, companionship, loneliness, warmth, confidence, confusion, fear, bravery, joy, humiliation, guidance, and sharing. So many feelings, events, seasons, animals, people, traditions, tests, trials, feasts, ceremonies, adventures, so many ways of living. I could tell stories forever. If caribou could talk, I am sure they would do the same thing. As they travel over the land they encounter many things, some good and some bad. The good things are food, water, other caribou, shelter, mating, birth, travel, play, some of the bad things are the ones created by industrial minded humans; things like dams, reservoirs, pollution, mining, roads, clear-cut forestry, low level jets, fires, over-hunting, and rapid climate change due to global warming.

My experiences of living on the land impacts my role as an artist. I am easily able to portray the natural environment. Through years of observation and interaction, I create a physical and spiritual connection with the land, water, and animals. With my senses, I came to understand the essence of life underneath the surface of what we see visually. Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains,

A human person does not stand alone, but shares with other animate and, in a Western sense, ‘inanimate’ beings, a relationship based on a shared ‘essence’ of life. The significance of place, of land, of landscape, of other things in the universe, in defining the very essence of a people, makes for a very different rendering of the term essentialism as used by indigenous peoples.26

With the insight I gain from my experiences, I try to capture the essence of the animals, people and environment I encounter. I realize that my drawings and paintings of the animals in their

environment are very important to people. They like not only the aesthetics of my work, but also the content, what the animals and the environment mean to them.

My first thoughts about *10,000 Drowned*, was to only make paintings. But being on the land during my research trips, let me know that I needed some elements to be more tactile and from the land. While two-dimensional paintings tell some stories, other stories need three dimensional objects, and others need video. Rather than confine myself to paintings and to the walls, I needed to stretch my art out over the floor. Through painting, sculpture, video, and voice narration I am able to portray part of the world of the caribou from ideas I conceived during my visits home to Northern Quebec.

I once wanted to see the whole world. I watched an ant crawling around in blueberry blossoms. I realized that the ant has no concept of the whole world, only the world that it is in now. This is how it also is for the caribou. They live facing the kindness and hardships of nature in delicate ecosystems, where every living thing depends upon each other to keep it in balance. When there is too much or little of something, things get thrown out of balance. Industrial invasion into these ecosystems often destroy the balance and environmental disasters ensue. Indigenous peoples of Canada stand to protect the natural environment from this. The colonial governments try many ways to take away land and water rights from Indigenous people. There has been no conciliation, but now the Canadian government forges reconciliation. Indigenous peoples are strong, the animals need them and vice versa. I need the animal. I can be a voice for them. We, as artists, need to stay in touch with one another, together our voices are stronger.

Now I am older, I want to make my homeland my home base. A place to venture from for short periods of time and get inspiration for more paintings. Paintings that relate to the land and the beings who live there. I know that a lot of people who have never experienced living in the
wilderness do care about nature, they have a connection and will stand to protect it. We are all related. All connected to each other.


Vizenor, Gerald. *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence.* Lincoln, Nebraska: University of
Nebraska Press. 2008.

Poem

I am Caribou.
Chilk my hooves bite the turf
Zing my hooves on patches of bedrock
Swoosh through the mossy swamps
I am caribou

My nostrils breath deep
You can see the pink inside
And hear the air fill my lungs
Many miles over the tundra

Warm is my coat all covered with hair
Many layers dense
Ready for winter
I travel

Over hills through valleys
Rivers and rapids I swim
To winter homes embedded
My memory of miles travelled

But now
Forces unknown new
Industrial human made
Even this one time
And we drowned, many

Still I try carry on
Generations through blood
Back home
And back home

We are plenty
But not many enough
To stand unprotected
As did once before

Since the dawn of strange human
Machines slice the land
Guns fill the air
Our children are falling

Dams divert rivers
Reservoirs block pathways
Drown our traveled
Ancient migrations

Now many hunters
Here from not
Come with guns
Drown us in blood
Rivers of blood
Course our veins
Fresh water rivers
Cut open
Silence drowns survival
Our language not spoken
You can see us
To hear our voices
Stop the rivers rising
Help our travel
Winter to summer
And back
Life’s revival

Figures
Figure 1. Untitled. Margaret Orr. (Pen, watercolor on paper, 4” x 6”, 1996).
Figure 4. Water Sky. Margaret Orr. (Oil on canvas, 5’x5’, 2018).
Figure 2. Land Water. Margaret Orr. (Acrylic and oil on canvas, 5’x5’, 2018).
Figure 5. Land Fire. Margaret Orr. (Acrylic on canvas, 5’ x 5’, 2019).
Figure 3. Painted Hide. Margaret Orr (Acrylic on canvas, 5’x5’, 2018).
Figure 7. Caribou. Margaret Orr (Acrylic and oil on canvas, 4’x5’, 2019).
Figure 6. Caribou Travel. Margaret Orr. (Oil on canvas, 2 @ 32” x 40”, 2 @ 16” x 20”, 2019).
Figure 8. Antlers. Margaret Orr (Ceramic, 2019).
Figure 10. Air. Margaret Orr (Ceramic, 22” x 12 ½” x 16 ¾”, 2019).
Figure 9. Water. Margaret Orr (Ceramic, oil, 14 ½” x 11 ¼” x 11”, 2019).
Figure 11. Earth. Margaret Orr (Ceramic, oil, 24” x 22 ½” x 21”, 2019).
Figure 12. Fire. Margaret Orr. (Ceramic, acrylic, 19” x 23 ½” x 17”, 2019).