

***I continue to shape:* Maria Thereza Alves, Deanna Bowen, Cathy Busby, Justine A. Chambers, Nicholas Galanin, Ame Henderson, Maria Hupfield, Jessica Karuhanga, Lisa Myers, Mickalene Thomas, Joseph Tisiga, Charlene Vickers**

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by **Vanessa Fleet**

What do we do with the cracked histories we've inherited? How do we participate in active recovery? These questions are as pragmatic as they are philosophical. In an exhibition that explores aesthetic practice in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, curator cheyanne turions examines art's capacity to speak back to settler-oriented histories and "support interruptions where new kinds of stories become possible to tell."

In the curatorial statement, turions explains turning toward the writing of David Garneau, who used the phrase "extra-rational aesthetic action" to describe the affective responses provoked in him as a result of artworks that engage in cultural decolonization. Garneau was considering three such examples: "Rebecca Belmore's yell before a panel discussion; Guillermo Gómez-Peña's threat to decapitate a woman during a work of performance art; and Terrance Houle's presentation of his naked, fleshy belly in photographs and performances." Laying out the startling associations that compel him toward these acts, Garneau theorized about the political potential found in disruptive awakenings of the senses—a potential that might burn through the effects of his own colonial conditioning. *I continue to shape* is a curatorial progression of this concept. For turions, it is clear that the generative

potential of decolonial aesthetics lies in our responses to collisions between familiar cultural forms and gestures that disrupt how we expect them to behave. Acknowledging that it is not necessary to depart from one's experience to inquire deeply about our own colonized thinking, *I continue to shape* is an experiment in de-conditioning that feels especially radical given the complexity of our current political moment.

"History, like all stories, is told slant, subject to distortion by those with the power to represent it," reads the exhibition's opening line. The role of images in directing representational power and re-inscribing colonial fantasy is apparent from the title work in the first gallery. Nicholas Galanin's searing C-print *Things are Looking Native/Native's Looking Whiter* (2012), combines Edward S. Curtis' ethnographic portrait of an unnamed Hopi woman, hair looped in butterfly whorls, with a celebrity picture of Carrie Fisher as Princess Leia in *Star Wars*, sporting a white outfit and cinnamon bun hairstyle. The image presents an immediate critique around traditional hairstyles and cultural appropriation in the construction of a Hollywood idol. But looking at the work up close, I am more preoccupied with how the Hopi woman's face is mask-like in its stillness, her expression unyielding. Does her gaze suggest a representational strategy against the frontality



Nicholas Galanin, *Things Are Looking Native, Native's Looking Whiter*, 2012, giclée
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, ART MUSEUM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

of Curtis' lens—an emptying-out of the self while holding a pose before the camera? Positioning her face alongside that of an actor playing a resistance leader, Galanin may be encouraging this equivocation.

While Galanin's title image insists on the recognizability of cultural icons, an adjacent installation of altered black-and-white photographs by Maria Thereza Alves offers indistinct views onto Indigenous sites of habitation in the Amazon. Refusing the clear passage into place that contemporary viewers have come to expect from landscape photography, the series *NoWhere* (1991–2018) is overlaid with cryptic black lines, referencing centuries-old plans of conquest and modern architectural drawings influenced by Sir Thomas Moore's writings on utopia—which emphasized the disposability of Indigenous peoples in the Americas. The effectiveness of this work lies in Alves' broader intervention into the gallery: angling through and across these images are wooden two-by-fours that divide up the wall space at seemingly random junctures, their edges balanced at uneasy angles. Evoking scenes of displacement while asserting its nature as a site-specific series, *NoWhere* prompts viewers to consider the catastrophe of colonial contact in this place too.

Echoing the scale and materiality of the two-by-fours are Charlene Vickers' 10-foot-long cedar spears, *Diviners* (2010), which are presented in dialogue with Alves' work, installed on the opposite wall. A means of locating the invisible, Vickers' divining rods summon the presence of murdered and missing Indigenous women into the museum space. These forms were envisioned by the artist to double as extra-large porcupine quills—a creation of nature, for protection and survival. Situated alongside Galanin's small, vitrine-enclosed *Native American Beadwork: Rape Whistle Pendant* (2014), these works together envision culturally specific strategies to confront gendered violence on colonial territory, uniting the tactile with the tactical. Such well-known objects and images act out of line with our expectations, and thus invite our participation in defining new meanings.

Foregrounding the voices of artists who observe how Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are mutually transformed by the processes of colonization, *I continue to shape* asks to viewers engage in ways of being otherwise. There are gathering places that encourage movement and dialogue. For example, in the centre of Cathy Busby's floor-to-ceiling text installation *We Call* (2017)—which reproduces selections of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action for academic and cultural institutions—is a meeting table and chairs. They are part of a malleable scenography created by choreographer Justine A. Chambers that encourages visitors to rest from the work of reconfiguration that the exhibition asks of us and find contemplative space. This scenography was staged in front of Mickalene Thomas' resplendent *Origin of the Universe* (2012), a nude self-portrait studded with rhinestones.

To activate the setting, Chambers brought in collaborating artists for three separate performances—meaning that its physical layout changed over the course of the exhibition. In Deanna Bowen's activation of the site, she began by recalling her experience in the gallery weeks prior, overhearing two white men (probably University of Toronto students) deriding Thomas' nude figure. From a clothesline suspended from wall to wall before the work in question, Bowen draped black blankets, creating a curtain behind which the black female body could take rest from being the object of looking or objectified in the museum space. The move was incredibly powerful. Perhaps more than any other artwork, Bowen's performance reinforced the exhibition's call to recover individual agency and interpersonal responsibility amidst the lineages of racism and violence that are part of our environment and condition our ways of seeing. *I continue to shape* is an invitation to not turn away, but to turn and face the structures that have shaped us, in order to step into new possibilities of being.