

Ottawa: the capital of Canada, our home and Algonkin land. Ottawa and the sites/sights for which it is famed—Parliament Hill, Byward Market, Rideau Hall, national museums, Château Laurier, beds of tulips, Rideau Canal—lie within territory never ceded by the Algonkins.¹ As the city of Ottawa began to take shape in the mid-nineteenth century, the Algonkins were “settled” on reserves.² Their historic displacement from the site of present-day Ottawa paved the way for the process of building a capital city.

“Ottawa” is derived from “Odawa,” Anishinaabek peoples from the Georgian Bay area who conducted business on the Ottawa River in the seventeenth century. Ottawa is thus named for people who never lived here, who visited the region only briefly for trade and commerce.³ The city’s profile is no different today: people journey to Ottawa from all over the world—seeking capital sights, but primarily seeking capital jobs.

Many First Nations peoples choose to reside in Ottawa and other cities; in 1991, 49.5% of those who identified themselves as Aboriginal lived in Canadian cities.⁴ Moving to the metropolis from reserves, villages, towns and other cities, they embody complex experiences of urban and rural, rootedness and restlessness, centre and periphery, home and away.

Urban migration has long been a fact of life for Aboriginal people. Ryan Rice, for example, belongs to a century-old lineage of Mohawk men who have found employment as steelworkers in New York City. Available after 1860, steel provided the structural frameworks for America’s first skyscrapers. The steel skeleton in a completed high-rise, however, is hidden by cladding—stone, brick, glass. Rice, in his drawings, focuses on the steel. He prompts us, in other words, to acknowledge and consider the presence of First Nations in cities.

Urban Myths is motivated by this metaphor of visibility and invisibility. What we see in the metropolitan environment—buildings, monuments, parks, street names, neighbourhoods—reflects and reproduces societal values. Yet there is little in the Ottawa landscape that valorizes or affirms the existence of its Aboriginal inhabitants. In the realm of public art, there is only the Indian Scout statue in Major's Hill Park, and several totem poles scattered throughout the city.⁵

The city can thus be terra incognita to Aboriginal and other newcomers. For Rice, leaving Kahnawake to live in Ottawa, Montreal, or Brooklyn is a mixed blessing. He writes: "We build cities. We participate in, we enjoy and we contribute to the city. We love the city and we fear the city." But, he wonders, "Do you become less Indian if you live in the city? Will you lose your values, traditions and/or language? Become disconnected from your people? Forget who you are? Deny where you come from?"⁶

The nine artists in *Urban Myths* do not pretend to offer straightforward answers to the complex issues raised by Rice. What they do is make eclectic, compelling and often humorous works that comment on what it means to inhabit that urban landscape: its opportunities, tanglements, attachments, realities. They traverse an expansive range of topics—from authenticity and technology to history and identity. In the process, as Marcia Crosby has written, they actively renegotiate and reinvest in the "power and meaning of their cultural identities."⁷

Despite the artists' diverse backgrounds, approaches, styles, and media, their works converge around several broad themes: the centrality of history and memory; the creation of new communities; the past as contiguous with the present; the redefinition of family, home, and nation; and the understanding of movement and change as more constant than the status quo. The essay that follows is divided into three broad sections: *Topographies*, *Patterns*, and *Migrations*. The sections provide a loose structure; the section titles are meant to be suggestive, not restrictive.

James Clifford writes that human location today is “constituted by displacement as much as by stasis.”⁸ Displacement, he argues, becomes “constitutive of cultural meanings,” rather than simply transferring or extending them.⁹ William Kingfisher agrees. He views movement not “as an awkward interval between fixed points,” but as a “natural state of being in this world.”¹⁰ To be an Indian in the city is to forge different identities, new myths. Sometimes the traffic roars; other times it is but a distant hum. But it always keeps moving.





BARRY ACE

The Anishinaabe artist Barry Ace reworks floral imagery in *Parallel Tasking* (cat. 1). Ace presents a wearable powwow vest adorned with an elegant, undulating floral pattern, displayed on a 1930s sewing form. On the vest front, he uses white and coloured cut glass beads to create the floral motif; he employs electronic components to replicate the same motif on the back. Sheathed in black velvet, the sewing form is topped with a “headdress” made of mottled pheasant feathers radiating from a copper armature. When installed in *Urban Myths* under a single spotlight, the vest sparkled—glass, copper and brass reflected tiny glints of light.

Ace threaded the electronic bits (capacitors and resistors) on the vest’s back into a fine brass screen. He laid the screen over a scanned image of a computer circuit board, abstracted and vividly coloured using Adobe Photoshop. In the scanning process, Ace discovered the words “parallel tasking” on the circuit board’s logo. The title is apt, as

it provides a perfect metaphor for Ace's clever negotiation of discursive categories usually organized as binary opposites: rural/urban, craft/art, female/male, past/present, tradition/innovation, authentic/aculturated.²⁸

The floral design on the vest is a nineteenth-century pattern used by First Nations women of the Central Great Lakes. Ace has been beading the front for ten years; his work continues the centuries-old Anishinaabek expertise in creating extraordinary beaded and quilled objects—baskets, purses, clothes, bowls—embellished with elegant floral motifs.²⁹ Western collectors and academics have typically situated these objects in the realm of female “craft,” as the authentic products of an historic rural tradition. Ace pulls us to the other side of the discursive divide. Very here and very now, *Parallel Tasking* consciously positions the intricate and ingenious technology of Anishinaabek beadwork as contemporary high art.

In its formal, museum-style presentation of beaded First Nations clothing on a freestanding mannequin, *Parallel Tasking* comments slyly on historic practices of collecting First Nations art. As Ruth Phillips has argued, the disciplines of art history and anthropology have privileged in Aboriginal art what was deemed rare, old, and unacculturated.³⁰ The formation of art history and anthropology as academic disciplines in the late nineteenth century occurred during the “Museum Age” (about 1840 to 1930), when the majority of ethnographic museums in Europe and North America established their collections of Aboriginal arts.³¹

With his tongue-in-cheek description of *Parallel Tasking* as an “adulterated cultural expression on borrowed colonial media,”³² Ace playfully denies the rigid categorization of his work—and by extension, all Aboriginal art—and declares the right to define his own terms. The vest, Ace writes, is both traditional and contemporary: “traditional, in...that it is informed by my past, and contemporary, in that it belongs in the present.”³³ *Parallel Tasking* thus speaks to the possibility of inhabiting distinct but contiguous worlds.

AFTERWORD

It is possible, in hindsight, to locate *Urban Myths* in a particular geographical and historical moment. The National Capital Region has seen, in the last decade, a dramatic increase in public exhibitions of contemporary First Nations art. Local galleries, artist-run centres, and national museums have presented many solo exhibitions of Aboriginal artists from across Canada: a short list includes David Hannan and Rosalie Favell, Robert Davidson and David Neel, Carl Beam and Gerald McMaster, Shelley Niro and Robert Houle.⁵²

Numerous group exhibitions seen locally create a critical and aesthetic mass that builds on the solo shows, and further demonstrate the scope and diversity of work being produced by Canadian Aboriginal artists. Such exhibitions include: at SAW Gallery, *Solidarity: Art After Oka* (1991); at the National Gallery of Canada, *Land Spirit Power* (1992); at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, *Indigena* (1992), *Reservation X* (1998), and *Emergence from the Shadow* (1999); at the Carleton University Art Gallery, *From Icebergs to Iced Tea* (1994); at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, *AlterNative* (1996), and at the Ottawa Art Gallery, *Exposed* (2000).

Urban Myths, however, is the first group show in Ottawa to feature solely the work of local Aboriginal artists. As such, it constitutes a selective snapshot of a dynamic, but neglected, aspect of the contemporary local scene.

The location of *Urban Myths* in the Karsh-Masson Gallery, located in Ottawa's City Hall at 111 Sussex Drive, is somewhat ironic. The Rideau River that laps up against the side of the building cascades over the Rideau Falls into the Ottawa River. When in the spring of 1613, Samuel de Champlain reached the present-day site of Ottawa in birchbark canoes guided by two Algonkin men, he was amazed by the "impetuosity" of the "marvellous" falls.⁵³ It is Champlain who is remembered as "the First Great Canadian." The Algonkins are forgotten, the ensuing narrative is European. It's the same old story.

The Karsh-Masson Gallery is named for photographer Yousuf Karsh (b.1908) and painter Henri Masson (1907-96), a double-barreled tribute to two renowned local artists, both immigrants from across the Atlantic. The Gallery was founded in 1994, the year after Moshe Safdie completed his renovation and expansion of City Hall. The space Safdie used for the Gallery formerly housed the office of the City Clerk, who co-signs all bylaws into law, and who is responsible for registering births, marriages, and deaths. It is this activity of civic monitoring and record-keeping that, writ large, mirrors Canada's colonizing regulation of Aboriginal people—activity hinted at in Ryan Rice's leashed animals.

On January 1, 2001, the eleven municipalities of the Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton were amalgamated into a super-sized City of Ottawa. The City sold its Sussex Drive headquarters to the federal government. The future of the Karsh-Masson Gallery is uncertain. On the City's pre-amalgamation website, under the heading "Inside City Hall," there was a link that asked, "Are You in the Right Place?" If the nine artists' work shown in *Urban Myths* is about claiming places and spaces in the city, the answer can only be an unqualified yes.