

Bev Koski
Christian Chapman
Recast

Curated by Lisa Myers



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G44

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by Lisa Myers

Recasting in the context of film or theatre means reassigning an already established role. Recast came to mind when I was considering how artists Bev Koski and Christian Chapman create new roles for the protagonists in their photo and video work. Koski transforms mass produced figurines and recasts these in photographic form, while Chapman invites four artists to create their own narratives of a fictitious Woodland artist. Here, throughout the exhibition and the essay, I'm thinking through the ways shifting representations of Indigenous people subvert stereotypes and mythologies.

Mass produced tourist kitsch items perpetuate stereotypes of North American Indigenous people such as the noble savage, childlike-primitive, and indian princess, simplified and romanticized in figurines and dolls. As tourist items they offer the consumer a sense of owning and taking home an 'indian'. These representations inform popular opinions and beliefs about Indigenous people as they circulate within the social fabric.¹ During her travels, Koski gathers representations of 'indian-ness' disseminated as toys and tourist objects. The absurd forms of these figures further motivate Koski's need to transform the items. Following the contour of the figure with mathematical precision, she creates a kind of netting that covers the objects in beaded armour, leaving only the eyes exposed. This bead weaving technique adds an independent layer over the figurine and differs from the embroidery beading used to decorate regalia or moccasins that emphasize design motifs sewn directly into a fabric or leather surface.

During her artist talk at the Banff Art Centre in 2012, Koski explained that hiding small kitsch tourist items in a beaded cover would "make them easier to look at." Although



Christian Chapman, still from Super 8 film *Edmazinbiiget*, 2008-2014

obscuring the figure's caricature features – such as braided hair and 'noble' poses, along with attached accoutrements (hatchets, arrows, tipis, fires, and animals) – seems to mask its identity, the exposed eyes reveal an emotional urgency. Their newly confined positions compromise their demoralizing and offensive signification, yet amplify the tension. Using photography Koski re-presents these palm-sized objects, reassigned from mass consumed objecthood to a new position at human scale. Magnified by the camera, the small objects now possess an unavoidable and confronting pose.

The title of each photograph corresponds to the location and number of items purchased. Koski's photograph titled *Toronto #1* (2013) shows a figure with arms crossed and wide smiling cartoon eyes gazing shyly to her right. The figure's outfit resembles silver chainmail. This armour-like coating appears to trap the entity, yet at the same time the beaded cover offers protection, reflecting back at the character a kind of self-awareness of its harmful and racist significations. The presence of the work as a photograph creates a confrontation with one's own role as witness and evokes empathy for the trapped and enclosed, but not quite contained character. These objects appear as victims of circumstance, and yet are implicated in their own role in perpetuating stereotypes and informing popular perceptions of Indigenous people. With all their connotations, these photographs circulate the non-art tourist item within an art context.

Similarly, painter and printmaker Christian Chapman recasts the narrative of a Woodland artist in video format. In the 1960s, Norval Morrisseau's painting style, characterized by a style that employs dark outlines and bold solid colours, marked the founding of the Woodland School of painting. Morrisseau's groundbreaking commercial success and recognition in Toronto encouraged art institutions to consider Woodland painting's narrative approach not merely



Bev Koski, *Berlin #1*, beads, thread, found object, 2014

within ethnographic museological classifications but also within the context of contemporary Canadian painting.²

Continuing in a narrative tradition, Chapman started his collaborative film project in 2008, along with Sioux Lookout-based video maker *Vov Abraxas* (Brian Aysanabee) playing the Woodland artist, and Thunder Bay-based cinematographer Greg Jacobsen.³ Using black and white Super 8 film, the project entitled *Edmazinbiiget* (2008-2014), portrays the life of a fictitious Woodland artist living in the bush. In different seasons, we see him walking through deep snow and along a frozen lake in snowshoes, cooking and painting in his cabin, and paddling with a companion in a canoe. The grainy quality of the Super 8 film visually enhances the nostalgic feel of the narrative.

The recasting in *Edmazinbiiget* comes from changes in scenarios, through picture edits and shifts in the soundtrack. Chapman's project collaborators are: Sámi filmmaker Marja Bål Nango from Norway; Pawnee/Delaware/Kiowa artist Nathan Young from Oklahoma; Cree artist Sébastien Aubin's and Algonquin Anishinabeg artist Caroline Monnet's of the Montreal-based media collective AM. Chapman's laboratory approach to narrative leaves the project open to his collaborators to edit their own videos of the artist's everyday life. The results are four video inter-



Christian Chapman, still from Super 8 film *Edmazinbiiget*, 2008-2014

pretations and although the main character never changes, his circumstances vary depending on which artist creates the video piece. Chapman recognizes this approach as an experiment of outcomes where the personal background, influences and skill-set of each artist emerges through the videos.

In 2013, I visited Chapman's studio in Fort William First Nation while *Edmazinbiiget* was still in production. His studio sits on the shore of Lake Superior and inhabits the house he lived in as a child with his grandmother. For the film he transformed the space into an indoor set in the style of an old cabin by covering the white drywall with vertical wood boards and adding a wood burning cooking stove. He adorned open kitchen shelves with tins of Tenderflake and Magic Baking Powder, and a small painting table was set-up in front of the lake-facing window. Chapman explained that the project was a gradual collecting of things to build the narrative.

What I find so compelling about this initial scene is that Chapman creates this cabin-space-of-art-making, inside his own cabin of art-making. Chapman assigns no specific identity to the main character of the film and leaves the era ambiguous. He explains that this character could personify Woodland Painters such as Norval Morrisseau, Benjamin Chee Chee and Carl Ray surviving in a relatively remote location, making art as part of their everyday life, and even as a spiritual part of their life.

Koski and Chapman's artworks shift perspectives to reveal the complexities of representation. Koski's photographs give a heightened presence to small, seemingly tame objects and sharpens these objects for public presentation. Chapman engages several media artists to tell a collective story of an imagined Woodland painter that bridges painting history and contemporary video art. Both artists recast the roles of objects and narrative that continue to circulate in social life. Inviting us to reconsider how meaning is made.

1 Valda Blundell, "'Take Home Canada': Representations of Aboriginal Peoples As Tourist Souvenirs," in *The Socialness of Things: Essays on the Socio-semiotics of Objects*. ed. Stephen Harold Riggins (Walter de Gruyter & Company: Berlin, 1994), 262.

2 Valda Blundell and Ruth Phillips, "If It's Not Shamanic, Is It Sham? An Examination of Media Responses to Woodland School Art," *Anthropologica New Series, Native North Americans and the Media: Studies in Minority Journalism* 25, no. 1 (1983): 122-123.

3 Greg Jacobsen died tragically in an accident in 2011 before the shooting of the film was complete.

Cover image

Christian Chapman, still
from Super 8 film
Edmazinbiiget, 2008-2014

Opposite page

Bev Koski, *Toronto #1*, beads,
thread, found object, 2013

Right image

Bev Koski, *Toronto #4*, beads,
thread, found object, 2014



Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography is a non-profit artist-run centre committed to photography as a multi-faceted and ever-changing artform. Founded in 1979 to establish a supportive environment for the development of photography, Gallery 44's mandate is to provide a context for reflection and dialogue on contemporary photography and its related practices. Gallery 44 offers exhibition and publication opportunities to national and international artists, award-winning education programs, and affordable production facilities for artists. Through its programs, Gallery 44 is engaged in changing conceptions of the photographic image and its modes of production.

Bev Koski is an Anishnabekwe artist who lives in Toronto. She is a graduate of the Ontario College of Art and has a BFA from York University. Koski was involved with 7th Generation Image Makers, an art and mural programme for Indigenous youth run by Native Child and Family Services of Toronto. She currently teaches beading at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, among other places. She is a constant beader and occasional artist.

Christian Chapman is of Anishnaabeg heritage from Fort William First Nation. His interests include painting, printmaking and film. Chapman uses storytelling as a main theme in his practice to compose his images. The act of storytelling has been an important part of his life: it has informed him of his culture by shaping his identity and personal experiences.

Lisa Myers is of Anishnaabe ancestry from Beausoleil First Nation and the Georgian Bay region. She grew up in Milton, Ontario. Myers earned her Master of Fine Arts in Criticism and Curatorial Practice at OCAD University and continues her research as an independent curator. Myers has curated exhibitions at the MacLaren Art Centre and the York Quay Centre at Harbourfront in Toronto. She lives and works in Toronto and Port Severn, Ontario.

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