

# TOMORROW PEOPLE SKAWENNATI

February 4 – March 18, 2017

**M**ost Indigenous peoples have considered the universe in how they shape their worlds, so why wouldn't a contemporary Kanien'kehá:ka' artist reimagine the relationship between Sky World (the Haudenosaunee site of origin) and Earth? In her exhibition, *Tomorrow People*, Skawennati provides a provocative 'thought path' that activates the symbolism of an ancient, yet contemporary culture through hints of recognizable signs, materials and metaphor while piercing a linear or Cartesian acceptance of time. By reimagining key Haudenosaunee philosophies: the Creation Story and the *Ohen:ton Karihwatehkwen* (Thanksgiving Address), the artist playfully reclaims the super-human powers of the Ancient Beings as avatars in cyberspace.

Skawennati's early form of "gaming" was the iconic Barbie doll, which she saw as a confident, heroic action figure that engendered limitless adventures. This familiar figure forms the underpinnings for her avatar: a virtual representation of herself, envisioned for the future and featured throughout the exhibition. Before entering the exhibition space, visitors are greeted by the avatar in precise Kanien'kéha, French and English in *Words Before All Else Part 1*. The *Ohen:ton Karihwatehkwen*

are the customary words that are said at the beginning of all Haudenosaunee gatherings to acknowledge our relationship to the natural world. Here, only the first verse of the Address is stated, in which we recognize and thank the people. Through the avatar, Skawennati communicates with flawless diction in three languages plus conveys an idealized human figure. These details contradict negative ideas about Indigenous people.

*She Falls For Ages* is a retelling of the Haudenosaunee Creation Story. Sometimes known as *The Myth of the Earthgrasper*, this meta-narrative has for centuries been an oral recitation. The Creation Story has long moved back and forth from "breath," as described by anthropologist Dennis Tedlock, to the fixed medium of the written form. Skawennati drew her inspiration from Sotsisowah John Mohawk's 2005 update of the widely sought after Hewitt/Gibson version, originally dating from 1898-1899.<sup>2</sup> Elders say that winter is the time that this foundational story would once have been shared with families, perhaps, one imagines, around the glow of a log fire; and now, around the glow of the projected image.

Skawennati carves out an enchanting slice of the epic narrative, with emphasis placed on the opening drama in Sky World. Very little will be familiar to the usual textual rendition of the story except the intended teachings. Pantone pink, yellow, turquoise, green, orange and purple colours light up an interconnected grid emanating from a central tree which will eventually become the portal of transition and lead to the formation of earth and humanity. This visualization is a new imaging from the "breath" to the written word, now blossoming again in a virtual space, true to the teachings of unending transformation.

"Now all the flowers of the tree which have illuminated this world for alltime have become new. All things shall come into a constant state of unending transformation and retransformation."<sup>3</sup>

Within Mohawk's 2005 version, the sequence of events that activated the shift from life in Sky World to the creation of our physical world was precipitated by the action of "dream guessing": " 'I've had a dream, and as in our custom I want the people to guess what my dream is so that the vision of my soul can become real' ".<sup>4</sup> In *She Falls For Ages*, this is conceptualized as a game, one that the main character wins by using her telepathic powers.

Like all anticipatory art, *She Falls For Ages* clearly suggests that Indigenous or Haudenosaunee philosophy is part of a post-racial, family-centred and renewable earth as “future.” Perhaps this Sky World is an inversion of the past as future? The past may be this highly technological, sleek and denaturalized world of our future, flipped into the site for renewal as Sky Woman dances, yet anew on A’no:wara Kawé:note or Turtle Island. The tiny seeds placed in the neckpiece of Sky Woman ensure the continuity of the Creator’s gifts in this re-imagining.

The works *Birth of an Avatar*, *She Is Dancing With Herself* and *Dancing With Myself* signify the transformation of the body in virtual reality. In dialogue with the work of Mariko Mori’s *Birth of a Star*, Skawennati fashions her avatar as pop-icon while working towards structural change of the location of the Indigenous body. Archetypal in its physical structure recognized as Barbie, Skawennati’s avatar “delinks”<sup>5</sup> from colonial, Western and imperialistic narratives and the hegemonic structures of a Eurocentric worldview.<sup>6</sup> As part of the “delinking”, a layer of materiality and cultural texture are evocatively added through the interplay of cornhusks, ribbon shirts, cool conic hair buns and high-top leather mocs.

The triptychs *Generations of Play* and *Generations of Play 3D*, juxtapose a cornhusk doll, a Barbie doll and Skawennati’s avatar, as image and as object. All are de-faced, following in the tradition of the Haudenosaunee cornhusk doll; the facelessness originally intended to warn against vanity. Viewed together, these three playthings speak to the urgency of seeing ourselves as both traditional and contemporary.

North America is not a post-colonial space. The virtual realm and the creation of avatars open up another plateau to imagine different realities. Skawennati levels the hierarchy of technological access while challenging the normalization of oppression, both internally and externally for Indigenous peoples. By daring to reimagine the emblematic trope of renewal through the experience of Sky Woman as avatar, Skawennati provides another translation of the ongoing affirmation of what is Haudenosaunee.

Jolene Rickard, January 2017

Edited by Hannah Claus.

1. Kanien’kehá:ka translates to “People of the flint”; one of six nations that form the Haudenosaunee, commonly referred to as the Mohawk Nation and the Iroquois Confederacy.
2. Mohawk, J. (2005). *Iroquois Creation Story: John Arthur Gibson and J.N.B. Hewitt's Myth of the Earth Grasper*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Mohawk Publications.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Mignolo, Walter. (2011). “Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option: A Manifesto”. *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1, 2, p. 44-67.
6. Pullen, T. M. (January 1, 2016). “Skawennati’s TimeTraveller: Deconstructing the colonial matrix in virtual reality”. *Alternative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 12, 3, p. 236-249.

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Official event of Montreal’s 375th anniversary  
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