ALWAYS VESSELS

Barry Ace

Vanessa Dion Fletcher

Carrie Hill

Nadya Kwandibens

Jean Marshall

Pinock Smith

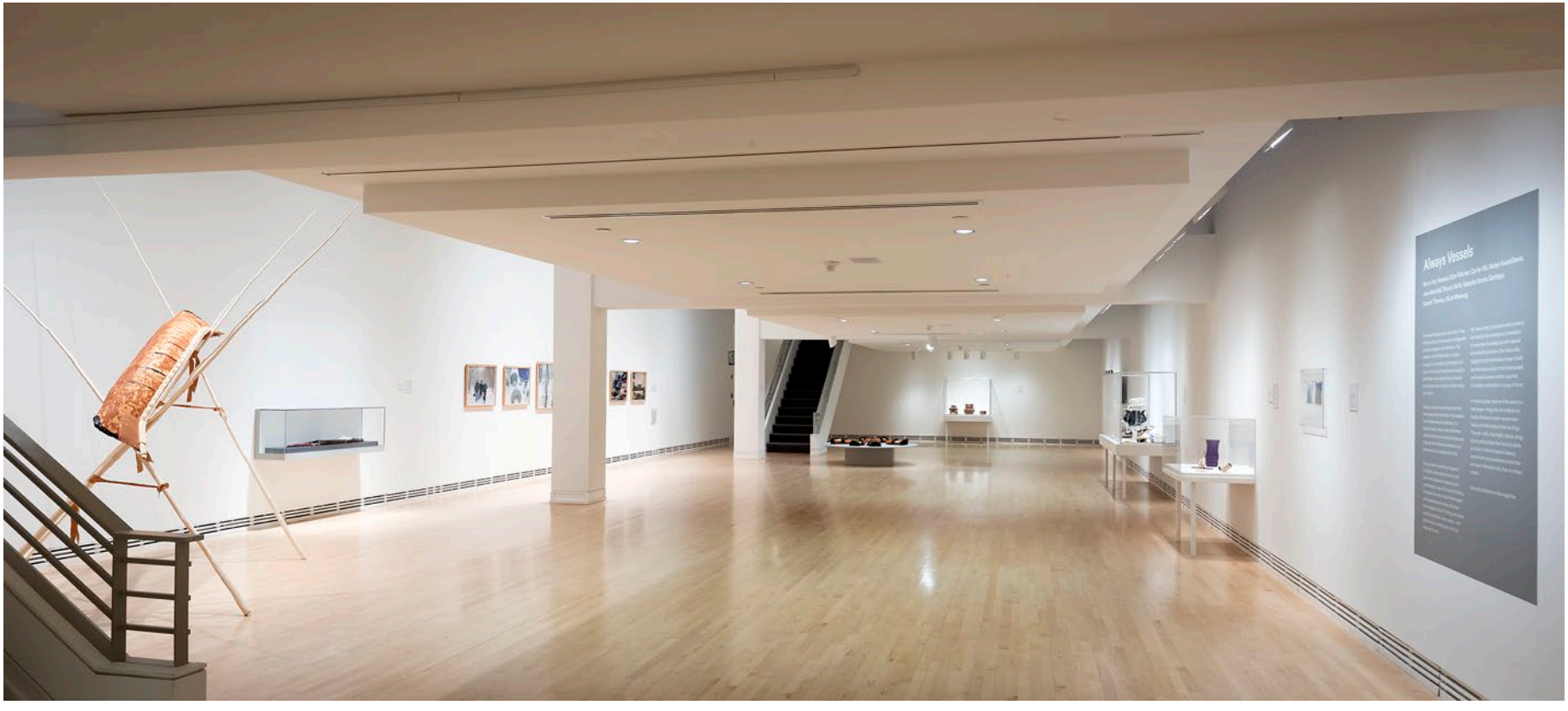
Natasha Smoke Santiago

Samuel Thomas

Olivia Whetung

Curated by

Alexandra Kahsenni:io Nahwegahbow


Always Vessels

From left: Carrie Hill, Pinock Smith, Vanessa Dion Fletcher, Nadya Kwandibens, Barry Ace, Alexandra Kahsenni:io Nahwegahbow, Sandra Dyck, Alastair Summerlee

ALWAYS VESSELS

Alexandra Kahsenni:io Nahwegahbow (Anishinaabe / Kanien'kehá:ka, Whitefish River First Nation)

The Kanien'kehá:ka artist and curator Greg Hill has written of the concept of Indigeneity using the metaphor of a container. The container that Hill describes is strong enough to carry centuries of memory and custom, but also soft and tender enough to be flexible: it can expand in any direction and change shape and form without losing its integrity.

Vessels, containers and things that hold have always been central to Anishinaabek and Haudenosaunee livelihoods. Our baskets, bags, canoes, pots and kettles collected and carried cherished items and materials that offered nourishment and sustenance to our bodies and minds.

Always Vessels explores the capacity of objects and practices to carry, hold and communicate our customary and contemporary ways of being and thinking. It features the work of nine Anishinaabek and Haudenosaunee artists who draw from multiple forms of training, and whose subjects and media range widely—from glass beads to photography and from language to land.

Yet these artists' processes remain primarily informed by the contemporary translation of customary knowledge as both material and embodied practice. Their works offer insights into the tremendous range of skills and techniques unique to the Anishinaabek and Haudenosaunee, and the ways that knowledge is embodied in a range of forms.

As Native people, when we think about our belongings—things that are made by our hands, minds and voices—we are never really just thinking about them as things. They are, rather, meaningful objects, songs, stories and practices that have the ability to contain, hold and transmit memory, nourishment and sustenance across time and space. Metaphorically, they are always vessels.

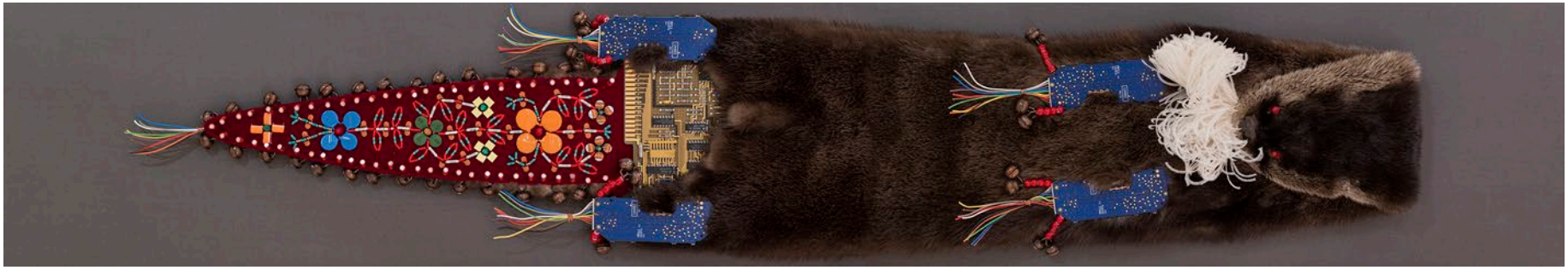
BARRY ACE

(Odawa Anishinaabe, M'Chigeeng)

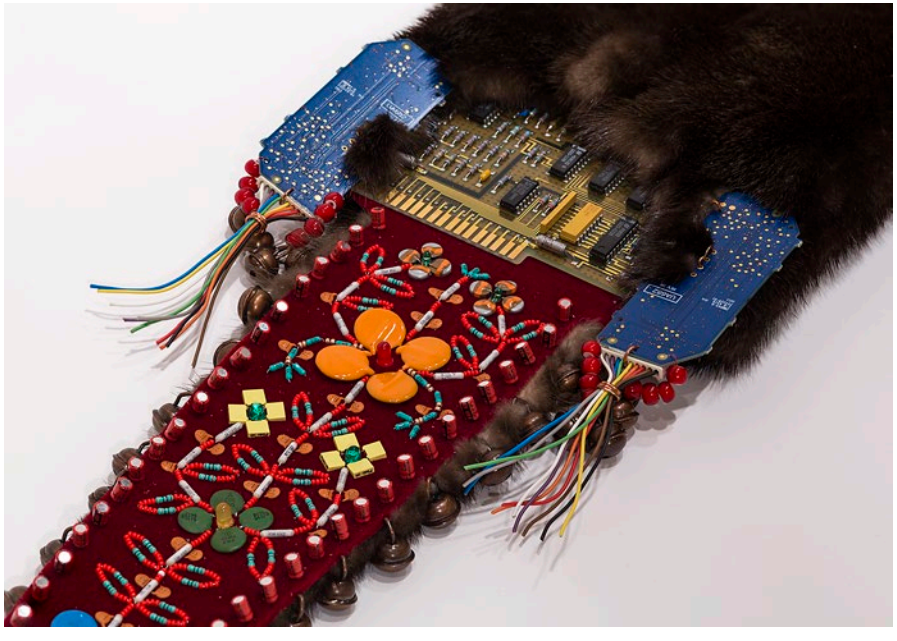
The otter is a very meaningful animal for the Anishinaabe. Our histories illustrate that the otter, a kind and caring being, was entrusted with bringing healing and helpful substances to humans and medicine people. *Spirit Vessel* echoes early otter skin bags that were made to carry and protect important bundles and cherished items.

The otter's tail is ornamented with electronic components applied in floral motifs. Echoing an Anishinaabe visual language of beadwork that reflected energy transfer and interconnectivity in the natural world of medicinal plants, Ace's newly translated florals are composed of capacitors, resistors, and circuit boards—contemporary media that are likewise used to store, release and transmit energy.

With a feather plume emanating from his mouth signifying breath, and exquisite circuit boards for tiny paws that recall stars and celestial bodies in the sky, this otter bag honours the travels of custom across time and space.



Barry Ace, *Spirit Vessel*, 2017



Barry Ace, *Spirit Vessel*, 2017

VANESSA DION FLETCHER

(Lenape/Potawotami)

According to the artist, this work began held in her mouth and moved down to her feet. Examining Indigeneity as embodied practice through the act of traversing the land, Vanessa Dion Fletcher explores themes of communication from the perspective of a non-language speaker. The artist has no direct access to her ancestral languages—Lenape and Potawatomi—and also has a learning disability, which affects her short-term memory.

Seeking to communicate her sense of belonging without the use of written or spoken words, Dion Fletcher marked copper plates by wearing them on her feet and walking the landscape of three places very meaningful to her: Toronto, Ontario; Thamesville, Ontario; and Pangnirtung, Nunavut.

In each location, Dion Fletcher considers her renewal of relationship to land and place, and the ways in which her movement enables the creation of new connections and relations across time. The prints made from the worn copper plates carefully record the impressions and intricacies of these thoughtful conversations, and write the topography of the artist's experience of land.

Vanessa Dion Fletcher, *Writing Landscape*, 2010-11

Vanessa Dion Fletcher, *Writing Landscape*, 2010-11

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Vanessa Dion Fletcher, *Writing Landscape*, 2010-11

JEAN MARSHALL

(Anishinaabe, Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug First Nation)

Hide sewn mitts are made to hold and warm our hands. In her careful sewing and beading of these four pairs, Jean Marshall utilizes a customary mode of making to address current concerns. Created in response to ongoing resource extraction in the mineral-rich region known as the “Ring of Fire” in northern Ontario, this installation conveys collective resistance and acts as a reminder of our relationships with and responsibilities to land.

In very old visual languages of the Northeast, materials that shine and appear to emit light are felt to be imbued with good, life-giving qualities that bring about warmth and clarity of mind. Marshall’s white glass beads share these traits with fire.

The circular arrangement of these beaded mitts evokes an empowered and resilient community that recognizes the responsibilities we share in defending and caring for land and for each other.

Each pair of mitts is sewn on the side with single welts in the colours of white, yellow, red and black, intimating that these responsibilities radiate outwards in each of the four directions.

Jean Marshall, *Ring of Fire*, 2017

Jean Marshall, *Ring of Fire*, 2017

CARRIE HILL

(Onkwehonwe, Haudenosaunee, Akwesasne Mohawk Nation)

The Haudenosaunee are well-known for their skill in ash splint basketry. Carrie Hill was taught to weave by her aunty Laura Mitchell, and says she feels most like herself when she works splint with her hands. In experimenting with bright dyes, contemporary forms and fancy curls, Hill explores the new possibilities of traditional media.

Hill pays tribute to the preciousness of the crop in *Mini Corn*, while acknowledging the longstanding tradition of miniature basketmaking. This art form was crucial to the livelihoods of Indigenous makers of the Northeast during the souvenir trade of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, when economic constraints inhibited customary ways of life.

The *Albino Dragon* set pushes fancy basketry beyond its traditional forms and uses. With this woven pair of cuffs and earrings, Hill conceives of natural ash splint and decorative curls as a contemporary mode of body ornamentation.

Created to visually emulate sound waves, *Can You Hear Me?* is made from interwoven splints dyed bright pink and purple, which appear to pulse and radiate from the base of the vessel to its rim. The vase's title conveys the embodied nature of things made by hand, Onkwehonwe reclamations of voice and the importance of genuinely listening.

Carrie Hill, *Albino Dragon*, 2017

Carrie Hill, *Mini Corn*, 2017

NADYA KWANDIBENS

(Ojibwe Anishinaabe, Animakee Wa Zhing Nation)

Nadya Kwandibens's *emergence* series narrates one community's revival of their sugar bush, which had not been used for several decades.

Taken at the beginning and end of April, Kwandibens's photographs trace the rhythmic continuance of a process that has been practiced by the Anishinaabek for centuries of springtime seasons: tapping maple trees, collecting sweet water into sap buckets and then boiling it down into maple syrup.

In the personal reflections that accompany these sessions, sugar bush family members Damien Lee and Elysia Petrone share their experiences in renewing this ethical, tender relationship with maples, each other and land.

In documenting these moments, Kwandibens centers Indigenous knowledge systems and seeks to uplift the practices that continue to nurture us in mind and body.

Nadya Kwandibens, *emergence series: Sugar Bush Sessions*, Part 2: Animikii-Waajiw Sugar Bush, Fort William First Nation, Thunder Bay, Ontario, April 30, 2016

Nadya Kwandibens, *emergence series: Sugar Bush Sessions*, Part 2: Animikii-Waajiw Sugar Bush, Fort William First Nation, Thunder Bay, Ontario, April 30, 2016

PINOCK SMITH

(Algonquin Anishinabeg of Kitigan Zibi)

Much of the concept for this exhibition began with Pinock Smith and his careful instructions on how to work birchbark with your hands. Known for his talents as an educator and woodworker, Pinock is one in a long line of Anishinaabek who have learned to skillfully form bark into beautiful containers.

The uses for beloved birchbark, culled from trees, are plentiful. Used to carry and store items, the bark can also be scraped and incised to record stories and oral history. Easily cut, folded and sewn, birchbark is a very soft and malleable material, yet once it is shaped, it is sturdy enough to hold weight and be watertight. In the Great Lakes region, a territory permeated by waterways, birchbark canoes were essential to life.

A large part of Pinock's current canoe-building practice involves teaching others to learn to work with bark, where meaning arises out of the context and process of making. In repeating the movements of cutting, cleaning, and sewing birchbark and transmitting this knowledge to others, Pinock's canoes exists along a continuum of an Indigenous making practice generations old, and there is an immeasurable amount of comfort in mimicking the motions of your ancestors' hands.

Birch bark is both a physical and metaphorical vessel; the Anishinaabe continue to renew their close relationship to the bark, which embodies and holds vital stories and the oral history of this land.

Pinock Smith, *Wigwàs Chiman*, 2017

Pinock Smith, *Wigwàs Chiman*, 2017

NATASHA SMOKE SANTIAGO

(Onkwehonwe, Haudenosaunee, Akwesasne Mohawk Nation)

The Haudenosaunee have a ceramics practice that is generations old. Hand-built and pit-fired, pottery was made to gather, prepare and store important things like food and water. In the forming, incising and firing of clay, Natasha Smoke Santiago draws from this long history of making, while also addressing her concerns as a contemporary Onkwehonwe.

The rounded body and castellated rim of *Corn Pot* draw from ancient Haudenosaunee forms. Shards of very old ceramics have been found to speckle the earth all throughout Haudenosaunee territory. Emerging out of the old is a continuance of motifs devoted to very treasured crops—images of corn, husks and the faces of important beings.

The artist has textured the surface of her *Sun Pot* with a small corn cob. The mottled clay surface of the clay pot, smoked in a fire, recalls a cloudy day, and the warmly-painted sun effigy peeks through the cloud cover.

Water Protector's Pot, Many Into One is an honouring vessel made in response to the grassroots resistance against the building of the Dakota Access Pipeline. Four beings from all directions of the earth align as one to protect the waters for the next seven generations. The incised sun and gathered arrows represent the occupation at Standing Rock Sioux Nation, organized to bring an end to the construction of the pipeline—a very dangerous entity rendered as a black snake.

Natasha Smoke Santiago, *Water Protector's Pot, Many Into One*, 2016

Natasha Smoke Santiago, *Sun Pot*, 2017

Natasha Smoke Santiago, *Corn Pot*, 2011

SAMUEL THOMAS

(Haudenosaunee, Lower Cayuga Band, Six Nations of the Grand River)

Though we remain rooted within our home territories, we are also a people with worldly concerns, ideas and opinions. In *The Power of Place—Strength of Being*, Samuel Thomas examines Haudenosaunee engagement with the global through the act of making. Drawing from distinctly Haudenosaunee forms, techniques and principles, Thomas responds to important power places around the world.

The velvet papyrus scroll holder, made by Samuel Thomas in response to the Egyptian pyramids, is embellished with the raised floral beadwork for which the Haudenosaunee are well-known. The beaded bark box references important community sites in Kenya, and its contents convey themes of shared experiences concerning Indigenous and Kenyan relationships to land and histories of colonization.

The vase from Delphi recalls Grecian vessels that depict ancient myths, yet the beaded narrations tell the Haudenosaunee creation story of Sky Woman, the Twins, the Thunderers and the Winds. Thomas's beaded velvet dish, made at Chichen Itza, Mexico, brings together celestial motifs and annual ceremonial cycles of the Haudenosaunee Longhouse and the Maya.

The series culminates at Niagara Falls with *Prophecy*, which foretells a time when the world will undergo tremendous change and the Falls will flow in reverse. In recognizing human engagement with the natural environment, *Prophecy* encourages us to be mindful of our actions and how we perceive our relationship with the world and our place in it.

Samuel Thomas, *Mexico*, from *The Power of Place — Strength of Being* series, 2010

Samuel Thomas, *Egypt*, from *The Power of Place — Strength of Being* series, 2010

OLIVIA WHETUNG

(Mississauga-Ojibwe Anishinaabe, Curve Lake)

Olivia Whetung's practice explores acts of / active native presence. Drawing from her experience as an Anishinaabemowin learner, she examines the ways in which language acts as a container for the world, and how we view and understand our place within it. In *Reflections 1 & 2*, Whetung considers the intersections of Indigenous geography, language and the locative practice of beadwork.

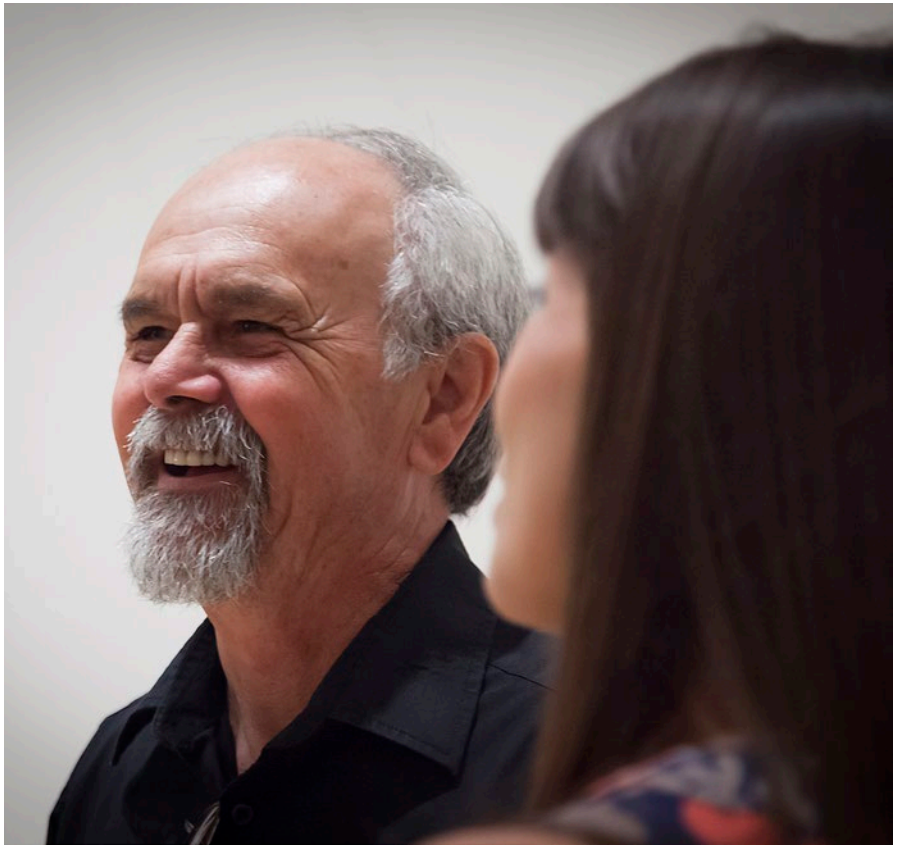
Whetung's territory, now known as the Kawarthas, comes from the Anishinaabe name, *gaa-waategamaag*, meaning "land of reflections." In these place-based, loom-woven works, iridescent glass beads record the ephemeral flicker of light on water, and make material the lake reflections that give *gaa-waategamaag* its name.

Olivia Whetung, *Reflections 1 & 2*, 2017

Opening reception for *Always Vessels*, 11 September 2017

Carrie Hill (back left) and her family

Amy Jenkins, Barry Ace and Joe Friday



Pinock Smith and Alexandra Kahsenni:io Nahwegahbow

Nadya Kwandibens

SUGAR BUSH STATEMENTS

Indigenous intelligence emerges from a space within us that is informed and governed by our ethical relationships and practices; it is lived by understanding our place and responsibilities within creation. The urgency for Indigenous intelligence today, as in the days of our ancestors, demands that we think analytically and critically about our present struggles and challenges.

emergence is a photo series that focuses on the existing presence of Indigenous intelligence within our nations. It's about looking inward and facing ourselves. It's about empowering and lifting each other up.

emergence is an ongoing open call for sessions to be photographed that considers the questions: *What does Indigenous intelligence look like? How is Indigenous intelligence actualized within my nation, my community, my family?*

Nadya Kwandibens

Nadya Kwandibens
emergence: Sugar Bush Sessions
Part 1: Animikii-Waajiw Sugar Bush, Fort William First Nation, Thunder Bay, Ontario, April 3, 2016

Damien Lee, 2016

One of my fondest memories of childhood was of making maple syrup on my reserve. My mom and dad would take me to the top of *Anemki Waajiw*—the mountain in the middle of Fort William First Nation—to collect sap from the maple trees. We'd bring that sap to our house in Anishinaabekwe Bay; I remember my dad dismantling our woodstove and pulling it onto the driveway where we'd boil the sap into syrup... smoke billowing out of the shortened "chimney" on a driveway of mid-April ice.

That time, circa 1986, was one of the last that the Fort William First Nation sugar bush was tapped and used. It would be left to its own for the next 30 years. And so it has been with great excitement that I've watched the resurgence of the sugar bush now. Since 2014, my cousins from the rez and I have been tapping the sugar bush again. Through this work, we have been re-establishing our connection to the bush, the land, and to the maple trees. As such, maybe what's happening isn't so much the resurgence of the sugar bush, but rather our relationship with it.

In the book *First Nations Jurisprudence and Aboriginal Rights: Defining the Just Society*, Chickasaw scholar James Sákéj Youngblood Henderson writes that Indigenous law and knowledge comes from the land, and our relationship with it. He notes that the land is always changing, and that because of this law knowledge is not static. It changes to adapt to new opportunities and challenges. The aim is to live well within the flux, and by doing so new knowledge emerges, while old principles re-emerge to guide new decisions. But living with that flux requires us to be with the land, to disengage from the artificial structures of governance and law flowing from Eurocentrism.

To me, the sugar bush allows us to take up Henderson's call. In the sugar bush season, we have to go to the bush each day in order to check and empty the buckets. This is an act of respect for the trees in that we do not want to let the sap go to waste, but it's also an act of being with the flux. The daily checking of the buckets puts us on the land in an immediate sense—walking into the sugar bush, we observe how it is doing, if it is facing a new threat, if the sap is flowing earlier or later than other years.

This relationship is not artificial because it is not separated by the office-based band administrative governance decisions. Instead, it is a direct relationship—we ask no one other than the trees for permission to be there.

Taken together, our reconnection with the trees, our direct relationship with them, and the fact that we approach that relationship with fluidity in order to live within the flux of when the trees are ready to share their sap, establishes an emergence or re-emergence of Anishinawbe intellectual and political orders in Fort William First Nation. This emergence centres good relationships with land and each other—*mino-bimaadiziwin*—while decentring money and Indian Act band councils. It centres consensus-based decision making, and the emergence of new leaders: each year a new person emerges from our group to lead the sugaring operations. And for me, this emergence also centres the memory of my childhood: in each sugar season, I see my young self with all those good memories of my family on the land.

But this emergence also emanates outwards. Each season more and more people join our sugaring operations. In 2014, there were about eight of us. In 2015, we estimate that about 200 people participated in one way or another. This year, 2016, we had maybe less people overall, but more people came to us from other reserves, and from town. This year was also the first since the 1970s that an elementary school from Thunder Bay joined us on an organized school trip.

This is emergence of all the things I've talked about above because, like me in the mid-1980s, the children who've joined us this year will remember their sugaring experience forever. This makes me feel like the Fort William First Nation sugar bush will be protected for generations to come—all it took this time around was for a small group of people to remember childhood experiences and put them back into action.

In my mind, nothing bad can come from maple syrup. It is pure goodness. And so far in re-establishing our sugaring operations at Fort William First Nation, that goodness has emanated in all seven directions: outwards into all our relationships, upwards and downwards in the ceremony of sugaring, and inwards in our personal connections with ourselves. If the aim is to live well within the flux, sugaring prepares us to be centred, enmeshed in loving relationships, and to address emergent challenges and opportunities as a collective.

Nadya Kwandibens
emergence: Sugar Bush Sessions
Part 2: Animikii-Waajiw Sugar Bush, Fort William First Nation, Thunder Bay, Ontario, April 30, 2016

Elysia Petrone, 2016

While Damien from Part 1 has fond personal memories of making maple syrup on the reserve, I had to dig a little deeper to get at my families' ties to the sugar bush on *Anemki Waajiw*. You see, my family underwent a separation—a distancing from the community when my grandmother's family moved to the other side of the *Kaministiquia* river, after her childhood house on the corner of City and Mission Road burnt down. How I came to know of my connection to the sugar bush is through a story my mother tells me. She remembers seeing a newspaper clipping dated from 1909 at her grandparent's house. The old article described her grandfather as a young boy with his father, Aloysius McCoy, making maple syrup on Mount McKay. The father and son (the son and grandson of the late James McKay after whom Mount McKay was eponymously named) had set up a teepee and were boiling sap over an open fire.

After I heard this story, I wanted to do as they did and make *Zhiiwaagamizigan* up on the mountain. That dream started to become a reality after I moved back to Thunder Bay for school in 2013. During that first year at school I was studying Anishinawbe law and I also got wind of a group making syrup on *Anemki Waajiw*. My first visit to the sugar bush was in the fall of 2014 when I participated in a class field trip with John Borrows, an Anishinawbe scholar who wrote the book on Indigenous legal traditions.

I just loved being up in the sugar bush. It is nestled in a beautiful valley with two rock faces on each side. I felt good to be up there and I could not wait to be a part of the action. Over time, I got to know some of the folks involved and to begin the 2015 season I was invited to participate in the opening feasting of the trees, where we offered cloth and tobacco to the biggest tree of the stand. That season I participated in a few harvests and one boil. I wanted to be up there every day (relationships take work) but I was struggling to stay afloat at school and the sap was flowing right in the middle of exams. This season however, I did not have the same conflicts and everything seemed to connect.

Looking back on my first season, my heart is full. I am thankful for being able to get back to my roots, spending time on the

land, for the family that has been created, and for the teachings received from the trees, sap and each member of the sugar bush family. Some of the memorable moments include: watching spring progress during the hikes into the bush, the excitement of finding a bucket full of sap, quenching my thirst by drinking cold delicious medicine water right from the bucket, negotiating creative ways to carry the sap out of the bush depending on how much sap we collected versus how many hands were on duty, learning a new song on the hand drum while sitting by the boil and seeing people's enjoyment when they were gifted a jar of syrup.

A few of the teachings I received came to me through missteps. Sometimes it takes breaking a law to discover what the law is. For example, the person overseeing the boil has to be observant of the way the sap bubbles, its colour, its texture, and its foaminess. I made the mistake of over boiling the syrup, which made it too thick and too smoky. Another law exposed is that when sap is left sitting in a bucket too long it will ferment and taste terrible.

Some might guess the best part about making *Zhiiwaagamizigan* is getting to enjoy it, but for me the greatest part has been strengthening my connection to the sugar bush family. This is especially important, because it is restoring the relationships that were severed for my family by the effects of colonialism and the *Indian Act*. Making maple syrup is a gift that has allowed me to connect with my ancestors, to connect with my community and to the land. This has been my medicine. This has been my reconciliation.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Barry Ace (Odawa Anishinaabe, M'Chigeeng)
Spirit Vessel, 2017
Otter pelt, ostrich plume, circuit boards, capacitors, resistors, light-emitting diodes, white heart beads, copper wire, beads, coated wire, brass hawk bells, velvet, cotton thread
Collection of the artist, courtesy of Kinsman Robinson Galleries

Vanessa Dion Fletcher (Lenape/Potawotami)
Writing Landscape, 2010-11
Intaglio prints, 2011, Collection of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada
Copper plates, 2010, Collection of the artist
Video, 2010, 4 minutes, 15 seconds, distributed by Vtape

Jean Marshall (Anishinaabe, Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug First Nation)
Ring of Fire, 2017
Elk hide, wool cloth, beaver fur, glass beads, imitation sinew, thread
Collection of the artist

Carrie Hill (Onkwehonwe, Haudenosaunee, Akwesasne Mohawk Nation)
Can You Hear Me? (2017)
Dyed ash splint basketry

Mini Corn (2017)
Ash splint basketry, with cherry burl stand made by Glenn Hill, Jr.

Albino Dragon (2017)
Ash splint basketry

Collection of the artist

Nadya Kwandibens (Ojibwe Anishinaabe, Animakee Wa Zhing Nation)
emergence series: Sugar Bush Sessions, 2016
Four photographs from Part 1: Animikii-Waajiw Sugar Bush, Fort William First Nation, Thunder Bay, Ontario, April 3, 2016

Three photographs from Part 2: Animikii-Waajiw Sugar Bush, Fort William First Nation, Thunder Bay, Ontario, April 30, 2016

Chromogenic prints
Collection of the artist

Pinock Smith (Algonquin Anishinabeg of Kitigan Zibi)
Wigwàs Chiman, 2017
Birchbark, cedar, spruce root, spruce gum and ash wood
Collection of the artist

Natasha Smoke Santiago (Onkwehonwe, Haudenosaunee, Akwesasne Mohawk Nation)
Corn Pot, 2011

Water Protector's Pot, Many Into One, 2016

Sun Pot, 2017

Hand-built Haudenosaunee pottery
Collection of the artist

Samuel Thomas (Haudenosaunee, Lower Cayuga Band, Six Nations of the Grand River)
From *The Power of Place — Strength of Being* series, 2010

Prophecy (Niagara Falls)
Beads, wire, liquid acrylic, Queenston shale, clay

Mexico
Velvet, coated paper, beads, wire, miniature silver Mayan calendar coin

Greece
Velvet, silk lining, beads, Greek "worry" and "eye" beads, alabaster

Kenya
Wool, beads, bone, bark, amber, metal chain

Egypt

Beads, turquoise, velvet, Egyptian cotton thread, silk tassels

Collection of the artist

Olivia Whetung (Mississauga-Ojibwe Anishinaabe, Curve Lake)

Reflections 1 & 2, 2017

11/0 Delica seed beads, nylon thread, push pins

Collection of the artist

This publication is produced in conjunction with *Always Vessels*, curated by Alexandra Kahsenni:io Nahwegahbow and presented at these venues:

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Front cover: Natasha Smoke Santiago, detail of *Water Protector's Pot, Many Into One*, 2016

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ALWAYS VESSELS

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