

SPRING 2014
KC ADAMS: BIRCH BARK LTD.



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EXHIBITIONS | SHERWOOD GALLERY

KC Adams: *Birch Bark Ltd.*

Curated by Jennifer Matotek, Director/Curator

MARCH 22 TO JUNE 4, 2014

Artist Talk: Saturday, March 22, 1:00 pm, Sherwood Village Meeting Room

Reception: Saturday, March 22, 2:00 pm, Sherwood Gallery

What we carry with us, what we are marked with

by Jenny Western, independent curator, Winnipeg

The humble birch, Saskatchewan's official arboreal emblem since 1988, has often been the tree of choice for artistic types. From the well-known Robert Frost poem ("When I see birches bend left and right / Across the lines of straighter darker trees...") to archeologically unearthed documents (including the noted 13th century birchbark drawings attributed to a Russian child named Onfim) there is something about the birch that seems to stir up humanity's creative juices. The birch's papery exterior in particular has been the foundational media for a variety of projects over time. One of

the most celebrated forms in North America is, of course, *mazinibaganjigan*, or birchbark biting, as translated from Ojibway to English. The Ojibway, along with the Cree, the Algonquin, and others with access to the birch tree, have practiced this craft for years, with others catching on along the way. By folding bark that has been removed in strips from the tree, patterns and symbols are carved into the malleable surface using teeth to make small grooves and gashes. In some ways, the technique is similar to making paper snowflakes by folding and cutting a sheet of paper, as the designs of the birchbark biting are repeated symmetrically when unfolded. However that is where the similarity ends, as birchbark biting at its finest is not simple. Far from it, this art form requires great skill, patience, and endurance, with the intricate designs to prove it. Women have traditionally been the keepers of this practice, and makers like Saskatchewan artists Sally Milne and the late Angelique Merasty have continued to promote the art form contemporarily. Despite seemingly widespread interest, it is said that birchbark biting is an Indigenous art form that is being “lost,” as fewer members of the younger generation are learning these customary techniques. This rich and compelling art form deserves the attention of both “modern” and “traditional” artists alike.

KC Adams, a Yorkton-born, Winnipeg-via-Selkirk-based artist of Scottish and Oji-Cree ancestry, has taken a unique approach to the traditional forms of birchbark biting, introducing it into an almost futuristic realm. In her

sculptural installation *Birch Bark Ltd*. Adams has created a forest of twenty-four birch trees, composed mainly of paper clay. Cut off at the knees, each tree is supported by a narrow gallery-grade plinth as its base. Light seeps out of the porcelain skins of these sculptures in a pattern that resembles the delicate intricacy of the birchbark biting technique. Upon closer inspection, viewers will notice that the usual designs inspired by nature incorporate a familiar but different kind of symbol. Corporate logos such as those of the CBC, Shell, Chrysler, Mercedes, Volkswagen, Bell, Pepsi, Safeway, the Royal Bank, Apple, the Olympics, the Bay, Manitoba Hydro, the New York Yankees, and the Winnipeg Art Gallery appear subtly upon the tree's bark. The peaceful grove of birch trees seems to operate in stark contrast to the introduction of these economically-driven symbols. So, why are they here?

According to Adams, *Birch Bark Ltd*. is a way of coming clean about her own complicit consumerist tendencies. Adams' work has often examined the dynamic between the natural and technological worlds in relation to personal identity. One of her most well-known series, *Cyborg-Hybrids*, involved Photoshopping portraits of technologically-minded cultural workers of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal backgrounds into glossy, magazine-quality images. Wearing white beaded t-shirts with racially charged slogans such as "Scalping Is In My Blood" and "Dirty Little Indian," viewers are drawn into the alluring visuals of these stoic and beautiful people before being confronted by the words appearing on the models' chests. Through the



process, audiences are challenged to reflect upon their own preconceptions while the sitters in the photographs enter into a sort of kinship, linking communities of people in Banff, Charlottetown, Winnipeg, Brandon, Ottawa, and New York City through shared experience. Another piece by Adams, *Kokum Mamama*, examines community and relationships in a slightly different way. A sculptural work installed on the gallery floor, *Kokum Mamama* is an interconnected series of porcelain pods lit from within. The pods lie on a bed of sand and are surrounded by sprigs of wild sage. The formation of this installation references a family tree, obliquely pointing to Adams' own familial lineage. The result is a highly personal project that interweaves organic forms with a nod to the cybernetic world.

The influence of both *Cyborg Hybrids* and *Kokum Mamama* are evident in *Birch Bark Ltd.* and the latter installation's emphasis on identity and relationships. While a response to her own consumerism, *Birch Bark Ltd.* began with Adams thinking about the legacy that she would pass on to her young son. As a new parent and an artist who has been working through issues of cultural and personal identity, Adams started to think critically about where her values had been lain. Aboriginal wisdom and teachings were certainly in there, but so too was a connection to her iPad. Faced with the challenge of placing this legacy into action, Adams set to working it out through her artistic practice. She was able to bring the two symbols together onto her porcelain trees using a computer program to create patterns similar to that of birchbark

bitings. The outcome is an investigation of hybridity, offering a glimpse into the complexities of contemporary Aboriginal identities today. Whether living on the reservation or in urban centres, Aboriginal people across Canada are influenced by a variety of desires, inheritances, personal preferences, and public projections upon their identities. *Birch Bark Ltd.* asks us all, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to take an honest look at what we carry with us, what we are marked with, and what is in our hearts. Those are things that will leave a lasting effect upon us and those are the things that we will leave for future generations to uncover, like so many layers of birchbark.

Artist Biography

KC Adams is an Oji-Cree multidisciplinary artist who holds a BFA in Studio Arts from Concordia University. She works in various media that include sculpture, installation, drawing, painting, photography, ceramics, printmaking, and kinetic art. Her work has been shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions throughout Canada, the United States, Europe, and Australia. Her art is part of the collections of the National Museum of the American Indian.

CREDITS

KC ADAMS *Birch Bark Ltd.*, 2012, porcelain, LED lights, wooden plinths
Photo: University of Regina Photography Department

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