This text accompanies the exhibition

**Sovereign Acts II**

Curator
Wanda Nanibush

Rebecca Belmore, Lori Blondeau, Dayna Danger, Robert Houle, James Luna, Shelley Niro, Adrian Stimson, Jeff Thomas

January 21 – April 1, 2017

For commentary on the works and issues raised in the exhibition as well as suggested readings, please consult *Ways of Thinking* on the Gallery’s website: ellengallery.concordia.ca/ways-of-thinking/current/?lang=en
The history of Indigenous peoples performing cultural dances and practices for international and colonial audiences is an important part of Indigenous art in general and performance art specifically. From the early contact years onward, the Indigenous performers known as ‘Indians’ faced the conundrum of maintaining traditional cultural practices by performing them on stage while also having that performance fulfill the desires of a colonial imaginary. These performances took place within the context of colonial policies of assimilation and subjugation.¹ The exhibition Sovereign Acts II starts from the idea that the performers were aware of how they were being viewed and worked with audience expectations, carving out a future and an identity for themselves despite the constraints they found on every stage. In Sovereign Acts II, the artists Rebecca Belmore, Lori Blondeau, Dayna Danger, Robert Houle, James Luna, Shelley Niro, Adrian Stimson, and Jeff Thomas, contend with the legacy of colonial representations as well as the legacy of cultural performance by utilizing a variety of aesthetic strategies such as reenactment, remixing, memorialization, mimicry, parody, masquerade, and portraiture. They return to the history of performing ‘Indian’ and its conundrums to recuperate the erased and objectified performer as an ancestor, an artist, and an Indigenous subject. Through this return they seek to understand their own relationship to performing culture in a contemporary art context, often turning the gaze back onto an audience and making the colonial desires that underpin colonial imagery visible. Lastly, some of the artists use performance itself as an entry point in rewriting colonial historical

narratives from an Indigenous point of view. The exhibition seeks to highlight the artists’ works as performative ‘acts’ that negotiate expectations as much as represent culture and identity. It is important to state that representing Indigenous culture includes aspects of contemporary culture, not just the pre-contact culture of the colonial imaginary. The Indigenous acts of making work follow the path of the past Indigenous performers to present negotiated and highly conscious representation of culture and/or identity.

There are works that diverge from specifically using the history of performing ‘Indian’ on world stages. In curating the exhibition, I was led to work that while not dealing with the history of performing culture were dealing with identity as something to be performed and in a continual process of negotiation. Performativity is a “repetition and ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.” If culture is something that comes about through a process of reiteration and ritual that must be repeatedly performed to produce what is spoken of the cultural performance then it is also a space of creating normative identity. The construction of culture has the temporality of sedimentation. For Indigenous peoples, the sedimentation of colonial discourse has been six centuries long. For Butler, performance becomes a way of disrupting or reconfiguring or plainly opposing normativity. These resistant performances come out of the difference that comes from failing to live up to the ideal of the norm, in this case ‘Indian-ness’ as savage or romantic. “Construction not only takes place in time, but is itself a temporal process, which operates through the reiteration of norms; [culture] is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration.”

Culture here is a difficult word taking on many meanings in many contexts. I am using it to specify what others would call ethnicity and worldview but which include processes of subjection, colonialism, and racialization.

Indigenous peoples of the Americas, to hazard a generalization, speak of themselves as having oral cultures with long standing storytelling traditions. History in an oral culture is something performed for the purposes of maintaining, creating, and changing cultural identity. History is performed repeatedly for each generation, undergoing in every instance of iteration a subjective inflection, action, emphasis, and, sometimes, plot of the storyteller. Through dance, ritual, ceremony, medicine, storytelling, and song the self was sought. The self in this view was not pre-given, unified, or unchanging and these performances of culture, history and identity were/are also the ‘culture’ of Indigenous artists and performers. Song, dance, ritual, and ceremony were banned at the height of the nineteenth century when staging Indigenous cultures for entertainment was most popular. The prohibition, while attempting to break the cultural identities of Indigenous peoples, actually marked those very activities as central or integral to any conception of Indigenous and thus became central to any contemporary Indigenous identity whether in repudiation or reclamation. The colonial discourse on assimilation whereby Indigenous peoples were to ‘become white’ externalized the process of discursive production of idealized normative social/political identities. The colonial authorities, which includes the church had to say what ‘white’ is and thus create structures and institutions to assist Indigenous peoples in becoming white. It further reinforces how all of society was being subjected. The critical distance created by both failing to be either the right ‘Indian’ or the right ‘white’ is the space of agency afforded to Indigenous artists. In not being cultural informants or artists who reject cultural affiliation there is an agency to critique any pre-given identity. They do not recourse to a ‘true’ or authentic culture to replace the critiqued stereotypical or subjugated versions. Social con-

struction and self-representation mutually influence each other, which for de Lauretis, leaves “open a possibility of agency and self-determination at the subjective and even individual level of micropolitical and everyday practices.”

4 There is also a space opened up to actively create Indigenous cultures through the use of personas, fictional biographies, family histories, personal narratives, ceremonial actions, archival deconstructions, and performative interventions.

World fairs and exhibitions of colonized peoples was a large part of popular entertainment during the early and mid 1800s. Indigenous peoples were exhibited as exotic, almost disappeared examples of ‘primitive man’. Ishi is an example. The shows cemented Europeans’ image of Indigenous peoples as belonging before or outside modernity and urbanization. They were often exhibited alongside technological innovations, further reinforcing western man as the innovator, the one destined for progress. The exhibitions were also used to disseminate the science of racism whereby another peoples’ inferiority could be scientifically verified by types of bodies and dress.

The nineteenth century also saw the emergence of Wild West shows, the most famous of which was Buffalo Bill’s, in the colonial territories of North America. They coincided with the systematic slaughter of the Buffalo (almost complete by 1880) and the suppression of Indigenous cultural traditions, in particular dances and practices that resisted and posed threats to colonial rule. Many practices were prosecutable: by 1884 in Canada and 1904 in the United States. The most targeted were the Sundance and the Ghost Dance—not least of all due to their connection with uprisings against the Americans and Canadians, most famously at Wounded Knee. Ironically, the earliest dance to be caught on film is Thomas Edison’s Ghost Dance, which documents a staged ghost dance by a travelling troupe of Sioux performers from Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show who dropped by his studio in 1894. These same performers had been in jail for being at Wounded Knee and were released into Buffalo Bill’s care with the hopes that the stage would civilize them. It is on the stage that they were able to continue the dance. The performance was not as it would have been in their community setting. The way the bodies move and the costuming is not what would take place in a ghost dance. The dancers would have known this and yet to get out of jail, see the world and bring that knowledge home, they performed stereotypic movements.

In their critiques of colonization and the history of colonialism, the artists show how any form of cultural identity as much as any other identity based on being a man or woman or straight or gay must be performed repeatedly in order to become real; and that it must also be repeatedly policed to stabilize the status quo of power distribution in the larger society. Indigenous performers had to contend with colonial policing of ‘Indian-ness’ as well as their families’ and communities’ understandings and expectations. There is a third space, however, where the two meet: in the travels and performances, which produced more complex conceptions of Indian-ness. This space—where many conceptions compete and stereotypes compound and collide—becomes a freer un-policed space to perform consciously different identities. In seeking specificity of a particular nation, place or tradition, or in the subjectivity of the performer, artists attempt to unwind themselves from the colonial imaginary. Colonialism was resisted and because of this there is more than just a colonial ‘Indian’ to source for identity construction. No one can have the final word on the nature and culture of Indigenous identity but there is still much to be said that has been silenced by colonial representations. Embarking from specific historical moments, the artists in Sovereign Acts II seek to define themselves from in and outside colonial
This is a modified version of the essay that accompanied the exhibition Sovereign Acts at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, University of Toronto, in 2012. That exhibition presented the works of Rebecca Belmore, Lori Blondeau, Robert Houle, Terrance Houle, Shelley Niro, Adrian Stimson and Jeff Thomas.
### List of Works

1. Adrian Stimson  
   *Buffalo Boy Shaman*  
   *Exterminator*, 2005  
   Digital inkjet print  
   Courtesy of the artist

2. Rebecca Belmore  
   *In a Wilderness*  
   *Garden*, 2012  
   3-channel video installation  
   4 min. 20 sec.,  
   10 min., 44 sec.  
   Courtesy of the artist

3. Lori Blondeau  
   *Asiniy Iskwew*, 2016  
   Digital inkjet prints  
   Courtesy of the artist

4. James Luna  
   *Ishi Speaks*, 2011  
   Digital inkjet prints  
   Courtesy of the artist

5. Thomas A. Edison  
   *Ghost Dance*, 1894  
   35mm black and white film transferred to video,  
   21 sec.

6. Shelley Niro  
   *The Iroquois Is a Highly Developed Matriarchal Society*, 1991  
   Hand-tinted gelatin silver prints  
   Courtesy of the artist

7. James Luna  
   *In My Room*, 2016  
   Video installation with fake flame device, logs and rocks  
   Video; 2 min. 17 sec., colour, sound  
   Courtesy of the artist

8. Shelley Niro  
   *The 500 Year Itch*, 1992  
   Hand-colored gelatin silver print, sepia toned gelatin silver print,  
   gelatin silver print  
   Courtesy of the artist

9. Dayna Danger  
   *Adrienne*, 2017  
   *Lindsay & Sasha*, 2017  
   Digital prints  
   Courtesy of the artist

10. Dayna Danger  
    *Three Masks*,  
    2016, 2016, 2017  
    Leather and bead embroidery  
    Courtesy of the artist

11. Adrian Stimson  
    *Onward Upward*, 2005  
    Digital inkjet prints on archival paper, vinyl lettering  
    Courtesy of the artist

12. Adrian Stimson  
    *Sketches of Indian Life*, 2005  
    Digital inkjet prints on archival paper, vinyl lettering  
    Courtesy of the artist

13. Adrian Stimson  
    *Buffalo Boy’s Wild West*  
    *Peep Show*, 2007  
    4-channel video installation, poster;  
    *North*, 1 min. 28 sec.;  
    *Don’t Look East*,  
    7 min. 26 sec.;  
    *Sacred South*,  
    8 min. 56 sec.;  
    *Wild West*, 2 min. 34 sec.  
    Courtesy of the artist

14. Robert Houle  
    *Shaman Never Die*, 2015  
    *Shaman Dream in Colour*, 2015  
    *Shaman Heals by Touching*, 2015  
    Oil on canvas  
    Courtesy of the artist  
    and Kinsman Robinson Galleries, Toronto

15. Adrian Stimson & Lori Blondeau  
    *Putting the Wild back into the West*, 2004-2010  
    Digital inkjet prints  
    Courtesy of the artists
16. Shelley Niro  
_Abnormally Aboriginal_,  
2013  
Photographs on canvas  
Courtesy of the artist

17. Jeff Thomas  
_Shoots the Crow,  
Lakota, Bismarck,  
North Dakota, 1995  
Get Up and Dance: Ron  
Good Eagle, Comanche/  
Osage/Sac & Fox, 1995  
The Powwow  
Suitcase, 1982  
Amos Keye, Haudenosaunee  
(Iroquois), 1982  
Richard Poafpybitty  
(Pink Panther), Comanche/  
Omaha, 1983  
Turtle Powwow, Niagara  
Falls, New York, 1983  
Pigment prints on  
archival paper  
Courtesy of the artist
The Gallery thanks all the artists, Wanda Nanibush and Barbara Fischer as well as the Woodland Cultural Center, Brantford; Urban Shaman Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Winnipeg; Kinsman Robinson Galleries, Toronto and Truck Gallery, Calgary for their invaluable assistance in the organization of the exhibition.