



SPRING 2016

When Raven Became Spider



Sonny Assu, *When Raven Became Spider, Embrace*, 2003, akoya shell buttons, melton wool, synthetic gabardine, white cotton jogging fleece. Photo: Don Hall.

WHEN RAVEN BECAME SPIDER

JOI T. ARCAND, SONNY ASSU, SHAUN BEYALE, JULIANNE HERNEY, ELLE-MÁIJÁ TAILFEATHERS
AND JEFFERY VEREGGE
APRIL 15 TO JUNE 22, 2016
CURATED BY LEENA MINIFIE

Reflections on the power of hidden transformation stories and super-being iconography

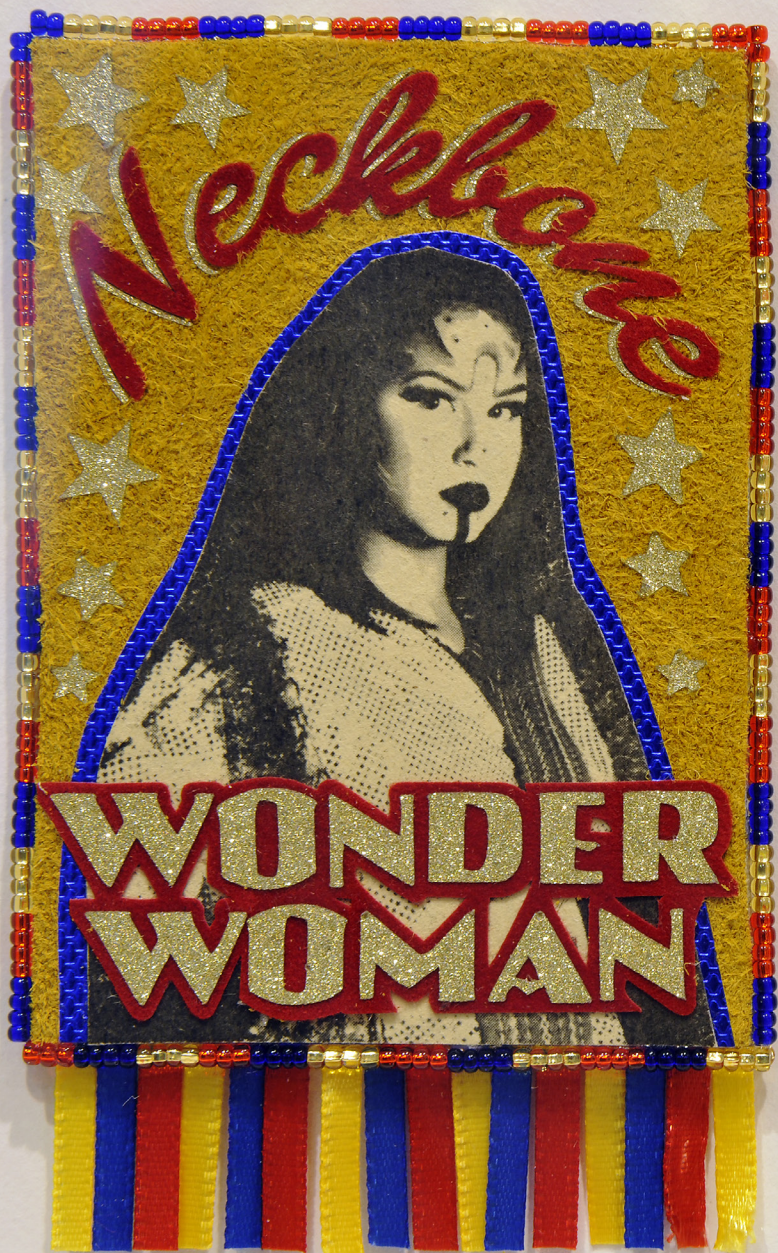
BY LEENA MINIFIE, GUEST CURATOR

Indigenous stories often exist in the grey realm. The characters' fates may be uncertain. Even though there are teachings of light and dark, good and bad, these categories are not the sole focus of the stories, or their characters. Forces of good or bad may enter the story as a sub-plot, but these parameters lie on a gradient. Stories move back and forth, as characters experience obstacles and triumphs. I am fascinated by the double-meaning or dubiousness of particular stories.

Collectively, across Nations, supernatural beings exist in everyday life. Supernatural existence is an extension of, and an essential element of, every traditional story, a force that weaves through narratives across the continents in all Indigenous cultures. The thread drawing together the artists selected

for the exhibition – Joi T. Arcand (Cree), Sonny Assu (Kwakwaka'wakw), Shaun Beyale (Navajo), Julianne Herney (Cree/Mi'kmaq/Métis), Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers (Blackfoot/Sami), and Jeffery Veregge (S'Klallam) – is the idea of transcendence, as well as a shared comic-book style aesthetic.

Characters in *When Raven Became Spider* express a desire to transform, to lift away from the physical works that situate them, ready to propel themselves off the page, out of the photo, through the screen, or off the drum. Transformation resonates as an Indigenous power of survival in genocidal times. As Felicia Gay states: "transformation is a traditional concept that still holds weight within our Indigenous communities and powerfully works to reframe the notion of power



Joi T. Arcand, *The Beautiful Indian SuperMaidens™ Trading Cards: Neckbone Wonder Woman* (detail), 2016, mixed media. Photo: Don Hall.

THE BEAUTIFUL NON SUPERMAIDENS™

NECKBONE WONDER WOMAN

AKA: Julianne Herney

ORIGIN: Before 1491 & lives for eternity.

SUPERPOWER: Telekenesis.

She has the power to eat 1000 neckbones in one sitting.

She can summon the light of the sun to destroy enemies through her willow.

and Aboriginal women.”¹ Although supernatural beings and animals are not obviously depicted in all works, their superpowers are implied through their references to story. Power, beauty, strength, wisdom, justice, and the will to triumph are all subjects represented within these pop Indigenous icons. Characters beat all odds and excel at various human feats and challenges, altering themselves to overcome the status quo and to engage in defensive actions for their Native sisters, families, and Nations. Each artist focuses on the resilience of their heroes. The rest of the muck, the villains and the crisis, are taken as a given by the existence of these characters. The heroes in this exhibition automatically reference the prospectus of stereotypes that erupt into society daily, but their sheer existence renders these stereotypes false.

The theme of transformation is also implied in the works’ comic-book stylings, and in the translation from oral-traditional to visual-pop-cultural. All of the pieces in the exhibition portray super-beings or superheroes to a public audience, and collectively transform the icons and imagery from their Nations, placing them into a mainstream pop culture context. These characters have been created in order to affirm their status in stories, and for their artists to assert and direct the stories of Indigenous people. As in pop art, the works include artists’ self-references, nods to other pop art creators, and callouts to contemporary pop culture iconography. Most of these artists’ images are saturated in a primary colour palette, or drawn with bold black and white intensity. Jeffrey Veregge reminds

us that “comics are just a modern way of idealizing the concepts of Good vs. Evil. The hero’s journey. Modern day myths that today’s world can accept. Just as in earlier times when the earliest of man took to the walls of their cave dwellings to draw their tales.”²

Sonny Assu explains Raven’s *raison d’être* in *When Raven Became Spider*, the series of works from which this exhibition takes its name: “He (Raven) is inserting himself into the Spiderman narrative, not to become a hero, but to be noticed again because that is what he wants to be, he wants people to look at him, to witness him.”³ In this light, we can see the progression of Assu’s *Challenging Tradition Series*, where Raven is slowly revealed in contemporary comic book stories. While Raven becomes present, other elements in Raven’s world are left behind and forgotten. It brings up questions: How has Raven been turned into a commodity in Assu’s work? Have our other supernatural beings lost the fight? Have they been rendered invisible? Has the attention-seeking trickster emerged as the only element necessary for transformation today? Where lies the Eagle, Raven’s wise, noble, and stoic counterpart? Raven stands for transformation, and Eagle, by our stories, stands for the intellect necessary to transform. Eagle does not insert himself into the stories, but perhaps resides behind the curtain, advocating for intelligence and graciousness as he subtly influences Raven on his journey of transformation. Indigenous trickster stories have this counterbalance, these dichotomies. Is Eagle the artist? Or is Eagle manifested in the observer of the works? Will the balance of the



Jeffrey Veregge, *Widow*, 2016, digital print. Photo: Don Hall.

powers be deemed invisible through the modernization of Indigenous images?

Each of the artists play with ancient stories and modern stories simultaneously. They are keenly aware of the power of pop culture, acknowledging their status and influence in North America by creating work within the comic-book genre. The artists and their works allude to the collective cultural fabric of a new generation of Indigenous adults, most of whom were raised within media-saturated mass culture. By appropriating and dispersing pop culture images in their work, the artists in *When Raven Became Spider* resiliently inject their values back into mainstream narratives.

Eva Kimminich says “Just as identity draws its mental foundations from a culture in order to embody itself, every culture needs bodies, which incarnate, defend, or alter it.”⁴ Arcand, Assu, Beyale, Herney, Tailfeathers, and Veregge assert visual sovereignty over Indigenous iconography, using their character’s bodies to defend their people, and to incarnate our collective Nations into these beings by altering contemporary pop culture iconology.

¹ Felicia Gay, exhibition text for *Transformation, Testimony & Warrior Woman: Stop the Silence*, AKA artist-run, Accessed March 2, 2016, <http://akaartistrun.com/portfolio-item/joi-t-arcand-shelley-niro-transformation/>

² Jeffrey Veregge, Skype interview with the author.

³ Sonny Assu, interview with the author.

⁴ Eva Kimminich, “Identity and Society – Culture and Violence: Reflections on the Power and Dynamics of Signs” in *Science + Fiction: Between Nanoworlds and Global Culture*, eds. Stefan Iglhaut and Thomas Spring in cooperation with Sprengel Museum Hannover (Berlin: Jovis, 2003), 40.



Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers, *A Red Girl's Reasoning*, 2012, HD video. Image courtesy of the artist.





Julianne Herney, *A Historic Confrontation*, 2016, performance. Photo: Eagleclaw Thom.





When Raven Became Spider installation view, Ottawa Art Gallery Annex, 2017. Photo: Rebecca Basciano.



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COVER IMAGE

Shaun Beyale, *The Time Traveler*, 2015, ink, grey Copic marker, and white Gelly Roll pen on paper. Photo courtesy of the artist.

