

Crossing the Border

The Saskatchewan half of a biennial formerly limited to Alberta reckons with treaty territory, not just provincial boundaries.

by Michael Peterson

November 11, 2020 8:30 AM



Heather Benning, "Winter Sleep," 2020, wheat, resin, pine, acrylic resin, linen and cotton thread (with poem by Sheri Benning), installation view at Remai Modern, Saskatoon (courtesy of the artist; photo by Golden Media Group)

For the first time in its 24-year history, the Alberta biennial crossed the provincial boundary into Saskatchewan this year, leading to a partnership between Edmonton's Art Gallery of Alberta, which launched the biennial in 1996, and Saskatoon's Remai Modern.

Both cities are Treaty 6, and this version of the biennial asks what it means to frame an exhibition around treaty territory, in addition to provincial boundaries. This has led not only to a greater focus on Saskatchewan artists but, through them, a broader understanding of relationships to this land, as well as a continued reckoning with some of our histories.

This is significant for the Remai, as prior programming often focused on global artists and considerations. It also marks the first time the biennial includes two Indigenous curators, Felicia Gay and Franchesca Hebert-Spence; the Remai was without an Indigenous curator until last month, when Tarah Hogue was named the inaugural curator of Indigenous art.

Works in the Saskatoon half of the biennial (Edmonton's half is reviewed [here](#)) take different approaches to discussing borders, specifically, as the exhibition essay says, "the ways borders are defined, who has the power to enforce them, and who (or what) is confined by their limits."



Lyndal Osborne, "Drought," 2020, mixed media installation, dimensions variable, installation view at Remai Modern, Saskatoon (photo by Blaine Campbell)

Some works centre around experiences of the land itself. For instance, Saskatchewan artist Heather Benning draws on her family's farming past to consider the struggles facing grain farmers.

Winter Sleep situates an installation of a kitchen table and chairs tumbling from a large pile of grain in the centre of the space, while a poem by her sister Sheri, embroidered on linen sheets that resemble grain sacks, hangs on a nearby wall. The work addresses the current unsettling of the family farm by massive agribusiness holdings and the overturning of the grid system of land division, which was used to displace Indigenous and Métis people during colonial settlement.

While Benning's work focuses on grain farmers, Edmonton artist Lyndal Osborne's *Drought* draws attention to the experiences of ranchers living in two very different parts of the world: the Porcupine Hills in the Alberta foothills and New South Wales, Australia.

The work includes photographs, but most captivating are the sculptural installations. Although constructed from materials involved in the ranching process – fence posts that show their wear, barbed wire wrapped around a bundle of fur – what caught me first was the visual presence of the installation. Osborne turns these utilitarian objects into complex geometric arrangements, asking us to stop and consider what can so easily be overlooked on the prairie countryside.



Wally Dion, "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters", 2020, acrylic on canvas, 74" x 66" (collection of Lawson A.W. Hunter)

Other works more directly place bodies within the exhibition and focus on experiences of people who live on this land. Saskatoon-born Salteaux artist Wally Dion's black and white painting, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, takes its title – and some of its imagery – from Francesco Goya's aquatint of the same name, depicting an Indigenous woman holding up two fingers in the shape of a vee. She is surrounded by Goya's bats and owls, as well as wolves. The work is a call for resistance against oppression and, in Dion's words, "the awakening of people through protest, disruption."

Meanwhile, Calgary-based artist Nurgül Rodriguez's *Out of Place* displays an installation of what started as 1,095 porcelain cups, representing the number of days she was legally required to reside in Canada during a five-year period in order to become a Canadian citizen. During the exhibition, visitors are able to take home a cup in exchange for answering a question from the Canadian Citizenship Guide.



Nurgül Rodriguez, "Out of Place," 2019-2020, installation with glazed porcelain, dimensions variable, installation view at Remail Modern, Saskatoon (courtesy of the artist; photo by Blaine Campbell)

For me, what resonated most was the *NDN Survival Trilogy* of videos by Thirza Cuthand, a Regina-born artist of Plains Cree and Scots descent. By letting us see and hear from people living on this land, she helps us connect more deeply and better understand their experiences. And, significantly, the people Cuthand presents are Indigenous.

The prairies are often depicted as empty landscapes with large skies and wind-blown wheatfields. And while this may seem neutral, unoccupied landscapes were used historically by the Canadian government to visually represent the land as empty – a sort of *terra nullius*, or "land belonging to nobody." This erasure of Indigenous peoples supported colonization – for if land was seen as limitless and unoccupied, it would be easier to justify settlement.



Thirza Jean Cuthand, "Less Lethal Fetishes"(video still), 2020, video with sound (courtesy of the artist)

Through stories constructed in the videos, Cuthand confronts the experiences of Indigenous peoples and some of the impacts of settler colonialism. *Reclamation* imagines a future without white people, who have left to colonize Mars. While the setting is post-apocalyptic, the video is not sorrowful. Indigenous people in the video no longer feel the need to hide their ways of being and the land is returning to health. As one woman explains: "Babies won't feel shame caused by white people."



Thirza Cuthand, "Reclamation"(video still), 2020, video with sound (courtesy of the artist)

In another video, *Extractions*, Cuthand places herself in the frame, presenting her efforts to conceive a child through in vitro fertilization. She shows the process – from harvesting eggs and fertilizing them to injecting herself with hormones – while discussing why it’s important to have children. She wonders, “Maybe not having babies makes it easier to give up because you don’t have people to worry about a future for.” She talks about wanting to give up, but then says, “not caring is a privilege.” It’s a privilege held most often by white people.

In the video, Cuthand talks about wanting to move to Winnipeg but deciding against it because it has a high rate of seizures by the child welfare system. She also discusses the misogyny of ‘man camps’ at resource extraction sites and their connection to missing and murdered Indigenous women. She muses about going back to old ways but ends by saying: “I don’t have answers. I just have 10 eggs and a freezer. And trying to make sure there are still Indigenous people after I die.”

In framing the biennial in relation to treaty borders, in addition to provincial ones, space is provided for relationships and experiences with the land that unsettle dominant settler narratives, offering opportunities to situate ourselves in new ways. As artists like Cuthand and Dion remind us, this land continues to be a site of oppression. When considering how we want to live here, then, we can use this opportunity to learn from the artists and incorporate

Indigenous worldviews that place on us responsibility not only to each other, but to the land itself. ■

borderLINE: 2020 Biennial of Contemporary Art runs from Sept. 26, 2020 to Feb. 14, 2021 at the Remai Modern in Saskatoon and from Sept. 26, 2020 to Jan. 3, 2021 at the Art Gallery of Alberta in Edmonton.

The Remai Modern's exhibition features work by Judy Anderson and Cruz Anderson, Cindy Baker, Elisabeth Belliveau, Heather Benning, Lisa Birke, Bill Burns, Thirza Jean Cuthand, Wally Dion, Don Gill, Laura Hale, Laura Kinzel, Michèle Mackasey, Barbara Meneley, Tim Moore, Lyndal Osborne, Nurgül Rodriguez, Laura St. Pierre, and Blair Fornwald and Nic Wilson.

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