

sanguine, terre brûlée et autres angoisses

maryse arsenault

18 january - 8 march 2013

OPENING RECEPTION - JANUARY 18 7PM

ARTIST TALK - JANUARY 19 2PM

sanguine, terre

brulée et autres

angoises

sanguine, burnt

umber and

other sorrows

ARTIST STATEMENT : MARYSE ARSENAULT :

The title reads: Sanguine, Burnt Umber and other Sorrows. A few thousand screen-printed stars reinterpret cabinet cards of indigenous people from the turn of the 19th century. This recent endeavour reflects on hidden Mi'kmaq bloodlines in my Acadian ancestry, unravelling what really lies In the Shadow of Evangeline (Galerie d'art Louise-et-Ruben-Cohen, 2011). First completed for a group show and residency, the work has an on-going objective of building relationships between First Nation communities and all other cultural bodies across Canada. The final phase of this project will be to send these prints as individual peace offerings.

Ethnological portraits by early photographers, such as Edward Sheriff Curtis and C. S. Fly, are pulled from the Internet, reprocessed and duplicated eight times. Up to 960 4"x6" photographs mounted on 1/8" Russian Birch, are spread on the floor like tiles, forming an eight-pointed star. Appropriation and colonization are evoked through form and meaning. The grid-like installation invades the gallery space and entrance, referencing land occupation and violation. The viewer is pointedly aware of how little space is left in the room, with only diffuse lights focused on the raked display. Compelled to follow narrow paths between the points, one must kneel for closer contemplation.

Intricate aureoles cover men and women's faces, recalling the human soul and the superstition that it accesses the body vessel through one's eyes. Veiling of the eyes is meant here as a prayer, an attempt to heal some ancestral scars, a way to nurture these beautiful people and ultimately give them a proper burial. The masking of the head can be interpreted, however, as another defacing of the subject's identity, making it significantly sensitive for some viewers. The double meaning is part of my intention: we ARE fostering both hidden bloodlines and unspoken hardships. We ARE denying aboriginal rights, and depriving all humans of sacred knowledge for a sustainable future!

The eight-pointed star is found on traditional blankets and crafts in both Mi'kmaq and Acadian homes. Does this come from their long lost and taboo friendship? My general practice examines collective memory and the ancestral imprint. Through archiving, appropriation and intervention, there is a constant investigation into matter and its potential to hold memory. Can thought be manifested through prayer, through water, through objects? When memory conforms to material, does recollection become counterfeit? Photography can immortalize a moment, forever cast in the silver-print. Can the silver also hold one's soul?

Gallery Connexion : This work, *Sanguine, terre brulée et autres angoisses* (sanguine, burnt umber and other sorrows) was created during a 'Shadow of Evangeline Residency' at Galerie d'Art Louise-et-Ruben-Cohen, which sought to examine the formation of history and identity in Acadie. Why do you think that revisiting these collective histories or fictions was appealing to you, or interesting, or important?

Maryse Arsenault : Because I was working a lot with collective memory and ancestral memory ... so I think its important to recognize what it does, I guess. Uncovering things that we don't really learn in school. Not necessarily believing legends. Or maybe, seeing how legends have real elements to them, or how they've influenced our histories.

GC : That even sort of fictional stories have real effects in how people live their lives and perceive themselves ...

MA : I guess it's more that the way people perceive us will effect how we perceive ourselves. Even if there is no truth in it. I really feel that the Acadians are the

'weak culture,' in a way. Often forgotten. Even us, we don't really realize why this 'weakness' exists. We were pacifist people. It's not necessarily weakness. We were neutral in the war (between the English and the French). There are different reasons why we were defeated. I find the romanticized version of it just gives the illusion that we were just ... *weak* ... or at the wrong place at the wrong time. I like to uncover those kind of stories, and not just stay complacent to them.

GC : Romanticized ideas about anything in history are probably good to revisit ...

MA : Unravel, or deconstruct ... There's some truth in it, but we just keep repeating these same romantic thoughts about it, without really making a difference I guess.

GC : Maybe you have a sense that this work addresses the shared history of Acadians and Mik'maq, in a particular way?

MA : It started as specifically as the relation between the Mik'maq and the French, because that's what I know a bit about – because of my ancestry.

We survived on this land because of them. That's what interested me at first, but then I realized it's a nationwide problem, and even all of the Americas, and across the world. That the colonization of land is always at the detriment of the Indigenous people. It's really time to start listening to these people, and start acknowledging their presence.

GC : I've noticed that people seem to react in a very defensive way to artwork – or other work – that's trying to address Canada's historic and present relations with First Nations. There's this reaction where people will say things like, “oh just more things for us to feel guilty about.” I wonder if you had thoughts about this sort of politics of guilt? That many people seem to feel like the only response they can have to our shared histories is *guilt*.

MA : I guess that's what I'm trying to ... mediate. Because, really, that's not how we can go about it ... and heal anything, by feeling guilty. So, really, we have to address it. I think maybe there is a feeling of guilt in my work. When I think of collective memory, ancestral memory ... guilt is

always there. It's the type of emotion we have without really knowing why we have it. I think that it's a kind of first defence: that in trying to be compassionate, we feel guilty.

GC : The Idle No More movement seems *not* to be about First Nations people *against* other people in Canada; rather, it might be about standing together ... solidarity ...

MA : That's what I feel I was trying to open up dialog about, when I did this work. Because I felt there was a tension culturally, between Mik'maq and French. Also, why is it that we never really open up dialog with people we don't agree with? How do we combine our forces, and try to stop being so defensive. It's the easy way out to get all defensive and say, “okay I apologize. I've apologized and that's that.” No. It's not about apologizing. It's about building a better world together, and not letting Harper, or *any* government, walk all over us. And they *are*. They have a tendency to pit different cultural groups against each other, when really we all want to the same thing ... clean water to drink ... for our families, for generations ... I think the governments have

a tendency to play with this issue of survival, and scare us.

GC : How do you hope that this exhibition might be a space for dialog, and maybe between people with different backgrounds?

MA : Well that's where I'm at a loss. I mean this project really opened up my interest in doing this with art. I was kind of an environmentalist when I was young, but I got discouraged. This project rekindled a desire to address politics with my work. The challenge is to try to reach people that you wouldn't talk to in your everyday life. Maybe make them understand that we're not against each other. The only reason we're against each other is if we feel there's not enough for everyone ... but there's room for all of us.

GC : You seem to have a sense that something is lost in the telling of Acadian history, because it neglects the Acadian relationships with First Nations, or portrays Acadians as the *only* people to have subjugated or oppressed ...

MA : Yeah, we kind of rode that wave, as a cultural entity, for sure. We became this 'oppressed minority,' so

there were these government groups and non-profit groups that started to protect us. We were able to take advantage of that and become quite strong, culturally anyway. All of that happened without any acknowledgement of the Mik'maq. That's what appalled me. We're still complaining that we don't have all of the cultural rights that we should – in this bilingual province, in this bilingual country – when really ... so many hundreds of Nations have been either obliterated or forcefully 'assimilated.' The romanticized version of Acadian history kind of says, "oh the Acadian people, the group of fine people that were mistreated," but maybe we're not the only ones. Also the Irish or the Black Loyalists or ...

GC : There are other forgotten cultural groups, other histories ...

MA : Or that First Nations didn't sign up to have reserves, they signed to share decision making. I really think decision making should be done by all of the parties that are effected.

GC : *Sanguine, terre brulée et autres angoisses* appropriates photographs taken of American

Aboriginals in the nineteenth century, by American photographers such as C.S. Fly and Edward Sheriff Curtis. One criticism of Edward Curtis' photographs – by contemporary scholars such as Gloria Jean Frank, Ahousat First Nations, Nuuchah-nulth – is that they construct First Nations people as 'noble subjects' situated in a 'mythic past,' and perpetuate the “ethnological fate of always being presented and treated as anthropological specimens.”¹ The motifs you have printed on each photograph obscure the faces of the subjects. Printing over top of these photographs seems to interrupt the 'normal' telling of history: do you have a feeling that that's what the work is trying to do?

MA : I think it is. It's a way for me to ask people to revisit what they know. Not giving it to them. It maybe offends some ... it's just to rethink it. We're so used to seeing it one way. It's like closing somebody's eyes ... for them to really want to open them.

¹ Gloria Jean Frank, “‘That’s My Dinner on Display’: A First Nations Reflection on Museum Culture,” *BC Studies* 125/126 (Spring/Summer 2000), 164.

GC : When you describe this work, you describe narrow the paths created between the points of the star, such that people visiting the installation might walk within the work.

MA : Well it's kind of interesting. Again, there, it's a double-sided thing: I'm criticizing the fact that there's just a narrow point of view of history, but I've created these narrow pathways in my own work – these narrow points of view.

GC : Maybe I disagree: within your installation, even though the paths are narrow there are many different places where you could stand – within it, or outside of it.

MA : I think it's kind of a constructive criticism, let's say. There's so many ways of seeing something, but we have to be open to see them; open to share, and change our minds, and *be* directed sometimes. Like in an argument, say, we're not letting ourselves be directed by somebody else. We want to have control. This desire for control is what makes us fight for nothing, I guess. We don't want to be vulnerable. And ... there's an analogy here, but I don't know where it is ...

GC : You've said that the

eight-pointed star we see in the formation of your installation is a pattern used in both Acadian and Mik'maq crafting traditions. The patterns you have printed onto the photographs resemble embroidered or quilted patterns. Where did you take these motifs from?

MA : They were mostly quilt patterns that I looked up. I like that the star has a spiritual meaning across many different cultures. This all encompassing force. The (installation's eight-pointed) star was present in Acadian quilts. I'm still verifying if this star comes from the friendship between the Mik'maq and the French, but it kind of dawned on me while I was doing this research. That the French maybe started using that symbol once they were *here*, not when they were in Europe, necessarily ... I found that interesting.

Maryse Arsenault is an Acadian artist who practice bridges different media, including printmaking, drawing and painting. She received her BFA from l'Université de Moncton, and is currently and MFA candidate at Concordia University in Montréal.

Gallery Connexion is an artist run centre in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada. Founded in 1984 as the Organization for the Development of Artists, Gallery Connexion supports politically and socially engaged art through a range of programming initiatives such as exhibitions, performances, special projects, artist residencies and workshops.



PHOTO : Mathieu Léger

installation view *sanguine, terre brulée et autres angoises*



Gallery Connexion is a non-profit organization funded in part by the generous support of government grants and private donors, and through the fundraising efforts of our membership. *Sanguine, terre brulée et autres angoises* is made possible through the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the New Brunswick Arts Board, the City of Fredericton, Kingswood Ventures, and Northampton Brewing Company.