

Mapping Me In ...

July 4 to September 20, 2015

The Kelowna Art Gallery's One on One series is curated every spring by an emerging Canadian First Nations curator who selects an emerging Canadian First Nations artist to work with. Each exhibition will be accompanied by a web-based publication. This year the Kelowna Art Gallery is pleased to be working with Saskatoon-based curator Felicia Gay, who has selected artist Wally Dion for the exhibition. He is also from Saskatoon but has recently been dividing his time between there and Binghamton, New York. Dion will be showing recent works, produced in 2013 and 2014, that are made up from a massing together of smaller, identical components and involve "tracks" that have been filled with paint. Dion likes to work with small units that he fits together like puzzle pieces to create his final works.

The One-on-One series is conceived of as an open-ended, collaborative project. It is intended that both the curator and artist be on hand for the opening of the exhibition.

Opening Reception

Friday, July 3, 7 to 9 pm

The artist and curator will give a talk at 7 pm.

This is a free event, open to members and guests by invitation.

Curatorial Essay

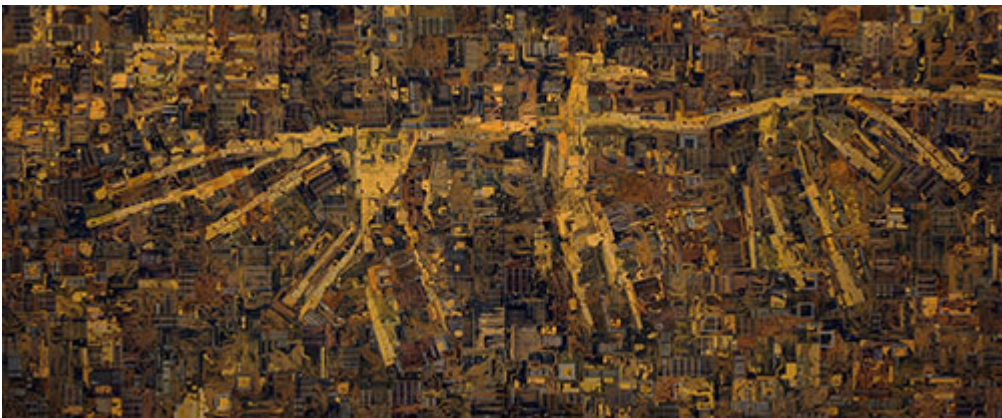
Mapping Me In ... New work by Wally Dion

By Felicia Gay

Wally Dion is a contemporary Aboriginal artist known widely for his beautiful sculptural works. His series of starblankets and thunderbirds quilted together from computer circuit boards is one such series. These large-scale works, like his paintings, are made up from a network of components. One might look at *Mapping Me In ...* and think the work to be a departure from his past pieces, but in fact his new work takes on the same Dion process of piecing together smaller elements to create a larger sculptural picture.

Dion's traditional territory is the Yellow Quill First Nation, Salteaux terrain in southern Saskatchewan. Until recently his home was Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and much of his most well-known works were created there in the early 2000s. Wally is likely best known for his large-scale portraits akin to the Soviet propaganda style, and his large circuit board sculptures. His repetitious process of bringing together smaller components to create a large cohesive visual images is not purely a process in terms of thinking logistically around gallery installations or shipping, which every artist must contend with. It is also a process of philosophy in which one fewer component equals chaos. One element to him means nothing by itself but brought together brings clarity to his visual narratives as a whole.

A resident of Saskatoon myself, I am originally from the Métis/First Nations community of Cumberland House in northern Saskatchewan. As such, I can easily relate to Dion's visual themes. His utilisation of situated knowledge as an urban First Nations man gives strength to his work and centres our people visually. His series of Soviet propaganda-style paintings tackled issues of identity and signified Aboriginal people as worker. The damaging tropes of Indian as lazy, or Indian as childlike and dependent were decentred within the series, and new transformative realities were offered within public spaces. His circuit board series touched on First Nations' navigating technology, and the trope of the primitive or vanishing Indian was put in opposition to the reality of Aboriginal people living and functioning in the here and now.



Wally Dion, *Thunderbird*, 2008, circuit board, plywood, nails, 48 x 116 in. (121.9 x 294.6 cm) Collection of the MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina, Saskatchewan. Photo: Don Hall.

Mapping relates to a wide range of issues concerning the Aboriginal community. Maps were utilised by colonists to segregate Aboriginal peoples and lay claim to Indigenous territories via a colonial bureaucracy. When discussing how Aboriginal people are mapped into the Canadian national

imaginary, two key strategies are utilised by colonists who seek to remain in a centred position of power. One strategy is to have Aboriginal people separate and apart. This is seen in the reservation system in Canada; this separation is also maintained off-reserve with urban Aboriginals who are often segregated to the lower socio-economic margins of the city. Aboriginal people are often the target of landlords who discriminate and segregate with their bias and perceptions of Aboriginals. These perceptions are woven and entrenched within the national imaginary. The second strategy that colonisation effectively uses is a nation-wide subverted silencing of Aboriginal people. Voice is silenced in many ways. For example, Canada will bring out its Aboriginal people for large scale political and media events when the country is represented, but only if in conjunction with the past. Men, women and children in powwow regalia adorned with feathers, Indian politicians in their war bonnets. The Indian cannot live in the present when relegated to the past and has no currency in the present. Though that is not to say Aboriginal people are not present because of their traditions, it is only that Aboriginal people are more than their cultural heritage. Aboriginal people are a multi-faceted group that contribute and function in this country beyond what colonial history dictates them to be.

Wally Dion's contemporary work progresses within the Canadian Aboriginal contemporary art scene as work that often touches on issues of history, technology and identity. First Nations people are referenced from colonial history and from those references stem many facets of misidentification recycled throughout history. Aboriginal people continually contend with how Canada identifies them as a unit. Compartmentalized notions of Aboriginal people originating from imperialistic histories cast them as a defeated people, supporting the belief that their erasure from the national imaginary is imperative to the health of Canada as a nation. When Aboriginal people are brought out into the public sphere it is often only in conjunction with the past, or as a destructive and dysfunctional group who should hold no power on their own terms.

Currently, through social media, Aboriginal people are networking on a greater scale to address issues that affect them as a people. Technology is utilised and Aboriginal people have mapped themselves in – effectively navigating the media and connecting with the wider community to bring forth transformation and change. The Canadian Government has tried silencing, either by ignoring issues, for example when Prime Minister Harper stated that an inquiry into Canada's missing and murdered Aboriginal women was not high on his priority list. Silencing has also been attempted through violent naming, delegating Aboriginal people who dissent against Government oppression as ecological terrorists/radicals who threaten the economic well being of the country.

Mapping Me In ... is about the process of navigating contemporary spaces as Indigenous people. Mapping oneself in is seen in the abstract sense – as negotiating spaces of institutional power. Dion's sculptures act as contemporary post-colonial Indigenous maps and landmarks. To reference Indigenous history is important. Indigenous people in Canada as well as elsewhere have utilised mapping as a way to navigate territory safely and effectively. There are boundaries that as an Aboriginal person you may not be allowed to cross and the social controls utilised are economic (poverty), social (lower social classes) and physical/oral (how you look and speak). Many Aboriginal people are frequently encouraged to mimic dominant culture but are reminded subversively that they will never belong. So how does one negotiate institutional places of power and places that represent social control, such as the police, the legal system, academic institutions, government, health care, and, yes, the Western cultural community aka the art world?

Maps are made up of segments that do not necessarily make sense without a point of reference or in singularity. Dion has related to me that what intrigues him the most about his current and past work in terms of process is the notion of one large cohesive piece made up of many parts – one piece does not make sense without the other. In this new work every sculptural piece was cut at exact 90 degree angles and fitted together very precisely almost like a puzzle. The forms themselves are highly abstracted maps and monuments that tie into the curatorial thematic of Indigenous mapping and monuments signifying places of power and direction. Technically speaking, Dion says the series was created by applying successive layers of transparent medium along narrow tracks of plywood. The colour is derived by a building up of the pigment over time. The layers are thin, with a negligible

amount of pigment, allowing the viewer to pierce the surface of these works, exposing a multitude of layers and subterranean processes. Channels and pathways are added to the network creating opportunities for mixing and co-mingling of colours. Where the *Dendrite* pieces have walls to contain the fluids and rely on channels to add medium, the *Steppes* can be thought of as a cauldron or funnel, collecting all medium and colour into a central gravitational point.

Looking back to the traditional territories that Dion and I are from, they are territories rich with visual modes of First Nation map making that draws on traditional knowledge and places of power. Prior to contact and even after contact First Nations groups practiced Indigenous modes of mapping. Petroglyphs or rock paintings are found in northern Saskatchewan along the river waterways which were once utilised as highways for travel and trade. On the southern plains there are pictographs carved in stone and huge boulder monuments marking sites of significance or warning. Some were used to point travellers away from alkaline waters, or as sites of sympathetic magic utilised to aid in the hunt. The rock paintings are thought to point travellers to safe rest spots or mark out sites of religious significance. Indigenous peoples of Saskatchewan marked out particular locations for many different reasons represented as teachings and worldview. Indigenous teachings and worldviews are not linear but cyclical and do tend to come about again in the present. Currently, Dion's highly abstracted maps and monuments constitute what would be considered a fresh take on Indigenous modes of map making. Why do so now? The past often speaks to how we must navigate in the present. Mapping oneself in as an Aboriginal person in the Canadian national imaginary is no small feat. We can utilise contemporary landmarks such as Dion's sculptures as points of reference; but for what purpose? Perhaps the maps act as a way for Aboriginal people to stake a claim. Staking a claim through mapping could take place anywhere, it could be spiritual or perhaps a way to center their rights territorially or politically. Dion's maps mark a presence to demonstrate the Aboriginal people as present tense, a visual outcry against the silence. *Mapping Me In ...* therefore becomes a strategy, a post-colonial signifier of presence, power and place.

Works in the Exhibition

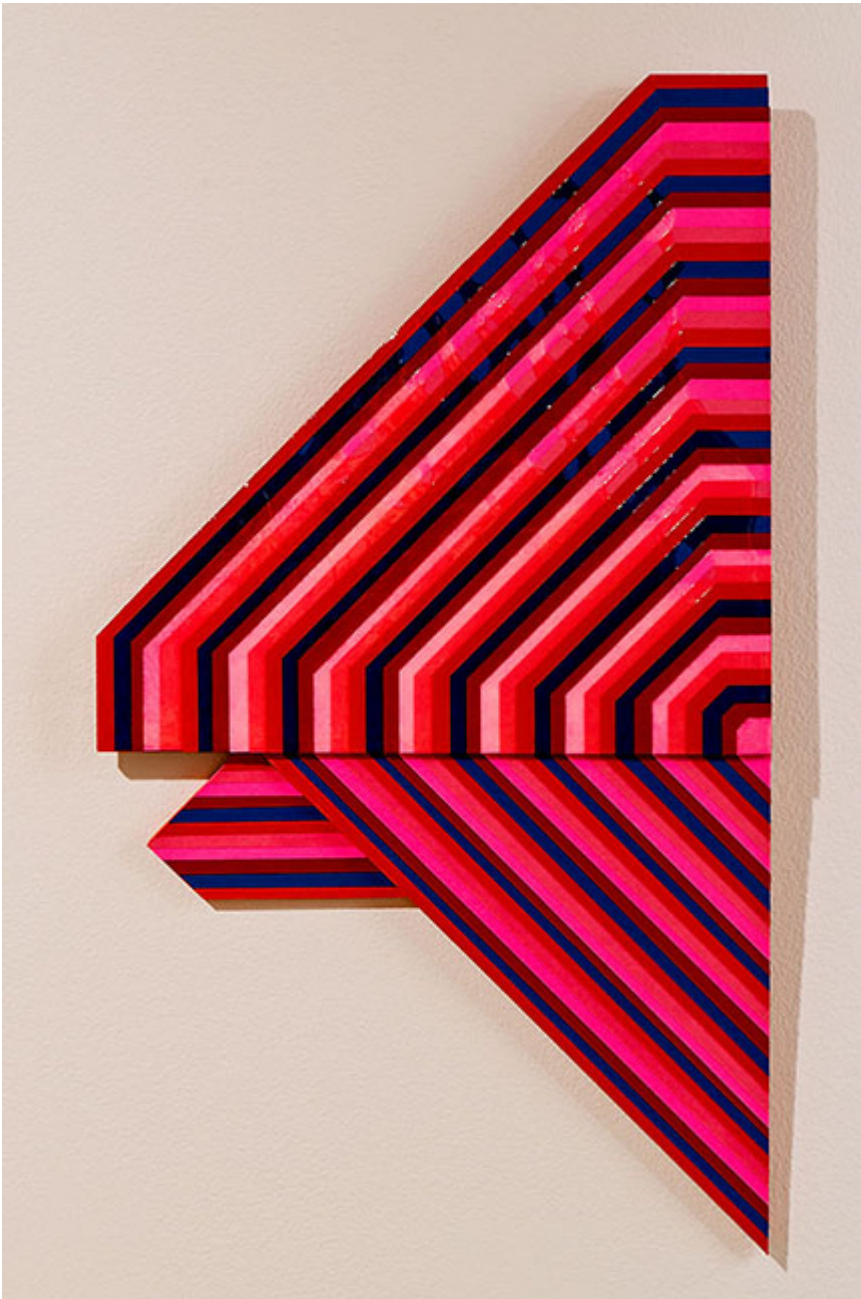
Wally Dion



The new 43, 2013, coloured paper,
12 x 12 in. (30.4 x 30.4 cm)



Wisakedjak, 2013, coloured paper,
6 x 6 in. (15.2 x 15.2 cm)

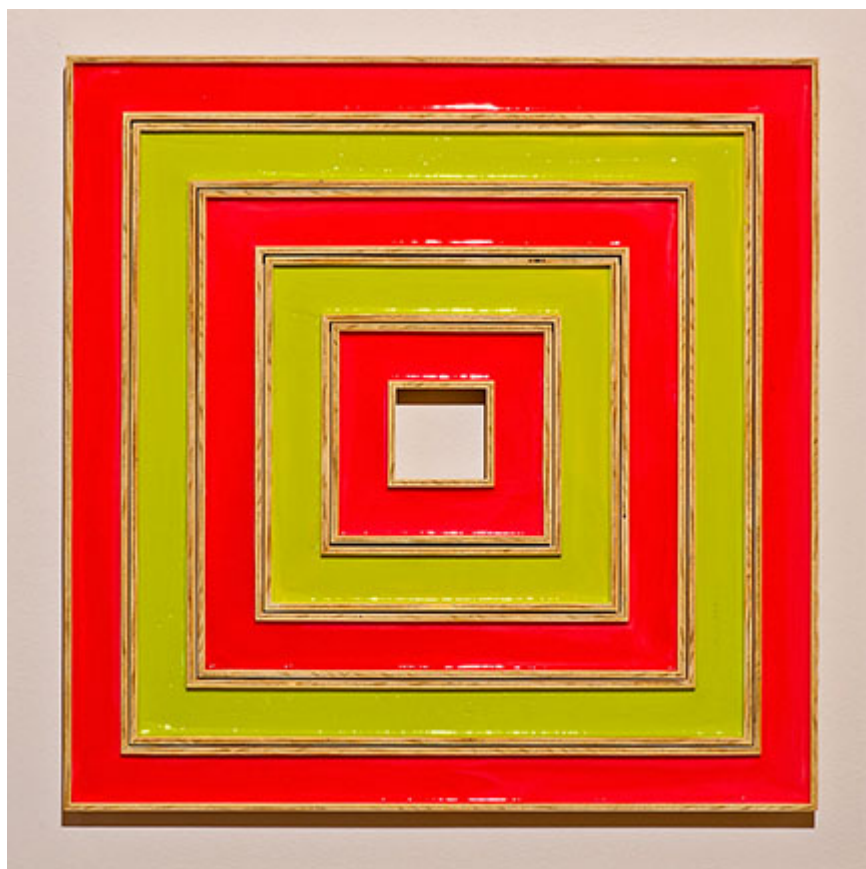


bisected concentric, 2014, coloured paper on wood,
17½ x 10 in. (44.4 x 25.4 cm)

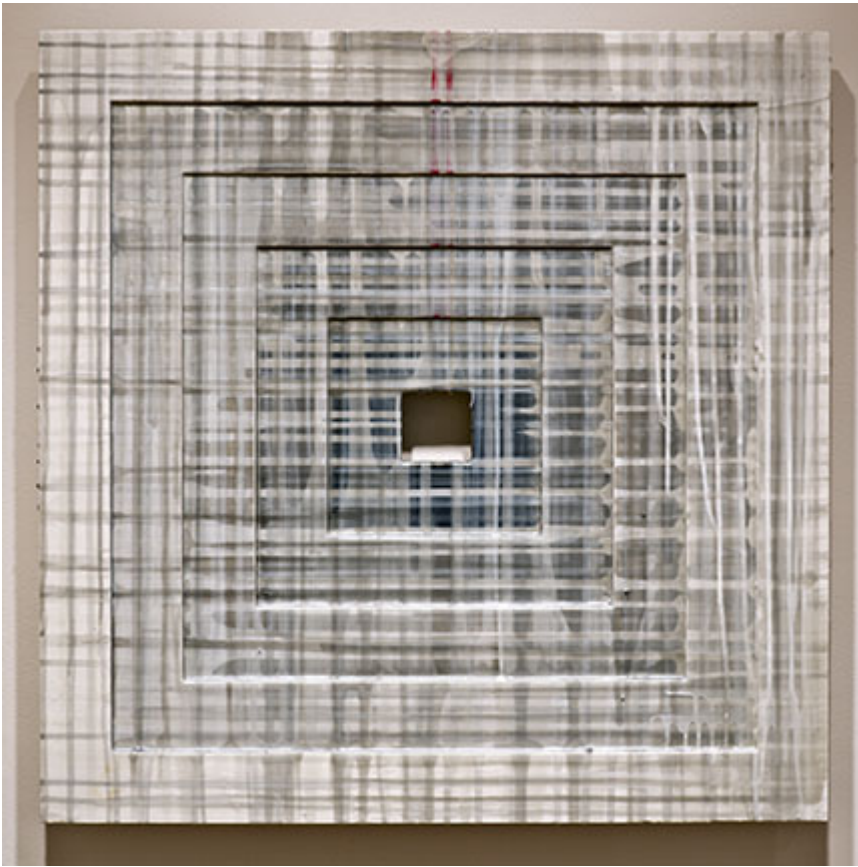


three caves, 2014, acrylic and acrylic medium on plywood,

overall size: 20 x 76 in. (50.8 x 193 cm)



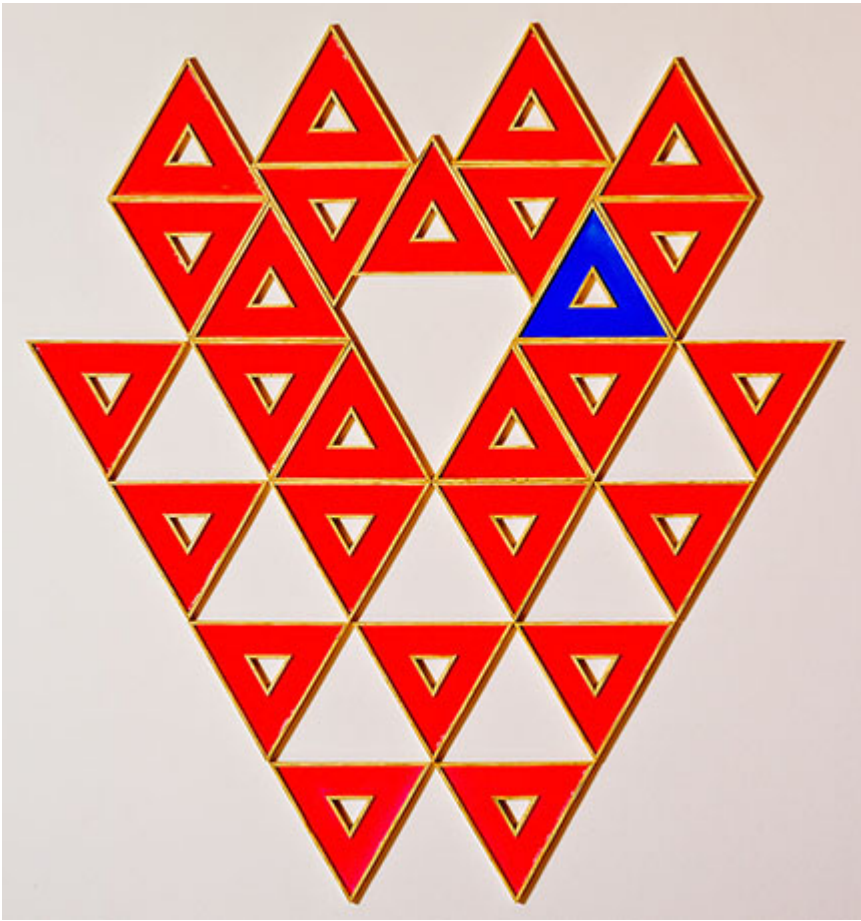
concentric, 2014, acrylic and acrylic medium on plywood,
23 ½ x 23½ in. (59.7 x 59.7 cm)



steppes, 2014, acrylic and acrylic medium on plywood,
27 ½ x 27½ in. (69.8 x 69.8 cm)



ziggurat, 2014, acrylic and acrylic medium on plywood,
4 ¼ x 22 ¼ x 22 ¼ in. (11.4 x 56.5 x 56.5 cm)



polygon, 2014, acrylic and acrylic medium on plywood,
60 ½ x 56 in. (153.7 x 142.2 cm)

Artist's Biography

Wally Dion

Wally Dion, b.1976 Saskatoon Saskatchewan, is a visual artist living and working in Binghamton, New York. He is a member of Yellow Quill First Nation (Salteaux). Dion holds a BFA from the University of Saskatchewan and an MFA from Rhode Island School of Design. Throughout much of his career, Dion's work has contributed to a broad conversation in the art world about identity and power, and can be interpreted as part of a much larger pan-American struggle by indigenous peoples to be recognized: culturally, economically, and politically, by settler societies. Utilizing large scale portraiture, found object sculpture, site specific installation & kinetic sculpture Dion has expanded upon this practice to include themes of personal history & spirituality.

Dion has exhibited extensively throughout Canada and has had numerous solo exhibitions including: *Wally Dion: Star Blankets* (2011) Ottawa Art Gallery; *Thunderbird Series* (2010), Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, Brandon; *Red Worker* (2008), Grunt Gallery, Vancouver; and *Wally Dion* (2008), MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina. His work has also been included in major group exhibitions including *Before and After the Horizon: Anishinaabe Artists of the Great Lakes* (2013), National Museum of the American Indian, New York; *Fiction/Non-Fiction* (2013), Esker Foundation, Calgary; *Oh, Canada* (2012), MASS MoCA, North Adams; *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years* (2011), Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art, Winnipeg; *Flatlanders: Saskatchewan Emerging Artists* (2009), Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon; and *No Word for Goodbye* (2006), Kenderdine Art Gallery, Saskatoon.

Dion's work can be found in numerous prominent collections including: the Saskatchewan Arts Board, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Canada Council Art Bank, Aboriginal Art Centre, Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, MacKenzie Art Gallery, the Mendel Art Gallery, and many private collections.

Curator's Biography

Felica Gay

Felicia Gay is Swampy Cree/Scottish, and was born in 1977 in Cumberland House, Saskatchewan. She is the former Director and co-founder with artist Joi Arcand of The Red Shift Gallery, a contemporary Aboriginal art space (2006-2010). In 2006 Felicia was awarded the Canada Council for the Arts Aboriginal Curatorial Residency with AKA Gallery in Saskatoon. She has a Masters of Arts (2010) in Art History and a Bachelor of Arts (Honours, 2004), both from the University of Saskatchewan. Gay taught as a sessional lecturer at the University of Saskatchewan from 2011 to 2013. Currently she is working as a freelance curator. She is dedicated to furthering the representation of Aboriginal peoples in contemporary art and in contemporary Canadian art history. She is interested in the strategies of counter-memory; dismantling and transforming the cultural controls of colonial discourse, and how artists and curators are lending "voice" to their own situated Indigenous-centred knowledge(s) across a range of visual media. Some of her curatorial projects include, *Give her a face* (2006), *no word for good-bye* (2006), *Politics of Mother* (2006), and *Othered Women* (2008), *Lens* (2014), and *Eco-Indian* (2015). Some of her publications include articles in *Blackflash Magazine*, *North Central Intervention: Terrance Houle*, DAG Volumes: No.2 (2013), and *Farmer's Daughter* (Joi T Arcand).