

Work to Rule

April 2 to July 3, 2016

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—Tania Willard, Guest Curator



Curatorial Essay

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By Tania Willard, Guest Curator

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A disjointed sense of time and space function throughout this exhibition, from the present moment of online spaces and anonymity to the limits of history and guarded knowledge. One work that functions to hold the dislocating spaces together is *Untitled ("OK territory")*. In the first showing of this work at the Contemporary Art Gallery in 2015 in Vancouver, the conventional plastic bucket filled with land from the artist's territory was displayed on a plinth under an acrylic vitrine. In the Kelowna Art Gallery iteration of this work we have decided to show it without a vitrine. The power of the vitrine to evoke museum practices and containment is evident in the original exhibition strategy. But echoing the movement of the artist and the navigating of the particular spaces, institutional protocols and socio-political contexts of art and cultural production each iteration of placing the earth is differently considered, as is the title. The earth in the pail is from Stewart's home, the Upper Nicola Band of the Okanagan Nation in Douglas Lake, BC. The soil in the pail represents land inherited from specifically women in her family but also Stewart's connection to this place, a rootedness to place and ancestral belonging in Okanagan Nation territories. *Untitled ("Ok Territory")* functions simultaneously as a comment on the ready made and found object stream of contemporary art while also being a performative residue and a constant reminder of the Indigenous territories we move throughout.

Contrasting the looseness of the earthen work is the more regimented installation, *Indian Artists at Work*, in which the artist examines a 1976 publication, *Indian Artists at Work* (Ulli Seltzer), which uses black and white documentary images and narrative to frame the practices of a number of First Nations artists. Stewart takes this starting point, appropriating the title font of the publication and creating a grid on the gallery wall with bright vinyl colour swatches and hues and the repeating title text, *Indian Artists at Work*. The grid functions as a way to give form and repetition to the text, abstracting the meaning, drawing closer attention to the words themselves and each constructed meaning they belie. Site specific installation of this work responds to the changing histories of aesthetics and representation in institutions. The narrative of cultural craft production present in the original book becomes obscured by Stewart's grid, fragmenting the story and questioning assumptions and contextual devices in documentary image making. By focusing on the devices of documentary images, echoes of stories told and untold are revealed.

The way Stewart has abstracted the reference to the book and used the grid as a way to neutralize all the loaded cultural assumptions can also be related to the weaving work, *Sim - real / very*. The textile piece is a jacquard weaving, an early type of automated mechanical process that has been likened to the first computer. Stewart worked with a weaving technician, Ruth Scheuing to create this piece. The weaving depicts a photograph by Benjamin Haldane, a Tsimshian photographer active in the 1870s through the early 1900's. Stewart selected the photograph during her residency at the Nisga'a Museum where it was used in the museum's display. Interestingly when Stewart compared the image used for display in the museum to the photograph she realized that one man in the far left had been

edited out. In this cropping of the image, the man not pictured happens to have western style pants. The question becomes was the man edited out in subsequent translations of the image to convey a sense of authenticity or was there simply a case of format and scale.

The rest of the image features a Nisga'a woman Chief, and a group in button blankets and regalia. Benjamin Haldane was a compelling figure and one of a very few Indigenous photographers active in the 19th century. In this image we are drawn to thinking about all of the missing pieces, the limited information we have of both the photographer and his subjects. Haldane's photographs were almost lost when most of his glass plate negatives were thrown out, thankfully they were recovered and recent scholarship has placed his important work in the context of photography in the 19th century¹. Representing an Indigenous artist who never saw his due attention, Stewart's interest in the photograph and translation into the work *Sim - real / very* is a way of reframing Haldane's practice as a disruption of the colonial lens and the ways in which Indigenous peoples were pictured. However we are all implicated, for the ways in which we make assumptions about the image. In this exhibition of the work Stewart shows the final panel of the weaving, the image of the man who is cropped out, in a cardboard mailing tube. We never get to see the final weaving as an assembled hole, We are challenged with our own desire to reconstruct the image and to consume the documentary as authentic, despite our own awareness of the complexity of the image. The contrast between the documentary image and it's subsequent obscuring by the grid imposed by the mechanical weaving technique reveals these cultural assumptions.

A similar artistic strategy can be understood in the artists incorporation of a 1968 35mm slide of an untitled Leon Polk Smith painting in the exhibition. Leon Polk Smith is one of the originators of hard-edge painting in America and associated with the modernists of the 1940s-90s in American painting. He was also a queer Cherokee man, perhaps not the easiest identity to inhabit in the period of time in which he was active. He was born in the Indian Territories which later became Oklahoma, many of the biographies of this artist in America touch very lightly on this aspect of his identity whereas in Germany and internationally his identity is fore-grounded. Instead of just accepting the vague accreditation in American sources to his heritage when we think about his identity as integrated and as embodied in this work we come to consider how an Indigenous artist at this time navigated the New York art world during the modernist era and how his unique view of abstraction was grounded in his experience of land and home. However, we also become aware of the dangers of letting the artist's identity overly contextualize his practice, a German source related to this artist discusses all his work with the sweeping statement, "Leon Polk Smith (1906-1996) was drawn to geometric con-structivist art by the Red Indian attitude to life and nature of his forbears."²

Stewart's choice to display a small slide is in contrast to the large scale in which the Leon Polk Smith worked. In viewing, "*I can't imagine that there is an end to space*" we are meant to consider intimately, to be drawn into what the narrative of the object, the slide, represents. The technology itself, in terms of photographic processes is now in increasing obscurity and the artists oeuvre is perhaps not well known outside of circles of academics and art historians. When I am drawn into the introspection of the slide I think about the artists life at that time and how he may or may not have chosen to frame his indigeneity. Leon Polk Smith's practice was concerned with constructions of space yet as we reflect on his work we are subsumed by constructions of identity. On the back of an exhibition card in the online archives of Smith's fonds he writes, "I paint neither politics, religion nor philosophy but you may find your own in my work I am particularly interested in creating spaces that move in all directions."³ Knowing Polk Smith was a modernist and a Native American painter represents tension, angst and movement through cultural institutions interpreted as a binary. In response to this binary Stewart proposes new grounds of possibility by employing abstraction and intimacy, anonymity and exposure our assumptions and speculations are ruptured producing not a binary but a 'constellation'⁴ of possible narratives.

In the new video work, "*a sort of working to rule*" a series of still images are sequenced in and out of context. They represent at first an anonymous figure, assumedly for scale, in the space of the art gallery. The images are from the websites of leading art institutions and commercial galleries in the contemporary art world in New York. Minimal, beautifully lit, and stunning works of well known

contemporary artists are in the foreground of the images, articulating much of the context of how the New York art world is facing itself to the world via the internet. When we come to understand or recognize the figure in the screen captured stills as the artist herself, our sense of the aggregating of these images becomes ruptured. Next we become aware of our own position occupying the gallery space looking at the artist who is also in a pose of looking within the gallery. The titling of the video piece is a direct quote from artist Allan McCollum from the essay *Creativity = Capital?* referencing the labour struggle strategy of withdrawing services and carrying out only the minimum required services. Both in the essay Stewart references and in their practices McCollum in collaboration with artist Andrea Fraser engage in a complex critique of the structures and context of the contemporary art world and speculate on the importance of artistic production. When we consider the artists research field and her line of inquiry we find ourselves part of the institution, by our presence we become implicated in the mechanics of cultural spaces. What assumptions do we carry with us, how do we navigate between anonymity and individuality in the worlds around us? Are there times when it is important to suspend our own or others expectations of how we embody and perform our identity. What happens in 'cultural institutions' when this identity is either intentionally foregrounded or obscured?

This is particularly relevant when we think of the *Indian Artists at Work* publication and the history of Indigenous artistic production as relegated to folk craft and ethnographic function. In a context of provincial and nationalized efforts both past and present, to engage Indigenous art and artists we can not ignore the histories of paternalism. Paternalism is a problem because it is rooted in de-humanizing, justifying the need for controlling the means of a person, community or culture to be self determining⁵. Thusly rooted in ways cultural institutions approach indigeneity we can see both obscurity and foregrounding as problematic ways to frame artistic production. All I have done here is reveal my own angst and navigation of cultural spaces, that is how Stewart's work compels us to not only observe her but to place ourselves into the dialogue, the tension, the binaries and circumnavigation of the cultural sector.

Stewart's installation and interventions occupy the documentary to reveal a complexity and intimacy of entanglement with the spaces of cultural production and exhibition. Leon Polk Smith dedicated his work to understanding form and colour, which have been likened to the canyons and valleys, sharp light and hard edges of the American Southwest which he also found in New York city. In the space of the studio Tsimshian photographer Haldane created new ways of seeing a time that has been viewed with a standard colonial lens. When we examine the reasons these artists are not well known we encounter not only the challenges of the documentary and the assumptions that shape histories but we start to make links to abstractions, like the grid, that have a suggested way-finding.

The grid used in Stewart's works can also be understood as way-finding as a possible map, a route of navigation, not based on hard-edge but on intuition, suggestion and intimacy. The land presented innocuously in the pail is a way-finding as is the artist inserting her own figure in relationship to contemporary art spaces. We might consider what happens when the grid, the linear nature of history and the land collide with colour and form to present new ways of orienting ourselves to understanding form and colour not as disconnected from socio-political contexts but as rooted in them. Uses of the grid in urban planning and social engineering would suggest order and rigidity but here the artist employs the same strategies with all their history of modern abstraction and social planning and manages to find freedom and introspection within those orders. We are left to consider how grids are dismantled; how threads are disentangled, the beauty that lies within that potential disorder, and the tension holding it all together.

Endnotes

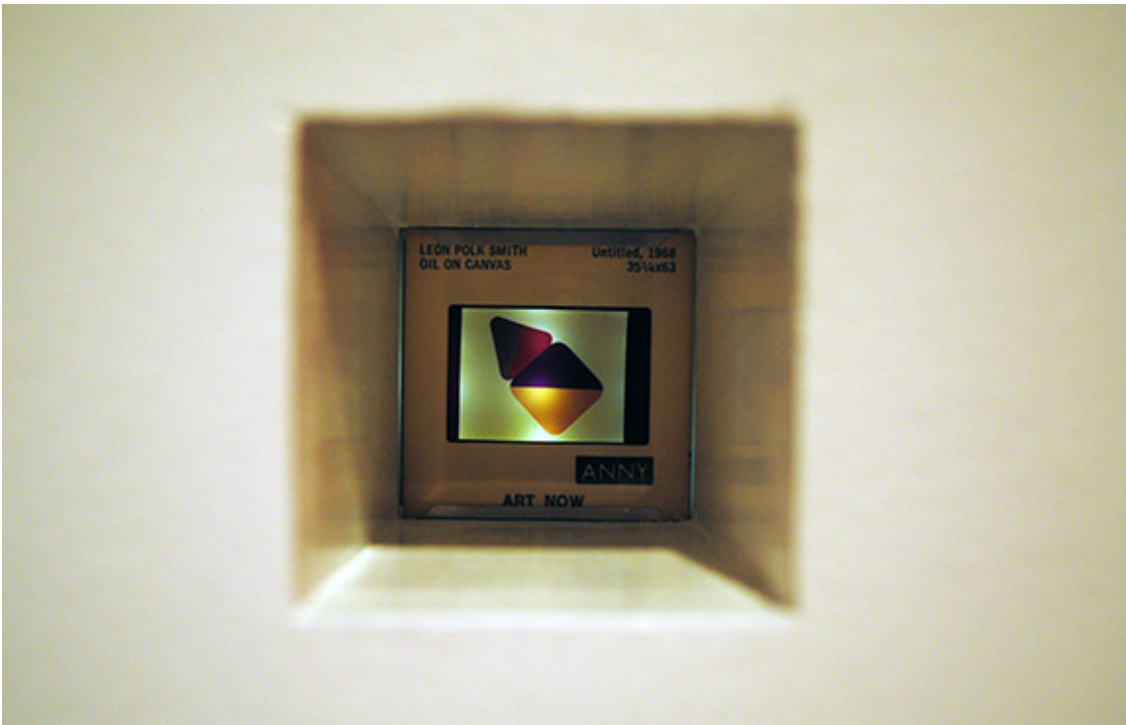
1. Mique'l Askren, 'Bringing our History into Focus: Re-Developing the work of B.A. Haldane, 19th Century Tsimshian Photographer,' *Blackflash: Seeing Red*, Volume 24, No. 3, 2007, pp. 41-47. <https://notartomatic.wordpress.com/2010/04/16/bringing-our-history-into-focus/>

2. *Leon Polk Smith – Leon Polk Smith in the Arithmeum*, <http://www.arithmeum.uni-bonn.de/en/events/61>
3. Transcribed from back of exhibition announcement card, in Archives of American Art: Leon Polk Smith, Accessed March 1st, 2016 at:
<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/container/viewer/exhibition->
4. Leon Polk Smith's body of work includes works referred to as Constellations, for example, *Oh Happy Day, Constellation Series*, 1972.
5. From the early charitable organizations which advocated for Native art, such as the BC Indian Art and Welfare Society, active in the 1950s to the 1980s.

Works in the Exhibition



Krista Belle Stewart, *Indian Artists at Work*, 2016, acrylic paint and vinyl, 271 x 729 cm



Krista Belle Stewart, *"I can't imagine that there is an end to space"*, 2016, 35 mm slide, Led lights and wood support, 8 x 8 x 14 cm



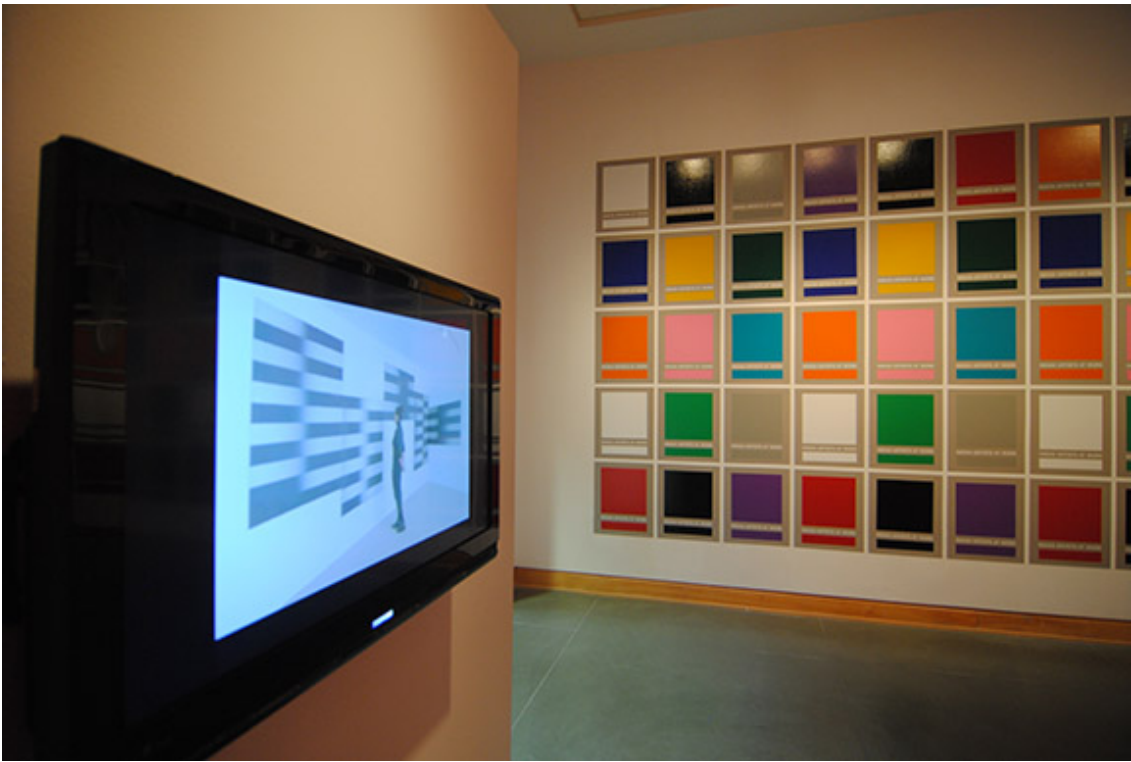
Krista Belle Stewart, *Untitled ("OK Territory")*, 2016, pail, land from Douglas Lake, BC



Krista Belle Stewart, Tube containing the fifth panel of *Sim - real / very*, 2015, 91 x 9 cm diameter



Krista Belle Stewart, *Sim - real / very*, 2015, Jacquard weaving, 244 x 122 cm



Krista Belle Stewart, "a sort of 'working to rule'", 2016, digital video

Artist's Biography

Krista Belle Stewart

Krista Belle Stewart's work engages the complexities of intention and interpretation made possible by archival material. Her work approaches mediation and storytelling to unfold the interplay between personal and institutional history. Stewart's recent exhibition *Motion and Moment Always* at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver (2015) marked the first solo exhibition of her work and the culmination of fall 2014 residencies at the Nisga'a Museum and Western Front comprising new works developed in Nisga'a and at her ancestral home in Douglas Lake, BC. Her work *Seraphine, Seraphine*, a two-channel video installation was exhibited at Mercer Union, Toronto (2015) in collaboration with the 28th Images Festival. She has exhibited in group shows including *Where Does it Hurt?*, Artspeak, Vancouver (2014), *Music from the New Wilderness*, Western Front, Vancouver (2014), and *Fiction/Nonfiction*, Esker Foundation, Calgary (2013). Stewart holds a BFA from Emily Carr University and is an MFA graduate from the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College in upstate New York. She is a member of the Upper Nicola Band of the Okanagan Nation, and lives and works in Vancouver and Brooklyn.

Curator's Biography

Tania Willard

Tania Willard, Secwepemc Nation, works within the shifting ideas around contemporary and *traditional*, often working with bodies of knowledge and skills that are conceptually linked to her interest in intersections between Aboriginal and other cultures. Willard was Aboriginal Curator in Residence with Kamloops Art Gallery from 2013 to 2015. Recent curatorial work includes *CUSTOM MADE/Tsitlem te stem te ckultens'kuc*, which was Willard's culminating exhibition for her curatorial residency with Kamloops Art Gallery and featured twenty contemporary artists working with ideas that bisect the binary of contemporary and traditional. Willard's curatorial work also includes *Beat Nation: Art Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture*, co-curated with Kathleen Ritter for the Vancouver Art Gallery, and featuring twenty-seven contemporary Aboriginal artists. She is currently working on co-curating a solo exhibition called *Unceded Territories*, on Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, co-curated with Karen Duffek at the Museum of Anthropology, UBC, Vancouver. As a practicing artist, Willard's recent project *BUSH gallery* collapses the boundary between artist and curator while creating space for experimental contemporary art practice in a land-based, outdoor environment outside of institutional spaces. *BUSH gallery* hosts an annual rez-idency on Willard's family land on Neskonlith Indian reserve, near Chase, BC, part of Secwepemculecw.