

Inheritance

April 1 to July 9, 2017



Our annual One on One project is curated by an invited emerging Indigenous curator, who selects an emerging First Nations artist with whom s/he wishes to work. This year the Kelowna Art Gallery is pleased to be exhibiting works by Amy Malbeuf, who is a Métis visual artist from Rich Lake, Alberta. The exhibition, *Inheritance*, has been organized by independent curator Cathy Mattes, who is based in Sprucewoods, Manitoba. She is a Michif curator, writer, and art history professor at Brandon University, in Brandon, Manitoba.

Mattes writes: “The exhibition contains mixed-media works that evoke contemplation about the value of personal, cultural, and artistic inheritance to Indigenous artists. Originally from Lac La Biche, Alberta, Amy Malbeuf incorporates passed-down ancestral items such as trapping equipment and china to expose the cultural continuums that can be found within Michif (Metis) families when one looks closely. Referencing beading and moose hair tufting, and using tarp as a symbolic material of resistance and being on the land, Malbeuf further navigates and resists constricting colonial dressings. Presented together in the context of this exhibition, her art is both gentle encouragement and reminder that nurturing revolution can be traced and located in family, community, and the artistic actions taking place in the larger Indigenous art world.”





Curatorial Essay

Amy Malbeuf: Inheritance

By Cathy Mattes

The art of Michif (Metis) artist Amy Malbeuf evokes contemplation about the value of personal, cultural and artistic inheritance to Indigenous artists.¹ Malbeuf incorporates passed-down ancestral items such as trapping equipment and china into installation and sculpture to expose the cultural continuums that can be found in Michif families when one looks closely. Integrating beading and caribou hair tufting, and using tarp as a symbolic material of resistance and being on the land, Malbeuf navigates and withstands constricting colonial dressings. Her art is both gentle encouragement and reminder that nurturing revolution can be traced and located in family, community, and the artistic actions taking place in the larger Indigenous art world.

Malbeuf's art embodies aesthetics of *wahkootowin*, the Cree term for a worldview that privileges family and values relatedness between all beings. According to Michif scholar Brenda Macdougall, employing the Cree concept of *wahkootowin* helps to understand the nature of Michif identity, and acknowledge family ties and the roles they played in the construction of Michif communities and concepts of nationhood.² The prioritization of Indigenous epistemology, valuing oral sources as well as written documentation, and acknowledging the importance of kinship is key to employing *wahkootowin*. Malbeuf's aesthetics of *wahkootowin* incorporate thorough investigation into Indigenous experiences on the land, personal and familial narratives, and consideration about artistic purposes and processes. She looks to the art and scholarship of Dr. Sherry Farrell Racette, who integrates research about Michif kinship, culture and history into her own practice. Malbeuf credits Farrell Racette with encouraging her and other artists to create art that helps them navigate and express complex personal and collective Michif stories and experiences.³

Malbeuf's family is from the Lac La Biche area, one of the oldest Michif settlements in Alberta. Michif hold specific ties to the land, and have unique political structures, strong cultural practices, language, and histories. Our nation is noted for its historical resistances against the colonial government, led by leaders like Louis Riel, Gabriel Dumont, and Cuthbert Grant. We identify through kinship and peoplehood models, and not the racial constructs that cause our existence to be questioned and challenged in Canada. Encounters with colonial forces have created stigmatized families, who at times bear the burden of attempted assimilation, internalized racism, and lateral violence. However, like many others from Indigenous nations birthed on this land, we constantly perform remedies to declare, re-instate, and acknowledge who we are as a people.

Contemplation and dialogue about the benefit of sitting around the kitchen table with Michif family and friends surfaced during the development of this exhibition. Historically in Michif households, the kitchen table was the center of the home. It was where loved ones were fed, clothing mended, beadwork and embroidery completed, and where political and cultural scheming occurred. It remains an electric and activated space out of necessity and a center for dialogue and artistic activities. The piecing together of my own Michif identity happened around the kitchen tables of my mother, aunties, and cousins. It is where I learned to bead and make moccasins and star blankets. It is a space where I have listened to my family share cultural knowledge and stories, their thoughts about on-goings in the world, or watched them play cards and drink coffee. The kitchen table has always been a safe space where I became and was allowed to be Michif freely.

In recent years there has been dialogue in the Michif arts community around the benefit of mobilizing kitchen table gatherings in the name of Indigenizing art and art discourse. To contribute to this current and expand upon our own conversations around the kitchen table we held the Metis Kitchen Table Talk in Brandon, Manitoba in January 2017. With the guidance of the Manitoba Metis Federation – Southwest Region, we invited community members to gather with us and encouraged them to bring inherited objects that were important to them. Everyone who came shared personal items such as

photographs, teacups, art, fiddles, and the stories that went with them. These objects and accounts were catalysts for discussion about their experiences as Michif people. This act of gathering and sharing our inheritances with other Michif was a manifestation of nurturing revolution, and contribution to the exhibition.⁴

Malbeuf's piece *Cream and Sugar* perhaps best reflects the value of kitchen table talk and having cultural and familial inheritance to draw upon. It is strategically positioned high in a gallery corner, and ties all of the art concepts in the exhibition together. Placed on a found ornate red corner shelf is an inherited cream and sugar set. Malbeuf was gifted the set from her aunties, her father's sisters. Both the shelf and the china set are similar to items I have seen in my aunties' kitchens, and remind me of the warmth of their kitchen and nurturing ways (which include encouragement to pursue opportunities, tips on motherhood, gentle prodding, and lots of joking and laughter). Upon closer inspection it becomes evident that Malbeuf tufted the cream and sugar vessels, covering the finely painted floral designs with pink caribou hair. The intervention of tufting provides tactility to the china similar to that found on Meret Oppenheim's iconic fur-covered cup and saucer set, *Objets*. However unlike Oppenheim's work, Malbeuf's is still functional, and honours the matriarchs of her lineage. By tufting onto china and placing it on the found red shelf she inserts a cultural embedment that is subtle, beautiful and culturally grounding.

The Outer Seam 2 comments on the resourcefulness, experimentation and labor-intensive practices of Indigenous women artists, past and present. It consists of a round embroidery hoop with long fringed blue tarp cascading down. The work provides contemplation of how utilitarian and cheaply manufactured materials like tarp can carry or contain culture. Tarp has multiple functions, such as providing a surface to tan hide, or in emergency situations as shelter and temporary warmth. Historically hide was used in a similarly utilitarian fashion, and Malbeuf is interested in working with tarp the way hide once was. This includes beading the material, stretching it as one would hide, or in the case of *The Outer Seam 2*, turning it into fringe. Fringe can be found on shirtsleeves, pant seams, dresses and footwear. It is always placed on the outer seam. Making fringe is laborious and time consuming, yet serves no real functional purpose. However its presence can be essential in making a garment whole, because it's decorative, a cultural signifier and because making fringe is meditative in its repetition, and offers time for self-reflection.

In recent years, tarp has also been utilized in social resistance, and Malbeuf noted its presence during #IdleNoMore in 2014. As people across North America gathered to participate in teach-ins, flash mobs and protests, statements of resistance were placed on tarp. In *BFIF* Malbeuf chose to bead abstracted words onto white tarp with four-inch-long white bone beads. They make up a derogatory phrase about a Michif person stated by a non-Indigenous man in the 1800s. The white beads on white tarp make it difficult to decipher the letters and decode the phrase, which Malbeuf refuses to reveal. By making the words ineligible and being secretive about their meaning the potency of them is diminished. In *BFIF* Malbeuf shows how beauty can be found in acts of resistance by poignantly taking the negative and through abstraction and beading, subverting its power.

The third piece in the exhibition made with tarp is *Woodland Camo*. It expresses how the artist's family finds sustenance on the land, signifiers of Indigenous cultures, and demands placed on contemporary Indigenous artists. Malbeuf purchased the digital camouflage printed material in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 2015 during an artist's residency. The name of the tarp, "digital woodland camo" raised considerations about the significant impact of the Woodland School of Arts' contributions, and the demands placed in the past on Indigenous artists to have an identifiable aesthetic, regardless of their cultural backgrounds or artistic interests. The name of the tarp was a trigger into this contemplation and questioning of what sorts of demands are now placed on contemporary Indigenous artists regarding aesthetics.

The beaded gun case sewn to the tarp is her father's. Malbeuf believes it may be a trade item that was passed down to him from his father. The slightly damaged floral beadwork found on the hide gun case shows its repeated use and value to her father. Its placement on the patterned tarp horizontally and

in the middle suggests a compass arrow, mapping and navigating the land for sustenance. Emanating from the gun case is intricately patterned loomed beadwork Malbeuf purchased in Italy, and sporadically placed beads sewn onto the tarp. Beads themselves are trade items, and the intermingling of beading by Indigenous hands on the gun case and tarp with purchased Italian beadwork suggests resilience and resourcefulness. It exposes how materials not considered Indigenous or natural can imply Indigeneity, and become cultural signifiers.

Taking Off the Coat expresses continuance and cultural continuity between generations. Held within a light box, a fleshed beaver tail is placed. Malbeuf's grandfather hunted and trapped, and his skinning shack is on the farm where she now lives in Rich Lake, Alberta. She found the partially fleshed beaver tail strung up on his shack, and decided to complete the fleshing. Fleshing involves taking extra layers of flesh off of animal skin and although she has fleshed other animals, she had never fleshed a beaver tail before. This required learning the process from her father, a re-instatement of Michif practices. The glow of the light box makes the fleshed tail appear almost translucent and map-like, and it is a thoughtful expression of intergenerational cultural resurgence.

Stretch is emblematic of lasting and outlasting, and consists of her grandfather's wooden animal fur stretchers. Despite being made with whatever materials were available, they have lasted for three generations and show signs of patching and repair. This suggests commitment to the object, because obtaining a better and newer stretcher has always been possible. Her grandfather chose to maintain its upkeep instead, testing its longevity, and his ability to be resourceful.

Stretched over the two wooden structures are rabbit furs dyed with zebra and ocelot cat print. Malbeuf purchased them from Halford Furs in Edmonton, the same store where her grandfather used to sell his furs. The curious prints placed on the rabbit fur are another reminder that Indigenous artists have consistently valued materials in all forms. This includes convenient ones or those bizarrely decorated. Her ancestors would have similarly experimented with materials presented to them, even tackily printed rabbit fur. The purchased furs from Halfords and her grandfathers' stretchers embody his practice of trapping fur, selling it to the store, so that it could then be sold and used by artists like his granddaughter. The work maps his movements on the land as a trapper, and hers as an artist.

Visual art is potent and can guide Michif who have internalized the shame brought on by colonization, and affirm our cultural existences and longevity. Malbeuf's work forges and maps relationships between kinship, art, and the value of inheritance. Her work is grounded in *wahkootowin*, and contemplates intergenerational engagements on the land, familial narratives and artistic contemplation. *Inheritance* provides space for self-reflection, contemplation about Michif experiences and collectiveness, and the potential of creating new inheritances grounded in personal and familial narratives about being and becoming Michif.⁵

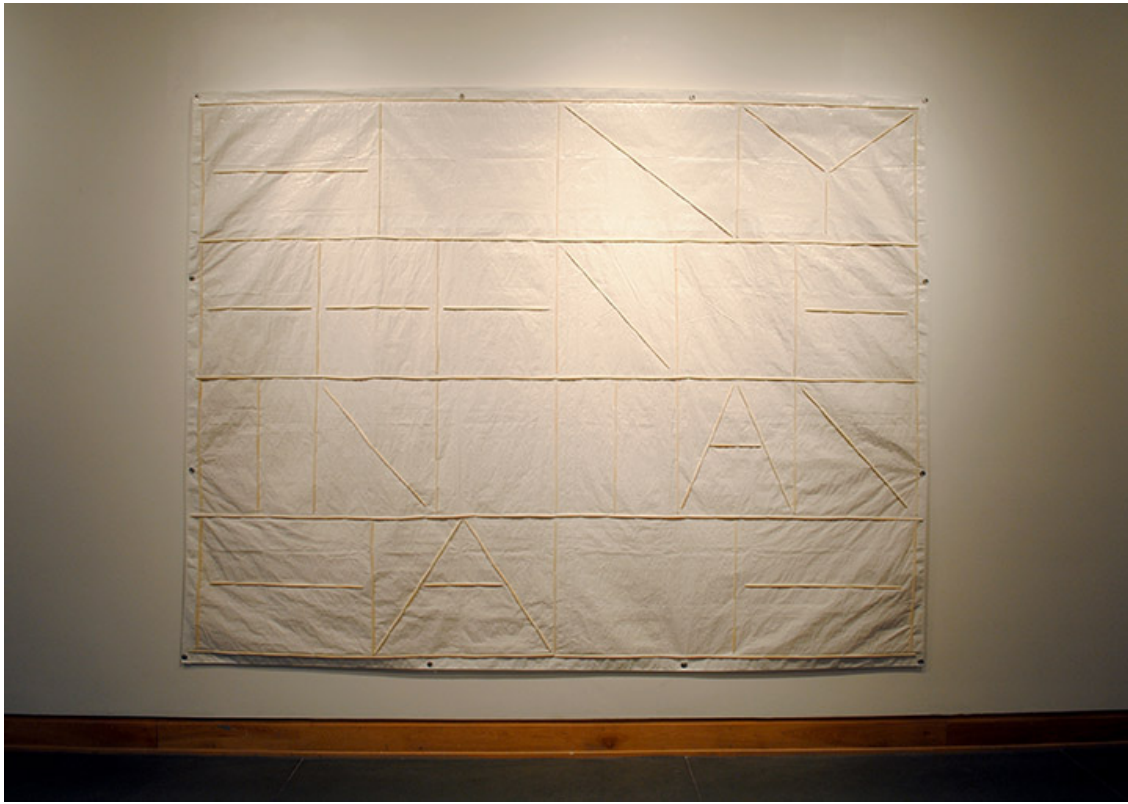
1. For the purpose of this text, the term Michif is used to describe Metis people whose ancestors stem from the Metis homeland and Red River Settlement.
2. Métis scholar Brenda MacDougall's use of *wahkootowin* in her research to trace the emergence of a distinct Métis community at Île à la Crosse in northern Saskatchewan exposes the value of it in discussing the Metis. See "Wahkootin: Family and Cultural Identity in Northwestern Saskatchewan Metis". *The Canadian Historical Review*. Vol.87, No. 3, 2006, pp. 431-462.
3. An example of Dr. Sherry Farrell Racette's ground-breaking research is "Sewing for a Living: the Commodification of Metis Women's Artistic Production," in *Contact Zones: Aboriginal Women and Settler Women in Canada's Colonial Past*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005.
4. Marsii to the Manioba Metis Federation-Southwest Region, and all of the participants of the Metis Kitchen Table Talk. In particular we thank Leah LaPlante, Arlyce Allan and Sabrina Bornkessel of the MMF-Southwest Region for their hard work and gracious hosting of the event.

5. For more writing on Amy Malbeuf see Angel Marie Schenstead's curatorial essay on her exhibition *kayas-ago*. Edmonton: Art Gallery of Alberta, 2014.

Works in the Exhibition



Amy Malbeuf, *The Outer Seam 2*, 2016, embroidery hoop and tarp,
144 x 12 in. (365.7 x 30.5 cm)



Amy Malbeuf, *BFIF*, 2017, bone beads on tarp,
84 x 114 in. (213 x 279 cm)



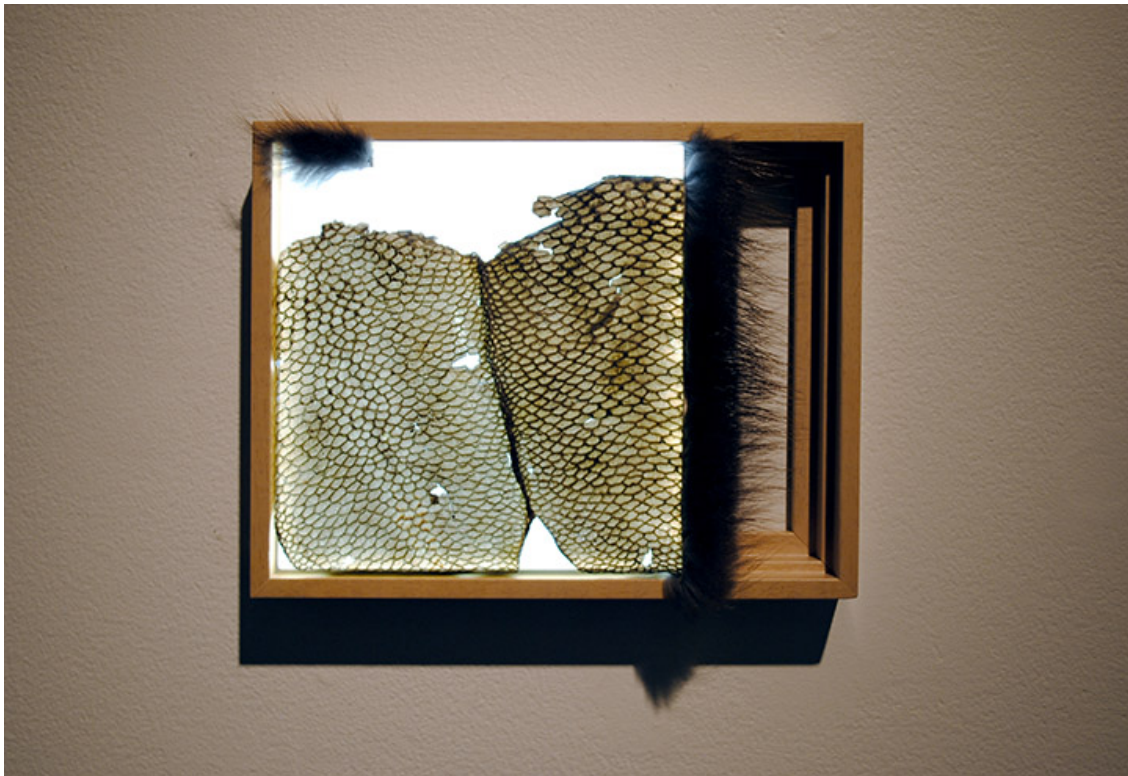
Amy Malbeuf, *Cream and Sugar*, 2017, inherited objects (formal dinnerware), caribou hair.



Amy Malbeuf, *Stretch*, 2017, inherited objects (fur stretchers), rabbit fur.



Amy Malbeuf, *Woodland Camo*, 2017, tarp, beadwork, inherited object (gun case)
90 x 110 x 5 in. (228.6 x 279.4 x 1.27 cm)



Amy Malbeuf, *Taking off the Coat*, 2015, inherited object (beaver tail),
beaver fur, wood, light, 5 x 8 x 1 in. (12.7 x 20.3 x 2.54 cm)

Artist's Biography

Amy Malbeuf

Amy Malbeuf is a Métis visual artist from Rich Lake, Alberta. Through utilizing such media as caribou hair tufting, beadwork, installation, performance, and video, Malbeuf explores notions of identity, place, language, and ecology. Malbeuf has exhibited her work nationally and internationally at such venues as Art Mûr, Montréal, MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina; Kamloops Art Gallery; Art Gallery of Alberta (Edmonton); and Kings ARI, Melbourne, Australia.

In 2016 she was selected as one of six Indigenous Canadian artists to create a permanent public work of art for the upcoming Indigenous Art Park in Edmonton, Alberta. Malbeuf has participated in many international artist's residencies, including at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Australia; The Banff Centre, Alberta; The Labrador Research Institute; and in 2015 she was one of two Canada Council for the Arts fellows at the Santa Fe Art Institute, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Curator's Biography

Cathy Mattes

Cathy Mattes is a Michif curator, writer, and art history professor at Brandon University, in Brandon, Manitoba. She is based in Sprucewoods, Manitoba. In her curatorial practice she focuses on the complexities of engaging Indigenous communities with contemporary art. Several examples of her projects are: *Frontrunners* (Urban Shaman Gallery and Plug-In ICA, 2011) *Blanche: KC Adams & Jonathan Jones* (Chalkhorse Gallery, Sydney, Australia, 2008), and *Rockstars & Wannabes* (Urban Shaman Gallery, Winnipeg, 2007). Mattes has written for various arts and cultural institutions, including the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, The Winnipeg Art Gallery, and the National Museum of the American Indian. She is presently pursuing her PhD studies at the University of Manitoba, in Winnipeg, in Native Studies.