

RADICAL
INCLUSIVITY,
RELATIONAL-
ITY.



AND
INDIGENOUS
PHOTOGRAPHY

by WANDA NANIBUSH



The economies made by extracting resources from the Earth are a direct attack on Indigenous lives and ways of being.

There is an automatic coupling of Indigenous Peoples and the fight against the Earth's destruction through extractive economies. And yet, there is tension between the environmental movement and the Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination movement. Many Indigenous photographers have demonstrated this is in the way they develop a visual language for Indigenous philosophies of radical inclusivity and relationality. Their ideas challenge the Anthropocene and human-centred activism. I will focus on five artists and five images or series here to open up this trajectory in Indigenous photography.

In Canada, First Nations and Inuit had their sovereignty physically reduced by the forced migration onto reservations in the south and settlements in the north. Where we once moved freely across our vast territories that sustained our communities' well-being in every way, our movements then became controlled and monitored in the name of progress. The control was used to clear us out of the way for colonial settlement and capitalist enterprises only awarded to the 'whites' amongst us. The economies made by extracting resources from the Earth are a direct attack on Indigenous lives and ways of being. As an Anishinaabe (Ojibway/Chippewa), I have been raised to see all of creation from insects to animals as part of my family relations. All our lives are seen through relationships which I refer to as the concept of relationality.

Page 65: *Boat Lake Road* from the series *akunnirun kuupok*, 2019 © Iabiusiak, courtesy of the artist and Norberg Hall
 Page 66: *nindinawemaganidog (all of my relations)*, *madonna*, 2017 © Rebecca Belmore, courtesy of the artist

The work *nindinawemaganidog (all my relations)* is a series of photographs by Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore that dives deep into relationality; that between us to the Earth; mothers to children; memory and place; and more. The series also represents new threads of inquiry that Belmore has found in her own live performance artworks. The photograph *madonna* is related to a performance I curated on Canada Day 2012 in Queens Park, Toronto. Belmore, in looking at the monuments to kings and queens, decided to create a temporary monument to our First Mother the Earth by wrapping a 150-year-old oak tree in a craft paper gown. It was important to her that the oak tree was Indigenous and had witnessed colonialism. In the photograph, she revisits the performance in the form of a woman wrapped in craft paper sitting on a drift log. She is essentially wrapped in dead trees — paper being the product of the extractive economy of lumber. The image is layered with meanings and histories of colonial and Indigenous natures. Belmore has stripped the figure of the Madonna from its Christian roots and replaced her with the figure of our First Mother, the Earth. The beginning of all creation is the Earth and we learn how to care for all living beings from her. And it is her in all her monumentality that is threatened. We can feel her disciplining us in the floods, melting ice caps, fires, and other earth-led destruction of the human world that puts her at risk. Nowhere is this relationship of interdependency between us and all living beings more visible than in the far north of Inuit territories. It was also one of the first casualties of the environmental movement when the seal hunt and fur industries were attacked in the name of conservation and love of animals. In an Indigenous context, the killing of animals sustains human life but also the whole environment when it is done sustainably and with the love and respect one feels for their kin. Just a simple example of this relation, allowing animals to breed uncontrollably also destroys biodiversity and brings the animals it feeds on to extinction. Inuk artist Maureen Gruben lives and works in Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories, in northern Canada. In the performance, video and photography work *Stitching My Landscape*, a bright red cloth zig zags for almost 1000 feet along the



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→ Installation view from *Stitching My Landscape* (2017), Tuktoyaktuk, NWT, April 2017 (Commissioned by Partners in Art for LandMarks2017/Repères2017 and curated by Tania Willard). Photo: Kyra Kordoski © Maureen Gruben, courtesy of the artist
 → *where you go i follow*, 2020 © asinnajaq, courtesy of Art Gallery of Ontario

snowy landscape while in the foreground, a woman lies on the ground near the beginning of the stitching. The work is inspired by a memory Gruben had of a gut stretched red against the white snow during one of her brother's seal hunts. She gathered folks together to prepare the site, including drilling 111 ice holes into which the cloth was secured. Gruben, in a true labour of love, unrolled 300 metres of broadcloth and, by doing so, stitching the land from one hole to the next. In the video she made of the work, she includes the sound of her dad chiselling the ice as another layer of love. Memory, family, animal relations, and land all map onto each other in a landscape that has held her people for centuries, healed them and taught them how to be with all their relations.

'Water is Life' has become a rallying cry for Indigenous Peoples as a reminder that the land is also water. We consider water to be the lifeblood of the Earth. It shows the relationship between women and their babies who grow in water and the Earth, who needs the water systems to grow food and sustain life. Like the Earth, our bodies are made up of roughly two-thirds water. These are important connections for Indigenous Peoples to renew and maintain, so we feel that our destinies are tied to each other. As an Anishinaabe, part of my identity is to protect the water. Inuk (singular Inuit) artist asinnajaq in the work *Where You Go I Follow* (2020) brings poetic renderings to our relationship with water. She prints a close-up image of the water of James Bay in northern



Quebec onto a large 8 x 10 poly sheer fabric. It hangs from the ceiling, gently moving as people walk around it, reading the poetic quotes she has placed on the walls. This relationship to water feels like love that is threatened in her people's homeland. She said in an interview recently: 'I'm just thinking about Nunatsiavut right now. People said, if we continue mining and this new hydro project (a hydroelectric dam in James Bay), the George River caribou herd, which also goes through my homeland, won't come back. And now it's a devastated caribou herd. People can't hunt caribou anymore. If that is a part of who you are, if you are in relation with animals, they become a part of your identity and so losing that relationship is a big loss in your life'.

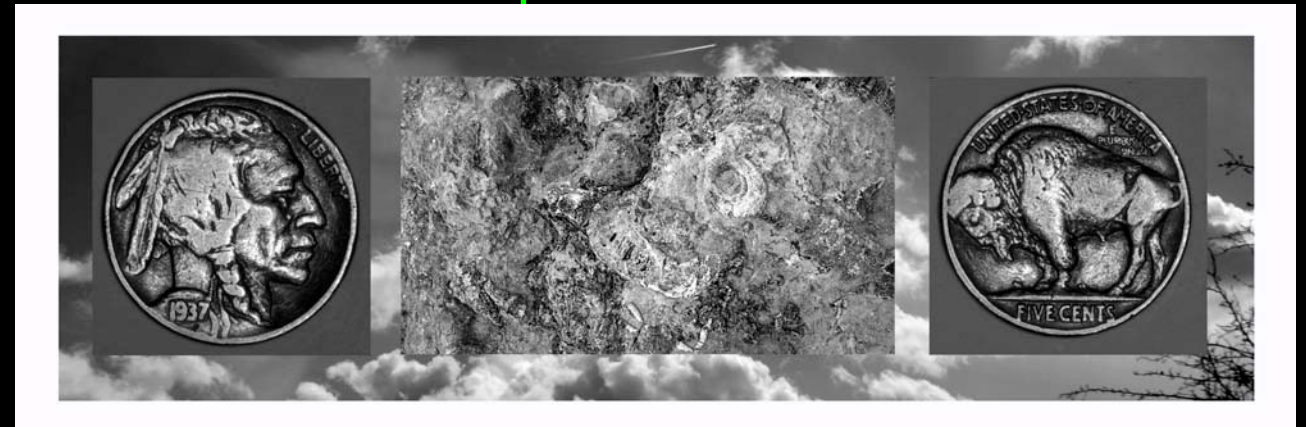


↑ North Mart from the series *akunnirun kuupak*, 2018 © kablusiak, courtesy of the artist and Norberg Hall
 → Shed from the series *akunnirun kuupak*, 2018 © kablusiak, courtesy of the artist and Norberg Hall
 ↓ *History of the World #1* © Shelley Niro

Artists have been able to document, imagine and reinvigorate customary relationships with the land and our non-human kin through photography. Inuit artists, in particular, undertake extensive community documentation projects starting in the 1940s with Peter Pitseolak, continuing with senior artists like Jimmy Manning and emerging artists Bryan Adams and Robert Kautuk, just to mention a few. Colonialism is felt like a cultural apocalypse and demands an equal response in terms of remembrance and preservation of the very cultures under attack. Artists document cultural and community practices in depth in order to be able to pass on knowledge to the next generations.

Artists like kablusiak add some extra sass to documentary photography forms, especially in the work *akunnirun kuupak* where ghostly forms haunt the landscape — structures of modern life in her ancestral territory of Inuvik in Northwest Territories. The ghost is part of a longer performative series kablusiak has been doing for years. They travelled 'home' to Inuvik for the first time as an adult in 2018, where the ghost figure reappears to address kablusiak's own in-between-ness as both Inuk from Inuvik and mainly urban. It feels like the ghost, who is kablusiak disguised or in perfect haunting fashion, might be skipping, running, dancing, walking through the landscapes of a home they did not grow up in. Haunting is a form of making visible the assertion of belonging, no matter what.

Mohawk artist Shelley Niro's photographic series *History of the World #1* through *#4* uses collage to smash assumptions about the origins and history of the world that is Eurocentric and colonial. Instead, she reads the surface of the Earth and the fossils she finds become 'attached to the narrative of these small creatures as they went about their daily tranquil lives and suddenly they are now the centrefolds for explaining my own existence as I slither along the edges of this century. These imprints of long-gone life unite us all as evidence of where we come from'. Niro is inspired by the age of the Earth and juxtaposes that with the 1937 United States nickel coin, which had an Indigenous head on one side and a buffalo on the other. The colonialists really believed we would vanish, but we are still here and



our relationship with the Earth and animals is still part of our identity. Each *History of the World* is coloured in one of the four directions — red, yellow, black, and white — to signify the directions of the Earth — east, west, north and south — in a moment of radical inclusivity Niro shows that in the end, it is the Earth that reigns over us and we are her children, all humans and all living beings — everyone. We are part of her, our first Mother, and always will be.

Artists like Belmore, Gruben, asinnajak, Niro, and kablusiak combine their impulse to protect cultural practices and knowledges with an ever-expanding contemporary art vocabulary often working in photography, performance, video, and installation at will. No matter the artistic strategy chosen by artists, it is clear we need fewer saviours and more relations if we are to shift from extraction and destruction to continuity and peace.

WANDA NANIBUSH is an Anishinaabe-kwe curator, writer, and image warrior from Beausoleil First Nation. She is currently the inaugural curator of Indigenous Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario and co-lead of the Indigenous and Canadian Art Department. She is involved in collection diversification, and publishes articles for magazines, books, and journals. Her major exhibition *Robert Houle: Red is Beautiful* is currently touring to the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington. Wanda is the founder of aabaakwad, a yearly gathering of International Indigenous writers, artists, and curators. aabaakwad's last edition took place at the 2022 Venice Biennale.