

VISITING / ECHOES AND REVERBERATIONS FROM THE LAND

by Heather Igloliorte

In 2011, I was a Research Fellow at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (now the Canadian Museum of History). One of the perks of the position was that I was able, on several occasions, to arrange behind-the-scenes tours of the museum's extensive collections for a number of Indigenous artists who happened to visit Ottawa throughout the 2011-2012 academic year. At one point, Jordan Bennett came to see me at the museum, and then-Curator of Eastern Ethnology Stephen Augustine – now a Dean at Cape Breton University – took the time to lead us on a guided tour of the Mi'kmaq collections of eastern Canada. I most distinctly remember the late nineteenth and early twentieth century porcupine quillwork. What stood out was not the beautiful baskets – of which there were many – but the surprisingly colourful chair seats and backs, constructed of elaborate quillwork in bright pinks, oranges, purples, greens and blues. The commercial dyes used by the Mi'kmaq quillworkers, who must have been thrilled by the endless opportunities for new designs that the colourful dyes afforded them, had faded slightly with time, but still held their vibrancy. Five years later, it is clear that the image of these chair backs and seats stayed with Jordan as well. If I didn't already know the colourful inspiration behind Bennett's latest series of paintings and carved pieces, I might suspect he had been looking at Hockney's southern California pool paintings rather than 100-year old Mi'kmaq quillwork. In this audio and visual installation, the paintings on wood and carved sculptures all strongly reference this living tradition and echo the form and appearance of those quillwork seats. Yet many times, sites and stories are embedded in these graphic abstractions of Mi'kmaq artistic practice as well.

Although currently residing in Kelowna, BC, Bennett's practice has long centered on his home Ktamkukeweq (Newfoundland), both in terms of his people's knowledge of and connection to the land, as well as to Newfoundland and Labrador's long and destructive history of colonization and the complicated trajectory of decolonization. As a multidisciplinary, or perhaps more accurately, non-disciplinary artist who works in whatever medium best suits his conceptual needs, Bennett has previously built turntables that remix the Mi'kmaw language with the aural projections of trees, made digital data ports out of the cast skulls of local animals, which play videos made from the perspective of rabbit or wolf when connected, and erected paper teepees on which he inscribed the Indian Act to challenge the enthusiasm of many of Newfoundland's Mi'kmaq descendants for finally gaining state 'recognition' – yet no land – as the province's Qalipu First Nation.

Since arriving in BC a few years ago, Bennett has continued to think through what it means to be a Mi'kmaw artist within the context of colonial Newfoundland's dark history of relations with the original

peoples of the island. At age twenty-eight, he got tattoos of two line drawings made by Shanawdithit, believed to be the last of the Beothuk, who were pushed out of their coastal Newfoundland territory centuries ago, many of whom either starved, were slaughtered by British colonialists or died of foreign diseases. Shanawdithit was also twenty-eight when she made the drawings, some of the last she made before her own death from tuberculosis in 1829. Bennett became fascinated with recovering the history of the Beothuk, especially concerning the relationship between them and his people, the Newfoundland Mi'kmaq from the western half of the island. In the testimony recorded in the 1827 diary of Bishop Inglis, Shanawdithit recalls centuries of peaceable relations between the Beothuk and Mi'kmaq, including a partial understanding of each other's languages and stories. However, over the final century and a half of their co-existence, the stressors of contact with the English on the east side of the island and the French on the west caused this relationship to disintegrate.

Following Shanawdithit's passing and thus the imagined erasure of the Beothuk people, the Mi'kmaq faced not outright genocide but instead complete state denial. For decades under British imperial policy and responsible government, the presence of the Newfoundland Mi'kmaq had been officially ignored.¹ When the Newfoundland Commission of Government finally joined Confederation in 1949, it continued to refuse to recognize any of its citizens as Aboriginal, including the Mi'kmaq and other provincial Indigenous peoples, such as my own, the Labrador Inuit (this decision had different, yet equally far-reaching, implications for us as well). The 1947 first draft of the terms of Confederation had included provisions for the implementation of the Indian Act, stating that the "Indians and Eskimos of Newfoundland" would be the sole responsibility of the federal government, but the final version told a different story. Both the Newfoundland and the Canadian governments decided against extending the Indian Act to the new province's Aboriginal population, and all mentions of its Aboriginal peoples were written out of Confederation, making Newfoundland the only province or territory to do so.² While the Mi'kmaq Samiajij Miawpukek Indian Reserve was ultimately recognized under the Indian Act in 1987, Bennett's band, the Qalipu First Nation, was only officially formed in 2011 after more than forty years of struggle and frustration.

Now, Bennett's work seeks to participate in the revitalization of and respect for Mi'kmaq traditions within Newfoundland while recovering the lost history of relations between the Beothuk and Mi'kmaq. The artist aims to question the assumptions and myths regarding the historical, physical and cultural erasure of the Beothuk people by European settlers, the facts having been long obscured by the unreliable historical accounts of European and Canadian settler historians alike. Bennett instead draws on a vast archive of Indigenous visual culture in this endeavor. He has studied museum collections within Canada in tandem with the research of Mi'kmaq historian and ethnologist Ruth Holmes Whitehead, who has documented Mi'kmaq, Beothuk and Maliseet artifacts housed in collections outside of North America. He has also examined Shanawdithit's many hand-drawn

illustrations along with the transcribed explanations of her sketches, recorded at the end of her life. Finally, Jordan has also often returned to Newfoundland, spending time at the known sites of Mi'kmaq and Beothuk occupation and contact, coming to understand the overlapping histories and spaces of Ktamkukeweq's peoples.

This new body of work reflects that research and his time on the land. It merges the wealth of imagery and iconography drawn from both Mi'kmaq quillwork and design with the Beothuk visual record, as well as the resonances and reverberations recorded from the land at each site, using a microphone and system rigged up by Bennett to capture the sound from these sites of confluence. In the exhibition, this audio element invites reflection, rewarding those who sit with these works a little longer with an intensifying audio experience, cleverly arranged using motion detectors and speakers, yet affective in a way that reminds us of the experience of being on the land, being attentive to our stories, and curious about both possibilities and incommensurable histories. Like the sound installation, each of these brightly coloured abstractions reflect on points of contact that were once significant and that may have continued to be so. In Bennett's paintings and carvings, he deconstructs and reimagines a kind of Indigenous Newfoundland futurism, where the Mi'kmaq eight-point-star and the double-rainbow coexist with the Beothuk forms for which we have few names. Each work is a place, an attempt, a potential.

At its heart, this is a collection of works about visiting with our relations and reclaiming our histories. It creates a space where Mi'kmaq and Beothuk cultures continue to flourish and co-exist as they did centuries ago in Ktamkukeweq, to imagine a future that might have been, but is not now. And in reflecting on that, we are reminded of what is always at stake.

Endnotes

- ¹ Tanner, Adrian, "The Aboriginal Peoples of Newfoundland and Confederation." *Newfoundland Studies* 14:2 (1998), 238.
- ² Brantenberg, Anne and Terje Brantenberg, "Coastal Northern Labrador after 1950." *The Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 5, Ed. David Damas (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1984), 689.

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