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Space and Recognition: Curating Latin American Art in Toronto

Winning Essay of the 2020 Graduate-level TLN Telelatino Essay Prize

by

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TLN – Telelatino PRIZEWINNING ESSAYS

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Iván Argote, *Touristas,* 2012.

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July 14, 2020

A few years ago I was asked to prepare a 10-minute presentation for a panel on Latin American art in Canada. It was a challenging, enticing and delightful nightmare, yet a task that I undertook, after all, one does not often get invited to speak on local contemporary Latin American art within the Toronto art scene very often. Yet, there could be no way that I could possibly begin to delve into the multiple complexities and layers of truth nascent within the artworks, the diversity and richness of concerns, and the magnitude and breadth of experiences. The lack of understanding or assumptions generated would be inevitable. Nonetheless, I was committed to continue in whichever avenue, space, community gathering or conference possible to tackle the less sought-out discourses and aesthetics, the powerful, politically and socially engaged practices, the inquisitive and less conformist nature of Latin American art to an uninformed uneducated Canadian audience.

My curatorial practice began over a decade ago in an attempt to diversify exhibitions' content and aesthetic to a predominantly Anglo-Canadian audience and arts community. Despite its relevance in the international art scene, in Canada and particularly in Toronto, one of the most diverse cities in the world, Latin American art remains for the most part unexplored by critics and curators. As a young art student in the early 90s, there was only one class we could take during our 4 years of undergrad work

and needless to say, it could barely scratch the surface of such an enormous topic as Latin American Art. Despite the best intentions of the only professor knowledgeable enough to deliver this subject, there was no interest from administration to dedicate further resources to Latin American Art. Unfortunately, this still holds true twenty years later. In the mid to late 90s, many of us had to continue to seek our own knowledge, create our own opportunities and platforms and gather our own resources after going out in the 'real art world' which we soon realized wasn't as accepting as we once naively believed. As I began to curate exhibitions, write about fellow colleagues works, organize speaker series, deliver workshops, organize group studio critiques, and co-found an arts organization, I realized that what I was attempting to do was to foreground a transcultural exchange and generate collective recognition to rupture the passive and hierarchical reception for art I found present in Canadian galleries and museums.

It is important to understand a brief recount of my own experience as to why I continue to stubbornly address issues of marginality and resilience. I come from a family of survivors. My mother arrived to this country at a sourly young age with a 20-day-old daughter to an unforgiving winter in January of 1974. Exiled from a distant Chile we would no longer see until our return, still under dictatorship 10 years later. My mother and father, both university students and revolutionaries, ended up washing dishes, cleaning toilettes, baking bread, and working in the construction industry for the next 10 years in both Vancouver and Toronto. Their dreams and professions never completely

built back together, like so many other immigrant and refugee lives that arrive daily to this country, they were confronted by a predominantly Anglo-Canadian demographic, unwilling to share privilege and systemic racism became the norm. Art helped shape my own identity and it became a tool for recognition within a society that excluded and neglected marginalized voices. Although my life as a young artist was quite different from that of my parent's generation, I too confronted various forms of discrimination. The struggle for inclusion did not only encompass the possibility to exhibit work at galleries, but it also included distribution of wealth, resources and social privileges, ultimately to change and innovate social systems imposed by generations of colonization.

I co-founded LACAP-Latin American Canadian Art Projects in 2005, a Toronto-based, not-for-profit arts organization dedicated to the implementation of art projects, which promote Latin American art in Canada with an emphasis on artistic excellence, critically engaged artistic practices, and hemispheric networks of exchange. LACAP projects have ranged in scope, scale and initiative throughout the years. Its events and activities include the multidisciplinary Allende Arts Festival; the professional development workshops of Aconsejate; civic engagement projects such as the naming of the Victor Jara Lane; the educational programs of the Art of the Americas: Knowledge series for Young Audiences; the community-based Solidaridad Museum Project; the IMAGINE: Latin American Art Centre Pilot Project; and the Latin American Speakers Series. Under this same framework, our most recent project, Sur Gallery, was developed

as a space to showcase Latin American artists in a way that not only gave voice and space to us, but also granted the opportunity to become active players in a mainstream visual art circuit. It became crucial to begin a dialogue, reflect on current issues that not only addressed our lives in Latin America and our perspectives working within peripheries and cultural hybridity, but to begin a conversation with Canada and our role in this diaspora.

Jota Castro, *Survival Guide for Demonstrators,* 2005.

In 2014, state surveillance in Canada was on the rise. New laws and technologies were redefining the relationship between "public" and "private" spaces. Art can become a critical response to the process and impact of surveillance; it turns the modalities and technologies of surveillance inward, deepening our understanding of how surveillance

affects relationships between the collective and the individual, the watcher and the watched, the object and the subject. The first exhibition I curated for Sur Gallery, presented in the context of the Pan Am/Parapan Am Games under Stephen Harpers government, was entitled *Sportsmanship under Surveillance*. Coming from a dictatorship in the southern hemisphere, having lived through terror and state surveillance and knowing when the media is used to distract people, the theme of state surveillance was an obvious choice to delve into. Underneath the bewildering veil of prosperity and celebration, the games brought deeper control over citizens while invading privacy and distorting concepts of what a free society should condemn. The exhibition exposed the impact governments have when using questionable surveillance tactics in the name of national security. For example, Jota Castro investigated and produced a newspaper entitled *Survival Guide for Demonstrators.* The guide consisted of a printed newspaper offered to the public, which included images and information with practical tips and reasons for which to demonstrate in the cities of Brussels, Istanbul, Havana, London, Dakar, Bilbao, Jeremie, and Treviso. The back page of the guide included our city's destination and asked Torontonians to provide its own tips and reasons to protest.

For the exhibition, Costa-Rican Montreal-based artist, Juan Ortiz-Apuy, presented *The Freedom Fighter Manual* a17-page document designed by the CIA in 1983, airdropped over Nicaragua with the goal of overthrowing the elected government. It contained a series of instructions for public disobedience and revolt, from ripping the pages out of books in public libraries, to how to make Molotov bombs. For the

installation, Ortiz-Apuy replicated each page of the manual, which was silkscreened with glow-in-the-dark ink and set against 3 motion-sensor security lights. As you walk in the space, the lights are triggered and the content of the manual becomes invisible. You have to stand perfectly still for a few seconds in order for the lights to shut off once again and view the piece. With his piece, Juan Ortiz-Apuy explores levels of state intervention and imposed policies implemented for decades in the name of national security.

Juan Ortiz-Apuy, *The Freedom Fighter Manual*, 2011.

Growing up within a left-wing exiled community in Canada and later under a repressive dictatorship, it is not surprising that my curatorial interests are heavily influenced by this lived experience. Surveillance, feminism, decolonialism, transnationalism, interventions, immigration, memory and trauma–past and present, dominate–and as such are part of an ongoing conversation through various artistic manifestations. This has been my endless search and inspiration, and the conversations that I bring to the forefront are as relevant as when I began curating 15 years ago.

Latin America has a long tradition of honouring national heroes, those who fought for independence, martyrs who died in the name of revolutions, and courageous women and men who continue to fight for the disenfranchised, for freedom. Some adored more than others, some given stature and state recognition, others portrayed as terrorists, this concept of grandiosity occupies an important place in the Latin American imaginary and psyche. In the exhibition, *From the Heroic to the Absurd*, which comes from a quote by Simon Bolivar "*there is only a step between the heroic and the absurd"* my intention was to find manifestations that subverted historical narratives by questioning sovereignties, re-evaluating ideological constructs, resisting centres of power, and aesthetically rupturing infallibility. I believe that the role of the artist is not to erect monuments, or necessarily defame Bolívar's legacy, but to offer insight into the normalcy of human nature, and as such, accept that all heroes may fall into streams of ridicule, disputing perceptions of perfection. I invited Guillermo Trejo, an Ottawa-based Mexican artist, to

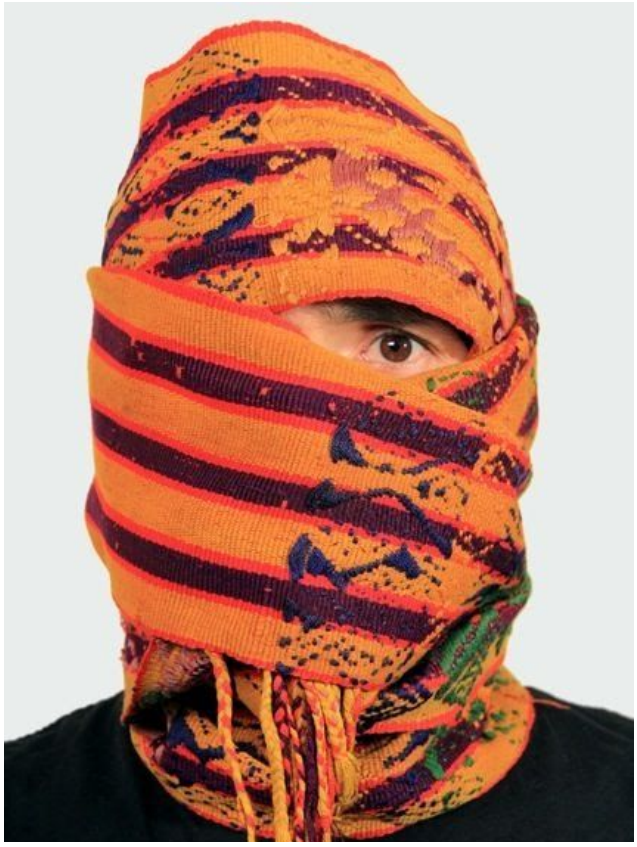
exhibit *A Forgotten Ideology, Monumento #1* and *A Dissertation about Actions* as well as Cuban Hamilton-based artist Julio Ferrer's *American Idol* and *Chelfie*.

Guillermo Trejo, *A Forgotten Ideology,* 2015.

The concept of ridiculing monumentality is recurrent in our most recent exhibition entitled *Power in Resistance*. The artist Colombian artist Iván Argote investigates the city as a place of transformation searching for signs of fallen power and studying manifestations of control. Monuments of Spanish conquistadores mark territory in many regions of Latin America, their presence being a constant reminder of colonization, an attempt to exterminate Indigenous culture and people. Iván Argote's

gesture questions colonial legacy and subverts perspectives of this past, defying authority and embracing Indigeneity in Latin America.

Vancouver-based artist Carlos Colín, on the other hand, shares a series of photographs entitled *The Uprising of the Mask. The Iconoclastic Riot* in which he references Indigenous resistance movements in Latin America. The traditional belts from Guatemala, conceals the artist's identity much like the Zapatistas do with black ski masks, for without a face and without a voice, the artist undermines authoritarianism. He becomes visible in a land that marginalizes.



Carlos Colin, *The Uprising of the Mask, The Iconoclastic Riot,* 2014..

In 2017, I curated an exhibition entitled *Vehemence*. The exhibition explored the human body as a site of trauma and memory. Artists and designers in the exhibition created an intense vernacular informed by personal and collective narratives that transpired in Central America. For decades, Central America has been subject to human right violations. Violence pervades social and cultural life with abductions, torture, death

squads, execution of prisoners, and massacres of women, children and the elderly. Indigenous people are subject to the most disruptive forms of repression and fight a long battle against large corporations that are killing the land and people in the name of profit. Drug trafficking across the borders increase violence and social instability of many, while governments do little to improve the livelihood of its population.

The artists in *Vehemence* having come from Central America bring a particularly compelling voice as they offer testaments, political outcries, and denunciations to a North American audience. As such, Salvadorean Vancouver-based artist Osvaldo Ramírez Castillo's drawings present uncanny elements – mutilated bodies, faces missing eyes, figures lacking flesh –contend his delicate choice of medium – sawdust, paper, and watercolour. Ramírez Castillo references popular folklore, Pre-Columbian mythology and North American culture, and repeatedly alludes back to memory and recurrence of history.

Osvaldo Ramírez, *Spring Cannibalism*, 2010.

The exhibition, *Declassified History: Archiving Latin America*, highlights oppressive regimes from the south that are explicitly linked to corrupt governments of the north. Through installations, the artists capture moments in history that may well repeat. The exhibition tackles a dark period in history marked by United States interventions in Latin America. Through sculpture, installation and video the exhibition exposes truths from the past and broaden our perspectives on how we view the present and future. Archives of the CIA's involvement in Chile, Paraguay, Brazil and other countries in

Voluspa Jarpa, *En nuestra pequeña región de por acá*, 2016.

Latin America–revealed in works by Cuban Toronto-based artist Omar Estrada, Chilean artists Voluspa Jarpa and Iván Navarro–explore the dynamics of the Cold War as an important aspect to collective memory and adds to the debate about history and responsibility.

Throughout the process of curating in Toronto, I have found that it is not only empowering to be providing a platform for Latin American immigrant artists, but to do so in a manner that will improve their professional careers without falling into stereotypical or preconceived notions of Latin American art. It is important to curate exhibitions that address the ways in which the immigrant voice is portrayed and interpreted and how relevant this discussion is in the context of Toronto. For the immigrant, the space that lies in between two points is often one of ambiguity and yet it is also a place where two or more realities meet. Within the process of relocation the discrepancy between what is encountered and what is imagined can be discombobulating: landscapes, language, food and customs all offer points of detachment, and though they may become familiar through repeat encounters they may continue to exist in a state of prolonged estrangement from one's surroundings. Moving from a place of origin, the sense of attachment to home is never fully abandoned and it is debatable as to whether the émigré can ever feel completely settled upon arriving to a new land. As demonstrated in Toronto-based Isabel M. Martinez's series of chromogenic prints for an exhibition I co-curated with Sally Frater entitled *Interstices*. The series *The Weekend* stages various times of day, periods of weather and life cycles avoiding and failing to offer a complete and accurate depiction of reality. Instead, synthesizing a fragmented memory that is easily erased. Under the surface, we witness a dualism that overcasts an ongoing experience, a lifetime of

shadows, plays with relationships and aspirations, appearing in both personal and existential realities.

Isabel M. Martinez, *The Weekend*, 2012.

This lack of anchorage can also function as generative and creates new realms and ways of being such as in the case of Bratford-based artist Alejandro Arauz's video installation and performance piece, *Skin Anthem* for the exhibition *True Patriot Love*. In

this case, the artist has used the Canadian national anthem and translated it into - Spanish, Hindi, Ojibway, German, Tagalog, Japanese, Hebrew and Arabic. The words have been laser etched onto wood, pressed onto skin, and ink pressed/transferred onto paper. In so doing, Arauz intends to expand not only printmaking's role and its possibilities by incorporating video as a testimonial presence to the act of performance but also tackles the artist's desire of visibility: through surface, mark, performance, and translation.

Laura Barrón, *North,* 2018.

It is a constant struggle to inhabit the present, to conquer spaces and to leave an immigrant's past behind. An arrival is never completely accomplished and a departure is forever yearned. The search for a place is persistent and unsettling. And in the images in the exhibition *Life In Flight* it is a state common to many that have made Toronto their home. Toronto-based Mexican artist Laura Barrón's approach is by photographing a group of people along the shores of Lake Ontario–on the southern edge of the city, facing the south. The video component of the installation entitled *North* includes portraits as they merge with one another in a dialogue of features, thoughts, needs and questions, all present in each gaze. She exhibits the portraits as a community whom might or not know

each other or have anything evidently in common, but are linked as Latin American immigrants in Toronto. The artist's exploration with *North* not only implies to what is missing, but also what the collective chooses to 'see' in the landscape. Toronto-based artist Jorge Lozano's *Shifting Fragments/Border Thinking* installation in the exhibition *Life in Flight* explores the past with a letter directed to his mother that reminds us all of the experience felt by immigrants upon arrival. Contradictory and raw, the shared spaces of reflection nurtured by the values bestowed upon him as a child simply disappear as he lands and realizes that he no longer inhabits the same land and space of childhood

José Luis Torres, *The Ultimate Map*, 2016.

memories and values. For Quebec-based artist José Luis Torres, his prefabricated and found objects are re-contextualized and become vessels through which to reflect notions

of space and place, memory and the relationship between the body to site, and the process of transition. For his installation *The Ultimate Map*, Torres uses tape measures to construct a wall map of the world. Using materials that represent the permanent construction of our everyday lives the work suggests that any topographical attempt to accurately reproduce the earth and all of its territories lays somewhere between fiction and impossibility.

As a curator, working in a predominantly Anglo-Canadian sphere despite attempts of diversification and inclusion, Latin American-Canadian women confront a much more challenging path than their fellow colleagues. Julieta Maria, Claudia Bernal, and Maria Ezcurra, among other Latin American-Canadian women, actively contribute to a global discussion within a contemporary feminist framework. In the exhibition, *Strike a Chord*, the artist Claudia Bernal presents the installation and performance *The Sleepwalkers***.** Sleepwalking, being a combined state of sleeping and wakefulness is one that we can all in some way relate to during times of anxiety and uncertainty. Events seem to be coming from a dream perhaps a nightmare, blurring the lines in an illusory form. Bernal exposes the reality of sleepwalkers: as agents who act despite their state of unconsciousness, despite their blocked sight; agents who define their actions based on the course of their own stories and trajectories. Bernal leaves traces of the body, of a performance shared to an audience. We are left with scattered pieces to decipher its meaning, as if we too are

trying to make meaning of a shared dream.

Claudia Bernal, *The Sleepwalkers***,** 2017.

Getting There, a video installation by Julieta Maria, presented for the *True Patriot Love* group exhibition, presents a rich Canadian landscape with no signs of human life. Within a few minutes, a life form emerges amongst the rocks as we slowly identify the artist's naked body. We clearly understand that she does not belong in this context, in that situation, in that geographical location. She walks barefoot upon jagged rocks, we witness the difficulty and painful vulnerability as she emerges from a camouflaged to an overt state of presence. This manifestation of identity as fluid and controversial poses questions of marginality and invisibility. Julieta Maria also has shown in a group exhibition entitled *Strike a Chord* where she shares two video pieces. *Limpia*, meaning 'to clean' in Spanish, is an attempt to wash away invisible marks of pain, unseen trauma,

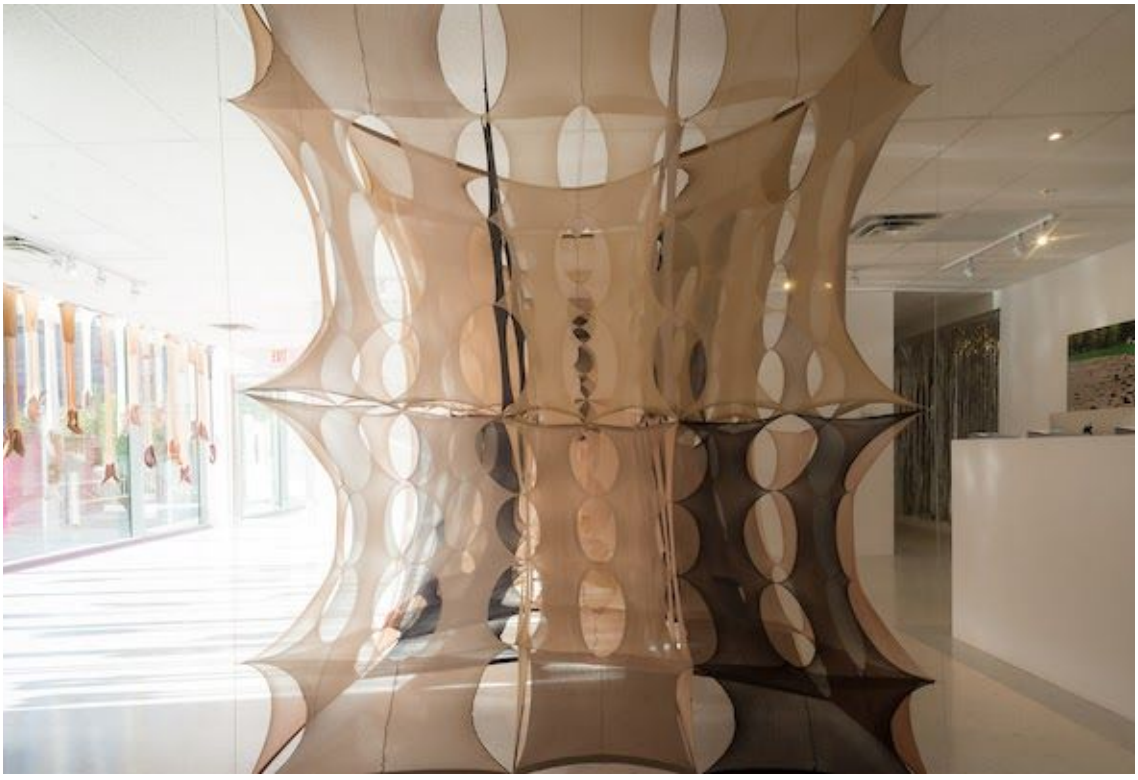
and distress unclearly defined and performed through the act of licking a daughter's face. It is our mothers who acknowledge our pain, who are in tune with our past and future, and who can offer healing and understanding when all else fails.

Julieta Maria, *Limpia*, 2013.

This raw and beautiful state of true belonging can only be found in a place of total acceptance and comfort, a place which our mothers provide and is reciprocated when our mothers age. Are we the fish, captured and immobile, as we await our death destined for consumption in Julieta Maria's *Embrace*? Or are we the person embracing guilt and our own complicity, capable of changing the course of our and others destiny? Most of us in some way or another are both, living precarious lives, destined to be either active agents

or subject to abuse. Julieta Maria poses herself as resisting a struggle, and within a few minutes the life of a living being is lost in her hands, against her naked clutch. The artist's voice is poetic and strong, vibrant and ahead of her time as she offers images that linger in a contemporary vernacular.

Maria Ezcurra's first solo exhibition in Toronto, *In Your Shoes*, explored multiple scenarios of social detachment and of invisibility. Ezcurra is capable of placing others in a situation of discomfort despite her true intentions of transformation and strength through shared spaces. Constructed by social and cultural experiences of violence and vulnerability, Maria Ezcurra poses disembodied anomalous installations that engulf the gallery space and offers performances in public spaces that display disenfranchised communities all of which allure painful memories of perpetual inequality. Murdered and missing women is a truth that few choose to address as it entails confronting a trauma inherited and painfully ignored. Yet Ezcurra's stretched nylons, hanging emergency rescue blankets, and empty floating high heel shoes contained in panty hose remind us of the tears shed and of the missing body incapable of replacing or fully understanding its pain. Different channels of reconciliation and healing begin to surface throughout the exhibition, as we are obliged to take a different path reminded of our own complicity by our mirror reflection exemplified by the installation *Reflections*.



Maria Ezcurra, *Reflections,* 2016.

As I continue to navigate perspectives of Latin American art and its multiplicity in Canada, I continue to be drawn by my own experiences of longing, for mourning, searching for political manifestations and historical references, alluding to hybrid identities and its social implications as well as validating an artistic and cultural contribution that must be documented. I offer a glimpse into the a contemporary outlook, a conversation established by artists caught between two hemispheres and offer questions to what could and is a dialogue of translation. This translation has inevitably led me to seek an understanding of our responsibility and role as immigrants to this land and begin an active conversation with Indigenous peoples with intersectional lived experiences. As

disenfranchised and racialized in a system that continues to marginalize, I would like to offer a bridge not only with the South but, with those who acknowledge this colonial difference. Meryl McMaster has been one of the few artists that have no links to Latin America exhibiting *Truth to Power* at Sur Gallery in an exhibition *Power in Resistance*.

The Onondaga Madonna

She stands full-throated and with careless pose,
This woman of a weird and waning race,
The tragic savage lurking in her face,
Where all her pagan passion burns and glows;
Her blood is mingled with her ancient foes,
And thrills with war and wildness in her veins
Her rebel lips are dabbled with the stains
Of feuds and forays and her father's woes.

And closer in the shawl about her breast
The latest promise of her nation's doom,
Paler than she her baby clings and lies,
The primal warrior gleaming from his eyes;
He sulks, and burdened with his infant gloom,
He draws his heavy brows and will not rest

—Duncan Campbell Scott (1878)

Meryl McMaster, *Truth to Power,* 2017.

Her photograph *Truth to Power*, references the role and vision Duncan Campbell Scott played in the development and administration of Canada's Residential School system. As Deputy Superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs he believed Indigenous people were "doomed" to disappear and it was the duty of the government to wean them

from their primitive state.

The method used was the forced enrolment of Indigenous children in residential schools, a process that not only subjected children to abuse and death, but to genocide. Ironically, Scott is remembered as an icon of Canadian poetry. He wrote *The Onondaga Madonna* in 1898, in which he stereotypically racializes an Onondaga woman and her child, painting them as “savage”, “pagan” and “doomed”. This poem is reproduced in *Truth to Power* by the hand of a 10-year-old Indigenous Kahnawà:ke girl, 119 years later. The artist stands defiant and despite being surrounded by the legacy of Duncan Campbell Scott and a system that continues to oppress and ignore, future generations prevail and heal, they resist and overcome the unimaginable.

McMaster’s work leads back to why I came to this country, as a 20-day old baby in the arms of a frightened 23 year-old mother escaping a brutal dictatorship and the unimaginable outcome of our exile. As we continue to demand and struggle for a future that acknowledges our truths we also need to embrace memory for without it reconciliation will never be possible. It is within this recognition that we can begin an intersectional dialogue, which not only places value to neglected and erased voices, but offers spaces of respect and understanding, growth and nourishment.