

Story Keeping

*Brittney Namaakii
Bear Hat and
Richelle Bear Hat*



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Story Keeping: An Introduction

Story Keeping is an exhibition of new and existing work by Mohkinstsis (Calgary)-based artists Brittney Namaakii Bear Hat and Richelle Bear Hat. Drawing from their shared Blackfoot and Dane-zaa Cree heritage, the artists look to storytelling practices and legacies of land and language displacement through their experiences growing up in both rural and urban environments. Through sculpture, photography, drawing, and video, they share how stories can connect people and places, and ask what can be told, and what should be held close.

From blankets to frying pans, snapshots to Memojis, Richelle and Brittney work with images and objects as tethers to family connections. The collaborative 2016 work, *Little Cree Women (Sisters, Secrets & Stories)*, presents a series of displays tied to family knowledge. Dried mint leaves and beaded moccasins, willow and birch bark, charcoal and braids of the artists' own hair are set in shadow box frames. These beautiful objects are catalysts for memories and stories. They not only carry great significance for the artists, but they are also sites of contemplation about shared learning and intergenerational care.

In Richelle's 2017 video work, *In Her Care*, the camera frames rolling hills, prairie grasses, a Siksika nation community centre, reservation houses, and a road that meanders through the landscape like an ancient river. Each shot gently lingers, allowing viewers to gaze

across all corners of the image. With similar grace, the narrator speaks of matriarchal storytelling and sharing Blackfoot language. Long rests are provided between each passage. The effect is a feeling of generosity, a sense of the artist treating her audience with care, in the same way that her Elders treated her with care—allowing time to reflect and absorb. As she says: “time doesn’t matter when I am surrounded by my family”. The narrator refers to her mother as part of the prairie grasses, and gestures of care are also directed towards the land. Hands braid together sprigs of sage growing from the prairie soil, and then they gently let go.

The value of sharing language with Elders across generations is also explored in Richelle’s 2019 two-channel video *nitssapaatsimaahkooka (she shared with me)*. Personalized animated emojis, known as Memojis, become a means of communication through which the artist learns Nitsiipowahsin language from her grandma, Alona Theoret. By presenting these Memojis on large monitors in the gallery, the act of learning becomes larger than life. While this project was developed before the pandemic, it has only become more relevant as many Elders have begun using technology to sustain connections with younger generations. As Richelle and her grandmother take turns speaking, the Memojis that represent them reveal many of the emotions that come to the fore when learning one’s own language. In a new special version of this work for Nanaimo Art Gallery, Richelle connects with

Snuneymuxw Elder Shxuysulwut Lolly Good to share language across place and nation.

Blanketing is a custom shared across many Indigenous cultures, including Blackfoot and Cree communities, and is often tied to celebrating individuals during coming of age ceremonies or other rights of passage. Shrouding a community member in a blanket is an act of trust, care, and love. For *Story Keeping*, Brittney Namaakii Bear Hat has created a new sculptural work that showcases large blankets with family photographs printed on them. Brittney often works with cutouts from snapshots as a way of reconstituting stories and memories from her home territories, which are far from urban Mohkinstsis (Calgary) where both she and Richelle live and work. Printing these images on blankets adds deeper symbolic connection to these cherished pictures.

While they are removed from a ceremonial context, Brittney's blankets are still linked to family and place, and are given an added layer of relation and care through their display. They are tied to a frame based on a traditional hide tanning structure. As she explained to me in an email, "I want to have the blankets stretched and be part of the memory I have of my kokum scraping hide in the bush. I am recreating the image I have in my head with blankets that show partial images of places in our home territory. These are my "hides" and are placeholders until I gain further knowledge

of how to care for moose and game in such traditional practices”. These works are set around a sculpture based on a perfectly built campfire. Nearby wall drawings depict objects that are tied to the images on the blankets. Together these elements make up a constellation of shared knowledge and familial relations.

Through their works Brittney Namaakii Bear Hat and Richelle Bear Hat are very careful about how they share community stories and objects in the gallery setting. They regularly consult with family members and Elders about what can or should be shared. Their works carry a warmth and generosity towards their audiences, and yet there is often an act of veiling that pays respect to the Story Keeper or original owner of images or mementos depicted. In this sense the title *Story Keeping* refers to an act of holding on to stories as well as sharing them. Cherished family heirlooms and tales are set at a distance, and yet their symbolic value remains present through their distillation into the sisters’ artworks—rich allegories that speak with power because of what they cannot say, as much as what they can.

—Jesse Birch

Sisters and Story Keeping: Richelle Bear Hat

—BRITTNEY NAMAAKII BEAR HAT

Richelle Bear Hat is my sister. We've known each other for our entire lives and many people can speak to our similarities. To start with, the research and root of our art practices are very similar, but we take different paths when our stories enter exhibition spaces. Our main difference lies in our execution. Richelle works with new media to ask how our stories can be shared across generations. Stories always need to be told and passed on, that's something Richelle and I take with such weight. As any sister pairing we have shared memories, stories, experiences and most of all secrets.

Recreating moments and changing art spaces to hold care for nostalgia is the core of our practices. How Richelle uses this care to guide her work can be seen in many of her video works and performances. Richelle employs video, usually set in the present, as an anchor to create space to remember language, stories, and our family.

One of her main focuses is in language and how our Blackfoot heritage can be remembered through new approaches; like voice recordings shared through text messages. Corresponding with our elder family members and allowing a digital space to still achieve the imparting of Indigenous languages is one way to save these sacred learnings. Richelle feels the loss of language

and she attempts to mend it with an urgency to heal. She and my grandma don't allow distance or barriers to stop them from sharing our traditional ways of speaking. Our Elders are there for us and we need to let them guide us, because without them we are lost. Richelle's work *nitssapaatsimaahkooka (she shared with me)* (2019), is a good example of this duty. Levelling it out in humour and approachability is what is so valuable about this work. Seeing how vulnerable it can be to try to communicate Blackfoot through Memojis and knowing that my grandma was sitting with Richelle, teaching, is so tranquil and healing. The ability to choose "identity" in such a fun form as Memojis and tying it to something so rich as the Blackfoot language is how Richelle sees a future for keeping our traditional practices. This approach allows her to reconnect to our community and most importantly our family.

One thing I've learned on this path—not just as an artist but as a Blackfoot/Cree/Dane-zaa woman—is that stories will outlast us, and that their passing is compellingly important. Richelle and I are growing to understand this sentiment; holding true to the weight of stories, memories and ourselves.

The landscape can be rough so you better be too: On the Work of Brittney Namaakii Bear Hat

—RICHELLE BEAR HAT

When walking through the woods single file with your family, you watch where you step. There's an exchange of trust between everyone to keep up and be aware of your surroundings. You march forward with the promise of either a good fishing spot or swimming spot up ahead. The trails are long known by your family and the trees have witnessed your lives to this point. Our laughter bounces through the landscape and is absorbed into it. Brittney is a caretaker of moments like this. Family outings and gatherings become memories that sustain us, resonating when we are away from those landscapes.

Our dad has asked us many times, are you rough and tough? This reminder makes me smile everytime and continues to encourage me to aspire to those words. As I got older I began to understand that the word rough can be related to the woods and rivers he grew up with. Those trails he followed and the ones he made himself. Being out in the bush there's an understanding that you need to match the energies of the landscape to survive. The landscape can be rough, so you better be too. When he reminds us each time it's said with softness and protection. This duality was explored by Brittney with her blanket work titled, *Hello My Girl*. A soft and sturdy Pendleton blanket with a familiar design was embroidered with the rough and tough question. Seeing those familiar words made me smile like many times before.

Brittney's use of materials reflect those conversations and exchanges of care. It can be a familiar texture, colour or shape that transports you to a memory. By viewing a material isolated from its context and reshaped into a new environment, you have the opportunity to better understand why it's important to you. Creating these visual landscapes is a delicate balance of story, imagery and surfaces. She is careful with her words because we were taught that your words can hold strength and comfort for those you share them with.

As a child, sometimes you wouldn't have anything to do, so going to an auntie's house seemed like a good idea. Growing up helps one realize that whatever thought pulled you there, it was because moments of connection and learning were always present there. Walking up to the house you could smell hides being smoked. The earth was shaped by the wheels of big trucks, which made it hard to walk. There was a large circular structure that new hides were stretched on. It made it easier to scrape with a tool made from moose bone. I still remember the feelings of uncertainty holding the tool in my hand as a small child, as she encouraged me to try scraping the hide myself. The trust and certainty she shared gave me the courage to try.

Lessons learned from our dad and family can be straightforward and clear. Other times it's through observation and repetition that teachings are understood. Our kokum and great aunties have their own ways as well. Brittney cares for these lessons and moments of growth through artworks that honour the family who shares them.

Biographies

Brittney Namaakii Bear Hat is a Mohkinstsis/Calgary-based artist, whose Blackfoot and Cree/Dane-zaa ancestors have lived on the lands, that are now part of Treaty 7 and 8, for many millennia. Her work explores this cultural lineage through installation, photography, text and collage. Brittney graduated from the Alberta University of the Arts in 2011, where she majored in painting. Her work explores identity and storytelling, wanting to contribute to the rich stories of her home territories. Within her work, Brittney is unfolding that which ties her to these unique landscapes.

Brittney's most recent work, *Hello My Girl*, was a part of *Big Rock River: Contemporary Indigenous Art in an Ancient Land* (2022) exhibition at The Okotoks Art Gallery. Other recent exhibitions include *Related* (2022), at Libby Leshgold Gallery, Vancouver; *Visions of the Hunt* (2018), at The Esplanade Arts and Heritage Centre, Medicine Hat; *níchiwamiskwém | nimidet | ma soeur | my sister*, Contemporary Native Art Biennial (BACA), Art Mûr, Montréal and *I Believe in Living* (2018), Untitled Arts Society, Calgary. Brittney was also awarded the Joane Cardinal Schubert Memorial Scholarship in 2011 and the Sonia de Grandmaison Scholarship in 2013.

Richelle Bear Hat is a Mohkinstsis/Calgary based Blackfoot/Dane-zaa Cree artist. The Bow River and Blueberry River have provided for her two families and have shaped how she connects with the land, her family and community. Understanding these

relationships and experiences of shared memory is at the core of her artistic practice. Richelle is interested in the many ways knowledge can be exchanged within family mentorships and in return translated and honoured. Video, text, sound and paper-based works are the materials and means of production she uses as a platform for storytelling.

Richelle graduated from the Alberta College of Art + Design with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Drawing in 2011. She has since gone on to work with the Banff Centre as a Collections Practicum (formal work study) with the Walter Phillips Gallery, TRUCK Contemporary Art in Calgary as Engagement Coordinator, and is currently Coordinator of Indigenous Programs at the National accessArts Centre.

What stories do we tell?

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