

Indigenous Family Trees, Legacies, and Branching Out

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Thinking about art through the lens of family (biological or chosen) has been a standard practice in modern and contemporary Western art, but the same strategy for curating and research has yet to materialize across generations of Indigenous artists and makers. Artists may take up themes of family and domesticity within their art practice, but here I aim to highlight “artist families” and the generational production of art. Although Indigenous kinship structures are nebulous and wide-reaching, the immediate family is a key source of knowledge and space for teaching.

Families often revere makers and lovingly pass on traditions, graphic motifs, techniques, and other closed teachings. For example, Andrea Flowers taught her granddaughters Veronica and Vanessa (V&V Crafts) the technique of sewing waterproof sealskin boots before she passed in 2019.¹ There is often a noticeable similarity between works presented publicly by some career Indigenous artists and pieces made by family members. Certain styles, aesthetics, and conceptual or narrative techniques are revisited by generations of artists. I argue that this should continue to be an apparatus for creative inquiry, as it has been for other non-Indigenous artist families, groups, and partnerships. Bringing together works by artists with shared familial experiences and perspectives simply makes sense. Emphasizing Indigenous art “families” and kinship undoes the historical fissure caused by a restricted definition of family imposed by colonization and missionaries. Here, I borrow from Indigenous feminist scholarship and kinship studies to chart the development of familial practices and to demonstrate the strengths of family as an analytical tool.

Full disclosure: I was a member of the curatorial and research teams for the recent family exhibition *Ashoona: Enduring Art Stories* (2022) at La Guilde, working alongside artist and curator Goota Ashoona, Pitseolak Ashoona’s granddaughter. In the process of thinking about the similarities among artworks by family members and researching the extensive and complicated family tree, I could not help but think of other Indigenous artist families. This approach of drawing associations within wider kinship networks allowed us to put works from the same place in conversation with one another, providing both an actual family reunion and a unique

convergence of artworks by members of the Ashoona and Pootoogook families.

This is not to fetishize the idea that creativity and artistic prowess are in a family’s blood. For example, in recent correspondence, Cheryl L’Hirondelle and Gabrielle L’Hirondelle Hill confirmed that they are likely distantly related by fraternal great-grandfathers. I do not think it’s appropriate to force their work into dialogue simply because of their familial relations, but reflecting on the family could bring the artists together if they should so choose. On this

subject, interdisciplinary scholar Kim TallBear would note that Western settler society has a scientific obsession with quantifying Indigenous ancestry. This fixation with DNA—with genetic or genomic definitions of Indigenous ancestry and populations—misses “indigenous articulations of indigeneity [that] emphasize political



¹ — See “Learning the Disappearing Art of Black-Bottomed Sealskin Boots,” *Inuit Art Quarterly*, 3 November 2021, accessible online.



Native Art Department International

Untitled (Carl Beam), 2017, vue d'installation | installation view, Mercer Union, Toronto, 2020.

Photo : Toni Hafkenscheid, permission des | courtesy of the artists

status and biological and cultural kinship constituted in dynamic, long-standing relations with each other and with living landscapes.”² Settler colonialism, through Christian missionaries and violent educational processes, shaped many Indigenous communities into nuclear, heteronormative units on individual allotments, effectively splintering communal, tribal territory using “family” as a mechanism of land dispossession.³ In the genocidal settler-colonial imaginary, Indigenous blood was constructed as “dilutable,” a supposed imminent biological vanishing.⁴ However, many more family arrangements remain and continue to prosper within Indigenous communities, including extended, chosen, nuclear, biological, and adopted relations. Using the loose contextualizing lens of “family” to celebrate generations of Indigenous art is a simple and appropriate means for countering these past, present, and future erasures.

Cree-Métis poet Marilyn Dumont uses the term “kinscape” both for the relationships

preserved with the land and for how communities rely on connections with their kin for survival.⁵ Indigenous kinship grows ever broader, expanding to plant, fish, and animal nations echoed in clan structures and revered in worldviews that de-centre the human in notions of family and relations.⁶ This transference of knowledge from species to species and between family generations is artfully explored by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson through a teaching of an amik (beaver) trying to build a dam on its own for the first time without parental guidance.⁷ Kinship with land, with nonhuman nations, and with other humans is a vital part of Indigenous worldviews and life. It makes sense to pull these threads into art spaces as a curatorial and analytical tool, reversing the dislocation and sterile authorship of the Western art institutional frame and the anonymity and erasure of the ethnographic museum.

As mentioned earlier, thinking about family lineage (biological or chosen) has been a common practice in modern and contemporary art, but the same approach has not been applied to the prolific generations of Indigenous artists and makers. From Dada groups to Surrealist couples, contemporary Western art’s social world has been neatly tied together by art institutions, museums, and feminist scholars. Indigenous families and romantic partnerships have not been focused on by curators in this way; their familial relations remain unattributed in museum collections making family-, community-, or nation-specific analysis difficult. This absence of tying together social threads continues in the practices of contemporary artist couples such as Tanya Lukin Linklater and Duane Linklater or Terry Haines and Aaron Rice,⁸ whose bodies of work have not been positioned as the products of artist families/partnerships. Whether or not works of art are intended to be displayed together, there is meaningful purpose in rekindling the familial connections harboured within artwork, as adjacent creative processes messily overlap in daily life around shared dinner tables, pots of coffee or tea, and running errands. This is not to fault Indigenous artists themselves for not mobilizing family and kinship as they continue to navigate careers that are oriented through Western institutions. Of course, artists’ works can and should stand on their own. However, curatorial strategies that focus on family and kinship—as conceived by Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. (PNIAI) and carried forward by Indigenous artists and curators in projects such as the Onaman Collective, daphne, and gijiit—provides a roadmap to communal analysis, storytelling, and success.

One exception to this might be the ultra-contemporary, conceptual art of Maria Hupfield and Jason Lujan, partners in Native Art Department International (NADI). Under the guise of bureaucracy, this artist couple have taken on the NADI name, letting their respective art practices stand alone. From their *Bureau of Aesthetics* (2020) exhibition, a fluorescent neon “no U-turn sign” hangs above a

lithograph by Carl Beam simply titled *Untitled (Carl Beam)* (2017). Hupfield and Lujan note how identity fetishism has impacted Beam's legacy and the artworks collected by institutions. The visible markers of Indigeneity, such as animals, feathers, and archival photographs, have been the driving factors for museum collections, likely due to an end-of-century scramble to neoliberally "diversify" their holdings. NADI not so subtly demands that these selective and reductive identity concerns not cloud conceptually rich and historically important contemporary artworks by reducing them to caricatures. NADI offers Hupfield and Lujan an opportunity to push back against narrow definitions of Indigenous art. At the same time, cultural institutions need to move beyond broad, pan-Indigenous mission statements, and the locus of families and kinship networks is one way to achieve this. Reasserting the informal art-making and art-gatherings processes of the familial as purposeful "happenings" uplifts the family, friends, and kin of Indigenous artists without fixating on digestible tropes.

As noted by NADI, Carl Beam is a hallmark of contemporary Indigenous art. He developed an iconic aesthetic of collage overlaid with splattered paint, in works that incorporate archival photographs or natural history references. His daughter, Anong Migwans Beam, uses some of these stylistic elements in full, busy canvases, richly layered compositions, and limited colour palettes. Whereas Carl Beam's artworks are cryptic and violent due to their saturated and contrasting colours, Anong Migwans Beam reworks these elements into dreamscapes following the nightmare. Her compositions, such as *Springtime* (2012), take these qualities and make them ethereal, fantastical eye candy with melty cool dark tones accentuated with bright colour. Her father's ridged grids are replaced with clouds of photo transfers (typeface numbers and photographs). The painting's focal point, the Falcon, adopts the symmetrical and central composition that Carl Beam sometimes used. Anong Migwans Beam's most recent series exchanges many of the collage elements for geometric, abstracted natural landforms with washy colours, as in *Bright Iceberg* (2020). It seems fitting that Carl Beam's daughter returns to the subject matter of mountains and ice using a softer palette, decades after her father broke into the National Gallery of Canada with its 1986 purchase of *The North American Iceberg* (1985).

Another father-daughter lineage is evident in the rich conceptual practices of Gerald McMaster and Meryl McMaster. Although now known for his curatorial and scholarly work, in his early art practice Gerald McMaster took up themes of identity, Indigeneity, and colonial history. The title of his 1993 painting *niya nêhiyaw* translates to "I am a Cree person" and features texts such as "art or artifact...?", "Indigenous Aboriginal," and "Indian!!" For Meryl McMaster, her mixed identity is a place of spiritual richness from which to draw on a Plains Cree worldview, European folk references, and ancestral histories of settlement.

She takes the concept of identity and builds on the militant activism of her father's work. Apart from their shared family lineage, she uses these central themes of her ancestors as key stories and concepts in her performative self-portrait photography, complete with ornate costumes and sculptures. She has developed a signature motif using white face paint that both obscures and highlights her face, making her appear ghostlike; it was first used in the *Ancestral* projections series (2008), in which she and her father wore ethnographic portraits over their faces. In her *Ordovician Tide* (2019) triptych, the artist plucks bottles from the sea or drops them into the surf. The landscape is the rocky shore of western Newfoundland, geologically similar to Scotland and Ireland; the landmass metaphorically refers to experiences of migration, departing, and returning. Meryl McMaster pulls viewers into the timeless present and the distant tectonic past while presenting herself as the ancestral summation of this familial story.

To return to the *Ashoona: Enduring Art Stories* exhibition, Inuit Nunangat continues to produce prolific artist families. These legacies, like the Ashoona-Pootoogook dynasty, likely stretch to museum collections of traders' "curios." The family's art practice spans a vast history, from the birth of the commercial Inuit art market in Kinngait (formerly Cape Dorset) with Pitseolak Ashoona, to sculptural modernism via Kiugak Ashoona and Goota Ashoona, critical acclaim through Annie Pootoogook and Shuvina Ashoona, and into the present day with lovingly rendered miniatures by Ning Ashoona and diligent observational drawings by Nicotye Samayualie.

One of the key facets that runs through the drawings of Inuit women artists is a narrative realism, sometimes autobiographical, in line with the theme of sulijuk, or "it is true," in Inuit art. Grandmother Pitseolak Ashoona's drawings of nomadic camp migration and childbirth, with the detailed amautiit (parkas worn by Inuit women) of a lifetime seamstress, were followed by her daughter Napachie Pootoogook's scenes of domestic life, even the dark sides. Ashoona's granddaughter Annie Pootoogook received acclaim for her images of blunt, unglamorous reality. Kudluajak Ashoona continues this tradition with vintage and retro scenes of carefree life. Her drawings feel like flipping through a family photo album: men with painted faces in hockey jerseys, women in bikinis drinking beers on the rocky arctic beach, cozy family interiors. Unlike the other Ashoona and Pootoogook women, Kudluajak Ashoona makes dense compositions, with background detail spilling to the edge of the paper. This quality makes the drawings feel like all-consuming worlds, similar to Shuvina Ashoona's fantasies, but different because they resemble family photographs or keepsakes, with muted colours almost faded to a sepia tone. Her body of work reads like a love letter to family life and all the people who have moved through it.

Although some Indigenous cultural programming is moving beyond pan-Indigeneity

and focuses on specific regional, land-based, national, or thematic approaches, references to the family or kin as units of social organization will likely continue as theoretical tropes. While this framework can still be appropriative, when done in honest collaboration with artist families, groups of makers, and knowledge keepers to bring communal practices and a worldview centred on kinship into art spaces, it enriches and animates diverse bodies of work. As Indigenous artists continue to create critical works dealing with history, identity, and relations, this cultural lens informed via the family and its subsequent analysis remains important. By charting these developments, we remember established artists, uplift the next generation, and provide pathways for future artists and makers to follow. ●

2 — Kim TallBear, "Genomic Articulations of Indigeneity," *Social Studies of Science* 43, no. 4 (August 2013): 509–33; quotation from abstract, accessible online.

3 — Daniel Heath Justice and Jean M. O'Brien, "What's Done to the People Is Done to the Land," in *Allotment Stories: Indigenous Land Relations Under Settler Siege*, eds. Daniel Heath Justice and Jean M. O'Brien (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), xi–xxviii; Mark Rifkin, *When Did Indians Become Straight?: Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 19–22.

4 — Eve Tuck, *The Henceforward*, podcast, "Episode 4: Red and Black DNA, Blood, Kinship and Organizing with Kim TallBear," 25 July, 2016, accessible online.

5 — Marilyn Dumont, "Interlude: Kinscape," in *Allotment Stories: Indigenous Land Relations Under Settler Siege*, eds. Daniel Heath Justice and Jean M. O'Brien (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 74.

6 — Doug Williams, *Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg: This Is Our Territory* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2018).

7 — Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Interlude: Amikode," in *Allotment Stories: Indigenous Land Relations Under Settler Siege*, eds. Daniel Heath Justice and Jean M. O'Brien (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 140–42; also see Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Land as Pedagogy," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, Society* 3, no. 3 (2014): 1–25.

8 — Jas M. Morgan (L. Nixon), "We Lost an Entire Generation," *Canadian Art*, 11 September 2017, accessible online.