



Teacher's Guide: Skeena Reece: *Sweetgrass and Honey*
Exhibition Dates: January 19 – March 18, 2018

For our 2018 Winter Education Program, Plug In ICA is offering a tour of the solo exhibition: *Sweetgrass and Honey* by artist Skeena Reece. The guided tour will be complimented by a workshop. For this session we have two workshop facilitators. On Monday's and Friday's Winnipeg-based performance and sound artist, Ray Fenwick will guide workshops, and Tuesday through Thursday, dancer and performance artist, Ming Hon will be our facilitator. The combined tour and workshop introduces students to thinking about artist's archives, performance, stereotyping, myth and symbolism, colonialism, the intersection of the personal and the political, and site specificity. The tour will introduce students to Plug In ICA's history and then discuss the exhibition, accompanied by the workshop. The tour and workshop can vary in length to suit your schedules but is designed to last approximately two hours.



Skeena Reece, *I Know*. From the digital photo series, *We Still Know*, 2007.

Contents:

- i. Learning Objectives
- ii. Context of Exhibition
- iii. Framework for Gallery Visit
- iv. Background Information
- v. Worksheet
- vi. Definitions
- vii. Introduction to Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art
- viii. Sources

i. Learning Objectives:

In general students will:

1. Read and interpret visual materials—connecting art to diverse subjects and developing ways to speak about and think through contemporary art, its ability to reflect society.
2. Communicate their ideas, experiences and feelings in relation to contemporary art while developing critical reflection and thinking skills.

Specific to the current exhibition, students will:

3. Through the themes and works presented in the exhibition, students will have the opportunity to think about how personal experiences are linked to the political, and extend their understanding of colonialism, healing, and structural and institutional racism. They will consider how divergent factors including economics, stereotypes, the arts, and fantasy contribute to oppressive structures, and how humour and contemporary artistic practice can be used in response.
4. Students will have the opportunity to think about the social relevance of the artwork and the artist, creating links to current events and contexts of representation.
5. As part of the workshop with Ray Fenwick (Monday's and Friday's), participants will focus on the use of improvisation, parody and humour – processes that the artist Skeena Reece so often employs in her work. Fenwick will give the students a taste of performance art by using simple games, which he shamelessly steals from theatre, improvisation, and "icebreaker" activities. Ming Hon on the other hand will share a performance exercise she uses in her own practice, which also uses absurdity and parody.

Assessment:

The teacher will decide on the appropriate assessment of this activity and communicate it to the class.

Suggested assessments:

- a) Reflecting on *Stekyawden Syndrome*, 2018 students can think about the place of storytelling or mythology in their lives. Do they have specific cultural stories that have been passed on to them? What role do these play in their lives? Can they see these stories as a metaphor for a social, historical, or political situation they are learning about in school, or experiencing directly?

b) Thinking about the practice of commissioning, students can reflect on their personal skills and abilities. Do they have ideas they would like to express in a medium they aren't skilled at? What would they make if they knew how? How does Reece's work with other artists change their ideas about what an artist is or can be?

c) Reflect on the way the artist uses opposition (both as in opposite to something and being opposed to, or against something) to convey meaning. For example: in *Indian Guide: Self Preservation*, 2005 she installed the video work with several props to create an inviting, living room like setting. This works in stark contrast to the site-specific artwork, *Access Denied*, 2018 in the front gallery. Highlight one other instance where this strategy is used. What is the effect of this?

d) Considering parody – have students reflect on humor or absurdity as a strategy they might use to deal with racism, sexism or bullying.

Curriculum connections:

Grade 9-12 Visual Arts

- The workshop will introduce students to performance art and the use of the body as material.
- Students will think about collaboration and commissioning as a way to expand how they can express their ideas and realize projects.
- Students will be exposed to sculpture, video art, stop-motion animation, installation, painting, mural art. They will see how traditional and non-traditional media are used together to offer critique or create an experience for viewers.
- Students will reflect on the role of context in creating and showing art. They will see how the artist created work in direct response to the location of the gallery, histories of representation, and colonization.

Grade 9-12 English Language Arts

- Students will explore how materials and presentation affect content by reflecting on this in the exhibitions.
- An understanding of 'reading artworks' will be introduced, giving students a sense for how narratives are expressed through the use of titles and approaches to installation.
- Students will be asked to comprehend and respond personally and critically to the exhibition.
- Community will be built by introducing students to a local cultural organization.

ii. Context of Exhibitions

From Stockholm Syndrome to Indian Princesses, Reece uses various subjects in building a new lens with which to examine her personal history within a rereading of the displacement and continued disregard of indigenous people in North America.

Sweetgrass and Honey is a collection of works from a photographic series to mass-produced posters. This exhibition will feature several newly commissioned works, including a specific installation that challenges the racist history of the Hudson's Bay, which sits across the street

from Plug In. As well she will create a mural that offers a psychological look at the relationship between captor and captive; and another artwork that visualizes the ghosts in our history - buried in the land we occupy. Many of the artworks presented in this solo exhibition were produced in collaboration with other artists who Reece ignites as producers and translators.

iii. Framework for Gallery Visit:

Classroom preparation (before coming to Plug In ICA):

- As a class go over a selection of the provided resources.
- Read the curatorial text and look at the definitions provided in section VII. Discuss any questions or confusion they might have and the meaning of the definitions.
- In smaller groups discuss some of the themes you think will be important in the exhibition. Discuss your expectations and thoughts on what the exhibition and gallery will look and feel like.

Activity (at Plug In ICA):

- Participate in a tour of *Sweetgrass and Honey* guided by gallery staff. This may include an optional tour of Plug In ICA facilities; including the office, permanent collection of artwork, and rooftop terrace (weather permitting).
- Communicate ideas, experiences and feelings in a question and answer period
- Ray Fenwick or Ming Hon, workshop facilitators will discuss the themes of the exhibition in the context of their art practice and the exhibition. Students will participate in a workshop using performance and/or movement.

Optional activities (after coming to Plug In ICA):

- Complete the Worksheet in section V.
- Think about a project you would like to realize but don't have the skills. Who would you ask to realize that project for you, and how would you do that?
- Considering the role of visual culture in mass media or popular culture. How are you effected by the images you see? For example, how do images of women appear in popular culture? What effect does that have on you? If you are a woman how do they make you feel about yourself? And if you are a man, how does that effect your expectations of the women around you? If you are trans? Thinking about how Reece uses parody in *Entitled, 2017* to counter the romanticized image of the 'Indian Princess' by using the same symbols and tropes, but with a twist, how could you counter misrepresentation or absence of representation? Try using photography, collage, painting, or a media of your choosing to explore this idea.
- Consider the role of the archive in *Sweetgrass and Honey*. Skeena Reece uses her earlier work alongside newer work to create perspective and show different stages of her own development and thinking. She also uses images derived from a museum archive to comment on cultural value, and histories of dispossession. Ask students to look at artwork they did at the beginning of the school year, or even a few years ago. Revisit the work and think about what can be learned from thinking about it alongside artwork or writing you have recently produced. Try putting them together to see the effect.

iv. Background information:

Curatorial Overview:

Exhibition: *Sweetgrass and Honey*
Curated by Jenifer Pappararo
January 19 – March 18, 2018

Skeena Reece is best-known for her critically penetrating and humorous performances, in which she portrays a range of personas that are often driven by the potential of a raw exchange with audiences. For her solo exhibition *Sweetgrass and Honey*, she builds on her lexicon of characters at times ramping up the clichés and emboldening stereo-types while sincerely trying to unearth their origins and stonewall their continued perpetuation. From Stockholm Syndrome to Indian Princesses, Reece uses various subjects in building a new lens with which to examine her personal history within a rereading of the displacement and continued disregard of Indigenous people in North America.

Sweetgrass and Honey is a survey of sorts, recontextualizing some of Reece's earlier works, showing out-takes from a 2005 video *An Indian Guide: Self Preservation* and animating the photo shoot from *We Still Know*, 2007. Even the exhibition title is pulled from her debut folk music album released in 2011. This revisiting is in constant motion as a series of exposes, demonstrating Reece's artistic processes as well as sharpening the focus on her layered but direct subject; her process being one of structured improvisation and intimate collaboration. And her subject formed by the outlines of the long, reoccurring and transmuting effects of colonization while effacing racial stereotypes used to relegate Indigenous culture into the past. Reece often works within a narrative structure she devises to invisibly pulse under the surface of the work she produces. For *We Still Know*, Reece imagines a moment in the past, set in the 50s and 60s when young native men just graduating from residential schools were entering city life, looking stylish, moving with confidence and optimism, free and unencumbered. Reece posits and attempts to capture this moment, depicting a time of transition encapsulated by potential. This is an experience she imagines as her father's, and one she knows could have only been fleeting - before the effects of racism and past traumas surfaced, at times expressing themselves in self-destructive and violent ways. But this moment of power no matter how real or sustained, is important for Reece to express as an illustration of strength and survival. This resolute and hopeful moment is the establishing shot for *Sweetgrass and Honey*, determining a resilient image that should linger steadfast as other narratives and exposures unfold throughout the exhibition. The out-takes from *An Indian Guide: Self Preservation* express a struggle of identification, where understandings of indigeneity come into conflict with day to day experiences. At one point in the filming, Reece, who is behind the camera, asks each of the three actors how they would respond to being called a typical native man. This draws out the performers who address the multiplicity of what that description might mean as well as leads them to identify the derogatory inference of being called 'typical' anything. The embodiment of a typical native-ness is transformed into caricature in *Entitled*, 2017, a painting for which Reece commissioned the west coast painter and illustrator Collin Elder to portray her using the clichéd aesthetic devices common to paintings of the glorified Native Maiden, but her portrait sits in stark contrast to the romanticism of the Indigenous female, as she invites the voyeur to gaze upon her self-aware smirk with an air brushed double chin. Reece's portrait has her dressed in a feather cape, posed stoically in the center of a barrage of wilderness signifiers from the wolf to the grizzly bear, but she asked for a bored wolf, a dumb spirit bear, a contentious totem pole made in the US in Haida style made by non-Haida carvers and the 2010 Vancouver Olympics inukshuk logo in a nauseating

mash up of cultural clichés. She is presented as a pervasive image of the Native Indian in her natural habitat, but skewed in parody. She is an absurd dream and flawed vision of the past. Reece exacerbates this relegation to the past, by placing velvet stanchions in front of the painting as if it was in the historical section of a major museum. She further propagates this prolific image as she turns it into a mass-produced poster available for purchase in the gallery's shop.

The past is an ever-present and fraught subject in *Sweetgrass and Honey* – one that Reece is constantly pushing back at and pulling into current times. In the photographic series, *Un-Entitled*, 2017, Reece wears "herstory" on her body. She invited the artist Gord Hill, a deeply politically charged writer and activist who is a member of the Kwakwaka'wakw nation, to illustrate aspects of colonial occupation and its destructive force, which Reece placed on her body as tattoos. Pictured on her skin are line drawings of men ready for battle. A conquistador, an Oka stand off with a Canadian soldier and an Indigenous warrior are part of her flesh. As if rising from the historic depths of battle there is also an illustration of mother and child that on the artist's skin endure into the present, inviting viewers as caregivers to question why violence is perpetuated. Reece's *Moss Bag*, 2015/17 renders this parental relation even clearer as she frees a relic from the confines of museological display. She has made an adult sized moss bag and cradleboard traditionally used as part of child rearing to carry newborns until they could walk. The sculpture, hangs on the wall like an over-sized and kitsch crucifix – a reference that shows the sacrifice of motherhood while also locating it as a place for healing and contemplation.

This unsettled encounter between past and present is part of *We Are All One*, which she first produced in response to Tsimshian Treasures an exhibition of Tsimshian ceremonial masks and objects at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology (MOA) in 2007. Reece commissioned Vancouver-based artist Nathalee Paolinelli to paint a series of child-like black and white water-colours of some of the objects represented as artifacts in the exhibition. The humble depiction of the objects' has an ethereal quality that reflects meaning that cannot be found in the objects themselves, but instead resonates as a cultural practice. Reece's representations are an act of reclamation, and an acknowledgement that value is situated within the people and culture who made them and continues to produce them. A re-commissioned series of these water-colours are scattered around the exhibition as stickers on the walls. They are presented in *Sweetgrass and Honey* as disposable cheap renditions, again undermining their value as objects – now presented as artifacts which in MOA's exhibition catalogue suggests were originally acquired by Reverend Robert J. Dundas as gifts or purchased for little in the mid to late 1800s, and were last auctioned off in the early 2000s by Sotheby's for over \$20,000 each, breaking records for these types of objects sold at auction. But this monetary value is not where their worth lies.

This economic schism is brought to the fore in *Access Denied*, a site-specific work that challenges the racialized capitalism of The Hudson's Bay's origins in the fur-trade. One of the company's early flagship stores sits across the street from Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art and can be viewed through the windows of one of the institute's gallery's. Reece blocks the view by stacking burlap sacs from floor to ceiling. From the street, the gallery appears to be a storehouse tightly stocked full of goods. The filled room mockingly sits in opposition to The Bay in acknowledgement of Reece's awareness of the past, and how deeply disturbing is this knowledge. This particular branch of the department store has closed three of its massive floors, amalgamating into two floors. Even with the merging of departments, the store feels barren and on the edge of closure. But *Access Denied* is a bluff. Once at the interior entrance to the gallery, the viewer can see that the room's fullness is staged; it is a façade. In actuality, the gallery's

windows are only lined with stuffed sacs that sit in front of a prop wall. Even with the illusion broken, Reece denies visitors access to the gallery space. The 'goods' (sacs filled with air) are inaccessible - just out of reach, announcing an economic rift that is still felt in Indigenous communities who continue to be systemically denied access to the benefits of our country including accurate historical accounting for the disabling injustices of then and now.

Reece's challenge to historic oppression and cultural genocide is a gesture that carries consequence in that it posits a future to come. In *The Mountain Goat*, a Gitksan myth, village people are punished for their poor treatment of mountain goats who they killed or harmed cruelly without reason for food. There are deadly consequences for their brutal and unreasoned actions because retribution from the mountain goats is inevitable. In cultural contrast, the mountain goats sees animals as equals to the villagers, whose moral and physical high ground implies that cruelty is dealt with swiftly and totally as they bring a mountain crashing down on the village. The new work *Stekyawden Syndrome*, a large-scale mural done in collaboration with Northwest Coast, Wuikinuxv and Klahoose Nations' artist Bracken Hanuse Corlett, frames this myth within a psychological trauma that leaves captives overly sympathetic with their capturers. Reece has diagnosed Indigenous people as having Stockholm Syndrome, but this blinding condition is breaking as reprisals must be discussed.

- Curated by Jenifer Pappararo

Skeena Reece is a Tsimshian/Gitksan and Cree artist based on the West Coast of British Columbia. She has garnered national and international attention most notably for *Raven: On the Colonial Fleet* (2010) her bold installation and performance work presented as part of the celebrated group exhibition *Beat Nation*. Her multidisciplinary practice includes performance art, spoken word, humor, "sacred clowning," writing, singing, songwriting, video and visual art. She studied media arts at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, and was the recipient of the British Columbia award for Excellence in the Arts (2012) and The Viva Award (2014). For her work on *Savage* (2010) in collaboration with Lisa Jackson, Reece won a Genie Award for Best Short Film, Golden Sheaf Award for Best Multicultural Film, ReelWorld Outstanding Canadian Short Film, Leo Awards for Best Actress and Best Editing. She participated in the 17th Sydney Biennale, Australia. Recent exhibitions include, *The Sacred Clown & Other Strangers* (2015) a solo exhibition of her performance costumes and documentation at Urban Shaman Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Winnipeg and *Moss* at Oboro Gallery, Montreal (2017). An iteration of *Sweetgrass and Honey* will travel to the Comox Valley Art Gallery.

v. Definitions:

Parody

Uses imitation, humor and often absurdity as commentary on something pre-existing. Parody is a strategy that is used in literature, music, visual art, or comedy.

Stockholm Syndrome

Describes a state of empathy that develops in a small percentage of people who have been kidnapped or held hostage. The name was given to the condition after it was observed in several hostages who refused to testify against their captors after a bank robbery in Stockholm, Sweden in 1973.

Stekyawden

Directly describes a geographic location in British Columbia translated as painted Goat Mountain. The word is related to the a Gitksan Myth about the retribution of

a village of mountain goats on another village that harmed them. (Versions of the myth are available by pdf at the instructor's request).

Site Specific

"The term site-specific refers to a work of art designed specifically for a particular location and that has an interrelationship with the location"

(source: Tate Museum website: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/site-specific>)

Installation Art

Often site-specific, installation art is three-dimensional, and works to break down barriers between the viewer and the art object, often engaging the body of the viewer in the work.

(The Art Story website has a good expanded definition: <http://www.theartstory.org/movement-installation-art.htm>)

Performance Art

Often associated with the 1970's – a time when performance, or live art came into wide use by artists in North America and Europe - performance art usually uses the artist's own body. It can be rehearsed or spontaneous and is usually only performed once, however performance for the camera has become a common practice. One theorist, Jonah Westerman made the remark that "performance is not (and never was) a medium, not something that an artwork can be but rather a set of questions and concerns about how art relates to people and the wider social world." (2016).

Residential Schools

Government sponsored schools, which were usually also affiliated with the Catholic church. Their aim was to assimilate Indigenous children to understand and mimic cultural beliefs and customs normative to Euro-Canadian culture.

vi. Worksheet:

Respond to each of the following questions with at least three sentences:

1. Think about the media used for each artwork. What impact does that have on the experience of the work? What is the history of the media? For example: stickers are a common material that is easy to produce and distribute. How does the media interact with the subjects in the work to create new meaning?
2. Think about the effect of scale in the artwork being presented. The photograph, *I'm Telling You*, 2007 placed at the entrance uses the scale of domestic or vernacular photography, which looks very small on the large wall, while immediately next to that, *Stekyawden Syndrome* takes up an entire wall; and the photographs in *Un-Entitled* use scale and cropping to enlarge parts of the body. How does the scale of the work affect its meaning and experience?
3. Identify one artwork that you liked or disliked in the exhibition and give your own interpretation of the work, relating it to your life and experiences.

vii. Introduction to Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art:

Plug In, established in 1972, was Manitoba's first artist-run centre. For the first 15 years of its history, Plug In was one of the first (and few) organizations on the prairies to focus exclusively

on the production and exhibition of contemporary art. The interest in contemporary art, coupled with a sense of isolation from large-scale cultural institutions such as the Winnipeg Art Gallery or the National Gallery, originally attracted artists to Plug In. Belief in the idea of an artists' network as a social, aesthetic and economic alternative to those represented by commercial and public galleries was the foundation of Plug In.

Throughout its forty year history, Plug In has encouraged and nurtured the development of independent arts group in the province that each address an identified community need (e.g., Video Pool was spawned by Plug In, as was Mentoring Artists for Women's Art and Counterparts: the Winnipeg Gay and Lesbian Film and Video Festival).

In the late nineties, after twenty-five years of operating as an artist-run-centre, Plug In began to re-envision its role in the local and national art community. Having arrived at a position of notable acclaim for its exhibitions and publications program, Plug In sought to have these programs matter in a larger way. To reach this goal, Plug In launched three initiatives to connect with larger audiences and expand the reach of our programming: the national and international circulation of exhibitions; the development of a website; and the creation of an audience development initiative. These changes marked Plug In's transition from an artist-run-centre to something that resembled both a gallery and a museum, yet was neither – an interim phase during which a new hybrid was taking form.

The descriptions, and various models of, "institutes of contemporary art" in the UK and the US confirmed that Plug In's mission; priorities; and activities fit best within an ICA model. And while this model is itself a relatively fluid one, for Plug In's purposes the ICA distinction meant: the generation of a thoroughly researched mix of exhibitions that offered multiple access points to contemporary art and ideas; insightful interpretation through publications, programs and events; and creating the facilities and environment for lively interaction among artists, art and audience.

With these goals in mind, in 2009 Plug In made the decision to move from its location at 286 McDermott to a new purpose-built facility for art and education in partnership with University of Winnipeg at the corner of Portage Avenue and Memorial Boulevard. This move expanded the ability to program multi-disciplinary activity that stretched what art, and what an ICA, could be. The facility was co-developed with the active participation of Plug In, and hosts three permanent installations by internationally renowned artists Jimmie Durham, Dan Graham, Rodney Latourelle and Louise Withoft.

Plug In expanded its mentorship opportunities by focusing on education in a number of ways, including making a summer residency (the Summer Institute) a regular part of its programming. The goal of the Summer Institute is to provide a space for professional artists and other cultural producers and (scientists, engineers, writers, curators, architects, philosophers, etc) to research and produce work, individually or collaboratively. This program serves a distinct niche in that it provides collegial support for artists at all stages of their careers, following their basic training (university, art colleges, or equivalent experience). Faculty is hired, and provides feedback and support to artists on a peer-to-peer basis. Each year 10 to 15 artists participate in the program. The idea of encouraging mentorship and facilitating an open discourse has always, and continues to be, integral to Plug In as an organization, and the Youth Education Program is built upon these premises.

viii. Sources

Link to Plug In ICA:

<http://plugin.org/>

Resources:

Skeena Reece on Treasures of the Tsimshian Performance:

<http://www.ammsa.com/publications/windspeaker/reece-shares-treasures-tsimshian-people>

Treasures of the Tsimshian:

<http://www.ago.net/treasures-of-the-tsimshian>

Residential School info:

<http://wherearethechildren.ca/en/>

TRC Calls to Action:

http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf