



Main Space



Xpace Cultural Centre
2-303 Lansdowne Ave
Toronto ON M6K 2W5
416 849 2864
Tuesday-Saturday 12-6
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***Ascension of Abundance* curated by Natalie King**

Janine Ilya, Par Nair, Alexis Nanibush-Pamajewong, Cedar-Eve and Hau Pham

May 26 – July 8, 2023

“...I end up in discussions with other young women who are trying to be good aunties without having aunties of their own. We express sadness and shame at being made to beg for teachings like we’re mining for gold with our bare hands, only to be told we aren’t trying hard enough...

But resistance is in our blood. So we shred their illegal contracts with the movement of our hands, digging for the roots our great-grandmothers used to treat cramps, anxiety, and patriarchy. We recreate rites-of-passage ceremonies to teach ourselves survival skills for the apocalypse that has never ceased. Here, knowing how to salvage the quills from a roadkill porcupine is more useful than being exiled to sit alone with our sins, like the in abstinent, unconciliatory little witches we are—heathen, obstinate, and refusing to convert.”

- Erica Violet Lee, *‘In defense of the wastelands’*¹

Ascension of Abundance is an exhibition in which artists move through time and space to portray thoughts, feelings and ideas related to dreaming of worlds beyond our current reality.

Janine Ilya, Par Nair, Alexis Nanibush-Pamajewong, Cedar-Eve and Hau Pham all share speculative futures and themes of abundance, joy, sovereignty, magic-making, and

¹ Erica Violet Lee, *‘In defense of the wastelands: a survival guide’*, *GUTS Magazine*, April 2016

world-building as each are embedded in the artist's practices, creating space and energy to expand our current reality while sharing their stories, memories and thoughts regarding the past, present and future.

Dr. Darcie Little Badger, a Lipan Apache scientist and Indigenous futurist author, reflected in an interview that: "Both in and outside fiction, we are pushed to the past tense. The reality is, many Indigenous cultures in North America survived an apocalypse. The key word is survived. Any future with us in it, triumphant and flourishing, is a hopeful one."²

Reflecting on these triumphant and flourishing futures. As artists and creatives, we are often working within hard timelines, on top of a full or part time job, well aware of scarcity and abundance. Colonial forces and praxis force us to believe that resources are limited, including our time, relationships and livelihoods. We are currently living in a capitalistic and colonial society, at the same time there are many artists working within ideas of future reclamation. Abundance is everywhere in our relationships, in our time and in our lived experiences. Past and present converge to create ideas/narratives and dreams about the future.

Within these ideas of future, past and present, the artists in *Ascension of Abundance* create worlds within worlds, telling their stories through textiles, painting, sculpture, installation and video.

the shawanga river, our miskwi

Spirits See Red (2022), is an installation that creates a traditional and sacred space of time, while also facilitating a conversation surrounding symbolic notions of genocide against Indigenous people, this work also explores reclamation.

Alexis Nanibush-Pamajewong is from Parry Sound, Ontario. She is Ojibwe and proudly represents her community, Shawanaga First Nation.

² Decolonizing Science Fiction and Imagining Futures: An Indigenous Futurisms Roundtable, Dr. Darcie Little Badger, Strange Horizons Magazine, 2017

Alexis' work includes several pieces that span different mediums including woodcarving, single channel video and print. Within these works are the presence of the colour red. The lights illuminate the colour red onto the works, surrounding the area with a crimson glow.

“Red is a powerful colour. The psychology behind red, even if they say they don't like the color red, they're attracted to it because of when you're in the womb, and how the stomach basically looks from the inside. I think about that too as kind of like birth and love and being held.”³

The editeg⁴ presence in Alexis' work symbolizes blood and editeg teachings, healing, medicine, and love, using language, food, and stories. Alexis' work to me signifies a future where we as Indigenous peoples receive healing.

“Reclaiming my Indigeneity like, a lot of that comes with, like, you know, you learn about your culture and you're learning about your family language, ways of knowing and being, but you also have to learn about, like, the really shitty fucking things, the government issues around that. I think that's one thing that we don't really acknowledge is that reclaiming Indigeneity also gives you a sense of anger that comes with it, too. And you have to be prepared for that. Take care of yourself.”⁵

Through these worlds Alexis creates work that explores what it means to be an Anishinaabe person and her connection to the land, more specifically the Shawanga River, a large river located in Alexis' home territory in Shawanga First Nation. Overfishing and overhunting are currently an issue in Alexis' home territory.

‘*Our Miskwi*’ is a single channel video work accompanied by a poem that explores themes of blood quantum, assimilation, resilience, survivance and sovereignty. The artist uses plexiglass, ode'imín, miin, odatagaagomin, miskomin⁶ to tell the story of Miskwi. Mirrored by her connection to the land, Alexis speaks to resistance.

Within the video text appears at the bottom of the screen, Alexis speaks to Miskwi:

³ Alexis Nanibush-Pamajewong in conversation with Natalie King

⁴ *berries, Anishinaabemowin*

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *strawberry, blueberry, blackberry, raspberry, Anishinaabemowin*

*our miskwi was and is not for your viewing
or absorbtion
our miskwi is sacred, and its ours
our miskwi will not divide
our miskwi will not dissolve
our miskwi exists and survives
our
miskwi*

-Alexis Nanibush-Pamajewong, *our miskwi was, is, and will...*, 2023

mawinzo and *nibi anang*, 2023, are two inkjet prints. These two prints collaborate to acknowledge dreams, stars and berries as medicine and healing. Alexis references *nibi anang* which translates to 'water stars' in Anishinaabemowin;

We are star people— dreaming of swimming in editeg⁷ water, soaking up their medicine and love..⁸

In the far end of the gallery sits *Mikinaak*, (2023). This basswood hand-carved sculpture made from Basswood, berry stain and wood chips is a process of love and labour. The piece stands firm in the gallery, with various shades and hues of red and purple, creating an almost holographic colour story. The basswood soaks up the blood and memories of the editeg which include ode'imín, miin, odatagaagomin and miskomin.⁹ *Mikinaak* is Anishinaabemowin for snapping turtle, the form of the sculpture can be interpreted in different ways depending on who is witnessing the work, but it is intended to acknowledge our four legged friends and our shared relations on Turtle Island.

⁷ Berries, Anishinaabemowin

⁸ Alexis Nanibush Pamajewong artist statement

⁹ *strawberry, blueberry, blackberry, raspberry, Anishinaabemowin*

Spirits See Red (Drum) “is about the Anishinaabe concept of kobade meaning the relations to our ancestors, our grandparents, and acknowledging that we are all a link in a chain or vital park of spiral. The drum mimics our heart beat, and can synchronize our beat together. The red beads communicate the bloodline— our family, to the land, the stars, to our songs, and the love we have for each other. ”¹⁰

Alexis gifts viewers with a love letter to her home territory, a love story between herself and the land.

her stories were blue.

Having moved from India to Canada in her early twenties, Par Nair’s work addresses diasporic journeys of South Asian communities, highlighting stories of peoples historically silenced in colonial spaces. Nair’s multidisciplinary practice considers cultural histories, family archives, photos and histories to unravel narratives surrounding Indian women.

“*her stories were blue*” is a series of hand embroidered works based on photographs Par’s grandmother collected. Par’s grandmother would carefully curate the images that she loved and would send them along to Par to embroider, creating an intergenerational collaborative art making process.

The work aims to trace the vanishing familial archives and fading crafts specific to diaspora and migration. These works are created on *kasavu mundu*, a textile with a golden border traditionally worn by Indian men, from Kerala, India. By carefully hand embroidering stories of mothers and daughters on this specific material, Nair considers and imagines worlds and creates space where the voices of Indian women had not previously existed, creating a new dialogue that centres Indian women.

Speaking to familial reactions to her work Par adds “I also see how much joy it is bringing them, which I didn’t expect, like, somehow, I was always thinking, ‘would they be okay with this?’ But they say, ‘oh my gosh, we can’t believe that you’re telling our story on such a large scale’.”¹¹

¹⁰ Alexis Nanibush-Pamajewong describing work *Spirits See Red (Drum)*

¹¹ Par Nair in conversation with Natalie King

capital G Greatness

The idea of greatness is instilled in Turtle Island through the project of colonialism.

For thousands of years bodies on Turtle Island were here to celebrate and care for the land.

As an artist and cultural worker, I am constantly reminded of the double-edged swords that things like capital 'S' Success or capital 'G' Greatness are, and the realities of the day-to-day existence that is trying to survive, thrive and continue to live. In her work, Hau Pham investigates what this Greatness means.

Pham's work draws heavy influence from her South-East Asian Heritage and Buddhist beliefs. Her practice relies on the intersection of one's relationship with the object, and the perception of Asian women in the western world. Her works are a reflection of the Asian feminine experience.

"I was thinking a lot about the collection of objects and how they are like humans. We always collect things, and we use them as representations of ourselves, right? We also place a human relationship to those items, regardless of whatever role that they serve." ¹²

In the corner of the gallery hangs two paintings by Pham: *I was Crafted to be Great* and *Vietnamese Woman Figurine with her hat broken off*. The first painting, *I was Crafted to be Great* features a realistic rendering of a large Laughing Buddha figurine carved from Jade, his smiling face accentuated by this bright green exterior. In *Woman Figurine with her hat broken off* there is a figure within the centre of the piece with her broken hat at her feet. Pham and I discuss the optics of these figurines and more broadly what these paintings of objects represent to her:

"You know, and I think both of those paintings deal with ideas of perfection and greatness and always like pushing yourself to be to be better or to be the best to be the greatest that there was." ¹³

¹² Hau Pham in conversation with Natalie King

¹³ Ibid.

the land of a thousand hills

Rwanda is warmly known as the land of a thousand hills because of its hilly and mountainous physical natural beauty covering the land. These hills are echoed in the work '*Within the palm of my land*' by Janine Ilya with the Kitenge cloth patterns moving up and down in various lines to mimic the presence of the hills of Rwanda.

within the palm of my Land (2023), is a large-scale mixed media piece on Kitenge cloth¹⁴, recycled fabrics, wire and acrylic paint on wood that portrays a history of diaspora and immigration. The textiles in the work act as a representation of the histories and stories that are embedded in Rwandan culture, this work piece depicts an open palm which simultaneously welcomes the immigrant home and releases them into the world.

Janine and I discuss the history and significance of these textiles and how the figurative aspect of the piece is important:

“Welcome home. The fingers in the piece being three dimensional. That was important to me because I wanted this sense of being held. The textiles that I use were brought from Rwanda to me. And so family members and friends have brought these textiles.. And so, even the fabrics themselves have had full lives and have had full experience with travel and displacement, or immigration.”¹⁵

Janine Ilya is a multi-disciplinary Canadian-Rwandan artist, based in Toronto her practice centers around capturing the subtleties of intimate moments and Black identity. She looks at how the concepts of intimacy and vulnerability – in relation to others and oneself – contribute to the process of identity formation, drawing from her memory, observations, and communities.

Ilya also draws inspiration from her mother, often working together or collaborating on the process of choosing textiles to include in the works:

¹⁴ Kitenge cloth is an East African, West African and Central African piece of fabric similar to a sarong, often worn by women and wrapped around the chest or waist, over the head as a headscarf, or as a baby sling. Kitenges are made of colorful fabric that contains a variety of patterns and designs.

¹⁵ Janine Ilya in conversation with Natalie King

“My relationship with textiles is very intimate because of my relationship with my mom. Growing up with her being a designer. Her being a seamstress. I've always been very interested in fabric and textiles. It's interesting because I'm learning how to sew more recently in life. It also has to do with her own practice. She was trained to be a designer, so she had her own store in Rwanda as well. My relationship with textiles themselves is mostly embedded in what she has taught me about different types of fabric and how they lay on your body, how you have to care for them, how you have to wash and things like that. I also have this very strong part of my practice that allows the materials to guide me.”¹⁶

i cry in Denim (2023), reflects on the grief and the complexities of the artist's journey of longing to be fully immersed in one's culture, while also contemplating being reminded of how immigration and displacement coexist to produce a colourful and complex multi-layered identity. “When I do go back to Rwanda, like I know of course, there are different ways of interacting with people because of cultural elements and things like that, but it's like almost I get to like tap into these parts of myself that I don't get like that I don't get here in Canada.”¹⁷

spirit stitches or windows to the future

Cedar-Eve is an Ojibway artist from Saugeen First Nation in Ontario. She was born and raised in Toronto and is currently based in Montreal as a full-time artist.

“All my work is done intuitively. So I didn't really come in with the idea of turning it into a pillow, it was more like, I'm gonna sew a bunch of leather together and then draw onto it. I feel like the images that are drawn onto it were just like patterns that I had seen. They're really detailed pen drawings. It's a bunch of little tiny shapes that make up the main form of the body.”¹⁸

In Anishinaabe culture, our dreams play a significant role in decision making. We are taught that they are messages from our ancestors meant to guide us right where we are meant to be. Our dreams are our guides. In her series; *Spirit Stitch* (2012), Cedar connects this dream world to their current reality.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Janine Ilya in conversation with Natalie King

¹⁸ Cedar Eve Peters in conversation with Natalie King

Four pillows are centred in the gallery. Each pillow is made from deer hide, stitched together and stuffed with the artist's hair. Spirits are drawn in various fine lines and the images flow over the hide, each pillow shaped like its respective spirit. Speaking to the physicality of the piece and having Cedars hair becoming integrated into the piece:

“ My DNA is embedded into this. After doing it, a bunch of these things came to light, but I wasn't in the process of making. This is really from my spirit. Other than the piece being physically a pillow, obviously, you could sleep on them if you want to. Just that idea of messages from our ancestors, in the dream role, but then also, physically, through my hand and creating these things, because I'm not aware of it. Being able to make those pieces felt like it was connecting me so much more to my spirit realm and not just my physical self, learning more about my culture at the time, learning about how, how significant dream worlds are. They're your guides. It's a window into the future...”¹⁹

Spanning generations, time and physical geographical places, *Ascension of Abundance* is meant to hold space for these stories, bringing them to the forefront of the collective consciousness of viewers as an act of honour, of remembering. These stories are integral to telling the stories of who we are and where we come from, in abundance, forever.

- Natalie King

¹⁹ Ibid.