



carrie allison

wâhkôhtowin



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Owens Art Gallery

foreword

I first encountered Carrie Allison's work at *A Handmade Assembly* in 2018. I had just started as the Director/Curator at the Owens Art Gallery after a year spent editing the art history journal *RACAR*. I remember being struck with the way her work combined beading, landscape, and language to reveal what Indigenous scholar Carmen Robertson once called "a sensorial, embodied connection to place."¹ How apropos, then, that when I asked Allison if there were a particular author she would like to write about her work she gave me Robertson's name. Being able to make this connection in such a concrete way is one of the joys of curatorial practice. It is especially gratifying given that the exhibition title—*wâhkôhtowin*—is the Cree word for "kinship" or "the way in which we relate to each other." More than simply using this term as an evocative title, I believe Allison treats *wâhkôhtowin* as an artistic methodology and guiding principle. Indeed, more than most exhibitions, this one feels borne of relationships rooted in affinity and good faith.

An array of individuals and organizations work hard to make exhibitions like this one possible. We would like to thank Carrie Allison for her beautiful, compelling work, and for her kindness and professionalism. Allison would like to thank her partner Jacob, for his never-ending support. We are also grateful to Carmen Robertson, whose wonderful essay "kinship: the way in which we relate to each other" provides greater context for the exhibition. At the Nova Scotia Museum, Sean Haughian, Curator of Botany at the Herbarium, and Ian Loughead, Senior Conservator, raised the bar on professionalism and collegiality. We are so grateful to them and to NSM for agreeing to loan us the seven specimens featured in Allison's work *Beaded Botanicals*. This project would also not have been realized without the technical wizardry of preparator Roxie Ibbitson. Mount Allison University continues to provide the bedrock of financial support upon which the Owens Art Gallery and its programs rest. We are also extremely grateful to receive ongoing assistance from the Canada Council for the Arts through its Artistic

¹ Carmen Robertson, "Land and Beaded Identity: Shaping Art Histories of Indigenous Women of the Flatland," *RACAR*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2017), 14.

Catalysts component, as well as funding from the New Brunswick Department of Tourism, Heritage and Culture, the Town of Sackville, the Rotary Club of Sackville, and a loyal group of generous donors also known as the Friends of the Owens. Finally, we sincerely thank our staff, student interns, volunteers, and supporters in the community of Sackville and the broader Atlantic region.

Emily Falvey
Director/Curator

kinship

the way in which we relate to each other

In a teaching about water, the late Cree Elder Sandy Beardy explained that Nipiy, a nêhiyawêwin term for water, invites complex associations with life and death.¹ Elemental cultural notions such as this resonate in the three works of art included in Carrie Allison's solo exhibition. The concept of "the way in which we relate to each other" carried within its title proffers an intimate embodiment of rivers and flora. Conjuring the bloodlines of Mother Earth and relational interconnections to water, *Heart River* (2018), *Connect/Contact* (2017), and *Beaded Botanicals* (2018–19) evoke an aural resonance that echoes and narrates the energy and power of water. "This work is an honouring," explains the artist. "This act is for the river."² Blue beads—flowing, meandering, and sparkling like the waterway it suggests—conjure the rhythmic presence of the Heart River, all the while recalling its route, which runs through northern Alberta before it empties into the Peace River as it flows northward to the sea. *Heart River* thus reveals an inherent tension between action and stasis. Perpetually in motion, the Heart, like all rivers, modifies the contours of its banks, overflows its boundaries, and cannot be easily contained. And yet, the sound that comes with inexorable movement defies the seemingly quiet permanence of the beaded contours on display. The sublime nature of Allison's undertaking reflects what she refers to as the cultural life force that supported her ancestors. This is how she describes the river and her way of honouring that force, which undoes any perceived stasis—any ostensible silence.³

The thousands of tightly sewn, no. 8 glass beads in this work not only map the physicality of the meandering river route, the performative action they record signifies the artist's intimate relationship with the river. The impressive, ten-metre long undulating

¹ Late Elder Sandy Beardy, quoted in Cheryl Darlene Sanderson, "Nipiy Wasekimew/Clear Water: The Meaning of Water, from the Words of the Elders. The Interconnections of Health, Education, Law and the Environment," PhD diss. (Burnaby, BC: Simon Fraser University, 2008), 74.

² Conversation with the artist, March 2019.

³ *Ibid.*





artery amounts to 250 hours of beading—not including the time taken to scale the map and create the pattern—and represents a visit with the ancestors of Allison’s Cree and Métis family territory. Nation states such as India and New Zealand legally recognize rivers as persons, and, in this context, Allison’s beading of the contours of this river’s bodily form personifies kinship.

Next to the monumentality of the beaded cartography of *Heart River, Connect/Contact* serves as a tranquil presence. Subtle movements within the suspended installation imply presence and life. The circular discs generate improvised traces that fuse the fixed with the unfixed to defy time and space. The hand-made paper circles, which contain flora harvested by the artist from the banks of the Heart River, resist an aural silence, enticing visitors to *listen* for the sounds of the watery embodiment of place. *Connect/Contact* merges with *Heart River* in ways that amplify the many stories of kinship undulating through these works.

Beaded Botanicals draws upon more expansive interconnections with rivers and territories. This series of beaded works represents endangered flora found in Mi’kma’ki, the territory in which Allison currently resides. Each beaded plant offers a visual register of relations that tie the artist to the ancestors of the eastern territory that hosts her. Akin to the embodied process undertaken in *Heart River*, *Beaded Botanicals* invites a knowing and an honouring, in this case using diverse plant species under threat from environmental degradation. Derived from an intense study of the botanical collection at the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History, these beaded sketches represent not just a sense of loss, but also the need for action aimed at healing and supporting kinships within these ecosystems. The visual once again suggests the aural, interweaving with the implicit sounds of nature, and evoking the importance of listening, of hearing.

Honouring water has long been part of Indigenous artistic practice and many contemporary beaded artworks also engage with water in complicated ways. Nadia Myre, from Kitigan Zibi First Nation, beaded her work *Meditations on Black* (2012) as a means of channelling the proverbial power of water. The large circles of variegated black and blue glass beads reference pools of water that possess an affective energy that conjures interconnectedness. Ruth Cuthand, of Cree and Scottish

ancestry from Saskatchewan, inventively beaded water-borne parasites suspended in everyday drinking vessels to mimic tainted water in her work *Don't Drink, Don't Breathe* (2016). A beaded confrontation with the water crisis facing so many First Nations communities, Cuthand's work gets to the heart of colonial matters, while also acknowledging the powerful significance of water to life. More recently, Olivia Whetung's *tibewh* (2017) similarly channeled colonial issues in an exhibition of beaded artworks that reference a particular water system and reminded viewers of the interventions that disrupt natural waterways.⁴ The Anishinaabe-kwe from Curve Lake First Nation in Ontario also beaded a scale representation of the system of locks on the Trent-Severn waterway, and in so doing they joined a larger decolonial process of remapping ancient waterways that connect us as one.

wâhkôhtowin's multiple engagements with water draw from the narratives posed by noted beaders, while also fostering new narratives. Listening to the sounds harboured in Allison's visualizations of relations, the ostensible quietude of these three works gain strength and join together in an evocation of undulating rhythms, like songs. "Songs are like rivers: each follows its own course, yet all flow to the sea."⁵ In this way, the artworks in *wâhkôhtowin* call forth rhythmic stories of interconnectivity that flow across space and time, to bind us together, and make us stronger.

Carmen Robertson

⁴ Shannon Webb-Campbell, "Reclaiming Indigenous Bodies, Bead by Bead," *Canadian Art*, 27 June 2017, <https://canadianart.ca/reviews/olivia-whetung-tibewh>.

⁵ John Berger, "Some Notes on Song: The Rhythms of Listening," *Harper's Magazine*, February 2015, <https://harpers.org/archive/2015/02/some-notes-on-song>.







Connect/Contact: this is the land of my ancestors 2017
Installation shot, Owens Art Gallery. Photo: Roger J. Smith





1 Beaded Botanical 1 (*Allium tricoccum* Aiton.) 2018



Int'l Garden, 2444
Det. 2/76
Allium tricoccum var. *buckleyi*

PLANTS OF NOVA SCOTIA, CANADA
Allium tricoccum Aiton.
-only flower buds (buds) visible, leaves have completely disappeared
Col. A. Wilson
Det.
28 June 1976
HERBARIUM OF THE NOVA SCOTIA MUSEUM, HALIFAX, CANADA-NSPM

018406P

2 *Allium tricoccum* Aiton 1976



3 *Beaded Botanical 2 (Cypripedium parviflorum var. pubescens)* 2018



4 *Cypripedium parviflorum* var. *pubescens* (Willdenow) Knight 1999



5 Beaded Botanical 3 (*Sabatia kennedyana* Fern.) 2018



047371

PLANTS OF NOVA SCOTIA, CANADA

000.
050 *Sabatia kennedyana* Fern.

13 August 1986

Col. Alex Wilson
Det.

N.S.P.M. - Herbarium of the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History, Halifax, Canada

6 *Sabatia kennedyana* Fern. 1986





8 *Coreopsis rosea* Nutt. 1986



9 Beaded Botanical 5 (*Lachnanthes tinctoria* Walt. Ell.) 2018



019728P

FLORA OF NOVA SCOTIA
E.C. Smith Herbarium Wolfville, N.S.

#26

Lachnanthes tinctoria (Walt.) Ell.

Coll. Paul Morris & I-Ping Wong
Det. Paul Morris 16 Oct. 1992

list of works

Heart River 2018

seed beads on felt

The Heart River

Photo: Carrie Allison

Connect/Contact: this is the land of my ancestors 2017

harvested plants in hand-made paper

1

Beaded Botanical 1 (*Allium tricoccum* Aiton.) 2018

toho beads on linen

2

***Allium tricoccum* Aiton** 1976

Collection of the Herbarium of the Nova Scotia Museum

3

Beaded Botanical 2 (*Cypripedium parviflorum* var. *pubescens*) 2018

toho beads on linen

4

***Cypripedium parviflorum* var. *pubescens* (Willdenow) Knight** 1999

Collection of the Herbarium of the Nova Scotia Museum

5

Beaded Botanical 3 (*Sabatia kennedyana* Fern.) 2018

toho beads on linen

6

***Sabatia kennedyana* Fern.** 1986

Collection of the Herbarium of the Nova Scotia Museum

7

Beaded Botanical 4 (*Coreopsis rosea* Nutt.) 2018

toho beads on linen

8

***Coreopsis rosea* Nutt.** 1986

Collection of the Herbarium of the Nova Scotia Museum

9

Beaded Botanical 5 (*Lachnanthes tinctoria* Walt. Ell.) 2018

toho beads on linen

10

***Lachnanthes tinctoria* Walt. Ell.** 1992

Collection of the Herbarium of the Nova Scotia Museum

11

Beaded Botanical 6 (*Pancium dichotomiflorum* Michx.) 2019

toho beads on linen

12

***Pancium dichotomiflorum* Michx.** 2010

Collection of the Herbarium of the Nova Scotia Museum

13

Beaded Botanical 7 (*Adiantum pedatum* L.) 2019

toho beads on linen

14

***Adiantum pedatum* L.,** 1989

Collection of the Herbarium of the Nova Scotia Museum

biographies

Carrie Allison is an Indigenous, mixed-ancestor, multidisciplinary visual artist born and raised on unceded and unsurrendered Coast Salish Territory (Vancouver, BC), with maternal roots in High Prairie, Alberta. Situated in K'jipuktuk since 2010, Allison's practice responds to her maternal Cree and Métis ancestry, thinking through intergenerational cultural loss and acts of reclaiming, resilience, resistance, and activism, as well as notions of allyship, kinship and visiting. Allison's practice is rooted in research and pedagogical discourses. Her work seeks to reclaim, remember, recreate, and celebrate her ancestry through visual discussions often utilizing beading, embroidery, handmade paper, watercolour, websites, QR codes, audio, and video. Allison holds a Masters of Fine Arts, a Bachelor of Fine Arts, and a Bachelor of Arts in Art History from NSCAD University. She has performed and exhibited throughout the Maritimes and has received grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Arts Nova Scotia, and the Canada Council for the Arts.

Carmen Robertson is an Indigenous scholar and curator of mixed Scottish-Lakota ancestry. She is Canada Research Chair in North American Art and Material Culture, Carleton University, and a Professor of Indigenous Art History, jointly appointed to the School of Indigenous and Canadian Studies, the School for Studies in Art and Culture, and the Institute for Comparative Studies in Literature, Art, and Culture. Her SSHRC-supported research centres on the Anishinaabe artist Norval Morrisseau, on whom she has published extensively. She is also working on a project related to contemporary Prairie beadwork. Robertson maintains an independent curatorial practice and recently guest curated *Dana Claxton: The Sioux Project, Tatanka Oyate* for the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina.

This Occasional Paper was published in conjunction with the exhibition *carrie allison: wâhkôhtowin*, curated by Emily Falvey, and presented at the Owens Art Gallery from 7 June to 14 August 2019. Occasional Papers are part of a publishing initiative designed to foster a more immediate engagement with the ideas and issues arising from our exhibitions. They also serve as a record of our programming and the individuals, collectives, and organizations that make it possible.

Front cover: *Beaded Botanical 3 (Sabatia kennedyana Fern.)* 2018

Back cover: *Sabatia kennedyana*
Fern. 1986

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PLANTS OF NOVA SCOTIA, CANADA

000.
050 Sabatia kennedyana Fern.

13 August 1986

Col. Alex Wilson
Det.