

Elexiitq ; Ehts'qò / Connected ; Apart From Each Other

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Abstract

Thesis: Ełexìitq̄ ; Ehts' q̄q̄ / Connected ; Apart From Each Other

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Art and life are constantly influencing each other, sometimes subconsciously. This thesis and installation are an example of how my journey has led to the physical distance and cultural disconnection to the beliefs and traditions of my people, and then as a reclamation act later on in life when understanding the importance of learning about my indigenous roots in the Northwest Territories.

The installation has many components that contribute to its final state for presentation. The work brings together aspects of culture, technology, dene drum infused audio elements, and experimentation to communicate the difficulty and transmission of knowledge through digital sources in order to learn about culture, which is usually a very hands-on process.

This work and thesis cover aspects of my early life and upbringing while living all over Western Canada, the thirst for knowledge, interest in technology and sci-fi and how it has influenced my practice, and the representation of my culture in how I perceive it and practice our teachings.

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Artist Statement

“Ełexiitq̄ ; Ehts’q̄q̄ / Connected ; Apart From Each Other” by Casey Koyczan – 2021

“Ełexiitq̄ ; Ehts’q̄q̄” is an immersive installation that communicates the journey of learning more about my Dene culture through distance education and research; utilizing and adapting to work with technology and communication tools as viable resources for learning language, tradition, stories, and spiritual beliefs.

After leaving my hometown of Yellowknife when I was seven years old, a disconnect of my culture started to form; I lived all over Western Canada and even though I have met some amazing people and experienced many things, I was away from my people and language. Throughout my life there have been times where I would return to the North and slowly learn more about who we are as Tlicho people and our specific practices, songs, and beliefs, but they were far and in between. Within my early adulthood I felt the obligation and importance of learning as much of my culture as possible by using the knowledge I have acquired and the technology that I enjoy working with. Even though it has been a challenge, there are a few key points that have helped me form a better understanding of who I am regardless of my location:

- To follow traditional protocol of using every part of the animal; I use every part of the materials harvested. Nothing goes to waste and everything has a purpose.
- To give offerings when taking anything from the land, and when visiting friends and family.
- Communication is key; especially at great distances from home or the people you love.
- Read and remember the stories and legends of the Tlicho people; this has been an influential factor for a lot of my work involving music, audio, digital, 3D, and XR.
- The focus of resonance and vibration for our songs; as we are mostly made up of water, the greater the vibration, the better the connection between us and the spirits of our ancestors.
- Pay attention to the universal language of the Medicine Wheel and its teachings; it is followed and referred to by a wide variety of nations across Turtle Island, and helps to create a common understanding and mutual respect between cultures.
- I am not any less Indigenous because I am not fluent in my language; various life situations have made it difficult to learn and become immersed in my language. Learning the Tlicho dialect will be a journey for the rest of my life, and it’s never too late to try and learn.
- Experimentation is essential for progress; bringing together many different mediums and technological approaches within my creations that are rooted in cultural, spiritual, and ceremonial practices.
- Work hard and respect each other; My parents had always placed an emphasis on work ethic and respect for my brother and I growing up.
- Follow the “Dene Laws”; During my early adulthood I’ve tried to follow the teachings of the “Dene Laws” as much as I can. These points have helped me to represent myself in a way that is common to Dene people:
 - Share what you have.
 - Help each other.
 - Sleep at night and work during the day.
 - Be polite and don’t argue with others.
 - Young girls and boys should behave respectfully.
 - Love each other as much as possible.
 - Be as happy as possible at all times.

- Pass on the teachings.

The hanging logs mimic the power of nature and the relationship that we all have with the land. The resonance of sound and song within the logs triggered by the viewers proximity emphasize the steps towards finding that connection to culture. The multi-channel Dene drum and chanting composition occupies the space as people explore and interact with the surroundings and discover their own composition. The experimental visuals reference the exploration on this path motivated by a thirst for knowledge, personal reflection and understanding of cultural identity.

MFA installation concept, description and meaning

Ēlexiitq ; Ehts'q̄q̄ / Connected ; Apart From Each Other is an installation that communicates the efforts and struggles of growing up away from my home; the distance between family members, and the celebration of culture regardless of location. It is unofficially the second iteration of my work "Emotive Ascension" which was the installation showcased for my Bachelor of Fine Arts graduating exhibition at Thompson Rivers University. (1) With my new work, the combination of physical, digital, and auditorial elements work together in order to create a dimly lit space coloured by experimental projections that resonate the energy of land, ceremony, gatherings, and drum dances. The viewer is intended to feel mystery and comfort, caution yet welcome, and an overall sense of wonder as they explore the realms of interactivity within the space.

When approaching and standing by the hanging willow logs, a soundscape emanates from within them and invites the viewer to spend time with it and converse through energy. The projections are also triggered within this process that act as a visual communication tool for the materials; displaying imagery of the classical elements (earth, wind, fire, water), the seasons, the landscape of the Northwest Territories, nebulas and stars, and binary code. The imagery moves through scenes that infuse all of these sources and transfer through portals of fire that navigate to different destinations; transporting the viewer and representing the spirit of Dene people.

The placement of the logs is important for this installation, as they represent the four quadrants of the Medicine Wheel, and the self or creator at the center that connects us all. They are a representation of the four seasons, the four offerings of sweetgrass, sage, cedar and tobacco, and four directions of North, East, South, and West. It also represents the circle of life and the stages of birth, growth, maturity, and death. It includes the emotional values of the heart, the spirit of the soul, the physical properties of the body, and the intellect of the mind. All of this is represented and considered when constructing this artwork, and resonates within the space to trigger the bodily senses of sight, sound, smell, and touch through reverberation.

Description of audio and video

The soundscape for the installation is a multi-channel composition with five separate audio sources that are all synced up and run for the same duration in a consistent loop. Each source has the sound of a Dene drum being played at various tempos and drumming patterns; some of these are either the side of the drum being played to produce a "clack" / rim-shot sound, while others have had a delay implemented in order to provide a wider range of sounds that contribute to the overall score. I also

included the sounds of synths, strings, guitar, bass, and myself chanting with somewhat of a drone aesthetic with subtle notation so the viewer is able to become immersed in the soundscape and start to feel the spirituality and ceremonial approach that I am presenting.

The experimental video present in the installation was created by utilizing a culmination of footage from the Northwest Territories and Manitoba in order to represent my journey from my homeland to where I now reside in order to continue this chapter of education within my life. Other video assets are used as layering options and implementation to push the experimental nature of the imagery; these assets include snow blowing in the wind, the landscape of the Northwest Territories, water flowing, and imagery of nebulas and space to fulfill my interest of the cosmos and how it plays its role in my interest of science fiction and thinking about the future. I have been greatly inspired by the work of the contemporary dance group Chunky Move and their work "Mortal Engine" for the projection elements within this project, even though my creations are tailored more towards indigeneity and land. (2)

Binary code is present within the duration of the video which is a result of converting the "Dene Laws" into a series of ones and zeros. This was done using an English to Binary converter online, and was changed to communicate technology's role in my life and how I've produced my artwork with my culture and these laws in mind. Binary is the antithesis of digital data flow and how everything within a digital world is created; think of binary code as atoms that make up everything around us. I felt doing this provided an effective way to show my appreciation for both my culture and technology, and how they have the ability to work together, as opposed to pushing each other apart.

Just the titles of the Dene Laws have been converted to binary as each letter of the English alphabet is a series of numbers; the full description of each law would be too large to tangibly embed within an experimental video projection, but is something I plan on working with in the future.

The full explanation of the Dene Laws is: (3)

- ***Share what you have.***

This is the umbrella law; under it sits all the other laws. It was absolute importance that people share what they had long ago, just for survival. Share all the big game you kill. Share fish if you catch more than you need for yourself and there are others who don't have any.

- ***Help each other.***

Help elders cut their wood and other heavy work. Help sick people who are in need; get them firewood if they need it. Visit them and give them food. When you lose someone in death, share your sorrows with the relatives who are also affected by the loss. Help out widows as much as possible and take care of orphaned children.

- ***Sleep at night and work during the day.***

Don't run around and laugh loudly when it gets dark. Everyone should sleep when darkness falls.

- ***Be polite and don't argue with others.***

Don't harm anyone with your voice or your actions. Don't hurt anyone with your medicine power. Don't show your anger.

- ***Young girls and boys should behave respectfully.***

Don't make fun of each other, especially in matters of sex. Don't make fun of older men and women. Be polite to each other.

- ***Love each other as much as possible.***

Treat each other as brother and sister, as though you are related. Help each other and don't harm anyone.

- ***Be as happy as possible at all times.***

The creator has given you a great gift; Mother Earth. Take care of her and she will always give you food and shelter. Don't worry, just go about your work and make the best of everything. Don't judge people, find something good in everyone.

- ***Pass on the teachings.***

Elders are to tell stories about the past every day. In this way, you people learn to distinguish between good and acceptable behaviour and when they are older, they will become the storytellers who will keep the circle strong of life going.

The installation video is over seven minutes and is created to be a seamless consistent loop. It spans across many ranges of colour and realms of nature infused with binary code. The scenes shift from many different versions of imagery, and are tied together by footage of fire that assists each transition. Fire is important to many cultures as it provides us with heat, a way to cook our food, is present in drum circles, gatherings, and ceremonies, and in this case acts as a portal that helps to bring in the viewer and see things that may not be there. It helps to speak to the work and allows us to listen to ourselves to find peace and harmony.

Both the audio and visual aspects of this installation were tailored in order to fit with the physical attributes of the willow logs and overall presentation of the installation; to work together to provide a dark, experimental, and personal work. I had previously constructed a soundtrack for this installation that proved to be too upbeat and euphoric and after testing that composition in the gallery, felt it needed to be changed in order to suite the aesthetic that I wanted to exhibit. I didn't realize that the audio didn't match with the installation until the logs were first hung up in the space, and returned to the audio creation process within one of the last nights before the installation was to be opened to the public. This was a test in adaptability and understanding the root of concept that I wanted to dig up in order for everything to work together in the gallery and for the sound to have a symbiotic relationship with the interactivity of the lasers, the physical materials, and the video.

Learning language through technology

Although it is not ideal or the perfect way to learn one's culture, I've had to make the effort to learn as much about my culture from a distance by using the internet, apps, and online resources. One of the first resources I starting using was the Dogrib / Tlicho Dictionary which is available online as a PDF document. (4) It is a Tlicho to English dictionary that not only covers how the majority of words are

spelled, but also how to use certain syllabics and glottal stops. This has been a viable resource in regards to naming songs, artworks, and other forms of expression as it has taught me words that I feel connected with; even though they are just one to four words at a time. One obstacle about this resource is that shows how a word is spelled but doesn't provide pronunciation; which is important in order to be able to speak the language as Tlicho is difficult to speak and involves a lot of glottal stops and accentuated clicks, nasal sounds, and some words are either pronounced through the mouth, the nose, or a combination of both.

I discovered the Tlicho app online two years ago, and it has helped to pronounce words effectively. It has a list of categories ranging from days and months to common phrases and greetings. (5) I used this app to help me construct my introduction in Tlicho that I give for public talks, presentations, and panel discussions. Although all of the words within the Tlicho Dictionary are not available within the language app, it has been a great starting point in order to teach myself how to speak my language. To finally be able to receive instruction for words and phrases that I can play over and over again until I get the pronunciation correct has been greatly beneficial in my journey, and hope that more words and phrases will be continually added to it via updates and new versions of the app.

Keyboard layouts for computers and phones have been made available by the First Voices app, and offers an array of Indigenous languages spanning all across Canada. (6) Having access to the Dene alphabet has been greatly beneficial in being able to provide accurate syllabics that are represented within the words in preparation for promotional material or graphic designs.

Culture, distance, and the life path

I was born in Yellowknife, NT, and lived there until I was seven years old. Within that time, I spent a lot of my time exploring the landscape, attending gatherings and events with my parents, and remember eating an abundance of wild meat almost daily whether it be moose, caribou, and sometimes even ptarmigan. As I was still just a child everything was fun and would always wear my moccasins during the winter that were made by family members or friends of the family. My mother would always get mad at me for not wearing rubber shoes with my moccasins, because I enjoyed being able to run fast in the snow without them on. Rubbers definitely helped preserve the hide on the bottoms of them, but I thought rubbers were just for elders so I refused to wear them the majority of the time.

Even though I was too young to comprehend a lot of what cultural identity or importance was, I knew I was surrounded by it, immersed in it, and our lives were rooted in this way of living as modern Dene people. An unfortunate circumstance occurred very early in my life with my parents divorcing when I was three years old. My father is full blood Dene and mother is Metis; when my father left a lot of those cultural events that we previously attended were a lot more far and in between. I realized it was after which that I started spending a lot more time on my own, on my bike, and playing with friends until very late at night. There were times where my brother and I would have to fend for ourselves while our mother partied constantly. Our father gained custody of us in 1990 and we moved down to Edmonton with him. While living with him we would smudge with sage and sweetgrass regularly, and he would explain to us that smudging is to cleanse the mind, spirit and soul, and that we should continue this practice for the rest of our lives. Our parents didn't learn any specific Dene languages, and honestly would speak more Cree to us than anything else; albeit just slang terms like astum (come here) and awas (go away). My father had a very conflicted upbringing with his parents and later on his time in

Residential School pushed him further away from learning about his own culture; due to this a lot of my Dene culture wasn't naturally passed down or taught to me.

We moved from Edmonton to Whitehorse as my uncle was already living up there and seemed like a good idea to migrate North and live among family. It was a rocky start but I was enrolled in school and we started renting a trailer where we would live for the next 3 years. My brother moved back to Yellowknife after a year and a half as he missed my mom and was having trouble in school in Whitehorse; I wanted to stay with my dad as I felt it was a healthier way of life. It was sad to see my brother leave but I understood even at a young age; I stayed and was enrolled in a hockey league the next year and started doing better in school. It was a great place to grow up as it felt like a very safe small city; it was something that I was familiar with and felt somewhat like Yellowknife and still does. I met a lot of indigenous people there and made a lot of friends, I attended many indigenous gatherings and became more familiar with the Tlingit and Athapaskan ways of living and language. The Yukon is very proud of their indigenous cultures and it was great to grow up in that environment, even though it wasn't my own.

When I was sixteen, we moved from Whitehorse to Lethbridge, AB. This was a very big step in my life as we moved there to further my hockey career and to acquire a better education. It was so different from what I experienced before and not only experienced culture shock, but also landscape shock as it was the first time I ever lived on the plains; I was previously always surrounded by forests, water or mountains. It didn't take long for me to realize that there weren't very many indigenous people in Lethbridge, and that the majority of the indigenous population lives on reserves in Alberta. It also didn't take long for me to experience racism, which kept on coming for the six-year duration that I lived there. Before that I didn't know what racism was, I never felt it, or if I did, I was too young to comprehend it or be hurt by whatever was said or done. There were times when living there that I was ashamed of who I was, what my skin looked like, and what my dad and I are. Even though I had a very culturally diverse friend group, comments even made by my friends hurt, let alone people I didn't know. This pushed my cultural pride even further away, I didn't want to be indigenous anymore, and I started to rebel in many ways against my father and society as I felt trapped in a place where I didn't want to be. This feeling remained after I moved out of my dad's care and into a shared household with some friends; he moved to Edmonton and I stayed in Lethbridge working for the next year and then going to Lethbridge College taking their Multimedia Production program.

After graduating from college, I spent a brief time in Edmonton with my dad but winded up moving back to Yellowknife where I worked in a photo shop developing and printing photos, taking passport photos, and selling both digital and analog film cameras. I fell in love with photography and would avidly experiment with different cameras and types of film while still creating graphics with Photoshop and Illustrator by using my training in college.

I eventually moved to Kamloops, BC, with my partner at the time and we worked for the first year; we both got jobs at the local ski hill and would eventually both enroll at Thompson Rivers University. I started out wanting to be a geography major but math was not my strong suite, so I took the Bachelor of Fine Arts program instead; I tried to get out of the arts, but I suppose it sort of sucked me back in, and am grateful that it did. Within my second year of my BFA a local artist asked me "Why don't you make indigenous art?", and I didn't really know how to respond to that at first; I was there to learn how to be an artist, let alone be forced to make a specific type of artwork. My partner was very supportive as the

question seemed to trouble me for quite some time, bringing back my conflicted past with my culture, childhood, and parents. It did however make me think more about my culture, who I am, and that I really didn't know much about it other than how I was raised. Throughout my BFA I didn't make any artwork that was obviously indigenous to the naked eye, and even though my final work "Emotive Ascension" didn't house any overt notions of indigenous culture, there were subtle implementations of it by lining the surrounding area of the walls with bundles of wild sage that were harvested from around the campus, and the underlying meaning of the installation to respect the land.

Within my time spent back in Yellowknife after a brief seven-month stint in Vancouver after my BFA graduation, I kept making artwork and exploring ideas in order to express myself. I eventually created an artwork titled "Residential Values" which I label as a performance painting where I shot painted pucks that were coated with black, white, and red onto a canvas and repeated the cycle. (7) Around 350 - 400 shots were taken and the canvas was completely covered by the end; my body was sore, and the emotions were running high. It was an artwork that was created to show the anger, frustration, sadness, and pain that the residential school system inflicted upon Indigenous peoples in our country and worldwide, and also spoke to my dad's experience in the system and the racism and issues I faced while playing hockey in Southern Alberta. It was a work that received a few mixed reviews in person, but began to reach a more understanding audience when it was released online. To this day it is still the most personal artwork I have created as it forced me to shed my skin as an artist and show some inner meaning in regards to what I and my family have faced in our lives. It was a pivotal stepping stone for my career and enabled me to take more risks within my artwork, and to not be afraid to show my true self as an artist.

Telling stories in our own way

There is a Thomas King quote from "*The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*" that resonates with me:

"There is a story I know. It's about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I've heard this story many times and each time someone tells the story, it changes. Sometimes the change is simply in the voice of the storyteller. Sometimes the change is in the details... But in all the telling's of all the tellers, the world never leaves the turtle's back. And the turtle never swims away." (8)

The above quote from Thomas King is something I hold very close, as it legitimizes how I feel about the expression of my own culture. For many years I felt quite conflicted with telling stories and artworks from a Dene perspective and how I've re-told some of our stories in a different way with new technological mediums, but these words help to make me feel more comfortable with what I'm doing and how I choose to form my creations. When I got into creating virtual reality artwork, I immediately started creating animals that call the North home, and are tied-in with our culture in regards to the stories that have been passed on throughout generations. These creations gained quite a bit of attention and proved to be another outlet for my creative expression; something that I could add to my art arsenal and another medium to create with.

The film collective Western Arctic Moving Pictures (WAMP) were the ones to get me into VR. After a year of me using these tools, they hosted a VR workshop in Deline, NT, and asked if they could show

some elders my work titled “Raven Gods”, which is a large elaborate raven with glowing eyes and a council of five larger ravens in the sky looking down at the viewer. (9) This was created being inspired by the raven creation stories, and also for my affinity for ravens and the role they play as the dominant bird species in the Northwest Territories. I was nervous and hesitant to provide them with permission, but knew that this was one of the tests that I would have to encounter at some point, as their voices mean a lot to me. I requested that the facilitator tell me what their feedback was after viewing, and they informed me what was said after the elder spent some time looking all around my creation, and eventually taking off the headset: “You know I never really liked the idea of VR and what it was used for, but if it’s going to be used like this, then it’s okay with me.” To me, this was the biggest green light, the best thumbs up, and the only blessing I felt like I needed in order to continue with what I was doing with this medium; it gave legitimacy to what I was creating, and the messages I was sending. It was always something that I had in the back of my mind when I started creating in a digital and VR realm, but with knowing what was said of my work by a respected elder in a remote community of the North, it served as a motivational factor and put my mind at ease in regards to it being okay to experiment and push our stories to the next level.

I started Dene drumming in 2017 when I was gifted my first Dene drum from a close friend of mine, which was made by Morris Neyelle in Deline, NT. (10) It was such an honour to receive this from someone I love and respect as a friend, and started to familiarize myself with it after taking it out on the land to make a fire and smudge it as I played it for the first time; this is something the Dene do in order to make the drum our own and to show respect for the tree and animal that gave up their lives for it to be made. When I asked a close friend of mine from Wrigley if they would be able to teach me some songs, he simply replied “No, make your own.” I was confused at first so I asked him if that was allowed, and he told me that all songs came from somewhere; they came from people's feelings and life instances, and that it was encouraged to do that in our culture. I was taken back by that, as I thought it was customary to learn all of the pre-existing songs within our culture, but my mind immediately went another way. I started to hear drums that were louder than life, to hear the sounds being transformed into something else that reached across broader contexts of existence, and sounds that could reverberate throughout generations. With that mentality I started recording my drum at various tempos and with different drumming patterns in order to take them into Ableton Live and experiment with the sounds. Since then, I have implemented my drum into almost every sound and music composition that I’ve created; coating it with delays, reverbs, distortions, and numerous other effects that would push its limits in how it can be heard and interpreted. (11, 12) I feel we have an obligation as indigenous people to respect traditional protocol and beliefs, but to also have the freedom to experiment with our culture to bring it into something new and exciting.

Physicality; from underlying story to performance

Since I started creating large scale installations and sculptures, physicality has been an important aspect within my practice. I believe it is my hockey background that fuels my work ethic and ability to push myself in order to complete large tasks and to persevere through difficult situations. I discovered the work of Chris Burden while studying for my BFA and was fascinated by the amount of physical sacrifice and boundary pushing that was shown within his artwork. (13) Even though some people would view his artwork and performances as grotesque and tasteless, I feel there is a valuable lesson to be learned within his artwork, and that is to push yourself to your limits in order to become a better artist.

These artworks / performances included “Shoot”, where a friend shot him in the arm with a small caliber rifle while he stood in the gallery bleeding throughout the duration of an art opening, or being nailed to the top of Volkswagen Beetle in “Trans-Fixed”, alluding to the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross and our societal perceptions of commodity and materialism. This made me ponder the ways that I could push my physical limits within my own practice, albeit done in a different way. I took this inspiration and used it mostly for my harvesting practice, and later on within my sculpture and installation process. To continue on with my process and practice through pain, suffering, and mental turmoil. I’ve often second guessed my process and regularly ask myself why I put myself through the things I do, usually within the most intense moments of a project, but it’s who I am, and the path I have taken.

I know that with the increase of age and what pushing my limits has done to my body already with numerous pulled muscles, cuts, scars, burns, and internal bleeding, that I will not be able to do this forever. I feel I am shifting my process to work more efficiently and smarter rather than implementing brute force and laborious techniques in order to reach my goal or bring my projects to fruition; it is a shift that will bring me into the next chapter of my practice and will focus on the many other mediums that I love to engage with.

Harvesting aesthetic

I harvest materials in a primal way, reminiscent to what our ancestors would have done, and later infuse my materials with technology to create something new. This duality of existence and stark contrast is a way to communicate the potential for cultural beliefs and practices to coexist alongside the technological advancements within our society. I was first inspired to use earth materials after viewing artworks by Thin Air Studio, which is a small collective based in Cincinnati, OH, (14) and various works by Polish-American artist Olga Ziemka, specifically the resonance of mother nature within her work “Stillness in Motion”. (15)

The harvesting process has always been done in the same way where I will walk in the bush, forest, or along waterways with a pair of gloves and a rope that is tied together at each end. I’ll gather some of the first pieces and loop the rope around the bundle and then back through the rope in order to secure the wood, and to also provide a handle for myself that I use to hoist over my shoulder to continue the harvesting process. This is done repetitively until I can barely lift the bundle, after which I return to my collection area, unload it, then head out again and repeat the process until I have enough materials to adequately do my work justice. Very rarely do I acquire materials that I have personally separated from the earth; it is almost always already separated from the earth before I discover it. This is to reference my aesthetic in respecting the materials and land, but to also give them another chance at life as an artwork. Something that is separated from the earth isn’t necessarily dead as it is still giving life and shelter to things like insects and organisms that feed off this decaying substance.

My harvesting was never documented or filmed until I was commissioned by the Winnipeg Art Gallery to do an installation for the “Insurgence / Resurgence” exhibition; the installation was called “Gone But Not Forgotten” and was a tribute to the lives of the people who have been found in the waterways in Manitoba as I harvested the materials from along the Red River and Assiniboine River. A local videographer was hired to follow me around for the day while I went harvesting, and even though it was weird at first, I quickly got used to it and felt comfortable. This was done again while I harvested materials for a project to be included in the “Li Salay” exhibit at the Art Gallery of Alberta and was also

included for a feature within the program “The Exhibitionists” by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). (16) After this experience I started to film myself while I harvested not only for documentation purposes but to also showcase on my social media stories and news feed. I have always enjoyed seeing other people's works in progress, and felt this would be a way for me to showcase my own process. We are our own worst critics, and I always feel a bit conflicted when posting my process stories, but have had an abundance of people reach out to me saying that they enjoy watching these videos; even if it's just harvesting, hollowing out logs, or timelapse videos of myself in the studio.

The materials for my MFA installation were acquired from the University of Manitoba campus. There were three to four large willow trees that were cut down by the Architecture buildings on the Fort Garry campus in Winnipeg, Manitoba. They were cut up into large pieces on site and transported to an unused area of the golf course which is still on campus property. I had heard of this process taking place and put in a request to campus facilities in order to acquire five large pieces from the pile. I scouted out the massive collection of logs and brush and tagged the five pieces that would later become the main pieces of the installation. Even though this has been a very different harvesting process for me, I was still not the one to remove these pieces from the earth, and gave a tobacco offering when I went to tag my preferred pieces for facilities to pick up. Being able to acquire these materials were important for me as they are a part of my reflection upon my time spent on campus throughout my master's degree. I have heard that the people who frequent the architecture buildings on campus miss seeing the trees, so I wanted to honour these materials in a way that can celebrate their lives and the feelings, oxygen, and shade that they have provided students and faculty over the years.

Materials, Environmentalism, and self-critique

For many years I've been promoting the importance of the environment within my artworks; sometimes these notions are subtle, and sometimes they are the main focus of the work. A lot of the reason behind this was due to the fact that I use a lot of earth materials within my works; logs, branches, foliage, sage, etc. Using these materials help me to incorporate smell into my installations and is able to trigger one of the many bodily senses in order to have the viewer experience an additional realm in regards to their interactions within my constructed spaces. However, within a recent work that I created, I used numerous cans of spray paint in order to coat the surface to resemble a glossy black organic or plastic layer; to question the viewers interpretation and study of the materials in thinking that they are not earth materials but rather manufactured plastic or a mold. It was within this stage of my process that I realized that it was very hypocritical of me to say that I am an artist that cares about the environment and how we should treat it better while going through many cans of spray paint and releasing an abundance of compacted aerosol into the atmosphere. With this in mind, I started to brainstorm ways to provide colour and coatings for these materials that will help them to remain strong while still being environmentally friendly.

I know there are certain manufactured paints and substances that can carry out this role effectively, but I feel it would be more beneficial to myself, my practice, and the environment to create my own concoctions and formulas for such substances. I remember seeing tutorials and videos of how people have created their own earth tone paints by harvesting a collection of yellow leaves, drying them out, crushing them up, and mixing them with binding agents or oils that resulted in very appealing paints. I have started to plan the use of techniques such as this but at a larger scale in order to coat large pieces

of materials; possibly filling a tub or trough with ashes and coal that are a result of wood being burned in a fire and adding water and other agents to make a thicker liquid of black and dark grey that will have the ability to bind effectively to materials. This is a starting point to try and visually represent a better understanding of environmentalism, but I am glad that I was able to be self-critical enough to realize this about my practice, and shift my ways to make proactive change within my artworks. Even though producing these paints and stains will take a considerable amount of time and more planning, it is something that I feel obligated to do from now on in order to represent myself more securely and speak with more truth as an environmental artist.

Since a child I have always been fascinated with technology, this carried on throughout my life and is still very present within who I am and how I operate. We are surrounded by technology in rural areas and for some it is an integral part of our lives. I have used an abundance of equipment within my works as a way to move art from just a visual experience, to something that engages the viewer and promotes the use of other bodily senses when they are in the presence of my creations. The manufactured items used within my practice have been an array of microphones, speakers, cables, cameras, infrared cameras, televisions, projectors, and now 360 laser range scanners. (17) This is also a mild conflict for myself as an artist representing environmentalism because technology will not cease to exist; it's forever evolving, adapting, and progressing, just like us as humans and nature. However, the industrial production of these products and the careless ways in which people dispose of these materials has a large impact on the environment; our oceans and water ways, the land we walk on, and the air we breathe. Some organization and corporations are trying to move to more environmentally friendly means of production, but for the most part they have all been manufactured relatively the same since coming into existence. This leaves me with quite a quandary, and feel it will take a lot of analysis and self-reflection as to how I should move forward with implementing technology into my works, but at the very least I am aware of this dilemma within my art.

Returning materials to the earth or otherwise

At the beginning of my arts career when I started using earth materials, they were free of any toxic chemicals. I didn't paint them or coat them with anything and used tension among the materials themselves for sculptural construction. They were safe to return to the earth, and when discarded they would not cause any harm to the environment. In some cases, the materials were returned to the exact location where I discovered them.

A couple weeks before the "Insurgence / Resurgence" exhibit was to be taken down, a tour of the show was provided to a group of Chiefs and elders from around Manitoba, and after viewing my work and being told about its meaning, one of the Chiefs asked if they would be able to acquire the wood in order to be burned in ceremony. I approved their request graciously as it has been the most meaningful way yet for my work to take on its final form of being completely set free of the restrictions of this planet and to embark on their journey through our atmosphere and into space. This process proved to be especially significant to the work itself because one of the things it was about was to raise awareness for the continued injustices and murders of our Indigenous people across Canada.

As my practice matures, I am putting more importance on showing works more than once. Previously with a lot of my works, they were time based and usually only ran the duration of the exhibit before I would discard the materials or have someone request them for firewood. Now I am creating my works

in order to be shown for many years to come. I am preparing the materials so that they are not only durable, but also designed to be as light as possible in order to minimize shipping costs and have studio technicians within galleries be able to handle them easily. I feel the aspect of consideration for other people has been a growing concern within my art practice, and have noticed it being mildly implemented into how I create for installation and showcase within public spaces.

3D Render of installation

I chose to make a 3D rendering of my installation in order to conceptualize how it would look in real life. (18) This took quite a bit of work in order to complete, but was a very beneficial technique to carry out the rest of the artwork; a collection of still frames and animated fly through videos were created. They were originally provided to the Mackenzie Gallery for their studio techs to grasp my concept of the installation for a group show that is scheduled for June 12th, 2021, but was also used for my MFA exhibit at Urban Shaman to give the studio techs a better idea as to how it would look and feel.

These renderings provided a better understanding of my vision, how I interpret it, and how I see it being experienced in an ideal empty square room. By doing this I have learned a lot more about my process and the tentative difficulties and challenges that I might encounter during its construction and installation. Although it is a digital rendition of the work, it has helped for others to grasp the concept and for myself to think more critically about my process and the technical aspects that it involves.

Recreating the installation in this way also opens up opportunities for other immersive viewing experiences. Due to the pandemic having such a detrimental effect on the arts and music industries in Canada, people are not able to freely walk into galleries to view artworks; the regular foot traffic has almost diminished completely. I am planning to take this version of my installation one step further in order to allow people to navigate through this creation in a first-person perspective by using a game engine such as Unity or Unreal. People would be able to experience it by way of laptop, desktop, mobile phone, or a virtual reality headset to experience the most realistic version of the installation, and mimicking the feeling of being in the gallery space; to hear the binaural audio that resonates from within the logs, how the sound bounces off the walls, and how the colour and light from the projections bounce off objects as you move throughout the virtual space.

There have also been suggestions by people to take the project even further by implementing digital interactivity within the experience. When you get close to the logs in this digital space, they would transport you to various places and environments from around the Northwest Territories such as culture camps, hide tanning camps, Yellowknife city streets, my mom's cabin on the Ingraham Trail, and other places in nature that would be either digitally reproduced, or exist as filmed 360 video clips from these locations. This is a very exciting idea and concept, and flows naturally with how my work shifts between numerous mediums and disciplines. I will continue to construct 3D mockups for my works as it enables me for better planning and facilitation within a lot of the stages of my process, helps to form a concise understanding of creation to completion, and opens up a multitude of opportunities for artistic presentation over numerous platforms.

Social Media and Culture

Within the last five years there has been a huge surge of cultural material that is posted and hosted on numerous social media platforms from around the world. This has not only enabled us to be proud of our culture on a global platform, but to also admire and appreciate other cultures and how we share similarities and differences.

Fashion has been very well represented within Indigenous cultures in North America and abroad, and continues to generate buzz and awareness to some notable professional and emerging artists and designers. In Canada there are a plethora of people that I really admire and choose to represent by purchasing their clothing and apparel through online distribution; Mobilize, Section 35, and The Rez Life, to name a few. This act of intercultural respect is something that helps us to provide a healthy relationship with each other and our nations.

Artists within the Northwest Territories have had to rely heavily on self-promotion and to facilitate an online presence in order to be included within the greater arts scene in North America and the world at large. There are no official contemporary art galleries in the Northwest Territories, and that has been a huge detriment to my career throughout the years of being a practicing artist while living in Yellowknife. The will and determination to get our art out there, to write grants and apply for exhibits, residencies, and be asked to do artist talks, has been a mainstay in the journey of an NWT artist while constantly exporting ourselves to make opportunities happen. We tend to have a very “Do It Yourself” (DIY) approach to art and exhibits because we are basically representing ourselves the majority of time; experimenting, and not afraid to try to new things as alluded to in Victor Masayesva’s essay “Indigenous Experimentation” in *Transference, Tradition, Technology*. (19)

Conclusion and closing remarks

The journey throughout the conception, realization, construction, and presentation for this installation and the many facets of the artwork included has been a tumultuous experience, yet I’ve learned a lot more about my practice and myself in the process. I haven’t mentioned the pandemic much within my dissertation because I didn’t want it to affect my artwork, but it has. This global situation and crisis that we’ve been presented with has greatly derailed my focus, as when it first swept across Canada, I had to switch my thesis idea into something new that could be worked on and presented from home; only to have to switch back after four months when studio access was granted again. I feel despite having lost access to the numerous facilities and services that the university would normally offer, I still pushed through in order to create a large-scale thought-provoking artwork that I can be proud of, and is a representation of the maturity of my artwork and creative process.

It is without a doubt that my path of learning my culture has been difficult and requires an extensive amount of dedication and concentration, and pales in comparison to learning directly from elders and our people while on the land in a hands-on fashion. Regardless, I continue to do my best in representing my culture and home territory while navigating the obstacles that are constantly presented to me. I am honoured to unveil this artwork for its first showing to take place at Urban Shaman Contemporary Aboriginal Art Gallery, and for the installation to then travel to Regina for the rest of 2021 within a group show, and then to Toronto in early 2022 for another solo exhibition.

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Thank You / Mahsi Cho,

Casey Koyczan

Installation photographs of "Ełexiitō ; Ehts'ōō / Connected ; Apart From Each Other"





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