

## **Open Spaces: Windows to a View**

### **Current exhibition:**

### ***Ekosi***

### **Tamara Lee-Anne Cardinal**

**December 22, 2017 – February 19, 2018**

**curated by Jessie Short**

### **About the curator:**

Jessie Short is an independent curator, filmmaker and multidisciplinary artist whose work involves memory, Métis history and visual culture. Jessie attained an MA degree in 2011 from Brock University where her MA thesis explored contemporary Métis visual culture. Jessie served as the Executive Director for the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective (ACC), 2012 to Dec 2014 and prior to this worked in the Visual Art department of The Banff Centre between 2009--2010. Jessie has directed two short films, *Wake Up!* (2015) and *Sweet Night* (2016), both of which have screen nationally and internationally. Jessie currently works as a programming coordinator for Ociciwan Contemporary Art Collective.

### **Curatorial statement:**

The web of life and everything that connects us.

Tamara Lee-Anne Cardinal's installation *Ekosi*, is unintentionally well-timed to coincide with the holiday season (the work will come down just after the major commercial date of Valentine's Day). As work winds down for the winter break, and Christmas shopping reaches a fevered pitch, Cardinal's work floats calmly in the Open Spaces gallery on 7th Avenue in Calgary. The CORE, Calgary's downtown luxury shopping centre is just blocks away from *Ekosi*. Meanwhile, the corner of the building, beside the eastern window of the Open Spaces gallery, is a favourite haunt for the city's homeless, although their stays are generally short due to the police officers and security guards who patrol the area. As a care worker at a crisis shelter catering to Indigenous women and children, Cardinal is deeply aware of the poverty and abuse that plague some of Calgary's most vulnerable populations, and much of her work is informed by this understanding.

Based on Cree teachings Cardinal has received, the work depicts the four stages of life. Four circular pieces are displayed two-by-two in two separate woven structures that comprise *Ekosi*. The title is a Cree word that can express "that's it; that's the end; alright; good-bye; amen; it is okay," although Cardinal's usage tends more towards the literal English translation meaning "enough," asking viewers to consider "what is enough?" The stages are represented by the four circles made of collaged images on a background of empty tea bags, which are woven into a web-like structure of artificial sinew attached directly to the wall by metal hooks. Each life stage (infant/child, youth, adult, elder) entails specific relationships, needs, and responsibilities that are reflected in both the images, and in their placement. Following the path of the sun, the images are read from east to west, with the infant/child circle in the east window, the youth circle next and, in the west window, the adult and elder circles. Each circle

contains images from personal hygiene and food packaging, newspapers, community resource pamphlets, as well as the artist's personal items such as family photographs. The images represent needs, which are defined both through Cree teachings and psychological theories, such as Abraham Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*, that Cardinal has studied as part of her social work.

The materials in *Ekosi* are arranged in the centre of the infant/child circle as their world is largely self-focused and centred around more basic needs of sustenance, warmth, rest and affection. Moving towards the youth circle, the images start to move out of a tight, central formation as youth become more aware of themselves in relation to the external world. The adult images are, again, more spread out from the centre while the elder circle has images located entirely at the periphery of the circle. The canvas of emptied tea bags for each circle is representative of medicinal plants that were traditionally used for sustenance and healing. Some Indigenous people may still hold and use this knowledge, however, the commodification of foods and medicines for all peoples has slowly replaced traditional medicines and foods with more readily available commercial products. Cardinal's inclusion of the tea bags is more an acknowledgement of both the realities of these changes and the social bonding that the act of sharing food entails.

Cardinal's art is entwined with her deep sense of care for others, and respect for the place in which she resides, a sign of her place within the adult circle. Cardinal's Cree ancestry stems from the Treaty 6 area of Saddlelake, however, she is a mindful guest in Calgary, which sits firmly in the Treaty 7 area. Treaty 7 is the traditional territory of the Blackfoot Confederacy, the T'suu Tiina, Stoney Nakoda, as well as home to the Metis Nation of Alberta (Region 3). As a student at Alberta College of Art and Design, Cardinal was active in the development of the recently created Lodgepole Gathering Place + Indigenous Students Centre, including the development of an elders advisory council for the college. It was through this experience that Cardinal was told of the Blackfoot origins of Abraham Maslow's well-known hierarchy of needs, a point that is never mentioned in the literature, but is generally known amongst the Blackfoot.

Maslow spent significant time with Blackfoot communities in southern Alberta, which led to him developing his now infamous theory, apparently adapted directly from Blackfoot life teachings.<sup>1</sup> The general theory posits that once basic physical needs are met, then other needs, such as belonging, esteem and personal growth can be fulfilled. It is the difference between simply surviving and thriving. Cardinal's circles of life stages in *Ekosi* loosely correlate to Maslow's hierarchy, from the most basic physical/safety needs, through to love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Interestingly, Maslow's lack of acknowledgement of the Blackfoot sources of the theory fall more in line with the child/adolescent stage where "the need for respect or reputation is more important...and precedes real self-esteem or dignity."<sup>2</sup> The hierarchy is not a linear model, and survival/thriving in some areas of one's life is no guarantee of the level of attainment in other areas.

Back to the C-Train platform where the Open Spaces gallery sits. People rush through and board trains with shopping bags while others sit huddled amongst public art sculptures *Transit Story* by artist Jill Anholt. Figures of humans painted to look either blue/green from one side and yellow/orange from the opposite direction, spring up from the metal ventilation grates on the ground, made of the same metal grating that covers the holes that vent air into the outdoors. The figures are eye-catching, although they seem (at least partly) designed to keep people from sitting in the area. Cardinal notes that the sculptures unintentionally offer one of the basic needs: safety. You can't kick someone tucked behind a metal sculpture, as sometimes happens while people are sleeping in the streets. Deeply aware of the positioning of her work within this larger cultural conversation of needs and wants, and aware of her

own positioning in the city, Cardinal's *Ekosi* offers another piece of the puzzle too: beauty, hope, connection and inspiration to all that see it.

<sup>1</sup> Conversation with Tamara Lee-Anne Cardinal. Calgary. Dec 18, 2017.

<sup>1</sup> "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs." Simply Psychology. Accessed December 20, 2017.  
<https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>