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Krista Belle Stewart
Indian Momento, 2016,
installation view, *In search of Expo 67*, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2017, Courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Guy L'Heureux

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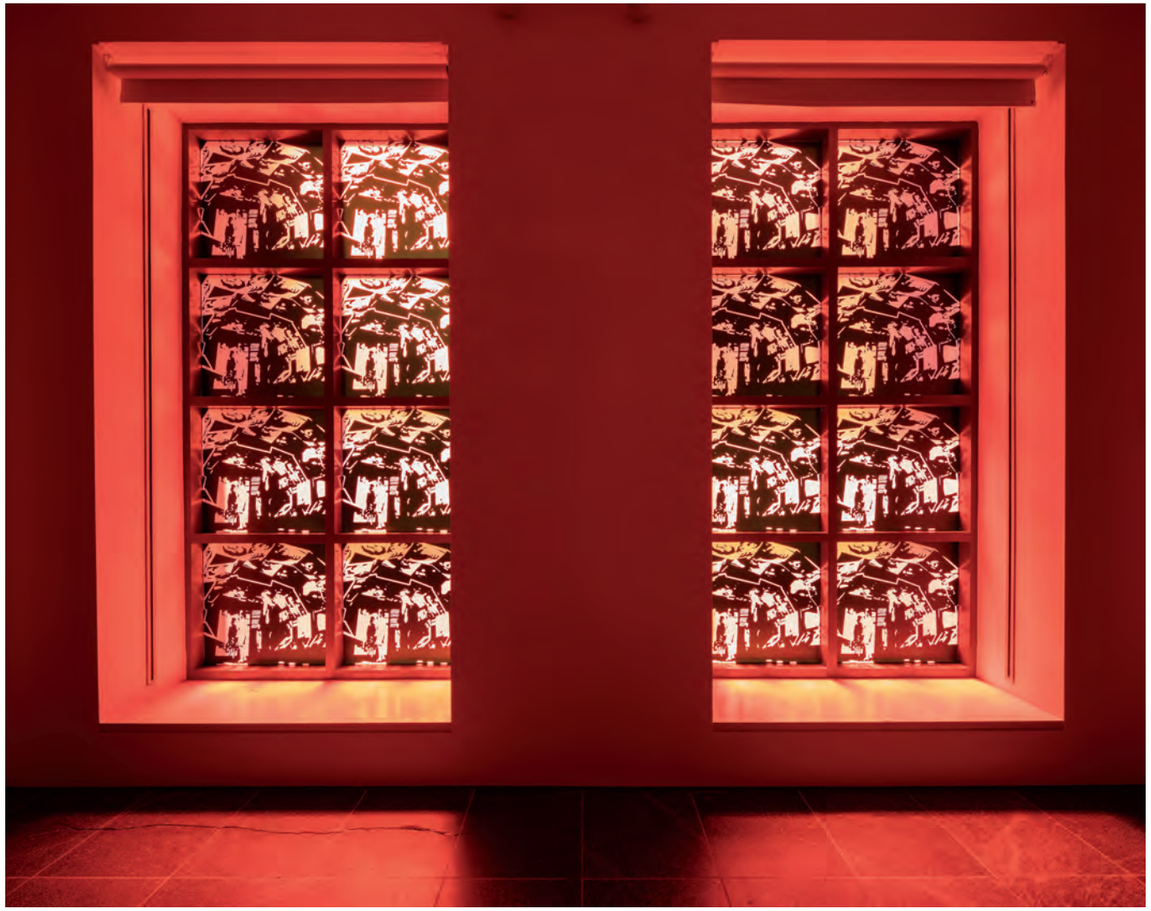

ORTHOGONAL HEART LINE: INTERSECTING THE COLONIAL GRID

Tania Willard

Classic

Colonial style
Colonial window
Colonial column
Colonial house plans
Colonial countertops
Colonial marble and granite
Colonial farms
Colonial grid

Colonial

In early colonial buildings and cabins in the Americas, windows were made of mica, waxed linen, or paper. Glass windows did not become common until shipping routes and time frames were shortened between the colony and the Crown. Until ships plundering the "New World's" gold became wealthy and steady enough to supply the colonies with such *civilized* things as windows.

I want to take a minute to think about windows not existing. Seeing the land only when you decide to go outside, and in that act being part of it, the land around you. Windows allow us to pretend we are separate: we are inside, and we consider outside as being behind an invisible barrier, a transparent separation. A window is one of the many things that has a colonial story, that we navigate within an architecture of coloniality. Small windows in early log cabin missions and forts have become glass-walled petrochemical office towers, and glass and windows the world over symbolize the contemporary moment of urban and controlled spaces. This is the *classic colonial grid*. We frame views in windows, we sell products in window displays, we block wind and reflect sky with windows that climb higher and higher to frame better, more expansive, more expensive views.

Photography can be thought of as a distribution of views through windows. Made up of lenses of melted sand and mineral flooding across ice-thin sheets and exposed to sunlight. Colloidal silver, glass plate, negatives, all are methods of taking pictures of views framed within a window, exposed onto a window, and then developed into another view. There is a colonial grid in all these windows.

Not all windows consume, not all glass eats up the sun. I want to understand that a window can be something else. In Krista Belle Stewart's new work, *Earthbound Mnemonic* (2019), installed on the windows of the BC Hydro Dal Grauer Substation in downtown Vancouver, windows become not about seeing in or about separation; instead, they are containers. Stasis chambers for story. Caring for and keeping narrative in a state of stable care to promote its longevity, to allow story to take a long journey like the multi-lightyear expeditions of science-fiction astronauts. This long archive of story can be understood more deeply when we realize the work's source imagery is made up of digitally altered photographs of the artist's earthen tiles from the installation *Eye Eye* (2018). In this earlier work, Stewart worked with soil from her home in Spaxomin (Douglas Lake, BC) and formed and fired it into tiles, which are installed in a grid pattern on the gallery wall. Subtle variations in earth and mineral create small portals through which we look *into* the land, not out of a window *at* it.

Stewart's installation on forty-eight windowpanes of the Dal Grauer interrupts the colonial grid with striking red and copper forms that outline the bloodline of this story. Drawing from her work with grids, familial and relational narratives, histories of colonial-settler relations, and the archive, this new work positions the earthen tiles as an abstraction of the process of the earlier *Eye Eye* work. The source image of *Earthbound Mnemonic* is these same earthen tiles, photographed in the kiln—lining its sides, stacked up, and arranged—in the process of firing. This photograph reflects the artist's process and acts of translation, which are key concepts in many of her works that are iterations of the "historical." Locating the deep geological time and the living Syilx presence on the land, each tile in *Eye Eye* represents a deep archive of life lived in relationship to the land. Further abstracted in *Earthbound Mnemonic*, the process of the tiles' making is still evident, but coded. As coded and deep as our own bloodlines.

Presented with the final image, we are left to infer our own meaning, a process of divination that asks our own cultural selves and diverse embodied

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See, for example, the image at Owen Geiger, "Thompson Indian Tribal Pithouse," *Natural Building Blog*, April 12, 2014, http://www.naturalbuildingblog.com/thompson-indian-tribal-pithouse.

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2 & 3
Krista Belle Stewart,
Eye Eye (detail), 2018,
Courtesy of the artist

narratives to read the work. I see: an underground home, a traditional pit-house, an Indigenous architecture, a home. These copper and red forms could be read spatially in reference to one another; some are stacked and some intersect in oblique, as opposed to gridlike, meeting points within the embrace of a hexagonal structure. This is remarkably like the log-frame structure of an underground home: four central pillars support a hexagonal frame, with log sides stacked ladderlike on top of this frame, and bark, tree boughs, and earth used for the roof.[1] This architecture is itself an archive, as coded teachings and cultural knowledges inform it, set in a balance of reciprocity between the people and the land and the story. Story is always part of the land and part of the structure.

The speculative architecture in Stewart's image is only *my* reading. It strikes me that the inversion at play in the work operates at many levels: in the inverted role of the land and its relationship to a framing device; in a window and a lens, or a window as a lens; in the intensity of the colour shift between the copper and the red vinyl; and in the idea of the archive as a humancentric historical device. Here archive is not made by us, but *includes* us and our stories on the land, both in the past and more recently. Perhaps it is not surprising that when I first saw the work without any context regarding its creation process, I thought it was a graphic version of an underground home or kekuli. These geometries are themselves coded in relationship to the land and to us. These stories have always arrived in stasis, and awake when they are called upon.

That it is in stasis does not mean the story is unshifting—grids are made of orthogonal lines that meet at right angles or, in art history, that denote a vanishing point. In the case of *Earthbound Mnemonic*, Stewart points to her process of "iterative representation," explaining that "history is understood through multiple (re-)mediations." This grid has become a container of possibilities, outcomes, and narrative; relations are held at right or intersecting angles to each other, not in rigidity but in care and interrelatedness. The vanishing point is another interesting implication for this work within the context of Stewart's practice. A vanishing point in the pictorial tradition of perspective can also be correlated to the concept of the "vanishing race," which is much more about the suppression of Indigenous culture and taking of Indigenous lands, or, as professor of anthropology Audra Simpson puts it, "what was being lost was not culture but land—Indian

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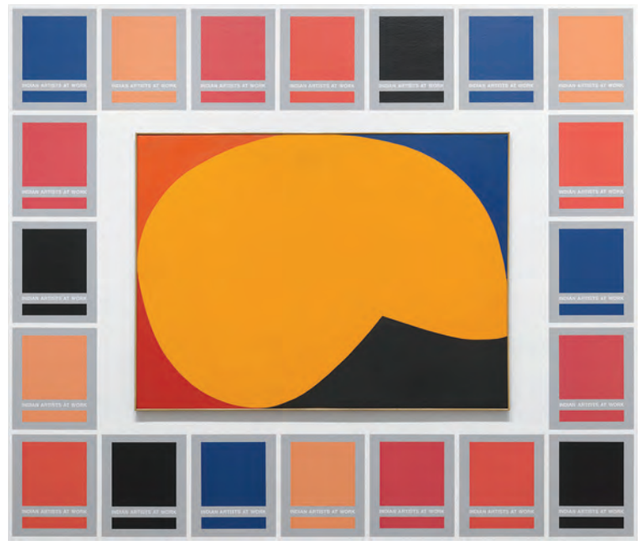

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Krista Belle Stewart,
Indian Artists at Work (detail),
2016, Courtesy of the artist

land, and lots of it."[2] There is no vanishing point in Stewart's image. If anything, it appears as an aerial topography suggestive of structure; in fact, it is a representation of an intimate process and a human scale of materials and creation. This scale has subsequently shifted in the final installation of the work: the intimate process of relationship to material, to cultural narrative, and to iconography has been scaled up to architectural size into an image that becomes an aesthetic of coded stories.

Another story one could tell about vanishing lands and peoples in the wake of colonial grids is about energy grids. The Dal Grauer building is an electrical power substation designed in the modernist moment to reveal, through its glass exterior, a celebration of electrical consumption. Hydro power in this province exists in the dubious realm of self-affirming settler-owned or Crown land. We do not have to look far into Earth's archive, the history *in* the land, to see that most of the province's energy comes from Indigenous resources. While this heritage-status building is lauded as a confluence of engineering and art—appearing, as it is sometimes said, like a Piet Mondrian or De Stijl painting—Stewart's practice is well honed in both interrupting these grids and also in adopting them into relation with her own aesthetics. Extending the continuity of relationality, the work, installed on the building's central bank of windows, is held *between* the De Stijl architectural reference. This recontextualization reveals other translations and inversions at play in the work. Every time this story is awakened, it entertains a new telling.

Kriste Belle Stewart's image suggests a speculative architecture, an archive of land laddered onto a contextualizing grid. Do these hexagonal lines and markings disrupt the colonial grid or assert their own structure amid it? If this story is in a slow-shifting stasis—in a chrysalis of narrative—then this narrative of historical (re-)mediation may be travelling to the edges of the universe, in this stasis chamber, to the futurity that was eclipsed by colonial constructs. This is an orthogonal heart line, reaching back in time to the ancestral and simultaneously forward into the unknown, and always intersecting with story. Archives of land are like that—existing in specks of dust and vast expanses at the same time, scaling story as it shifts.

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Audra Simpson, "Why White People Love Franz Boas; or, The Grammar of Indigenous Dispossession," in *Indigenous Visions: Rediscovering the World of Franz Boas*, ed. Ned Blackhawk and Isaiah Lorado Wilner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 169.