BC Hydro Dal Grauer Substation Public Art Project

Jordan Bennett

al'taqiaq: it spirals, 2021

April 2021 – March 2022
944 Burrard St, Vancouver

Jordan Bennett
al'taqiaq: it spirals, 2021
Courtesy of the Artist
Installation mock-up:
Jocelyne Junker, Capture

Sponsored by the Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association

Curated by Kate Henderson

3,599 Miles Apart: An Interview with Jordan Bennett

Kate Henderson

al'taqiaq: it spirals, Mi'kmaq artist Jordan Bennett's first lens-based public artwork, is a multilayered photographic work that features a moose skull gifted to the artist by a family friend who harvested the moose in Bennett's home community over a decade ago. The inspiration for the work was a porcupine quill basket created by ancestral artists from Bennett's nation around 1860–90. Bennett took the skull's patterns directly from the ancestral designs found on the porcupine basket and then photographed the painted skull on Mi'kma'ki land. Through photography, Bennett reconnects the spirit of the displaced basket back to its origin and home territory.

For decades, this Mi'kmaq cultural belonging – the porcupine quill basket – has existed many miles from its home of Mi'kma'ki (Mi'kmaq territory), kept in the collection of the Museum of Vancouver (MOV). The MOV is built on the village of Seṅák̲w (Vanier Park), which is part of the unceded territory of the Sk̲wx̱wú7mesh (Squamish) Nation, and *al'taqiaq: it spirals* is installed on the façade of another settler-colonial institution: the BC Hydro Dal Grauer Substation. The Dal Grauer, which powers almost half of downtown Vancouver, sits on the unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sk̲wx̱wú7mesh, and səl̓ílw̓ətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

al'taqiaq: it spirals is a reclamation of cultural belongings, stories, and histories. The image weaves together generations of Bennett's ancestors and their deep connection to land and animals. By placing this photograph of Mi'kmaq culture in Vancouver, a link is created between both places – the Lower Mainland and Mi'kma'ki – and between the

cultural belonging of Bennett's ancestors and the artist's own work. The work's positioning on a public building and on a huge scale provides space for these ancestral designs to exist outside the museum and on the street, to be visited daily.

In the following conversation, the artist discusses this powerful and timely work and his return to photography as part of his artistic practice.

Kate Henderson
Tell me about your process and the influences that informed this site-specific work for Capture Photography Festival.

Jordan Bennett
I have always been inspired by designs rooted in Mi'kmaq territory, particularly porcupine quillwork. These objects come from animals that live on the land, and a lot of the quillwork I reference is created from porcupines that lived 200 or 300 years ago. So, my works connect back to these beings.

For *al'taqiaq: it spirals*, I wanted to tell a story about Mi'kma'ki that was also rooted in the city of Vancouver. Sourcing porcupine quillwork from the Museum of Vancouver's collection gave me an opportunity to think about how the designs rooted in Mi'kma'ki have travelled so far. I both wanted to find a way to share that idea with Vancouver and at the same time give this quillwork a chance to visit with people again, to be utilized, and to become a shared story.

The way I wanted to do that was to bring the basket back here, to Mi'kma'ki, in a sense. The only way I could do that was either through recreating the design with photographs or by translating the design onto a physical form and photographing that form in situ. The latter was the most powerful option. It's what felt the most right.

Quillbox and cover, Mi'kmaq
Museum of Vancouver Collection,
AG 103a-b

KH
I love that sense of time travel. That the porcupine lived hundreds of years ago, and you're using the basket to inform your work now. I really think this is a beautiful gesture. Does the moose skull have a particular significance?

JB
The moose, just like the porcupine, is a huge part of our community. This animal has provided sustenance to my family and my ancestors for hundreds of years. This particular moose skull and how it travelled into my life has its own story. That skull belonged to a family friend of ours, who hunted it well over a decade ago. My dad had seen it on the side of this gentlemen's shed for years, and he's always asked him about it. One day, our friend finally gave it to my dad, and my dad in turn surprised me with it. It's a beautiful set of antlers, and it's very rare to find them attached to the skull like that, in this pristine form.

I let the skull live on the land – exactly where it was photographed for the work, actually – for about two months. One day I grabbed a can of spray paint because I thought the skull needed to be hot pink. I had seen a porcupine quillwork piece that was created in the mid-1800s, and hot pink was one of the colours used. Hot pink came to Mi'kmaq via settlers who were trading colours and dyes, so you can date porcupine quillwork by the introduction of these bright colours.

I left the hot-pink skull in my yard for a while, and then it hit me that I needed to paint it with porcupine quill design as a way to connect it back to its home. This moose's ancestors originated in Nova Scotia, and it was hunted in Newfoundland (where moose were introduced in the early 1900s), and then brought back to Nova Scotia, where I live. So, adding this quillwork design brought it all full circle.

KH
Historically, photography has been theorized as being an "index" – a trace of something real, whether an object, a place, or a time. You were unable to visit the MOV and study the porcupine quill basket due to travel restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic, and so you had to work from a photograph – an index – of the real object. Could you speak about your use of this "trace" in the work, and perhaps how this photograph is further indexical of your ancestral lands and community belongings?

Paul Emile Miot
Group of three women of the Mi'kmaq nation, 1859
photograph from a collodian glass-plate negative
53.34 × 68.58 cm
© musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

JB
If it wasn't for the folks at the MOV taking the time to photograph this basket, *al'taqiaq: it spirals* may not have been able to happen. They engaged with me and they spent time with the basket on my behalf. Visiting is a big part of my practice, and when I visit these belongings, I'm not just spending time with objects – I'm spending time with an ancestor. Photographs are as important as the objects themselves, because they share the spirit of that being, that belonging.

One of the main reasons I've been reincorporating photography into my practice is because of an experience I had many years ago when I encountered plate photography of Mi'kmaq people from the mid-1800s at Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac in Paris. That was physically the closest I could ever get to my ancestors, because the light that bounced off their skin in that moment – making those images – was literally captured on those plates, which in turn became artworks that I was able to visit over a hundred years later. Ever since that encounter with these photographs, I feel like photography has been inching its way back into my life and art practice.

KH
One of the most interesting aspects of your work is how it seeks to create a conversation between and across territories and times. It provides a connection between land, cultural belongings, and histories. You often mention the act of visiting when discussing your work. In which ways does *al'taqiaq: it spirals* facilitate a visit between the territories of Mi'kmaq, xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, and səl̓ílw̓ətaʔɬ.

JB
Most likely the quillwork basket is stored in a part of the MOV's collection that is specifically Indigenous, so it has been visiting with the community belongings of those territories within the confines of the museum for a long time. *al'taqiaq: it spirals* gives me the chance to facilitate a visit between the quillwork basket and the territory outside the walls of the museum.

I would love to visit with xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, and səl̓ílw̓ətaʔɬ people in the community, but because of the weird times we're in, this photograph is now acting as a physical stand-in for me. I have friends from these nations in Vancouver, and they often wear their design on their bodies through tattoos, medallions, or clothing. My hope is that they will walk by the installed work, and there will be an interaction between the cultural signifiers of our communities. At the same time, this piece of my people's history – the quillwork basket that was stuck inside the museum – is now out in the world and can visit with people again, in its own way.

Kate Henderson and Jordan Bennett wish to express their gratitude to Sharon Fortney, Curator of Indigenous Art and Collections, and Jillian Povarchook, Acting Curator, at Museum of Vancouver.