

Digital Art History:
Moving Towards a Decolonizing Methodology

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ABSTRACT**Digital Art History:
Moving Towards a Decolonizing Methodology**

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This thesis examines current approaches to digital art history, while arguing for the importance of integrating decolonizing methodologies into digital platforms. As a case-study, the thesis analyzes how the artwork of Nadia Myre (an Algonquin member of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation, b. 1974) appears on the websites of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Art Mûr gallery and AbTeC virtual gallery. In this thesis, I draw on the visual theorist Johanna Drucker's distinction between "digitized art history" and "digital art history," as well as concerns raised by the art historian Nuria Rodríguez-Ortega about the techno-determinism surrounding digital art history – to construct a critical approach to the process of art history going digital. I offer decolonizing methodology as a way forward that implicitly answers these scholars' calls for methodological complexity in digital art history. Referring to Linda Tuhiwai Smith's influential writings on decolonizing methodologies, I use the concepts of "remembering" and "reframing" as decolonizing sub-categories, or strategies, as a theoretical framework through which to examine a range of digital platforms. Even though these sub-categories are not the only possible approaches to take, they are a compelling place to start investigating how digital art history resonates with older art historical methodologies, and how digital practices can transform art history in a critical way.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	vi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Section One: Theoretical Framework.....	5
Part one	5
Digital Scholarship, Intellectual Complexities.....	5
Digital art history: “The Belated Tail End of the Digital Humanities”	8
Art History: Technical, Digitized, or Digital?.....	12
Critical Digital Art History: An Uneven Playing Field?	16
Part two	21
A Two-edged Sword: Digital Art History and Marginalization.....	21
Old Guards, New Technologies: Decolonizing Digital Art History	24
Section Two: Indigenized Digital Art History – A Case Study	29
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA).....	31
Art Mûr.....	37
AbTeC Gallery	41
CONCLUSION.....	47
FIGURES.....	50
BIBLIOGRAPHY	69

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, “What’s On.” Screenshot. Accessed May 03, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/whats-on/>

Figure 2 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, “Quebec and Canadian Art.” Screenshot. Accessed May 03, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/collections/quebec-and-canadian-art/>

Figure 3 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, “Quebec and Canadian Art.” Screenshot of artworks. Accessed May 03, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/collections/quebec-and-canadian-art/>

Figure 4 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, “Nadia Myre.” Screenshot. Accessed May 03, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/works/53910/>

Figure 5 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, “An invitation to slow down.” Screenshot. Accessed May 03, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/education-wellness/invitation-to-slow-down/>

Figure 6 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, The search result for the term “Indigenous.” Screenshot. Accessed May 03, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/search/?q=Indigenous&f=works>

Figure 7 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, The search result for the term “Native.” Screenshot. Accessed May 03, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/search/?q=native&f=works>

Figure 8 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, The search result for the term “Aboriginal.” Screenshot. Accessed May 03, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/search/?q=Aboriginal>

Figure 9 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, The search result for the term “Algonquin.” Screenshot. Accessed May 03, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/search/?q=Algonquin>

Figure 10 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, The search result for the term “Indian Act.” Screenshot. Accessed May 09, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/search/?q=Indian%2520act&f=works>

Figure 11 — Art Mûr Website, “Artists.” Screenshot. Accessed May 09, 2022. <https://artmur.com/en/artists/>

Figure 12 — Art Mûr Website, “2012 Exhibitions.” Screenshot of part of the page. Accessed May 13, 2022. <https://artmur.com/en/exhibitions/2012-exhibitions/>

Figure 13 — Art Mûr Website, “Indian Act.” Screenshot. Accessed May 09, 2022.

<https://artmur.com/en/artists/nadia-myre/indian-act/>

Figure 14 — Art Mûr Website, “Nadia Myre.” Screenshot. Accessed May 09, 2022.

<https://artmur.com/en/artists/nadia-myre/>

Figure 15 — AbTeC Island, “Welcome to AbTeC Island.” Stills from AbTec Island on Second Life. Accessed May 10, 2022.

Figure 16 — AbTeC Island, reformatted version of “Celestial Tree” from the *TimeTraveller*TM episode *She Falls for Age*. Stills from AbTec Island on Second Life. Accessed May 10, 2022.

Figure 17 & 18 — AbTeC Island, “Timetraveller Boutique.” Stills from AbTec Island on Second Life. Accessed May 10, 2022.

Figure 19 — AbTeC Island, “Residency of the Guardian of the Celestial Tree.” Stills from AbTec Island on Second Life. Accessed May 10, 2022.

Figure 20 — AbTeC Island, “Wood Buffalo National park.” Stills from AbTec Island on Second Life. Accessed May 10, 2022.

Figure 21 — AbTeC Island, “AbTeC Gallery.” Stills from AbTec Island on Second Life. Accessed May 10, 2022.

Figure 22 — Nadia Myre, *Meditations on Red* (1,2,3,4,5), 2013, Installation view at AbTeC Gallery, part of *Reformatted* exhibition, 2020. Image source: Exhibition Album on Flickr. Accessed May 11, 2022.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/obxstudios/albums/72157719470542829>

Figure 23 — Nadia Myre, *Meditations on Red* (1,2,3,4,5), 2013, Installation view at AbTeC Gallery, part of *Reformatted* exhibition, 2020. Image source: Exhibition Album on Flickr. Accessed May 11, 2022.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/obxstudios/albums/72157719470542829>

Figure 24 — Reformatted Vernissage, AbTeC Gallery, 2020. Image source: Vernissage Album on Flickr. Accessed May 11, 2022.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/obxstudios/albums/72157719397036624>

Figure 25 — Reformatted Vernissage, AbTeC Gallery, 2020. Image source: Vernissage Album on Flickr. Accessed May 11, 2022.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/obxstudios/albums/72157719397036624>

INTRODUCTION

When I first saw examples of Indigenous art in Montreal I was struck by the daring and innovative ways the artists challenge, question, and reveal issues related to colonization and decolonization. I asked myself why I had not seen any of these artworks throughout my education, including my Master's degree in the philosophy of arts, undertaken in Tehran. Before moving to Canada, my source of information about art all over the world was mainly from digital platforms such as the websites of museums and art galleries, online press releases, publications, newsletters and so forth. As a student in Iran but digitally connected to the world, I thought I was well-versed in questions of colonialism and European hegemony, but the important cultural production of North America's Indigenous artists had not been apparent to me. Therefore, I sought an answer to this gap in my knowledge by exploring the information that these platforms provide and the data they stuff cyberspace with. Progressively, my questions surrounding the availability of art and cultural materials facilitated by the development of digital tools, also encompassed how epistemological and methodological aspects of art history are being practiced and enabled by digital technologies.

Since the establishment of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s, a great deal of cultural materials has migrated into networked environments. In the twenty-first century, it could be argued that the global network of the internet has become a fundamental dataset for gaining information and more importantly, doing research. The encounter of traditional humanities with computational techniques, enabled by digital technologies, gave birth to what is known as the digital humanities. However, computational methodologies and analytical techniques have not systematically taken hold in art history. As will be discussed in this thesis, reports show that art historians have been hesitant to employ these digital tools, mainly because they question whether their research will benefit from deeper levels of digital engagement. Most of the projects related to art history that

might be labeled as using digital methods support this claim since digital technologies are used in a simplistic or merely quantitative way. These issues shape the theoretical framework of my project. Two goals have guided this thesis: on the one hand, I address the debates surrounding how digital technologies have been transforming the research questions and methodologies of the discipline of art history; and on the other, I test out these bigger questions across the field through a focused case study, examining how the work of a single Indigenous artist, Nadia Myre (an Algonquin member of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation, b. 1974), appears on a range of digital platforms, while asking whether or not the artwork's strong decolonizing stance is persuasively represented.

I organized the content of this thesis into two sections. In section one, I provide a context for how the fields of art and humanities have dealt with the intellectual complexities brought about by the digital era. I then develop the theoretical framework by grounding my discussion in the question put forward by the visual theorist Johanna Drucker, namely, "Is There a Digital Art History?" Explaining how a range of authors distinguish between "digitized," "digital" and "technical" art history, I move forward to argue for the possibility of a critical digital art history, by investigating the challenges that art historians and scholars have faced when dealing with the information age and digital technologies.

In the second section I propose an answer to the imperative that a digital art history must have methodological complexity – by approaching digital art history through the lens of a decolonizing methodology. The principal aim of this research is therefore to contribute to the understanding of a digital turning point in the field of art history, by insisting on the importance of Indigenous artists and theorists' contribution to the entire field of art history. Considering how the artworks of an Indigenous artist are displayed digitally, allows me to reflect on the status quo

of digital art history, while deconstructing it in a critical way. To understand the changes to the discipline enacted under the rubric of digital art history, I believe it is crucial to include not only academic art historical research facilitated by technology, but also museum websites, galleries' social media, art publications digital extensions, and so on. The discourses which have constituted the structures of art history may function similarly in cyberspace. Therefore, it is important to investigate the persistence of those master narratives that art history has been trying to confront in recent decades. Analysing the online presence of an Indigenous artist is one step in a decolonizing approach to digital art history. This is important at a time when information systems have not provided equal opportunities despite the initial premise of the digital world, at a moment when not every culture benefits from the same levels of connectivity and modes of sharing information.

However, given the limited scope of this thesis, I narrowed my case study to the websites of three Montreal-based museums and galleries where some artworks created by the artist Nadia Myre are shown. These three websites are the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA), a major public Institution; Art Mûr, a private contemporary art gallery; and AbTeC virtual gallery, an Indigenous-run network. Choosing a single artist was not an easy decision to make, but Myre's work has resonated with me for the way it tells the stories of a shared past, for how it travels across realities of identity, collective history, and cultural representations while also offering insights about resilience and Indigenous peoples' presence on the land.

As the writing of this thesis comes to an end, I am reflecting on the past two years of working on this topic. I started this research before the pandemic had shaken every aspect of our lives. Since then, the ways in which we conceive virtual/online life have transformed drastically. With that change, we were compelled to employ digital technologies not only as one tool amongst many, but as the main means for communication, as virtual driveways to see friends and family

members, as windows for contemplating the world, as platforms to learn and teach, and as venues for visiting museums and art galleries. These pandemic circumstances show that the critical study of digital technologies is more important than ever when the internet has become an inseparable part of reality.

SECTION ONE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Part one

Digital Scholarship, Intellectual Complexities

The American Council of Learned Societies defines “digital scholarship” as related to “building a digital collection of information for further study and analysis; creating appropriate tools for collection-building; creating appropriate tools for the analysis and study of collections; using digital collections and analytical tools to generate new intellectual products; and creating authoring tools for these new intellectual products, either in traditional forms or in digital form.”¹ This broad definition, brings several art historical examples to mind such as the *VERONA* (Van Eyck Research in Open Access) project with its goal of “providing a reference for comparative research on the works of Van Eyck;”² *Technical Data/Image Base on Caravaggio and His Followers*, a project that examines technical and material research on works of arts with a focus on Caravaggio’s influence;³ or a most recent project *The Shape of Art History in the Eyes of the Machine*, which is an attempt to use machines to classify styles in art as an extension of art historians’ methods for analysing style.⁴

Although the ultimate objective of the first two examples remains more related to “building a digital collection of information for further study and analysis,” the contribution of the latter

¹ John Unsworth, *Our Cultural Commonwealth: The Report of the American Council of Learned Societies Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 2006): 7. <http://www.acls.org/cyberinfrastructure/>.

² The project is carried out by the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA) in Brussels as a study of “the creative process of Jan Van Eyck (c. 1390-1441) and the different hands involved in the paintings of his workshop.” See, <http://clostertovaneyck.kikirpa.be/verona/#home/sub=project>

³ Implemented by the Max Planck Institut für Kunstgeschichte/Bibliotheca Hertziana (Rome, Italy), the aim of the project is “to consider Caravaggio’s entire catalogue within the sphere of technical data on painting production influenced by his style during the first half of the seventeenth century.” Marco Cardinali, “Digital Tools and Technical Views: The Intersection of Digital Art History and Technical Art History in a Digital Archive on the Painting Technique of Caravaggio and His Followers”, *Visual Resources* 35, No. 1-2 (2019): 54. See also, <https://www.biblhertz.it/en/digital-humanities-lab>

⁴ Ahmed Elgammal, B. Liu et al., “The Shape of Art History in the Eyes of the Machine” (paper published on the 32nd AAAI conference on Artificial Intelligence, New Orleans, February 2018).

example is more linked to “creating appropriate tools for the analysis and study of collections.” By reviewing numerous examples that relate to this definition, one can see that what they share in large part is the complexity generated by their interdisciplinary nature, namely by using tools created in the scientific field, and at the same time being part of the category of art and humanities. In other words, tools and techniques originally created in fields outside the arts and humanities are employed to analyze the objects of study in the arts and humanities. Among the examples mentioned earlier, the first two were carried out by art historical institutions, whereas the third project was implemented by computer scientists. All three examples use digital tools to test out what art historians already know. Yet a huge gap can be found in the principles guiding the way they are conducted.

In the project *The Shape of Art History in the Eyes of the Machine*, the scholars first describe the tools, material content and methodologies that forms part of their research. As they explain, the machine-learning software programs AlexNet, VGGNet, and RestNet5 (tool) were employed to train “a large number of state-of-the-art deep convolutional neural network models, and variants of them,”⁶ (methodology) to analyze and classify the style of images provided by the WikiArt dataset (material content).⁷ Examining the ability of the machine to learn and predict style categories, Saleh and Elgammal’s main questions are “How does the machine classify styles

⁵ These are variations of machine learning software “originally developed for the task of object categorization” for an earlier project implemented to study art historical images in the discipline of computer science. Ahmed Elgammal et al. p 3.

⁶ Ahmed Elgammal et al. p 5. As defined by Elgammal, the Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) method in general “consists of a sequence of layers of artificial neural units of different types. Convolutional layers apply learned filters (templates) to each location of its input image. These convolutional layers are interleaved with pooling layers, which aggregate the responses of the convolution layers. Typically, the sequence of convolution and pooling layers results in re-representing the visual information in the image as responses to a large number of learned filters applied to wider and wider regions of the image as the information propagates deeper in the network. Such filters are learned or tuned by the machine in response to the task in hand.” Ahmed Elgammal et al., 7.

⁷ Elgammal et al.

in art? And how does it relate to art historians' methods for analyzing style?"⁸ The result of their analysis of 77,000 paintings shows factors underlying the visual variations of style in art. While some of their findings correlate with style patterns suggested by art historians such as Heinrich Wölfflin, they see their research as offering "insights into the characteristics and functions of style for art historians, confirming existing knowledge in an empirical way, and providing machine-produced patterns and connections for further exploration," they state.⁹ Therefore, their analysis remains mainly limited to a quantitative confirmation of art historians' observations.

As the examples in question indicate, digital projects are either creating reference materials in the form of image repositories or they use big data to develop computational analytic tools that can test out old art historical questions. While one cannot deny the importance of digitizing art history and the employment of computational methods in art historical research, this thesis argues that we need to dive deeper on the grounds that "art history is about so much more,"¹⁰ as the art historian and cultural analyst Griselda Pollock asserts. In her critique of Babak Saleh and Ahmed Elgammal's project, Pollock comments that they seem to consider art history as nothing more than nineteenth century connoisseurship. "But unsurprisingly, the discipline has developed somewhat since then," she explains, "We no longer hunt for connections – we ask questions. We are not diagnosticians seeking for common symptoms. We are not criminologists tracing clues that link a with b."¹¹ By overlooking contemporary art historical concerns, these technical projects merely extend traditional art history studies, missing out on the bigger questions and reinforcing the master

⁸ Elgammal et al., 1.

⁹ Saleh and Elgammal, 24.

¹⁰ Griselda Pollock, "Computers can find similarities between paintings – but art history is about so much more," *The Conversation*, August 22, 2014, <https://theconversation.com/computers-can-find-similarities-between-paintings-but-art-history-is-about-so-much-more-30752>

¹¹ Pollock, 2014.

narratives that are no longer practiced. The fascination with technical advancements extended an uncritical approach to the field of art and humanities.

Digital art history: “The Belated Tail End of the Digital Humanities”

In an attempt to build a systematic account of digital humanities in action, Susan Schreibman, Professor of Digital Arts and Culture at Maastricht University, emphasizes the dependency on computational methods, defining those methods as the techniques and tools that are used to produce new knowledge as well as the creation, analysis and dissemination of digital resources that are either based on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) or critically dependant on it.¹² Drawing from the definition proposed by the *arts-humanities.net* project in 2007, she argues for “a conceptualization of the process of digital humanities having content, tools and methods as its core elements,”¹³ and calls for a focus on “method,” on which, she claims, the arts and humanities are widely dependant. Schreibman highlights the importance of understanding these methods and their suitability in the context of the humanities but she overlooks the significant discrepancy between the disciplines in which these methods are designed and the disciplines on which they are applied, namely, the difference between the natural sciences, including computational sciences, and the humanities on the other hand. In other words, she does not seem concerned that the digital humanities have been established according to disciplines in which the object of knowledge is measurable by quantitative methods, whereas it is a qualitative approach that prevails in the humanities.

¹² Lorna Hughes, Panos Constantopoulos, and Costis Dallas, “Digital Methods in the Humanities: Understanding and Describing their Use across the Disciplines,” in *A New Companion to Digital Humanities* (UK: Blackwell, 2016), 152.

¹³ Hughes, Constantopoulos, and Dallas, 152.

Having been fascinated by the new opportunities offered by the technological revolution, that facilitated studies that would be impossible to carry out without technical advancements, the domain of digital humanities has for the most part taken an uncritical approach toward computational methods, not challenging “the unquestioned value of computational analysis and digital technology for furthering research.”¹⁴ Moreover, the presumption that technology is the most powerful tool for producing new knowledge, has led to the misleading assumption that it necessarily improves and strengthens all disciplines; this has sidelined the need to question methods informed by epistemologies from their home disciplines.

Therefore, in debates surrounding the humanities entering the digital arena the question remains whether the digital humanities is grounded on humanistic theories and values, which is to say whether it has a humanistic “cyberinfrastructure,”¹⁵ to borrow from John Unsworth, dean of libraries, university librarian, and professor of English at Brandeis university. Referring to the 2003 National Science Foundation report *Revolutionizing Science and Engineering through Cyberinfrastructure*, Unsworth describes “cyberinfrastructure” as a “layer of enabling hardware, algorithms, software, communications, institutions, and personnel that lies between a layer of base technologies . . . the integrated electro-optical components of computation, storage, and communication and a layer of software programs, services, instruments, data, information, knowledge, and social practices applicable to specific projects, disciplines, and communities of practice. [...] This layer should provide an effective and efficient platform for the empowerment of specific communities of researchers to innovate and eventually revolutionize what they do, how

¹⁴ Nuria Rodríguez-Ortega, “Digital Art History: The Questions That Need to Be Asked.” *Visual Resources* 35, no. 1-2 (2019): 8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973762.2019.1553832>.

¹⁵ Unsworth, 6.

they do it, and who participates.”¹⁶ The full breadth of the question of cyberinfrastructure and how to develop it for art historians (as one of “specific communities of researchers”) is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, exploring the digital humanities can pave the way for an extension of art historical methodologies into the digital domain. However, this would imply a more active role for scholars in the field of art history, as the discipline is considered to be “the belated tail end of the digital humanities”¹⁷ and is in danger of being left behind by the technological turn in the humanities.

In a report on the first ever survey of the art history community published in 2012, Diane M. Zorich, the director of the Smithsonian’s Digitization Program Office (DPO) and one of the leaders of an expert team digitizing Smithsonian collections, provides a record of art historians’ opinions on and engagement with digital technologies in the discipline. According to Zorich, while “there is a pervasive sense that the discipline is too cautious, moves too slowly, and has to “catch up” in the digital arena,”¹⁸ one of the main issues for art historians is the lack of awareness about the latest digital advances. Art historians also have difficulty determining whether methods and techniques developed by other disciplines might be relevant for their studies and this leads to a lack of interest in exploring how their research might benefit from deeper levels of digital engagement or how digital scholarship might enable new areas of inquiry. Zorich points out that the discipline’s engagement with the digital world is often limited to the use of digital images and to searching the Web. She further notes that “technologies that allow for in depth analysis and

¹⁶ Unsworth, 6.

¹⁷ Claire Bishop, “Against Digital Art History,” *Humanities Futures: Franklin Humanities Institute*, accessed January 20, 2021. <https://humanitiesfutures.org/papers/digital-art-history/>

¹⁸ Diane M. Zorich, *Transitioning to a Digital World: Art History, Its Research Centers, and Digital Scholarship*, (A Report to the The Samuel H. Kress Foundation and The Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media. Virginia: George Mason University, 2021), 20.

interpretive research (such as GIS, rendering, or text analysis tools) are not typically used by those working in art history research centers.”¹⁹ Given that most of these techniques are amongst those commonly classified as part of the digital humanities, and because of the humanities’ uncritical approach toward these techniques, it is necessary to reconsider the reception of digital technologies by the discipline of art history with regard to an essential distinction between simply employing digital technologies as mere tools and utilizing those tool in a transformative way with a critical approach. Addressing the impact of technology on the discipline of art history, Matthew P. Long and Roger C. Schonfeld explore a wide range of activities that might be labeled as digital methods, categorizing them along a spectrum, “from those that are technology-enabled, where new software or technology has a transformative impact, to those that are technology-facilitated, where technology has a more incidental impact”.²⁰As has been discussed earlier, much of the rhetoric in the digital humanities has been linked to the adaptation of computational methods, a digital turn which resulted in “technological-facilitated studies,” that is to say studies in which technology greases the wheels. On the other hand, since the discipline of art history has been slow in moving toward digital technologies, art historians have been hesitant about how “technology-enabled” studies can be transformative. This brings us to the significant distinction that Johanna Drucker draws between “digitized art history” and “digital art history” in her influential 2013 article, “Is There a ‘Digital’ Art History?”

¹⁹ Zorich, 13.

²⁰ Matthew P. Long and Roger C. Schonfeld, *Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Art Historians* (New York: Ithaka S+R, 2014), 14. https://sr.ithaka.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/SR_Support-Changing-Research-ArtHist_20140429.pdf

Art History: Technical, Digitized, or Digital?

Seeking a definition for digital art history, Drucker proposes a division between an early phase of practicing art history by employing more advanced, technological tools, and a further step whereby these tools would have a fundamental impact on how the discipline is practiced. While the former is built on “the use of online resources,” the proper domain of the latter is “the use of analytic techniques enabled by computational technology,”²¹ she claims. Therefore, digitized art history in her view, involves doing some part of work digitally, whereas digital art history would have to bring about a substantial transformation in research questions and knowledge production – a new way of thinking with digital processes, in the field of art history.

Drucker’s fundamental separation of these concepts has become a point of reference in the definition and practice of digital art history. Many other scholars have constructed their arguments using this same distinction, although some authors criticize her for not actually undertaking the re-evaluation of art historical method she calls for,²² since at no point in her text does she provide a clear definition of what digital art history is. However, in a later conversation hosted by Francesca Rose, the program director and manager of communications at the Terra Foundation for American Art, she refers to digital art history with uncertainty, asking, “what would that mean? That a form of art history completely reliant on digital tools is now a distinct branch of the field? It doesn’t make sense.”²³ Furthermore, in a sense, Drucker’s attempt adds more complexity to the debate as she does

²¹ Johanna Drucker, “Is there a Digital Art History?” *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation* 29, no. 1-2 (March 2013): 7, DOI: 10.1080/01973762.2013.761106

²² Paul B. Jaskot, “Digital art History as the Social History of Art: Towards the Disciplinary Relevance of Digital Methods,” *Visual Resources: an international journal on images and their uses* 35 no. 1-2 (2019): 1-13.

²³ Johanna Drucker, Anne Helmreich, Matthew Lincoln and Francesca Rose, “Digital art history: the American scene,” *Perspective* [online] 2 (2015): 9. DOI: 10.4000/perspective.6021.

not take into consideration the already existing terms including “technical art history” used by scholars who had been carrying out their research through a reliance on digitized materials.

One example of this research is a project conducted by Marco Cardinali, a professor in Physics applied to Cultural Heritage at the University of Rome La Sapienza and the co-founder of the company Emmebi Diagnostica Artistica, specializing in the scientific analysis of artworks. Through a review of the history of technical art history in his project *Digital Tools and Technical Views: The Intersection of Digital Art History and Technical Art History in a Digital Archive on the Painting Technique of Caravaggio and His Followers*, Cardinali investigates the legacy of scientific reasoning in the field of art history. He refers to technical art history as a way of implementing research in art history by employing “impressive technological advances both in reproduction devices and in multispectral detectors that took place from the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century.”²⁴ While the term “technical art history” might seem synonymous with digitized art history, he draws a distinction between them by describing the latter as a “range from the digitized collection of primary sources, to digital means of scholarly publishing based on open peer review and team research, to scholarly research enabled by computational analysis.”²⁵ Therefore, in his distinction he separates significant technological methods and innovations incorporating significant technological methods and innovations, such as the use of photography beginning in the 19th century, and those that offer faster and easier solutions to scholars, which would fall under the rubric of digitized art history.

²⁴ Marco Cardinali, “Digital Tools and Technical Views: The Intersection of Digital Art History and Technical Art History in a Digital Archive on the Painting Technique of Caravaggio and His Followers”, *Visual Resources* 35, no. 1–2 (2019): 64. DOI: 10.1080/01973762.2019.1555351

²⁵ Cardinali, 52.

For Cardinali, the most significant episode in the development of technical art history is the invention of photography. Asserting that art historians were among the early converts to the use of photography, Cardinali notes, “the founder of art history as an academic discipline in Italy, Adolfo Venturi (1856–1941) believed that the new tool would be key for advancing research methodologies.”²⁶ In a similar way photography offered unprecedented opportunities to scholars such as Heinrich Wölfflin.²⁷

Whether “technical,” “digitized” or “digital,” the question that should be asked is: has the digital turn in art history been helping the discipline to move forward? There are nonetheless important questions raised by Drucker’s article, that are worth considering. She re-examines the computational methods and tools employed by art history at a time when digital technologies are no longer revolutionary, but she also introduces the possibility of comparing digital art history and critical theory. Drucker first refers to the fundamental challenges that were brought about by critical theory in the 1980s, changes that transformed art history profoundly. In her view, critical theory is understood as “semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, cultural and critical studies, and feminist thinking,” those theories that effected art history in such a way that “every aspect of art historical knowledge was shaken at its foundations.”²⁸ She goes on to ask: “What work in digital formats or using digital tools would produce an intellectual insight sufficiently striking that anyone working in the field would be prompted to cite it because it has

²⁶ Marco Cardinali, 64.

²⁷ The German art historian, Horst Bredekamp has discussed how early 20th century art historians such as Heinrich Wölfflin understood that photography would fundamentally transform the research and teaching in discipline of art history. Bredekamp writes: “in contrast to the rejection of photography by artists, art critics, and members of their own discipline, these scholars’[art historians] work thus constituted a new perspective towards Bildgeschichte.” (“A Neglected Tradition? Art History as Bildwissenschaft,” *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 420).

²⁸ Drucker, 5.

changed the field through its methods or theoretical implications?”²⁹ As will be discussed later in the thesis, Drucker compares digital methodologies and critical theory to question whether digital technologies are capable of changing the discipline of art history profoundly and structurally, with regard to how it understands its object of study.

In her view, the tremendous transformation brought about by cultural studies and critical theory radically challenged the discipline of art history. Whereas photography pushed art history forward on its technological axis, critical theory shook it epistemologically. However, in both examples the discipline’s methodology has been fundamentally transformed. It is thus possible to argue for a critical digital art history that would entail profoundly transformative, technology-enabled ways of practicing the discipline.

Therefore, while searching for a definition is a fundamental step in legitimizing this area of research, it is important to re-phrase Drucker’s title question in a more critical way. In an attempt to provide a critical overview of the evolution of the field of digital art history, Nuria Rodríguez-Ortega, the Chair of the Art History Department at the University of Malaga has written, “The key question that must be posed today is not ‘What is digital art history?’ or, in other words, what are its elements of similarity and difference with regard to a supposed ‘traditional’ art history or a digitized art history. Rather, we should be asking ‘What does art history mean in the post-digital era?’ ‘How are its identity and role constructed in this context?’”³⁰ Challenging the unquestioned value of computational methods, Rodríguez-Ortega seeks to re-evaluate the adaptation of digital

²⁹ Drucker, 6.

³⁰ Rodríguez-Ortega, 8.

methods in art history within a post-digital society, when technological progressivism is no longer taken for granted, and hence the technical aspect of these methods ceases to be a value in itself.

Critical Digital Art History: An Uneven Playing Field?

As mentioned above, Drucker draws a comparison between digital art history and the role played by critical theory in the past. She continues to argue that if the convergence of digital technologies and art history is supposed to have a comparable impact, the digital methods in question should fundamentally change “the way we understand the objects of our inquiry.”³¹ Drucker’s argument above all circles around the intellectual foundation of art history; she wants to know how it is being influenced by new digital tools. As she argues, digital methods should not merely consist of some new tools for accessing and analysing large numbers of artworks easier and faster but should rather imply new ways of thinking. That is to say, a profound transformation in art history will occur only if these approaches turn into critical ways of thinking with digital processes and “provide new bases on which the judgment of the trained historian can build.”³² However – while Drucker explains what she hopes will emerge, she herself does not explain how the transformation will occur, or how digital methods can become a genuinely critical approach.

In a similar way, Rodríguez-Ortega develops a critical stance toward digital methods. She proposes that, in a post-digital era, when the digital has ceased to be a revolution, the strategies and methods that have been brought about by it and employed in various disciplines should be revised and re-evaluated. This “involves the introduction of a meta-critical focus into the process of construction, definition, and practice of the so-called digital art history.”³³ However, unlike

³¹ Rodríguez-Ortega, 6.

³² Rodríguez-Ortega, 7.

³³ Rodríguez-Ortega, 7.

Drucker who believes in finding novel ways to exploit the potential of computational analysis, Rodríguez-Ortega asks for a critical perspective on digital art history that is not based on technological progressivism. She is skeptical about the techno-determinism surrounding digital art history, that often describes digital technologies as having progressive potential, and takes for granted that computational analysis has unquestionable advantages for furthering research.

The dominant narrative in digital art history literature has indeed tended to describe the ever-progressive potential of these new tools, their ability to deliver ever-more complex analyses in art history; as if only those computational methods can enable new discoveries, that would otherwise remain undiscovered in the discipline. What is at stake in this scenario is a marginalization of theory as digital technique becomes a center around which art historical research practices can be shaped. In other words, instead of reconstructing methodological tools according to theoretical questions, it is the tool, namely computational method, that determines research questions. This is especially relevant when it comes to the centrality of quantification in projects carried out under the banner of digital art history.

In an article on the contribution of computational science to the field of art history in the digital age, the pioneering theorist of digital culture and media art, Lev Manovich discusses the adaptation of quantitative methods in art history, or “humanities of the visual,”³⁴ as he puts it. Manovich refers to Adrian Raftery, a statistician and sociologist who argues that statistical methods have greatly improved scientific rigor in the discipline of sociology; for Manovich, the adaptation of quantitative methods in the academy suggests that sooner or later the fields of art

³⁴ Lev Manovich, “Data Science and Digital Art History.” *International Journal for Digital Art History* 1 (2015): 14.

and humanities will experience their “quantitative turns,”³⁵ as well. Similarly, Elgammal and others approach art history as a “predictive science” which with the help of data science and machine learning will “discover fundamental patterns and trends not necessarily apparent to the individual human eye.”³⁶ However, in Manovich’s view quantitative and computational techniques should be integrated into the humanities methodology not in the form of classical statistical methods but rather, as related to the context of social and cultural transformations.³⁷ Likewise, what he means when discussing the analysis of cultural phenomena with the help of data science is above all quantitative ways of comparison, which enables multiple views of same data, thus expanding our understanding of it.³⁸ Therefore, in Manovich’s argument, while digitally-enhanced comparison allows us to compute differences between as many images as we want, it does not move beyond that, towards a qualitative level. Nevertheless, Manovich is well aware of this limitation and explains that although data science attempts to utilize computers to accomplish human beings’ cognitive tasks faster, “achieving this goal is not easy because of what computer sciences call a ‘semantic gap’. This is the gap between the knowledge that a human being can extract from some data, and how a computer sees that same data.”³⁹ Yet, he still conceives of this computer “vision” as a requirement in “seeing” contemporary culture since he sees it as an extension of the human ability to compare which contributes to the attempt to automate recognition, classification, or another cognitive tasks.⁴⁰

³⁵ Manovich, 14.

³⁶ Elgammal, Liu et al., 24.

³⁷ Elgammal, Liu et al.

³⁸ Elgammal, Liu et al.

³⁹ Elgammal, Liu et al., 22.

⁴⁰ Elgammal, Liu et al., 23-33.

Along similar lines, Drucker speaks of the impossibility of automating judgment. Although she acknowledges machine vision's inability to imitate human perception, and therefore qualitative analysis, she maintains a techno-progressive notion of digital methods for the particular reason that "the analysis of specific features or properties in large corpora of digital files of texts or images on which art historical research proceeds can be significantly enhanced and augmented by the use of computational techniques,"⁴¹ as she states. Therefore, while she argues for a critical approach regarding the process of art history going digital, for her it is above all the quantitative method that allows art historians to ask new research questions, have a new understanding of the object of their inquiry and find new bases for their judgment.

Contrary to Drucker and Manovich, Rodríguez-Ortega sees this techno-progressive narrative as one of the main obstacles facing art history as it becomes digital. She does not deny the advantages of computational capacities for the discipline of art history, nevertheless, she takes into consideration the post-humanistic, post-digital hybrid ecology where humanistic thinking is no longer the sole point of reference. Under these circumstances, the notion of an art object under study, the subject who studies it, and even the process of creation, distribution and reception are subject to profound transformations. Rodríguez-Ortega argues for re-thinking "the techno-positivistic, empirical, and objectivist approach that is usually associated with data and analytical tools, in order to contextualize them in a 'humanistic' way of thinking that is defined by its interpretive nature."⁴² In other words, she wants to remain cognizant of the epistemological and methodological changes that accompany the digital. This re-configuration includes a twofold trajectory: on the one hand, a formulation of changes imposed by new computational methods on

⁴¹ Drucker, 5.

⁴² Drucker, 9.

the ways in which art history is understood and studied, that is to say, on the intellectual construction of art historical knowledge such as comparison or classification. On the other hand, a reflection on the ways in which these computational methods are playing an important role in the production and distribution of art historical knowledge. Therefore, through examining these new transformations outside a techno-progressive perspective, one can identify the insufficiencies of computational methods for the discipline as well. Strictly speaking, if technology is “enhancing” and “augmenting” art historical research, to borrow from Drucker, we should also shed light on those dark corners in art history where computational methods have a more insidious effect of reinforcing master-narratives.

As mentioned above, Griselda Pollock criticized art history related projects building on computer science because there was no understanding of the development in art history, away from nineteenth century connoisseurship to the rise in significance of economics, politics, literature, philosophy, languages, and ideologies in the study of art. “Art thinks through making, through forms, through materials. And over the past century, art history has been enriched by feminist, post-colonial, queer, and trans-national perspectives,”⁴³ she states. In a somewhat similar way, in his pioneering book from 2001, *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich asks, “what are the ways in which new media relies on older cultural forms and languages and what are the ways in which it breaks with them?”⁴⁴ The contributions of these authors are crucial for this thesis and allow me to formulate a series of questions. If the history of art describes, analyses, and interprets objects of visual art and culture, now that part of its methodology is new, digitally speaking, how does this influence the discipline of art history? In other words, if art history is turning into a digital

⁴³ Pollock, 2014.

⁴⁴ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 34.

form of knowledge, what are the ways in which this new art history (art history going digital) relies on older art historical languages and methods, and what are the ways in which it breaks with them?

By the same token, it is important to ask how digital art history is contributing to those approaches and master narratives that art history has been trying to question and change. Thus, a critical debate should take into consideration the epistemological changes in the discipline and how these new branches of knowledge intersect. One way to approach this is through an examination of “the inequalities that information systems can produce and the cultural hegemony, based on the technical and economic advantages that certain countries and cultures currently have, which create an uneven playing field,”⁴⁵ as Rodríguez-Ortega maintains.

Part two

A Two-edged Sword: Digital Art History and Marginalization

In his introduction to the 2005 book *Digital Art History*, the art historian William Vaughan speaks of an “intellectual fusion” that resulted from the interaction between developing information technologies and the study and practice of art,⁴⁶ as he wrote in 2005 Now, more than fifteen years later, it is important to look back at the road we have taken and “reflect upon to what point we are configuring truly hybrid spaces.”⁴⁷ While digital technologies offer new possibilities, we should not forget that they also introduce the risk of marginalization. This marginalization is in part a consequence of a more or less passive consumption of digital techniques by art historians, one can argue. As discussed earlier, until recently digital technologies were considered new tools that helped art historians to carry out their research more easily. The notion of progressive potentiality

⁴⁵ Rodríguez-Ortega, 132.

⁴⁶ William Vaughan, “Introduction: Digital Art History?” in *Digital Art History: A Subject in Transition*, ed. Anna Bentkowska-Kafel, Trish Cashen and Hazel Gardiner (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2005), 1–2.

⁴⁷ Rodríguez-Ortega, 10.

that accompanied these methods tended to overshadow their epistemological or sociocultural dimensions.

Moreover, the supposedly neutral characteristic of cyberspace along with its premise as a global, open, collaborative and equal place has reinforced the idea of the end of hierarchy, the dominance of certain ideologies or epistemologies and the immediacy of access and dissemination. Calling this the “fallacy of the absence of intermediation,” Rodríguez-Ortega recognizes this as a myth that has to do with “the illusory belief that the digital realm is a neutral, innocuous space that delivers the information that we seek, produce, and manage in a pristine way, as if it were a mirror. This fallacy of the absence of intermediation makes it difficult for us to see the Web as a cultural, political, and ideological venue.”⁴⁸ Drawing an example from UNESCO World Digital Library and comparing the differences in the numbers of entries accorded to various cultural contexts, she shows that throughout its digital development, art history has continued to be dominated by the Western tradition.⁴⁹ Despite the initial premise of cyberspace then, the fact remains that non-western narratives have been marginalized.

This example and similar instances reveal that “online interaction is anything but a utopia of democratic communication,” as Cameron Bailey, a Canadian film critic and the CEO of the Toronto International Film Festival, has commented, when arguing that race functions similarly across physical and virtual spaces.⁵⁰ Marginalizing discourses continue to exist online in the form of data and content, while these discourses can become a constituent of the structures constructing

⁴⁸ Rodríguez-Ortega, 132.

⁴⁹ Rodríguez-Ortega, 131.

⁵⁰ Cameron Bailey, “Virtual Skin: Articulating Race in Cyberspace,” in *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, ed. Mary Anne Moser and Douglas MacLeod, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 30.

cyberspace itself. Although the World Wide Web was supposedly built to create new levels of connectivity and modes of sharing information with the idea of moving toward an egalitarian virtual world, the network was designed by specific logics, with specific forms of technology and accessibility to specific groups at its foundation, which multiplies exponentially as it is growing.

In their 2005 article on Indigenous art and digital space, Jason Edward Lewis (Hawaiian/Samoan), a digital media poet, artist and software designer, and also the Concordia University Research Chair in Computational Media and the Indigenous Future Imaginary, and Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, (Kanien'kehá:ka, Mohawk), a new media artist, acknowledge the opportunities that cyberspace brought to marginalized Indigenous communities: "Cyberspace—the websites, chat rooms, bulletin boards, virtual environments, and games that make up the internet offers Aboriginal communities an unprecedented opportunity to assert control over how we represent ourselves to each other and to non-Aboriginals."⁵¹ However, they are aware of the danger of seeing this space as "Terra Nullius,"⁵² which is to say a free, blank tablet, ready to be inscribed.

Therefore, as digital tools and methods further permeate the fabric of cultural production, distribution and reception, it is important to ask whether they are bringing about changes to the structures and mechanisms of power underlying knowledge production. In other words, will digital technologies generate structurally transformed representations or simply "duplicate what already exists?" as a media artist Loretta Todd (Cree/Metis) asks, when discussing Indigenous narratives

⁵¹ Jason Lewis and Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, "Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* (Summer 2005): 29.

⁵² Lewis and Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, 30.

in cyberspace and how Indigenous worldviews find a place in and fit into cyberspace.⁵³ Even though cyberspace can be considered an extraordinary opportunity for excluded cultures to represent their art practices and knowledge production according to their own epistemologies, the structures that maintain art-historical hegemony have remained strong. It is therefore of interest to test out this area of agency and contestation, by examining some of the digital platforms on which non-western art is represented in the territory now known as Canada.

Old Guards, New Technologies: Decolonizing Digital Art History

It can be argued that one of the most important art historical developments in recent years has been the flourishing of Indigenous art, art history, theory, methodology, and curatorship. Increasingly, the project to decolonize art, art history, and art institutions has become crucial. Indigenous peoples in Canada have had a rich history of utilizing as well as developing digital media to tell their stories in new ways. Their endeavour to become active participants in the contemporary technological world has helped the movement towards a decolonized digital realm. The ground-breaking works of Indigenous researchers has raised awareness about the structures perpetuating the status quo while also calling attention to changing perspectives, thus inspiring both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars to bring more voices and experiences to the discipline of art history. Therefore, as a critical tool, a decolonizing methodology helps to deconstructing privileged narratives lodged within art historical theories and practices. This constructive approach helps provide a picture of what a non-colonial art history might look like.

⁵³ Loretta Todd, "Aboriginal narratives in cyberspace," in *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, ed. Mary Anne Moser and Douglas MacLeod, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 180.

As the discipline is now turning into a digital form of knowledge the challenge that faces art historians is, to determine how digital methods can become a genuinely critical approach. When Drucker draws a distinction between digitized and digital art history, her main question is whether digital technologies are capable of changing the discipline of art history structurally, in a way that is comparable to the effect of critical theory. I believe that approaching the process of art history going-digital through decolonizing methodologies is one answer to Drucker's insistence that a digital art history must have methodological complexities. It is for this reason that I anchor my analysis in the framework of a decolonial methodology. Nevertheless, before any considerations about how, and under what circumstances digital art history can be decolonized we should first ask if there is a need to decolonize digital art history. A comparison of digital media with knowledge and print media on the one hand, and the changing representations of Indigenous histories and ways of knowing in museums on the other hand, shows that the answer is yes.

In the third chapter of her book, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, when discussing the colonizing of knowledge, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou, Māori), professor of Indigenous education at the University of Waikato, puts forward an argument about how knowledge has been used to discipline colonized subjects through exclusion, marginalization and denial. "The effect of such discipline was," she asserts, "to silence (for ever in some cases) or to suppress the ways of knowing, and the languages for knowing, of many different indigenous peoples. Reclaiming a voice in this context has also been about reclaiming, reconnecting and reordering those ways of knowing which were submerged, hidden or driven underground."⁵⁴ The systematic colonization of Indigenous peoples since the European

⁵⁴ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, (London: Zed Books, 2012), 134.

conquest demanded new arrangements, classification and organization in knowledge, which, not surprisingly, were made from the colonizer's perspective. "Travellers' stories were generally the experiences and observations of white men whose interactions with indigenous 'societies' or 'peoples' were constructed around their own cultural views," Tuhiwai Smith claims.⁵⁵

Thus, colonizers started to discover "new" lands, "new" peoples and "new" cultures while representing them through their own lens. This resulted in a way of seeing and understanding Indigenous peoples that prevailed over the ways in which the Indigenous peoples would have represented themselves. These "travellers' tales and adventurers' adventures,"⁵⁶ to borrow from Tuhiwai, were not therefore objective observations but instruments of power that colonizers employed to establish their own master narratives and legitimize their practices. Even though Smith mainly focuses on Maori people and New Zealand, her seminal text has been referred to widely in Canada and is considered to be one of the main references in any decolonizing approach in research in the domain of art and humanities.

In Canada and North America, Indigenous authors have for generations drawn on traditional knowledge but it wasn't until the 1980s that the emergence of Indigenous publishing made possible editing and publishing practices that follow guidelines in alliance with Indigenous cultures.⁵⁷ The adaptation of editorial guidelines, including the incorporation of Indigenous protocols, in print culture aims to "respect cultural integrity and complement the emerging distinct indigenous literary voice(s),"⁵⁸ asserts Greg Young-Ing (Opsakwayak Cree), a Canadian editor

⁵⁵ Tuhiwai Smith, 41.

⁵⁶ Tuhiwai Smith.

⁵⁷ Greg Young-Ing, "Perspective on the Indigenous tradition/New technology interface," *Indigenous affairs* 2 (2003): 14-17.

⁵⁸ Young-Ing, 16.

and expert on First Nations copyright. Considering these changes is useful since they provide us with a historical context. Even though the “denial” or “exclusion” of Indigenous art and cultures has decreased in some places, and despite the fact that culturally-based practices have been adopted in publishing Indigenous cultural materials, it is still crucial to explore whether Indigenous forms of knowledge and ways of understanding the world are respected in cyberspace. For digital art history, which is still under construction, will not change methodologically and epistemologically if it is not fully open to new narratives and new interpretive models.

Similarly, projects aiming to decolonize museum collections and exhibitions in physical space resonate with the need to decolonize virtual space. In her book, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, Amy Lonetree (Ho-Chunk), an associate professor of American Studies at the University of California, explores how museums can serve as sites of decolonization. Through an analysis of three national and tribal museums,⁵⁹ she investigates how museums can be sites of conscience and decolonization. She argues that a decolonized museum should first, change the way Indigenous history and culture are represented, and also collaborate with Indigenous communities in all aspects of museum practice; furthermore, museums must be willing to speak the hard truth of colonialism. “The purpose is to generate the critical awareness that is necessary to heal from historical unresolved grief on all the levels and in all the ways that continues to harm Native people today,”⁶⁰ she asserts. Moreover, it should challenge the stereotypical representations of Native people produced in the past; and lastly, it needs to serve as a site of knowledge making and remembering.⁶¹ Therefore, in Lonetree’s view, a

⁵⁹ Mille Lacs Indian Museum in Minnesota, the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, and the Ziiibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture & Lifeways in Michigan

⁶⁰ Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museum: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*. (Chapel Hill North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 6.

⁶¹ Lonetree, 3-28.

decolonized museum is constituted of critical components where Indigenous past, present and futures are represented with the communities' collaboration in order to honor their knowledge and worldviews with regard to truth telling.

Likewise, when asked what a decolonized gallery would look like, Heather L. Igloliorte (Inuk) art historian and Concordia University Research Chair, explains:

A decolonized gallery not only has a lot of diversity in it, not only shows the past all the way to the present and shows how contemporary artists are thriving in the present day, bringing in representation from all of the peoples instead of just some of the people. But a decolonized gallery also shares that history and makes bare that hidden history of how a museum's collections came to be. Because they are not neutral, they are very much the product of these hundreds of years of collecting practices and institutionalization that has got us to this point. And so to me a decolonized gallery is much more diverse, is much more representative of people when it is grounded, to reveal those histories and how they came to be that way.⁶²

The same questions asked of museums and galleries must be applied to digital platforms, when cultural materials are represented. What would a decolonized museum website look like? How effective are the online representations of Indigenous cultural materials in shaping an understanding of Indigenous peoples' past and ongoing presence? How do these platforms represent Indigenous protocols? How can they be described as carriers of Indigenous cultural values? In which ways do the design and implementation of digital technology employ Indigenous values?

⁶² Heather Igloliorte and Eunice Béliador, "What does it mean to decolonize a gallery?" Zoom Webinar, May 19, 2021, Concordia University, YouTube channel, accessed February 01, 2022, 5:09, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdcZDQaksfU>.

SECTION TWO: INDIGENIZED DIGITAL ART HISTORY – A CASE STUDY

Now that the need to decolonize digital art history has been presented, some considerations about how and under what circumstances digital art history can be decolonized should be discussed. An important question is posed by Kyra Landzeliu in her article “Paths of Indigenous Cyber-Activism”, where she asks, “Can the internet be “indigenized”: understood and assimilated into Indigenous practices and beliefs, rooted in place and cultural tradition?”⁶³ Keeping in mind the broader context of art history going digital, in this section, I will investigate how the art practice of the artist Nadia Myre (b. 1974), an Algonquin member of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinaabeg First Nation, is represented on a selection of online platforms. Based in Montreal, Quebec, Myre is a multidisciplinary artist who uses a range of materials and media (beading, photography, video, performance, etc.) to explore identity, resilience and the politics of belonging. Over the course of her career, her work has been presented on a variety of online platforms including institutions’ websites, digital catalogues and the digital outlets of museums and galleries.

To narrow down the scope of my investigation, I have selected three different online platforms of Montreal-based institutions, where Nadia Myre’s art is displayed: the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA), Art Mûr Gallery, and the Aboriginal Territories on Cyberspace (AbTeC) virtual gallery. Comparing a major public institution (MMFA), a private contemporary art gallery (Art Mûr), and an Indigenous run network (AbTeC) allows me to ask whether decolonizing methodologies are apparent when exercising digital art history.

Given the limited scope of this MA thesis, I have created a conceptual framework to investigate how Indigenous culture and knowledge are represented through artworks on these

⁶³ Kyra Landzeliu, “Paths of Indigenous Cyber-Activism,” in *Indigenous Affairs 2* (2003): 7.

digital platforms. The two concepts I rely on to analyze my case study are “remembering” and “reframing,” which are drawn from the research projects described by Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her influential text *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2012). Tuhiwai Smith identifies twenty-five social science projects which intersect with Indigenous decolonizing research practices. These decolonizing sub-categories, or we can call them decolonizing strategies, provide me with a way of investigating whether specific online projects are informed by decolonizing methodologies. These methodological strategies are not the only possible approaches to take, but I believe they are a good place to start.

When explaining the project of “Remembering,” Smith argues for the importance of representing the past, stating “the remembering of a people relates not so much to an idealized remembering of a golden past but more specifically to the remembering of a painful past, remembering in terms of connecting bodies with place and experience, and, importantly, people’s responses to that pain.”⁶⁴ Comparably, in Amy Lonetree’s view, museums become sites of decolonization when they represent the Indigenous past, present and futures. Igloliorte too argues for a decolonized gallery which “shows the past all the way to the present” and also ““how contemporary artists are thriving now.” Thus, a decolonizing approach should transcend a mere reference to history. One decolonizing strategy is therefore to make visible the colonial past while acknowledging the resilience of Indigenous people, by highlighting the continuity of their cultures to the present day.

Moreover, a decolonizing approach should also involve “reframing” through decolonizing narratives. As Smith asserts, “reframing is about taking much greater control over the ways in

⁶⁴ Tuhiwai Smith, 244.

which Indigenous issues and social problems are discussed and handled. One of the reasons why so many of the social problems which beset indigenous communities are never solved is that the issues have been framed in a particular way.”⁶⁵ In this respect, then, recognizing Indigenous ways of knowledge making and multi-vocality is another decolonizing strategy. When discussing the MMFA’s attempt to create a conversation between the Inuit art collection and art in the contemporary, modern or other collections, Igloliorte reminds us that “Indigenous people and Black People and people of colour were a part of all of that but there was only one narrative being told.”⁶⁶ It is through this revisioning that a decolonizing methodology helps to construct online representations of Indigenous art. What follows in this section is a description and analysis of the three platforms, to test out if, and how, the above-mentioned decolonizing approaches and strategies have been practiced when Myre’s work appears.

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA)

With over a million visitors per year, the MMFA is one of Canada’s most visited museums and it is also the oldest museum in Canada, having celebrated its 160th anniversary in 2020. The MMFA’s website is funded by the Ministère de la Culture et des Communications and is developed as part of the Quebec’s digital culture plan (PCNQ).⁶⁷ The museum has five pavilions, seven collections, over eighty exhibition galleries, and more than forty-five thousand art pieces. However, there is only one online collection and two images of Nadia Myre’s works on its website. This includes one of her video works, *Portrait in Motion* (2002) and a short video footage about her *Indian Act* (2002).

⁶⁵ Tuhiwai Smith, 255.

⁶⁶ Igloliorte and Béliador, 8:16.

⁶⁷ “About the Museum,” Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, accessed February 10, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/>

Myre's *Portrait in Motion* (2002) is a 3-minute video showing a canoe on a foggy lake. The paddler slowly navigates the canoe across a blurry setting with an accent of warm colors, and calmly approaches us, and we recognize Nadia Myre paddling. Without pause, she traverses and leaves the frame. *Portrait in Motion* appears under the collection "Quebec and Canadian Art," which is one of the museum's seven online collections, alongside "Art of One World," "Early to Modern International Art," "International Contemporary Art," "Sculpture Garden," "Quebec and Canadian Art," "Decorative Art and Design," and "Photography and Graphic art." Surprisingly the "Quebec and Canadian Art" collection has the smallest number of pieces with 766 works (Fig. 1). Clicking on this collection, directs the online visitor to a landing page where the lead image is reminiscent of a museum in a European country, with marble sculptures and classic paintings in gold gilded frames (Fig. 2). This is the first impression that online visitors receive of the collection "Quebec and Canadian Art."

To see the work of Myre, an online visitor might click on the "what's on" tab on the top bar of the landing page, scroll down the page and search for the artist's name or the title of the artwork (Fig. 3). Here, as the online visitor scrolls down the page, the webpage is shaping their understanding of Nadia's work: it is a "Quebec and Canadian" piece of art, (similar to what they have seen in the lead capture picture?) and one that corresponds to the six-section description on the page. The titles of these sections read as follows: Inuit Art, Founding Identities (1700s-1870s), The Era of Annual Exhibitions (1880s-1920s), Towards Modernism (1920s-1930s), The Age of the Manifesto (1940s-1960s), and Expanding Fields (1960s-1970s). One important aspect of this categorization is the timeline. The sections start with the 1700s and ends in the 1970s. Therefore, one might believe that "Quebec and Canadian Art," existed only until the 1970s. This understanding is reinforced by the term "international" in the title of the two other collections

containing some modern and contemporary art, namely, “Early to Modern International Art,” and “International Contemporary Art.” It is worth mentioning that these are the only collections organized chronologically.

None of the descriptions provided in the “Quebec and Canadian Art” section speaks about the survival and resistance of Indigenous peoples, nor do they help in remembering the hard truths of colonization and its ongoing effects. The only references to that history are the phrases “contact with European Canadians” and “proliferation of cultural exchanges with Europe.” Therefore, these descriptions imply a simple encounter and positive cultural exchange. Similarly, the section “Inuit Art” fails to convey Inuit history and the effects of colonization and remains very much an admiration of “the growth of this collection,”⁶⁸ not to mention that there is no trace of other Indigenous peoples’ art, including Métis and First Nations. Therefore, when the online visitor ultimately arrives at Myre’s artwork, their understanding of the work is partially shaped through the context in which her art is represented. The colonial past here is reduced to a simple “contact” and “encounter.” Although speaking of this “contact” is vital, it does not contribute to the decolonial process unless it is narrated as part of Indigenous peoples’ survival and resilience. As Steve Loft (Mohawk), a curator, writer, and media artist, asserts when speaking of their Indigenous communities, “we are as we are, partly as a result of contact, but not DEFINED by it.”⁶⁹ Therefore, referring to this contact without recognizing its effects and the ability to transcend it disregards Indigenous peoples’ cultural continuity.

⁶⁸ “Quebec and Canadian Art,” Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, accessed April 01, 2022.

<https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/collections/quebec-and-canadian-art/>

⁶⁹ Steve Loft, “Who, me? Decolonization as Control,” in *Decolonize me*, (Ottawa: Ottawa Art Gallery = Galerie d’art d’Ottawa, 2012), 75.

Moreover, there is no acknowledgment of Myre's Indigenous identity; she is described as "Nadia Myre, Born in Montreal in 1974."⁷⁰ It is not until reading the description provided at the end of a pop-up page, that visitors discover the artist is Indigenous, provided that they click on the name. At that point the following text appears:

"The Algonquin artist Myre returned to the first contact between Aboriginals and Europeans to re-appropriate the symbols and skills that characterized their interaction. However, she transgresses them, shifting them in time, to expose their discrepancies. Here, her work's clearly political nature is veiled by a playful poetry."⁷¹

Here again the emphasis is on the "first contact between Aboriginals and Europeans," as in the description introducing "Quebec and Canadian Art", yet there is no context for the reason the artist attempted a re-appropriation, while the "clearly political nature" of Myre's artwork has not been explained "clearly". Furthermore, only a still image from the video is provided here, which does not help in grasping the meaning of the work (Fig. 4).

The second of Myre's artwork appearing on the MMFA website is not in the museum collection, but rather, *Indian Act* (2002) was part of a temporary exhibition. (The well-known *Indian Act* consists of the first 56 pages of the legislative text, beaded over with red and white beads.) The website has two videos titled in English and French, both of which show the same moving-image footage, as a camera zooms in and out of the work (Fig. 5). Oddly, though, the English and French soundtracks are markedly different. The English-language video includes the voice-over narration of a poem (about the artwork) by Diane Regimbald, read by Joseph Martin. The poem is mainly a formal description of the work without any reference to its meaning or

⁷⁰ "Nadia Myre, Portrait in Motion," Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, accessed February 02, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/works/53910/>

⁷¹ "Nadia Myre, Portrait in Motion," accessed February 02, 2022.

connotations. “Beads, Red line after line, stitched into the white page, they take space, between the words. A work of white beads stitched. Work of words made from footsteps soon over the words,” the narration goes.⁷² In contrast, the French-language video has Inuit throat singing as a soundtrack. The title reads: “«Indian Act» de Nadia Myre au son de Sivulivivivut (« Ancêtre ») de Tanya Tagaq.” Although this latter video is an effort at multi-vocality by adding Indigenous oral culture in presenting the work, these videos neither introduce the artist nor do they place the work in the larger context of Indigenous history, art and culture.

Furthermore, this work cannot be accessed through the museum’s collection page but is instead part of a page called “An Invitation to Slow Down.” The text on this page reads, “works of art speak to us—all we have to do is take the time to discover their many facets. We encourage you to slow down the pace a little and make time for contemplation.”⁷³ Here again, there is no reason given as to why the work is displayed on this page, nor why a work related to a colonial past is placed on a page which invites online visitors to slow down!

One way to find works or artists on the MMFA website is to use the search toolbar on the top right corner of the landing page. However, when I tried the queries “Indigenous” and “Native” the result does not include Myre’s work (Fig. 6 & 7). On the contrary, the queries “Aboriginal” and “Algonquin” are tags which direct online visitors to her work (Fig. 8 & 9). While the former shows a result of 148 artworks, the latter contains only seven artworks. However, the result for the term “Aboriginal” also includes any artwork that is described by the word “original” in its caption/description/title and the result for the term “Algonquin” includes titles such as “Algonquin

⁷² “An Invitation to Slow Down,” Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, accessed February 01, 2022, <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/education-wellness/invitation-to-slow-down/>

⁷³ “An Invitation to Slow Down,” accessed February 02, 2022.

park.” Therefore, with these search results, the online visitors see a combination of various artworks which are not necessarily created by an Indigenous artist and thereby are not led to understanding the work in a re-visioned context.

Likewise, the query “video” yields no result from the website’s search engine. Strangely, when I refined the search by the “objects” dropdown menu and choose the category “Video/film,” the result includes Myre’s work, which ironically appears as a still image. None of these queries result in finding about her work *Indian Act*, even if the online visitor types one of the terms “Indian Act,” “Indian” or “act” (Fig. 10). Searching for the name of the artist directs the online visitor to all the content that contains her name, including a news item about the 2018 spring break at the museum in which she is introduced as “the Quebec Indigenous artist.”⁷⁴ This is the only place that I found the term “Indigenous” used to identify this artist. However, there is no further detail about her or her art. Similar to the introduction of the artist on the *Portrait in Motion* page, which reads “Born in Montreal in 1974...The Algonquin artist,”⁷⁵ here again, the website fails to represent an Indigenous artist and her art with respect to “remembering the past,” or “reframing” it from a decolonized viewpoint.⁷⁶ The story that MMFA website selects to tell does not challenge

⁷⁴ The French version of the same page says: “l’artiste québécoise d’origine autochtone.” “Spring Break at the Museum,” Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, last updated February 14, 2018. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/news/spring-break-at-the-museum/>

⁷⁵ “Née à Montréal en 1974...Artiste algonquaine.” “Nadia Myre,” Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, accessed February 09, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/fr/oeuvres/53910/>

⁷⁶ It seems no coincidence that a selection of Myre’s work are also part of shows on the Textile Museum of Canada. By displaying Myre’s art, the Textile Museum of Canada demonstrates the cultural and political importance of making by hand illustrated in Myre’s pieces and destabilizes fixed readings of her work. Moreover, the website’s introduction of the artist is a clear, concise reference to the colonial past and its ongoing effects, as it states, “Nadia Myre is a Montreal-based artist of mixed Algonquin and French-Canadian heritage. A member of the Kitigan Zibi Anishnabeg First Nation, she draws attention to the power and histories of Indigenous textile practices that she situates in a colonial context. (“Nadia Myre,” Textile Museum of Canada, last update March 25, 2019. <https://textilemuseum.ca/press/nadia-myre-balancing-acts-opening-april-24-2019/>) Here, the acknowledgement of the artist heritage is elaborately stated, the colonial context is directly specified, and the importance of her inquiry is reframed in a new way, that is to say, in its relation to the power of textile. Seeing her work on the Textile Museum’s website shows how that how a piece is presented affects how the audiences perceive it. Instead of seeing her work as a piece of fine art, here it is surrounded by other objects made by non-fine art voices emphasizes on its the cultural and political significance.

established, Western exhibition practices. It does not provide the artist's own understanding of her Indigenous community's history, neither does it invite online visitors to consider her, and her community, meaning Indigenous peoples, as active participants of this history. Ultimately, it does not decolonize the understanding of online visitors by inviting them to reframe that history. The MMFA website's only hint of a decolonizing methodology remains some multi-vocality in the French video about *Indian Act*. The MMFA otherwise makes no attempt to reframe or recontextualize Indigenous art and culture. Smith states: "'histories' have a focus and purpose, because they have been written to support claims to territories and resources, or about past injustices, they have been constructed around selected stories."⁷⁷ The story that MMFA website selects to tell, is not constructed according to decolonizing strategies because it entirely avoids speaking about the history of colonization.

Art Mûr

Art Mûr is one of the largest private contemporary galleries in Montreal, established in 1996. The Art Mûr website is organized according to the following categories: artists, exhibitions, news and publishing materials. There is no search function on the website, but, given the size of the platform and categories provided on it, any artist can be easily found. Nadia Myre is amongst thirty-three main artists on the website, each of whom is identified by one of their artworks. (Fig. 11). Contrary to the MMFA, where only two of Myre's works appear on its online platform, eleven artworks by Myre are available on the Art Mûr website, including, the project *Eyes Watching* (2021); three versions of the project *Code Watching*, one in Montreal (2019), one in Berlin (2018), and one in Leipzig (2017); *Meditations on Red* (date not specified); *Meditations on Black* (2012); *Indian Act* (2002); the *Landscape of Sorrow* series (2009); *The Scar* project (date not specified), *Scarscapes*

⁷⁷ Tuhiwai Smith, 240

project (2005-present); and *Skin Deep, or poetry for the blind* (2004). *Indian Act*, one of the works displayed on MMFA website, appears in three images on this website, which includes an installation view of a number of pieces as well (Fig. 12).

Although all three of the photos are titled “Nadia Myre, *Indian Act*, 2002,”⁷⁸ when it comes to description, Art Mûr’s website is superior to the MMFA’s. After a short clarification about the process of making the work and where it has been displayed, the website’s description reads, “*Indian Act* speaks of the realities of colonization – the effects of contact, and its often-broken and untranslated contracts. The piece consists of all 56 pages of the Federal Government’s Indian Act mounted on Stroud cloth and sewn over with red and white glass beads. Each word is replaced with white beads sewn into the document; the red beads replace the negative space.”⁷⁹ Here, there is a direct reference to “colonial realities,” and what MMFA website calls “contact” is here replaced with “the effects of contact.” Yet online visitors are not given further elaboration about the importance of beading in Myre’s Indigenous community nor do they find a description for her choice of colors. Thus, Art Mûr website’s effort to make visible the colonial past through remembering prevails over the MMFA’s, though it is still far from a clear decolonizing strategy that would recognize the history and legacies of that shared past.

By placing *Indian Act* amongst other works by the artist and detailed interpretations of some of her other artworks,⁸⁰ Art Mûr provides a broader context for understanding Myre’s inquiry in general and her endeavour to create conversations about identity and resistance. Seeing *Indian Act* in the context of other Myre’s works as well as those by thirty-two other artists helps the online

⁷⁸ “*Indian Act*,” Art Mûr, accessed March 01, 2022. <https://artmur.com/en/artists/nadia-myre/indian-act/>

⁷⁹ “*Indian Act*,” Art Mûr, accessed February 07, 2022. <https://artmur.com/en/artists/nadia-myre/indian-act/>

⁸⁰ For example, her own text about some projects including *The Scar Project* and *Skin deep, or poetry for the blind*; David Garneau’s text about *Landscape of Sorrow*; or a text about *Code Switching* written by Natasha Chaykowski.

visitor to perceive the artwork in a re-contextualized framework, thereby reframing its meaning. For, “Reframing is about [an image’s] parameters, about what is in the foreground, what is in the background, and what shadings and complexities exist within the frame.”⁸¹ If the MMFA’s French-language video about Myre’s work introduced a multisensory dimension, because the visitor hears throat singing in the background while looking at the visual components of the work, on the Art Mûr website, they see the work in a broader context of the artist’s other works, which enriches the meaning.

The Art Mûr website introduces the gallery as playing an important role in the diffusion of contemporary art in Montreal, “Art Mûr is proud to call itself the only contemporary commercial art gallery in Quebec that represents as many Quebec artists as artists from the rest of Canada, and as many female as male artists.”⁸² However, in this introduction there is no trace of the important event that Art Mûr hosted in 2012, namely the first edition of the Contemporary Native Art Biennial (BACA) with Nadia Myre as the guest curator. This is not indicated on the artist’s introduction page either. The gallery has been one of the hosts of the Biennial since 2012, with Myre participating in other editions including the 2nd in 2018 and the 6th, upcoming in May 2022, yet the website has not emphasized on gallery’s distinctive role, merely placing the Biennial in its list of exhibitions.

To find the Biennial’s editions on the Art Mûr website, online visitors have to click on the “Exhibition” tab, select the exact year, and try to find it in a long list of titles (Fig. 13). Therefore, for the visitor who has no prior knowledge of the Biennial, there is little chance of finding it on

⁸¹ Tuhiwai Smith, 153, quoted in Heather Igloliorte, “‘No History of Colonialism’ Decolonizing Practices in Indigenous Art,” in *Decolonize me*, (Ottawa: Ottawa Art Gallery = Galerie d’art d’Ottawa, 2012), 24.

⁸² “About us,” Art Mûr, accessed February 20, 2022. <https://artmur.com/en/about-us/>

the Art Mûr website. Furthermore, Myre's important role as the curator of the first edition of the Biennial is not clearly evident, and this omission must be questioned, given the significance of the Biennial for Indigenous art and curatorial practices.

As was the case on the MMFA website, here too there is no territorial acknowledgment, which is to say, no recognition of the traditional Indigenous lands as part of a decolonizing strategy. However, it does introduce the artist as “an Indigenous and Quebecois artist from Montreal who is interested in having conversations about identity, resilience and politics of belonging.”⁸³ These words are written next to a collection of her works on the website. Therefore, when online visitors are read this introduction, they have the opportunity to simultaneously glimpse the artworks. Put differently, as the text unfolds information about the artist, a general understanding of her art is shaping in the background by images (Fig. 14). Finally, the last thing online visitors see are three links that direct them to artist’s Curriculum Vitae, website and Facebook page. Including these links is important as this helps the Art Mûr website attain a decolonial approach by privileging the artist’s voice.

The Art Mûr website provides Myre’s first-person description for some of the works and also collaborates with other authors who talk about Myre’s works. Some examples of the former are the *Skin Deep* (2004) and *Poetry for the Blind* (2004) projects, where the artist tells the story of her artwork, the creation process and her inspirations through written text.⁸⁴ However, this effort remains limited to text and image, without moving towards exercising Indigenous cultural

⁸³ “Nadia Myre,” Art Mûr, accessed February 20, 2022. <https://artmur.com/en/artists/nadia-myre/>

⁸⁴ Nadia Myre, “Skin deep, or poetry for the blind,” Art Mûr, accessed February 11, 2022. <https://artmur.com/en/artists/nadia-myre/skin-deep/>

protocols in forms of oral presentations of the works, sharing that knowledge through storytelling, or including translations of texts in Indigenous languages of artist's community.⁸⁵

AbTeC Gallery

Part of the "Initiative for Indigenous Futures" at Concordia university, the AbTeC (Aboriginal Territories on Cyberspace) gallery is an Indigenously determined virtual exhibition space for contemporary art. The gallery has its headquarters on cyberspace; called "AbTeC Island," it is a 3D virtual world created on the online multimedia platform, Second Life.⁸⁶ This virtual world can be accessed via Linden Lab's client software. Registering and creating an account on Second Life are free. Online visitors, who are called residents of Second Life, then need to create virtual representations of themselves, called avatars. Residents can walk, run or fly in the Second Life world, also known as the grid, and interact with places and objects. They can meet other residents or participate in individual and group activities.

The AbTeC gallery is indeed an island bought on Second Life in 2003, a virtual piece of land purchased with real money by Jason Edward Lewis and Skawennati:

"Having established AbTeC Island as our headquarters and studio in cyberspace, we built a gallery as a set for the *Time Traveller*TM *machinima* series created by Skawennati. Since the platform is created based on this Skawennati's project, most of the element are given from the *Time Traveller*TM's episodes. The story takes place, for the most part, in the year 2121 and it imagines that, by then, Montreal's Musée de beaux-arts would have a gallery dedicated to early 21st

⁸⁵ One obstacle for these smaller, non-central platforms in translating their websites is the issue of funding. Explaining the reasons her request for receiving some funding for her project FourDirectionsTeachings.com was rejected twice by the Canadian Heritage Partnerships Fund, Jennifer Wemigwans states, "This is evident in the preferences of non-Indigenous government funding bodies that select which knowledges get recovered. For example, in Canada and the United States, huge amounts of funding are available for online digital collections of Indigenous artifacts, yet Indigenous Knowledge projects and language projects online continually struggle to find funding." (Jennifer Wemigwans, *A Digital Bundle: Protecting and Promoting Indigenous Knowledge Online*. Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada: University of Regina Press, 2018, 58).

⁸⁶ The pioneering virtual world developed in 2003 by the San Francisco-based firm Linden Lab.
<https://www.lindenlab.com/about>

century Indigenous art, indicating the significance of the present era's renaissance of Native art and culture.”⁸⁷

In this short description, a decolonizing approach for remembering the past all the way to the present is implied. Envisioning the time when a discrete gallery in an art museum will display “early 21st century Indigenous art,” the AbTeC gallery emphasizes the continuity of Indigenous cultures from the past, to the present day all the way to the future.

To travel to this future world, visitors create avatars which can take any form including human, animal, vegetable, or they can create one that resembles them as they are in real life. To access the island, they only need to search the word “AbTeC” and enter the location on the platform's map. Visitors can then freely move around and test out an immersive experience of living virtually on an island created and developed by Indigenous peoples (Fig. 15). When entering the island, the visitor lands on the welcome bench, where they see a welcome text in different languages. In front of them is the “Celestial Tree” from the *TimeTraveller*TM episode *She Falls for Age*. The tree refers to the “story of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) creation story. In it, Sky Woman jumps from Sky World through a hole created by uprooting the Celestial Tree, to save her unborn child and ‘the seed of a new world’”⁸⁸ (Fig. 16). Behind the tree the “*Timetraveller* Boutique” is located, where accessories, selected from *Time Traveller*TM, are displayed. (Fig. 17 & 18). On the right side of the Boutique, there is “Residency of the Guardian of the Celestial tree,” and on the left side of the it, “Fort Smith” is located, the gateway to Wood Buffalo National park (Fig. 19 & 20). AbTeC gallery is located on the left side of the park. Moving around and exploring this future land places enhances the experience of being in the AbTeC galley. Therefore, when the visitor

⁸⁷ “History,” AbTeC, accessed February 08, 2022, <https://indigenousfutures.net/other/abtec-gallery/>

⁸⁸ Dion Smith-Dokkie, “Skawennati: Machinimagraphique!” *Initiative for Indigenous Futures*, June 12, 2017. <https://indigenousfutures.net/skawennati-machinimagraphique/>

enters the galley to see the exhibitions, when they pass by the entrance to read the curator/artist statements, their understanding of the environment and the context in which the artworks are displayed have already been reframed by the island (Fig. 21). The experience of reading the descriptions of the show and curators/artist statements is similar to the one in the physical space of a gallery, yet the title of each work pops up once a visitor gets close to a piece.

Calling the display of works “cyberealism,”⁸⁹ AbTeC has hosted more than five exhibitions from August 2020 to the present (April 2022). Myre’s *Meditation on Red* (2013), was part of the *Reformatted* show, about which the website description says, “the artworks in it, never intended for Second Life, had to be imported, uploaded and sometimes digitally coaxed and cajoled to make it possible to show them in this particular virtual world. They are reformatted versions of their original selves—like all of us now, seeking new ways of being and speaking with each other, trying new ways to be together apart.”⁹⁰ The project is a number of large-size, hand-beaded round panels, created with red and white beads. The exhibition displays a 3D version of the artwork, digitally “reformatted” to be shown in this virtual world. The exhibition is no longer available on the AbTeC island at the time that I am writing this thesis in 2022, however, there are photo albums of the vernissage and the exhibition on Flickr.⁹¹

The exhibition photo album shows the work on a wall of the virtual gallery as well as in the exhibition setting, amongst other artworks (Fig. 22 & 23). In the photos of the vernissage, the online visitors in their avatars are shown when visiting the exhibition and moving around to experience the show in the island (Fig. 24 & 25). By entering the island in an avatar, and seeing

⁸⁹ “Works that would fit into the particular aesthetic of Second Life, which includes bright colours, strong graphic elements, and a certain cleanness found in digital spaces. Call it cyberealism.” (“History,” AbTeC, accessed 08 February, 2022, <https://indigenousfutures.net/other/abtec-gallery/>)

⁹⁰ “AbTeC Gallery,” AbTeC, accessed February 08, 2022. <https://indigenousfutures.net/>

⁹¹ “2020-06-09 Reformatted Exhibition,” Flickr, accessed April 25, 2022. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/obxstudios/albums/72157719470542829>.

the work in an Indigenous-created future, online visitors here become an active part of the exhibition, while their understanding of the artworks is shaped by “remembering in terms of connecting bodies with place and experience,”⁹² to borrow from Smith. This new, multi-sensory experience that AbTeC creates to help the visitors reflect on the artwork, differs from the Art Mûr website, which relies only on visual images and written texts. However, certain problems do arise: I could not find any video of the *Reformatted* exhibition on the AbTeC website, AbTeC TV or AbTeC island itself. Moreover, logging into the platform to explore the island for a better understanding requires specific digital system. This brings forward the question of accessibility with regard to cyberspace.

As explained earlier, cyberspace has brought about unprecedented opportunities for people from previously marginalized cultures to speak for themselves and at the same time reveal misconceptions about their cultures and knowledge. This means that the number of Indigenous peoples seizing the opportunity to represent their own cultures and ways of understanding the world is increasing. As Lewis and Skawennati say, “we can instantly update what we publish in order to respond to misrepresentations, misunderstandings, and mis-readings; and we can instantly propagate our message across a world-spanning network. And we don't need to fight through any gatekeepers to do so.”⁹³ Yet, there are many hurdles for Indigenous peoples when it comes to issues of accessibility, and the ability to reach a wider audience. When speaking of the issue of accessibility, we should ask what kind of access different communities have to the latest computers, information technologies, software, as well as internet bandwidth – if they have any access at all. The same question should be asked regarding access to AbTeC gallery.

⁹² Tuhiwai Smith, 244.

⁹³ Lewis and Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, 30.

When explaining who can access the gallery, the AbTeC website mentions that, “anyone using a computer that meets Second Life’s System Requirements can visit.”⁹⁴ However, the system requirements in question amount to a long list of high quality and up-to-date computers and operating systems including fast-speed processors and the latest drivers that support strong Graphic cards, to help the users to “be able to successfully participate in Second Life.”⁹⁵ For instance, when I used a laptop with the minimum requirements mentioned on the list, the platform did not perform properly and I had to borrow a device with a stronger processor to solve the issue. Therefore, although AbTeC gallery is about an Indigenous-run network showcasing Indigenous art, the audience’s accessibility is a concern.

This is not to underestimate the importance of such an online space. As argued in the analysis of the MMFA website, the active role of Indigenous peoples in creating and developing these technical systems and their attempt to recuperate traditional knowledge within these systems, is an important step in rethinking the infrastructures of digital systems and computational technologies from Indigenous perspectives. The AbTeC virtual gallery is one of the most successful of these efforts. Not only does AbTeC show how Indigenous peoples have been deeply involved in the development of advanced and complex computational technologies to visualize and understand Indigenous values and knowledge, but it is also an example of what it means to put into practice Indigenous peoples’ protocols. This is what Smith refers to as, “indigenism as being grounded in the alternative conceptions of world view and value systems.”⁹⁶ Privileging Indigenous voices starts from developing the platform and designing its contents in the AbTeC case.

⁹⁴ “Activaating AbTeC Island,” AbTeC, accessed 02 March, 2022. <https://indigenousfutures.net/other/activating-abtec-island/>

⁹⁵ “System Requirements,” Second Life, accessed 02 March, 2022. <https://secondlife.com/system-requirements>

⁹⁶ Tuhiwai Smith, 245.

AbTeC attempts to demonstrate the past, through envisioning futures, whereas Art Mûr only refers to it indirectly, and it is thus only evident if one makes connections across various pieces created by the same artist that are displayed on the website. This is also quite different from the MMFA website, which continues to frame Indigenous artworks in a Eurocentric historical narrative. The AbTeC gallery displays Indigenous works in the context of an Indigenous created future island, thereby reframing that dominant narrative.

It is worthwhile mentioning that what is missing on all these online platforms is the artist's presence. On none of these I could find a video or a sound track that shares Nadia Myre's views, some form of medium where the online visitors could see the artist and hear her talking about the artworks, representing the knowledge and meaning behind them from a first-person, non-mediated perspective. This is where the significance of the artist's own website becomes apparent. Unlike the MMFA and the Art Mûr websites, the artist's website provides the entire *Portrait in Motion* video, while there are multiple interviews available where she talks about this artwork, explaining the process of making the work as well as what the work is about in her view.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Nadia Myre, "Interviews," oboro.tv. accessed February 03, 2022. <http://www.nadiamyre.net/press-nadia#/interviews/>

CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of some of Nadia Myre's artworks on the websites of three Montreal-based museums and galleries, this thesis has investigated the possibility of merging decolonizing methodologies with the digital technologies that have been adopted by the discipline of art history. This project is in many respects a journey, exploring to what degree the field of art history has been transformed with regard to digital practices. My point of departure was the question raised by Johanna Drucker, "Is There a 'Digital' Art History?" where she draws an important distinction between "digitized" and "digital" art history. Drucker argues that digital innovation should bring intellectual insights to the discipline, however, arriving at a definition of digital art history remains the focus of her discussion. Moreover, her argument implies that the power of technology is the ultimate way of advancement in the humanities.

This tech-progressive conception of digital advancement is mostly apparent in the projects conducted under the rubric of digital art history. As the examples provided in this thesis show, the approach does not consider the theoretical and methodological transformations that have enriched the discipline over the past century. Matthew P. Long and Roger C. Schonfeld's report of a wide range of projects that employed digital methods supports this. They categorize these studies along a spectrum from technology-enabled to technology-facilitated ones and show that much of the rhetoric in the field remains limited. Griselda Pollock puts forward this concern too in her critique of an art history related project building on computer science. Likewise, while acknowledging the significance of computational methods in practicing art history, this thesis challenges this uncritical, tech-positive approach.

Drucker's question – whether digital technologies are capable of changing the discipline of art history structurally in a way that is comparable to the effect of critical theory – paves the

way to incorporating critical perspectives into the digital turning point of art history. Yet nowhere does she explain how the transformation should occur, namely, how digital methods can become a genuinely critical approach. Rodríguez-Ortega's voice brings a more nuanced perspective on these issues by challenging the unquestioned value of computational methods. She develops a critical stance toward digital methods too, and unlike Drucker, addresses how digital methods intersect approaches that have been critically changing the discipline of art history in recent decades. With concerns raised by Rodríguez-Ortega and others, I argue that approaching the process of art history going digital through a decolonizing methodology offers a way forward, and implicitly answers these scholars' calls methodological complexity in digital art history.

To show the degree to which the digital turning point of art history intersects with a decolonizing methodology, I concluded this thesis with a focused case study and tested out the discussed perspectives. This case study was a way for me to investigate whether there is anything genuinely decolonizing occurring on these platforms, and by extension, in the field of digital art history. In doing so, my guiding framework is two of the Indigenous decolonizing projects that Tuhiwai Smith identifies, namely "remembering" and "reframing"; I employed these research practices as decolonizing sub-categories, or strategies. As the analysis reveals, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts website has not taken any clear decolonizing approach in displaying Nadia Myre's work. It entirely avoids speaking about the history of colonization by reducing it to a simple encounter and positive cultural exchange. Even though the Art Mûr website is in this regard more successful than the MMFA's, no clear decolonizing strategy is demonstrated here either and some important Indigenous aspects of practicing decolonization have been ignored. AbTeC shows how Indigenous peoples have been involved deeply in the development of digital technologies to

represent Indigenous art and is a strong example of what it means to employ these tools to practice decolonizing strategies.

If the debates surrounding digital art history are calling for methodological complexity, an analysis of what is being currently exercised through digital technologies should reveal that. However, as I have demonstrated, it is possible to employ a simple quantitative method together with a more complex qualitative approach. My analysis of these online platforms follows this logic and I argue that when discussing digital art history, we should think about the discipline all the way back to its conceptual foundations. It is important to throw light on the way that digital art history resonates with older art historical methodologies, and how it challenges some of them.

Through selected examples, this thesis demonstrates that the answer to Drucker's question, "is there a digital art history," is yes – if computational techniques are not merely statistical methods, but are instead integrated into art historical methodologies, in the context of transformations occurring in the discipline. The result is not a definitive methodology, but rather what has evolved through my analysis of the data provided by some online platforms, of the online presence of an Indigenous artist. The critical framework I propose in this thesis moves towards a decolonizing methodology in the realm of digital art history, so that by the use of digital technologies goes beyond mere tools, becoming instead a method contributing to the discipline's transformation.

FIGURES

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- Sculpture Garden
- Quebec and Canadian Art
- Decorative Arts and Design
- Photography and Graphic Arts (online)

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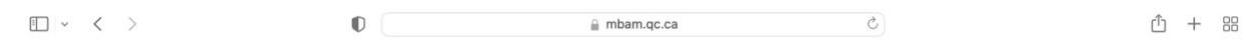
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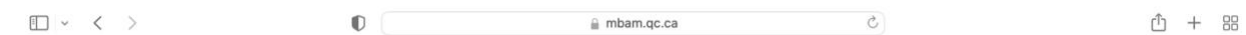
Figure 1— Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, “What’s On.” Screenshot. Accessed May 03, 2022.
<https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/whats-on/>



Quebec and Canadian Art



Figure 2 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, “Quebec and Canadian Art” Screenshot. Accessed May 03, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/collections/quebec-and-canadian-art/>



Menu

Search through all collections

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Objects

Period

768 works in our online collection

View mode

Filter by

François Baillairgé
Adoring Angel
From the church of Saint-Laurent, Île d'Orléans

Louis-Philippe Hébert
The Dew

Alfred Laliberté
French-Canadian Woman at Work

Alfred Laliberté
Oxen with Harrow

Alfred Laliberté
The Caster

Figure 3 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, “Quebec and Canadian Art,” Screenshot of artworks. Accessed May 03, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/collections/quebec-and-canadian-art/>

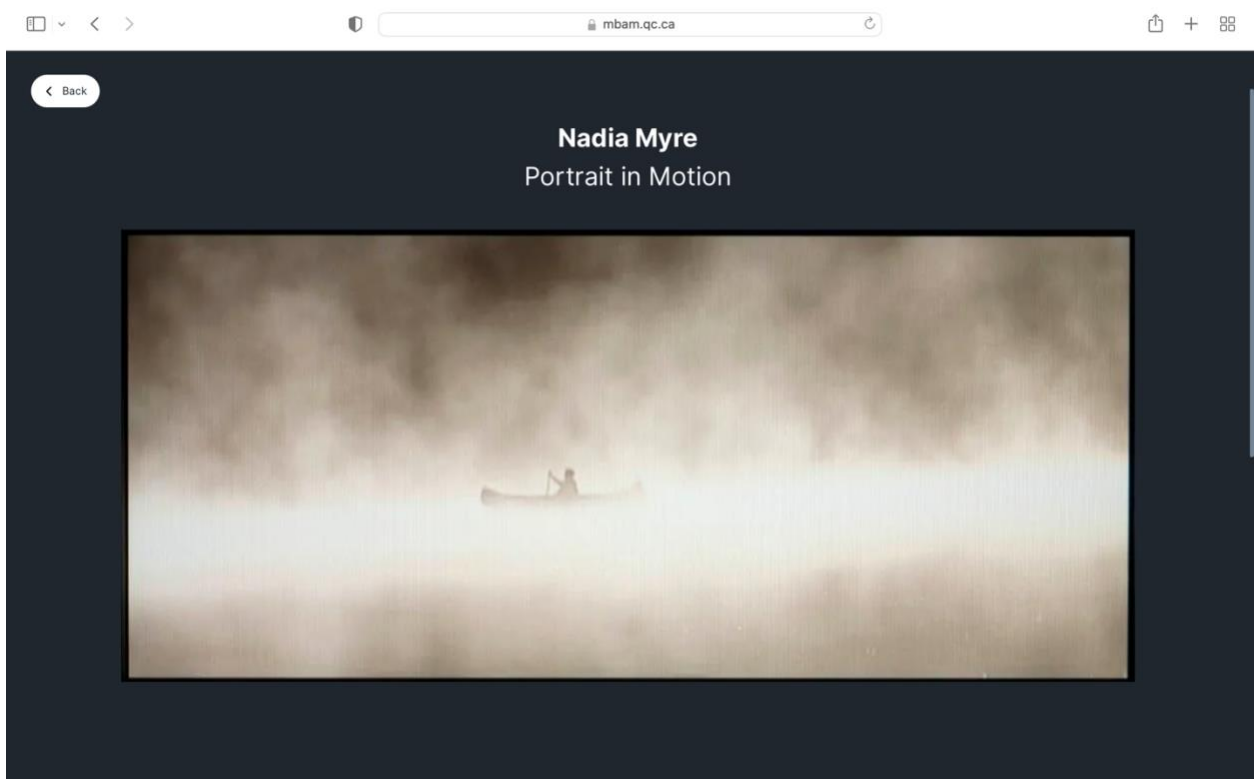


Figure 4 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, “Nadia Myre” Screenshot. Accessed May 03, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/works/53910/>

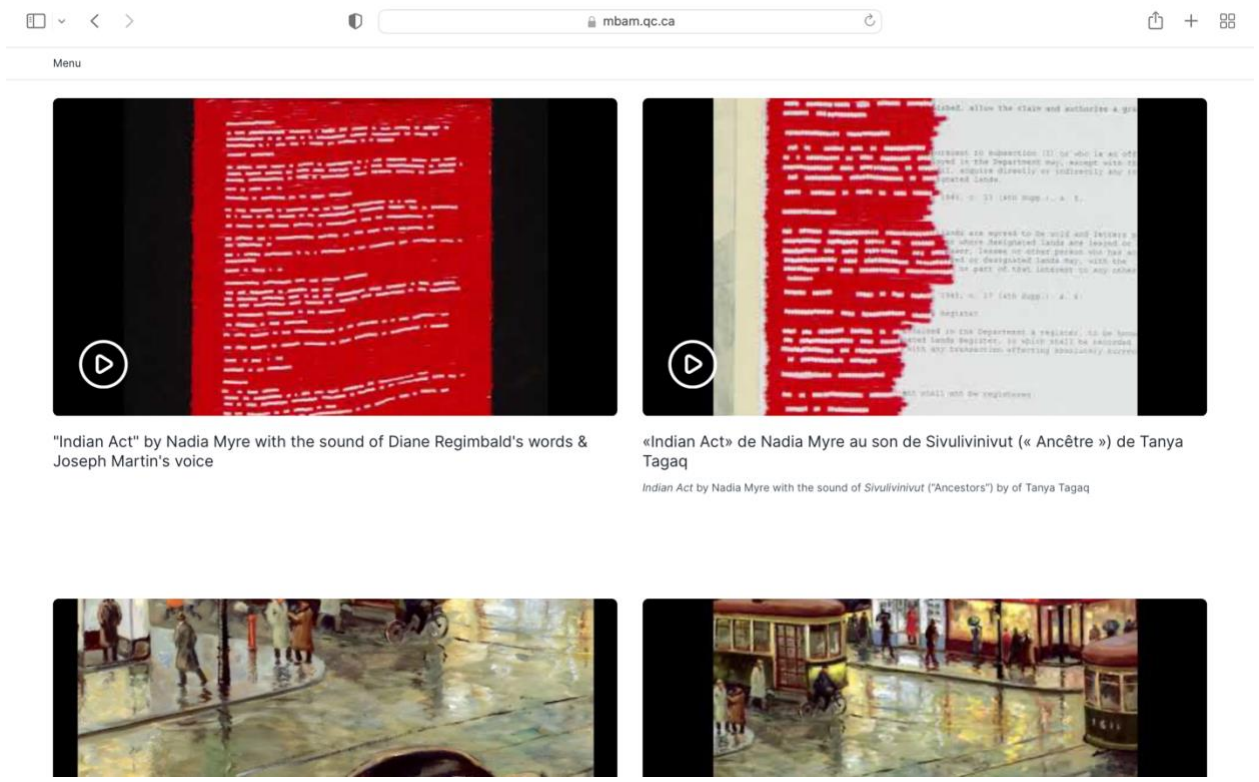


Figure 5 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, “An invitation to slow down” Screenshot. Accessed May 03, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/education-wellness/invitation-to-slow-down/>

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL www.mbam.qc.ca. The search bar contains the term "Indigenous". Below the search bar, navigation links include "All website 70", "Exhibitions 4", "Artworks 23", "Activities and events 0", "News 21", and "Other results 20". The main content area is titled "Artworks 23" and displays a grid of 23 individual artwork items. Each item consists of a small image of the artwork and a text label below it. The artworks are diverse, including ancient Egyptian fragments, Northwest Coast Alaskan crest helmets, Peruvian ceramic vessels, and contemporary Indigenous art by artists like Meryl McMaster, Hannah Claus, and Diego Romero. The grid is organized in approximately 5 columns and 5 rows, with the last row containing only three items.


Figure 6 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, The search result for the term “Indigenous.” Screenshot. Accessed May 03, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/search/?q=Indigenous&f=works>

mbam.qc.ca


Native

All website 54 Exhibitions 1 Artworks 42 Activities and events 0 News 7 Other results 3


Artworks 42




Gabor Szilasi...
Native American at Home, Mistissini Reserve, Northern Quebec From the series "Québec rural"




Mario Doucette...
The Native Americans' Crusade in Europe III




Mario Doucette...
The Native Americans' Crusade in Europe I




Wanda Koop...
Home and Native Land




FRANCE, POITOU... (?)...
"Jesuit" Ring




FRANCE, POITOU...
"Jesuit" Ring




JAPAN, KYOTOAwata ware...
Square Serving Bowl



Gustave Courbet...
The Brook of the Black Well



Maxime Maufra...
The Yellow Sail, Peninsula of Quiberon




Paul Cézanne...
Bend in a Road in Provence


mbam.qc.ca

Native


All website 54 Exhibitions 1 Artworks 42 Activities and events 0 News 7 Other results 3




Adolphe Monticelli...
Gateway to a Fort




John MacWhirter...
The Valley of Slaughter, Skye




Louis Apol...
Field near Arnhem (The Velp at Arnhem)




Herri met de Bles...
The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah




Lyonel Feininger...
Yellow Street II




John Frederick Kensett...
On the Hudson




Julio González...
Cactus Man No. 1



NORTHWEST COAST, ALASKA...
Dancing Blanket (Gwiis Halayt)



Emily Carr...
Kitzeukela, Community House



Betty Goodwin...
Carbon

Figure 7 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, The search result for the term "Native." Screenshot. Accessed May 03, 2022. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/search/?q=native&f=works>

mbam.qc.ca

Aboriginal

All website 208 Exhibitions 6 Artworks 148 Activities and events 0 News 32 Other results 20

Artworks 148

Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Coté...
Caughnawaga Women

Kent Monkman...
Trappers of Men

Nadia Myre...
Portrait in Motion

Rebecca Belmore...
Mixed Blessing

Léon-Claude Mascaux...
Swimming Medal after the original presented at the Sculpture Competition of the 1924 Olympiad of Art

Léon-Claude Mascaux...
Running Medal after the original presented at the Sculpture Competition of the 1924 Olympiad of Art

Léon-Claude Mascaux...
Track and Field Medal after the original presented at the Sculpture Competition of the 1924 Olympiad of Art

Léon-Claude Mascaux...
Woman with Torch or Civilization Medal after the original presented at the Sculpture Competition of the 1924 Olympiad of Art

Léon-Claude Mascaux...
Dance or Dancer with Little Faun Medal after the original presented at the Sculpture Competition of the 1924 Olympiad of Art

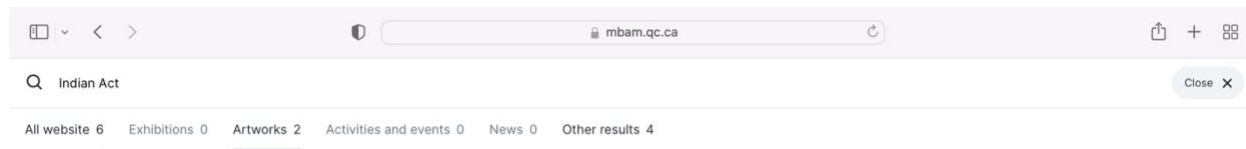
Giovanni Battista Piranesi...
Veduta del Monumento eretto dall'Imperador Tito Vespasiano per aver ristaurati gl'aquedotti dell'Aniene nuovo e Claudia [View of the Porta Maggiore, Originally an

Figure 8 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, The search result for the term “Aboriginal.” Screenshot. Accessed May 03, 2022.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL mbam.qc.ca. A search bar at the top contains the text "Algonquin" and a "Close X" button. Below the search bar, a navigation menu shows "All website 9", "Exhibitions 0", "Artworks 7", "Activities and events 0", "News 1", and "Other results 1". The main content area is titled "Artworks 7" and displays seven art items in a grid:

- Louis-Philippe Hébert...**
[Algonquins](#)
- Tom Thomson...**
[Algonquin Park](#)
- Tom Thomson...**
Early Autumn, [Algonquin Park](#)
- Louis-Philippe Hébert...**
Fisherman with a Spear
- Tom Thomson...**
In the Northland
- Jean Paul Riopelle...**
Painting
- Nadia Myre...**
Portrait in Motion

Figure 9 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, The search result for the term “Algonquin.” Screenshot. Accessed May 03, 2022.



Artworks 2



Gauri Gill..
Untitled (20) From the series
"Acts of Appearance"



Gauri Gill..
Untitled (48) From the series
"Acts of Appearance"

Figure 10 — Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Website, The search result for the term “Indian Act.” Screenshot. Accessed May 09, 2022.

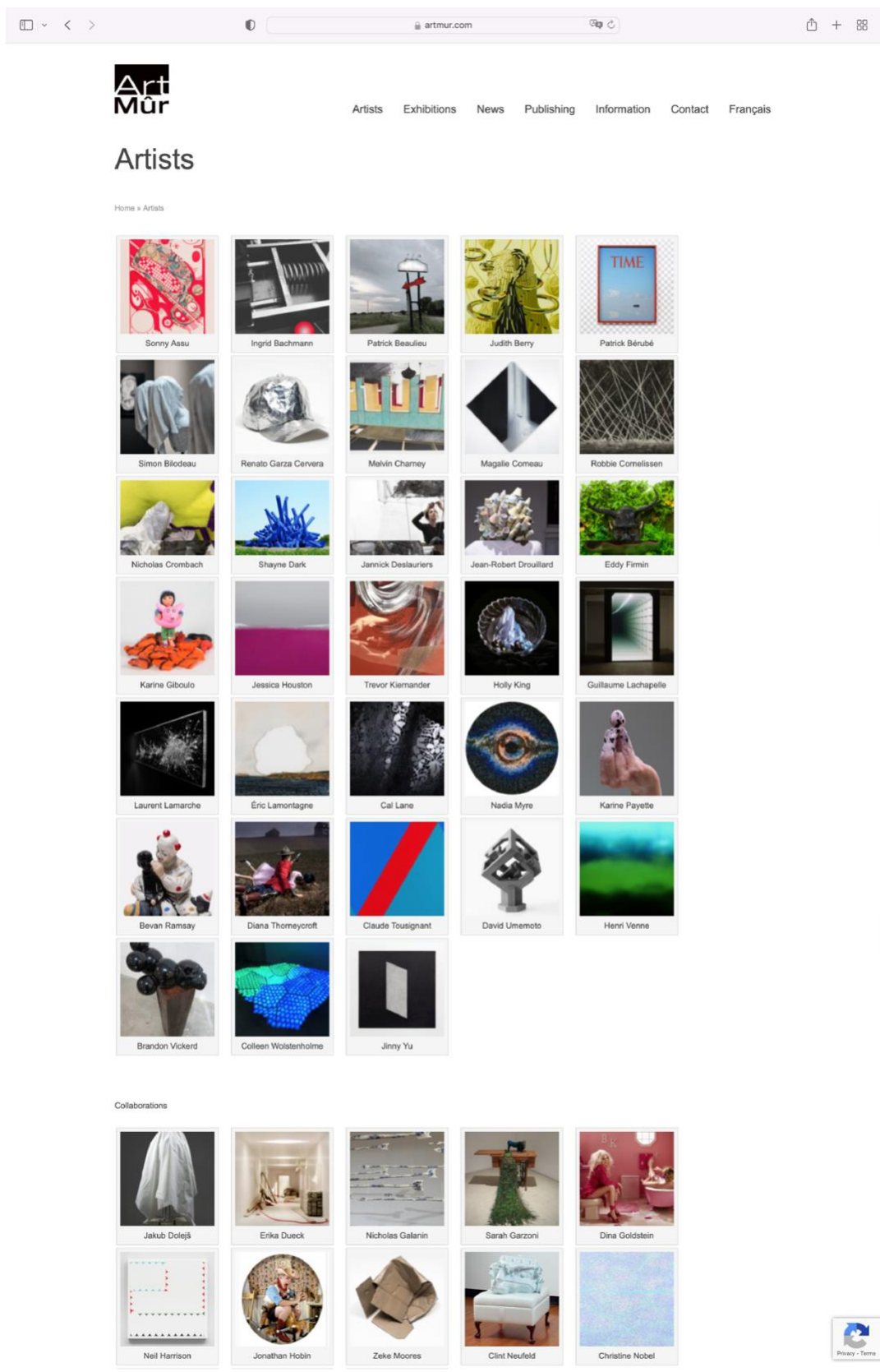


Figure 11 — Art Mûr Website, “Artists.” Screenshot. Accessed May 09, 2022. <https://artmur.com/en/artists/>

artmur.com


Art Mûr

Artists Exhibitions News Publishing Information Contact Français

2012 Exhibitions


Home » Exhibitions » 2012 Exhibitions

November 10 – January 19, 2013
Ewa Zebrowski: *en passant*




Ewa Monika Zebrowski

November 10 – January 19, 2013
Brandon Vickard: *Chopper*




Brandon Vickard

March 3 – April 21, 2012
Opening reception: Saturday, March 3, from 3 to 5 p.m.
Nadia Myre: *Meditations on Black Lake*



Meditations on Black Lake


March 3 – April 7, 2012
Opening reception: Saturday, March 3, from 3 to 5 p.m.
Magalie Comeau: *Le vertige de l'organe à habiter sur le vide. Les petites Architectrices.*



Le vertige


March 3 – April 21, 2012
Opening reception: Saturday, March 3, from 3 to 5 p.m.
David Spriggs: *4 Colour Separation*

March 3 – April 21, 2012
Opening reception: Saturday, March 3, from 3 to 5 p.m.
Laurent Lamarche: *Magnification*



Laurent Lamarche

January 14 – February 25, 2012
Opening reception: Saturday, January 14, from 3 to 5 p.m.
Contemporary Native Art Biennial (BACA), 1st edition
A Stake in the Ground: Contemporary Native Art Manifestation: Sonny Assu, Jason Beag, Carl Beam, Rebecca Belmore, Kevin Lee Burton, Hannah Claus, Bonnie Devine, Raymond Dupuis, Edgar Hoop of Birds, Vanessa Dion Fletcher, Nicholas Galanin, Greg Hill, Robert Houle, Maria Hupfield, Rita Latandre, Cienna Matoash, Alan Michelson, Nadia Myre, Marianne Nicolson, Michael Patten, Arthur Renwick, Sonia Robertson, Greg Staals, Tania Willard, Will Wilson
Guest curator: Nadia Myre



A Stake in the Ground

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Figure 12 — Art Mûr Website, “2012 Exhibitions.” Screenshot of part of the page. Accessed May 13, 2022.
<https://artmur.com/en/exhibitions/2012-exhibitions/>

Art Mûr

Artists Exhibitions News Publishing Information Contact Français

Indian Act

Home » Artists » Nadia Myre » Indian Act

Indian Act speaks of the realities of colonization – the effects of contact, and its often-broken and untranslated contracts. The piece consists of all 56 pages of the Federal Government's Indian Act mounted on stroud cloth and sewn over with red and white glass beads. Each word is replaced with white beads sewn into the document; the red beads replace the negative space.

Between 1999 and 2002, Nadia Myre enlisted over 230 friends, colleagues and strangers to help her bead over the Indian Act. With the help of Rhonda Meier, they organized workshops and presentations at Concordia University, and hosted weekly beading bees at Oboro Gallery, where it was presented as part of the exhibition, Cont[r]act, in 2002.

Art Mûr Montréal
 514 933-0711
 5826 St-Hubert
 Montreal, QC H2S 2L7

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 KAYAK

Socials
 Facebook Instagram YouTube

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 Search...

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Figure 13 — Art Mûr Website, “Indian Act.” Screenshot. Accessed May 09, 2022.

Art Mûr

Artists Exhibitions News Publishing Information Contact Français

Nadia Myre

Home » Artists » Nadia Myre

b. 1974, Montreal, QC.

Nadia Myre is an indigenous and quebecois artist from Montreal who is interested in having conversations about identity, resilience and politics of belonging. A graduate from Camosun College (1995), Emily Carr (1997), and Concordia University (M.F.A., 2002), Myre is a recipient of numerous awards, notably Banff Centre for Arts Walter Phillips Gallery Indigenous Commission Award (2016), Sobey Art Award (2014), Pratt & Whitney Canada's 'Les Elles de l'art' for the Conseil des arts de Montréal (2011), Quebec Arts Council's Prix à la création artistique pour la région des Laurentides (2009), and a Fellowship from the Eiteljorg Museum (2003). Recent accomplishments include *Tout ce qui reste / Scattered Remains* (Montreal Museum of Fine Art, 2017), *Decolonial Gestures or Doing it Wrong? Refaire le chemin* (McCord Museum, 2016) and commissions for new work: the Quebec Room carpet design (2015) for Canada House in London, England (with Karen Spencer), Orison (galerie Oboro, 2014), *Formes et Paroles* (Musée Dapper, Senegal, 2014), and *Sakahân* (National Gallery of Canada, 2013). As well as having participated in international biennales (Shanghai 2014, Sydney 2012, and Montreal 2011), Myre's work has featured in prominent group exhibitions such as *Changing Hands 3* (Museum of Art and Design, New York, NY), *Pour une république des rêves* (CRAC Alsace – Centre Rhénan d'Art Contemporain, Altkirch, FR), *Le temp du dessin* (Ensemble Poirer, Nancy, France), *Vantage Point* (National Museum of American Indian National Mall, Washington, DC), *It Is What It Is* (National Gallery of Canada), and *Femmes Artistes. L'éclatement des frontières 1965-2000* (Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, QC). Her work has received accolades from the New York Times, The Washington Post, and Le Devoir, and has been featured in ARTnews, Canadian Art, Parachute, American Craft, C Magazine, and Monopol. Her works may be found on permanent exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, National Gallery of Canada, Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec, Canadian Museum of History, and the Musée des civilisations (Québec).

Curriculum Vitae
www.nadiamyre.net
Facebook

Eyes watching

Code Switching (CA)

Code Switching (DE)

Code Switching (DE)

Meditations on Red

Meditations on Black

Scarscapes

Landscape of Sorrow

Indian Act

The Scar Project

Skin Deep

Privacy - Terms

Figure 14 — Art Mûr Website, “Nadia Myre.” Screenshot. Accessed May 09, 2022.

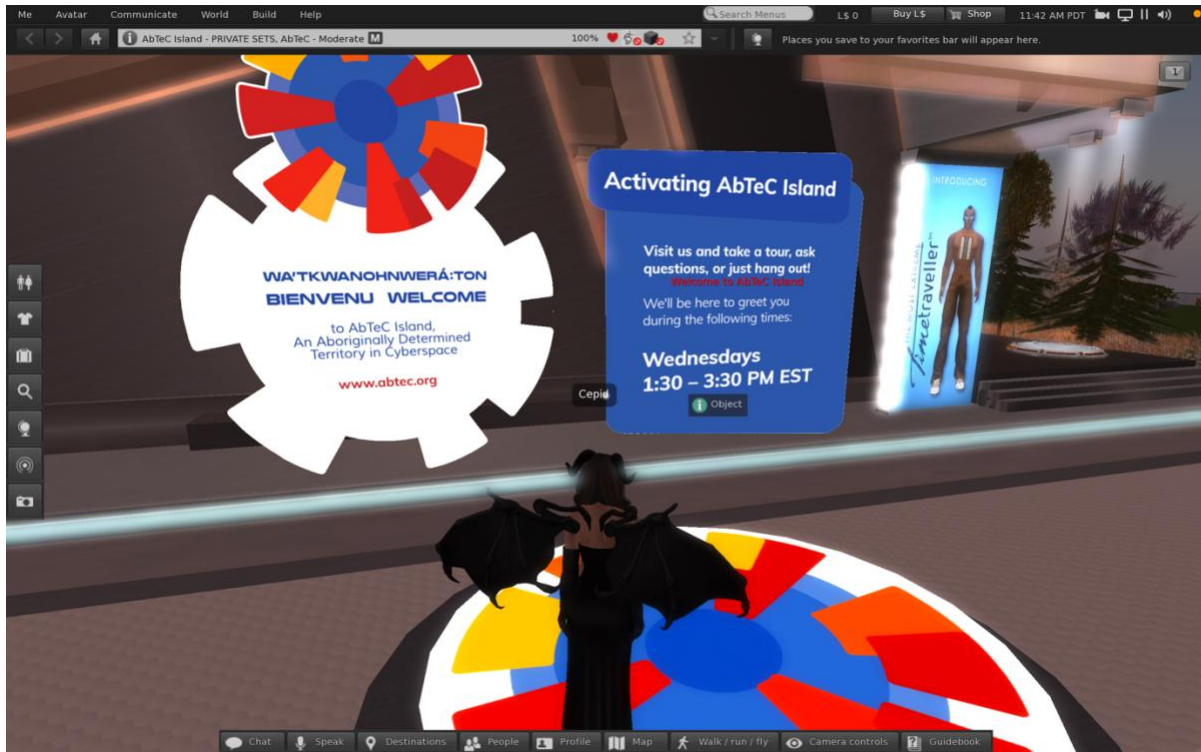


Figure 15 — AbTeC Island, “Welcome to AbTeC Island.” Stills from AbTeC Island on Second Life. Accessed May 10, 2022.

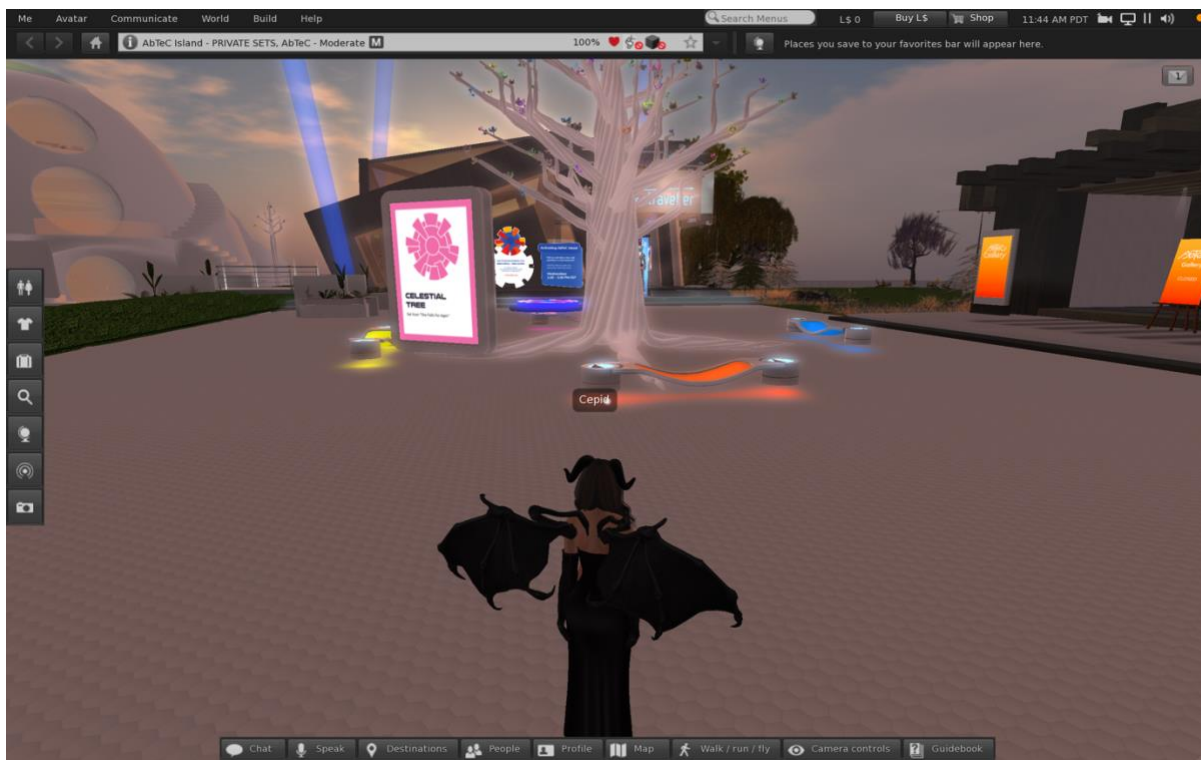


Figure 16 — AbTeC Island, reformatted version of “Celestial Tree” from the *TimeTraveller™* episode *She Falls for Age*. Stills from AbTeC Island on Second Life. Accessed May 10, 2022.



Figure 17 — AbTeC Island, “Timetraveller Boutique.” Stills from AbTeC Island on Second Life. Accessed May 10, 2022.

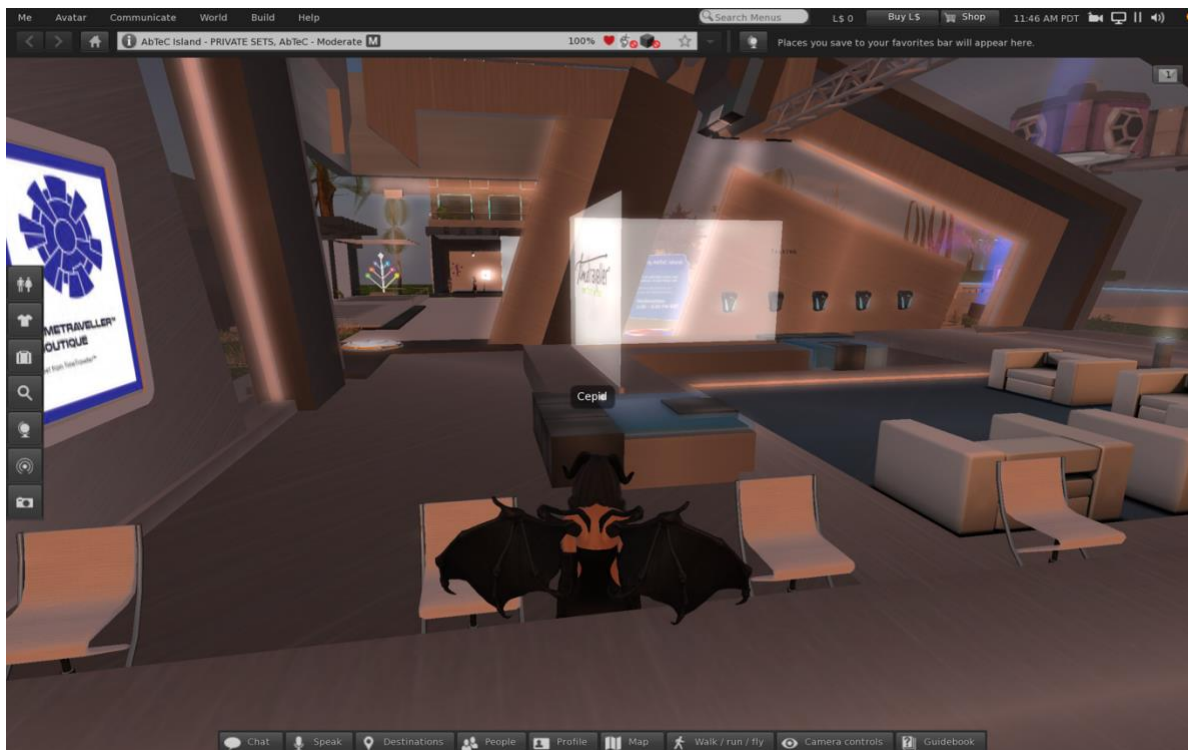


Figure 18 — AbTeC Island, “Timetraveller Boutique.” Stills from AbTeC Island on Second Life. Accessed May 10, 2022.

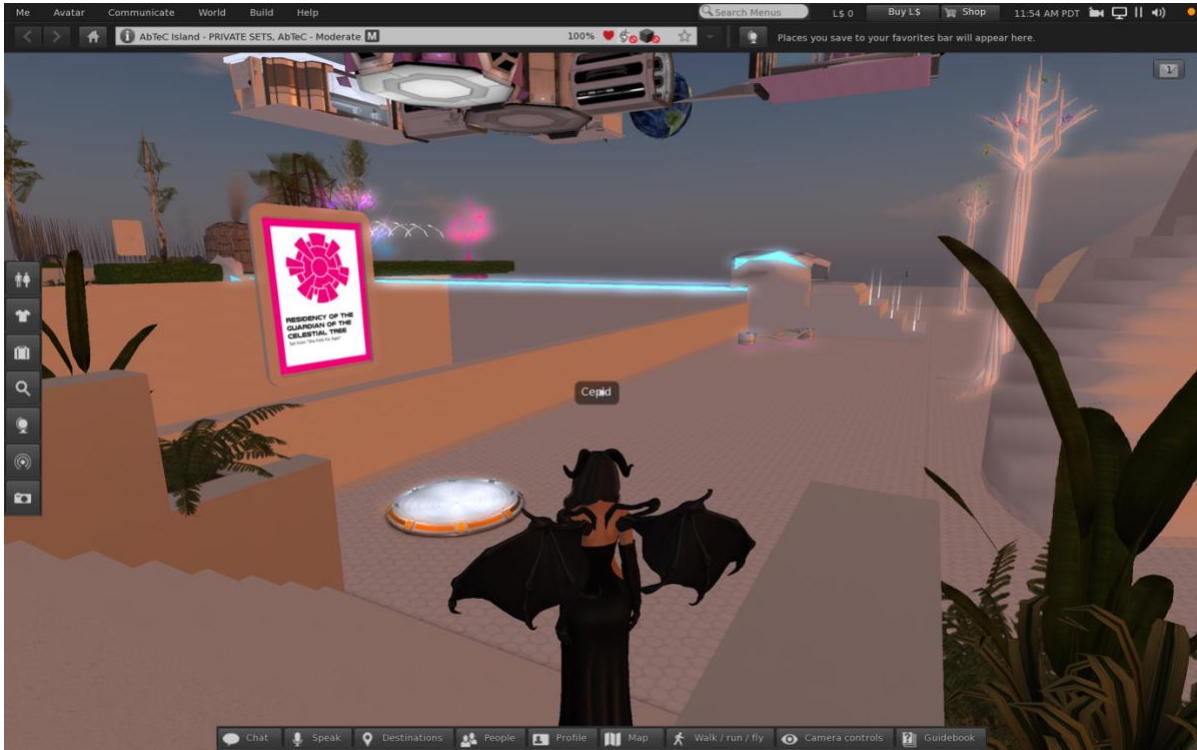


Figure 19 — AbTeC Island, “Residency of the Guardian of the Celestial Tree.” Stills from AbTeC Island on Second Life. Accessed May 10, 2022.

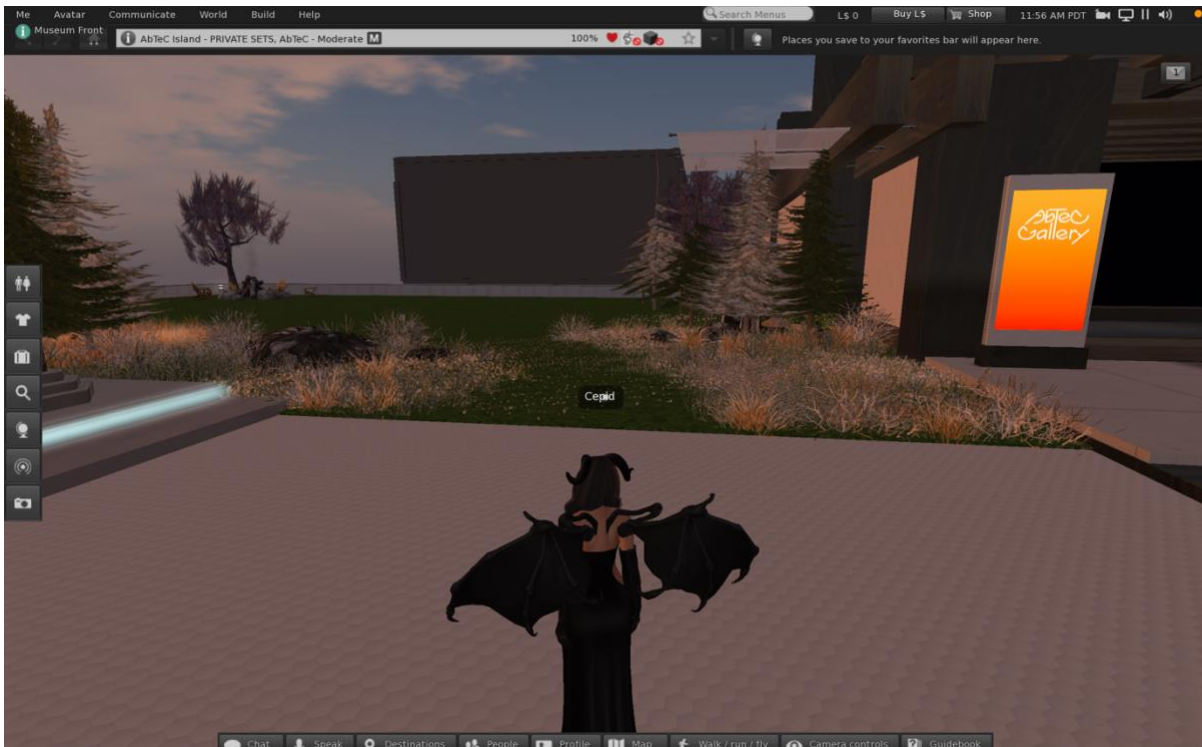


Figure 20 — AbTeC Island, “Wood Buffalo National park.” Stills from AbTeC Island on Second Life. Accessed May 10, 2022.

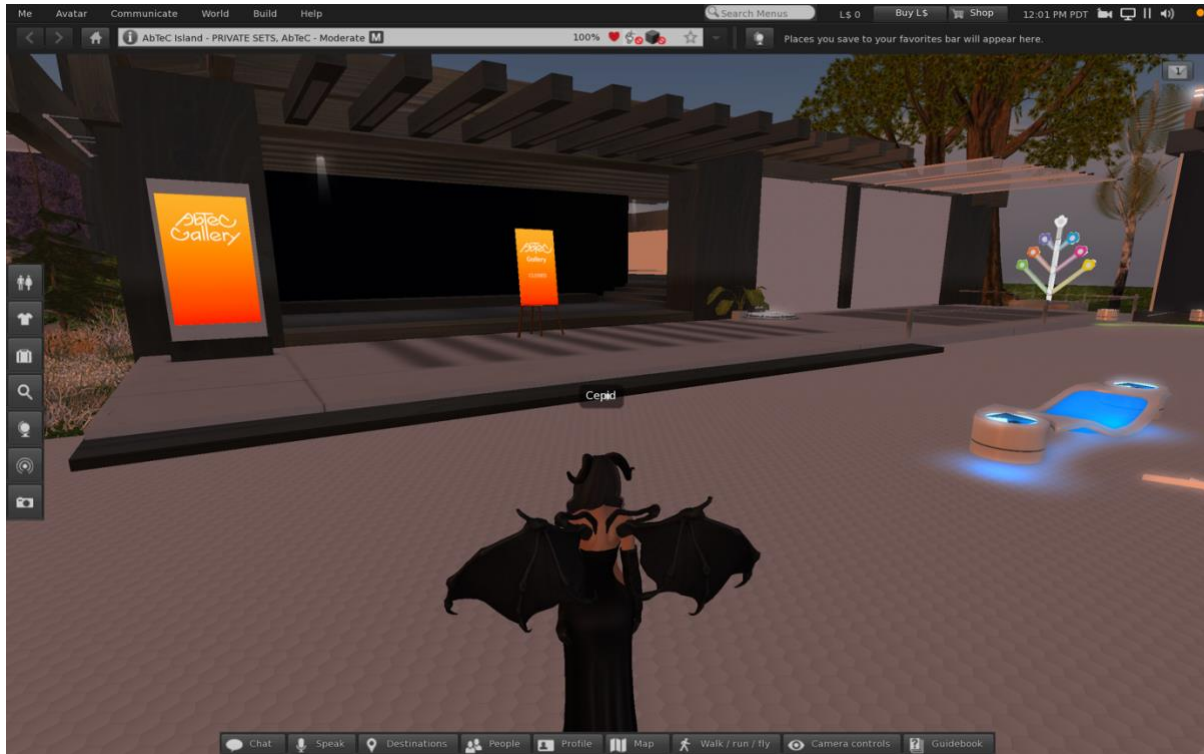


Figure 21 — AbTeC Island, “AbTeC Gallery.” Stills from AbTeC Island on Second Life. Accessed May 10, 2022.

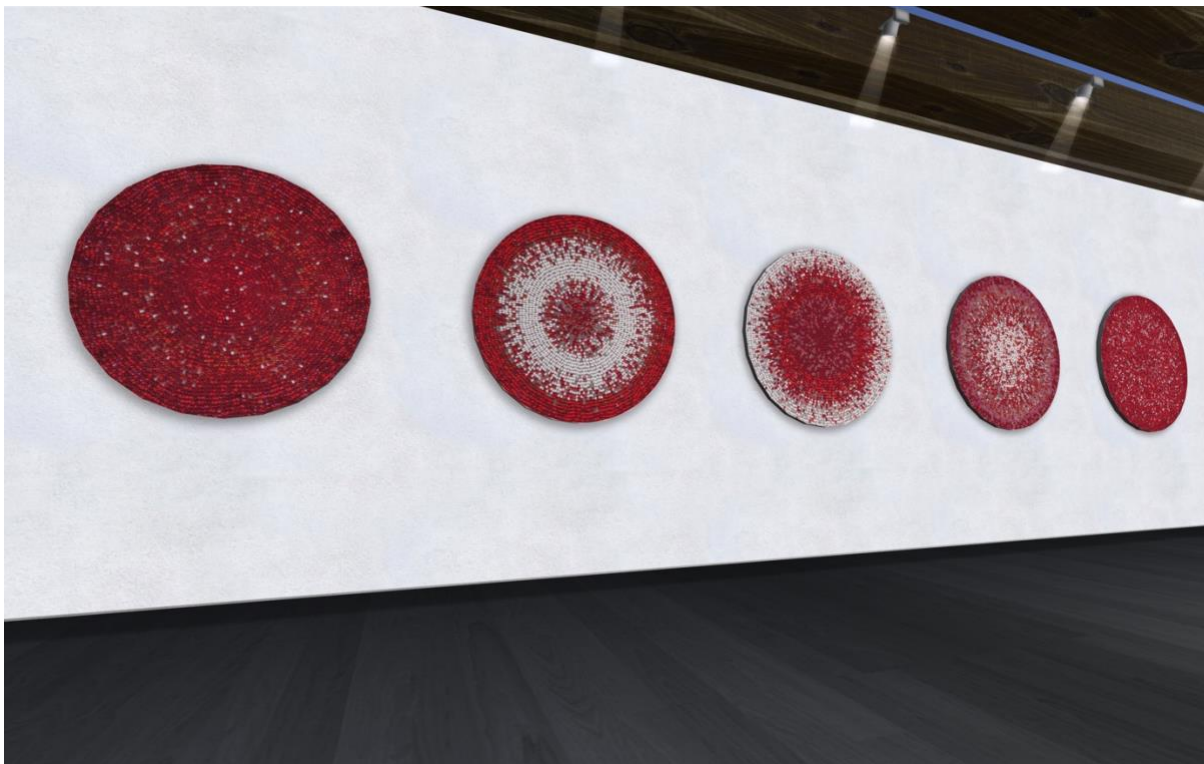


Figure 22 — Nadia Myre, *Meditations on Red* (1,2,3,4,5), 2013, Installation view at AbTeC Gallery, part of *Reformatted* exhibition, 2020. Image source: Exhibition Album on Flickr. Accessed May 10, 2022.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/obxstudios/albums/72157719470542829>

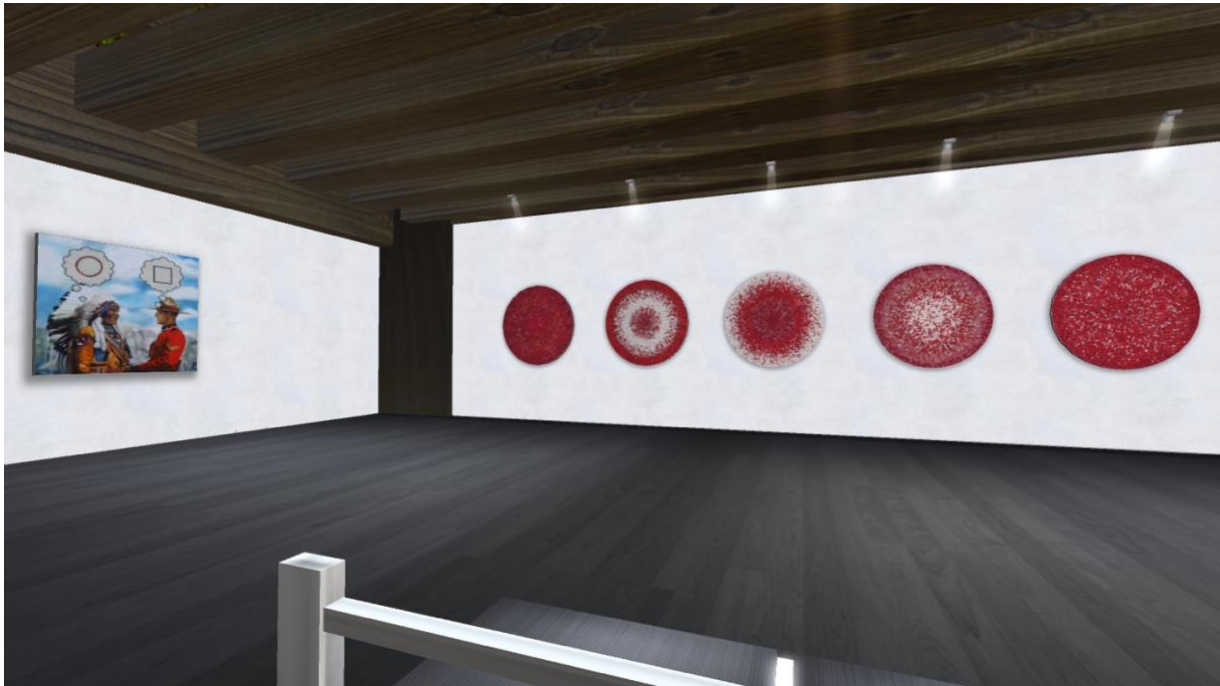


Figure 23 — Nadia Myre, *Meditations on Red* (1,2,3,4,5), 2013, Installation view at AbTeC Gallery, part of *Reformatted* exhibition, 2020. Image source: Exhibition Album on Flickr. Accessed May 10, 2022.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/obxstudios/albums/72157719470542829>



Figure 24 — Reformatted Vernissage, AbTeC Gallery, 2020. Image source: Vernissage Album on Flickr. Accessed May 10, 2022. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/obxstudios/albums/72157719397036624>



Figure 25 — Reformatted Vernissage, AbTeC Gallery, 2020. Image source: Vernissage Album on Flickr. Accessed May 10, 2022. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/obxstudios/albums/72157719397036624>

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