

Ore Body

Tsēma Tamara Skubovius

October 21 - December 31, 2016

"My investigation for this work grapples with the body, my body as it has witnessed material and metaphysical landscapes changing and continually impacted, shaken and consumed by corporate resource extraction. I critique how the value of land and natural resources are created and assessed through Western measures-of-wealth (social, economical, environmental, power, ownership) and how these types of evaluations impact traditional and contemporary cultural production in the Canadian wilderness, which is still considered an untapped frontier for natural resources. My Praxis is sparked by strategies of Indigenous resistance to neo-colonization, the embodied knowledge and everyday acts of decolonization as ways to understand the imaginary Canadian true-north and industrial reverberations felt by those who live downstream." - Tsēma Tamara Skubovius

A digital copy of this text can be found online at www.gallery44.org/exhibitions/ore-body

Artwork in vitrines left to right:

Emergence 1, backlit digital inkjet print, 2016

Trailhead, mixed media, 2016

Emergence 2, backlit digital inkjet print, 2016

Skype conversation. May 18, 2016

Alexandra S Majerus: You have just finished your MFA at OCADu and now have some more breathing space to think about this project. With the exhibition still several months away, do you already know what you are planning to exhibit in the vitrines?

Tsēma Tamara Skubovius: I am thinking about obsidian. Obsidian is a mineral mined in northern BC by ancient Tahltan people and still collected on Mount Edziza. LANDIMINE, my thesis, is grounded by obsidian because it is an agent to ancient and contemporary mining practices. This rock contains the memory of my family and is a marker on the land upon which my people moved. Whenever they rested or watched for game, they made arrowheads from obsidian and left flakes across Tahltan territory. For me, it is a proxy for the industrious quality of the Tahltan people.

I am excited to develop and expand the obsidian project from LANDIMINE into a new direction. The title of the body of work is Ore Body and I am considering two backlit photographs of obsidian and a sculptural installation.

ASM: I have your LANDIMINE exhibit invitation on my desk (*Emergence 1*). The image has a mysterious quality; the stone is not quite glass, not quite mineral and very black.

TTS: Obsidian comes in multiple shades - blue, brown, green, a speckled grey but its most common colour is black.

ASM: Somehow it makes me think of Game of Thrones.

TTS: That's right! It is dragon glass. It is magical. While I was doing my BFA, I worked at mine sites as a field assistant, one of many Tahltan community members who work in mines and mineral exploration. I have a push-pull relationship with the industry having worked for and against the mines. Although I consider corporate mining as we know it today to be part of a colonial/capitalist enterprise, the Tahltans have mined both obsidian and copper since time immemorial. During my MFA, I became interested in the word mine as a play on words: mining for minerals/mining as research/mining as a way to blur the line between colonial and Indigenous.

ASM: How do you position/negotiate yourself between First Nation and this colonial project?

TTS: Through my practice, I am honouring Tahltan philosophy of equal give and take to maintain balance on the Land. I practice this by honouring the material and the place where I harvest the material - a place that has been our home for a very long time. By researching and visiting our historical sites, I feel engaged with people and places. I see value in artistic research as a way to convey meaning apart from the usual mainstream avenues (scientific, education, pop culture, etc). People back home don't always understand contemporary artwork or artistic research but they do understand performance and iconic materials. For instance, "relational aesthetics" as it's known in contemporary art, is shown by wearing my button blanket regalia, which reflects my identity in performance. Furthermore, I activate Potlatch methodology to Indigenous my performance through sound, gift-giving and artwork. The function of the artwork is to communicate and engage and I hope members from northern communities, especially those engaged or impacted by mining practices, can relate to my work.

ASM: Could you further explain the Potlatch methodology?

TTS: Potlatch is a relational system governed by ceremony and protocol. In Potlatch ceremony, Tahltan people address their business (government and inheritance), which is completely verified through oral documentation. Potlatch is centred in Tahltan identity, being connected to Land through recognizing familial and spiritual relationships and affirmed by physical objects and gifts such as food and art. Through the process of making my button blanket, the pinnacle of Tahltan regalia, I experienced sewing as a meditative activity. Closer to Potlatch, I traveled to Tahltan territory where sewing is a communal activity, a senate, a sharing circle and space to make relations between human-to-human and human-to-material. While making the artwork for LANDIMINE, I realized my everyday relationship to space, people and the land could be seen through the lens of the Potlatch system.

ASM: Tell me more about these new images.

TTS: I see these images of the obsidian as portraits. As the size of the vitrines, they become larger than life. I will probably work with the black obsidian on black so that it is coming out of the darkness. I am thinking about the word "emergence", imagining the obsidian emerging from the darkness, from the background, in a place of becoming from a mine or the ground or being hidden and sacred.

ASM: The subtle difference between foreground and background is much like how you use the word mining as both mining for minerals and mining the archives. You are blurring the lines between binaries.

Skype conversation. September 7, 2016

ASM: You are currently in Tahltan territory spending time with your family and spending time in the environment. Have you had the chance to show your work to the community or on a smaller scale such as your family? If so, has it opened up new meanings taking it back to the source/site?

TTS: I haven't shown my work to my community in a gallery setting. Instead, I try to engage with my northern community by asking my grandparents what they think of my work and learn from their interpretations. I try to make my work accessible - I feel that adds value and meaning if viewers can understand it in their own way. I would love my artwork to be for multiple communities, including the art world and my Tahltan community. It is something for me to strive for. I do get positive comments from community members online. As problematic as social media can be, the online community is valuable as it lessens the physical distance between all of us.

ASM: How has the new project Ore Body changed/grown over the summer? Has being there fed into it?

TTS: I am still on a similar trajectory, but over the summer, the material used in Ore Body has gained a more active voice now that I am collecting and using it. I am working with the original image, *Emergence 1*, from the LANDIMINE invitation, but the second image is new - it is going to be gray/green obsidian with a similar colour background. *Emergence 2* is emerging from a fog.

ASM: The fog could be read in multiple ways: it could be the fog of history with the obsidian emerging out into a new era, or the fog could also be timeless. Fog has a duality; it may be seen as scary and it also may be seen as comforting.

TTS: I am going to fill the third vitrine with a long braid of horsehair and flagging tape that is about the thickness of my own braid. I came up with the idea while at my grandparents ranch up north. Horsehair is used in place of human hair in Indigenous mask making. Horsehair continues to signify human and Native hair in contemporary art. With the flagging tape, it becomes a metaphor of the weaving of industry and body.

Tsēma Igharas (formally Tamara Skubovius) is an interdisciplinary artist and member of the Tahltan First Nation. She studied Northwest Coast Formline Design at K'saan (2005/06), has a BFA from ECUAD (2011) and MFA from OCADu (2016). Tsema has shown in notable group show, Interweavings for emerging First Nations artists who have previously won a YVR Art Foundation scholarship (RAG 2014/15) and recently selected for Culture Shift, Contemporary Indigenous Art Biennale in Montreal and Luminato festival in Toronto (2016). Tsema graduated from the Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design program at OCADu showing her thesis work, LANDIMINE that connects materials to mine sites and bodies to the land.


original. indigenous