

fragments from the lost home

By Blair Fornwald, Curator/Director

(Content warning: brief mention of sexual abuse)

Our stories about our families often feature ourselves and our closest kin—parents and grandparents, siblings, chosen family, partners, and children—as central figures. These people and their stories connect us to a widening network of people and stories that reaches into the distant past and extends into an untold future. Without beginning or end, our stories must begin *in medias res*. Latin for “in the midst of things,” the phrase describes narratives that open mid-plot, where the reader learns about the world and its characters through flashbacks and expository dialogue. This narrative device closely mirrors the way we learn about, and position ourselves in relation to, others.

By incorporating found and gifted materials, recreating and referencing significant spaces and objects, and utilizing techniques passed down through generations, *a story in the middle* artists Catherine Blackburn, Lucien Durey, melannie monoceros, and Audie Murray explore how traditions, skills, values, sensibilities, and sensitivities are inherited across generations.

Some of these works also address what has been forgotten, stolen, or suppressed. Families disperse or are separated. Ways of life change by happenstance, force, or design. And some stories are simply too hard to tell. Some are taken to the grave. What do we make of the objects left behind? How does their meaning, symbolic weight, and valence change as the world changes around them?

It is also important to note that while the handcrafted object or family heirloom is a common conduit for nostalgia, nostalgia isn't always benign. The word, derived from Greek, describes aching homesickness: *nóstos* means “homecoming,” and *álgos*, “pain.” In its most dangerous form, it manifests as a desire to recreate the past as remembered, a stubborn longing for the “good old days” that never were. The late artist and writer Svetlana Boym names this “restorative nostalgia,” that which “stresses *nóstos* . . . and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home.”¹ Restorative nostalgia is the Vaseline-smeared lens through which we see the past in soft focus and sepia tones, the sentimental reverie at the heart of every reactionary political, social, and religious movement.

As a critical counterpoint to restorative nostalgia, Boym offers the concept of “reflective nostalgia,” which “thrives in *álgos*, the longing itself.”² The homecoming is endlessly deferred so we that may continue to savour the bittersweet complexity of our memories and our past. “Reflective nostalgia,” she writes “does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones. It loves details, not symbols.”³ By working with materials and practices that evoke highly specific relationships, memories, and histories, the artists in this exhibition invoke a kind of temporal rupture,

inviting conversations and collaborations between ancestors and descendants, loved ones and strangers alike.

melannie monoceros' *Down the House / Sit* pairs two textiles: a machine- and hand-tufted royal blue rug with symmetrically arranged abstract and geometric shapes is presented alongside a small photograph which has been printed on fabric, then quilted and hand-embroidered. At first glance, it feels like a rather incongruous pairing. The rug is crafted out of loops of luxurious, slubby yarns; it is dense and thick. Its composition of pale blue squiggles, ivory white L-shapes, and multicolored dots—some in warm earthy tones, others in punchy neons—feels resolutely modern, like a hard-edge painting, made soft. In contrast, the quilted photo has a homey, vernacular aesthetic. It depicts a cozy living room—the artist's grandmother's—and is trimmed with vintage lace, stitched with thread, and framed in an oversized decorative wooden frame, all sourced from their grandmother's home.

monoceros' grandmother, Ikolyn, immigrated from Xaymaca (Jamaica) to Canada in the late 1950s, just prior to the nation's independence from Britain in 1962, and her home décor choices reveal an English influence. There is a conversational arrangement of lightly-patterned ivory sofas and a wingback chair with a doily draped over the backrest, a mahogany colonial-style coffee table with matching side tables, and a big picture window outfitted with layers of sheers, tie-back curtains and a dramatic swag valence. Above it all is a dramatic stucco ceiling with the heaviest dollops forming a perfect circle in the middle of the room, like a mound of whipped cream on a slice of cake. Below is wall-to-wall carpet, in the same vivid shade of royal blue as monoceros' handcrafted rug.

It becomes apparent that the rug's abstract forms reference the placement of furnishings and décor in monoceros' grandmother's living room. The correlates are not quite synchronous though, suggesting that this is a map drawn from memory. The artist's memory also guides the crafting of details in quilted photograph. monoceros has outlined the furnishings and décor depicted in the photo in off-white thread, while more delicate embroidery traces the outlines of absent items: plants, more pictures, a stack of cds, a dining room table at the edge of the picture plane. The details that make a home functional and personal were removed, monoceros explains, in preparation for the sale of the house after their grandmother's passing.⁴ In both pieces, monoceros' loops and stitches re-furnish the room as remembered, articulating the ways that grief, loss, and longing linger in small things.

Through labour intensive processes such as beading, sewing, tufting, trapping, tanning, skinning, and tattooing, Catherine Blackburn expresses the ways that Dene life forges strong connections between land and body. Her work, *Trapline II*, honours the material practices of the artist's late grandparents – her Setsié, Eugene George, a trapper and fisher, and her Setsuné, Christine George, who not only made clothing for the family, but also adorned these garments with her own beadwork and embroidery designs.⁵ In Blackburn's sculpture, a dozen rabbit furs in steel traps hang horizontally along a wooden beam. Aesthetic adornments soften and complicate a purely descriptive or utilitarian reading of the work: the beam, the traps, and the lower halves of each fur are a sweet shade of pastel pink, and long strands of sparkling red beaded fringe drip from each fur, pooling on a white plinth below the hanging sculpture like blood falling on snow. *Trapline II* expresses the simultaneous harshness and beauty of living close to

the land, and works to resolve apparent contradictions between the two. It also expresses the symbiosis of the practical and the decorative, as exemplified through fur trim, which provides warmth, softness, and visual appeal to the garments and footwear it adorns. Beadwork too, serves a practical function, as expressions of love and devotion strengthen vitally important social and familial bonds.

Beadwork is often used as an analogue to language in Blackburn's work, allowing her to communicate in Dene, even though she does not speak the language. Like the rivulets of beaded blood let from the body in *Trapline II*, beadwork can also exteriorize deeply embodied sentiments that words may not express. Blackburn's *Tth'i konarídi ?ú (Can you say it again)* ruminates on language loss and reclamation. Two pairs of headphones, decorated with beadwork, face each other as if in conversation; their cords are buried in a small mound of earth. We hear the artist's voice as she practices speaking Dene, as well as her mother's voice, gently correcting her pronunciation. In a photograph, we see the artist and her mother facing each other, holding hands and wearing the same headphones, in a wintry Prairie landscape. Blackburn was raised in this landscape. She grew up away from her homelands and her language, in a predominantly white farming community, and did not learn Dene as a child. As much as it is about language, *Tth'i konarídi ?ú (Can you say it again)* is a work about deep love and understanding. Blackburn recognizes how fraught and painful her mother's decision not to teach her children Dene must have been, and the complex colonial underpinnings that may have informed this decision. Now as an adult, and without a trace of resentment, Blackburn asks her mother for help learning Dene, a reciprocal act of teaching and healing.

Much of Audie Murray's work considers expansive possibilities for collaboration across generations. In her work, *for hambone, metis billy stick* she recreates a significant, highly specific object made by her mooshum, Armand Fisher, who passed away in 2005. Ostensibly meant to be kept by the door to fend off would-be intruders, this hand-carved billy stick attests to the wry and playful sense of humor of a man who earned the nickname "Hambone." Its ability to function simultaneously as both a joke and a weapon attests to its third function, as art. Murray's faithful recreation of this complex object involved stenciling it with Fisher's distinctive handwriting, tenderly embodying him. She has also fashioned a leather sheath for the billy stick, adorned with beaded Michif floral designs and, eponymously, a hambone. Murray conceptualizes the carving and painting of the billy stick as a collaboration with her mooshum and the creation of the sheath as a gift to her family and community—both intergenerational acts of love and care that transcend time and permeate boundaries between vital states.⁶ Presented here as a photograph depicting the billy stick and sheath hung side by side, Murray demonstrates another act of care for her family and loved ones, opting to keep these objects, imbued with so much love and intent, close to home.

chi fii embraces the old ones enacts a similar collaboration with much more distant relatives. Massive photo prints depict two hammer stones with simple daisy chains wrapped around their pitted grooves. In Cree, and other Indigenous epistemologies, rocks are grandfathers, animate beings whose existence long predates human history. In the essay accompanying their exhibition, *Rocks, Stones, and Dust*, John G. Hampton explains some of the similarities we share with rocks:

Persevering through epochs—ashes to ashes, dust to dust—we are made of star stuff. It can be reassuring to see ourselves reflected in eternity. But rocks aren't eternal: they erode, aggregate, sediment, metamorphose; they are carried, carved, deposited, dissolved, shattered; and they are also named, pictured, mapped, and prayed on. Rocks are as mobile, changing, and alive as any other matter, even if their relationship with time may be quite different than our own.⁷

Murray's gesture is as delicate as the stones she wraps are sturdy, and it articulates differences in contemporary, prehistoric, and geological perceptions of time. Her strands of beaded flowers—a cheery beginner pattern one might learn as a child—hug deep furrows pecked, ground, and polished thousands of years ago, into rocks that coalesced into being over millions or billions of years. It is a simple gift that can turn our attentions toward the profound: how strange and wonderful it is to exist alongside, to sustain, and be sustained by, all of the ancestors and beings that came before. Murray's offering asks us to contemplate a family lineage that reaches into the distant past and future, long before, and long after, humans.

While most of the artworks in *a story in the middle* address blood relationships, Blackburn and Murray honour each other as chosen kin with a pair of works titled *For Audie* and *for Catherine, Tattoo Gloves*. Murray, who has trained as a traditional tattooer, gave Blackburn hand markings, including floral patterns based on Blackburn's grandmother's designs. In exchange, Blackburn embellished a pair of vintage leather gloves with embroidery and caribou hair tufting replicating those hand markings. The gloves are further adorned with fringe, ric rac and fluffy pom poms. In turn, Murray adorned a pair of well-worn camo print work gloves with moose hair tufting, brain-tanned hide, chain, and beadwork replicating her own hand markings—a bison head and a thunderbird—as a gift for Blackburn.

Does an object retain the aura of affect if its origins are unknown? In his work, Lucien Durey ruminates on the narrative and emotional potential of objects, often addressing interpersonal and familial relationships by proxy. By incorporating found, gifted, and thrifted materials with varying emotional weights and personal significances to the artist, Durey's work insinuates that all materials, no matter how prosaic, may serve as potent containers for memory. His work sometimes flirts with sentimentality: the mobile, *Stardust*, for instance, takes its title from the name of an apartment building, visible from a boyfriend's balcony and is decorated, rather romantically, with dried flowers saved from bouquets and plucked from that balcony. These tendencies are offset by the inclusion of funny, idiosyncratic materials and unprecious modes of production. In this case, the flowers adorn beeswax-dipped Cheez Whiz jar lids, ping pong balls, and Bumpits (hair volumizing inserts once sold on late-night TV infomercials), which hang from an old dishrack mounted to the ceiling—a little model of the universe, both meaningful and meaningless.

In contrast, Durey's installation, *Parlor*, is a spare living room set piece where each element is so specific it feels as if it must be a Chekov's gun: a wobbly floor lamp illuminates an amoeba-shaped table cut from a wooden door and set on spindly hairpin legs. On the surface of the tabletop, bits of broken glass form a sparkling, scattered constellation suspended in thick resin. Near the table is an orthopedic pillow, encased in black leather. Staring blankly at this scene is another artwork, called *Bog*, comprised of dozens of

thrifed safety eyes, affixed to a blue plastic shower mat and suction cupped to the glass exterior of a picture frame.

The word *parlor* is derived from Old French, *parlur*, “a place for speaking,” a fitting title for work that addresses stories rarely told. *Parlor* is comprised, in part, of materials that carry narratives of grief and trauma—glass from the car accident that killed his uncle, a pillow that belonged to his sexually abusive grandfather, a roommate’s lamp inherited from her grandparents, who survived the Holocaust. Durey’s arrangement alludes to basement rumpus rooms where teenage cousins, siblings, or best friends might candidly share these secrets—courageous and potentially cathartic acts.⁸ Though the objects still feel haunted, they also feel transformed and contained in this configuration.

The artworks in *a story in the middle* embody a set of temporal and relational paradoxes. The objects and materials the artists use in their work are embedded with history, narrative, and emotion; they are vessels carrying the past into the present. And yet, each work finds its meaning in the poetic dissonance between past and present—the home as remembered and the home as it is now, the signature and the tracing, the story as heard and the story as told. And while each artwork refers to specific histories and narratives, lovingly rendered with complexity and detail, each evokes familiar emotions widely-felt: love, grief, longing, and empathy.

¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xviii.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ melannie monoceros, “a screening, a reading and a discussion.” 22 April 2021, School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg.

⁵ Catherine Blackburn, conversation with the author, 30 October 2020.

⁶ Audie Murray, “Artist Talk.” 20 February 2021, Neutral Ground, Regina, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I3v9UZU_ETc

⁷ John G. Hampton, “Contemporary Rock Art,” in *Rocks, Stones, and Dust* (Toronto: The Justina M. Barnicke Gallery and the University of Toronto Art Centre), https://rocksstonesdust.com/essays/Contemporary_Rock_Art.pdf

⁸ Lucien Durey, “a screening, a reading and a discussion.” 22 April 2021, School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg.