

MARCH 17, 2023

## HER ART, HER ANCESTRY, HER WORDS MERYL MCMASTER SHARES HER STORY

*The Ottawa-based artist walks us through her recently opened exhibition at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, which explores her Indigenous and European ancestry.*



Meryl McMaster, *The Grass Grows Deep*, 2022, courtesy of the artist, Stephen Bulger Gallery, and Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain.



Sara Angel  
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

“[Meryl McMaster](#) (b.1988) is one of the most intriguing and accomplished artists working in Canada,” writes author Jim Burant in the Art Canada Institute publication *Ottawa Art & Artists: An Illustrated History*. After launching her career in 2010, McMaster quickly garnered international acclaim for photographic tableaux in which she explores her mixed nêhiyaw (Plains Cree), British, and Dutch ancestry using props, makeup, dress, and performance. In the new survey exhibition *Meryl McMaster: Bloodline*, organized by the McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern, earlier pieces are displayed alongside the artist’s 2022 series, *Stories of my Grandmothers / nôhkominak âcimowina*. The Art Canada Institute spoke with McMaster about some key pieces in the show and about *Stories of my Grandmothers*, a project inspired by the artist’s discovery of documents belonging to her paternal ancestors that included two diaries and a 1976 letter written by her great-grandmother Bella Wuttunee.

*Meryl McMaster: Bloodline* is on view at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario, until May 28, after which it will tour Canada.

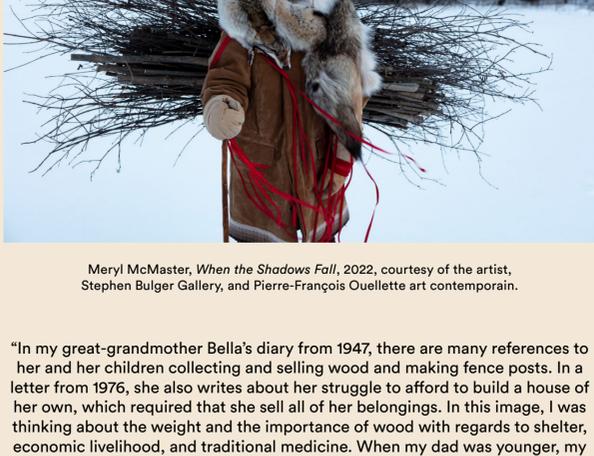
### ON THE EDGE OF THIS IMMENSITY



Meryl McMaster, *On the Edge of This Immensity*, 2019, courtesy of the artist, Stephen Bulger Gallery, and Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain.

“My 2019 exhibition, *As Immense as the Sky*, was one of the first projects for which I delved deeper into family stories and involved places my family had lived in or passed through. This image was taken in Gore Bay on Manitoulin Island, where my maternal great-grandmother was born. I had this vision of me as a giant carrying a big boat of birds on my shoulder, and we’re travelling together into the unknown. I was thinking about the great migrations of animals and humans across land and water, and about the impact humans have on the land. By transporting the birds, I was trying to get them to safety and, more broadly, protect nature.”

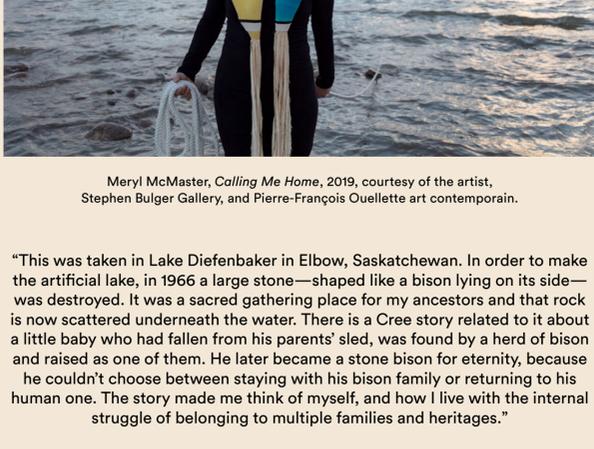
### WHEN THE SHADOWS FALL



Meryl McMaster, *When the Shadows Fall*, 2022, courtesy of the artist, Stephen Bulger Gallery, and Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain.

“In my great-grandmother Bella’s diary from 1947, there are many references to her and her children collecting and selling wood and making fence posts. In a letter from 1976, she also writes about her struggle to afford to build a house of her own, which required that she sell all of her belongings. In this image, I was thinking about the weight and the importance of wood with regards to shelter, economic livelihood, and traditional medicine. When my dad was younger, my great-grandmother would tell him to chew the leaves of a poplar tree to help with certain injuries and illnesses.”

### CALLING ME HOME

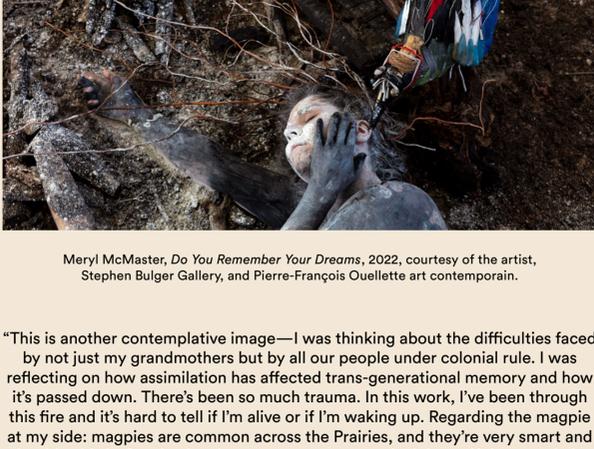


Meryl McMaster, *Calling Me Home*, 2019, courtesy of the artist, Stephen Bulger Gallery, and Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain.

“This was taken in Lake Diefenbaker in Elbow, Saskatchewan. In order to make the artificial lake, in 1966 a large stone—shaped like a bison lying on its side—was destroyed. It was a sacred gathering place for my ancestors and that rock is now scattered underneath the water. There is a Cree story related to it about a little baby who had fallen from his parents’ sled, was found by a herd of bison and raised as one of them. He later became a stone bison for eternity, because he couldn’t choose between staying with his bison family or returning to his human one. The story made me think of myself, and how I live with the internal struggle of belonging to multiple families and heritages.”

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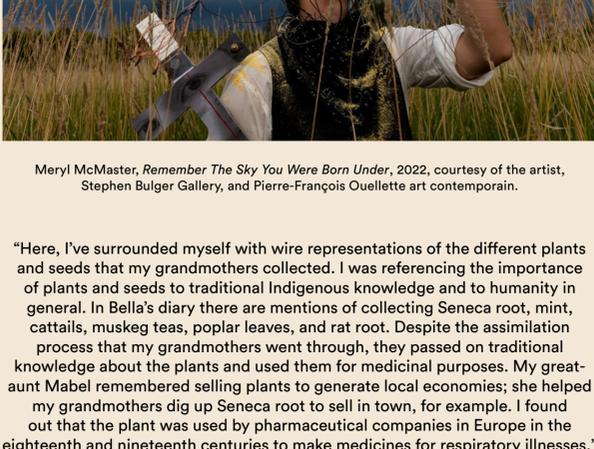
### DO YOU REMEMBER YOUR DREAMS



Meryl McMaster, *Do You Remember Your Dreams*, 2022, courtesy of the artist, Stephen Bulger Gallery, and Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain.

“This is another contemplative image—I was thinking about the difficulties faced by not just my grandmothers but by all our people under colonial rule. I was reflecting on how assimilation has affected trans-generational memory and how it’s passed down. There’s been so much trauma. In this work, I’ve been through this side and it’s hard to tell if I’m alive or if I’m waking up. Regarding the magpie at my side: magpies are common across the Prairies, and they’re very smart and intuitive birds. But they’re also scavengers, so you don’t know if the magpie is trying to rouse me or devour me.”

### REMEMBER THE SKY YOU WERE BORN UNDER



Meryl McMaster, *Remember The Sky You Were Born Under*, 2022, courtesy of the artist, Stephen Bulger Gallery, and Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain.

“Here, I’ve surrounded myself with wire representations of the different plants and seeds that my grandmothers collected. I was referencing the importance of plants and seeds to traditional Indigenous knowledge and to humanity in general. In Bella’s diary there are mentions of collecting Seneca root, mint, cattails, muskeg teas, poplar leaves, and rat root. Despite the assimilation process that my grandmothers went through, they passed on traditional knowledge about the plants and used them for medicinal purposes. My great-aunt Mabel remembered selling Seneca root to generate local economies; she helped my grandmothers dig up Seneca root to sell in town, for example. I found out that the plant was used by pharmaceutical companies in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to make medicines for respiratory illnesses.”

### THE GRASS GROWS DEEP



Meryl McMaster, *The Grass Grows Deep*, 2022, courtesy of the artist, Stephen Bulger Gallery, and Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain.

“With this image, I was thinking about my grandmothers and their lives on Red Pheasant Cree Nation (Saskatchewan). There was a lot going on at the time that was never mentioned in Bella’s writings, like the 1885 Northwest Resistance, the enactment of the Indian Act and the signing of the treaties, the Indian residential day schools, and the outlawing of the Sun Dance. In this image, I’m thinking about those critical events that changed lives and the course of history, as well as questions of legacy and the stories we inherit. The diary that I’m carrying features a picture of my three grandmothers and my costume references different stories about them. The three butterflies represent my grandmas’ souls, in accordance with Plains culture.”

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