

Essay by Franchesca Hebert-Spence on Lori Blondeau's for the exhibition *I'm Not Your Kinda Princess* presented at Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art from 11 March to 31 July 2021

On a windy fall day, members of the Winnipeg arts community trekked to the theatre at ArtsSpace for an artist talk - inside you could hear the low hum of folks visiting while the sun slowly set outside. Lori Blondeau, a new member of the arts community who had moved to the city less than a month prior, had been invited to give a presentation on her practice. That night, standing upon the stage, framed by velvet curtains, Lori not only reviewed her practice but also introduced herself to the audience by sharing stories of her experiences. One story she told was about the time that CBC had come to interview her mother, Leona Blondeau (Bird), after Bill C-31 had passed. The reporter asked, "how does it feel to be an Indian again?" to which her mother replied, "I never wasn't and this piece of paper doesn't change who I am." Lori has shared many stories with me since then, but to this day, this remains one that frames my fundamental understanding of Lori as a person and as an artist. Below are stories that Lori has shared with me that run in tandem to the artworks on display in *I'm Not Your Kinda Princess*.

I can only articulate this deep knowing as 'power in pride'. It is characterized by a weaving together of memory, knowing and stories - of and for Blondeau's kin. As an individual who had been taken out of community, I don't have the same access, knowing or memory of place. This makes the time that Lori has spent sharing her stories with me all the more special. It's also why I hold so much respect for the power that comes with her deep knowing of self, community and kin, that she communicates throughout her practice.

In the 90's to 00's, Indigenous cultural production was, and can still be, written about in a way that centres the power of the work in its capacity to educate non-Indigenous viewers. In particular, the threads or translations focus on strategies of humour and 'contemporaneity' with the end goal of deconstructing stereotypes, rather than probing the deeper layers of the conceptual framework that are specific to Indigenous folks' community or lived experience. This pattern can be seen with artists such as the beloved late James Luna, Shelly Niro and Dana Claxton, in addition to Lori. The emphasis on the western gaze, and writing that focuses on how Indigenous cultural production that *benefits* the western gaze has effectively

overshadowed the ways in which artists have made, and continue to make, work that centres themselves, their families and their communities. I'm not denying the moments of permeability, but rather my argument is that the focus has been weighted to prioritize 'universal' access rather than specific cultural experiences or visual languages - the characteristics that make art a potential site for transcultural experience. When interviewed about whether her work was a reclamation of the 'Indian Princess,' Lori echoed her mother: "Indigenous people shouldn't have to reclaim anything that was always theirs to begin with."

Both Lori and Leona's statements are about memory and remembering, honoring and being part of a continuum – while this is a form of activism and resistance, I shy away from naming it as 'radical'. Terms like 'radical care' or 'radical relationality' take actions that are fundamental to various nation's epistemologies and suggest they lie outside a dominant or default framework. Positioning them as radical delegates them as a subaltern action, rather than a continuum and a source of community power that can be tapped into. Lori's photographic series *Pakwâci Wâpisk* is an excellent example that points to the ways in which she actively decentres a western-european gaze and instead privileges those with a shared experience or knowing. In these images, neoclassical architecture, an aesthetic associated with western-thought or a visual short-hand for "civilization," is shown as decrepit and crumbling - even the word neoclassical is as much of an oxymoron as the concept of a 'dead culture'. Yet, Lori stands fierce and defiant upon these stages. Her pride and knowing - denoted by the nod to the knowledge systems that endure, that she enacts by wrapping her body in the colour of power for Plains folks - demonstrates heart work through embodying survivance, thrivance, and the power of her kin. Her photography, performance and installation each respond to a specific context. For example, in *Pakwâci Wâpisk*, Lori explores the way we stumble across architecture in public space, calling attention to these inconspicuous ways they serve as monuments to imperialism, and refuting the values they stand for through her own deep knowing of longer histories of space and place (be it constructed, researched or searched for).

There is a story about a boy who was raised by and lived with the bison. When he passed, he turned into a big rock and is known as Mistaseni. Mistaseni became a gathering point for communities in the Prairies - many stone rings and imprints, new and old, were left where tipis nestled into the earth/ground. As with most gathering places, the government saw the power in this place and decided to erect a dam - their type of power and their type of authority - to submerge Mistaseni and the surrounding area. Mistaseni once again brought people from the different nations together, this time to protect him. In a final desperate attempt to subdue the opposition, the government tried to blast and destroy Mistaseni and what he represented, thinking that relocating him would end the conflict. His name isn't big rock for nothing - while fragmented, he isn't gone. Ultimately, the spirit of that place, the spirit of coming together, and the inherent power aren't things that can be affected by dynamite or submerged - and while part of Mistaseni is resting in the lake, not able to act in the same capacity, the fragments live on in those who remember.

Asinîy Iskwew is a series that capitalizes on how photographs act as mnemonic devices, capturing a moment in time to serve as a catalyst for memory. The series itself is undeniably powerful; Lori is an indomitable figure with the composition tilting upwards, and paired with the sheer scale of the work when printed, these images have a commanding presence. These elements are amplified with the coded knowledge of the history of Mistaseni - the images aren't mere references to Mistaseni but rather serve as fragments, calling to those who know, or have shared histories. When *Pakwâci Wâpisk* and *Asinîy Iskwew* are installed in context with one another, clear connections can be drawn between the compositions and in the way, Lori holds herself; yet the stories that go with the works serve very different conceptual purposes and tell two different histories.

The multilayer integration of intimate narratives continues in one of Lori's most iconic performance personas - Belle Sauvage. Performances that are enacted by Belle Sauvage allude to and remember women who performed in Wild West shows and vaudeville acts. What is unique about the installation of the series in this exhibition is how the series is juxtaposed with a photo of

Ernest Bird. The image was taken in 1928, where he posed, decked out in a beaded vest, cowboy boots and a six-shooter. Ernest Bird is Lori's grandfather, and this image is one of the multiple archival images installed within *I'm Not Your Kinda Princess*. The images are family portraits; images of the folks that the work is made for and where her work comes from. The tangibility of Lori's family photos becomes even more precious when we think about an ongoing move to digital images and the spaces in which they're retained.

When the *Putting the Wild in the Wild West* series (collaboration with Adrian Stimpson) began in 2006, the images were shot on 55 Polaroid film, which peeled making a positive and negative - the negative could be used to reprint. Individuals would sign over the rights to the images to Lori and Adrian, paralleling land histories of land apprehension, and in return receive the positive image or the 'printed' image. It was in 2010 that the stock of polaroid film ran out after the company went bankrupt, forcing the images to be taken using digital cameras afterwards. The role of the photo changes in a really significant way - unlike the image of her grandfather, unless the photos are printed and cared for, their ability to act as a mnemonic device is compromised in some ways.

Lori isn't performing Belle Sauvage, she's remembering: remembering the acts, remembering signing land claims with an x, remembering the significance of standing in front of the camera, remembering that these photos will last - if they're cared for - and imagining what they'll mean for her children and her children's children.

In the middle of the prairies, there is a community on the periphery of a valley. For a long long long long time, the valley served as a lookout for the community. For upon the hill were tipi rings, imprints left by those who would stay there. As time passed, a farmer from the community came along and ploughed the ground, erasing the rings that had been there for so long. When razzed about it, he said "I didn't remember they were there!" But a Kokum who lived on that very hill did remember and created a beautiful rock garden in front of her sod house. Eventually the little sod house was left empty and burnt down, leaving its imprint in the earth and the rock garden behind. One

day, the hill had visitors: the kin of the Kokum. As her relatives stood on the hill and remembered, her granddaughter picked up a rock and carried a piece of that hill with her to her home eastward.

— Franchesca Hebert-Spence