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Taylor Baptiste

Curated by Dr. Stacey Koosel
& Ryan Trafananko

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Taylor Baptiste (she/her) is an interdisciplinary artist from the Osoyoos Indian Band of the Okanagan Nation. She draws upon her upbringing in Nk'mip – a field of sagebrush and wild roses nestled between the mountains and Osoyoos Lake on the Osoyoos Indian Band reservation. Raised by Richard and Colleen Baptiste, her art practice is deeply rooted in her family, community and ancestral history. Moreover, she incorporates elements of Syilx storytelling and epistemologies, reflecting a connection to the land and waters of the Okanagan. She sculpturally blends Okanagan land-based materials and Syilx traditional practices with contemporary mediums and modes of making; working with materials ranging from ochre pigment, buckskin, rocks, beadwork, sinew and ready-made materials. While sculpture serves as her primary mode of expression, Taylor's artistic repertoire also encompasses digital illustration, painting, photography, and most recently, film and projection.

Vance Wright (they/them) is a reconnecting two-spirit member of the Tl'azt'en Nation, and was raised on the unceded territories of the Sinixt Nation in what is colonially known as Nelson BC. Currently residing in the occupied and unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations in Vancouver, they are an emerging artist, curator and writer. They hold a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Emily Carr University, with a major in Critical and Cultural Practices and a minor in Curatorial Studies.

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Essay by Vance Wright

Pictography is a practice of mark making, and a practice of engaging deep time across space. Pictographs are made from red ochre pigment being placed on a rock surface, depicting imagery that pertains to creation stories, conflicts, agreements, bargains struck, or familial stewardship territories, among other things. The word is traced etymologically to “pingere,” or “pict-,” meaning “painted,” and the greek word “graphos,” meaning “written,” or “writing.” The english word “graph” also is linked to equipment that records, or denotes something written or drawn in a specified way. This makes a certain kind of sense as pictographs record events, and are specific to each Nation.

The red ochre used in pictographs historically originated from one of few places in what is now referred to as British Columbia. With this in mind, the widespread use of this pigment is evidence of a robust trade economy between Nations. This powder form of iron oxide is symbolic of a deep connection to the land, as it originates from the earth and was traditionally mixed with fish eggs, fish oil, bear grease, berry juice and/or saliva, thus bringing the land and the various beings it contains into relation with one another, to create an oil based paint that could sustain itself for well over 1,300 years.

There are three main components to a pictograph; the story, the site, and the hand. The story is what informs the imagery and how it is interpreted, it is passed from lip to ear between generations. The site is not only where the pictograph is located, but also pertains to the story, usually a pictograph marks where the story unfolded. The hand is necessary in order to make the pictograph, it is an act of service to the community and to future generations, an individual is sometimes responsible for changing the landscape in deep time, to strengthen a communities knowledge and connection to the land.

A common unfortunate fall out of settler-colonialism is the vandalization of these historical sites. In my final year of high school, I remember some teen settlers vandalizing the S'ini'xt pictographs in my hometown. Even more recently, pictographs were defaced in the Okanagan territories— a moment that Baptiste remembers vividly as the grief she felt was akin to losing a loved one. The site was one of the first pictographs that Baptiste's father had shown her, and she would visit every so often as a place of reflection.

Last year, these Okanagan pictographs were restored using laser technology, which destroyed the spray paint but left the red ochre underneath untouched. Baptiste was able to witness the restoration, and began to think about what motivated the act of defacing in the first place— namely, ignorance. Most settlers don't know what pictographs mean to the Nations whose land they are on,

and so Taylor began thinking of sculpture and pictography as a way to respectfully share information in the hopes that pictograph sites could remain protected. If settlers continue not knowing what they are and what their significance is, how can we expect them to respect and protect pictographs?

After witnessing the spray paint removal process, Baptiste began researching what was happening between rock and pigment at the microscopic level. This research taught Baptiste that over the centuries since these signs were painted, a thin bio-film of micro-organisms grew over the pictographs surface, which took on the pigment of the ochre from their surroundings thus becoming active agents in the pictographs preservation while simultaneously animating them. Settler colonialism aims for museum goers and book readers to see pictographs as static, as emblematic of a time gone by, but these findings deny this colonial worldview. These are not calcified or fossilized, but marks made by actual human beings with the help of the land, of animals, and small beings. They are emotional, as they are a direct connection to that ancestor who mixed the paint, who put paint to stone, and words to others ears.

Taylor's practice is a continuation of tradition in contemporary times. Her work also involves the story, the site and the hand, embracing red ochre as a material but bringing it off the rockface to stand alone in three-dimensional space as a way to animate the pictographs in the same way the microorganisms do, breathing a transformed life into them. According to Rosalind E. Krauss, Sculpture is a double negative—neither land, nor architecture, but exists in relation to both and speaks in the language of the monument. Baptiste pulls pictographs from the land and creates monumental sculptures with them, scaling them to be as big or larger than a human body. A throughline between pictography and sculpture is that they both operate as a form of monument, site specific commemorations. These contemporary sculptural pictographs still revolve around stories told to her by family, about creation, about connection, but the site is different and changing, as if her history and that of her family and ancestors follows her anywhere. In this way, her work evidences how connection to culture and ancestors persists in a hypermobile world, that her stories remain unflinching, being shown in territories that they have never appeared in before. These are ochre marks that you can pack up and take with you.

Her work is also somewhat contingent upon the audience in attendance—anyone who is Okanagan will know what story the pictographs are telling, but these sculptures are often exhibited in other territories. There is a certain generosity in Taylors work, a willingness to share with her audience the formal aspects of Okanagan pictography even if she is not permitted to share the stories that they pertain to. The story may not be accessible to everyone, but the site of the gallery is, as is the evidence of her hand in the making of her sculptural pictographs. In the setting of settler colonialism, her hand as an artist is one of continuing the teachings that were given to her in order to benefit her community, and highlighting the importance of making marks on spacetime for future generations.