

Sovereign Intimacies

September 26 - December 20, 2020

Co-curated by Nasrin Himada and Jennifer Smith,
Partnership with Gallery 1C03, with support from Video Pool Media Arts Centre

Jennifer Smith: How did our intimacies grow? Looking back it seems so natural, so easy, the growth of these intimacies have been rooted in respect and sharing. What did we talk about? These reflections seem foggy, as every word seemed to reflect or inspire something in the other. How do these intimacies grow so strong when our introductions came from casual interaction at openings, book launches and community events? How did it seem we understood each other so well from the beginning, while not really knowing much about each other? I remember the first time I felt like you understood something about me we had never discussed. You were giving a lecture and speaking about longing for your grandmother, how you imagined her, and described the things you wanted to learn from her. As you spoke, your emotions were deep, and strong, and even though you felt you had more to learn from your grandmother, she was so present in you. Or at least that is what I wanted to believe because you were speaking the words and emotions I feel about my grandmother, and I know even though I didn't get to learn from her directly that she has left so many gifts with me to carry with me through life.

I still wonder why it was so easy to trust each other? As we shared ideas and visioned a shared project you often said what I was thinking, if not there was space for me to take time to understand your thoughts along with my own thoughts, and there was so much space to learn from each other. Although there was such an ease in our discussions, the growth that I personally get to experience from hearing your ideas, hearing you speak about art, culture,

Nasrin Himada: I was so moved that you had asked me to co-curate an exhibition with you. I know you were inspired by Peter [Morin] and Ayumi [Goto]'s performance at the Vancouver Art Gallery a few years back. Specifically, in the ways their friendship unfolded and infolded into their practice, that one conditioned the other. It's even hard to bring language to this process, because it challenges how we think about work in this context: the intimacy in friendship is the work, a commitment toward being together, thinking together, eating together, laughing together. It has been challenging to create, emphasize, and prioritize this approach to curating in an institutional setting. Our vision for the exhibition was driven by the intimacy built over time through conversation, lunches, visits, a friendship that was forming quickly as you describe. I had to remind myself a few times not to fall back on certain habits while we were bringing the show to fruition. Habits conditioned by institutional structures, and the pressures that inevitably arrive because of deadlines and other administrative protocols. I had to remind myself that we can do this on our terms, to honour the ways in which this process first began. And it was through discussion with you that these values were made clearer each time. Building something together by putting value on care brought into light our shared curatorial ethics.

This is a hard term to use, a challenging one—ethics. But it is one I think of often when entering a relationship, a process that is bigger than self, allowing me to consider the power of intention as they are being set with someone else. What drove *Sovereign Intimacies* as a

heritage, and life (as if they all aren't one anyhow) was a gift. But then you said you were learning from me too. This is how intimacies grow.

Understanding these intimacies means more than being collaborators or friends. Day-to-day we talked about so many subjects. Talking about our own histories and connections to our cultural histories, moving through ideas of colonization/ decolonization, working and changing the foundations of institutions, and then you had a crush, and I had a friend get sick, and work got hard, there were birthdays, and discussions of caring for ourselves and community around us, we got busy, but we always made time to check in, to talk. The talks were personal, but also every moment of them was so relevant to the work we were doing together, each of these moments may not be evident in the exhibition but they are all there. Along with the moments that belong amongst the artist and community that surround us, as we grow together through a mutual understanding of what it means to share space on the lands we live in whether we are Indigenous to this land, or have come to these lands outside of the context of settler/colonial histories. We grow together by learning from one another, sharing knowledge, emotions, and time, we know that each of us offers each other many gifts, and we leave ourselves open to what is given, as well as freely give to each other. We are building *Sovereign Intimacies*, and the exhibit shows we are not the only ones.

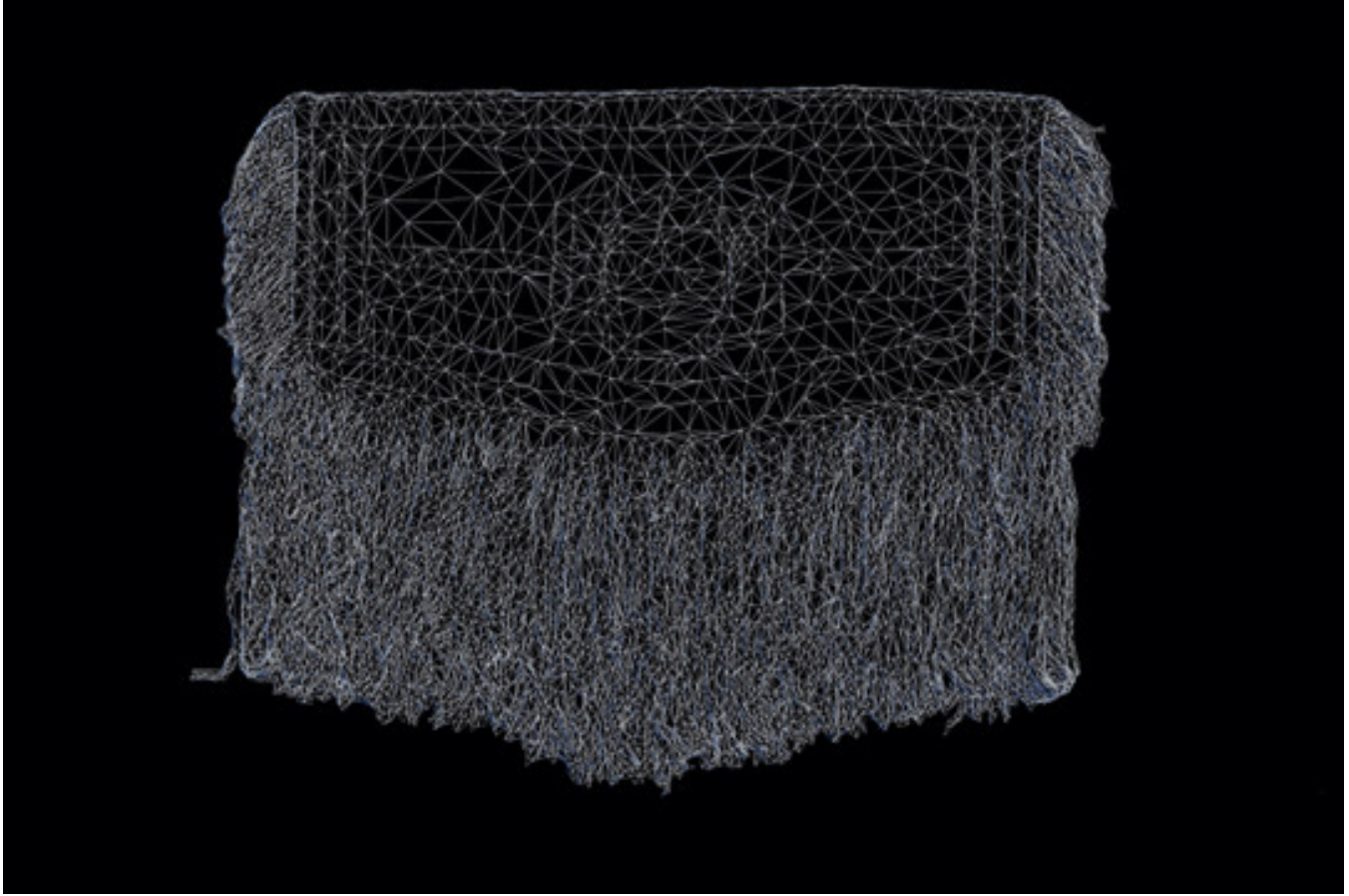
Jennifer Smith

project is a common understanding that there is so much to learn from each other's lineage, our life stories, the knowledge that we carry—that in the process of getting to know someone means there is possibility for transformation. The project had already begun before we even knew it. It had already captured us.

The artists presented in this exhibition offer forms of collectivity that are based on the principles of taking time, learning, listening, letting the process guide the work. Each in their own way, and through their own chosen media, have provided a space in which to consider intimacy as active, as action, and as change.

This exhibition is for us. When I refer to "us" I mean you and me, and all the artists we have worked with on this, and for our friends and family, and the communities who desire conversations between us: we who come from a lineage of people impacted by colonial and white supremacist violence. In order to emphasize the ways in which through our struggles, love and care, we build our solidarity. So for me the curatorial ethics we have built together, with the artists and through encounters with their artworks, are grounded in relations. And in the question of: how do we continue to show up for each other? It is through this intention that I believe liberation manifests in these intimacies that are sovereign.

Nasrin Himada



Wrapped in the Cloud © Jaad Kuujus (Meghann O'Brien), 2018. Produced in collaboration with Conrad Sly, Hannah Turner, Reese Muntean, and Kate Hennessy. Video, 4 mins.

Hassaan Ashraf & Annie Beach Living on the lands currently called Canada it is evident that language is taken for granted. On a day to day basis, the majority of people can speak to each other, hear the language of their ancestors, whether that is English or French. These two languages are extremely accessible, leaving little space for the intimacies of language that are not so commonly spoken. Hassaan Ashraf and Annie Beach's collaborative work *Heart Berry Kief* opens up the intimacies of language, intimacies that are very clear to people on these territories who do not speak one of the two 'official' languages, or belong to any of the Indigenous nations on these lands who have had to fight to retain their languages. Hassaan and Annie's exploration of the intimacies of languages reveals the love, and belonging that language has the capacity to invoke when it is paid attention to. The collaboration has each artist celebrating languages that have importance to them. Hassaan paints Urdu phrases in calligraphy and Annie Indigenous slang in a graffiti style on a mural. The words intertwine, and meld into one another. The mural is a representation of people sharing their cultural knowledge with each other, but also a welcome to those who recognize one of the languages represented. Reminding those who see it and recognize those languages that there are people here who understand them, and celebrate their existence, in the same ways that Hassaan and Annie celebrate and honour each other's existence.

iris yirei hu's practice foregrounds care in how it manifests in research and apprenticeship. iris's mixed media installation, *weaver girl limns two rainbows*, depicts a painting of the artist weaving on a Taiwanese Atayal foot loom. The painting is framed in a Navajo loom with the foundation made up of locally sourced clay that dates back to pre-treaty time. The piece brings together iris's study of two Indigenous weaving practices. The Atayal are an Indigenous community in Taiwan who under Japanese occupation had their livelihood destroyed when their weaving, head-hunting and facial tattooing practices were banned by Japanese colonizers. When traveling with her mother to Taiwan, iris apprenticed with Ms. Sayun Yuraw, whose Atayal weaving lineage was severed and spent the latter part of her life reclaiming the lost craft. iris, for some time now, has also sustained a relationship and continues to apprentice with Melissa Cody, a Navajo artist and weaver. iris centres a deep commitment to cultivating relationships and intimacy with the histories of people and places in which she encounters, conditioning an ethical framework that connects these histories to the earth, creating a space for how sustainability and awareness are part and parcel of these relations. Creating a line of connection between all the elements that come to form our knowledge of place and of being, iris uses art as a vehicle to give form to these stories, subjects, and movements that exist in the entanglement of colonization and dispossession of land and peoples.

Meghann O'Brien *Wrapped in the Cloud* © by Jaad Kuujus (Meghann O'Brien) produced in collaboration with Conrad Sly, Hannah Turner, Reese Muntean, and Kate Hennessy, is an otherworldly video that reveals the layers that connect community and ancestral knowledge, representing the often inexpressible depths of love and culture. *Wrapped in the Cloud* is a digital representation of a weaving called *Sky Blanket* by Jaad Kuujus (Meghann O'Brien), that reveals what our eyes cannot see when looking at the weaving. We are let into a sacred realm that shows us how every ancestor holds space in the constellations created through the process of weaving threads together. The warp and weft change the structure of the threads, making them stronger once woven together. Through collaboration with other artists, and community, *Wrapped in the Cloud* is stronger for the shared knowledge, care, and presence of each person and spirit that has had impact on the making of the weaving and the video. It all comes together through Jaad Kuujus (Meghann O'Brien) who brings this work into existence.

Ayumi Goto and Peter Morin's *Gift – 遠足 (Ensoku) – Away* places gift giving as a central part of their relationship as collaborators, friends, and artists. Gift giving plays an important role in both Ayumi's Japanese cultural heritage and Peter's Tahltan cultural heritage, and they both freely give gifts to honour this shared tradition that is part of their respective cultures. There is very little distinction between the roles that the artists play in each other's lives, the roles of collaborator, friend and artist all come together to form Ayumi and Peter's relationship. They are committed to each other and take responsibility in understanding the other's life, family, culture and interests. Through artifacts of the evidence of Ayumi and Peter's friendship and collaborations, they are exhibiting examples of gifts that they have given each other. The work they have included in the exhibition may focus on the ideas of gift giving to each other, but what they exhibit is also a gift to the audience. The gifts include asking the audience to think critically, to laugh, to find joy, to love and respect one another, to attempt to understand the ways we can impact the lives of those around us, and to laugh and find joy again.

When thinking about **Wanda Nanibush's** curatorial work an immediate word that comes to mind is intuition, a curatorial approach that gives space and respects the body's capacity to know, and to bring that knowledge and vision to fruition through an intimate process with the artists. At a talk a few years ago that took place at McGill University, Nanibush expressed the significance of centring an approach to curating that feels like a gathering of friends and families in the kitchen, speaking freely, openly in an environment that is comforting and warming. This approach to curating drives her ambition to create spaces where conversations can be had among many communities who have been working toward liberation and sovereignty. Among the many seminal exhibitions she has curated, like Rebecca Belmore's *Facing The Monumental* (2018), Rita Letendre's *Fire and Light* (2017), and *Sovereign Acts* (2012, 2017, 2020), Nanibush is also the founder of *aabaakwad*, a powerful gathering of Indigenous artists, curators and thinkers that focuses on an Indigenous-led conversation on Indigenous art by those who create, curate and write about it. The first iteration took place at the Art Gallery of Ontario and the second at the 22nd Biennale of Sydney. She was also the co-curator of *From Glissant: Unfixed and Unbounded*, an international event that highlighted current thinking on poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant's concept of relation. As part of *Sovereign Intimacies*, Nanibush will be giving a talk on her curatorial process and vision, as well as her curatorial work in Palestine, and future projects.

M. NourbeSe Philip is a prolific poet, essayist, novelist, playwright and independent scholar who has written many seminal works including *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, the speculative prose poem *Looking for Livingston: An Odyssey of Silence*, the collections of essays *BlanK*, and the long form poem, *Zong!*. Philip's work reveals the power of language—that there is potential for change and transformation in meaning by breaking open form and by breaking open words. There is so much to learn from Philip's work, so much to listen to, to sit with, to read and re-read, to hold close, to return to. Her words tell the stories of grief as well as joy, of memory's active presence, of loss and refusal. A line that resonates so deeply with this exhibition comes from a powerful piece by Philip entitled "Interview with an Empire," where she writes of writing: "The struggle is to reduce the gap between the experience and the expression of that experience." Philip offers a way to enter into these conversations on intimacy and process by already informing us that bringing language to these expressions might take some time and work and from that poetry might be borne. For *Sovereign Intimacies*, Philip will facilitate a durational reading from her poetry book *Zong!* on the anniversary of the massacre of enslaved Africans on board the slave ship *Zong*, that took place in 1781. Philip facilitates this every year in order to create a space for us to remember those who have passed, but it is also to remember this event as that which "cannot be told yet but must be told."

mel monoceros makes respect for their community a central part of their practice. mel is an amazing artist creating weavings, films and poetry that stand on their own. But the work mel creates that is exhibited, published and screened is never made solely for those purposes. When mel hosts readings of their poetry they ask people to engage, to respond to what they wrote with their own personal stories. When mel is part of an exhibition they teach workshops to share their own knowledge, while at the same time making space for the participants in the workshop to share what they know. Their artwork is about the reciprocal nature of what it means to create, and share what we make, and not placing value on anyone maker over the other. mel's work questions the power dynamics of being a professional artist who is given space. They take every opportunity they are given and carefully and thoughtfully share it with others. This careful thoughtfulness looks at who is not being given space, examines the needs of those people, and facilitates a way for the door to be opened for more people.

David Thomas and Cheyenne Thomas are architects and designers from Peguis First Nation who have collaborated on many projects together including the Indigenous Peoples' Garden in Assiniboine Park. They implement an Indigenous worldview into their architectural designs, and emphasize the importance of design's relation to the land. Indigenous design is modern and sustainable, and their vision is to utilize design and architecture in a way to further make visible Indigenous presence in urban spaces. As they have expressed, Indigenous design is the most innovative when it comes to thinking about the environment, and that for them it is important for these values that prioritise relations to land to be seen and implemented into the fabric of our cities. For *Sovereign Intimacies*, the Thomases will give an artist talk to discuss their respective practice, their collaboration, as well as the projects they are working on now.

Sovereign Intimacies is a group exhibition co-curated by Nasrin Himada and Jennifer Smith, in partnership with Gallery 1C03, with support from Video Pool Media Arts Centre. The exhibition takes place at Plug In ICA from September 26 – December 20, 2020, with extensive programming that consists of online talks, workshops, screenings, and poetry readings. *Sovereign Intimacies* explores themes of cultural and community exchange between Indigenous artists and artists from the diaspora, more specifically artists who are First Nations, Inuit and Métis collaborating with artists living in what is currently called Canada who came to this land and are not part of the settler/colonial history of the country. The group show consists of pairings of artists, as well as individuals, whose work is based on process and relationship building, and for those whose work is invested in active conceptualization around topics of friendship and intimacy, who are working to build collective vision of a sovereign future.

The curatorial intention is to present not only work in a gallery space, but to focus on an extensive online public program featuring readings, talks, workshops, screenings, and other local community engagements and encounters. The aim is to construct a space where these conversations highlight collaboration and exchange of knowledge. The community is centered, knowing that this exhibition cannot respond to and encompass all the needs of future discussions, but sets the goals for the community to continue these discussions to amplify our collective voice.

Curator Bios

Jennifer Smith is a Métis curator, writer and arts administrator in from Treaty One territory. She works at Video Pool Media Arts Centre as the Distribution Manager. Jennifer is the President of the board for the Coalition of Canadian Independent Media Art Distributors that runs VUCAVU.com and sits on the board of the National Indigenous Media Arts Coalition and Platform Centre for Photographic + Digital Arts. Jennifer has curated exhibits and video programs for the Manitoba Craft Council, Video Pool Media Arts Centre, Open City Cinema, MAWA, the Manitoba Crafts Museum and Library, and in 2018 was the Indigenous Curator in Residence at aceartinc.

Nasrin Himada is a Palestinian writer and curator. Their writing on contemporary art has appeared in *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *Critical Signals*, *The Funambulist*, *Fuse*, and *MICE*, among others. They currently hold the position of Curator at Plug In ICA.