

Mnemonic (Re)Manifestations: Barry Ace

Essay by Alan Corbiere

Anishinaabe artist Barry Ace traces his lineage to Chief Assance¹ (Little Shell) of the **Nigig** (Otter) clan. In this exhibit called Mnemonic (Re)Manifestations, Ace contemplates cultural metaphors, visual symbols, media, story and history. Throughout these collected works, Ace summons the mnemonic locked in tradition and releases it in new media re-creating manifestations anew. These symbols are all tied to story and (his)tory.

Long ago, the vengeful actions of **Nenbozhoo** compelled the underwater beings to flood the world. **Nenbozhoo** re-created the world by using some of the old world. This newly, re-created earth was re-populated by plants, insects, fish, birds, animals, and **Anishinaabeg** (humans). The **Anishinaabeg** population increased but soon they started to get sick and die. It is said that, the creator saw that the people on earth could not protect themselves against disease and death. In the spirit world, across the ocean, a council was held to determine how best to teach the people to protect themselves. A medicine bundle was prepared and the **makwa** (bear) was the first one charged with carrying this sacred bundle of everlasting life to the **Anishinaabeg**. The bear carried the bundle as far as the great salt water. The **miigis** (little cowrie shell) then relieved the bear of his burden and carried the bundle along the bottom of the ocean to this continent. The **miigis** met a waterfall and could not climb any further. **Oshkaabewis** (ceremonial attendant) met the **miigis** and grabbed the bundle. However, the load was too great and he required assistance. **Oshkaabewis** looked for a suitable candidate to help deliver this medicine bundle to the **Anishinaabeg**. He journeyed around the world four times but could not find anybody suitable to help him. **Oshkaabewis** then met **Nigig** playing on the bank of a river. He asked **Nigig** to help but **Nigig** just kept on playing, sliding down the riverbank. **Oshkaabewis** asked **Nigig** again and again, finally on the seventh attempt **Nigig** agreed to be messenger and he placed the bundle on his back. **Nigig** and **Oshkaabewis** took turns carrying the bundle. They shared the burden but also took time to share the teachings that accompanied the bundle. They sought out the **Anishinaabeg**. The journey of the **Oshkaabewis** and **Nigig** was mnemonically manifested in a **Mide-wiigwaas** (a birchbark scroll). According to one record, the otter, **Oshkaabewis**, and thus the **Midewiwin** (called the Grand Medicine Society) travelled to La Crosse. To memorialize their stop, a man standing was etched onto the Mide-wiigwaas (birchbark scroll). The next place depicted on the scroll was **Waawiiye'adinong** "The round shaped lake (often listed as Lake St. Clair by Detroit)"; then **Mashkiigo-ziibi** (Swampy River);

¹ Assance has been spelt a number of ways including Aisance, Aissance, and Essens. Utilizing the modern orthography, the Ojibwe word for clam is **es**, a small clam is **esiins** or **esens** (depends on dialect).

Mooningwanekaaning (Place of the Northern Flicker aka Madelaine Island); and then **Shagwamikaang** (Shallows where the waves break); **Nemitigmishkaang** (Oak point), followed by a shallow river called **Naongowo-ziibi**, then “**Ka-ke-no-ne**,” then **Gaa-zagaskwaajimekaag** (Leech Lake) and **Obaashing** and finally to Little Ottertail Lake.² **Nigig** went ashore and shook himself off. He shook himself again and there were many **miigis** (little cowry shell) dripping from his hair. **Nigig** told **Oshkaabewis** to keep the shells because they would serve as a reminder, a mnemonic for creation and the **Midewiwin**. The otter, Ace’s **doodem** (clan) was an important messenger for the Anishinaabeg. Similarly **miigis**, little sea shells called cowry, a cousin of **esiins** (freshwater clam, which was historically spelt as Assance and Ace, Barry’s surname), play an important role in mnemonically recalling **Anishinaabe** history and cultural teachings, thus by virtue of his **doodem** (clan) and his surname, Barry is perhaps predisposed to encode these teachings in new media for this generation.

The **Oshkaabewis** and **Nigig** noticed that the people were very poor and unhealthy and even listless. **Oshkaabewis** wondered what could be the matter with them but **Nigig** thought he knew the answer. **Oshkaabewis** turned around and **Nigig** was gone. He heard someone laugh out on the lake. **Oshkaabewis** and the people on shore looked out to the middle of the lake and there was **Nigig** laughing and calling to them. He told them that he would show them the four directions so that they could live in harmony with all of creation and receive all of the gifts that each direction offered. **Nigig’s** head disappeared and then re-appeared in the east. **Nigig** then dove again and his head re-appeared in the middle where he had started. **Nigig’s** head then disappeared again only to re-appear in the south. **Nigig** hollered to the people and they cheered in return. **Nigig** then returned to the center and proceeded in the same manner to dive to the west and north.³

Nigig and **Oshkaabewis** had delivered the bundle to the **Anishinaabeg** but much work remained to be completed. **Oshkaabewis** taught the people how to construct the lodge and he also taught them to sing certain songs. The **Midewakik** (waterdrum) arose from the first layer of the earth. The otter then said, “That drum won’t be any good to anyone. How will it make a sound without anything covering the top of it to make it roar?’ The otter lay across the top of the drum and made a hide to cover it. Then the otter spoke: ‘Anyone that wants everlasting life will now talk about me too; this is why I give you my hide.’”⁴ **Nigig** wanted to be remembered for doing his duty.

² Redsky 1972, p. 105 – 106. Spelling of Ojibwe place names have been modified to adhere to modern orthography.

³ This retelling is based upon Hoffman 1891, p. 175, and Benton-Banai, 1988, p. 63 – 65.

⁴ Redsky 1972, p. 103.

The hide of the **nigig** held power. The **Midewiwin** medicine society revered the otter as a patron to their members. Similarly, the **Anishinaabeg** revered the **nigig** because of their amphibious nature. The otter can swim great depths, but is also comfortable on land. Modern day dancers make a head dress of the **nigig**'s hide, they have also made belts out of his hide. In Mnemonic (Re)Manifestations, Barry Ace has made "**Nigik Makiznan: Otter moccasins**" with strips of decorated otter hide flowing from the heel of the shoe. These moccasins are based upon the trailer moccasins made by the ancestors to hide their footprints, deleting any trace of their presence. Ace has made his **Nigik makiznan** for the modern age though, the electronic components and extending wires are meant to erase any digital presence while the otter tails/ trails erase the physical tracks.

In beadwork patterns, the **Anishinaabe** crafts people often incorporated a design called the otter tail or otter trail. These otter tails/ trails are elongated hexagons preceded by four or more diamonds and followed by the same number of diamonds. The effect is that of an otter hopping and then sliding through the snow or the mud. This visual motif adorns beaded moccasins, beaded shawls, straps, leggings and beaded bags, such as the bandolier bags also known as 'friendship bags.'⁵ Bandolier bags consist of a wide strap, a panel (the bag) and the fringe or tabs that hang from the panel.⁶ Many early bandolier bags had the front panel that was decorated, at first with geometric designs (much like a grid or circuit board), and later with floral designs. Often the perimeter of this front panel was framed with the otter trail/ tail design. Framing the central panel of the bandolier bag with the otter trail/ tail is a manifestation of the mnemonic.

The Ojibwe bandolier bag was inspired by the bandolier bags worn by colonial soldiers, especially the bags that had thick straps to hold extra cartridges of ammunition and gunpowder. The **Anishinaabeg** modified the design to suit their needs. The straps on the bag no longer were required to carry physical ammunition, instead they were to convey the spirit power of the owner, thus the design, whether floral or geometric, became a mnemonic for spirit power. Now Ace's bags, made with capacitors, resistors, and circuit boards allude to a different type of ammunition, an electronic 'ammunition' necessary for the modern **Anishinaabe**.

The generic Ojibwe word for bag is **mashkimod**. Consulting dictionaries produced in the mid-nineteenth century, the word **mashkimod** is synonymous with "Pindâgan."⁷ In the modern orthography this word is rendered as

⁵ Whiteford

⁶ other article

⁷ Baraga 1992, p. 356 also Rhodes 1993, p. 420.

biindaagan which now means “pocket.”⁸ The initial morpheme of the word **biind-** refers to inside or in. The initial morpheme has also been used in the construction of other words for items such as the powder horn **Biindakatewan**,⁹ and the quiver for arrows, **Biindanwaan**. Similarly the word for shot pouch, **biindasinaan** or **biindasinaajigan** are related,¹⁰ as is the word for scabbard or knife sheath, **biindikomaan**.¹¹ However, these are not the words for the bandolier bag. In fact, consulting these 19th century dictionaries for the term “bandolier bag” is fruitless because the bags were not called that back then. However, looking under different terms one finds the word for medicine bag listed as **biinjigoosan**.¹² In Ojibwe, some words for a container utilized the initial morpheme “**biind-**” but this is also related to “**biinj-**”, as in **biinjyihii** “inside.”¹³ However, the etymology of **Biinjigosaan** is elusive save for the initial morpheme that refers to “inside.” Except for **biindaagan**, which is now used for pocket, these words are all practically obsolete and some are known because of the practice of storytelling.

Perusing the mid-nineteenth century dictionaries reveals that another word “Kishkibitâgan” was used for tobacco pouch.¹⁴ In central Ontario this word is rendered today as **gshkibidaagan** and is translated as pouch.¹⁵ In Minnesota area this word is spelt as **gashkibidaagan** and is an animate noun for “bag with a closeable top, tobacco bag, pipe bag, bandolier bag.”¹⁶ This word is related to the transitive verbs “**gashkibidoon** *vti2* wrap and tie s.t. in a bundle” (inanimate) and “**gashkibizh/ gashkibiN-/ vta** wrap and tie s.o. in a bundle” (animate).¹⁷ In

⁸ Rhodes 1993, p. 53.

⁹ “Pindakatewân. Powder-horn; pl. *-ag*,” Baraga 1992, p. 356. The word can be broken down as **biind-** referring to an internal compartment, the medial **-akate-** referred to the gun powder (*makate* ‘it is black’), and the final morpheme **-wan** is a nominalizer.

¹⁰ “Pindassinan or pindassinadjigan. Shot pouch; pl. *-an*.” (Baraga p. 356).

¹¹ “Pindikomân. Knife-sheath, scabbard for a knife.; pl. *-an*” (Baraga p. 357). This word survives on Manitoulin Island and Walpole Island but spelt as “**biindkomaan ni** scabbard, knife sheath” (Rhodes p. 54).

¹² This word was spelt by Bishop Baraga as “pindjigossan” (Baraga 1992, p.168) and by Reverend Edward Wilson as “pinjigoosun (pl. *-un*)” (Wilson 187[4], p. 289).

¹³ Rhodes 1993, p. 55. This is spelt as **biinjay’ii** in Nichols and Nyholm 1995, p. 37.

¹⁴ Baraga 1992, p. 265 also Baraga 1992, p. 191. Interestingly the tobacco pouch is ontologically animate whereas the medicine pouch **pinjigosaan** is inanimate.

¹⁵ Rhodes 1993, p. 176. Even more interesting is the animate ontological status of the **Kishkibitâgan** changed from Baraga’s time (mid-nineteenth century) to an inanimate status by 21st century as recorded by Rhodes.

¹⁶ Nichols and Nyholm 1995, p. 49 lists **gashkibidaagan** as animate.

¹⁷ In Central Ojibwe “**gshkapdood** *vti* tie s.t. up, wrap s.t. (*inanimate*)” and “**gshkapnaad** *vta* tie s.o. up, wrap s.t. (*animate*),” Rhodes 1993, p. 176.

contrast, the word for a parcel, or something that is wrapped, is **gshkapjigan**¹⁸ and **gashkibijigan**.¹⁹ The element that distinguishes the parcel from the bag is the final morpheme “-**daagan**” referring to a pocket, which is shared by both **Gashkibidaagan** and **Biindaagan**.

The “Kishkibitâgan” of Baraga’s age morphed into the **gashkibidaagan/gshkibidaagan** of modern times. The word is a direct reference to the bag or pouch with a closeable flap. The earlier tobacco bags were more functional, however, the pattern was altered and these evolved into the bandolier bags that had more elaborate stylized beaded floral motifs. These floral motifs had no equivalent in the natural world.²⁰ In fact, these latter elaborately beaded bandolier bags became more of a status symbol and were associated with the **Midewiwin** (Grand Medicine society). Some high-ranking members wore two bags, one over each shoulder forming an X across the chest. By the 20th century many of these bags no longer had a pocket; the beaded panel and strap were for show. Thus another name for the bandolier bag came into being: **Aazhooningwa’igan** literally meaning ‘that which is worn over the shoulder.’²¹ This is perhaps the specific word for the decorative bandolier bag that has no pocket. In Mnemonic (Re)Manifestations, Ace’s more recent bandolier bags have incorporated video screens inside the panel, diverting any attention to what would be in the bag, and perhaps even changing the function of the item from a **gashkibidaagan** to a pocketless **aazhooningwa’igan**.

Engaging Ace’s art requires a more expansive approach, some would say a more holistic approach. The engagement should not be confined to visual appearance, nor to the materiality of the items, nor to the English language. The artist challenges the viewer/ visitor/ sojourner to transgress those limitations by including capacitors, resistors, diodes, wires, and **Anishinaabemowin** (Ojibwe) words. The **Anishinaabemowin** words carry meaning, the words carry understanding, the words carry history and the words carry culture. Similarly, all of the items in this exhibit: scrolls, bandolier bags, belts and otter moccasins are used to ‘carry’ cultural meaning, much like the otter bearing the medicine bundle upon its back. As an **Anishinaabe** artist who is not fluent, Ace’s work carries the burden of being a conduit to **Anishinaabe-nendamowin** “Anishinaabe thought.” Thus the **Anishinaabemowin** names of the art are mnemonic (re)manifestations.

The works contained in Mnemonic (Re)Manifestations by Barry Ace, an **Anishinaabe** artist of the **nigig doodem** (otter clan), can be viewed singly and admired as beautiful works of art that incorporate electronic parts thus making a statement on modernity and the **Anishinaabeg** artists’ continued ability to adapt

¹⁸ Rhodes 1993, p. 176. This is an inanimate noun.

¹⁹ Nichols and Nyholm 1995, p. 49.

²⁰ Article**

²¹ Nichols and Nyholm 1995, p. 49.

to and incorporate new media. However, the works can be viewed and contemplated as a whole, ensconced in a movement of cultural revitalization, a movement of cultural self-discovery and identity. The works are both personal and communal, containing individual metaphors and symbolism yet tapping into an ancient iconography that is universal to all **Anishinaabeg**. Just as the **Nigig** (otter) traversed the land bringing the medicine bundle of everlasting life to the **Anishinaabeg** throughout Turtle Island, Barry Ace's collected work traverses galleries across Canada, inviting the viewer to further investigate the mnemonic in order to comprehend and contemplate its many manifestations.

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