

Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin: The Five Great Lakes **by Barry Ace**

My textile work replicates traditional Great Lakes' floral and geometric motifs by using reclaimed and salvaged electronic schematics and circuitry (capacitors and resistors) that act as metaphors for cultural continuity (antithesis of stasis), bridging the past with the present and the future. In doing so, my work intentionally integrates traditional cultural art practices, such as beadwork, which is then juxtaposed against contemporary ephemera, disparate materials and found or sourced objects as a confluence between the historical and contemporary.

The work presents a new series of Anishinaabeg honour blankets for each of the Five Great Lakes: the traditional territory and homeland of the Anishinaabeg (Ojibwe, Odawa and Potawatomi peoples). The Hudson Bay trade blankets carry with them a long narrative of colonization and trade history with the peoples of the Great Lakes, but also carry with them culture specific signs and semiotics as they became assimilated into Anishinaabeg material culture. The trade blankets were at one time revered and were offered as highly valued gifts and worn as regalia on important occasions and even fashioned into garments such as coats. When these blankets were decorated with a beaded blanket strip they took on an even greater cultural and spiritual significance. A fine example of this can be seen in a photograph of *Nahgunegahbow* or *Mahjegahbo* (Standing Forward or He Looks Well Standing Forward) taken by Charles A. Zimmerman (circa 1872 and 1890) and sourced from Smithsonian Institute. In the image *Nahgunegahbow* is wearing such a blanket with a blanket strip. The beaded motif on the blanket strip clearly depicts an alternating and repeating pattern of Thunderbirds and octagon motifs representing the sky world and the underworld. The sky world is depicted with the Thunderbird, while the underworld is depicted by the cascading octagon motifs as the *Mishibejew* (Underwater Panther) who disturbs the water from below the surface.



Charles A. Zimmerman "Nah-gun-e-gah-bow (Standing Forward Chief of Rabbit Lake Chippewas)." Cabinet card. Circa 1870 - 1890.

As a specific response to, as well as an act of decolonization, the name place for each blanket representing a Great Lake is in Anishinaabemowin, followed by a translation. The installation of the blankets draws reference to a family story from my great-grandmother Josette McGregor (1875 – 1975) of Sagamok, who remembered in her youth travelling between the North Shore of Lake Huron and Manitoulin Island by boat with home-made sails rigged out of sheets and blankets used to harness the wind. The *Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin: The Five Great Lakes* blankets are suspended with different coloured rope using a pipe and pulley system. The remaining rope is pooled at the base of each blanket representing eddies of water current.

Gichi-aazhoogami-gichigami: Lake Huron (Great Crosswaters Sea) is represented by the scarlet Hudson Bay blanket, an early and popular trade blanket colour, particularly in the east. For example, during the War of 1812, when Captain Charles Roberts was unable to source military greatcoats for the British troops, the Mackinaw coats were recut from scarlet blankets by Anishinaabe women. The scarlet Hudson Bay blanket represents *Gichi-aazhoogami-gichigami* as the central homeland of the Anishinaabeg and Manitoulin as a sacred spiritual centre. The black velvet covered blanket strip is comprised of beaded Thunderbird medallions trimmed with horsehair with alternating floral motifs comprised of electronic capacitors and resistor stem and leaf work. The centre medallion with floral motifs is trimmed with copper wire simulating horse hair and referencing the importance of copper as a sacred medicine of the Anishinaabeg.

Anishinaabewi-gichigami: Lake Superior (Anishinaabeg Sea) is represented by the green Hudson Bay blanket. The black velvet covered blanket strip is embellished with red velvet medallions with horse hair and copper wire trim and electronic component floral motifs. Embedded in the center of four medallions are Canadian silver dollars from the early 1960s depicting a French voyageur and Anishinaabe paddling a canoe during the fur trade.

Aanikegamaa-gichigami: Lake Erie (Chain of Lakes Sea) is represented by the gray Hudson Bay blanket. The purple velvet covered blanket strip represents the sacred wampum belts of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg that originally used beads carved out of the purple and white shells of the quahog clam. The white shell beads are

replaced with white electronic components arranged to replicate a wampum belt. The belt represents a wampum peace belt between the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg. One side has the Haudenosaunee Great Tree of Peace depicted by the turtle with a pine tree on its back and a vigilant eagle perched on top. Below the tree are the weapons laid down in peace. The opposite side has the Thunderbird representing the Anishinaabeg. These motifs are contained inside white squares joined together by two rows of white resistors.

Gichi-zaaga'igan: Lake Ontario (Big Lake) is represented by the white Hudson Bay blanket. The purple velvet covered blanket strip, like the blanket strip for Lake Erie, also represents the sacred wampum belts of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg. This belt represents the five Anishinaabeg communities from Manitoulin Island to *Mjikanning* (Rama) who came together to push the Haudenosaunee below Lake Ontario during the fur trade and competition over access to the beaver. The five diamond shaped motifs representing the five Anishinaabeg communities are repeated on either side of the central medallion with a beaded Thunderbird. If the blanket was worn across the shoulders, it could be read from the right or left side.

Ininewewi-gichigami: Lake Michigan (Illinois Sea) is represented by the multi-coloured striped Hudson Bay blanket. The red blanket strip and three medallions with fire motifs connected by a band of electronic component resistors represent the Council of Three Fires of the Anishinaabeg also known as the People of the Three Fires, the Three Fires Confederacy, or the United Nations of Ojibwe, Odawa and Potawatomi. In Council, the Ojibwe were addressed as the "Older Brother," the Odawa as the "Middle Brother," and the Potawatomi as the "Younger Brother." In addition, the Ojibwe are the "keepers of the faith," the Odawa are the "keepers of trade," and the Potawatomi are the designated "keepers/maintainers of/for the fire". Originally, the Three Fires Confederacy had several meeting places, but *Michilimackinac* (the strait between Lake Michigan and Lake Huron), became the preferred meeting place due to its central location. From this place, the Council historically met for military and political purposes. The Three Fires Confederacy still exists today and meet regularly each year at various locations including Manitoulin Island.