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# PUSHING BOUNDARIES

Bringing together the historical and the contemporary in Anishinaabe art

by *Barry Ace, Ottawa.*

**F**rom an early age, I have been fascinated with the beauty and the aesthetics of the Anishinaabe cultural arts of the Great Lakes of Canada, in particular, porcupine quillwork, beadwork, splint-ash and birch-bark basketry, clay pottery and traditional dance. My visual art practice draws its inspiration from my Anishinaabeg (Odawa) culture and heritage and from my apprenticeship with strong Anishinaabe women in my family and community who were basket-makers and bead-workers, like my great-aunt Annie Owl McGregor. I am a band member of M'Chigeeng First Nation, Manitoulin Island (Odawa Mnis), Ontario, a vibrant community situated on the largest freshwater island in the world. Manitoulin Island is the homeland of six Anishinaabe (Odawa, Ojibwe and Potawatomi) of M'Chigeeng, Sheguiandah, Aundeck Omni Kaning, Wiikwemkoong and Zhiibaahaasing that are situated alongside many settler communities, the largest being Little Current.

Coming from a culturally rich community, my art training was not garnered from western fine art educational institutions, but instead directly from talented and innovative community-based women who taught me to be a maker—to make beautiful objects with my hands. Beginning with splint-ash basketry and later moving onto beadwork, I focused my attention on working with these small glass

beads or as they are called in Anishinaabemowin: manidoominens (little spirit or spirit-energy berries). As I honed and refined my beadwork technique, I began to create more and more intricate and complex floral motifs for dance regalia with an understanding that the floral motifs represented medicine flowers comprised of



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animate healing energy. When danced at traditional gatherings, these beaded medicine flowers literally or metaphorically released power for individual and collective community healing. Having entered into the powwow dance circle as a traditional dancer and growing up entrenched in the cultural arts, all of these gifts would unequivocally coalesce into my future visual and performative art practices.

What made my work unique and innovative, however, was the eventual integration of technology directly into it. After graduating from high school, I enrolled in an electronic technology program at Cambrian College of Applied Arts and Technology in Sudbury in the mid-1970s, working with circuits and electronic components such as capacitors, resistors and light-emitting diodes among other types of components. I immediately saw a correlation between the colourful and vibrant candy-coated flat disc capacitors, glass beads (manidoominens) and Great Lakes beaded floral motifs. I distinctly remember in my electronic laboratory class playing with four round, flat







## ABOUT THE ARTIST BARRY ACE

As an accomplished and award-winning writer, educator and artist, Barry has worked in the milieu of visual, literary and performing arts for over 30 years. In the early 1990s, he was a lecturer with the University of Sudbury in the Indigenous Studies Program. He has also written numerous essays on contemporary Indigenous art and artists.

**FROM 1994 TO 2000** Barry served as chief curator with the Indigenous Art Centre, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, and during his tenure, he curated or co-curated numerous exhibitions, including the international touring exhibition, *Transitions: Contemporary Canadian Indian and Inuit Art* (1997). In 1999, he and his team won the Deputy Minister's Outstanding Achievement Award for the development and implementation of a groundbreaking artist-in-residence and exhibition program that featured an impressive roster of emerging and established Indigenous artists.

**IN 2006** Barry co-founded and served as the inaugural Director of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective (ACC/CCA), an incorporated national non-profit arts service organization in support of the Indigenous critical and curatorial communities with membership in

Canada, the U.S.A., New Zealand and Australia. Building on his work with collectives, he co-founded the Ottawa-based artist collective—Ottawa Ontario Seven (OO7)—with local Ottawa-based Indigenous artists to provide opportunities for self-curation, public engagement and critique, and he regularly exhibits under this moniker in Canada and the U.S.A.

**IN 2010** At the invitation of artist Robert Houle, Barry travelled to Paris (France) and undertook four site-specific dance performances honouring the Ojibwa dance troupe lead by Maungwaudaus (George Henry), whom in 1844 performed in George Catlin's travelling portrait gallery exhibition. Barry's essay, *A Reparative Act*, won the Ontario Association of Art Gallery's Curatorial Writing Award for 2012. Under special commission by the Ottawa Art Gallery, a film short on Barry's performances by Shelley Niro entitled *Homage to Four in Paris* was included in the Ottawa Art Gallery's 2017 exhibition *Àdisòkàmagan / We'll All Become Stories*.

**IN NOVEMBER 2018** Barry was selected as the first Indigenous artist for the newly established Art + Law Indigenous Artist in Residence Program. Being the first of its kind, the Art + Law residency brought together 94 students, faculty and participants from the Indigenous community and the general public around a collaborative project. Barry proposed a collaborative work that would coalesce a very complex legal document, "The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action," into a single work of art taking the form of an 11.5-metre-long contemporary wampum belt. Each participant was asked to confirm their participation by first surrendering their rights to the work by signing a witnessed document and symbolically accepting one dollar in exchange. The surrender was a wry reference to the treaty-making process in Canada, which is also reflected in the work's title, "For as long as the sun shines, grass grows and water flows."

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technological age into works of art—also has an environmental benefit.

One other aspect of my work is that it addresses the impact of colonization on Anishinaabe of the Great Lakes by revealing that we are not trapped in an anthropologic stasis (cultural stagnation). Rather, it demonstrates that we are a vibrant and innovative culture that has historically embraced new technologies and seamlessly negotiated a confluence between the historical and contemporary, while maintaining a distinct and signature Anishinaabe aesthetic.

I am often asked for whom am I creating my artwork? In other words, who is my primary audience? I always respond that first and foremost my primary audience is my Anishinaabe community and second is the general public. I unequivocally believe that it is imperative that I contribute to pushing the boundaries forward while contributing to our distinct Anishinaabe cultural continuity. Through my work, I do not shy away from addressing neglected and often tragic historical and contemporary impacts of colonization through social, cultural, and political narratives, such as the impact of residential schools on my family and community. I am also seeking new and innovative ways to push the boundaries and semiotics of our cultural arts, as demonstrable acts of nationhood, resistance, reparation, self-reflexivity and modernity. ■

capacitors and placing them into a petal floral composition that exactly replicated Anishinaabe floral motifs. What was also apparent at the time was the similarity in form and function between the glass-bead or spirit berry and the ability of a capacitor in an electronic circuit to store energy and release it when it is needed. This had a profound impact on how I viewed these components, for our Anishinaabe worldview is rich in power or energy relations in both language and oral traditions, as well as in story-telling. My up-cycling of salvaged and repurposed electronic components —turning the refuse of our



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