

Beyond the Bead

Beadwork has occupied a liminal space in the contemporary art world. Through changing materials, techniques, and technology, beading has played an integral part in diverse cultures for tens of thousands of years. Somewhere between historical and contemporary practice, textile and sculpture, beadwork often defies categorization and expectations.

When I began to develop the Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery's first exhibition solely featuring beadwork, I wanted to share the ways in which this medium with such a rich and diverse history can be employed in unexpected and revolutionary ways. Despite the strong connections between beading and glass, beadwork is not often considered alongside other forms of glass art. However, much in the way that fused or stained-glass artists combine raw materials into finished artworks, beadwork artists stitch and connect glass beads together with other materials into intricate pieces of fine art. From functional, wearable items to ceremonial pieces or sculptures, beadwork can take numerous forms. Each is connected to the incredible history of this practice as well as to contemporary trends and styles.

Anishinaabe artist Barry Ace defines his works as those of *cultural art*. I find this term to be an apt descriptor for both Barry Ace and Sharl G. Smith's work. Their pieces are certainly fine art, yet each of their practices—and beadwork itself—are inherently tied to centuries of cultural history and knowledge. Ace and Smith embrace this history, while adapting their beadwork with new and contemporary approaches to the medium—Ace, through his incorporation of technology and communication, and Smith through her unconventional use of massive beads made from glass, steel, and brass. It is this connection to the past, as well as to contemporary culture, that I find most compelling in their work.

Kitchi Zibi Omâmiwinini and Samuel de Champlain (Nepean Point) (2013) is a pair of beaded necklaces created by Ace that reference the Samuel de Champlain and Indigenous scout statues by Hamilton MacCarthy at Nepean Point in Ottawa. This work was created as part of a larger project to counter celebrations of the 400th Anniversary of Champlain's arrival on Turtle Island. Ace and other artists worked to reignite the controversy surrounding the pair of MacCarthy's sculptures which placed the Indigenous scout in a position of subservience to Champlain. In 1999, the Indigenous figure was moved to Major's Hill Park, but the connection and significance of these sculptures was never truly resolved. As part of the counter programming in 2013, the Indigenous figure was given a name by elder Annie St. George, Kitchi Zibi Omâmiwinini, the original name of the people of the area, which means "big river people."

Sharl Smith, *Inheritance II* (detail), 2022.
Variegated blood red glass beads, thread.
6' x 1.5'. Collection of the artist. Photo by
Conan Starck:

Comprised of glass beads, porcupine quills, and rooster feathers on hide and rope, this pair of beaded necklaces once again brings these two figures into conversation with one another. Removing the sculpture of the Indigenous figure did nothing to challenge the racist and colonial history of this scene. Together, the beaded figures challenge our understandings of the "discovery" of North America, of the settlers who came here, and of the relationships between Indigenous groups and figures like Champlain. By recreating and reuniting these figures within a traditional Indigenous beading practice, we see them through a new lens. We are reminded of this colonial past and of the continued racism and inequity in Canada.

Smith's *Inheritance II* (2023) was created in response to recent approvals for bauxite mining by a Canadian company in Jamaica's Cockpit Country. An important forested, hilly region, Cockpit Country is known as a site of "safety and inherited abundance" since The Maroons were able to escape Spanish and British slave plantations by fleeing into this region. With thousands of glass beads, Smith mimics the rolling hills of Cockpit Country in this work as she reflects on the colonial past and present practices that threaten our environment and collective future. It is these colonial systems that control wealth for the benefit of the few, and through Sharl's research and creation, she aims to highlight the flaws in destroying land for profit. The work of creating this piece is intricately connected with the dispute and environmental degradation in Smith's homeland. Through the blood red beads and rolling hills, we are drawn into Cockpit Country and to the site of capitalist and colonial conflict.

Ace is probably best known for his works that blend traditional beading and Anishinaabeg culture with electronic e-waste, particularly in his bandolier bag series. Created by Indigenous groups in the Eastern Woodlands/Great Lakes area, bandolier bags were made from a variety of materials and typically covered almost completely in beaded designs. Ace's bandolier bags are similarly constructed and decorated but incorporate embedded video screens as well as electronic components like capacitors, resistors, and LEDs that expand upon traditional Anishinaabeg-style glass beadwork. Bandolier for *Aanikegama-Gichigami: Lake Erie* (Chain of Lakes Sea) (2019) and *Gashkibidaagan for Jean Baptiste Ense* (Great-Great Grandfather) (2018) are two such works. The first is part of a series featuring videos taken at the shoreline of each Great Lake while the second screens an historical silent film produced by the Ontario Film Bureau in 1925.



Barry Ace, *Waawaashkesh Dodem* (Deer Clan) *Automata Bandolier*, 2020.
Glass beads, capacitors, light-emitting diodes, resistors, vintage circuit boards on handmade paper. 96 x 31cm.
Collection of the artist.



Barry Ace, *Bandolier for Aanikegama-Gichigami: Lake Erie* (Chain of Lakes Sea), 2019. Mixed media. 108 x 29 x 11cm. Collection of Karen Schreiber.

Indian Pow Wow was filmed in Wiikwemkoong, Manitoulin Island and depicts dignitaries or bureaucrats being hosted by the Anishinaabe community. Featuring speeches, dancing, singing, and reenactments, what is ironic is that the Indian Act banned Indigenous people from dancing. As Barry Ace states: "The film provides demonstrable evidence that dancing for the enjoyment and entertainment of visiting non-Indigenous dignitaries or bureaucrats was the exception." In Ace's work, the electronic components are representative of contemporary communication and new media. He connects Anishinaabeg aesthetics and teachings with new technologies to convey messages for the viewer to explore diverse issues including Indigeneity, colonialism, land rights, and the environment.

For the past year, Sharl G. Smith's work has expanded in scale using custom-made beads in stainless steel, brass, and —most recently— glass. With these new beads, Smith's practice has become one of intricate bead-stitching at architectural scale. In a medium often seen as "women's work" and thus subject to the disparity of value between male and female labour, Smith alters our perceptions with life-size public sculpture. The tiny details of seed beads have become magnified as the viewer encounters work that takes up both physical and metaphorical space in the often colonial and misogynist gallery environment. In mirror-polished stainless steel and brass, Smith's sculptures use the same stitches and forms as her traditional beadwork, and we find the similar qualities to glass that play with light and shape. With the metal beads however, we also experience the addition of a clear reflection that multiplies and expands within the work. This mirroring also creates an additional implication of the viewer, in that the piece is not only demanding our attention through its scale, but also reflects our own image back at us. As we explore the forms on display, we find ourselves within them.

With jade-green glass beads hand-blown by artist Tara Marsh, Smith re-connects her large-scale practice with the traditional glass seed beads. Producing the same glowing and reflective qualities as their smaller relatives, the large beads impose upon us the meditative and tender qualities of beadwork. At monumental scale, we experience the connection between the history of beadwork and the intersections between femininity, care, and support that are central to her work. Boundaries pushed, and scale expanded, Smith makes a clear and unequivocal statement that "women's work" and the related care, support, and shelter are critical elements of life, and that there is value in each of these.

Beyond the Bead is thus a reflection on these unique practices. In the delicacy and technology of Barry Ace's work we encounter new modes of communication and a melding of history and tradition with contemporary connection. Simultaneously, Sharl G. Smith's work bares the inequity and misogyny of our world in the opposing scale, materiality, and gentleness that rise above and around us. Connected to the generations of bead artists before them and to centuries of tradition, Ace and Smith push this medium further, demonstrating both the inherent value and future potential of this practice. They challenge us to experience these intricate works, and the stories that they tell. For in their beauty and awe-inspiring technicality and scale we find respect for the past and a challenge to achieve a better and more equitable future.

Peter Flannery, MA
Curator & Collections Manager



Sharl G. Smith, *Embrace I*, 2023. Blown glass spheres, brass spheres, macrame rope. 116 x 46 x 64cm. Collection of the artist.

Cover:

Barry Ace, *Kitchi Zibi Omamiwinini and Samuel de Champlain (Nepean Point)*, 2013.
Glass beads on hide, cotton rope, porcupine quills, rooster feathers.
City of Ottawa Art Collection.

Sharl G. Smith, *Shelter III (Hugs)*, 2023. Stainless steel spheres, stainless steel wire rope.
245 x 183 x 122cm. Collection of the artist.

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Barry Ace & Sharl G. Smith

