



Nibi Emosaawdang Mkiznan (Water Walker Moccasins)

mixed media

9 x 4 x 29 1/2 in, 22.9 x 10.2 x 74.9 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist

EXHIBITED

MacLaren Art Center, Barrie, Ontario, Labours of Love, February 16 - May 19, 2024

Complete medium: found pair of children's cowboy boots, acrylic, electronic components, glass beads, coated wire, plastic, velvet, synthetic hair, tin and metal.

As we continue to feel the effects of climate change more intimately, Indigenous ways of considering the natural systems we are a part of become ever more imperative. With the smoke-filled skies of the summer of 2023, we are reckoning with the reality of our precarity and that our planet is exceedingly parched.

Nibi (water): our relationship to it is primal; without it species, including our own, will perish. There are those, like Indigenous activist Autumn Peltier, who have come forward as protectors of the water. While only a youth she confronted Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as well as addressed the United Nations, raising awareness about the lack of access to clean water in

reserve communities. Born in 2004, she is an Anishinaabe-kwe (woman) from Wiikwemkoong First Nation on Manitoulin Island in Ontario. One of the most internationally known water protectors, she comes from a legacy of other Anishinaabe-kwewak who follow traditional teachings around water as cared for and protected by women.

In the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg, which in Canada stretches from parts of Quebec into Saskatchewan, hundreds of years of commercial logging and mining have left lakes and rivers toxic, including with high levels of mercury. The reality for many living on reserve is ongoing water advisories along with health complications, from chronically inflamed skin conditions to terminal cancer. Initiatives like the group Nibi Emosaawdamajig (Those Who Walk for the Water), led by Shirley Williams and her niece Elizabeth Osawamick, have been part of sustaining momentum around the issue of clean water. Since their first walk in 2010 around Rice Lake, and for seven years following on Mother's Day weekend, they have walked for different bodies of water in the Kawarthas and Peterborough area. In 2003, the late Josephine Mandamin (1942–2019), also from Wiikwemkoong and Peltier's great-aunt, traversed Lake Superior on foot while carrying a bucket of water. Revered as a Nookmis, a wise grandmother and Elder, she walked to draw attention to the high level of contamination of the Great Lakes as well as all lakes and rivers across Turtle Island. Called "Grandmother Water Walker" and "Biidaasige-ba" (the One Who Comes with Light), Mandamin is the originator of the water protector movement; each of these Anishinaabe-kwewak have, in their own way, expanded awareness of the issue.

As a debendaagzijig (citizen) of M'Chigeeng First Nation on Manitoulin Island, Barry Ace's mixed-media work Nibi Emossawadang Mkiznan (Water Walker Moccasins) is an honouring for the Anishinaabe-kwewak (Women Protectors of the Water). A pair of children's leather cowboy boots painted blue, the shafts are covered by electronic components and glass bead embellishments that represent healing medicinal flowers. This work was completed right after Gwiiwzens Dreamed of Spirit Horses, and both works echo Ace's 2017 work Erased (collection of Global Affairs Canada), which references the trailduster moccasins that the Mandan warriors wore to erase their footsteps and elude their enemies. In this work, the coated wire and synthetic hair that extend from the back of the boots could be understood as metaphorically erasing the damage done to the water. The trailing wire and hair can also be seen as representing the flow of water as connected to the Anishinaabe-kwewak, who walk for water and the interconnected species whose health and survival depend on our waters to be as they were prior to colonization—plentiful and clean.

Essay courtesy of Leah Snyder, digital designer and writer, The L.Project. Snyder writes about culture, technology and contemporary art, and is a contributor to the National Gallery of Canada's Gallery magazine and other Canadian art and architecture publications.

This work is accompanied by a letter of authenticity and provenance signed by the artist.