Transformation Bandolier (2015) 100 x 32 cm, mixed media on Arches Platine paper. Collection of the Artist.

The bandolier bag, or gashkibidaagan, factors prominently in the material culture of the Anishinaabeg, along with other First Nations of the Great Lakes Regions into the Prairies. Many stunning examples exist in museum collections, pointing to the diversity in their design and ornamentation. From the early Odawa or Ojibwe quillwork with their geometric patterns to the abstracted floral designs of the Lenape (Delaware), they delight the eyes. The bags were not meant to merely serve a practical purpose, they were created to be gifted “as a significant display of gratitude and respect to friends, family, other tribes and government officials," as well as to “signify respect for another individual’s accomplishments or contributions,” as Marcia Anderson notes. [1]

The exact root of this iconic form is not known. Many earlier precursors exist, even pre-contact, but the iteration that is seen by the mid-1800s, particularly within the Ojibwe of Minnesota, is what became known as the gashkibidaagan, also at times referred to as aazhooningwa’an, a word that means to “wear across the shoulder.”[2] The etymology of

gashkibidaagan “comes from gashk-, meaning “enclosed, attached together,” and -bid, ‘tie it.’ ”[3]

The structure of the bag consists of a strap (often made to be detachable), the front and back panel of the rectangular pocket area and the bottom fringe. Whether the bag is loom-woven, as with earlier bags, or with the spot-stitch appliqué that appears late 1800s into the early 20th century, the structure stays consistent.

With Transformation Bandolier, Barry Ace deconstructs the bag down to its essential form. We see all the conventional elements of its structure: strap, pocket panel and fringe. For the work, paper is his material of choice, as though he is patterning a template for the future. For Ace, the decision was deliberate, a way to provoke questions as to why, when fabric would be the obvious option, he would opt to use such a delicate material? The fragility is a meditation on loss, of how things can be easily damaged or destroyed when one’s attention is lacking. When stitching, paper presents a formidable challenge as it can be easily marked. Ace stated, “You have to be very definitive when you poke a hole into the paper. You can’t go back very easily to make a change.”

The floral motifs Ace has sewn onto the strap and the edges of the pocket panel reference the Woodland-style beadwork seen on the bandolier bags that gained in popularity once European glass seed beads become more available through trade. At this time, the geometric imagery produced through beading hand-looms, referencing the earlier Anishinaabe quillwork, now flowed with twists and turns. By the late 19th century, due to the increased accessibility of beads, the visual imagery on the appliqué mimics the meandering of the vegetation seen in the Eastern Woodlands.

The word for bead in Anishinaabemowin is manidoominens, meaning “spirit energy berry” or “little spirit berry,” as beads were considered to contain within them a spiritual energy or healing power that could be activated. Ace has incorporated components - resistors, capacitors, and diodes - that contain within them the ability to transmit energy, a simile for the bead. They form leaves and flowers with lines of glass beads connecting the components. This work is also a deep contemplation of the importance of the bead within Anishinaabe culture. Along with the components and actual beadwork, including the vibrant red and yellow flowers along the top of the pocket area, Ace has embedded a digital table, a device that requires similar types of components for its power. Here, the programmed image loop contains abstracted beadwork digitally collaged from sourced image files of traditional beadwork. Ace isolates a motif, then flips it, reconnecting it to its origin, producing a kaleidoscope effect of infinite regeneration. He observes that the bead itself now becomes a simile for the digital pixel, the one small element that connects with other small elements to form a meaningful whole. “The piece folds into itself in profound ways,” Ace explains.

For Ace, his reflection on the value of the bead to the Anishinaabeg was to provoke yet another question with the work, and he asked “Is it possible to maintain a distinct

Anishinaabe aesthetic, without the use of beads?" His query may seem cursory, yet when considered against the historical backdrop of loss of Indigenous cultures, it becomes poignant as well as prescient.

Excerpt from essay by Leah Snyder for the Heffel exhibition catalogue Encoding Culture II – The Works of Barry Ace.