

Barry Ace
Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin
The Five Great Lakes





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cover: *Gichi-zaaga'igan* Lake Ontario (Big Lake)

Curator's Foreword

Station Gallery is honoured to have started a dialogue with Barry Ace. His latest suite of embroidered blankets relate to specific Anishinaabe narratives about each Great Lake. The large blankets hang suspended with a pulley system, strung with nautical rope that is affixed to each blanket adorned with detailed bead and electronic component floral work. From a distance Ace's works make reference to colour-field painting. Approaching these works closer reveals their astonishing grace and delicacy. Each blanket holds an inner life that longs to envelope, to adorn, to protect, to remember.

The artist couples his latest series of honouring blankets with a parallel series of lens-based, beaded scrolls titled *Memory Landscapes*. These commemorative works float atop a teal blue band painted around the new gallery space. Ace honours shared voyages and intersected life-paths with his adopted brother, who has passed into the spirit world.

Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin is a sophisticated warp and weft; simultaneously operating on many levels. Elements, codes and concepts interweave through these works. The artist reclaimed ready-made Hudson's Bay point blankets, creating contemporary honouring blankets. Each coloured wool covering is adorned with unique Anishinaabe blanket strips that remix intricately designed floral motifs and geometric iconography composed of traditional glass-cut beads and contemporary electronic components such as capacitors, resistors and diodes. Each work radiates with meaning. In the accompanying statement, the artist offers a generous account of the historical and cultural narratives of each blanket. Ace pays homage to each Great Lake by recounting Anishinaabeg mnemonic iconography, evoking a deep code embedded into each blanket strip.

This suite of contemporary honouring blankets are witness to the persistence of Anishinaabeg cultural continuity, through the confluence of the historical with the contemporary. Ace stages a dance of connectedness. Just as the electronic component used by the artist is a medium for transmission and connectivity, Ace connects immense narratives and vast generations existing with the Lakes through space and time immemorial. Having passed through the artist's hand, the blankets hold the content of consciousness of both Aboriginal and settler populations who lived, live and will live with the Lakes.

Barry Ace's installation is aptly situated at the gallery, at the right time. During this landmark sesquicentennial year, his work commemorates ancient inland seas, a profound knowledge base and venerable traditions vastly deeper than 150 years. Just as his contemporary practice is timely, so too his work is fittingly located in close proximity to a Great Lake. A white blanket hangs on the black wall—in conversation with itself—*Gichi-zaaga'igan* speaks with the Big Lake. Beyond the fields, just south of the gallery, Lake Ontario swells into the horizon.

Olexander Wlasenko
Curator
Station Gallery



Barry Ace



Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin
The Five Great Lakes



My textile work replicates traditional Great Lakes' floral and geometric motifs sourced from 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.

Aanikegamaa-gichigami: Lake Erie (Chain of Lakes Sea)

Nahgunegahbow or Mahjegahbo (Standing Forward or He Looks Well Standing Forward)

This exhibition presents a new series of Anishinaabeg honour blankets for each of the Five Great Lakes: the territory and homeland of the Anishinaabeg (Ojibwe, Odawa and Potawatomi peoples). The Hudson's 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 the blankets became assimilated into Anishinaabeg material culture. The trade blankets were at one time revered and were offered as highly valued gifts and were worn as regalia on important occasions and even fashioned into garments such as coats. When these blankets were decorated with a beaded blanket strip, for instance, they took on and even greater cultural and spiritual significance. An early photograph taken by Charles A. Zimmerman (circa 1872 and 1890) and sourced from the Smithsonian Institute of Nahgunegahbow or Mahjegahbo (Standing Forward or He Looks Well Standing Forward) wearing such a blanket and blanket strip is a fine example. 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) disturbs the water from the below the surface.



Ininwewi-gichigami: Lake Michigan (Illinois Sea)

As a specific response to and 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 First Nation, 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. Each blanket is suspended with different coloured rope and a pipe and pulley system suspends each blanket. The remaining rope is pooled at the based of each blanket representing eddies of water currents, perhaps created by the Mishibejew below.

Gichi-aazhoogami-gichigami: Lake Huron (Great Crosswaters Sea) is represented by the scarlet Hudson's Bay blanket and is an early and popular trade blanket colour, particularly in the east. For example, during the War of 1812, the Mackinaw coats were recut from scarlet blankets by Anishinaabe women for the British troops when Captain Charles Roberts was unable to source military greatcoats. The scarlet Hudson's Bay blanket represents Gichi-aazhoogami-gichigami: Lake Huron (Great Crosswaters Sea) 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 scared medicine of the Anishinaabeg.

Anishinaabewi-gichigami: Lake Superior (Anishinaabeg Sea) is represented by the green Hudson's 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. The center medallion has a pewter Hudson's Bay token circa 1704 that was used as currency for trade goods.



Aanikegamaa-gichigami: Lake Erie (Chain of Lakes Sea) is represented by the gray Hudson's Bay blanket. The purple velvet covered blanket strip represent the sacred wampum belts of the Haudenausone and Anishinaabeg that were originally carved out of shells; with the dark purple beads carved from the quahog clam shell. 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 Haudenausone and Anishinaabeg. One side has the Haudenausone 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 and the two motifs are contained inside two white squares that joined together by two rows of white resistors.

Gichi-aazhoogami-gichigami: Lake Huron (Great Crosswaters Sea)

Gichi-zaaga'igan: Lake Ontario (Big Lake) is represented by the white Hudson's Bay blanket. The purple velvet covered blanket strip, like the blanket strip for Lake Erie, also represents the sacred wampum belts of the Haudenauone and Anishinaabeg. This belt represents the five Anishinaabeg communities from Sault Ste. Marie to Manitoulin Island to Mjikanning (Rama) who came together during the fur trade to form a confederacy to challenge the Haudenauone, who were invading Anishinaabeg territory, forcing them back to Lake Ontario. The five diamond shaped motifs representing the five Anishinaabeg communities are repeated on either side of the central medallion with beaded thunderbird. If the blanket was worn across the shoulders, it could be read from the right or left side.

Ininwewi-gichigami: Lake Michigan (Illinois Sea) is represented by the multi-coloured striped Hudson's 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; 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 Ojibwa are the "keepers of the faith," the Odawa are the "keepers of trade," and the Potawatomi are the designated "fire-keepers". 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 exist today and meet regularly each year at various locations including Manitoulin Island.



Indian Pow Wow is a silent film from the collection of the Ontario Motion Picture Bureau and filmed in Wikwemkoong, Manitoulin Island (Ontario) in 1925. The film depicts visiting dignitaries or bureaucrats who are hosted by the entire Anishinaabe community. It documents welcoming speeches, dancing, singing and historical and cultural re-enactments performed for the visiting delegation, community members and for the film company.

What is ironic about this film is that it was illegal for Indigenous people to dance in Canada in 1925. An amendment in 1914 to the Indian Act, the federal legislation pertaining to First Nations in Canada, outlawed dancing off-reserve and in 1925, dancing was outlawed entirely.

The film provides demonstrable evidence that dancing for the enjoyment and entertainment of visiting non-Indigenous bureaucrats was the exception.

Film sourced from the collection of Library & Archives Canada (Ottawa).



List of Works

***Aanikegamaa-gichigami: Lake Erie (Chain of Lakes Sea)* 2016**

Hudson's Bay blanket, velvet, beads, transistors, metal, mountain climbing rope. 183 x 228 cm.

***Anishinaabewi-gichigami: Lake Superior (Anishinaabeg Sea)* 2016**

Hudson's Bay blanket, velvet, beads, capacitors, resistors, light emitting diodes, micro-chips, horse hair, silver dollars, pewter, copper wire, metal, mountain climbing rope. 183 x 228 cm.

***Gichi-aazhoogami-gichigami: Lake Huron (Great Crosswaters Sea)* 2016**

Hudson's Bay blanket, velvet, beads, capacitors, resistors, light emitting diodes, horse hair, copper wire, metal, mountain climbing rope. 183 x 228 cm.

***Gichi-zaaga'igan: Lake Ontario (Big Lake)* 2016**

Hudson's Bay blanket, velvet, beads, transistors, horse hair, metal, mountain climbing rope. 183 x 228 cm.

***Ininwewi-gichigami: Lake Michigan (Illinois Sea)* 2016**

Hudson's Bay blanket, velvet, beads, resistors, horse hair, metal, mountain climbing rope. 183 x 228 cm.

***Memory Landscape* 2014**

(8 works from a suite of 30)

digital output on archival canvas, glass beads, wood, hide

***Indian Pow Wow* 1925**

Ontario Motion Picture Bureau

silent film

14:30 min (looped)

Biography

Barry Ace is a practicing visual artist and the recipient of the 2015 K.M. Hunter Visual Artist Award. Drawing inspiration from multiple facets of traditional Anishinaabeg culture, he creates objects and imagery that utilize many traditional forms and motifs. He then disrupts the reading of these works with the introduction of other elements, endeavouring to create a convergence of the historical and the contemporary.

His work can be found in numerous public and private collections in Canada and abroad. He is a band member of M'Chigeeng First Nation, Manitoulin Island (Ontario) and is represented by Kinsman Robinson Galleries in Yorkville (Toronto).

