Mnemonic (Re)Manifestations: Barry Ace

Essay by Alan Corbiere

Anishinaabeg artist Barry Ace traces his lineage to Chief Assance¹ (Little Shell) of the Nigig (Otter) clan. In this exhibit called Mnemonic (Re)Manifestations, Ace contemplates cultural metaphors, visual symbols, media, story and history. Throughout these collected works, Ace summons the mnemonic locked in tradition and releases it in new media re-creating manifestations anew. These symbols are all tied to story and (his)story.

Long ago, the vengeful actions of Nenbozhoo compelled the underwater beings to flood the world. Nenbozhoo re-created the world by using some of the old world. This newly, re-created earth was re-populated by plants, insects, fish, birds, animals, and Anishinaabeg (humans). The Anishinaabeg population increased but soon they started to get sick and die. It is said that, the creator saw that the people on earth could not protect themselves against disease and death. In the spirit world, across the ocean, a council was held to determine how best to teach the people to protect themselves. A medicine bundle was prepared and the makwa (bear) was the first one charged with carrying this sacred bundle of everlasting life to the Anishinaabeg. The bear carried the bundle as far as the great salt water. The miigis (little cowrie shell) then relieved the bear of his burden and carried the bundle along the bottom of the ocean to this continent. The miigis met a waterfall and could not climb any further. Oshkaabewis (ceremonial attendant) met the miigis and grabbed the bundle. However, the load was too great and he required assistance. Oshkaabewis looked for a suitable candidate to help deliver this medicine bundle to the Anishinaabeg. He journeyed around the world four times but could not find anybody suitable to help him. Oshkaabewis then met Nigig playing on the bank of a river. He asked Nigig to help but Nigig just kept on playing, sliding down the riverbank. Oshkaabewis asked Nigig again and again, finally on the seventh attempt Nigig agreed to be messenger and he placed the bundle on his back. Nigig and Oshkaabewis took turns carrying the bundle. They shared the burden but also took time to share the teachings that accompanied the bundle. They sought out the Anishinaabeg. The journey of the Oshkaabewis and Nigig was mnemonically manifested in a Mide-wiigwaas (a birchbark scroll). According to one record, the otter, Oshkaabewis, and thus the Midewiwin (called the Grand Medicine Society) travelled to La Crosse. To memorialize their stop, a man standing was etched onto the Mide-wiigwaas (birchbark scroll). The next place depicted on the scroll was Waawiiyede’inong “The round shaped lake (often listed as Lake St. Clair by Detroit)”; then Mashkiigo-ziibi (Swampy River);

¹ Assance has been spelt a number of ways including Aisance, Aissance, and Essens. Utilizing the modern orthography, the Ojibwe word for clam is es, a small clam is esiins or esens (depends on dialect).
Mooningwanekaaning (Place of the Northern Flicker aka Madelaine Island); and then Shagwamikaang (Shallows where the waves break); Nemitigmishkaang (Oak point), followed by a shallow river called Naongowo-zibi, then “Ka-ke-no-ne,” then Gaa-zagaskwaa jimkaag (Leech Lake) and Obaashing and finally to Little Ottertail Lake. 2 Nigig went ashore and shook himself off. He shook himself again and there were many miigis (little cowry shell) dripping from his hair. Nigig told Oshkaabewis to keep the shells because they would serve as a reminder, a mnemonic for creation and the Midewiwin. The otter, Ace’s doodem (clan) was an important messenger for the Anishinaabeg. Similarly miigis, little sea shells called cowry, a cousin of esiins (freshwater clam, which was historically spelt as Assance and Ace, Barry’s surname), play an important role in mnemonically recalling Anishinaabe history and cultural teachings, thus by virtue of his doodem (clan) and his surname, Barry is perhaps predisposed to encode these teachings in new media for this generation.

The Oshkaabewis and Nigig noticed that the people were very poor and unhealthy and even listless. Oshkaabewis wondered what could be the matter with them but Nigig thought he knew the answer. Oshkaabewis turned around and Nigig was gone. He heard someone laugh out on the lake. Oshkaabewis and the people on shore looked out to the middle of the lake and there was Nigig laughing and calling to them. He told them that he would show them the four directions so that they could live in harmony with all of creation and receive all of the gifts that each direction offered. Nigig’s head disappeared and then re-appeared in the east. Nigig then dove again and his head re-appeared in the middle where he had started. Nigig’s head then disappeared again only to re-appear in the south. Nigig hollered to the people and they cheered in return. Nigig then returned to the center and proceeded in the same manner to dive to the west and north. 3

Nigig and Oshkaabewis had delivered the bundle to the Anishinaabeg but much work remained to be completed. Oshkaabewis taught the people how to construct the lodge and he also taught them to sing certain songs. The Midewawik (waterdrum) arose from the first layer of the earth. The otter then said, “That drum won’t be any good to anyone. How will it make a sound without anything covering the top of it to make it roar?’ The otter lay across the top of the drum and made a hide to cover it. Then the otter spoke: ‘Anyone that wants everlasting life will now talk about me too; this is why I give you my hide.’” Nigig wanted to be remembered for doing his duty.

---

2 Redsky 1972, p. 105 – 106. Spelling of Ojibwe place names have been modified to adhere to modern orthography.

3 This retelling is based upon Hoffman 1891, p. 175, and Benton-Banai, 1988, p. 63 – 65.

4 Redsky 1972, p. 103.
The hide of the nigig held power. The Midewiwin medicine society revered the otter as a patron to their members. Similarly, the Anishinaabeg revered the nigig because of their amphibious nature. The otter can swim great depths, but is also comfortable on land. Modern day dancers make a head dress of the nigig’s hide, they have also made belts out of his hide. In Mnemonic (Re)Manifestations, Barry Ace has made “Nigik Makiznan: Otter moccasins” with strips of decorated otter hide flowing from the heel of the shoe. These moccasins are based upon the trailer moccasins made by the ancestors to hide their footprints, deleting any trace of their presence. Ace has made his Nigik makiznan for the modern age though, the electronic components and extending wires are meant to erase any digital presence while the otter tails/ trails erase the physical tracks.

In beadwork patterns, the Anishinaabe crafts people often incorporated a design called the otter tail or otter trail. These otter tails/ trails are elongated hexagons preceded by four or more diamonds and followed by the same number of diamonds. The effect is that of an otter hopping and then sliding through the snow or the mud. This visual motif adorns beaded moccasins, beaded shawls, straps, leggings and beaded bags, such as the bandolier bags also known as ‘friendship bags.’ Bandolier bags consist of a wide strap, a panel (the bag) and the fringe or tabs that hang from the panel. Many early bandolier bags had the front panel that was decorated, at first with geometric designs (much like a grid or circuit board), and later with floral designs. Often the perimeter of this front panel was framed with the otter trail/ tail design. Framing the central panel of the bandolier bag with the otter trail/ tail is a manifestation of the mnemonic.

The Ojibwe bandolier bag was inspired by the bandolier bags worn by colonial soldiers, especially the bags that had thick straps to hold extra cartridges of ammunition and gunpowder. The Anishinaabeg modified the design to suit their needs. The straps on the bag no longer were required to carry physical ammunition, instead they were to convey the spirit power of the owner, thus the design, whether floral or geometric, became a mnemonic for spirit power. Now Ace’s bags, made with capacitors, resistors, and circuit boards allude to a different type of ammunition, an electronic ‘ammunition’ necessary for the modern Anishinaabe.

The generic Ojibwe word for bag is mashkimod. Consulting dictionaries produced in the mid-nineteenth century, the word mashkimod is synonymous with “Pindâgan.” In the modern orthography this word is rendered as

---

5 Whiteford
6 other article
biindaagan which now means “pocket.”

The initial morpheme of the word biind- refers to inside or in. The initial morpheme has also been used in the construction of other words for items such as the powder horn Biindakatewan, and the quiver for arrows, Biidanwaan. Similarly the word for shot pouch, biindasinaan or biindasinaajigan are related, as is the word for scabbard or knife sheath, biindikomaan. However, these are not the words for the bandolier bag. In fact, consulting these 19th century dictionaries for the term “bandolier bag” is fruitless because the bags were not called that back then. However, looking under different terms one finds the word for medicine bag listed as biinjigoosan. In Ojibwe, some words for a container utilized the initial morpheme “biind-“ but this is also related to “biinj-”, as in biinjyihii “inside.” However, the etymology of Biinjigosaan is elusive save for the initial morpheme that refers to “inside.” Except for biindaagan, which is now used for pocket, these words are all practically obsolete and some are known because of the practice of storytelling.

Perusing the mid-nineteenth century dictionaries reveals that another word “Kishkibitâgan” was used for tobacco pouch. In central Ontario this word is rendered today as gshkibidaagan and is translated as pouch. In Minnesota area this word is spelt as gashkibidaagan and is an animate noun for “bag with a closeable top, tobacco bag, pipe bag, bandolier bag.” This word is related to the transitive verbs “gashkibidoon vti2 wrap and tie s.t. in a bundle” (inanimate) and “gashkibizh/ gashkibiN- vta wrap and tie s.o. in a bundle” (animate). In

---

8 Rhodes 1993, p. 53.
9 “Pindakatewân. Powder-horn; pl. –ag,” Baraga 1992, p. 356. The word can be broken down as biind- referring to an internal compartment, the medial –akate-referred to the gun powder (makate ‘it is black’), and the final morpheme –wan is a nominalizer.
10 “Pindassinan or pindassinadjigan. Shot pouch; pl. –an.” (Baraga p. 356).
11 “Pindikomân. Knife-sheath, scabbard for a knife.; pl. –an” (Baraga p. 357). This word survives on Manitoulin Island and Walpole Island but spelt as “biindkomaan ni scabbard, knife sheath” (Rhodes p. 54).
12 This word was spelt by Bishop Baraga as “pindjigossan” (Baraga 1992, p.168) and by Reverend Edward Wilson as “pinjegoosun (pl. -un)” (Wilson 187[4], p. 289).
13 Rhodes 1993, p. 55. This is spelt as biinjayi’ii in Nichols and Nyholm 1995, p. 37.
14 Baraga 1992, p. 265 also Baraga 1992, p. 191. Interestingly the tobacco pouch is ontologically animate whereas the medicine pouch pinjigosan is inanimate.
15 Rhodes 1993, p. 176. Even more interesting is the animate ontological status of the Kishkibitâgan changed from Baraga’s time (mid-nineteenth century) to an inanimate status by 21st century as recorded by Rhodes.
16 Nichols and Nyholm 1995, p. 49 lists gashkibidaagan as animate.
17 In Central Ojibwe “gshkapood vti tie s.t. up, wrap s.t. (inanimate)” and “gshkapnaad vta tie s.o. up, wrap s.t. (animate),” Rhodes 1993, p. 176.
contrast, the word for a parcel, or something that is wrapped, is gshkapjigan and gashkibijigan. The element that distinguishes the parcel from the bag is the final morpheme “-daagan” referring to a pocket, which is shared by both Gashkibidaagan and Biindaagan.

The “Kishkibitâgan” of Baraga’s age morphed into the gashkibidaagan/gshkibidaagan of modern times. The word is a direct reference to the bag or pouch with a closeable flap. The earlier tobacco bags were more functional, however, the pattern was altered and these evolved into the bandolier bags that had more elaborate stylized beaded floral motifs. These floral motifs had no equivalent in the natural world. In fact, these latter elaborately beaded bandolier bags became more of a status symbol and were associated with the Midewiwin (Grand Medicine society). Some high-ranking members wore two bags, one over each shoulder forming an X across the chest. By the 20th century many of these bags no longer had a pocket; the beaded panel and strap were for show. Thus another name for the bandolier bag came into being: Aazhooningwa’igan literally meaning ‘that which is worn over the shoulder.’ This is perhaps the specific word for the decorative bandolier bag that has no pocket. In Mnemonic (Re)Manifestations, Ace’s more recent bandolier bags have incorporated video screens inside the panel, diverting any attention to what would be in the bag, and perhaps even changing the function of the item from a gashkibidaagan to a pocketless aazhooningwa’igan.

Engaging Ace’s art requires a more expansive approach, some would say a more holistic approach. The engagement should not be confined to visual appearance, nor to the materiality of the items, nor to the English language. The artist challenges the viewer/ visitor/ sojourner to transgress those limitations by including capacitors, resistors, diodes, wires, and Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe) words. The Anishinaabemowin words carry meaning, the words carry understanding, the words carry history and the words carry culture. Similarly, all of the items in this exhibit: scrolls, bandolier bags, belts and otter moccasins are used to ‘carry’ cultural meaning, much like the otter bearing the medicine bundle upon its back. As an Anishinaabe artist who is not fluent, Ace’s work carries the burden of being a conduit to Anishinaabe-nendamowin “Anishinaabe thought.” Thus the Anishinaabemowin names of the art are mnemonic (re)manifestations.

The works contained in Mnemonic (Re)Manifestations by Barry Ace, an Anishinaabe artist of the nigig doodem (otter clan), can be viewed singly and admired as beautiful works of art that incorporate electronic parts thus making a statement on modernity and the Anishinaabeg artists’ continued ability to adapt

---

18 Rhodes 1993, p. 176. This is an inanimate noun.
19 Nichols and Nyholm 1995, p. 49.
20 Article**
21 Nichols and Nyholm 1995, p. 49.
to and incorporate new media. However, the works can be viewed and contemplated as a whole, ensconced in a movement of cultural revitalization, a movement of cultural self-discovery and identity. The works are both personal and communal, containing individual metaphors and symbolism yet tapping into an ancient iconography that is universal to all Anishinaabeg. Just as the Nigig (otter) traversed the land bringing the medicine bundle of everlasting life to the Anishinaabeg throughout Turtle Island, Barry Ace’s collected work traverses galleries across Canada, inviting the viewer to further investigate the mnemonic in order to comprehend and contemplate its many manifestations.

**Bibliography**


Redsky, James. 1972. Great Leader of the Ojibway: Mis-quona-queb. McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, ON.


Wilson, Reverend Edward F. 187[4]. The Ojebway Language: A manual for missionaries and others employed among the Ojebway Indians. Roswell and Hutchinson, Toronto, ON.