



Nadia Myre: Balancing Acts

April 25-September 15, 2019

Exhibition Guide

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Curated by Sarah Quinton

Balancing Acts is a solo exhibition of work by internationally acclaimed artist Nadia Myre. Myre draws attention to the power and histories of Indigenous textile practices through beadwork, textiles, photography, video and sculpture. *Balancing Acts* is a survey of artwork made over the last ten years – some on view in this exhibition for the first time.

Nadia Myre is a Montreal-based artist of mixed Algonquin and French Canadian heritage. A member of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation, her work explores the politics of belonging by positioning her practice within a framework of resistance and resilience. Throughout her 25-year career, Myre's hallmark multidisciplinary methodology has honoured a range of media that balances ancestral and contemporary methods of working.

“We are delighted to be working with an artist of such significance at this time in history,” said Sarah Quinton, Textile Museum of Canada’s Curatorial Director. “Nadia Myre’s provocative work considers the cultural and political importance of making by hand alongside the urgencies of caring for one another. She asks us to consider our connections to the environment and to relationships that shape the way we live today.”

Nadia Myre: Balancing Acts is organized by the Textile Museum of Canada and is generously supported by presenting sponsor BMO Financial Group. It is a Primary Exhibition of the 2019 Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival.

Cover image: Nadia Myre, *Code Switching: Circle* (2017), Digital print

Scars and Healing

The first section of *Balancing Acts*, entitled 'Natural Economies,' looks at exchanges within and amongst our natural and social environments. The *Scarscapes* and *Scarscapes 2* series in this section present beaded textiles and largescale digital photographs that examine the healing power of beadwork and collaboration.

These series of works have their basis in an earlier participatory project by Myre called [The Scar Project](#). Between 2005 and 2013, at different galleries, museums (including the Textile Museum), community spaces, and biennials around the world, Myre invited participants to sew a scar that they are carrying with them and write its story. From this archive of people's representations of their physical and emotional scars, Myre identified a series of shapes that recurred and used them as the basis for the beadwork and photographs that make up the *Scarscapes* and *Scarscapes 2* series.

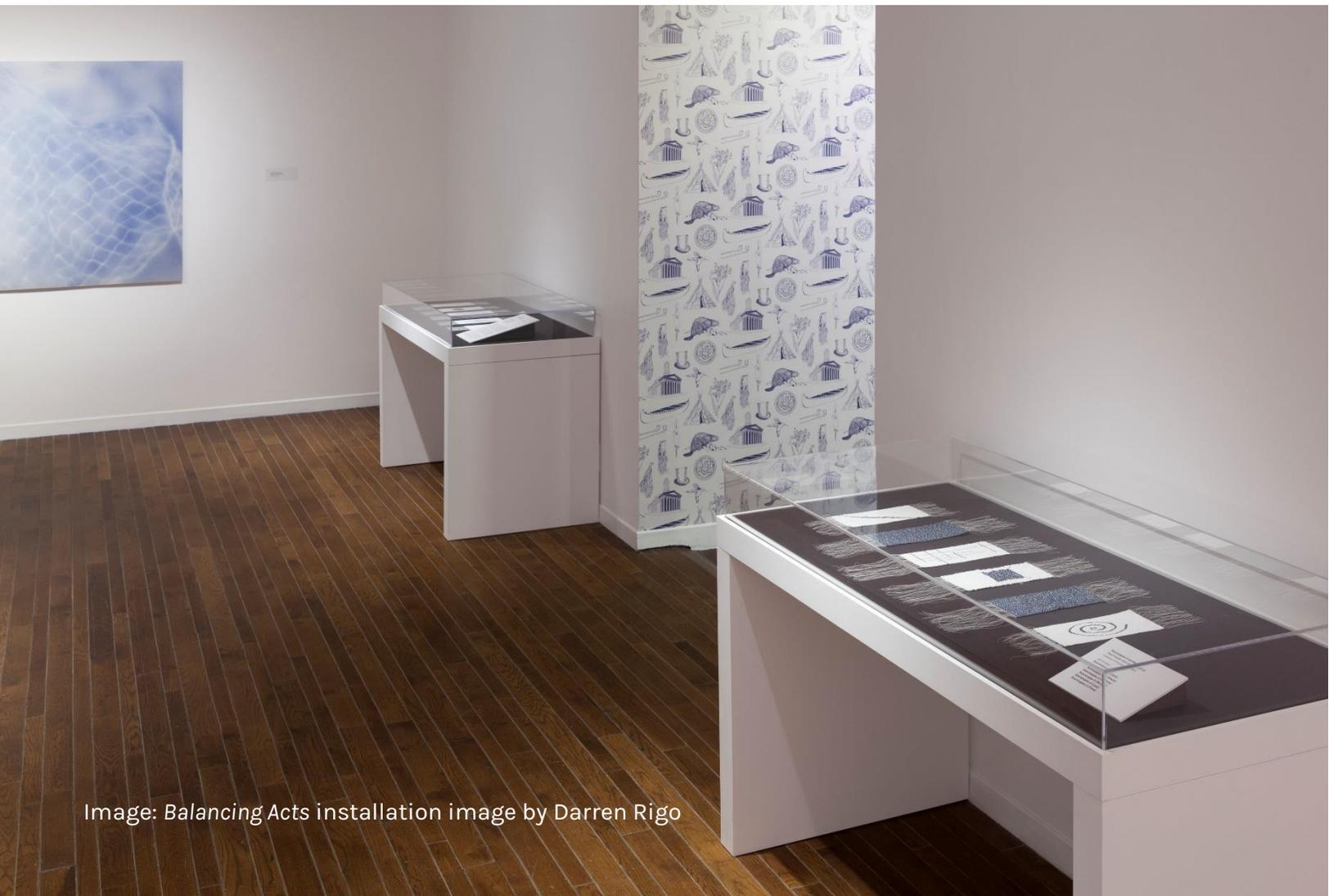
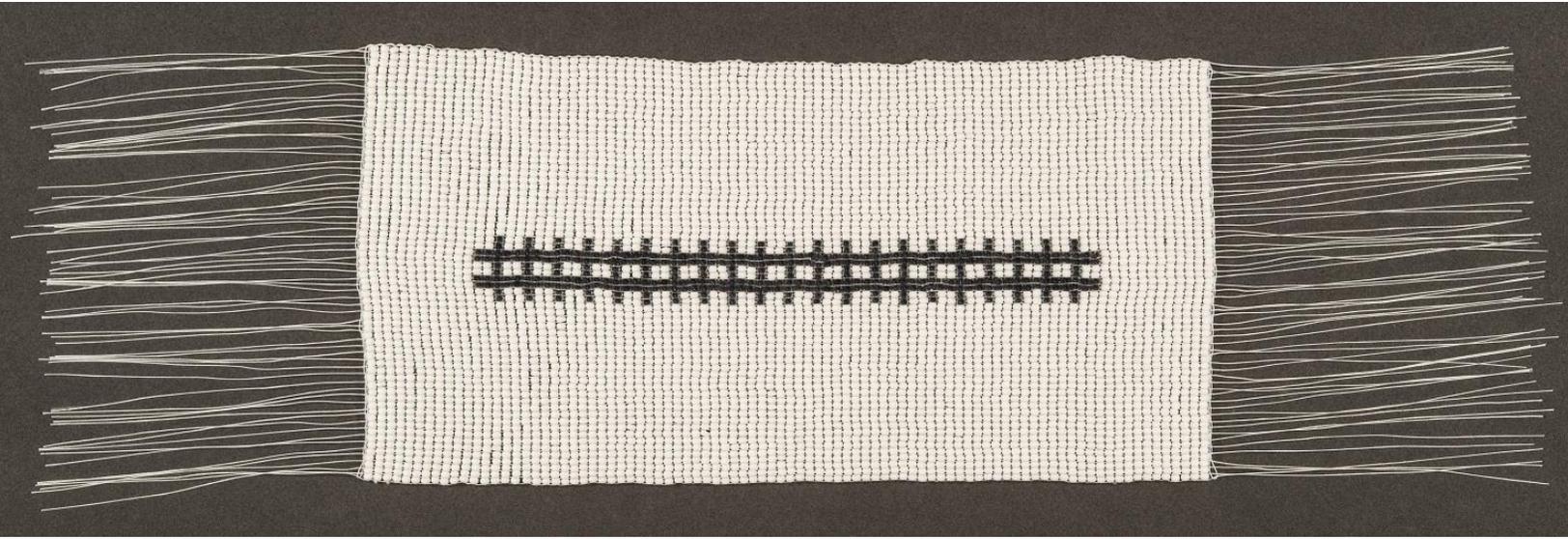


Image: *Balancing Acts* installation image by Darren Rigo



A scar is indicative of a wound and of healing. Myre uses the powerful medium of beadwork to give form to the wounds felt by individuals across communities.

In an interview with Candice Hopkins published in *Vernissage* in 2012, Myre described the physical and mental state of doing beadwork: “The ritual hand gestures and movements fall into a contemplative, almost automatic rhythm that frees the mind like a meditation.” Through the beadwork and large scale photographs in the *Scarscapes* and *Scarscapes 2* series, and the piece *Meditation 01 (Respite)*, a digitally reproduced and enlarged image of a circle of beadwork, Myre draws the viewer into this contemplative, meditative, potentially healing space. The work encourages reflection on personal and collective scars, connectedness, and healing.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Myre presents the pieces in *Scarscapes* and *Scarscapes 2* as both beaded objects and digital photographs? What details do you notice when you look at each series?
2. Consider the scars that human actions and activities leave on our natural environment. Myre’s *Red Net (Working Title)* is made from recycled t-shirt material that is knotted in a similar fashion to the way fishing nets are made. With its striking red colour, this piece gestures towards alarming issues around fishing, mass produced textiles and chemical dyes, and care of our oceans and waterways. Read more about this under ‘Textile industries and environment’ section under Additional Resources at the end of this document.

Image: Nadia Myre, *Scarscapes (Scar Stitch)* (2009), seed beads and thread

Authority and Preservation of Cultural Traditions

Decolonial Gestures or Doing it Wrong? is a project that Myre produced when she was an artist-in-residence at the McCord Museum in 2016. The moccasins, basket, bag, and hair receiver displayed in this section are the result of the artist making Indigenous-style craft objects according to instructions from Victorian-era women's magazines, read to her by a curator from the McCord Museum in Montreal. The curator refrains from saying the name of the object. The installation includes a video of Myre making each of the objects, an audio recording of the curator reading the instructions to her, and digital photographs of a beaded moccasin and a crocheted basket. At the end of her residency at the McCord Museum, Myre exhibited her work alongside objects from the McCord Museum's collection.

Through this project Myre considers the preservation and erasure of Indigenous craft traditions through colonial institutions, and the possibility of recovery. While it is the curator of the Museum, as official knowledge-keeper for the museum collection, who reads the instructions to the artist, Myre reclaims these traditions through the act of making them.

The magazines from which the instructions were chosen illustrate a common Victorian attitude toward Indigenous craft practices: they are appreciated for their beauty, but their cultural significance and circumstances that necessitated that Indigenous people sell craft objects to tourists and settlers are ignored. Objects and techniques are presented as ahistorical, without meaning, disassociated from their makers, community or individual innovation; they are considered as beauty, or charm, which can be recreated by anyone.

Image: Nadia Myre, *Moccasins* (2015), leather, thread, glass beads; *Basket* (2015), crochet cord, silk, thread, ribbon



Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of the curator reading the instructions to the artist? What is the significance of leaving out the name of the object?

2. a) Take a look at the museum records for two objects from the McCord Museum that were included in Myre's exhibition (below). What information does the museum record about the objects? What is missing?



Bag
Anonyme - Anonymous
Eastern Woodlands
Aboriginal: Anishinaabe?
1900-1930, 20th century
Deer hide, cotton cloth, silk, glass beads,
hare fur, cotton thread
24.2 x 24.5 cm
ME966X.121
© McCord Museum

Link: collections.musee-mccord.qc.ca/en/collection/artifacts/ME966X.121



Wall pocket
Rosemary Hill
Eastern Woodlands
Aboriginal: Iroquois (Tuscarora)
1999, 20th century
Velveteen, cotton cloth, plastic?, glass
beads, cotton thread
11.6 x 3.5 x 17 cm
Gift of Dr. Victoria Dickenson
M999.61.1
© McCord Museum

Link: collections.musee-mccord.qc.ca/en/collection/artifacts/M999.61.1

b) Explore the Textile Museum of Canada's [online database](#). What information does the museum record about the objects? Is this the same or different from the approach of the McCord Museum?

c) What does the information that is recorded and shared by both institutions say about what the museum values about these objects?

3. a) Look at the way Indigenous beadwork is presented in the article “[How to make the Indian Bead Work: Designs Which May Easily be Reproduced](#)” (see resources). Consider the author’s attitude toward Indigenous people. They repeatedly use negative stereotypes and make generalizations about Indigenous people. How does this contrast with the author’s writing about the beadwork objects themselves?
- b) Beadwork is an important medium of cultural expression in Indigenous communities. The author writes about the colours, materials and techniques used to make these pieces, but does not assign the pieces any cultural significance or speak about how they might be traditionally worn or used. If someone were to follow the author’s urgings and recreate the pieces illustrated in the article, what would be lost?

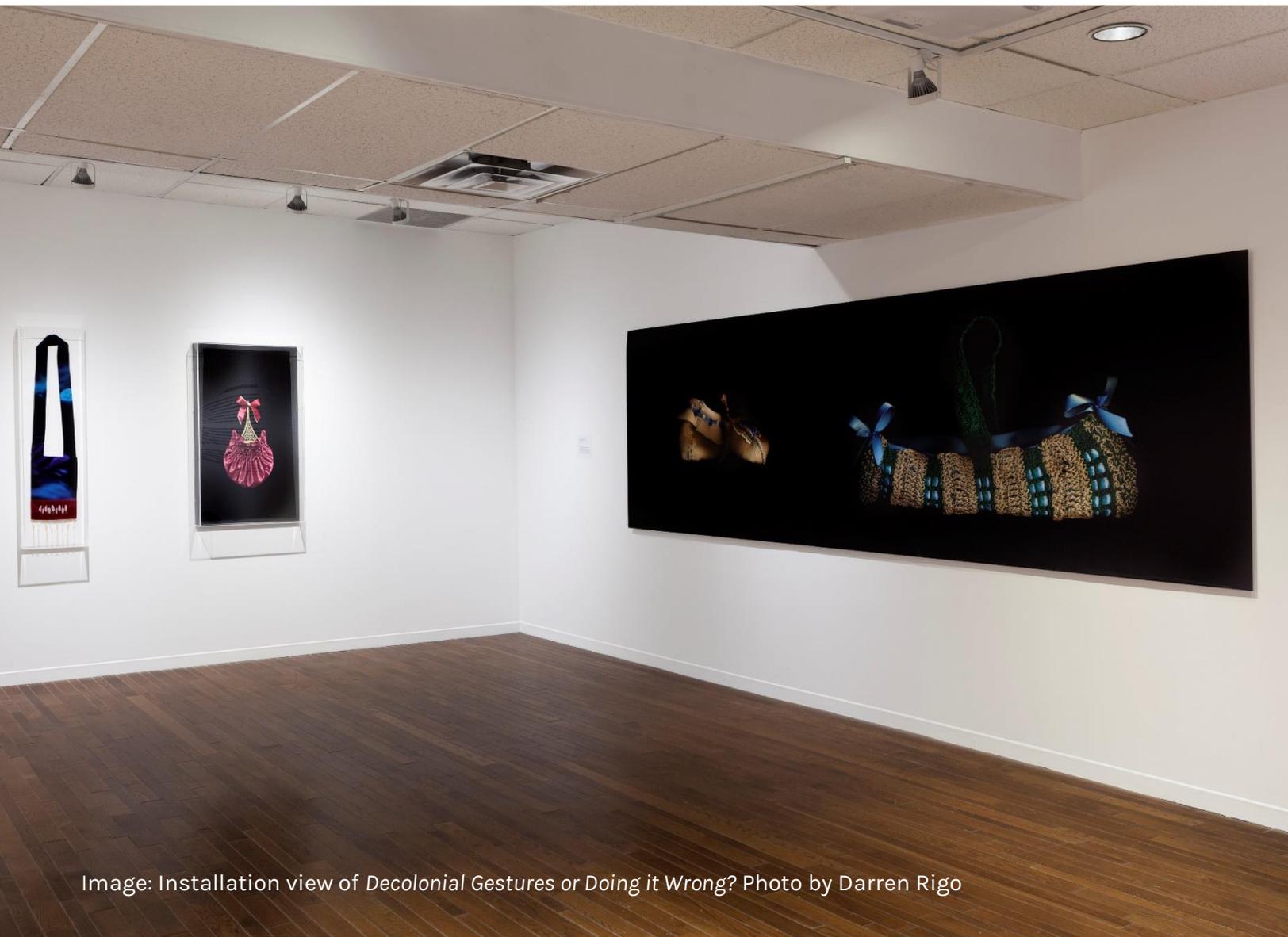


Image: Installation view of *Decolonial Gestures or Doing it Wrong?* Photo by Darren Rigo

Museum Collections

Whether purchased, found, or taken, historical objects in museum collections have generally been removed from their original or intended context. This is true of objects from all different cultures: why might it be particularly problematic in the case of Indigenous cultural objects, given the history of colonialism in Canada? In Myre's own words "Once you remove them from the communities who make and use them, their intrinsic meaning is lost. In a museum, there is no one to remember for us."

When a museum has an object in their collection, part of their responsibility is to protect the object from being damaged and try to preserve it for as long as possible. This is done by handling objects as little as possible; maintaining appropriate levels of temperature, light and humidity while objects are in storage; making sure objects are safe when they are on display in an exhibition; and only allowing objects to leave the museum when the same conditions of care can be met.

While this is done for the protection of the objects, it has often meant that people from the communities in which the objects were made do not have access to them. Much can be learned about the maker, the materials, the symbols of objects from seeing, touching, and smelling them. By keeping objects such as Indigenous beadwork 'safe' in museum collections, their community has restricted opportunity to learn from and celebrate the object; at the same time, the museum and its knowledge holders have limited opportunity to learn about the object from the community. Through the work of Indigenous leaders and artists like Nadia Myre, awareness of the value and healing power of accessing and visiting collections has been acknowledged and museums are increasingly creating space for community members to access collections.

Many ceremonial objects from Indigenous communities were taken into museum collections and the care protocols for these sacred objects were ignored. Their removal from communities, along the oppressive legislation of the Indian Act which criminalized the celebration of Indigenous ceremonies, caused - loss of knowledge and community. Following decades of activism, many museums are now returning these objects to their home communities.

Discussion Questions

1. How do objects come be in museum collections? What is lost, in meaning, context, and material, when objects are brought into museum collections? How might what is lost be restored? Is this possible?
2. Research Indigenous leaders and activists involved in repatriation. What museums have they engaged in conversations about repatriation? What was the Museums response? See Repatriation under 'Additional Resources' for related articles.

Code Switching

Nadia Myre's *Code Switching* project features clay pipe fragments that the artist collected along the Thames River, in London, UK. In the late 18th and the 19th centuries, people known as mudlarkers would scavenge in the mud of the River Thames at low tide, looking for objects that had fallen off boats or been discarded. They would sell what they found for small amounts of money. Today, amateur archaeologists licensed by the London Port Authority have adopted the moniker of mudlarkers.

Among other things, Myre and other mudlarkers continue to retrieve large numbers of pipe stems from clay pipes that were produced in factories in England and Scotland from the late 1500s. The long, narrow stems of the pipes would quickly become clogged; people would break the clogged parts of the stems off and soon throw the whole pipe away. As they were very cheap, they were treated as disposable items.



These pipes were used to smoke tobacco. Tobacco is indigenous to North and South America. Traditionally and today, tobacco has spiritual, medicinal, and cultural significances and uses in many Indigenous cultures. European colonists were introduced to tobacco in North America and brought it back. In Europe, tobacco was appreciated for its medicinal uses but was also used recreationally and seen as a valuable commodity. Though the European market for tobacco was growing, cultivation on the continent was not successful owing to labour, ethical, and environmental conditions so colonists began producing it in North America for European consumption. Owned by British and Scottish merchants, these plantations depended on the labour of West African slaves.

Image: Nadia Myre, *Code Switching: Pipe (detail)* (2017), digital print, edition of 5

Code switching refers to the practice of alternating between two or more languages in the course of a conversation depending on the context of the ideas being expressed. It can also refer to the practice of modifying one's actions in unfamiliar settings to accommodate different cultural expectations for appropriate behavior. In the *Code Switching* series, Myre considers how the meaning and uses of objects such as tobacco and the pipe stems change depending on their use and contexts.



Discussion Questions

1. Watch the video of Myre's performance [A Casual Reconstruction](#). How does this work address the idea of "code switching"?
2. Besides tobacco, what other plants were considered culturally significant to Indigenous communities in North America? How has the use of these plants changed over time and in different contexts?

Image: Nadia Myre, *Untitled (Tobacco Barrel)* (2018) installation view, Photo by Darren Rigo

Additional Resources

Nadia Myre:

Nadia Myre's website; find interviews and articles under the About tab:

www.nadiamyre.net/

Métis scholar Sherry Farrell Racette speaks about the formation of community through beadwork and the scars it produces in *The Radical Stitch: Bead Until Your Fingers Bleed* at MAWA: vimeo.com/192830983

The Scar Project:

Photos of the making and exhibition of The Scar Project:

www.nadiamyre.net/#/thescarproject/

A video of Myre speaking about The Scar Project at the 18th Biennale of Sydney in Australia (2012): www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MPou1dWRnc

Textile industries and the environment:

A video of textile artist and activist Rowland Ricketts speaking at the Textile Museum of Canada about the destructive impact of denim production and what he calls an 'indigo wasteland': www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVCi00U7ac0&t=5s

An article about ocean micro-plastic pollution that comes from washing clothing made with synthetic fibres: www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/9/19/17800654/clothes-plastic-pollution-polyester-washing-machine

Learn about the damage caused by abandoned fishing gear and work that's being done in coastal British Columbia to alleviate the problem:

Ghost Nets Article: www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/ghost-nets-how-lost-and-abandoned-fishing-gear-are-destroying-fish-stocks-marine-wildlife-1.5207474

Ghost Nets Documentary: gem.cbc.ca/share/episode/38e815a-0115045a25a

Read about a Memorial University student who is looking for an alternative to plastic fishing rope: www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/masters-student-microplastics-fishing-rope-1.4882240

Museum collections:

Explore the Textile Museum of Canada collection: collections.textilemuseum.ca/

Explore the McCord Museum collection: collections.musee-mccord.qc.ca/en/keys/collections/

The webpage for the McCord Museum's 2016 exhibition of Myre's work, *Decolonial gestures or doing it wrong? Refair le chemin* (includes a video interview with Myre): www.musee-mccord.qc.ca/en/exhibitions/artist-in-residence-nadia-myre/

Repatriation of Indigenous objects:

Return of sacred objects helps revive ceremonies in Indigenous communities, CBC, December 15, 2017: www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/indigenous-communities-artifact-repatriation-1.4451889

Indigenous Repatriation Handbook, Royal BC Museum:

royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/sites/default/files/indigenous_repatriation_handbook_v01_screen_jw_20190327.pdf

Read the story of the Potlatch Collection, now housed at the U'mista Cultural Centre:

www.umista.ca/pages/collection-history

Bill C-391, a bill that provides for the development and implementation of a national strategy to enable the return of Indigenous human remains and cultural property to the Indigenous peoples of Canada that is currently under review in the Canadian senate: www.parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/bill/C-391/third-reading

Hear perspectives on repatriation from Lucy Bell, Head of Indigenous Collections and Repatriation, Cara Krmpotich, Associate Professor and Director of Museum Studies Program, and Gail Lord, President and Co-Founder of Lord Cultural Resources:

www.tv.o.org/video/museums-repatriation-and-ownership

Victorian Ladies' Journals Beadwork Articles:

How to Make the Indian Bead Work, *Ladies Home Journal*, v 20, 1902-3:

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015024462445&view=1up&seq=479&size=150>

Infant's Shoe (instructions used by Myre to make moccasins), *The ladies' hand book of fancy and ornamental work*, 1860:

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=caia.ark:/13960/t7zk6g82w&view=1up&seq=33>

Indian Canoe Work Basket (instructions used by Myre), *Godeys' lady's book*, 1861:

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=caia.ark:/13960/t7zk6g82w&view=1up&seq=33>

Tobacco, Mudlarking, and Clay Pipes:

Information about traditional perspectives on tobacco within Indigenous communities: keepitsacred.itcmi.org/tobacco-and-tradition/traditional-tobacco-use/

A Land "Wholly Built Upon Smoke": Colonial Virginia and the Making of the Global Tobacco Trade, 1612–1776 by Edward D. Melillo:

www.amherst.edu/system/files/A%2520Land%2520%2527wholly%2520built%2520upon%2520smoke%2527.pdf

An article about clay pipes in the River Thames:

www.beachcombingmagazine.com/blogs/news/mudlarking-the-art-of-smoking

An essay by Mother Tongue (Tiffany Boyle and Jessica Carden) on Myre's Code Switching project: artmur.com/en/artists/nadia-myre/code-switching-and-other-work-2/

Beads, they're sewn so tight:

The resource guide for the Textile Museum of Canada's exhibition *Beads, they're sewn so tight*, guest curated by Lisa Myers, that featured work by Bev Koski, Katie Longboat, Jean Marshall and Olivia Whetung. *Beads, they're sewn so tight* presents the work of four other contemporary Indigenous beadwork artists:

www.textilemuseum.ca/education/education/resource-guides/beads,-they-re-sewn-so-tight.aspx