

Breathe

July 6 - October 2, 2023

Co-Created by Nathalie Bertin and Lisa Shepherd



**textile
museum**
OF CANADA

Lisa Shepherd
Be Well, 2020
British Columbia, Canada
Mixed Media: Velveteen, glass beads,
cotton kohkôm-print lining; beaded.
Image courtesy of the artist

Content Warnings

In artist statements to follow, there is mention of atrocities committed against Indigenous communities, some of which are ongoing or took place in the recent past.

Please take care of your own mental health, and consider if you are prepared to contemplate these topics.

There are images contained within this text that show animal products, such as fur, feathers, hide, and bone. While this may be difficult to view, consider how sustenance hunting and wearing furs can be necessary for survival.

Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that the land on which the Textile Museum of Canada operates is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabe, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat. It is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Metis.

Through our activities we seek to create a space for people to share, learn, and celebrate the textile practices of today and long ago in the spirit of peace, friendship and respect.

When COVID-19 made its way into Canada in early 2020, isolation, closures, and disbelief had the population in the grip of rising panic. For some Indigenous people, it was déjà-vu. It had not been many generations prior that infectious disease had gravely impacted First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

In response to the noticeable lack of artwork being produced by their communities during the pandemic, Métis artists Nathalie Bertin and Lisa Shepherd co-created the *Breathe* project. In April 2020, they launched a Facebook group and invited artists from all directions and demographics to create masks in any medium that belonged to their culture and artistic practice, in hopes of documenting a significant moment in human history.

In a matter of weeks, a strong, supportive, and incredibly creative community guided by the Indigenous teachings of reciprocity evolved. The project provided an outlet for makers to share their creations, along with their unique stories of fear, courage, sadness, hope, love, and healing that unite us all.

At present, the *Breathe* project is represented by over 85 masks created by more than 50 artists from across Canada. They have been exhibited in phases at the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies (Banff, AB), Royal Alberta Museum (Edmonton, AB), Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre (Yellowknife, NWT), Art Gallery of Guelph (Guelph, ON), and Galt Museum (Lethbridge, AB), and are seen here all together for their final presentation.

Resiliency

"These masks are my Inuvialuit response to Covid-19. Over half of our people were wiped out during the Spanish Flu epidemic approximately 100 years ago and we were on the brink of extinction. We had no natural immunity to diseases brought over by European Whalers and Fur Traders. My maternal grandparents were young children who helped fetch water for the sick and dying during that time. Today's Inuvialuit descend from those who survived the devastating flu epidemic. We also face the same fear with Covid-19.



"These masks are a testament to our strength and resilience as Inuvialuit People. We are strong, intelligent, successful, modern people who still live according to traditional values and way of life passed on to us from our ancestors.

Taalrumiq
Prince George, British Columbia, Canada
Inuvialuit Fortitude Mask 2, 2020.
White seal skin, red walrus tusks, red sealskin, sequins, beads, blue fox, ptarmigan feather, birch bark, leather, sequins, fabric, ribbon, bias tape, beads, elastic, chainette, reclaimed metal bag closures; traditional skin sewing and sewing machine techniques, appliquéd, beaded (flat stitch beadwork, beaded edging)
Courtesy of the artist.

"As Indigenous people, our experiences tell us that we aren't really seen, heard, or valued by mainstream society. Yet we are still here despite years of colonization, systemic racism and injustice, genocide, diseases, starvation, residential schools, and ongoing ill treatment of our people. These masks are a sister set, inspired by the resilience, strength, and fortitude of Inuvialuit people and culture; these masks say *I'm here, I'm real, I have value, I exist*. We are still here. Our experiences, our history, our future matters, we matter.

"Both masks feature traditional design elements of Inuvialuit clothing, such as walrus tusks. Walruses were an important resource for Inuvialuit life in the arctic, providing food, material for tools, rope, waterproof clothing and oil for lamps."

Taalrumiq / Christina King





Eliza Firth
Inuvik, Northwest Territories, Canada
Fanny Rose (detail), 2020
stroud, wool thread; embroidered
Courtesy of the artist; photo by Mina Keykhaei

"A tribute to my late Mother Fanny Rose, She was a hero and a survivor to the TB Pandemic. My Mother was in isolation for almost three years in a hospital where she looked out a window and saw the changing of seasons. Isolation back then was painful and lonely. Her children were left home in her small community, she sewed for us using stroud, wool, hides, pelts, & embroidery. My Mother passed away over forty years ago. I was gifted her drawings by a dear friend of hers. Oh, how she loved to draw flowers, I use pinks for her. She had five pink handkerchiefs; One for Church, One for when she went to the local store; One for when she met important people like "The Queen" and for gathering with her friends; One for spare just in case someone needed it...

"This pandemic is a reminder of our past survivors. So, let us be resilient like them." ***Eliza Firth***



"Beading is my passion, my saving grace."
Crystal Behn

Crystal Behn
Prince George, British Columbia, Canada
Untitled (detail), 2020
moose hide, seed beads, cut beads, bugle beads, glass rondelles, rik rak, dentalium shells; hand-smoked, beaded
Courtesy of the artist

craft as medicine

Creating something with your hands can be a way of coping with difficult situations. During the early time of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people took on new hobbies, especially arts and crafts - these activities help us de-stress, relax, and can even help us meditate. You might have heard of "flow state" before; when you are well-practiced with a craft, the repetitive activity (such as beading) will help you become both calm and focused. Craft has been used as therapy for folks living with PTSD and other mental health conditions.

This exhibition features many advanced techniques, including (but not limited to):

Beading

An artform where the artist uses beads (small pieces of glass, stone, wood, and plastic) to create a larger image, motif, or decorative design on a surface. Beading is often done in combination with embroidery and other hand-sewing techniques.

Carving

The process of cutting into a hard material (often wood or stone) using a chisel and knife. Carving can create a 3-dimensional object like a sculpture, but you can also cut into a surface to create a 2-dimensional design.

Embroidery

Decorating a surface using a needle and thread.

Felting

The process of creating a fabric by fusing fibres together, using heat and friction. Needle-felting uses the friction of barbed needles to tangle wool roving into a solid material.

Finger-Weaving

Finger-weaving: An Indigenous art form where a woven fabric is created without using a loom. A common example of finger-weaving is braiding, but complex fabrics, belts, sashes, and other accessories can be created with this process as well.

Glass fusing

The process of cutting and placing pieces of glass on top of each other, and heating them in a kiln to melt the pieces into solid glass.

Hand-dyeing

The process where a dyer adds colour to the fabric in their home or studio, rather than in an industrial setting such as a factory. Hand-dyers often use natural dyes, but not always.

Hand-tanning

The process of preparing an animal hide to be used as leather. While commercial tanneries will use various chemical solutions to tan hides, hand-tanning is often more environmentally friendly, using fats, oils, urine, and cerebral-spinal fluid (the liquid that surrounds the animal's brain and spine).



Adrienne used wet-felting and needle-felting to make this mask, along with beading and embroidery techniques!

Adrienne Assinewai
New Brunswick, Canada
Ombaashi (She Is Lifted by the Wind),
2020
Wool, shell, porcupine quill, glass beads,
leather;
Wet-felted, needle-felted.
Courtesy of the artist

Metalwork

Shaping metal with heat and/or tools to create a new object or artwork.

Quillwork

An Indigenous artform that uses porcupine quills or quills from bird feathers to create designs. This decorative craft is similar to embroidery, but uses softened, dyed quills instead of thread or beads.

Quilting

An artform where the artist joins pieces of fabric together by sewing, to create a pattern. The word quilting indicates several layers of fabric, especially soft batting. When fabrics are joined by the edge, without layering, it is called "piecing" or "patchwork".

Ribbon-work

An embroidery appliqué art that uses ribbons to create decoration for clothing and dance regalia among Indigenous groups, especially Métis, Cree, and Ojibwe.

Rug-hooking

An art or craft which uses burlap as a base, and strips of yarn, wool, nylon, or silk which are looped through the burlap and held in place by tension. Rug-hooking is extremely popular in Canada, especially on the East Coast.



Graham Giniw Paradis
Thorold, Ontario, Canada
Quillpocalypse Now, 2020
Porcupine quills, moose hide, velveteen, cloth, aluminum screen,
rawhide, sinew, 24 kt gold spikes, silk ribbon, braided yarn, cedar;
Quillwork (woven and embroidered).
Courtesy of the artist



Jennifer Curran
Ontario, Canada
Passion Flower, 2020
Wool, sari silk, beads,
metallic embroidery thread, cotton;
Hooked (fine shading technique), beaded,
embroidered, hand-stitched.
Courtesy of the artist

Symbolism

"I have an interesting relationship with **bears** or, more specifically, bear spirits. At times when I am most in need of healing, they gather around me. When I am in danger, they are there to protect.

"Several years ago, I was gifted some Bear hide. I tucked it away, waiting for the right time for it to do its work. I was gifted claws as well. This summer it called and became the mask you see here. The blueberries honour the foods she eats, with red beads to represent the salmon.

...

"I created this mask to honour the work that bears do, for me and for all of us." *Joeann Argue*



Nathalie Bertin,
Blueberries, 2020.
Moose hide, beads, Melton wool,
cotton fabric, rabbit fur, leather;
Beadwork.
Courtesy of the artist.

"I chose **blueberries** atop a blueberry flower surrounded with silver beads to represent the container my mother used [as a mask]. Blueberries are also great anti-oxidants ... On the inside, there is a pocket for **cedar**; Another good medicine used for the prevention of chest infection and irritation." *Nathalie Bertin*



Joeann Argue
Beaver Falls, British Colombia,
Canada.
Spirit of the Bear (detail), 2020.
bear skin, delica beads, bear claw, satin
ribbon, deer hide, wool cloth; beaded
(single-needle beadwork), embroidered
(needle painting embroidery).
Courtesy of the artist; photo by Mina Keykhaei

"The **strawberry** is the most important symbol of this mask. In Ojibwa and Métis teachings, it is called the Heart Berry. When we speak from the heart, we speak its truth. The mask itself represents the obstacles or challenges we face. Even so, the strawberry reminds us that if we tell our truth, we can face our obstacles and work to overcome them. When we speak, we send tendrils like a strawberry plant. When we tell our truths, those tendrils bear fruit just like the strawberry plant." *Nathalie Bertin*



Nathalie Bertin
Bonfield, Ontario, Canada
Pandemic Vogue, 2020
Hematite beads, glass beads, velveteen,
ribbon, cotton fabric; Beaded.
Courtesy of the artist

"My mask has **strawberries** on it representing strong women. With the turtle on the other side. Strawberries are medicine for Indigenous people. They are a beautiful leader fruit that grows wild. It brings life to people, its taste is sweet, and it also makes juice.

Turtles represent the island that we live on, **flowers** are the beauty that this island has for all people." *Sherry Lickers*

"I made this mask for my daughter. I chose the **wild rose** for it embodies strength, resilience and healing. They were my mother's favourite flower, as well as mine and now my daughters too. The rose petals and rose hips are very medicinal and I harvest the rose hips every year. Julia and I bonded over many cups of rose hip tea in her Great Gramma's tea cups while we stayed safe at home." *Brenda Davidson*



Brenda Davidson
Thompson, Manitoba, Canada
My girl, 2020
Melton wool, beads, embroidery thread,
birch bark, moose hide, cotton;
Hand-sewn, beaded.
Courtesy of the artist



Amanda Roy
Montreal, Quebec, Canada
Wild Roses, 2020
Birch bark, sweetgrass, pine sap, sinew,
bear fat, deer hide, spruce root;
Anishinaabek birch bark canoe making
techniques, etched, sewn.
Courtesy of the artist



"The **Moccasin Flower** (aka Pink Lady Slipper Orchid) grows in our area for a brief time in spring. The delicate flower requires a special balance in the earth to grow. (I've tried to transplant it but have been unsuccessful.) As a traditional food gatherer, I know that when this flower appears, it is the right time for certain hunting activities.

"The Moccasin Flower also reminded me of another story. Briefly, this story is about how a community had fallen ill during a harsh winter but had no medicines left to treat the people. The illness had become so bad that even the Chief and the Messengers were ill. One of the last members still well enough to make the harsh trek to another village to obtain medicines was a young woman whose husband had also fallen ill. Determined and brave, she set off in the winter cold. As time went by, the woman's community began to worry that she had not come back yet. A search party of the few remaining healthy went out to look for her. When they found her frozen body, she was clutching a birch basket filled with medicines. They also saw her tracks in the snow were stained with blood from her bare feet. She had sacrificed her life so that others could live. When spring came, the Moccasin flowers started to grow where her feet had stained the snow." ***Nathalie Bertin***

Nathalie Bertin
Bonfield, Ontario, Canada
All That We Need, 2020
Glass beads, cotton thread, leather lace, birch bark;
Beaded, stitched
Courtesy of the artist

"I created this mask during the COVID-19 pandemic. I grew up in Northern Canada and I identify as being Dene First Nations. I tried to make this mask in the shape of the **Northern Lights** and a inukshuk from the best of my memory. In my culture, the northern lights represent our ancestors in the spirit world. You see them dancing in the winter sky. During this pandemic everyone is scared and people are losing family members and friends to this horrible virus. I made this mask in hopes that those people will find comfort in looking into the sky and knowing that their family/friends who may have passed on will always be with them. Growing up as a child and watching the northern lights dancing beautifully in the sky I find peace. This is what this mask makes me feel, peace, during this frightening lonely time. I hope that one day we can all be free from this." ***Marsha Snow Lafferty***



Marsha Snow Lafferty
Princeton, British Columbia, Canada
Looking Towards the Northern Sky,
2020
Felt, ribbon, beads, rabbit fur;
Beaded.
Courtesy of the artist



Dianne Brown-Green
Stouffville, Ontario, Canada
The Roost (detail), 2020.
Handmade milkweed paper, acrylic paint, beads;
Beaded, painted, pressed.
Courtesy of the artist; photo by Mina Keykhaei

"**Monarch Butterflies** have been a source of healing and inspiration during this journey of constant change and challenge. With saying that, the butterfly is being used as an inspiration to represent that we will persevere as we have done for several generations before us. As well, they teach us to slow down, know the importance of the environment, Mother Earth, her creatures and our connection to the Land and its beauty."

Dianne Brown-Green

"I chose the **turtle** because it is representative of Turtle Island which is the land on which we live, and Mother Earth. The turtle is considered a powerful symbol of protection and strength for women in Indigenous culture. As I was stitching the scutes together I thought of all the grandmothers who lovingly prepared and sewed blankets, clothing and shelter for their families. I thought of all the missing and murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

"My mask represents all of the Grandmothers, all the MMIWG, all the ancestors and all the generations to come.

"My turtle shell mask is hand made from all natural materials. The shell is actually composed from the cast-off turtle scutes that the turtle sheds as it grows. I sewed the scutes together using natural sinew. The shells are very delicate so it was a very long and painstaking process but a lot of thought and emotions went into each stitch as I reconnected with my indigenous roots.

I used leather cord and braided it to make the edging. This was to reinforce the edge and also for aesthetic purposes.

I had thought of several ways of finishing the mask so that it was as close to traditional as possible. I then chose to braid the ties to represent hair braids and a connection once again to my roots. In Indigenous culture, **hair braids** can represent a deep cultural connection to ones identity. To many they represent strength, pride and honour."



Sheryl Boivin
Ontario, Canada
Turtle mask, 2020
Turtle scutes, sinew, leather, feather, glaze, sage, cedar;
Sewn, braded, glazed.
Courtesy of the artist



Definitions & Important Terminology

Arrowhead Sash / Ceinture fléchée

A piece of woven French-Canadian clothing that ties around the waist. Métis use the arrowhead sash as part of their regalia. They were worn for protection from the cold, and to support the back and prevent injury. These sashes can be machine-woven, or created using a technique called finger-weaving. The arrowhead is the oldest known design, as early as the 18th century.

COVID-19

An acute disease in humans caused by a coronavirus, which is characterized mainly by fever and cough and is capable of progressing to severe symptoms and in some cases death, especially in older people and those with underlying health conditions. It was originally identified in China in 2019 and became pandemic in 2020 (From Oxford Languages).

Kohkôm

Translates from Cree to "grandmother".

Sacred medicine

The use of plants and spirituality to heal the body and mind. The four Indigenous sacred medicines are tobacco, sage, cedar, and sweetgrass.

Medicine wheel

A circular symbol broken into four areas or quadrants. These four areas have four different colors assigned to them, which are most often yellow, red, black, and white. It is very important to note that different nations have different medicine wheel teachings, according to their stories, values, and beliefs. So, there is not only one perfect medicine wheel.

The four areas of the medicine wheel have attributes assigned to them: the four directions, the four states of being, the four sacred medicines, the four seasons, the four elements, and the four stages of life (TribalTradeCo.com).

MMIWG

An acronym for "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls". This refers to a crisis of Indigenous women and girls being disproportionately represented among the missing and murdered people in Canada each year. Indigenous groups estimate that over 4000 Indigenous women and girls have been missing and murdered between 1980 and 2012, despite the RCMP reporting the number to be approximately 1200. Indigenous women 15 years and older were 3.5 times more likely to experience violence than non-Indigenous women, according to the 2004 General Social Survey (The Canadian Encyclopedia).

Pandemic

An outbreak of a disease that occurs over a wide geographic area (such as multiple countries or continents) and typically affects a significant proportion of the population: a pandemic outbreak of a disease (from Merriam-Webster).



Marlene Kelly
Courtenay, British Columbia, Canada
Journey through the Medicine Wheel, 2020
Deer rawhide, sinew, moose hide,
double-sided ribbon, sacred medicine cabochons
(white pella, cedar, sweetgrass, tobacco, sage),
Czech glass seed beads, glue, tin cones, horsehair,
acrylic paint, matte sealant; Beaded (single-needle
beadwork, freestyle beading, picot beaded edging),
couched, blocked, dry brushed, hand-sewn.
Courtesy of the artist

Discussion

During our artist talk, Co-Curator Lisa Shepherd said:

"Our wellness has been challenged, and where is the balance in that? What does it take to take care of each other, still, after pandemic? If we take the responsibility to make space for kindness, we can be the ones who change things... We still need to look out for each other"

Expanding on Lisa's thoughts, **what are some ways that you support vulnerable people in your family? Your community?**

Artists in *Breathe* were invited to "create masks in any medium that belonged to their culture and artistic practice";

Can you think of some skills or techniques practiced in your family? Has a member of your family or cultural group taught you an art or craft?

Arts and crafts have been proven to help heal the body and mind - **How do you use art as medicine?**

"Self care is so important to my mental, physical and spiritual health that I took some time to really care for myself. And I tried not to let those feelings of guilt sneak up as I was taking time for myself. I beaded beautiful flowers, vines and berries representing growth, nourishment, and surrounding yourself with loved ones."

Marcy Friesen



Marcy Friesen
Carrot River, Saskatchewan, Canada
Self Care, 2020
Beads, moose leather, wolf fur;
Beaded.
Courtesy of the artist

Breathe Web Resources



Suggested Reading (books)

Suggested Reading (articles)

Videos