



"I'm Not Painting Landscapes Here"

An Interview with artist Lindsay Delaronde

Ava Hansen

A woman lies with her back on the earth, pulling on a leather boot as if ready for action. Though she wears no other clothing and flames flicker nearby, the woman expresses no caution or vulnerability, she exudes calm and strength.

This scene is one of 30 self-portraits of First Nations women in a photo-series, which will premier in an exhibition at the University of Victoria Legacy Art Gallery this fall. Each woman worked with Lindsay Delaronde to develop a photographic portrait of herself that would portray her as she wished to be seen and understood.

Delaronde, whose own portrait is described previously, sees herself primarily as the facilitator, rather than the artist, of the body of work. The Iroquois, Mohawk artist grew up in Kahnawake, Quebec, and now lives and works as an artist in Victoria, B.C.

On a grey December morning, I am welcomed into her home to discuss her photo-series which has at its basis, her desire to counteract the negative stereotypes of Indigenous women, something epitomized in the derogatory term "squaw" – a word Delaronde thought a lot about in her development of the project. Over cups of tea she explained how the overall project, which includes both the photographs and each women's own statement, is about

Top: "Lascivious Fire", Lindsay Delaronde, 2014, part of the photo-series "Squaw". Photograph by Ellie Dion

“conflict and resistance” against what is carried in the term “squaw”. Delaronde’s motivation for much of her work comes from recognizing tension and then allowing the work itself to resist or defy that negative history.

The photographs dismantle blanket conceptions of Indigenous cultures in Canada and draw attention to the strength, courage, beauty, and rich cultural lives of a diverse group of women. “Art is a radical way of keeping culture, keeping identity, keeping the stories. It’s a very radical action to be a part of,” Delaronde says.

Delaronde’s role as facilitator for the current photo-series, enabled her to sustain a supportive environment. Many women who sat for Delaronde expressed to her “I’ve always wanted to do something like this. To have somebody ask me what I want. Somebody just ask me what feels right for me”. Delaronde adds, “To be exposed in front of a camera is very empowering.” Many of the participants gained confidence over the course of their photo shoots, transforming in front of the camera.

“This is a really intimate body of work,” she says. “I’m not painting landscapes here...I’m talking about the deepest part of the human soul.”

A strong aspect of the project is about “exploring sexuality in relation to vulnerability and empowerment and finding strength within sexuality that’s been very tainted.” Delaronde sees sexuality as tainted with conceptions that are perpetuated by colonial popular culture.

Much of Delaronde’s previous work has also urged viewers to contemplate sensuality in relation to identity. “Sexuality is a powerful force. Without our sexualities we would not be able to create... Sexuality is an aspect of one’s self.” This series also explores sexuality as an integral part of the women’s identity. However, for Delaronde, sexuality is much more complex than what popular colonial culture reduces it to. In this series, she allows the women to express vulnerability, empowerment and strength in relation to this aspect of their selves.

“How I perceive eroticism and sexuality is a deep, deep, deep connection and relationship with the self. That’s where eroticism comes from and where sexuality lives,” she says. “Some of the images are not typically what you’d expect to be sexual.” In this way, Delaronde explains, they dismantle popularized visual conceptions of sexuality.

The creation of each photograph required a courageous marriage of vulnerability with empowerment on the part of the women who were photographed, and she knew she would have to undergo the process herself before asking others to do so. Her initial inspiration for her own self-portrait came during a two-day potlatch where the central fires of the longhouse and the fire dance mesmerized her. She remembers thinking, “that is the dance of eroticism. The fire was the natural element that was related to the natural instinct of sexuality.” The experience motivated Delaronde to incorporate flames into her self-portrait.

Every woman involved in the project similarly has a story behind their portrait. Participants chose poses, props, and settings that they felt most comfortable in.



“To give agency and autonomy the whole way was my goal,” says Delaronde.

Additionally, the photographs are “really grounded in that person and supported by the environment.” Mud, earth, dirt, water, and forest were frequently incorporated, creating a sense of “going back into Mother Earth. Going back into the womb,” Delaronde says.

Delaronde has sewn within this work her personal perspectives, drawing values from traditionally matriarchal Iroquois culture, while respecting the backgrounds of a diversity of women. “Women were the holders and the carriers of what was important to the Iroquois people,” she says. Implicitly, the series addresses issues around the ownership of the female body in the wake of mistreatment, and aims to “reclaim the body, where this has been stolen, raped, ripped apart, severed in all ways,” she says.

“This narrative is not isolated as an Aboriginal issue. It’s stemming from this Indigenous lens because I’m an Indigenous artist, but I’m also a human being and also a woman, so I’m inclusive in the way that I’m trying to make space,” she says. “[An] Indigenous worldview can be so powerful because it’s so gentle... It extends [across many] realms and looks at the uniqueness of a person but [that person in connection with] community - it’s more of a holistic view.”

In another body of work Delaronde completed in 2015, titled “We All Bleed Blood”, Delaronde expressed the message of inclusion and interconnectedness from an Indigenous perspective. To do so she used the symbolism of blood and a blade from the Royal BC Museum, and the Medicine Wheel.

Considering this work holistically, Delaronde reflects, “It was a chemistry of different things that came together all at a very specific time, like making

Top: “Our Stolen Sisters”, Lindsay Delaronde. Subjects contributions to the “Red Dress Campaign”. From left to right- Natu Bearwolf, Tiffany Joseph, Erynne Gilpin, Keilah Lukenbill-Williams, Lindsay Delaronde.
Photo Credit: Peruzzo

a baby, conception... It's all about spiritual time," she says. She goes on to explain how timing for this project was not intellectually determined, but "was following the spirit of the work."

Delaronde's familiarity with emotion and spiritual realms of being comes from both internal exploration as well as her background in counselling. Delaronde began her Master's degree in Counselling at almost the same time that she started this project. While she separates counselling from facilitating, one of Delaronde's motivations in her art practice is a desire to help viewers and artists begin emotional healing. "I really have gone through a lot of challenging life experiences that helped me to understand that healing can happen and that life is good."

In her experience, healing can come from working through personal prejudices. Often prejudices can be explored by how we respond to our environment, or in the case of this body of work, how we respond to art.

A way for people to respond to and engage with the series will be through workshops hosted at Legacy Art Gallery's downtown Victoria location throughout the Fall of 2016. The workshops explore the construction of identity – one through mask-making and the other through creating corn-husk dolls. Both "give people the time and space to express themselves." Through corn-husk doll and mask-making participants can contemplate the paradoxes presented through the photographs, such as how no matter what we do to project our internal identities, we can never fully control what others may project onto us.

In addition to the workshops, the Legacy Gallery is also holding a panel discussion to address questions raised by the exhibition and stereotypes of Indigenous women.



Delaronde sees holding discussions around Indigenous issues as one way that museums, such as Legacy, and other institutions are shifting to be more inclusive.

Right: "We All Bleed Blood", Lindsay Delaronde.
Photographed by Shane Lighter.



“It’s moving slowly, but it’s just again looking at alternative world views being implemented in very Western Eurocentric dominant places that only provided one view of things,” she says, noting that creating a space for alternate views to be presented is a crucial component of decolonization and breaking down dominant narratives.

“It’s in the arts, where people are speaking up and telling their stories - showing their stories.” Currently, photography is Delaronde’s way of providing that platform. “[These photographs] are a documentation of where we’re at historically, in terms of our healing, Indigenous people are healing right now, creating spaces, we’re creating art, we’re creating spaces and places in education, health, all realms.”

Delaronde cautions that while there is a vast history of violence against Indigenous peoples in Canada, recognition of this history should not create “a deficit model, a victim sort of narrative of Native people, and we have been victims, yes...but there’s also transcendence, there’s also the culture, there’s also the strength, there’s also the pride.”

Ultimately, the photographs redress this victim narrative by presenting alternative narratives about culture, strength and pride of Indigenous women through visions of their identities created by the women themselves.

Ava Hansen is a fourth-year co-op student (majoring in Art History) at the University of Victoria, serving her second co-op term as curatorial assistant with Legacy Art Gallery. Hansen previously worked at the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies as a summer interpreter.



Top: “Untitled 6”, Lindsay Delaronde. Photograph by Michael Thessel. This photograph is part of a series that documented Delaronde’s interactive art initiative, *Aiako’nikonhraieni ta’ne (to come to understand)* which was part of *Decolonizing Street Art Convergence*, 2015