



THIRZA CUTHAND: MEDICINE AND MAGIC

IMAGINENATIVE FESTIVAL 2020
CURATED BY: ARIEL SMITH

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INTRODUCTION

MAGIC INDEED...

THE WORK OF THIRZA CUTHAND IN THE 2020 IMAGINENATIVE FESTIVAL

At Vtape, it is our great pleasure to participate in this Artist Spotlight featuring Thirza Cuthand. Having distributed Thirza's work for many years, we see her work as an artist examining gender, body, and identity, while never losing touch with her Indigenous spirit. Her humour and her courage are unparalleled.

Many thanks to Niki Little, imagineNATIVE Artistic Director, for her generosity and friendship, and to all the staff and board at imagineNATIVE, our most valued partner.

Lisa Steele

Creative Director, Vtape

THIRZA CUTHAND: MEDICINE AND MAGIC

In this dual-channel video installation artist Thirza Cuthand creates a bridge between two stories from her maternal family history that happened over 200 years and 6000 km apart. Cuthand was born and raised in Saskatchewan, a member of Little Pine First Nation, and is of mixed Plains Cree and Scottish ancestry. Cuthand is very familiar with her Cree family history. Growing up Cuthand heard stories of medicine men in her family and of a particular bundle protected by bear spirits that was used to doctor and heal the community. One of the two stories featured in *Medicine and Magic* is a story about her great, great grandfather Misatimwas whose terrible wound was healed. Recognizing that she knew much less about her Scottish heritage, Cuthand conducted research and learned of a possible ancestor, Isobelle Sinclair, who was executed for purportedly practicing witchcraft in Scotland in the 1600s.

She writes: “I fell down a Google rabbit hole one day when the Survey of Scottish Witchcraft came out online. There was one case with a last name and a location close

to my Great Grandmother’s hometown that made me pause. It was a “white magic” case. A woman protecting cattle and talking with fairies. Relatively benign things. But she was executed for it.

“By juxtaposing the story of Misatimwas with the story of Isobelle Sinclair correlations are drawn between the Christian colonial violence which repressed/represses traditional Cree Medicine and practices and the colonial violence that did the same to the medicines and practices of women who were accused of being witches and burned.

“Thinking about these two stories, both were really about colonization. Christianity brought to Scotland an end to widespread beliefs in folk magic, and persecution of the women practitioners. And in Canada, with my Great Great Grandfather, the things he was healed from and healing others were wounds from wars with the Canadian Government over land, and epidemics of smallpox and Spanish Flu that were threatening



Bears Still dying

our family. My Grandpa, Stan Cuthand, Misatimwas' Grandson, grew up to become an Anglican Minister, yet he was very proud of telling us about his Grandfather, about the struggles that he had in 1885, and about things he believed in that were not Christian at all. Near the end of his life he said he was not going to Heaven, he was going to where his ancestors were, he was going to the stars."

Cuthand's approach with *Medicine and Magic* is more subtle in comparison to much of their previous work and can be seen as a departure in some ways, most noticeably in the absence of the artist's own voice and image which is often featured in the form of voice-over essay or direct address monologue. Cuthand opts instead to use the words of others, namely, FineDay's account of the story of Misatimwas, along with stock footage and some previously shot super 8 footage. This shift in tone, however, does nothing to take away from Cuthand's keen ability to effectively impart her thesis with clarity and emotional vulnerability. In fact the breathing room afforded to the viewer in *Medicine and Magic* with its slower pace allows for the work to wash over before sinking in, contributing to an almost meditative quality that is a new direction for the artist.

MEDICINE AND MAGIC: THIRZA CUTHAND IN CONVERSATION WITH ARIEL SMITH

Curator Ariel Smith sat down with filmmaker and performance artist Thirza Cuthand for a conversation regarding her newest work *Medicine and Magic* and making work during a global pandemic.



Cows Still Gulty

ARIEL SMITH

Your latest work *Medicine and Magic* consists of two separate videos that are then presented as a dual channel video installation. One of the videos reflects on your nêhiyawak family history and one on your Scottish family history. Can you speak about the choice to create two separate videos that are then shown simultaneously in the same physical space?

THIRZA CUTHAND

They're two different stories coming from two different cultures, but at the same time those two cultures are both living within my body simultaneously. I think that's why I wanted to have the videos separate but playing at the same time. Almost like they are in conversation with each other.

AS

Mixed-race Indigenous identity is a theme you've frequently returned to in your work, I'm specifically thinking of earlier tapes like *Through the Looking Glass*, and also more recently with *Thirza Cuthand is an Indian Within the Meaning of the Indian Act*. You've said you feel more connected to your nêhiyawak culture...

TC

Yeah. I really didn't know that much about Scottish things. I mean, there's some food that my grandma made that my mom would make too sometimes, but that turned out to pretty much be British food actually. I wasn't really raised that way. My grandma was the only white person in my family. I wasn't really raised around white people except for who I went to school with and when I would go see my grandma.

AS

Right, so you were raised around your Cree family and family history, but you say you know less about your Scottish ancestors.

TC

Yeah.

AS

In one of the videos in *Medicine and Magic*, the one featuring the bears, we learn a story about your Great Great Grandfather Misatimwas being doctored with the bear robe. This is a part of your family's recorded and oral history, something that you grew up hearing. The second video tells us about a woman from Scotland, Isobelle Sinclair, who you learned about recently through your own internet research and may also be an ancestor. How does your relationship to the two stories differ? Does one feel more emotionally proximate or more authentically yours?

TC

Yeah, I mean because Misatimwas who is my Great Great Grandfather, I'm a direct descendant of him. I know for sure that I am related to him and exactly how and I heard the stories of him throughout my childhood. And then Isobelle Sinclair is more of... It's more tricky because I just know that Sinclair is a name associated with my family history in Scotland. And she lived close to the area that my Great Grandmother immigrated from to get to Canada. So there's a high potential we're related, but at the same time it was 1633 when she died, and I don't know much about her. There was very little information in the database....



M and M Still Execution

AS

Yeah you found out about her in the Survey of Scottish Witchcraft which is an online resource right?

TC

Yeah. Exactly. So there wasn't much information there about her. I don't think it even said how old she was when she died. And I don't think it says if she had children either. So I don't know how she could be related to me. It's just that we have the same last name in our histories. So it's more tenuous, which is how my relationship is with my father's side anyway.

AS

Tenuous?

TC

Yeah. So I'm much more connected to the story of Misatimwas because I've known that story from a young age whereas Isobelle Sinclair is just some name and some tragic history that I found online in this database about witches that were executed. It's also more removed from me because it was so long ago, and whereas the other one was in 1885 which is a long time ago, but it's also not that long ago, comparatively.

AS

How did the difference, in terms of your connection to the two different stories, how did this difference impact the way you decided to impart the stories to the audience?

TC

I think there's some distance in the imagery and the way this story is told about Isobelle. There's just the facts about her presented in text, and then some general facts about witch hunting in Scotland whereas the story about Misatimwas being doctored for that wound comes across as more intimate or more:...

AS

Visceral?

TC

Yeah! I'm actually making a whole separate video about why Misatimwas was wounded, a whole separate video on that story.

AS

Cool

TC

Yeah

AS

It's interesting because there's a part of me that while I was viewing this new work, I was thinking about your experience of finding, through your own internet research, about this person that may be a distant relation, and it reminded me of when non-indigenous people do that with an Indigenous ancestor...

TC

23 and Me.

AS

Haha yeah. But it was a flip of the script. The opposite of what we're used to hearing, which is the non-indigenous person, like a settler person, discovers that they have a distant indigenous relation, and then suddenly their identity forms around this narrative. So I just thought that layer was interesting and wondered if it had crossed your mind at all when you were making the piece, but...

TC

Yeah, I didn't really think of it that way, but that's interesting to point out because I actually know a bunch of Cree/Scottish people specifically who are trying to connect and explore their Scottish side. It's different obviously because learning about having Scottish ancestry isn't going to have the same problems with

people taking on an identity to get grants and jobs. But it's true, it does flip the script..

AS

In this new work there seems to be a commentary on the oppression and repression of both nêhiyawak medicine and ceremonial traditions, and I guess what you would call Scottish medicine and ceremonial traditions or practice, through British colonization.

TC

Yeah. I mean that's the problem when you make Indigenous art, everything circles back to colonization . Obviously Scottish folk magic was a big thing and then Christianity came on the scene and started pushing people around and trying to get rid of what they saw as pagan or demonic because it was of the devil and all that kind of thing. The same thing with Cree and other Indigenous rituals and ceremonies and practices happened. Actually the medicine bundle that is talked about in this piece, the bear robe that was used in the doctoring was buried in an unmarked grave so that anthropologists couldn't steal it and sell it to the Smithsonian or whatever.

AS

Grave robbers

Misatimwas was so low that he didn't want anymore water.



Ritual objects:
Cloth, Hair, Salt Water



M and M Still Water

TC

Yeah! So I think about that, about the actual burying of this ceremonial object, and then comparing that with actually burning an entire human being, which is what was done to Isobelle Sinclair, because she was doing a ritual that the locals didn't agree with. It was actually a really benign ritual. She was just doing a spell or a prayer I guess to protect cattle.

AS

Yeah it's interesting to make that correlation because I mean the "British Empire" learned how to do what they did from the colonization of Scotland and Ireland, and then used what they learned from that and went to their genocidal empire building project all over the world including here in what's now called Canada.

TC

Exactly

AS

You made this piece during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and various stages of social isolation and quarantine, or what I've just been referring to as "End Times". What was it like creating in this context and did it affect the project?

TC

Well, I mean, a lot of the images are taken from stock footage that I purchased so that would have happened with or without COVID because I wanted to have the ocean in there and I don't live near an ocean anyway. I couldn't go to Scotland to shoot regardless of the pandemic because I don't have the money to do that. The footage of the cows I could shoot because they were in my neighborhood.

AS

Cows?

TC

Yeah. They're just on the next block, there's a farm. So I could just walk over there and film them, but

AS

Oh yeah. Riverdale Farm!

TC

Yeah, and then the footage of the bears came from some Super 8 that I had shot in Saskatchewan last summer. I used that footage and then some stock bear footage. It was really complicated, though because you can't really do shoots. While I was making it, you definitely couldn't. I'm actually doing a shoot later this month that's with actors and a set and everything, and that will have to be very different now.

AS

Yeah. It's interesting because even when I was coming up with this question, I was thinking about isolation, social isolation when you're creating and I guess that there always is a period of isolation with creating art at least in part of it if not all. So in some ways maybe it didn't feel that different really?

TC

I don't know. Without COVID it might've turned out differently. I'm not sure. It would have expanded what I would have been able to do, but at the same time, I think there's something about the use of the stock footage that is related to the distance between me and the two stories. Usually I'm in my own videos but these stories were about real people who aren't me so it seems like it was better to have them represented by the animals they were attached to when the two stories happened. Bears and Cows.

AS

You're very present in the majority of your media artwork, either your body or your voice or both. In this new work, as you just mentioned, you're not featured in it in the same way you usually are. Not only did you not film yourself, you also used the words of other people as a

storytelling device. I don't know if I've ever seen a piece from you that has neither your voice, words or body. The bear video features the words of FineDay. It's the story of your Great Great Grandfather, but it's through the account by FineDay. So you use his words and then in the video featuring the cows the text you use was taken directly from an internet database. Why did you decide to go a different direction with this new work?

TC

Yeah. I did try at first actually to write monologues that would be added to the videos as voice-overs and they just weren't working. And then I remembered I wanted to... I remember reading that account or finding that book we had growing up by FineDay that had that story of Misatimwas being doctored with the bear robe, and just how magical and interesting it was to read this story about my ancestors. And so I wanted to present it, similar to the way I first experienced that story from somebody's text from a long time ago. Like I mentioned I'm trying to tell that story about Misatimwas in a more personal way in another piece, but this one, I think I just wanted it to be less coloured by my take on it and my feelings about it.

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

SCREENING RELEASE

THURS OCT 22, 10:00 AM

Less Lethal Fetishes

A Retrospective Screening: Thirza Cuthand (Cree)

Curator: Ariel Smith (Nêhiyaw)

English | Short Experimental Videos

Canada | 49 min

The familiar razor-sharp wit and DIY diarist aesthetic abound in this selection drawn from Thirza Cuthand's prolific video art practice. Released over the past 20 years, the featured works present Cuthand's voice and body prominently as both subject and object while taking up with and scrutinizing themes of queer Indigenous identity, madness, kink, and colonialism.

Anhedonia

Canada | 1999 | 9:30 min

English | Colour

Named after a medical term for the inability to experience pleasure as a symptom of depression, *Anhedonia* marks the beginning of Cuthand's long term and ongoing exploration of her own mental illness within her work. Performative and corporal, *Anhedonia* is an unapologetic first-person testimony on the experience of suicidal ideation and the effect of homophobia and colonialism on mental health.



Anhedonia

Just Dandy

Canada | 2013 | 7:38 min

English | colour

In *Just Dandy* Cuthand recalls her own 2001 film *Helpless Maiden Makes An I Statement* by revisiting the latent eroticism and kink undertones of the "wicked queen" archetype found within fairy tales. She tells us of a love affair gone awry and makes use of an effective tongue-in-cheek allegory of invasive European plant species in this hilarious and sexually graphic critique of settler colonialism.



Just Dandy

Love and Numbers

Canada | 2004 | 9:00 min

English | colour

Binary code, spy signals, paranoia, and unrequited love. A Two-Spirited woman in a psychiatric hospital attempts to make sense of heartbreak and the effects of colonial violence during a mental health crisis.



Love and Numbers

Less Lethal Fetishes

Canada | 2019 | 9:24 min

English | colour

Naked and raw in body and thought, Cuthand delivers a monologue drawing connections between gas mask fetishes, breath play, the ethics of exhibiting as an artist, and environmental racism in Canada.



Less Lethal Fetishes

Sight

Canada | 2012 | 3:33 min

English | Colour

Shot on super 8 and making use of camera-less animation techniques, Cuthand juxtapose's personal experience of migraine triggered vision impairment and mental illness with the story of a relative's self-induced blindness. A sensitive and movingly vulnerable elucidation on the relationship between mental health and disability.



Sight

Thirza Cuthand is an Indian Within the Meaning of the Indian Act

Canada | 2017 | 8:56 min

English | Colour

Blood, earth, and the filmmaker's own body serve as powerful visual metaphors in this deeply personal contemplation on mixed-race identity and anti-Indigenous racism. An emotional essay on both the privilege and pain of passing as white while Indigenous.



Thirza Cuthand is an Indian Within the Meaning of the Indian Act

BIOS

ARTIST

Thirza Jean Cuthand was born in Regina and grew up in Saskatoon. Since 1995, she has been making short experimental narrative videos and films about sexuality, madness, youth, love and race which have screened in festivals internationally.

CURATOR

Ariel Smith is an award-winning Nêhiyaw and Jewish filmmaker, video artist, curator, writer and cultural worker. Ariel is largely self-taught, but honed many of her skills through artist-run centres and her passion for artist-run culture has become an integral part of her practice. Previously, she was the technical director at Saw Video Media Arts Centre and Executive Director at imagineNATIVE. Ariel is currently the Artistic Director of Native Women in the Arts and is completing an MFA at York University.

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Medicine and Magic by Thirza Cuthand
Curated by Ariel Smith

iNdigital Online Space,
<https://indigital.imagenative.org/>
October 20 – November 28, 2020

Artists' talk Thursday, November 19, 2020
Instagram Live – 7:00pm

Artist Spotlight

Less Lethal Fetishes

A Retrospective Screening: Thirza Cuthand (Cree)

Curator: Ariel Smith (Nêhiyaw)

Screening Release – October 22, 10:00am



We acknowledge the traditional territories of Indigenous nations worldwide and their continuing connection to the land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures and to the elders both past and present.

Operating as a distributor, a mediatheque and a resource centre with an emphasis on the contemporary media arts, Vtape's mandate is to serve both artists and audiences by assisting and encouraging the appreciation, pedagogy, preservation, restoration and exhibition of media works by artists and independents. Vtape receives operating funds from the Canada Council for the Art through the Media Arts Section, the Ontario Arts Council and the Toronto Arts Council.



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