

# PHOTO, MEDIA AND DIGITAL ART

Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art  
Suite 124, Box 124  
401 Richmond Street West  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5V 3A8  
T 416.591.0357 F 416.591.0358  
info@prefix.ca www.prefix.ca  
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## PREFIX.

For Immediate Release (August 23, 2013)

### ABORIGINAL ARTISTS EXPLORE HOW THE PAST IS HELD IN THE PRESENT IN NEW EXHIBITION AT PREFIX

(Toronto) – Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art is pleased to present *Trade Marks*, a group exhibition curated by **Betty Julian** that features the world premiere of newly commissioned photographic, video and audio works by four early-career aboriginal artists: **Keesic Douglas**, **Meryl McMaster**, **Nigit'stil Norbert** and **Bear Witness**. The exhibition is presented by Prefix in association with ImagineNative.

An opening reception will be held on **Thursday, September 19 from 7 to 10 PM** at **Prefix**, located at 401 Richmond Street West, Suite 124, Toronto. The artists and curator will be present. The gallery is open from Wednesday to Saturday, 12 to 5 PM, and admission is free. The exhibition continues until **November 23, 2013**.

*Trade Marks* presents a new generation of aboriginal artists who, through their various artistic strategies, challenge and interrogate working assumptions of *who* they are. The exhibition contributes to the recently revived conversation on what it is to be aboriginal in Canada today. It also considers how these artists have responded to the imposition of Western systems of classification on non-Western arts and how their artistic practices have been informed by methodologies of decolonization.

Toronto-based artist **Keesic Douglas** examines the subject of trade and its inequities through the complicated history that exists between the Hudson's Bay Company and aboriginal Canadians. The central focus of his photo and video works is the iconic Hudson's Bay point blanket, used by the company to trade with the aboriginal peoples of Canada in the late 1700s. In his photographic series *Trade Me* (2010), the artist incorporates the point blanket into historical re-enactments associated with the fur trade, adopting studio techniques commonly used in commercial and fashion photography. The related video *Trade Me* (2010) follows the artist on a canoe expedition as he makes his way along the traditional trade route of his ancestors to return the blanket to the Hudson's Bay Company's flagship store located in downtown Toronto. In his new photographic series *Traded* (2013), the blanket, a rifle and animal pelts are individually photographed in a forest clearing reminiscent of the sites where trade would have occurred more than two hundred years ago.

In her series of large-scale, performance-based photographs titled *Murmurs* (2013), **Meryl McMaster** is pictured in front of a concrete façade wearing an elaborate headdress that resembles a mumuration – a large group of starlings moving as one. Each bird is thoughtfully crafted from the pages of North American history books, a reference to how language has partially constructed the collective identity of aboriginal and European Canadians. When viewed from right to left, the photographs show the artist walking into the past, enveloped by the force of the mumuration. From left to right, she is launched into the present, looking to the future through an opening in the swarm.

In her new photographic works, **Nigit'stil Norbert** depicts alleys and doorways in her Toronto neighbourhood, once the ceremonial gathering place for indigenous groups. The artist captures how nature persists, even through cracks and crevices in the urban landscape. At each location, she leaves behind a stencil inspired by her grandmother's needlework. In so doing, she pays homage to her past while commenting on the displacement of aboriginal peoples.

In his new audio artwork *Indigenize Space* (2013), multimedia artist **Bear Witness** blends spoken word and sound appropriated from numerous aboriginal gatherings to create a kind of soundtrack to the social and cultural movement of this engaged generation of aboriginal peoples. The piece remixes

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traditional beats, words, rhythms and hip hop to present a contemporized take on being indigenous in Canada today.

### **Additional Related Events**

Culture Days, Curator's talk: Saturday, September 28 at 2:00 PM

Nuit Blanche: Saturday, October 5, from 7:00 PM until sunrise

ImagineNative Art Crawl: Friday, October 18, from 5:30 to 8:00 PM at A Space, Gallery 44, Prefix ICA and VMAC, all at 401 Richmond Street West.

Closing reception and magazine launch: Thursday, November 21, from 7:00 to 10:00 PM

### **About the Artists**

**Keesic Douglas** is an Ojibway artist from the Mnjikaning First Nation in central Ontario. He received a BFA from the Ontario College of Art and Design (now OCAD University) in 2008, where he was awarded the OCAD Medal in Photography, and he completed an MFA at the University of British Columbia in 2010. Specializing in photography and video, he has exhibited his work across Canada and internationally, most recently at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (Ottawa), the National Museum of the American Indian (New York) and Urban Shaman Gallery (Winnipeg). In 2007, his video *The Vanishing Trace* won Best Short Documentary at the ImagineNative Film and Media Arts Festival (Toronto), and in 2009, his video *War Pony* screened at the Berlin International Film Festival. He lives and works in Toronto.

**Meryl McMaster** is a visual artist of Plains Cree and European heritage. She was born in Ottawa, where she currently lives and works. She graduated from the Ontario College of Art and Design (now OCAD University) in 2010. The recipient of numerous awards and scholarships including the Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship, the Charles Pachter Prize for Emerging Artists, the Canon Canada Prize and the Nora E. Vaughan Award, she has exhibited in various galleries, including the MacLaren Art Centre (Barrie, ON), the McMichael Canadian Art Collection (Kleinburg, ON), the Latcham Gallery (Stouffville, ON), the Station Gallery (Whitby, ON) and Harbourfront Centre (Toronto). Her work is held in the Canada Council Art Bank and the Donovan Collection, as well as in various private collections. She is represented by Katzman Kamen Gallery (Toronto).

**Nigit'stil Norbert** is a Gwich'in artist from Yellowknife who received a BFA from OCAD University in 2012. Her photo-based art practice focuses on the historical and contemporary representations of aboriginal peoples in Canada; as such, it is rooted in her interest in the convergence of old and new ideas, as a place for considering the formation of new traditions. Her recent explorations have involved stop-motion photography, unique beaded photographs and installation-based works. Her work has been exhibited in Canada and the United States, most recently at the Ottawa Art Gallery, the Robert McLaughlin Art Gallery (Oshawa, ON) and the Museum of Contemporary Native Art (Sante Fe). She lives and works in Toronto.

**Bear Witness** is a multimedia artist, DJ and filmmaker of the Cayuga Six Nations. He remixes appropriated images and sound to create video assemblages, exploring stereotypical representations of aboriginal people in North American media and popular culture. He re-edits these images – many of them taken from Hollywood blockbuster films – to create new narratives representing his experiences as an urban aboriginal artist. He has exhibited his work across Canada and in Berlin, and was the recipient of Ottawa's Golden Cherry Award for Video Artist of the Year in 2008. He is co-founder of A Tribe Called Red, a Native DJ collective that hosts a monthly event called Electric Pow Wow.

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### **About the Curator**

**Betty Julian** is an independent curator of black and Mi'kmaq heritage. Born in Halifax, Nova Scotia, she currently lives and works in Toronto, where she teaches photography at OCAD University. She was a founding member of the New Initiatives in Film programme for Aboriginal Women and Women of Colour at Studio D, National Film Board of Canada. She recently completed a graduate diploma in psychoanalytic psychotherapy from the Centre for Training in Psychotherapy (CTP) in Toronto. Currently, she is researching and developing an integrated programme of research and study on photography as a contemporary art form, critical issues of representation, the politics of aesthetics, and psychoanalytic thought.

### **About Prefix**

Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art is a public art gallery and arts publishing house based in Toronto. A registered charitable organization, Prefix fosters the appreciation and understanding of contemporary photographic, media and digital arts through exhibitions, publications, public programmes and related activities.

### **Acknowledgements**

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For more information, print-ready images or to schedule an interview with the artists or curator, please contact:

Alysha Rajkumar  
Operations Manager  
T 416-591-0357  
F 416-591-0358  
E info@prefix.ca  
www.prefix.ca

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