

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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For Immediate Release (September 18, 2018)



INDIGENOUS ARTISTS CHALLENGE TRADITIONAL WESTERN THOUGHT IN NEW EXHIBITION AT PREFIX

(Toronto) – Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art is pleased to present *On Being Illiberal*, a world-premiere exhibition that features photographic and video works by three Indigenous artists: **Merritt Johnson, Fallon Simard** and the late **Carl Beam**. Curated by **Suzanne Morrissette**, the exhibition is presented by Prefix in association with the ImagineNative Film and Media Arts Festival.

An **opening reception** will be held on **Friday, October 19 from 8 to 10 PM**. At the start of the reception, an **artist and curator talk** will be held as part of the ImagineNative Art Crawl. Both events will take place at **Prefix**, located at 401 Richmond Street West, Suite 124, Toronto. The exhibition, which opens to the public on Friday, October 5 at 12 PM, continues until November 24. The gallery is open to the public from Wednesday to Saturday, 12 to 5 PM, and by appointment. Admission is free.

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One might surmise that relations between Indigenous peoples and the state have improved, particularly when collaborative terms such as consultation, economic and social partnership, and reconciliation are used in popular discourse. Yet Indigenous peoples continue to live and work under conditions restricted by the norms and standards of a society that has been built upon foundations of Western liberal philosophy. Priority is often given to the needs and aspirations of settler states and their inhabitants over those of Indigenous peoples within Indigenous territories, with Indigenous cultural and political knowledge and agency regularly portrayed as anti-progress or anti-state—ultimately, illiberal. The media have been known to perpetuate these problematic characterizations, often deferring to notions of justice and rights that have not adequately attended to Indigenous political presence. As written by curator Suzanne Morrissette: “Indigenous people are often perceived as ‘bad liberals,’ incapable of managing the conditions of modern life and calling into question the freedoms and equality of so-called ‘everyday citizens.’” *On Being Illiberal* brings together the work of

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three artists who propose an alternative narrative, one that challenges these perspectives and suggests other possible Indigenous-led futures.

About the Artists

Carl Beam (1943–2005) was an Ojibway artist who was born and died in M'Chigeeng First Nation. The recipient of a BFA from the University of Victoria in 1974, he continued with post-graduate studies at the University of Alberta in 1975 and 1976, but subsequently left over a dispute about his thesis on Aboriginal art. He is renowned for working with photography and collage in an aesthetic style that is more akin to the expressive layering of American pop artist Robert Rauschenberg than the traditional forms of the Anishinaabe. In 1986, his painting *The North American Iceberg* (1985) became known as the first work by a First Nations artist to be purchased for the permanent contemporary art collection of the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa). In 2000, he was inducted into the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, and in 2005, he was a recipient of the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts. In 2011, the National Gallery of Canada organized a posthumous exhibition of his work, which subsequently travelled to the Museum of Anthropology (Vancouver) and the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

Merritt Johnson is a multidisciplinary artist who works in sculpture, performance, video and painting. She holds a BFA from Carnegie Mellon University (Pittsburgh) and a MFA from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design (Boston). Her work explores survival from her perspective as a mixed Indigenous woman of Mohawk, Blackfoot, Irish and Swedish heritage. She has exhibited and performed at numerous venues, including the Bronx Museum of the Arts (New York), the Birmingham Museum of Art, Kamloops Art Gallery, Denver Art Museum and the Museum of Anthropology (Vancouver), among other venues. In 2011, she gave an artist talk at the Interactive Futures new media conference (Vancouver), and in 2014, she held the Social Engagement Art Residency at the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts (Santa Fe).

Fallon Simard is an Anishinaabe artist, filmmaker and scholar from Couchiching First Nation in Grand Council of Treaty No. 3 Territory. They hold a BFA from York University (Toronto) and an MA from the Interdisciplinary Masters in Art, Media and Design programme at OCAD University (Toronto). Their work examines how state violence impacts Indigenous bodies within the context of colonialism. Their films have been screened at the Asinabka Film Festival, the One Flaming Arrow: Intertribal Art, Music and Film Festival, Appropriate This! Critical Ethnic Studies Association Conference and the Toronto Experimental Underground Film Screening.

About the Curator

Suzanne Morrissette is a Métis artist, curator and writer from Winnipeg. She received a BFA from the Emily Carr University of Art and Design (Vancouver) in 2009 and an MFA in Criticism and Curatorial Practice from OCAD University (Toronto) in 2011. In 2017, she completed her PhD in Social and Political Thought at York University (Toronto), for which she probed the historical lineage behind contemporary perceptions of Indigenous political knowledge in mainstream North American society, particularly those perceptions which characterize resistance to state powers as aggressive or anti-progress. In her research, she examined the ways in which the creative practices of contemporary Indigenous artists provide a generative site through which to confront and challenge these perceptions. This research, which received SSHRC CGS and Provost Dissertation Scholarship support from 2013 to 2017, has been nominated for the dissertation prize as well as the Governor General's Gold Medal for 2018. Morrissette's recent exhibitions have been presented at venues such as Harbourfront Centre (Toronto), the Ontario Crafts Council (Toronto), Definitely Superior Art Gallery (Thunder Bay) and Urban Shaman (Winnipeg). The recipient of numerous grants from federal and provincial arts councils, she is currently an assistant professor at OCAD University.

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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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Photo: Fallon Simard, video still from *Continuous Resistance Remix*, 2013. Courtesy the artist.

For more information, print-ready images or to schedule an interview with the artists or curator, please contact the Gallery Manager at 416-591-0357 or info@prefix.ca.