

ARTFORUM

Duane Linklater

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Growing up on the land of the Moose Cree First Nation near the tip of James Bay in northern Ontario, Duane Linklater had two choices in or out: by small plane or, more frequently, via the Ontario Northland Railway, which, until government cutbacks forced the closure of the southern segment of the line last year, ran some 530 (often desolate) miles between the town of Moosonee and Toronto. To call it a lifeline might be an overstatement, but for Linklater and anyone else along the far-flung whistle stops that dot the “Northlander” route, the train is more than just an essential passageway south; it’s a collective measure of the distances and disconnections that course through cultural memory and identity.

Linklater has since come a long way, but the formative impact of this railway seems to never be far from his mind. The centerpiece for his exhibition “Learning” transforms the Ontario Northland logo into a floor-to-ceiling wall painting, the parallel bands of its familiar tripartite chevron design registering as a lightning strike at the subliminal potency of constructed identities—past, present, and future. That challenge to the authority of memory is mirrored in a set of three accompanying works: a mail-order print of Canada geese by popular 1970s Ojibwa artist Benjamin Chee Chee, computer-screen photos of Kurt Cobain at an MTV *Unplugged* session in 1993, and a Mohawk warrior atop a wrecked police truck during the 1990 Oka crisis in Quebec. All hold an unsettled resonance for Linklater, representing pivotal personal shifts in a boyhood spent far from the fray, but also carrying their own tragic charge as iconic lives and moments that burned brightly and then out. Bringing them together is a coming to terms of sorts for Linklater, a speculative exercise that reconnects the line between lessons learned and legacies not to be forgotten.