

When Those White Gallery Walls Aren't Neutral

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No, NYU Steinhardt's 80WSE gallery isn't undergoing a renovation—at least not in the conventional sense. But if you've walked by lately, you might've noticed that some of the walls have been knocked down—their drywall removed to expose the bare brick beneath.

This is the doing of Duane Linklater, an Omask êko Cree artist from the Moose Cree First Nation in Northern Ontario who's taken the artist's imperative to push boundaries—whether aesthetic, cultural, or political—more seriously than most.

In a roundabout way, the seed for this structurally challenging exhibition was first planted in the form of a strange email Linklater received from Ontario's Thunder Bay Art Gallery a few years ago.

The message read: "Are you related to Ethel Linklater?"

Tilting his head with curiosity, Linklater, a graduate of Bard College's Milton Avery Graduate School of Arts and 2013 recipient of Canada's largest award for young artists, typed out a reply: "Yes, that's my late grandmother," he wrote. "Why do you ask?"

It turned out that the gallery had come to possess five artworks by the elder Linklater and, since she had passed away, was looking for permission from a family member to digitize and publish a photograph of them. “I was astounded,” Linklater recently told a group of NYU students on a tour of 80WSE. He hadn’t known about these works, let alone that they had ever been shown in an exhibition. After signing the requested release forms, he asked the gallery to send along all materials—accession records, exhibition catalogs, and photographs—that would help him piece together the story of how his grandmother’s work had ended up in Thunder Bay, unbeknownst to anyone in her family.

What he learned was that these five objects—caribou-hide and rabbit-fur mitts, slippers, mukluks, and baby boots designed to be shown and not worn—had been part of an exhibition called *From Our Hands: An Exhibition of Native Hand Crafts* that traveled throughout Ontario from 1982 to 1985. Afterward, the collection was donated to the Thunder Bay Gallery.

The discovery became inspiration for Linklater to mount his own *From Our Hands* exhibition, which originated at the Toronto contemporary art center Mercer Union in Toronto with curator Georgina Jackson and is showing at 80WSE through February 18. The show engages with questions about the under- and misrepresentation of indigenous artists in galleries and museums, and about what each generation leaves behind for the next.

That’s where dismantling the walls came in.

“As an indigenous artist, I think a lot about the museum proposing itself as a neutral space. It’s a white space—as in white walls, white people,” Linklater said. “I find that proposition of neutrality problematic. But at the same time, I find that working within those spaces of friction can be generative for me.”

In this case, Linklater said he asked himself what the space was made of—literally—and then partnered with Nicola Lees, 80WSE’s new director and curator, on the

major architectural renovation to remove drywall and steel studs in all five galleries. Though everyday building materials such as gypsum and concrete are often taken for granted, Linklater repurposed these in imposing sculptures that, at eight feet high, mirror his own height and breadth (with arms extended). Draped with blankets and animal hides, these solemn structures serve as a reminder of the damage that resource extraction has done to indigenous communities, Linklater explained, citing as just one example the recent struggle over the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock Sioux reservation.

Linklater's thinking about a previous legal contest, the Supreme Court Case *Dollar General v. Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians*, which dealt with an assault committed against a tribal member by a nonmember on a reservation, also made its way into the exhibition in the form of quote from Sonya Sotomayor that the artist spelled out in new steel studs he painted red to stand out from the gallery's exposed brick structural walls. Musing on the question of vanishing indigenous sovereignty, Sotomayor asked, "What then remains?"

The phrase sounded to Linklater like poetry. But it also stirred up complicated feelings about the language of the state, and what he called the colonial "project that began 500 years ago to make sure the federal government has control over indigenous people." The studs that Linklater installed with Sotomayor's words will remain after the exhibition closes, present but hidden behind a new layers of drywall, plywood, and paint. "There's something nice about opening things up and then covering them up again," Linklater said. "It will be up to someone else in the future to hopefully discover this again."

For a 2014 show at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia Linklater took on that role, sanding down the gallery walls to reveal self-portraits of the indigenous artist Kimowan Metchewais that had been installed for an exhibition 12 years prior and since painted over. It was a wrenching task: Metchewais had died, and by removing the paint Linklater risked accidentally going too far and potentially erasing these

precious hidden works. But the idea of allowing for the flow of indigenous knowledge from one generation to the next was important to him.

For *From Our Hands*, Linklater requested loans of his grandmother's works and built museum-style steel and concrete apertures to hold them up for view. "It was important for me to be close to my grandmother's work," Linklater reflected, "To be proximate, both physically and metaphorically, is what I wanted to do. I can't touch these artworks without white gloves, but I can make artwork that can hold them and touch them and be near them." In displaying them with such care, Linklater offers a critique of the museum tradition of classifying work by indigenous artist as "craft," as the original 1980s *From Our Hands* did. Continuing the theme of intergenerational dialogue through art, the exhibition also includes a colorful Claymation film made by Linklater's 12-year-old son Tobias, which plays on a monitor in one of the rear galleries. Because Tobias was born in 2004, the same year his great-grandmother passed away, the juxtaposition is an especially poignant one for Linklater. "There's something important about bringing these things together," he said.

When Linklater visits New York, he likes to visit the indigenous section of the Metropolitan Museum to look at a beautiful beaded hood made about 200 years ago by an artist from his area, working through the discomfort that the experience inspires. "I have this really complicated relationship with it," Linklater said of the hood. "I like that I have a place to go and look at it, because I want to see it and be near it. But at the same time it's strange to see it there under glass, with a security guard looking at me."

For some, seeing Ethel Linklater's work in a context like 80WSE—where Linklater has opted not to post explanatory text alongside each piece—could be similarly disorienting. How would someone who hadn't heard the story about how Linklater came to know of his grandmother's works interpret their presence here? Would a casual gallery visitor perceive the armatures as central to the show or part of the background? For the most part, Linklater leans into that uncertainty, acknowledging that it can be difficult for an artist to figure out when to step away and let the work

speak on its own. “I find the voices on the walls too much,” he said. “I’d rather let the work be the focus, and have the other information come out in other ways, for this project, anyway. Maybe for another one I’d do something different.”

In a way, an echo of his own voice—discretely but powerfully embedded in the building’s bones—will linger at 80WSE long after those very walls are painted over with new text for the next show.

80WSE Gallery, part of NYU Steinhardt’s Department of Art and Art Professions, is free and open to the public Tuesday-Saturday from 11 am to 6 pm. *From Our Hands* runs through February 18, with an accompanying display of images of Duane Linklater’s studio in North Bay, Ontario, will be installed in the gallery’s Washington Square Windows.