

Art **Reviews**

Duane Linklater's Messy Notions of Identity

The Native artist's simultaneity of diverse references obliterates tidy notions of identity, while being transparently true to his own biography, aesthetics, and heritage.



Lori Waxman July 17, 2023



Duane Linklater, "what grief conjures" (2020), teepee poles, paint, nylon rope, wooden pallet, refrigerator, tie-down straps, hand truck, plastic statue, handmade hoodie, cochineal dye, silkscreen, 249 x 160 x 160 inches (photo by Rachel Topham Photography, courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver)

CHICAGO — Duane Linklater has built a most improbable structure: an enormous tepee that projects out from the wall rather than up from the ground. Its 20-foot-long poles are bare, uncovered by the canvas that hangs straight down from the lashings. As a metaphor for the horrendously awry world of today, “dislodgevanishskinground” is as apt as any. But this isn’t an upside-down house or a horse suspended from the ceiling, it’s a sideways tepee, and as wrong as it clearly is, it’s also fantastical and audacious, with emphatic cultural specificity.

The tepee is one of two on view in *mymothersside*, Linklater’s solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Also included are eight more tepee covers, a bundle of tepee poles, 3-D printed and re-photographed Indigenous artworks, a trio of furs, an old avocado-colored refrigerator, an oversized hoodie dyed with cochineal and worn by a knockoff Greco-Roman statue from Wayfair, a banner touting both The Cure and the American Indian Movement, and a couple of videos, one made in reference to Yvonne Rainer, another to the easternmost point of land in North America.

Linklater’s simultaneity of diverse references, of which this is but a partial list, obliterates tidy notions of identity, while being transparently true to his own biography, aesthetics, and heritage. Born in 1976, the Omaskêko Cree artist, from Moose Cree First Nation, went to school in Timmins, a small city in Northern Ontario, where he got into punk rock and skateboarding. His mother was born in a tepee in fly-in territory; his maternal grandparents lived in the bush until sent to one of Canada’s notorious residential schools. Linklater, who has an MFA from Bard College and currently lives in North Bay, Ontario, with his wife, the Alutiiq/Sugpiak artist [Tanya Lukin Linklater](#), and their three children, relates these and other details in the exhibition catalogue via interviews conducted with his maternal aunt, Irene Linklater, and grandmother, Agnes Hunter, alongside home photographs taken by his teenage daughter, Sassa.



Duane Linklater, “3 tipi covers for new old geometries” (2018), digital prints on hand-dyed linen, sumac, cedar, charcoal, nails, dimensions variable (photo by Rachel Topham Photography, courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver)

That insistence on the importance of family and community, so rare in the art world, explains both the exhibition's title and some of the more social aspects of Linklater's materials. His tepee cover paintings — half-circles of stitched-together linen panels up to 20 feet in diameter and featuring stake loops, central smoke flaps, and door cut-outs; printed with pre-contact geometric patterns and the European floral designs that largely replaced them; and alternately displayed folded, hung, or draped — are colored with dyes derived from sumac, dandelion, black walnut, iron oxide, and other regionally sourced minerals and pigments, as introduced to him by Ojibwe artist [Anong Beam](#). The sapling poles used in the monumental sculpture “what grief conjures” — at its center stands the hooded statue, atop the green fridge, atop a hand truck, atop a shipping pallet — were harvested and prepared with the help of friends affiliated with Dokis First Nation; a video, not on view at the MCA, shows family members moving amid the structure to a score composed by the artist and his son, Tobias. The coyote pelt hung on a garment rack in “The place I seek to go” was bought at Fur Harvesters Auction, a long-established business in North Bay where Linklater's grandparents once sold furs and where members of his extended family continue to do so. “Modest Livelihood,” a meditatively silent and slow film that will play during the second half of the show on the wall above the gallery entrance/exit, follows Linklater and Dane-Zaa artist [Brian Jungen](#) hunting moose with Jungen's uncle, elder Jack Askoty, on Dane-Zaa territory in northern British Columbia.

“Sunrise at Cape Spear,” the video playing throughout the first half of the show, engages with community, too — but a community long disappeared. The visuals are simple, just waves crashing on the rocky shore of a promontory as day breaks, yet the location is anything but: the very tip of Newfoundland, nay the entire continent, it was originally inhabited by the Beothuk people, who were forced to migrate inland by progressively expanding European settlement and declared extinct in 1829. Having reoccupied their place, Linklater attempted to use that fact to counter the lack of meaningful language about Aboriginal people on the Cape Spear Wikipedia page. The [ensuing dispute](#) between him, site administrators, and other volunteer editors about the relevance of his addition to the page — it was repeatedly and ultimately deleted — would be comedic if it weren't so revelatory of the systemic ways in which Indigenous perspectives have been suppressed.



Duane Linklater, "UMFA1981.016.002, UMFA1981.016.001, UMFA1981.016.004, UMFA1981.016.003, UMFA1982.001.008, UMFA2003.10.20 (Tafoya), UMFA2003.10.19, UMFAED.1998.3.21," detail (2015), eight natural ABS 3D prints, mirrored tables, dimensions variable (photo by Hong Cheolki/Seoul Museum of Art, courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver)

Linklater manifests the violence committed against Indigenous North Americans by Western institutions most explicitly — with a gutting mixture of coolness and poignance — in projects responding to the ways in which Native artifacts have long been collected by outsiders. What's here are the ghostliest, crappiest of copies: off-white ABS plastic versions of masks, pots, a figurine, and a mini totem pole from a hodgepodge of cultures, marred by seams, doubled by the mirrored surfaces of the tables on which they are arrayed. The originals, belonging to the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, have undergone practices that are abhorrently typical: individual authorship never recorded, objects considered animate by their tribes stored away as if dead, diverse cultures grouped into simplistic cultural categories. Linklater's bad copies won't make anyone feel better, nor should they as they register the alienation and loss that museums and collectors have long perpetrated in their pursuit of interesting objects.

my mothers side, which debuted at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle, has the distinction of being the MCA's first solo exhibition dedicated to an Indigenous artist. That's long overdue, and well complemented by two terrific smaller shows concurrently up in Chicago: *Marie Watt: Sky Dances Light*, a wondrous display of jingle-cone cloud sculptures by the Seneca artist, at Kavi Gupta Gallery, and *Brenda Draney: Drink from the river*, a survey of the spare, dreamlike canvases of the Sawridge First Nation painter, at the Arts Club of Chicago. But solo shows cannot on their own supply all the Native voices missing from the history of American art — for that, Indigenous-led blockbuster surveys are sorely needed. And they're coming in both book and exhibition form: In August, DelMonico Books/BIG NDN Press will release *An Indigenous Present*, a breathtaking 448-page coffee-table book, edited by Choctaw-Cherokee artist Jeffrey Gibson and featuring artwork by more than 60 contemporary Native makers, plus interviews, essays, and artist texts. Then, at the end of September, *The Land Carries Our Ancestors: Contemporary Art by Native Americans* will open at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, curated by the veteran Salish/Kootenai Nation artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. May the buckskin ceiling forever be unbroken.



Duane Linklater, "boys don't cry," detail (2017), digital print on hand-dyed linen, 120 x 180 inches. Art Gallery of Ontario (photo by Dennis Ha, courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver)

[mymothersside](#) continues at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (220 East Chicago Avenue, Chicago, Illinois) through September 3. The exhibition was curated by Amanda Donnan, chief curator at the Frye Art Museum, Seattle, and organized at the MCA by Carla Acevedo-Yates with Iris Colburn.