

# Representation as Liberation: A Review of Duane Linklater's "mymothersside" at the MCA

MARCH 16, 2023 AT 7:00 AM BY [VASIA RIGOU](#)



*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. Courtesy: Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver/Photo: Rachel Topham Photography*

An unexpected exhibition—in terms of scale, rawness and emotional response—"mymothersside" deconstructs and reassembles memory, identity and Indigenous myths and misconceptions. Omaskêko Cree artist Duane Linklater creates a minimal yet immersive environment by bringing together large-scale sculptures, video works and digital prints on linen that clash with mundane items of contemporary life—a fridge, a hoodie, an aluminum garment rack with a skinned coyote pelt just hanging there as if it was recently hunted down.

For over a decade, the Ontario-based artist has been addressing the contradictions of contemporary Indigenous life within and beyond settler systems of knowledge, representation and value in an extensive mixed-media practice occurring both within and beyond gallery limits—"mymothersside" was originally presented at Seattle's [Frye Art Museum](#) where it spilled out into the courtyard; its reincarnation at the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) features newly commissioned work for the atrium.



Duane Linklater, "can the circle be unbroken 2" (detail), 2019. Digital print on linen, iron red dye, cypress yellow ochre, blueberry extract, charcoal, nails, 120 x 240 inches. Commissioned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver/Photo: Glenn Cheriton

Upon walking into the space, a larger-than-life tipi takes you aback. Stripped down to its poles, the tent is now see-through. In the middle, there's an olive green old-school fridge on top of which stands a mannequin wearing a pink hoodie. In "what grief conjures," one of the most ubiquitous symbols of indigeneity now looks almost like a place of sacrifice. Elsewhere, the tipi cover, draped and folded in a semicircular shape, serves as a canvas onto which Linklater digitally prints imagery that he tints with natural dyes. It takes a look around the gallery to piece the tipi together. To complete the ensemble, a similar installation faces sideways: with its base pinned on the wall and its top extending out toward the center of the gallery. This eighteen-foot-tall tipi demands a closer look: its fabric hangs out as if a high wind blew it away. It provides an unlikely sight that oozes of loss, sorrow and displacement—both physical and cultural.



Duane Linklater "boys don't cry," 2017. Digital print on hand-dyed linen, 120 x 180 inches. Art Gallery of Ontario, Purchased with funds from the Dr. Michael Braudo Canadian Contemporary Art Fund/Photo: Dennis Ha, courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver

Linklater's architectural interventions include more hand-dyed linens that bring tipi covers to mind ("can the circle be unbroken," "3 tipi covers for new old geometries"), a pink jacket pinned onto the wall and a collage-like panel of digital prints titled "boys don't cry"—an ode to The Cure's 1980 album, from which he borrowed the work's title, that also includes the silhouetted image of the iconic English rock band's frontman, Robert Smith. The titles as well as the works themselves reveal the artist's undeniable connection with music. More than that, references to his family, childhood home, and favorite bands, films and garments are abundant throughout the exhibition. Linklater will not stand for reductive notions of identity. Indigenous culture is greater than the sum of its parts.



Duane Linklater "The place I seek to go," 2014. Coyote fur, garment rack, hanger, flat screen TV, mac mini, HD video loop, cables, 132 x 66 x 20 inches. Collection of Remai Modern, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Purchased with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Grants program, 2016/Photo: SITE Photography, courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver

In "the place I seek to go," coyote fur, garment rack, hanger, flat-screen TV, Mac mini, HD video loop and cables assemble a piece that offers an insight into Linklater's life and experiences, such as the ancestral practices of hunting and fur trading. The digital video work, "Sunrise at Cape Spear" showcases exactly that: sunrise from a rocky shore at Newfoundland's Cape Spear, the easternmost point in North America and the place of earliest dawn on the continent, where Indigenous North Americans are thought to have first encountered Europeans in Newfoundland, around the year 1000. It is believed that over the course of a millennium all of the island's resident tribes were rendered extinct.

Toward the back of the gallery, small 3D-printed sculptural works are arranged on display tables. They resemble bones, animal skulls, masks, pots and various small objects that are reproductions of artifacts from the collection of the Utah Museum of Fine Arts in Salt Lake City. Purposely faulty, these low-fidelity replicas are meant to comment on the ways in which knowledge is lost when such objects enter museum collections. Their crisp white surfaces come in juxtaposition with their tribal nature—but it is in these contradictions that Linklater shines.



Duane Linklater, "Sunrise at Cape Spear" (still), 2011. Single-channel HD digital video, text from Wikipedia conversations, artist story (handout), 12 minutes, 39 seconds/Courtesy: Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver

Challenging the relationship between museums and indigenous peoples and their objects, Linklater brings cultural wisdom, knowledge, agency and power to the table. He poses them against cultural appropriation, loss, exclusion and marginalization. His effort to reset indigenous culture and imagery within the museum space reflects a need for belonging, inclusivity and value on a lasting legacy that's been a long time coming. In one word: Coexistence. Between the personal, the historical and the cultural, "mymothersside" shows that representation does and should matter. The effect of Linklater's work is a loud and clear nudge in that direction.

Duane Linklater's *mymothersside* is on view at the [Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago \(MCA\)](#) through September 3.