

Directly sewing something from the earth onto something that was nourished from the earth

Interview, Carrie Allison with Lea Hogan



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Contact/Connect: this is the land of my ancestors, handmade paper with harvested plants from Heart River, 2017, photo credit Roger J Smith

Carrie Allison is a visual artist based in K'jipuktuk (Halifax) with familial roots in Vancouver, BC and High Prairie, Alberta. Allison's multi-disciplinary art practice in textile and beadwork is rooted in her maternal ancestry and to her commitment to honour the histories of the land that influences her art making practice. We met over skype late October 2019 to discuss her practice, how her art works with the land and for the land, and to this forms a method of honour to her peoples and resistance to systemic racism. These topics emerge from our discussion on three projects she created for

three rivers: Heart River in High Prairie, Alberta; Fraser River in British Columbia; and the Shubenacadie River in Nova Scotia.

LH: Talk about your practice. Talk about what motivates you as an artist?

CA: My practice is interdisciplinary, so I use a lot of different mediums to express what is needed to be expressed. My practice is intensive. My process is 20% thinking and conceptualizing a project and 80% is making something. A lot of time is spent doing repetitive things. My Fine Art degree was mainly painting and drawing, but it was series based so a lot of it was repetition. Drawings were done and masked, regimented. It wasn't until my Master's degree that I started beading. I'm Cree-Metis of European descent. The reason was that I needed to be careful. I wasn't taught to bead and I wanted to understand what I was going to do. The practice could mean, as an Indigenous Artist with certain signifiers, that it speaks to a certain history. I wanted to be aware of that history. I wanted to respect the history, but I also wanted to speak to the Cree-Metis history of Northern Alberta, where my maternal ancestors are generally from.

My mother is Cree Metis and Scottish, I think...I'm not really sure...I'm pretty sure my grandfather is Scottish? My dad is from New Zealand. We called him Igora. It basically means "white guy" in Mauri. I don't really talk to him. He wasn't really in my life, so my maternal family is really important to me. It wasn't until 2008, when my grandmother passed away, that I started to be aware that her brothers and sister came down from Grand Prairie (High Prairie area) and I discovered that there was a community and language that they spoke, Cree or Niegwe, and I was intrigued by that. I just could not understand why we didn't know. We saw them when I was younger, but I don't remember the language or community. I started to learn about them, started to go, and visit them and talk to them about my grandma's sister, about growing up. My grandma was a residential school survivor so that explains why we didn't grow up with the language. We always knew we were Indigenous, but we weren't connected to community, to ceremony, or to things that encapsulated us as Indigenous people.

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These are things I'm trying to respectfully engage with without implementing myself in this community that doesn't know me, because I'm geographically far away and I never grew up there. I need to be conscious of that. As well, I'm white passing so I need to be conscious of what I look like, the privileges I have, and how I engage with my cousins and community back there -- try and be as aware as I can be. My art practice is about trying to do all of that, give myself the space to think through these things, and think through the complexities of reclaiming my identity and decolonizing myself. You have to unlearn so many things. Not only as an Indigenous person but as a person in general. The way that we understand the world is very much within this colonial lens. I'm learning that and breaking that apart and critically engaging with that.

LH: A question that comes up for me is regarding your beading practice as a form of connection to your maternal ancestry. Was beading a practice within your maternal family's history or did it emerge from self-taught knowledge of the practice?

CA: It wasn't practiced by anyone that I know. My family liked to sew and embroider. I have cousins, an uncle, and second aunts who bead but nothing that was taught to me. Beading intrigued me in that it was a time-intensive activity. I tried it and found it to be engaging and frustrating at the same time. For some reason, I love those two contrasting elements together. I wanted to get better at it because I felt like I had the ability to do it. I have good dexterity and eyes. I was born for this, so I had to be good at it. Everything that I read about beading further instilled that desire. I was interested in the process and theory behind beading. Indigenous nations have always beaded. There are these misconceptions that beading is inauthentic. It's ridiculous because we have these ideas of authenticity and it's not accurate at all to dismiss beading as an Indigenous practice. Beading came after trade so First Nations people have always had beading, beading with seeds, shells, bones, or rocks. Really anything that could be turned into something else could be used for beading. Beading also relates to quill work as well. Where my family is from, quillwork was practiced a lot. Quill work and beading stand in for the land itself because if you're making beads out of seeds, you're literally sewing a piece of the earth on your garments. A lot of regalia is made with hides. You're directly sewing something from the earth onto something that was nourished from the

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earth. The adornment on garments is a practice of honour, a practice of taking something that you respect and putting it on your body to say how important that being is, whether it's a tree, a bison, or anything else. Putting it on your body was a way to respect where the object came from, but also as a form of protection as well. That lineage is still practiced today in Metis and Cree beading. There is a lot of respect that goes into it and a lot of symbolism that's still trying to articulate the relationships we have with the earth, or stories. They are interconnected. Art, for me, is a way to tell a story, ask a question, or just engage a person or even myself.

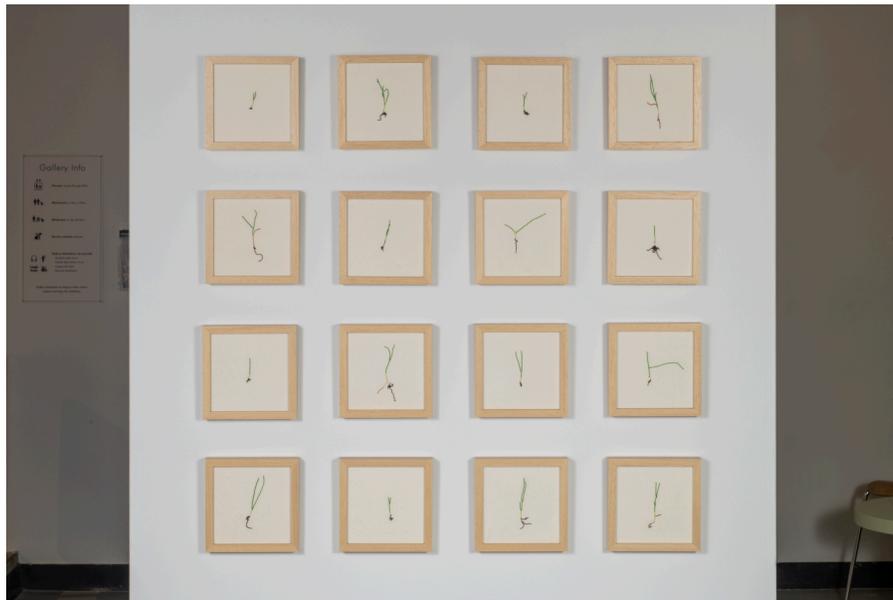
LH: That is interesting, considering that we are talking about site specificity in art practice. It's not just site-specificity but also a specificity to beings. When I say beings, I mean what we may call objects or nature. They are living in their own existence while being connected to other systems or beings. It reminds me of Vanessa Waits' concept of Place-Thought where we not only consider all things like the land to be living beings, but also that we are informed of our own agency through these interactions with land. That practice that brings this connection, this sense of honour and respect, I find that fascinating, beautiful, and heartwarming. As an artist, what does it mean for you to connect with land?

CA: Land is everything to me. Likely the same for all Indigenous people. I engage with the landscape everyday. I have a dog, so I go out once or twice a day. We don't go anywhere extravagant but it's good for us to be out in the world. All of my administrative work, my applications are done on the computer. I create web content as well. Doing all that work is tiring.

I do spend a lot of time at home beading. Beading is a way for me to connect with the landscape or other lifeforces that are present. One of the reasons I started to bead the waterway was to honour the waters by making them, spending hours of time to learn their curves, where they thin out or where they start to widen, and thinking through the sustenance they've provided to my family. For instance, the Heart River, where my grandparents had a farm and raised their kids in the first few years of their life together, was my maternal great grandmother's family area. Making this waterway was a way for

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me to connect to the place through distance, because I'm based in Nova Scotia and my family's territories in High Prairie (Northwest Alberta). Making beadwork became a way to respect, to get to know, and to connect with these stories, histories, and places from a place far away. Beading is very much a practice of honouring, engaging, and thinking through the complexities of being located away from the territories that I'm from. Being and land is intermeshed with how I become to understand the world.



Plot, toho beads on linen, 2019, photo credit: Steve Farmer

LH: What has emerged for you, from this practice and connection?

CA: I'm not sure. I feel like I'm not done. I finished some rivers and they mean a lot to me and I'm currently making another one. When I first started to bead the rivers, that was my first beading project. I made another project with loon beading, a different type of beading. What came out of my river series was that my practice grew to encompass beading -- I just really enjoy it. There's a lot to learn from doing and gathering.

I've gone to beading symposiums and met people. Social media is also a great place to connect, get tips from Indigenous folks because we network a lot. I can reach out and

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ask if others have done a certain style of stitching, or when I have some challenges with a project, I can get some suggestions about the material or other practical issues. More experienced beaders want to pass on their knowledge and sometimes these communities (depending on where you are) don't have young folks in the rural area. Some folks have left to go south from where my family is from. There are a lot of different scenarios, but older knowledgeable people want to pass their knowledge along. I'm grateful for that.

Another thing that I've been blessed with is the sense of community that comes from this one practice and how it fans out. It's all encompassing because it doesn't just include the beading network. It also includes tufting. Tufting is usually done with moose or caribou hair and that leads to harvesting these animals and how to process the furs. There's so much you can learn through just this network just from taking one small object and attaching it to another with string. This now opens the door to other practices like tide tanning.

LH: I like that you identify how the practice bridges community even when the work may be somewhat isolated. The generational engagement is also important since, from what I know, there have been some generational divides. The fact that beading could be one of many methods to connect generations and, by extension, connect these generations to land and site is quite beautiful. Additionally, you've identified the historical knowledge within the practice that you still try to work through. It reflects how your practice is not about creating art in a singular moment, it's continual!

CA: The powwow ban was on for almost 100 years, mostly on the west coast but also nationally. Indigenous folks couldn't practice ceremony. Ceremony includes songs, dancing, and gift giving. It also includes regalia making. If you're not making regalia, you're not passing on beading or tufting or quill work. You're not passing it along to the next generation. That wasn't lifted until the 1950s. Canadian state has had access and control on the Indigenous Art market for a long time. Because they've been in control, they've replaced the value of the art with what they felt the art deserved. It was not based on practice because these Settlers were putting prices on our things. They've

never made things like moccasins before. For so long, Indigenous art making has been devalued. That's why it's exciting right now, since so many people are starting to price their work as it should be -- based on labour. But there are people who don't respect that. There's also the competing side of trinkets overseas that are made to look 'Indian-like' and they are vastly cheaper than something hand-made from an Indigenous person, thus devaluing the worth of authentic objects. That's why sharing this knowledge and passing on these traditions are important to Indigenous people.

LH: Everything you said has really emphasized the importance of sharing. The practices are substantial, and they need to be passed on, they deserve to be treated with dignity as a practice. My next question is based on your piece, *The Shubenacadie River Beading Project*, that you called it a response to the Alton Gas mining for natural gas storage. Could you talk more about your response? Particularly, to the harm it causes to natural spaces and the environment?

CA: Just to contextualize *The Shubenacadie River Beading Project*, the project was created alongside two other river projects that I was working on at the same time: Heart River in High Prairie and Fraser River in British Columbia. I was looking to connect these places since I have personal histories with each of these sites. I also recognized that I'm an uninvited guest on Mi'kmaq territory. I actively think about being an uninvited guest and how that appears. How can I incorporate this conscious idea through my artwork or project? I took the Shubenacadie river since I've heard about it for a while and I knew that a lot of the water grandmothers and warriors were there protecting the river from Alton Gas.

Nova Scotia is part of a larger territory call Mi'kma'ki which also includes parts of New Brunswick and parts of Maine. It's disputed whether this includes Newfoundland, I say it does. The treaties here are treaties that existed prior to Confederation. They are not the first treaties signed with British or French people but they are some of the first. The first is called The Treaties of Peace and Friendship, signed in 1725/26 and they have about 13 official documents, but they have up to 30 different Peace and Friendship Treaties. They basically each state the same thing but in different languages. Who wrote them?

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But the thing is the Mi'kmaq nation first signed the treaty to call a truce. They wouldn't go up against the British crown. They wouldn't impede or fight them but with the understanding that British folks would not interfere with hunting, fishing, and other farming or agricultural practices. This agreement still exists to this day. It hasn't been re-negotiated. So when the land was declared as Canada, Canada took on the British 'contract.' In the case of Alton Gas and the Shubenacadie River, the Nova Scotian government approved the Alton Gas' project, stating they consulted with the Indigenous people. However, this consultation is vastly different from how an Indigenous perspective -- specifically Mi'kmaq -- looks like. When Alton Gas and other resource companies say, "No, we consulted you. We have the paperwork from the government," the communities responded, "No, we didn't sign that and this is not how this works. This is not how we run our nation." Alton Gas moved in, started setting up, and Mi'kmaq folks and their environmental allies came up and started to build a Treaty Trunk House.

The Peace and Friendship treaties states that you can build anything on your land. A Trunk house is a recognized shelter in that agreement. The one built here was a small house that they occupied right beside the construction area. This helped to postpone the project by halting construction along the river. This struggle is still happening as we speak. They're occupying space and asserting their treaty rights as treaty people.

My idea for *The Shubenacadie River Beading Project* (2018) was to get the word out about what was happening along the river. Additionally, this small act of beading the river could be seen as a form of activism. I wanted people to be aware that this project stood in favour of Mi'kmaq people asserting their treaty rights, that the river space should be honoured by the people who've cared about the river for so long and they should decide how the river may be used. I'm a treaty person. I occupy space on this land. Just being here makes me a treaty person. People should engage the history of the land and be respectful of it. *The Shubenacadie River Beading Project* was about engagement, conversation, and about the treaty. I want to honour the rights of the Mi'kmaq people and the anger I felt that they were being ignored. We have this homogenous view about Canada but what has actually happened on this soil is vastly different than how that identity is reflected. We need to learn about treaties and the

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territories that we are on. Making the treaty a priority was a large component of *The Shubenacadie River Beading Project*.

LH: I loved how you described the house as a strategy of delay from their mining. It's similar to the Transmountain Pipeline here at Burnaby Mountain. There's a place called the Watch House that's set up near the tanks on Burnaby Mountain near Simon Fraser University. It's similar to the extent that the people who occupy the house are not 100% trying to stop the work but instead to ensure they work without damaging the land. They have an agreement regarding how far they're allowed to construct their tank and to stay within the agreed zone. The Watch House surveys the workers and documents moments where they're violating their agreement. I had a chance to go up there in July 2019 and they showed us their process, the decaying and withering plant life due to the construction. Just from these stories alone, we are seeing how much fighting, protesting, and resistance there is toward Canada's negligence towards Indigenous folks and their land. These forms of resistance emphasise how important it is for Canada to talk with Indigenous folks, not the typical version of 'consulting' that results in these atrocities.

CA: Canada's idea of consulting needs to be redefined with Indigenous People. This does vary between each nation. We hear politicians say that they respect Indigenous People and they want a nation to nation relationship. This is far more complicated than what they're saying. How do you actually intend to do so? Because I have doubts.

LH: The last question I have for you is regarding resistance. We've discussed this throughout our conversation with regards to your beading practice as strategy resistance. I would like to know if you found that there's a resistance between yourself, land, and your art? Additionally, what does resistance mean to you?

CA: Resistance to me is dependent on the context. Whether I'm creating art or discussing my practice on a panel, I see resistance as resisting colonial ideologies that are based in fabrication. As I said earlier, I grew up as a white passing person in a predominantly white community. We didn't have connections to our Indigenous

community at all. White privilege is something you can embody in certain ways. Definitely, my skin has given me certain privileges that are not afforded to other members of my family. Recognizing this has been something I had to engage with actively and accept. It is hard to be self-critical. Meanwhile, the word 'privilege' comes off like a dirty word. It has been shaped to be negative. It's not great or something you want to be called-out on, but it's something society has given to you without your consent -- like to be cis-gendered for instance, or that I'm in a heterosexual relationship. These things afford me privileges and I need to name them as such. I need to understand the complexities involved, and engage and resist ignorance. Critical thinking and respectful learning are something that I try to do. There are a lot of things that are said on a daily basis that are harmful to certain people. I want my friends to say that "hey, that was kind of offensive." I want to be that person that shuts the fuck up and admits that what I said was super shitty and that will stop saying that and I will learn. It's a habit I need to be engaging as an educator, an artist, as a person that wants to improve. I want to live in an inclusive society that's safe.

LH: It's a balance.

CA: Is that what you meant by resistance?

LH: I mean, it's open to interpretation. Part of my question was to look at strategies of resistance within your own practice, and if you and your art have moments where you're resisting each other.

CA: The history of beading is a history of resistance. For many Indigenous people, because of the systems at play, certain policies, engaging in beading could put you in jail. I look at beading as a sense of resistance because people who carry it on are predominantly women. However, in many of these communities, the male/female binaries don't exist. They were a lot more fluid. If there was a male that wanted to do 'women's work' (which wasn't even labeled as women's work until colonialism and religious influences came into play), you could do whatever depending on your strengths. Things that are typically labeled "women's labour" are also a form of

resistance because they are deemed unpaid labour...In terms of my practice resisting me, I really can't think of anything. Maybe?

LH: That's fair. If there's no resistance between yourself and your practice then, that gives a sense of a harmonious relationship.

About the Author

Carrie Allison is an Indigenous mixed-ancestor multidisciplinary visual artist, writer, arts administrator and educator, born and raised on unceded and unsurrendered Coast Salish Territory (Vancouver, BC), with maternal roots in High Prairie, Alberta. Situated in K'ijipuktuk since 2010, Allison's practice responds to her maternal Cree and Métis ancestry, thinking through intergenerational cultural loss and acts of resilience, resistance, and activism, while also thinking through notions of allyship, kinship and visiting. Allison's practice is rooted in research and pedagogical discourses. Her work seeks to reclaim, remember, recreate and celebrate her ancestry through visual discourses. Allison holds a Masters in Fine Art, a Bachelors in Fine Art and a Bachelors in Art History from NSCAD University.

Lea Hogan (they/them/their) recently completed their Master's Degree in Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University. Their research focused on aesthetics and reception in YouTube videos created by trans artists. They explored a sensory approach to locating queerness in nature spaces using an auto-ethnographic walking practice while documenting responses through video and journaling. Hogan has a practice in the theatre as a stage manager, lighting and sound technician, actor, and dramaturg. They have worked as a Teaching Assistant in the School of Contemporary Arts and School of Communication at Simon Fraser University, and as a catalogue compiler for Pride In Art Society. They currently work as an AV Technician for Simon Fraser University Vancouver, an editor on the Comparative Media Arts Journal, and is an active member of the Teaching Staff Support Union on multiple committees. Hogan will be presenting their research as part of an event inspired by the FASS 3 Minute Thesis event, *Graduate Research for Social Justice: A Dialogue with Sheila Watt-Cloutier* on February 25th, 2020.