



Melissa Peter-Paul, *Friends*, synthetically and organically dyed porcupine quills, natural porcupine quills, birch barks, and sweet grass, 2019.
Photo: Rebecca Viau

Melissa Peter-Paul Honours Contemporary Quillwork in Epekwitk

Resilience and empowerment through L'nu material traditions

BECKA VIAU



Melissa Peter-Paul, *Netflix and Quill*, synthetically and organically dyed porcupine quills, natural porcupine quills, birch barks, and sweet grass, 2019.
Photo: Becka Viau

Charlottetown's this town is small artist-run centre has partnered with local coffee shop Receiver Coffee Co. Together the artist-run centre and the café show a series of curated exhibitions by local creators. As a space situated in the thick of the colonial conversation, Receiver Coffee Co. is a place with great potential to subvert normalized colonial discourse, and actively engage in Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation.

The walls of this particular coffee shop speak harsh truths to those who are willing to listen. Built with colonial Island red brick and dated before Confederation, the exhibition space is situated on Victoria Row across from a Canadian monument to Confederation—the Confederation Centre of the Arts.

The walls of this public gallery space and active coffee shop are aged, but they are very relevant to the context of *Apija'tuek Epekwitk*, a solo exhibition by Lnu'k artist Melissa Peter-Paul.

Receiver Coffee shop on Victoria Row is a historical mash-up, a complex contemporary place, a space on the fringe of Canadian national monumentalism and government. It is rich, in the colour of the red earth stone and in conceptual possibilities.

Apija'tuek Epekwitk is the first contemporary quillwork I have seen presented on the unceded and unsundered territory of Epekwitk. Peter-Paul's quillwork brings goosebumps to all who are awoken to colonialism's ongoing legacy, as the criminalization of Indigenous material traditions and culture by the Canadian government, such as quillwork, were small pieces of the complex and continuing genocide being carried out against the Lnu'k.

In the age of Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation, it is integral for Indigenous material traditions and culture to be showcased, to be invested in, and for its renaissance to be Indigenous lead.

Some of this is already happening with projects brought forth from Flotilla and Atlantis. Interesting connections and resonances are beginning to form across the Atlantic provinces, particularly in the Maritimes around Lnu design and contemporary art practices, notably the work of Jordan Bennet, Carrie Allison, Jerry Evans, and now Melissa Peter-Paul. These artists are leading the contemporary way of Lnu'k visual design.

There are 14 quill box lids and two acrylic paintings presented by Peter-Paul in *Apija'tuek Epekwitk*. Each quill box lid is presented in a white frame, which beautifully showcases the contemporary colour patterns and precise craftwork involved in each piece. The designs range from fairly simple (with not too many quills) to a piece titled *Ma'Kit*, which involved over 12 long hours of quilling (not including the procedure of harvesting and preparing the materials).

From contemporary colour choices to witty everyday titles like *Netflix and Quill*, all of the work involves designs found in local archives that date back to first contact, yet each piece has a surprisingly contemporary take on traditional design.

"I just want to share quill work with people and have them to ask questions or want to find out more," says Peter-Paul. "I wanted to add some humour into my work because it often contains very serious conversations about history and culture. I added this contemporary aspect to my work so that younger generations could really connect with it, and to see if I could crack any smiles."

Peter-Paul is also dedicated to learning and sharing spiritual knowledge and teachings around material traditions.

"There are always teachings that come with the process and protocols of the work," she says. "How to harvest, treat and honour the land and to sustainably take what nature provides the artist."

On social media, Peter-Paul often shares her experiences of harvesting and preparing the materials. For the artist, it is within this knowledge that peace and resilience can be found, and she is proud to see the children in her life growing up with this knowledge as part of their everyday life.

"My oldest child, who is ten, is quilling now," says Peter-Paul.

The act of making is an act of pride and resourcefulness for both her and her family. The connection to the land enables the creative expression to flourish.

"It seems like it is always 3 am when the ancestors want to talk to me, so that is when I work. I can't resist it, I have to at least get the design out before sending the kids off to school." ■

Becka Viau is an artist, curator and writer currently based in Charlottetown.

