

MERYL McMASTER

Bloodline

Meryl McMaster (b. 1988) is a leading voice in art today, making large-scale photographic self-portraits that explore her mixed Plains Cree/Siksika and Anglo/Dutch ancestry. While some of her earliest works, included here, infuse historical representations of Indigenous peoples with contemporary aspects, others suggest a sort of imaginative repossession of the land, articulated in dreamlike scenarios. Her elaborate costumes, which she crafts herself, embody the blended strains of her ancestry, often echoing historical garments and ceremonial regalia.

McMaster's more recent works picture the artist on the home territory of her father's Plains Cree family on Red Pheasant Cree Nation in central Saskatchewan. The newest of these reach for connection across time to the three generations of remarkable Plains Cree and Métis women who came before the artist in the family line. As McMaster puts it, "While we may never know the full truths of our ancestors, we can still hold their memories close to our hearts." A mother now herself, she continues to delve for the roots of her cultural identity, expanding her practice in this exhibition to include, for the first time, the medium of film.

Sarah Milroy, Chief Curator, McMichael Canadian Art Collection
Tara Hogue, Curator (Indigenous Art), Remai Modern

MERYL McMASTER

1988, Ottawa, Ontario

1. *niki natohtên ispîhk askiy ka-kiyâmastêk* *I Listened As The World Became Silent*

2022

From the series *nôhkominak âcimowina* | *Stories of my Grandmothers*
Giclée print, 101.6 x 152.5 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

“I was really struck by the story of the mass hanging in 1885 at Fort Battleford, Saskatchewan,” says McMaster, explaining the source for this disturbing image. “It was an execution of eight Plains Cree warriors. During those days people were starving, and these men were rebelling against colonial rule during the so-called North-West Rebellion. They were hanged for killing settler men. It was a public hanging and the townspeople would have come out to witness. But the thing that really disturbed me was that the children from the Battleford Industrial School were brought to witness it too. My great-great-grandmother Tilly would have been around fourteen or fifteen years old at the time, and she most likely would have been brought to this event.” McMaster presents herself as a protector of these children, represented by the little pencils tied onto the front of her costume and hanging down her side. “The butterflies represent the spirits of the men,” she says. “Their souls, their beings.”

2. *NIPÊHTÊNÂN KITEH* *WE CAN HEAR YOUR HEARTBEAT*

2023

Video, 9 min 48 s

In collaboration with David Hartman

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

“A song, a story, a coin, a travel pass—tokens and tales that lead me back to my *âpihtawikosisân* and *nēhiyaw* grandmothers. Their stories are of brave and proud women trying to live a truthful life in the unsettling modern world. *kā-âyimahk*. It was difficult. Life was difficult is what they often said. Getting from one place to another was done by walking, by horse and wagon,

or by train, a powerful yet contradictory presence. While the train offered my grandmothers new opportunities for love, adventure, and interconnection, it threatened the autonomy of their communities by enabling new settlements on Indigenous land. I retrace their journeys along paths whose tracks have now been reclaimed by the natural world. Presence and absence are held together by stories.”

—Meryl McMaster

2. NIWANISKÂN ISI KIYA I AWAKE TO YOU

2023

Video, 10 min 26 s

In collaboration with David Hartman

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

“mikisiw-wacīhk, the Red Hills, near the Eagle Hills in Saskatchewan. What pulls me closer to my ancestral home? It is the stories. The stories I have heard throughout my life. It is where the prairies meet the forests, where my nēhiyaw relatives have lived as far back as memory can reach. But there are more recent stories too. Reading the diary my great-grandmother Bella wrote at age forty-eight and a letter from when she was seventy-eight, I learned of her self-determination.

There is a tree I have known since I was a child that was planted on the site of our ancestral home. For me it is a marker of memory, time, and of connection. It stands on a hill like a beacon, welcoming me, summoning me to hear the stories—to listen to the land, the wind, and dream.”

—Meryl McMaster

Vitrine 1

Left to right: Isabella (Bella) Wuttunee and Mathilda (Tilly) Schmidt, c.1930s

Left to right: Mathilda (Tilly) Schmidt, Howard McMaster, Isabella (Bella) Wuttunee and Lena McMaster, 1951

Lena McMaster, 1945

Lena McMaster, c.1939–1940

Isabella (Bella) Wuttunee, c.1975–1980

Left to right: Gerald and Lynn McMaster standing
at old tree on Red Pheasant Cree Nation, 2019

Lower row, third from right: Isabella (Bella) Wuttunee
sitting with railway workers, students, and teachers
from the Battleford Industrial School, c.1910

Left to right: Mathilda (Tilly) Schmidt and Howard McMaster,
c.1948

Lena McMaster, 1946

Left to right: Bertha Wuttunee and baby, Mathilda (Tilly)
Schmidt, Grace Ouellette, Mabel Ouellette, George
Wuttunee and Isabella (Bella) Wuttunee, c.1940s

Left to right: Oliver Wuttunee, Mathilda (Tilly) Schmidt,
Isabella (Bella) Wuttunee and George Wuttunee, c.1940s

Left to right: Howard McMaster, Isabella (Bella) Wuttunee,
Gerald McMaster and Mabel Ouellette, c.1954

Left to right: Mathilda (Tilly) Schmidt and unknown, c.1920s

Front row: Lena McMaster, Cecile Wuttunee and Oliver
Wuttunee. Back row: George Wuttunee, baby unknown,
Isabella (Bella) Wuttunee and Lennox Wuttunee, c.1927–1928

Isabella (Bella) Wuttunee, c.1940s

Left to right: Howard McMaster, Isabella (Bella) Wuttunee
and Gerald McMaster, 1954

Lena McMaster, 2011

Lena McMaster's "Treaty ticket," c.1951–1954

Lena McMaster's railway travel card, c.1947–1950

3. *kikiskisin kipowâmina*

Do You Remember Your Dreams

2022

From the series *nôhkominak âcimowina* | *Stories of my Grandmothers*

Giclée print, 101.6 x 152.5 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

4. *nakasin isi kikiskisowina*

Leave To Me Your Memories

2022

From the series *nôhkominak âcimowina* | *Stories of my Grandmothers*

Giclée print, 101.6 x 134.6 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

This image is inspired by stories that McMaster heard of her great-grandmother Bella Wuttunee and her children collecting grouse eggs and bringing them into town to sell. The government had been trying to cull the population of grouse on the prairies. The story reminded her of what had been done to Indigenous peoples in the residential school system.

5. *kiskisi kîsik êta kânihtâwikiyan*

Remember The Sky You Were Born Under

2022

From the series *nôhkominak âcimowina* | *Stories of my Grandmothers*

Giclée print, 101.6 x 152.5 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

"You never know how an image is going to reach someone," says McMaster. "For the most part I'll never meet my viewers. But those are probably the most important conversations that I have, the silent conversations through

my work. They're just like little seeds that are floating around. They'll catch ground somewhere, hopefully, and maybe get enough water to grow."

For this work, McMaster gathered various plants and seed pods that would have been used by her female ancestors: Seneca root, mint, cattails, muskeg tea, rat root, and poplar tree leaves. These plants were collected for traditional medicine but also for trade in the broader colonial economy.

Vitrine 2

Bird sculpture, Meryl McMaster, 2022, mixed media

Canadian penny (George VI, 1939) flattened by a train, 2022

Four railway spikes from Saskatchewan, date unknown

Metasequoia pinecone from Saskatchewan,
Collection of Canadian Museum of Nature, CMNFV 3600

Two pieces of fossilized wood from Saskatchewan,
Collection of Canadian Museum of Nature, CMNPB 3601

Diary of Isabella Wuttunee (née Schmidt, 1898–1980), 1946

The series of works titled *Stories of My Grandmothers* arose from McMaster's encounter with the diary of her great-grandmother Bella. "She was writing it in the late 1940s, while she was living on Red Pheasant raising several children," McMasters says. "It wasn't really a journal; it was mostly just short sentences describing the mundane things like visitors coming, daily happenings and chores, planting seeds, chopping wood, who was going off to school and how, illnesses, selling wood, searching for their horses—those kinds of things." Nonetheless, it provided the starting point for a rich artistic journey.

Letter written by Isabella Wuttunee
(née Schmidt, 1898–1980), 1976

6. *tahkopitêk tipahikan*

A Tangle of Time

2022

From the series *nôhkominak âcimowina* | *Stories of my Grandmothers*

Giclée print, 101.6 x 152.5 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

7. *maskosiy atimi-ohpikin*

The Grass Grows Deep

2022

From the series *nôhkominak âcimowina* | *Stories of my Grandmothers*

Giclée print, 101.6 x 152.5 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

In this work, McMaster is expressing her connection to all her grandmothers. “I’m standing in the prairie landscape at Red Pheasant and I’m holding a diary and there’s a picture of the three of them on the cover,” she says. “The title is a reference to roots. There’s a lot going on underneath that we don’t see, that’s connected to who we are.”

Reflecting on her use of colour here, McMaster says, “I’ve used the colour red often in my photographs, either in fabric or in other different materials or with face paint. The colour red follows me. It represents my connection with family, and it marks a kind of trail for me between the past, the present, and the future.”

8. *itahto mêtscanâs wîhtam*

Every Path Tells

2022

From the series *nôhkominak âcimowina* | *Stories of my Grandmothers*

Giclée print, 101.6 x 152.5 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

“One of the pieces of family ephemera that we still have is my grandma Lena’s travel card,” says McMaster. “The Department of Indian Affairs would have issued it to her. In this photograph I’m wearing it on my wrist. It basically authorized her to be able to take the train and go off the reserve. My dad was told a story of her taking the train to a place called Gleichen in Alberta, where

she had met a man named Howard McMaster, who was Blackfoot from Siksika First Nation. She ended up marrying him.” Her travel card is on view in this gallery. In this photograph, you can make out the trace of the railway ties now overgrown by vegetation, as well as the train trestle in the distance. “There was also a story my grandma would tell my dad about when she was a young teen and loved flattening pennies on the railway tracks.” The railway line allowed freedom for McMaster’s grandmother, but it was also an instrument of colonialism and territorial expansion for settlers. “I think that the symbol of the train has meaning for lots of different minorities across the country,” says McMaster.

9. *cistâwewina kwayaskinohk kistikânihk* ***Echoes Across The Field***

2022

From the series *nôhkominak âcimowina* | *Stories of my Grandmothers*
Giclée print, 101.6 x 152.5 cm
McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

McMaster writes in syllabics the Plains Cree word waniskâ in the snow, a salutation that her father remembers hearing in the mornings when his mother or grandmother would come to get him up for the day. The term means both “wake up” and “awaken,” suggesting both arousal from sleep and revelation.

10. *ispîhk cikâstêsiniwina pahkihtin* ***When the Shadows Fall***

2022

From the series *nôhkominak âcimowina* | *Stories of my Grandmothers*
Giclée print, 101.6 x 152.5 cm
McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

“There was a letter that my great-grandma Bella wrote in her seventies, which for some reason we still have,” says McMaster. “In it, she describes being widowed in the early 1940s and how hard it was to live off the land, how she had to sell some of her cattle to buy food. She was only in her forties then, but she stayed on Red Pheasant for the rest of her life. In this letter she recalls that she really wanted to have her own house, and how difficult that was for her to do. She was trying to get the government assistance that Indigenous people were allotted. But she basically fails in getting any money.” Her letter is on view in this gallery.

NÔHKOMINAK ÂCIMOWINA STORIES OF MY GRANDMOTHERS

Stories of My Grandmothers draws on the lives of three of McMaster's paternal female relatives: her grandmother Lena McMaster (1921–2013); her great-grandmother Isabella (Bella) Wuttunee (1898–1980); and her great-great-grandmother Matilda (Tilly) Schmidt (1870–1955). Collectively their experience spans 130 years lived on the Red Pheasant Cree Nation, in present-day central Saskatchewan. McMaster's new works have their genesis in her great-grandmother's diaries, which contain simple and casually noted descriptions of events in her daily life—from chores and the weather to special visitors and trips to town. McMaster has blended these memories with those of her father, her great-aunt, her great-uncle, and others in the Red Pheasant community. "By establishing a dialogue with my grandmothers, I keep their memories relevant and alive," McMaster says, "making visible a transfer of knowledge between four generations of women."

11. *wikamik osci nikamowin* *Harbourage For a Song*

2019

From the series *pêyakwan kîsik kakwâyaki-ispîhcâw* | *As Immense as the Sky*

Digital chromogenic print on lustre paper, 101.6 x 152.5 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

12. *ê nitomikowiyân ta kîwîyân* *Calling Me Home*

2019

From the series *pêyakwan kîsik kakwâyaki-ispîhcâw* | *As Immense as the Sky*

Digital chromogenic print on lustre paper, 101.6 x 152.5 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

13. *Ordovician Tide I*

Ordovician Tide II

Ordovician Tide III

2019

From the series *pêyakwan kîsik kakwâyaki-ispîhcâw* | *As Immense as the Sky*

Digital chromogenic print on lustre paper, 101.6 x 152.5 cm each
McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remail Modern

McMaster's mother's family is of European ancestry. Here, McMaster stages herself at the geological seam between Europe and Turtle Island—the Cabot Fault in Newfoundland, which was once connected to what is now Europe.

500 million years ago.

Histories written in the rocks.

*Travelling 'cross the ocean,
from Cabot Fault.*

*Ancient branches run through the Emerald Isle
and Scotland.*

At the precipice in-between.

—Meryl McMaster

14. *tohtahin êtî namôya ka miskimân I* ***Lead Me to Places I Could Never Find*** ***on My Own I***

itohtahin êtî namôya ka miskimân II ***Lead Me to Places I Could Never Find*** ***on My Own II***

2019

From the series *pêyakwan kîsik kakwâyaki-ispîhcâw* | *As Immense as the Sky*

Digital chromogenic print on lustre paper, 101.6 x 152.5 cm each
McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remail Modern

15. *itâmihk kâ kaskatêwinihk, pêhôw*

Deep Into the Darkness, Waiting

2019

From the series *pêyakwan kîsik kakwâyaki-ispîhcâw* | *As Immense as the Sky*

Digital chromogenic print on lustre paper, 114.3 x 76.2 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

16. *nipimâtisiwin ayapihkâtêw isi kiya*

My Destiny is Entwined With Yours

2019

From the series *pêyakwan kîsik kakwâyaki-ispîhcâw* | *As Immense as the Sky*

Digital chromogenic print on lustre paper, 101.6 x 152.5 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

17. *katisk kisipanohk*

Edge of a Moment

2017

From the series *katisk kisipanohk* | *Edge of a Moment*

Giclée print on enhanced matte paper, 152.2 x 239.8 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

Most of McMaster's early works were shot on location near her Ottawa home, but as her resources expanded, so did her aspirations to explore other spaces and places. This iconic work, shot at Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump in Alberta, recalls her ancestors' history of bison hunting on the plains, in which herds were driven over the cliffs to their death. All parts of the animals were destined for use, in contrast to the wasteful culling of the bison by settlers for the making of British bone china. The hat McMaster wears here is a nod to the beaver-fur top hats that were all the rage in faraway London and Paris. The bison and beaver became victims of settler influx.

18. *osci êta kîyapic môy kê kâmwâtahk*

From a Still, Unquiet Place

2019

From the series *pêyakwan kîsik kakwâyaki-ispîhcâw* | *As Immense as the Sky*

Digital chromogenic print on lustre paper, 101.6 x 152.5 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

This work, shot on the Red Pheasant Cree Nation, is a striking expression of McMaster's cultural hybridity, reflecting both the Scots ancestry of her mother's people and her Plains Cree and Siksika family on her father's side. "I have a big black feather headdress on that's modelled on a headdress particular to the Dog Soldiers," McMaster recounts, "a warrior society that came from more southern nations in what's now the United States. Over time they migrated north to where my ancestors lived." The school bells in her hands recall the legacy of the residential schools. McMaster seems to ring them here as if to call the Ancestors. "I'm walking, I'm searching, I'm calling," she says. "The title is important too. This is a beautiful, still place, but this land has a lot to say."

19. *kisikwahk cikâstepayik*

Weight of the Shadow

2015

From the series *kiyêtohtêwin* | *Wanderings*

Giclée print on hot press paper, 114.3 x 76.2 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

Like many of McMaster's early works, this photograph was staged near the Ottawa River, close to her home, yet it evokes a sense of endless migration and restlessness. "I think a lot of my images are about a journey," says McMaster. "Whether it's a mental journey or a journey to an actual place that's a second home, that's part of who I am. And the bells on my skirt are letting the world know that I'm coming."

20. Consanguinity

mâmitonêyihtamowin

Sentience

Tilsam

Viage

2010

From the series *tastaw askiya | In-Between Worlds*

Digital chromogenic print on matte paper, 61 x 61 cm each

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

Of her series *In-Between Worlds*, McMaster has written: “The most profound experiences in my life over the past several years have occurred while exploring remote natural landscapes. It was during these moments of deep change that personal life-meaning took form. To arrive at this heightened understanding of myself, I first had to experience a challenge—whether within a group or alone.”

21. *kisipâyihk ôta kê misâk*

On The Edge Of This Immensity

2019

From the series *pêyakwan kîsik kakwâyaki-ispîhcâw | As Immense as the Sky*

Digital chromogenic print on lustre paper, 101.6 x 152.5 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

22. *paskwâw mostos*
Buffalo

mistatim

Horse

2010

From the series *aniskaciwin* | *Ancestral*

Digital chromogenic print on lustre paper, 111.8 x 76.2 cm each
McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

Of these striking hybrid images, McMaster says, “I was looking at animals that held resonance for Indigenous peoples—the bison, the eagle, some powerful animals that are in our stories—and I was also thinking about how our continued impact on the planet is affecting our surroundings quite drastically, as well as our longstanding connection to our fellow beings.”

23. *yôtin métawêwin pîtosî I*
Wind Play Variation I

2015

yôtin métawêwin

Wind Play

2012

yôtin métawêwin pîtosî II
Wind Play Variation II

2015

From the series *tastaw askiya* | *In-Between Worlds*

Digital chromogenic print on matte paper, 61 x 91.4 cm, 91.4 x 91.4 cm
McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

This series of works arose from an observation McMaster had about some blue balloons that were lying around her studio: What would happen if she were to use them to make a kind of fur-like costume? The result was the garment and headdress here, which riffs intentionally on the famous bearskin headgear of the Grenadier Guards regiment of the British Army and its affiliate, the Canadian Grenadier Guards. The item of clothing is associated with imperial authority and colonization.

24. *tipahikan nihcipayiwîn*

Time's Gravity

2015

From the series *kiyêtohtêwin* | *Wanderings*

Giclée print on hot press paper, 76.2 x 114.3 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

“I was inspired by the drawings that Indigenous peoples of the Great Plains made called ‘winter counts.’ These were very simple drawings usually done on hide, and later paper, depicting something that happened within that community that marked an important moment—a death, an illness in a tribe, a celestial occurrence, or a Sun Dance. In effect, I created my own winter counts along the spines of these books. Each drawing represents an important memory or moment in my life. Then there’s the unwritten part of me that’s still being developed. I’ve stretched my arms out like a bird; I’m just holding the weight of time and my own existence.”

—Meryl McMaster

25. *tâpwêwin isi sôhkisiwin*

Truth to Power

2017

From the series *tâpwêwin isi sôhkisiwin* | *Truth to Power*

Giclée print on cold press paper, 121.9 x 159.8 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

Truth to Power confronts the legacy of the colonial administrator Duncan Campbell Scott (1862–1947), who played a significant role in the development and administration of Canada’s residential school system. Here, his poem “The Onondaga Madonna” reveals his starkly racist view of Indigenous peoples as dark, savage, and doomed to extinction. In this work, the poem is copied in the hand of a contemporary ten-year-old Kahnawà:ke child.

26. *apowâtamowin kahcopicikêw*

Dream Catcher

2015

From the series *kiyêtohtêwin* | *Wanderings*

Giclée print on hot press paper, 81.3 x 167.6 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

27. *aniskaciwin niktowâsik*

Ancestral 6

2008

aniskaciwin mitâtaht

Ancestral 10

2008

From the series *aniskaciwin* | *Ancestral*

Digital chromogenic print on lustre paper, 111.8 x 76.2 cm each
McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

The *Ancestral* series was one of McMaster's earliest artistic explorations of her Indigenous identity, completed while she was still a student at OCAD University. The source images for these works were drawn from the late nineteenth century, appropriated from the American photographers Edward S. Curtis and Will Soule and from historical paintings by George Catlin. "In a darkened studio I projected them onto my own face and onto my father's," McMaster recalls, "and then I took the pictures. There was no Photoshop here."

28. *Anima*

2012

From the series *tastaw askiya* | *In-Between Worlds*

Digital chromogenic print, 91.4 x 91.4 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Remai Modern

In Plains Cree culture, butterflies are associated with the presence of the ancestors, flitting back into contact with the living. Here the butterflies flock together in the winter, an anomaly in the natural order of things. "It's as if I was turning into ice," says McMaster, "and the butterflies are in a sense breathing life back into me. They're waking me up."

kamâmâkosak

Butterflies

2023

52 butterflies, mixed media, variable dimensions

Made by Marianne Collins

FLOOR PLAN

1st floor

Salle Nicole et René Després et Jeannette et Luc Liard



