

# CLOSING THIS WEEKEND: Kwe at Justina M. Barnicke Gallery U of T Toronto & Skin Deep at Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa

Posted on [August 8, 2014](#)



Rebecca Belmore "Sister" 2010. Image provided by Scotiabank Contact.

*"KWE delves into the complicated and fertile relationship between Indigeneity, art, and colonization. Kwe is the Anishinaabe word for woman and is a term of respect. Rebecca Belmore's artistic practice engages the question of what it is to be an Anishinaabe-kwe artist working today through photography, sculptures, videos, and performances."* [Scotiabank Contact website](#)

Crammed into a confined space at the [Justina M. Barnicke Gallery](#) are four videos that span the career of artist Rebecca Belmore. The combination of the tight squeeze, the darkness and the haunting sounds seeping from the headsets feels like an assault on the senses – as it should be. Because Rebecca's work isn't about being conceptual – it batters you, hits you

hard, compels you to have some sort of reaction even if that reaction is to go deeper into denial because the uncomfortable truths she tells are too painful to wrap your head around.











*Above images of Rebecca's October 2013 performance in Toronto. All images by Leah Snyder for Mixed Bag Mag.*

At a performance last fall as part of the [Symposium on Decolonial Aesthetics From The Americas](#) Rebecca scraped stone, blood, oil, over a window from the outside as we looked on as witnesses from the inside. The blazing lights of a parked car in a dark lot (aimed at the window and framing Rebecca's body in silhouette) summed up how murdered and missing Indigenous Women (the current count according to the RCMP is 1181\*) may have spent their final moments. I've travelled alone many times. I think of the close calls I have had on dark roads alone in cars with a man / men. There go I but for the grace of some god.

Why her, that Kwe? And why not me?

One might say because "she was in the wrong place at the wrong time" – the English phrase, that in this case, is a misnomer that actually means she was in a place where one is caught in a web of systems (beyond her control) that ensure that oppression won't quit. An Indigenous woman's body is still genocidal ground zero, lying under the immovable mass of

Colonial rubble. At present very little is being done to protect our Indigenous sisters.

Despite the tragedy, Rebecca's work has a beauty, and I am sure I am not the first to say this, a spirit of resilience. The KWE (pronounced K-way) exhibit demonstrates her ability to embed elegance into any composition or object. One exits from the room housing the videos into the main room inhabited by photography with a striking and succinct presence – a woman's back, a worn jean jacket, outstretched arms, gracefully positioned fingers reach out as if to soften, with her touch, the room's sharp corners.





In the series *Untitled* a woman is wrapped in the swaddled style of a mummified corpse. The spirit of the woman breathes into the negative spaces; her shadows extend beyond her physical presence. Rebecca's compositions are laconic phrases that speak of life enduring.

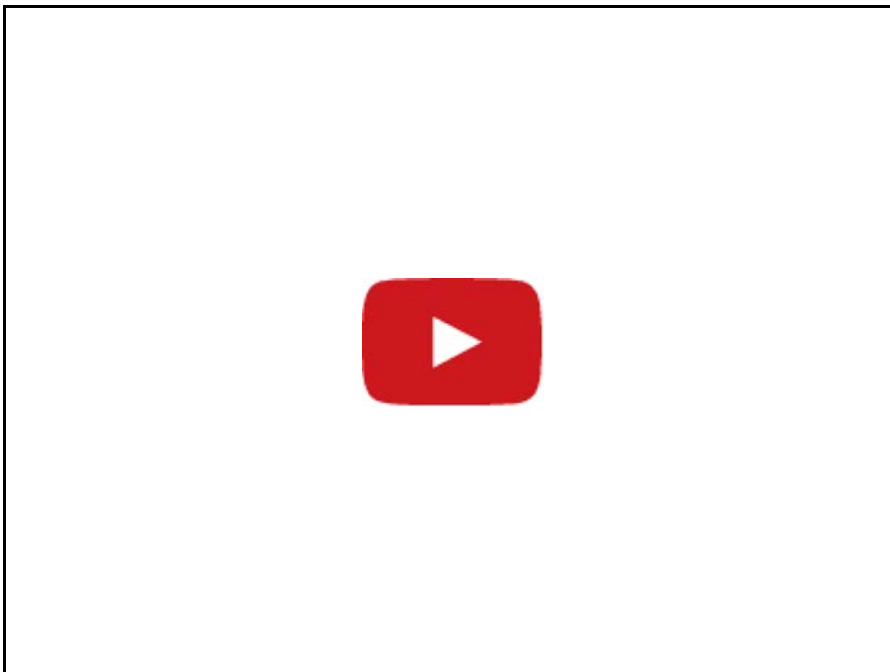
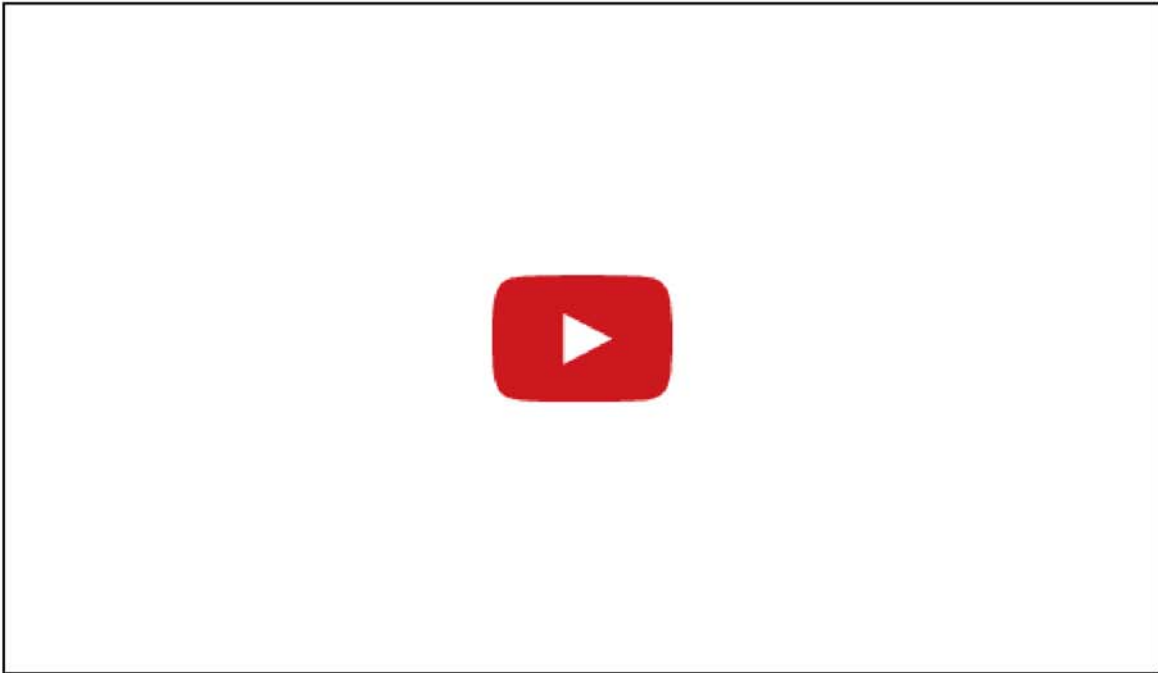
KWE closes this weekend at the Justina M. Barnicke with a performance by Rebecca. The performance [Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to their Mother Gathering](#) will include taking the megaphone Rebecca constructed in 1991, as a reaction to the Oka Crisis (Kanien'kehaka Resistance), out of the gallery space into the periphery of the city – Gibraltar Point, Toronto Island.

*"We are living through the pollution of our waterways from unregulated industry, and both Indigenous people and Canadians need to stand together to protect what Anishinaabe people and scientists believe is the lifeblood of Mother Earth. Many Indigenous women have brought attention to the issue through water walks, which actively heal the spirit of the water. Come lend your voice to their action or just hang out in support."* [Read more...](#)

This event is tomorrow, Saturday, August 9, at 1 pm on Toronto Island. Join the [Facebook Event Page](#) to find out information on shuttle buses from the Gallery and pricing for ferries to the island.

In light of what has happened this week around water this has become a more imperative event.





\*NOTE ON THE NUMBER 1181: When I asked Métis artist Christi Belcourt of the [Walking With Our Sisters Project](#) to confirm the latest stats on the missing and murdered sisters she pointed out that the number doesn't include deaths of Indigenous women who are ruled as suicide but whose death might actually be a murder. This number, she says, also doesn't include trans women. Or women who were lost in the system of residential schools, adoption, and foster care. Or women who are non-status. So the number, in truth, is much higher. It is also important to note that Indigenous men are going missing and being murdered at an alarming rate.



*LEFT: Rebecca Belmore at KWE opening. RIGHT: KWE's curator Wanda Nanibush. Image by Leah Snyder for Mixed Bag Mag.*



*Image courtesy curator Lisa Truong.*



*“Skin Deep explores the enormous importance of skins and skin clothing in Inuit culture, past and present. In Inuit narratives, skin is something that can be worn, shed, and manipulated. People tattoo their own skin to affirm personal and cultural identities, and wear clothing made from animal skins for aesthetic adornment and protection from the elements. Skin Deep features the tools used to hunt animals and prepare their skins; prints, drawings, and sculptures depicting stories and objects in which skin plays a central role; and objects made from skin, such as mitts and boots. The exhibition includes the work of artists like Ningeokuluk Teevee, Jessie Oonark, Amaqu Ashevak, and Helen Kalvak.”*



*Photo of curator Lisa Truong by Justin Wonnacott courtesy of Carleton University Art Gallery.*

*Inuit Art: Skin Deep* is a small but impactful show selected with care by curator Lisa Truong. The exhibit currently on at Ottawa's [Carleton University Art Gallery](#), opened with uncanny timing this past spring after a winter of (justifiable) discontent from the Inuit community in response to *Ellen DeGeneres* support in the banning of the seal hunt.

The twittersphere was alive with [#Sealfies](#) as acts of self-determination. Some guests to the CUAG show expressed to Lisa that they had no idea until viewing the *Skin Deep* how vital seal was to the economy and culture of the North and now understood the reaction of the Inuit community.





*Photo by Justin Wonnacott courtesy of Carleton University Art Gallery.*

Inuk filmmaker [Alethea Amaquq-Baril](#) was one of the spearheaders of the social media campaign. Alethea's documentary [Tunniit: Retracing the Lines of Inuit Tattoos](#) recounts her own, often raw story, of how she uncovers the lost traditions of tattooing.



With the coming of Christianity to the North tattooing became a shamed practice. Unlike other traditions that went underground but were still practiced in secret, tattooing

disappeared. Alethea's decision to tattoo her own face, initially, was not met with support from her Inuk mother. The shame around marking one's body to embrace one's identity as an Inuk person has been etched deep into the psyche of the Inuit. Breaking with traditions became a strategy of survival once the European arrived and took control.

Knowing this, when you see Amaquq Ashevak's *"Tattooed Women"* in *Skin Deep* you understand that it contains loaded histories and contemporary victories in its quiet presence. Much like Rebecca's *Untitled* series, the way the women are wrapped by the bands of ink can be read as simultaneously binding and protective.



*"Tattooed Women" by Amaqu Ashevak. Image courtesy of Dorset Fine Arts.*

Lisa recounts:

*"when I saw Alethea's documentary I knew I wanted to do something on the body and  
"Tattooed Women" was the first piece that popped into my mind. Alethea's documentary*

*shows reclamation of knowledge and a decision to go find that knowledge even if it is obscure – to go hunt it out – and place it on the body.”*

Alethea's choice to score her face with ink was a radical act of decolonizing her body. Her reversal back into time to bring forth a lost tradition will have dramatic impact on the future of her community. Already we see other Inuit women following her example.

Of Amaqu's work Lisa says:

*“This piece is a reflective piece looking forward and looking back so on the right you have the woman who is representing the traditional body and facial tattoos as well as traditional forms of beauty. You can see ever so slightly the tattoos on her cheeks and two braids on the side of her head.*

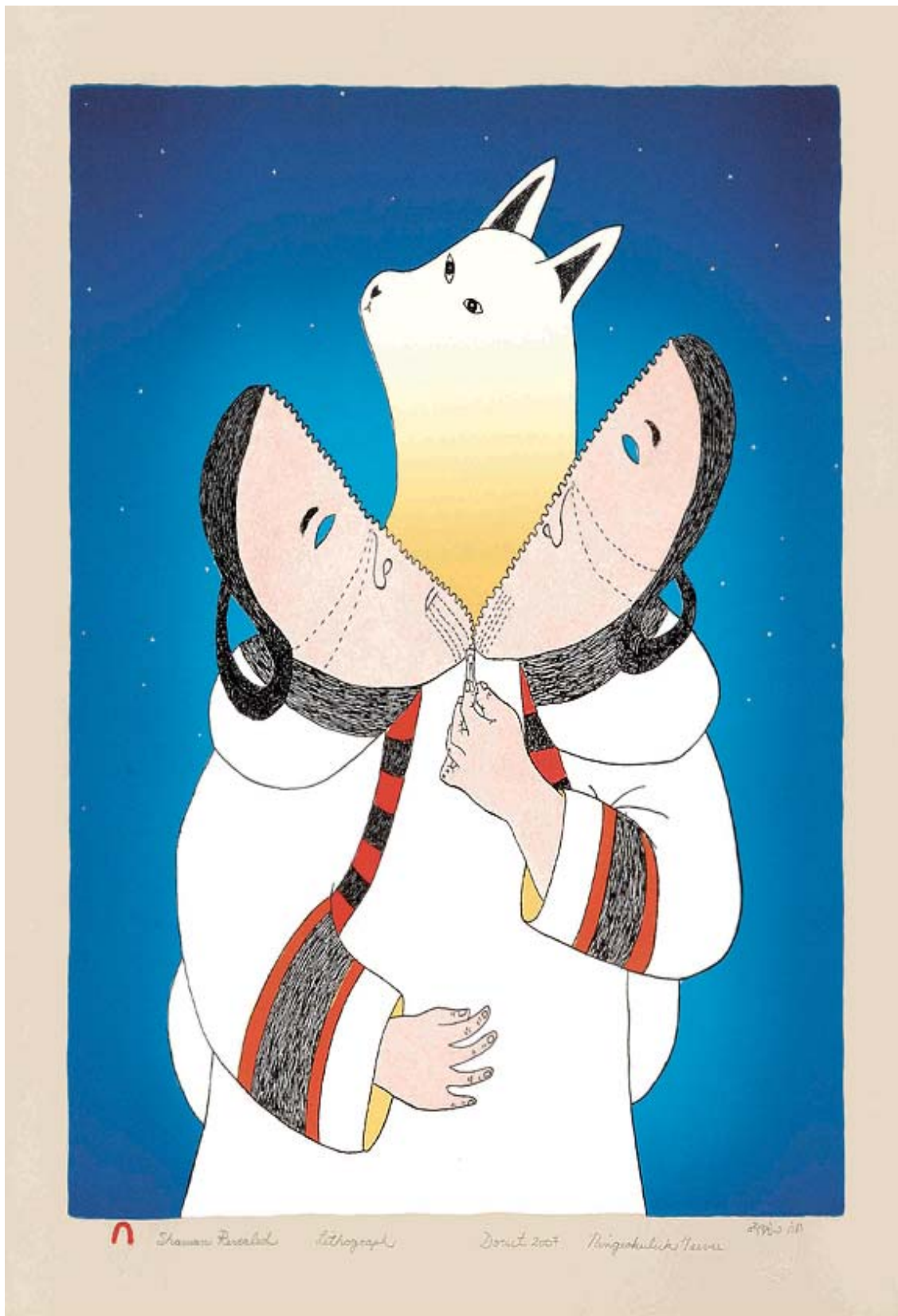
*On the left a woman is clothed in tattoos that are contemporary, not to be literal, but as a symbolic decision on what parts to reveal and what parts to cover.*

*The way the women are posed, their arms up, they are asking people to look at their bodies. There is this gaze that travels across the body.*

*It's a very warm piece and thought provoking piece because of the body language of the women – they are modest but have their arms up as to expose.”*

For me, the power in this piece is the agency it expresses regarding women's bodies and spiritual selves. As Lisa says, this work, like Alethea's decision to tattoo her face “demonstrates the body as a place of political and cultural sovereignty.”





*"Shaman Revealed" by Ningeokuluk Teevee. Image courtesy of Dorset Fine Arts.*

The other piece in the show that as a woman moved me was *"Shaman Revealed."* In a time when we desperately require (s)heros the unzipping of a woman's skin to reveal the animal spirit inside speaks to the importance of personal transformation in finding the source of one's influence.

The artist, Lisa says, “combines a traditional legend [[the legend of Kiviug](#)] with contemporary flair. The story is about staying true to oneself and not criticizing others for being who they are.”

There is alchemic power when we reveal what we hide inside.

Both KWE and Skin Deep present the female/kwe body as the conduit of great strength and locate her beyond victimhood.

[Inuit Art: Skin Deep](#) closes this weekend at CUAG.

For weekend visiting hours visit the Carleton University Art Gallery’s [website](#).



Image courtesy curator Lisa Truong.

## Related Posts



[CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL ART: Resources for All The Talent](#)

[TIME FOR RADICAL CHANGE: Sakahàn at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa](#)



"The youth program was fantastic!"  
This is the best audience for this exhibition as getting youth involved



IDENTITY CRISIS: When Two (or more) Worlds Collide with  
Akram Khan & Basma Alsharif



INUIT IN OTTAWA: Foodland Security, A Taste of The (Edible)  
Arctic & How To Do Away With Cultural Prejudice While Having  
Fun!



INUIT IN CANADA: Celebrating By Supporting a Thriving  
Culture



FICTIONS & LEGENDS: Jérôme Havre Closes at the Textile  
Museum, Toronto



MIXED BAG MAG DOES NEW YORK: Art Smart in NYC



THE END OF THE KARA WALKER EXHIBIT AT THE  
DOMINO SUGAR PLANT: The Complex Relationship between  
the Collective History, Memory, and Lived Experience and  
Those Unwilling to Share the Burden

OTTAWA LOVE: New Opportunities with The Governor General's Rideau Hall Foundation,



CUAG & Michaëlle Jean's The Power of the Arts



ALEX & ALMA: Alex Colville Retrospective closing this weekend in Toronto & Alma Duncan next weekend in Ottawa



CLOSING THIS WEEKEND: The Sahmat Collective - Art & Activism in India since 1989 at The Art Gallery of Mississauga



CLOSING THIS WEEKEND: Making Otherwise - Craft and Material Fluency in Contemporary Art at Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa

THE CURATOR AS A 21ST CENTURY AGENT OF CHANGE: Leah Snyder presents at the Michaëlle Jean Foundation's Power of the Arts Forum



This entry was posted in [Aboriginal / Indigenous](#), [Aboriginal Artists](#), [Activism](#), [Artists](#), [Canadian](#), [Carleton University Art Gallery](#), [Gender / Sexuality](#), [Identity](#), [Identity Politics in Art](#), [Indigenous Culture](#), [Inuit](#), [Inuk / Inuit](#), [Issues of Representation](#), [Justina M. Barnicke](#), [Ottawa's Art Scene](#), [Photography Leah Snyder](#), [Toronto's Art Institutions](#) and tagged [Aboriginal](#), [Alethea Arnaquq-Baril](#), [Anishinaabe](#), [Arnaqu Ashevak](#), [Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan](#), [Canada](#), [Canadian](#), [Carleton](#), [Christi Belcourt](#), [Contact](#), [Dorset Fine Arts](#), [First Nations](#), [gender](#), [Identity](#), [indigenous](#), [Inuit](#), [Inuk](#), [Justina M. Barnicke](#), [Lisa Truong](#), [Metis](#), [Ningeokuluk Teevee](#), [North](#), [Ottawa](#), [Rebecca Belmore](#), [Scotiabank](#), [sealfies](#), [tattoo](#), [Toronto](#), [Tunniit](#), [University of Toronto](#), [violence](#), [Walking With Our Sisters](#), [Wanda Nanibush](#), [Women](#) by [admin](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#) [<http://mixedbagmag.com/2014/08/kwe-and-skin-deep/>] .

Comments are closed.