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## Rebecca Belmore: Kwe, at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Renowned, fiery First Nations artist speaks of mother Earth in new exhibition of performance, sculpture, installation

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Rebecca Belmore with Speaking to Their Mother in Banff, using it as intended.

By: [Murray Whyte](#) Visual arts, Published on Sat May 17 2014

Let's get something straight, says Wanda Nanibush. "I didn't want this show to be about identity," Nanibush, the curator of *Kwe*, a new exhibition of the work of renowned native artist Rebecca Belmore, declared earlier this week.

"Even though it's chock full of it?" asks Belmore, listening intently, an impish grin curling her lips. And fair enough: Belmore, 53, is one of the country's best known artists, made famous on the international stage for her fiery, often-confrontational performance pieces centred on the ravages of colonialism on her people and its contemporary fallout. And then, there's the title: *Kwe*, in Anishinaabe, both Nanibush's and Belmore's native language, means "woman."

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It all boils down to a weight of a particular, politicized expectation, but Nanibush does an admirable job of defying it. Helping her along, of course, is Belmore, whose own gestures — sometimes shocking, occasionally subtle and most always open to interpretation — defy easy categorization.

One definition that both woman embrace is status as Anishinaabe people, a group of First Nations clustered around the Great Lakes on both sides of the Canada-U.S.

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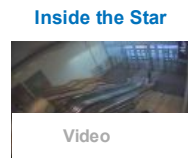
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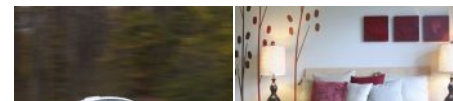


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In a curious confluence, on the same day this week that Nanibush and Belmore put the final pieces in place for *Kwe*, at the University of Toronto's [Justina M. Barnicke Gallery](#), the Art Gallery of Ontario announced its own broad-ranging exhibition of Anishinaabe art and culture, ranging thousands of years right up to contemporary artists like Robert Houle and Carl Beam.

And absent? Belmore, a bona fide Anishinaabe kwe, and the biggest name living artist the culture can claim (the late Norval Morrisseau might trump her, but only just). "It's a long story," Belmore smiles, when asked why, declining to comment further. "I'm just not in it, that's all. Instead, I'm here."

It leaves the mind to wander to some obvious conclusions: that maybe Belmore, with her powerful, unsettling gestures might be too disruptive for an exhibition already walking on the ever delicate political eggshells of aboriginal cultural representation? Or maybe Belmore, who is fiercely protective of her work and its presentation, declined?

"No comment." She smiles again and it's a warm, mischievous thing. Belmore's reputation, as a rage-filled firebrand pushing back hard against a litany of colonial ills, belies her. In 2005, when she represented Canada at the Venice Biennale, she produced a video called *Fountain*, a menacing work in which Belmore, dark hair shaved to a crewcut, lugged buckets of water from an idyllic lake, eventually dousing her lens with a thick, red liquid, evoking the blood of her ancestors spilled in the wake of colonial advancement. A video piece from 2001, *The Blanket*, tackles head-on allegations about the Hudson's Bay blanket, namely that hundreds of them were deliberately inculcated with the smallpox virus and distributed to natives across the newly established colony of Canada, a story that [HBC denies](#).

In person Belmore is thoughtful, soft-spoken and wickedly funny, prone to warm, generous laughter in one moment and quiet reflection in the next. There is much about the viral spread of Christianity — colonialism's main engine, the world over, converting so-called heathens, right up to the painfully recent era of residential schools here — and Belmore doesn't shy from strong statements. *Mixed Blessing*, a 2011 sculpture here, shows a kneeling figure in a jet-black hoodie, its face obscured by a flowing train of hair; on its back, two crossing texts read "F\_\_kin artist/F\_\_kin Indian" ("Take your pick," she laughs).

She's quick to deflect credit — the show, she says, belongs to Nanibush; she just helped her fill it — and is as likely as not to politely avoid explanation on any of her pieces here.

"I don't really have anything to say about that," she says, walking lightly past a series of untitled photographs of her sister bound tight in thick, white fabric and suspended in uncomfortable poses. Confinement, struggle, repression and endurance all come to mind, but Belmore's not telling. One piece she doesn't mind talking about, though, is *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to their Mother*, a massive wooden horn, bound together with leather and animal skins.

It also works. As a massive amplifier for an actual megaphone, the piece has been seen, and heard, all across the country since it was made in 1991, as a direct response to the land rights crisis in Oka, Que. The Mohawk nation there stood up to a land developer looking to build a golf course on their ancestral land. The military was called in and the standoff sat on the knife's edge of disaster for weeks.

Far from amplifying the conflict, Belmore took a step back. Not coincidentally, this is where *Kwe* comes in. "It was about having people speak directly to the land, speaking to the Earth, which is the mother of us all," she explains. On reservations and in cities coast to coast and even on Parliament Hill, anyone and everyone was encouraged to speak openly to the Earth (when it was installed at the National Gallery in Ottawa, it was aimed directly at Parliament Hill). In August, the piece will find its way to Harbourfront Centre, where passersby will be able to speak, loudly, to the city's much abused water spirits of Lake Ontario ("Sorry" might be an appropriate start).

In any case, it becomes clear that *Kwe* is less about any conventional notion of female aboriginal identity than it is a connection to land, place and the superceding layers that strain those ties to near-breaking. In another room, *Facing the Monumental*, a video of a 2012 performance piece Belmore made in Queen's Park, sees her wrapping a 150-year old oak tree in craft paper, eventually binding one of her assistants in the layers with only her hands, feet and head poking through ("when you get older, you can abuse other



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people's bodies instead of your own," she laughs).

It's a complex cluster of things: in Queen's Park, which is ceremoniously littered with monuments to the British Empire — Queen Victoria, a horse-mounted King Edward VII — Belmore creates her own. That it both honours the land at the same time it represents its destruction — the paper, in effect, binds the tree in layers of its own death — speaks quiet volumes about Belmore's overarching concern.

Last year, Belmore made *Private Perimeter* in Sudbury, a subdued video piece here in which an anonymous figure dressed in a safety vest — reflective X in bright yellow, the generic costume of construction labourers everywhere — wanders scrubby hillocks, rubble fields and the clear lakes, a strip of flagging tape waving in the breeze. Belmore made the work wandering liminal zones: some are barren lands being broken and rebuilt for housing developments and shopping malls; some are contoured landscapes, slag heaps, created by dumping mining residue; and others are undisturbed lands (on the surface, at least) of a nearby Indian reservation. With her anonymous wanderer, Belmore asks quietly: in the layers of competing interests on the same land, where can you draw the lines? Decades of seepage into nearby lakes respect no such boundaries and neither does Belmore's work; she wilfully trespassed on mining lands to make it.

Its quietude stands in contrast to an intense performance Belmore made in 1991 for the Havana Biennale. On the opposite wall, the artist, bound, gagged and shrieking, ascends an ancient stone staircase, sand cupped in her hands. She climbs, step by step, spreading sand as she goes, to a triumphal arrival at the top. She called it *Creation or Death, We Will Win*, and it draws the same line: between private and public, and whose right it is to impose their will on another.

"Artists have a job to do," she says. "Everyone, every being on this planet, has to live on this Kwe. Artists are important to that, I think."

*Rebecca Belmore: Kwe continues at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, University of Toronto, to Aug. 9. The artist will perform at the gallery on May 23 at 8 p.m.*

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