

art

VIDEO/PHOTOGRAPHY/PAINTING

Humour, anger, history

Aboriginal artists explore the complexities of colonization **By FRAN SCHECHTER**

SOVEREIGN ACTS at Justina M. Barnicke Gallery (7 Hart House), to May 27. 416-978-8398. Rating: **NNNN**

IN THIS SEASON OF GRADUATING students' exhibits, U of T curatorial studies master's candidate **Wanda Nanibush** goes to the head of the class. Exploring the many dimensions of aboriginal performance, Sovereign Acts showcases work by some of Canada's major artists.

From the beginning of coloniza-

tion, when Europeans exhibited them as curiosities, through the Wild West shows and cowboy films of the reservation era, North America's indigenous people have had a fraught relationship to the "command performances" they gave for their conquerors, who viewed them with both fear and fascination.

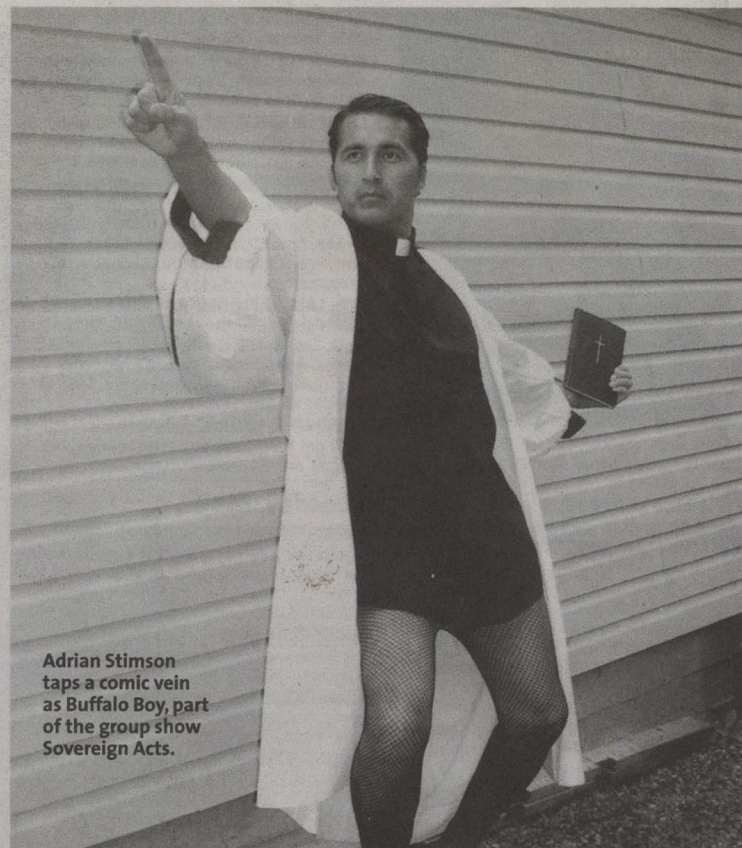
Rebecca Belmore's three-channel video *In A Wilderness Garden* plays with images of land and captivity. Belmore, her hands tied behind her, runs through the woods and fran-

tically tries to dig with her feet in the earth under dead leaves; on another screen a motionless blanket-wrapped person looks away from the camera at an alien manicured garden hedge "wall."

Adrian Stimson brings deadpan comedy to his character Buffalo Boy, occasionally donning a shamanic horned buffalo robe but more often sporting androgynous regalia of cowboy boots and hat, fishnet panty hose and fur mini-dress. In a series of tiny peephole videos he attracts attention wandering around Venice or riding a rocking horse.

He teams up with **Lori Blondeau**, as alter ego gay Wild West show performer *Belle Sauvage*, for a series of old-timey souvenir-type photos in which the pair engage in assorted hanky-panky behind solemn white people dressed as soldiers, priests or chiefs.

Robert Houle's paintings of historical performers, **Terrance Houle's** video of the burning of a toy covered



Adrian Stimson taps a comic vein as *Buffalo Boy*, part of the group show *Sovereign Acts*.

wagon, **Shelley Niro's** impersonation of Marilyn Monroe, and **Jeff Thomas's** photos documenting the powwow circuit round out the show.

But perhaps its most shocking element is a 24-second clip made at Edison Studios in 1894 of a Wild West

show troupe performing the *Ghost Dance*, a forbidden ritual shrouded in tragedy. It's easy to see why contemporary aboriginal artists, using humour and anger, are still mining this complex history. ©

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