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The Children Have to Hear Another Story: Alanis Obomsawin

September 6—November 25, 2023

University of Toronto Art Centre

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Works by Alanis Obomsawin

Curated by Richard Hill (Smith Jarislowsky
Senior Curator of Canadian Art) and Hila
Peleg.

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The exhibition is organized by Richard William Hill and Hila Peleg and made possible through a partnership between Haus der Kulturen der Welt, the Art Museum at the University of Toronto, and Vancouver Art Gallery in collaboration with the National Film Board of Canada, and by the generous support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Embassy of Canada, Berlin, and CBC/ Radio Canada. This project has been made possible in part by the Government of Canada. Additional project support has been provided by ISO (Indigenous Screen Office).

Introduction to the Exhibition

by Richard Hill and Hila Peleg

Alanis Obomsawin was born into a dark period of Indigenous history, when options for social and political agency were radically and systemically foreclosed. Despite this, she managed to consistently access public platforms to advance Indigenous concerns and tell Indigenous stories. She has done this so effectively and with such integrity as a documentary filmmaker working at the National Film Board of Canada that she has become a revered and beloved figure within Indigenous communities and celebrated both in Canada and internationally. In the process, she has created a model of Indigenous cinema that privileges the voices of her subjects and challenges core assumptions (economic, environmental, political, epistemic, ontological) of the world system created by colonialism that we all now inhabit and contend with.

This exhibition attempts to explain how Obomsawin achieved what she did and what it has meant for her to do so. It begins with an exploration of the forces that motivated and gave Obomsawin strength beginning when she was a young girl and is then organized chronologically by decade, starting in the 1960s, when she first came to public attention as a performer and activist commenting on Indigenous issues. Although social and biographical developments

never fit neatly into discrete decades, the exhibition structure nevertheless helps make visible important changes that occurred over time. Each section is organized around her major films, with artwork, documents and ephemera providing additional context. Select items from each decade are briefly introduced within these pages.

It is important to understand how early Obomsawin committed herself to helping her community and the obstacles she had to overcome in her childhood. In the year she was born, 1932, Indigenous children in Canada were sent by the state to church-run residential schools. These schools had the explicit mandate of destroying Indigenous cultures, beliefs and languages and replacing them with the cultures and Christian religions of European settlers. If you were an Indigenous person who wanted to vote in a federal election in 1932, you would be required to give up your “Indian Status” and associated Treaty Rights and other collective rights—few people chose to do this. If you were an Indigenous woman and married a non-Indigenous man, you would automatically lose your status. If you wanted to practice ceremonies such as the Sun Dance or the Potlatch or even create the objects associated with them, you would be breaking the law as laid down in the *Indian Act* of 1876. And if you hoped to see Indigenous people in the public sphere, you would find a deluge of “Indian” imagery in popular media but very few Indigenous

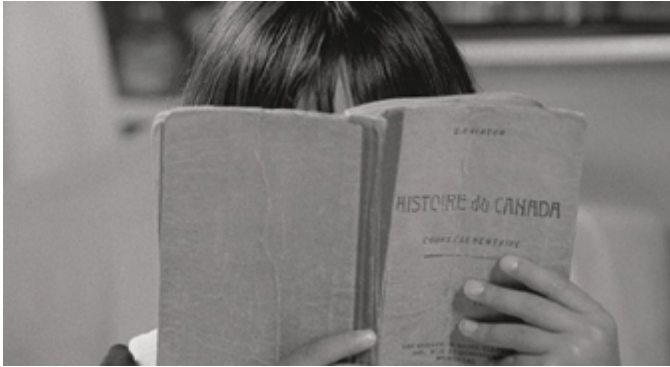
people representing themselves or their cultures. Likewise, in academia and public policy discussions, there were anthropologists and other “Indian experts” speaking confidently about and proposing solutions to the “Indian problem.”

Having moved from her home community of Odanak to Trois-Rivières (at about the age of five) to start grade school, Obomsawin was spared residential school but nevertheless taught a curriculum that slandered and disparaged her Abenaki heritage. As the only Indigenous child in her class, she was subject to vicious racist bullying at school and in town. Her circumstances would have broken many strong people, or at least prevented them from achieving their full potential. Yet when her father died when she was twelve—another terrible blow—Obomsawin resolved: “Nobody’s going to beat me up anymore.”

This act of will was followed by a surprisingly adult insight: “I thought, if the children could hear the stories I hear, maybe they would be behaving differently... By the time I got to be fourteen, I knew exactly why and how all this had happened.” She then put this knowledge into action. Her commitment to children and the transformative potential of education has remained a driving force of her lifework. Looking through her personal photograph collection, she can be seen again and again surrounded by children—playing, performing, telling stories. Much later,

Obomsawin looked back on this period of her life to examine not only the forces that constrained her but those protectors who visited her dreams to give her strength.

—*Richard Hill and Hila Peleg*



Alanis Obomsawin, *When All the Leaves Are Gone*, 2010 (still). Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada.



Alanis Obomsawin, *Untitled*, 1990, monotype. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Emily Gan.



Alanis Obomsawin, *Untitled*, n.d., drypoint. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Emily Gan.

1960s

Alanis Obomsawin quickly put into action her adolescent insight that children needed to hear a different story about Indigenous Peoples. She began locally, visiting Scout troops, “telling them stories and going to the bush to talk about the things I learned as a young person. Eventually I started going to the classroom.” Around the same time, she worked as a model in Florida, later making Montréal her home. She became immersed in the city’s cultural foment of the late 1950s and 1960s, meeting influential artists, photographers and musicians and gaining a reputation as a singer and storyteller.

By the early 1960s, the media had discovered Obomsawin. And she discovered the media—quickly grasping the opportunity to direct the attention she was getting to the issues she cared about. By 1964, she began appearing occasionally on CBC/ Radio- Canada television programs, talking about Indigenous issues and performing songs. Her activism on behalf of children in her home community of Odanak also drew attention, including a Christmas Eve 1965 article on the front page of the *Montreal Star*: “‘Princess’ Rival to Santa.” It reads: “The Abenaki children, like paleface youngsters, believe in Santa Claus, but they are depending mostly upon a sort of ‘fairy princess’ to bring them gifts tomorrow.” This was, of course, Obomsawin, who still provides gifts to every child on her reserve each Christmas. Like other

media coverage of her in this period, the tone is sympathetic and somewhat patronizing at the same time, but her own agenda nevertheless comes through.



Alanis Obomsawin with her handmade toys, n.d. Courtesy of the artist.

EXCERPTS FROM CBC/RADIO-CANADA TV PROGRAMS, 1964-69

(Note: Most of the coverage of Obomsawin in the media, including her frequent appearances on CBC, is displayed on monitors throughout the central gallery.)

This series of clips from Obomsawin's CBC/ Radio-Canada appearances provides a sense of how she used her presence as a singer and advocate in this important national forum. In the 1964 interview with Jean Ducharme on *Aujourd'hui*, Obomsawin discusses the importance of maintaining Indigenous heritage against the pressures of assimilation and flips popular assumptions by arguing that Indigenous cultures have also contributed a great deal to the wider world.

On *The Observer* that same year, Obomsawin speaks with host Alan Hamel about Indigenous issues and performs several songs. The program takes what can only be described as a bizarre turn at the end. As Hamel and Obomsawin conclude their conversation, he says, "I know that the bear is the symbol of the Abenaki, and so we have decided to cook a little bear meat today. Have you ever had bear meat?" Obomsawin, looking a bit embarrassed and perplexed, answers, "No, not me." Hamel then proceeds to fry chunks of bear meat that have been rolled

in on a trolley. One suspects that, even in 1964, this seemed strange to most viewers. Today, it is surely evident to almost anyone how alienating this supposed gesture of hospitality was, even if one does not know the taboo against eating bear meat if one is Bear Clan, or that Obomsawin is a lifelong vegetarian.

The 1966 profile of Obomsawin for the program *Telescope* is the most thoughtful and aesthetically compelling approach to her life and career from this period. Directed by Ron Kelly, the episode centres on Obomsawin's efforts to raise money for a swimming pool for the children on the Odanak reserve; it also addresses the challenges she herself had to overcome in dealing with racism growing up. The river that the children previously swam in had become too polluted to use. The nearby town of Pierreville built a pool, but the Indigenous children were not welcome there. Unwilling to accept this situation, Obomsawin spent several years raising the funds to build a pool on the reserve for them. Just recently, she reports, "The same community who would not accept our children came to the band council and asked if their children could come and swim in Odanak because they don't have a swimming pool anymore. Of course, they said yes. I was very happy about that, because I wouldn't want them to behave like they did."

In 1969, Obomsawin appeared on the program

Take 30 in a roundtable format strikingly different from her previous appearances on CBC/Radio-Canada programs. *Take 30* began in the early 1960s as a weekday afternoon “women’s program,” covering subjects like entertainment, travel and household hints, but by 1969 it had evolved to take on serious social and political issues. The roundtable, featuring all women, was moderated by Adrienne Clarkson, who came to Canada from Hong Kong as a refugee and went on to become one of CBC’s best-known interviewers and eventually the first person of colour to be appointed governor general of Canada. In the conversation, Clarkson positions herself as a classical liberal in conversation with women representing movements for change on the themes of “violence, oppression and action.” Aside from Obomsawin, they include two iconic public figures: urban planning theorist Jane Jacobs and Kathleen Cleaver, a leader within the American Black Panther Party. Also present are sociology professor Margaret Norquay and Jennifer Penney, introduced as a “student leader, feminist and political radical.”

Press clippings featuring Obomsawin, 1965–79

This selection of press clippings provides another window into Obomsawin's emergence as a significant public figure in the 1960s, including being chosen by *Maclean's* magazine as an "Outstanding Canadian of 1965."

Photographs and press clipping from Obomsawin's modelling career, c. 1950s and 1960s

Obomsawin began modelling in her teens, a job that led her to Florida—where she ended up living for two years—and then to Montréal, which, along with her home community of Odanak, has been her home ever since. Obomsawin has maintained a lifelong interest in fashion.

Handmade animals and presents by Alanis Obomsawin, since 1948

When Obomsawin was sixteen years old, she reflected on her own experiences of hardship and made the remarkable decision to do something for the children on her home reserve of Odanak: she would provide each child with a present at Christmas and Easter. At sixteen, this meant making toys by hand, baking cookies, painting Easter eggs and creating whatever else she could think of. Her first homemade stuffed animals were somewhat two-dimensional creatures copied from

children's drawings, made while she taught herself to sew. Since then, every generation of children in Odanak has had their Christmases brightened by gifts from Obomsawin.

***“‘Princess’ Rival to Santa,” Montreal Star,
December 24, 1965***

In 1965, Obomsawin's Christmas generosity found public recognition on the front page of the *Montreal Star*. The accompanying article was illustrated by a tableau from the community's nativity play, with Obomsawin in white buckskin as the Virgin Mary. In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Obomsawin could not distribute her Christmas presents at the community centre as she usually does—these days, five for every child—so she delivered them door to door, followed by three pickup trucks piled high with toys. Many of these presents are store bought, but others have been made or embellished by Obomsawin and her friends throughout the year. The basement of her Odanak home appears to be primarily dedicated to toy production.



Handmade toy by Alanis Obomsawin, n.d. Courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Photo: Kyla Bailey.

1970s

Alanis Obomsawin's work as a filmmaker began to be released through the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) in the 1970s, although her relationship with the NFB began earlier. Her profile on the CBC program Telescope caught the attention of Robert Verrall (NFB animator and production director) and Joe Koenig (NFB director and producer), who brought her in as a consultant because of their discomfort with how the NFB was portraying Indigenous Peoples in its documentaries. Her criticism of these portrayals was right on point: in the films, "we never get to hear the people speak." Verrall was impressed

and offered Obomsawin a contract in 1967, which would turn into a permanent position about a decade later. She has worked at the NFB ever since and is now the only remaining filmmaker on staff.

The films that Obomsawin released in the 1970s aim directly at giving their Indigenous subjects opportunities to tell their own stories. This agenda fundamentally and permanently shaped Obomsawin's approach to cinema, which, whenever possible, involves visiting communities and taking the time to build trust. This includes listening to and recording stories solely on audio tape until she thoroughly understands her subjects' perspectives and everyone involved is comfortable enough for camera and sound crews to come in and do their work.

The 1970s also saw the rise and growing influence of “red power” activist groups, such as the American Indian Movement in the US and Canada.

Mariposa Folk Festival, program brochures and photographs, 1969–77

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Obomsawin performed at and was a programmer for the Mariposa Folk Festival in Southern Ontario. The recovery, celebration and revitalization of folk traditions that the scene was initially premised on created space for the appreciation of Indigenous

musical heritage. For a number of years, Obomsawin was responsible for programming a “Native area” as a regular aspect of the festival, bringing in performers from many different Indigenous communities.

***Christmas at Moose Factory (1971),
13 min., Moose Factory, Ontario, along with
archival material, production photographs and
children’s drawings***

Obomsawin’s debut film does something unprecedented: it depicts the Cree community of Moose Factory in Northern Ontario through the drawings and voices of its children. While focused on a period around Christmas, the drawings and stories nevertheless provide a rich portrait of various facets of the community and its institutions from the children’s perspectives. This includes not only family life but also experiences at two schools: the residential school, run by the federal government—some of the students come from town, but many others from the reserves—and the village school in Moose Factory for locals. The NFB has kept many of the artworks used in *Christmas at Moose Factory*. This selection of visually compelling drawings offers a sense of the breadth of themes seen in the film. To coordinate camera movements when filming the drawings, transparencies were created as guides; these transparencies are here displayed atop the drawings to illustrate this process.

As the film represents Moose Factory primarily through the children's artworks, the production stills on display provide an especially valuable record of Obomsawin's work with the children and the warm relationships she established with them through play and attentive listening.

Old Crow (1979), 29 min., from Sounds from Our People, a six-part television series, Old Crow, Yukon

Decades before *Sigwan* (2005), Obomsawin made a short film involving children in the creation and performance of bird and animal character masks.

Mother of Many Children (1977), 58 min., Burns Lake, British Columbia, and other places, along with archival material and production photographs, 1975–77

Obomsawin's first feature-length documentary provided the opportunity for Indigenous women from diverse communities across Canada to discuss their experiences as women. The result is a fascinating collage of insights from many Indigenous communities, generations and experiences. As the vignettes accumulate, the viewer is given an increasingly complex understanding of the ways in which the strength of women holds communities together and keeps Indigenous values vital and active, even as people's lives change.

Amisk (1977), 40 min., La Grande Rivière and Montréal, Québec, along with archival material and production photographs, 1974–77

When the James Bay Cree began to protest an unwanted hydroelectric project, including building a dam, on their territories, Obomsawin characteristically brought all the tools at her disposal to address the situation. Drawing on her connections with Indigenous performers across Canada and the US, she helped to organize the nine-day James Bay Festival in Montréal in 1977 to support the struggle. At the same time, she made *Amisk*, a unique document of the intersections of Indigenous cultures, musical traditions and activism at this generative moment. “Amisk” means “beaver” in Cree, and trapping beaver is shown to be an important part of the livelihood of the James Bay community. In the film, concert and other performance footage is interspersed with interviews with members of the James Bay Cree centred on their struggle and amplifying their voices through a show of political unity amid diversity.

Education kits for Manawan (1972) and L'il'wata (1975), various materials, along with production photographs, c. 1970–75

Another of Obomsawin's NFB projects was to create education kits that could be sent to schools across Canada to aid teachers in their

lessons on Indigenous Peoples. It was a project that aligned perfectly with her goal of reaching children with more accurate information. The box kits each focused on a particular community and contained short filmstrips, vinyl records, colouring books and photographs, as well as objects that appealed to children's tactile senses, such as miniature snowshoes created by the children themselves.

EXCERPTS FROM CBC/RADIO-CANADA TV PROGRAMS, 1971-78

The excerpt from the CBC/Radio-Canada series *This Land* (1971) provides a vivid sense of the growing influence of Indigenous activists like Obomsawin, who were connecting with one another and thinking about how to adapt mainstream professions and institutions to Indigenous needs.

It also provides an understanding of the active nurturing of connections between urban activists and reserve communities at this time.



Christmas at Moose Factory, c. 1971 (production photograph). Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada and the artist.



Alanis Obomsawin at Mariposa Folk Festival, Orillia, Ontario, n.d. Courtesy of the artist.



Alanis Obomsawin conducts an interview for *Mother of Many Children*, 1977. Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada.



Amisk, 1977 (production photograph). Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada.

1980s

Through the late 1970s and into the 1980s, the attempts of earlier activist movements to articulate a positive vision of Indigenous cultures began to develop into a broader and more explicitly political program. This included building on the connections being made across Indigenous communities to create coalitions to defend Treaty Rights and work toward sovereignty over government organizations, social services and territory. This shift was mirrored in Alanis Obomsawin's films.

Along with persistent land and Treaty Rights issues that erupted at times into open conflict between Indigenous communities and the state, Indigenous Peoples were also addressing the multigenerational damage to families and cultural institutions inflicted by colonial dehumanization and assimilation. This included attempting to gain control of and provide culturally specific social services to their own communities.

***Incident at Restigouche (1984), 46 min.,
Listuguj and Montréal, Québec, along with
archival material and production photographs,
1982–84***

On June 11, 1981, 550 members of the Québec provincial police, dressed in riot gear, descended

upon the Restigouche reserve, a small Mi'kmaq community of 150. The ostensible motivation for the raid was to inspect the community's modest salmon fishery, but the scale and brutality of the police action—which Obomsawin was able to document through interviews with the community—made it clear that it was aimed primarily at creating a spectacle of the province's authority at the expense of Indigenous sovereignty. One of the film's most compelling moments is Obomsawin's heated interview with Québec Minister of Fisheries Lucien Lessard, which she conducted in her own home.

Internal documents from the NFB show the challenges Obomsawin faced in getting Incident at Restigouche approved. Aside from the usual hurdle of responding to an unfolding crisis quickly through a slow-moving bureaucratic approval process, the programming committee forbid her to talk to the “whites” and only allowed her to speak to the “Indians.”



Alanis Obomsawin, *Incident at Restigouche*, 1984 (still). Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada.



Incident at Restigouche, 1984 (production photograph). Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada and the artist.

EXCERPTS FROM CBC/RADIO-CANADA TV PROGRAMS, 1982–83

In the 1980s, Obomsawin continued to appear on CBC/Radio-Canada programs as both a performer and a public intellectual with important things to say about Indigenous issues.

Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child (1986), 29 min., Breynat, Alberta, and other places, along with archival material, press clippings and production photographs, 1984–87

On June 26, 1984, a bright and thoughtful seventeen-year-old Métis boy, Richard Cardinal, walked out into a wooded area on his foster parents' property in Sangudo, Alberta, and hanged himself. He left behind a heartbreaking diary documenting his short life spent being neglected and abused as he was moved through twenty-eight different foster homes. Obomsawin uses Cardinal's own words from his diary, along with interviews and staged re-creations, to tell his story. She also made the difficult ethical choice to include photographs of Cardinal's death scene in the film. These are hard to look at and even harder to forget. The film ends with a demand for Indigenous control of social services.

The displayed press clippings are from Obomsawin's research files for the film *Richard Cardinal* and provide a glimpse of the extensive press coverage Cardinal's story received across Canada. It became one of the galvanizing moments in the struggle for Indigenous Peoples to govern social services in many communities at this time.

***Poundmaker's Lodge: A Healing Place*
(1987), 29 min., Edmonton, Alberta, along with
archival material, 1984–87**

Where the case of Richard Cardinal demonstrates the vulnerability of Indigenous children in the care of social services, *Poundmaker's Lodge* presents the hopeful model of an Indigenous-run addiction and mental health facility. The facility, named after the nineteenth-century Plains Cree Chief Pîhtokahanapiwiyin (Poundmaker), was founded in 1973 to provide culturally specific services to its Indigenous clients. Obomsawin probes deeply into the underlying causes that have led to high levels of substance abuse in Indigenous communities, including the destructive impact of colonialism on Indigenous families and social systems.

Bush Lady (1985/2018), vinyl LP

Obomsawin's only full-length album provides a sense of the breadth and depth of her musical influences and abilities, blending and moving effortlessly between the traditional and the contemporary. The first recording was released by CBC/Radio-Canada in 1985. She was not entirely satisfied by the track "Bush Lady," however, and so rerecorded this song and then released an independent album, which was remastered by Constellation Records, in 2018.

The titular song, written many years ago but

still sadly relevant, is about a young Indigenous woman who comes from a reserve to the city only to be victimized and exploited. The narrative plays out between two voices: the young woman and the taunting and predatory men who refer to her only as “bush lady.” As the song proceeds, we hear in the woman’s replies her tragic awareness of her victimization as she struggles to appropriate the term and articulate the reality of her position, although no happy conclusion is provided.



Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child, 1986 (production photograph). Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada and the artist.



Incident at Restigouche, 1984 (production photograph). Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada and the artist.

1990s

Most of Alanis Obomsawin's energies as a filmmaker in the 1990s were spent living through and then analyzing, in one film after another (four in all), the causes and effects of what is often referred to as the Oka Crisis or, by many Indigenous people, the Kanehsatà:ke Resistance. For much of the Canadian public, the crisis—an armed standoff between the Kanyen'kehà:ka (Mohawk) and the Québec provincial police, called the Sûreté du Québec or SQ, and later the Canadian military—appeared to erupt from nowhere. However, as Obomsawin would show, it was in fact a long time in the making: an outcome of the legacy and ongoing reality of colonial dispossession, as the town of Oka continued to expand onto territory that the Mohawk community of Kanehsatà:ke claimed as their own. The final straw was a plan to expand a golf course into an area known as the Pines that is sacred to the Mohawks. As tensions rose, the Mohawks began to arm themselves, the provincial police were sent in and more Indigenous people joined the Mohawk defenders.

On July 11, 1990, a SQ tactical unit was commanded to remove the Mohawk warriors, attacking with concussion grenades and tear gas; a fifteen-minute exchange of gunfire between the two sides then followed, ending with SQ

Corporal Marcel Lemay shot and killed and the SQ retreating. A tense standoff ensued that lasted seventy-eight days. Throughout the crisis, protests in support of the Mohawk defenders broke out across Canada, but there was also a powerful backlash and many Indigenous people reported new levels of hostility and harassment in their daily lives. The events playing out on the nightly news— however they were spun—shattered mainstream Canada's illusions that the state's relationship to Indigenous Peoples was essentially benevolent.

Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance (1993), 119 min., Kahnawá:ke, Kanehsatà:ke and Oka, Québec, along with archival material and press clippings, 1990–99

Obomsawin shot *Kanehsatake* from behind the barricades, providing a critical Indigenous view of the crisis. It has become her best-known film. On her way to work at the NFB one morning, listening to the radio, she heard about the blockade and immediately decided to change the project she was working on. With the challenges she faced getting approval for her earlier documentary *Incident at Restigouche* (1984) in mind, she called in to work to say she wouldn't be in that day and went to Kanehsatà:ke immediately. After seeing the situation, she returned to the NFB offices in Montréal, announced that she would be switching to a new production and left

for the barricades with approval for a “four-day shoot,” camera operator in tow. Working with a small crew and on her own, Obomsawin was able to remain in Kanehsatà:ke for the duration of the crisis, capturing vividly the ongoing tensions and constant threat of violence that the defenders endured on their side of the razor wire.

The long roll of calculator tape displayed in the exhibition is a record of the number of feet of film that Obomsawin shot during her time behind the barricades. She recorded so much footage that it took her editor, Yuri Luhovy, six months just to view it all.

In September 1990, the SQ secured a court injunction to cut service to Obomsawin’s NFB cell phone. NFB executive producer Colin Neale sent a fax to Lieutenant General Kent Foster expressing concern that one Major Cameron had obtained and passed along Obomsawin’s telephone number to the provincial police. A response from military lawyers arrived the next day.



Alanis Obomsawin pictured in *Le Téléjournal* (CBC/ Radio-Canada) newscast, 1990. Courtesy of CBC/ Radio-Canada.



Mohawk women marching in solidarity during the *Kanehsatà:ke Resistance* near Oka, Québec, 1990. Photo: John Kenney.



Robert Verrall, *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, c. 1993 (production drawing), watercolour on paper. Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada.

Production drawings by Robert Verrall

Although Robert Verrall had retired from the NFB four years before the Kanehsatà:ke Resistance, he made a commitment to continue supporting Obomsawin's work. They kept in touch during the crisis, but it wasn't until she began editing the film that she requested his help.

Obomsawin felt it was essential to put the resistance at Kanehsatà:ke into historical context. Verrall writes: "She wanted me to illustrate part of the long history of betrayal with drawings. [...] The work took several weeks to complete. It was a labour of love." Sadly, it is a story of shamefully broken promises.

EXCERPTS FROM CBC/RADIO-CANADA TV PROGRAMS, 1990

Obomsawin stayed behind the barricades for the duration of the standoff, even during a tense period when CBC/Radio-Canada withdrew its news reporters, because she feared what might happen if a camera was not present as a witness. The day before the standoff ended, she learned that the defenders planned to burn their weapons and walk out the next day. She chose to leave that day on foot to avoid being taken away in a military truck. Upon leaving, she gave powerful interviews to the media in English and French.

2000s

At the same time as direct Indigenous political activism was continuing across Canada in the first decade of the new millennium, many significant changes were occurring without fanfare inside institutions as attitudes evolved and long-closed doors began opening. More and more Indigenous people were graduating from universities and entering professions in which they worked with allies to change institutions from the inside. In the arts, this had already begun to show fruit in the early 1990s, and by the early 2000s, many institutions, including the important federal funder the Canada Council for the Arts, began to prioritize Indigenous inclusion.

With increasing access to mainstream cultural institutions, Indigenous people began to use these platforms to explore a wide range of questions, including how Indigenous thought and values might be sustained and put into action in these spaces. These were issues that Alanis Obomsawin had been addressing throughout her body of work, but in the 2000s, some of her films came to be centred closer to home, and they are, arguably, some of her most personal works.

Sigwan (2005), 13 min., Odanak, Québec

Filmed in Odanak, *Sigwan* is a fable of alienation and reconnection. At first the alienation appears to be simply between a young girl, Sigwan, and her community. However, when Sigwan wanders off into the forest and is befriended by a group of bear people who bring her into their circle, it is not only Sigwan's connection with her community but also her community's links with the bear people that are renewed, and a balance is restored. The film uses storytelling as a framing device and handmade masks to transform actors into non-human characters.

Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises (2006), 104 min., Odanak, Québec, and other places

In *Waban-Aki* (the Waban-Aki Confederacy includes the Abenaki, Obomsawin's nation), Obomsawin directs her lens toward her home community of Odanak, and from there creates a collective portrait of her people and their territory that is at once intimate, poetic and steeped in history. While the film does not flinch away from the many difficulties the community has faced and continues to deal with, the stories it weaves together of voice and image present a rich appreciation of the many personalities as well as cultural richness and resilience of its people.

Baskets made by Émilie M'Sadoques, Barbara Ann Watso and unknown Abenaki women

The creation of ash splint baskets features prominently in *Waban-Aki*, both for their economic significance during dark times and as objects of cultural heritage and pride. This beautiful selection has been loaned by Musée des Abénakis in Odanak, which not only is a remarkable community resource but also plays an important role in educating visitors.



Alanis Obomsawin, *Wabanki: People from Where the Sun Rises*, 2006 (still).
Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada.



Alanis Obomsawin, *Sigwan*, 2005 (still). Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada.



Alanis Obomsawin, *Wabanki: People from Where the Sun Rises*, 2006 (stills).
Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada.



Since 2010

Over the past thirteen years, Indigenous issues have been at the forefront of public conversations across Canada, and “decolonization” (variously imagined) has become a priority in many academic, cultural and political institutions. The structural depth of these changes remains an open question, and many worry that symbolic gestures are too often offered in place of real action on long-standing substantive issues, such as Treaty Rights, land claims and unequal social spending. Nevertheless, more Canadians have begun to reckon with histories of colonialism that have, for decades, been wilfully ignored. With growing connections being made between Indigenous communities around the world and increasing awareness of Indigenous issues, the importance of Alanis Obomsawin’s work to the global conversation on decolonization has never been clearer. She has remained continuously active, using the recent COVID-19 lockdowns to explore her personal archives and produce a series of new films.

Several important events and movements have helped to shape this period. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was created in 2008 as a condition of the settlement of a lawsuit against the federal government on behalf of Indigenous residential school Survivors.

After faltering in its initial composition, the TRC was reconstituted under the leadership of Murray Sinclair, a Anishinaabe judge then sitting on the Court of Queen's Bench of Manitoba. The commission heard testimony and took statements from over 6,000 Survivors across Canada and released its final report in 2015. As Sinclair put it: "Reconciliation is not an Indigenous problem. It is a Canadian one."

Also influential has been Idle No More, a grassroots protest movement that began on Facebook in 2012 and quickly spilled out onto the streets with flash-mob Round Dances and other protests that drew the attention of the mainstream media. The movement has often addressed the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. This ongoing problem, a long-standing concern of Obomsawin's, came to wider notice in the 2010s, leading to a public inquiry that began in 2016 and submitted its report in 2019. The report details the appallingly high levels of violence that Indigenous women face in Canada.

***When All the Leaves Are Gone (2010), 17 min.,
Odanak and Trois-Rivières, Québec***

This evocative film condenses many of Obomsawin's childhood experiences into the story of Wato, a young Indigenous girl facing many hardships. These include the serious illness of her father, overt racism in the classroom and

racist bullying in the streets. Wato counters these experiences in her powerful dreamworld, where she finds love and support from her guardians.

Horse and animal prints, since 1990

The dreamworld explored by Obomsawin in *When All the Leaves Are Gone* also appears in her print work. “As a little girl,” she has said, “it’s my dreams that saved my life.” In part they were an escape: “At least when I was sleeping, nobody was beating me. I had a whole world.” In this world there were “hundreds of animals... always protecting me, dancing with me, playing all kinds of games. I call them horses, but they don’t look exactly like the horses we know. All the animals that are my friends, I give them names that are like the ones we see. But they all look different.” There are many horses and other non-human figures to be seen in her prints, each passing on their energy, strength and compassion to the woman who dreams them.

Honour to Senator Murray Sinclair (2021), 29 min., Montréal, Québec, et al., along with archival material and press clippings, 2021

Cutting between a public talk given by Murray Sinclair and footage of testimony from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission court hearings that he oversaw, Obomsawin provides an emotionally searing reminder of the devas-

tating effects of the residential school system on Indigenous individuals and communities. The subject is particularly timely because of the recent discoveries of unmarked graves at former residential school sites across Canada, which have drawn international attention. Disclosure of church and government records on the death and burial of children at residential schools was one of the issues raised by the TRC and not properly followed through on, but the issue has been discussed in Indigenous communities all along. As Obomsawin said recently: “We knew that in the early ’60s; we talked about it when nobody was listening— they said, ‘Ah, the Indians, they’re always complaining.’ Now it’s different. People are appalled by that and they want to know more. They say, ‘How come we never knew that?’ Well, they weren’t listening. Now they are.”

We Can’t Make the Same Mistake Twice (2016), 163 min., Ottawa, Ontario, and Pictou Landing, Nova Scotia, along with archival material, 2010–16

This documentary rewards the viewer’s investment of time with genuine insights as Obomsawin follows a decade-long court case filed by the Assembly of First Nations and the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada against the federal government for its failure to provide the same care and services to Indigenous children as other Canadian children.

Obomsawin builds a compelling and detailed picture of long-standing inequity through the accounts of those fighting the issue and the drama of courtroom testimony.



Alanis Obomsawin, *Bill Reid Remembers*, 2021 (still).
Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada.



Bill Reid, *nijjaang.uu* (*Portrait Mask*), 1970, wood, paint, human hair.
Courtesy of the Museum of Anthropology, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, Walter C. Koerner Collection, A2617, Photo: Kyla Bailey. Courtesy of the Bill Reid Estate.



Alanis Obomsawin, *We Can't Make the Same Mistake Twice*, 2016 (stills).
Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada.



EXCERPTS FROM CBC/RADIO-CANADA TV PROGRAMS, 2015–19

Obomsawin has been honoured throughout her life, from being named an “Outstanding Canadian of the Year” in 1965 by Maclean’s magazine to receiving the many recent honorary doctorates that line the staircase of her Montréal home. All the same, it is fascinating to compare this series of recent television clips to her earliest appearances on CBC/Radio-Canada in the 1960s: not only is Obomsawin now recognized as a national treasure, but also the changed attitudes we witness are the fruition of the activism in which she has played such a significant role.

List of filming locations in Canada and the US

01. Attawapiskat, Ontario

The People of the Kattawapiskak River (2012)

02. Breynat, Alberta

Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child (1986)

03. Burns Lake, British Columbia

Mother of Many Children (1977)

04. Chisasibi (Fort George), Québec

Mother of Many Children (1977)

05. Chisasibi (La Grande Rivière), Québec

Amisk (1977)

06. Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire

The Native American Council of Dartmouth College Presents a Way of Learning (1988)

07. Edmonton, Alberta

Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child (1986)

Poundmaker's Lodge: A Healing Place (1987)

Honour to Senator Murray Sinclair (2021)

08. Esgenoopetitj (Burnt Church), New Brunswick

Is the Crown at War with Us? (2002)

09. Fort Chipewyan, Alberta

Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child (1986)

10. Fort McMurray, Alberta

Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child (1986)

11. Grande rivière de la Baleine, Québec

Mother of Many Children (1977)

12. Halifax, Nova Scotia
Honour to Senator Murray Sinclair (2021)

13. Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts
Mother of Many Children (1977)

14. Inuvik, Northwest Territories
Honour to Senator Murray Sinclair (2021)

15. Kahnawá:ke (Kahnawake), Québec
Mother of Many Children (1977)

Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance (1993)

My Name Is Kahentiiosta (1995)

Spudwrench: Kahnawake Man (1997)

Rocks at Whiskey Trench (2000)

16. Kanehsatà:ke (Kanehsatake), Québec
Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance (1993)

My Name Is Kahentiiosta (1995)

17. Kenora (Rat Portage), Ontario
Canada Vignettes: Wild Rice Harvest Kenora (1979)

Mother of Many Children (1977)

18. Lac La Biche, Alberta
Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child (1986)

19. Lil'wat (Mount Currie), British Columbia
L'il'wata (1975)

Mother of Many Children (1977)

20. Listuguj, Québec
Incident at Restigouche (1984)

Our Nationhood (2003)

21. Manawan, Québec

Manawan (1973)

Mother of Many Children
(1977)

**22. Maskwacis (Hobbema),
Alberta**

Mother of Many Children
(1977)

23. Mayerthorpe, Alberta

*Richard Cardinal: Cry from a
Diary of a Métis Child* (1986)

24. Missisquoi River, Vermont

*Waban-Aki: People from
Where the Sun Rises* (2006)

25. Montréal, Québec

Amisk (1977)

*Sounds from Our People:
Gabriel Goes to the City*
(1979)

Incident at Restigouche
(1984)

No Address (1988)

*Le Patro Le Prévost:
80 Years Later* (1991)

Professor Norman Cornett:

*“Since when do we divorce
the right answer from an
honest answer?”* (2009)

*Honour to Senator Murray
Sinclair* (2021)

26. Moose Factory, Ontario

Christmas at Moose Factory
(1971)

Mother of Many Children
(1977)

27. Norway House, Manitoba

Our People Will Be Healed
(2017)

*Jordan River Anderson, the
Messenger* (2019)

28. Odanak, Québec

Mother of Many Children
(1977)

Sigwan (2005)

*Waban-Aki: People from
Where the Sun Rises* (2006)

Gene Boy Came Home (2007)

When All the Leaves Are Gone (2010)

29. Oka, Québec

Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance (1993)

My Name Is Kahentiiosta (1995)

30. Old Crow, Yukon

Sounds from Our People: "Old Crow" (1979)

31. Old Town, Maine

Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises (2006)

32. Ottawa, Ontario

Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises (2006)

We Can't Make the Same Mistake Twice (2016)

Jordan River Anderson, the Messenger (2019)

Honour to Senator Murray Sinclair (2021)

33. Paint Hills Islands, Nunavut

Mother of Many Children (1977)

34. Penobscot Indian Island, Maine

Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises (2006)

35. Piapot, Saskatchewan

Sounds from Our People: Cold Journey (1979)

36. Pictou Landing, Nova Scotia

We Can't Make the Same Mistake Twice (2016)

37. Portage la Prairie, Manitoba

Mother of Many Children (1977)

38. Puvirnituk, Québec

Canada Vignettes: June in Povungnituk – Quebec Arctic (1980)

39. Sangudo, Alberta

Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child (1986)

40. Shoal Lake, Ontario
Mother of Many Children
(1977)

41. Slave Lake, Alberta
Honour to Senator Murray Sinclair (2021)

42. St. Laurent, Manitoba
Mother of Many Children
(1977)

43. The Pas, Manitoba
Sounds from Our People: Cold Journey (1979)

44. Toronto, Ontario
The Federal Court Hearing
(2012)

45. Trois-Rivières, Québec
When All the Leaves Are Gone (2010)

46. Vancouver, British Columbia
Bill Reid Remembers (2021)

47. Waskaganish, Québec
Sounds from Our People: Cree Ways (1979)

48. Wetaskiwin, Alberta
Jordan River Anderson, the Messenger (2019)

49. Whapmagoostui, Québec
Walking Is Medicine (2017)

50. Winnipeg, Manitoba
Mother of Many Children
(1977)

Jordan River Anderson, the Messenger (2019)

Honour to Senator Murray Sinclair (2021)

51. Wolinak, Québec
Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises (2006)

For clarity, this legend includes the names of locations as they appear in Alanis Obomsawin's films, in some cases paired with place names that have since changed to better represent Indigenous preferences.



Handmade toy by Alanis Obomsawin, n.d.. Courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Photo: Kyla Bailey.

Filmography

Unless stated otherwise, Alanis Obomsawin was the writer, director and producer of the films listed. Many of these films are available to view for free on the NFB website: <https://www.nfb.ca/directors/alanis-obomsawin/>

2021

Bill Reid Remembers, Digital HD, colour, sound, 24 min.

Upstairs with David Amram, Digital HD, colour, sound, 16 min.

Honour to Senator Murray Sinclair, Digital HD, colour, sound, 29 min.

2019

Jordan River Anderson, the Messenger, Digital HD, colour, sound, 65:30 min.

2018

Walking Is Medicine, Digital HD, colour, sound, 5 min.

2017

Our People Will Be Healed, Digital HD, colour, sound, 97 min.

2016

We Can't Make the Same Mistake Twice, Digital HD, colour, sound, 163 min.

2014

Trick or Treaty?, digital video, colour, sound, 85 min.

2013

Hi-Ho Mistahey!, digital video, colour, sound, 100 min.

2012

The Federal Court Hearing, digital video, colour, sound, 20 min.

The People of the Kattawapiskak River, digital video, colour, sound, 50 min.

The People of the Kattawapiskak River—Six Months Later, digital video, colour, sound, 6 min.

2010

When All the Leaves Are Gone, digital video, b&w and colour, sound, 17:30 min.

2009

Professor Norman Cornett: "Since when do we divorce the right answer from an honest answer?", Super 16 and DigiBeta, colour, sound, 81 min.

2007

Gene Boy Came Home, Super 16, colour, sound, 24:30 min.

2006

Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises, Super 16, colour, sound, 104 min.

2005

Sigwan, Super 16, colour, sound, 13 min.

2003

Our Nationhood, Super 16, colour, sound, 97 min.

2002

Is the Crown at War with Us?, Super 16, colour, sound, 96:30 min.

2000

Rocks at Whiskey Trench, 16 mm, colour, sound, 105 min.

1997

Spudwrench—Kahnawake Man, 16 mm, colour, sound, 58 min.

1995

My Name Is Kahentiiosta, 16 mm, colour, sound, 30 min.

1993

Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance, 16 mm, colour, sound, 119 min.

1991

Walker ("Playing Fair" series), dir., D-2 video, colour, sound, 14 min.

Le Patro Le Prévost: 80

Years Later, 16 mm, colour, sound, 29 min.

1988

No Address, 16 mm, colour, sound, 56 min.

The Native American Council of Dartmouth College Presents a Way of Learning, video, colour, sound, 40 min.

1987

Poundmaker's Lodge: A Healing Place, 16 mm, colour, sound, 29:30 min.

1986

Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child, 16 mm, colour, sound, 29 min.

1984

Incident at Restigouche, dir., writer, 16 mm, colour, sound, 46 min.

1980

Canada Vignettes: June in Povungnituk, dir., writer, 16 mm, colour, sound, 1 min.

1979

Sounds from Our People (six-part television series)

Old Crow, 16 mm, colour, sound, 29 min.

Gabriel Goes to the City, 35 mm, colour, sound, 28:30 min.

Cold Journey, 16 mm, colour, sound, 29 min.

Cree Way, 16 mm, colour, sound, 28:30 min.

Mother of Many Children, 16 mm, colour, sound, 28 min.

Amisk, 16 mm, colour, sound, 28 min.

Canada Vignettes: Wild Rice Harvest, Kenora, dir., writer, 16 mm, colour, sound, 1 min.

1977

Mother of Many Children, 16 mm, colour, sound, 58 min.

Amisk, 16 mm, colour, sound, 40 min.

1976

L'il'wata (seven short films; remastered in 2009), dir., prod., film strip, colour, sound

Puberty: Part 1, 14 min.

Puberty: Part 2, 17:30 min.

Basket, 13 min.

Mount Currie Summer Camp, 8 min.

Xúsum, 4 min.

Salmon, 4 min.

Farming, 1 min.

1973

Manawan (seven short films; remastered in 2009), dir., prod., film strip, colour, sound

History of Manawan: Part 1, 18:30 min.

History of Manawan: Part 2, 18:30 min.

Moose Call, 5 min.

Snowshoes, 7:30 min.

The Canoe, 2 min.

Children, 5:30 min.

Partridge, 2:30 min.

1971

Christmas at Moose

Factory, dir., writer, 35
mm, colour, sound, 13 min.
2021 Bill Reid Remembers,
Digital HD, colour, sound,
24 min.

Public Programming

Opening Reception

Wednesday, September 6, 6pm–8pm

University of Toronto Art Centre

Artist and Curator Tour

Saturday, September 9, 2pm–4 pm

University of Toronto Art Centre

A guided, public tour of the exhibition with Alanis Obomsawin and Curator Richard William Hill (Smith Jarislowsky Senior Curator of Canadian Art at the Vancouver Art Gallery).

imagineNATIVE Art Crawl

Wednesday, October 18, 4pm–10pm

Starting at Onsite Gallery, the Art Crawl includes 401 Richmond Street West, the Art Museum, and the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Alanis Obomsawin: In Conversation with Cameron Bailey

Thursday, November 16, 4:30pm–6pm

University College

Alanis Obomsawin will speak about her lifework, Indigenous storytelling, and activism through her films, drawings, and music.

All programs are free and open to the public. For more information and to register, visit artmuseum.utoronto.ca/programs.

Monograph

Alanis Obomsawin: Lifework

Editors: Richard William Hill, Hila Peleg and Haus der Kulturen der Welt

Published by: Prestel, 2022

English, hardcover, 272 pages, 25 x 31 cm, 250 colour illustrations

ISBN: 978-3-7913-7923-4 Price: \$79

This comprehensive book reflects on Alanis Obomsawin's lifework by bringing together rigorous essayistic investigations with personal anecdotes, conversations and storytelling. It includes an interview with the artist, her own writings and etchings, archival material and a vivid array of film stills and photographs.

Authors include Karrmen Crey, Richard Fung, Monika Kin Gagnon, Richard William Hill, Jessica L. Horton, Ursula Johnson, Alexandra Juhasz, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Doreen Manuel, Joseph Naytowhow, Monique Nolett-Ille, Alanis Obomsawin, Elizabeth A. Povinelli, Jason Ryle, Lisa Steele, Loretta Todd, Robert Verrall and Jesse Wentz.

Colophon

Published on the occasion of the exhibition
The Children Have to Hear Another Story: Alanis Obomsawin, which is organized by Richard William Hill and Hila Peleg and made possible through a partnership between Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Art Museum at the University of Toronto, and Vancouver Art Gallery in collaboration with the National Film Board of Canada, and by the generous support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Embassy of Canada, Berlin, and CBC/Radio Canada.

This project has been made possible in part by the Government of Canada. Ce projet a été rendu possible en partie grâce au gouvernement du Canada.

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Wednesday	12 noon–8pm
Thursday	12 noon–5pm
Friday	12 noon–5pm
Saturday	12 noon–5pm
Sunday	Closed
Monday	Closed

Closed on statutory holidays.
Admission is FREE. All are welcome.

artmuseum@utoronto.ca
artmuseum.utoronto.ca
@artmuseumuoft
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