

# Momus

## Caroline Monnet's Uneasy Objects

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*Pizandawac / The One Who Listens / Celui qui écoute*, a recent exhibition at the [Art Museum at the University of Toronto](#) (AMUT), draws its title from the traditional name of artist Caroline Monnet's family, prior to the changing of surnames in her traditional territory of Kitigan Zibi by Christian missionaries. The Montreal-based Monnet is of Anishinaabe and European descent, and she is best known for drawing on the design traditions of both her cultural backgrounds, exploring the ongoing effects of colonization while simultaneously celebrating Indigenous survivance. Using sculpture, video, installation, and textile work, Monnet is able to deftly connect multiple narratives through—literally, in many cases—weaving together stories and approaches, for example, in Anishinaabe-inspired patterns embroidered onto plastic tarpaulins or cut into plywood. The rising appeal of Monnet's approach to art-making has been recognized by recent solo exhibitions at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and Arsenal Contemporary Art in New York; a nomination for the National Gallery of Canada's Sobeys Art Award; inclusions in the 2019 Whitney Biennial, 2019 Toronto Biennial, and 2021 Bonavista Biennale; and regular appearances in French and English national media. It is a popularity due at least in part to her work's legibility.

While storytelling is a foundational premise in much of Monnet's art and in *Pizandawac*, curator Mona Filip assembled the works to create a narrative of their own, bringing the artist's engagement with materials into sharp focus. Monnet came of age helping her family to flip and renovate homes in Aylmer, Quebec, and her work recalls this family history while also pointing to housing shortages, poor housing quality on reserves, and the construction industry's environmental effects. Her use of industrial materials such as Kevlar, Tyvek, cement, foam, and plastics, in conversation with natural materials like copper, maple, and animal fur places her own history within wider social and cultural contexts. Along the path through *Pizandawac*, land and language were ever present but subsumed and contained, as the maple and copper used in works near the entrance to the exhibition gave way to roof underlay, polyurethane foam, air membrane, polyethylene, extruded polystyrene foam: manufactured materials of the construction industry that often require mining into the earth for minerals and fossil fuels, building on top of it, and dumping into the lands and waters.



Caroline Monnet, *The Future Itself Has a Future*, 2018. Courtesy the artist and Blouin Division Gallery. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.

The installation *The Future Itself Has a Future* (2018) is an apt introduction to Monnet's use of materials to guide multilayered storytelling. Just inside the main doors to *Pizandawac*, a spotlight reflected off the hundreds of stretched and looped copper wires that make up the work. The warm, shimmering light of copper, a mineral intertwined with Monnet's Anishinaabe culture, drew in visitors, while the wires' wavelike form referenced both telephone wires laid across the ocean floor and strung on telephone poles, allowing transatlantic conversation and, according to the label, the "transmission of knowledge systems that do not rely on the written word." Like much of Monnet's work, *The Future Itself Has a Future* simultaneously celebrates Indigenous knowledge and language resurgence, while exploring copper as an element mined through often violent extraction that also underlies the advent of the colonizing communication systems that would attempt to eradicate Indigenous cultures. But this work, like many others in the exhibition, prompts questions for further consideration: What is at stake in using materials that are themselves entangled with the relations they seek to critique? What are the industrial materials' narrative afterlives? And how might these works continue to comment on the relations they have set in motion as they themselves degrade?

In the opening rooms of *Pizandawac*, Monnet paired the copper of *The Future Itself Has a Future* with maple in a series of topographical wood sculptures that seemed to float, languidly curving around the main exhibition space. The undulations in the wood simultaneously reflect the rolling landscape of Kitigan Zibi, Monnet's ancestral territory, and also the sound wave created by speaking the phrase *Nindanweb apii dagwaaging* (when it's Fall, I rest) in Anishinaabemowin. They effectively illuminated the exhibition's demand to listen to the land.



Caroline Monnet, *Ikwe origami (Portage de la Femme)*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Blouin Division Gallery. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.

As wood and copper pulled visitors into the space, an eclectic mix of materials beckoned from the cluster of small galleries that spill out from AMUT's entrance. The work *Framing the Bones* (2022) uses an embroidery method inspired by Anishinaabe birchbark biling—a method of folding thin sheets of birchbark and using teeth to create intricate patterns—featuring detailed stitches that pierce a black polyethylene sheet with threads that are both earthy and redolent of the bright orange of traffic cones and high-vis overalls. Similarly, in *A Strong Force of Attraction* (2023), sill gasket—a material used on exterior walls to fill the space between the sill plate (the wood that anchors a house to its foundation) and the foundation wall—is woven into a pattern and installed in a lightbox, a commentary on attempts to create impenetrable barriers between the home ("inside") and the natural world outside. As the glaring LED lights leaked through the thin weave, the impossibility of creating impenetrable barriers revealed itself. Monnet's work has an openness and porosity that can be seen in the light shining through *A Strong Force of Attraction*, or in the air passing through *Canopy*, a three-dimensional folded plywood screen "roofed" in asphalt shingles and punctuated by perforations arranged in a pattern that echoes Ikea instruction manuals, syllabics, coded language, circuit boards—all forms that are familiar but not quite readable. In turn, the perforations of *Canopy* created viewpoints through which pink insulation, crammed in the Plexiglas sculpture *AKI (Land)* (2021), was visible.



Caroline Monnet, *AKI (Land)*, 2021. Courtesy Pierre Gendron Collection. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.

While plexi is a familiar material in museum settings, ubiquitously used in display cases, in *AKI*—a work in which the letters A, K, and I are shaped out of plexi and filled with pink insulation—the display case becomes the work. The pink insulation packed inside the plexi structure imitates a stratigraphy, ostensibly presenting a way of reading land that is at once geologic and manufactured. Heather Davis notes in her book *Plastic Matter* (Duke University Press, 2022) that plastics like Plexiglas (also known as Lucite or Perspex), polyethylene, polyurethane, and sill gasket appear to create barriers that seal off the world, promising protection, but they are in fact porous in a different way. They shed microplastics and fibers that silently infiltrate environments and atmospheres, and seep into waters and bodies, across the blood-brain barrier, with consequences largely unknown.

While Monnet's work does not delve into the histories of materials, focusing instead on their consequences, those stories are also part of the work's *transmissions* (a term that Davis also uses to describe how the consequences of plastic waste are often heaped upon those who had the least to do with its advent and overconsumption). The pink insulation of *AKI*, for example, is made from spun glass threads (fiberglass) used to reinforce plastic and form the spongy material instantly familiar as insulation (the pink, as it turns out, was simply a successful marketing tool that stuck around). Tyvek is cut and reassembled into rows of gently billowing fabric to form *Akwinowag (Flock)* (2023), becoming, as described in the label, "a gust of wind, the eye of a tornado, a flock of birds murmuring." The material was an accidental invention in the laboratories of the chemical company DuPont and is now recognizable in personal protective equipment, hazmat suits, tarpaulins, temporary dwellings. The asphalt shingles of *Canopy* are a product made from the leftovers of oil refining. All of these materials have known environmental consequences, but many construction materials may additionally have largely still-unknown health impacts; homes are not the pristine spaces they are often assumed to be. Behind Monnet's use of contemporary construction materials is the silent hovering presence of asbestos, much of which was mined in a region of Quebec not far from Kitigan Zibi. Once popular in popcorn ceilings, tiling, and roofing due to its insulating and fire-prevention properties, the naturally occurring fibrous silicate mineral carries risks that are now well known: inhaling it can cause severe lung conditions including lung cancer. Like so many of the materials chosen by Monnet, asbestos was once welcomed inside, and its consequences suspected, though ignored, for decades. Her works are lush, intimate, and beautifully detailed and made, but these will always be uneasy objects.



Caroline Monnet, *Dialogue*, 2023 (left); *Akwinowag (Flock)*, 2023 (right). Courtesy of the artist and Blouin Division Gallery. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.

Filip highlighted the tensions in Monnet's work by drawing them out through a juxtaposition of dark walls and spotlights. They tend to be shown in flood-lit white cubes, but in *Pizandawac* the play of dark and light built up a series of dramatic encounters. Though perhaps inadvertent, the nineteenth-century architecture of the gallery itself became part of the exhibition, as did the fact that AMUT is located in a block of buildings where construction has been uninterrupted for several years. The gallery space wasn't a backdrop so much as it was a player in the exhibition. The dark and dramatic paint on the walls, the dust from outside construction creeping into the supposedly clean air of a controlled gallery environment, the spotlights glinting off the glass threads in the fiberglass, were all central to the installation. In the exhibition, two narratives were present. On the one hand, many of the works are celebratory, building toward the current and future potentials of Indigenous communities, language reclamation, and the centrality of waters and land. But the exhibition gently and effectively also raised awareness of the lurking presence of potentially toxic materials. These materials are not static, actively shedding microparticles and fibers into their surroundings, leaving traces even after they've been removed. The thread of *Pizandawac* sews the split narratives back together, foregrounding embodied relationships to land and culture as a path towards healing.