

Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize  
CARFAC Alberta  
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February 7, 2019

Re: Latitude 53 – Heather Shillinglaw nomination

It is with great honour that Latitude 53 nominates Heather Shillinglaw for the Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize for her powerful work “The Carlton Trail”, featured in the exhibition *Whiskey Scrip*, shown at the gallery October 12-November 17, 2018.

“The Carlton Trail” is a new work that formed the centrepiece of Shillinglaw’s 2018 exhibition, that retells her family’s oral history of her great-great-grandfather John “Old Man Jack” Norris, who, according to family stories, contracted Indigenous and Métis women to transport whiskey on Red River Carts, disguised as homesteading supplies. Shillinglaw’s beaded and quilted hide map of the Carlton Trail traces these journeys from Fort Garry to Fort Edmonton, entangled with the issuance of Métis scrip and the impacts of this smuggled alcohol.

The exhibition *Whiskey Scrip* began with a conversation with Heather Shillinglaw about her older works “Buffalo Corral” (2014–18—the work includes new elements added each time it is exhibited), “Whispers in the Forest”, and “Trapped (Live, eat, sleep, repeat)” that all occupied a similar scale—installations that would fill an entire gallery room—and were thematically linked. This led to the idea to bring these works together in an comprehensive exhibition, including works old and new, that would fill all three of Latitude 53’s gallery spaces—the first time this had been done with a single artist.

At the Art Gallery of Grande Prairie in 2016, Shillinglaw exhibited “Kokum Quilts”, which took traditional quilts as a starting point for paintings. However, for the exhibition *Whiskey Scrip* her work went directly to the source diving into the techniques of quilting itself. The “Grave Markers” series (2018) exhibited at Latitude 53 are the direct result of this: art quilting and traditional beadwork, made as Shillinglaw learned these techniques for the first time, form the bookends to the new installation that includes the nominated work.

“The Carlton Trail” formed the key element of this exhibition’s re-telling of a legend of Shillinglaw’s family origin. Alongside learning new techniques of art-quilting and leatherwork, Shillinglaw travelled to view the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives and collections from Library & Archives Canada with the hopes to find some material corroboration of the story she had heard of her ancestor John Norris, called Old Man Jack. Some of the artefacts discovered in this research are documented in a slide-show in the exhibition.

Shillinglaw writes:

Woven with a memory from the past, of the beginnings of my travel and art journey, when my older daughter turned 14, I remembered a story my grandfather told me when I turned the same age. He was sitting on the sofa at the house I grew up in, drinking, and he told me about my great-great-grandfather John Norris, who had hired women and their families to transport homesteading provisions and, hidden under hides, whiskey, transporting all of this along the Carlton trail from Fort Garry to Fort Edmonton. I wanted to retell the oral story, immersing the public in it, revealing the “Whiskey Wilderness” chapter of Canadian history.

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John Norris—also known by the nickname of Old Man Jack—had resided in Victoria Settlement and then later in Edmonton. He traveled as an independent trader in 1864, leading the first Red River cart train on the Carlton Trail. For some years he did annual trips, and later he traveled under the Hudson's Bay Co. in 1869 and the 1870s. John Norris devised a plan: he'd arrange and/or manage teams made up of people from Indigenous tribes and Métis, with women leading Red River carts stashed with contraband whiskey. As the people made their way along the trail, the authorities assumed that they carried only homesteading supplies, because women were conducting the transport.

“The Carlton Trail” was exhibited alongside the Grave Markers as well as the floor piece “Whispers in the Forest”. These pieces set the scene by examining the contemporary landscape depicted in the maps of “The Carlton Trail”—recognizing and paying tribute to our (often disappeared) co-habitants the bear, hare, moose, bison and fox, and capturing directly images of the ground in a particularly fraught boundary, the Primrose Air Weapons Range. These elements are also surrounded with pieces of charred whiskey barrels, bringing them into relationship with the story.

The work itself takes the form of a map in four panels, created with quilting techniques and many fabrics on bison hide. Shillinglaw calls out many specific details used in the piece: a red road made from the traditional Métis sash, and the peculiar colours and finish of the commercially tanned bison hide acting as an ironic note to the extinction of the wild herds. Installed in the gallery, the maps were placed diagonally on the wall, using vertical space to tell the story of the journey going North as well as West from Fort Gary (now Winnipeg) to Fort Edmonton. This painstaking detail of careful installation lies in tension with the geographic distortion of all legendary stories, and with Shillinglaw's own bending of the land to the flexing hides, and adjustments to include major landmarks and lakes.

As you view the work, the fabrics quilted on dazzle, catching the light on their iridescent surfaces. The wall itself is painted a mottled clay colour—another reference to the ground, as each of the works in the exhibition depicts it in some way. And in this work, in brilliant red, is the motif that echoes throughout the exhibition: the X, the clumsy signature produced under duress by Métis individuals being parted from their land by the force of the Indian Agent, the promise of short-term wealth (and whiskey), and the law of the time.

“The Carlton Trail” is a landmark work in Heather Shillinglaw's practice. It is also a powerful re-telling of not only her family story, but of the traumas of the process of Scrip and the history of the Métis people in this place. For these reasons, Latitude 53 is proud to nominate this work for the Eldon & Anne Foote Award.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Adam Waldron-Blain, Program Coordinator  
Latitude 53

\* Please credit the provided photo: Blaine Campbell.