

McMullen Gallery (on behalf of Friends of University Hospitals) nominates *Power & Vulnerability* by Edmonton-based Dene and Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) artist Lauren Crazybull for the 2020 Eldon + Anne Foote Visual Art Prize.

Power & Vulnerability, a 60 inch by 48 inch acrylic on canvas portrait, was featured in Crazybull's solo exhibition, *The Future All at Once*, at McMullen Gallery in the University of Alberta Hospital, from June 8 to August 4, 2019.

The portrait presents a seated, classically posed male on a scale that is larger than life. The figure's relaxed, self-assured body language is complemented by his boldly positioned head and strong, knowing gaze. Crazybull made a daring choice to light the sitter with pink and green coloured lights, and painted the complex shadows and reflections on his face and in the background with confidence, evidenced by the masterful treatment of contours in the face and hand. The subject's features and clothing are rendered with a graphic realism, while by contrast, the background is a wash of pastel tones, creating an aesthetic that is at once current and futuristic. Crazybull has no intention of shrinking the presence of her subjects, and this work personifies that conviction.

We have nominated *Power & Vulnerability* not only for its formal achievements and the power of the ideas it communicates, but also how it connected with the audience and engaged our hospital community in a conversation about contemporary Indigenous identity in Canada. "It is so satisfying to see this representation of Indigenous Peoples," 'Ellie' wrote in our visitor comments book. Another comment states, "I would welcome all of these individuals and their portraits in my home," demonstrating the relationship and connection that Crazybull is able to form between her sitter and the viewer.

Crazybull's work exemplifies the shift toward Indigenous-centred thinking, which privileges the first person experience over any form of interpretation of that voice. Many Indigenous and non-Indigenous patients, families and community members came to see *The Future All at Once* and visit Crazybull during her residency in McMullen Gallery. The affirming and positive quality of the work, and of the artist herself, became a magnet within the hospital and the broader community, creating opportunities for conversation, connection and learning.

In *The Future All at Once*, Crazybull portrayed First Nations Peoples in a way that acknowledged living with traumas of the past, while looking towards a future that is empowered and self-determined. The exhibition featured 12 portraits of the artist's friends and colleagues. While most of the portraits were titled with the sitter's name, *Power & Vulnerability* was distinctively titled with a message, singling it out among the pieces in the show. The painting depicts Crazybull's friend, illustrator Elijah Cardinal, and rather than naming him, as she did with the other pieces in the exhibition, she presents him as an unknown, ultramodern, and emboldened icon. This transition from focusing on individuals

and their specific characteristics to creating a collective model for contemporary Indigenous identity is emblematic of a conceptual shift in Crazybull's portraiture.

Crazybull has emerged boldly in Edmonton's contemporary art landscape, primarily utilizing the genre of portraiture and seizing it for its power to, in the artist's words, "reverse the colonial gaze". Crazybull employs the historically Western tradition of portraiture to disrupt the colonial narrative. Like portrait artist Amy Sherald, who documents her African American contemporaries without nostalgia or limitations to a specific time or place, Crazybull creates timeless images of her community members that defy the effects of the systems of oppression in which they exist. Crazybull grew up in foster care and, as she says, "that kind of kept me from my culture and my family." She has said that, "With my art practice and my paintings, I am trying to imagine a world where colonialism hasn't touched my life in some way." Crazybull is a self-taught artist whose work demonstrates astonishing focus, clarity, and technical skill.

In 2019, Crazybull was chosen as Alberta's inaugural Artist in Residence, and *Power & Vulnerability* was a finalist for the Kingston Prize, Canada's premier portrait award. Throughout that year, Crazybull received much media attention, including a feature on CBC Radio's *Q*, and articles in *Galleries West*, *Canadian Art*, *Where Magazine*, *Edmonton Journal*, CTV News and CBC Arts. In 2018, Crazybull was awarded the McLuhan House Artist Studio Residency. Earlier in her career, she worked in radio and broadcasting, focusing on Indigenous issues, and as the art coordinator at iHuman, using her creative power to assert her humanity and advocate for the innate fortitude of Indigenous people. The talent and achievements of this young artist, as exemplified in *Power & Vulnerability*, deserve recognition.

As Autumn Schnell wrote in her July 2019 review of Crazybull's McMullen Gallery exhibition, "Lauren Crazybull is changing portraiture. She's allowing us to change from being portrayed to being portrayers. We are no longer the images that colonialism wants – instead we are ourselves, embodied as people, and resisting colonialism." (*Canadian Art*, July 18, 2019) Starting in the 18th and into the 19th centuries, portraits of Indigenous peoples by artists such as George Catlin and Nicholas de Grandmaison presented First Nations leaders and individuals in traditional cultural apparel and accessories, presenting often inaccurate, and idealized or anthropologized representations. These depictions belied the lived experiences of their subjects and created fictions about First Nations cultures and peoples. *Power & Vulnerability* is the antithesis of these portraits, honouring the dignity of the Indigenous man depicted and the truth of his existence.

Misperceptions of Indigenous Peoples in Canada—often negative and racist—have been stuck in place for decades, but *Power & Vulnerability* calls these views into question. The *Power* in this painting moves the viewer to believe in the subject's authority and agency. The *Vulnerability* is not unsanctioned scrutiny, but rather an openness and humanity that is

within the sitter's control and he—via Crazybull's representation—is allowing the viewer's access to it.

As a counterbalance to history, this painting and its related body of work acknowledge the devastating history of First Nations Peoples in Canada through colonization. Their personal and communal power was revoked through cultural genocide, displacement, and discriminatory laws. Finding power in vulnerability is risky for any Indigenous person in this country. At the University of Alberta Hospital, we see the broadest diversity of Edmonton's population as health challenges touch all lives. But systemic oppression of First Nations are evidenced by the high proportion of Indigenous Peoples accessing acute care. The presence of *Power & Vulnerability* in the hospital indirectly referenced the systemic racism in the health care system and the broader population, but it did so by telling a story about the contemporary experience of a First Nations person with grace, style, and cleverness.

Lauren Crazybull shares a perspective that is germane to her generation, and provides significant value to the Canadian post-colonial landscape at this critical time in history. Canada's *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* recommends, "the preservation, revitalization, and strengthening of Aboriginal languages and cultures are best managed by Aboriginal people and communities." ([*Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action*](#), page 2) This call to action is embodied and amplified through Crazybull's painting, *Power & Vulnerability*.

Links:

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/q/thursday-oct-17-2019-bong-joon-ho-lauren-crazybull-and-more-1.5323133/artist-lauren-crazybull-on-how-portraiture-can-give-a-presence-and-power-to-the-sitter-1.5323271>

<https://edmonton.ctvnews.ca/truer-idea-of-what-indigeneity-is-young-artist-challenging-portraiture-perception-1.4456883?cache=yes>

<https://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/albertas-artist-in-residence-plans-large-scale-map-focusing-on-indigenous-culture>

<https://www.gallerieswest.ca/magazine/stories/lauren-crazybull/>

<https://canadianart.ca/reviews/lauren-crazybull/>

<https://canadianart.ca/essays/seeing-through-by-lauren-crazybull/>