



Eldon and Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize
CARFAC Alberta
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Edmonton, AB, T5K 1M7

RE: Nomination of Lana Whiskeyjack's *sâkipakâwipîsm – Leaf Budding Moon (May)*, 2020, from the exhibition *We Are The Medicine* for the 2022 Eldon and Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize

Dear Jury,

Before all, Lana Whiskeyjack is *nêhiyaw*- a four part being of this land. Her grandmother, Caroline Whiskeyjack, taught her to be a grounded and confident *nêhiyaw iskwêwak* – cree woman/womxn. A daughter and granddaughter, mother and grandmother, she is connected to the wombs she comes from, as well as the wombs that came from her. A multidisciplinary artist and scholar from Saddle Lake Cree Nation, Treaty 6 Territory, Alberta, Lana Whiskeyjack is currently based in *amiskwaciy waskahikan*. Her series *We Are The Medicine* is her love letter to her family, her culture, her language and her history, and it holds her hopes and dreams for future generations of *nêhiyawak*.

We Are The Medicine presents a deeply personal rendering of the *nêhiyaw* teachings of the Thirteen Sacred Moons. Within the *nêhiyaw* annual calendar, the year is divided into thirteen lunar cycles, rather than the twelve months of the Gregorian calendar. Learned through personal and communal ceremonies, dreams, and from community knowledge keepers, the Thirteen Moon teachings in *We Are The Medicine* are deeply personal to the artist. Luscious, vibrant colours permeate each portrait-like study. Whiskeyjack captures relationships and interconnections, incorporating relatives (human and more-than-human, past and present), tools, seasonal changes, and natural phenomena into a wider conversation. Her intention is to convey the beauty and vitality of *nêhiyaw* culture, promoting curiosity, un/learning and to soulfully reconnect to the spirit of being a human of this land.

In 2019, before setting brush to canvas, Whiskeyjack brought together thirteen women and two-spirit relatives for a pipe ceremony. The ceremony created a space to share the hopes, dreams, experiences, and energies of all who were present. The conversations had during that ceremony formed the emotional core of this series. Whiskeyjack wanted to center whole, complex and true experiences of *nêhiyaw* women and people of diverse genders. She celebrates the beauty, wonder and knowledge of wombsters – all those beings with wombs. From the sacredness of sitting with your grandmothers (menstruation), to the strength and knowledge of *kohkoms*, the agency to be found in embracing your body and sexuality, the divine wonder of giving birth, and the power to be found in boldly claiming who you are.

In the *nêhiyaw* annual calendar, the new year takes place in the spring - announced by break up of the ice and the opening of the first leaf buds on the trees. A time of renewal, of rights of passage, and a return of life, *sâkipakâwipîsm – Leaf Budding Moon (April-May)*, marks the starting point of Lana Whiskeyjack's incredible series.

In this large-scale oil painting (40x60") rich blues, purples, and glimmering whites permeate this twilight view of birch trees at the edge of a dense forest. Set in the early hours before dawn, the painting reminds us of the tenacity of winter. Burst of orange and brown peak out, glimpses of a forest floor briefly hidden by a late spring snowfall. The changing climate has made these late snowfalls more

common in recent years, unsettling the well-known rhythms and cycles of the land. A full moon hovers over the treetops in the background. The air is crisp and clear, one can almost smell the dewy tell-tale scents of spring drifting on the breeze.

Despite the snow, there are many clear signifiers of the changing season throughout the piece. A pileated woodpecker and a northern flicker perch in the trees. On the right, a birch tree has been tapped with a spigot. The freshly flowing birch water drips steadily into the waiting bucket. Another medicine is present in the background - chaga growing in the crux of a birch tree.

Standing tall and self possessed, a young Indigenous man is at the center of the piece. Very obviously contemporary, we are drawn to the bright colours in his clothing and jewellery. A neon yellow and pink breech cloth presents a playful futuristic fashion take to the traditional nêhiyaw clothing for spring and summer. Bright pink jeans, worn in the place of more traditional hide leggings, are rolled up at the cuffs, leading the viewer's eye down to his shoes. The toes of his high-top sneakers are painted to look like this young man doodled them with floral beading patterns. Quirky and joyful, these details give clues to the personality of this figure staring out at us. Whiskeyjack also has included an important tool in this painting - a môhkamân (knife) held in his left hand.

Walking the slender line between adolescence and adulthood, he appears both confident and settled, self-assured of who he is. This is a portrait of Lana Whiskeyjack's okosisis (son). Born female and still possessing a womb, his self confidence is hard-won. Like many transgender individuals, he struggled with body and gender dysmorphia. Not being able to see or exist as one's true self causes deep emotional pain. His journey has been a difficult path to walk.

His story is a profound place to start *We Are The Medicine*. For Whiskeyjack, he embodies new beginnings and hope for the future. She was deeply moved by his immense courage. Growing with him, Whiskeyjack talks about the intense emotions and teachings that came to her as well, as she learnt how best to support her transgender child. From her uncle and aunt, Jerry and Jo-Ann Saddleback, she learnt that in nêhiyaw communities there have always been more than just two genders. The diversity of gender expressions exists in tandem with a range of different roles and responsibilities that every individual has within nêhiyaw communities. Men born in women's bodies were regarded as warriors, iyhikwêw. Their strength and courage were directed to maintaining the first law of a warrior: peace. Complex and nuanced, the nêhiyaw world view celebrates the teachings, perspective, and diverse knowledge that is inherent when looking at the world from a non-binary lens and embracing those who exist all along the spectrum of gender identity.

As the title of the exhibition suggests, Lana Whiskeyjack's work is an act of recognition and gratitude to ancestral medicine, restoring balance and nêhiyaw perspective.

"A traditional concept that has been shared with me throughout my life is that we are born with the medicine that we need to restore balance within ourselves. I am reminded by each creation that I am born with the medicine to help myself." -Whiskeyjack, 2020.



Her son has been an inspiration and guide to Whiskeyjack. This work honours his journey of finding his own strength and acceptance of who he is – claiming both his medicine and his culture. After he saw an early version of this work, he asked to have the scars from his top surgery painted in. Despite the pain, and struggle of the journey, it is part of who he is, and he wanted that full story reflected in the work. He is proclaiming loudly “niya oma niya” - “I am who I am”.

sâkipakâwipîsm – Leaf Budding Moon (May) is a powerful site of education and reclamation. Visitors to the gallery were able to see and learn a history and experience that may not have been open to them before. Whiskeyjack creates work from a place of deep love, which is tangible for viewers. Many visitors told Gallery staff that they had never had the opportunity to learn about transgender experiences, or different cultural understandings of gender. Whiskeyjack’s beautiful and unflinching vulnerability encouraged others to do the same. This piece allowed viewers to step outside of their own experience and listen to Indigenous stories with a compassionate heart. Her work offers a space to do to both the intellectual and emotional labour of reconciliation.

Whiskeyjack’s series reflects on the past, while simultaneously looking forward with optimism for the future. She has witnessed so much change, brought forward by the unbelievable strength, labours, and unyielding determination of past and present generations of Indigenous peoples, now being carried forward and built upon by their children.

But most importantly, Whiskeyjack has created a series where Indigenous women/womxn and diverse gender peoples can see themselves. *We Are The Medicine* reminds iskwêwak and diverse genders of their sacred relationship to nurture and safeguard the cultural lifestyle of their community. Through her work, they see a powerful celebration of their experience, knowledge, and unique worldview.

One young visitor had heard of *sâkipakâwipîsm – Leaf Budding Moon* and begged their mother to bring them to the exhibition. They raced up the stairs, across the gallery space, and sat on the floor in-front of the work. They proclaimed loudly to the entire space that they had come to spend time “with a boy who is just like me.”

For all these reasons, I wish to nominate *sâkipakâwipîsm – Leaf Budding Moon* by Lana Whiskeyjack for the 2022 Eldon and Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize.

Sincerely,

Emily Baker

Curator

Art Gallery of St. Albert