

Written Description

MNIDOONS GIIZIS OONHG - LITTLE SPIRIT MOON by Heather Shillinglaw

The artwork *MNIDOONS GIIZIS OONHG - LITTLE SPIRIT MOON (NOVEMBER)* by Heather Shillinglaw is an evocative piece that bridges Indigenous storytelling, ecological wisdom, and celestial wonder. It is one of the panels in the exhibition *Nokomis gizis* ("Grandmother Moon"), a series of 13 quilted, beaded, and painted story images inspired by the Turtle Moon calendar. The exhibition profoundly conveys the interconnectedness of life on Turtle Island, guided by the cycles of the moon, and serves as a beacon for cultural resurgence and community healing.

Heather Shillinglaw, a mixed-media artist and member of the Cold Lake First Nation, has masterfully combined traditional and contemporary techniques in this artwork. The use of beads, watch gears, and other materials transforms the depiction of *Biboonkeoni* (the wintermaker constellation) into a vivid, textured narrative. By weaving ancestral teachings, such as those of the beaver lodge and land wisdom, with her personal journey—including materials collected two decades prior—Shillinglaw ensures the piece carries both historical depth and artistic innovation.

Shillinglaw on the work:

"The red road teachings are highlighted in this month. The mythical red road reminds us to travel in a good way, follow the traditional teachings, and live with good values. We are also reminded of the spirit of our ancestors. In this panel I highlight the beaver lodge and land teachings that the beaver teaches us that this is a time of rest, to bring our families close. In this constellation I have also incorporated the Biboonkeoni, wintermaker. This constellation is made of a strong canoe man that has a long, outstretched arm, representing the arms that rule the winter sky. Beads and watch gears represent the stars that make up the constellation. I collected the watch parts 20 years ago when I traveled to New York with the Alberta College of Art and Design and stumbled across a watch repair business off Times Square. I bought the parts not knowing what I wanted to use them for until I started this work. The size of this moon is appropriate in that we had a smaller moon this month in 2021."

The series draws on oral histories and star knowledge taught by Elder Lynn Lush-Desjarlais, a residential school survivor. These teachings are integral to Indigenous culture and heritage, yet they also engage broader audiences by offering profound reflections on humanity's relationship with nature and the cosmos. In its artistic context, *MNIDOONS GIIZIS OONHG* exemplifies the rich tradition of Indigenous visual storytelling, yet it stands apart for its ability to incorporate tactile and multimedia elements in ways that make traditional knowledge accessible to contemporary viewers.

This work is extraordinary not only for its artistry but also for its profound impact on community engagement. Heather Shillinglaw's collaboration with Elder Lynn and the surrounding programming—including storytelling circles, beading workshops, and panel discussions—has extended the artwork's reach far beyond the gallery walls. By grounding her practice in land-based teachings and facilitating community connections, Shillinglaw has ensured her art becomes a living, breathing part of the cultural landscape.

The McMullen Gallery, located in the University of Alberta Hospital, is an ideal venue for this work. Its role in fostering healing through art makes Shillinglaw's pieces, which are deeply rooted in Indigenous medicine and resilience, especially resonant. Approximately 20% of the hospital's patients are Indigenous, and having access to an exhibition like *Nokomis gizis* can be profoundly healing. It acknowledges and validates the cultural experiences of these communities in a place where they are often overlooked.

Shillinglaw's vision goes beyond creating visual art; she fosters dialogue and builds bridges between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. The exhibition's workshops and storytelling events have provided opportunities for participants to connect deeply with traditional Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. Such engagement not only educates but also fosters a sense of belonging and understanding, especially within the hospital's diverse audience.

By intertwining artistic excellence with cultural resurgence, historical reverence, and social connection, *MNIDOONS GIIZIS OONHG* exemplifies why this work and its accompanying exhibition merit recognition. It is a testament to the transformative power of art and its ability to heal, unite, and inspire.