

Circling the Truth



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The first thing you see when you enter “RESERVE(d),” the installation conceived by **Caroline Monnet** and **Kevin Lee Burton** at Winnipeg’s Urban Shaman Gallery, is a large photograph on plexi of Monnet’s grandmother. Caroline sees her as “the spirit of the place, welcoming people into the gallery and also protecting the community in the centre of the gallery.” The image, then, functions as both an invitation and an obstruction; it basically obliges the viewer to enter the installation from the periphery, making the encounter with the space a movement from the outside in. This gentle coercion was an intentional part of their first collaboration. Burton and Monnet want us to go from nature to culture, so we circle through the landscape (Monnet’s video of the topography around God’s Lake Narrows literally moves) on our way to the houses on the reserve. The photographs of those houses and the people who live in them are suspended on two sides of plexi in the gallery’s centre. They are Burton’s close family members and friends—an uncle, a brother, a sister-in-law, two nieces. “What I was trying to focus on was the character and unique essence of those individual households,” Burton says.

Both he and Monnet are filmmakers, so Burton directed a photographer to take the images. What started out in his head as a documentary rendering of life on God’s Lake Narrows, where he was raised, ended up as a more personal portrait of the community. The subjects look out at us more than we look



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in at them. “Thinking about it I realized that what I wanted was a super-straightforward look into the camera,” and the result of his shift in focus moves from voyeurism to engagement.

There is much to see. Both filmmakers are concerned with the ways in which the past and the present intersect. Monnet is aware that a gap can exist between generations, so she projects herself onto the image of her grandmother. “I’m an embodiment of her, so bridging the gap is a way of reclaiming my culture, my spirit memory.” She is aided in that reclamation by images of a trio of birds (a heron, a loon and a raven) that she sees as “powerful symbols of vulnerability.” These solitary beings are realized in grey tones, the colour of memory for both artists. Throughout the installation, they employ a subtle palette. “We are a people who are not stuck in time, we keep evolving. That’s why we have black and white on one side of the plexi and colour—which is more contemporary—on the other,” Monnet says.

The exhibition is not without a political dimension. From the outside, Burton’s houses are “derelict and absolutely substandard,” but from the inside they are warm and lived in. His primary purpose is to honour and not hector. “I don’t work from the pathology of life. I try to take the next step to ‘now where, so now what?’ It’s very stagnating as an Aboriginal person to be constantly harping and griping. Of course, I have my issues and I could paint a really nasty picture of my reality, but I choose to make something different out of it. My mission is to nurture love for the people and the place.” Mission accomplished. ■

“RESERVE(d)” was exhibited at Urban Shaman Gallery in Winnipeg from April 23 to May 29, 2010.

1. Installation views of Kevin Lee Burton and Caroline Monnet, “RESERVE(d)” exhibition at Urban Shaman: Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Winnipeg, 2010, digital print. Photographer: Scott Stephens, digital images on Plexiglas, video projection, dimensions variable. Photograph: Kevin Lee Burton. Courtesy Urban Shaman.

2. Installation views of Kevin Lee Burton and Caroline Monnet, “RESERVE(d)” exhibition at Urban Shaman: Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Winnipeg, 2010, digital print. Photographer: Scott Stephens, digital images on Plexiglas, video projection, dimensions variable. Photograph: Scott Stephens. Courtesy Urban Shaman.

3. Installation views of Kevin Lee Burton and Caroline Monnet, “RESERVE(d)” exhibition at Urban Shaman: Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Winnipeg, 2010, digital print. Photographer: Scott Stephens, digital images on Plexiglas, video projection, dimensions variable. Photograph: Jonathan Couchman. Courtesy Urban Shaman.