

# INTERVIEWS WITH LORETTA TODD, SHELLEY NIRO AND PATRICIA DEADMAN

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## Introduction

Although the films and videos of Loretta Todd, films and photography of Shelley Niro, and the photography of Patricia Deadman are markedly different, each artist reveals many of the same concerns. Todd and Niro not only utilize Native talent on both sides of the camera, but perhaps more importantly attempt to create a Native aesthetic. This aesthetic is not only concerned with establishing an Indigenous "point of view" on such issues as the legacy of boarding schools, Native identity in the late 20th century, or the commodification of the environment, but also with expressing intrinsic aspects of Native cultures in a variety of visual media. It is not the primary concerns of these artists that the non-Indian audience understand what is going on in their work; rather, opening a video with an honouring song, as Todd does, or embedding beadwork designs in her imagery, as Niro does, or referencing traditional encampments, as Deadman does, locates their work in a space where certain meanings within their cultures become foremost.

## Loretta Todd (Métis/Cree)

Loretta Todd has long been an active voice in First Nations affairs. Before she began her filmmaking career she worked for the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs as a researcher and writer for Youth, Health, and Social Development. Subsequent to that she worked as a program officer

for the Employment and Immigration Commission and as a job re-entry coordinator for the Musqueam Indian Band. Her earliest films were *My Dad's DTs*, a 16 mm. experimental drama on adult children of alcoholics which she produced, wrote, and directed, *Robes of Power*, a video on ceremonial button robes, and a video installation entitled *Red Road and Blue Neon*. She has also worked as a producer and researcher on numerous film and video projects. In the spring of 1996 Todd was a Rockefeller Fellow at the Center for Media, Culture and History at New York University.

Her first major production as director, writer, and narrator was *The Learning Path* (1991). This film received a number of awards, including a Silver Hugo at the Chicago International Film Festival, the New Visionary Award at the Two Rivers Native Film Festival, and a Blue Ribbon at the American Film and Video Festival. Todd's next major film was *Hands of History* (1994), a documentary focusing on four First Nations women artists: Rena Point Bolton, Doreen Jensen, Joanne Cardinal-Schubert, Jane Ash Poitras. As in her other films, she begins this one with an honouring song, then creates a sense of reciprocal relations among the participants as a way of breaking down what she sees as the limited structural paradigms of Canadian documentaries. In the 1996 *Forgotten Warriors* Todd reclaims history and gives a voice to those who have been ignored by the very government they served.

Loretta Todd's films implicitly explore the Native in cyberspace and, further, ask what it means to be storyteller in the electronic age. What is the role of art and the artist in the community? How does the artist serve the community? Todd believes that the artist is not on the margins but has a specific role to play. She uses film and video to create and transform the spaces inhabited by First Nations people.

LA: *What led you to film-making?*

LT: There were a number of things, and it's hard to pinpoint one. When we finally did get a t.v. I was the kid who stayed up late at night watching old movies and thinking that if they could make movies about England two or three hundred years ago, then there must be old movies about us two from or three hundred years ago. I thought they were really were made two and three hundred years ago. I didn't realize they were just re-enactments of that time. I also stayed up late at night with the radio trying to tune in to cities like Los Angeles and places like that, even though I had no sense of Los Angeles or where it was. I liked playing with the radio all night and trying to get these unknown weird places and hear different voices. I always had a fascination with the technology even though I had no real concept of the technology when

I was younger. But more specifically, when I was older and working for Native organizations, and living in Vancouver for a few years, I realized that the Northwest Coast people have a strong sense of territory. I was lucky to be a guest in this territory and to have been given the kind of welcome that I had. But I was also aware of the fact that it was important that I didn't take a leadership role, that I wasn't someone who could be in the forefront because the territory belongs to the people there. I tried to think about a way in which I could still have a voice but be in the background. Film-making was that way, because I'm behind the camera, I'm not visible, I'm giving other people voices and I'm recognizing the territories that I'm in, the cultural territories, the physical and geographical territories, so it was a way of negotiating what my role was going to be in the community. I also wanted a skill. I have worked for Native organizations, I have worked in government, and I particularly felt that when I was working for the government you couldn't see the fruits of your labour. We did a lot of community and economic development projects but the government had less and less of an interest in the results of those separate projects and more interest in financial accountability and paperwork. I felt really frustrated with this so it became important for me to have a skill. I was a young person trying to support my daughter. I've done a lot of jobs, working in bakeries and in construction, for example, and I'd always thought it was important to have a skill. I had an affinity for film, though. When I watched film I could analyze not simply the plot but I could get into a whole analysis of the politics or the ideology, the dream world that was being created. I went to Simon Fraser Film School, an experimental film school in Vancouver.

LA: *One of your first films was The Learning Path. It was interesting because you combined historic and contemporary footage with re-created scenes. How did this film come about?*

LT: The Learning Path I made in '91 as part of a series *As Long As The Rivers Flow*. It was a series of five films that were being produced by a man who had hired permanently-nominated directors. He had initial discussions with a woman named Alanis Obomsawin [director of *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, 1992], and she was going to make a film focusing on education. Then Oka happened, and that became her complete commitment. She could not think about another film. She recommended that I be the person to take over. It was a little hard going whether or not they were going to hire me because all I had done were some low budget videos for Native organizations. I had

done an experimental piece called *My Dad's DT's* and I guess that was the thing that convinced them to hire me. In that there was a poetical, lyrical dreamscape that I was dealing with. That's always been the direction I had gone in my work. The very first pieces I did, even in film school or for Native organizations, combined drama with documentary. I didn't really plan to combine documentary with drama. It was just that that was the technique I needed to tell the story. Anyway, I was able to make *The Learning Path*. Alanis said, "It's your film, Loretta, you go where you want with it." She had already talked to Olive Dickerson, who was in the film. I also interviewed Dr. Ann Anderson and Eva Cardinal, and we got along really well. We talked about their experiences and the kind of film they would like. They wanted a hopeful film, not another typical documentary and I know I didn't want to make another typical documentary because we've seen them so many times. Using drama and an experimental technique was an attempt to decolonize the documentary. The documentary is such a pervasive aesthetic in Canada because the primary sort of film-making in Canada is documentary and that aesthetic is so codified. There really isn't a feature or dramatic film industry. You could go so far as to say that there really isn't a popular culture in Canada. In the States it may be a little different because there are these sort of celebratory documentaries or documentaries that take on political issues and they're real triumphs of the political will and all this stuff, but in Canada a documentary is something that you see all the time.

The documentary is so pervasive that I recognized how painful that aesthetic was for me growing up. There were so many documentary films about Native people by outsiders that we were basically silenced. That's nothing new. As a kid I would be at school, when we moved to the city, and they would show us these Indian films and the White kids would laugh. That made me feel helpless. I told the producers that I couldn't just make another documentary, that I had to push the film and find another way to tell the story. I felt the strength I had as a film-maker was the ability to create beautiful images that were poetic and emotional. If they give me the freedom to do that then I could create that kind of storytelling. That's what I set out to do. When the women told me the stories of their experiences in school, images would come to my mind and then from those images I would decide which ones I could shoot and how I could work. The image of the nun was a very particular thing. I had spent not quite a year in a boarding school, but the women in the film had spent their whole childhoods in a boarding school, and one of the things we talked about, just as women sitting around talking,

not as film-maker and subject, but just as women sitting around talking, even though they were older than me, was the kind of terror that the nun's image brought to us, and yet, at the same time, how that image was also a secure thing because it was something that we saw all the time. The nun was our reality. She was both horrible and beautiful at the same time. At night we would hear them walking down the corridors, the heavy wool of their habits brushing against the corridor, and even though it held terror, it was still our childhood sound. How could I convey that? I tried to create the sense of these beings in our lives who are both terrifying and comforting. That's when I decided to go to an abandoned residential school. I put the daughter of a woman who was working on the film in an old nun's outfit. I shot those scenes in black and white. I wanted the light to bum out the image and have the nun figure drift through the hallways and rooms. We never see the face in the film, because we never saw their faces in real life. They were just faceless. They drift through this place as ghosts, as haunting, terrible ghosts. So that was one of the strategies. It was one of my ways of being able to tell the story. It was a way of decolonizing the documentary and a way of including my voice and making a contribution. In some ways it was an honouring too, in that these women can tell their stories, and as oral storytellers they conjure up images for us. Their story has created this in my imagination and here I'm offering it. I wasn't trying to fall in the line of any particular documentary filmmaker. No one was going to tell me how I was going to do it. I broke all kinds of conventions in that film.

LA: *At the beginning of your films you include an honouring song.*

LT: I wasn't really conscious of it until recently and I decided I'd include an honouring song for almost everything I do. Again, if we've trying to decolonize the documentary then we can bring in our own forms of how we talk and how we do business and how we deal with one another, and one of the ways we deal with one another is that we honour one another, and that often comes through song. Whenever I've been to meetings or a ceremony or a cultural gathering there's usually a welcoming song or honouring song for the people who are participating. That honouring song honours the people who are sharing their stories, and honours the people who have arrived to hear the stories. That honour song hopefully creates a respectful space to start the film off so that the people who are there will listen and open their minds to the stories they are about to hear. It's also my way of honouring the people who have shared their stories with me to make

the film. I'm trying to bring those ways of how we do business into the practice of film-making.

LA: *Do you have a sense of your audience when making a film? You've done many films for Native organizations which include information that the non-Native audience may not understand. No More Secrets, for example, is about solvent abuse.*

LT: I'm just really tired of explaining, explaining, explaining, because all we ever do is explain. People are always asking me what things mean. I was once in the woods in northern British Columbia, where I'm not even from, and this guy's there producing a small current affairs show out of Calgary and he's asking, "What tree's that? What plant's that, Loretta?" There is an expectation that we're there to explain the metaphysical world or the natural world, or to explain our hurt, our angst, our pain. To me that defines a power relationship in that they're the ones who need to know and we're there to serve their need to know. But my films are much more specific. The people I'm making the film about are my audience because I have to consider what they are going to think when they see this film. I'm thinking about them all the time. I'm thinking about my own family. Will I bring honour to them when I make this film, or will I embarrass them in some way? Am I contributing to the health of my own family? I remember an Elder told me about how her grandson had watched a Native video and it wasn't necessarily anything that was really slick or fancy or anything like that, but it had people he knew in it. And she said he's watched it over and over and over again. So I'm thinking about them. I'm thinking about the things that are familiar to those kids, what's going to mirror back to them. And not just the actual material, physical aspects of their lives, but the emotional and imaginative aspects too. Someone asked me once if I were an interpreter of reality. I don't feel I'm an interpreter of reality. I'm not trying to feed back people's realities and say here's your reality, and you can thank me very much for showing you your reality. I'm trying to reach people emotionally, spiritually, physically, intellectually, mentally. How can they understand the story at each of those levels? That means that a younger person may experience a film differently than an older person who knows a little bit more. So I guess I'm not thinking about an audience in general as much as I'm thinking about the person, the child, the grandmother. I think about non-Indian people, too, not that I have to explain everything, but how can I get to their gut. How can I make them dispense with their expectations of what I'm supposed to do and instead let them just become part of the

experience of watching this film, so that perhaps in the end they'll be changed a little bit. Sometimes I have a very specific audience, like for the solvent abuse film. The organization said we need to use this video for young people and old people and parents who can all sit down and after seeing this feel comfortable talking about solvent abuse. Then I have to think, what would make them feel comfortable, and in that case those people who need this story own that video. They're the ones who own this experience and this process. They are the audience. Each film varies. But I really do think of those children. I think of my own daughter.

LA: *Is it a goal of your work to create a dialogue between Native and non-Native people in Canada?*

LT: I know that a lot of the Six Nations people and the people out here in the East believe in the two-row wampum. The White people are in their canoe and we're in our canoe and there's no reason for there to be interaction. I respect that. However, they build pulp mills on our rivers. They build highways through our land. They bring drugs into our streets. So there has to be a dialogue. In fact, when I was doing the war veterans film I talked to Native historians who said that in the early wars the Whites and French and Indians fought alongside one another. I asked them what that meant. Why would Indians fight with these guys, side with the French, or side with the English? One historian said a lot of it was about land, but the other thing was that Indian people saw the French and Englishmen come over and they were like kids in the sand box. They were fighting all the time. He said he honestly believes that a lot of the Chiefs at the time, a lot of the people at the time, thought they could bring those people into our sphere of influence. The point was that the way they live on the land isn't correct so it's our job to protect the land, to protect our territory, and we will go to battle with them. I don't feel that Indians are the teachers and the nurturers and the caretakers of White people. But we are caretakers of the land. And if these people are living on the land with us and they are the ones who are going to create economics and commerce from the land, particularly in Canada, then we really have to be talking to them. It's happening in B.C. where there are treaty negotiations going on where White people, not just politicians, have third party groups, wildlife groups, land use groups, and are able to bring their voices into the discussions. And the Indian people who have been there at those tables have welcomed those third parties. You live on this land with us and we welcome and respect your voice about how you want to live on the

land. I start my filmmaking from my love of my people, my love of the land, for all my relations. The next place I start my films is to try to make other people feel that same love. But I'm not there as an apologist for White people. I'm not there as someone who feels that I have to get them to listen. But if my tools are emotion, if my tools are beauty, if my tools are working with people's beliefs, then what I'd rather do, instead of creating action-adventure films where people are killed and everybody's excited and their adrenaline rushes, is use that same strength of film to get to people at a deep level. If I can open their minds and make them recognize who they are, then hopefully that can start off or contribute toward dialogue or discussion.

LA: *In addition to the honouring songs, you embed various levels of protocol, like in Hands of History.*

LT: Protocol was a big part of *Hands of History*. When I first started making this film my treatment was that I was going to do all these elaborate art things like I had done with my other films. I was going to do optical printing and have paintings and frame the women with paints and color. However, I didn't have the feeling that I could trust that elaborate vision to an institution like the National Film Board of Canada. I just didn't feel it was going to work. I knew Joanne and I've known Doreen for years. Doreen's been a teacher of mine. Anyway, when I got to talking to them and thinking about the film I realized that it would be presumptuous of me to put my art in the film, not because I didn't think I was an artist of equal stature, but the protocol was that I'm honouring them, and not insert my art into the film. That was the first thing. The other thing was, how can I then construct this? How can I make this if I'm not going to do all the fancy stuff and still not make a film like another documentary? I thought, I can make this film as if women are sitting around in a circle and telling a story, and one will talk for a while and then finish and then another one will take up, but where she'll take up doesn't really leave off with the other one but it will spark something in her mind that will take her into her own thoughts about her art, who she is and where her art comes from, and that will continue throughout the film. There's an effort to create the protocol of the circle in the construction of the film. I'm using the protocol of the circle and allowing or creating that space for them to share their stories. Another protocol going on is the fact that at the time I was making the film there was a debate going on in Canada between traditional and contemporary artists. I wanted to show a continuum between the traditional and the contemporary artist and that the continuation of a culture involves a process. I was trying

to show that the art being made by contemporary artists really originated with traditional artists, and that even though the contemporary artists are influenced by and working within the Western art tradition and Western art practice, their protocol is back to tradition, not to the Western world. This is my opinion, not necessarily the opinion of all the artists in the film, but that's a subtext of the film. So there were levels of protocol going on.

LA: *Voice = Life (1995) uses a different technique. What were you trying to do in that film?*

LT: The organization Healing Our Spirit asked me to make this video, but I didn't want to make a video about what you do and how you do it. I wanted to find out what "Healing Our Spirit" means. That suggested that the film would have to help promote in some way what the organization does. It seems that whenever we talk about HIV/AIDS, I mean North America in general, it's death, it's despair, it's the image of the person near death. It's the Western way of looking at death, the sense of finality and the shame associated with HIV/AIDS. If they're talking about healing our spirit, if they're talking about disease, what does the disease have to teach us? One of the things it has to teach us is that we have to love our bodies, which means we have to love how we look. One of the things that came up at Healing Our Spirit is that so many of the people who are on the streets and at risk of getting HIV, so many of the kids who are doing drugs and alcohol who are at risk of getting HIV, have been violated in some way. There's a cycle of sexual abuse. There's no denying it. As a consequence there's not a love of the body, of our sexual power, of our sexuality. There's the sense of being violated and not knowing how to protect yourself. So there's a lot of risky behaviour going on. But rather than pathologizing it and saying you're wrong to do that and you're bad to do that, I wanted to take another approach and say "look how beautiful we are." Even when we have HIV, look how beautiful we are. Even the fellow who's very ill at that point with AIDS, I wanted him to look beautiful, and I wanted to play with the idea that we are beautiful people and that we live in this world. I wanted to work with that idea of beauty. I also wanted to work with the idea that we're all in the circle together, that we all own this disease. It can happen to any of us, and we cannot exclude anybody from the circle. I had to take those concepts and find a cinematic way of expressing them. I put all the people who work at Healing our Spirit into a circle. I went into the studio and shot the people in front of a blue screen and added images later, the sky, the clouds,

and then the other thing I wanted to do was to show the many faces of our people. I invited all my friends and they invited their friends and people came, mothers and sons and boyfriends and grandmothers and grandchildren, and we just sat around and took pictures, just to sort of proclaim to one another that we are beautiful, that we should not fear one another. I interviewed the people individually at Healing Our Spirit to talk about what "Healing Our Spirit" means to them and what it is that we're learning from HIV/AIDS.

LA: *Another recent film of yours is Forgotten Warriors. Do you feel that your films try to reveal things that are ignored or denied by the dominant culture?*

LT: I'm not the kind of person who can go and deal with big pressing political issues. I just am not that. I don't know why. I guess because part of that type of film-making means being in your face and I can't do that. Maybe it goes back to being aware of somebody else's territory and realizing the protocol of that. Instead, I'm looking at the subjects that are more hidden, subjects that people aren't talking about or that we live with every day but don't always look at. The veterans came to me a few years ago in B.C. I knew some of them. They wanted to make a story about what they had been doing. They were on a healing journey and most of them had stopped drinking, and they wanted that to be a message to other veterans and to young people. They also felt that they were getting old and they had to start thinking about what they were leaving behind. They wanted a message of healing and hope. The other thing was that they felt that they hadn't ever been acknowledged by the Canadian government. In fact, the Canadian government didn't invite them to lay a wreath at the official memorial in Ottawa until 1983. Even then the only reason that happened is because of lobbying from Native organizations to get them to invite the war veterans and to acknowledge their contribution to Canada during the first and second World Wars. The other thing was that a lot of them had never gained the same benefits that returning non-Native veterans had. Some of them had actually lost their status because officially in Canada, if you were Indian, you weren't a Canadian citizen, and in order to be in the Canadian army you had to be a Canadian citizen. Sometimes the recruiting officer would forego the formality and enlist them anyway. The enlistment officer would say you've got to put down Canadian or English or whatever, so that when those guys came back from the war they discovered they'd been struck from their enrolment list and they were no longer Status Indians. That didn't happen in every

case but it happened in enough cases. They couldn't get education benefits, they couldn't get job training benefits. There was confusion over who's administering to Indians. Is it Indian Affairs? Indian Affairs had such a punitive relationship to Indians that they would go so far as to deny wife and family allowances to Native women. So the film is an effort to talk about those things, to bring those things into Canadian consciousness. It was also a way of putting their experience into Canadian history, to reclaim their role in history. I went through the War Archives at the Film Board and looked at hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of rolls of film and I only saw two images of Indians. There was a complete erasure in Canadian history about Indian involvement in the war. The film is a chance to reclaim our place in history and to insert those men and women into that history.

LA: *In addition to your films you also write about film and media.*

LT: I do a little bit of theoretical writing for various publications, although I try to do it in my own way. I don't try to be academic. "Aboriginal Natives in Cyberspace" is an essay from a book called *Immersed in Technology*. That book developed from a workshop in the Banff Center, where a number of artists were called together to create virtual reality. An Aboriginal artist in Vancouver, Lawrence Paul, was invited to do one of his virtual realities and the conference organizers asked me to write about his work. But I realized I couldn't just write about his virtual reality pieces without talking about the context of virtual reality and what cyberspace means to our lives. I wrote about cyberspace and the implications it has. My point was, if people are going to create this new universe, they have to think about the consequences, not just to this generation, but to seven generations down. I think every piece of technology or machinery or whatever should be scrutinized in that same way. Every time something comes that's new, we should ask what it means not just to our lives but to the seven generations. What does it mean to the land? If we create something, what does it mean, what's it going to do, what can it do? That's basically what I call for. I also talk about virtual reality, about how Lawrence Paul's piece doesn't allow you to leave your identity or leave your body. In his piece, he applies natural laws so you can't just slide through this seamless corridor of space and time, that in fact, when you actually go into his virtual reality you hear your feet on the stones, you can't pass through walls, you have to go through doors. It's a more augmented reality. He implicates you. You have to be who you are and you have to examine

your relationship to his spiritual reality. Why is it that the West wants to create a virtual reality where you lose yourself and your identity?

LA: *How do you see the role of the artist generally, and the film artist in particular, in serving the community? You've said that you want to make films as well as someone does beadwork.*

LT: When a lot of us in Canada started our training and then went out into the world to start making films, we found a very large alternative media community. There are many film and video co-ops, but as Native people we didn't have complete access. I've had a little bit of access to the Film Board in the last few years, but compared to the way most non-Native filmmakers have access to the Film Board I've had a very marginal place. If we lived in the cities we could go to these co-ops, so a lot of us started going to them, but they tried to draw us into their politics. And their politics basically is that they are in the margins of their Western culture. The artist is someone who's there partly by choice but partly also because Western culture doesn't value the artist. There's a political implication about the role of the artist in Western culture, and there are ideologies and different value systems that go with that. It was difficult for me because as much as we all had to lobby together for increased services and access to resources and grants so that we could have good equipment and be able to go and make our work, I felt that I couldn't in all honesty agree with their concept of what the role of the artist was. I feel that artists from the Aboriginal community should be able to deal with criticism and should be able to make criticism. The whole clowning tradition within Aboriginal communities is a way of dealing with people about things that they shouldn't be doing. There is a tradition of the artist in the Aboriginal community who does speak the unspeakable. A group of us across Canada spontaneously realized that we had to have our own organization. We had to define who we were as film and video makers within our own cultural context. What was our role? There have only been Native film and video makers for the last 20-25 years in Aboriginal countries, so what does that mean? We never were there before. Are we storytellers, are we chroniclers, are we ethnographers? Who are we, and what is our role? That meant examining the role of the artist. Fortunately, many of the people who were involved in making film and video came from enough of a traditional context that we could start talking about seeing ourselves as part of this continuum. I see myself in the same way as the storyteller, except my way of telling the story is different. We felt that it was important to reassert that because the storyteller, the artist,

has a role to play in the health of the community. Even though there's no word for "art" and "artist" in most communities, there is a word for people who tell stories. There's a word for people who make things and help people with their dreams. Again, it goes back to protocol. Therefore, what is my role? We are unlike the non-Native filmmakers, particularly the ethnographer or the documentary filmmaker, who feel they can go anywhere and do anything because they're there in the interests of science or in the interest of justice. It doesn't matter what they have to do to get that story out. I can't do that. I have to observe the protocol. I have to feel free to be able to bring my whole imagination to bear, all my artistic and creative abilities to bear. And if there's a tribal official who's doing something bad to the people, that should be known. But I can't be there to give away stories that aren't mine to give away. I can't be there telling things that the people only want told to a few people. These stories, these films, are inherited by our children. The legacy that is in these films is inherited by other people, so everything I do I have to be very careful about why I do it, who I do it for, who's going to be hurt by this, who is going to gain from this. I have to think about the seven generations. I have to think about the consequences of my actions. So on one hand, I live in this creative, imaginative world. On the other hand, I live in a world in which I am part of something, I am part of a whole, I am part of a circle. And I have to make sure that I am a strong link in that circle, not a weak link in that circle. The role of the Aboriginal storyteller, filmmaker, video-maker, is still in flux. It's still being defined.

LA: *Are the stories changing?*

LT: The stories are changing. The things that are going on in our lives are changing, the kinds of concerns of our people are changing. I think skill is really essential. Yes, we can make videos and they can be earnest and sincere and in the moment. That's really important, but I also think that we have to uphold the highest standards, just as the carvers and the beadmakers do. We must get the highest quality image that we can. It's not cheap by any means, so that's something that has to be borne in mind. But that's something that has to motivate us as well, thinking of our role in that way. The technical and the imaginative are the processes by which we're putting these stories down.

### Filmography

Forgotten Warriors Director/Writer (National Film Board), 1996

*Hands of History*, Director/Writer (National Film Board), 1994

*The Learning Path*, Director/Writer/Narrator (Tamarack Productions/National Film Board), 1991.

### Videography

*Voice - Life*, Director (Healing Our Spirit First Nations AIDS Society), 1995

*Taking Care of Our Own*, Co-producer/Director/Writer (Professional Native Women's Association/Ministry of Social Services and Housing), 1991

*Chronicles of Pride*, Producer/Director/Writer (United Native Nations Knowledge Network), 1990

*Eagle Run*, Producer/Director (First Nations House of Learning/School of Physical Education and Recreation, University of British Columbia), 1990

*Halfway House*, Director/Writer (Allied Indian Métis Society), 1986

### Other

*The Four Directions*, Producer (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), 1992-93

*The Healing Circle*, Scriptwriter (Forefront), 1991

*Day Glo Wrestler*, Scriptwriter (Omni Films/Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), 1990.

## Shelley Niro (Iroquois)

The photography of Shelley Niro explodes myths about Native people through a focus on individuals: her mother, her sisters, and herself. Using single shots, triptychs, and multiple-panel series, and both historical and new photographs, she challenges the idea that Native people are a restricted class or are unable to have full lives as individuals in society. At the same time, Niro does not ignore the deforming effects of history, politics, bureaucracies, and injustice.

In *Passing Through* (1993) Niro creates a narrative by showing her mother walking beneath a street sign that declares "Woodstock The Friendly City." The last panel shows the same figure walking away from the camera, next to a sign that reads "Thank You Call Again." In between these two photographs are three shots: the impersonal City Hall (actually in Brantford), the imposing Provincial Court Building, and the usual "No Parking" signs ("Unauthorized Vehicles Towed Away") framed by another

municipal building in the rear. An initial irony emerges between the first and fifth shots and the middle three, as the polite signs which frame the city are contrasted with the coldness of the city's civil architecture and unpeopled streets. The irony is heightened with the realization that this Native walker is a foreigner in the city, and that the purported friendliness may not extend to her.

Niro has taken other excursions into downtown Brantford (named after Mohawk war chief Joseph Brant, who led a group of Iroquois, mainly Cayugas and Mohawks, from New York into Ontario after the Revolutionary War). One day, Niro and her sisters "invaded" the city as an act of personal empowerment. As "an exercise in liberation" and as a way to regain a sense of control, she and her sisters dressed up, developed alter egos, and spent the day in Brantford. The *Mohawks in Beehives* series (1991) is a documentation of this day. In "Red Heels Hard" there are six hand-tinted photographs of her sisters posing at the base of a statue of Brant; "Standing on Guard for Thee" is a single shot of the sisters under the statue, and this time Brant's boots and robe are also tinted red. In this series, the streets are peopled—Native peopled.

Another hand-colored photograph in this series is "The Iroquois Is a Highly Developed Matriarchal Society." The triptych reveals the photographer's smiling mother in her kitchen beneath a hair dryer. On the surface it is a playful image of the simple dailiness of living. Her mother is caught *au naturel*, unposed. The shots are framed on black mat, into which are inscribed Iroquoian beadwork symbols. This triptych in particular stands deliberately at odds with Edward Curtis' and others' depiction of "the Native," which generally portrayed the Indian unnaturally, a reflection of the photographers' needs and preconceptions.

The interplay of the personal and the political, the mixing of the minutiae of daily life with the broader forces that impact that life, is one of the underlying structures of Niro's work. This structure also emerges in the six-panel piece called *In Her Lifetime* (1992). Featuring one of her sisters, the panels present photographs and a third-person narration about what is going on in the life of the subject. The first two panels depict a smiling figure turned somewhat away from the camera, apparently thinking about her youth, but in the two center panels the figure faces the camera (and the viewer) with thoughts less sanguine. In the fourth panel, a close-up, the character realized that "Native issues would never be resolved in her lifetime." In the last two panels (actually flipped images of the first two) the figure is "back to the immediate," thinking about Christmas, her kids, and that "Friday was just a day away."

*This Land Is Mime Land* (1992) is Niro's most elaborate achievement to date. Comprised of over a dozen triptychs, the panels disclose the artist through two self-portraits flanking a photograph of a family member. (The family photographs are both contemporary and from her "family archives;" the contemporary photograph is sepia-toned). One self-portrait shows her in street clothes; in the other she is dressed in a costume: as a robed and bewigged judge in "Judge Me Not;" as Elvis in "Love Me Tender;" as Marilyn Monroe in "500 Year Itch." Niro's use of family photographs reveals that identity is multi-faceted, and includes daughter, mother, and aunt. The photographs in street clothes show the individuality of the self while the costumed poses offer ironic commentary on the dominant culture.

Niro's multiple-panelled works create a narrative through both continuity of image and through juxtaposition, the latter through a montage effect. The images are meant to be "read" in sequence, like a film. Her images are carefully structured to produce this narrative effect. In 1992 she extended her concept of photographic narrative to the medium of film. In collaboration with Anna Gronau, Niro wrote and directed *It Starts With a Whisper*.

In addition to her photography and other work, Niro has co-curated *From Icebergs to Iced Tea* at the Thunder Bay Art Centre. Her work is in the collections of the Laurentian Art Centre, Sudbury, Ontario, the Canada Council, and the Canadian Museum of Civilization, both in Ottawa. She has also received commissions for her poster and mural work.

LA: *You've said that in In Her Lifetime (1991) you've tried to reflect one day in the character's life in the series of photographs. You've also included some text in each photograph.*

SN: I wanted to use very simple imagery. I also wanted to create a very simple narrative, but it always comes down to the bottom line. I'll read the piece to give you an idea. The first image reads: "In her younger years she was so carefree laughing, singing, dancing." It's an image of a woman, one of my sisters actually, looking quite happy, with a carefree expression. The second image reads: "She would look out to the horizon and let her thoughts drift out with the never-ending tide." At this point she is turning a little bit away from the camera. In the third panel the text reads: "As maturity set in, she would become depressed over the fact that soap operas have no endings, some country music reminded her of soggy cornflakes, she could never find the matching sock to the one she held in her hand... and." With this image I wanted to create a very domestic, everyday, ordinary kind of situation: but at the same time it expresses not huge problems, but they're indicative of that sort of ongoing routine that never ends. The next panel

continues: "Native issues would never be resolved in her lifetime." So she is going through her life, a very ordinary type of life, but there is an underlying problem that will be there regardless of how long you live and how many Indian people there are. Certain issues will never be resolved. She could live until a hundred and fifty and they would still be there. Then she has to bring herself back into the ordinary situation again, which leads to the bottom line of the story: "She would give herself a shake and realize Christmas was six months away, the kids would be out of school soon," and then the final panel: "and Friday was just a day away." She's bringing herself back into reality, and even though it's a boring reality she still has to bring herself back to it.

LA: *There's an interplay between everyday life and the broader political issues.*

SN: I think so, even though I'm not a political person. I'm not one to go and rally and protest and I really don't know the big issues. I can guess at them because I'm taking my information from mass media sources, so I have to condense it to a point where I try to understand it, but I don't think I'll ever understand a lot of it. At the same time, it's always there, that whole process of trying to figure out what's going on, like who's deceiving me. There's always that questioning going on. So it acts like a wave, and then it has to come back to the very beginning again, like a wave would go out and come back.

LA: *Did you try to do that in the placement of the five panels? The first panel is a reverse of the last one, and the second is the reverse of the fourth. In the middle panel you have a close-up of the figure looking directly into the camera.*

SN: Yes, that's exactly what I tried to do. I tried to create a wave-effect so that it peaks in the center panel and then goes back out again.

LA: *This work, for example, has a narrative dimension both in the imagery and the text. Do you generally attempt to get that dimension into your work?*

SN: I don't necessarily work toward that but sometimes it just happens. It's like an idea will come to me quickly and then I use it. Other pieces I have to really work toward, but this one just happened—a stroke of luck!

LA: *Many of your pieces are triptychs or multiple panel shots. Do you consider yourself more intuitive or do you structure what you're doing ahead of time?*

SN: I think that I'm unconscious and conscious at the same time. I'm always thinking about stuff, but in a very subconscious way. So I don't necessarily say to myself, "How will I do this?" It's not math to me; it's something that I'm thinking about and then if I start getting an idea, it starts working itself out once I start on it. It's not something where I say I'm going to do this and then I'm going to do that. It sort of evolves into a piece. The series *This Land is Mime Land* evolved from an idea. It was a very simple idea, but then once I started working on it, it just kept growing and growing. If I'm doing a series like *Mime Land*, I usually shoot five or six shots to the one I'll use. Sometimes it's surprising that when I first look at the negatives I don't think they are going to be very interesting, but when I start re-examining them something starts happening, I guess the creative forces take over and you start to put one image with another.

LA: *Maybe we could take a look at some of This Land is Mime Land. Generally speaking, how did this particular series of triptychs develop?*

SN: Well, it happened after *Mohawks in Beehives*. I wanted to put myself into the work and I wanted to work with contemporary imaging. That's where the costumes came in. I went to a costume place and rented a bunch of costumes and then started putting them on and it was like a masquerade. That's where *Mime Land* came from because I felt like putting on makeup and posing.

LA: *You also play on my, this land is mine.*

SN: Exactly. This land is my land, mime land.

LA: *In each triptych in the series there is one hand-tinted photograph of you in a costume on the left. The middle panel is a sepia-toned photograph, some old family photographs and others more contemporary. In the right-hand panel is a self-portrait in regular clothes. Some of the costumed Shellys come from pop culture, like Elvis ("Love Me Tender"), Marilyn Monroe ("500 Year Itch"), or Star Trek ("Final Frontier").*

SN: I wanted to use the costumes I could fit into. So that was Elvis and Marilyn Monroe and the *Star Trek* figure. I think that's also indicative of what they rent at costume places, the pop-culture icons. Those are the costumes they had at this place anyway. Then the rest I just invented, like the Mohawk worker ("Mohawk Worker"), or the ballerina in "Survivor," and "North American Welcome" where I'm the Statue of Liberty. It starts feeling kind of schizophrenic because you're putting

on these different disguises but it was like I could put on these other personalities. It's something that I usually don't do.

LA: *You mentioned about the use of Marilyn Monroe that, "Marilyn is compared to 'Mother' and reflects on the artist becoming a triangle of social and historical dilemma, feminist discourse."*<sup>1</sup> Could you expand on that a bit?

SN: It's hard because this work is pretty old, and at the time I'm doing it I can kind of construct all these big ideas, like you go through the social and psychological process of creating a work, but the Marilyn Monroe was, I think, one of the very first images that I was working with in this series. I was bringing out how Marilyn is always held up as the great beauty, and how the beauty she possessed is way beyond anything a lot of people I know could ever attain or even come close to. Then, at the same time, I was thinking about some similarities, how my mother and Marilyn would have been the same age, and how they both lived in North America, but at the same time they're so different that there's no connection there at all. There's nothing there that draws a connecting line between Marilyn Monroe and my mother. So when I was working on that piece, I had all these thoughts going through my head about the idea of ideal beauty and the place of women in society and then there's me, even further removed than my mother is.

LA: *All of the middle panels are women except for the one with your father.*

SN: Well. I've noticed that in my family pictures, there are more women in the old photographs than there are men, and there's only a couple of my father. There's more of grandmothers, aunts, that sort of picture. That's pretty interesting to me, too. Why are there more pictures of females than males? But this isn't the whole show. There's about five pieces missing out of it and he's in another one as well.

LA: *The Mohawks in Beehives series (1991) also uses multiple panels and hand-coloring. "The Iroquois is a Highly Developed Matriarchal Society" is one of the works in the series, a three panel piece which shows your mother at home under a hair dryer. How did the series develop?*

SN: The *Mohawks in Beehives* was created in March of '91, after Oka and the Gulf War and February, which is a crazy month of the year because there's that winter blues feeling. Everybody's trying to fight the depression that lingers over that month. So I thought up *Mohawks in Beehives* as a way of bringing a bit of control into my life and the people around me; the control is really a state of liberation, a freedom in expressing

ourselves. It was liberating in the fact that we just allowed ourselves to act, to be flamboyant and outrageous, because you're usually in situations where you have to know the rules and the protocol and know how to act in public. But when you're with your sisters you can give yourself license to be as obnoxious as you like, especially if you're going to be out attacking the rest of the world. So that's what we did on this day. We invaded downtown Brantford (Ontario). All these pictures are from that one day. We got dressed up and stepped outside of our own personalities and created alter egos.

LA: *On the framing mat you have designs incised both on Mime Land and Mohawks in Beehives series. Could you talk about the function of the incisions on the mat?*

SN: In that series I tended to use a more traditional design, but it's a very basic design, and I just wanted to incorporate that into the work. But with *This Land is Mime Land* I decided to invent my design as I went into it because I think you have to look at the traditional, but at the same time you always have to stay inventive. In *Mime Land*, because I'm dealing with both contemporary and historical presences, I also wanted to deal with a cultural signifier. In my other work, I've used a beadwork design and I wanted to continue using that same sort of design, but I wanted to incorporate a more original, more contemporary one in the mat.

LA: *How did you become interested in photography?*

SN: Photography has always been a mystery to me. It's one of those things where, as a kid, I looked at a photograph and wondered how it was done because it was like magic. As I got older and started taking photography classes, the magic was resolved in my mind, and I started realizing I could take my own photographs. That in itself was quite empowering, having that knowledge. And once you get that knowledge, you can do anything you want with it.

LA: *James Patten writes that your photographs deal with the construction of the self in Western society. Your work "questions the validity of white society's images of First Nations' people. At the same time, her work negates the construction of a pure native self-identity as ultimately creating yet another unrealistic stereotype. As a First Nations woman, Niro is especially sensitive to how both white and native social values control and manipulate women."<sup>2</sup> Do you think your work is trying to break down sort of both these poles of stereotypes?*

SN: Yes, because I think a lot of times Indian people end up stereotyping themselves. Like [Shawnee-Cayuga poet] Barney Bush was saying at a recent poetry reading, they buy into the mushy, gushy image that is acceptable and safe. Some people think that to be Indian you have to do certain things, but I'm just saying that you're Indian no matter what you do, but you have to decide what you want to do and you have to ask questions, like, am I doing something because it's expected of me, or am I doing it because I really believe this and it's really a part of me? So I'm always questioning that, saying, "Am I being truthful to myself? How much a part of what I do is part of my psychology?" I'm always thinking about that and I'm always aware of what I'm looking for, but it's always like I'm looking through a fog. So even if I'm finishing work, I'm never really certain about what I've found, but I'm always wading through something. I guess it's the wading process that's probably the most interesting.

LA: *Your work has been called "a bold assertion of selfhood rather than a search for identity."*<sup>3</sup>

SN: If you're searching for your identity, that sounds kind of hopeless, doesn't it? It just seems to have a connotation that you're lost or you're trying to find your way back to someplace. I think it relates to stereotyping, so instead of accepting what people say you should be. I'm questioning why can't I be like I am, why can't I like parts of other things in contemporary society? Regardless of how Indians are viewed, as being very isolated and alienated, we still watch TV, we read the papers, we listen to music. There are many other commonalities with the dominant culture that I probably wouldn't want to live without or exclude myself from.

LA: *What was the reaction to your early work? Were people confused because it didn't seem to be "Indian photography"?*

SN: Before this newer work here? People would respond, "What the hell? What is this?" Sometimes they just don't get it right away, and that's fine with me because by the time I finish a piece and by the time it's hanging on a wall, I'm usually doing something else. My father doesn't understand my stuff and I think, well, if my father doesn't understand it, why should anyone else?

LA: *Maybe we could talk about your art training. You also paint and do graphics, but you're best known for photography.*

SN: I was always an artist. I started out in graphics because I was in a city that had a community college with a graphic art program. I thought I'd take a graphic art course but I hated it. But they also had within the course a photography section and that's the part I really liked. I do painting and I've done some sculpture. I kind of go in a circle. I do a lot of different things, I don't necessarily stick to one medium because I think everything is so exciting. It's too exciting to stay with one thing.

LA: *Do you think that the triptych or the multiple-image format offers you more possibilities in what you're trying to express?*

SN: I think the triptychs are very animated. If you start following the line of the imagery, it creates a feeling of movement, and if you start looking at the images, it tries to create a dialogue. I think that's the part that's most interesting and exciting for me because you start feeling that rhythm in the work. It creates a continuity that I like, that feeling of that rhythm.

LA: *So in a sense, even in the stills, you're creating movement.*

SN: I think so. In the piece "Red Heels Hard" [6 panels, 1991] there's a definite storyline in the action. It's like a very short movie. It's like a video.

LA: *Speaking of film, you did It Starts With a Whisper in 1992.*

SN: I had a partner in this film, Anna Gronau. She is an experienced film maker and we co-produced, co-wrote, and co-directed it. It was really made for the end of 1992 when a lot of people at the time were making art pertaining to the issues of Columbus. I didn't want to make a painting or do something that would be stuck in a closet and forgotten about. I wanted to do something that would be more contemplative of the year, but at the same time could have a life of its own afterwards. It was designed so that it would be shown New Year's Eve of 1992, and it was designed so that the screening of the film would end at midnight, so we'd catapult ourselves into the rest of the history of the world. The story is about a young Iroquoian girl, Shanna, who's crossing a threshold from being a girl into being a woman. She's questioning her existence and place in the world. She doesn't know how to go about living a happy life knowing all the atrocities that have happened. Then she meets with an Elder toward the end of the film and he advises her that she has to think about these things but not let that knowledge of the past prevent her from living in the present. It was originally shot in 16mm but it's transferred to video now.

LA: *Maybe we could talk in some detail about the film. You started with Shanna's narration about a tribe that was nearly wiped out but who were assimilated with the Cayugas. Why did you start the film with this historical framework?*

SN: With that narration I started describing the Tutelos, who lived around a part of the Grand River, because I think many of the stories that you see in film festivals, or any kind of festivals about stories, try to remember history and have us learn, and relearn, that history. If you make an effort to try to piece little things in your own memory together eventually those memories will become whole and you can feel that the past makes sense to you.

Also, I wanted to reinforce the notion that Iroquois people weren't as bloodthirsty as history portrays us. We were quite willing to accept different ideas, and in this particular case the Tutelos were absorbed into the Six Nations or Iroquois society out of generosity. They had specific beliefs and specific ceremonies and the Iroquois acknowledged the fact and respected that, so the Iroquois were quite willing to bring them in. That's one of the reasons why that was put in there.

LA: *We first meet Shanna as she is walking through nature, dressed in traditional clothing. On the soundtrack, voices of the past are calling her and voices of the present urge her on. She's asking herself questions, too, in a voice-over, like, "How do you go forward when so much has been lost?" Then, the action jumps to the present. What was going on with that opening sequence?*

SN: Well, the opening is in direct contrast to what happens later on, and it concerns people who feel that they are responsible for retracing certain steps and who try to see what is gone, what is lost. Then, once you acknowledge that things are gone, that you will never get back some things, you also acknowledge that as a contemporary person you still want to be a part of today. I think many people are in the schizophrenic position where they are never going to get those things back from the past, but are also in a position where they are always searching.

Those particular voices at this point in the film are from the three women who come later on, and who represent spirits. If you try to retrace things you become aware that there are actual people that made the beadwork, that made the songs, and that these are organic creations from people's labour. But at the same time, the inspiration comes from something other than just the fact that you can do these things. It has to come from some place and that's what those voices

are implying, that even though we have fingers and we can glue and sew, and that there is still some kind of "divine" in a good work, there is something else beyond that.

LA: *Your images of beadwork are like a frame for the narrative. After the opening scenes of Shanna in nature you cut to the urban scene, where the aunts appear like magic in characteristically extravagant clothes.*

SN: Niro garb! I think that part was a bit over done. I look at it now and I think, "Do they really need those things in their hair?"

LA: *They do have a spiritual, magical presence. They materialize in their car from nowhere.*

SN: Right. I think we all like to feel we have ancestors who are guardian angels or ancestors who are looking over us. Even if it might be a fantasy, it's something that you like to rely on.

LA: *These ancestors are very contemporary in their dress and actions.*

SN: They are. Shanna thinks they are stupid, they bug her, they get on her nerves and all that sort of thing, but what they are actually doing is focusing on her. They are more aware of her than she thinks. She feels they are not paying any attention to her but they are. She feels they'll never know what she is talking about, while in fact, they themselves have gone through what she is going through and are cushioning her journey, trying to have her take it less seriously.

LA: *They go on a road trip, a pilgrimage in a way, and when they arrive at Niagara Falls it's very garish and disorienting. Shanna looks overwhelmed by all the street signs, the neon lights. There is a claustrophobic feeling of the environment enclosing her.*

SN: It's a contrast with the Falls itself. You have the junky part of Niagara Falls and then you have the Falls itself. You realize that nothing anybody can put together will ever compare to the Falls. It's one of the seven wonders of the world, and all that other tacky tourist stuff is so trashy in contrast.

LA: *At the same time tribal names run through her head, and she has a dream of a conversation with Elijah Harper.*

SN: He's the one person that put a stop to the Meech Lake process. Because of him everything came to a standstill... and Canada hated him for it.

- LA: *He's a revered figure and he dispenses advice to her. What was your intent in the sequence with him?*
- SN: Well, she goes through a period where she is standing at the Falls and there are actually three threads of voice-over, but they don't come out too clearly. One of them is speaking the tribal names, another one is speaking about important dates that occurred in Western history, like 1066 and 1492, and the third is things like Darwin's Theory and *Old Man River*. I don't know, the sound mix was not too easy to follow here. Anyway, it's about being seventeen years old and having all these thoughts: Who am I? What am I? What am I going to do? What is it all about? That sort of thing. The Elijah Harper scene is a dream sequence where she comes to the realization that even though she might be feeling guilty about not doing enough, maybe not having a good enough hold in the world, and that she has some responsibility to the world, he tells her, "It's your life, you've got to be happy . . . get on with it, girl." At that point, I guess, she comes of age and realizes that it is her life to live.
- LA: *After that scene you cut to a fancy motel room with a heart-shaped bed. The aunts are decked out.*
- SN: Well, in that particular scene, even though they have been trying to influence her, she joins them, but she joins them on her own terms. She dresses up like they are, but she's made it her decision rather than just going along with them.
- LA: *What struck me in this scene was what looked like a Busby Berkeley dance routine done by the four characters.*
- SN: I grew up on musicals, the Broadway shows. For a number of years the Hollywood medium has used the Indian, so now the Indian is using the Hollywood medium.
- LA: *The film ends at Niagara Falls, December 31st, 1992, at 11:55 p.m. They are having a little ceremony at the Falls.*
- SN: Each one of them is asked to bring her own little version of a New Year's Eve celebration. Each one of them is asked to bring something to that ceremony. Somebody brings a pot of tea, somebody else brings a cake that looks like the world. I wish we had a candle on that world, you know. Somebody else brings a poem and Shanna brings her song, so then they all sort of take part in this little ceremony.
- LA: *Finally, there is a fireworks display, and the fireworks are transformed into an image of a turtle and the celestial tree.*

SN: That reverts to the very beginning where the film starts out with the beadwork. That design is on Shanna's leggings as she is walking, and also represents the creation of the world. So, in essence they are celebrating the continuation of life.

LA: *Then, 1992 is over, and the character is starting a new year, a new life.*

SN: We had a subtitle that said specifically "December 31st, 11:55 p.m., 1992," and the film was shown so that it would coincide with real time. The film was made in that year, but because I am an artist I didn't really want to do a painting or photograph so exact that the year would be over and in 10 years I would look at it and say, "Oh, my God, why was I doing that?" I thought, well, the film was the most effective way because I was hoping it would go into the next millennium and continue on despite the fact that it was done then.

LA: *The characters of the aunts are your sisters Deborah Doxtater, Beverly Miller, and Elisabeth Doxtater. They are also the models in many of your photographs.*

SN: My brother did some of the music. You know the male voice in the beginning? That's my brother, and then my brother-in-law also did some of the music for "I'm Pretty."

LA: *You mentioned in an interview that in making this film you weren't concerned about non-Native viewers, that it was dealing with Native aesthetics and a celebration of Iroquois people.<sup>4</sup> Could you discuss your concept of Native aesthetics as it is expressed through your film?*

SN: I want to use Indian music. I want to use Iroquois design. I want it to feature Iroquois people. Films like *Black Robe* and *Last of the Mohicans* portray Indians in a certain way, showing them as being nasty people. I wanted to emphasize Iroquois art and design. I want to emphasize the fact that a culture does not survive by being nasty. It survives out of the will to be creative, and by being creative it boosts the level of thought. It's not that you want to take over the world. It just happens that you want to create, you want to grow. So that's where that statement came from.

LA: *Do you think that the filmmaking experience will have an effect on your photography? Are those two methods of making art exclusive or do you think that one can connect to the other?*

SN: Well, it made me appreciate people more in their own specialties or their own areas because, if you don't work in something, you take it

for granted so easily. You never give it a second thought. But once you start seeing people work and how they really take what they're doing seriously you can't help but respect their skills. That makes me want to examine even more deeply what I'm doing because the work on the film made me want to question more about why I'm doing something and what I'm trying to do. You know, I just don't want to take any steps for granted anymore.

LA: *In the catalog for the Watchful Eyes show you wrote that, "When I started looking at Indian art, the majority of the artists were men and they were looking for heroes and warriors. I started thinking about image-making and representation of women. There were very few women artists and the representation of women that they were portraying were pow-wow images. That imagery was fairy tale like. If we as Indian people are trying to destroy the noble warrior image then we must start portraying the world they way we see it and experience it."<sup>5</sup> Would you just expand on that and talk about how that relates to what you're trying to do?*

SN: This goes back to maybe '75 when I started going to different art shows with Indian people. At the time the men outnumbered the women. The images that even the men were doing of women were pretty unrealistic. They wanted to see them with their pow-wow shawls or they wanted to see them as spiritual creatures or buxom beauties. I thought, well, there's no point in really getting angry over this because the only thing you can do is start creating work that would fill that void, or start changing the direction. So I started using my family in my work because they're sort of representative. I won't say typical. Who's typical? But to me these family images are the common images that I live with. At the same time, using these basic images was a self-actualization process where, if you start relating to the people you're looking at, and the more images you see of somebody that looks like you, the more you can accept yourself, whereas if you see images of people that you have no connection with and can't relate to, then you're doubting your own presence. You say, "I don't look like that." I thought by using these images of women, it actually creates a welcoming feeling, and it makes other Indian women say, "I can relate to these images." A lot of women have said that to me, that they can see their own aunts or their sisters in these images that are up on a gallery wall.

### Notes for Shelley Niro

1. Shelley Niro, Artist's Statement, *Cultural Contrasts: Inner Voices/Outer Images* (Stamford, CT: Stamford Nature Center, 1994).
2. James Patten, "Shelley Niro: Sense of Self," *Shelley Niro: Sense of Self* (London, Ontario: London Regional Art and Historical Museums, 1994), p.3.
3. Gallery brochure, Gallery of the American Indian Community House. New York, NY, 1995, unpub.
4. C. Osmond, "It Starts with a Whisper... and a Lotta Hard Work." *NIPA* 92 (Fall, 1992):11.
5. Shelley Niro, *Watchful Eyes* (Phoenix, AZ: The Heard Museum, 1994), p.29.

### Selected Exhibitions

- Image and Self in Contemporary Native American Photoart*, group exhibition, Hood Museum Dartmouth College Hanover, NH, 1995.
- Native Images: Native Issues*, two-person exhibition. American Indian Community House, New York, NY, 1995.
- Watchful Eyes: Native American Women Artists*, group exhibition, The Heard Museum, Phoenix, AZ, 1994.
- Sense of Self*, solo exhibition, London Regional Art and Historical Museums, London, Ontario, 1994.
- Works by Shelley Niro*, solo exhibition, Castellani Art Museum, Niagara University, Niagara Falls, NY, 1994.
- Defining Our Realities: Native American Women Photographers*, group exhibition, Sacred Circle Gallery, Seattle, WA, 1993.
- This Land is Mime Land*, solo exhibition, Ufundi Gallery, Ottawa, Ontario, 1992.
- Mohawks in Beehives*, solo exhibition, Ufundi Gallery, Ottawa, Ontario, 1991.
- The Language of the Lens*, group exhibition, The Heard Museum, Phoenix AZ, 1990.

## Patricia Deadman

Although there is a whimsicality to much of Pat Deadman's photography, the underlying thrust is quite serious. *Beyond Saddleback* and *In Search of a Perfect View* comment on the deformation of nature which occurs when the landscape is reduced to another tourist commodity. Nature is being altered for human consumption. Another series depicts trees wrapped in burlap for winter protection. Yet Deadman asks the questions: "We wrap our trees in burlap to protect them from the winter? What are we doing to protect ourselves? Why are we doing this?" Here Deadman implies, ironically, that we are protecting nature at the expense of the human community. Like Niro, Deadman integrates text with her photographs, which provides a humorous or ironic counterpoint to the imagery.

Another hallmark of Deadman's photography is her deliberate manipulation of the image. She does not consider herself a documentarist who simply shows the surface of the subject. Rather, through either painting on the photograph, as in the *Powwow* series, or manipulation in the developing process, as in the *Beyond Saddleback* series, Deadman uses the image as her canvas, the instrumentality of her vision.

Most recently Deadman has been a guest curator at the Walter Phillips Gallery and a curatorial intern at The Power Plant in Toronto. Her travelling exhibition *staking LAND claims* was shown in Banff, Thunder Bay, and the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford.

LA: *I first noticed your work in 1990 in a show at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery called Fringe Momentum. Those were the photographs of powwow dancers that you painted on.*

PD: Those photographs are an on-going process. I started out with very small photographic images. At the time it was a helpful reference for my paintings, but at some point the drawing, the painting and the photography overlapped. What came out of that series were my small 4x6" mixed-media photographs. Prior to the work of 1986 I was blasting away at images, using black and white double exposures and manipulation, trying to get that sense of urbanization and cultural shock. I moved to London, Ontario, and there are not a lot of Native people in the city, but more than in Woodstock [Ontario], so you notice different tensions. You're sitting on the bus and nobody sits beside you, that sort of thing. It's like, "wait a minute..." Why is this happening? I had never noticed this before because in Woodstock you just go about your business.

I was not really consciously aware or raised believing I was different. Native awareness started to come up for me because, I don't know whether you know my history, but I was born on Six Nations, and adopted when I was thirteen months by a non-Native family, so Woodstock is actually my home town. I grew up here. During the '80s, a lot of Native issues were hot subjects. I had to find something that connected with me because the issues that some people were trying to address just didn't apply to me, they weren't my own experiences. So I had to find something and, hence, the *Powwow* series. I went to my first powwow and it blew me away, a feast for the senses.

LA: *What year was that?*

PD: 1987. The series just started to grow and it became a process for me. Eventually the photographs grew from the 4x6 inch to the 6x24 inch ones that you see here. Then there was another step, where pieces about 1x2 inches take up maybe ten feet of wall space, so that you actually have to walk through the series. That's based on the idea that when you're sitting at a powwow and you're looking through a lens, all you see for that split second is a blur, like a little detail of a costume. That's how I was thinking. I carried that thinking on to my new series, which is dealing with the landscape.

LA: *Were the original photos for the Powwow series done in color?*

PD: Yes. They're just regular 4x6 inch color photos and covered with latex paint, melted beeswax, graphite, and colored wax.

LA: *Some of the images are clear, but some are more abstract, where you don't really see the figure.*

PD: That's the intent, because it's more or less trying to catch the essence of the powwow. It's a feeling of the overloading of the senses. It's a hot, muggy day and you sit on the ground feeling the vibrations. The images have to do with peripheral vision as well, because you know there's something there but you're not quite sure what it is. You just see that little blur, that brief moment. That's why the shapes are abstract. A lot of these large pieces become very "landscape-ish," to use a term which probably doesn't exist. But you start seeing mountains and rivers and I think that's got a connection to the land. It's using color and shape, and you see the image and you're not quite sure which is the actual photograph and which is the drawing. There's a nice quality about the beeswax, too, because once you burnish it, you can't really tell the difference on the surface. Some of them get quite

thick, some of them are very translucent, so it all depends on the application.

LA: *You depict the emotional imagery of the powwow and, at the same time create a visual ambiguity.*

PD: I think that's a very important aspect of the work. I'm not trying to recreate the scene literally. It's more the mood and atmosphere. It's very hard to talk about something that's inside that you can't really explain.

LA: *Some of your paintings, too, seem to be trying to capture that same effect of motion and movement in an abstract image. You actually began as a painter.*

PD: Yes, I usually paint in a 5x4 foot format, but where I was living at the time, I really couldn't paint. I had to paint in the basement and stand in between the rafters and that wasn't working out. I'm now just starting to get back to painting, which is really my first love.

LA: *Did you aim for a similarity between the paintings and the photographs?*

PD: I think they were, at the time, trying to be a little bit different. I'm dealing with the color and the mood in an abstract image. I'm working with something that you really don't see, like a feeling of energy, so my paintings tend to be very large, very aggressive, while at the same time making reference to the dancers by using color or by showing just a hint of braiding, just some little reference.

LA: *You mentioned when talking about some of the powwow photographs that there was a suggestion of the land. One series, Beyond Saddleback [1991], was literally about the land.*

PD: I took my train of thought from the powwow dancers and applied that to the landscape. The *Saddleback* series came out when I was at the Banff Center for the Arts [Alberta, Canada]. I had ten weeks in Banff and it was just great. The photography studio there had burned down so they built a brand new building with top equipment. At the time when I thought I was going there, I had an idea but as soon as I got there, the area was overwhelming. There's so much to do and see. I decided to do a lot of hiking and during the hiking I started remembering the powwow series, of being aware of your surroundings and what is around you—the smells, the wind, the textures—you're just more or less consumed by the landscape. Saddleback is a mountain not too far from Lake Louise. The *Saddleback* series—I call them "The Fuzzy

Trees" for lack of a better word—try to recapture that kind of moment again, but rather than manipulating the surface, I manipulated the actual photograph. I was quite happy with the way the series turned out because it was another turning point for me.

LA: *What did you do to manipulate the image?*

PD: The manipulation was done during the printing process. The film is processed and the negatives are developed. A lot of people believe they're just really fuzzy, out-of-focus shots, but they're really quite clear. I print black and white negatives on color paper, so you get to dial-in the color that you want. Basically, you get your exposure time, divide it by, let's say 4 times, and then it's just a matter of shifting the paper. The result is soft edges, which I like because it adds that painterly quality to the photograph. It's reminiscent of a leaf or grass, and I think that played another role in my newer work as well. I used infrared film for some of the images. *Beyond Saddleback* is infrared and that was the first time I'd really used it, so I was happy with what I got.

LA: *Did you have an idea how these would turn out with the film and the printing process?*

PD: It was totally spontaneous. One myth about photography is that if you have a negative, you can just print out as many as you want, right? My technique allows for only one image, so it's a lot like painting. You can make similar images, but there's only one which is really unique. I work in a series but I don't make multiples of one image.

LA: *This is a one-of-a-kind photograph. You couldn't duplicate this exact print a second time.*

PD: You couldn't. With the process of color photography, you're working in total darkness, so there's the logistical side of setting up your darkroom to begin with. The photograph is 30x40 inches so your enlarger head is way up here and your paper is way down there and it's a very physical thing. I like that as well. I like that process and, again, there's room for mistakes because I might miss the paper completely. It's great because I'm working with the Kreanite processor so the prints are done in four and a half minutes. It's a dry process.

LA: *Maybe we could talk for a second to your art training and education. You studied painting and then moved into photography?*

PD: I went to Fanshawe College in London, Ontario, which was a three-year diploma course. They throw everything at you, which is great,

because it's basically all studio time, so you get a hands-on for film and video, sculpture, drawing, painting, printmaking. By the third year I was leaning towards the two-dimensional. From there I went on to the University of Windsor [Windsor, Ontario], where I earned my BFA in Visual Arts. I've done a lot of experimentation on my own. When I was in Banff doing the photography studio, I had technical assistance with the color photographic processes. I had never printed my own color enlargements before, but I have a handle on that now. I treat photography like painting and drawing. It's just another tool. I just know that basic rules enough to break them.

LA: *Do you feel that you're trying to break down the distinctions between photography and painting. You've painted on the Powwow series photographs and the Saddleback photographs are painterly.*

PD: That's always been the issue: how do you mould the mediums through painting and photography? They are both rich in history, but amalgamating the two is a tricky thing. To some degree I'm happy with the results, but this distinction is not an anxious issue in my work.

LA: *What was the series In Search of a Perfect View about?*

PD: This was a series of twenty-eight images and it was again a response to the landscape, only a little tongue-in-cheek. It was done in Banff as well. The whole premise is that it's such a tourist area and people are always in quest of the ideal photograph when they go to Banff. It was a response to seeing the tourist buses pull up to a site, with people running out with their cameras taking their shots, and twenty minutes later they'd be gone. This was their experience with the land. I thought that was so amusing. When you're hiking, the maps have "you are here" signs and along the trail they have little benches strategically placed in front of the scenic vistas. You walk along for a while and you have another bench, and this is their idea of what you're supposed to be seeing. I found that absurd. The response to that was a series of images, which is actually a documentation of a hike, a very short hike, but it shows the scenic points in between the benches. In each shot the mountain is always in the center, it's always the focal point, and the reason the images are only 2x3 inches is because it's reminiscent of what you actually see in the camera lens, which is a very small and very compact image. The mountain is always there, maybe a quarter of an inch big, but I'm saying that the mountain is here, it's always with you. If you really observe the series, you'll notice the trees getting higher and once you get to the top, there will be a vista. Then when you're coming back down the trail, the trees are getting lower. At one point in the images, if you really catch on, you realize that it's the shot

where you just came from. But the mountain is always there. It's a humorous thing and the whole idea takes up quite a lot of running feet in the gallery, so you have to walk through quite a bit whether you start at one end or the other. And the very last shot is what I interpret as the perfect view. It includes all the elements and it's shot further along the stream where there was no bench.

LA: *There were twenty-eight shots displayed horizontally?*

PD: They're hung at eye level. I had originally thought to mimic the landscape so the line of photographs would create some kind of horizon line. But I thought, no, because this is how people see the landscape, at eye level. Hardly anybody will sit on the ground and look at the land, so it's that point of view again—it's always at eye level.

LA: *Why does your work orient around the land?*

PD: The land is a very personal experience and one that's closest to my heart, something that I can identify with. There is respect and a concern for how we treat the land. I look closely at how people misuse or appropriate the land, and the issues of ownership and power and control. These are questions always in the back of my mind and in a lot of my work, like the *Serve* series, my new work, it is a way of thinking. It's addressing some of these questions that I have about the use of the land.

LA: *Even though the images themselves don't appear "political," it seems like the subtext is more politically-oriented.*

PD: My work isn't overtly political. I know some artists are very blatant and it's a personal choice. You can always read about politics in the newspaper. I don't want to be surrounded by it all the time. I know the issues and I get offended when it's just thrown back in my face. What are you trying to say or do about it? What are you commenting on, other than this is the issue? I like work that you have to become personally involved with. My work may be misjudged as being superficial, but it's work that you have to spend time with. Even with the powwow images, you have to spend time with them to appreciate them. There's nothing wrong with having to stop and think about a photograph and how that in turn relates to your perspective.

I try to make work that responds to human qualities, not just to one group of people, Native, women, whomever. Somebody said to me, "You should make a lot of images right now because it's hot to be Native." If you're Native people expect the familiar. I thought that that

was just playing the game too much because whatever you put out at the time, even though people might consider it "Native art," it has to be the best that you're doing. If this is the best that you can do, what are you going to do next? So I don't let politics get in my way. If you want to be involved, that's fine, go for it, but I'm content to make my own work and if people respond to it, that's great. Of course, I realize that this is a political statement in itself. I think the *Serve* series is non-gender and non-specific because it deals with the human qualities and human emotions that we all share at some point. To me, this is the magic of art. I think it's so hard to express what's inside and to put it out for everybody to see. It's a very personal thing. It's fine and it's great to put out feelings of anger and frustration because that's all part of it. At the same time, if you're taking the hot topic of the day and trying to build on that, then my question is, is this how you really feel, or is this what you think you should be feeling? It's very topical, but what are you left with? It's another documentation of the event. I question a lot of things like that. I would be more inclined to deal with what people were trying to feel or the emotion that they were dealing with.

LA: *In the Serve series (1994) you've integrated words with the photographs, "conserve," "preserve," "reserve," "self-serve," "deserve."*

PD: It's a play on words. In my statement for the series I've referred to the dictionary meaning of the words because it's straightforward and those are definitions that people know. It's always been fascinating to me to have people interpret what I think. In "conserve" I question how we treat the land. My thought at the time was, this is another hiking trail, but how did it get there? The landscape is not as pristine as we think it is. Men had to build roads and strip the land to get to that so-called pristine place, and probably thousands of people have walked the same trail for years. So what you're seeing isn't really new, but it's new to you. In some sense you can appreciate the landscape, but at the same time you sense the history of the land.

LA: *What process did you use to make these?*

PD: The images were printed on Duratrans, a clear plastic material. It's like Mylar and they are mounted between plexiglass so that light shines through. The words are computer-generated and digitalized on a clear piece of plastic, and then it's sandwiched with the negative and then exposed on the Duratrans.

LA: *"Preserve" depicts animals.*

PD: These were taken at the Whyte Museum and are all stuffed animals in a showcase. This is probably how future generations are going to see wildlife. For whose benefits is this for, the control of nature? Again, it's dealing with issues of power—who's doing what to whom? But ultimately I guess nature has the upper hand. This came about from another series that I did, but the whole idea just sounds absurd.

LA: *You're the subject of "self-serve." It's set at a self-serve gas station.*

PD: This is probably the only self-portrait that I've ever done that was literal and that I even bothered to show anybody. The t-shirt is appropriated from the Indian motorcycle. It has the word "Indian" on it and below that it reads "genuine parts and service." My thoughts at the time were, if you don't do anything for yourself nobody else is going to do it for you. That's dealing with a lot of different issues. In general, I guess what it means is, no matter what anybody else does, you have to do it yourself, or it does not get done. The t-shirt is basically anything for a laugh. The humour is another approach to art. It focuses on identity and my way of interpreting "Indian" in a contemporary context.

LA: *Do you use your photographs as a way of exploring these issues?*

PD: I think so. It's an awareness of where you are, your history, and thinking about the generations ahead.

LA: *In this new series you have eight images of trees wrapped in burlap displayed in two rows of four. Four of the works have text written on the border of the photo.*

PD: They move across and there's a story line so you have to read them. Again, it's a humorous reference to the land. I wrote, "We wrap our trees in the winter for protection." It's like, wait a minute, let me think about this for one second. We wrap our trees in burlap to protect them from the winter? What are we doing to protect ourselves? Why are we doing this? I was fascinated because the images are ambiguous. Some of them almost look like human figures wrapped in burlap in the snow. I did a previous series which showed conical structures built around trees so that they looked like little teepees along the side of the bank. This series is just carrying it a step further since they do represent human forms under burlap. I paired these with shots from the Reserve. The story goes like this: "The year is 1994, they efficiently prepare themselves like the many generations before them for the long harsh Canadian winter. Bitterly cold winds and snow drifts will domi-

nate the wilderness." And, of course, you can apply that to the history of Native culture.

Underneath each of these shots of wrapped trees is a shot of the Reserve and the traditional teepees. They depict both a sense of history and contemporary life. It's a black and white photo printed on colored paper and I chose a surreal pink color. It's reminiscent of Edward Curtis, where everything has that romantic, idealized lifestyle.

Then the next panel: "In order to protect themselves from the elements, they dress appropriately. Their sturdy garb is made from heavy duty 10-ounce burlap and is securely wrapped around their limbs." That is juxtaposed with the traditional teepee and modern day tents.

The next one reads: "Small bands from various regions can be seen gathered in many parts of southwestern Ontario. They adapt quite readily to their surroundings whether it be a rural outpost or an urban center." Historically, teepees were in a circular grouping or in a straight-line like along a river, depending on the situation, so there is that thought.

Then the last image is: "Even though it is inevitable that some will not survive, entire encampments will overcome many adversities that will cross their path. It is in their nature to be cooperative and organized and to be environmentally friendly." It creates a sense of irony, the wrapped trees juxtaposed with the teepee images.

LA: *Do you try to create a narrative in your work?*

PD: Sometimes a narrative is inevitable because the images dictate that, whereas some, like the *Serve* series with one-word text, are more ambiguous because you have to think about what I'm actually trying to achieve, a certain thought process. The storyline is just kind of fun; it's a spontaneous reaction to the picture. It's using imagery and putting it in today's terms.

LA: *Could you describe Ice Views (1992)?*

PD: It's a series of handmade books. They're 4x6 inches and made out of plaster and cheesecloth. There are seven of them. Each one is reminiscent of Stanley's Glacier, located a couple of hours from Banff. Again, it's a tourist thing because we've all been tourists and we have that need to bring something back from where we've been. This is similar to bringing back an actual piece of the landscape rather than a t-shirt that has a picture of the land on it. When you open one up, it has a small photographic slice of the land. Each one has a different

natural element, so each book has titles "Sky and Ice," "Rock and Trees," and "Beyond the Ridge."

LA: *How were they displayed?*

PD: I made an easel out of twigs and twine, and they're displayed on a Carrera marble shelf, so that you have that white, cool surface. They are meant to be picked up and held and touched but they're really fragile. The covers may break apart.

LA: *Were you trying to get a certain texture on the book cover?*

PD: Yes. That was the whole idea of the glacier, the snow, the ice, and bringing back small pieces of the land. It's another way of thinking about the whole tourist scene, with a tangible object becoming materialistic, I did this series about the same time as the *In Search Of* series.

LA: *In works like this you're moving away from the usual display of photographs on a wall.*

PD: I think this is just another presentation of the photograph. We all have albums of photographs of our summer vacation, right? You have to look at the photograph to see what it is and remember where you were at that time, remember what it was like, not just pictorially, but what you felt emotionally. In this series it's the spiritual quality of the land.

LA: *Did you like the hand-made book format?*

PD: Originally these were little prototypes for larger books. I like the idea of bookworks, and books, of course, have their own history, and small photographs would lend themselves nicely to that format.

LA: *Do you feel that First Nations photographers are reclaiming their own images?*

PD: I really can't talk for other artists, but I think photography is used in that sense now, in destroying the myth and the stereotypes and reclaiming what is basically yours. I think that's always a good way to use a medium, whether it's photography or painting or whatever. Native photography on the whole is still such a new medium I think it's developing new ways of expressing those ideas. Photography has certain genres, like documentary, and it's very easy to fall into a category and say, "I'm going to do photojournalistic photography and I'm going to go and do these issues." That's fine and that's great. For me, I just don't want to use it in that context. My photos are integrated with other media, and become an element of an installation.

LA: *Where do you see your work going?*

PD: At one point Gerhard Richter said, "I know nothing, I see nothing." To get to that point and to depict that would be the ultimate. I think that's kind of where I'm coming from. You can talk and get into all this spirituality and how that affects you, but how do you define or recreate that energy, that essence of knowing? How do you record that or respond to that? It's a very difficult thing, because time, that moment, that second, is very elusive. But that's what I'm trying to deal with and it's hard.

### Selected Exhibitions

*This Land Reserved*, solo exhibition, The Woodstock Art Gallery, Woodstock, Ontario, 1995.

*AlterNative*, group exhibition, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario, 1995.

*Cultural Contrasts*, group exhibition, Stamford Museum and Nature Center, Stamford, CT, 1994.

*Preserve, Conserve*, solo exhibition, Joseph D. Carrier Art Gallery, North York, Ontario, 1994.

*Defining our Realities*, group exhibition, Sacred Circle Gallery, Daybreak Star Cultural Center, Seattle, WA, 1993.

*Rephotographing the Land*, group exhibition, Dalhousie Art Gallery, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1992.

*No Borders*, group exhibition, Native Indian/Inuit Photographers Association [NIPA] Gallery, Hamilton, Ontario, 1991.

*Fringe Momentum: The Photocollages of Patricia Deadman*, solo exhibition, Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Thunder Bay, Ontario, 1990.

### Selected Bibliography

Lynn A. Hill, "Patricia Deadman," *AlterNative*, Kleinburg, Ontario: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 1995, pp. 16-17.

Susan Gibson Garvey, "Rephotographing the Land," *Rephotographing the Land*, Dalhousie, Nova Scotia: Dalhousie Art Gallery, 1992, pp. 3-8.

Patricia Deadman, "Artist's Statement," *No Borders*, Hamilton, Ontario: NIPA Gallery, 1991, p. 12.

Janet Clark, "Fringe Momentum: The Photocollages of Patricia Deadman," *Fringe Momentum*, Thunder Bay, Ontario, Thunder Bay Art Gallery, 1990, pp. 5-12.