

Stitching and Storytelling as Healing: Ruth Cuthand's *Don't Breathe, Don't Drink* (2016)

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Abstract:

Beautiful beads turn ominous when artist Ruth Cuthand creates the three-dimensional forms of viruses commonly found in contaminated drinking water in Canada. Cuthand's work *Don't Breathe, Don't Drink* (2016) started with the story of Attawapiskat First Nation, located in northern Ontario, declaring a housing emergency because of black mold.¹ Cuthand's beadwork exemplifies the medium as a powerful source of visual storytelling. Beadwork's entwinement with time is part of its ability to tell stories, in its laborious process, and in its ability as a medium to continually evolve as a storytelling agent. In Cuthand's work, the relationship between time and beadwork provides opportunities for activism and healing, encouraging conversations about drinking water crises in Indigenous communities that continue in Canada today.

Keywords: Indigenous Art, Beading, Storytelling, Healing, Temporality, Contemporary Art

¹ "Ruth Cuthand-Don't Breathe, Don't Drink," Ruthcuthand.ca, accessed April 2022.
https://www.ruthcuthand.ca/dont-breathe-dont-drink/ruthcuthand_dont-breathe-dont-drink7/.

Introduction

Beadwork is often categorized as craft in the Western tradition, and relegated to glass cases, giving the false impression that it is an art tradition associated with the past. By drawing hard lines between the past and the present, this gives power to historians who decide what is modern and what is not.² Beading is a powerful form of visual storytelling and an important practice in Indigenous communities today.³ Sherry Farrell Racette says that, “The sharp, witty social critiques and engaged creative processes employed by many artists using traditional media become a form of visual activism when they reveal unknown histories and move viewers and participants to action.”⁴ There is a transformative power in traditional materials, enabling them to confront trauma and hidden histories, while affirming the ongoing vitality and sovereignty of Indigenous communities.⁵

Ruth Cuthand’s beads tell a story. Her work, *Don’t Breathe Don’t Drink* (2016), is comprised of a freestanding table covered in a wrinkled, bright blue tarpaulin, placed in a partially constructed room. The table’s surface is covered with clear drinking glasses, vessels, and baby bottles which look clear, other than tiny flecks of color shining from inside. As the work draws the viewer in, it is revealed that those flecks of color are three-dimensional beaded viruses and bacteria, suspended beautifully and ominously, in each glass. Each of the viruses and bacteria in the artwork have been present in the drinking water of Indigenous communities.

² Aleida Assmann, *Is Time Out of Joint? The Rise and Fall of the Modern Temporal Regime* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2021), 130.

³ Lana Ray, “Beading Becomes a Part of Your Life: Transforming the Academy Through the Use of Beading as a Method of Inquiry,” *International review of qualitative research* 9, no. 3 (2016): 363. https://oculcr1.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01OCUL_CRL/17erkeh/cdi_crossref_primary_10_1525_irqr_2016_9_3_363.

⁴ Sherry Farrell Racette, “Tuft Life: Stitching Sovereignty in Contemporary Indigenous Art,” *Art journal* (New York. 1960) 76, no. 2 (2017): 120.

⁵ Racette, “Tuft Life,” 123.

Cuthand's work exemplifies that beading is an effective form of visual storytelling. The concept of time is intertwined with beading, in its laborious process and in its durability as a constantly evolving storytelling agent. The relationship between time and beadwork provides opportunities for healing and activism in Ruth Cuthand's *Don't Breathe, Don't Drink*, which encourages conversations about Indigenous drinking water crises that continue in Canada. Through beading, Ruth Cuthand reminds art gallery visitors that objects in institutions should not only be objects for historical knowledge, but also for contemporary knowledge.⁶

Beading in the Past, Present, and Future

The history of beading is long. Beads, which were brought from overseas by Europeans, were traded and favored by Indigenous people because they were quicker to use, covered large areas, and were made in a wide range of colours.⁷ Beads replaced porcupine quills, as preparing quills is a long process, consisting of sorting, dying, and flattening them to sew into patterns.⁸ The shift from slower to quicker methods of beading therefore has colonial ties. In the nineteenth century, the traditional arts market in Canada became a low-end tourist market due to colonial influence, as an assembly line approach was encouraged, leading to diminished excellence and care.⁹ Due to harsh economic conditions from colonial government policies, beadwork became commercialized, devalued, and labeled as "exotic," "primitive," and

⁶ Ruth Cuthand and Chantal McStay, "Ruth Cuthand," *Bomb* (New York, N.Y.), no. 146 (2019). https://ocul-crl.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01OCUL_CRL/1ortgfo/cdi_proquest_miscellaneous_2194038279.

⁷ "Trading Series," Ruthcuthand.ca, accessed April 2022. <https://www.ruthcuthand.ca/tradingseries/>.

⁸ "Trading Series," Ruthcuthand.ca.

⁹ Racette, "Tuft Life," 116.

“decorative.”¹⁰ According to Lana Ray, museum exhibits tend to lack substance, putting forth the idea that beads are foremost “pretty to look at.”¹¹

There is a growing movement of artists who are reclaiming the materials of their grandmothers and reinvigorating traditional practices, moving them from the past into the future.¹² Cuthand explains that she is interested in taking beads from a stereotype into something that makes people pause and think.¹³ Cuthand’s first major beadwork series, *Trading* (2009), depicts magnified viruses both brought by Europeans and given to Europeans.¹⁴ The beaded viruses are represented within circles, as if the viewer is looking through a microscope, set on black velvet which was commonly used by Indigenous communities for beading.¹⁵ The viruses are so highly magnified that they look like colorful abstractions. Cuthand looks at beads in a new way, with forms that remind her of the practices of Plains Indigenous women who use abstract designs in their works.¹⁶ Below each of the circles, the names of the viruses are stenciled on in a font similar to those on shipping boxes.¹⁷ Cuthand is emphasizing Indigenous issues of the past by recalling colonial history and its effects on Indigenous health. After Cuthand’s *Trading* series, she continued to use beading as a medium to engage with Indigenous issues of both the past and the present. Cuthand explains that when she started beading

¹⁰ Ray, 365-366.

¹¹ Ray, 366.

¹² Racette, “Tuft Life,” 115.

¹³ Cuthand and McStay, “Ruth Cuthand,” 60.

¹⁴ “Trading,” Ruthcuthand.ca.

¹⁵ Jake Moore and Ruth Cuthand, “GGArts Series: Ruth Cuthand,” Art Gallery of Alberta, March 11, 2021, video, 8:00. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-i7MHGhzJL>.

¹⁶ Felicia Gay and Ruth Cuthand, “Ruth Cuthand Interview,” MacKenzie Art Gallery, December 8, 2020, video, 4:45. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yupq1_nzbWA.

¹⁷ Moore and Cuthand, “GGArts Series: Ruth Cuthand,” video, 8:00.

seriously, she wanted to create content that she could “put some teeth into,” wanting to change the bead scene from a “crafty thing.”¹⁸

Don't Breathe, Don't Drink (2016)

Cuthand's *Don't Breathe, Don't Drink* started in 2011, when Attawapiskat First Nation, located in northern Ontario, declared a housing emergency because of black mold.¹⁹ Exposure to black mold is dangerous for human health, and residents' homes were no longer livable.²⁰ Cuthand's research revealed to her that long-term exposure to black mold can cause respiratory diseases, and Attawapiskat was living with this hazard on a daily basis.²¹ Cuthand studied photographs of residents forced out of their homes which she saw on the news, having to live in shacks with blue tarps for roofs.²² From the imagery gathered from the news, Cuthand created *Attawapiskat*, which is the tablecloth that holds the bottles in *Don't Breathe, Don't Drink*.

Beaded into the tablecloth are magnified images of black mold stocks with black spores coming out of them, lining the skirt of the tablecloth.²³ The tarp does not look brand new, as it is extremely wrinkled. The stocks of the mold are made with translucent, shell-coloured beads that shine with the light of the gallery. The tarp took two years for Cuthand to complete, and she explains in an interview that each spore that makes up the black mold magnification takes fifteen minutes.²⁴ Cuthand stressed that the work is time consuming in an interview with the Art Gallery of Ontario.²⁵ Clearly, the process of creating this beaded work was laborious and long.

¹⁸ Moore and Cuthand, “GGArts Series: Ruth Cuthand,” video, 6:00.

¹⁹ “Ruth Cuthand-Don't Breathe, Don't Drink,” Ruthcuthand.ca, accessed April 2022, https://www.ruthcuthand.ca/dont-breathe-dont-drink/ruthcuthand_dont-breathe-dont-drink7/.

²⁰ “Ruth Cuthand-Don't Breathe, Don't Drink.”

²¹ Cuthand and McStay, “Ruth Cuthand,” 57.

²² “Ruth Cuthand-Don't Breathe, Don't Drink.”

²³ “Ruth Cuthand-Don't Breathe, Don't Drink.”

²⁴ Cuthand, Hudson and Nanibush, “Artist Spotlight,” video, 14:20.

²⁵ “Don't Breathe, Don't Drink.” Art Gallery of Ontario, AGO Insider, accessed April 2022, <https://ago.ca/agoinsider/dont-breathe-dont-drink>.

Each bead has to be threaded onto the tarp, a process that cannot be rushed without losing its integrity. Lana Ray articulates that the process of beading means that works are embedded with feelings and beliefs that are transferred to the finished beadwork.²⁶ This gives the reader the impression that without the time and meditation that beading takes, they would not take on the same depths of meaning.

Cuthand explains that if reserves have to boil water for use, then the house will be filled with more moisture, encouraging the growth of black mold.²⁷ Cuthand emphasizes that, “there is no place to go if black mold moves in.”²⁸ In order to address water supply issues, Cuthand studied magnified bacterium and parasites that are found in contaminated water and beaded their structures in three-dimensional form.²⁹ The Government of Canada’s website outlines long-term drinking water advisories on public systems on reserves. According to the Government of Canada, as of February 3rd 2023, 138 out of 170 registered long-term drinking water advisories have been lifted since November 2015. Though, this means that there are still 32 long-term drinking water advisories in 28 Indigenous communities.³⁰ Comparing those numbers to the website on March 21st 2022, progress is slow with only one new community having access to clean water in the last year.³¹

Cuthand chose six of the most commonly found parasites and bacteria found in contaminated water, including E. coli, Salmonella, and Typhoid fever.³² The beaded structures

²⁶ Ray, “Beading Becomes a Part of Your Life,” 365.

²⁷ “Teacher Resource,” Art Gallery of Ontario.

²⁸ “Teacher Resource,” Art Gallery of Ontario.

²⁹ “Ruth Cuthand-Don’t Breathe, Don’t Drink,” Ruthcuthand.ca.

³⁰ “Ending long-term drinking water advisories.” Government of Canada, Sac-isc.gc.ca, accessed April 2022, <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1506514143353/1533317130660>.

³¹ “Ending long-term drinking water advisories.” Government of Canada, Sac-isc.gc.ca, accessed April 2022, <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1506514143353/1533317130660>.

³² Cuthand and McStay, “Ruth Cuthand,” 57.

consist of a range of vibrant colors and the bacteria and parasites shine from the glass bottles. Sherry Farrell Racette describes the works as “hauntingly beautiful.”³³ Those beaded structures were then placed inside and submerged in an eclectic collection of glasses and baby bottles filled with resin, of which she collaborated with artist Cindy Baker.³⁴ The beaded parasites are submerged in a way that looks like they are swimming in the water, their tails spread out in the resin. Cuthand explains that she bought glasses from second-hand stores, including ones with scratches, so that they would have the look of being well-used by families.³⁵ Beading is part of a past collective experience and can shape strategies for interacting with the present.³⁶ Cuthand is using beadwork to bring Indigenous issues into contemporary discourse, taking advantage of the ability of beads to continually evolve as a storytelling agent.

Beading as Healing

The laborious process of beading provides opportunities for healing. Beading circles force participants to slow down and to take time for contemplation. By participating in beading circles, beads are not part of a distant past, but are part of the present. In the early 2000s, Cuthand taught classes at First Nations University of Canada, both in Indigenous art history and in studio work.³⁷ The repetitive motions of making allow time for contemplation and reflection along with opportunities for the communal sharing of stories, song, and skill.³⁸

³³ Racette, “Tuft Life,” 121.

³⁴ Cuthand, Hudson and Nanibush, “Artist Spotlight,” video, 8:40.

³⁵ Moore and Cuthand, “GGArts Series: Ruth Cuthand,” video, 27:20.

³⁶ Ray, “Beadwork Becomes a Part of Your Life,” 364.

³⁷ “Artist Talk Ruth Cuthand,” Gordon Snelgrove Gallery, April 12, 2014, video, 4:20.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMVgVlvdJpM>.

³⁸ Stephanie G Anderson, “Stitching through Silence: Walking With Our Sisters, Honoring the Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women in Canada,” *Textile : the journal of cloth and culture* 14, no. 1 (2016): 91. https://oculcr1.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01OCUL_CRL/1u1q6pt/cdi_oup_upso_upso_9780252037153_chapter_018.

Stephanie G. Anderson explains that beading can facilitate an enhanced sense of connectedness, responsibility, and solidarity.³⁹ There is a strong connection of beading to experiences of storytelling, healing, the passing of memory, and the expression of agency, which all point towards beadwork as a form of medicine.⁴⁰ The medicine that beading provides cannot be obtained through the distant viewing of beads through glass, but rather in their active participation in communities. Anderson's article continues saying that acts of mending cannot be achieved quickly, or through individual action.⁴¹ Cuthand says that the process is time-consuming and repetitive, but also recognizes that the process is meditative.⁴² There are sensual, emotional, and spiritual components that come through in the process of beading.⁴³ Clearly, the aspect of time is entwined in beading's process of creation.

Interacting with Beads

Beads have the ability to bring Indigenous issues into contemporary discourses. Cuthand explains that beads are beautiful and seductive, so when people look at the beads they are drawn in, but then as they get closer understand that they are a dangerous thing.⁴⁴ Ruth Cuthand's beaded works are described by Racette as, "simultaneously beautiful and unrelentingly tough."⁴⁵ Through the initial beauty of the glass beads, viewers are drawn in. The beads keep viewers interested and when they realize what the work is about, they are able to engage in discussion in a meaningful way.⁴⁶ Cuthand states, "Though humour softens the blow

³⁹ Anderson, 91.

⁴⁰ Anderson, 91.

⁴¹ Anderson, "Stitching Through Silence," 94.

⁴² "Artist Talk Ruth Cuthand," Gordon Snelgrove Gallery, video, 32:00.

⁴³ Ray, "Beading Becomes a Part of Your Life," 365.

⁴⁴ Cuthand, Hudson, and Nanibush, "Artist Spotlight," video, 7:30.

⁴⁵ Racette, "Tuft Life," 120.

⁴⁶ Cuthand, Hudson, and Nanibush, "Artist Spotlight," video, 7:30.

of a critical message, I have found that making work which confronts the most difficult truths about Canadian society and the impacts of colonization on Aboriginal people are made remarkably palatable when delivered in a strikingly seductive package.”⁴⁷

Don't Breathe, Don't Drink was acquired by the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2017. When tours at the Art Gallery of Ontario stop at the work, children as young as kindergarten, and up to grade twelve, were able to pick something up from the work, creating an avenue for discussions on clean drinking water issues in Canada.⁴⁸ Cuthand does not encourage the term “activist” to be attached to her work, because she does not dedicate her life to one cause, but rather she jumps from project to project.⁴⁹ Even though Cuthand’s *Don't Breathe, Don't Drink* is not deliberately activist, it is still a form of visual storytelling that brings Indigenous ways of knowing and experiences into the present.⁵⁰ Cuthand’s beaded works are in the gallery, but they are not conventionally displayed, as the glasses are on top of a free-standing table. Cuthand inserts her beading in the gallery in an active way, engaging viewer’s with their untraditional form that disrupts their expectations. Cuthand talks about the idea of beads as active agents, saying in an interview that one can think of the bead as an animate object, which has life.⁵¹ The beads are then active agents in their storytelling. Cuthand creates the designs, but the activism that comes from the beads are peoples’ reception of them. Cuthand opens a pathway, and the beads do the storytelling.

⁴⁷ “I’m Not the Indian You’re Looking For,” ruthcuthand.ca.

⁴⁸ Cuthand, Hudson, Nanibush, “Artist Spotlight,” video, 17:30.

⁴⁹ Cuthand and McStay, “Ruth Cuthand,” 61-62.

⁵⁰ Cuthand and McStay, 62.

⁵¹ Gay and Cuthand, “Ruth Cuthand Interview,” video, 5:30.

Conclusion

The temporal nature of beading, in its laborious process and in its abilities as a medium to continually evolve as a storytelling agent, provides opportunities for healing. The ability of beaded works to bring Indigenous issues into contemporary discourse is demonstrated in Ruth Cuthand's *Don't Breathe, Don't Drink* (2016), which creates an avenue for discussions on clean drinking water issues in Canada. Cuthand uses traditional methods as a form of visual storytelling. Cuthand emphasizes Indigenous issues of the past, recalling colonial history and its effects on Indigenous health, through beads which are part of Indigenous past and also part of Indigenous present. Beading allows time for personal reflection and meditation, and also creates time for communities to gather together, forcing participants to slow down and to listen to others. Beadwork can then act as a form of resilience, propelling Indigenous discourse in the present and into the future.

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