

Autumn Whiteway

Digital Activism

Autumn Whiteway, a Saulteaux Metis archaeologist and visual artist overturns colonial narratives through powerful digital art and photography. Spending her childhood displaced from her community in Barends River, Manitoba she felt a disconnect to her culture growing up. Prioritizing traditional education, Autumn completed three degrees after finishing high school. She graduated from the University of Calgary in 2011 with a Bachelor of Science (BSc) with First Class Honours in Archaeology concentrating in physical anthropology (1) and a Bachelor of Art (BA) with Distinction in Greek and Roman studies focusing on archaeology. Then in 2016, Autumn completed a Master of Arts (MA) in Anthropology from the University of Manitoba, in Winnipeg. Her MA focused on archaeology in a continuation of her undergraduate degrees' research on the mortuary practices of the Bedouin of Jordan.

After ten years of formal education Autumn felt a need to explore her creative side. She dabbled in painting and explored Indigenous art styles. 2020 was a period of transition. She lost her job as an archaeologist and left an abusive relationship. She decided to pursue art as a full-time career. Autumn's art transitioned from traditional art forms such as drawing and painting on canvas to working almost entirely on digital art with her iPad. The vibrance and accuracy of this media speaks to her.

Her digital drawings are done in the Woodland Style (2), inspired by Norval Morrisseau, and a work that she saw of his. The vibrant colours and symbolism drew her in. Morrisseau remains a huge influence on her art to this day. Autumn's art is very bright and full of powerful symbols such as fours, and sevens which represent the four sides of the medicine wheel and the seventh generation principal (3) respectively.



Photography, a large aspect of Autumn's artistic practice, brings attention to important issues in the Indigenous communities. Currently she is being mentored in wet plate collodion (4) tin type (5) photography. This black and white photography process was practiced in the 1800s by photographers such as Edward Curtis (6), who documented Indigenous people as if they were a dying race. Such photos represent Indigenous people in a serious and stoic fashion, which is an inaccurate portrayal. Autumn worked on a series called Histories Written by the Victors. One wet plate photo called Smiling stoically features a radiant smiling man and aims to correct the narrative that Indigenous people don't have a sense of humour.

Autumn's activism aims to educate people about the misinformation that colonial narratives have fed us. She is proud of her heritage and outwardly identifies as Indigenous through fashion and accessories. Because of this she has experienced racism and has been victim to many stereotypes. University gave her the ability to critically think about the issues facing Indigenous communities. Through her photography

she speaks out about the distortion of history and discovers herself in the process.

One piece that stood out to me was a photograph entitled *The Great Slaughter*. This work represents the first mass killing of the bison as the transcontinental railway headed west across the U.S Great Plains. The American government used starvation as a tool to force Indigenous people into submission which subsequently led to treaties, reserves, and residential schools. The picture features two white European men standing over a dead bison, one holding a knife and the other aiming the gun that took its life. Autumn's partner plays the part of the dead bison wrapped in a bison hide and mask. His participation as a Blackfoot man symbolizes the suffering of Indigenous people due to the loss of the bison.

“I want to push boundaries and make people think.”

When curating exhibitions, Autumn gives Indigenous people a space to share their art and culture, in the hope that it starts a discussion between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Autumn also teaches a variety of workshops through the Arts Commons in Calgary for elementary and junior high children. She offers thirteen different workshops amongst them are Woodland Style Art and Winter and Counts where students draw their own history.

After five years as a professional artist Autumn can see her career transitioning from emerging to a mid-career. Mentoring other artists is a milestone that she is extremely proud of. The Indigenous art community in Calgary is tight knit, and the support of community members and elders has been integral to her development as an artist. Autumn feels fortunate to be able to use her art as one Indigenous voice to help in the reconciliation process.

Based on an interview by Ayshani Aurora

References

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