



Born Celestial

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Kaya Joan, Natalie King, Nicole Neidhardt, Celeste Pedri-Spade

Performances by Danielle Boissoneau and Chyler Sewell

Curated by Alex Jacobs-Blum

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Writing:

Alex Jacobs-Blum, Danielle Boissoneau, and Chyler Sewell

Copy Editing:

Sally McKay

Documentation:

Grant Alan Holt

Design:

Kristina Durka and Eli Nolet

Front cover: Left to right: Natalie King, *Like a hawk silently soaring over the Don Valley, Red is Love*, 2022. Celeste Pedri-Spade, *Roses*, 2016. *Nora*, 2021. Installation view.

Page 2: *Guswenta (Two Row Wampum)*, in Hamilton Artists Inc. foyer. Installation view. Photo by Eli Nolet. Back cover: Kaya Joan, *we exist, therefore, we exist (the continuum)*, 2021-22. Nicole Neidhardt, *Spider Woman Weaves Her Pattern of the Universe*. 2022. Floor installation view.

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A Map to the Next World

Alex Jacobs-Blum

“We are all Born Celestial. Made of the Earth and of the Stars, we travel interdimensionally, accessing love and healing across all timelines. We look inward to see forward, held by the continuity of our Ancestors moving through us. As we are returning home to ourselves, we guide each other with tenderness and care into the future, each carrying gifts essential to the continued existence of all our relations.”

- Alex Jacobs-Blum, *Born Celestial*

Collapsing the future into the present, *Born Celestial* imagines unearthed futures beyond settler colonialism where Indigenous knowledge systems thrive. Informed by their identities and their own Nations’ thought systems, the artists activate the dreams of Ancestors, Kin and future relatives unbound by material form. Our Ancestors live in our bodies in real time, and ancestral knowledge is our alchemy, braided into our DNA. Through storytelling, artists Danielle Boissoneau, Kaya Joan, Natalie King, Nicole Neidhardt, Celeste Pedri-Spade, and Chyler Sewell access memory, knowledge and radical love from their Ancestor relatives. *Born Celestial* carries a responsibility to the Indigenous youth of today and seven generations¹ to come, seeking to create ripples of creative inspiration for youth present and future,

¹ The Seventh Generation teaching is a core value of the Hodinöhsö:ni’. It is a responsibility that each person holds to ensure the next seven generations to inherit the land will also thrive.

ultimately projecting Indigeneity forward with Ancestors guiding the way. Mvskoke scholar, Laura Harjo explains, “Futurity is an action; it’s a practice. The actions we take today enact our relatives’ futurity: we both live out the futurity architecture of our ancestor relatives and frame a futurity for our future relatives.”² Harjo emphasizes that hopefulness and visualization are at the core of mapping new futures.

As a Lower Cayuga, Wolf Clan woman with relations from Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, my methodologies and responsibilities are rooted within our Hodinöhsö:ni’ Great Law of Peace. I worked on two interconnected projects, *Born Celestial* and *All Our Relations*. Both were created with Kanikonhri:yo (Good Mind)³ and care at their foundation, intended to be welcoming spaces to Indigenous people of all ages and communities.⁴ The title and themes of the project, *All Our Relations* are a reference to the Hodinöhsö:ni’ teaching, “We are a part of everything that is beneath us, above us, and around us. Our past is our present, our present is our future, and our future is seven generations past and present.”⁵

Grandmother Renee Thomas-Hill, a Cayuga Nation, Bear Clan, Elder from Six Nations, inspired the installation of the Guswenta (Two Row Wampum) in the Hamilton Artists Inc. foyer for *Born Celestial*. In 1613, an agreement was established between the Hodinöhsö:ni’ and the Dutch in the form of a wampum belt.

2 Laura Harjo, *Spiral to the Stars: Mvskoke Tools of Futurity* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 34.

3 Susan M. Hill, *The Clay We Are Made Of: Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2017), 29.

4 Growing up in Hamilton, I reflect on my experience growing up in a large urban city centre, outside of my community of Six Nations of the Grand River. I had limited encounters with Indigenous art and culture, nor was I encouraged to access those spaces. I rarely saw myself represented within mainstream media, galleries or museums and my spirit yearned for connection and belonging. *Born Celestial* is an embodiment of what I needed for my spirit as a young person.

5 Winona LaDuke, “Introduction,” in *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (United States: Haymarket Books, 2017).



Two purple parallel lines run the length of the belt, one line representing a canoe and Hodinöhsöni' ways of being; the other a ship and European ways of being. The canoe and ship are meant to travel down the river of life side by side as equals. The agreement states that neither will attempt to steer the other's vessel. As long as the rivers continue to flow, the agreement is everlasting.⁶

Grandmother expressed the power of symbology and how it can be used as a tool in creating inviting spaces, particularly in empowering Indigenous youth leaders.⁷ My goal was to create a safer space that was in direct consultation with Indigenous community. My family would often mention feeling intimidated by galleries' white walls and by the academic language found in these spaces. I am mindful that white walls are reminiscent of health care buildings where racialized and marginalized peoples experience systemic discrimination. My goal for incorporating the Guswenta was to disrupt these experiences. The large-scale installation can be seen from the street through floor to ceiling windows. Upon entering Hamilton Artists Inc. you are welcomed into the agreements of Guswenta: friendship, peace and unity.

A golden abalone shell greets you at the entrance of *Born Celestial*, offering gifts of wampum for guests; a beautiful contribution made by my friend and mentor, Ann Brascoupe. Each gift of wampum is a reminder of our individual responsibilities in caring for the land, each other and future generations. The exhibition design embraces the notion of safe access, allowing the viewer to rethink their engagement with art.

Born Celestial offers space for Indigenous folks to dream and speculate about the future of their communities. The exhibition strives to create a visual language that

6 Rick Hill. "Rethinking the Two Row Wampum." Conversations in Cultural Fluency #5, Deyohahá:ge: Indigenous Knowledge Centre at Six Nations Polytechnic, 5 April, 2016. YouTube video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTpFqm_IUNo

7 Grandmother Renee Thomas-Hill, in conversation with the author, March 2022.

articulates the future as both a metaphor and methodology of resistance to inspire social change. In consultation with Indigenous youth from the Wasa-Nabin program from the Hamilton Regional Indian Centre, we discussed the question, “How do we make institutional art spaces more welcoming to Indigenous people?” Our discussion led to the idea of painting the walls a colour not typically found within those spaces. The deep purple walls mimic the expansiveness of the universe, pushing beyond the gallery walls. Dreams of infinite possibilities and healed communities act as blueprints for map-making.⁸

The concept of mapping retains a Eurocentric perception of land, historically operating from a colonized gaze of controlling, objectifying and exploiting Indigenous lands and territories.⁹ Harjo’s definition counters the settler colonial understanding of mapping by redefining, “A map to the next world is a map of futurity.”¹⁰ I would further elaborate that mapping is a form of way-finding and healing; it is as individual as it is collective. Harjo’s perspective calls to question how viewers perceive and engage with maps while maintaining the importance of relationality, inclusive of land, plant, animal and cosmic relations.

Spaces dedicated to interconnectedness encourage shared dreams of the future and directly oppose settler colonialism. The artists adopt such methodologies of mapping by creating decolonized conventions in art. Rooted within Indigenous thought, they channel the exuberance of their Ancestors to create materialities that thread resurgence with healing. I imagine each artwork as a network of constellations, activating portals of infinite knowledge and sparking creative inspiration in future building.

8 Harjo, *Spiral to the Stars: Mvskoke Tools of Futurity*, 81.

9 Tamara Bellone, Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro, Francesco Fiermonte, Emiliana Armano and Linda Quiquixiv, “Mapping as tacit representations of the colonial gaze,” in *Mapping Crisis*, ed. Doug Specht (University of London Press, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 2020), 30-31.

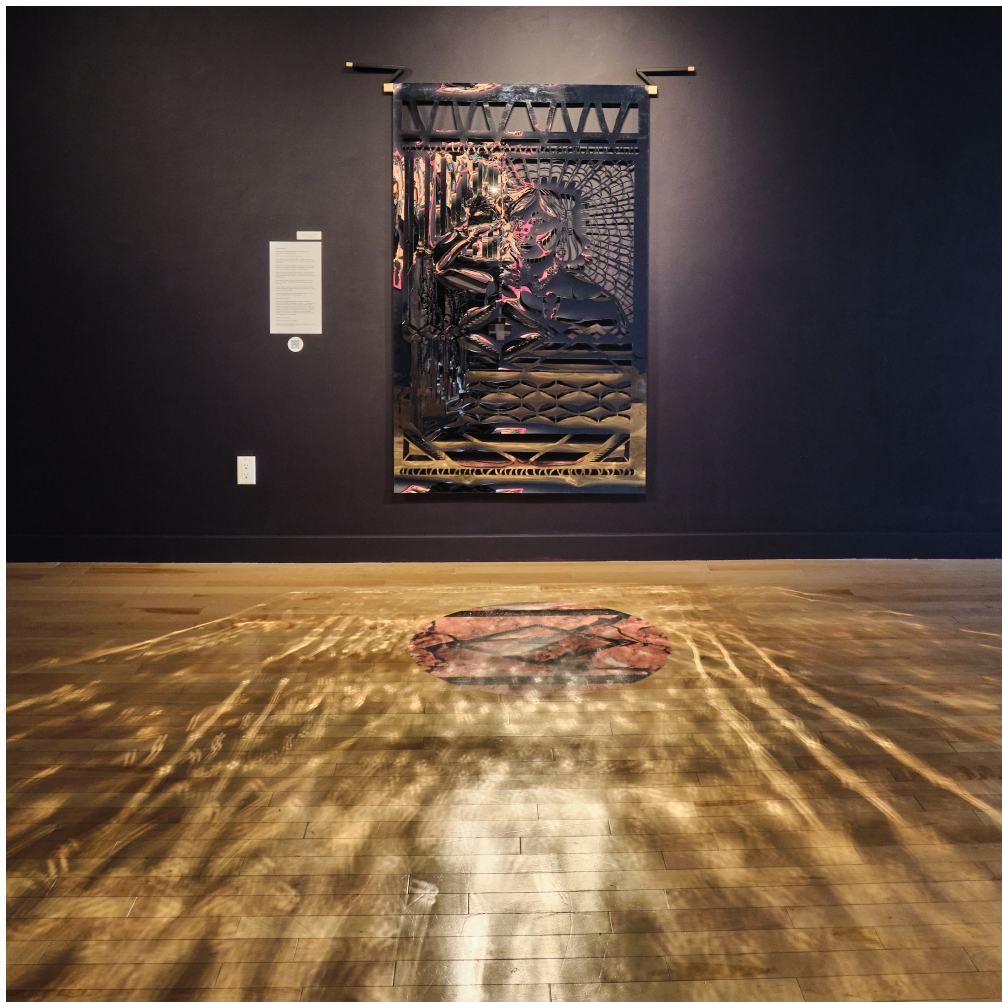
10 Harjo, 82.

Kaya Joan is a multi-disciplinary Afro-Indigenous artist born, raised and living in T'karonto with Vincentian, Kanien'kehá:ka, Irish and Jamaican relations. *we exist, therefore, we exist (the continuum)* (2021-22) explores the intersections of realms; Skyworld, Dreamworld, Earth and Waterworlds, to seek an understanding of interdimensional relationships and responsibilities. In collaboration with their Ancestors and living relatives (human and non-human), Joan aims to empower a liberated future for Black and Indigenous peoples. They employ playfulness, joy and light in a process of healing; interweaving Joan's persona, Spike, as a trickster spirit throughout realms.

For *we exist, therefore, we exist (the continuum)*, Joan uses a colonial map as a canvas, weaving in dimensions of beings and multiple timelines. Intervening with vibrant colour on a black background, Joan challenges colonial forms of mapping land by entwining the experience of the viewer as a participant. They activate a decolonial methodology for viewing and understanding space by stretching the canvas beyond a typical square format. Spirits reach beyond each corner like a supernova of explosions, climbing up the walls, intentionally taking up physical space.

Nicole Neidhardt is Diné (Navajo) of Kiiyaa'áanii Clan and European descent, currently based in T'karonto. Neidhardt actively dreams of alternate realities and temporalities integral to building Indigenous futurity. The work is visioning possible futures that return to Diné aesthetics and stories as a means of resisting oppressive systems of erasure on Indigenous communities.

in *Spider Woman Weaves Her Pattern of the Universe...* (2022), Neidhardt blends the Navajo Creation story with contemporary materials to offer alternative modes of knowledge dissemination. Using hand-cut mirror mylar, Neidhardt stencils a portrait



of Spider Woman (Na’ashjé’íí Asdzáá)¹¹ embodying the birth of Navajo weaving and mapping of the cosmos. The materiality is significant to Neidhardt’s practice, inhabiting diverse modes of storytelling.

As the viewer steps into the vinyl portal of a Navajo environment, they are enveloped by Spider Woman’s reflective web of knowledge and care. Upon scanning the QR code the viewer is transported to the home of Spider Woman, a sacred rock formation called Spider Rock in the Navajo Nation at Canyon De Chelly. Neidhardt activates ancestral technologies as time travelling portals between past, present and future. Mirror mylar offers glittering reflections of the stars, and the light reflections on the floor mimic the movements of water, centring the work within healing.

Celeste Pedri-Spade, PhD, is an Ojibwe visual anthropologist and practicing artist from Northwestern Ontario (Lac des Mille Lacs First Nation). Pushing against colonial power and gender-based violence, Pedri-Spade draws upon the resilience of Anishinaabe relatives and Ancestors. *Roses* (2016) and *Nora* (2021) are wearable art pieces drawing on familial knowledge and traditional Anishinaabe designs. They operate as embodiments of healing and an unbound access to knowledge. *Nora* and *Roses* confront western conceptions of beauty by asserting Anishinaabe aesthetics. Inspired by the legacy of Pedri-Spade’s great-Grandmother, Rose, and Grandmother, Nora, the pieces are intended to be worn by Anishinaabe bodies and animated by movement.

Roses is a jingle dress, traditionally worn for healing dances, featuring a portrait of Rose in a repeated pattern. It is made of pink cotton, deep burgundy velvet, gold metal cones and embellished with beaded roses in an Anishinaabe floral design. Similar motifs and colour palette are represented in *Nora*. A floor length gown is

¹¹ Nicole Neidhardt, *Spider Woman Weaves Her Pattern of the Universe...* Artist Statement for Born Celestial, Hamilton Artists Inc. 2022.

accented by a blush pink taffeta rose extending into an oversized bow. Performing as a whole, *Roses* and *Nora* are nestled in cedar branches and honour one another in conversation. Cedar, a sacred medicine, offers healing while activating alternative senses, creating multiple layers of audience engagement.

A one-minute video accompanies the installation, displaying *Nora* in Pedri-Spade's home and generating intimacy by opening up space to view the work outside of an institutional context.

Natalie King is a queer interdisciplinary Anishinaabe (Algonquin) artist, facilitator and member of Timiskaming First Nation, currently based in T'karonto. King presents a triptych of painted works on canvas, *Ancestor Signal* (2022), *Like a Hawk silently soaring over the Don Valley* (2022) and *Red is Love* (2022). Using vibrant colour palettes and soft forms, King's aesthetic rejects western societal norms. She inserts femme and queer bodies to challenge the colonial gaze by visualizing exuberant, liberated, decolonial futures of Indigenous love and joy.

Ancestor Signal specifically addresses Anishinaabe futurisms by channelling Anishinaabe artists throughout time in a gathering of solidarity, asserting the right to self-governance. Love flows like rivers throughout time, tethering Earth to Skyworld and the infinite cosmos. In a cosmological embrace, the beings uplift each other's strengths and creativity.

Like a Hawk silently soaring over the Don Valley (2022) recognizes the continuance of familial histories beyond the physical. King acknowledges past and future ancestral relations held within the body. The sacred fire opens portals to accessing relationships and building upon those connections, weaving strawberry medicine (heart berries) throughout.



Whimsical beings embrace one another within hair nests in *Red is Love* (2022). These kinships are sacred in nature; representing care, community, kinship and belonging. Influenced by Anishinaabe hair teachings, these relationships are bound to the earth and one another. Centring queer Indigenous experience, King's practice activates a consciousness that spans beyond western notions of time, love and relationality.

By artmaking, King (re)gains traditional Anishinaabe knowledge and seeks to recover bonds that were disrupted by colonial impact. Combining hopefulness with Anishinaabe teachings, she aims to inspire healing pathways forward for future generations.

On Wednesday July 20, 2022, artists Chyler Sewell and Danielle Boissoneau further activated *Born Celestial* with poetry readings and storytelling performances. The evening was a beautiful community gathering full of laughter and deep contemplation. Boissoneau and Sewell, mother and daughter, each with their own lens on the future, offered valuable perspectives of growth and hope.

Chyler Sewell is an Anishinaabe storyteller and published author from Garden River First Nation, based in Brantford, ON. Sewell shared three poetry and storytelling works, *spring* (2022), *Gimiwan Finds Manoomin Seeds* (2022) and *words that hold stories* (2022). Featured in the *Born Celestial* catalogue, *spring* is an honest retelling of how Indigenous people currently experience microaggressions and violence within institutions. Sewell reflects on the seasonal aspects of her personal experiences by navigating the complexities of being Indigenous. Oscillating between trauma and joy, she compares the experience of negotiating between these feelings to the harsh winter and warm spring. Through offering sympathies to herself, Sewell carries forward the responsibility to the younger generation, reminding them that it is important to laugh and feel joy.

Danielle Boissoneau is a 2spirit femme, Anishnaabekwe from Garden River First Nation, based in Hamilton, ON. She performed three works, *Starseed* (2022), *Super Sacred* (2019) and *Thunder Baby* (2018). *Starseed*, is a critical analysis of urban Indigenous lived experience, reflecting upon, and bringing attention to how capitalism and colonialism intentionally suppress (re)connection. Grappling with traumatic histories Indigenous peoples face, Boissoneau centres the narrative as a coming home journey to combat settler colonialism. She reminds us of our abilities to access stories and otherworldly power from Ancestors and Stars, but this requires constant healing work. Landing in a place of hopefulness, Boissoneau channels a future-bound perspective by concluding the piece with,

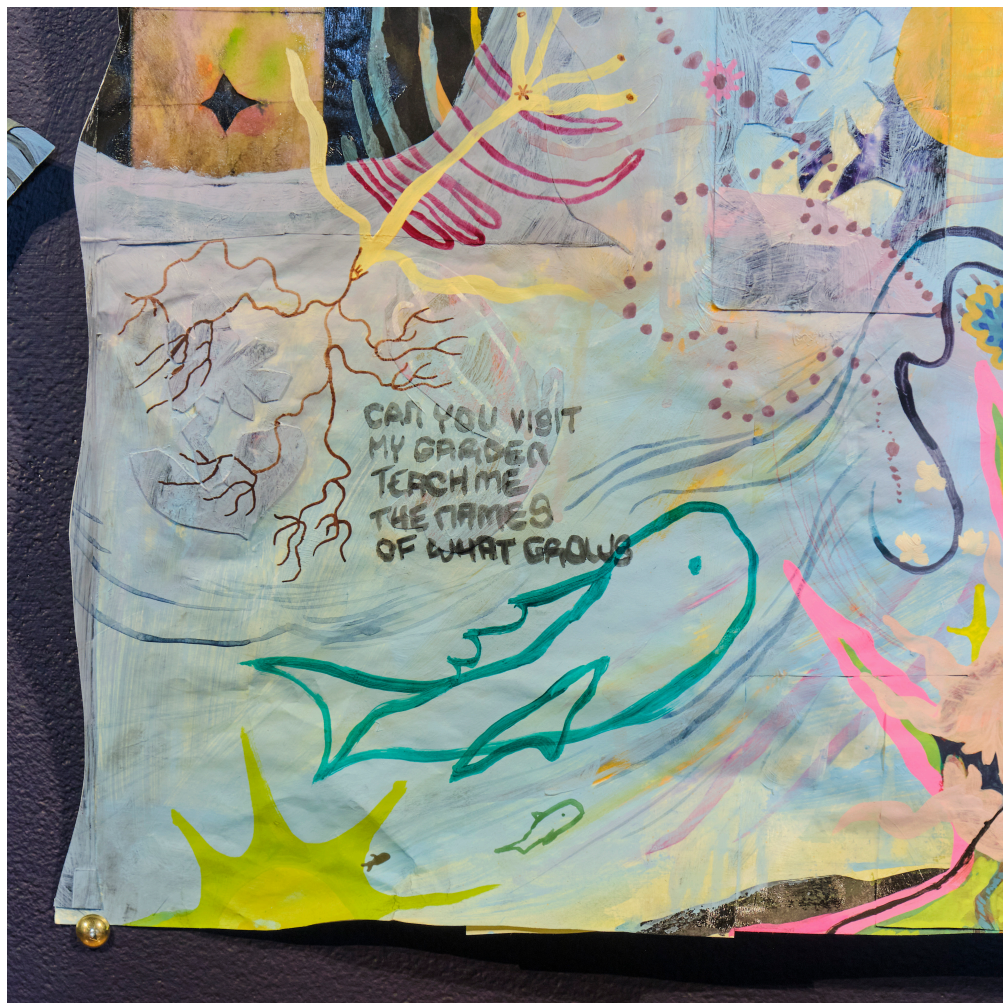
No matter how much they think they won
We will always be star people¹²

The performances had a profoundly positive impact on the audience – consisting of Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members. Intergenerational knowledge sharing is a central facet of futurity; conversations between mother and daughter enhance our collective understanding of intergenerational healing. The laughter in the room was electric, resonating throughout the entire exhibition. Laughter is a powerful medicine which brings together community and actively opposes colonial violence while alleviating pain that has been imposed upon Indigenous peoples.

Boissoneau and Sewell's performances encompass lived realities, land and identity within expressions of healing. These radical responses of healing are vital in building a map for the future.¹³

¹² Danielle Boissoneau, *Starseed*, 2022.

¹³ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017, United States. 48.



Through artmaking, the *Born Celestial* artists are creating safe spaces for themselves, their families and kin to heal. These modes of artistic and cultural resurgence offer opportunities for audiences to learn and grow. The teachings I have personally received from each artist and their works in the exhibition are immeasurable, and have brought me to a new chapter in my own healing journey.

As a continuation of *Born Celestial*, I partnered with Supercrawl (Hamilton's yearly multi-arts festival) and the Hamilton Regional Indian Centre to develop a curatorial project titled, *All Our Relations*. It was a community arts-based project with four Indigenous youth, between the ages of 14-22. We collectively developed original documentaries centering their artistic practices and self-expression. The artists, Autumn Tapp, Kianna Powless, Skylar Grace and Tiffany Silversmith, reflect on how land, community, cosmos and ancestral relations contribute to their artmaking. The work was installed on a 20ft x 10ft digital screen outside of Hamilton Artists Inc. from September 9th-11th, 2022. The installation was a powerful intervention, witnessing Indigenous youth take up space within an urban city centre. Each artist spoke to their experience in artmaking as a cathartic and embodied process.

I believe that futurity comes from within; a legacy and a continuum. *Born Celestial* and *All Our Relations* are part of my legacy and healing. Witnessing and learning from other Indigenous people who also engage with art as expressions of healing uplifts my own practice and journey. These are legacies which will carry forward through our familial, kinship relations and beyond. We will become the future Ancestors that our kin will look to for guidance. The work being done in this current moment provides the maps for the future generations to reference and build upon. I trust that Indigenous knowledge systems will guide us into the future just as our Ancestors did for us.

Starseed

Danielle Boissoneau

It's hard to see the stars in the city
You look up
See a light
Maybe it's a plane

Then the stardust falls down
And illuminates my eyes
I gaze towards the sky
That plane was just a lie

Internalize, externalize, accept and then blame
Centuries of forced upon shame
That reflect to me through the crosses on their capes
Through the iterations of popes and prime ministers
Something so cold and ugly, quite sinister

And it's so hard to remember
Where we come from

It is so hard to remember
Where we come from

Giizhigo Kwe, we sing her songs and if we close our eyes
And let ourselves find safety, I can remember her flight
From the sky to this world, sacred resonance unfurled
She landed right here

Turtle's back, heart attack, time collides.
And it's quiet.

So Quiet, I can hear your heart beat
21 jump street
Land Back – reconcile this

The magic that flows through these veins can't be replicated
Certainly hesitated
When our babies were confiscated
The stardust settled on the pavement

Anungmin .. the whisper shakes the cement
Anungmin .. the dust shakes the world
Anungmin .. it rises within me and I remember
Our creation stories tell us that we come from the sky
I have no reason to believe otherwise

The first person on this land was a woman
I have no reason to believe otherwise.

Ev'rytime my feet touch the land, I'm transported backwards,
forwards
But only if I let it

Because being a starseed doesn't give me the key to fantastical
joy, peace or safety
It gives me connection, it helps me remember, I can reclaim and
determine
Reject preachers' sermons
And undo all the roads built for the pope

I can close my eyes and remember something beyond this place
I can close my eyes and imagine something beyond this place

And maybe that's why they are so violent towards my people
Because we come from the stars
And no matter
The violence
The theft
The separation
The tears
No matter how much they think they have won

We will always be star people



Spring

Chyler Sewell

You are strong.

You are resilient.

You are actively surviving genocide and intergenerational trauma, and what Indigenous person isn't.

You don't talk about the real hard things around trauma, because they'll smile at you with those pitying smiles and congratulate you for fighting the good fight in a battle that they don't even really care to understand.

Resilience has taught you frigid strength, a strength that cuts you off from your heart because that makes it easier and it hurts too much and you don't like crying. [Breathe] And you don't feel safe.

But you don't acknowledge the unsafeness, because if you did, then you'd have to be the one to change it and that's exhausting and you're too tired for exhaustion.

So you embrace harsh, numbing winter. It makes you feel in control, like the world isn't conspiring for the demise of you and your descendents and even the memories of your ancestors. Winter makes you feel like you don't feel so that your heart is safe and so that you can continue the good fight.

But my dear,

You are weak. You are fragile and lovely and delicate.

You're warm, fleeting spring. But you are also harsh, numbing winter. And I don't want you to need to be that. I want you to have the freedom to be spring. Be warm. Be fleeting. Be soft.

Because you deserve vulnerability.

You deserve vulnerability, my dear. And there will be people around you to give that to you. They will carry your harsh numbness until you thaw into your spring and welcome back the warmth of your delicate heart.

I know that's hard my dear. I know why you learned winter because I learned it too. I practiced winter until someone taught me spring again. And spring was refreshing. It freed me from expectations of hopelessness and reminded me that there is joy in sunrises and rain and wind on your skin and belly laughing among people who love you.

And I remember thinking to myself, "This is the real good fight"

That if I can experience joy and laughter and love, what's to say that the people around me and the people after me won't experience these things too?



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HAMILTON ARTISTS INC.

155 James St N
Hamilton, Ontario
L8R 2K9
<http://theinc.ca>

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For more information, exhibition documentation, and extended biographical notes on the artists, please visit theinc.ca/exhibitions/

Page 5: Left to right: Natalie King, *Ancestral Signal, Like a hawk silently soaring over the Don Valley, Red is Love*, 2022. Celeste Pedri-Spade, *Roses*, 2016. Kayla Joan, *we exist, therefore, we exist (the continuum)*, 2021-22. Installation view.

Page 9: Nicole Neidhardt, *Spider Woman Weaves Her Pattern of the Universe*. 2022. Mirror mylar, vinyl decal, 360 video. Installation view.

Page 12: Natalie King, *Red is Love*, 2022. Acrylic on canvas. Detail view.

Page 15: Kayla Joan, *we exist, therefore, we exist (the continuum)*, 2021-22. Mixed media (ink, acrylic, gouache, collage) on paper. Detail view.

Page 20: Left to right: Kayla Joan, *we exist, therefore, we exist (the continuum)*, 2021-22. Celeste Pedri-Spade, *Roses*, 2016. (Detail view). Nicole Neidhardt, *Spider Woman Weaves Her Pattern of the Universe*. 2022. Installation view.

Page 23: Nicole Neidhardt, *Spider Woman Weaves Her Pattern of the Universe*. 2022. Detail view.

Page 25: Left to right: Celeste Pedri-Spade, *Nora*, 2021. *Roses*, 2016. Installation view.



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