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Field Notes and
Reflections as a Settler of Color
Exhibition Review: Rebecca Belmore:
Facing the Monumental

Musée d'Art Contemporain de
Montréal, June 20–October 6, 2019

Prakash Krishnan

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Exhibition Description

“*Facing the Monumental* from Canadian artist Rebecca Belmore is the largest exhibition of her work to date and a major overview of the past 30 years. The rich body of work presented will include sculptures, installations, photography, and videos, some of which are based on performances. With boundless beauty, sensitivity and resilience, her work explores our problematic relationships with territory, women’s lives, historic events and ongoing violence against Indigenous peoples.”¹

Field Notes

I enter the exhibition *Facing the Monumental* at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal (MAC) with three of my fellow classmates but quickly lose sight of them when I’m struck by the sheer scale of the works exhibited. The first piece I observe—a photograph, artist (No. 2)²— features a figure facing away from the camera.

Dressed in an orange construction suit with a reflective safety cross on its back, the figure stands in front of a large structure covered in a bright orange tarp. A large print, nearly two meters across that stands in front of the work consumes my field of vision. I am unable to take in anything other than the vast field of orange. After a while, my group moves on without me, and I feel my own body replace the figure in the photograph. Deeply entrenched in the world of the work, I've transitioned from observer to observed. As the scale of the work fills the frames of my peripheries, I feel somehow embodied into the art. Feeling a deep identification with the figure, I conjure the sense as if I am somehow complicit in animating the photograph into a performance. But as I stare deeper into the textures of oranges and neon hues, the feelings of complicity I am experiencing redirects its attention to neocolonialism. I am forced to reflect on how my complicity within settler colonialism has transformed Indigenous ways of life, symbiotic with the natural topography of the land into this neon-orange-covered, always-under-construction concrete landscape.

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This image bookends the last image I observe. Also taken in 2014, the photograph X mark exhibits another figure donning a reflective vest, again facing away from the camera and looking out across a whitened landscape and a cloudy-yet-bright sky. As with *artist (No.2)*, I am deeply engrossed by the image's scale and am brought into the field of vision of the figure centering the photo. Unlike the former image, however, I am unable to see past the contrast of the reflective vest and the snowy landscape. With this simple staging, Belmore is again able to evoke images of neocolonialism and land exploitation, putting in visual contrast the natural and the synthetic.

Considering that *Facing the Monumental* was originally curated and exhibited for the Art Gallery of Ontario, whose gallery spaces suppose a different configuration, reflecting upon how exhibitions are reconfigured for different spaces proves an interesting exercise in thinking about how exhibition design influences the way art is experienced. The upper level of the MAC, where the exhibition is on display, is split into five general sections: the entry, the large exhibition space, the small exhibition space, the adjoining Francis Alÿs exhibition, and the theatre room. The MAC exhibition design leads visitors to move counter clockwise from the entrance hall into the large exhibition space until exiting back into the hall following the theatre room. My curiosity piqued by a sign reading “More Rebecca Belmore,” I follow the arrow leading toward the theatre room, instead of following the set path taken by my classmates. This opening of different paths with which to experience the artworks lends agency to the viewer while also offering multiple readings of Belmore’s works, which span over 15 years and various disciplines including video, sculpture, textiles, and photography.

I enter the monumental, dim theatre and find myself alone, overwhelmed by the sound of rushing water. Her 2005 short film fountain is playing, projected onto a wall of cascading water. Once again, the sheer scale of the work immediately possesses me. Through a kind of sensory deprivation via the combination of the grand, dark room, thunderous rushing of water, and the immense screen filling my vision, I feel a certain intimacy forged between myself and the on-screen portrait. The design of the space creates an inability to extract any distance from myself and the piece, thereby producing acute feelings of anxiety. Watching the film several times, I try to make sense of the unclear narrative. Is the woman in the film struggling with the currents? Drowning, even? Trying to carry herself out of the ocean? I eventually conclude that once she embraced her environment, she was able to emerge from the water, dump the bucket back onto the camera, and effectively color the scene in a new light. As I explore the rest of the exhibit, I attempt to embody the same response as the figure in fountain. Instead of fighting to find meaning or understanding from art that was constructed from experiences and knowledge that are not mine, I seek to

chart my affective experience and consider how my feelings might relate to the work displayed.

Within the large exhibition space, my attention is begged by *sister* (2010). The longer I stare, the more powerful the image becomes. Once again, the scale of the image attracts attention and makes it difficult to look away. I observe that the backlighting of the image also provides an interesting effect—it moves the gaze from behind the portrait subject (where I’m standing) to her face (which is facing away from me).

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This is a gaze wherein no matter my physical position, I cannot see what the light sees—her face, her identity. The fact that the object of this portrait was facing away from the gallery reminds me of Sara Ahmed’s description of turning in relation to subject formation. “Turning,” Ahmed says, “... take[s] subjects in different directions. Depending on which way one turns, different worlds might even come into view.”³ The subject’s pose, arms splayed, is similar to the iconography of Jesus on the cross. The pose, the turned around gaze, the name of the photo, the role women play in our society and in our lives—all of these come together to provide this vivid image of the sister as the protector or defender. The sister is often rendered faceless but is the crux of our communities and our struggles. This piece paired with the poem affixed to the wall beside *sister*, “Indian Woman” by Jeanette Armstrong, exemplifies the crucial place Indigenous women hold in society. It also reiterates the need for political action in response to horrors and injustice of the ongoing crisis in Canada of femicide against Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people (MMIWG2S).⁴ This is often unaddressed in Canadian politics, making this work all the more powerful.

Reflections

It is impossible for me to critically reflect on the experience of viewing this exhibition without also reflecting on my own identity and position when it comes to Indigenous-settler relations on Turtle Island.⁵ Although I am not white, I do possess several settler privileges, such as the freedom to move freely within national borders, which contribute to my ability to gain upward class mobility and live free of the lasting hardships that come from being forcibly extracted from one's land and undergoing cultural genocide. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Wang echo this sentiment in expressing that "settlers are diverse, not just of white European descent, and include people of color, even from other colonial contexts."⁶ This sentiment expresses my situation exactly. I often think about the ways in which I am complicit and benefit from settler colonialism. I am able to live, go to school, and work on stolen lands. I am fluent in Canada's two "official" or "national" languages. I can afford the museum's entry fee. I profit off the labor of others more marginalized than I, which in turn affords me the time and leisure to experience this exhibit. All these examples are aspects of modern life that have been easily granted to me, but Indigenous people are often unable to benefit from their lands and communities that have been violently excavated. It's been stated that "settler colonialism is a structure, not an event."⁷ Both the museum and I are complicit in maintaining these structures.

Artist Rebecca Belmore and *Facing the Monumental* curator Wanda Nanibush are both Anishinaabe and are members of the Lac Seul First Nation and Beausoleil First Nation, respectively. They also share a long-standing relationship prior to the development of this exhibition. While I initially took notes conscious of my settler positioning, I realized it would be irresponsible to conduct a serious analysis or pose judgment of whether or not *Facing the Monumental* can be interpreted as an act of decolonization without consolidation with Indigenous epistemologies. Because museums are colonial institutions, I want to consider if this Anishinaabe artist's exhibition is indeed a gesture toward decolonizing the museum or if it is simply a product of tokenism. Linda Tuhiwai Smith

mentions “researching back” as a method of self (Indigenous)-recovery and determination through a “knowingness of the colonizer.”⁸ Because of Belmore’s and Nanibush’s insider/outsider identities with respect to their education and institutional connections and prestige, I looked to renowned Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s 2018 feature of Belmore and Nanibush to see, in their own words, what place the installation has in decolonizing the museum space. Simpson, in this feature, reflects on Nanibush’s notion of “curat[ing] space as material,” which then leads to Belmore’s repossession of the colonial space, “creat[ing] and hold[ing] a decolonial presence” that, according to Simpson, gifts her “with the feeling and experience of freedom.”⁹ My personal opinion on this subject remains unclear, but also irrelevant. After all, “decolonization is not accountable to settlers.”¹⁰ I can say for certain, however, that I am grateful for the opportunity to have experienced this exhibition and to have the platform and privileges to be able to share these observations and reflections. ■



Author Affiliations

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Endnotes

1. “Rebecca Belmore: Facing the Monumental,” MAC Montréal, <https://macm.org/en/exhibitions/rebecca-belmore-facing-the-monumental/>.
2. The images alluded to in this piece can be viewed at the MAC Montréal website, <https://macm.org/en/exhibitions/rebecca-belmore-facing-the-monumental/>.
3. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 15.
4. The acronym for “Missing and Murdered Women, Girls and 2-Spirit People.”
5. In keeping with Indigenous creation stories, Turtle Island stands in place for North America.
6. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 7.
7. Ibid, 35.
8. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 7.
9. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “I Am the Artist Amongst My People,” *Canadian Art*, July 11, 2018, <https://canadianart.ca/features/i-am-the-artist-amongst-my-people/>.
10. Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” 35.