

# Along for the Ride: A Conversation with Lori Blondeau

Troy Gronsahl, 2018

This spring, I was invited to interview Lori Blondeau on the occasion of her exhibition, *Grace*. Lori and I recorded two hours of conversation at Round Lake, filled with laughter and honesty, arriving at a greater understanding of her work and appreciation for her practice. Given the informal, conversational tone of the interview, it has been edited for clarity and organized thematically to provide insight into the artists' thinking and context for her art.

Curated by Leah Taylor for College Art Galleries at the University of Saskatchewan, *Grace* is a mid-career survey exhibition featuring a range of work including Lori's early street performances, the ironic persona-based performances and related photographic works that established her reputation, contemplative performances and installations, and her recent performance photographs. The main floor exhibition space is anchored by a presentation of her 2002 performance titled, *Are you my mother?*

## *Are you my mother?*

Drawing extensively from her mother's experience at residential school, and developed with her participation, this latest incarnation of *Are you my mother?* retains the primary elements of the previous work: a patch of green grass delineated by a fence, projected images of bronze statues of Queen Victoria and Pocahontas, and an integrated narrative component. The performance hinges on a simple, repetitive action—the peeling of a poplar stick. Characteristic of Lori's approach to performance, it is a practical, task-oriented movement transformed through deliberate, repetitive activity. The sense of smell, so closely linked to memory, is an essential part of the work and the scent of poplar infuses the performance space.

Troy: Can you tell me about the origins of this performance?

Lori: I wanted to remount the performance *Are you my mother?*, which is based on a residential school story my mother told me back in the 90s. My mother comes from George Gordon First Nation. She is Cree and Saulteaux, and was placed in residential school in 1939-40... I worked with my mom for about a year to put the performance together. It was a performance that was based on the memory of smell—her whole story is about smell and the memory of home and being in a sterile institution.

When my mom went to residential school her parents weren't allowed physical contact with her. They didn't go visit her very much—which I can understand from their point of view, to go visit your kids and not be able to touch them—so her grandparents used to go and visit her. There would be a fence between them, so her grandmother would throw over a little blanket for her to sit on and they'd have tea and bannock and visit. Then she'd get her grandmother to throw her sweater over so she could smell it, because it smelled like home, like woodstove. Poplar has a really specific smell when you burn it and my whole reserve is Poplar trees. That image always stuck with me, of her sitting with her grandparents with this fence in between them and her smelling my great grandmother's sweater to smell home. That's one of the things she hated about residential school was the smell of it...

I was trying to understand what she went through, the whole idea of residential school and the philosophy behind it. How they were 'taking the Indian out of the child.' I thought about my mom smelling the sweater and what smell does. I wanted to fill the gallery up with that smell.

*Are you my mother?* was first performed as part of Lori's graduate research project at the University of Saskatchewan. Things did not go according to plan. The performance triggered a powerful and unanticipated reaction. Partway through the piece, her mother, who was watching with the audience, broke down. As Lori recounts: "She just started crying: *No, Lori. Stop.* In the middle of my performance."

Lori suspended the performance to care for her mother. They moved into a private space where she insisted Lori finish the piece. Returning to the space, the artist encountered a teary-eyed audience. She felt unable to finish the performance as originally planned and created an alternative ending. It was a difficult work and in her many ensuing artist talks and public lectures, she never spoke about this experience. Now, returning to the university for a survey exhibition of her work, Lori decided it was time to remount this piece.

Troy: What was your motivation for creating this work?

Lori: It was about trying to make people feel what it was like for my mother. She couldn't leave. She ran away twice from residential school, both in the winter time. She would never say anything bad about residential school. I don't think she had the capability to put what happened into terms. So I asked: *if it's so good how come you ran away twice? And in the wintertime? She said: I just wanted to be free. And we just ran and ran and ran until they caught us...*

The performance is about survival. The fact that my mother survived. I'm not saying she doesn't suffer from trauma, she definitely does.

T: Did she participate in telling her truth? When they interviewed residential school survivors?

L: Yes. She didn't do it publicly. She did it in 2007 and she could invite three people, so she invited myself, my father, and her sister who's next to her. I heard stuff in her testimony that a child should never hear about their parents. It kind of traumatized me. I asked her *why did you invite me?* And she said: *well, because of your research you were doing.* She would give me all the papers she would get through the whole process. It was called the "Common Experience" when it first started then it shifted to "Reconciliation." So I went to her testimony and we always talked really deeply. I've been living with her since December and I told her *I think I'm going to redo that piece.*

T: How will it be different?

L: I think it's going to be more of a celebration than the first time I did it where I was trying to tell her story, tell people: *This is what happened. This is what it was.* So now I want to take it to another level where it's not all about the grief and the trauma, where it's about survival. We're still here and we're not going anywhere.

## Again and again

By definition, a survey exhibition is a kind of reflective exercise—one that seeks to make sense of the past and evaluate the present moment. While many artists are reluctant to remount earlier works, as performance practice becomes further entrenched in art historical discourse, it has become increasingly common to re-present past performances.

Troy: While I love the idea that performance is temporary and cannot be fixed by documentation, the idea of re-presenting a work also appeals to me: it becomes iterative or evolving or changing.

Lori: There is this notion that you can never re-do a performance. I struggled with that. I talked to James Luna about it and he said, *You can redo a performance as many times as you want because it's never going to be the same performance. There'll be something different about it. Your audience will be different, where you're doing it will be different, these people haven't seen it before.*

T: Yes. The context will change. So what's changed in fifteen years since you've first done this performance?

L: Truth and Reconciliation.

T: Does it change how people read it?

L: That's exactly what's going to happen. People are more aware of residential school because of Truth and Reconciliation and the testimonies that were given.

T: Because you are now an established artist, people also bring their knowledge of you to the performance. Does that also change how your performances are received?

L: No, I just think that the older I get, the longer I do this, I become a better performance artist. It's like honing your craft and trying to refine it. The way I thought fifteen years ago isn't the way I think now. That's not that long ago but things have changed so much, right?

T: It's interesting to think that we're not the same people we were fifteen years ago. We can feel fixed or locked into our identities or who we are as people, but perhaps this shows the malleability of identity and how who we are as people changes over time—we respond to things differently, our perspectives change. I see an openness and opportunity in that, and perhaps it could be generative and positive in terms of improving relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

L: It's interesting because I think all that work that I did all those years ago is still relevant today. If not more relevant today.

T: Is that depressing?

L: Is it depressing? [Laughter followed by a long pause]

What did I say to my mom? I said: *Ya, we could be really depressed about this stuff, couldn't we?* But no, I try not to be a depressing person. But I also think that we shouldn't ignore it and pretend that this shit never happened — which I think a lot of non-Indigenous people would like to do. It's that attitude: *Oh just get over it.* Well you get over it! [Laughing]

T: I guess that's the great thing about humour. You can address difficult subject matter.

L: I think as Indigenous people we really rely on our humour. I think all humans rely on humour as a survival technique. Because we were colonized and everything that happened to us as Indigenous people, humour became important. What are you going to do? Sit around and cry about all this shit for the rest of your life? You know, you'd kill yourself. So I think using humour goes hand in hand with trying to talk about something difficult. It's a real balance because sometimes I think *oh, that's really not that funny. I don't know if I should be doing that.* But then I laugh about it...

That's something that James Luna taught me. I did an interview with James for *Mix Magazine*<sup>1</sup> in 1997 and I described his work like a roller coaster ride: he brings you up, then he slams you down. He brings you up, then he slams you down. And he said: *I make people laugh, but then I also make people think.* It's in your face at some point and I think that's the beauty of performance art. That you are able to take it to the point where it's exposing something we shouldn't be laughing at. Like the Dollar Stores selling dream catchers or the stereotypical "Indian" crap, the kitschy stuff you can buy. I think people are becoming more aware because of social media but it's kind of unbelievable that this shit gets sold. Especially as Plains Indians, our image is so commodified... This doesn't represent us. This isn't who we are as a people... There are some white people who have never even talked to an Indian, but they still have this notion of who we are and how we're supposed to be.

T: Do you think about working for a white audience?

L: If I thought white people are my audience, I think it would just be boring. [Laughing]

T: But by working in institutions, do you feel like you're directing your work towards a predominantly white audience?

L: No. No. This another thing that James Luna taught me— because we're Indian people, we make our work for Indian people. And if the white people want to come along for the ride they can. And they'll get it, ya know? We'll never run out of fucking material. [Laughing]

## This ending starts at the beginning

The earliest works in the exhibition are street performances by Lori and her artistic collaborators and eventual co-founders of TRIBE, the arts organization dedicated to contemporary Indigenous art founded in 1995 by Lori Blondeau with Bradlee La Rocque, April Brass, and Denny Norman. Those early works were assertive, improvisational, and charged with energy. As Lori recalls: "We would go take up space on 20th Street in Saskatoon. We'd throw a performance together."

Troy: What were those early performances like? Were they musical? Did it look like busking? Performance art? Was it more like intervention?

Lori: Intervention. There was music in it, we used everybody's talent. One day we went and barbecued hamburgers at the Little Chief Service Station and we fed the street people. We'd just show up and do something weird and it was usually on 20th Street.

T: I think about how much that neighbourhood has changed.

L: How much that has changed. How much art has change. We would just go and do art anywhere. And it wasn't about if we'd get paid or not — and I truly believe in artist fees, I am an advocate, and I think that's what TRIBE became known for — but I think about this whole new generation of contemporary Indigenous artists and I ask myself... would they do it? I don't know.

T: Do you feel, though, like you had to do it?

L: Well we had to create space. The only shows that were going on in any public

art museum or artist-run centre was one show per year — if that. IF that.

T: Because there were fewer opportunities to present your works, is this why you did those public intervention projects?

L: Yes.

T: Were you consciously working outside of the art gallery circuit or was that just where you found yourself?

L: It was done purposely. And with TRIBE we partnered with AKA, and then we'd just take over galleries. You know to see three Indigenous contemporary art shows in the same city, in Saskatoon, in three galleries at the same time, it shifted everyone's mind set. I think we really changed what has happening in the contemporary art scene at the time. And made people accountable. I think that was Truth and Reconciliation... I think our city and our art galleries were at the forefront of partnerships and collaborations.

T: I don't remember a time before TRIBE. When I went to art school, it had already started so it was totally normal.

L: We changed a generation of people.

T: You really did.

L: And that's exciting. Because it's about momentum. It's about moving forward. I think that's what Truth and Reconciliation is about. I think there are a lot of people doing Truth and Reconciliation the wrong way — I don't know what the formula is to do that, but I think TRIBE and the Saskatoon galleries and what we did more than twenty years ago... we were before our time.

T: It kind of anticipated it. You talked about momentum, and you would have to have some kind of critical mass in order to even initiate a conversation about reconciliation. That said, are you that interested in reconciliation?

L: No. What is that? Whose reconciliation? It's not my mother's reconciliation. It's not reconciliation for all those people who went to residential school. So I ask: *whose reconciliation is this?* It's not ours.

[Long pause]

I think we can move forward and get to a better place. We can always make ourselves better as human beings. And as people of different races in a country built on the backs of First Nation people—I maybe a bit harsh with that, but it's true. I think it's an exciting time. It's a time of change. And with Trump and rednecks, there's pushback because people are scared. People who don't want to change are scared of it. In Canada, I think we're really looking at how the institutions work—whether it's government, whether it's the judicial system. It's institutions who need to reconcile. Not us.

T: As an artist working within arts institutions, do you think it is a way to somehow shift how those institutions might work?

L: Ya, because you can only change them from the inside, right? That's why TRIBE never got a space. Because we thought *we can take up their space. Let's insert ourselves.*

For the past two decades Lori Blondeau has been resolute in her commitment to opening up space for contemporary artists of Indigenous background. She positions this work within a continuum of cultural practice that speaks to the creativity, ingenuity, and resilience of Indigenous people. As she told me in our conversation: "The whole survival thing really informs my work as an artist. That's one thing that colonization didn't realize: is that we would adapt. And we're still here."

Lori's work continues to be essential and uncompromising. She insists on the right to articulate her own reality, exposing difficult histories, confronting stereotypes, and complicating the predominant historical narrative. Now operating within a political and cultural landscape that is shifting with the rhetoric of reconciliation and indigenization, Lori's work remains as relevant as ever, serving as a guidepost as we try to find our way.

## Acknowledgements

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<sup>1</sup> Lori Blondeau and Bradlee Larocque, "Surreal, Post-Indian Subterranean Blues," *Mix: the magazine of artist-run culture* 23, no. 3, Winter: 46–53.