

# Decolonizing

## An Art and Teaching Practice

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*Language is a powerful tool and can be used oppressively to marginalize, control, and isolate others. Colonial language is something we all use, often unknowingly, and is built upon the idea of a people who believe they are superior to others. The language of academia is fraught with such exclusionary affects. This language burden may in part be why my chosen medium is visual art. A visual image can extend beyond language barriers.*

The word decolonize has become a politically charged transitive verb that can raise more questions than answers. Decolonizing is the action of removing what is recognized as colonial. Colonizers are people who take control of other people and the land where they reside. Although colonization has taken place all over the world among different peoples, I am focussing on the colonization of Indigenous First Peoples in Canada by European migrants. In Canada, colonizers can also be described as having Western European ways of knowing and being. Knowledge from different sources may get labelled as “other,” and mistakenly believed to be inferior or less advanced. Because decolonization is a process, its journey is never complete, thus, it requires an ongoing commitment. Indigenization

is the opposite of colonization and for me, a more preferable way to go about this because it offers practical ways to recover what was lost.

Over the past six years since leaving the islands, I have been a wayfinder, navigating the contradictions of the term decolonization in graduate studies. And because of this, I am drawn to its difficult solution. Engaging in a decolonizing art practice requires a commitment to

sit with the discomfort of my own ancestry and way of living. It is an unfolding process of self-interrogation that I repeat daily, hourly, and in every moment that I can muster awareness. In doing this work, I sit with the ambiguity of life around me and begin to re-story my own narrative, especially as an educator. This process is uncomfortable and unsettling, and filled with rhetorical self-doubt. In the book, *Unsettling*



*Embedded*





the *Settler Within*, author Paulette Regan aptly used the word *unsettle* as reference to both Settler and the difficult state of becoming un-settled. As a non-Indigenous person, I am deconstructing the myths I carry about myself including that of peacemaker and educated “knowing better than...” citizen. Mi’kmaw Elder Albert Marshall suggested the phrase “two-eyed seeing” to represent an integration of Western and Indigenous ideologies offering contemporary solutions from multiple points of view. As an educator and artist of Euro-Canadian ancestry, I find myself tenuously balancing between familiar Western ideologies and a more recent appreciation of Indigenous Ways of Knowing. In both instances, I concern myself

with environmental stewardship (stewardship as a word rests uncomfortably on my tongue) and climate action.

As seen on the cover, *Walking in our Footsteps* is a painting that speaks

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to the relational connective energy of life below the feet. The minute we step into the forest, thread-like hyphae (mycelium) sense our presence and send this information to the trees. Our presence is known and we become part of the forest as we enter. A chance encounter quickly changes outcomes into a liveable collaboration. Everything is connected and affective, an aspect of decolonization.

In the painting, *Embedded*, the dilemma of the aesthetic acrylic painted sea anemone contrasts with the intrusion of plastic garbage on an organic life form. Are the effects of plastic on marine life part of a larger discourse around colonialism, clean water, wild food and sustain-



able harvests? Decolonizing is an ever changing process, an unfolding awareness that challenges our sense of individuality, ownership, and personal ego. Decolonizing an art practice will be different for everyone. Some artists may work with organic material naturally sourced and avoid industrial production. Artists who take the time to produce their own art from raw materials (i.e., cedar weaving, dyeing and spinning wool, making paint, wood working) could be considered as such. Artists as allies draw attention to marginalized cultures and other aspects of colonization in a critically reflective way; they give voice to Indigenous cultures through counter-narratives.

My process of decolonization focuses on one key aspect: relationality. In this sense, I am embracing a “two-eyed” view, knowing other aspects of my process remain dependent upon a western framework of painting. The way I learned to draw, paint, and teach evolved from a canon of European art that includes colour theory, linear perspective, and design. This is visible in the painting, *The Girl in the Fence*. In this image I question how colonization has changed land use and ownership. How might this way of understanding land affect our children and their learning environments? While I continue to use the knowledge of my western art training, I want to mentally shift what, why, and how I paint. With this new awareness I can challenge my Western-Eurocentric lens in representational art. I have a place-based relational art practice, sourced by personal experiences in nature and the classroom (community and culturally focussed). Finding similarities and connections in art topics (i.e. mushrooms, roots, forest, children learning) redirects formative western learning from individualist



*Mycelium Forest*

thinking and deconstructs hierarchical frameworks. How are all things: animals, plants, fungi, landforms, and even the cosmos, connected? In Haida Ways of Being, this is gina ‘waadluxan guud ad kwaagida -everything depends on everything else. Indigenous author and researcher Shawn Wilson said, “Relationships do not shape reality, they are reality.” He defines relational thinking as a way of knowing that arises from respect and accountability with all life.

In the painting *Mycelium Forest*, cubist lines connect object and space into a relational encounter. The practical aspects of cubism can act as a metaphor for seeing multiple perspectives. A relational art practice involves listening to Indigenous storytellers, studying and being present on the land, and avoiding

capitalist practices (including the ivory towers of academia, ironically this is the place I where have been trying to do this work). Hierarchical thinking is replaced by a recognition that entities have inherent value, effect, and influences; there is an ethical responsibility to all relations. Decolonization is activated by relational thinking and requires an anti-colonial rational that includes ethical land relations and obligations to Indigenous cultures and to all sentient life.

I have made mistakes on my journey.

I have no doubt there will be more.

I look forward to the opportunity to learn from others by considering different perspectives, and to listen with presence.