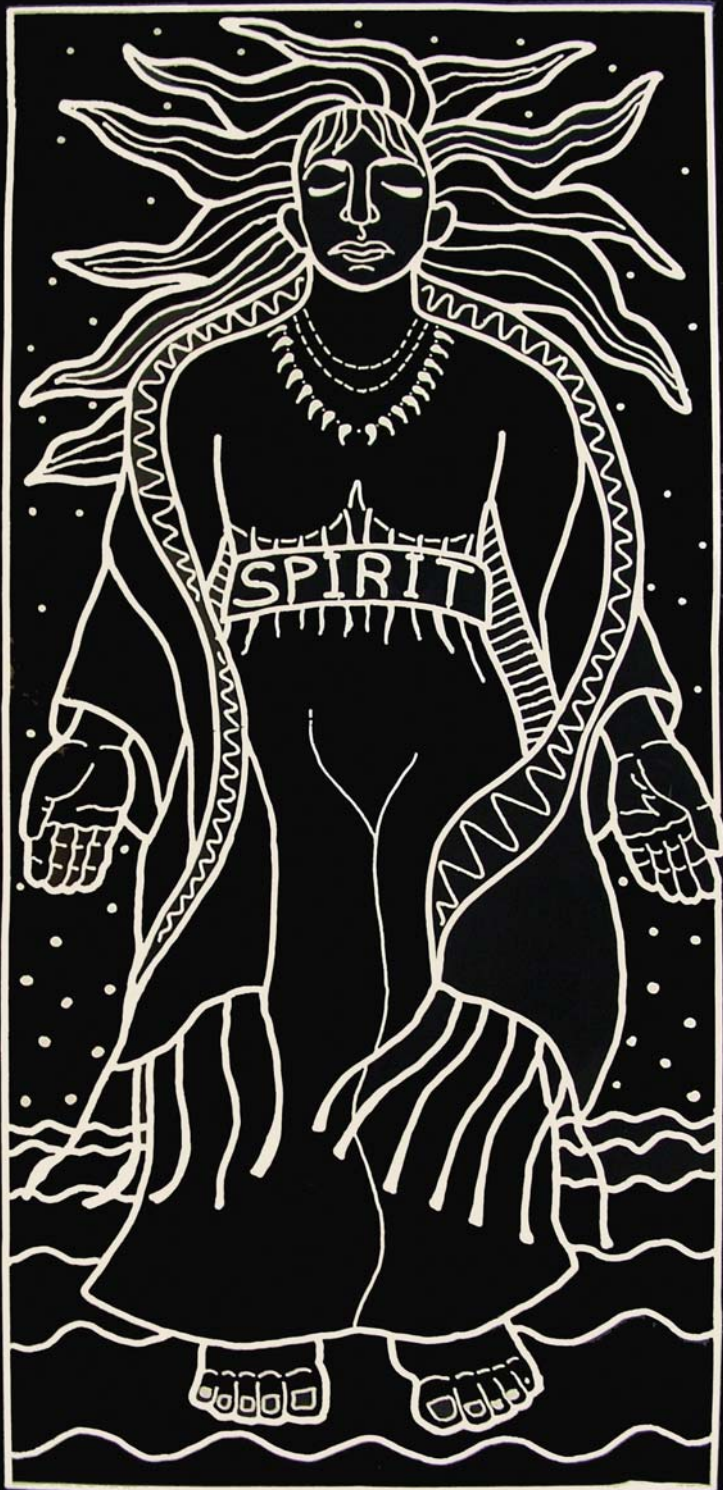


ON SURFACE

SHELLEY NIRO
WARRIORS AND OTHER WORKS

MARCH 6 - APRIL 18 2009



Shelley Niro's *Warriors and Other Works* inaugurates a series of four exhibitions taking place at **The Print Studio** in Hamilton between March and October 2009.

Under the title *On Surface*, the series features print-based works by four contemporary visual and media artists. The curatorial intent of this project is to explore the connection between the print/image and the layers of meaning underlying its surface. The craftsmanship inherent to relief printmaking, such as Niro's woodcuts, is all about whittling away at surfaces in order to reveal meaning. Copper and zinc plates are etched, engraved or scratched, and the resulting incisions create lines, textures, narratives. Yet, tools and materials used in the creation of a matrix most definitely remain hidden from the viewer who receives only an impression made in ink onto another surface. The mysterious and laborious effort congealed in a numbered edition of prints resonates with the reality of our globalized economy. Who and what is at work behind the creation of an image is equally relevant to artistic practice as to perceptions of social, political and historical truths.

On Surface includes upcoming exhibitions by Yoshiko Shimada (April/May), Delio Delgado (September/October) and Amelia Jiménez (November/December), curated by Ingrid Mayrhofer.

Resurfacing

Artist Shelley Niro remembers travelling to Queenston Heights in the St. Catharines-Niagara region of Southern Ontario as a student and being told about the Haudenosaunee soldiers who helped the British defeat the Americans in the battle for that area. Niro recalls that she and her fellow classmates were told this story while they were gathered by a statue of General Brock¹. There was not then, nor is there now, a monument for the Haudenosaunee First Nations soldiers who took part in that battle. Growing up in the area, I too have visited this monument to Brock. While I can remember hearing about Isaac Brock and the battles with which he is associated, I do not recall hearing mention of the Haudenosaunee.

Reflecting on the absence of the Haudenosaunee soldiers from the discourse surrounding Brock led Niro to reflect on the presence of others absent from narratives of general Brock and his compatriots, namely the women who were left behind by the Haudenosaunee warriors. Niro surmised that the women who were left behind would need specific skills to survive and sustain their villages while the men were away. The artist speculated that the four primary characteristics that they would need to summon would be intellect, emotion, strength, and spirit²—four directions. Niro's musings led to the creation of *Resting with Warriors* (2001), a body of work consisting of an edition of four large-scale woodcuts, each set in a different colour.

Looking at the images that comprise *Resting with Warriors* I am struck not only by their power and beauty but also by how they appear to be simultaneously moving and still. The prints are full; they are rich with detail. Perhaps because



Haudenosaunee Senses, lithograph, 2001

the prints were pulled in dark inks I read them as night scenes. In the print *Spirit* the subject's hair streams out from her head, her figure surrounded by white circles that I read as stars. With palms outstretched and eyes closed, she seems to hover about the earth. A certain calmness and tension emanates from these figures, I feel that I am privy to witnessing a ritual unfolding in stages before my eyes. I am also aware of the setting that surrounds each subject. Each subject, perhaps acting as a personification of the aforementioned traits, is thoroughly grounded in nature. My association of the figures in *Resting with Warriors* with nature is likely influenced by the knowledge that the blocks which produced the images were included in the original installation of the work at Rodman Hall gallery in St. Catharines. The blocks were installed at 45 degree angles

on the grounds of the gallery, leaning so that visitors could rest [on them], connecting to nature while interacting with the artworks. Only fragments of the original carvings themselves remain.

Niro has noted that wars are usually fought over resources. Her photograph of the Grand River, *Passage*, depicts a body of water that runs through the landscape of south-western Ontario. Her photograph is still but the sound of water rushing over rocks runs through my mind. I have been to the Grand River many times. I have driven over it and played beside it with my niece and nephew when they were younger. But Niro's comment brings me back to the Niagara region. It makes me think of Niagara Falls.

I have only ever been to the larger side, the 'Canadian' side of the falls. I think of how people in this country are smug in the knowledge that Canada has claimed a more impressive side of the falls than the part belonging to the United States. As if this formation were an entity that can be cleaved in two. The last time that I visited the Falls, was the first time that I truly understood the sheer volume and enormity of the cascade. I was standing at a section of the Niagara River that had no barrier separating the water from the bank. I was fearful of the undertow, for I understood

that if I were to fall into the river that my chances of survival were slim to none. Accompanying me was a young woman who was on her first trip to North America, she had never seen the Falls before. She was awed in the presence of this body of water, which, though it was so enmeshed within the fabric of my life, I had long taken for granted. Through her eyes, I was awoken to the awesomeness of this sublime formation. I feel that the next time that I visit the Falls I will bring the knowledge of my last visit with me.

We sense the inherent value of what we term resources, i.e. the natural world, yet we often choose to disregard their true worth. Monuments are meant to commemorate places, events and times past deemed important. Niro's pieces, though works of art first and foremost, also serve as monuments. For not only do they commemorate the peoples and landscapes past; they simultaneously testify to the sacredness of those who are present. Viewing Niro's work is always a transforming experience for me. Standing before her creations I am still: I see, I listen, I feel, I learn. I remember. I am mindful. I am aware of what is presented before me and that the works extend beyond what I experience through my senses.

In printmaking, the act of preparing a block or plate can be likened to the act of excavation. Layers of wood and copper are carved away or incised, rendering flat surfaces into markings which reveal lines, patterns, images and speak to us of texture. The act of printmaking is about process. The process of transformation. In my mind it is fitting that Niro's *Resting with Warriors* took shape in the form of woodcuts. Carving into blocks of wood, Niro revealed what had previously been submerged in the earth and in the history of the Niagara region.

Sally Frater - 2009

¹ As noted by Greg Hill in the essay "For the Collection of Indigenous Art", written May 22, 2008 for the National Gallery of Canada and in an interview with Shelley Niro conducted by the author on February 10, 2009.

² Ibid, artist interview

Sally Frater is an independent curator and writer based in Toronto, ON. She holds an Honours BA in Studio Art from the University of Guelph and an MA in Contemporary Art from the Sotheby's Institute of Art.



Resting with Warriors, 2001, plywood, outdoor installation detail



Strength from the series *Resting with Warriors*, 2001, woodcut

Shelley Niro AOCA, RCA, MFA

Born in Niagara Falls, New York, Shelley Niro is a Turtle Clan member, Bay of Quinte Mohawk from Six Nations. Internationally recognized for her innovative approach to film and video, Niro has exhibited across Canada, the U.S. and in Europe. Her work is represented in numerous collections, including the National Gallery of Canada, which recently added *Resting With Warriors*.

Recent exhibitions include

2007

Outside The Columns, University of Buffalo, Buffalo, NY
Almost Fallen. Urban Shaman, Winnipeg, Manitoba, and OBORO, Montreal, Quebec,
The Requickening Project: with Lori Blondeau, University of Foscari, Venice, Italy
Native Perspectives: with George Longfish, Hamilton College. Hamilton, New York
Across Continents: with Jeffrey Thomas. Canada House. London, England
Unlimited Boundaries, The Albuquerque Museum, Albuquerque, New Mexico,
1900-2000, A Century of Women and Work, Workers Art and Heritage Centre, Hamilton, Ontario
Cultural Contrasts, Iroquois Indian Museum, Howes Cave, New York

2006

Persona, From The Collection. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario
Nuit Blanche, Toronto, Ontario
Faking Death, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York
Beyond the Woodland School, McMaster Museum of Art, McMaster University
Our People, Our Land, Our Images, CN Gorman Museum, University Of California, Davis, CA

Her award winning films and videos have been screened at numerous festival since 1993, and at the Venice Biennale, in 2003

Awards include

Best Film, Best Director, Best Actor and Best Film for *Honey Moccasin*
 Wind and Glaciers Voices II, and Walking in Beauty Award for *It Starts With A Whisper*

List of Works in the Exhibition:

Resting with Warriors, 2001, woodcut, 'black' edition of four includes *Spirit, Emotion, Strength, Intellect*.
Haudenosaunee Senses, 2001, lithograph
Passage, 2004, series of 6 silver prints

Artist: Shelley Niro

Guest Writer: Sally Frater

Guest Curator: Ingrid Mayrhofer

Images courtesy of the artist

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Gallery hours

Wed—Fri: noon—6 pm ; Sat: noon—4 pm



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