



SHELLEY NIRO

***A Good, Long Look***

JUNE 10 – AUGUST 21, 2021

## A NOTE FROM THE CURATOR:

Shelley Niro is a collector of objects and impressions. The exhibition *A Good, Long Look* includes both old and new work, tracking her focused gaze as she reconstructs lost or misremembered histories of her Mohawk ancestry. Spanning decades of Niro's career, the photographs, paintings, and sketches on display comprise a reconstruction of those histories, moving easily from the past of decades to the past of millennia. The life and intention of each object is probed until Niro finds the agency in the brachiopod who left a mineral trace, the toy maker who sculpted a story into plastic warriors, and the three or more men who contributed their physical beauty to a tribute to their own demise.

To say it was an honour to work with Shelley on this exhibition would be an understatement. I was humbled in the presence of this artist, whom I have long admired. I was also inspired. While the following interview describes her patient, keen approach to art-making, it also paints a picture of a life lived with eyes open. When despair crowds out love, or cynicism replaces humour, a good, long look, administered with care, might be a first action towards something better.

- Lucie Lederhendler  
Brandon, Manitoba. June 2021.

INTERVIEW MAY 2021

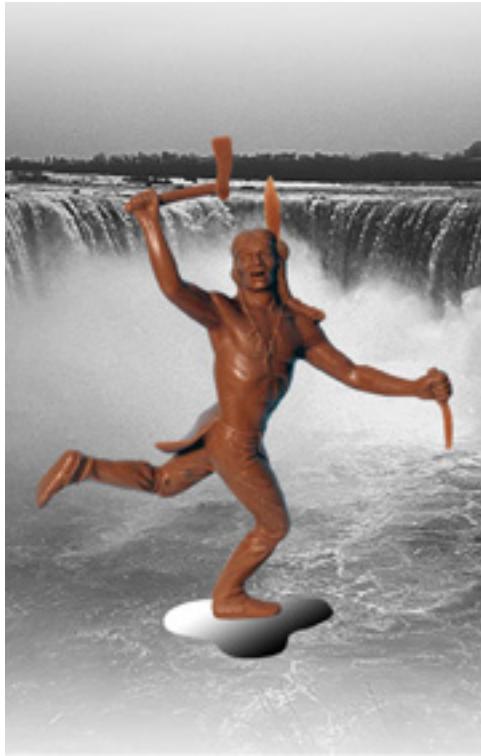
Between Shelley Niro, Artist (Brantford, Ontario)  
and Lucie Lederhendler, Curator, AGSM (Brandon, Manitoba)

The AGSM is located on Treaty 2 Territory. We would like to acknowledge and honour the fact that this is the traditional shared land of Cree, Oji-Cree, Anishinaabeg, Dakota, and Dene Peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

The AGSM would like to thank



COVER: *Chiquita*, 2021. Digital photography.



LL: I wanted to start this conversation with a turn of phrase that stood out for me in a text you provided me about *History of the World*, talking about the portrait on the nickel. You say, “Beauty is the wanted feature here.”

SN: Yes.

LL: I'll start with this: do you think that the sculptor who designed this nickel was going for the beautiful face? Or, was he using the face to create a beautiful composition?

SN: I'm assuming that he was going for beauty. That face is a composite of four different people put together. I don't know what he chose from who, or even what he was looking at, like what was he comparing it to?

Was he looking at real Indian men's faces? So it makes me question, what was his goal? Did he succeed? I think he succeeded.

LL: Because it is a very handsome portrait.

SN: Yeah, it's very nice.

LL: On another hand, we have the digital collages, *Toys Aren't Us*. In those you have a little brown plastic warrior toy, and you put them in really surreal scenarios, like tightrope in the sky, among the eagles. These figurines, these little toys, clearly aren't portraits. It's just pure stereotype: he's grimacing and shirtless, and really aggressive.

ABOVE: *Toys Aren't Us* (Left to right:) *The Dimpled One*; *Mr. Ambidextrous*; *Day at the Beach*. 2017, Digital photography.

**SN:** I was impressed by the way they were sculpted, how well done they were. While sometimes you look at toys where Indian people are portrayed and they're really cartoonish, these are really nice. And I like the size-- they're like ten inches tall.

The more I looked at them, it seemed like they each had their own personality. Some of them were pretty fierce and warlike, and taking those stances. I thought I could do something with their expressions. So there's one with nice little dimples in his face, and I called him *The Dimpled One*. There's *Mr. Ambidextrous*--he's got a knife, and something else in his other hand. Then *The Show Off*, he looks like a balancing act. In *Day at the Beach*, I placed three of them behind these three pieces of sculpture I found at the antique store, and they just seemed to blend well together. If you spend enough time with anything, you can start creating your own narrative about what's going on. That's what I did with those ones.

**LL:** It's funny, I had really assumed that they were a criticism of essentializing. But you've taken this other kind of action, a productive action. You're saying, "No, these aren't essentializing, these are all characters! Look at this: it's a portrait."

**SN:** You know everybody's been critical of how Indian people have been portrayed. I started thinking about the artist who actually made these works. They've been handed down through the decades, and here they are in my space, and I can do whatever I want with them.

**LL:** I wonder what they were made for. Were they supposed to be like GI Joe's? Or--

**SN:** I think so. I think that there's probably a whole bunch of them, and other soldiers that are that size that they're fighting against. If you get a bag of those kinds of toys, the little wee ones, they're always fighting and pretty aggressive with each other. So I don't know what the counterpart to those guys are. If there is a counterpart to them.

**LL:** If there's another half of the story you're supposed to make when you play?

**SN:** Yeah, exactly.

**LL:** The kind of portraiture that I certainly know you best for depicts real Indigenous women, often your friends and family, presented in a way that defies essentialism. That's maybe a different process to get to the same end, that you were just talking about. A lot of the way that you defy that stereotype is by bringing out joy and silliness. So I wanted to bring it back to the idea of beauty being a wanted feature. When you're photographing your friends and your family, are you going for beauty?

**SN:** Well I like to think that the beauty is there, I'm just capturing it with my camera. I'm not changing things to make them more beautiful. I'm not applying makeup or anything like that. I'm just taking a picture of them, and saying, "Aren't these people beautiful!"

**LL:** I want to talk about *In Her Lifetime*, which was the first piece that you said you were specifically interested in showing here at the AGSM. I just looked back at that email, where you wrote that even though it's from 1990 it's still relevant today. Now, I think this is your sense



of humour, that what you've given us now is literally 600% bigger than the 1990 printing. When I realized that, I thought of the panel that gives the work its name, "Native issues would never be solved in her lifetime." 30 years later, six times bigger. It's like you're saying, "SO??" [Snaps fingers.] Is this impatience?

**SN:** Yeah, I've always wanted to see that work bigger. I think it's nice at eight by ten, but I just really wanted to see that work huge. As I get older, maybe it's my eyesight. I want to see this work BIG!

**LL:** I also noticed that you're playing around with her posture and her pose. You repeat and flip the images in this almost rhythmic way. With the *Chiquita* [series] as well, there's something about that pose that's clearly part of the content of the work. Can you talk a little bit about the importance of the poses? That idea of repetition.

**SN:** Yeah. I think that in *In her Lifetime* the pose is really subtle, just her shoulders and her head. By mirroring it, I thought it's like a wave. It's going one way, and then it comes back and we end up in the same spot we were in. *Chiquita* is a photograph of my mother when she was about 15. I wanted to create this environment for her with the rose. I used a rose because she was allergic to

roses. If she was around roses, she got put in the hospital so many times. It took her a while to realize that she was allergic. She liked them, but they were deadly to her. So whenever I see roses now, I think of my mother, and I think of how my mom would have been not too healthy in this environment. That's why I put the rose and my mother's image together. It's about memory too; the things that you've been affected by all your life. I put my mom in a situation that's a danger to her, but I just wanted her to be in this really kind of beautiful setting.

**LL:** In the *Chiquita Sketches*, she's emerging from a shape.

**SN:** It's a canoe! I have another little series that goes with that, those pieces. They're two feet by three feet or so, and they are also canoe shapes. I use that canoe shape to slide through life. Gliding, using that vessel to get from one place to another place, as quietly and subtly as I can. So I put her in that shape also.

**LL:** In the catalogue for *Indian Summer*<sup>1</sup> you say that it's almost like you're gifting all of these figures a canoe just so they have a way out. It's giving them freedom, like a talisman.

**SN:** Right. You can use the canoe shape in a lot of different ways.

**LL:** It seems to me like your approach to painting is almost the antithesis of the mechanicism [sic] of photography. Especially thinking about that ability to just flip shapes. In your paintings, though, you use these organic ripple forms to fill space.

**SN:** You know, to produce a photograph, people take it for granted, that you can just click something, and you have a photograph, whereas if you really want to show photography, you have to think of the scale, think of the framing, think of how it's going to be enlarged, all that sort of thing. With painting, I find that it's kind of immediate. You can just pick up some paint and a brush, and work at it. Not that I'm saying painting isn't work, but it's a different kind of work. And it's something that I really appreciate.

**LL:** Yeah. That's interesting, you're right. People might assume that the immediacy of photography is that once it's done, that's what you have. But you're saying the opposite, that as you're working on a painting you're getting closer and closer to what it's going to be. Earlier, when I hadn't seen the mylar sketches yet, I asked you what they were about, and you said, "Peace." and then you kind of laughed, and then you said, "Well, they're landscapes." You also have this enormous landscape triptych in the show. This isn't at all the first time that you've worked with landscapes, but I wanted to ask you about that relationship, between painting and landscape. If there's something in the content of your painted landscapes that isn't in your photographed landscapes.

OPPOSITE: *Darkness*, 2021. India ink, oil pastel, and acrylic on paper.

<sup>1</sup> Indian Summer, (Exhibition) September 12 - November 8, 2015. Glenhyrst Art Gallery, Brantford, Ontario.





**SN:** Landscape, I love landscape. You can be really abstract with it, you can create these shapes within the composition. You can make them like big shapes, you can make them small shapes. You can get totally enveloped in the environment that you're trying to create. You're alone in your studio, and it's so much fun just being able to paint a landscape.

**LL:** And as a conduit to being about peace? Like I was saying about manipulating the poses in your portraits,

to be about something, I wonder what you're doing when you look at a landscape to make it about peace, itself?

**SN:** Well I think you're just designing your own life when you're painting a landscape. You're saying, I'm going to allow myself to stand here and try to recreate something that doesn't look like the landscape at all. But you're trying to envelop yourself in this creation. You want to be happy with what you're doing.

ABOVE: *The Grand Behind Glenhyrst*, 2021, Oil on canvas.

**LL:** I've heard you talk before about sadness in the Mohawk Valley, which you visited with your sister, because your father always talked about how beautiful it was. And you realized that he was remembering his mother's memories.

**SN:** His grandmother's memories.

**LL:** Oh wow. When I was trying to formulate a question about the mylar drawings being about peace, I was listening to this talk with Lori Beavis<sup>2</sup>. That there was a kind of anger when you confronted the beauty of the landscape. So here, beauty was not a positive feature for you.

**SN:** Well, the thing is, if you look at the history of Six Nations people, we're basically running for our lives during the American Revolution, and it's a whole history that is not talked about too much. Once you start researching it, and you start finding out these things, it brings up all these hardcore feelings about that landscape, and why you're not part of the landscape. When you go and visit it, it--I don't think it's nostalgia, but something happens. Like this landscape that I'm looking at is so beautiful, and so incredibly important, and I don't know if it's possessiveness or what, but you want to hold on to it somehow. To still be part of it. Realistically I can't be a part of that landscape. So yeah, there's a little bit of anger there. Frustration that my kids won't care about that landscape. I don't know if other people feel this way, like my generation is maybe the last generation that will think about that landscape as much as me. Yeah, it brings up all kinds of questions.

**LL:** I want to speak about the Buffalo nickel, but fair warning, researching this sent me down a bit of a rabbit hole. So, the Buffalo nickel was sculpted by James Earl Fraser (1876-1953), when you look him up, one of the first things that comes up is that his father was sent to recover the remains of the 7th Cavalry after the battle of Little Bighorn (1876). While the person who would eventually design the Buffalo nickel four months into his, you know, gestation, his father was out burying General Custer (1839-1876). Crazy Horse [Thašúnke Witkó] (c. 1840-1877) and Sitting Bull [Thatháŋka Íyotake] (c. 1831-1890) were involved in this battle, and Crazy Horse prophesied that in seven generations there would be unification of the people.

Now, you wrote about using these Lakota colours as a means to unify Indigenous people all over Turtle Island. Meanwhile, the Haudenosaunee people have a founding principle of Seven Generations. So this might be another unifying bit of language. Then when you look at the dates, it is actually about seven generations ago, that all of this happened, right?

**SN:** Right.

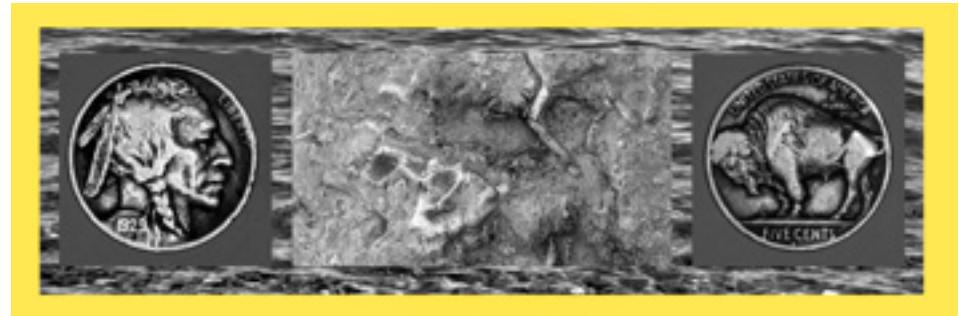
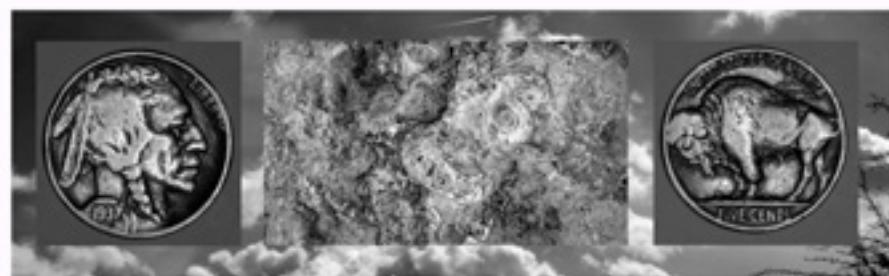
**LL:** So, on the one hand, I wanted to pause there, speaking about unification and the construction of history that you're engaged in. That this work is kind of an antidote to the erasure of histories. Is that something that's very intentional in your work? Are you trying to reconstruct histories that maybe have been erased?

<sup>2</sup> Shelley Niro: *women, land, river.* (Exhibition) January 19 - March 31, 2019. Art Gallery of Peterborough, Peterborough, Ontario.



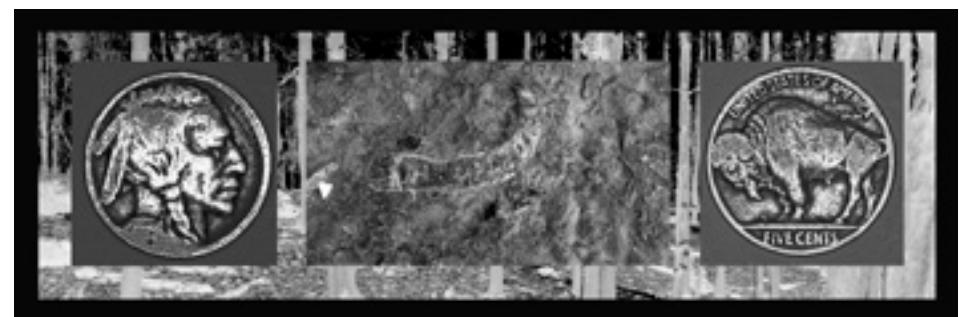
**SN:** I think so. I think a lot of Indian artists do that, because a lot of our history has been ignored, erased, and pushed aside, for the economical purposes of the continent. So I think that when we find a bit of history that's interesting, it's like, I have to put this somewhere! So that other people can learn about it. So yes. Not consciously--I don't say, "I want to make something based on this." It has to come to me in a very quiet way. Like those nickels, those Indian Head nickels. The more you have something, the more you look at it, the more you think about it, you can develop layers of your own knowledge and put it into the work. The same as the *Toys Aren't Us* series. Just looking at those figures long enough allows me to see that I can really use these guys and make something beyond just taking a photograph of them. It's very multilayered and sometimes I don't totally understand what I'm doing until it gets done. Sometimes maybe a year or two later, I think, "Oh yeah, that's what was going on."

IMAGES: *History of the World*, 2017. Digital photography.



**LL:** You also seem pretty aware of the relationship between the different things that you work on. Bouncing back and forth, it's not like you have one single project at any time.

Relating to what you wrote, that the nickel was created as a tribute to a vanishing race--the absurdity of that, it's like going through the bother of holding a formal funeral for somebody who you're burying alive. Which brings me back to thinking about his father, and the idea of burying these bodies. I'm wondering if this sculptor, 37 years later, was thinking about that. If he was aware of the irony of making a nameless person have as much dignity as all of those named white men that were on all the other coins. If he was thinking about his father, who was not very interesting, but just engaged with history in this one very very important moment in American history. Also, an important moment in military history. You know there's still all the theories about Custer, and where Custer's body actually is.



**SN:** It would be interesting to know what his father would tell this guy, you know? Was he more, “I buried Custer, he was a sonuvabitch,” or, “It’s too bad he got killed”? That sort of thing. He’s probably influenced by that. He was influenced by that as a little boy. He would hear what his dad would tell him.

**LL:** Because surely you do, when you’re part of something that significant, you do tell your kids, right?

So this all relates to *History of the World*, which I was linking to Manitoba initially for the bison and the fossils, but found another bit of history to fall into as well. Because we’re out here in Manitoba, where the bison slaughter still stains the ground red, and where you can find a fossil pretty easily. Though apparently the Lake Erie fossils are some 200 million years older than the Manitoba fossils. I think any place that you can look down and find these things really connects you to this larger landscape in a really profound way.

**SN:** Yeah.

**LL:** I also wanted to talk about [your 2018 film, *The Incredible 25th year of*] *Mitzi Bearclaw*. During a dream sequence, Mitzi says, “She’s dying. I love her so much.” There’s a double entendre of the mother and the Earth, that makes a real link to the relationship between the landscape and reciprocal care. She’s there to care for her mother, and to care for her father, who has to care for her. That links back to that relationship with the ancestors. Of those fossils. Could you speak to that? To the fossils? Because that’s also relatively new in your work, isn’t it?

**SN:** Yeah I suppose so. In the film when she says, “I love her so much and she’s dying,” they’re looking at the Earth. In other parts of that film too, there are references to the environment. They’re on an island, and Honeyboy is bringing water from the boat, and Mitzi says, oh it’s good to know that we have drinking water at least. I’m hoping that it would be a slight reference to the quality of water that First Nations are receiving. And there’s the dream, where Charlie B comes down to the beach and Mitzi follows him, and they’re standing in front of the shore line, and then all these dead fish start to show up? That’s just about the environment.

Also just, whenever I look at fossils, or if you stand long enough and look at these things, you think, well, millions of years ago, these little things had life. They must have had joy and all that kind of stuff in their life, and now here you are. I think we’re just privileged to be able to look at these things. It’s a reminder that the world goes on.

**LL:** I think anybody who thinks about fossils long enough will figure out they’re our ancestors. It’s just the patience you need to think about them. And, if they hadn’t had a will to survive, we would not be here.

**SN:** Yeah, that’s right. And then everything fell apart! [Laughs]

**LL:** Again, in the conversation you had with Lori, you talk about reciprocity in the story of the Peacemaker and Hiawatha? To which Lori responded with some of your work that references sensuality as it understands love<sup>3</sup>.

**SN:** Right.

<sup>3</sup> *The Essential Sensuality of Ceremony*, 2002. (Series) Black and white print on fibre-based archival paper.

**LL:** Especially your work with your friends and family as models has this very different kind of love. How much do you reflect on the quality, or the type of love that constitutes the content of any individual work?

**SN:** Oh, that's a hard question. Well, first I take the photograph. There's an agenda to the work as I'm making it. But I think the real love comes in when you have the photograph, and these people are no longer around you. You have to invest time and thought and care into the images as you're making them. And because you're doing that, you end up loving the work. Because you are working with your friends and your family. It just takes on a deeper meaning in the work, I think.

**LL:** I've heard you talk before about that deep appreciation that happens in post-production, of how much this person trusted you.

**SN:** Yeah. I think that's really important. It's always a privilege when you can work with people that you do know and love, you know that their image will last. You hope the image lasts for quite a while. You have to pay attention to what you're doing.

**LL:** In terms of the practice? Or in terms of how you're treating--

**SN:** I think in terms of how you treat an image, because they're really giving themselves to you. So you have to be careful of how you use that.

**LL:** Now if you can just tell me a bit about the sketches that you made specially for our windows here?

**SN:** Yeah. *Sketches* are very sketchy. I wanted to do something just, very free. You know, to take the brush and just go Whoosh. I don't know, they're like the strangest things I've ever done.



*Sketches*, 2021. India ink on mylar.

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY:



**Shelley Niro** is a member of the Turtle Clan, Bay of Quinte Mohawk from the Six Nations Reserve. Working in photography, painting, sculpture and film, Niro frequently utilizes parody and appropriation in her works to challenge stereotypical images of Aboriginal peoples, and women in particular. Often humorous and playful, her

works address the challenges faced in contemporary Indigenous North American society. A graduate of the Ontario College of Art, Niro received her Master of Fine Art from the University of Western Ontario. Niro's work has been broadly exhibited in galleries across Canada and can be found in the collections of the Canada Council Art Bank, Canadian Museum of History, and Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography. Her award-winning films have been screened in festivals worldwide, and she presented work at the 2003 Venice Biennale. Shelley Niro lives in Brantford, Ontario.

## A MESSAGE FROM THE ARTIST:

I would like to thank

- My mother June Chiquita Swain Doxtater
- My sister Debra (Bunny) Doxtater
- My granddaughter Raven Blackey
- Ontario Arts Council, Materials and Exhibition Assistance
- Sam Thomas
- Jonathan Groeneweg, Smokestack
- Robert Daniels, Earls Court Gallery

BACK COVER: *Chiquita*, 2021. Digital photography.

## LIST OF WORKS:

### *In Her Lifetime*

Series of 6, 60" x 40"  
Digital photography  
1990 (Reprinted 2021)

### *Toys Aren't Us: The Show Off*

20" x 24"  
Digital photography  
2017

### *Sketches*

Series of 9, 42" x 84"  
India ink on mylar  
2021

### *Toys Aren't Us: The Dimpled One*

20" x 24"  
Digital photography  
2017

### *History of the World*

Series of 4, 60" x 20"  
Digital photography  
2017

### *Chiquita Sketch*

42" x 84"  
India ink, oil pastel, and acrylic on paper  
2021

### *Chiquita*

Series of 3, 40" x 40"  
Digital photography  
2021

### *Darkness*

42" x 84"  
India ink, oil pastel, and acrylic on paper  
2021

### *Toys Aren't Us: Mr. Ambidextrous*

20" x 24"  
Digital photography  
2017

### *Indian Brains*

52" x 85"  
India ink, oil pastel, and acrylic on paper  
2021

### *Toys Aren't Us: Day at the Beach*

24" x 20"  
Digital photography  
2017

### *The Grand Behind Glenhyrst*

Triptych, 144" x 60"  
Oil on canvas  
2021

### *Toys Aren't Us: Then Everyone Got Angry*

20" x 24"  
Digital photography  
2017

## UP NEXT:

### ***CRIPTYCH:***

Susan Aydan Abbott, Yvette Cenerini,  
Susan Lamberd, and Andrea von Wichert

SEPTEMBER 16 – NOVEMBER 13, 2021



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