

## Olivia Whetung | *inawendiwok*

Art and life entwine seamlessly in Olivia Whetung's work, mutually informing and guiding each other in forging profound relationships with the land and its gifts. For her exhibition at the Art Gallery of Mississauga, the artist draws upon her experience working on and with the land to create artworks that speak of the interdependence within our ecosystem. A member of Curve Lake First Nation and citizen of the Nishnaabeg Nation, Whetung deftly uses beadwork, printmaking, and digital media to address issues of Indigenous land and food justice, knowledge transfer, language, and environmental stewardship. Her current project builds on direct observations complemented by meticulous research into food de-commodifying movements, Anishinaabe knowledge, and the ecology of her home territory.

As suggested by the exhibition's Anishinaabemowin title, *inawendiwok*—which loosely translates as “they are related to each other”—Whetung's work emphasizes the ways in which coexistence within the ecosystem is mutually linked. The series of mixed-media sculptural installations, digital prints, and three-dimensional beadworks she has produced examine the vital connectivity within woodland, wetland, and garden environments, as well as their crucial role in ensuring ecological sustainability.

The exhibition opens with a body of work directly associated with Whetung's food growing practice. Two pairs of painstakingly bead-embroidered harvest bags installed on display mannequins gesture to cultivation seasons and the life cycle of plants from seed to nourishment. Referencing both Ojibwe bandolier bags—items of prestige that indicate status—as well as vegetable harvest bags used by undervalued agricultural workers, Whetung's beaded bags point to labour inequities and social injustice. Denouncing current economic systems that perpetuate vast global imbalances by positioning food as a highly commodified product subject to market fluctuations and profit, her elegant designs depict traditional Indigenous foods and activist calls to action.

The first set of harvest bags carries an abundance of corn feed in one pouch and presents images of berries, cattails, roses, and wild rice below the words BREAD LAND DIGNITY. Titled *this stubborn, apparently limited, narrow-minded aspect of the people* (2022), the work quotes Frantz Fanon's praise for the tenacious demands of the colonized for fundamental rights to their livelihood and survival as “the most rewarding and effective model.” Further referencing the three key words in Fanon's famous statement, “For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity” (*The Wretched of the Earth*), Whetung advocates for the reconsideration of food as a fundamental human right within a worldview that values nurturing the land and sharing its gifts in return. The second set of bags, entitled *a true food revolution* (2023), has one pouch filled with overflowing sunflower seeds and offers imagery of corn, maple leaves, sunflowers, chilli peppers, and salmon. The call to DECOMMODIFY FOOD and the presence of a wild turkey skull on the seed-strewn ground between the two

mannequin stands further underline the need for a paradigm shift that recognizes the necessity of food access for all creatures in the ecosystem.

*Unplanned Offerings* (2023), a series of digital beadwork prints, further articulate the links between food cultivation and inter-species survival. Growing food on her land, Whetung witnesses the concrete ways in which her planting interacts and integrates with the broader environment. As various creatures feed on her garden, the network of relations is made evident; whether wanted or not by humans, these interactions have their own purpose in sustaining the ecosystem. Otherwise, whether in small backyards or on a large industrial scale, agricultural production that fails to satiate more than human hunger also fails to contribute to a broader welfare and inevitably proves detrimental to the environment.



Olivia Whetung, *Unplanned Offerings*, 2023. Digital beadwork.

Nestled opposite each other in two vitrine-like niches, *Sugarbush Shrapnel* (2019) and *Sculpture for Survival 1 & 2* (2022-23) further exemplify the close relationship between art making and food work in Whetung's holistic practice. The five jewel-box-like beadworks in *Sugarbush Shrapnel* are effectively described by their title—each piece encases a fragment of debris caused by the disintegration of an old outdoor barbecue overheated in the process of boiling maple syrup. Five pods—one for each of Whetung's immediate family members, including herself—stand as small, abstract effigies of possibly the last generation in her lineage able to process maple syrup on their home territory. Despite cultural persistence, the practice is now endangered by climate change causing the shortening of cold seasons and massive decline in maple sap production. Anticipating lean years as we hurtle toward environmental collapse, Whetung offers endurance strategies with her accurately named *Sculptures for Survival*. The two locket necklaces contain practical emergency tools encased in exquisite beadwork: rabbit snares and a fish hook and line. Drawing on Anishinaabe artistic expressions in everyday objects as carriers of both meaning and utility, Whetung creates portable kits of persistence to keep close to one's heart and depend on in hard times.

*Jewelweed gloves* (2022) and *For the rusty-patched bumble bee* (2022)—a set of bead-embroidered gloves and garden shears—speak further to the proximity of art and life in Whetung's approach. A traditional remedy that counteracts poison ivy, jewelweed is featured on a pair of yellow leather gloves intended as a daily

reminder to exercise care and awareness. On the shears sheath, depictions of the highly endangered rusty-patched bumble bee and its favourite foods function as a reminder to the gardener to be aware that what she cuts may deprive another creature of their sustenance. Here, beading serves not only to embellish and personalize ordinary yet cherished tools, but also as a mnemonic device, reminding the user of reciprocal actions and responsibilities.

Whetung's first-hand observations are nourished by a critical understanding of Western agricultural models and natural science methodologies as harmful to the ecologies of Southern Ontario, where they have caused massive environmental destruction. Colonial worldviews, brought over by European settlers, treat only cleared farmland as "productive" while deeming woodland and wetland unmanageable and useless. These outlooks centre human needs and desires at the expense of the ecosystem's survival. Considering humans as evolutionarily superior, distinguished from all other species, they propagate a philosophical, psychological, and spiritual separation from nature that leads to deep fallacies and a mistreatment of land as an endless supply chain of resources for our comfort and material gain.

In *Wake* (2023) and *Eulogy* (2023), Whetung honours the creatures impacted by human-caused habitat destruction. She draws attention to beavers and waterfowl deprived of their homes in the aftermath of artificial dam and canal construction. Contrary to common misconceptions, beavers are highly sensitive animals with a range of emotions; they grieve their dead and mourn loved ones killed in the manufactured alteration of their environment. A ghostly silver-painted beaver skull parts the exquisitely beaded blue water trails of *Wake*. In the wake of beavers' work, water is filtered and clarified. In contrast, settler expansion, colonial trade, and unbridled economic development divert and leave rivers polluted, both literally and metaphorically, with colossal environmental consequences. A scaled-down replica of Ottawa's Rideau Canal lock gates frames the sculptures and beadwork in the *Eulogy* installation. As water flows away from the locks, it gradually turns from silver to blue tones, cleansed from commodified use and reclaimed by its natural inhabitants. Among them, a silver-gilt sculpture represents Beaver reading the story of creation as told by Basil H. Johnston, in which Turtle offers his shell as solid ground to host the world amid flooding waters. Though officially the canal is presumed to have generated an enhanced diversity of wetland cultures, the artificial flooding and reshaping of the waterways accompanied by the conversion of forests to farmland caused substantial destruction of natural habitats and drastic reduction in biodiversity.

The third installation in the exhibition, *Stand* (2019), physically references a stand of trees: a forest. Five tall panels of wood veneer—a form of processed wood material manufactured and standardized by lumber industries for construction—hang from the ceiling and are anchored to the floor by flagging ribbons tied to river rocks. Each bears delicate imagery embroidered in thread and seed beads, illustrating the intricate network of life supported by the forest. Including species maligned or susceptible to poaching, these depictions highlight the intrinsic significance of woodland ecosystems beyond the self-centred logic of human greed.

Interspersed among the *Stand* installation, small veneer-clad plinths display *Rabbit feeds the forest* (2021-22), a humorous yet poignant work comprising rabbit droppings rendered in Swarovski crystal pearls sitting on diaphanous islands of beaded snow. The human tendency to separate ourselves from nature and keep what we revile as undesirable species and their waste at bay, away from our gardens and cottages, deprives the land of much-needed fertilizers. We foolishly assign value to sanitized versions of nature and its resources, neglecting environmental sustainability.

On the main gallery walls, clusters of small, delicately shimmering beadworks depict light reflections on water as well as the texture and topography of lakeshore rocks. Created by reproducing photographic details pixel by pixel, *Reflections* (2018) alludes to the history of naming the Kawartha Lakes region where Whetung resides. As part of efforts to develop commercial campaigns for drawing tourism to the area, local governance held a public contest in 1895 to give the region an Indigenous name. Martha Whetung of Curve Lake First Nation won the competition by proposing Gaawaategamaag, which means “light shining on the water” in Anishinaabemowin. However, the name was roughly anglicized to Kawartha shortly after. *Untitled 1 & 2* (2018) carefully follow the porous boundary where rock meets water, where solid and liquid substances negotiate their cohabitation and determine each other’s path.

Whetung’s affecting and perceptive works solicit our attention and reconsideration of spaces and species that are crucial to biodiversity and to sustainable food production. Tenderly foregrounding our more-than-human neighbours, they remind us that we are not the only ones to benefit from the land’s gifts, nor to suffer from ecological ruin. Unchecked, insatiable human craving brings devastating loss. Only through a renewed understanding of kinship and gratitude may we restore an ecology based on responsibility and reciprocity that can sustain a shared future.

—Mona Filip, Guest Curator

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