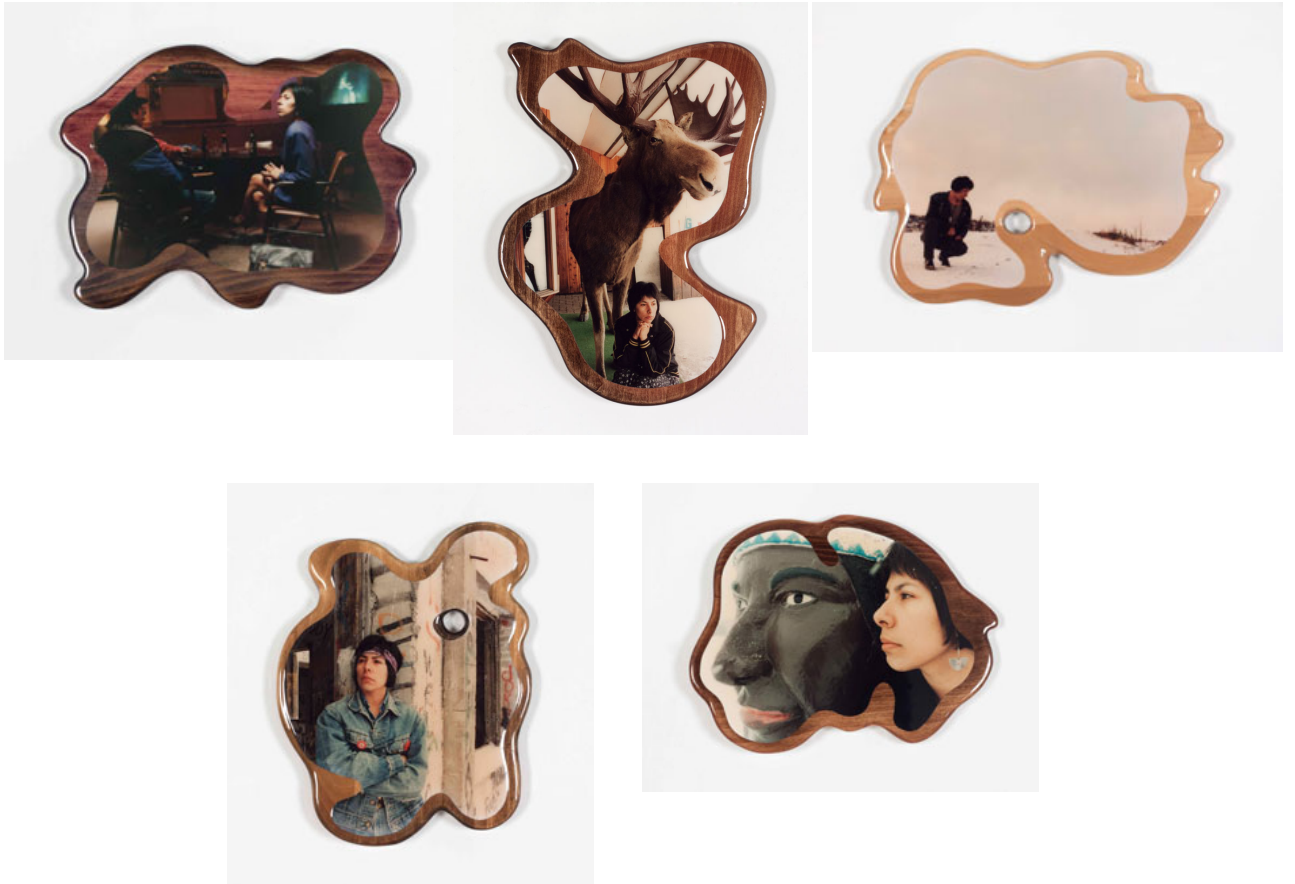




Rebecca Belmore
***Five Sisters*, 1995**
Essay by Wanda Nanibush,
2012



Rebecca Belmore, *Five Sisters*, 1995, photographic prints mounted on wood. Purchased with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Grants program/ Ouvre achetée avec l'aide du programme de Subventions d'acquisition du Conseil des arts du Canada.

Rebecca Belmore's *Five Sisters* was created in 1995 as part of a sustained conversation with the exhibition *Indian Princesses and Cowgirls: Stereotypes from the Frontier*, curated by Gail Guthrie Valaskakis and Marilyn Burgess. The exhibition consisted of Valaskakis's collection of "Indian Princess" imagery and Burgess's collection of cowgirl imagery taken from nineteenth and twentieth century pop culture. Belmore also produced a bookwork for the catalogue which was published by Oboro, the exhibition organizing gallery in 1995.

Five Sisters as an idea began with the plethora of "Indian" imagery that can be found on Aboriginal People's living room walls. These images are garnered from folk art, pop culture and Aboriginal art. Some of these images were used to stereotype and thus dispossess Aboriginal Peoples of culture and land. And yet they have become a source of pride. We had a wood decoupage plaque of an Indian princess on our wall. It was



carved in the shape of an “arrow head” with the embedded image of a beautiful “Indian maiden.” She had a beaded feather hair-piece, long black hair in braids, a choker around her neck and a white buckskin dress on. The image was wistful and romantic. I had been to other homes with wooden plaques of romantic scenes of love, quotes of “chiefs”, and scenes of warriors on horseback riding through pristine landscapes. As a teenager I had posters of inspiring quotes from *Sitting Bull* scrawled across Edward S. Curtis's portraits of “Indian chiefs.” I remember thinking how beautiful we used to be. This is the problem and contradiction that *Five Sisters* points out. Even when re-appropriated, Western conceptions of “Indians” can still deny Aboriginal People contemporaneity and agency. Belmore takes a different path and focuses on five contemporary Aboriginal women.

“Sisters” is the colloquial term Aboriginal women use to refer to each other as an invocation of solidarity and acknowledgement. Using wooden plaque decoupage covered in a glossy varnish, Belmore cites these living room kitschy artworks. Her images represent five contemporary Aboriginal women in five sites of daily life in and around a small town. These figures are iconic and could stand in for other Aboriginal women across the country. They could stand in and at the same time they are specific to a place and people, the Anishinabe-kwe of Sioux Lookout and the surrounding areas in Northern Ontario. Belmore performs each character in five still photographs. In the photographs Belmore is playing someone else in a very believable setting with a real character and yet she is still visible. It is her and not her. She uses a fictionalized real to render visible the lie that is popular representation. Her representations are of the everyday Anishinabe women in their diversity: a tough activist, criminal, or butch (outsiders) standing defiantly in the doorway of a run down building; a woman relaxing after work with a relative over a drink in a small town bar; a young hip teen staring at the logging road that has destroyed hunting; a passerby taking photos with a large 'Indian' head; or sitting in front of a stuffed Moose in a local gas station. The stereotypical images and loss of culture are blended into the every day of travelling through towns, working, and walking about. Belmore does not appropriate characters but through approximation inhabits them. She does not see them as separate from herself. This is the main reason why I think she used her own body as a contemporary Anishinabe-kwe who also hails from Sioux Lookout.

Rebecca Belmore grew up in Upsala, a small town between Thunder Bay, where she went to high school, and Sioux Lookout, where she was living when she made *Five Sisters*. The territory is full of water and bush for hunting and fishing. The Trans Canada highway 17 links the towns, and folks think nothing of driving four hours to visit someone or see a show. Once you pass the hitchhiking Sasquatch and arrive at the corner of Hwy 17 and the road north to Red Lake in Vermillion Bay, you will find the huge Indian head outside the Moose Cree Trading Company. Belmore places her face next to it and snaps a photo that is disturbing in its lack of similarity. The only monuments to Indians are grossly out of proportion and completely unrealistic. Belmore inserts her subjectivity as an artist into the townscapes that erase her and effectively eclipses the big head with her own. A nearby gas station has a taxidermy moose as a tourist attraction and trophy. Placing a contemporary Aboriginal woman, who might have hunted moose, in front with a contemplative expression undoes the usual route of desire for the exotic. Instead of a tourist picture with an Indian, Belmore inverts the gaze and looks at the culture that would reduce an animal to a trophy thereby drawing a parallel to the way Aboriginal women have been objectified. The woman seems to identify with the Moose and uses photography as an agent to criticize sport hunting. The transition to 'white man's' cultural practices is visible in another plaque where a young woman examines clear-cut logging.



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She bends looking at something we can't see. Is she looking at animal tracks or is she wondering how she can continue hunting in these circumstances? The ambiguity of expression in all the works draw attention the contradictions of living as an Anishinabe woman in the territory of your people and watching it used for resource extraction and tourist attraction.

It is not the poses of sedimented identity that matter but the expressiveness of the bodies in the snapshot images. It is as if their freedom lies in their everyday movements and encounters. The past is past and no law or guilt will change it. It is the living that brings out change and difference in the narrative that confine us to the past as pre-contact cultures. By focusing on women Belmore hints at the erased history of the here and now. The bar, work, defiance, strength, and beauty are all part of an Anishinabe living culture that butts up against the colonizing culture that would stuff a moose instead of creating life out of it, that would clear cut land instead of working in harmony with it. *Five Sisters* grows from an astute artist's intuition pointing to what comes next without defining it. Belmore points to the ways in which things continue, but if we express what *is* without putting labels to it we can see the differences that were there all along. She intuitively inhabits other positions without judgment, drawing out the ways in which the everyday is already changing the world in multiple tiny ways.

In embedding these contemporary women into a kitschy form of craft presentation like wood decoupage, Belmore resists the temptation to separate high art from low art and instead renders the contemporary Aboriginal everyday as a subject for art and as a hoped for fixture for Aboriginal living rooms. She asks: What would happen if we hung these photos in our homes? A craft that was the preferred past time of the European courts at the height of colonialism becomes a mode of generating positive Aboriginal identity in the living rooms of Aboriginal people in the former colonies.

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