

L O R E

BY RYAN RICE, GUEST CURATOR

« The truth about stories is that that's all we are. »

Thomas King

Stories and storytelling shape our perceptions, lives and choices in complex ways. Evolving through oral tradition, diverse cultures and in/formalities, the stories we hear and tell interweave experience and imagination with threads of history, politics, religion and small talk to make sense of our relationship to place, faith and one another. Verbal expression fosters social communication and stimulates our senses through the act of listening and the power of sound. Passed down from generation to generation, spoken narrative develops communal culture. The orator or storyteller has the ability to entice our imagination to experience knowledge, locate memory and preserve testimony. However, the implementation of literacy, beyond mnemonic devices, and eventually of the printing press – overrode the oral tradition amid a western purview. Text and print-based media were influential in determining what society accepted as truth, fact and reality. Still, the oral tradition and storytelling continue to flourish in universal forms of communication expressed through the visual arts, music, dance, theatre, songs, film and symbols.

In the exhibition LORE, artists Duane Linklater, Tania Willard and Jason Lujan focus their artwork on the enduring, diverse and powerful forms of storytelling and oral tradition in First Nations cultures and beyond to challenge literacy's reputed domination. The artists acknowledge the warning issued by writer and scholar Thomas King: "Stories are wondrous things," he says, but "they are dangerous... For once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world."¹ and they assume responsibility for setting loose the interpretations, critiques and creative ideas their work conveys.

Linklater paints contested fictions, Willard manoeuvres between belief, faith and imagination, and Lujan restructures the premise of a classic fable in a cinematic style similar to a lucid dream. The stories they

examine and present are remixed and jumbled, and can span generations, even cultures. The narratives investigated are contingent upon a colonial-influenced worldview that sometimes clashes with non-Western perspectives, both locally and globally.

To deconstruct dominant voices and beliefs embedded deep in Western culture, Linklater and Willard retranslate master narratives that surfaced in the Age of Exploration – narratives common to the “Old” and “New Worlds.” Disseminated both orally and in print, these narratives continue to have a profound effect at all levels of society. Linklater’s and Willard’s works lure these master narratives to the Other side (their side) in order to decontextualize erroneous perceptions and reconstitute the criticality of the Indigenous voice and Other perspectives pertinent to expanding the limits of societies’ beliefs and reasoning.

Linklater’s work focuses on the captivity narratives of popular 18th - and 19th - century literature, such as *The Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion* by Rev. John Williams (1706), *The Abduction of Daniel Boone’s Daughter by the Indians* by Charles Ferdinand Wimar (1853) and *Narrative of My Captivity among the Sioux Indians* (1871) by Fanny Wiggins Kelly. In recounting the experiences of women settlers kidnapped by Indians, these tales construct and eroticize stereotypes of the “savage” within European and North American colonial discourse. Unlike Pocahontas’s kidnapping by European settlers (and Pocahontas was only one of many Native people taken captive), these stories do not fit neatly within this type of populist tale.

In the seven paintings of the series *Narrative of My Captivity*, Duane Linklater lavishly yet delicately exaggerates the tension and aura of misrepresentations, giving rise to a whimsical fairytale aesthetic understood through the captivity narratives, which blur the distinction between right and wrong, good and bad. His characters are derived from images in European art history (for example, *Goya’s The Third of May, 1808* [1814] in *Bulletproof* [2007-2008]) and in National Geographic, animal books and Indian – themed books. Linklater says the intent is “to sabotage these stereotypes by appropriating and recontextualizing images from European contexts and histories in subtle ways. These paintings shall evoke a variety of responses from viewers and open a dialogue for further discussions of deconstructing stereotypes of Native peoples in contemporary society”.

The conceptual framework surrounding Tania Willard’s *The Old Ones* opposes Indigenous and colonizing cultures in a search for balance and a resistance to colonialism. Through the selected paintings (*RIP*, 2007),

prints (*Thunderbird*, 2007) and artist book (*Dreaming Terra Incognita*, 2008), Willard emphasizes an abrupt interruption in the belief system common to two cultures' mutual tolerance. The silkscreen *Thunderbird* boldly depicts a red thunderbird in flight; in a demonstration of mis/interpretation, "thunderbird" is written across its wings in the classic Ford's typography. In indigenous cultures, the thunderbird represents power that is synonymous with oral history in traditions around the world. Disrupted by Western values, this symbol brands commodities of power such as automobiles, helicopters and weapons of war. The artist states, "Situating our resistance to the assimilation of our cultures within a context of strength and power, like the thunderbird, we find our struggles echoed in the stories of our ancestors, our old ways and realities, and it is here that our power lies. We believe in our dreams, our stories, ourselves".

The Wolf, Fox and Raven central to Willard's painting *Spiritual Survivor* (2005) represent clans significant to her Nation. She juxtaposes these spiritual icons onto Byzantine Christian icons typically rendered in religious paintings. Although one symbol is viewed as savage and the other as saint, Willard conflates the two faiths by presenting Wolf, Fox and Raven cloaked in robes and surrounded by the glow of halos. Her artwork acknowledges commonalities found across cultures and encourages unity in the face of environmental, spiritual and manmade uncertainties. A message in the upper left hand corner of the painting reads, "The time of warnings, passive resistance and conformity has already passed. All of us are now confronted with an enormous challenge – SURVIVAL". The story is the same, no matter what our faith.

Jason Lujan's short video *From One Dream to Another* follows a young Indigenous girl's journey from the forest toward the clearing of a cityscape. Drawn by the alluring buzz of a global community, she arrives amid the concrete lost in a dreamlike state. Lujan's narrative toys with identity and transition through notions of shape-shifting, cultural assimilation and hybridization. Using a series of long-exposure photographs animated with graphic overlays and sound, Lujan emphasizes popular allegory, a metaphorical form of perception and unique positions of cultural power. The artist conjures the feelings of confronting the unknown, fear and change. The piece's open-endedness, alluded to in the title and video-making process, conveys an emotional ambiguity that remains unresolved.

Lujan's experience making the video had a profound effect on his evolving practice. He states, "*From One Dream to Another* was actually done twice. I spend a lot of my artistic practice learning on the job, and like many artists I know, most of the details occurred after the fact; Canada just somehow felt like the right place to do it, and using night photography felt like the right way to do it, and so the challenge of actually

realizing this project meant doing it once, learning what (and where) worked and didn't, and then coming home to New York City for a few months before going back to Toronto and doing it again". *From One Dream to Another* can be viewed as a cautionary tale, a hybrid legend or a warning about lore's ability to manoeuvre many worlds, which translates universally from one person to another.

Linklater, Lujan and Willard prove to be storytellers in their own right, converting oral narratives to visual narratives. The story, storyteller and lasting significance of the oral tradition provide foundations from which the artists seek out a dichotomy of universal realities relying upon myth and the relationship of fact to fiction. Together, the works in LORE bring about an opportunity to criticize, manipulate and reconsider the impact of traditions developed through orality, neutrality and the art of narration. The works evoke the timeless lore, accumulated over generations, that lingers unspoken in our minds, urging us to set it loose. Architecture and visual arts critic John Bentley Mays reminds us that "we have stories to teach us, stories to heal us, stories to warn us, and stories to lead us".² There are still many stories to be told, resolved and experienced.

¹ Thomas King. *The Truth about Stories (A Native Narrative)*. House of Anansi Press, 2003.

² Stephen Hurley, "All We Are: The Truth about Stories", <http://www.edutopia.org/stories-storytelling>, 3/7/08.

Quotations from the artists are drawn from e-mail artist's statements in correspondence with them from March-August 2008.