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A Thread That Never Breaks: Digitizing Ancestral and Literal Threads

Panelists: Meghann O'Brien and Lisa Myers, with Sage Paul

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Abstract

Artist Meghann O'Brien has described her woven textiles and baskets as threads that connect to ancestral knowledge. Visualizing the strong connections between generations as the literal threads in garments inspired *A Thread That Never Breaks*, an art exhibition that brings together artworks by seven Indigenous artists: Joi Arcand, Angel Aubichon, Leanna Marshall, Caroline Monnet, Meghann O'Brien, Pacific Sisters, and Olivia Whetung. Held in the cyberworld's digital gallery, the exhibition presented the works of these artists who visualized the strong yet unseen inter-generational connections provided by ancestral knowledge. The digitization of the artists' physical works into the digital realm prompted the artists to think deeply about the benefits and potential challenges that come with presenting Indigenous art digitally. This conversation includes Sage Paul, Lisa Myers, and artist Meghann O'Brien.



SAGE

Hi everyone, and welcome to Fashioning Resurgence, a panel series in partnership with The School of Fashion at Toronto Metropolitan University. And with Indigenous Fashion Arts. I'm Sage Paul. I'm the Artistic Director at Indigenous Fashion Arts. And we're here today with Lisa Myers and Meghann O'Brien to speak about *A Thread That Never Breaks*, an exhibition that has now gone digital. Lisa, do you want to introduce yourself?

LISA

I'm Lisa Myers and I'm working with Sage on this exhibition. I'm a curator and an artist, and I teach at the Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change at York University. My mum's family is from Chimnissing, or Beausoleil First Nation and my dad's English and Austrian. I grew up in Southern Ontario.



MEGHANN

Hi, my name's Meghann O'Brien. My name in the Haida language is Jaad Kuujus, and I use that a lot artistically. I've got matrilineal lineage with the Haida. I was born in the village of Alert Bay and am of Kwakwaka'wakw ancestry and my Dad was born in Ireland and immigrated as a kid, lives in Ontario, and then came across the country. I'm a weaver and mostly have been working with basketry and ceremonial textiles and have some explorations in fashion. More recently in the last couple of years I have been working with a group on a digital lab and translating some works into another realm.



SAGE

Awesome. Thank you so much Meghann.¹ Meghann's an artist in the exhibition *A Thread That Never Breaks*. Like Lisa said, we're co-curators on this project together. *A Thread That Never Breaks* is a virtual exhibition that features Angel Aubichon, Caroline Meghannnet, Joi Arcand, Olivia Whetung, Leanna Marshall, Pacific Sisters, and Meghann. I was hoping, Lisa, that you would share a little bit more about the curatorial vision of the exhibition before we jump into Meghann's talk?

LISA

Sure. Well, I think it was something that you shared with me, and it really related to the curatorial project when we spoke, I had recently just finished working on. The two things both happened at the Textile Museum in Ontario, so it related to a talk that you conveyed to me that I attended when Meghann was speaking about her work and the way that threads connect to ancestral knowledge.

And coming out of just finishing working on the show *Beads, they're sewn so tight* in 2018, I had been really thinking about the way that beadwork also contains the knowledge of previous generations.² Designs are informed by people's experience and their lives. These ideas came together in our conversations which started building the premise for the exhibition *A Thread That Never Breaks*. It brought my interest in beadwork and textile work with your expertise and your focus around Indigenous fashion. I think that the line-up of artists that we're working with really bring those worlds and show that intersection of those worlds. I don't really see them as completely separate at all, but these artists bring those together.

The premise [of the show] is around how threads connect these works in fibre and in textiles; connect to ancestral knowledge; and how they connect to the knowledge and life experience that people bring to their work. It has a connection to the past or ancestral knowledge that is present. I think that is also what I wanted to emphasize: that it's about a presence as well as that. So that's what I think of. That's how I would explain the curatorial premise.

¹ <https://indigenousfashionarts.com/a-thread-that-never-breaks/>.

² <https://textilemuseum.ca/event/beads-theyre-sewn-so-tight/>.

SAGE

I love it so much. Like you said, I was totally inspired by your talk, Meghann, that you gave about a very similar name to our exhibition. I just feel so grateful and excited that you allowed us to take this idea that is so intrinsic in the way that so many artists work: that we are all carrying on our ancestral knowledge and the practices that have been passed on. I'm so grateful that, Lisa, you, and I get to work together because I'm totally about fashion. I'm such a fashion girl, of course, I really love to look at work critically and curatorially. I think all of us coming together is a gift for me. Meghann, could you share a little bit more about that talk that you gave at the Textile Museum?

MEGHANN

It was the second time I'd given that talk. The first time was at the Textile Society of America Symposium in 2018 when the theme of that symposium was *The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan-Global*; looking at some of the ways that those two ideas interact and how, sometimes, mostly with Indigenous practices all over the world, some of them are being exported globally.

I was invited for that symposium and put together my very first PowerPoint presentation and was really nervous. But yes, when we had it at the Textile Museum of Canada, I gave the same talk, it was the same length of time. Before I was doing it, I was really nervous, and I had a little bit of writing that I put down for the beginning because most of it is just saying whatever in the way it needs to be said in the present. Especially when you're in a room, there's such a synthesis of all of the people that are there. It creates something different.

I wrote about how the threads that do not break are the ones we can't see. They're those that we carry within us. They're the ones that are passed silently from generation to generation and often go unnoticed. These are the threads that, even though at times they may be dormant, are always present. It's only us who can connect with and see them. If we feel it's necessary to find ways to keep pulling them forward with us I believe that our ability to connect with these ancestral threads requires a shift in our thinking. A shift in a way of seeing ourselves and the world around us in a new way. I invite those that are listening and participating in the space that's created by us being here to work with that and with those threads. Acknowledging that we carry those in our own hands. And being alive in the present that we're creating for the future, as well. And that it's this thing that's passed to our descendants so that they can continue the story. I think there's an amazing power in the present moment and in our ability to weave a new story for those who come after us. And yes, stuff I feel pretty strongly about, I guess, from an ideas' perspective.

I think since I wrote that, there's a lot more. As we're talking about it in this context, the ways that ideas transform and are added to and evolve. I'm talking mostly about weaving, a traditional practice. But in the last four or five years, I've really been interested in the old, old societies of our people on the Northwest coast. I see that art form as being a product of that society and that way of seeing, and the relationships that our people carried not only with each other and our communities, but with the natural world. We're in a very different society and there are a lot of different concepts going around. How do I take what I view as my practice as a weaver and the way I was trained as a form of education? What are the teachings that come from that and how can those be translated into a way that makes it so that it's not something relegated to the past, but it has relevance for today? A lot of the time, the object gets too sticky or way too easy to classify in today's world. Classifying and dismiss, like label, I understand that, and then move on. I think it needs something more to break through. That's what you're talking about, Lisa, bringing together these different worlds. I guess, that they are the same thing, but they're categorized in different ways. This is a really amazing opportunity to break down those classifications.

LISA

Even time-wise or in temporarily thinking about categorizing things as past, as being in the past, categorization, I think, can apply to that too. What I love about this concept and how you've just talked about threads. I love threads as a plural because there are multiple kinds of connections that are made. I love that it is in the present that these things are manifesting, which breaks up that kind of idea that it's only accessed as a historical thing, something that happens often within museum collections and things like that. I think that's a really interesting part of your weaving practice and just not to dwell on the work that I did with beadwork by Bev Koski, Olivia Whetung, and Katie Longboat, and Jean Marshal for that show at the Textile Museum. But I do think that is something. There is a presence that they create of not only techniques but the kinds of patterns and the knowledge and the way that they approach the use of threads. I love that. I love what you're thinking around that as a weaver-artist.

SAGE

I feel like we think about ancestors as being in the past. When we categorize everything, everything gets siloed even between mediums, even between our generations; that was in the past, now I'm going to do something new. But we need that ancestral knowledge to move into the future. And I think it also is really grounding in who we are today and knowing that we will be future ancestors. These ideas that we leave for our nieces, our nephews, our grandchildren, and our great-great-grandchildren, what are we leaving for them

and how are we leaving that information for them. With the exhibition going online, I find that it's wild that this has had to happen in this way because we are always working with tangible materials. We have the physical action of weaving something, or beading something, or sewing something. Now we're going online, which is this whole different medium. I find it really trippy because when I'm watching these avatars on AbTec and Second Life, which is just this weird cyberspace world where they call those shapes primitive and they are then building woven garments or woven textiles out of these primitive shapes. They're literally called... You use a primitive shape to build these different items in Second Life. It is new in that world, but it's still a place where we can carry on these ancient techniques, these ancestral skills and techniques and stories that have been passed on to us. What is our role now in the digital world to carry on these practices that are completely changed online. Maybe we shouldn't talk about what Second Life is first, actually. I feel like I just jumped in.

LISA

Yes, it's been really interesting meeting the artist there and having a space for artists to create their work and to take it from the physical realm to the digital realm.

SAGE

We've had a couple of meetings to bring the artist into the space and really talk about it. But that sandbox within that space, where the artist can actually create, I think that really starts to make it real. It's no longer just a digital image on the screen. You really see the building blocks of creating work within Second Life. I find it interesting that they call it transmediating. Did they make that word up or is that an actual term for digitizing work? What is transmediating to you, to both of you? You want to go first, Meghann? I feel like I've been talking a lot.

MEGHANN

Yes, I guess it's the first time that I've heard the word, but I think it's just translating different objects between mediums or something along the lines of that. I think there's huge potential with it, but also in the digital realm, there is a separation between us in the physical world and being able to interact with it and travel and all these things. On one level, it opens things up into a whole new way of doing things, but also, takes certain things away. We're always building on our own understandings of things. I found the experience of taking one of my woven pieces and bringing it into the digital realm a huge educational process because that's what that work was. It's called "Wrapped in the Cloud".³ It's on display now at a few different places. I found that the

piece was really healing my relationship with technology or giving me a bigger understanding of it. I was working with an organization called Making Culture Lab. There was a digital artist named Conrad Sly in the group, who actually created the word. We used a laser scanner to take the piece in, and then we did photogrammetry, so it takes images of the piece all the way around. Then Conrad takes all of that into his computer and then his computer can't even handle it, so it's connected to all these crazy servers all over the world; these programs that thousands of people have been building over years and years. It's all just mind boggling.

There were some similarities and really interesting things that arose out of that process for me. I've always viewed technology as something really alienating. But through that, I saw the human element in it in a way I hadn't before, which was really refreshing. So much of my practice is very solitary and creating with just... One dimension, it's just me with some materials. But on the other hand, I guess there's deeper layers to that. But yes, it was just super interesting. One of the things I've been thinking a lot about lately is why does the work exist? I feel about the "Wrapped in the Cloud" piece, yes, that the why of that was really powerful because I wanted the work to come home. This idea that you could use technology like 3D printing and create a digital replica of a physical work had this tremendous possibility, have a piece exist in multiple places.

Sage, you were saying that we're always working with physical tangible things, and that there's a fragility to the physical world, as well. When I weave an object or we make an object, a piece of art exists as a singularity. But as soon as that work went into a digital realm, it was like it existed in this weird other space and had the ability to be sent without shipping. It just felt like it had this immortality to it, as if it had been captured at such a high level and recreated in the digital space, that it was always going to exist there. Then the hard-drive crashed, and I realized it's not. It's not. It's not exactly immortal. But it was really interesting because, weaving is often is talked about as being one-dimensional or just very flat and on a wall and not a sculpture. It's a joke when people talk about it that way. But when you 3D print or scan it in, this thing has so much depth and dimension as you break it down into its parts. As the maker, you understand that, the whole idea of categorizing.

SAGE

Wow. I think that's just so amazing.

³ <http://hennessy.iat.sfu.ca/mcl/projects/wrapped-in-the-cloud/>.

LISA

I think of transmediating as a translation, as well, between media; transferring something from a physical to this digital is one kind of mediation. But it makes me think about how that is something that Indigenous artists have been doing for a really long time. When I think of a translation, I think about language and I think about trying to relearn Anishinaabemowin and trying to think about how to translate things. I face that maybe really often. I feel like I've contended with this as an artist or as curator in how to convey meaning. But also conveying working between converting or... I don't know. Translation between media. I can see that so strongly in your work, Meghann.

I think that transmediating was already there in this exhibition even before we even had to deal with the digital realm, but it was in different ways that we hadn't really thought through. I guess bringing knowledge into different mediums is a kind of form of that transmediation. I think it's a really useful term to think through in what we're doing in curatorial and art practice. It would be interesting to talk to Skawennati more about that term and how she's working in Second Life. Those are the things that come through for me when I think about transmediation. I think about translation, working in different mediums, and bringing your knowledge and your practice into different mediums. Sage, as a person who is very much steeped in fashion, what do you think this means for Indigenous-made fashion? I am curious to know if you think that's in transmediation, this kind of translation or moving between media? How do you see that coming or maybe manifesting in the fashion that you're seeing?

SAGE

Well, it's so interesting to think about it as translation because things get lost in translation all the time and reproducing items can be amazing and can really support communities and bring us together. But it can also pose a lot of issues. People can then just take it and use it and they see things out of context because we're no longer with the person who's created it. Or you're no longer in human-to-human community where you can actually have conversations about it. The idea of translation, I find to be really, really interesting. When it comes to fashion, we're looking at translating between these two worlds. Real-life fashion is a tangible thing. It's like we wear it, we have to wear it, it's a part of survival. Then when we're putting it online then what is fashion then? What is it? We dress avatars because we do it in our real world and we're assimilating our lived realities. But it's still not reality. We can do so much in Second Life or even in 3D, like you said, scanning these garments. It really allows us to look at every single pixel of these items that we're creating. But then we have the power to manipulate it in any way we want. And with the exhibition, it's interesting to talk about things that are just floating in space. Or talk about

having an avatar dressed in Leanna's garments. And Leanna wants her jingle pants to be able to be switched so that someone can have their avatar wear that. In real life, that would never happen. You could never go to an art gallery and see a garment and put it on. But then, I think, on the flipside, when it comes to fashion, there's the one side where in a gallery you can't interact with the art, especially textiles, because they're fragile, like you said, Meghann. But in terms of the commercial side of fashion, there's a sense of entitlement, where people feel like they are allowed to have anything. If they can pay for it, then they can have it and they can own it, which I think, especially in Indigenous fashion and a lot of cultural-based fashion, is a huge issue. Because we can't. We can't just take it. People have taken time to know how to create that fashion. Like, Meghann, when you create your pieces, those are stories. They hold stories in clans and symbols that have been passed on to you, and they're meant for very specific times or people, as gifts, or however that work is shared.

When I think about transmediation, it opens up a whole new world of carrying on where we come from and carrying on stories and that knowledge that I think is so, so important. But it also slightly frightens me because how are people going to use it after these kinds of platforms, especially open-source platforms like Second Life, anyone can access it. Anything can happen in there, even though it's not real life, we're still in this matrix that is real life. So when I think about transmediation related to fashion, I'm both very excited for it and I'm really so excited and curious about the exploration that we are starting to do. How can we move beyond just that screen? How can we make it into AR? I love the work that you guys create. I love it so much. How do we share that in a way that? I think, is respectful and is within what the artist intends for it to be experienced. Thanks for asking me that, Lisa.

LISA

You're welcome.

SAGE

So, Meghann, I thought it was really interesting that you were just talking about the wire frames. Not the wire frames, but how you actually 3D printed or copied your actual woven capes or textiles. It sounds to be a very different process than what we're doing in Second Life. What do you think about these processes?

MEGHANN

Well, I think the impression is that in Second Life, you can actually build within Second Life. Whereas, here, it was done by a person and then re-uploaded into a version that could be shared. So, I guess it wasn't open-sourced programs,

I'm guessing, because there were some protections that we had when we were creating that piece. Everybody I was working with, they were really concerned with you don't want this in an open-source thing because people can just take it and print some keychains. It can be very easily stolen.

This is what you were talking about. Cultural property can be really dangerous in a way. I think Skawennati was saying that they have it so people can't alter things in that space, so you need permissions from them. But, yes, I want to say, too, though, when you're talking about translation, it's so interesting, I'm still thinking about that concept as well. And just how if you think about translation, so much can get lost, like you said. But also, there's never a direct translation. Things are altered in a way that can't be really undone. It's really interesting to think about how the work is transformed by being in the space that we're bringing it into. There's somewhat of a dissonance between traditional practices like beadwork and weaving and different things. That when you bring it into this other... They're almost like creations of two different worldviews. By placing them together just creates this friction that's really interesting to me; that I don't really understand, but that I like to think about.

LISA

In Second Life the physical and material parameters that we work within including the physics of gravity are different than in the virtual. For example, Olivia's beaded shawl could become super-huge in a virtual space. The size and scale of it could change so easily. We could suddenly make something float in the air. I'm not picking up on your thread of this idea of world view or the way that worlds are. I'm thinking more in terms of the physical manifestation of it or the non-physical, the virtual. What possibilities of the virtual world? It's almost like a dream world. We can conjure up a world in our imaginations where you can go a little further than what you could do in the physical space. In Second Life, there are no parameters whereas the physics of a physical space is a challenge. There is something interesting about entering an imaginary space and saying, "Oh, wait, we could just make that thing floating there," or, "Suddenly, that thing could have lightning bolts coming out of every point." I guess it would be more imaginary than dreaming because we have this consciousness. What you're talking about makes me think of those potentials and how it is hard. It is actually challenging to just start understanding the possibilities in that realm.

MEGHANN

When we did that first walkthrough, that's what I was considering too. I was thinking could be a really amazing way to prototype things for the real world, to build spaces, to explore different ideas. There's a group called Drift Studios

in Europe that does art installations which to me, feel like that I would wish I could do but don't have the resources to do.⁴ Yes, I see what you're saying, though, I think I really agree with that. And it's really liberating, in a way.

LISA

Could you explain a little more about what you were thinking about the different kinds of worldviews? I'm curious to know more about what you mean about that.

MEGHANN

The creation of technology is such a collaborative thing from what I've learnt from talking with Conrad, who has got a really interesting perspective. The way he thinks about what he does and about technology itself is really interesting. I can't really explain it that well, but, basically, just the origins of technology and where that comes from. Basically, the scientific world view. I think it's a product of that. And beadwork or weaving, what is that a product of? And those are very different world views. There's a guy, Leroy Little Bear, who does a talk about this, about how the quantum world view is much more in line with his Blackfoot worldview, and that the Western scientific world view, we're still living in that as a society.⁵

Science has far surpassed that and has gotten to this other place that's really quite mystical. But our lives aren't functioning in that way. But he was talking about how the Blackfoot worldview was much more based in what we call the quantum world view now: the origins of the practice is, where they come from, and how they're now enmeshing. Sorry to talk about weaving all the time.

LISA

That's all right. That's fine. That's what you're all about. Go for it.

MEGHANN

One thing that we discovered along the way was that the Jacquard Loom was actually the first version of computer programming and is considered to be the origin of the computer. This is really neat that weaving specifically has ties to the development of computers as technology and programming, and to bring those things back together, like they're meeting again in this crazy way.

⁴ <https://www.studiodrifting.com/work>.

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_txPA8CiA4.

LISA

I think that there's also some other places where people have brought in... Relating. I believe it's Buffy Sainte-Marie who wrote about pixels in relation to beadwork, how the digital and fibre work relate. I didn't realize the connection between Jacquard weaving and a computer. That's really fascinating to me, actually.

MEGHANN

I don't remember who invented it, but it was super-old technology. What was I going to say about that, though? Sorry, I lost my train of thought completely.

LISA

That's okay. Sorry if I threw you off.

MEGHANN

Oh, yes, that was what it was. I think it's binary.

LISA

Binary code, yes.

MEGHANN

The way that the designs, probably in beadwork and then Ravenstail weaving, in particular, has a binary code. But, essentially, that's what it is.

LISA

Embedded in it.

MEGHANN

Yes.

LISA

So that's the article, I was trying to look for this article and it's really bugging [me] that I can't find it. It really looked at digital Indigenous new media and media works, wampum and things like that. I wish I could find it off the top of my head; not off the top of my head, but on my computer that I'm staring at. There has been quite a bit of text that connects those things, and I think it's really important. Artists like Cheryl L'Hirondelle have lots to say about that and I think that these conversations could start expanding and building. We could join those conversations too at some point, or maybe we already have in our transmediations.

SAGE

I think we already have.

LISA

Yes, we already have. Sometimes you don't know where [you] are because you're already in the middle of it, you know what I mean?

SAGE

Well, especially, COVID has forced us into this place of exploration. I don't know if we would have. Well, Meghann, you were already exploring that. But on this large scale of fashion and craft, I feel like people are being forced to really think about their work in different ways and how to create it, what that means. I think when we're actually making in physical form, there's a lot of honouring that goes into our work and acknowledging where stuff comes from. A lot of us have really strong ideas around that work, and now we're putting it online. Sometimes I think it talks about trade, some of our work, and it really carries on a lot of old ways of up-trade of storytelling and how we pass that knowledge from generation to generation. Now that we're being forced to change into this world very quickly. But it feels like it's something that we have to do, because otherwise, we wouldn't be able to enjoy this work together. We wouldn't be able to share these stories together. Yes, so I think that we're in it, but we're forced into it.

LISA

In terms of this moment, thankfully, there's already been artists that have been doing work online, like Skawennati. Artists that have been doing net art and net-based kind of work since the 90s have provided a really nice pathway. There is this pathway for what we feel is urgent or what we need; the conditions that we're working under right now. So that's part of what we've entered into. It's brought us into that. That which they've already worked on for so many years.

SAGE

Yes. It's still quite new. There's so many people who have paved the way, like Buffy. When I think about Buffy and the work that she's created in the early days, I think how pixelated the work looks on Photoshop at the time. I feel like that's what we're working with right now in Second Life, is just how pixelated that work is. I find the limitations in actually building the work to be very interesting, because aesthetically, it just suggests what the work is. We can see it's a garment, but it doesn't carry the small details of a bead unless you've built every single bead in the space, which would be a literal sphere and then you can add a colour to it. Then it becomes something that possibly takes

just as much time to recreate in a digital form as it does in real life. But then you can duplicate it, I guess, just create multiple, multiple once you've created that framework on the internet. I feel like there's just a whole bunch of exploration. When I'm looking, especially, at the exhibition, the way that each of the artists are approaching it, I'm just thinking about the process and the way that it's being built. I feel like there are so many conversations to have around copyrights like we were talking about. It opens up the possibility of having it show in galleries around the world because you're no longer having to ship the very fragile textiles around the world and have them potentially be damaged or be lost. I find it to be a very exciting world. To see the designers actually jump in and build it and how they go about it I think will be quite interesting. Meghann, when you saw them building, they used a long tube to start creating the threads. At that moment, they were saying that we can create these tubes, but they can't get too small because then you can't see them anymore. Because we blew up the textile to be the size of the movie screen within that space, the thin thread then looked like a very thin thread. Yes, I just find it so interesting.

MEGHANN

It's super interesting. I feel like I could continue this conversation easily for three hours. We've been talking about objects and artish-type stuff. But fashion and art are these can be merging and one of the same, and brush up against each other. Then there is the cultural aspect of Indigenous fashion and fashion, questioning what it is and how free it is. I was reading about why a lot of fashion designers can easily get ripped off. The big fashion houses just get ripped off every season from the fast-fashion places. They do it cheaper, but they copy the designs and the styles all the time. This article was saying that that is how trends start and that's how change and transformation is pushed super-hard in that area. But bringing our cultural aspects of it into that world, it has its own kind of way it's running in the world that's super-unhealthy. I think a lot of people would agree that it is really detached, even though it's something that's so intimate to our lives and our survival. There's this distance from it and lack of understanding around where it comes from. As I reflect on it, it has to do with how early textiles were industrialized. I think textiles were regarded as quite sacred nearly everywhere in the world. If not sacred, then at least valued because people understood the work that went into creating it and had this concept of repair and keeping and caring for things that you really needed. As you take all these different pieces or ideas of what fashion is, what technology is, what art is, what Indigenous art and fashion is, and the way that some of them clash with each other and conflict. The whole idea of open source versus how we think about our designs is very, very different. On the one hand I think it would be incredibly cool, say, as clothing designers, or beadwork, or weaving designs, but I also get really violently angry about the idea of it. I think how

amazing it would be if you had the exhibit and then there were patterns that you could take and create that work within your own space if you wanted to, just to physicalize it. The physicality to go from her existing into this Second Life platform and recreate it there. It would be a template for it to come into the world in the space of the person there; the idea of making of and realizing how powerful that is. But then there's just so many problems with that as an idea. As a general idea, I think it would be really neat. I think some musicians have done that, where they just created sheet music. A long time ago, I think Vec did that where he said, "This is my album, if you want to hear it, you've got to play it". It's quite cool. But yes, that's an interesting thought because that's really an extension of the idea of an open-source thing.

LISA

Yes, and the spirit of it is sharing, but then it's vulnerable to the market, right? I guess it becomes vulnerable to be taken up and modified. That's where the risk is, do you think?

MEGHANN

Yes, totally, yes.

SAGE

Yes, it's so interesting when you speak about industrialization. Fashion was industrialized specifically for capitalists. That's the reason why the industry, you had aristocrats in Western Europe, who wanted to create quick change. That's what fashion became. When that quickly changed, you saw only the most elite having certain garments. Then, eventually, it would trickle down so that lower-class people could own it. Then a new style would come out. That system was built specifically to create money for those people at the top. This is why we get into all these issues of exploitation of our designs. As a community, of course, it makes sense to share the pattern because we should all be able to have a nice jacket and we should all know or have someone in our family who could recreate that jacket for us. But then you see someone who is just wanting to make money, they don't care about the design, they don't care about its functions. All they know is that it's going to make money. And then that's why we can't put these beautiful pieces... If you want to have it, if you want to wear it, you have to make it. I love that idea. I love that concept, but we live in this world where, ultimately, it would be used in really awful ways.

MEGHANN

Yes.

LISA

To me, it brings me back to this question, a question that interests me about Indigenous fashion. Fashion according to Lisa Myers, who knows nothing much about fashion anyway. But fashion has, to me it seems, fashion trends. I wouldn't say trends, but fashion collections are influenced. There's a visual culture that influences it. There are different kinds of inspiration for them. I feel like Indigenous fashion works in a difficult realm, in a sense. Yes, I think there is a different realm that it's working within, a realm that holds to the integrity of a design that was passed down. I'm trying to think about how does Indigenous fashion relates to mainstream fashion? There's a conversation that's a little less fluid and easy because of the integrity of designs and things that are connected to really important, whether it be, clans or crests, or whatever. Do you know what I mean? This question of how can it be influential and mainstream but it's not important that it is, or something? That's the question that comes up for me. I don't know, you probably had to deal with that question a bunch of times, Sage. Or you too, Meghann. And yes, so I don't know if I'm digging up stuff that's already been reconciled, but I think about it sometimes.

SAGE

I think it's so interesting, especially the context of an art exhibit. That's why I just think it's so important to align this idea of fashion in commerce, but fashion in art. Because I find our community is definitely more circular and holistic in the way that we approach how we create, how we share. I love the idea that you are wealthy based on how much you can give. That's what wealth is based on with a lot of our cultures and our Indigenous nations. It's not based on how much you have. Fashion is purely based on that idea of how much money you can make from the clothing that people are creating. Whereas, yes, like I said, our communities are just so much more circular in terms of supporting each other and making sure that visual language or the material culture around it is for all of us.

MEGHANN

It's a really tough one, I think.

SAGE

It is.

MEGHANN

I think on the one hand it is all of the things that you just said in such a profound way. People are making things that are for sale to anyone at the same time. So in a sense it is going out into the world. But then, there's just the question of who profits from it. I wonder about the end result. What is that end result, and where is it going?

SAGE

That is such a good question.

We're on our last few minutes. We could definitely talk about this forever; there's just so much knowledge. In the study and the research, the active actually doing things, looking at fashion through an art exhibit. And then looking at it through an online exhibition. And then, also, we have retail commerce, there's just so much. But if there's any last words, I would love to hear what both of you have to say.

LISA

Sage, what I've learned a lot from working with you, is that Indigenous Fashion Arts really asserts the practices of Indigenous designers. I think there's a real strength in that because it starts these conversations. It starts discussions around all the issues that came up today in this conversation. Even if I don't consider I have anything to do with the fashion world, I feel like I can have a conversation that relates to ideas that I'm interested in when I work with artists that are working with fibre-based or textile-based work. I think that's really important. I think that these ideas of translation and transmediation are things that we're dealing with all the time. I really appreciated being able to talk to you both about those ideas too, and how, Meghann, especially how your work has gone between the physical to the digital and how that's been for you. And the ideas of translation that come up. So, this has been really interesting. I don't know if you have any last words there, too, Meghann?

MEGHANN

No, just to say, I don't know, thank you, this has been a really interesting conversation. Yes, I appreciate all the work you both are doing. So much. It's a real honour to have the conversation. I don't know what else.

SAGE

Thank you. No, thank you so, so much. I am so thrilled about being able to speak about it because as we're working through the actual exhibition, these conversations are so important. I feel like we are speaking about something that we are right in the middle of trying to understand, and it's exciting and scary to jump in. I'm so grateful that I get to do that with you guys. You guys fill me with a lot of knowledge and things to think about. I'm so glad that we got to share that together today, so thank you, guys.

MEGHANN

Thank you.

LISA

Thank you.

Panelist Bios



Jaad Kuujus (Meghann O'Brien) is a weaver descended from the Haida and Kwakwaka'wakw tribes of coastal British Columbia. Her innovative approach to the traditional art forms of basketry, Yeil Koowu (Raven's Tail) and Naaxiin (Chilkat) textiles connects to the rhythms and patterns of the natural world, and creates a continuity between herself and her ancestors. Based in Vancouver, B.C, she is currently exploring the intersection of Indigenous materials and techniques with the world of fashion, the digital, and 3D printing.



Lisa Myers is an independent curator and artist with a keen interest in interdisciplinary collaboration. Myers has a Master of Fine Arts in Criticism and Curatorial practice from OCAD University. Her recent work involves printmaking, stop-motion animation and performance. Since 2010 she has worked with anthocyanin pigment from blueberries in printmaking, and stop-motion animation. Her participatory performances involve sharing berries and other food items in social gatherings reflecting on the value found in place and displacement; straining and absorbing. She has exhibited her work in solo and group exhibitions in venues including Urban Shaman (Winnipeg), Art Gallery of Peterborough, and the Art Gallery of Ontario. Her writing has been published in a number of exhibition publications in addition to the journal *Senses and Society*, *C Magazine* and *FUSE Magazine*. She is currently an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change (formerly Faculty of Environmental Studies) at York University. Myers is a member of Beausoleil First Nation and she is based in Port Severn and Toronto, Ontario.



Sage Paul is an urban Denesuliné woman based in Toronto and a member of English River First Nation. Her ethos centres family, sovereignty and resistance for balance. Sage is the Executive & Artistic Director of Indigenous Fashion Arts, which she also co-founded. She has been instrumental in establishing and leading projects for Indigenous artists working in fashion, craft, and textiles through several projects with Indigenous Fashion Arts, Inland, Ikea Canada, the International Fashion Showcase during London Fashion Week, Setsuné Indigenous Fashion Incubator, the Canadian Trade Commissions in South Africa and London, Artscape Launchpad and Canadian department store Simon's. Sage has contributed to *InStudio Magazine* (Banff Centre for the Arts), *Walker Reader* (Walker Arts Centre) and TEDx Toronto and has provided consultation for Toronto Metropolitan University, Urbani_T, Canadian Art and Fashion Awards, Harbourfront Centre and several others, including artists in the art and fashion sectors. Sage teaches the Contemporary Indigenous Fashion and Jewellery program at George Brown College, which she also developed. In 2019, Sage was nominated for the Premier's Award in Creative Art and Design and was recognized as "... leading Canada's Indigenous Fashion Movement" (*En Route Magazine*). Sage received the Design Exchange RBC Emerging Designer Award and was honoured by the Ontario Minister of the Status of Women as a trailblazing woman who is transforming Ontario. Sage likes to call herself a philosopher and artist. The ideas and process in the creation of her fashion and craft are catharsis of an urban Denesuline woman experience — resourceful, intentional, and resilient. She up-cycles fabrics and incorporates natural materials like raw hide and antlers into her fashion, which has been exhibited in a few art and fashion shows. Sometimes she retails it too. But, creating is her favourite part.

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