

Wayfinders

Art is a truth that reveals illusions. Our perceptions are formed by repetition, by rote, by habit and tradition. Our world view is essentially a collection of stories we are told, tell ourselves and tell others. Art breaks through these assumptions. That is one of its primary roles in the hands of a skilled communicator. Art offers us a chance to take a second look at the things we think we know and allow for a broader narrative, a deeper understanding, and therefore a life of greater possibility.

World renowned artist George Littlechild has spent a career exploring the secrets and inconsistencies of our history, specifically in regards to identity, family and the ongoing affects of the Residential School legacy. Many people have found healing in his work; many have been shocked and humbled; but everyone who sees it finds some kind of truth.

Paul Smith's purposefully naive landscapes, trickster characters and symbols can be difficult to decipher. They are as opaque as an unknown language without the tools to translate them. Consciously or not, they are imbued with indigenous symbology and weight, leaving it to the viewer to make an effort and to finish the connection for communication. As an analogue to cultural first contact and the resulting history, Smith's works offer profound insights into the way in which we approach one another and the commonalities that bind us but can remain unseen.

Amy Malbeuf is an emerging performance and sculptural artist whose works push the boundaries of modernism while strengthening her ties with her indigenous roots. Using traditional knowledge to inform her work, she shows us that there is space, and indeed a bright future, for the voice of First Nations, Métis and Inuit artists in our changing times.

The exhibition **Wayfinders** is a combination of these three unique talents. From a world master, to a mid career painter and an emerging artist exploring new directions, viewers are treated to a unique and compelling exhibition that hopefully will stay with them for years to come.

Artists create in isolation, drawing upon personal reflections and experiences. It is a very individual journey. In a way, we all stumble through shadow. It is the seekers, the curious, the ones who are looking for a way who strike the match and light the torch. The journey is personal but when the light is held high it can inspire us to do the same. Our Wayfinders are just like us, leading the way by simply trying to find one.

Aaron Paquette, October, 2014

The exhibition **Wayfinders** was curated by Aaron Paquette and organized by the Art Gallery of Alberta for the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program. The AFA Travelling Exhibition program is supported by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts. This exhibition was generously funded by Syncrude Canada Ltd.

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program

The Art Gallery of Alberta is pleased to present this travelling exhibition to venues throughout Alberta. Currently the Art Gallery of Alberta serves approximately 60 venues in over 35 communities. Exhibitions on tour from the Art Gallery of Alberta easily adapt to space requirements of smaller venues: schools, libraries, museums, health care centres and other community facilities. The exhibitions are organized in such a manner as to make unpacking, packing, hanging and shipping as easy as possible. Along with the exhibition each venue receives an Educational Interpretive Guide. These materials enable teachers to use the exhibition within the school curriculum.

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Collection is the primary source of works featured in the travelling exhibitions. Other sources for exhibitions may include community partners, archives, private collections and loans from artists. Each year we welcome new venues to enrich their community art through the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program.

Our Thanks

The Artists and Curator:

George Littlechild
Amy Malbeuf
Paul Smith
Aaron Paquette

Syncrude Canada Ltd.

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts

and to the many individuals, organizations and communities who contribute to the success of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program each year.

COVER IMAGES:

Top Left: George Littlechild, *What Could Have Been*, 2007, Digital image on canvas, Collection of the artist

Bottom Left: Paul Smith, *Untitled*, 2014, Acrylic on birch, Artist's collection

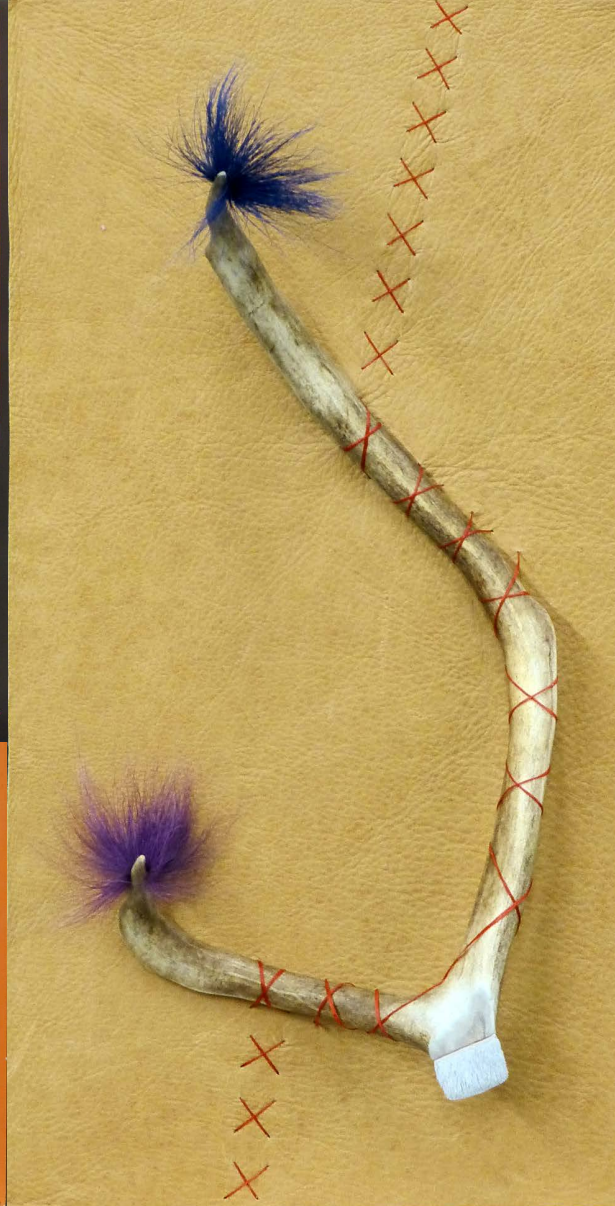
Right: Amy Malbeuf, *Ghost of a Caribou*, 2014, Sinew and caribou hair on antler on elk hide, Courtesy of the artist

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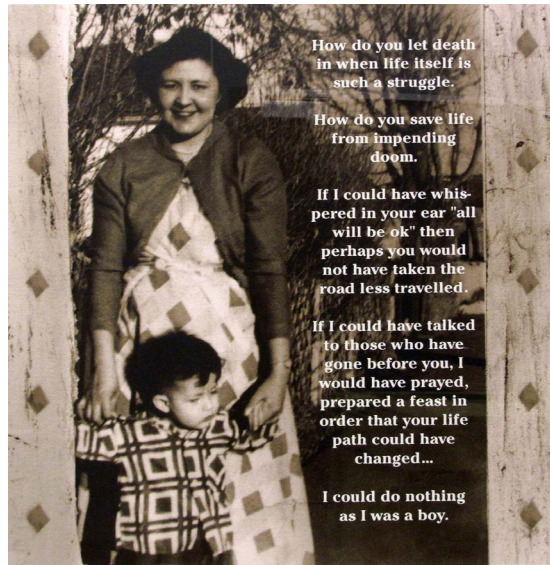
Mother
Rachel Littlechild, age 18, 1947.
Clothed in traditional attire she would have worn had she not attended Indian residential school.



The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program

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George Littlechild
I Could Do Nothing as I Was a Boy, 2003
 Archival Digital Image
 Collection of the artist

George Littlechild was born in Edmonton in 1958. His mother, Rachel Littlechild, was a Plains Cree member of the Ermineskin Reserve in Maskwacis (formerly known as Hobbema) and his father, James E. Price, was of Scottish/Micmac extraction from New Brunswick. As an infant he was taken by government agencies, in a process known as the 'Sixties Scoop', and put into a series of foster homes (non-native) where he remained until he was eighteen. This government policy of breaking up native families and attempting to destroy indigenous cultures came to be of great significance to Littlechild's life and work.

George Littlechild's art is motivated by a drive for self-understanding and self-healing. The core of his art practice was, and is, research and narrative exploring the experiences, lives and ways of his ancestors. As expressed by curator Ryan Rice in the forward to Littlechild's book George Littlechild: The Spirit Giggles Within:

....Littlechild's own life experience is emblematic and common to Native history of the 20th century. His placement within the foster home system from infancy to adulthood barred his relationship to his immediate family and home. His circumstances as a victim of what is referred to as the "Sixties Scoop" steered him on a path to recover what was missing and instilled in him a desire to belong. Through creativity, Littlechild found himself on a path of recovery that led to empowerment - confronting his upbringing and losses and reclaiming his Plains Cree identity.

Littlechild's journey through loss is movingly expressed in the art work *I Could Do Nothing as I Was a Boy*, seen above. As voiced by the artist concerning this piece:

This photograph of Mother and Jack, my older brother, was taken in 1956, two years before I was born. I see such joy in her face; she exudes happiness. She stands in front of her home off 96th Street in Edmonton, looking complete and content. She was in love with her husband, Joe Smith, who died that same year. After his death, her life did what we would call a 360 as she mourned his loss immensely. She met my father, James Price, and had four more children; however, she spiralled downward, dying tragically on Edmonton's skid row in 1965. R.I.P., my dear mother - I wrote you a little note in this art piece, dedicated to you with love. Your son, George.



Amy Malbeuf
iamthecaribou/thecaribouisme, 2014
 Caribou hair and human hair on elk hide
 Courtesy of the artist

As expressed by curator Aaron Paquette, the exhibition *Wayfinders* is a combination of three unique talents exploring new directions and reflecting the complex world we live in today. Drawing upon both traditional First Nations artistic skills, practices and symbology, and contemporary art concerns, the artists in this exhibition examine the past, personal life experiences, and investigate contemporary issues and realities.

Amy Malbeuf is a multidisciplinary visual artist of Métis heritage from Rich Lake, Alberta. Through her art practice she explores notions of identity, place, language, tradition, myth, spirituality, and consumerism. Through her art Malbeuf examines the relationships between humanity and nature; deconstructs popular misunderstandings of Indigeneity; and explores the complicated intersections between race and culture.

Malbeuf's art works in the exhibition **Wayfinders** are about the loss of caribou habitat, the decrease in caribou population, and the negative cultural and socioeconomic impact this has on Indigenous people in Canada. Malbeuf expresses that the cultural survival of many Indigenous nations is intrinsically linked to the survival of the caribou. The caribou's existence has provided sustenance and cultural ways of knowing that has been passed down through the generations for thousands of years. According to the artist, the survival of the caribou are important because cultural knowledge, such as the art form of caribou hair tufting, and the tremendous cultural and spiritual knowledge gained from the traditional harvesting of caribou, is kept alive for generations to come. In writing of her art work *iamthecaribou/thecaribouisme* Malbeuf states:

The caribou has been so generous to offer its skin and hair for our warmth and protection, its meat for sustenance, and its bones and antlers for tools and cultural practices. Humanity has been selfish and taken advantage of all the caribou (and other living beings) have offered, including destroying the caribou habitat so that the caribou is no longer able to have a place to live. People have forgotten that if we destroy the caribou's home, we are destroying our home as well.



Paul Smith
Untitled, 2011
 Ink and acrylic on paper
 Artist's collection

Paul Smith is an active artist and independent curator. His artwork reflects and is influenced by popular culture, graphic design, illustration, tattoo and comic book art, minimal abstract painting, colour theory and graffiti/street art/outsider art. While a very contemporary artist, however, Smith also draws upon aspects of First Nations symbology to reflect on present-day realities. A major motif found in his work is that of the First Nations trickster figure *Nanabozho*.

In numerous story traditions a trickster is a being who plays tricks or otherwise disobeys normal rules and conventional behaviour. While trickster characters are found in many cultures throughout the world, Native American tricksters are very different from European fictional characters as Native American tricksters demonstrate an openness to life's multiplicity and paradoxes.

Among the many different Native American story traditions there are a number of tales that feature a trickster Rabbit or Hare, particularly among the Algonquin-speaking peoples of the central and eastern woodland tribes. These peoples have a special character known as *Nanabozho*. Some tribes looked upon *Nanabozho* as a hero and even consider the Great Hare to be the creator of the Earth. *Nanabozho* is also regarded as being a supporter of humans and helps them out in many ways such as bringing fire and light. Some groups also believed that the Great Hare taught sacred rituals to the holy men amongst the Natives. In some tribes, however, *Nanabozho* is depicted as a clown, a predator and even a thief.

Paul Smith, with his interest in comic and graffiti art, has chosen the rabbit as his 'tag' or comic alter-ego. In essence, the rabbit is his 'totem'; the animal that represents him. The contradictions inherent in this figure and the fact that trickster figures, through their actions, switch things around and break down perceptions, appeals to his overall artistic aims. As expressed by Smith in speaking of his work:

My work concerns itself with little questions. At its base are questions of identity, thoughts moving towards the human condition and the contradictions inherent to simply being. These ideas, however, are only the foundation for the curious, violent, and wonderful moments that form us, which I attempt to illustrate.