

Nahanni McKay

Hole 8, 2021, photograph

Artist statement

The Banff Springs Fairmont Golf course is one of the two leisure sites in Banff that occupy a wildlife corridor. A wildlife corridor is a strip of natural habitat connecting populations of wildlife otherwise separated by cultivated land. A campground is occupying the other corridor under the sacred mountain, Mîni Hrpâ. When building the golf course, the natural landscape was significantly stripped to accommodate this field of play.

In the making of Banff National Park, colonizers' appeal to nature was prioritized and incorporated into the design of the campgrounds and golf courses, effectively banning Stoney Nakoda and other First Nations from their traditional hunting grounds. My work, *Hole 8* at the Banff Springs Fairmont Golf Course, represents how the national park system is a colonial structure that prioritizes tourism over sacred Indigenous lands and wildlife of turtle island.

Challenging myself in my photography, I used 120mm film for the first time dubious of how the film would turn out. Using the skulls of deer, cougars and bears I positioned these sacred items on the Hole 8 to create an uneasy looking creature. Hole 8 is one of the 18 holes on the Stanley Thompson course at the Fairmont Banff Springs.

When I chose this spot, the sun was rising and there were the sounds of coyotes in the distance. I lit sage in my abalone shell to smudge myself and the skulls giving thanks to the animals that are helping me today. Taking out my new thrifted medium format camera, I started taking photos. In the early winter I completed a six week artist residency called Akunumus?itis : Ecological Engagement through the Seasons at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity which was a two-part residency engaging in a land based, observational learning that supports artists to create a project that informs the viewer to the cultural narrative that is Banff. I had two mentors during my residency, Lillian Rose who is a cultural consultant with the Ktunaxa First Nation and Joely BigEagle Kequahtoway who co-founded the Buffalo People Art Institute in Regina where they provide land-based teachings to students using land-based practices in their art. They provided me with the knowledge to carry out this project with proper training and protocols to bring my concept safely into public spaces.

I created a lightbox for the Personal Structures Exhibition. I printed one photo on 40 x 40 inch backlit film paper and situated it between two pieces of plexiglass. To create the lightbox I found scraps of wood in the shop at the Banff Centre and cut them to make a 41 x 5 x 41 box using the tools provided. To illuminate the work, I installed LED strip lights in the back of the photograph.

Lightboxes are costly and creating the lightbox myself as part of the final presentation allows a personal experience of creating my work fully by hand. The structural components of my piece are made from plexiglass, wood and backlit film all of which are fairly new materials for me. During the production of this piece, I learned to employ these materials and have gained modest confidence in a woodshop setting and some valuable skills like using saws.

Expanding my knowledge of materials is necessary to continue pushing my work in new directions and to make sure I'm not limiting myself to only photography. About a year ago I read, *These Mountains Are Our Sacred Places* by Reverend Chief John Snow. Since then, this book has become extremely important to me, informing my life on Treaty 7 Territory. It clarified what the creation of Banff National Park meant to Stoney People and how the ripple effects are still felt today.

This book pushed me down a conceptual path in my art practice and is vital to the work I've created for this exhibition. One part of this book stood out to me in particular, which outlines how the effects of the creation of Banff National Park are often most evident when encountering wildlife; "The problem was that the conservationists movement emerged from a money-oriented society which never learned our ways, our values, our traditions. The sacred waters, the hot springs that we used for healing and cleansing, were to become tourist resorts; our sacred mountains were to become ski areas and parks where we no longer have the right to pursue our religious practice.

The pipe stones that we got from the mountains and the natural earth paints that we used in our religious ceremonies and for other special occasions were bulldozed over and concrete now covers them". Snow, J. (1977). The Immigrant Society Closes In. In *These Mountains Are Our Sacred Places* (pp. 105–107). essay, Fifth house.

Growing up in this mountain town I have challenged and questioned the term "mountain culture". As an Indigenous person I want more Indigenous representation and knowledge and land-based practices to the conservation system.