

The discovery of her great-grandmother's diary inspired Meryl McMaster's stunning new body of work

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Bloodline, a survey exhibition from photographer [Meryl McMaster](#), opened earlier this month at the [McMichael Canadian Art Collection](#), where it will appear through May 28. In the show's final room, a collection of found items are displayed under glass. They're seemingly unremarkable in the wake of McMaster's images which hang on the surrounding walls: large-scale prints that are, per her signature, cinematic tableaus with the artist herself at their centre — an often surreal figure of mystery, ensconced amid hand-built costumes and props.

But in the centre of the room, protected in their glass cases, the objects serve as sort of decoder key to the pictures on the wall. There are black-and-white family

snapshots; a hand-written letter; a personal agenda labelled 1947, its banal daily entries written in pencil: "Monday: Boys digging a cellar.... Tuesday: Mother taking train to Battleford. Went to the Sundance."

McMaster's great-grandmother, Bella Wuttunee, wrote those bullet points in a careful script. From 1898 to 1980, she lived in Red Pheasant Cree Nation, an area roughly 30 km south of North Battleford, Sask. Bella's mother, Tilly Schmidt, appears in family photos in the vitrines, as does Lena McMaster, her daughter. As the artist was producing her latest body of work, she was inspired by the lives of those women, a creative process that began when her father first showed her the family mementos that are currently displayed at the McMichael. The result is titled *Stories of my Grandmothers | nôhkominak âcimowina*, a series of images that sees its debut as part of *Bloodline*.



Meryl McMaster. "Leave To Me Your Memories," 2022. (Meryl McMaster)

At 34, McMaster has already become a notable figure in Canadian art — a 2016 nominee for the Sobey Art Award and winner of honours including the Scotiabank New Generation Photography Award. She's in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, among others. This current exhibition at the McMichael will later tour the country — beginning with the Remai Modern in Saskatoon (which is the co-organizer of the show). It's not even her first survey. [Confluence](#), which appeared in nine galleries across Canada, opened at the Carleton University Art Gallery in 2016, just six years after McMaster finished her BFA at OCAD University.

As a student, McMaster began putting herself in front of the camera, and select works from her time at OCAD U appear in *Bloodline*, the earliest examples drawn from her 2008 series, *Ancestral*. Born and raised in Ottawa, the artist's family background is a mix of Plains Cree, Métis, Dutch and British, and for *Ancestral*, she used her own face as a sort of canvas, transforming her likeness with projected images: photos of animals and depictions of Indigenous men and women from the 19th century. (Her father, the Governor General's Award-winning artist and curator Gerald McMaster, also served as a model for the series.)

The effect created in those photographs suggests transformation, movement — maybe an imagined moment where time stands still or all points in history have converged at once. They're themes that have continued to persist through McMaster's practice. Right up through her most recent series, she often explores ideas around memory, migration and the spaces that exist between time and identities.



Meryl McMaster. "Time's Gravity," 2015. (Meryl McMaster)

And it's the life and times of her paternal grandmothers that especially inform her new body of work, which includes two films (a first for McMaster) that were largely shot in Red Pheasant. In one of them (*We Can Hear Your Heartbeat*), McMaster walks a railway track. Now overgrown with prairie grass, it's a route her Cree and Métis grandmothers would have travelled. "Why do I come to this place?" she says in a voiceover. "What does it know of me that I can not know of myself?"

Questions like those drove McMaster to create the project in the first place, and she told CBC Arts more about the creative journey when we reached her by phone in Chelsea, Que. Here are some moments from that conversation.



Meryl McMaster. "Every Path Tells," 2022. (Meryl McMaster)

CBC Arts: You mentioned you've been working on the new body of work for a couple of years, so how did it all begin?

Meryl McMaster: In a period of about five years, my grandma — my dad's mom — and my two uncles — his brothers — passed away, and so my dad came into possession of some photographs and documents and things from I guess the mid-19th century until the 1970s. He shared them with me; he thought I would be interested. There were photographs I'd never seen before of my grandmother and her family. And there were a couple objects in particular that I was really interested in.

One was a diary that my great-grandmother Bella Wuttunee wrote in the mid-1940s, and there was also a letter that she had written in the 1970s — this four-page letter about her life. She was in her mid-to-late seventies when she wrote it.

There's such a nostalgic feeling to looking at old black and white photographs, and there's this draw I had when looking at them — looking at the details to see if I

recognize myself in these women and family members, some that I knew growing up and then others that I never had the chance to meet. It's just like this urge to connect and to learn what life was like from their perspective.

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VIDEO

How Meryl McMaster takes the vast Canadian landscape and makes it very personal

Those were my initial feelings, and then after, it did kind of cross my mind: could there ever be a time when I'm looking at this in my work?

That got my creative juices going in terms of looking at these different belongings. And I was really interested in interviewing my great aunts and uncles who are still alive, who would have memories of them.

What did you want to know? Were there stories or details from the diary you wanted to learn more about?

Yeah, definitely. The little diary that was my great-grandmother's, it was recounting everyday life on the reserve. So, it wasn't like a journal where she was talking about her deepest thoughts and feelings, it was just things that they were doing on the farm — notes about daily life and the weather. So with that, I definitely wanted to hear more from my great aunt and uncle, and see if they could add more to the very short sentences she had jotted down every day for a year.

And also, there was the letter. As I was saying earlier, it was written by my great-grandmother, and in that one, I got more of a sense of her voice. It starts with her talking a teeny bit about her life and the kids she had. She was really struggling to get some money from the government to build a house of her own, and she kind of failed to receive any money in the end.

That was something I asked my family members about — if they remembered that. Through these little bits of information I was trying to form these mental pictures in my head, and I was also trying to find more stories that weren't in any of [my grandmothers'] pieces of writing.



Meryl McMaster. "Do You Remember Your Dreams," 2022. (Meryl McMaster)

Were you trying to picture what your grandmothers were like, or were you trying to imagine something more broad, like what it would be like for anyone to live in that time and place?

I think it was both. I was really trying to understand these three women better in my own mind, and understand what they were like. What I got from it was a sense of their self-determination and resilience.

Through that, I was also trying to figure out — maybe glimpse a different side of them, as well. I was trying to feel more connected — to understand them better because they were living through a really difficult time, you know, under this colonial structure of power. My father was affected by them going through this life of assimilation, and then that has also affected me. It's about trying to understand — just understand it all — to have a fuller picture of who they were and what their lives were like to form a better mental impression in my head.

Not to oversimplify things, but that impression you were trying to form, is that what you were out to capture in the new photos?

Yeah, yeah. It's part of that. In these pictures, I'm trying to tell bits of their stories, and there's also my interpretation of these stories and who they were. It's also about pulling back and looking at what was happening to not just these three women, but the broader community.

Where were the new images shot? Is it all in the same place — is it Red Pheasant? Or where are you in the images?

Not all of them are in Red Pheasant. Some of them are shot near me, like where I'm living in Chelsea, Que. But yeah, there are some I knew I wanted to photograph in Red Pheasant or the Red Pheasant area.

I was curious how the locations were selected. How did you go about choosing them? Were these places your great-grandmother wrote about?

There's definitely a few, like *The Grass Grows Deep* and *Every Path Tells. Echoes Across the Field*: that's right where my grandmothers would have lived.



Meryl McMaster. "Echoes Across The Field," 2022. (Meryl McMaster)

You can really see the span of seasons in the new photos — you've got snow on the ground, you've got green grass. So were you going back and forth to Saskatchewan over the course of a year? What was that experience like?

(laughs) Yeah. It was because I was shooting these two films at the same time that I was working on the photographs, and the films were predominantly shot in Saskatchewan — mostly on Red Pheasant and the Battleford area.

It's a tricky process, travel. I started doing that in my last body of work, *As Immense As the Sky* — travelling with all these different elements and photographing at different locations. So I had a bit of an idea of what I was getting into: just packing up all my things and having to open them up at the airport — you know, for the oversize baggage people. (laughs)

If something gets broken while I'm photographing or travelling — you know, I've definitely had to go to the hardware store to get pliers to repair something.

Looking at your work, I certainly get the sense that you plan everything meticulously. You know, you've created all of the costumes, the makeup, the props — you've selected where the photo is taking place with great purpose. But at the same time, you shoot so much outdoors — and in this case, you're travelling. So like you were saying, there are all these potential risks. Do you find yourself having to improvise much? Are there images that changed quite a lot upon arriving in Saskatchewan?

When I do my idea sketch, it's definitely not how the image always ends up looking. In some cases it does. Like, in some cases there's only so many ways I can move in something.



Meryl McMaster. "Edge of a Moment," 2017. (Meryl McMaster)

For *Edge of a Moment* at Head Smashed in Buffalo Jump, the winds were so high. I wanted to photograph early in the morning, but it was like 80 or 90 mile per hour winds. I couldn't let go of my hat because it was going to fly off my head! I ended up photographing it in the middle of the day, so I guess images sometimes change like that — more, you know, to do with lighting.

Your photos are often described as self-portraits.

Yeah.

Is that accurate to you? Is it you in the photos, or who are you in these pictures?

I mean, that's a good question. They're kind of imagined self-portraits. Yes, it's me. But they're kind of representations of my thoughts or feelings or imagined parts of myself.

Thinking about the new ones, *Stories of my Grandmothers*, I'm almost stepping into their shoes. When I was photographing these images I was thinking about them.

It's not always [self-portrait]. Sometimes when I look at the photographs, I don't see me. I think that it's something that sometimes feels complicated to answer — and even to understand sometimes, you know?



Meryl McMaster. "Remember The Sky You Were Born Under," 2022. (Meryl McMaster)

I wonder if the question is more about time. Like, when do these scenes take place? Your new body of work: are these pictures in the past? Is this your grandmother's time, or is this happening now, or in the future?

It's this kind of timeless state. A lot of the images talk about the past, present and future. It's almost like a combined timeline.

At the beginning of working on this latest project, you'd discovered all of these family mementos, and as you were saying, you were so curious about your grandmothers — you wanted to connect. Now that you're on the other

side of this project — now that it's done — do you feel more connected to who your grandmothers were, or are you left with more questions? Where has the process taken you?

Yeah, I mean, I think I definitely feel more connected with them. I definitely have a better understanding of their history and what was happening around them: who they were and how they went through life. But you know, I think you never really truly know someone. Even your self is something that you're discovering and realizing. I feel like there's still a lot of gaps that I want to fill, if I can — you know, talking with my great aunt and uncle, my cousins. I'm still asking questions. And so I think it's a process that will keep going beyond this project.



Meryl McMaster. "When the Shadows Fall," 2022. (Meryl McMaster)

This conversation has been edited and condensed.

Meryl McMaster. *Bloodline*. To May 28. The McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ont. www.mcmichael.com