

Meryl McMaster *As Immense as the Sky* 4 December 2019 – 23 February 2020



Meryl McMaster, *On the Edge of this Immensity* (2019), Giclée Print. Courtesy the artist

Ikon presents the first UK solo exhibition of work by Meryl McMaster (b. 1988, Ottawa), during 4 December 2019 – 23 February 2020. From a rising generation of indigenous artists in Canada, McMaster's photography explores identity and its distinct cultural landscapes, with extraordinary visual impact. Comprised of new and recent work, the exhibition draws from the artist's dual heritage to examine broader questions of being, placing emphasis on the social, cultural and environmental contact zones of both her indigenous and European ancestors.

McMaster is a Plains Cree from Red Pheasant First Nation (Saskatchewan, Canada) and a member of the Siksika First Nation (Alberta, Canada) on her father's side, and Euro-Canadian (British and Dutch) on her mother's. Fashioning elaborate, sculptural garments and props, her performative self-portraits – recently staged in a variety of dramatic, outdoor settings – present journeys which are both actual and imaginative, into the realms of her ancestors. Previously focusing on tensions entailed in the overlapping and transforming of bi-cultural identity, McMaster reflects on the struggle found at the intersection of self-

exploration and heritage: “While both sides of my family lived on the Canadian prairies, their histories and cultures were often in tension – even conflict. Walking the paths of my indigenous and European ancestors [has been] an act of absorbing time and space, sites of peace and struggle, into a new vision of personal reconciliation.”

In her latest series *As Immense as the Sky* (2019), which the exhibition takes as its title, the artist intersects various narratives that draw on a sense of place, ancestry, memory and self. Captured across various Canadian provinces, including ancient sites in Saskatchewan and early settlements in Ontario and Newfoundland, the artist interprets, and re-stages patrimonial stories collected from relatives, community elders, and friends. Acknowledging the personal and social history and effects of colonisation, McMaster contemplates how ancestral stories are written into the landscape by the people who once lived, as well as those who still reside, in these sites. With an ecological proposition, she presents herself in nature, viewing the environment and seasons as an integral part of the cultural context, where myth and narration go hand in hand. McMaster explains:

“I want to bring specific awareness to the broad consequences of colonisation and how the mentality of greed and/or lack of foresight is still impacting us today. Each of us has a complicated relationship with the past with gaps and biases, and it is important to me to expose and explore these gaps so that we may encounter our next moments better prepared.”

Selected works from her series *Edge of a Moment* (2017) are also presented at Ikon. Taken in Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump in Alberta, an important historical site for the Siksika First Nation, the series nods to the wider environmental consequences of colonisation. More specifically, McMaster references the dangers of unsustainable land usage with the erasure of key species within ancestral ecosystems; in this case, bison, beavers and prairie chickens – the latter whose footprints have been abstracted into a garment design. Rather than resolving these dilemmas, McMaster’s work creates opportunities for introspection and conversation. In this vein, the exhibition not only conveys the artist’s developed understanding of herself, but also a refreshingly humane and timely artistic vision.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue with texts from American writer and curator Lucy Lippard and Indigenous Canadian writer and curator Lindsay Nixon.

For more information, high-res images and to request interviews please contact Milly Carter Hepplewhite or Lisa Hopf on 020 8969 3959 or email milly@pelhamcommunications.com or lisa@pelhamcommunications.com

Social Media Handles:

Instagram, Twitter and Facebook:

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Links

ikon-gallery.org

merylmcmaster.com

Note to Editors:

1. Ikon exhibition opening: Wednesday 4 December, 6-8pm.
2. Born in Ottawa in 1988, Meryl McMaster studied at the Ontario College of Art and Design University. She has exhibited widely throughout Canada, the United States and internationally, and was the recent recipient of the Scotiabank New Generation Photography Award (2018). Her work has been included in exhibitions at: Smithsonian National Museum of American Indian, New York, US; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada; the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada; The Eiteljorg Museum, Indianapolis, US; Les Rencontres d'Arles, France; and the Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, Australia.
3. Ikon is an internationally acclaimed contemporary art venue situated in central Birmingham. Established in 1964 by a group of artists, Ikon is an educational charity and works to encourage public engagement with contemporary art through exhibiting new work in a context of debate and participation. The gallery programme features artists from around the world and a variety of media is represented, including sound, film, mixed media, photography, painting, sculpture and installation. Ikon's off-site programme develops dynamic relationships between art, artists and audiences outside the gallery. Projects vary enormously in scale, duration and location, challenging expectations of where art can be seen and by whom. Education is at the heart of Ikon's activities, stimulating public interest in and understanding of contemporary visual art. Through a variety of talks, tours, workshops and seminars, Ikon's Learning Team aims to build dynamic relationships with audiences, enabling visitors to engage with, discuss and reflect on contemporary art.
ikon-gallery.org
4. Ikon is open Tuesday – Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am - 5pm. Admission is free. Ikon Gallery is supported using public funding from Arts Council England and Birmingham City Council. For the latest news and events follow @ikongallery on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).
5. Arts Council England is the national development body for arts and culture across England, working to enrich people's lives. ACE support a range of activities across the arts, museums and libraries – from theatre to visual art, reading to dance, music to literature, and crafts to collections. Great art and culture inspires us, brings us together and teaches us about ourselves and the world around us. In short, it makes life better. Between 2018 and 2022, ACE will invest £1.45 billion of public money from government and an estimated £860 million from the National Lottery to help create these experiences for as many people as possible across the country. artscouncil.org.uk