Artist: MCMASTER, Meryl (Plains Cree/European, b. 1988 Ottawa, Ontario; lives and works in Ottawa/Cris des Plaines/européen, né en 1988 à Ottawa, Ontario; vit et travaille à Ottawa)

Known for her large scale photographic works, Ottawa based artist Meryl McMaster’s photographic practice combines elements of performance and installation. Self-portraiture features heavily in McMaster’s oeuvre, as she explores tensions surrounding understanding one’s personal identity and heritage, especially her own as a woman of Indigenous (Plains Cree) and European (British/Dutch) descent. McMaster studied photography at the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD), graduating in 2010. That same year she won the Canon Canada Prize, Ontario College of Art and Design Medal (Photography), Spoke Club Membership Prize and Vistek Photography Award. She was one of three winners of the first annual Scotiabank New Generation Photography Award in 2018 and the winner of the REVEAL Indigenous Art Award in 2017 and was longlisted for the 2016 Sobey Art Award. She has received a number of prestigious grants and fellowships, including the Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellow, Indianapolis (2013).

McMaster’s work has been included in multiple exhibitions since 2006. She had her first solo exhibition in 2010 titled In-Between Worlds, which opened at Project Space, Harbourfront Centre, in Toronto and travelled to Station Gallery, Whitby, Ontario; Peterborough Art Gallery, Peterborough, Ontario; Art Gallery of Hamilton Design Annex, Hamilton, Ontario and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal, Quebec, until 2017. She has had a total of five solo exhibitions across Canada and the United States, most recently Confluence, which opened at the Carleton University Art Gallery in 2016 and travelled to the Doris McCarthy Gallery, Toronto, Ontario; Richmond Art Gallery, Richmond, British Columbia; Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Thunder Bay, Ontario and the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, Brandon, Manitoba, throughout 2017. Some notable group exhibitions include: New Generation Photography Award Exhibition, (2018) at the National Gallery of Canada and Onsite Gallery, OCAD, Toronto; Every. Now. Then: Reframing Nationhood (2017) at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; The Sublunary World (2017) at the Baldwin Gallery and Black Club, London, England; My Spirit is Strong (2016) at the Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada Art Gallery, Gatineau, Quebec; Back Where They Came From (2016) at Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri; Fifth World (2015) at the Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; In the Flesh (2013) at the Ottawa Art Gallery and 1812 – 2012: A Contemporary Perspective (2012) at the Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, Ontario. McMaster’s work has been acquired by various public collections throughout Canada and the United States, including the Canadian Museum of History, The Art Gallery of Ontario, the Canada Council Art Bank, the Eiteljorg Museum, the National Museum of the American Indian, the Ottawa Art Gallery, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

McMaster’s performative approach to photography, creating staged images characterized by elaborate costumes and props, has been the primary focus of her practice. She blurs the boundaries between performance, sculpture and photography, which is ultimately the end result. McMaster does not consider her elaborate props – from full on animal costumes (as seen in Wingeds Calling) to a sort of collar
fashioned out of hundreds of twisted newspapers (as seen in *Aphoristic Currents*) – as stand-alone works of art, but rather as tools of personal transformation that become extensions of her body.¹

The resulting photographs are self-portraits capturing the tensions between cultural and personal memory, and what is made possible by imagination.² She states: “I’m really interested in exploring questions of our sense of self and how we really come to construct that sense of self through land and lineage, history and culture.”³ In much of her body of work, McMaster presents herself in nature, and sees the landscape and seasons as an integral part of her journey of self-discovery. Both *Winged’s Calling* and *Aphoristic Currents* are part of McMaster’s 2010 – 13 series *In-Between Worlds*. The series was inspired by McMaster’s profound experiences exploring remote natural landscapes, through which she began to explore her relationship to others and her place in the natural world.⁴ She says that she viewed the creation of the series as a transformational experience:

> “The idea of *In-Between Worlds* struck me as an opportunity to express my bi-cultural heritage, not as a struggle but rather as a strategic way of thinking how they connect. I belong to two heritages, existing betwixt and between…I inserted my own body into visual spaces that reflected both the inspiration I felt from my time alone in nature as well as the concept of being betwixt…As I progressed, I began to incorporate sculptures that took on the form of talismans, further suggesting a collaging of my heritages.”⁵

*In-Between Worlds* is the precursor to her later series *Murmur* (2013) and *Wanderings* (2015). *Murmur* explores how collective identities are formed, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, through the use of thousands of paper starlings. *Wanderings* is a series of self-portraits in which dreamlike experiences represent the state of being in-between the past and the future, with themes relating to wandering and exploring the unknown. Both series use elaborate costumes and props to convey their messages.

Please cite in the following manner:

Jasmine Inglis, Acquisition Proposal for Meryl McMaster’s *Edge of a Moment*, accession #48508, Curatorial File, National Gallery of Canada.

³ Lynn Saxberg, “And the first New Generation Photography awards go to...” Ottawa Citizen (March 2018).
⁵ Ibid.