Artist: CUTHAND, Ruth (Plains Cree, b. 1954, Prince Albert, Saskatchewan / né en 1954, Prince Albert, Saskatchewan)

Ruth Cuthand is a multi-media artist and teacher who has worked in printmaking, painting, drawing, photography and beadwork. For over thirty years, this well-established Saskatoon based artist has been addressing the legacy of colonialism with a practice marked by political critique and subversive humour. Her practice addresses themes such as the lingering effects of first contact, Indigenous representation in mainstream media and the history of abuse in residential schools. In her recent work, Cuthand has focused on beadwork as a way to centre her position as an Aboriginal woman and use materials and techniques that have historically been denied status as serious art. “In my work, I challenge the status quo by exposing the inequities that have plagued for centuries Canada’s relationships with its First Peoples, while proudly claiming a complex and self-determined Aboriginal identity.”

Cuthand was awarded the 2013 Saskatchewan Lieutenant Governor’s Award and in 2015 was named an Alumni of Influence by the College of Arts and Science at the University of Saskatchewan.

In 1990, Cuthand’s first solo exhibition, S. Ruth Cuthand: The Trace of Ghost Dance, was held at Regina’s MacKenzie Art Gallery. Over the last thirty years her work has been exhibited extensively in North America, culminating in a solo retrospective titled BACK TALK (Works 1983-2009), organized by the Mendel Art Gallery in 2011, that travelled across Canada in 2012 and 2013. The artist’s work is included in the collections of the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon; Indian Affairs and Northern Affairs Canada, Ottawa, Ontario; Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Thunder Bay, Ontario; Laurentian University Museum and Art Gallery, Sudbury, Ontario; MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina, Saskatchewan; Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and Art Bank, Canada Council for the Arts, Ottawa, Ontario.

Smallpox, Spanish Flu and Pneumonia are part of the artists’ ongoing Reserving Series. In this series, the artist uses intricate beadwork to depict diseases that have affected Indigenous populations in North America from the mid 1880’s, when many Indigenous peoples were forced to abandon their traditional lifestyles and move onto reserves, until the 1980’s, what Cuthand deems the beginning of the contemporary era of new diseases.

The gold handwritten script that appears at the bottom of the works from the Reserving Series was commissioned by the artist from a local sign writer. This text is an important part of the work. As viewers get closer, they

realize that they are not only looking at a striking image, it is actually the depiction of a germ that has impacted and often killed many people. This text differs from Cuthand’s Trading Series, which includes diseases from the earliest days of colonization, where the name of the disease appears in white, stencil block letters painted directly onto the black suede matboard on which the beaded work is fixed. It also differs from the artists’ Surviving Series, which visualizes modern day diseases that have emerged since 1980 and often disproportionately impact Indigenous communities. In this series, the disease name is etched in Helvetica typeface directly onto the glazing placed over the work.

The inspiration for this series originated in the artists’ role as a teacher. Cuthand resisted teaching beadwork like a traditional craft, instead, she decided to subvert the materials and use them like paint. Working with beads brought up the history of Indigenous trade with Europeans, which led to Cuthand searching for viruses online. “I did an Internet search for the viruses, and they were just gorgeous to look at. These abstract images brought me my ‘aha moment’…Let’s do these images in beads.” These works examine both sides of Indigenous and European trade, highly prized colourful beads arriving in North America alongside horrible diseases which caused the decimation of many Indigenous peoples. Cuthand uses beads as a visual reference to this terrible exchange and in a larger sense colonialism in general, while using traditional materials in a contemporary setting, juxtaposing beautiful imagery with a dark history. In relation to all three series’ she states: “…it capitalizes on my fascination with the attractive and repellant subject; the simultaneously beautiful and abhorrent. This dichotomous relationship between appearance and content…it is that gap that creates a space for contemplation about the work and what it means.”

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3 Cuthand, Artist Statement.