CUTHAND, Thirza (b. Regina, Saskatchewan, 1978 / née à Régina (Saskatchewan) en 1978)

Thirza Cuthand was born in Regina, Saskatchewan, in 1978. A self-described “bipolar butch lesbian two spirited boy/girl thingamabob” of Cree, Scottish and Irish heritage, she majored in film and video at Emily Carr Institute of Art & Design in Vancouver. She produces experimental videos and films on low to no budget, in which she explores issues of identity, race, sexuality, relationships, ageism and mental health. Her work has been exhibited extensively in galleries and festivals nationally and internationally. These include the Walker Art Centre (Minneapolis), the Mackenzie Art Gallery (Regina), Oberhausen International Short Film festival (Germany), the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, Optic Nerve (Peterborough), The Women’s Television Network, MIX NY, the Walter Phillips Gallery (Banff), the Mendel Art Gallery (Saskatoon), the MIX Brasil festival of Sexual Diversity, New York Exposition of Short Film and Video, Oeer City Cinema (Regina), 9e Biennale de l’Image en Mouvement (Geneva) and Transmediale (Berlin) among many others.

She also works as a curator and has conceived programs for ImageNation (Vancouver), Video Out (Vancouver), Paved Art (Saskatoon) and Queer City Cinema (Regina).

"I sometimes think nobody really cares to hear these stories, but sometimes that's the exciting part of the challenge of being a filmmaker—trying to work really hard to make these films something people just HAVE to see for themselves. I think humor really helps—people are easier to reach if they are laughing than if they feel like they are being lectured. For myself, the second the end credits go I feel a rush."

As an Aboriginal woman, a lesbian, and a video artist, Thirza Cuthand is making work not only “concerned” with her Aboriginality, but reflecting on it as one part of the dilemma of who and what she is… and is not. Beginning her artwork while she was still a teenager, she has created an impressive body of work that examines some of the most taboo subjects in our society. She references her own sexuality, desires, lusts, doubts, and the questions she has about them and situates them within a post-colonial, post-feminist, and post-identity politics framework, challenging us to see her through her own eyes, not a predetermined collective conscience.

“Childhood sexuality, intergenerational relationships, mental disability, and the politics of multi-race identity are some of the fraught and frightening subjects that this artist has chosen, subjects that so terrify our colonial, puritanical, and polite Canadian society that many wish such topics would just go away. Yet Cuthand more than speaks the unspeakable. Her logic twists and turns, surprising, disarming, and (dare I say), entertaining.” (Shawna Dempsey, “Thirza Cuthand”, Poolside, Video Pool: Winnipeg, 1999, 11)
Cuthand has been described as “Canada’s Sadie Benning” and “fearless in her choice of subject matter.” Still young in age, but not so in terms of her influence on artists and video makers, Cuthand was, and is a pioneer in the medium. Her work unravels the many layers of identity, including those of race, gender, sexuality and disability, leaving us cringing at our own preconceptions and attitudes while challenging us to see them for what they are. Her biting humour and challenging content encourages us to laugh, and to think. Thirza Cuthand is among a group of pioneering Aboriginal film and videomakers such as Alanis Obomsawin, Shelley Niro, Dana Claxton and Loretta Todd. Her inclusion in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada is timely, and will bolster the gallery’s Indigenous, as well as media art collections.

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