

Audio tour transcript

Thank you for visiting the Art Gallery of Regina to experience the unique exhibition *owîceskoyakinikewak* from August 8 to October 12, 2024. *owîceskoyakinikewak* was a collaborative creation with community members using clay dug from the earth of our province, a process that connects us with culture, spirit, land, and water embedded in the clay.

Before entering the gallery, please use the coat rack in our welcome area or set large bags on the floor inside the gallery doors.

We understand that you may be curious about how artworks are made and what they are made from, but we urge you to refrain from investigating by touching fragile artworks, even those that might not look like art to you.

Please help yourself to sensory tools for use in the gallery from the baskets under the white table outside the gallery doors. There are earmuffs for those sensitive to sound, dark glasses for people with light sensitivity and fidget toys for those who wish to keep their hands busy. Please return these items at the end of your visit.

I'm Sandee Moore, curator of the exhibition *owîceskoyakinikewak*. I'm delighted to guide you through this exhibition, for which KC Adams turned the gallery into a reflective space, filling it with images, objects and sound that welcomes people into an experience of closeness to the land and culture.

KC Adams, also known as Flying Overhead in Circles Eagle Woman, is a Winnipeg-based relational maker registered with Fisher River Cree Nation. Primarily known for her photo-based and new media artworks, Adams has been exhibiting and winning awards for her artwork since the 1990s.

Adams conducted workshops with selected Indigenous women from two local communities and has included ceramics they created in the exhibition. Their names are Sybil Alexson, Larissa Cyr, Geanna Dunbar, Chantell Dubois, Alison Elsner, Karlie King, Melanie Monique Rose, Ethel Starblanket, Denita Starr, Reah Starr, and Judy Upton.

Before you experience the exhibition, please visit our welcome table to obtain helpful items and gallery information, including self-guided tour pamphlets and a map that attributes each ceramic object to its creator.

If you look at the wall to the left of the entrance doors, you'll see the exhibition's didactic panel inside the gallery. Didactic means intended to teach; an exhibition didactic panel includes information that helps visitors understand and learn about an exhibition. This didactic panel consists of the artist's name, the exhibition dates and title, *owîceskoyakinikewak*, and a short introduction I wrote for this show, which includes participants' names and an explanation of what *owîceskoyakinikewak* means.

Adams has titled the exhibition *owîceskoyakinikewak*, which translates to "s/he shapes clay or mud." The title draws attention to the artist's ongoing journey of learning her ancestors' language and cultural traditions, which, due to colonialization, were often not

passed on to younger generations. The artist points out that she titled the show Plains Cree to honour the Indigenous language most widely spoken in this place today rather than the Anishinaabe, which she has been relearning as an adult.

The words "shaping mud" also honour the role of The Artist as one whose creations exceed their modest input of materials. To shape mud is to be a creator. Not to breathe life into the sticky mire of earth mixed with water but to touch and form it into a pot: a blessing that nourishes human life. The artist hopes people will consider these central ideas when experiencing this installation.

Photos are permitted. If you post pictures from our exhibition, tag the Art Gallery of Regina and the artists.

When you enter the gallery, you will notice that the lights are dimmed, and the space is open and filled with soft sounds. You may have heard of things like Immersive Van Gough as art experiences that surround you; *owîceskoyakinikewak* is authentically immersive, pansensory, and creates an experience for understanding this place, the lands upon which we reside and the histories that live in the air, water, earth and fire of this land. Adams states she intended to create a contemplative space for leisurely viewing and reflection. She also mentions that she wanted to create an installation that Indigenous people could enter and feel seen while non-Indigenous folks also feel welcome.

At the heart of the exhibition is a symbolic fire pit—which includes branches and wood ash encircled by rocks.

Nestled into a downy oval of ash are ceramic objects made by Adams, Indigenous women in Regina and individuals from Starblanket Cree Nation, all created from clay dug from the land. We'll start the tour here.

The branches are the same as those used to build fires to turn soft clay into sturdy ceramics. The rocks are grandfather rocks; some have been heated and used in a sweat. Grandfather rocks contain wisdom. Because rocks are so old, they have memories and knowledge of the times that humans do not know.

Inside this ring of wood and rock is a pile of ash-covered sand. Many round-bottomed cooking pots and other ceramic objects created by community members are set into softly mounded sand and ash. The ash is not circular but oblong. We can understand this shape as an eye - critical for observing and knowing the world and providing insight and perception beyond sight. The shape is also reminiscent of a canoe, a vehicle closely associated with water and that resonates with connections to community and family.

The rounded shapes of cooking vessels, which also sustain life, mimic the rounded belly of a pregnant person.

The women - Sybil Alexson, Larissa Cyr, Geanna Dunbar, Chantell Dubois, Alison Elsner, Karlie King, Melanie Monique Rose, Ethel Starblanket, Denita Starr, Reah Starr, and Judy Upton - who created ceramics objects through workshops led by Adams learned to value themselves as women by learning about their roles as water protectors, life-givers and nurturers.

Working with clay harvested from their traditional lands brought participants into direct, intimate contact with the earth, water, and fire. This sustained contact evokes a profound sense of gratitude and care. Recognizing that community is critical, ceramic objects made from local clay and fired outdoors are a significant part of the installation. Please take an artwork attribution pamphlet from our welcome table for a map so you can identify the maker of each pot, medallion and smudge bowl collected at the gallery's heart.

Adams referred to archaeological examples of round-bottomed cooking pots from this area to inform how she makes and teaches how to make clay vessels. Often recognized for her work in new media and photography, it was an exhibition at Gallery 1C03 at the University of Winnipeg that connected Indigenous artists with archaeologists and the collection of the Manitoba Museum that first set Adams on the path to recovering lost ancestral ceramics knowledge.

The artist began by studying pottery sherds and surviving examples, learning from archaeologists and finally undertook an experimental archeological process. She considered conditions under which people would have created ceramic vessels up to 2000 years ago. She considered available tools and technologies. She learned to recognize features that indicate a rich deposit of clay, such as in Regina, left by a prehistoric ocean. She noted traces of textiles evidencing how woven fibres could be used to reinforce the crumbly ceramic body. She considered the migratory lifestyle of these

ancient potters, who may have little more than a day to fashion a year's worth of cooking pots when stopping in this clay-rich area. Working on the land, Adams incorporated methods she uncovered in the archaeological record and developed her own techniques through experimentation.

The artist, whose ancestry includes Ininnew, Anishinaabe and British, describes how she was unaware that her people had a pottery tradition, which is often left out of mainstream university curricula. Yet, she enthuses, the first time she touched clay, it just "felt right."

With generous support from SaskCulture, Adams conducted workshops in Regina and Lebret, Saskatchewan, this past June to share the healing power of clay with local Indigenous women.

She describes the importance of creating ways for people to handle the clay of this land to "recall lasting pathways of blood memory and transmit knowledge of traditional relationships with water to future generations." A desired outcome of the exhibition and the workshops is to activate the Indigenous community to carry this knowledge into practice and share it widely so that it "never goes silent again."

The photographs that encircle the gallery chronicle these workshops. Adorned with potent geometrical designs of the starblanket or Texas star and the medicine wheel or four directions, the artist underscores the themes of community, protection and the cycle of life. Each group of three photo collages and accompanying soundscape corresponds to four life-sustaining elements essential to ceramics: Air, Fire, Water, and Earth.

[South Wall - earth]

Turn to the South wall, which corresponds to Earth, you will hear the sharp tinging sound of a metal shovel blade cleaving clay and the resonant boom of fingers grazing the sides of a fired terracotta pot.

The triptych of images on this wall documents the multiple ways that making clay vessels enabled participants to connect to the Earth. This patchwork of images includes the sites where participants found clay. Other photographs include the faces and hands of participants and community members as they dig clay, make offerings in return, remove rocks and roots from the raw clay, and crush rocks used in sweats to use as temper. Non-pliable, granular additives called "temper" prevent cracks and explosions when drying and heating clay.

Traditionally, all members of a community, including children, would participate in creating clay vessels. For example, children mix clay, water, and temper with their feet, stomping and dancing dirt into elastic clay.

You might notice that most women are wearing long cotton skirts trimmed with ribbon bands at the hem. These are ribbon skirts: Indigenous and non-Indigenous women can wear ribbon skirts. A ribbon skirt could suggest a connection to Mother Earth, celebrating one's identity as a woman or commitment to sustaining and reviving Indigenous ways and traditions.

Adams' intention when creating these photographs was to show smiling faces. Through the exhibition, we invite you to share in these joyful community events

and experience the fellowship and respect for the interconnectedness of all people and the earth that permeates each image.

While it may seem surprising that *owîceskoyakinikewak* combines digital photography and sound with ceramics traditions that stretch back two millennia, Adams notes that Indigenous knowledge systems can be expressed in any medium, including digital media.

[West Wall - air]

Move counterclockwise to the West wall. You will notice the sound shifts as you move from one direction to the next. Here, you will hear deep inhalations of breath, filling lungs with air and then slowly expelling it.

The three photographs and sound here recognize how essential the air is to ceramic-making. Air feeds fire; it feeds our bodies. It allows us to share our thoughts through words carried upon breath.

Sunshine yellow and sky blue stripes band the three photo collages printed on adhesive vinyl on this wall, unifying them like a quilt made of component pieces or one piece of woven cloth.

The colours of the star burned into the central image correspond to air and sky.

Many of these photographs show people's intent and smiling faces as they touch clay and shape it into a vessel that can be used to feed and nourish themselves and others. Equally nourishing is this opportunity to feel the land, the water, the air and fire through shaping clay.

In the top left corner is Chief Mike - he was a supporter and active participant, forming many

beautiful objects with care alongside his community.

Particularly noticeable in this trio of photos is a mural on the side of the gymnasium where we held our workshops on Starblanket Cree Nation in Lebret. A giant eagle, strongly connected to the air and the skies, spreads its wings as if in embrace or protection of the family painted below. The words "honouring the children" on this mural remind us of unmarked children's graves just beyond the spot where we mixed the clay. Recognizing the interconnectedness of these elements and the circular way they support and sustain each other is an example of cyclical or non-linear thinking. Adams has noted that "circular thinking is decolonization." The sky is not just a source of air but also fire (in the form of the sun) and rainwater that falls to earth from clouds.

[North Wall - fire]

If we continue to circulate to the North wall, you will see a different trio of images accompanied by a new localized soundtrack: the popping and crackling of a wood fire.

In these photographs, Adams documents the drying and firing of ceramic vessels outdoors. Using historical methods to work with local clay is challenging; the pots can easily get damaged during the drying and firing. The wood must be absolutely dry; any traces of dampness from rain or liquid sap at the heart of a log can cause explosions, cracks and blowouts. Through trial and error, Adams discovered that long branches from long dead trees make the best firewood. They burn hot and clean.

Damp clay, called greenware, is first dried and heated by placing it

around the outside of a fire as it burns down to embers and coals. Then, pots are piled in the centre of a circle of ash, and new wood is piled up around the vessels.

Most ceramicists today dry their clay creations very slowly, over weeks, to prevent cracking. Then, they fire the vessels in electric kilns that can maintain very high temperatures to fire pots over many hours or days. The methods recovered by Adams reveal insights into how to work with clay that breaks with prevailing ideas of how to do things. Amazingly, the processes Adams shared with workshop participants took an hour or less to harden the clay into durable pottery. It's interesting to consider this an analogy to many people's journeys: "Exposure to fire makes what was fragile stronger."

In some cases, the women who created and exchanged knowledge with Adams made blazes to fire their pots; other times, they worked with firekeepers, men who have been educated about fire traditions in their communities.

Relationality, meaning connecting to people, the world, and the past through working together and sharing objects, is a crucial concept for Adams. Rather than working in the prevailing model of an artist who creates as a singular genius, she acknowledges that many people, including those who lived millennia before us, contribute to our knowledge and creativity. "You look at a vessel and understand it as a utilitarian vessel. Its relational meaning is embedded in it." The relational meaning of ceramic cooking pots is that traces of all community members who participated in their creation are written on them, while their role is also to feed these same community members.

People are connected to and through this object.

[water - East Wall]

Now, continue clockwise through the gallery to the East Wall. The trickling, splashing, tinkling sounds of water and shades of blue in the images signal that this wall is associated with water.

As an aside, Adams and six women were deluged with rain, an abundance of water, on the first day of workshops in Regina. Once the vessels have been vitrified and hardened in a fire, they can hold water, cook food, and be companions for our survival. Quilts tell stories and personal histories. Adam's quilt or blanket-inspired photographs show how essential water is to every step in creating a clay pot. Water is used to shape and smooth clay. It is mixed into earth to create a workable, pliable material. Clay was dug from the banks of lakes and creeks pictured on this wall. Even the clay soil of this area exists because of water; it is the remains of a Cretaceous-era seaway and the life it sustained.

Although firing ceramics means evaporating all the water, the watertightness of the vessels is created by removing the cushion of moisture that separates the flat plate-like particles of clay.

Attending to water as the giver of life and acknowledging women's traditional roles as water stewards are vital to Adams, who has created many other artworks focusing on water rights and women as water carriers. Water is a blessing. It connects us to human and non-human relatives; "the same water," proclaims Adams, "that animated the bodies of dinosaurs, now flows through my body and your body." She explains the profound connection between water and women, who

carry babies and give birth: humans begin life surrounded by fluid in the womb. "We all have a mother," she says. "We all have water flowing through our bodies. We all need earth, air, fire, water and family/community to survive."

As Director/Curator at the AGR, it is infinitely rewarding for me to support Adam's project *owîceskoyakinikewak*. Her art practice challenges contemporary art's preoccupation with novelty. By including 20 centuries of understanding in this exhibition and recognizing traditional knowledge as innovation, she proposes cyclical thinking as a contemporary way of being. Her generosity demonstrates how we can dismantle alienating structures of art. She freely exchanges knowledge with community members and includes them as artists. She acknowledges what each person, place and ancestor brings to the process. Her focus on a practical ceramic vessel, viewed as craft and functional and therefore excluded from the realm of art for many years, continues to resonate as a radical gesture of inclusion.

Thank you for taking the time to visit *owîceskoyakinikewak*.

This exhibition would not have been possible without grants from SaskCulture funded by Saskatchewan Lotteries and the Canada Council for the Arts, as well as our exhibition sponsor, TD Managed Investments. We are grateful to our partners, Starblanket Cree Nation and The Comeback Society, for connecting this project with local women.

Thank you to the City of Regina's Accessibility grants program for enabling us to provide inclusive ways to process the concepts in our exhibitions.

I would like to thank our core funders, SK-Arts and the City of Regina, through their Community Partner Grant program.

And I am delighted to recognize SaskTel for making this audio tour possible with their sponsorship, which connects people to experiences of art through communications technology.

I especially thank YOU for taking the time to listen to this audio tour and attend this exhibition. You can support the Art Gallery of Regina by becoming a member, donating, or both. Visit our website, www.artgalleryofregina.ca, for details on becoming part of our gallery's community and more about owîceskoyakinikewak.

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