



MACKENZIE ART GALLERY
MUSÉE D'ART MACKENZIE

MACKENZIE ART GALLERY VIRTUAL SCHOOL TOURS

TEACHER'S RESOURCE GUIDE

ITHIN-EH-WUK—WE PLACE OURSELVES AT THE CENTER

James Nicholas & Sandra Semchuk

28 JANUARY – 16 MAY 2021



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INTRODUCTION

ITHIN-EH-WUK—WE PLACE OURSELVES AT THE CENTER:
James Nicholas & Sandra Semchuk



James Nicholas and Sandra Semchuk, *understoryoverstory*, 2004-2005, 15 lightjet photographs, 76.2 x 95.3 cm each



TOUR PREPARATION

ITHIN-EH-WUK—WE PLACE OURSELVES AT THE CENTER: James Nicholas & Sandra Semchuk

Welcome to the MacKenzie Art Gallery's livestreamed digital tour program! This resource is meant to prepare you for your guided online experience, and we are excited to share our in-gallery programming with you from the comfort of your classroom/homes.

We look forward to working with you to create a safe and brave space for dialogue and learning, unpacking big ideas and working towards a deeper understanding of the world and each other through art. Please take the time to review this resource and reach out if you have any questions whatsoever.

TOUR PREPARATION

Please make sure you are in a space that includes audio-visual technology (webcam, microphone, 360 camera, laptops and projectors). Tours can be delivered using one device for the entire class (in this case a microphone and 360 cameras are preferred) or through each student joining through their own device. Students are welcome to join from home as required.

IF USING ZOOM PLATFORM

Please download the zoom app prior to your scheduled tour time. The gallery will email you a link to join the meeting upon booking the tour.

IF USING TEAMS PLATFORM

The gallery will email an invite to join the meeting upon booking the tour.

Please join the meeting 5-10 minutes prior to the scheduled time.

Please provide students with pencils and one sheet of paper for use during the tour.

Included in this resource is a mandatory pre-tour activity for you to complete with students prior to your tour. **Please make sure this is completed, as each student will be asked to share their work during the tour.** This is an important step for the interpretive process and directly contributes to deeper engagement with artwork themes, ideas, and meaning.



INTRODUCTION

ITHIN-EH-WUK—WE PLACE OURSELVES AT THE CENTER: *James Nicholas & Sandra Semchuk*

How can we understand each other better through art?

Explore the meaning of a loving discourse and intercultural collaboration through this exhibition of two prairie artists, Sandra Semchuk and James Nicholas. Working through themes of reconciliation, identity, culture and togetherness, Semchuk and Nicholas collaborated to create videos, photography, poetry and story. Exploring the wider-than-human context in their work, both artists examine how we as humans operate in the bigger world, considering our responsibility to each other and ourselves.

TOUR OUTCOMES

Students will learn about the effects of colonialism through the lens of intercultural collaboration, dialogue, and compassion.

Students will examine storytelling through multiple mediums, exploring the artists' poetry, photography, and video work.

TEACHER'S RESOURCE GUIDE

CURATORIAL STATEMENT

For fifteen years, Nicholas and Semchuk collaborated on a series of nationally exhibited photo installations and videos which unveil the mindset and effects of colonialism through the lens of their remarkable intercultural marriage. This exhibition brings together for the first time a comprehensive selection of their collaborations, tracing their creative output from their initial meeting in 1993 until Nicholas's accidental death in 2007. Their work reveals a profound commitment to dialogue in which Semchuk's identity as the child of Ukrainian-Canadian settlers from Saskatchewan meets Nicholas's experiences as a Rock Cree man from Manitoba.

While in the accompanying texts Semchuk reflects on her father's respect for the Cree even as he opened their land to exploitation, Nicholas responds with forceful poetry about the rights of ithin-eh-wuk, his people:

listen, acknowledge that we exist
we are not shadows of shadow cultures
we have inherent rights to the land our laws of
being ithin-eh-wuk
we place ourselves at the center

INTRODUCTION

ITHIN-EH-WUK—WE PLACE OURSELVES AT THE CENTER: James Nicholas & Sandra Semchuk

The questions Nicholas and Semchuk ask of each other are personal, at times humorous, at other times painful. As Semchuk notes, they recognized that their relationship was “an opportunity to make political, social and psychological structures created by histories of colonialism, occupation of the land, and racism visible to ourselves and others through our art practice.” Whether dealing with the marginalization of Ukrainian-Canadian settlers or Nicholas’s experiences as a residential school survivor, the effort is always, in Semchuk’s words, “to recognize the truths in each other’s stories.” At the same time the works embrace a “wider-than-human” context by honouring the land, plants, and animals that ground their stories.

Curated by Timothy Long, the exhibition will include over a dozen photo-installations plus a selection of videos. A publication featuring contributions by Dana Claxton, David Garneau, Elwood Jimmy, Andrea Kunard, and Althea Thauberger will address their work and the intercultural sharing which informed their practice.



James Nicholas and Sandra Semchuk, *Being Mom*, 2007-2009, 4 lightjet photographs, 50.8 x 61.0 cm each.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS***ITHIN-EH-WUK—WE PLACE OURSELVES AT THE CENTER:
James Nicholas & Sandra Semchuk*****JAMES NICHOLAS**

James Nicholas was a visionary activist, orator, author, poet, actor, and video/multi-media artist who throughout his life advocated forcefully for Indigenous language, culture, and self-determination. He was born in 1947 into the Bird Clan of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation of Nelson House, Manitoba. He was deeply influenced by the Rock Cree oral traditions and knowledge of his family: his great grandfather Pierre Moose, the first chief of Nelson House and legendary medicine man; his mother Sarah Linklater, a gifted herbalist and midwife for more than 100 new lives; and his father Lionel Nicholas, an exceptional trapper, hunter, courier de bois, poet in the Cree oral tradition, and medicine man. Along with future Grand Chief Phil Fontaine, Nicholas attended residential school in Manitoba, a traumatic experience which motivated much of his later work. Employing his skills as a writer and negotiator, he worked with the chiefs of northern Manitoba and the Nelson House Band to strengthen governance and administration, while also pressing federal and provincial governments on a range of issues, including land claims, fiduciary responsibility, economic development, child welfare, and education. In the early 1990s, Nicholas gave

away all his possessions and moved to Vancouver where he became an actor, writer/poet, video artist, and collaborating artist with his wife Sandra Semchuk. In 1995 he played the lead role in a Banff Centre of the Arts production of *The Sun Raiser* by Yves Soui Durand. His film acting credits include *Silence* (1997, dir. Jack Darcus), *Today is a Good Day* (1999, dir. Loretta Todd), and *Crossfire Trail* (2001), as well as a recurring role in the popular Canadian television series *Nothing Too Good for a Cowboy* (1999). Shifting his political interests into art making, he worked with First Nations artists such as Dana Claxton and Donald Morin. Nicholas's collaborative work with Semchuk (1993–2007) spans photography, text, and video and looks critically at the relationships between the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous. In 2006 he won the Best Experimental Film and Video Award at the IMAGENation Aboriginal Film and Video Festival in Vancouver. On October 15, 2007, Nicholas died while visiting the fishing camp of a friend near Lillooett, B.C. where he slipped and fell from a cliff.



ABOUT THE ARTISTS

ITHIN-EH-WUK—WE PLACE OURSELVES AT THE CENTER: James Nicholas & Sandra Semchuk

SANDRA SEMCHUK

Sandra Semchuk is an artist, photographer, educator, and storyteller who for fifty years has created photo-based works grounded in empathetic insight, resistance to dominant and dominating culture, and a deep respect for the wider-than-human context. She was born in 1948 in Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan to a family of Ukrainian and Polish descent. Her father Martin Semchuk was a socialist who as an MLA helped bring in Medicare in the 1960s; her mother Josephine ran the grocery store. Sandra attended the University of Saskatchewan (BFA 1970) and the University of New Mexico (MA 1983). In 1971 she became a founding member of the Photographers Gallery in Saskatoon. Considering recognition as the basis for identity formation and change, Semchuk moved from witnessing as observation in her early co-operative self-portraits with friends and family members, including her daughter Rowenna, to a practice of moving parallel in her multi-frame gestural self-portraits. These works, along with intergenerational and intercultural collaborations with her father Martin and husband James Nicholas, were featured in *how far back is home...* (Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1995), a mid-career survey that signaled her

importance to the development of photographic practices in Canada embodying interrogation of the self, dialogue, and the recognition of painful colonial histories. Beyond her fifteen-year collaboration with Nicholas, she has worked with a number of Indigenous artists and Elders, including Marcia Crosby, Archie Weenie, and Skeena Reece. Her investigation of Ukrainian-Canadian histories led to the publication *The Stories Were Not Told—Canada's First World War Internment Camps* (University of Alberta Press, 2018), which confronts state violence and inter-generational trauma with a poetics of remembrance, cross-cultural learning, and healing. Recent work engages the wider-than-human—the forest—and the overtone singing of Jerry DesVoignes to provide a larger context for human stories. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and can be found in the collections of the Art Gallery of Alberta, Glenbow Museum, MacKenzie Art Gallery, Museum of Modern Art (NYC), National Gallery of Canada, Remai Modern, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and Vancouver Art Gallery. Semchuk influenced several generations of students and artists as a professor at Emily Carr University (1987–2018). In 2018 her achievements were honoured with a Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

ITHIN-EH-WUK—WE PLACE OURSELVES AT THE CENTER: James Nicholas & Sandra Semchuk

OTHER RESOURCES

Writing about *Taking Off Skins* artwork
themedicineproject.com/sandra-semchuk-james-nicholas.html

Sandra Semchuk video portrait:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWK_4kNb-cE

Blackflash article on Sandra Semchuk:
blackflash.ca/2018/08/27/conversation-with-the-artist-sandra-semchuk/

Exhibitions of collaborations by James Nicholas and Sandra Semchuk include: *how far back is home...* (Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1995, toured), *Poundmaker's Garden* (Godfrey Dean Art Gallery, 2005), *Enemy Aliens, Castle Mountain Internment Camp* (Harbourfront Centre Art Gallery, 2006), *understoryoverstory* (Keyano Art Gallery, 2006), *The Medicine Project* (Grunt Gallery, 2008, web exhibition), *afraid of what I could become* (Mendel Art Gallery and Urban Shaman Gallery, 2008, with Pravin Pillay and Joys Dancer), *Love Stories: listening and seeing as gestures towards reconciliation* (Chapel Gallery, 2014; Indigenous People's Art Collective, Mann Gallery, Prince Albert, 2017), *Witnesses: Art and Canada's Indian Residential Schools* (Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2013), and *Moving Forward, Never Forgetting* (MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2015). Generational Retrospective.... In 2004, Nicholas and Semchuk created *Jericho Park Poems*, a commission for the dining room of the Salvation Army's Belkin House in Vancouver.

MANDATORY PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY***ITHIN-EH-WUK—WE PLACE OURSELVES AT THE CENTER:***
James Nicholas & Sandra Semchuk**MANDATORY PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY****Storytelling Through the Land**

ACTIVITY

Students will create an image that tells the story of a location through multiple perspectives (points of view).

MATERIALS

Worksheet for brainstorming

Pencil and eraser

Paper or canvas

Drawing materials or paint

INSTRUCTIONS

Select a location or place that is part of your own personal story. It could be somewhere you have had a good experience. It could be your family's home. It could be a place you had to leave but wish you had stayed. It could be the very spot you are standing on right now.

Thinking about that place, brainstorm answers to the questions on the provided worksheet.

Imagine you could see these things simultaneously from the past and in the present. Draw or paint an image that incorporates as many concepts from your brainstorming as you can. It may look odd to you at first; images might overlap, or seem unrelated to each other as you draw things that could have happened at different times. Leave space at either the bottom, top, or one side of the image to write one sentence.

Once you have created your picture, take a good look at it. Think about what you would say if you only had one sentence to talk about what was going on in that picture, and write it in the space you left on your artwork.

CURRICULUM OUTCOMES***ITHIN-EH-WUK—WE PLACE OURSELVES AT THE CENTER:
James Nicholas & Sandra Semchuk*****ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS, GRADES 1-12**

The CR(x).1 outcome for all grade levels involves taking in, comprehending, and responding to multiple mediums of texts that deal with issues of identity, social responsibility, and depending on the grade level either community or social action. Some grade levels also require that these texts include works by Indigenous artists. This exhibition will feature stories told through photography, poetry, and videos, as a collaboration between an artist of Cree heritage and an artist of Ukrainian-Canadian heritage. All of the themes required above will be addressed in this exhibition. Students will respond through analytical discussion, through connecting the artworks to personal experience, and through collaborative free-verse poetry creation.

ARTS EDUCATION GRADES 2-9**GRADE 2**

CP2.7 Students will be creating an artwork in the pre-tour activity that explores the layered stories tied to a place that is significant to them. For most students, this will mean exploring stories tied to their communities, and thinking

about communities that interacted with that place before them.

GRADE 3

CR3.2 Students will be responding through discussion and poetry to photographs by Sandra Semchuk and James Nicolas that use the environment to tell layered stories. The artworks that they create in the pre-tour activity are also responding to this use of environment as key to storytelling. Students will have a chance to reflect on connections between Semchuk and Nicholas' art and their own artworks during the tour.

GRADE 4

CP4.7 Students will be creating an artwork in the pre-tour activity that explores the layered stories tied to a place that is significant to them. For most students, this will mean exploring ideas around a Saskatchewan location.



CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

ITHIN-EH-WUK—WE PLACE OURSELVES AT THE CENTER: *James Nicholas & Sandra Semchuk*

GRADE 5

CP5.8 Students will be creating a pre-tour artwork that combines the mediums of drawing (or possibly photography for older students), and written language. They will share this artwork orally as well.

GRADE 6

CH6.2 Students will explore collaborative artworks between Cree artist James Nicholas and Ukrainian-Canadian artist Sandra Semchuk that use portraiture, landscape photography, and poetry to explore ideas about contemporary cultural identity.

GRADE 7

CH7.2 Students will explore collaborative artworks by Cree artist James Nicholas and Ukrainian-Canadian artist Sandra Semchuk that express ideas about place and use images of the environment to tell stories. In particular, students will explore the artwork *understoryoverstory*, which unpacks the story of building a northern road from multiple perspectives.

GRADE 8

CR8.3 Students will explore how Nicholas and Semchuk's artworks present a dialogue between two different worldviews (Cree and Ukrainian-Canadian) in an attempt to gain deeper understanding and appreciation for those diverse views.

GRADE 9

CH9.1 Students will learn about the activism present in the works of Semchuk and Nicholas. Students will see how these artists use written, verbal and visual storytelling to encourage dialogue and understanding between cultures. Students will learn about how having a loving discourse is an important first step in addressing the inequities created by colonialism.



CURRICULUM OUTCOMES***ITHIN-EH-WUK—WE PLACE OURSELVES AT THE CENTER:
James Nicholas & Sandra Semchuk*****VISUAL ART 10/20/30****GRADE 10**

CH10.1 Students will explore artwork that conveys topics about building relationships. The artworks explore the relationship between first generation Ukrainian-Canadian Sandra Semchuk, who was born in Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, and Cree artist James Nicholas from Nelson House, Manitoba.

GRADE 11

CH20.1 Students will learn about artwork by Semchuk and Nicholas that address the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples. Through texts that are part of the artworks, Nicholas frequently defines Indigenous rights. The artworks speak about colonialism and engaging in a loving discourse, building relationships between cultures.

GRADE 12

CH30.1 Students will explore artwork that conveys topics about building relationships, such as those between Indigenous and non-Indigenous treaty members. The artworks explore the relationship between first generation Ukrainian-Canadian Sandra Semchuk and Cree artist James Nicholas. These artworks specifically address colonization and its effects on individuals and the land.



APPENDIX A

BRAINSTORMING ABOUT YOUR SELECTED PLACE

NAME: _____

Place you selected: _____

How has the land physically changed over time? Did it get moved and reshaped by man or nature? Were things built on top of it, or taken down?

What people, animals, or plants were here 5 weeks ago? 5 years ago? 50 years ago? 100 years ago? 1000 years ago?

What would those people/animals/plants have been doing here? 0 years ago? 100 years ago? 1000 years ago?



APPENDIX A

BRAINSTORMING ABOUT YOUR SELECTED PLACE

Has there ever been a conflict (an argument or fight) in that location?

Have people ever interacted with love and care in that location?

Do you know of any stories related to that spot?



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