

## Finding Authenticity

### Transcript

(slow gentle piano music)

- [Tim Whiten] The raw experience of going into nature is an important thing. Tom Thomson took a chance. Thomson understood the need to actually engage with the natural environment in order to understand who he was and what he could contribute. And I believe firmly that, that is what is translated in the works.

(slow gentle piano music)

- [Chaka Chikodzi] Tom Thomson's landscape paintings are also self-portraits. You can feel his presence on every painting. He imbues the landscape with the feelings. So his painting is not just a landscape painting, it's also a connection between himself and the land.

- [Suzy Lake] Thomson's sense of poetry about Algonquin Park, it's focused on his whole relationship to the land and how he is in that land and trying to let his audience know what that experience is like. Not what it looks like, but it's like being there. And I think that that's where the notion of spiritual or poetic is attributed to his work beyond just the fact that they're beautiful paintings.

- [Dorian FitzGerald] Like every other Canadian, never mind Canadian art student, like the Group of Seven is presented as something of significance. And it was immediate to me that I like Tom Thomson's paintings. There's a vitality to them, that's beautiful. So as much as the Group of Seven and the idea of the Canadian landscape tradition and all these things, I mean, I understand it's theirs, nothing I really engage with but certainly if you handed me a Tom Thomson, I would put it up on the wall. And I'm like, yeah.

- [Allyson Mitchell] The story of the Group of Seven in some ways feeds into the story of colonialism. I do like the paintings, many of them. I don't know that much about them because I've resisted that certified national history, about this jolly adventure of explorers, having these heroic individual experiences. And I feel like I could group Tom Thomson into that conversation of myths of what Canada supposedly is and has become because it's been constructed that way.

- [Deirdre Logue] When I think about his subject being the Canadian natural landscape, and I think about climate change and climate justice surely you could find a way to make that kind of revered art more productive in contemporary times, than it is sitting in the dark waiting for an exhibition. And maybe selling the Tom Thomson's and donating the money to climate justice or you're like, isn't there, what would Tom Thomson--

- [Allyson Mitchell] That would be amazing.

- [Deirdre Logue] What would Tom Thomson want to do if it was really about, this is his love, his subject, the Canadian North?

- [Anong Migwans Beam] The Group of Seven, people have strong opinions about their work. There are a lot of pushback from the Indigenous point of view that they were painting terror in all this, an empty Canada. That might've been what they did but I don't believe that they did it with that intent to exclude. Up until that point, Canadian landscape was all painted in a mimicry of European style and European romanticism, all of the European landscape. But in Europe, they don't have giant forests of changing colored maple leaves. So for them to really celebrate Jack pine and Northern pines and these wild landscapes that we have, was really a radical thing in their time.

(peaceful music)

[text overlay: Art authentication involves an examination of five aspects of a work of art: Subject Matter, Style, Materials, Signature, Provenance. Some art and some artists do not fit neatly into these categories. We asked prominent Canadian artists about these categories. The answers they provided hinted at the inscrutable nature of art.]

(peaceful music)

[text overlay: Subject Matter]

- [Anong Migwans Beam] Authenticity is a really unique topic to me. Having experiences with handling an estate after an artist passes away. I come from a family of artists. My father is Carl Beam and my mother Ann Beam. They were both visual artists. My dad was a real trailblazer and he was the first indigenous artist to be purchased as a Contemporary Art by the National Gallery of Canada. I live in M'Chigeeng First Nation on Manitoulin island, and it's the largest freshwater island in the world. I'm a painter and a paint maker. Water and things of that nature, pervade my work, natural landscapes.

- [Nathan Eugene Carson] The predominant subject matter in my work would be portraiture. I'm really fascinated in the human soul and how I can put the human soul into a piece of work. When I let things just arrive or show up or come to be, it's always so much more beautiful than intentionally trying to paint something.

- [Suzy Lake] My formative years, I was a political activist and it was really very important to marry what was happening in the streets with what was happening in the studio. So I started using the body to represent ideas of what was happening culturally from a feminist perspective. The subject matter in the image may be a constructed set of an activity that I do. So there's a difference between subject and subject matter.

- [Shelley Niro] I'm originally from the Six Nations, Mohawk on the Grand and my predominant subject matter is mostly women. My mother, my sisters, my children and my nieces. I like putting images to my work that can be translated in different ways. And sometimes people on

first viewing won't see it, they won't recognize it but maybe on the third or fourth viewing they'll say, "Oh, I never saw that before." So that makes it more interesting for myself as the artist who created it that other people can see different layers in the work.

- [Dorian FitzGerald] The subject matter, initially, was of a completely self-indulgent process. I would come across images in particular the one I can think of. It was like Oprah Winfrey's birthday party that she threw for Sidney Poitier and then like these insane assemblage of 1000 roses that were the centerpieces on this table and it was on a magazine rack. And it was like this electric thing of like, oh, that is a perfect summary of the kind of egregiously wasteful display of wealth. I'm not sure that the painting actually says that,(laughs) but that was the motivation. But yeah, so that kind of random encounter was sufficient at the beginning for the practice. But then as soon as it became something I could make a living out of, a random encounter was completely unreliable(laughs) by its nature. And so then it became much more research-based. So the subject matter started out as excess. The technique is excessive. The amount of material is excessive. Like the effect is one of excess.

(birds chirping)

- [Anong Migwans Beam] My dad went to residential school. He went there only speaking Ojibwa and having an Ojibwa name and then coming out not speaking his own language and having had it like removed from him through abuse. All of his work really was about examining colonial viewpoints. We live inside a colonial framework that even without judging it, it's just to say that there are so many things that we do in an unthinking way that are totally normal to us that are part of a conditioned, just because that's just how things are done. He wanted to be free to be an artist, to be a painter. He never really was allowed to be that. He always had to be Carl, the political artist who is an Indigenous person and he explicitly states that in some of his work.

- [Allyson Mitchell] The artworks that we've made come from a feminist and a queer perspective. That perspective has to be critical, and not necessarily in a negative way. But that if you are identifying as a feminist artist and your work is grappling with the ideas that are troubled through feminism, it has to be critical of the institutions because the institutions are based in patriarchal, capitalist, colonial, classist, racist, sexist foundations. Let's throw in homophobic as well. So there's no way that your work would not be critical.

(gentle music)

[text overlay: Materials]

- [Anong Migwans Beam] A lot changed in my art practice when I started making paint. I think the first time that it really struck me was that I was out in a boat in the North Channel and I was finding rocks and I'm collecting rocks and I take them back and I make paint out of them. And then I'm doing a painting in my studio of that place and of those rocks. And then I had this realization that I'm painting these rocks with paint made of these rocks. And it was this really neat, circulus moment. Most people feel that, oh, paint red is red and paint is paint. As a paint

maker now, I'm really aware of how there's many different ways to get to red. Every component that goes into that is so identifiable at a molecular level. They're very different ways and they come from different places, they're made by different companies, they're very traceable. Now, we live in a different time where anyone has access to anything from all over. But even up to just 20 or 30 years ago, most artists are working with supplies from their local supplier.

(hammer pounding)

- [Chaka Chikodzi] I haven't lived in Zimbabwe for about 23 years. So the longer I was away from home, the more connected I was with the stone. The material I work with is a type of volcanic rock, unique to Zimbabwe. So Zimbabwe means house of stone. It is one of the largest volcanic ridges in the world that did not erupt. I work exclusively with this rock with my practice. It helps me mediate my place here in Canada as an African. I let the stone guide the process. I'm interested in my relationship with the stone. I look at the forces that created the stone is like a co-creator. Think of some of the big rocks that even if I was to go up the mountain to get it by myself, I can't do that. So I have to work with a team. My whole process is like a collaboration.

- [Nathan Eugene Carson] I would say the material that I mostly work in that's been consistent throughout my whole artist practice is paper. I really enjoy the tactileness. I also prefer paper that's been recycled or found on the street or something that has a little bit of, I always call it life to it. I work on the floor and I always bring an image up from the paper.

- [Tim Whiten] Within the last maybe 15 years, I've actually started to invest my time in use of glass. Glass is a constant mirror of what we are as human beings. People carry cell phones in their pocket. We have computers that actually allow us to communicate from distance. It's all based upon the nature of glass. It's an old material. And yet we're finding that it has the capacity to extend our consciousness. We live in a world now which functions on the basis of glass and it's major use for communications. We can look at things that are very small through the use of glass as a magnifying condition. We can look at things from a far distance through the use of glass as well. It's the same material but it affords us to extend our human consciousness.

(gentle music)

[text overlay: Style]

- [Chaka Chikodzi] I don't really think about style. I look for beauty. When I first traveled, that's when I first started questioning what the viewer wanted from me as an African artist. In the end I didn't want to give the viewer what they wanted from me. Once you have arrived to a style, I think it's because you have gained an audience or maybe because you are selling. Once you are selling, it means it's working, but then if it's working, you probably don't want to try something new because trying something new can be pretty costly.

- [Anong Migwans Beam] I think a lot of artists are always looking to find their style. My own early work looks an awful lot like my mum and dad's because I was learning from them how they make painting. And you're trying to find your own style. I think artists want to have a style that people know when they look at that work, oh, that's and your name comes to mind. But there's an awful lot of experimentation in between.

- [Nathan Eugene Carson] I try to break style as much as possible. And when I kind of get known for a particular style, I switch it up quite quickly. I find it's like repeating yourself. There's not a challenge there. And also too, it's quite boring. My style has evolved and changed over the years. If I'm known in one decade for drawing and painting, then I try to do the complete opposite the next, which would be maybe black and white photography or go into making sculpture or music or just another creative path.

- [Shelley Niro] I like to characterize my own technique and my own style as being imagination first. In my practice, I don't really think about style because I go from bead work, painting, photography, sculpture and it's like, what's my idea and how am I gonna get that idea done? Sometimes I finish something and I go, "Well, it's the weirdest thing I've ever done." (laughs)

(birds chirping)

- [Allyson Mitchell] When you think about style and how an artist develops a voice or becomes known for a way of making things, I think that a dilemma of commercially successful artists would be when something that they produce sells well, that they are asked to reproduce that and it can be a bit of a trap to continue to reproduce the same sort of looking thing.

- [Deirdre Logue] But also on the subject of style, you have a style with your work as an individual. I also have a style. But when we do other projects like the feminist art gallery of "Killjoy's Kastle," I mean, we're talking about other ways of depicting style.

- [Allyson Mitchell] Yeah.

- [Deirdre Logue] Like I would say chaos would be a style that we have or derangement. It's so multi-dimensional that there is a style to it but it's not described as you would describe style.

- [Allyson Mitchell] Like a particular kind of brushstroke.

- [Deirdre Logue] It's described as, it's described in the language of large-scale performance. It doesn't mean we don't have style. I mean, come on.

- [Allyson Mitchell] Look at us.

- [Male Interviewer] (laughs) Totally, yeah.

(gentle music)

[text overlay: Signature]

- [Tim Whiten] I don't think that I have ever signed a three-dimensional work in my life ever.

- [Nathan Eugene Carson] I think about signature a lot. And I always sign all my work on the back.

- [Suzy Lake] I deal with notions of signature and dating from tradition because of my painter printmaker training. So paintings are signed on the front lower right. And as a printmaker if there's an edition, you put the edition on the left, the title in the center and the name and the date on the right.

- [Dorian FitzGerald] The idea of signing a work especially on the face of the work, I mean, it just hasn't seemed like something to do. Sign on the back. (laughs)

- [Shelley Niro] I sign my work hesitantly. I think it ruins the work sometimes, it's like I've ruined my work by signing it. Sometimes I make the signature too big and then sometimes I make it too small and I was like, oh, I have to start rub it out, start all over.

- [Allyson Mitchell] It's not like oil painting with a signature at the bottom. We made this project called "KillJoy's Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House" and for that project over the years that we've done it, there's been hundreds and hundreds. Hundreds of artists have contributed to that and nobody signs the work.

- [Nathan Eugene Carson] It's something when I go into an art gallery is I see a big signature on a painting. That really agitates me. Like I just like staring at what it is that I'm supposed to and then maybe I'll think about who created it after.

- [Shelley Niro] I guess it's necessary for you to have ownership over what you've done. But I just find that kind of ruins it for me really as the last thing you do on your painting. It kind of finishes the piece once you've signed it. I don't know, it feels like you're abandoning your work by signing it. Okay, I'm done with you, now leave me alone. (laughs) Whereas if you don't sign it ever, it's like you could still kind of float in and out of your work.

(water burbling)

- [Anong Migwans Beam] Well, my dad, he always signed his name on the bottom right, Carl Beam, but not every work gets signed. Most of them do but I think there's a lot that you're doing them and you think you're gonna come back to it, but then you don't. And so I've gone through his work and found those. And it's funny to describe that to somebody. They're valueless for missing the signature. If the artist was habitually signing everything, missing a signature it just makes it practically, well, it's not valued.

- [Interviewer] So like significant.

- [Anong Migwans Beam] Significantly. We have this interesting thing in our family that Beam is not actually our genetic name, we're not really related to any Beams directly. And his real last name was Migwans. And just through the tussle of the last century, he came to have that name. And when I was in my 20s, he said, "I've come too far as Carl Beam, you could change it though." But I really had that name as part of belonging to me. So we ended up really redefining a name that didn't really belong to us and then inhabiting this name and now I've named my business Beam Paints after that name. So it's definitely ours now.

- [Tim Whiten] To sign the work has a lot to do with ego. There is no need to sign it to affirm the condition that exists within. It is in itself a signature. The nature of the work which issues from me is a very very specific understanding about who it is that I am, who it is that I aspire to be and the conditions surrounding that can't be faked.

(gentle music)

[text overlay: Provenance]

- [Nathan Eugene Carson] There was this one gallerist and he was like, "I wanna sell this work, I wanna sell this work." And I was like, you're not breaking up my series, like this is one series and one day it will be shown as a full series or if somebody wants to collect it, they can collect the whole series. And he said to me, "Oh, that's so hard, that's not the way things are done." But I was trusting that that right person, place will come. One of the laws of the universe is the law of attraction and like attracts like, so I often just think like most of the time those systems that aren't for me, just aren't attracted to me and I'm not attracted to them. Like I've never had a commercial gallery ask me to be part of their system.

- [Suzy Lake] The kind of work that I make isn't the kind of work that's gonna easily hang in someone's dining room. And yeah, I mean, my family has works of mine that they don't hang. So I do think that my quote end quote client would be institutions. And so that's really quite an honor because institutions have to be very selective. But when a private collector purchases my work, the work form or content wise really touches them and you get to meet them and they're the people that you want to have it. It's important to them. I mean, that's an ultimate compliment.

- [Shelley Niro] I've been fortunate enough to have my work purchased by the National Gallery. I think it's really kind of an honorable thing to happen. And I'm always surprised and excited when it does happen. It becomes pretty serious at that point. 'Cause if I was to keep it for much longer, who knows? Like, "Oh, we don't need this painting anymore, I'm gonna paint over it." So it helps me look at my work in a much more serious way.

- [Tim Whiten] For me, the works have to be found in a place or repository which has the capacity to retain those works so they can be accessible to people. I'm not interested in my work going to someone in their home where they're hidden from view other than for a few people, but not available to a larger population. It limits the import of the work. If people have

dollars and cents dancing in their mind, it most often prevents them from getting the sense of the real value of a work. And so it's a commodity, it's a thing. And they don't care about the nature of what its real purpose was. We've lost sight of the real purpose of cultural objects in the first place.

- [Dorian FitzGerald] In 2011, I painted a vase that was interesting because of questions about its provenance and how it was valued. It had come up for auction at Bonhams and was presented as a beautiful example of Chinese porcelain, and had a high estimate of millions of dollars. And then at the last minute, they were unsure about attribution. And so suddenly minimum bid was \$15,000 or something. So this vase ended up going for, I think it was \$7.89 million. In reading about it, this idea of provenance being paramount in the West, if it's a fake then it's of no worth or very little worth, maybe a curiosity, but that the craftsmanship required to make a credible fake is of course comparable to the craftsmanship required to create the object in the first place. I appreciate the idea of enjoying an object for what it is as opposed to only enjoying an object based on who owned it or that it came from the original source. The fact that one could appreciate one object as being as valid as the other one. I think is far more appealing to me than dismissing it out of hand 'cause it's a fake. So I find it compelling.

- [Deirdre Logue] The institution enables collectors in ways that are problematic for artists. So when institutions choose to restrict and collectors choose to restrict an artwork to a certain level of provenance that it has to be signed all these things, they actually set themselves up for failure first because there's the vast majority of artists that made that way. We tend to want to help the museum, move it a little bit more into more contemporary thinking about what it is that they're doing.

- [Allyson Mitchell] And the people inside of them can see themselves as dismantlers rather than protectors of status quo. But unfortunately I think the whole collection of art and how it's set up is only about the status quo, because I think that they desire to have things quote on quote change but they don't wanna give up the power that they already hold. So you kind of can't have both of those things. It's like how can we appear to be or like...

- [Deirdre Logue] Progressive.

- [Allyson Mitchell] Progressive and all those kinds of things but we're still gonna keep our board of directors, we're still gonna keep our CEOs, we're still gonna keep our directors who are like from a long line of white settler cis men.

- [Deirdre Logue] The perfect collector or the perfect curator or the perfect institution would take all of the same risks that the most adventurous art of their times take. And that collectors actually would be chosen by the artists, not vice versa. There's a real inversion of something fundamental that I think it forms the nature of art entirely.

(gentle music)

[text overlay: Authenticity]

- [Shelley Niro] The Group of Seven were a group of gentlemanly painters who would go out into the wild during the summer, collect all their sketches and their rough work and then come back into their own studio in the winter and paint these tableaus, what they've experienced. Sounds very nice. All these gentlemen just painting away. (laughs)

- [Deirdre Logue] I think the question of Tom Thomson and all of the ways in which his work and the Group of Seven's work is authenticated in many ways, created impossibilities for other artists. That a work has to have a signature, that the work has to be part of a group which is part of a movement. It fit really nicely into a European art historical framework. And remember that's where settler colonialism comes from. So it's these White European models that really are very problematic.

- [Dorian FitzGerald] Notions of authenticity and things like looting of historical sites to provide what is an authentic object. Yeah, there's all sorts of problematic things about what value is placed on authenticity.

- [Suzy Lake] I was approached not too long ago by an institution that was offered an artwork supposedly by me. And they sent me a photograph to confirm whether or not it was mine. And I was mortified at the quality of the work. I wasn't pictured in the image which I always am. And definitely it was not my work. So I was really grateful that they checked with me before putting my name on it.

- [Allyson Mitchell] If somebody were trying to authenticate an artwork of mine or ours together, they would have a tough time trying to prove that we had made it. And partly that's because it is unusual. It's ephemeral, it's performance, or it's collaboratively made with a large group of people.

- [Deirdre Logue] We kind of defy and redefine authenticity, signature, style and all the other things that a museum or a collector would need to create some sort of value.

- [Allyson Mitchell] I like to dream of a different world where institutions and collectors actually value collectivity, connectivity and if that were valued, the more that went into something as a culture, as a collaboration, we would be living in a different kind of world.

- [Anong Migwans Beam] Authentication puts a lot of authority to experts. And then really you have to ask yourself how credible is that authority. Early on in managing my father's estate, I had an instance where an individual who was very well thought of in the artistic community, made a comment on Facebook that they had seen some work of my father's and because they didn't recognize it, they stated, "Look at these fakes" because they were signed Carl Beam but visually they didn't match his expectation. And I had to track him down immediately and tell him really clearly that he was mistaken and that it was irresponsible of him to make statements like that without first checking with the estate. And part of that is because I think artists are by nature really adventurous curious people. And especially over the span of a lifetime, artists are

experimenting even ones that have a very defined visual style. So it's really difficult to declare yourself enough of an expert in one artist to be the arbiter of this is or this isn't.

- [Tim Whiten] I'm not agreeing with the whole idea of authentication. The basis of authentication has to do with the monetary value. And monetary value, there's essentially a problem. My own belief is the works that are much more significant to us have no real monetary value at all. What they have is essentially a spiritual value. I think that spiritual value outweighs the concerns for commodification. And yet people actually misunderstand the nature of the real transaction of a work of art. The means by which we understand ourselves as human beings, what we are, who we are and what we can aspire to.

(gentle music)

[text overlay: This film was created in conjunction with the exhibition *Tom Thomson? The Art of Authentication*, curated by Alicia Boutilier and Tobi Bruce, organized and circulated by the Art Gallery of Hamilton and Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University and the Canadian Conservation Institute. Produced, directed and shot by Ty Terrance Tekatch. Edited by Vanessa Crosbie Ramsay. Sound mix by Aaron Hutchinson. All works shown courtesy of the artists and their estates. Thank you: Allyson Mithcell and Deirdre Logue, Anong Migwans Beam, Chaka Chikodzi, Dorian Fitzgerald, Nathan Eugene Carson, Shelley Niro, Suzy Lake and Tim Whiten.]