



Darla Fisher-Odjig Beneath the Mask: Symbols as a Healing Phenomenon

My Hero

He is my brother,
For in his eyes endeared to all,
He has a cause,
And in that cause is peace on earth,
And life to all,
For he is my brother,
He is my brother,
As lifeless body drifting on the wind,
And whispers of the numbers called,
For he is my brother,
A number now is he,
He is my brother,
As thunder brushes,
Mud dried skin,
And fires burn,
To pierce,
A buddy known to all,
For he is my brother,
Crying freedom for me,
He is my brother,
For in his arms a baby cries,
And songs are sung,
And in those eyes,
That carry hope and loss,
He is my brother,
And freedom yet to be.

– Darla Fisher-Odjig





Artist Statement

Genocide is the intentional destruction of a people — usually defined as an ethnic, national, racial, or religious group — in whole or in part. [The hybrid] term combin[es] the Greek word γένος (genos, “race, people”) with the Latin suffix *-caedo* (“act of killing”).
– Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genocide>

As a child I experienced in some way the systematic washing out of red blood to white blood. In the exhibition *Beneath the Mask: Symbols as a Healing Phenomenon*, visual scribing is an emotional description of how damaging the enforcement of an alien cultural system on a First Nations child can be. The symbols and imagery are depicting the pain experienced as a child growing up in a family/community environment that had been subjected to character annihilation, cultural cleansing — white washing of red to white. Intergenerational trauma is real, it is what I and many have experienced because of the Residential School system, as my father attended day school and trauma was passed down to us. It has therefore reinforced the strength within myself. I paint in a symbolically scribed manner for my child, my grandchildren, and their children to know their history and to identify and accept who we are as whole people. To deny any part of who we are would be, in a sense, self-annihilation and self-abandonment.

Life is the flash of a firefly on a dark night, it is the breath of a buffalo on a cold winter's day, it is a tiny shadow running across the grass and into the sunset. – Chief Crowfoot (final words), 1890

My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back. – Louis Riel

The Final Frontier

Some First Nations people joke that when their status card expires, they're no longer Native — as if federal legislation were necessary to legitimize a person's cultural identity. But that's the expectation: they must fill out an application to see if they meet the Indian Act's criteria for being First Nations enough (which can be tricky for someone who has been adopted, or if their family name was changed, or if they were a woman who married a non-status man between 1951 and 1985, etc.). To say the Indian Act is imperfect is to minimize the atrocities it has authorized, but it remains a constitutionally affirmed national policy that First Nations peoples have been grappling with for more than a century.

A story of the intricacies of Indigenous identity unfolds across six acrylic paintings and a plaster-and-wire sculpture — all created over 2021 and 2022 — in Darla Fisher-Odjig's exhibition, *Beneath the Mask: Symbols as a Healing Phenomenon*, currently showing at the Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery. Each piece is a vignette that explores the cultural devastation that government and religious institutions have inflicted upon generations of Indigenous peoples, and the distinct marks those wounds have left on First Nations cultures and identities. *Beneath the Mask* reckons with the long-lasting impacts of colonialism — and the process of healing from it — on both an individual scale and within the broader political landscape.

Fisher-Odjig's exhibition symbolizes the internalized, often hidden trauma caused by colonialism. It's about the masks

Indigenous peoples wear to protect themselves. These masks have the unintended consequence of obscuring the truth. Though the trauma originates outside of one's control, it needs to be wrangled into the light in order to master it — to heal it, and appreciate its significance and the ways in which it unconsciously exerts its power. *Beneath the Mask* is about dropping the mask to reveal the truth, and in turn accepting what would not otherwise be possible to understand.

Beneath the Mask reflects on the malleability of childhood; in particular, one that's been shaped by colonial institutions' attempts to diminish the Anishinaabe, Cree, Odawa, Haudenosaunee, and other Indigenous ways of being at all costs — adulterating a true expression of self. *The Inception* depicts a culture obfuscated by these colonial forces. Masked children — their clothes contrasting the murky blue atmosphere around them — dance mockingly upon Mother Earth. Their cheer is a deception that hides the inner conflict between who they are and who they've been forced to become; a conflict that, resolved or not, ultimately becomes part of themselves. It's cognitive dissonance that must be resolved in order to be at peace once more.

This dissonance emerges in the painting *The Rapture: niizhwaaswi(7) agwaakwa'igan(sign)*, which illustrates the horrific practice of separating children and their families, something that happened routinely due to government-mandated attendance at church-run Residential Schools. The sky is torn open as a Catholic priest takes an Indigenous child from her mother's arms, severing ties between kin: mother and child, humanity and the natural order. The parted sky reveals a collage of colonial forces uniting in a shared

objective to “civilize” Indigenous children. The Canadian Red Ensign and the American flag serve as a reminder of the borders drawn to disconnect once-whole Indigenous nations.

In 1876, nine years after Canada colonized its way into existence, the federal government passed the Indian Act, further cementing the state’s control over First Nations peoples. This legislation enshrined into law assimilationist projects such as the Residential School system and forced enfranchisement. It also outlawed cultural practices thought to undermine the state, such as potlatch and Sun Dance ceremonies.

The fledgling federal government’s intentions towards Indigenous peoples may be best summarized by Canada’s first Prime Minister, Scotsman Sir John A. Macdonald, who said, “the great aim of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the other inhabitants of the Dominion as speedily as they are fit to change.”¹ A similar assimilationist effort was happening in the United States around the same time. American military officer Richard Henry Pratt described his philosophy: “all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”² The far-reaching ramifications of such philosophies are still being felt within Indigenous communities today.³

The powers that be have tried in various ways to use the construct of Indian status to destroy Indigenous cultures. A prominent example is Pierre Trudeau’s 1969 White Paper,⁴ an unsuccessful attempt to eliminate Indian status, the Indian Act, and the treaties that form the basis of the relationship between First Nations and the federal government.

Fisher-Odjig’s painting *Expi Red: Children with No Faces* explores the tension inherent in being a status Indian entitled to “benefits and rights” under the same act that was designed to assimilate First Nations cultures into oblivion. Against an ominous black and vermilion backdrop, a stroke of black leads to a shroud of plumage through which a small set of eyes peeks out. An inconspicuous medicine wheel sits upon the mind’s eye, perhaps a reference to cultural insight that has been obscured by the legal identity forced upon First Nations peoples.

Many of the faces that appear in *Beneath the Mask* are hidden by masks. In the age of COVID-19, masks are a way to protect oneself and others from harm. They are also a way to disguise oneself, either in an effort to conceal true selves or to shirk responsibility. “You can only wear masks for so long,” says Fisher-Odjig. “In regards to our identity, which is the core of our authenticity, we need to take the mask off and show the real [you]. Otherwise, I’m in a theatre, I have my mask on. I’m playing something else, and I’m far away from who I really am.”

Most of the figures in *The Masquerade: The 60s Scoop* are masked or in some way concealed. The painting illustrates payments of treaty annuities: in years past, an Indian agent from the Bureau of Indian Affairs travelled to reserves every summer to dispense four or five dollars per person — a pittance distributed in exchange for access to vast expanses of resource-rich land. The Indian agent’s mask hides his identity as an agent of assimilation: as coins spill from his hands, little children scurry to pick them up, conveying the federal government’s paternalistic approach to First Nations peoples.

Years ago, having become unsatisfied with her job as a graphic designer, Fisher-Odjig studied art therapy, a union of art and psychotherapy aimed at externalizing deep-seated trauma through shapes, colours, and form. The practice allows a person to explore the thoughts and feelings that words cannot express. “They’re not trying to cover it up with words. The symbols tell the truth more or less,” says Fisher-Odjig. The symbolism in *Beneath the Mask* isn’t a reflection of a singular moment in an artist’s life; rather, it examines a collective trauma that serves as part of the foundation of the country that is Canada — and serves as a surrealistic personal exploration of how that trauma can manifest in a single person.

Beneath the Mask: Symbols as a Healing Phenomenon stands as a reminder of the durability and defiance of Indigenous cultures: despite the oppressors’ best efforts to demolish First Nations peoples — and despite the harms those efforts have caused — the wounds, having been exposed to the sunlight, are healing.

Charnel Anderson is a journalist, writer, and member of Kiasheke Zaaging Anishinaabek (Gull Bay First Nation) living in northwestern Ontario.

Notes

1. Sir John A. Macdonald, quoted in Erin Hanson, “The Indian Act,” Indigenous Foundations, https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_indian_act/.
2. See Richard Henry Pratt, “The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites,” *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction (U.S.), 19th Annual Session Held in Denver, Colorado, June 23–29, 1892*, ed. Isabel C. Barrows. Boston: Press of Geo. H. Ellis, 45–58, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wvu.89030648919>.
3. See Amy Bombay, Kimberly Matheson, and Hymie Anisman, “The intergenerational effects of Indian Residential Schools: Implications for the concept of historical trauma,” *Transcultural Psychiatry* June 2014, 51(3): 320–338, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461513503380>.
4. See Naithan Lagace and Niigaanweewidam James Sinclair, “White Paper, 1969,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/the-white-paper-1969>.



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List of Works

All artwork is courtesy of the artist

Height x width x depth

Expi Red: Children with No Faces, 2021/22; acrylic on canvas; 116.8 x 91.4 cm

Fragmented Innocence: Stolen Children & Divine Wholeness, 2021/22; acrylic on canvas; 116.8 x 91.4 cm

Nesting: The Deliverance, 2021/22; acrylic on canvas; 116.8 x 91.4 cm

The Inception, 2021/22; acrylic on canvas; 121.9 cm circumference

The Masquerade: The 60s Scoop, 2021/22; acrylic on canvas; 152.4 x 96.5 cm

The Movement, 2021/22; plaster of Paris, excavated pottery, culturally traditional and contemporary objects, wire netting, cement; 116.8 x 121.9 x 94 cm

The Rapture: niizhwaaswi(7) agwaakwa'igan(sign), 2021/22; acrylic on canvas; 116.8 x 91.4 cm

About the Artist

Darla Fisher-Odjig (Nadeau) is a Lambton County-based First Nations (Ojibway, Odawa, Potawatami) artist, poet, and art therapist. She has published a book of her poetry and drawings entitled *My Healing Journey: A Walk in Two Worlds* and is the recipient of an Ontario Arts Council grant. Her work is held in numerous private and public collections, including the Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada Aboriginal Art Collection. Additional information can be found on the artist's website, <https://fisherodjig.wordpress.com/>.

Cover: *The Inception*, 2021/22; acrylic on canvas

Right gatefold: *The Masquerade: The 60s Scoop*, 2021/22; acrylic on canvas



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The Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery is a department of the Corporation of the County of Lambton.



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