

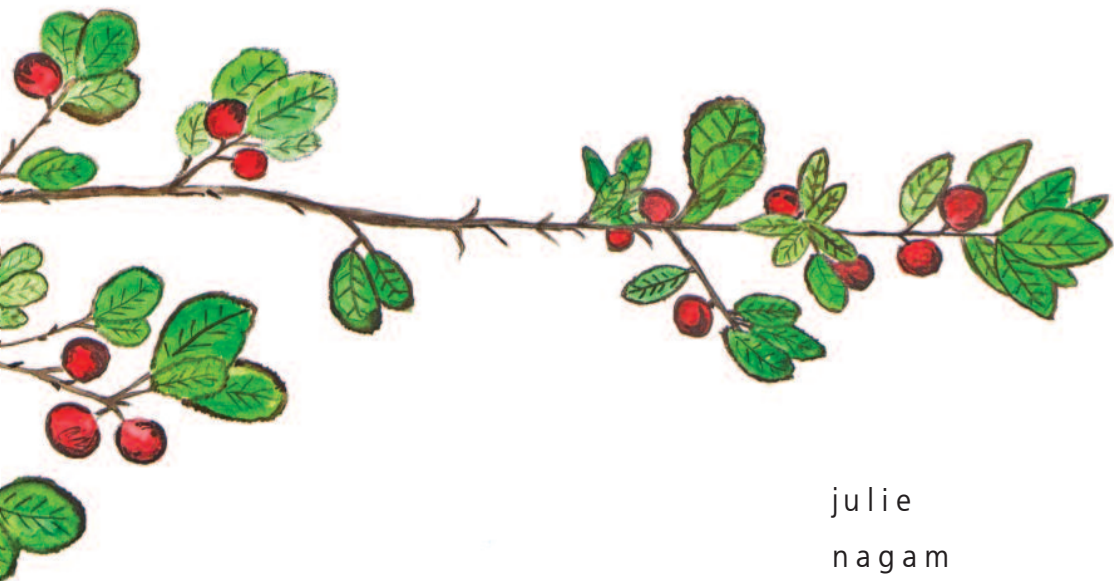


locating

the

little

heartbeats



julie

nagam







Print publication of the exhibition  
Julie Nagam: locating the little heartbeats  
presented at Gallery 1C03, The University of Winnipeg  
from January 10 – February 16, 2019

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Gallery 1C03 expresses sincere appreciation to Dr. Julie Nagam for creating this new, site-specific installation. We are grateful to Dr. Niigaan Sinclair for his insightful response to this exhibition, to Glen Johnson for building the light boxes for the exhibition and to the catalogue production team.

Julie would like say chi miigwetch and marsi to Glenn Gear for all his support in the creation of this work, the Banff Centre for the Arts and all the people who came to work with me at the residency the space between: collaboration, technology and the future, Lesley Beardy for photographs, to Jennifer Gibson for curating and supporting my work, to Niigaan Sinclair for writing the text and my family who continue to support me in all of my endeavours including this one.

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## curator's

## statement

**locating the little heartbeats** is a new site-specific multi-media installation by artist Julie Nagam presented at the University of Winnipeg's Gallery 1C03 January 10 – February 16, 2019.

Julie Nagam is a scholar, a curator and an artist. In her art, Nagam reads the land as a valuable archive of memory and as a witness. Her installations bring forward important relational concepts through painting with light, animation and projection. These multi-sensory creations incorporate drawing, painting, photography, sculpture, video and sounds from natural elements. Nagam's artworks result in interactive and transformative experiences for audiences and create the condition of bringing the natural world indoors.

The impetus for Nagam's work stems from her concern for the environment, water systems, and land-based knowledge. Issues around unclean drinking water, food sustainability, foraging, rapid melting of the polar ice caps, chemically-contaminated lakes and the finite nature of water are all alarming realities that society faces. Through her art, Nagam offers hope: "Our survival and our continuation as a people are tied to Indigenous knowledge of the land and a return or an extension of these land-based practices is what will bring us into the future."



Each of the works in *locating the little heartbeats* invokes the magical elements of flora that are indigenous to this area to remind viewers of the healing qualities of each plant. Specific plants, including bearberry, blueberry, fireweed, Labrador tea, and tobacco root, are highlighted by Nagam for their multi-faceted properties as medicine or food or for their use in ceremony. These plants are also special due to her particular relationship with them. Wild blueberries are a favorite food staple, she draws upon tobacco root for courage, and savors the smell of boiling Labrador tea. Nagam brings her plant drawings to life as moving image projections via digital technologies: stems stretch, leaves extend, berries and flowers burst forth. The resiliency of each herb and bush is highlighted as they seem to sprout from the earth and sway in the breezes of our imagination. Supported by the ambient sounds of nature, Nagam's "living ecosystem" considers the vital lifelines that indigenous plant life and the land offer to the human world.

**Jennifer Gibson**

*Director/Curator*

*Gallery 1C03, The University of Winnipeg*

**Seeing  
our  
Medicines**

Niigaan  
Sinclair

lwe daabishkoo gichi-gamiin, zaaga'iganiin, ziibiwan daabishkoo gimiskwiyaab giwi- iyawing bezhigon. Bezhigon nibi eteg omaa akiing, daabishkoo miskwi owe dinong. Dago owe gitigaan daabishkoo wiinizisan. Dago miinawaa owe aki, daabishkoo your flesh. (The oceans, the lakes, the rivers, it's similar to a blood vein in your body. It's like that. It's like the water on Earth is its blood. And the plants like hair. Also, the ground is the same as your flesh.)

- *Francis Nepinak, Giiwedinanang*

For millennia, Indigenous knowledge keepers created advanced therapeutic and medicinal knowledge gained from a historical and intellectual relationship with geography, ecology, and locality. These involved an intricate study of the life cycles of plant and animal bodies and the ways these relations influenced and effected the universe and, in particular, the human body. Developing innovative techniques and practices from this engagement, nature-based preventatives and therapeutics were created and administered to community members in the interests of preventing and treating sickness and disease, restoring balance and wellness, and connecting nations with the world around them. Much of this involved more than simply ingesting food and medicine but ceremony, song, story, and visioning. This made medicinal collection, delivery, and consumption an innately a reciprocal endeavour as the offering, acceptance, and engagement of medicine necessitating a return of the same. Medicine therefore is one of the primary ways Indigenous communities became so innately tied to their territories.

The colonization of Turtle Island was not just an invasion and removal of Indigenous peoples from their territories but an assault on Indigenous knowledge and health. As lands were flooded and cities sprung up virtually overnight, Indigenous communities were forced to adjust – and in some case abandon – traditional ideologies and practices in relation to their health and lifeways. Indigenous medicinal practices – representing to western thinkers an innate connection with the natural world that had to be “conquered” and “developed” in the march towards “civilization” – were deemed “savage” and “heathen” and “superstitious.” Traditional health practices such as childbirth and ceremonies such as sweat lodges that involved medicine delivery were outlawed and had to go underground. Over time this resulted in a devastating separation of Indigenous peoples from their medicinal and traditional knowledges crucial for their continuance. This came with a radical change to Indigenous physical and mental well-being as a dependence on processed food, commercial and corporate medicines, and a sedentary and Anglo-Saxon lifestyle led to shortened life spans and a life spiralling out of balance. This is not to mention the far-reaching effects “development” has had on ecology and the earth – pollution knows no racial or cultural lines.

Métis visual artist Julie Nagam’s *locating the little heartbeats* is an exhibition that recognizes the history of Indigenous medicine and the power of the earth while standing as a condemnation on environmental invasion and

degradation. Through animation, light, sound, and projection, Nagam re-creates the vibrancy of life cycles of fauna and intricately displays how every inch, every leaf and bud, comes with a story. Each must be watched closely, for each has a teaching. Her choice of five traditional, sacred medicinal plants – bearberry, blueberry, tobacco root, fireweed, and Labrador tea – all carry medicines that cure sickness and promote healthy blood flow and well-being for humans. Cree, Anishinaabeg, Métis and other nation's medicine keepers will know these well as all can be found in Manitoba but she also chose these medicines to illustrate something else: bears and birds and other animals use them to feed and heal themselves too. All of these medicines literally connect nations and communities across cultural, racial, and human and non-human lines. Medicines here stand not as commodities but relations that interact, enact, and inhabit a world with us – something we do not own but our relationships to.

Each medicine Nagam shows has its own offering – it's own story in this place. Bearberries are found in northern Manitoba and often used as a preventative to treat bladder infections and digestive issues. Blueberries are an antioxidant found throughout Manitoba and cures stress and chronic illnesses with that prevents cancer, diabetes and even Alzheimers. Valerian (Tobacco root) is a sleep aid, used to flavour foods, and helps with mental fatigue, cures stress and anxiety, and prevents cramping during menstrual cycles and colic





for children. Fireweed is found almost everywhere in Manitoba and is one of the most important medicines Indigenous medicine carriers use for digestive issues and skin infections, healing cuts and wounds. Labrador tea, of course, is probably the best-known Indigenous medicine in Manitoba and is found in marshes, harvested year-round. It is high in vitamin C and not only helps with fevers and flus but can help with diabetes and is one of the most delicious teas anyone can have.

Nagam calls for us to collect an understanding of the medicines around us; this knowledge, like our relations, is and are still here. This is inherently a question on how we perceive of land; as something to buy and trade or something that sustains and grows with us. Gaining a competency and fluency of medicines necessarily involves spending time on the earth, studying, experimenting, and offering your time and relationship to it. It takes time to understand why colours, directions, and roots grow in the patterns they do. Once we spend enough time thinking and studying it, then it is our job to share our findings with others. Nagam asks us to do all of this when watching the medicines appear and disappear and, in these spaces, think of who else can teach us about them – whether it be a kokum, the bears, the birds, the air, and/or the rain. Nagam explains, “The natural world bares witness to human and non-human activity for millennia, which could guide us back to bush knowledge. Reminding us of the critical power that nature



has over urban landscapes, how it will continue to flourish and override any human built structures. In the dense cityscape you can experience small organic life pushing through concrete and cracks to make its way towards the light. Our population could learn from the knowledge the land has to tell us. I think about the ways in which it breathes, feeds us and sustains us. This exhibition is excavating plants that are part of the flora and fauna of Manitoba, creating something magical to witness the power of nature and how it impacts us our lives. Each plant was hand drawn then painted and digitally transferred, to be painted out frame-by-frame and photographed to create the growing and dying aspect within an animation program. This includes hundreds of images that are sequenced visual stages of the process of growth and death that reminds us of our deep and profound connection to the earth”.

At the same time, *locating the little heartbeats* is a statement on industrialization, development, and the imposition of human conceptions on the earth. Capitalism and commercialism – the two forces most deeply rooted in colonialism – isn’t going away, whether we want it to or not. Nagam shows this via wooden boxes that literally “box” in the medicines, showing how constraining nature it impossible – it always escapes. Still, colonialism endures throughout the exhibit. The artificiality of the images on thin sheets are as transparent and transient as the images which emerge and disappear into

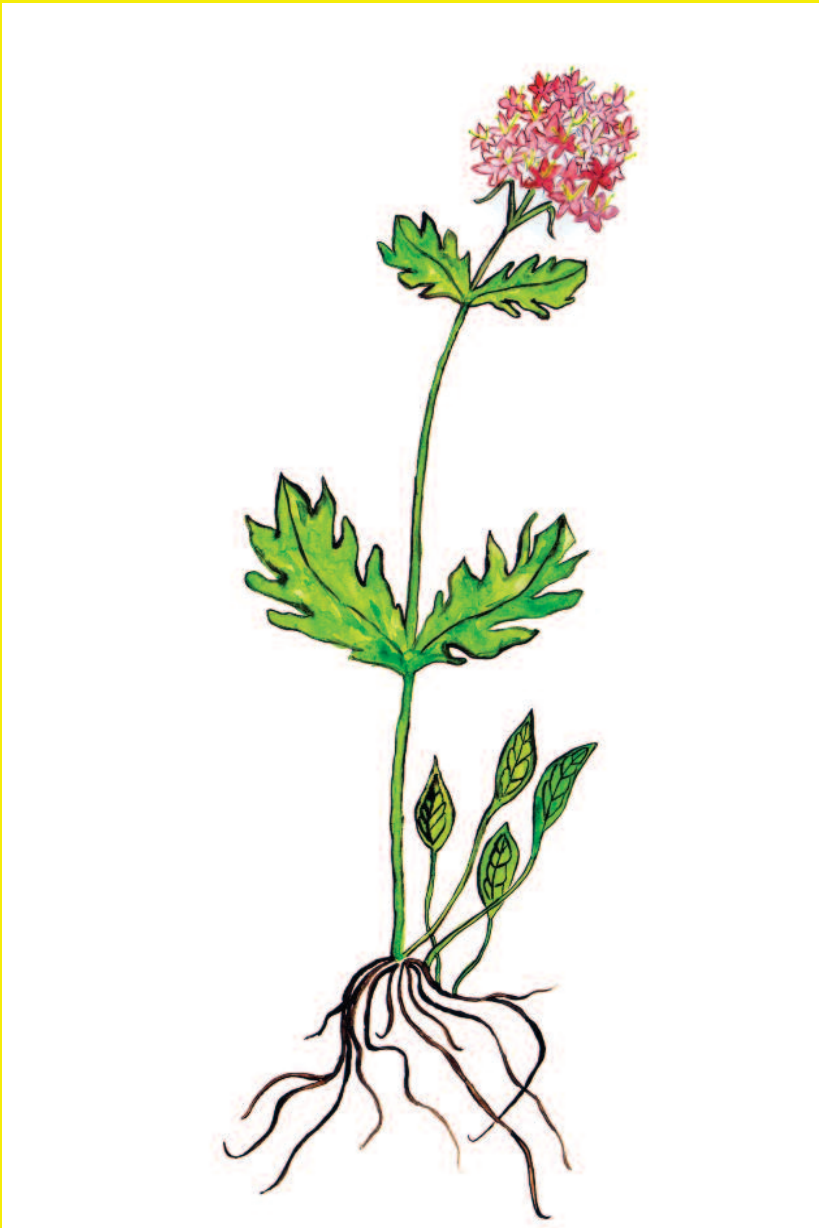
the darkness, overlaid by a soundtrack of the natural world that immerses the viewer but also transports them into the recesses of their memory and the land found there. The fabrication of the gallery itself, and the technology used to display the work, and indeed, *even this program*, all illustrate the complicatedness of a world that commodifies it at the same time. The location of the gallery in a university that – like all educational institutions in Canada – sometimes has difficulty recognizing or understanding Indigenous medicines, land claims, and senses of health is a reminder that no matter the confusion, relationships between Indigenous peoples and the natural world somehow survives. Medicine, Nagam appears to be saying, is a bridge to growth.

Medicines of the earth – and in particular medicines Indigenous peoples know and have been protecting and carrying for millennia – are not going away: we just have to see and hear their heartbeats. We have to earn the medicine we want. This process involves constant care, study, and commitment, for medicine is always moving, growing, receding and returning. Just as life offers distraction and sicknesses that threaten to take us off our paths, medicines are there to offer sustenance and prevention – just like a grandmother, grandfather, sister, or brother: a relation. The essences of Indigenous medicine are found here, in the resistance and resilience unveiled by Nagam in *locating the little heartbeats*. She asks us to locate them now in

what we see, what we hear and feel, and who we can find to help us learn and live more. The medicines we find could be the greatest forces we have against ongoing invasion and removal, colonialism and commercialism, and eventually, death. The refusal to acquiesce to fear, division, and acceptance of the devastation of the earth led by orange-skinned forces that seek to build walls and divide and colonize and conquer could just be the most powerful force of all: hope.

Seeing the earth as a body, as Nepinak does above, is not to anthropomorphize it; it is to see it for the fact it is a living, breathing being as dynamic as everything else. It is to literally see animacy in the growth of life around us and the stories within it. This process of finding, collecting, and learning from and with medicine is a never-ending journey and one Nagam encourages us to return to over and over and over again, like a relative visiting another for food, kindness, and a story. This is the gift of *locating the little heartbeats*, for it is locating yourself and your heartbeat in the heartbeat of others, especially the non-human relations we share far more of our time and life with than our human ones.









**Dr. Julie Nagam** (Métis-(Anishinaabe/French), German/Syrian) is the Chair of the History of Indigenous Art in North America, a joint appointment between the University of Winnipeg and the Winnipeg Art Gallery. She is an Associate Professor in the department of History. As a scholar and artist she is interested in revealing the ontology of land, which contains memory, knowledge and living histories. Her practice is investigating Indigenous stories of place to visually demonstrate alternative cartographies that can challenge myths of settlement situated in the colonial narratives of space and place. She has recently published *Traveling soles: Tracing the*



photo: Kali Spitzer

*footprints of our stolen sisters* (2017); *Deciphering the refusal of the digital and binary codes of sovereignty/self-determination and civilized/savage* (2016); *be polite.... because the settlers might be listening and watching* (2016). Her current SSHRC funded projects include *The Transactive Memory Keepers: Indigenous Public Engagement in Digital and New Media Labs and Exhibitions* ([www.glamcollective.ca](http://www.glamcollective.ca)). Nagam hosted and organized *The Future is Indigenous* (<http://abtec.org/iif/symposia/3rd-annual-symposium/>) and the International Indigenous curators exchange with Australia, Canada, Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Finland. She is co-editor of *Indigenous Art: New Media and the Digital*, a special issue of *PUBLIC* journal. She has curated and exhibited in ImagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival in Toronto, Canada. Currently, Dr. Nagam curated public art installations at The Forks in Winnipeg, and leading a team that is creating an Indigenous App for Winnipeg's art, architectural, and place-based history. She has co-curated with Jaimie Isaac *INSURGENCE/RESURGENCE*, the largest contemporary exhibition at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 2017/18 and will co-curate the first Indigenous Biannual for 2020. Her artwork *where white pines lay over the water*, was shown in, Toronto, Ontario, San Paulo, Brazil, Lyon, France, Wellington, New Zealand. Her installation *singing our bones home*, was shown in Markham, in London, England and in Winnipeg. Nagam created a new public artwork, *Electrical Currents* for Winnipeg Arts Council 2018, was commissioned to create *Manitowapow, speaking to the moon*, for Nuit Blanche in Toronto Canada in 2017, *the future is in the land if you listen to it* for the Smithsonian's exhibition Transformers in New York, USA, 2017-18, and *the future is in the land* was her solo exhibition at Aspace in Toronto, Canada 2018.



**Dr. Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair** is Anishinaabe (St. Peter's/Little Peguis) and an Associate Professor at the University of Manitoba. He is an award-winning writer, editor and activist who was named one of Monocle Magazine's "Canada's Top 20 Most Influential People" and one of the CBC Manitoba's "Top Forty Under Forty." He is a regular commentator on Indigenous issues on CTV, CBC, and APTN, and his written work can be found in the pages of newspapers like The Guardian and online with CBC Books: Canada Writes. He has written national curriculums for Indspire and the Assembly of First Nations as well as is an international speaker and workshop facilitator. His first book on Anishinaabeg literary traditions will be coming out with the University of Minnesota Press in 2019.







