

Greg Staats: Condolence

Condolence is often reflected upon as an expression of sympathy over the loss of something dear. The Condolence Ceremony of Haudenosaunee tradition extends beyond the commemoration of departed loved ones to act as the entryway for diplomatic proceedings or as a gesture of atonement through the exchange of wampum. Strings of wampum are also used to receive messages of encouragement and these healing rituals can also incorporate verbal metaphors such as the wiping away the tears or dispelling the clouds.¹ Mohawk artist Greg Staats' exhibition Condolence offers a contemporary meditation on the practice of condolence through new and recently created photographic and video-based artworks. Staats' exhibition also offers a moment of contemplation to consider personal histories, the loss of time passed, and speculation on the stories maintained within family archives.

Staats explains his motivations for the creation of Condolence with a poetic admission. "After a long investigation of relationships as a principle of organization, I have returned to a childhood strategy, the belief in travel as a vehicle for transforming my fears and perspectives,"¹ he says. Staats began photographing the three acres of land upon which his family resided on the Six Nations Reservation of the Grand River Territory. Because Staats lived on this land until he was nine years old, the recollection of this space occupies much of his early childhood memory. Returning as an adult, the photographic images he produced of the land capture traces of absence, whether through a sense of recent presence or mere palimpsests of what was once there. Photographs of empty chairs, gravel roads, and vibrant overgrowth become a personal mnemonic device for Staats, and perhaps for the viewer as well. Through the placement of these images together in his piece auto mnemonic six nations, Staats uses what has become a part of his personal photographic archive as a visual proxy for an oral history of his past.

In another photographic series within Condolence, Staats has recovered still images from a 1950 National Film Board of Canada documentary featuring members of his family. The piece entitled condolence six nations speaks of loss, both of time and of people, but also the realization of the current moment's importance for reflection and understanding. Like auto mnemonic six nations, this series of six photographs indicates a sense of absence. These photographs remain only

¹ Greg Staats artist statement 2009

segments of the whole NFB film, as the NFB film is only a segment of what Staats' family and others experienced in their lives at Six Nations. Yet the film and Staats' photos become part of the document that forms his familial archive and his understanding of the past.

In the video piece *Metathesis*, Staats' hands can be seen through an opaque screen diligently working a string of wampum beads. As his hands move, his voice begins to speak in the Mohawk language. He recites twenty one phrases drawn from the Mourning Rituals Condolence Ceremony, stumbling occasionally over pronunciation but never giving up. While the meaning of what is being said may be lost on non-Mohawk speaking audience members, the focused repetition of his act delivers a sense of the sentiment behind his words: "I suddenly became aware/ Approaching, moving across, barriers/ wisdom that which did sustain our minds/ with teardrops falling as you came." Although the screen behind which Staats works offers only an oblique view of his actions and the language barriers faced by Staats and his viewers provides a further obstacle to communication, *Metathesis* relies on an emotional dialogue to express itself. The term 'metathesis' is borrowed from the vocabulary of chemistry and indicates a reaction between two substances in which two parts of each substance are exchanged. The two toned wampum belt stands as a symbol of exchange and a further mnemonic device within Staats' practice.

Another video piece called *Red Oak Condolence* also looks at issues of exchange as it relates to spiritual traditions within Staats' family and community. In the Six Nations community there exists a vibrant Longhouse tradition as well as various Christian denominations, and among Staats' own relatives there were splits based on differences and diverse combinations of faiths. Yet Staats' interest lays in how the two spiritual camps transferred aspects of their traditions to each other motivated through what he sees as a sense of mutual acceptance.

Staats became interested in exploring this relationship through the family archive of his paternal grandparents and their involvement in the local Baptist church. The Christian community of Six Nations made up a small geographical area on the reserve but the group had significance. Looking back, Staats realizes that growing up in a Christian family among a community of Longhouse people left him knowing very little about the ceremonial traditions of his neighbours. Even members of his extended family were involved in the ceremonial traditions, including his maternal grandmother who had attended the Longhouse at the turn of the century.

Yet as a child he felt that he could not speak to Longhouse people for fear of “bad medicine.”

The Canadian Government also played a role in separating the two parts of the community when in 1926 they divided the Longhouse people from the Christian believers in Six Nations, lending more power and political privilege to members of the Christian community. Outside anthropologists who came to study the community however tended to focus on the conservative Longhouse people. In the late 1970s anthropologist Sally Weaver interviewed some of the Christians of Six Nations, including Staats’ paternal grandparents. Her findings, with both Christian and Longhouse traditions discussed, were released in a paper entitled “Grand River Reserve, 1847 - 1940”. Sally Weaver’s research in the community had interested Staats’ sister and among the things that she did in response to the experience was to make a recording of a local Christian musical group called the Red Oak Singers for historical posterity.

The recordings of the Red Oak Singers used for Staats’ video Red Oak Condolence was actually recorded by Staats’ grandfather, but it captures the same sense of gravitas as an element of profound personal history as the recording made by his sister. The hymns performed by the Red Oak Singers are sung in Mohawk, with occasional phrases resembling the traditions of the Longhouse. Even without the linguistic comprehension a listener can still intuit the emotion and tonal qualities of sadness and memory within their voices. The accompanying video in Red Oak Condolence is a simple black and white shot of oak leaves gently bobbing up and down on a branch. Watching the images of the leaves subtly swaying on a breeze is mesmerizing and creates a space for the audience to focus not only on the accompanying audio but their own thoughts regarding the video work.

Like the rest of the work that comprises the exhibition Condolence, Red Oak Condolence creates a moment for greater contemplation about mortality, about memory, about grief, and about our histories. Staats stresses that the work itself is something to be lived through. Our personal and family archives are complex in nature and Staats is interested in what is preserved in our stories and how even what is left out can tell part of our tale. With such a diverse accumulation and absence of information to sift through and sort together, Staats recognizes that there are a variety of memories and perspectives to be honoured. Binary systems are not simply good versus bad, but require an approach that incorporates collective memory rather than what Staats calls a single brushstroke. Achieving a

sense of balance through a sense of transference from one to another is what Staats is striving for with Condolence. Perhaps that is what the process of what understanding, healing, and condolence is all about too.

1Bruce Elliot Johansen and Barbara Alice Mann. "Encyclopedia of Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy)" Greenwood Press: Westport, CT. 2000. pp 58 - 59.