



CURIOSITY AND  
QUILLWORK

*Vanessa Dion Fletcher*

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Vanessa Dion Fletcher

Vanessa Dion Fletcher graduated from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2016 with an MFA in performance, she has exhibited across Canada and the US, at

Art Mur in Montreal, Eastern Edge Gallery Newfoundland, The Queer Arts Festival Vancouver, Satellite Art show Miami. Her work is in the Indigenous Art Centre in Gatineau, Quebec, Joan Flasch Artist Book collection, Vtape and Seneca College. In 2019, Vanessa is supported by the City of Toronto Indigenous partnerships fund to be an Artist-in-Residence at OCAD University.

Photo by Michelle Peek.

# ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Vanessa Dion Fletcher's solo exhibition *Curiosity and Quillwork* demonstrates an appreciation for repetition and pattern-making using and diverging from traditional quillwork forms.

As a mode of working through complicated limitations of colonial impacts, on language and limited access to traditional Indigenous knowledge. Dion Fletcher interacts with visual and creative means as a way of connecting to her ancestral relations and reclaiming her culture.

The exhibition features three new works: *Zigzag in twenty-nine parts* (2019), a series of works on paper; *Shifting Focus* (2019), a microscopic digital video; and *Advancing Colors* (2019) a delicate installation of an ornate pattern that emulates the traditional practice of birch bark quillwork.



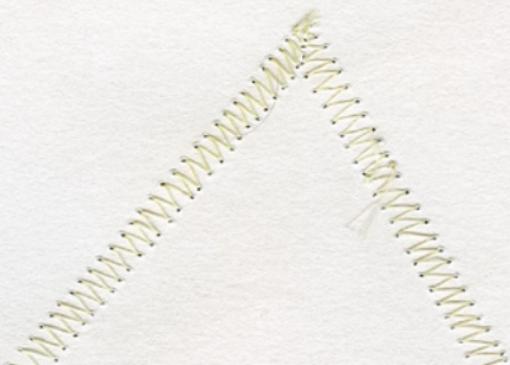
# QUILLWORK AND CURIOSITY

Vanessa Dion Fletcher's exhibition *Curiosity and Quillwork*, demonstrates an appreciation for the labour that accompanies the painstaking process of quillwork while working through the complicated limitations of colonial impacts, such as language and lack of access to traditional knowledge. By engaging with traditional materials, Dion Fletcher communicates with her ancestors while subverting the English language which impacts the ways she moves through this world an artist with a disability. Due to the barriers of the English language that suppress her capacity to genuinely express herself, she leans on the use of porcupine quillwork as a method of returning to ancestral teachings, one that does not acknowledge the restraints of a colonial language. As a mode of working through colonial trauma, she interacts with visual and creative means as a way of connecting to her ancestral relations and reclaiming her culture.



Through an immersive and multi-faceted display of artworks, the artist portrays an accessible, curious and delicate reflection on the intricacy and importance of Indigenous craftwork to ourselves, our families, and our communities, as a move towards andigenous resurgence practices and sovereignty. Over her six-month residency in Toronto as OCAD University's 2019 Artist-in-residence, supported by the City of Toronto's Indigenous Partnerships Fund, her work is reflective, fixated on the lengthy process and techniques of quillwork that flows through her Lenape and Potawatomi bloodlines. She didn't come into quillwork until after she completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts when she sought out the medium to expand her knowledge of her ancestral artistic practices. Upon receiving the Textile Museum of Canada Melissa Levin Emerging Artist Award, she received mentorship from Cree artist and educator, Brenda Lee, who provided instruction from her home studio in Nipissing First Nation, Ontario. As an ongoing project for the artist, she has crafted a series of twenty nine pieces of quillwork on paper, which diverges from

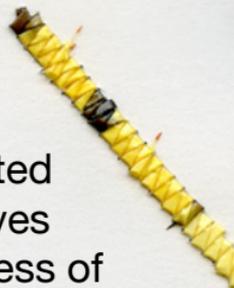




quillwork commonly applied to clothing and birch boxes and carries a similar affect to beading. The series of framed works on paper are titled *Zigzag in twenty-nine parts* (2019), which are all unique in their own way. Dion Fletcher does not consider them patterns due to their lack of repetitive markings – each

artwork maintains its own individuality. Alternatively, they resemble close-ups of designs or drawings that could be fractures of larger patterns as a whole.

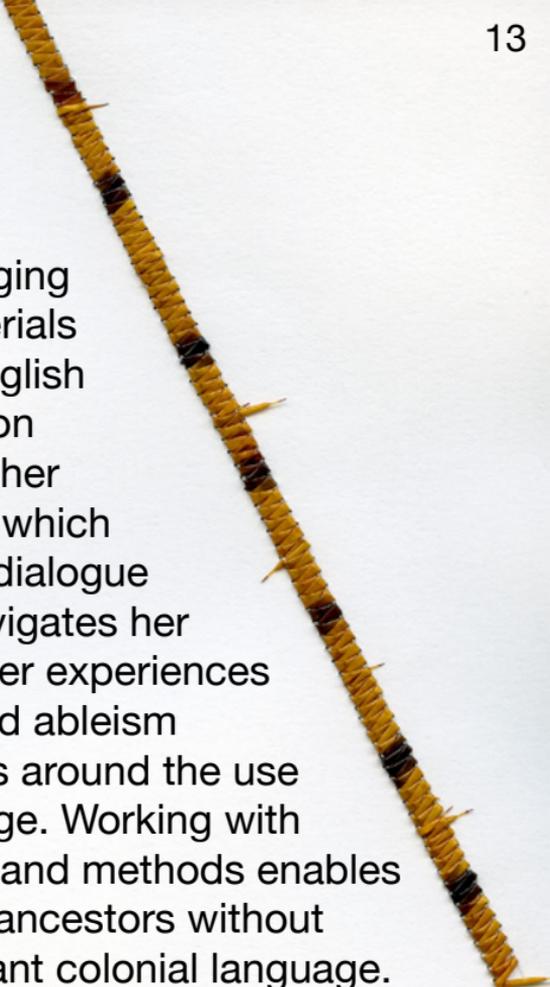
While some of the artworks carry similarities, the natural materials influence the randomness of the work, rendering it impossible to have two identical compositions. On clothing or moccasins, all of the ends of the quills are trimmed or tucked into each other to create a smooth design that can with stand the ware of a functional object. Dion Fletcher leaves the ends out, not only providing an unpredictable yet meditated outcome for each artwork, but also gives the viewers insight as to how the process of quillwork is accomplished. Lines overlap and

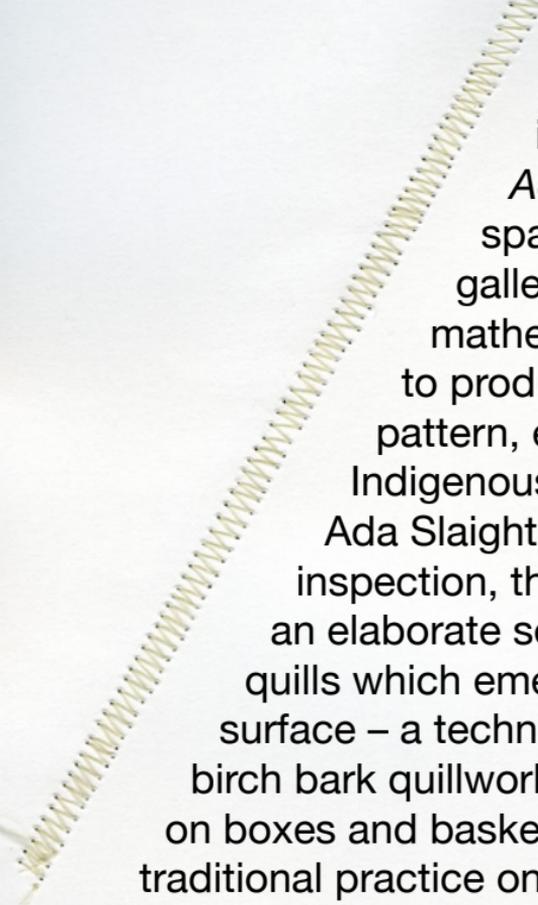


almost meet as they come together and drift – with varying yellows, browns, greens and reds. The 29 works display a series of individual themes that converse with one another – relating but not repeating – to create a quirky display of unconventional quillwork that speaks louder than words.

Repetition and pattern-making become an on-going theme throughout the exhibition. A microscopic digital video, titled *Shifting Focus* (2019), of porcupine quills takes on a kaleidoscopic effect, zooming in and out while the depth perception alternates between being in-zooming in and out while the depth perception alternates between being in and out of focus. And out while the depth perception alternates between being in and out of focus. With a running time of ten minutes, the video forces the viewer to pause and become mesmerized by the entrancing geometric pattern of creams and browns. Sounds of quills falling onto each other in conjunction with a cadence of soft-breath creates a trance-like experience for the viewer.

She expands on notions of communication, language, and accessibility by engaging with Indigenous materials while rejecting the English language – focusing on her lack of access to her Indigenous language which leaves her modes of dialogue disrupted. As she navigates her disability, Dion Fletcher experiences increasing conflict and ableism which mainly revolves around the use of the English language. Working with Indigenous materials and methods enables her to learn from her ancestors without the use of the dominant colonial language. *Shifting Focus* alludes to the meaningful patterns of our representational selves, our families and our communities. As shapes morph into a hypnotic series of symmetrical tilework, the video brings viewers closer to the intimacy of quillwork practices.

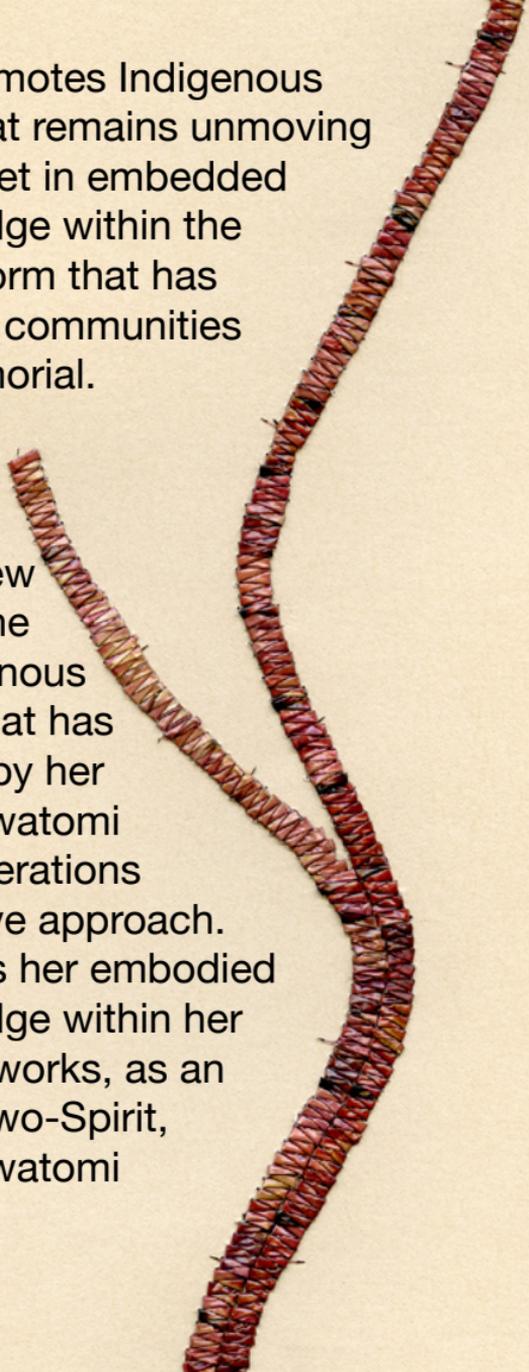


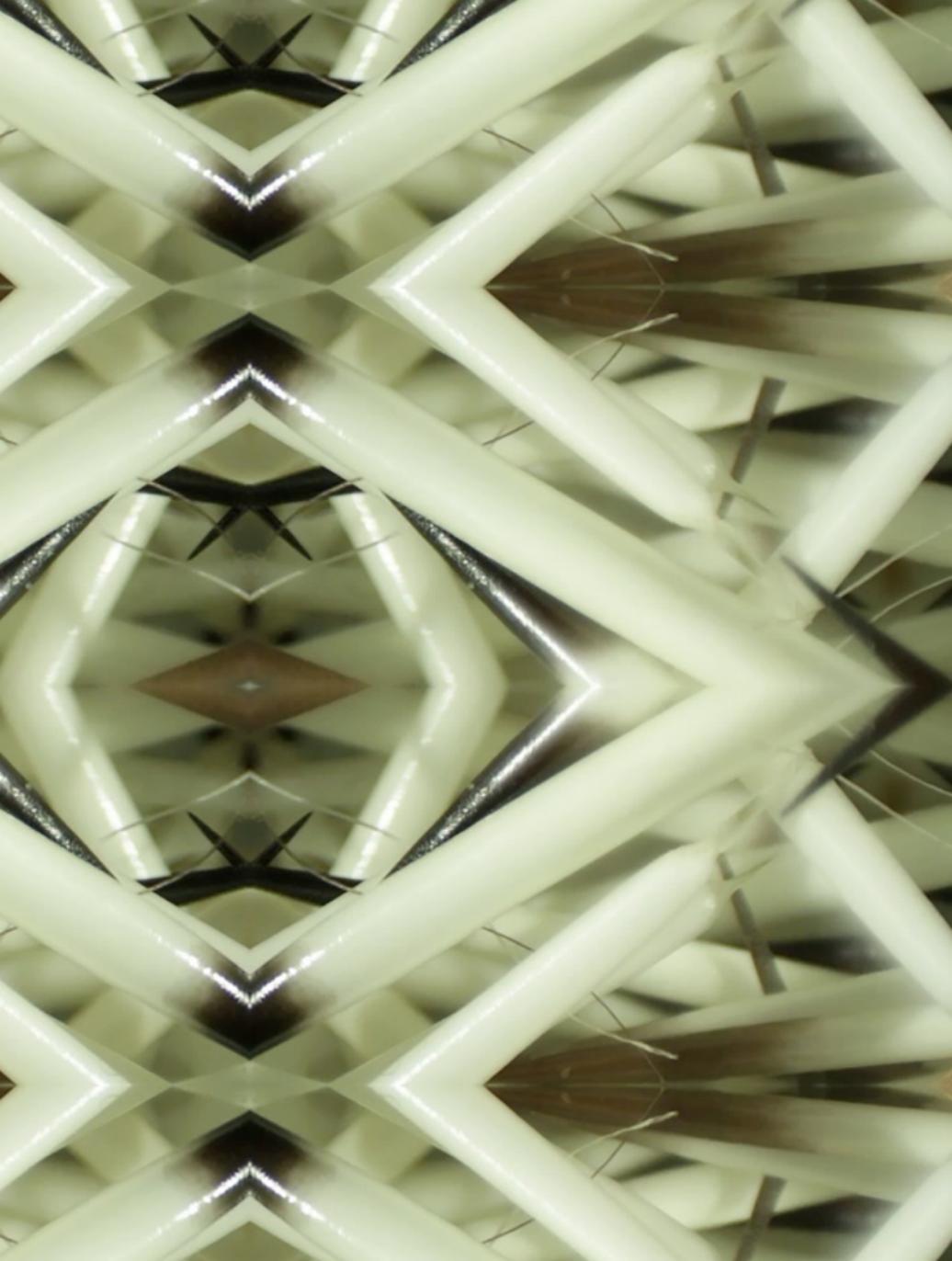


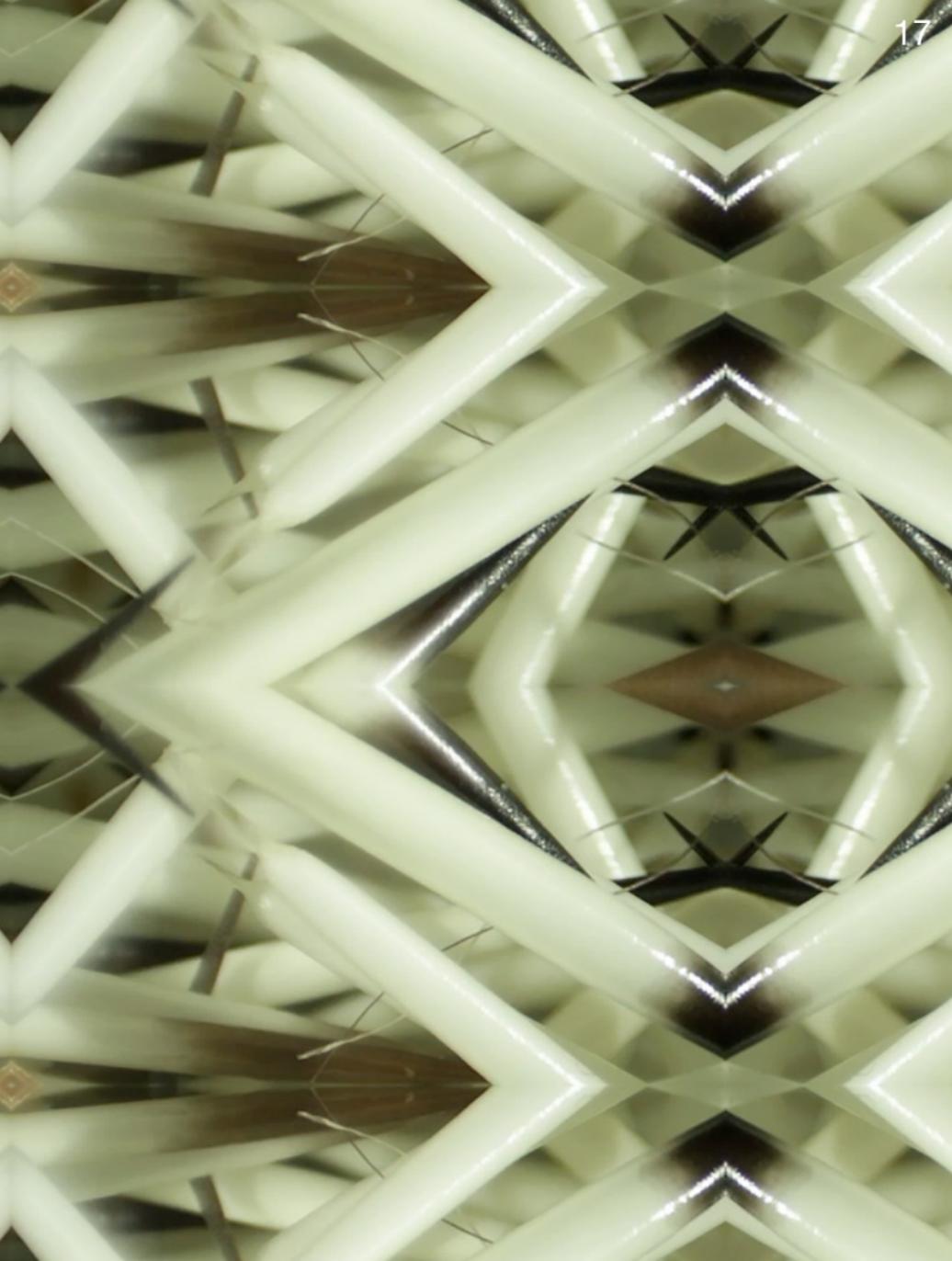
Lastly, a delicate installation titled *Advancing Colors* (2019) spans 8ft square on the gallery wall, creating a mathematical sequence to produce an ornate pattern, establishing a fixed Indigenous presence within the Ada Slight gallery. Upon closer inspection, the wall is covered with an elaborate series of embedded quills which emerges from the painted surface – a technique adapted from birch bark quillwork that is often seen on boxes and baskets. She emulates this traditional practice on the gallery walls by (and) invites visitors to touch the quillwork and wall. This strategically welcomes, an interactive environment with visitors, which allows them to closely inspect and engage with the intricate execution and painstaking process of quillwork without the limitations of language, sparking curiosity into traditional visual culture. By physically installing quillwork into the space,

Dion Fletcher promotes Indigenous representation that remains unmoving – grounded and set in embedded ancestral knowledge within the artist and an art form that has walked within our communities since time immemorial.

*Curiosity and Quillwork* invites viewers to gain new appreciation for the meticulous Indigenous material culture that has been maintained by her Lenape and Potawatomi ancestors for generations through a receptive approach. She demonstrates her embodied ancestral knowledge within her contemplative artworks, as an interdisciplinary Two-Spirit, Lenape and Potawatomi artist.



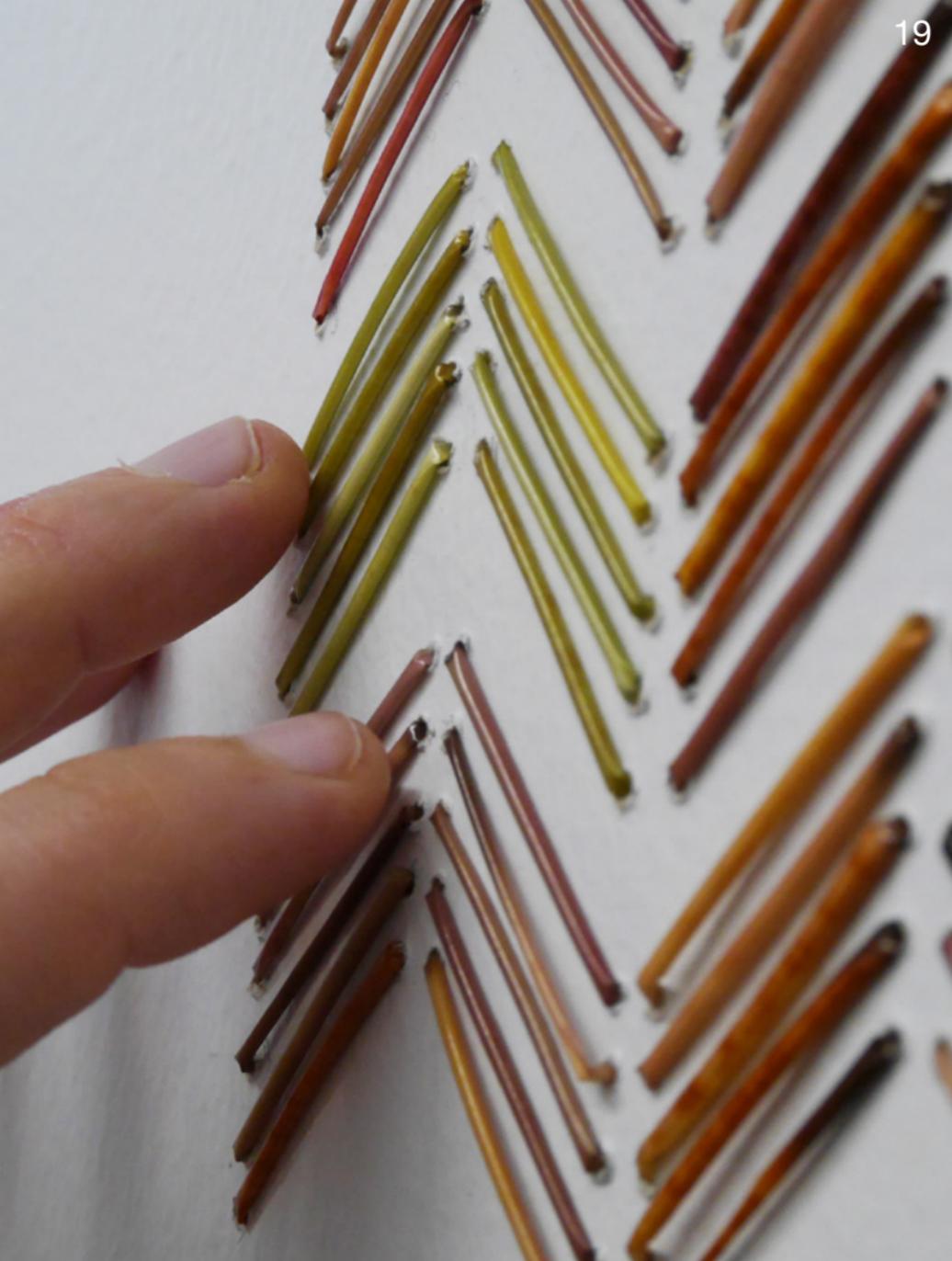




Accessibility plays an important role in her artistic practice. As an artist who identifies with disability and neurodiversity, she is committed to considering the multiple ways that audiences can experience her artworks. Within the installation of *Curiosity and Quillwork*, she ensures her voice, vision and view are clear for audiences, welcoming a variety of ways that gallery goers can respond to her curious and unique use of porcupine quills as subject.

By Adrienne Huard







# ABOUT THE RESIDENCY

In 2019, OCAD University hosted an inaugural residency with artist Vanessa Dion Fletcher at the Rosalie Sharp Pavilion. Funded by the City of Toronto's Indigenous Arts and Culture Partnership Fund, the residency was hosted by the University's Centre for Emerging Artists & Designers and the Indigenous Visual Culture program. Vanessa completed an in-situ six-month Visiting Artist residency, followed by a six-month post-residency to disseminate her research and work.

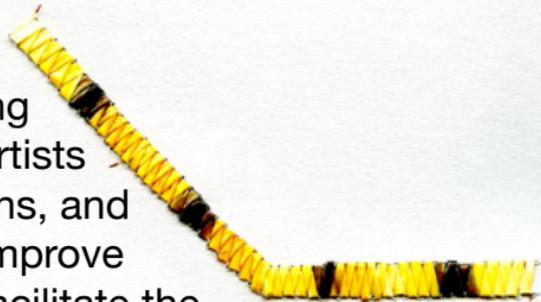
Opportunities for OCAD U students to engage with Vanessa were developed over the period of the residency, including an artist talk and welcome lunch, classroom presentations, studio visits, and an experiential learning placement. Adrienne Huard, MFA candidate in the Practice program Criticism and Curatorial worked alongside Vanessa to curate the final exhibition on view at the Ada Slight Gallery from September 10 to 21, 2019. *Curiosity and Quillwork*, is the culmination of Vanessa's work in residence at OCAD.

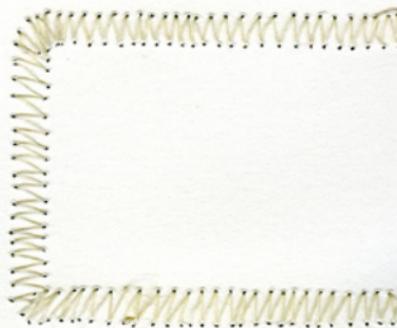


# ADRIENNE HUARD

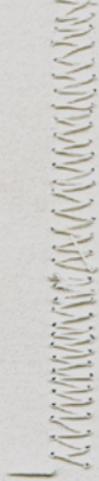
Adrienne Huard is an Anishinaabekwe born in so-called Winnipeg and is currently based in Tkarón:to/ Toronto. After graduating in 2012 from the University of Manitoba with a Bachelor

of Fine Arts majoring in photography, she decided to pursue a Bachelor of Fine Arts majoring in art history at Concordia University in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal. Huard graduated from Concordia in April 2018 and was accepted into OCAD University's graduate-level Criticism and Curatorial Practice program, which she began in fall 2018. Her area of focus for study is to challenge the positioning of Indigenous art and artists within cultural institutions, and explore how to better improve these relationships to facilitate the process of resurgence.









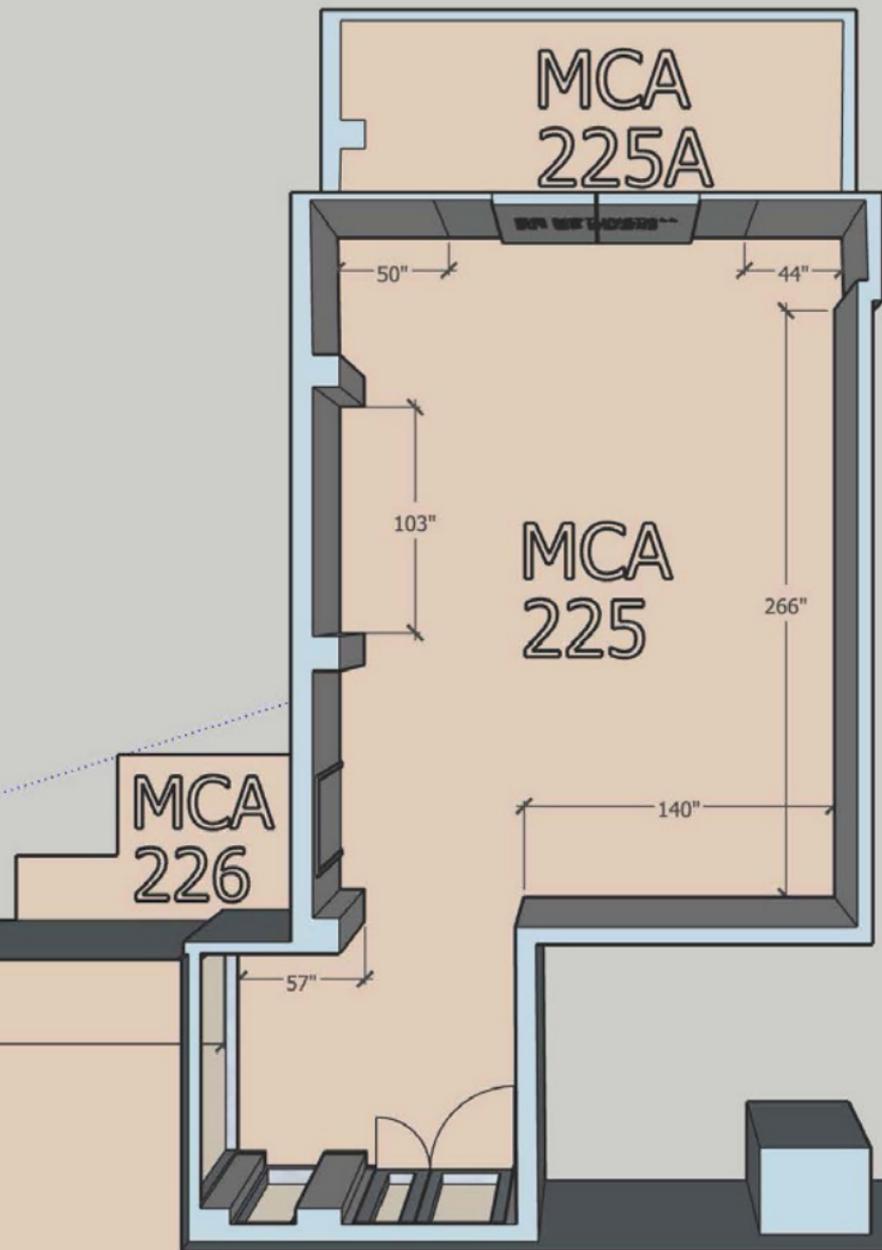
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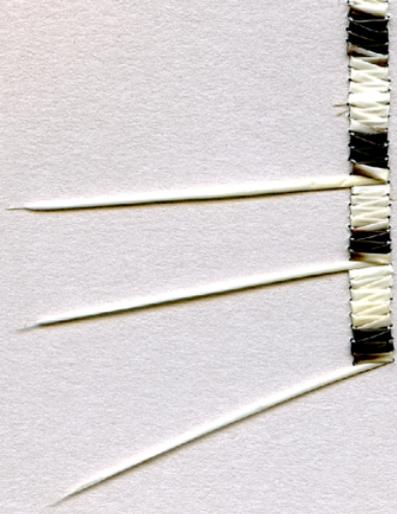
## **Accessibility**

The Ada Slaight Gallery is located on the 2nd floor of OCAD University's 100 McCaul Street location. *Curiosity and Quillwork* is located in room 225 of the Gallery. Enter through 100 McCaul Street's main doors located on the west side of McCaul St., there is a ramp and a flight of stairs to enter the building. Inside the lobby one can get to the 2nd floor by going up the spiral stairwell or elevator to level 2. There are two sets elevators in the lobby. Only the two west-facing elevators (behind the elevators facing the main entrance) will go up to level 2. On level 2 make a right turn down the hallway. The exhibition will be located to the left. Service animals may accompany visitors at any time. For hours of operation, visit [www.ocadu.ca/about/hours](http://www.ocadu.ca/about/hours).

## **Public transportation & Parking**

OCAD University's 100 McCaul Street location is accessible by the TTC via the Dundas St. streetcar. The closest accessible TTC station is St. Patrick. Paid street and underground parking is available around the University.







PG 17:

*Shifting Focus*, 2019

Digital video, 10:00 minutes, color, sound no language

PG 19:

*Advancing Colors*, 2019

Quillwork on drywall with latex paint



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was made possible by the City of Toronto's Indigenous Arts and Culture Partnership Fund, OCAD University, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Delaney Family Foundation.



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INDIGENOUS  
VISUAL CULTURE  
AT OCAD UNIVERSITY

Anushiik to the ASL interpreters who helped with this project, Uncle Michael for cooking, the experiential learning student who helped with install, Ryan Rice for initiating the collaboration, the Indigenous Visual Culture program, and the Centre for Emerging Artists & Designers team.

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