

Lifeworks

Fur and the flag

Fur was once the most important commodity propelling Canada's economic development. The fur trade peaked in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, when European fashion dictated an extravagant harvest of beaver fur. In more recent times, Canadians have questioned, re-evaluated and discarded the colonial philosophies behind the fur trade. When visitors enter Marianne Corless' exhibition *Further* at Vancouver's Grunt Gallery, they are invited to remove their shoes and walk on a room-sized carpet pieced together from discarded fur coats. Through her work Corless encourages a frank and fresh discussion about the role of the fur trade in the Canadian experience.

The grand fur carpet leads to 6 30" x 40" portraits, also made of fur, which depict historical figures such as Queen Elizabeth I, King Louis XIV and Pope Innocent X. These individuals ruled the nations and institutions intrinsically linked with Canada's colonization and expansion. Alongside the portraits hangs a Canadian flag made of fur, visually reinforcing its connection with the portraits. On the opposite wall, the flag motif is reworked into a series of wall hangings made of Hudson's Bay Company blankets reworked with additions of fur strips, hair, red paint and, in one case, copper leaf. The separation of the luxurious fur portraits from the utilitarian wool blankets vividly conveys the enormous divide between those who benefited and those who suffered as a result of the fur trade.

Courtesy of the artist

To create the fur portraits, Corless carefully rips apart recycled fur coats one seam at a time, creating a rich and

unusual palette of fur fragments, which she laboriously hand stitches into mosaic-like compositions. She then stretches this hybrid fur pelt onto a form and places the entire work in a traditional gilded frame. The resulting images are reminiscent of historical painted portraits and allude to iconic representations of powerful and authoritative figures. Corless applies the same techniques, on a larger scale, to create the fur floor covering.

Each piece in the show incorporates only the furs that were part of the Hudson's Bay Company's trade, such as beaver, fox, coyote, muskrat and mink.



Marianne Corless, 2002. *Fur Queen II*. Mink, muskrat, ermine and beaver fur, 20" x 16"

The presence of so much fur arouses many associations: the pelts are lush and sensuous, yet also represent the visceral realities of death and dismemberment. When new, fur coats signal wealth and power. As they age and are found second-hand, they remind us of how drastically an object's value, and what that object may represent, can diminish over time.

In stark contrast to the allusions to luxury and power in the fur portraits, Corless' treatment of the Hudson's Bay blankets transforms them into images of the death and disease "traded" with devastating impact into First Nations communities. Corless revises these iconic items, so closely associated with the fur trade, into injured Canadian flags. In *Blanket I*, fabric smallpox pustules boil and drip with hairs, the same threads that suture the blankets together. The blanket's rectangular shape is somewhat warped by these "repair" stitches, and its maple leaf emblem appears rotten and disintegrating. The crudeness of the sutures implies emergency surgery, a self-consciously primitive attempt by a contemporary artist to mend the wounds of the past.

In *Blanket III*, Corless integrates images of the financial framework that was being set up as the fur trade boomed. She inserts the Bank of Canada logo into the top and bottom thirds of this blanket and a copper maple leaf, echoing a penny, into its centre. Since Canada's first bank, the Bank of Montreal, was established specifically to support the financial needs of the fur trappers, *Blanket III* reminds us that many of Canada's "old

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money” families can trace the source of their fortunes to the fur trade. Corless reinforces this connection to the past in the fur portraits by using the same furs in her portraits of past and present royals: Queen Elizabeth I, Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Charles. She implies that the Elizabethan power structures of the colonial age exist to some degree to this day. And since viewers are standing on fur as they look at these images, they too become entangled in the historically complex legacy of the fur trade. Through this physical connection Corless signals the links between the blankets and the portraits, between Canada’s origins and its present and between the notable achievements and inconceivable disgraces that colour this nation’s evolution.



Courtesy of the artist

Marianne Corless, 2002. *Blanket I.* Wool, beaver fur, human hair, acrylic paint, 72" x 36"

Past progressive

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At an artist’s talk held in conjunction with the exhibition, Corless spoke about her desire to connect past and present issues of Canadian identity: “In my work, I am using the Canadian flag ... [and] the jolt of ownership that it evokes to generate a sense of responsibility in the viewer. The flag belongs to all Canadians and we must accept all that it represents: greatness, vision and violence. That is

who we are. That is who I am.” *Further* is a beautiful, complex and, at times, painful meditation on how contemporary ideas of Canadian cultural and national identity are most clearly understood when they include an awareness of Canada’s past.

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