

Chaz John, Matthew Kirk, and Nico Williams in Conversation with Caitlin Chaisson

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Organized by the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation

Anjuli Nanda Diamond:

Thank you everyone for joining us here at The 8th Floor, my name is Anjuli Nanda Diamond, Executive Director of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation. Tonight we have a conversation between artists Chaz John, Matthew Kirk, and Nico Williams, whose works are on view here in "The House Edge," which features the work of sixteen artists who consider the economic dimensions of Indigenous sovereignty. This is a wonderful way to round out this collaboration, so I want to thank Caitlin again for all of her work, it's been a pleasure.

Caitlin Chaisson:

Thank you so much, Anjuli, and to everyone for being here. As a settler I also give thanks to the Lenape past, present, and future, whose territories we are all presently seated upon, and where many other nations have ties to, including the Mohigan, the Wappinger, the Haudenosaunee further north, and the Matinecock, Montaukett, Setalcott, Unkechaug, and Shinnecock to the east.

It's a pleasure to be in conversation with you Nico, Matthew, and Chaz today, to hear a bit more about their broader practices. At first glance it seems that your work is very different, in form and subject and approach, but as I was preparing I ended up with a delightfully long list of things that appeared to be overlapping ideas or areas of interest, and you each illuminate them in very different ways, so I'm excited to tease some of that out together in conversation. The structure for today is that all three artists will give a really brief kind of illustrative talk with some slides for things that you can't see on view here, or some things that you can, but in a different way, and then we'll kind of bat around some questions together, and then open it up to questions from the audience.

Chaz John:

Hey, how's it going? I'm Chaz, and this piece is kind of a joke, I guess. A lot of my work has a lot of humor involved in it. My three pieces within the show are based on a Winnebago narrative called "The Spirit of Gambling," and so we have an actual spirit who is sort of like a Luciferian, fallen angel, first man, sort of character, and I definitely wanted to... I wrote a new zine and kind of retold that story, and it's available over there if you guys want to give it a gander, but I wanted to illustrate what the gambling spirit was to me in this painting.



A Gambling Spirit (Self-Portrait) / Life is Short, Skip Rent, Gamble on the Special Olympics, Get Evicted, Relapse on Four Loko, Treat Yo Self
Oil and Acrylic On Wood Panel 9"x 10.5", 2023

It's called "A Gambling Spirit (Self-Portrait) / Life is Short, Skip Rent, Gamble on the Special Olympics, Get Evicted, Relapse on Four Loko, Treat Yo Self." Yeah? So, I feel like that's kind of how that spirit would speak to me, because I'm in recovery myself, and I feel like this transformative, almost werewolf-like creature has been beheaded but still kind of talks, is something that I identify with in my recovery. And so, I feel like that voice in your head that's telling you, "Aw, It's okay if you just skip your rent, gamble on the Special Olympics, and relapse on Four Loko. That's fine. Treat yourself a little bit!" And so, I just wanted to throw this one in the mix so you guys could see it in a little different light over here.

Caitlin Chaisson:

There seems to be somewhat art historical references that happen throughout some of your work, do you want to talk about that here?

Chaz John:

This piece actually, it kind of started out as a test. I feel like that just went over really well. I think sometimes we do that as artists, where you just— I started using oil paint. This is one of the first oil paints that I started really kind of working on, so I wanted it to feel kind of heavy, like it has that weight to it as being oil rather than acrylics, or it has sort of an older feel. And I based it off of the beheading of John the Baptist. It was interesting, I have a friend here in town, a really good friend who I haven't seen for a long time, but he has a family now, and is in seminary school, an orthodox seminary in Yonkers, and his wife loved this painting as sort of like the Saint John's beheading, but then also, I guess there's another saint that is classically rendered as having a dog face, or having a wolf-like face, so it kind of, even without me knowing that, after she explained it, but it has this really interesting call back to that sort of mysticism in there, with those stories that I am also really interested in.

I think that's why I've been making the zines, "The Hare Cycle," which is almost like a savior character within Winnebago culture, a trickster character, but I feel is actually a little more complex. He'll perform some of these miracles, but he will also burn women alive and things like that that are really dark, but they kind of make sense in the context of the stories. I think that character was interesting in

Winnebago at the time because he sort of, at the end of the cycle, he sacrifices himself so that people can find eternal life in him, in this character. It's said when missionaries came to Winnebago, they were trying to introduce Christianity and Jesus as a character. They were like, "Nah, we don't need that dude. We've already got a guy! We already got a hare character."

I'm really interested in the greater context of my practice, and conceptually looking at the parallels of those kinds of stories, and the parallels of those sort of characters and archetypes that seem like we as humans kind of need these characters, and keep reinventing them, or keep creating them because they exist in some other way for us, and we play with, let them out in different ways.

Especially, "The Spirit of Gambling." Gambling... I'm really excited, I'm really thankful for you including me in the show, because gambling is something that I like to do, but it's also interesting in a way in which it's... People have always gambled, as long as there's something to gamble with. There's always games to be played, and I think it almost... It does, it really does have a spirit to it, and it is really inviting and exciting, especially when you win some shit, and you're like, "Oh, fuck yeah! Let's go again!" And then you lose it all, you're like, "God damn it." It's kind of like one of those things that is just a part of humanity in a way that I really enjoy.

Caitlin Chaisson:

I think you have some images of the Hare Cycle, too.



Tribal Shell Game
Engraved Shell, Charcoal, Freeform Air with Rubber Ball and
Astroturf 10" x 8" x 7", 2023
Photo Credit: Brad Trone

Chaz John:

This one is "Tribal Shell Game." I'm Mississippi Band Choctaw, as well as Nebraska Winnebago, and European. In Mississippian culture there's a lot of shell carvings and gorgets and I actually had the privilege of being able to view some of those this week, on Wednesday, I could hold some that I've never even seen like that up close before. They were really beautiful. And they carve them actually on the inside, which is interesting.

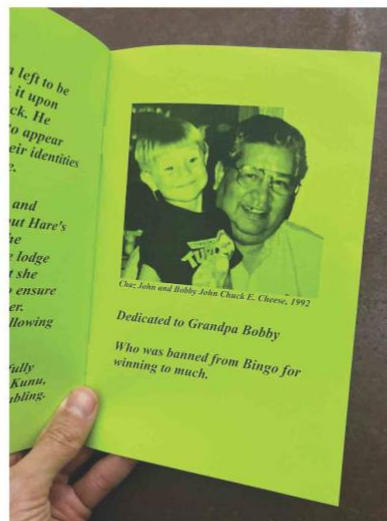
So, I really love tattoos, and it's a part of Mississippian culture as well, but I also really love the idea of tribal tattoos, neo-tribal designs, and then reincorporating them, Indiginizing them and then incorporating them into shows like this, where I'm like, "Yeah, this is an Indian thing." You know, it's funny to have just sort of like a tribal back tramp stamp in a shell. I think that's really good.

So, I carved this out initially with a Dremel, and then rubbed charcoal in it, which was sort of like a traditional way of bringing those images out, and it just wasn't hitting me as much as I wanted it to. And I wonder if you guys kind of feel this, too, where you go through the process of trial and error, kind of working with these new materials especially. But, I have some Free Form Air that I was using for my work, and kind of threw that in the mix, and then painted the charcoal on it, and it just absorbed it right away, and I felt like it gave it that bold, striking... and it captures that sort of neo-tribal design.

I want it to feel like that shell game, where it's like you... What is it, three-card monte, but with the shells, where you kind of switch it around? I wanted to give it a little bit of a narrative or something, by including the hand ball and propping it up on the wooden... Oh, and also, the astroturf. I love football, so I really wanted to have it... It almost looked like it was on a kickstand or something, you know? And actually, even my future work, I have a show coming up in August at Smoke the Moon. I'm working on these bronze pieces for the show that are kind of similar to this, and some of them are faces and things with shells, and making bronze works out of those. It's a symbol that is really interesting, I feel like they all kind of touch on as like a shell being sort of like a host body, or a body to inhabit, and in these old ways that they were doing them, they were cracking it open and carving the designs on the inside, that's kind of where the soul would be, or it's kind of on the inside of the body. So, I think I'm going to switch that around a little bit.

Caitlin Chaisson:

It's interesting to think about it in a casting process, too.



Hare Cycle #13 "The Gambling Spirit" Last Page
Artist Zine, Family Photo, 8.5" x 5.5", 2023

Chaz John:

I love the process of bronze, and really getting into metals. I just did a residency, started working at the foundry, and it's been a really cool experience. So, this is a picture of the last page of "The Hare Cycle #13." That's "The Spirit of Gambling." That's over yonder. And I dedicated this to my Grandpa Bobby, who was banned from bingo for winning too much, which is a true story (laughter). I don't even know how you get banned, how you could get banned. It seems impossible. But I feel like he might have been... He was kind of a hustler. Look at the gold tooth on this dude (laughter)... And we're at Chuck E. Cheese, like, that is a child's casino. It all comes full circle in a cool way. So, yeah, I was really happy to have this as the last page, because I feel like that's just such a good family photo.

I was also prompted to talk about newer work, or things that are coming up. There's another painting in this show too, I totally blanked on putting it into a slide, but it's "Rez Dog Mother with Bingo Sheet" that's included on the other side as well, and that was from an older show that I was doing a lot of rez dog pieces for, and that's based on my grandpa and my grandma going to bingo all the time. It's just a dog with a bingo sheet in its mouth. And it was made for rez dogs, so in the show, all the paintings were lower to the ground, and then I invited a bunch of dogs to the show so that it was like, it's for them.



"Melting of Columbia" WIP
Photo Credit: Brad Trone

So, this piece actually just received a grant that will remain nameless for now, but I'm really excited for it, and this was part of the project I pitched for them, and it's called "The Melting of Columbia," and it's a work in progress, so this is just some of the props. It's kind of like what's actually going to happen, because it's going to be a performative action with the sculpture remaining as the documentation of the performance... I've been doing a lot of research into the World's Fair in Chicago, which was known as the Columbian Exposition in 1893, which was the celebration at that time of Columbus... Which, it's already started out pretty gnarly, right? And then it gets worse. It was an exposition in Chicago that they built out on top of all this rubble, like a whole new city which was known as the Light City, built it really quick, a lot of Roman-esque buildings and monuments to Columbus and America, and they had different sites, different architectures. You know, it's things like that that they were showing off. They also had human zoos, and were really exploiting Native people, and it was really horrible.

But they also had these state fair-ish vibes, where it's like different states and different companies would show off different things. So it could be like, "Wisconsin had a camel-made cheese," or something in the fair, but then this company, a chocolate company at the time made a giant Venus de Milo sculpture made out of chocolate... So there was the chocolate sculpture, and then not too far away from that, they had these human remains in an exhibit, and it's really gnarly and horrible that they had a human baby, the desiccated remains of a Native baby, in sort of formaldehyde, almost like a Damien Hirst type thing, and they're not sure where they got it from. But, I was horrified at finding out, seeing these two things compared next to each other just seems like a nightmare already. It just seemed so dreamlike and terrifying.

I've also been really interested with these archetypes in stories, and Jungian research in understanding their ideas of dream works, and trying to re-enter dreams in a way to talk to the characters and change the outcomes of the dreams. And so, the project is based on, what if we were able to re-enter history as if it was a dream, sort of re-organize these symbols in a way that has a different outcome?

With this project, I'm working with white chocolate, which is sort of the fat byproduct of chocolate, which is still delicious, but it sort of gives it this flesh-like quality. And this is a cast that I made; it's just a cast mold of Venus de Milo, and I'm going to dress it like the goddess Columbia, which is like the female personification of America, as well as a female version of Columbus, and so it will be dressed in a cornucopia-style hat and stash, and on the side here is the beginning of the reciprocating heating coil that we're building, and so on the end of that tip will be the baby. I'm looking at a jeweler in Santa Fe to make a baby and a cradleboard, and we're going to cast it in gold. So, the idea is to have that baby in the coil inside of the hollow slipcast, on top of the heated plate, which is connected to a battery.

Then, I have some friends that are singers and drummers, and we're going to sing a song that's very special to one of our ceremonies, and once that song starts, we'll turn the battery on, and then the idea is for the baby inside to become so hot that it starts to melt the chocolate from the inside out, sort of destroying, sort of this devouring fact that's consuming it, because I see the goddess Columbia that's always depicted as this angel of Manifest Destiny and the settlers are coming, and everybody's running away, and it's bringing the light in this really horrible way, and so I see it as sort of like this devouring mother figure. So, that's been reversed in the way that it's going to burn us with its devouring fat, and reveal the child that's been distorted for this American spectacle, and that's been given new life in precious metals that will be able to be revealed, and then left as the documentation of that action. So, that'll be in a year and a half, got a lot of work to do and figure it out. We got some funding so I think we're going to try to make it bigger.

Caitlin Chaisson:

Thank you, Chaz.

Chaz John:

Yeah, you're welcome. Sorry that was kind of a bummer, but... (laughter) I always feel like my work is so humorous but thinking about this one, and I'm like, "Damn! This one's not funny at all!"

Caitlin Chaisson:

Yeah, totally. Matthew? And, I'm sorry, I just realized I didn't do the thing of reading the bios and all that beforehand, but they are printed somewhere if folks would like to read them. So, if there's anything you want to introduce about yourself please feel free.



Matthew Kirk
Waste Is A Thief, 2023
Wood, acrylic, ink, graphite, leather, coroplast, insulation
foam, hardware, wire, canvas
63 x 60.5 x 6 inches (160 x 153.7 x 15.2 cm)

Matthew Kirk:

Hi, I'm Matthew. Matthew Kirk (laughter). The pieces that I have in the slides here are similar to the pieces that are in the show. I know that when Caitlin came to see the studio and pick the work, she gravitated towards the more three-dimensional pieces that weren't just like a flat painting. And so, this one's called "Waste Is A Thief." I've gotten into this practice now where I make tables out of plywood, and then I have a different painting practice, where the tables, then, start to become part of a different kind of work. So, I'm making these more traditional types of pieces, but then the excess of the ink and the chalk and all the other materials I'm using starts to accumulate onto these tables, and then I take the tables, and then I cut them up, and build things with them.

It gets kind of crazy, because I've been working with making these things that can move, that are hinged, so you can't really tell but you can... or, one could go and manipulate this in some different ways, with the idea that it could be a couple of different configurations. So, you get more bang for your buck because it can be a couple of different things, however you want it. I like to use this material because it's sturdy, and I like to invite people to touch the work. I don't consider it incredibly fragile or delicate. I like the idea of people interacting with the work.

This particular piece started out actually as a three-dimensional house that I could kind of climb in, and it wasn't really working the way that I wanted it to, and finally I was taking all this extra cutoff material and putting it all together, and instead of making it this thing that you could walk into, I just broke it all down and then put it back together in a different way, and it happened real fast. But, yeah, I try to keep using as much of the material as I have so that I don't throw away a lot of stuff, because I don't like to do that. This work is a little different than some other pieces, but similar. Parts of this piece also have parts that have been pieces in the works in this show.

Caitlin Chaisson:

That's great. I didn't know that. What I'm wondering is, how do you know when a table is ready to be used in a work?

Matthew Kirk:

Usually just because I need to build something new, and so I'll be working on the table until I have a desire to shift away from making the other work that I'm making, and so I take the plywood and just break it all down, and then start using it that way. So, it's out of necessity, basically.



Matthew Kirk
I'll Sing Along, 2023
Canvas, acrylic, graphite, hardware, basketball rim, rope, hardware, wood
58.5 x 35 x 7 inches (148.6 x 88.9 x 17.8 cm)

This is on canvas, and there's a bike tire in there, and I wrapped the canvas around the bike tire, and then I shoved it through the basketball hoop. And it's like a deconstructed painting. Canvas doesn't really agree with me that much. I don't like it, unless it's something where it's messy and I can make it do what I want to do, instead of the... And it's nothing against a stretched canvas or anything, but I just never... It just doesn't ever agree with me, and so I had done another piece with another basketball hoop, and that piece was unprimed canvas, and this one was actually a painting that I got really frustrated with and just sort of pulled it off and then reset it in this way.

Nico came and saw my studio today, and so he saw some of the things where... I don't know what the right word is, but not able to let things go, and instead of letting the frustration win, I just sort of have to accumulate a lot of stuff and let it sit until there's this ah-ha moment where I'm just like, "Oh, I have this thing that would work really well right now," and then I just have to go dig it out of multiple Rubbermaid bins.

And then, I really like sports. I like football as well. I like basketball. I don't like watching basketball as much as playing it, but I really like to play basketball. I was driving the art handling truck one day and noticed a big dumpster, and there was this hoop sticking out, and so I had to jump out and get the hoop, because I'd been looking for one for a while, and then this actually was in another piece that I had used the hoop for, but then I needed the parts for that to go into the different thing, so then I had this hoop laying around.

So, these things, they come back to me, and then if it doesn't work out— I'm glad to have these pieces in the show, but realistically, at some point, I'll probably end up taking it apart if I have to use it for something else. So, it's like this feeling of continuously reworking things and making things new from old stuff, and adding whatever the new thing is at the time.



Matthew Kirk
Bone Trap, 2023
Wood, acrylic, brick, cinderblock, insulation foam
69.5 x 27.5 x 7.5 inches (176.5 x 69.9 x 19.1 cm)

I like a lot of brick. I did bricks here. I like picking up bricks when I'm walking around and finding bricks, and I put them in my bag and I bring them home, and I use them now also for other parts of a process of gluing, as like a weight to glue pieces down. But then sometimes, as I'm moving them around the studio, or the more I'm moving them around, they just start to turn into their own thing. And this is an old fence post that I had, the remnants of these parts of this fence that I built, and it just happened that the way that they all were laying on the grass, and I was like, "Oh, I can do these all together like this," and it's this nice little geometric thing. But it needs something more to it. I ended up looking at the bricks that are laying around, and putting all that together.

This is something that I had put into this show last October, and it's just the kind of thing that, again, that comes back when I'm already using the bricks for something else, and I was already... but, it's nice to have a picture of it, so I can remember that I did it. And then I if I ever have to do it again, and I know how to do it now, so... But, yeah, I don't think too much about the long term of it, because it's all so fleeting anyway.

Caitlin Chaisson:

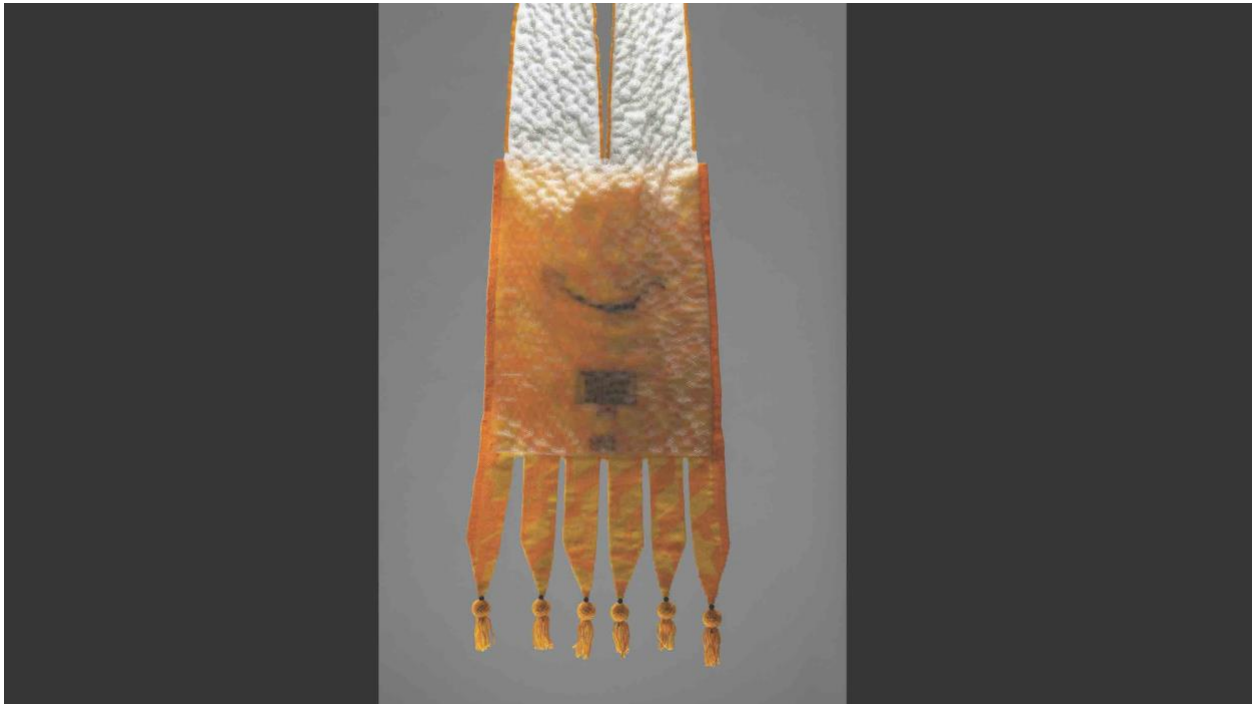
What happens when it's acquired, or it goes to a collection? How do you feel about that?

Matthew Kirk:

I think that that's great (laughter). I think it's nice for someone else to manage, and I don't have any problem with it being... but, I also know that I can't store this kind of thing forever. I build a crate and put this in there. I need that stuff for other things. So, it's the kind of thing where I feel like I could... I've seen this in my art handling job, where there's the original one, but then you're going to install and it's an edition or something, and it's like the bricks have to be a certain way. You have the picture of the original installation from the '70s or something like that. I'm like, "All right. Well, that's how that works." So, that's how this would work, too, for anybody that's wanting to acquire some bricks.

Caitlin Chaisson:

Thank you so much, Matthew. Nico?



Nico Williams:

Okay, so I did not give titles or dimensions, so we can make up titles the whole time, so this piece is called "Patience." It's-

Caitlin Chaisson:

Is that really?

Nico Williams:

No, it's not. Just kidding. Well-

Caitlin Chaisson:

It looks like you would need patience to make it.

Nico Williams:

Yeah. Well, let's go back. I chose this work because it followed after doing a series of beaded lottery tickets in the studio. And at the time, there was three of us working on it in the Montreal Hochelaga studio, that's the area we're located at, and the team was around three people at the time. So, I always want to acknowledge them and their hands behind the work.

This was like a layered lasagna of ideas that I had to just get out of my head, and it was even during the pandemic, and I just remember walking back and forth to the studio, and there wasn't a lot of people working in the building at the time. People were at home because of the mandates, and so it was very... I was dropping off things to the studio team. When I'd go drop off beadwork to them, or patterns, I would just see all these piles of boxes and packages piling up in front of people's houses, and I was really like, "Okay, something is going on there." I have a bandolier bag in my studio, which is like a traditional bag beaded by an Anishinaabe ancestor. I just did an archival visit to a major institution around here this week, and they would be in horror if they came to my studio, because it's like I had something in a drawer just hung up on a fire extinguisher in my studio (laughter), with the beads from 200 years ago, and still interacting with it.

The interesting thing about the bandolier bag that I was responding to was, that person would bead that bag for over a year, and then they would trade it for one horse. So, I was trying to think about that, and then I brought in this Amazon package from my house to the studio, and then I sort of meshed them together. On the back of the work, there's this totally transparent bubble wrap sort of texture. This is where the research started to happen with the beads in the studio. I had beadwork, little bubble wrap, and we tried to make bubble wrap and experiment around with that. We beaded a package and tassels, and we just tried to make it look like it was woven like one of the previous bags.



I'm always trying to respond to different objects, and go to a point of nostalgia of growing up on the rez. Aamjiwnaang First Nation, which is down in Southern Ontario. I guess on your side you would understand it as a part of Treaty of Detroit. And I don't think you have J Cloths down here in America, but in Canada they're everywhere.

Caitlin Chaisson:

Really? They're everywhere in Canada.

Nico Williams:

Yeah. So, this is a big thing, I was like, "Okay, wow." So, I beaded a J Cloth, and there's a series of three of them, and each was sort of exploring different moments or a response from a memory I had. This piece is called "Bang On Man!!!" and it was just thinking about deers hung up in the garage, while my uncle was working on a car, and he'd use the rag to clean up oil. This was the first time I ever painted beadwork before. It was just trying to explore. I would mix some oil paint and some pigment stuff, and this is the first Nico Williams painting.



Then there was responding to just imitating an object and not changing anything about it. This was the work that was inspired from dropping off templates to Alex, who was a studio technician at the time, and I remember going to their house and seeing this tiny little Amazon box. Normally, I'm picking up these objects, bringing them to the studio, and then having a connection, thinking about what conversation it can have. Because there's more layers to be looked at than what you're actually experiencing the first time. And then I remember just dropping off the beadwork to Alex, and then really thinking about it, and then they were like, "Do you want to take my recycling box right now?" I was like, "No!" And three weeks later, I was approached by a curator who was looking for the Amazon bag that was the beaded one that I showed a couple of slides back, but that's a part of an exhibition right now called "Radical Stitch," which is a major beadwork exhibition.

Caitlin Chaisson:

That's traveling.

Nico Williams:

Travel, yes. So, if you're in Canada this summer with the National Gallery-

Caitlin Chaisson:

Oh my gosh!

Nico Williams:

Yes! Major, major. And it's actually coming down to the US to the Eiteljorg... So, a curator was like, "Do you have the Amazon bag?" I was like, "It is on tour forever, okay?" Even the family who collected that Amazon bag, they were like, "Where is it?" I was like, "It's going on tour forever." So, it was three weeks after, and the curator was like, "I want to make work that talks about the pandemic, and I saw that Amazon bag, and I wanted to show it." And I was like, "It's on this tour and I can't get it, but I'm going to go back to Alex's house and I'm going to grab that Amazon box, because I'm going to respond to it by

beading it." And it even folds up like a box. But the thing was, Alex had recycled it with all the contents inside, so I had to have this weird relationship of ordering things from Amazon of various sizes until it arrived.



After ordering a bunch of things, and I forget what I ordered, we finally got the same size and repeated it all to look like a soggy Amazon box. It was sort of left out in the rain, there was like a grease stain on the tape, so I was really trying to just respond to it like, coaching it like a soft sculpture. How can we represent that box, and get as much detail as we could with it? There was, the tape here, there was tape here on the original box, but I wanted to take that off because masks were coming off, so I just wanted a little smile there.



And then, this work happened last year, and to think about conservation and collections... The institution that had acquired this work, we did this large sort of painted medallion using rocks from around the Toronto area, and we made a medallion just using large river rocks, so the conservation team encountered it and were like, "Do you know how many rocks are in those?" I'm like, "No, I do not," but I have installed this five times, and I'm going to get them to film me doing it this time when I go down to do it again.

I really wanted to bead these chairs that represented national identity. So, you know like "O Canada," "Star Spangled," and "La Belle Province" because it never did become a nation that's flourished (laughter), and they're all facing each other and excluding us from the conversation when you're interacting with it. And when you're going up and renting chalets up in Quebec... I started walking around in the mountains and noticing all these 'privet' signs, which just means 'private', private property. So, I'd be walking around the territory, and you just have all these signs everywhere around you.

And when I was getting these photographed by Paul, he was like, "Oh my gosh! That's so interesting, because I just came back from camping," and he was at the river with his partner, and they were enjoying the night sky, and this guy drove up with a truck, and he's like, "Hey, what are you doing on my land?" And he was like, "Oh, I'm just here at the shore, looking at the stars." And then the guy turned on his car lights, so then the light would drown out the stars. He wasn't allowed to look at the stars.

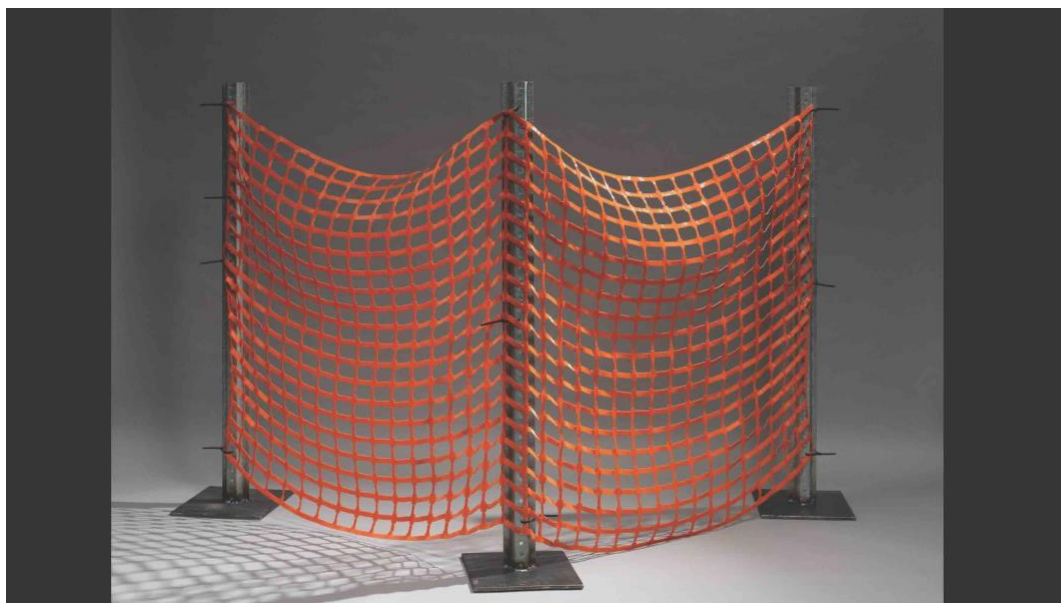
So, it's kind of interesting to think about how these conversations are happening, and with the world-building behind it, but I also wanted to go into the drawers again. I love going into drawers of museums. If you have an institution, invite me to come look. Because we actually discover lots of things when we start to interact with them. And Francesca Herbert that year went into a couple of museum archives. I'm leaving all the names anonymous of different collections... and started taking photographs of quillwork, beadwork done through nations throughout the Great Lakes, and then we took notes of what was written next to it. A lot of it is anonymous, sort of like, "Indian woman," et cetera, "beadwork." And we monochromatically place them into the backdrops of these national chairs.

But, you have to remember, everything that I'm beading is normally a found object, there was a Quebec and a Canada chair found in Ottawa that I was inspired by, so I'm always pulling inspiration from the street, because it's everywhere. So, when I'm in New York, I'm in heaven. I've seen it in Brooklyn. It's like, "Wow! Oh my gosh!" But that's where there's always a conversation to be had. And even the little net there is beaded using really tiny little fine beads. And then there is this work that came out this year. It was at James Fuentes, a group exhibition, "Young Elder," curated by Zach Feuer and Natalie Ball. Natalie has an exhibition right now at the Whitney. You should check that out. And this piece in particular is called "Times Are Tough."



So, the government announced in Canada that the prices of food was going to go up, I think two years ago or so now. I pulled that around that time. And I've been actually pulling flyers up periodically that I just see sort of placed around, so you can see sort of the price of things. Now it has gone way up. But, I just wanted to document those, and look at the resources that are sort of being packaged and advertised to us, what's affordable, what's changed, thinking about the land transforming. There's wheat fields for cereal, sugar imported over the water, so I was just trying to really think about Indigenous lands being torn up. Cows, farms, all those sort of transforming things to the land happening, and how this inked little piece of paper is representing that, what is accessible to us.

So, this is called "Times Are Tough," and that's the first one in the series. We have a couple of them. I'm just working on them whenever I get inspired by it. But, the sad thing about this is I recycled this one, and normally I keep them, so I was kind of bummed out about that. Yeah.



And then there's this work that we just showed in Paris last June, and this was a work that was beaded using a large glass tube. I was looking at things on Instagram and seeing how earrings were representing sort of identity, or wearing beadwork represents our identity, so I wanted to just work with an extremely fragile material I found because it sort of bursts like dust when you're working with it, but this work was looking at how the land is transforming, and we beaded the whole map using really tiny beads, and we even did the metalwork this time, which was kind of interesting. I am not a welder, I know that now, but there you go.

I just was really looking at how cities transform. Riverways that used to be there are no longer there. They put this meadow. If you go to Montreal, there's so much construction, so I just literally grabbed a piece of it from the side, and I didn't take the city one this time. I was like, "Well, I could take the ones from the city," but we just thought it looked cool.

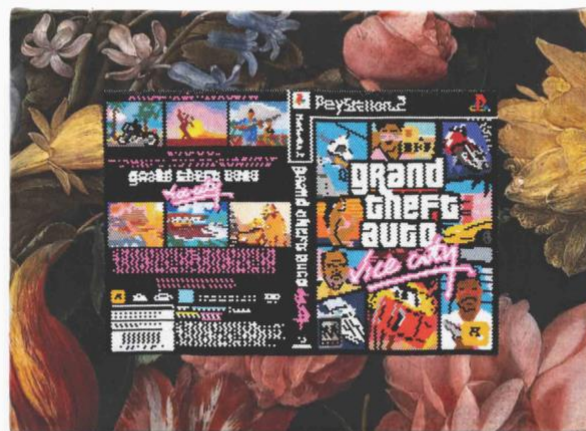
Caitlin Chaisson:

Nico, I feel like this is such a huge shift in scale. I'm just interested in hearing some of your thoughts about this one-to-one relationship, because you moved from cereal boxes, to Amazon packages...How are you thinking about scale?

Nico Williams:

It wouldn't be possible if...we were around six this time. Now we're 10 in the studio, so there's six of us working on this. And that's what I mean when I'm always talking about the team; because this would be not possible without them. There's one team member right now in New York, but they're "art"ed out right now... So, yeah, I'd love to acknowledge them. For scale, that's what I mean.

In order to have something like this done, because this is thousands of beads, it's hundreds of hours. You need to show people how to do it, and to put the good energy into it to keep making it as one. And that's the thing with beadwork: because it's very small, and it's very intimate material, it's very fragile. That's why I love this. It wouldn't be possible without the hands that are working on the... And during the Fuentes opening, I invited studio teammates who had worked on the project to come up, so I'm always trying to offer that opportunity for them, so some of them are here tonight.



This work's called "Cousins." Again, core nostalgia. I wanted to go back to my grandma's couch on the rez and put a video game down on it, and think about sort of representation of virtual land and space and interactions. So, I just decided to bead my city. And it's to scale.

Caitlin Chaisson:

The bead and the pixel.

Nico Williams:

The bead and the pixel, yeah! And this work finished at 4:00 in the morning before the deadline, and that was insane.



This work was created for the Armory Show this year. The work is called "Uncle," and I took a text style which represents many different things. People are going to take away different meanings from it, so I don't want to steer you in one direction, because I think everybody can take something from it, but the direction I went with it was, the label here is a picture of an Ojibwe man spear fishing, and I used a Harlequin romance novel book to take the font of it, and I wrote Tough Guy, so here it says 'Tough Guy'. It's really tiny little beads, and you see the Ojibwe man with a spear hunting walleye.



Thinking about indigenous hunting and fishing rights, and that's super important. And it's kind of funny, because it represents sort of a celebration of identity for Canadians. Like, the National Gallery was like, "Wow! That really represents... (laughing)!" It's like, "Actually, I'm talking about hunting and fishing rights."

Caitlin Chaisson:

Thank you so much. We don't have a ton of time for conversation, but I'm just so happy to hear the three of you speak about your practices in depth. I think, Nico, you said before about how you're walking around, you're finding these materials in the streets in the city around you, and picking them up and thinking about these embedded narratives of colonial, settler-Indigenous relations, and how they exist in the materials around us, all around us, and we don't have to look far to see that. I think you also see that in, Chaz in the way you're thinking about history, too. There's this element of the overlooked that I think appears in all of your respective work, and drawing attention to things that we wouldn't be noticing, and you're using art as a medium in which to do that. But I'm interested in this element of world-building across all of your practices. Chaz, I see you nodding, did you want to talk about how that idea manifests in your work?

Chaz John:

It's interesting, I work at Meow Wolf as an artist, and that's kind of like a theme park. It's very much about world-building. The materials that we use are also very much "theme park." I really like creating the illusion of the space that you're in. I'm working right now with some pieces based on... In school I had a class that was like Disney Imagineering. We started doing a lot of the concrete, and using a lot of vertical concrete to create false rocks and things like that. Now I'm calling that back into my next exhibit and kind of doing these pieces that are creating kind of these false rocks that could be hung on the wall. There's something that's really playful about world building, where I think that it kind of, especially in a theme park situation, calls you to be involved in it, want people to interact and play with it, and to kind of be in the mix. I think I am starting to move that way, especially in materiality, to want more interaction and more... especially the performance that's coming up. I want people to be involved, and

to be there for it, and experience it in a way that really is like a mini environment, or something like that. I'm definitely really interested in that.

Caitlin Chaisson:

Thanks Chaz. Matthew, you once said...

Matthew Kirk:

Oh, no (laughter)!

Caitlin Chaisson:

You were talking about grand visions, and I think you once said you approach everything thinking about how it will get moved. Like you might have this kind of grand vision, but how does it get in and out of the building? And that's, I think, just an incredible idea itself, is thinking about these big ideas like, how do they manifest. Your experience professionally, and also as an artist, you've developed a kind of pragmatism. How does what's pragmatic feed into your art practice?

Matthew Kirk:

Well, I like to build things. A lot of what I do is having a hand in the beginning, throughout the whole thing. So, yeah, to be able to disassemble something, or make something, I guess it's a form of control ultimately where I know exactly how it works, from any which way. Yeah. I don't really know. I mean, it's not something that people, I think, put a lot of thought into, especially because of there's been plenty of times where we move something into someone's house and it doesn't fit through the door, or it doesn't fit in the elevator, and it looked really nice at the art fair, but it doesn't work in the house now, or that kind of thing. So, I always try to think about all of the different problems that could happen, and try to make sure that those don't happen. I give myself other problems in some ways.

Caitlin Chaisson:

And Nico, you often mention about the tickets, the mots cacheés works, you've described it as building different worlds within these objects.

Nico Williams:

Yeah. Even when you pulled the reference of the Walleye Wars from the tickets, how all these words, and I even just finished a series of new word searches, with such small words in it, so it's just always... I don't know, it's being inspired by different histories, people scratching away histories, and moments of experiences. I think a lot of it is our experiences, our interests, when we're collecting objects and bringing them to the studio, or what collectively we take away from different things, you know? And I didn't know how to bead 10 years ago. It turns 10 this year, but literally 10 years ago, I walked into my first bead store and I just grabbed all the materials. So, it really started with the material, and I was like, "I'm going to figure it out, because I really want to work with this stuff." I literally loaded up my basket, and I was like, "Okay. I don't know how to bead, but I'm going to figure it out," you know? Yeah.

Caitlin Chaisson:

Yeah. Do we have any audience questions?

Audience 1:

I've got a question for Matthew. Your titles, are those after? Do you come up with the title after the fact, or do you shape the thing around the title?

Matthew Kirk:

The titles always happen afterwards, usually. I just write, I write them down... A lot of them are on pieces themselves, or on the wood, and then I just kind of walk around and place them with how they feel.

Audience 2:

Can you talk about the objects you're inspired by? Are there other objects, people around the studio, or? Is it just one object, or do you have other objects, or just... kicking around?

Chaz John:

Oh, yeah. I do kind of collect things, and bring them in and out, and kind of have them interact. I have this full-scale, anatomically correct skeleton that... It's not real, but it has, I just put... I didn't know what to do with this, so now it just has a monkey mask and a cowboy hat on it, and it scared the shit out of my friend's kid the other day. I totally forgot about this thing, they had to hide it in the closet. So, I don't know if you guys ever had that experience, just stuff that you have. And I'll definitely bring that guy back out. I had plans for it, but just not right away. Sometimes I feel like there's time to kind of ferment, you know? Things have to be ripe for the plucking before we can actually really implement it sometimes. Yeah, and it's just all a big experiment.

Audience 3:

Thinking of Meow Wolf as an institution, do you think that there's anything in the way they operate that can be applied more broadly to other art institutions?

Chaz John:

Yeah, and it's interesting. Now, I kind of think of entertainment like that is sort of its own animal in a lot of ways, where things have to be super strong, and it can't have the fragility of... especially some of the pieces here that are really beautiful, they'd get destroyed at Meow Wolf, which is such a bummer. But, it's one of those things that it almost has its own sort of weight of materials that have to be utilized, just because of the destructive force of the people walking around and knocking on the stuff, but they do have a small exhibit in Denver that's a gallery space for artists there, that's way more of the strict gallery approach.

It always is a challenge to navigate, especially a corporate-themed entertainment, and try to do something, really push the boundaries of incorporating just the greater model of art in that sort of environment, because sometimes it doesn't fit, but other times I think it should. I think that's what your getting at in your question--there's ways to have a little bit more edge inwards, and I think it comes out sometimes, but it's hard because it's a corporation, too, and they kind of want to keep a lot of things family friendly, and things like that.

But I have an exhibit right now in Dallas, and it was cool, because I feel like I made the cut, because you have a Christian right-wing group that always comes to all the exhibits and really knocks them, saying "This is demonic! Look at all this shit!" And so, one of my exhibits made it to one of those, just like, "Look at this weird mannequin with a thong and tattoos and stuff!" So, I was like, "All right, cool. We're doing something right, at least in that environment."

Caitlin Chaisson:

Thank you so much Nico, Matthew, Chaz, for talking about your practices, and thanks to everyone for joining. Please enjoy the show while it's still here. Tomorrow is the last day. Tell your friends!