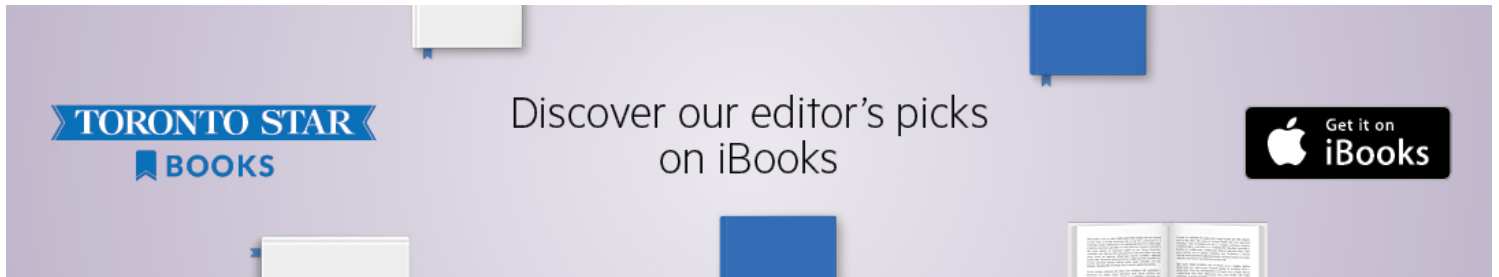




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Shelley Niro: The way of the subtle warrior

The Indigenous artist has been working tirelessly for decades. With a sudden surge in profile, it feels like her work has just begun.



Artist Shelley Niro's at Fort York, where her Battlefields of My Ancestors project is on display. (STAR)

By **MURRAY WHYTE** Visual arts

Sun., May 21, 2017

Near the outset of a recent conversation with Shelley Niro, the artist who had just won the \$50,000 Scotiabank Photography Award, I had to pause from my gushy preamble when I realized that I, the interviewer, was doing all the talking.

As I apologized, Niro, who is naturally quiet and down to earth, allowed herself a slight, sly grin. “Oh, that’s Ok,” she smiled. “You’re much more interesting than I am.”

It’s just the sort of wry reversal you might expect from Niro, whose long career has been built on a subtle, pitch-perfect sense of the absurd. At 62, Niro, a member of the Six Nations Reserve, Bay of Quinte Kanien’kehaka (Mohawk) Nation, Turtle Clan, appears to at last be coming into her own. In February [she was one of the recipients of the Governor General’s Award for Visual and Media Arts](#), a career-achievement honour bestowed on our very best.

It was the beginning of what’s shaped up to be a banner year. Niro’s work is showing prominently in four separate exhibitions at two of the country’s most prestigious art museums (the National Gallery and the Art Gallery of Ontario, with two each).

The Scotiabank Award came as Niro’s *Battlefields of My Ancestors* is on view for the Scotiabank Contact Photography Festival. The project has unfolded over three decades as a quietly contemplative exploration of colonialism’s campaign of erasures: European factions warring over lands that were never theirs to begin with.

Niro’s soft-spokenness shouldn’t be taken for timidity, says Wanda Nanibush, the AGO’s assistant curator of Canadian and Indigenous art. “She may be quiet in a public way but, for other artists, Indigenous artists, she’s a pillar,” Nanibush says.

“She’s been so influential and so ahead of her time for so long. She’s had a slow-building career and I think people are finally starting to realize she hasn’t been acknowledged enough. And I think that, really, it’s because she’s so humble; she doesn’t push herself into people’s faces.”

The day we met, Niro was giving a talk at Fort York, where the bulk of her *Battlefields* series is on view for Contact. It was perfectly fraught terrain — and timing, given the Canada 150 buildup — for her quietly provocative subject: a British garrison, built in 1793 to repel American invasions on land then freshly [acquired in the dubious “Toronto Purchase” by Britain from the Mississaugas of New Credit](#). The transaction, a literal steal, was disputed for centuries, right up to 2010, when the federal government finally agreed to proper compensation.

As we spoke, an actor dressed as a British redcoat, his shoulder slung with a bayonet rifle, played with a group of schoolchildren, and Niro chuckled quietly at the absurdity of it all.

“For me, being here is really significant,” Niro said. “I still think there’s a lot of hesitancy to talk about these things. So what we need to do is find a way to talk about them.”

For Niro, the counterintuitive, the understated and the sometimes outright hilarious have always been her path. For *Battlefields*, she made documentary photographs of sites straddling the border between Southern Ontario and the U.S. (“Canada 150 celebrates British and French, but there were some other people involved and that wasn’t their border,” she says).

The sites were all significant, both to Indigenous history and colonial exclusions. A tough one: *The War Against the Six Nations*, a plaque in New Hampshire, commemorates Major-General John Sullivan, who led multiple campaigns against native resistance, leaving bodies in his wake.

The battlefields are historical and contemporary both. A serene image of Niagara Falls becomes a symbol of callous appropriation – a sacred Indigenous site of refuge, transformed into a global destination for tacky tourism.

Caledonia, a picture of transformer towers looming over scrubby forest north of Toronto, is freighted by the ongoing clash between real estate developers and Six Nations, who oppose the environmental ruin their development may bring.

One picture, advertising a new housing development near Fergus, Ont., seems oddly out of place until an accompanying text explains that the land on which it’s to be built was gifted to Six Nations by the British for fighting as allies in the American Revolution (an ironic twist has the signage exhorting prospective buyers to “save thousands”).

Niro’s deft treatments of explosive subjects may seem at odds with peers like [Rebecca Belmore, an Anishinaabe artist whose visceral performances have always served as fiery political rebuke to the colonial order](#). Niro explains that such provocations have simply never been her way.

“For me, it gets too heavy,” she says. “I feel like you run the risk of pushing people away. Even as an Indigenous person, I’m guilty of it: ‘Not *that* again.’ I’ve always felt like if you could bring people closer you’d have a better chance of them understanding.”

Niro has always seen the divide between Indigenous and not from an absurdist’s point of view. As a 13-year-old in 1967, her school marching band at Six Nations was invited to participate in a parade with other schools for Canada’s centennial.

All the parents on reserve made costumes to meet mainstream expectations of the era. “The girls wore fringed skirts and feathers in our hair and there I was, playing my saxophone,” she laughed. “I remember how happy we were to be there, but if that was to happen today people would think we were crazy.”

As she grew up, she was drawn to painting and drawing but, by the time she was old enough to go to college, she demurred. It was the 1970s, an era growing increasingly charged for identity politics. As her peers began to take up the cause, going in growing numbers to art colleges, “I rejected it,” she said. “It just seemed fashionable or bourgeois. But I never stopped making art.”

Working on her own, Niro studied art history and took drawing classes but became frustrated. “I was really stuck on Michelangelo and da Vinci; if I couldn’t draw like that, I’d never be an artist,” she laughed. Then, in the ’80s, while taking a graphic arts course, she enrolled in a class for photography basics. “Learning how to develop black and white film, learning how to use an enlarger, it was like magic for me,” she said. “The world just opened up.”

In her 30s, Niro enrolled at the Ontario College of Art, determined to make her way, officially, as an artist. She learned painting and drawing (and continues to do it), but photography, filmmaking and performance had become her driving force.

Her favourite subjects were her sisters, her mother and eventually herself. An early photo series, 1991’s *Mohawks in Beehives*, shows hand-tinted images of her sisters dolled up in bright makeup and trendy hairstyles of the day — an implicit nod to Indigenous culture being a contemporary, living thing, despite a mainstream notion to the contrary.

“At the time, there was a lot of talk about how art depicted our people a certain way,” Niro said. “For me, and I think for a lot of people, it was important to show there was more to us than moccasins and feathers.”

I ask Niro if there was a single piece that, for her, marked her beginnings as an artist. Without hesitating she mentions *The Iroquois Is a Highly Developed Matriarchal Society*, a triptych of hand-tinted photos from 1991 of her mother under a standard-issue hair salon dryer, framed by a mat with hand-drilled Iroquois designs. It’s hilarious — her mother, always game, is laughing her head off — but also a powerful subversion of conventional belief.

“Shelley really doesn’t go for the stereotype,” Nanibush says. “Her responses always show something unexpected. She knows how difficult the struggle has been, and she makes work that allows people to feel better and to imagine a future.”

By 1992, Niro was including herself frequently in her own work. In a series of triptychs, Niro plays Marilyn Monroe (that one she called *The 500 Year Itch*, a bit of rough humour, given the date marking Columbus’s first contact with North American natives), Elvis Presley and Santa Claus, to name a few. Alongside, Niro included plain-spoken black and white self-portraits and, in between, images of her mother. Beneath the humour, the suggestion — of being caught between worlds, trying to find herself — seems clear.

In recent years, she has. Niro has worked constantly, producing films and digital collages addressing land, borders and treaties and, perhaps most importantly, Indigenous women. A signature work hangs in the AGO’s permanent collection right now: *The Shirt*, a nine-panel work from 2003 that seems to gather up all of her intentions in a single, powerful piece.

In it, an Indigenous woman, wearing mirrored sunglasses and a stars-and-stripes bandana, sports a series of T-shirts printed with a narrative of colonial catastrophe: “My ancestors were annihilated exterminated murdered and massacred,” says the first.

“They were lied to cheated tricked and deceived,” it goes on, until the punch line: “And all’s I get is this shirt.” And in the end, not even that: the next frame shows the woman, surprised and suddenly

shirtless; the last image is of a red-haired woman in full makeup, posing flamboyantly and wearing the shirt herself.

It doesn't take particularly well-developed powers of deduction to catch the point here (if you missed it, colonialism's take-everything, leave-nothing mandate is absurd enough to be lampooned). But it's delivered with such charmingly sly self-deprecation that the subject seems open to be addressed.

"What's the famous line: 'Dying is easy, but comedy is hard?'" Niro laughs. "I get upset sometimes, sure, but then the humour finds me and I think, 'That'll work.' If art can bring some relief, or a smile, it's well worth it."

Shelley Niro's Battlefields of My Ancestors continues at Fort York and at Ryerson University until May 28. It will return to Fort York for National Aboriginal Day and the Indigenous Arts Festival from June 21-25.

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