

illuminating the Plight of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women

An exhibition in Toronto's Gardiner Museum was created with the hope of bringing visitors face to face with the issue.

BY JOHN HANC OCTOBER 23, 2019

TORONTO — Sequoia Miller, chief curator at the Gardiner Museum, has it all planned.

On a warm August morning, the piece that he intended to display in the lobby of this 35-year-old ceramics museum had not yet arrived, but he could already envision how it would be lit, and where the piece — about 15 feet wide and 15 feet high — would be hung for maximum visibility.

He gestured across the museum's 1,450-square-foot lobby to the glass doors of the main entrance from Queens Park, a busy thoroughfare in Toronto's Yorkville neighborhood.

"You'll be able to see it from the street," he said. "This is a way to make her presence visible."

The "her" he referred to was a tintype image of an indigenous woman who stares at the camera with an expression that Mr. Miller called "serene, but resolved. A little mournful, but also resilient."

The image, created by Kali Spitzer, a photographer of native descent, the image — titled "Sister" — is part of a larger work called "Every One" by Cannupa Hanska Luger, an artist who was raised on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota.

By displaying the piece (which Ms. Spitzer and Mr. Luger say was created "in solidarity"), the Gardiner hopes to bring visitors face to face with a horrific issue known by variations of M.M.I.W.: Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.

In June, the Canadian government released a report after a nearly three-year inquiry found that 1,181 indigenous women were killed or had disappeared across the country from 1980 to 2012. Estimates by indigenous women's groups have put the number much higher.

The problem is not unique to Canada: Although the issue has attracted less attention in the United States, the National Crime Information Center reported that in 2016, there were 5,712 reports of missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls. Only 116 of those were logged in the United States Department of Justice's missing persons database, the report said.

In both countries, many of these unsolved cases are said to have been the result of indifference and lax law enforcement in their communities. "Whoever is doing what they're doing, they think they can kill all these women, and nothing will come of it because they're just 'Indians,'" the brother of one murdered woman said earlier this year.



Mr. Luger with "Every One." Credit: Brendan Ko for *The New York Times*

The crimes prompted Mr. Luger to create “Every One,” which after a few brief showings at other museums is at the Gardiner through Jan. 12.

The piece consists of more than 4,000 individual ceramic beads that are hung like a veil and give Ms. Spitzer’s already haunting image the appearance of being pixilated. (The subject of the original photograph is anonymous, but Ms. Spitzer has confirmed that she is an indigenous woman whose sister was murdered.)

While “Every One” is not the only artistic response to the murders, its display in the lobby of a museum better known for Wedgwood china might seem curious.

“A lot of people presume that elaborate teapots are all we’re about,” said Mr. Miller, a native New Yorker who came to the Gardiner in 2018 from Yale University, where he earned his doctorate in art history.

The Gardiner’s collection of thousands of ceramic objects, from many cultures and time periods, is extensive. But this venture into what might be called “museum activism” is part of a larger trend.

“There’s been a lot of discussion in the museum world about this kind of thing,” said Susie Wilkening, a Seattle-based museum consultant. “Some feel that they need to bring forward in their exhibits these more inclusive stories from the past or today that deserve to be heard. But making sure to do so in a way that audiences will be thoughtful in their response, and that won’t alienate people.”

What is particularly notable about “Every One” is that audiences were involved in the creative process as well. The idea, Mr. Luger said, came as he contemplated the statistics on the murdered and missing women. “I was trying to figure how to humanize that data,” said Mr. Luger, who lives in Glorieta, N.M. “That number of 4,000 is really impersonal.”

He came up with the idea of creating 4,000 clay beads upon which Ms. Spitzer’s photograph could be represented as one large image. But after rolling and creating a few dozen of the beads by himself, he had a brainstorm — get others involved, particularly those who had been affected by the tragedy. He shared his thoughts with some museum and gallery owners he knew.

“I thought it was a brilliant idea,” said Della Warrior, director of the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in Santa Fe, N.M., where Mr. Luger had appeared on a panel.

When Ms. Warrior heard about his concept for “Every One,” she and her staff decided to invite the public to help. They took out advertisements and publicized the bead-rolling in local news media. On a Saturday in February 2018, about 120 people — many of them of Native American descent — showed up to spend the day at work stations arranged in the museum’s auditorium to create the two-inch-by-two-inch clay beads to Mr. Luger’s specifications.

“I had to order 300 pounds of clay,” said the Indian Arts museum’s special projects director, Jhane Myers, with a chuckle. “We had a big dry erase board set up in the front of the auditorium to keep a running count on how many we’d done. Our goal was a thousand.”

By the museum’s 5 p.m. closing time, the group had created 1,385 beads, which were fired in kilns and incorporated into the finished piece. Others were created by small groups and individuals in the United States and Canada — many of the makers were directly affected by the murders — following the instructions Mr. Luger recorded in a widely distributed video.

“The way the community came together that day made an impression on everyone,” Ms. Myers said. “It’s a little out of the box for a museum to do this.”

But Ms. Warrior said museums were changing. “We used to be static places where people would come and look at the objects and then they left,” she said. “Now they’re taking a more assertive role in their programming and exhibits.”

The Gardiner’s decision to place “Every One” in its lobby, as opposed to an exhibition space inside, speaks to that desire to better engage the public on a hot-button issue — and not just members of the public willing or able to pay the Gardiner’s admission fee.

“Anybody can have access to it,” said Gail Dexter Lord, president and co-founder of Lord Cultural Resources, a Toronto-based museum and gallery consultancy. “That’s important.”

Ms. Lord visited the Gardiner to see the work after its installation in late August. She was impressed with what she called the work's "transformative, spiritual quality." She said, "Every piece of it is reverential."

Ms. Lord, well known in Canadian museum circles, said she hoped to see "Every One" exhibited at other North American museums next year, including the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

For now, the piece is making its presence known inside the Gardiner's lobby, and outside it. Mr. Miller said he had spoken with several passers-by who were, as he had hoped, drawn in.

"You can really see the piece glow from the sidewalk," he said. "It's phenomenal."