



NEWS / INDIGENOUS RIGHTS

Billboards celebrate indigenous women's resilience in Canada

Fifty First Nations, Inuit and Metis women artists will have their work on display on billboards across Canada.

by Jillian Kestler-D'Amours

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Fifty Indigenous women artists' work will be going on display on more than 150 billboards across Canada [Jillian Kestler-D'Amours/Al Jazeera]

Montreal, Canada - For Skawennati, it's an historic moment.

She is among 50 Indigenous female artists whose work - paintings, photographs and other pieces - will be going on display together on more than 150 billboards across Canada.

"There has been art on billboards before, but to have 50 indigenous women across the highways in Canada, I don't think that's been done before," said Skawennati, a Mohawk artist from the Kahnawake reserve, just south of Montreal.

The project - named, Resilience - will run from coast-to-coast until the beginning of August, intended to both reclaim space for indigenous women's art and make their communities' histories and cultures more visible.

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In the Montreal area, four billboards are going up: one is placed along the major road linking the city to Kahnawake, while the others are in the city's southwest, northeast, and on a busy street just south of downtown.

Skawennati told Al Jazeera the project gives the non-native public - which she said often still holds negative perceptions of Native communities - the opportunity to change those views.

She also hopes the images will serve as an inspiration to native peoples themselves.

"For native people and native women it will hopefully be a source of pride to see imagery that reflects us - and our hopes and dreams and feelings and memories," she said.

174 billboards across Canada

The exhibition's organisers began working on Resilience two years ago.

With a budget of about \$380,000, the project is "the largest exhibition of indigenous women's art in the country's history", said Shawna Dempsey, one of the organisers.

In total, 174 billboards will be set up across the country. Twenty-four will be static, paper posters, while the remaining 150 are digital and will feature all 50 images on rotation over the next two months.



In total, 174 billboards will be set up across the country.[Jillian Kestler-D'Amours/Al Jazeera]

The billboards are going up on major highways and roads, in the heart of large cities and in more rural, isolated communities, said Dempsey, the co-executive director of Mentoring Artists for Women's Art (MAWA) in Winnipeg in central Canada.

Thirty posters have also been printed on more durable material, and they will be shipped to places in the far north to be put up outside of community centres and other similar

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The locations were not chosen randomly, Dempsey told Al Jazeera. Instead, several were picked precisely because they are where indigenous women and girls have gone missing or were murdered.

Native women and girls face a disproportionately high risk of violence in Canada.

Native women over age 15 are 3.5 times more likely than non-native women to experience violence and in 2013, the federal police force found that nearly 1,200 indigenous women had gone missing or were murdered between 1980 and 2012.

[The project] is a way of celebrating indigenous women artists, but also reframing Indigenous womanhood beyond the statistics that somehow we just accept as a country.

SHAWNA DEMPSEY, CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF MENTORING ARTISTS FOR WOMEN'S ART

Rights groups believe the real number is actually closer to 4,000, however.

"This project puts the creativity and the strengths and the resilience of indigenous women in the locations from which so many women and girls have gone missing," Dempsey said.

"It positions those voices and those women not as victims, but as creative, strong leaders in our creative community ... It's a way of celebrating indigenous women artists, but also reframing indigenous womanhood beyond the statistics that somehow we just accept as a country."

Works reach 'across time, generations, distances'

Artist Maria Hupfield, whose work also features as part of the project, is a member of the Wasauksing First Nation and grew up in the Georgian Bay area of Ontario, about 230km north of Toronto.

Her piece, entitled Waaschegan ("Window", in the Anishinaabe language), is an image of herself, on the rooftop of her old studio in Brooklyn, New York, where she is currently based.

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x "You can see all of New York ... and I'm holding up a painting that my mother made as a young woman" of the seascape of Georgian Bay, where they're from, Hupfield explained.

"It's a connection," she told Al Jazeera, "It connects us across time, across generations, across distances. That's the work."



Maria Hupfield's piece is entitled Waaschegan, meaning 'window', in the Anishinaabe language [Courtesy: Resilience Project/Mentoring Artists for Women's Art]

The 50 artists participating in Resilience belong to different Indigenous groups across Canada, including First Nations, Inuit and Metis, the organisers said.

In that context, Hupfield said she hoped her work would be a sign of what is possible - and build solidarity between the many diverse and talented Indigenous women whose artwork is on display.

"I'm showing them: 'Here I am – and I see you and you see me,'" she said.

"It's a way to show that we're strong and we're mobile and we can create change and that we should be visible and that we have a future and that we're valuable and we have something to say and contribute."

'Thriving in the future'

For her part, Skawennati said a still from a film she made will feature on the billboards.

Called Jingle Dancers Assembled, the image depicts a Mohawk woman who, after magically travelling to the year 2112, is dancing with other women in jingle dresses, a traditional outfit worn by native women at pow-wows.

"Something I've been thinking about in my work is how does traditional regalia change over time? What items do we keep and what do we discard?" said Skawennati about the meaning behind her piece.

The main message of her piece is that indigenous people will "be thriving in the future".

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"Not just surviving, not just existing, but thriving," she said.

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"There's going to be many of us. We're going to be happy, we're going to be well, and we're going to be bringing our traditions into the future with us."

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