Arts

Forget 2017 — these Indigenous VR artists are imagining Canada's future 150 years from now

The '2167' series sees creators 'pushing towards a future that doesn't look anything like the past'

Chris Hampton · CBC Arts · Posted: Jun 19, 2017 4:53 PM EDT | Last Updated: June 19, 2017

The Hunt by Danis Goulet (Courtesy of TIFF)

After the attendant tightens the headset, just before she drops the earphones down, she sends me off with the instructions: "Sometimes you have to look around to find what you need."

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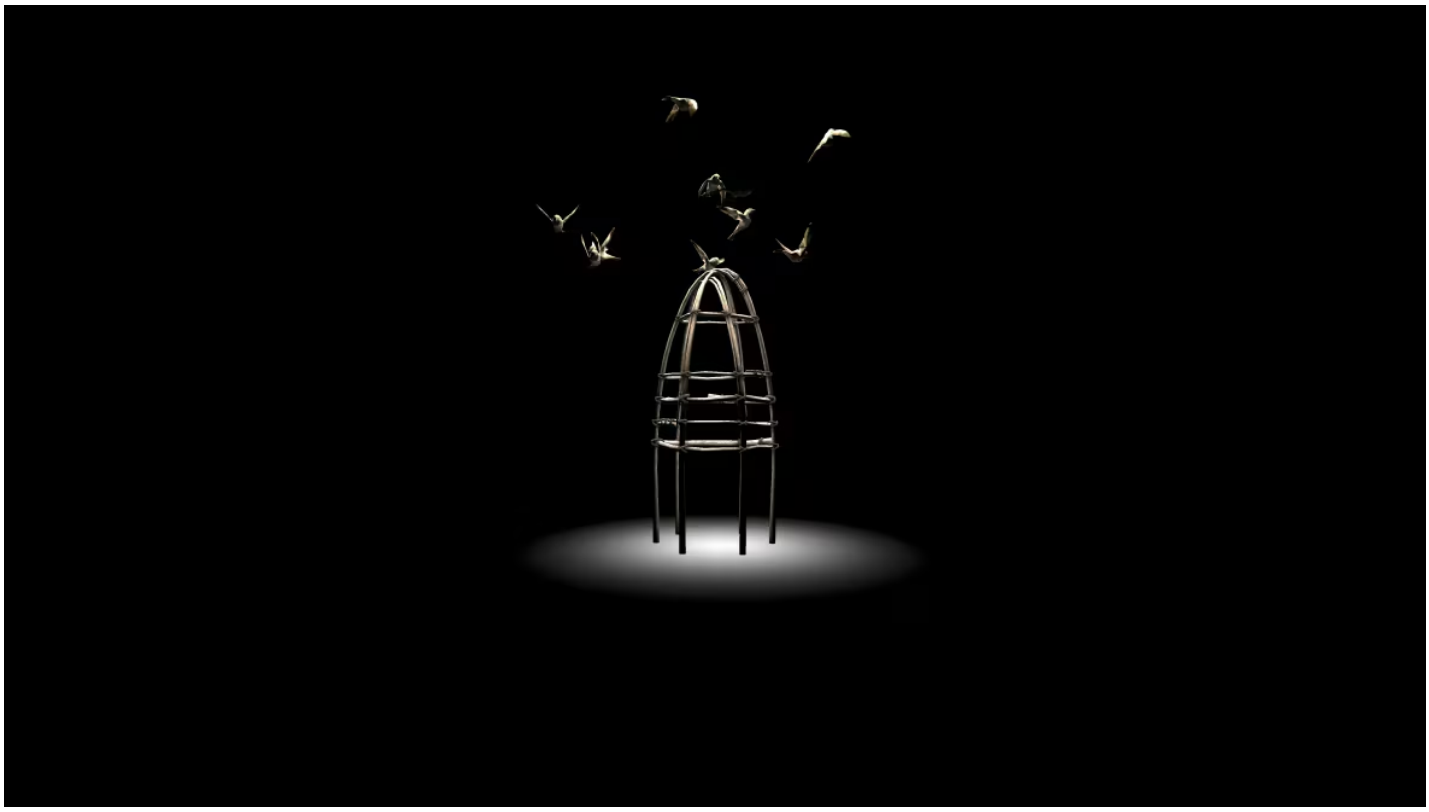
I spin in the chair, in the blackness of the goggles, and a form appears. It begins with a spiderweb. Then I'm drifting through some cosmic virtual space — part amazed by its impossible architecture and peculiar physics, part scared by the same. A teapot floats by. There are two voices. One is English. The other, I'm told, is Anishinaabemowin, the language of the Anishinaabe nation. Future Anishinaabemowin, actually — some are words that don't yet exist. These are transmissions, snatches of conversation, sent back in time.

The artwork, "Blueberry Pie Under a Martian Sky" by Montreal-based Anishinaabe intermedia artist Scott Benesiinaabandan, is a virtual reality project presented as part of *2167*. The immersive media series commissioned six Indigenous artists and filmmakers to create VR works imagining the world 150 years into the future. When Canada 150 and its commemorations feel fraught with colonial problems, *2167* is a powerful and constructive response. TIFF — one of the partners, along with ImagineNATIVE, Pinnguaq and the Initiative for Indigenous Futures — is now screening the first three works.



Blueberry Pie Under a Martian Sky by Scott Benesiinaabandan. (Courtesy of TIFF)

Benesiinaabandan's project reinterprets a traditional story about the Anishinaabeg descending to Earth from The Pleiades on a spiderweb. Another story says that, one day, a young boy will travel back up the web. The artist envisions a time when quantum science can open and maintain wormholes, stitching together distant regions of space-time. Perhaps this is the spiderweb. In such a world, the present and the future occur simultaneously. What will happen in 150 years is also happening right now.

Meanwhile, Postcommodity — a transdisciplinary art collective based in the American Southwest — have imagined a post-apocalyptic desertscape for their project "Each Branch Determined." The earth there is cratered and mountains are topped with fire. The work presents the future as an ambiguous proposition. As you explore, Postcommodity artist Raven Chacon explains, you wonder whether you've stumbled upon some chaotic destructive act or if it's actually a controlled burn.

Each Branch Determined by Postcommodity. (Courtesy of TIFF)

"It's the ruins of the Los Alamos National Laboratories, where the atomic bomb was built, or perhaps you're seeing some inhabited Anasazi ruins," Chacon says. "The craters are either made by bombings or maybe they're kivas — sacred places where people pray." You can hear the sound of running water while, cryptically, someone reads from a building code manual on

plumbing. Then you encounter the portal, which looks like TV snow or a test pattern. This universe is a vision of some grand reset — a new branch. It is about reemergence, he says, and the types of reclamations one might be attempting in 150 years.

The third work from *2167*'s initial program is "The Hunt," a piece of live-action immersive cinema by Toronto-based Cree/Métis filmmaker Danis Goulet. Her dystopian sci-fi follows a family hunting on sovereign Mohawk territory when they're stopped by a trespassing police surveillance orb. It's about how these Mohawk people are dealing with encroachment, she says, and how they're subverting the technologies intended for their subjugation.

The Hunt by Danis Goulet. (Courtesy of TIFF)

In the face of so much loss — of language and culture and land — the act of imagining the future is vital for Indigenous peoples, says Goulet. "I think there's this incredible movement right now to push for the revitalization of our languages, to assert our sovereignty and to assert Indigenous presence in a way we haven't seen before. All of that is pushing towards a future that doesn't look anything like the past." And the exercise of future thinking isn't mere speculation — it affects our present-day discussions, attitudes and actions. "As a young country

grappling with these bigger questions — which, yes, will create a lot of discomfort...if we, as a so-called polite nation, can find a way to embrace that discomfort in the interest of becoming more mature and more understanding of ourselves, the better it will be for everyone."

> "We're in a number of cultural and societal ruts; what we require is some serious acts of imagination to help us envision just how things could be different."
>
> *- Jason Lewis, co-director of Initiative for Indigenous Futures*

VR is such a natural medium for such exercises, explains Initiative for Indigenous Futures co-director Jason Lewis — whose lab team helped produce the Postcommodity and Benesiinaabandan works — because it is itself a metaphor for the future. "It's long been part of our Future Imaginary." And though it's seldom acknowledged by the digital art and industries crowd, Indigenous creators have been involved since the beginning of the medium. One of the very first VR artworks in Canada was "Inherent Rights, Vision Rights" by the Coast Salish artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, which was produced between 1991 and 1993 at the Banff Centre for the Arts for the Art and Virtual Environments Project.

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At the time, the Silicon Graphics workstations used to build Yuxweluptun's vision cost roughly $500,000. Now, there are desktop tools capable of similarly empowering creators. A smartphone can be made into a viewer. The technology and the know-how has never been so accessible; that's why it seems this latest VR wave might actually take, Lewis says. And that's why, at this moment, it's so important for Indigenous creators to get involved, sharing their voices and world views — and, in turn, shaping how the nascent technology develops.

"It's amenable to dreaming big and crazy and making things that people haven't seen before," Lewis says. "We're in a number of cultural and societal ruts; what we require is some serious acts of imagination to help us envision just how things could be different."

The attendant's instructions return with new meaning: sometimes you have to look around to find what you need.

2167. Through August 13. TIFF Bell Lightbox. Toronto. www.tiff.net

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