

Indigenous artists create virtual-reality vision of a future Canada

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Artist Raven Chacon, left, of Postcommodity collective and Jason Lewis, director at Initiative for Indigenous Futures, pose for a portrait at the TIFF Bell Lightbox in Toronto, Thursday, June 15, 2017.

GALIT RODAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Canada's upcoming sesquicentennial will no doubt prompt plenty of reflection about the past 150 years of this country – a past, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, that is deeply rooted in the colonization and attempted erasure of Indigenous peoples.

A new virtual-reality project launched between the TIFF, imagineNATIVE, Pinnguaq and the Initiative for Indigenous Futures, called *2167*, invites people to step inside the perspective of Indigenous artists to experience their visions of life in Canada 150 years in the future.

"This was an Indigenous-conceived, Indigenous-led project," says Jesse Wente, head of TIFF Cinematheque. "Canada 150 is about what got us to this moment. And what I hope for *2167* is that it will cause people to reflect, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, about what we can do in this moment that you and I are here in now, and how that resonates 150 years in to the future."

The project traces its roots back more than a year ago, when Wente and Jason Ryle, artistic director of the imagineNATIVE Film & Media Arts Festival, discussed ways of how to respond to Canada 150. Ryle proposed the idea of an Indigenous futurism project that involved virtual reality.

"That's exactly what aligned with what I was trying to come up with," Wente says.

Six Indigenous filmmakers and artists with a wide range of backgrounds were commissioned to create works with the help of Pinnguaq, a company that specializes in creating interactive experiences, and the Initiative for Indigenous Futures, based at Concordia University.

Three of the works – *The Hunt*, by Danis Goulet, *Each Branch Determined*, by the New Mexico-based arts collective Postcommodity, and *Blueberry Pie Under a Martian Sky* – are on display at TIFF through the middle of August. The remaining three will premiere during the imagineNATIVE film festival in October.

The three projects that recently premiered at the TIFF Bell Lightbox all, in their own way, reflect on the past, present and future of Indigenous peoples, and invite Canadians from every walk of life to do likewise. In *The Hunt*, a Mohawk man and boy are hunting on their sovereign territory when they are confronted by a flying orb policing the land. The altercation that follows prompts questions of sovereignty, self-determination and resistance.

"I wanted to find a way to express the way that Indigenous people are protecting the land, asserting their sovereignty and finding ingenious ways to use technology to do that," Goulet says.

The disorienting experience of *Each Branch Determined* initially seems like a postapocalyptic future, in which a decimated landscape is riddled with "shards of the previous civilization," says Raven Chacon, of Postcommodity. But the fires and other elements soon reveal themselves to be managed processes of restoration.

Virtual reality makes it a haunting, unsettling experience, as you move against your will through the landscape and down into a pool of crackling black and white reminiscent of television static, and through to another dimension.

Scott Benesiinaabandan, an Anishinaabe intermedia artist, takes full advantage of VR's ability to create a dreamscape in *Blueberry Pie Under a Martian Sky*, a meditation on the Anishinaabe people's origin and their language. Benesiinaabandan takes the story that the Anishinaabeg were descended from the sky through a spider web and reinterprets it as a wormhole that you travel back through. The story is narrated in Anishinaabemowin and English as abstract shapes and other imagery, including teapots and other items, float by and swirl around you.

"Language is encoded in our histories, in how we see the world," Benesiinaabandan says.

To explore the importance of language as not only expressing the past but as a living, evolving entity, Benesiinaabandan worked with elders from Manitoulin Island and Manitoba to consider how to build new words that might exist 150 years from now, and which are featured in the piece.

"You're hearing words from the future," he says.

Thanks to virtual reality, each of the approximately five-minute-long works offer the opportunity to experience an artist's perspective in a way traditional film cannot.

"You can almost literally, not quite, live in someone else's shoes," Wente says.

This is why *2167* may not just be entertainment, but also a bridge.

"It would be great for Canadians, especially non-Indigenous Canadians, to spend a moment imagining an Indigenous future, and not one you can see mediated by rows of seats in 2-D," Wente says. "Canadians are very disconnected from Indigenous people."

Canada 150 is problematic, to say the least. But *2167* reminds us that the only way to solve problems is to do so together, Goulet says.

"The thing about imagining a future is that I think it's going to take creativity for us to dream and imagine and then make real the futures that we want to see happen," she says. "These questions of how we move forward are not just for Indigenous people. They are for all Canadians to grapple with."

2167 runs through Aug. 13 at Toronto's TIFF Bell Lightbox (tiff.net).

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