

Rebecca Belmore

Rebecca Belmore belongs to a generation of First Nations artists in eastern Canada whose work grows out of their awareness of the complexity of their cultural position. A graduate of the Ontario College of Art, Belmore professes an ambivalence toward the art scene--following its international developments, but also drawn to the world of her grandparents' generation and the Anishinabe world view, to which she responds simply by saying: "It is crucial that we speak about our connection to the land." It is this predicament of trans-cultural identity, in conjunction with a belief in the efficacy of hybrid forms of cultural expression, that marks the real difference between her performances and installations and the paintings of Norval Morrisseau and his followers in the Woodland School that emerged in the 1960s from the first shock of the encounter between modern art and a linear style extracted from traditional Ojibway forms.

At a time when the apparent certainties against which modernism chafed have evaporated, so that postmodernism appears to have grown from arbitrariness, Belmore's certainties come from being Ojibway. In part, the effect of her earliest performance works depended, as she intended, on her nativeness to get a hearing. For example, the riotous *I'm a High-Tech Teepee Trauma Mama* has Belmore and her sisters wailing, fraught by ironic contradictions with which they must live; the refrain runs, "I'm a plastic replica of Mother Earth." In *Artifact #671B* she presented herself as a living, labelled and boxed artifact at the side of a road along which the Olympic torch was carried to the 1988 Winter Games in Calgary. It was in dramatic support of the Lubicon and their boycott of *The Spirit Sings*, the exhibition in Calgary for which some of the greatest native art had been retrieved from its international diaspora. The Olympic exhibition was sponsored by Shell Oil, with whom the Lubicon were locked in dispute over use of resources on their land.

These works also show Belmore's early awareness, evident in all her subsequent work, that there are different audiences for art. For this artist, moving away from the defining frame of an art gallery was not only a manoeuvre that recurs for the 20th century avant-garde, and one for which Canadian artists seem to have a particular affinity, but also a move to reach a variety of social groups.

The most spectacular example of this strategy is *Ayumee-aawach Oomama-Mowan: Speaking to Their Mother*, which combines her reach for audiences beyond those normally associated with art and her concern to give voice to the silenced and marginalised. It is a huge and beautifully constructed wooden megaphone designed to be set up out of doors and allowing people to speak directly to Mother Earth--a metaphor for the expression of anguish, anger and concern over what is also referred to as "the environment." Since its first exposure in the Rocky Mountains near Banff in 1991, the work has travelled with Belmore to more than ten sites in First Nations communities, urban and reservation. The Assembly of First Nations used the megaphone to voice their formal Aboriginal Peoples Protest at the exclusion of their representatives from the First Ministers Conference held in Ottawa in June, 1996. It enabled the expression of anger at

this persistence of official doublethink, first outside the Prime Minister's residence during the conference dinner, later outside the External Affairs Building. The intent at the second location was not to be ironic but to make a historical point about the distinction between aboriginal nations and the nation called Canada. This move into an overtly political context was the megaphone's ultimate vindication. Belmore comments: "Perhaps I have moved this artwork into a different place by allowing it to enter into an official political realm. Hopefully, it insists and continues to echo: 'we are of this land.'"

Two installations made for specific art galleries show Belmore working within the exclusively art context. They demonstrate her confidence that an Anishinabekwe sensibility informs everything she does, and that labels are not required. *Wana-na-wang-ong* was a transposition of the native name for a place in Ontario where she played as a child, which translates as "curve" and "something beautiful." These ideas she rendered in sand on the gallery floor and in immense curved hangings woven entirely from spruce roots. They are also intended as renderings of the conventions of greenish-brown-painted rectangles to which the Group of Seven's landscape convention could, irreverently, be reduced. *Temple*, made for the Power Plant Gallery situated where the city of Toronto meets the shore of Lake Ontario, is really a temple for the invocation of impurity. More than two thousand plastic bags filled with water, water from a "dead" lake included, are piled into a great geometric cascade--simultaneously beautiful and horrifying. Nearby, a telescope piercing the gallery wall allows another kind of concentrated view of dead water.

A strong idea is often the only link between some very disparate elements in Belmore's works. The genres to which she subscribes reject the classical unities and compositional values; her success with them depends therefore on her ability to blend form with conviction. *New Wilderness*, a piece made for the international exhibition, *Longing and Belonging: From the Faraway Nearby* in 1995, concretises what Belmore described as "a crazy road trip from Sioux Lookout to Santa Fe--lots of Walmart shopping, airport gift shops and weird little places. The Oklahoma City bomb-site was a significant must-see stop." At each of 168 sites (the number of people who died in the bombing) she bought a mug, usually decorated with some goofy native or nature image, and filled it with the local soil. Upon arrival in Santa Fe the mugs were shattered, their shards becoming a mural and the earth forms arranged on metal spikes. The formal devices relate Belmore to the work of British sculptors such as Richard Long and Tony Cragg. She is using an international sculptural idiom to convey her feeling that North America has become a "human wilderness," overlaying "fear and violence" on the land that she treasures.

Belmore does not welcome special treatment for her work as "native," but if it is possible to identify determination and sensibility as native in general, or as Anishinabe in particular, then Belmore's work makes that case with conviction.