

THE PRINTS OF ALANIS OBOMSAWIN

By France Trépanier, Guest Curator
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It was with great pleasure that I accepted the invitation of Open Studio to curate this exhibition of prints by Alanis Obomsawin. I have followed her work for over three decades and I hold her in high esteem as a filmmaker and artist. The concept for this exhibition became clear to me during a visit with the artist in December 2014 when I had the privilege to review the majority of her prints. Alanis' engravings, produced over the past 25 years, often deal with the same topics as her films, but with a completely different tone. It is this contrapuntal practice that I wish to highlight.

The pictorial work of Alanis Obomsawin is emblematic of her desire to communicate based on a "sovereignty of representation"¹ firmly rooted in an Aboriginal worldview. The point of view and gesture are imprinted with an authenticity that is far from the canons of Western art.

The artist is internationally celebrated for her work in filmmaking. Over the past four decades, Alanis has produced fifty hard-hitting documentaries, which demonstrate her desire to shake up our national consciousness by exposing the realities of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. She breaks both the silence and the invisibility while denouncing systemic racism. She gives pride of place to the stories of individual lives, especially those of women. She often depicts the political resilience and cultural creativity of First Nations. She underlines the importance of solidarity among Indigenous peoples. Her cinematographic work, eminently political, exhorts us with the duty to remember and invites respectful dialogue among peoples.

*"So much history can be lost if no one tells the story -- so that's what I do. I tell the stories. This is my way of fighting for social change."*²

The pictorial works of Alanis Obomsawin, though often inhabited by similar social preoccupations, unfold in a much more personal register. The visual markings of the artist reveal an intimate universe inhabited by creatures, symbols and animals. It is a world where "Interrelationships between all entities are of paramount importance... In Aboriginal philosophy, existence consists of energy.

¹ Randolph Lewis, *Alanis Obomsawin: The Vision of a Native Filmmaker*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006.

² Katherine Monk. *Weird Sex and Snowshoes: And Other Canadian Film Phenomena*, Vancouver, Raincoast Books, 2001. (p. 80)

All things are animate, imbued with spirit, and in constant motion.”³ Here, the images become manifestations of memory or dreamlike spaces explored by the artist. Alanis gives us a chance to traverse through the mirror in order to discover aspects distinct yet integrated within her creative process.

The first series of the exhibition is composed of nine monoprints which depict horses. These works are characterized by the strength of gesture and the simplicity of method. The horses are galloping, all in the same direction, fleeting images that evoke the urgency and fury of their strides. This series of prints was created in the summer of 1990 when the artist/filmmaker was behind the barricades to shoot what would become, three years later, the celebrated movie *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*.

During the crisis at Oka, Alanis extricated herself at night from the chaos of the confrontation to take refuge in a printmaking studio. She produced a series of monoprints that contain a high emotional charge and testify to the intensity of that moment.

The horse is a recurrent theme in the pictorial work of Alanis Obomsawin: the horse as ally, the horse as threat, the horse as confidante, the horse as free spirit. The series presented here concludes with an untitled etching, made in 2005, which represents a woman and a horse. The artist depicts herself accompanied with her mythical animal. This work offers a moment of transition to a second series of prints devoted to women and their children.

“I come from a world where women are always revered or respected. And they play a very important role. And I would say the biggest reason that we were always told—and I believe it—that the highest power is the woman who holds it, is because the woman gives life.”⁴

Women are prominent in the films of Alanis Obomsawin. As early as 1977, the filmmaker turned the lens of her camera onto Aboriginal mothers to direct the documentary *Mother of Many Children*. Combining oral tradition with the techniques of documentary filmmaking, Alanis presented a proud matriarchal society that struggles to preserve and transmit languages, stories and cultural pride.

In 1990, in the middle of the noise, agitation and terror of the clashes at Kanehsatake, there was a quiet mother cradling her young child behind the

³ Leroy Little Bear, *Jagged Worldviews Colliding*, in Marie Battiste, *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, UBC Press, 2000. (p. 77-85)

⁴ Alanis Obomsawin in interview with Mallory Andrews in *Voice(s) of the People: An Interview with Alanis Obomsawin*. *cléo*, a journal of film and feminism, vol 2, issue 2, August 2014.

barricades that profoundly moved Alanis. She went on to focus on the role of Mohawk women in other films that documented this crisis. Girls, women, mothers and grandmothers are also very present in her more recent works, including *Sigwan*, *Hi-Ho Mistahey* and *the People of Kattawapiskak River*.

Women also reoccur in Alanis' visual art production. Made between 2002 and 2007, the series *Mère de tant d'enfants* offers us an intimate portrait of Aboriginal women and the role they occupy in their communities. Alanis has a unique way to get in touch with her subjects. The respect that she has for them creates a climate of dignity and trust. People open up to her. It is this closeness, this candor, this patient force that the artist brings to her portraits of mothers and children. The five etchings of this series are rendered in a solemn style that gives the subjects a luminous and slightly nostalgic presence.

Next, *La grande visite*, an engraving made in 2007, is inspired by allegorical narratives in which humans and mythical animals rub shoulders. With a touching honesty, the work shows the moment of contact with Europeans and denounces injustice, racism and the colonialism still imposed on Aboriginal peoples. The exhibition concludes with *Femme aux bois*, a self-portrait in which Alanis depicts her dreamlike being - a woman-animal - who explores the parallel worlds of memory, imagination and creation .

Establishing the relationship between Alanis Obomswin's cinematic approach and her visual arts practice provides us with a fresh context for reading and appreciating her work. As a documentary filmmaker, she tirelessly pursues her intellectual project. She places herself in the service of her themes with great socio-political sensitivity. She observes, listens and documents events that take shape before her eyes. In the print studio, as an artist, she enters into an inner universe profoundly rooted in a multimodal worldview. She is inspired by visions, stories, dreams and memory. Alanis reminds us that in Aboriginal cultures, the concept of knowledge is inscribed in a continuum of time and space.

There are multiple ways of understanding reality.

Alanis Obomsawin, a member of the Abenaki Nation, is an internationally recognized filmmaker and a singer, writer, storyteller, visual artist. Over the last five decades, she has directed 49 documentaries at the National Film Board (NFB). Her films incorporate strong social content, inspired by the desire to let the voices of Indigenous people be heard. For the past 25 years, she has also worked as an engraver and printmaker, creating an important body of work which has been exhibited in Canada and Europe.

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