

*Narhî Wasagabiich
Catherine Blackburn*



This catalogue is published on the occasion of Catherine Blackburn's installation, *Narhi Wasagabiich*, on view from June 2019 to August 2020 on Hamilton Artists Inc.'s exterior Cannon Project Wall.

The installation is part of a National Billboard Exchange between AKA artist-run and PAVED Arts in Saskatoon and Hamilton Artists Inc. The three-way collaboration also includes billboard installations by artists Meghan Price at AKA/PAVED from July to August 2019 and Janet Wang at AKA/PAVED from July to August 2020.

Catherine Blackburn was born in Patuanak Saskatchewan of Dene and European ancestry, and is a member of the English River First Nation. She is a multidisciplinary artist and jeweller, whose common themes address Canada's colonial past that are often prompted by personal narratives. Her art merges contemporary concepts with elements of traditional Dene culture that create dialogue between traditional art forms and new interpretations of them. Her work has exhibited in notable national and international exhibitions and fashion runways including: *Àbadakone*, National Gallery of Canada, *Santa Fe Haute Couture Fashion Show*, *Niigaanikwewag* (2nd iteration), Art Gallery of Mississauga, and *Art Encounters on the Edge*, Bonavista Biennale, Newfoundland. She has received numerous grants and awards for her work, including the Saskatchewan RBC Emerging Artist Award, the Melissa Levin Emerging Artist Award, a publication in *Vogue* online magazine, as well as her inclusion on the 2019 Sobey Art Award longlist.

Vanessa Dion Fletcher is a Lenape and Potawatomi neurodiverse artist. She has written for publications including *Art In America* and the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*. Dion Fletcher graduated from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2016 with an MFA. In the fall of 2020 Vanessa is a Jackman Humanities Institute Artist-in-residence.

Armour for the Protectors

Vanessa Dion Fletcher

The Cannon Project Wall at Hamilton Artists Inc. takes up space—264 square feet. Like a typical billboard, it is probably something you are used to seeing briefly and from a great distance. This one, however, is close to street level, emphasizing its size and presence. Indigenous people know the importance of taking up space; it is one of the things we do best, at least that is how some people understand it. Our presence stands in the way of what state governments in Canada and the United States want most—our Land. Our Water. Access to the resources we have cared for since time immemorial. Examples of resources seized by governments and corporations are endless: beaver fur, fish, whale oil, timber, and grasslands, to name a few.¹ For each of these examples, Indigenous people, communities, and nations have been sitting together, standing together, and working together to resist. To protect.

Catherine Blackburn's featured billboard work, *Narhi Wasagabiich*, depicts two of these protectors, water protectors specifically. They are standing in a river with a spectacular forest behind them, wearing garments made by the artist herself. Water

¹ Winona LaDuke, *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (United States: Haymarket Books, 2017).

protectors are people—often women, non-binary, two-spirit, or Indigiqueer—who take on the responsibility and labour of protecting the water from being poisoned, buried underground, or otherwise harmed. The term came into popular use during the Dakota Access Pipeline protests at the Standing Rock Reservation beginning in 2016.² Their water. My water. Our water. All water is connected. What they protect for their community they are also protecting for you. So how does this image relate to its current home on a billboard in downtown Hamilton, Ontario?

A couple of years ago, I was invited to spend a day with artists and researchers at the western tip of Hamilton Harbour's Windermere Basin, which was once one of the most polluted bodies of water in North America. It is now celebrated as 'clean' after a twenty million dollar 'rehabilitation.'³ Would you stand in that water? Would you stand up for that water? Maybe you already have; perhaps you wrote or called your local government, or sat and sang and thanked the water. Maybe you attended and supported events to help protect that water. No matter where we live, our water is continuously under threat of being polluted, dammed, and re-routed. If we are lucky enough to have clean water running out of our taps, this constant struggle might slip our minds. *Narhi Wasagabiich* is here to remind us.

Narhi Wasagabiich is part of a larger series titled *New Age Warriors*. The handmade garments are made primarily using perler beads—the kind that you might

2 Allison Herrera, "Standing Rock Activists: Don't Call Us Protesters. We're Water Protectors." The World from PRX, October 31, 2016, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-10-31/standing-rock-activists-dont-call-us-protesters-were-water-protectors>.

3 Mark Basingthwaite, "Enhancement of Windermere Basin 4 Years after Restoration," in *Latornell.ca* (Allison, 2016), http://www.latornell.ca/wp-content/uploads/files/2016/Latornell_Prelim_Program_2016_DPS.pdf.



remember from childhood crafts, where you would arrange them on armatures and use an iron to melt the plastic beads together to make little ornaments or coasters. Although the beads are familiar and nostalgic, the garments take on an innovative aesthetic. Blackburn refers to these garments as armour. Whether it is your favorite sweater, a new suit, or a baby's blanket, we can all relate to the power of clothing. Blackburn made this armour for the people who are actively protecting our water, and they need all the protection we can offer.

To fit the Cannon Project Wall, Blackburn reformatted the image by mirroring it in the center of the frame. It took me a minute to realize this. Once I did, I started thinking about how the symmetry in the photograph references the symmetry in Blackburn’s textile works. When constructing regalia, art, or jewelry for the body, symmetry and asymmetry are often taken into consideration. The mirroring in *Narhi Wasagabiich* references the symmetry used in everyday garments, from our pants and sweaters to the most precious jewelry we use to adorn our bodies. This mirroring also reinforces the connection between the bodies and the land. While we cannot wear a landscape in the same way the water protectors wear Blackburn’s armour, we are just as much a part of the landscape. The water, food, and air all circulate through the land, and in and out of our bodies.

“Strong Spirits” is the translation of the text running down the figures’ bodies in the image, written on high visibility tape. You know the kind—it is part of personal protective equipment in industrial settings. Worn by construction workers, miners, and surveyors and also in recreational settings by cyclists and runners—people all around us. Blackburn wrote to me “In my eyes, the reflective tape text that hangs from their bodice pieces reminds me of straws: drawing life up into their bodies, giving them strength; the tape is used as a means to say ‘SEE US, HEAR US.’”⁴ The tape’s reflective properties come from tiny glass beads mixed into the paint that reflect light, making it much easier to see someone from a distance or in the dark. Its use is evidenced in its name: “high visibility.” In this case, it is a cry, a plea, a demand to be seen. Indigenous people do not only want to take up space. We want to be seen and acknowledged for the work we do to protect our sovereignty, our land, and our water.

4 Catherine Blackburn, email correspondence to Vanessa Dion Fletcher, April 8, 2020.

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Cover: Catherine Blackburn, *Narhi Wasagabiich*, 2018. Detail. Image courtesy of the artist.
Inside: Catherine Blackburn, *Narhi Wasagabiich*, 2018. Installation view at Hamilton Artists Inc., August 2019. Image: Mashal Khan.

