



MARIE WATT AND AN ECOLOGY OF CULTURAL IMAGINATION

by Fiona P. McDonald, PhD.

The aesthetic transformations of our material world are at the heart of the artistic practice of Portland, Oregon-based artist **Marie Watt**. The material and immaterial transformations performed by Watt upon everyday objects ignite our individual and collective imaginations. As an active agent in the mobilization of materials, such as woolen blankets, glass beads, metals, and wood, her works foster what anthropologist **Susanne Kuechler** calls an “ecology of cultural imagination.”¹ Her works invite us to think about the way memory functions in our material world, our unconsidered interspecies connections, and our role in the stewardship of knowledge.

A member of the **Turtle Clan of the Seneca Nation, Iroquois/Haudenosaunee**, Watt is an internationally exhibited and collected artist. Her artistic practice defines shared sensory engagements with materials that open up spaces for critical

dialogue of how art can be accessed through the concepts of color, mending, and transformation across and between cultures, times, and contexts. As Watt notes, her art “draws from history, biography, Iroquois proto-feminism, and Indigenous principles.”² Trained in painting and printmaking from **Yale’s** MFA program, today her studio practice is oriented towards materials that are conceptually sticky and adhere to our personal and shared narratives that explore interspecies engagements, stewardship, memory, and embodiment.

Watt’s artistic practice calls on us to see old materials in new ways.³ Since 2003, she has created large-scale sculptural works using woolen blankets, iron, wood, and bronze. Through the in-depth investigation of a single object—the woolen blanket—her knowledge of the value and production histories of mills has given her a deeper understanding of the various types of colors,

patterns, weaves, and mills from around the world. “Their tags, when still intact, share a story about where they were woven and reveal a step in what I assume to be a significant journey, from a mill (England, Dutch, East Asia, or North America) to a human or family of inhabitants. Given wool’s longevity as a natural fiber, these blankets tend to serve generations of people ... and our experiences are further imprinted on their fleece as stains, worn bindings, and mended bits.”*

Her work ranges in scale. On the smaller end of the spectrum are her intimate sampler works made using smaller remnants of woolen blankets that she embroiders. For example, *Susan B. Anthony with Woodland Influences* (2008) captures Watt’s respect for the influence of Iroquois proto-feminist values on Suffragist speech writers **Elizabeth Cady Stanton** and **Matilda Joslyn Gage**, who lived adjacent to Seneca Falls, New York. On the other end of the spectrum are her tower-like structures brought to life through the sculptural placement of hundreds of stacked blankets. In 2013, in preparation for a central work in *Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art*, the first ever quinquennial of global Indigenous Art at the **National Gallery of Canada (NGC)** in Ottawa, Ontario, Watt used donated blankets and accompanying stories to create the 36-foot-high tower *Blanket Stories: Seven Generations, Adawe, Hearth*. No matter the scale of her work, she continually tells the stories of silenced truths that link together the warp and weft of cultures and histories.

Watt’s work is more complex than the binary conversation of process versus product. As part of her labor-intensive-creative practice, she has incorporated sewing circles as one of many



Left page: Marie Watt in her studio. Photo: Peter Jennings. All photos courtesy Marie Watt Studio.

Top: **Marie Watt *Susan B. Anthony with Woodland Influences*** 2008, reclaimed wool blankets, thread, silk organza, 27" x 23½". Collection of Portland Community College Cascade Campus, Portland, OR. Photograph courtesy of Marie Watt Studio.

Bottom: **Marie Watt *Blanket Stories: Seven Generations, Adawe, Hearth*** 2013, reclaimed wool blankets, cedar, steel, 432" x 20" x 20". Permanent Installation at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Installation View, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photo © NGC. Detail left.





complex steps that bring large-scale works to life. “Sewing circles are an extension of Indigenous ways of sharing knowledge that are cross-generational, cross-cultural, and cross-disciplinary as they facilitate social connections in authentic and neighborly ways.”* She values the sewing circle as a way to “learn from each other”* through natural conversation and communal efforts. After the sewing circle ends and the stories are shared, Watt pays respect to each unique stitch and the stories that participants have gifted on to the material—these are the immaterial elements that inevitably change the texture of the final work.

She returned to the NGC in 2015 and hosted a sewing circle for a new work. Participants embroidered (with no experience necessary) on pre-marked areas of grey woolen blankets that Watt prepared. These pieces later become part of *A Cautionary Tale on Darkness (Raven Threatens to Take Back the Light)*. This collective large-scale piece speaks to her interest in interspecies knowledge and the importance of storytelling. In her youth, she would attend storytelling circles coordinated by her mother, **Romayne Watt**, an Indian Education Specialist. On one occasion, she heard the storyteller **Roger Fernandes**, also known as **Kawasa (Lower Elwha Band of the S’Klallam** from Port Angeles area of Washington State) share a story about raven. Watt recounts that “Roger was gifted the story to share about raven stealing the light. He modified the story to have an alternate ending, in which Raven realizes why the old man was protecting the light. Raven realizes that the old man felt humans were not responsible enough to take care of the

Top: Overhead view of Marie Watt’s 2015 public sewing circle event at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Visitors embroidered pieces later became part of her piece *A Cautionary Tale on Darkness (Raven Threatens to Take Back the Light)*. Photo © NGC. Detail right.

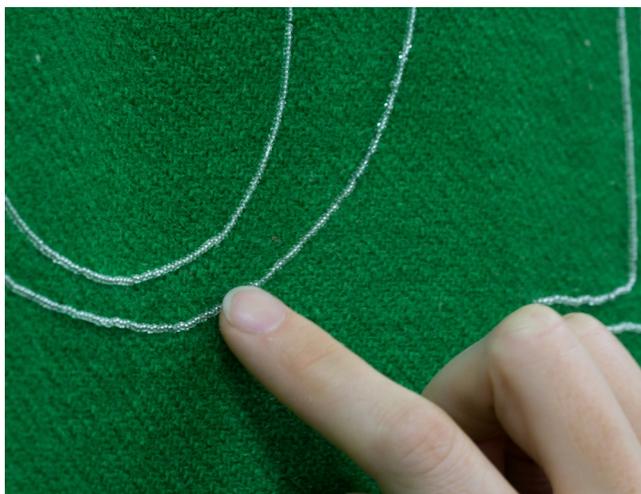
Right page: *Marie Watt A Cautionary Tale on Darkness (Raven Threatens to Take Back the Light)* 2015, reclaimed wool blankets, satin binding, embroidery floss, thread, 117" x 77". Photo: Aaron Johanson.

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Marie Watt installation of *Unsuspected Possibilities* at SITE Santa Fe (July 18, 2015–January 3, 2016).





Marie Watt Placeholder 2017, reclaimed wool blanket, clear transparent glass Czech seed beads, thread, 56½" x 140¼".
Photos: Aaron Johanson. Detail bottom.

light.”* In making *A Cautionary Tale*, the story Fernandes told allowed Watt to “reflect on mankind’s symbiotic relationship with the natural world” and the ties we have to the stewardship of knowledge. In 2015, this work became one of eleven large-scale suspended works installed at *SITE Santa Fe*.

In 2017, Watt participated in *If You Remember, I’ll Remember* (curated by **Janet Dees**) at the **Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University** in Evanston, Illinois. For the group exhibition, she created a work that responded to Indigenous history in and around the Chicago area. In *Placeholder* (2017), she connects to the work of Critical Literary scholar **John N. Low (Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians)** who reminds us that stories, dances, rhetoric of land claims, and speeches are “ephemeral monuments.”⁴ Watt beaded the phrase “EPHEMERAL MONUMENT” onto a green-colored, three-point Hudson’s Bay Point blanket (double-long in size with billboard-like proportions), using clear glass beads still produced using 200-year-old technology in the Czech

Republic—a material she later explored as part of her 2017 hot glass residencies at the **Rockwell Museum** and the **Corning Museum of Glass** in Corning, New York. *Placeholder* invites us to remember and contemplate the many ephemeral and immaterial moments—similar to the spaces created for stories during sewing circles—that are materialized in our embodied knowledge.

As part of the Block Museum exhibition, Watt co-hosted two sewing circles with over 300 participants. These public events acted as a catalyst that inspired Evanston clinical psychologist and artist **Melissa Blount** to host her own sewing circles to create the *Black Lives Matter Witness Quilt*, memorializing black women and girls who lost their lives to violence in Chicago.⁵

In the process of working with blankets, Watt has pushed them to the maximum limits of the material by situating them with nuanced readings that offer the opportunity for what she calls a form of “materializing the dematerialized.”* By drawing attention to the parts of a woolen blanket that are worn or show trace histories, she brings us closer to something unknown. That *thing* is the space where cultural imagination may, in fact, rest. By continually pushing against the materials to find new boundaries and stories to tell, Watt allows people to bring their own stories to bear on the works and to inspire their own actions. Anthropologist **Tim Ingold** notes that “[t]he experienced practitioner’s knowledge of the properties of materials, like that of the alchemist, is not projected onto them but grows out of a lifetime of close engagement in a particular craft or trade.”⁶

Watt’s work simultaneously articulates multiple meanings and values. Her aesthetic transformations consciously amplify the mutability of the woolen blanket through, at times, the incorporation of recontextualized materials that are critical to the process of transformation. She takes us further to look through the thinning parts of blankets to see new truths on the other side. How we create meaning in our material world—be it with thread, wool, glass, wood, or other tactile prompts—is at the heart of her artistic practice. In each encounter, it is the materials Watt uses that evoke responses, readings, and truths about how ecologies of cultural imaginations are enlivened with new meanings over time.

* Personal communication with Marie Watt, 2012–2017.

¹ Kuechler, Susanne. “Anthropology & Aesthetics,” *Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

² Marie Watt Studio website. mariewattstudio.com (Accessed August 10, 2017).

³ Several authors have written about Watt over the past decade and have helped me to see her work through various lenses. These include, but are not limited to:

- Berlo, Janet Catherine. “Back to the Blanket: Marie Watt and the Visual Language of Intercultural Encounter,” *Into the Fray: The Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art* (ed J. Nottage) (Indianapolis, IN: Eiteljorg Museum, 2005: p. 110–121).
- Fowler, Cynthia. “Materiality and Collective Experience: Sewing as Artistic Practice in Works by Marie Watt, Nadia Myre, and Bonnie Devine,” *American Indian Quarterly* 34 (3) 2010: p. 344–364.
- Conneller, Chantal. *An Archaeology of Materials: Substantial Transformations in Early Prehistoric Europe* (London: Routledge: 2011).
- Dobkins, Rebecca J. *Marie Watt: Lodge* (Seattle, Washington: The Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Willamette University and the University of Washington Press, 2012).
- Lovelace, Joyce. “Gather Round,” *American Craft Council*. craftcouncil.org/magazine/article/gather-round (Accessed: August 10, 2017).

⁴ Low, John H. *Imprints: The Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians & the City of Chicago* (Michigan State University Press, 2016: xiv).

⁵ Kluge, Stephanie. “Block Exhibit inspires Black Lives Matter quilt,” *Evanston Now*. evanstonnow.com/event/education/stephanie-kulke/2017-08-01/78071/block-exhibit-inspires-black-lives-matter-quilt (Accessed August 10, 2017).

⁶ Ingold, Tim. “Toward an Ecology of Materials,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012): p. 427–442.

Marie Watt is represented by PDX Contemporary in Portland, OR, and Greg Kucera Gallery in Seattle, WA. This fall, she is the Artist-in-Residence at Crow’s Shadow Institute of the Arts in Pendleton, OR. She will have a solo exhibition at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Washington State University in Pullman, WA (April–September 2018). mariewattstudio.com

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