Creating Visions of the Land to Unsettle Pioneer Displays (Or, the Day the Stones Flew Away)

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The written piece here emerges from a sustained questioning of how Indigenous material culture—specifically, projectile points—has been framed, categorized, and rendered legible within museum and archaeological contexts. Long positioned as typological artifacts or remnants of a distant past, these objects are often separated from the lived landscapes, relations, and practices that produced them. The following discussion traces my attempt to reconsider arrowheads not as static historical specimens, but as active material witnesses: to land, to labour, to colonial transformation, and to ongoing Indigenous presence. Through curatorial experimentation and material process, this work asks what becomes possible when these stones in their crafted state are approached with attention, care, and a willingness to listen.

The intended outcome of the project was to create a display which invites the viewer to reconsider typological displays of stone objects such as arrowheads and historicizing narratives regarding those objects in museums. The display invites the viewer to compare artistic interventions (cyanotype prints on cloth and paper) with arrowhead displays made by local settlers and donated to the museum. It also asks the viewer to acknowledge and consider the history of the object not just as an indicator of a distant past, but as an ongoing presence and narrative created by our interactions with them.

Gerald McMaster's installation *A Thousand Points for a Thousand Generations* (2009) at the Art Gallery of Ontario asked whether the projectile points that studded the walls of the gallery were art. As a student reading McMaster's writing on this new phase of the AGO, which sought to enhance its representation of First Nations artists while addressing the 11,000-year timespan of its collection, I was struck by the accompanying image and the implications of that question. Until then, I had only seen projectile points, such as arrow and spear heads, within the historicized context to which McMaster referred: typological and often chronological displays in an archaeological context. In 2022, while working with Dr. Andrea Korda at the Camrose Museum, and after seeing the museum's collection of arrowheads firsthand, I started to wonder about these displays. This reconsidering was also informed by my own family history. My dad, who was a Métis ironworker in the 1960s, would tell me about going down to the North Saskatchewan on his lunch break and picking arrowheads from the shore because they were so plentiful. There was something compelling in how these stone objects were treated and displayed in the museum—removed from lived landscapes yet densely charged with meaning—that made me want to work with them. I became interested not only in how they are displayed, but also in what they might communicate when approached beyond typology and chronology. Maybe to hear what they have to say for themselves.

It took another two years for me and Dr. Heather Caverhill, my colleague and co-curator in this project, to come up with a process and a plan. In late 2024, she shared with me the details of a "haunting" performed by the Kainai artist Terrance Houle and a co-creator, at a site in Blackfalls, Alberta. I was fascinated by Houle's practice of creating cyanotypes, made from locally gathered plants printed onto animal bones found on the property. Up to that point, my ideas of working with the arrowheads had been scattered. Houle's cyanotype process, however, offered a potential model and method that was materially sensitive, conceptually resonant, and responsive to place. With that, Caverhill and I moved from speculation to action—and began. We would use cyanotypes to record the arrowheads with the aim of situating them within the landscape.

Armed with a sheet of plexiglass, cyanotype solution, a couple of suitable canvases, and a vague idea of what we wanted to accomplish, Caverhill and I descended upon the Camrose and District Centennial Museum's collection, only to find that there were far fewer arrowheads than anticipated. For a brief moment, following an incident involving a sheet of paper, some gravel, and a very,

fig 1 Lightbox arrangement of arrowheads and stone artifacts. Camrose and District Centennial Museum, Camrose. Photo: author.

very windy day, the collection contained more stones than before we started the project. But I will come back to that scene later.

One of the project's earliest and most unexpected outcomes involved the near dismantling of several arrowhead displays. My project partner and I had been given permission by museum staff to work with the arrowheads and arrowhead displays in the collection. In my quest to engage and find as many arrowheads as possible, I admit that I initially approached a number of donated displays with less than pure intentions. Yet, it was precisely through close examinations of these displays that I developed a new and unexpected appreciation of them. After all, someone had made them: collecting, arranging, and presenting these objects in the effort of making a display for them. I realized it would be disrespectful for us to take these displays apart. With this realization and a growing regard for the displays themselves, we decided to include them as they are. (Though it is doubtful that we could have obtained permission to modify the donated displays, in any case.) While there is little provenance about the displays—a shock to no one who has worked in a museum—this absence does not mean they were without a presence. Rather, the displays carry traces of the individuals who collected and donated them. Also, it is important to note that not all the projectiles or stone objects seen in the images here are arrowheads. We were working with a limited selection.

The next unexpected outcome emerged through the process itself. While keeping an eye on the cyanotype as it developed outdoors, I had time to consider my surroundings. As I waited for the sun to interact with the stones to produce the print, I became aware of how responsive the process was to its environment. The cyanotype was not just taking an imprint of the stones, but in essence, it was registering the moment: the day, the weather, the conditions in which it was made. It was making its own memory of the landscape around us. We had initially set out to create a design that would evoke the land from which these points had been unearthed, but I quickly realized that I couldn't make these materials do anything. I could only establish the conditions in which these stone points, cloth, sun, and solution came together. The outcome itself remained beyond my control—and that realization was exciting. As if to underscore this lack of control, the wind seemed determined to return the points to the earth. A small mishap and a flip of paper sent several of them sprawling over the gravel. After the initial horror subsided, we laughed about how clearly, they wanted to go home.

fig 2 (left) Arrangement of arrowheads and stone artifacts on plexiglass outside the museum during cyanotype exposure process. Camrose and District Centennial Museum, Camrose. Photo: author.

fig 3 (right) Exhibit display in the museum showcasing cyanotype prints and donated arrowhead displays. Camrose and District Centennial Museum, Camrose. Photo: author.

In reflecting on this project, I am drawn to the work of Tania Willard, particularly her essay, "Witnessing the Persistence of Light." In it, Willard refers to the visible evidence of colonial violence seen in photographs from the Langmann photographic collection in the UBC Library Collections, asking readers to look at the stumps which "litter the foregrounds, backgrounds, and margins."[1] These tree stumps, she argues, are not incidental; they are material traces of land-clearing processes and stand as witnesses to the violence embedded in those acts. If we consider that the same processes of clearing, plowing, and rock-picking are what exposed these arrowheads to the people who later collected them, then the stones can also be understood as witnesses, like their wooden brethren. They hold cultural memories, which include the transformation of landscapes by human interventions, both Indigenous and settler.

However, these arrowheads and stones are more than holders of memory; they are affirmations that this land was, and still is, Indigenous land. Before colonial disturbances, arrowheads rested in the earth alongside us and our more-than-human cousins. Whether intact or in pieces, their unmistakable forms endure as material reminders of the people who made them. Most of the time. I'd like to share a quick story told by an acquaintance of mine in Saskatchewan. During a chat, he recounted how a farmer had seen arrowheads in his field for decades. Yet, it wasn't until one of his children remarked on them that he realized they were made by Indigenous people. This moment of recognition reveals a striking dissonance and further aligns these objects to Willard's discussion of photography. Like the images she examines, arrowheads—and the people who made them—are often positioned within a distant, receding, historicized, and even mythical past, despite the immediacy and tangibility of their participation in the present.

Lastly, I want to show you the work-in-progress, or rough-draft version of the display, which juxtaposes the settler-created displays with these cyanotype prints. As a part of a separate project, which focuses on Indigenous geographies,

beadwork, and the concept of "counter beading," I have been interviewing Métis and Cree artists about their practices. These conversations have been enriching and illuminating, revealing the many ways artists approach materials, process, and care. I mention this here because the words of one particular artist, Kim Gullion Stewart, reshaped how I understood the outcomes of this project. While preparing the display and looking at one of the cloths, the phrase "it needs a little love" came to mind. By this, I did not mean that the work needed adornments or corrections, but rather that it asked for more time, more attention, and a willingness to sit with it. I like to imagine that this is how the people who made these points—and those who later assembled the museum displays—related to them as well: through patience, care, and presence.

Or maybe that's just my excuse for not having finished the display yet.

ENDNOTES

1 Tania Willard, "Witnessing the Persistence of Light," in *NANITCH: Early Photographs of British Columbia from the Langmann Collection*, ed. Helga Pakasar (Presentation House Gallery, 2016), 63–73.