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Rebecca Belmore and Terrance Houle use many means to confront cliches in Friend or Foe

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Rebecca Belmore and Terrance Houle: Friend or Foe

At the Or Gallery until May 29

Picture this: a dark-haired man wearing a loincloth, moccasins, and a feathered bustle stands in front of an old movie theatre. Looking directly at us, he enacts a tragicomic pantomime in sign language. White urbanites walk and bicycle past, oblivious to his costumed presence and his emphatic gestures. The written translation that follows this scene identifies him as a Blackfoot "buffalo herder" who had previously viewed movie battles between his people and the "Paleface" tribe in this very theatre. His people always lost.

Juxtaposing the work of Vancouver-based Anishinabe artist Rebecca Belmore and Calgary-based Blood artist Terrance Houle—he of the red loincloth and prairie-chicken-dance bustle—*Friend or Foe* demonstrates how the human body may bear the burden of injustice, past and present. Both artists work across disciplines, including performance, video, and photography; in all these media, they confront cultural stereotypes and other aspects of the colonial legacy.

Houle's video projection *Friend or Foe* lends its name and theme to the exhibition and poses a note of humour—and tension—against Belmore's more sombre mood. Houle situates himself in four urban locations, dressed in that postcard aboriginal garb and using gestures all too reminiscent of sign-language exchanges between TV Indians and ever-encroaching white folk. Part of Houle's comic approach to his subject is his unapologetic use of his own pale, pudgy, bespectacled self—the concerted opposite of the taut, brown, eagle-eyed Indian warrior of Old Hollywood. This humour cleverly inflects the contradictions he creates between naming and labelling, individuality and generalization, identity and its willful misreading.

Belmore's new video work, *Against Glass (Diorama)*, is a startling departure from her previous large-scale projections, installations, and sculptures. Typically, the audience is physically immersed in her videotaped performances and mixed-media environments, enhancing the powerful sense of physicality she brings to her art. *Against Glass*, however, miniaturizes form, sound, and image and presents them, like a museum display, on a plinth.

The flat top of the plinth is a small screen, on which is rear-projected a video of a performance Belmore undertook this past winter at the Museum of Anthropology. In this multivalent work, Belmore and aboriginal performance artist Donald Morin construct a low, flimsy lean-to against the exterior window of the museum's Great Hall. Morin then occupies the structure while Belmore covers it with sticks, moss, grass, and other natural materials gathered from the immediate environment. The live audience, meanwhile, watches the performance from the other side of the glass, within the Great Hall, surrounded by its towering totem poles and its freighted history of ethnography and museology. Both the glass and the encasement of the First Nations actor within the improvised structure serve as metaphors for the ways in which museums distance us from the cultures they represent. The lean-to also speaks to homelessness, and to the poverty and disenfranchisement of many urban aboriginals.

In itself, the performance is evocative and multilayered; Belmore has chosen to further complicate it by setting out her miniature "diorama" on top of the screen. This includes pieces from a chess set composed of stereotypical "Indian" characters—chief, brave, warrior, medicine man, and buckskin-clad princess—and two miniature screens, onto which miniature projectors cast two other videotaped performances. The first, accompanied by a tinny chorus of "God Save the Queen", documents Victorious, in which the artist makes a very clever copy of a marble monument to Queen Victoria by embellishing fellow aboriginal performer Daina Warren with crumpled newspaper and honey. The second is an extended head shot of Morin, silently watching us watching the performances.

By miniaturizing these works and integrating them into a game of chess, Belmore establishes an uncomfortable imbalance between the viewer and the viewed. Instead of confronting us with her characteristic fierceness and physical courage, she depicts herself and her fellow performers as tiny and powerless—chess pieces in someone else's game, artifacts in someone else's museum, emoticons in a teensy universe of electronic devices. It's a knowing and deeply unsettling recapitulation of history.

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