

a *bed* to the bones

Teresa Marshall's new exhibition, *A Bed to the Bones*, is only the most recent in a series of engaging installations dating back to 1991, which thoughtfully synthesize Conceptual art strategies and the poetics and politics of First Nations identity.¹ Marshall continues in this new work to reveal a sensitivity to the complexities of language and to both the sensuous and symbolic properties of her artistic materials. *A Bed to the Bones* features mythical furniture and hybrid objects made from stretched rawhide skins, tobacco leaf mâché, artificial bones, hair, wood, glass beads, and other materials. Almost all of these elegant, if quirky sculptures do double duty as drums, and Marshall has provided the audience with homemade

¹ I use the term Conceptual art advisedly, since Marshall was quick to point out that Aboriginal American art traditions have always been largely conceptual in nature (pun intended); personal communication. Except as noted, all quotations from Teresa Marshall are taken from dialogues with the artist, June 5–12, 1998. According to Carol Podedworny, Marshall's interest in the "conceptual significance" of her work may be derived from both a "commitment to conceptualist principles" and to her "sense of obligation to her community." See Carol Podedworny, "Finding Home," in Melanie Fernandez, et. al., *The Department of Indian Affairs*, exh. cat. (Toronto: A Space, 1995): 8. With the exception of *The Department of Indian Affairs*, a succinct and useful overview of Marshall's history as an installation artist is contained in Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "Marshalling Resources," in Janet Clark and Charlotte Townsend-Gault, *Band Stands: Recent Work by Teresa Marshall*, exh. cat. (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Art Gallery, 1997): 5–15. An earlier version of *Band Stands* was shown in Vancouver; see Grant Arnold, Monika Kin Gagnon, and Doreen Jensen, *topographies: aspects of recent B.C. art*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1996). I am pleased to acknowledge that my research on First Nations artists has been generously supported by the Center for International Studies at the University of Missouri—St. Louis.

drumbeaters, which she intends them to use. Besides wanting to resist the reverence and silence of the “art church,” Marshall feels that if her work “is not interactive, then it’s just decoration.”

A further exploration of ideas, forms, and materials first seen in Marshall’s installation, *Band Stands* (1996), this new work is simultaneously fantastic and understated. She avoids, therefore, what I call the restricting polemics of “either/or” and chooses instead the enchanting ambiguity of “both/and.” Although Marshall’s work has never been impersonal, necessarily, *A Bed to the Bones* is her most intensely personal installation to date, and the tones of wood and rawhide help create an intimate warmth. Similarly, it lacks the black humour and ironic kitsch that has often, though not always, characterized her work. Certainly this installation is formally inventive, as several of the objects undergo a whimsical and clever metamorphosis; but *A Bed to the Bones* is not funny . . . not even darkly so. Its sober monochromaticism (with dramatic black and subtle rose highlights) and quiet theatricality does vibrate sympathetically with *Elitekey* (1990), which was seen at the National Gallery of Canada in 1992. Mysterious and archetypal, like *The Receptionists* (1992), *A Bed to the Bones* lacks — with one notable exception — the fiery anger of *Peace, Order, and Good Government* (1993), which was seen at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts in 1996–97.² Mature, risky, and manifesting the artist’s personal vulnerability, *A Bed to the Bones*, with its undertones of excavation, exhumation, and ethnography, productively

² For *Elitekey* and *The Receptionists*, see Diana Nemiroff, Robert Houle, and Charlotte Townsend-Gault, *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada*, exh. cat. (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992): 195–203. See Dan L. Monroe, et. al., *Gifts of the Spirit: Works By Nineteenth Century & Contemporary Native American Artists*, exh. cat. (Salem, Mass.: Peabody Essex Museum, 1996): 127. *Peace, Order, and Good Government* was a constituent element of *The Department of Indian Affairs* (see n. 1).

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ignores the enervated controversy of art versus artifact. (How odd and constricting that these “categories” were ever conceived as “opposing” ones.) In fact, one legitimate interpretation of the installation is that it is an anthropological display of the material culture of a fabulous, if enigmatic and bittersweet, world of Marshall’s imagination.

All at once a magical collection of discrete sculptures and a unified ensemble that suggests an unpopulated stage set (latent with human presence), *A Bed to the Bones* resists reduction to a singular meaning. But even though multiple themes and inspirations course through it, generating a thick visual intertextuality, the overarching leitmotif is that of a requiem. Marshall, whose mother died when she was eleven, spent many summers on the Mi’kmaq Reserve in Nova Scotia with her maternal grandmother, who died in September, 1997. Thus, when the drums in the gallery are being neglected, the eery, dirge-like silence is mournful and elegiac, and the emotional atmosphere is dense, heavy, and still. In one instance, when speaking about the character of the installation in its presence, Marshall seemed detached from the moment, her eyes veiled with a film of recollection, and she uttered in a slow, hushed, and dreamy voice the words “honouring, acknowledging, contemplating, recording, witnessing.”

Marshall identifies strongly with, and is fiercely proud of, her Mi’kmaq heritage, and has stated that artists “must be witnesses.” So the labour-intensive quality of the installation (scraping and soaking rawhide, making drums-as-furniture, fine stitchwork with sinew, and shimmering beaded decoration) and her attention to detail must be understood as signs of respect for the patient, laborious craft of her elders and ancestors. And it also helps to know, when considering the forms covered with tobacco mâché —

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a sophisticated Marshall variant on the traditional papier mâché — that in Native culture tobacco is not only a natural medicine that purifies when used properly, but as Marshall notes, “a gift, a prayer in thanks, a giving back.” Bespeaking the heartfelt and handmade, the objects that constitute *A Bed to the Bones*, almost all of which are fashioned from the “raw” materials of nature, have an elemental and archaic quality. They are immediately recognizable, however, as contemporary urban works of art. Much of their power, then, resides in their ability to embody a crossing back and forth between cultural traditions.³

The space of the installation is measured and articulated by a white wall or façade set roughly in the middle of the gallery. Although this form establishes a pause or interruption in our experience, the three Gothic windows cut into it allow us to see through to the other side, hinting at the passage from one time /space /world into another. In Marshall’s view it might also imply, for some at least, the separation of the front and back rooms of a wake. In each window sill she has placed a dance wand or rattle, perhaps, which terminates in a rawhide flower, its cluster of petals embodying a ritual prayer or song of remembrance. A life opening and spreading out to the world over time, each flower is in a different stage of bloom, and the delicate, rosey hue of its blossoms softly glows like the embers of the hearth back home. This poignant syncretism — the hard purity of a church wall graced with the leathery flower song of indigenous mourning — is deftly done, and the meaning of this merger resists interpretive closure.

³ For Marshall’s observations on “going back and forth between . . . two communities” and the need for a “critical perspective,” see her interview with Diana Nemiroff in *Land, Spirit, Power*, 196.

In the space on one side of the wall are five almost identical furniture drums with beaters and an empty litter of Gulliverian proportions. Made of rawhide and extraordinarily long bones — a kind of expressionist distortion — the litter reminded me at once of the royal ones used to transport the Sun King in ancient Southeastern Woodlands culture during the Mississippian period.⁴ In this context, however, I thought also of the fact that in our times art and artists must carry and nurture a wounded culture. The family, so to speak, of five table-drums are also stringed instruments of heroic proportions. This surrealistic doubling (tripling, quadrupling) in a single hybrid object relates to the curious and mythical transformations found in both aboriginal art traditions and the modernist primitivism derived from them. In a strategic move similar to Eva Hesse's visceral gloss on Minimalism, Marshall is using the permission or entree that an archaizing modernism offers to explore the psychological potency of these giant, teasingly anthropomorphic talismans. By talisman I mean Webster's second sense: "something producing apparently magical or miraculous effects." As one who does not make things, it is astonishing to me that a single sculpture could be invested with or conjure up such a wide variety of feelings, meanings, and ideas. For example, the wedding of elongated cello and Mi'kmaq drum signifies the crossing of cultures and their musical forms. That the shape of the table-drum

⁴ On the iconography of the precontact "chiefly litter," see James A. Brown, "The Mississippian Period," in David D. Brose, James A. Brown, and David W. Penney, *Ancient Art of the American Woodland Indians* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, in association with the Detroit Institute of Arts, 1985): 108, 111. According to Ralph T. Coe, "In historical times . . . along the Mississippi River . . . the chief of the Natches was called 'Great Sun' and was carried about on a pillowed palanquin;" see his essay, "Archæological Earthworks and Effigy Pipes: The Serpent Cult," in Ralph T. Coe, *Sacred Circles*, exh. cat. (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976): 54.

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is also comparable to both a grave marker *and* an ironing board opens even more interpretive possibilities. An earlier version of the ironing board as drum — *Pressing Issues* (1997) — was included in Marshall's *Band Stands* installation. What were the “pressing issues,” Marshall asks, faced by her grandmother, who was an important and accomplished woman at home, but who also walked the Reservation road into town to wash and iron white people's clothing. Knowledge of this commoditization of domestic labour and of Marshall's memory of her mother, grandmother, and aunts singing as they worked contextualizes her description of the table-drums as “a song waiting to be sung in celebration or in mourning.” Indeed, in spite of a haunting ghostly *absence* that envelops the gallery like an invisible fog, a palpable female *presence* and a validation of women's work permeates the installation. Creative paradox, to which I shall return, is therefore one of the strongest elements in Marshall's repertoire.

On the “far” side of the wall there are a pair of lonely votive candles (read *requiescat*); a pair of woman's shoes; a miniature pool table; an old-fashioned dressmaker's mannequin; a bed to the bones; and several rectangular rawhide drums framed like paintings, which Marshall, in a play on landscape, calls *Land Escapes*. Unframed versions of the *Land Escapes* (1996) were seen previously in *Band Stands*, where they had a striking similarity to certain cream-coloured passages in some of Clyfford Still's monumental, crusty abstractions.⁵ Here they continue to suggest not only telluric abstractions, but weathered antique maps as well. I am struck also by the fact that the desire for synaesthesia manifest in early modernism's “orphic” abstraction (i.e., Robert Delaunay, Frantisek

⁵ For the American Abstract Expressionist Clyfford Still, see Thomas Kellein, et. al., *Clyfford Still, 1904–1980*, exh. cat. (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1992).

Kupka, Wassily Kandinsky) may have been fully-realized, finally, in the *Land Escapes*, “paintings” which are literally capable of generating music.⁶ Referencing both modernist abstraction and the ancient Native American tradition of painting on hide, they also function for the artist as portraits of ancestors.⁷

The dress-maker’s mannequin has been humanized further by the addition of a flowing black topknot of hair. The sepia tone of its muslin dress-in-progress is the dominant colour of the installation, and like the pool table and the legs of the table-drums, the mannequin has a vaguely Victorian sensibility about it. The appropriated figurative images that Marshall heat-transferred onto the muslin are the only historically-specific, and certainly the most politically-charged, elements in the exhibition: General George Armstrong Custer, anti-hero of the American West; the Miniconjou Sioux Chief Bigfoot dead in the snow, murdered beneath a flag of truce at Wounded Knee Creek in 1890 by Custer’s 7th Cavalry; and, among others, a nostalgic Edward S. Curtis image of a Plains Indian man offering a pipe to the Great Spirit. The impact of this visual history of violence, loss, and stereotyping is intensified by the presence, on both side walls near the ceiling, of a single row

⁶ Synaesthesia is the overlapping or interpenetration of the senses, as in colours that evoke the tones of music or vice versa. According to Maurice Tuchman, in their search for the spiritual in art, early modernists “were intrigued with the prospect of intermingling senses and, more specifically, with painting’s approximating music.” See Maurice Tuchman (with Judi Freeman), “Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art,” in Maurice Tuchman, et. al., *The Spiritual In Art: Abstract Painting, 1890–1985* exh. cat. (New York: Abbeville Press for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986): 32.

⁷ Long before Woodlands people migrated onto the Plains they had a well-established tradition of hide painting. The Spanish explorers who visited present-day Kansas in 1540 reported seeing hide painting, but probably the art form was already thousands of years old. The materials, techniques, and aesthetic forms were already well-defined by the 16th century, and so the well-known Plains hide painting tradition represents a continuation of a much older art form.

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of black hair fringe (scalps?) placed at regular intervals, such that it might look, to some, like an abacus. We might read this as an aestheticization of coups-counting or as an emblematic honouring by Marshall of those First Nations people who have passed on. The mannequin wears a necklace of glass beads (a sign for the Native adaptation of European trade goods) with a brass crucifix. Given the painful cultural climate in Canada today, the cross is an immediate reminder of the Catholic church's acknowledged culpability in the abuse of First Nations students in the residential schools they operated for the government for decades. Furthermore, a recent court decision decreed that since the church-run residential schools were operating under the ægis of the state, it too, may be liable for damages. A threaded needle is stuck in the unfinished dress signifying unfinished business: in addition to Native litigants who were abused in residential schools, at present there are hundreds of unsettled land claims in Canada, in which First Nations are declaring aboriginal title to ancestral lands. Reclamation for land loss (or the restoration of aboriginal title) and reparation for the violence of clergy-schoolmasters is a substantial part of the unfinished business between Native people and the descendents of Eurocanadian colonizers.

The tiny pool table, the flat rawhide surface of which is yet another drum, is either the right size for young children or it constructs adult viewers as giants.⁸ Upon it one plays "cultural pool." The cue sticks have beaded decoration and hair fringe, such that they resemble a speaker's staff of authority. And when the balls, fashioned from tobacco mâché, sink into the pockets, they are returning into the drum or as Marshall explains, into "the earth, the

⁸ Elsewhere Marshall has manipulated scale to transform viewers into what Kristin Potter has called "giant Epicureans;" see her essay, "Teresa Marshall," in *Native North American Artists*, ed. Roger Matuz (Toronto: St. James Press, 1998): 354.

heartbeat, the land.” Here again, the artist is not inclined to decode the object for us, but asks instead a series of questions (à la Gauguin) attendant to it: “Where do we come from? What are the cues to all of this? Is this a game? Is this serious? Who is responsible for this god?”⁹

Marshall’s bed to the bones, which cues the eponymous title of the exhibition, is about life-size for a bed, but is quite large as a rawhide drum, and the huge, thick, bone mimicry used for the headboard plays, once again, with scale: what extinct Paleo-Indian period mammoth or towering culture hero would have left a skeleton of such immense proportions? Is this a (mythic) joke about an archaeological search for origins? Clearly, as a visual metaphor, Marshall’s drum-bed is extremely complex. A bed is a place of rest, dreams, and lovemaking. It is where we nurse our sick and aged, and as Marshall observes, most of us begin and end our lives in a bed. As a potential vessel of meaning, this particular bed, fashioned from skin, bones, and hair, has multiple significations for its maker: the bed is a drum because [in lovemaking] “it’s a song in hopeful anticipation of a child being born.” In considering its stretched and sewn skin, Marshall speaks of “quilting the landscape . . . of women suturing and healing.” She was also thinking, she explained, of “the mass burial site at Wounded Knee.” And what was that gargantuan grave, I ask, but a gaping wound in the earth, a bed to the bones of those First Nations people murdered because they wanted to dance their dead relations back to life? When the skin of memory is stretched tight as a drum over the bones of culture, is the result personal identity? Are bones here a metaphor

⁹ Marshall’s metaphysical questions, the kind one asks when doing grief-work, reminded me at once of Paul Gauguin’s Tahitian-period oil painting, *Whence Come We? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897) in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

for the ancestral ground of contemporary culture? Will we ever again hear the phrase “from the cradle to the grave” without thinking about Marshall’s bed to the bones?

Concerning bones and drums, consider this. We all understand bones as a symbol for that which is basic and structural, even primal and elemental. “I was cold right down in my bones.” “This house has good bones.” “Let’s get down to the bones.” Creative paradox number one: in an installation marked by a graceful, if elemental beauty, Marshall (“an artist must be a witness”) is getting right down to the grisly bones. Canada and the United States have a skeleton in their closet. Call it the post-Columbian history of the First Nations. And consider this: drums can be made anywhere (universal) from a dizzying variety of (local) materials. On a rudimentary level, at least, anyone can play a drum and the beat can be adjusted to the emotional tenor of the occasion. The rhythm of the drum is like the vital beating of our collective heart. For me, *A Bed to the Bones* offers drumming as a metonym for a way of living that both utilizes and preserves the natural material of the biosphere in all its diversity. Creative paradox number two: in spite of Marshall’s desire to resist the silence of the art church, much of the time a tomb-like quietude prevails in the gallery. Although action is required, the work encourages quiet contemplation. How strange, how paradoxical, to be surrounded by both silence *and* drums.

Members of the congregation, the musical question for today is, “Who, then, will play these drums?”

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