

# CLOSE READINGS

A column of frank reviews of recent exhibitions of Indigenous art.

Richard William Hill

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Marie Watt, *Dwelling* (2006).  
Reclaimed and new wool blankets,  
satin binding, thread, manila tags,  
safety pins, 96 x 66 x 84 inches.  
Installation shot at the Tacoma Art Museum.  
Image courtesy of the artist  
and the Tacoma Art Museum.



Marie Watt  
*Lodge*

Tacoma Art Museum  
30 June – 07 October 2012

Marie Watt has located her career in the middle of a deceptively perilous intersection. Not a simple four-way stop, but one of those multispoke Parisian intersections with lanes of traffic wide and narrow converging from all directions. This fact isn't immediately evident. The work does not beat you over the head with audacity; her signature materials – reclaimed blankets – are comfortably familiar and the hand that manipulates them is clearly guided by a sensibility that is gentle, thoughtful and refined.

Which arteries feed into this intersection to make it so tricky, then? We have the legacy of modernist aesthetics and the notion of high art in general, converging upon marginalized traditions of craft, including both women's and Indigenous traditions of abstraction (Watt's mother is Seneca, but she also draws on other Indigenous traditions in her work). We have the formal, disembodied rigour of minimalism on an apparent collision course with the kitsch of folk portraiture. We have a subtle tension between narration and poetic evocation through attentiveness to the subtleties of materiality. And we have the relationship between Indigenous visual and narrative traditions and the devices and conventions

of museum display. Does the traffic get through despite this complexity? Mostly, yes. There are a few little crashes here and there and, in the case of the ambitious installation *Engine* (2009), what looks to be a bit of a pileup. But overall the results are impressive, with Watt's thoughtful and sensitive engagement with her materials guiding her through.

Watt is best known for her sculptures composed of stacked piles of wool blankets. Here we have two examples: *Dwelling* (2006), a comparatively squat eight foot tall near-cube that takes its shape from blankets spread out and laid flat atop one another, and *Three Sisters: Cousin Rose, Sky Woman, Four Pelts and All My Relations* (2007), which, with its constituent blankets folded, makes for a taller, narrower and more precarious pile. Both works trade effectively on the aesthetic heritage of minimalism. In what one might now think of as the tradition of artists like Mary Kelly and Mona Hatoum, Watt is able to fill minimalism's formalist cubes and rectangles with poetic and narrative content. Indeed, the expulsion of references espoused by the minimalists seems to create a vacuum that draws content into their signature forms with special vigour.

Survivors and Survivalists

/ HILL

Watt balances this effect deftly in *Dwelling*, putting the sober weight and monumentality of her blanket cube to use in creating a democratic memorial with a wide range of associations. These include historical Indigenous relationships to the blanket as garment and trade item, but also go well beyond.

At its core, *Dwelling* is a participatory monument to everyone who contributed to its making. The artist placed a public call for contributions and received 100 donated blankets in response. She then purchased 900 new blankets to add to the pile. Volunteers sewed satin and felt bindings on the edges of the new blankets, resulting in a rich range of colours when stacked. The donated blankets were also tagged with each donor's name and a brief statement about the blanket's significance, invoking the conventions of museum display. These labels are intentionally placed so as to dangle out of the pile on one side. Viewing *Dwelling* from this angle reveals the work in its full power—its solid, sculptural mass punctuated by the apparently random distribution of individual names and narratives. The work trades in tension between the mass-produced ubiquity of blankets in general and the particularity of the individual experiences attached to each one. As an object, *Dwelling* evinces a definitive unity as an idealized geometric form, without ever allowing us to forget the particularity of each constituent part. We are aware that these parts are merely stacked and could be disassembled, but also that this would take considerable effort; it would not be possible to simply slip a blanket out from the middle. And while the sculpture embodies the architectural mass and shape suggested by its title, with no interior it also resists inhabitation and is impenetrable.

The story associated with one particular blanket stands out. When Watt put out the request for blankets in 2006, Peter Kubicek, who was then 76, donated a blanket that had been issued to him in 1945, when he was a fifteen-year-old boy entering the German concentration camp of Sachsenhausen. He still had the blanket when he and his fellow prisoners were forced-marched by the SS away from the advancing Soviet army. Aside from his striped prison uniform, the blanket was his only shelter. Those who couldn't keep up were shot by the side of the road. At the end of the twelfth night, the prisoners awoke to discover

that their guards had fled. Kubicek kept the blanket with him ever since.

The curators give special status to this story, dedicating a prominent text panel to presenting Kubicek's narrative in his own words. This is only fitting, given the significance of the story and the generosity of the gift. Singling one narrative out in this way may seem to threaten the unity of the project, to collapse its structural multiplicity into a vehicle for a single story, but instead it heightens the dialogue in the work between the general and the undeniably particular.

Watt also plays with the relationship between fine art and craft by adapting her blanket works to other media. The sculpture *Staff: Custodian* (2007) depicts a tall and very narrow pile of folded blankets in cast bronze. It resonates with both the elongated modernist sculptures of Alberto Giacometti and the long tradition of bronze sculpture in general. The change of medium deliberately disrupts the indexical aspect of the original blanket works and more closely corresponds to high art's material distance from the everyday object. This is also emphasized by the sculptural device of miniaturization; the blankets in *Staff* are significantly smaller than life-size. This, and their solid form as a single piece of bronze, allows them to be "piled" to a height that would be simply impossible if they were actual blankets. Thus they become a staff rather than a dwelling.

It's unfortunate that the effectiveness of *Staff* was impeded somewhat by two aspects of its installation. The first is that it was installed in proximity to a tall, narrow doorway that echoed its shape and dwarfed it, diminishing its impact. The second is that the dark gallery floor, which was so flattering to the bright blankets of *Dwelling*, made for a poor backdrop to the cedar base of *Staff*. The light-coloured base jarringly interrupted the continuity between the dark floor and the dark bronze of the sculpture itself, becoming more prominent than it should.

Watt's near-seamless joining of modernist aesthetics, domestic materials and women's traditional craft carries into many of her wall works. Here again the artist's unerring sense of design and gift for delicate but powerful colour combinations are evident in several series of woodcuts and lithographs, and in smaller sewn blanket works which she refers to (in the tradition of informal quilting and embroidery education) as "samplers." Pushed by the painter James

Lavadour to work on a smaller scale in order to develop her ideas more quickly and without the planning and commitment required by her larger blanket works, Watt began to "sketch" in fabric. [1] The results are often stunning, moving fluidly across a range of compositions, from the paradoxically gestural stitched lines of *Dream Catcher (retire)* (2005), to the many target motifs that evoke with equal credibility both Jasper Johns and the folk traditions of quilt design.

My favourite of the samplers is the *Part and Whole* (2011) series of four works that Watt created from a single old plaid wool blanket. They are inspired by Piet Mondrian's restricted palette and fondness for rectilinearity, but are not rigidly faithful to the artist's principles. *Piet, Grove, Lucky Number* comes closest to Mondrian's aesthetics—at least his later, looser boogie-woogie mode—but even here the grid is disrupted in various ways, disintegrating into dashes and interrupted by forbidden diagonals in the form of a tilted floating rectangle stitched into the centre of the composition. This seamless combination of genuine homage and gentle irreverence seems to characterize Watt's relationship to modernism. The work is contextualized in the catalogue and text panels as involving multiple open-ended references that include the anniversary of 11 September, 2001 and even "the Indigenous principle of utilizing every aspect of a source material so that nothing is wasted." [2] This sort of ethnographic explanation, which appears here and there in the text panels and catalogue, seems less convincing than the complex, multivocal conversation going on in the form and materiality of the works themselves.

When the works come to depend too heavily on narrative or, as in the case of Watt's blanket portrait series, when they mingle narrative with signs of kitsch, they do not fare as well. Many of the blanket portraits function within the accepted and conservative terms of the traditional portrait, honouring their subjects, including artist Joseph Beuys; the early-twentieth-century celebrity athlete Jim Thorpe; and Ira Hayes, one of the soldiers photographed raising a US flag at Iwo Jima. Although one can appreciate the logic of celebrating some of these figures in a folk and even kitsch mode of representation, the effect comes up short. The Beuys and Thorpe works are overwhelmed by their kitsch trappings (Watt had already lost me by the time I saw deer antlers sticking out above the Thorpe blanket, but

[1] Rebecca J. Dobkins, *Marie Watt: Lodge* (Salem, Oregon, Seattle & London: Willamette University & University of Washington Press, 2012), 40.



this gives a sense of how far these works go down that road). Also, I don't see the value in extending Beuys's dubious project of self-mythologizing or even what is achieved by dabbling in this way with notions of celebrity or cults of personality.

The largest and most problematic work in Watt's exhibition is *Engine*. From the outside, *Engine* looks like a slightly amorphous form of portable architecture on the scale of a large domed tent, with its felt covering hanging on the inside of an external framework. It is partially screened by two temporary gallery walls, and a large opening protrudes on one side into which the audience is invited to venture, after having removed their shoes. Immediately upon entering the curving tunnel, one is confronted with a large cluster of handprints. Most have the appearance of the brown silhouettes created when other colours—red, green, blue, yellow—are applied around a person's hand. This is reminiscent of a technique common in cave painting, in which an artist spits pigment against a wall while using their hand as a stencil. In this case, these are the handprints of people who worked on the project. This is not the only evidence suggesting that the interior is meant to resemble a cave rather than a built structure. Once you have wound your way into the main space, it opens up into a simulated cavern with felt-covered ledges and benches. There are even felt stalactites and stalagmites. Hidden lights provide subtle illumination and the felt walls dampen external noise. The implied invitation is to sit and watch videos projected on the walls overhead. The videos feature small ghostly figures that appear alternatively on three different areas of the cave to tell traditional Indigenous stories from the Pacific Northwest. The storytellers are Elaine Grinnell, Roger Fernandes and Johnny Moses, who Watt says she "grew up listening to and learning from as a kid attending Title IX Indian Education Programs in the Pacific Northwest's urban Indian community." [3]

If the identification labels in *Dwelling* hint at histories of museum collecting, the cave space of *Engine* quite explicitly evokes the didactic environments of the natural history museum. An environment is simulated, videos projected, stories narrated. There is even a sense that one of the goals is the edification of youth, with a storyteller noting that a particular narrative was adapted for young people. (I have been disturbed lately by how often the traditional



↑  
Marie Watt, *Engine* (2009).  
Felted wool, wood, audio/visual presentation,  
108 x 240 x 162 inches.  
In collaboration with The Fabric Workshop  
and Museum, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.  
Image courtesy of the artist.

Indigenous stories being told in public seem to be delivered as though their natural audience is children.) That said, all of the storytellers Watt has drawn on are clearly skilled at their craft.

It is evident that Watt's intent is not to create a specific cultural space—say, the space in which these stories would traditionally (or even currently) be told—but rather an imagined primal space of narrative in which, one presumes, we are invited to consider the titular "engine" of culture in general. As she says, "I am interested in how the teachings in the stories I've included similarly address the force of good and evil in the world and the role of humans and community in the web of life." [4] The curator even invokes the primal qualities of felt itself as a nonwoven fabric. [5] I am sceptical about not only this universalizing form of primitivism, which is treacherous territory for any Indigenous artist, but also about its material execution. The translation of stone into felt is charming, but too much so. Working with a material that is literally warm and fuzzy requires careful management of the symbolic associations we have with those two concepts. Usually Watt handles this aspect of her materials adroitly; but in this case, she loses the edge required to shift her play with the tropes of museum display into a critical register.

The display of *Engine* was accompanied by a video documentary about the work, shown prominently on a large monitor on one of the nearby gallery walls. I don't object to the use of involved didactics in art museum exhibitions, but it is distracting to have them visually competing for attention with the artwork at such a large scale and in such a prominent location.

Despite these misgivings, I left this midcareer retrospective with the sense of having encountered a serious artistic project underpinned by a mature, personal and well-refined sensibility. The one work that really failed, *Engine*, faltered by reviving modern notions of a primal, universal human experience and by losing faith with the specific cultural and aesthetic intersections so materially evident in much of the other work. Going forward, I suspect that the more Watt resists grand explanations and trusts the particularities of her fine sense of her materials, the more dexterously she will be able to navigate the intersection that she has daringly chosen to inhabit.

Richard William Hill is an independent writer and curator and Associate Professor of Art History at York University. He gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts for assistance with travel expenses related to this review.

[2] Ibid., 92.

[4] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., 79.

[5] Ibid.