



Above: **Resilient Repugnance Baptism Gowns** (series) (2018), variable sizes, fabric, beads, birch branch (for hanging)

## Jobena Petonoquot: Beading Stories

By Lori Beavis

*When you begin to bead you start by laying out all your hanks so the colours are revealed, like a rainbow. You cut a length of thread to a little longer than your arm, you don't want it too long or it will tangle up. You make a knot by wrapping the thread in a circle around the needle and then pull the needle all the way through the first bead, then tie a knot and clip off the little tail. When you are ready to begin beading, scatter a collection of beads on a cloth and take up your threaded needle, hold the needle on a slight angle to pick up the colourful glass beads – one, two, or more at a time – the beads then slide along the thread to take their place along the outlined pattern. The beads can be sewn down individually or an accumulation of beads can be stitched in place.*

While one might assume that beading is an art passed down from grannies or aunties, this was not the case for Jobena Petonoquot. Her granny was too busy and not interested in sewing, so at the age of twenty-five, Petonoquot taught herself the patterns and techniques, and started to bead. When she looks at her work now she sees her ancestry—a little bit of Algonquin, a little Naskapi, and a pinch of Victorian-era Euro-Canadian all come together. The beads she places and sews into patterns are a way for her to sew the memories and stories of family that she has heard throughout her life, and now holds within herself. As a non-Algonquin speaker, Petonoquot explains that while she only knows a few words of Anishinaabemowin, through the beads and her art practice she can speak her language.

The work in this exhibition is infused with family history and its intersections within the history of colonization in Canada. Petonoquot was raised in Kitigan Zibi, adjacent to the town of Maniwaki; it is the largest Algonquin territory in the land now called Canada. This unceded territory has been closely linked with both the Hudson's Bay Company and the religious Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate—connections with religion and economics which reverberate in Petonoquot's work. As she has observed, many actions of the colonial government were designed to keep Indigenous people dependent and confined to the reserve, because self-sufficiency threatened the stereotypes upon which the system was based.

Self-sufficiency is one of the characteristics Petonoquot admired in her grandfather. The two pairs of beaded moccasins, *Ode to My Grandfather* (2018) and *I helped My Mother as my Feet touched the Earth* (2016) are evidence of the artist's careful and patient work but also speak to her family's, and in particular her grandfather's ability to make his living and provide for his family through his knowledge of the land. As footwear, moccasins symbolize connection to the earth—the floral beadwork reinforces the cyclical patterns of the natural world. In indigenous cultures, the making of moccasins is a way of sharing history.



Left: **The Reservation Bonnet** (with tea bag rosary) (2018), 7"x7", Beads, nylon thread, vleather, teabag filled with dirt

Above Left: **Good Little Indian--We all Drank Tea with the Queen** (2011), 15" x 20" Intaglio print, Rag paper, mixed media

Above Right: **Ode to Tom Thomson--We all Drank Tea with the Queen** (series) (2011), 15" x 20" Intaglio print, Rag paper, mixed media

The skills are passed down through the generations, and the beadwork tells a story. In this way, moccasins bring together personal experience, family, community, and cultural survival.

Petonoquot's work often alludes to cultural survival and resilience. The glass seed beads themselves are linked to the history of colonization. While the beads were imported from Europe as a trade item, beadwork soon became an art form in which Indigenous women excelled, expressing Indigenous identity and ways of knowing the world. Beads are not trinkets. Beadwork is integral to Indigenous culture, and continues as a significant symbol of its resiliency.

The *Reservation Bonnet* (2018) and the four vintage christening dresses in *The Resilient Repugnance* series (2017-18) are embellished with beads to both indigenize and reference the use of Christianity as a tool of colonization. The beading on the bonnet and the dresses make a connection to both a religious cross and the four directions. The cross represents the way religion was used as a mechanism to justify atrocities upon her ancestors—the bonnet was dyed scarlet red to evoke the wrapping of wounds. In contrast, the four directions symbolized in the bead patterns and the four dresses themselves are an indigenous emblem and representation of all peoples of the world.

Petonoquot wanted the four vintage gowns to be intricately beaded and very pretty. Herein lies the dichotomy of this work, as they were then soiled with dirt when she ritually buried and then dug them back up at Kitigan Zibi, a locale of importance as the place where she grew up and now lives. This performative exercise was a symbol of not forgetting, and recognizing that we are still in a colonized situation.

The four intaglio prints, *We All Drank Tea with the Queen* (2012) were created at Concordia University, where Petonoquot experienced the dichotomy of identities between rural and urban, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and what it means to be an Indigenous woman. She created the series after visiting one of Montreal's many souvenir shops. Using the doll, teacup, beaver, and the iconic *Group of Seven* image of a jack pine, these prints draw a line between what is known and what is expected—as stereotypes and symbols of colonial presence and indicators that we continue to live in a colonized space.

As an Indigenous artist, Jobena Petonoquot is interested in how actions determine our survival as First Nations people. Her practice speaks to the importance of passing histories, family stories, knowledge and skills from one generation to another. It also creates a dialogue encouraging viewers to look further into the history and experiences