

Emmanuelle Desrochers
Leah Watts
A Conversation with Spider Woman
(Or to Catch a Spider in Its Own Web)

*Spinning the Threads of Accessibility;
Knowledge and Refusal into a Delicately Tensed Balance.*

Leah Watts' installation *A Conversation with Spider Woman (Or to Catch a Spider in Its Own Web)* addresses issues of accessibility, knowledge and positionality. Informed by the artist's mixed James Bay Cree and White settler identity, it explores balance and tensions through a video, beadwork, and two casts. The artwork draws from the Cree legend of Spider Woman, in which she is surreptitiously watched as she weaves her web and her knowledge is propagated against her will.

In the short video projected on a wall, a story is being told. Punctuated by thoughts, it is interwoven with reflections about positionality and cultural responsibility, such as how Indigenous knowledge is viewed, shared, and appropriated. In the background, blurred hands basked in sunlight meticulously bead the piece exhibited on the floor. Subtitles appear slowly, alternating between italicized and regular text; between voices and narratives, at times questioning the story and its protagonist, at others, the accountability of sharing, receiving and refusing knowledge. Below the video, on the floor, there is a rectangular beaded net made of translucent dark red beads. Atop of one end and underneath the other end of the net repose organic forms indiscernible at first sight. Upon closer inspection, handprints and creases formed by the fingers once involved in the creation of these casts – the embodiment of the negative space held by the artist's hands making a cupping gesture – become noticeable.

Watts' installation delivers and conceals content at once, challenging the viewers to engage with the work both physically and intellectually. They have to make an effort to read, watch and crouch. The audience must examine and piece together its materiality and visual language in order to meet the artwork halfway, while accepting its meaning might not meet them there. In doing so, Watts employs various threads of tension to create a whole that is strongly woven on delicate balances between consent and refusal; knowledge and confrontation; accessibility and effort.

Accessibility is one of the main themes in Watts' artwork, both in its content and in its experience. Based on the artist's position at a cultural threshold, the shifting perspectives showcased in the subtitles are part of the inaccessibility of her artwork. In a conversation with the artist last summer, when questioned about her choice of writing the text in English, Watts mentioned that "having it in English [was] for the sake of having at least one entry point"¹ to engage with the audience. Therefore, she also explores the conflicts between connection and confrontation with the viewers. Drawing from Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson's notion of ethnographic refusal, in which Simpson "refuse[s] to practice the type of ethnography that claims to tell the whole stories and have all the answers,"² Watts delicately yet powerfully, strikes a balance between sharing [parts of] a story, her responses to it, its meanings and their artistic embodiment while concealing parts of it; confronting the viewers with the fact that "not all knowledge is meant to be shared."³ Here, Watts' confrontation is lodged in the accessibility of her installation, while refusal dwells in what its inaccessibility conceals.

¹Leah Watts, in conversation with the author, June 28, 2020.

² Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of the Settler State* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 34.

³ Leah Watts, in conversation with the author, June 28, 2020.

Giving the knowledge she feels comfortable sharing, through *A Conversation with Spider Woman (Or to Catch a Spider in Its Own Web)*, Watts meaningfully captures elements and moments of tension interwoven with strong instances of delicate balance in multilayered installation.

Bibliography

Simpson, Audra. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of the Settler State*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014.

Watts, Leah. "Full Artist Statement." Personal communication, June 23, 2020.