

EXCERPTED FROM

# BACK TALK



RUTH CUTHAND

Works 1983 – 2009

MENDEL ART GALLERY | TRIBE INC.

THE LAST WORD:  
RUTH CUTHAND IN CONVERSATION WITH WITH JEN BUDNEY

**JB: Your retrospective, *BACK TALK*, presents over twenty-five years of work. How do you feel about your career as you look back on it?**

RC: It has been a long time. There was a period not long ago when I wasn't sure I would still be making art today. When I was younger, it was something I felt compelled to do. A few years ago, I started thinking that no one was interested in my work and maybe it was an expensive hobby. But I had an idea and decided to give the career one more try. I received a grant from the Saskatchewan Arts Board to do the *Trading* series [2009], and everyone was interested.

**Where would you say you sit in the Canadian contemporary art scene?**

Where do I sit? I don't know. I think of my contemporaries, like Jane Ash Poitras, Edward Poitras, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, and others — they are all my age, but obviously their careers have received a lot more attention than mine. I think I have been overlooked, but it's because I'm not the type of person to push myself forward.

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**I also think your aesthetics and tactics have been less easy for people to understand, and they would have been even more difficult ten or twenty years ago. There's a complexity to your practice that makes even your older works more contemporary in the ways they address identity politics and colonialism. Maybe the world had to catch up to you.**

Well, it's true that I'm very interested in the work of the younger artists coming up today, because they seem to be able to just "make work." I think the generation before them, my generation, had to forge new territory, and they had to have "Indian" content. There was a lot of history that had to be told, a lot of looking back at history and rehashing history.

**And retelling history is not something you've done in any obvious way.**

No. It hasn't appealed to me.

**Why not?**

I grew up in a time when my father's history was being retold in the home, but ignored by school systems and society. Some of my work tells a very small part of a larger history. One example is *Dance Little Horsie, Dance* [Plate 15], which deals with the moment Sitting Bull was shot and the horse he was given by Buffalo Bill did its trick, which was to dance at the sound of a gunshot. My work is mostly about contemporary events because I believe the personal is political. We live in interesting times.

**"May you live in interesting times" is said to be an ancient Chinese curse, isn't it?**

No. I think the times in Indian country are interesting — there is a movement to change things. I think people are starting to look at life in a different way.

**How would you describe the political power of your art, or any art?**

I think the political power of my work is because of my target audience, which is First Nations. I can say things in a direct way, and that's the power.

**What's more important to your work, anger or humour?**

I would have to say humour, because I've learned one thing: nobody likes an angry Indian. As soon as you're an angry Indian, you're shut off. People are like, "Here they go again," and they will just ignore you. But if you use humour, you can get people to laugh, and when they laugh, they are open. And when they are open, you can go in with the truth, and they don't

even know they are absorbing it.

**Have there been times in your career where you've been more angry than humorful?**

I think when I did the white liberal series [*Misuse is Abuse*, 1990]. I had just returned to grad school at the University of Saskatchewan in 1989. The previous year I had been in a TOJ [Training on the Job] program and had a bad experience with a white liberal. Through TOJ, it is expected that you will actually end up with a job, but unfortunately many Native people who went through the program were never "good enough" to actually get employment. I know a guy who went through the program five times. Even though he was trained in communications, he was only employed through TOJ.

I was trying to work out this experience through painting, but I couldn't, so my instructors told me to draw. And as you can see by the drawings, I can't draw. [laughter] So my feelings came out quite raw, and there's lots of anger in them, although there is humour too.

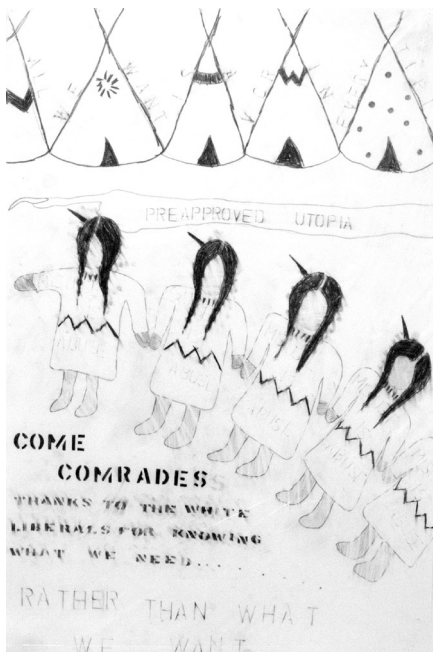


Figure 7  
*Chill November, 1990*  
graphite on paper  
106.7cm x 71.1cm  
Collection of the Artist

**Let's talk about technique for a minute. You say you can't draw, but these drawings have style. They have a distinctive style with recognizable, consistent characters. It's a crude style that complements the anger, and also amplifies it.**

I wanted the drawings to be crude because the message is caustic. I learned to draw with an eraser, which was very satisfying. At the end of it, I really liked to draw.

Originally I tacked the paper directly to the wall to add to the crudeness of the work. Sort of like a protest poster. The work has a certain vulnerability to it without the glass: there is nothing to protect it. Of course, for this exhibition they are framed. I'm really not all that relaxed about the work because it is on 100 per cent rag paper: I guess I want the work to last.

**You made that work twenty years ago. Can you talk about some of the ways that white people were embodying the white liberal women in your drawings? And do you still see it happening?**

White liberals are people who work with Native people, from helping agencies to Native organizations. They come to work with Indian people because they want to help—

**Because they "love Indians"?**

Because they "love" Indians, and they want to help by using their expertise, which sometimes ends up with them feeling superior to people. There is some inherent racism in them that they don't recognize.

So that's the phenomenon I wanted to talk about: the "I love Indians" thing. It's very hard to be an Indian and be what other people want us to be, or imagine us to be, because we're not them. And these white liberals get so disappointed.

**There are so many fictions projected upon you.**

Yep. For example, in one of those drawings [*Chill November, 1990*] [Figure 7], I drew teepees. It's a drawing about self-government. The text on the top of the drawing says: ALL WE WANT IS A VCR IN EVERY TIPI. There was a student in my MFA class who took real exception to this



Figure 8  
*Ruth Cuthand: BACK TALK*. Installation view, Mendel Art Gallery, 2011.  
On left: *Living-Post-Oka-Kind-of-Woman*, 1990.  
On right: *Misuse is Abuse*, 1990.

drawing. I think she had the idea that Indians on the reserve live without technology and don't want any technology — that they are primitives who live close to the land, very much like they did hundreds of years ago. I explained to her that most people on the reserve don't get cable so they have satellite dishes instead. She was appalled.

**I recall you said that you did not make the *Misuse is Abuse* series to educate white audiences, but to talk to other Aboriginal people about your experiences.**

Yes, but you know it was really funny, at the opening for my show of these works at the Gordon Snelgrove Gallery, there were two white liberals who fit the mold perfectly, and they both came up to me and were like, "Ha ha! You really told them." And I was like, "Ha ha! They're about you!" They didn't see themselves at all in the work.

There were other white people who saw my exhibition as hugely problematic, and accused me of attacking all white people. But the Native students supported my work. Many of them stood up and said, "This has been my experience too. This isn't some lunatic artist who's making this stuff up. This is what we face."

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**And yet Joan Borsa, who writes about your work in this catalogue, and who could be described as a white liberal woman, was a very early supporter of your work. How did this begin and how important was it to you?**

Joan Borsa has been a supporter of mine since I left my BFA program. She came to see my work in 1983, when she was writing for *Parallelogram*. Joan isn't a white liberal, she's a Ukrainian liberal! [laughter] She has in her own way been very encouraging to me about my career.

**What does the word "tradition" mean to you?**

Oh dear! [laughter]

[pause] There are some people within Indian Country who call themselves traditionalists, even though they are very contemporary people. Yet they dress a certain way, they have long hair, and if they are women they wear skirts, and they think that they are different than the rest of us. To me it seems like an effort to transform Indian spirituality into something more like church, with the church's rules and ideas of hierarchy, in which the Elder has total authority. I sort of rail against this, along with some of the rules, particularly the rule that women should wear skirts. People forget that there has been so much sexual abuse that a lot of women simply do not feel comfortable wearing a skirt.

I think we have to be a lot more open and kinder to each other than we're being now, rather than imposing rules and conformity.

**But that doesn't mean you aren't deeply attached to your family's history and tradition.**

That's correct. My father always told us stories about his grandfather, and we grew up with the history of our family. We lived in the Cypress Hills and went as far down south as Great Falls, Montana. That was our territory. And my great-grandfather was in the Battle of Cutknife Hill in 1885, and his son Josie, who was my grandfather, went to the United States and was part of the British Cree down in Montana. So I know all that exciting history.

But you know, that history is very male. So now I'm trying to understand who my grandmother was and where she came from. I know she had five sisters, and their descendents live today on the Little Pine and Poundmaker reserves. But I don't know anything about my

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grandmother's mother or her history.

**Do you have a way of finding that information? It must be difficult.**

It is, because when you go back to my great-grandfather's generation, there are no Christian names and there are no first-and-last name systems. To properly identify someone by only a Cree name, you have to figure out all their relations and find other people who are related to them... It's very intricate.

**Some of what you've been describing in our conversation has been the way that colonialism has basically fucked up Indian society, making it necessary for things like family and tradition to be rediscovered, reinvented, started anew, and recovered from. Similarly, some of what you present in your work are deeply disturbing and disruptive situations that are experienced quite regularly by Aboriginal people. So I can't help but think about mental health, the relationship between mental health and the traumas inflicted upon generations. It seems to me that a lot of the black humour in your work comes from an understanding of the urgency of that connection: how colonial society is crazy-making.**

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Yeah. One thing I'm trying to do in my work is deal with relationships, whether they are family relationships, or Indian-white relationships, or my own relationships to Mormons. These relationships are always something we push up against.

When I was doing the Mormon series (*Cardston, Alberta 1959–1967, 2005–2006*) it was really strange, because I was 46 and I started having flashbacks. They started when I went to the library and took out a book from the early 1960s in which the protagonist described dust motes she saw in a sunbeam shining through a window. For some reason this image triggered an avalanche of memories, and I started to have flashbacks. I was not expecting it. And I couldn't deal with it, so I went to counseling. My counselor was white, and she was married to a man who was non-white. She kept asking me questions about my childhood, and I recalled many things. For example, Cardston is Blackfoot country. And my father, who is Cree, was always telling us stories about the Blackfoot and how they were our mortal enemies.

**That's scary.**

And my mother was white, she was from New Brunswick, and she didn't understand racism. She didn't know why the racist comments we received from white people bothered us. She was always saying things like: "Don't think about it. Forget it." So we learned not to talk about it.

As for my father, if we talked about racism, it was like we were hurting him. He hurt so bad for us. So we wanted to spare him from that. And then, for some weird reason, as siblings we also decided not to talk about it. So it was something that as individuals we had to carry and bear by ourselves. I always thought it was very odd. But then when my daughter Thirza was a little girl, I asked her one time about racism, and she said, "I don't want to tell you because it will make you really angry." And I realized it was true! It's kind of an impotent anger because you can't do anything about it.

**Well, I'm not sure we are good at talking about racism in any way as a culture. It's like those surveys of white people where ninety per cent agree that racism is widespread in Canada but only twenty per cent admit to having any racist views themselves.**

And today the Conservatives are talking about building more prisons. Well, who's going to

be in the prisons? Indian people. Aboriginal people make up three per cent of the Canadian population but close to twenty per cent of the prison population. The Harper government is "getting tough on crime." But Indian people go to jail for dumb things.

**Cardston is not too far away from Lethbridge, and you were told once that the series could not be shown in Lethbridge because it would offend too many Mormons.**

I was told that if there is any nudity or profanity in the shows at the university, or anything too controversial, the Mormon students would complain. And nobody wants to deal with all those complaints.

**How did that make you feel?**

I was frustrated. Part of me wanted to just poke them in the eye, you know? But I also know what the comeback would be. The presidents or the heads of the Mormon church, they have these visions every once in a while. And in the 1960s, during the time of the civil rights movement, the fellow in charge had a vision in which God told him that they were to accept people of colour into their church. So the Mormons sanitized *The Book of Mormon* and took out some of the more racist terms. For example, "white and delightsome" became "spiritual and delightsome." They changed the wording to cover their asses, but what about those people in the Mormon church who are my age, who were raised with the original text: do they have those same racist attitudes, regardless? They are grandparents now. Is the racism being transmitted despite the changes to *The Book of Mormon*?

**Would you actually like to show your *Cardston, Alberta* series to the people of Cardston? If so, what would you hope to get out of that experience?**

I would like to show my work there, not to start a dialogue with the Mormon church, but to make myself feel courageous. Kind of like slaying a dragon with a stick!

**Do you feel that Cardston, Alberta was emblematic of Canadian culture as a whole? Was it just a more intensified version of the same kind of racism that exists everywhere?**

No, Cardston was the pits of hell, as my brother used to say. The Mormons had close ties with Salt Lake City, and they were an island to themselves. I never really thought of them belonging to Canada. The racism was intensified there. When we moved out of Cardston and back to Saskatchewan, no one had ever heard of Mormons. Our life there sort of evaporated, and we had no way of talking about it. Those experiences moved deep into us.

**How do you feel about Canadian culture? We're told as a nation we are too polite and apologizing all the time. Do you think that is true?**

[laughter] I think we are polite. I don't think we apologize too much, though, because look at the residential schools, how long did that take?

**Do you think we are afraid to get into some necessary discussions for fear of offending people?**

I have just been reading a book by Paul Chaat Smith called *Everything You Know About Indians is Wrong*.<sup>1</sup> He was talking about how in the USA the guy who runs the TV show *60 Minutes* was saying he doesn't do stories on Indians, not because they are controversial but because they are too complicated. To try to educate people, to get them up to speed to understand

1. Paul Chaat Smith, *Everything You Know About Indians is Wrong* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009)



the story, would take too long. You look at all the tribes and the different cultures, you can't just say "Indians." You have to narrow it down to one tribe, then you have to explain their history — he said that it is just too much work to explain. So I think that basically people are lazy, rather than afraid. For example, I think of what's going on in British Columbia, with so many different issues and different people in the interior and on the coast — it's so hard to follow the new treaty process.

**Speaking of complicated, not all of your work deals with anger or bitterness. This seems important to point out, since you have such a reputation for being provocative. But in 1998, you made a series of large portraits, hand-coloured photocopies on mylar, called *Indian Portraits: Late 20th Century*, which are very playful and colourful works with a distinct Pop sensibility. How did they come about?**

After Oka, I was feeling like everything had become too serious, and it was time for me to find joy in being a Native person in Canada. What I wanted to do was have fun and get other people involved, and I really like working with the Polaroid, which they don't make anymore, which is really sad. I found a toy headdress made with coloured chicken feathers, and I used this as a signifier of Indian. I gave it to people I knew — there are 42 works in that series, including portraits of artists, students, and my nephews and nieces, who were children then. The deal was: you put the headdress on and you can pose any way you want. It was really fun seeing how different people used the headdress. Some people used it to cover their faces, and some people turned it upside down. Some people did stereotypical, heroic kinds of poses... it was just a really fun project. I wanted to present us as people who can have fun and poke fun at ourselves, because sometimes the public sees us as only serious and angry.

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**It's interesting — I can't help thinking about other work by Aboriginal artists, such as new work by James Luna, whose last performance in Saskatoon included a photo-Karaoke session in which the audience dressed up and posed for photos with the artist, and the ongoing performance work of Saskatoon artists Adrian Stimson and Lori Blondeau (as Buffalo Boy and Belle Sauvage) who also have audiences participate by posing with them for photos... Is there something about Aboriginal identity that makes it particularly compelling or important to dress up and pose for pictures?**

Well, in southern Alberta on the highway to Waterton, when I was a child growing up, there used to be big public signs that explained history to the people in cars — these were stories carved right into the wood. And there was this guy from the Blood reserve who would dress in his headdress and gauntlets, and for two dollars, I think, you could take a photograph with him. That reminds me of James Luna's work, *Take a picture with a real Indian*. And that's how some Indians, in the '50s and '60s, made a little pin money. So I think that's where the staging and questioning of the "authentic" Indian comes from.

**A few years after your first *Indian Portraits* series you created some photographic images called *Indian Portraits: Early 21st Century* [2001].**

Yes, that one was kind of a disappointment. I had applied for and received a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts to make this series. Originally it was going to be fifteen portraits. I started talking to people about participating and trying to get them to project themselves into the future. My question to them was: Where are we going to be in a hundred years? Too often we are stuck in the past, so I thought imagining the future

was very important. I was hoping I would get some sort of sci-fi stuff out of it. But I got very frustrated with the project because about 75 per cent of the respondents talked about self-government. And you know, self-government is here already. I wanted a bigger vision. I wanted fantasizing. Would we colonize Mars? Would we drive hover-cars? But I didn't get it. I don't know if the individuals I picked weren't ready for it, or if collectively we are not ready to fantasize about the future.

**Why would that be?**

I think that society in general holds Indian people to be relics of the past. And so the only future we have is very short term. It stops at the idea of self-government, which is achievable in ten years. When you have the mentality of just trying to survive, to keep a culture alive, your sense of the future becomes restricted. You do not have the time or the space to think ahead a hundred years.

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**So much of the creative energy of Aboriginal people goes into finding ways of preserving elements of tradition and the past, so that it can be carried forward: language, stories, traditions...**

Yes. I think that as an artist, I'm in a luxurious position to be able to reflect on our society and ideas for the future. But so many of our people are unable to do this.

**The collaborative video you did with Elizabeth MacKenzie [*Word for Word*, 1995] [Plate 25] is about your connections and your disconnections to your heritage languages. It speaks about learning but also loss to some degree, longing and also failure.**

It was really interesting to make. It caused big problems in our family. My dad is an expert in the Cree language. He reads it and writes it and does Roman orthography as well as syllabics, and if anybody wants to know anything about the Cree language they go to him. And my mother is from New Brunswick. She only speaks English. When I was doing the video I was trying to ask my dad why he didn't teach us our language. And my dad is very defensive about that. It opened a wound with him and with me, and he was trying to blame my mom, saying that women are responsible for transmitting the language [laughter] — and I was like: "Here we are, we speak English — she did a good job!" [laughter] But I think when he went to university, he told us he struggled a lot because he would have to take his lectures in English, translate them to Cree in his head, translate his answer back to English, and he found it really a barrier for him in his education. So he thought if we just knew English we would be ahead of everybody. He couldn't foresee into the future, where having an Aboriginal language is actually an asset.

**Do you think your life would have been different if you had been able to speak Cree?**

I think so, especially in relating to my dad's family, because my cousins all speak Cree. When we went to the reserve they would talk in Cree, and my dad would change over to Cree, and I never knew what they were saying. It was like we were sort of pushed out of what was going on in the family. And then when everybody tells me how rich the language is.... You know, I'll ask somebody to translate something to English for me and they'll translate part of it, then inevitably they say "I can't say it in English because it won't have all the meaning." And then I get frustrated.

**How did the video collaboration come about?**

Elizabeth and I wanted to do something together for a long time. We were trying to find a point where we had something in common, and that's where we came up with the loss of language. Through the process, I realized that it would be heck of a lot easier for her to get back her French than for me to get back my Cree, because she can listen to French language radio on CBC, she can watch French language TV, and Cree speakers don't have that luxury of it being anywhere. Unless you were immersed in a community where everybody speaks it, I think it would be very hard to learn or relearn.

So we wrote about our losses, and I wrote a fantasy of simply waking up one morning and being able to speak Cree. I had my father translate my text into Cree, and then we went to a recording studio to read, and I couldn't read it. It was like nothing I knew, it was so strange, and I had a really, really hard time, so finally we ended up getting Leona Tootosis, who speaks Cree, to read the text aloud and I would follow her, sort of mimicking her. She was really nice. She said, "I know you don't speak Cree and I'm not going to make fun of you. Just try your best," and it worked out really well. Although Cree speakers, when they hear me on the video, they laugh, and that's the point.

When it came time to figuring out how to put the two pieces together, mine and Elizabeth's, I suggested that we simply intercut it. The piece after the credits, with the little sock puppets. I really like that. We got language tapes in French and Cree — and the Cree woman has such an awful voice! We edited the Cree tapes and performed them with little sock puppets. And I made sure we kept it in at the end of the video, because I really like it.

**You are from a family that is known for being outspoken. In her essay, Joan Borsa used the term "contraries."**

Yeah. My dad is bad and he passed it onto us. [laughter] He likes to say things just to poke people and get a reaction. My brother Doug and I were recently remembering how, when we were little my dad used to go into the store with change in his pocket, and he would start playing with the change to make it jingle so the store owners couldn't tell him to get out because he didn't have any money, since they could hear the money in his pocket. So he'd walk around the store real slow, jingling the change in his pocket, and then he'd just walk out without buying anything. I guess it was his way of claiming space. Doing it in a really subtle way.

**Also getting under someone's skin. That's sort of what your work does.**

Poking at people, yes. I come by it honestly!

**People always comment on the "anti-aesthetic" in your work. But your latest work, the *Trading* series and other beadworks are —**

It's beautiful, right?

**Yeah.**

When I started it, I wanted it to look beautiful, to be visually dazzling and suck you right in, until you realize they are pictures of viruses and bacteria. Then suddenly it is abhorrent. It's beautiful and abhorrent, so it puts you off guard. I like using opposites to get people to think.

**The beadwork is dazzling.**

I've worked with beads personally for a long time and I was trying to figure out some way

to make contemporary art with them — because some person somewhere told me that beading could never be a fine art, it could only be a craft. And when somebody tells me that something is impossible, or that I can't do it, I have to think really, really hard to try to do it. So I was trying to think of how to turn a craft that Indians make into a fine art. I was looking for a way to incorporate beads into a fine art that would mean something to me.

I was buying beads off the Internet. I have thousands of beads. So I had these beads, and they are beautiful colours, and I was trying to think of what to do with them. And I was thinking about Indian women of the past and the first time they would have seen beads, and how beautiful they must have been, with their shine and incredible colours. And then my synapses fired and I thought: diseases! I remembered when Robert Houle was working on a billboard here (in Saskatoon) about the smallpox virus in 1999.<sup>2</sup> The billboard was going to

2. The billboard was presented as part of Houle's solo exhibition, *Palisade*, co-produced by TRIBE Inc. and AKA Gallery, Saskatoon, 2009.

have a smallpox virus on it, and I remember hearing about it before it was made, but afterwards, when it was up, there was just this little black and white virus, and I was disappointed.

I went on the Internet and started looking up articles about the diseases that came to North America, and I started looking at the images of virus and bacteria. And wonderful people out there have coloured them, so you can more clearly see the nuclei on them and that kind of stuff, and they are just gorgeous! So I thought: that's it. That's what I'm gonna bead. There is such a variety of beads and trying to figure out the colours and how I'm going to use them has been really great — almost like painting.

**It strikes me that with the inclusion of syphilis as one of the diseases that the *Trading* series becomes quite humorous, in a very dark kind of way. The title infers a back-and-forth, but there is such an unequal exchange of diseases upon contact. And this parallels the balance of other kinds of trade between settlers and First Nations.**

Yes. But this has also been a bit controversial. You know, the latest scientific theory is that syphilis came from Central America. There's a theory that it started out as Yaws, which is a bacterial skin disorder. This theory postulates that when the Europeans came, Yaws couldn't transfer to them very easily because they were wearing clothes. But disease is really sneaky, it can mutate, so that's what it did — it mutated into a venereal disease and transferred to the Spanish sailors, and when they went back to Europe this new disease was discovered. At the time it was called the Spanish Sailors disease, and it was recognized in 1496, which is four years after the discovery of Central America. I wanted to recognize it as a disease that was indigenous, so I used materials that predated the arrival of Europeans, specifically quillwork — porcupine quills. And there are some Indians that are really offended by this work because they want to believe that before the arrival of Europeans we lived in Eden and had a perfect life with no disease, and everything was good, and we only had good things to offer to the world, and we would never transmit venereal disease and — [laughter] I mean, come on! Everybody at some point in his life has an STI! [laughter] Geez!

**And now you are doing works that are not in your retrospective show because they will be on view elsewhere at the same time, at Truck in Calgary.**

I've been doing them as artist-in-residence at AIDS Saskatoon. I've been doing diseases

that have afflicted people since early contact.

Also, a couple of years ago, Wally Dion said to me, "What are you going to do now? You know what, you know what would be really neat?" And I said, "What?" And he said, "If you did the viruses in 3D!" And I was like, "Are you crazy, Wally? That's impossible!"

So I've started doing them in 3D. [laughter] I am actually trying right now to bead a ball, to build a 3D HIV.

**What does the HIV look like?**

It's a ball, or at least it's round, and it has stalks all over it. I spent most of November and December trying to figure out how to do the little stalks, and now I've got it. I'm excited about these works and excited about seeing the *Trading* series altogether for the first time.

It's the first time I've made really "beautiful" works. I like it!

Saskatoon, March 2011

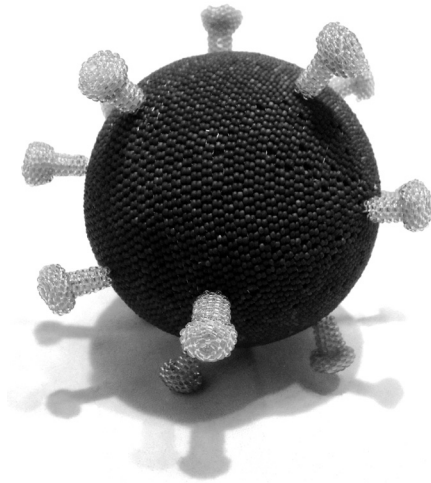


Figure 9  
*HIV*, 2011  
beads, thread and styrofoam ball  
c. 39.4 cm × 39.4 cm × 39.4 cm  
Collection of the Artist