

# Brownstein: Indigenous mother and daughter team up for ambitious exhibition

*In recounting a powerful family story, the multidisciplinary exhibition also conveys a compelling intergenerational view of the Indigenous experience in this country.*

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Lara Kramer, left, and her mother, Ida Baptiste, have teamed up for a multidisciplinary exhibition, called Ji zoongde'eyaang (To Have a Strong Heart), at the MAI art centre. They're seen on Thursday, Oct. 20, 2022. PHOTO BY PIERRE OBENDRAUF /Montreal Gazette

## Article content

The beginnings of the project first appeared a year ago with two brilliantly coloured billboards that popped up on Café Cherrier and Marché Bonsecours, featuring striking images of

Indigenous artist/performer/choreographer Lara Kramer cloaked in a symbolic Trade Blanket. The blankets were jointly designed and created by Kramer and her famed artist mother, Ida Baptiste.

But what began with this public two-billboard display, called *In Blankets, Herds and Ghosts*, has now mushroomed into a continuation of this mother/daughter collaboration, an ambitious, multidisciplinary exhibition called *Ji zoongde'eyaang (To Have a Strong Heart)*, which starts Saturday and runs until Nov. 19 at MAI (Montréal, arts interculturels).

It would probably be easier to note which artistic elements aren't featured in this event. The mother/daughter team brings new meaning to multidisciplinary. Included are everything from nine generational blankets to films to photos to podcasts to four short stories by Kramer to Baptiste's paintings from the 1990s depicting her memories from attending the Brandon Indian Residential School.

In recounting a powerful family story, the exhibition also conveys a compelling intergenerational view of the Indigenous experience in this country.



Lara Kramer, left, and her mother, Ida Baptiste, with some of their work in their multidisciplinary exhibition *Ji zoongde'eyaang (To Have a Strong Heart)* at the MAI art centre on Thursday, Oct. 20, 2022. PHOTO BY PIERRE OBENDRAUF /Montreal Gazette

“When the billboards came up in the midst of the pandemic, I approached my mom to collaborate with me on creating more,” says Kramer in a conference call with Baptiste. “We were so inspired by working on those blankets together. Then we realized we could do a lot of storytelling and healing with each blanket. We felt it was a time to work generationally, not only between her and I, but with my children as well.”

Kramer, among the first generation of her family not to attend a residential school, is of mixed Oji-Cree and settler heritage, raised in London, Ont. and now living and working in Montreal. Baptiste is an Anishinaabe Oji-Cree artist and an Ojibwa language teacher based in Rama, Ont.

Part of the collaboration between the two entailed Kramer beginning her “language journey” with her mother more than a year ago.

“It was a way for her to teach me our language,” Kramer says. “I was always so deeply inspired by my mother as a child. She had such a strong visual artistic presence.

“While we were at her home working on the blankets, I was snooping around and saw some of her old paintings from 30 years ago. They had never been shown. I told her they were stunning works, reflecting her experiences in residential school, and should be in the exhibit as well.”

And now they are.



Lara Kramer, left, and her mother, Ida Baptiste, with some of their work in their

multidisciplinary exhibition Ji zoongde'eyaang (To Have a Strong Heart) at the MAI art centre on Thursday, Oct. 20, 2022. PHOTO BY PIERRE OBENDRAUF /Montreal Gazette

But the blankets were key to Baptiste.

“The blankets tell a story about our history, the hardships and yet the resilience of our people,” says Baptiste, who gave up painting for a period during the ‘90s to focus on her language-teaching.

Baptiste concedes that she didn't share a lot of her residential school experiences with Kramer.

“I let it be known that's where I came from, but I pushed it down quite a bit,” Baptiste says. “There were things I just didn't want to say about that part of my life. I was in that school for seven years, from the time I was 4. And when I left there, I was pretty much just a puppet. I didn't know how to share emotions. I didn't know how to interact in conversations with others.

“We all had to re-learn these social communication skills when later surrounded by family. It wasn't easy for me, especially because I was among the few who had to stay at the school all year round. So there was also this feeling of abandonment. But I feel good now that we are able to put together our story in this project. It's also educational for all people.”

Even though her mother may not have talked much about her early years, Kramer indicates she was much aware.



Ida Baptiste with some of the works in multidisciplinary exhibition Ji zoongde'eyaang (To Have a Strong Heart) at the MAI art centre on Thursday, Oct. 20, 2022. PHOTO BY PIERRE OBENDRAUF /Montreal Gazette

“As a child growing up, I knew my mom had been afraid, that she wasn't raised by her family, that her family ties had been severed,” Kramer says. “I started my own journey in understanding her life further just prior to the mandated apology by the Stephen Harper government. I

remember telling my mother that the first school she went to was still up and part of it was turned into a museum in Portage La Prairie. I wanted to go see it. It's one thing for my mother to share parts of her story, but in reality the lived experience is felt every day. It became important to understand her life and wounds to better understand her, and myself as a child of a survivor.

“There was a point in my mom's journey, when I was around 12 and she wasn't able to parent me anymore. That's such a big part of the effect and experience of the residential schools. I did have pieces of the story from my mom, but I wanted to further understand them to confirm them with a care for the trauma, which has been a lifelong journey for my mother.

“This exhibit is really meant as an honour story to my mother's legacy,” Kramer adds. “The whole process has been like transforming scar tissue into something beautiful and strong, to show the strength of the heart.”

*Ida Baptiste and Lara Kramer's multidisciplinary exhibition, **Ji zoongde'eyaang (To Have a Strong Heart)**, opens Saturday and runs Tuesdays to Saturdays from noon to 6 p.m. until Nov. 19 at MAI (Montréal, arts interculturels), 3680 Jeanne-Mance St. Admission is free.*

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