



# **Wathahine - Photographs of Aboriginal Women by Nance Ackerman**



**The complete texts of the exhibition  
presented at the McCord Museum  
from Mars 10, 2010 to May 15, 2011.**

## Introduction

Nance Ackerman made a journey that took her across Canada from Labrador to Vancouver, from the Arctic to Kanehsatà:ke. It was a journey that put her between two identities – her life in the non – Aboriginal world and her First Nations heritage.

Nance photographed women of strength and determination – Elders, artists, teachers and activists who fought to improve their own lives and those of their families and communities. She also produced an exploratory film that examines fundamental principles of Aboriginal spirituality: dreams, womanhood, sacred thoughts and wisdom. Through imagery, the exhibition explores the contemporary realities of Aboriginal people.

### **Rose Gregoire (1948-2007) with her sister**

Tshaukuish (elizabeTh) Penashue  
Innu social workers  
Sheshatshiu, Labrador  
1991

Rose Gregoire and her sister Tshaukuish Penashue were leaders in the fight against military's practice of carrying out low-level test flights with jet bombers over traditional Innu hunting territory in Labrador. Tshaukuish has since organized a woman's shelter in Sheshatshiu and continues to fight for the rights and protection of the environment.

### **Unuishtam (Theresa) Rich (d. 1997)**

Innu traditionalist  
Sheshatshiu, Labrador  
1993

Unuishtam Rich started a programme to teach the teenagers of Sheshatshiu how to hunt, cook and sew out on the land.

### **Rita Joe (1932-2007)**

Mi'kmaq poet  
Eskasoni, Nova Scotia  
1991

Often referred to as the "poet laureate" of the Mi'kmaq nation, Rita Joe's poetry was inspired by everyday life on the Eskasoni reserve on Cape Breton Island, from the domestic to the spiritual, capturing both the anguish and elation of life.

### **Rose Morris**

Mi'kmaq healer, social worker and respected Elder  
Gold River, Nova Scotia  
1991

Rose Morris decided that to become a true healer she needed to return to school. She studied for a degree in social work and since then helps her community deal with the problems of modern life.

**Alanis Obomsawin**

Abenaki filmmaker  
Odanak, Quebec  
1993

Alanis Obomsawin is one of Canada's most distinguished documentary filmmakers. She began her career as a singer, writer and storyteller, but dove into filmmaking in 1967. Since then, Obomsawin has made over 30 uncompromising documentaries on issues affecting Aboriginal people in Canada including her award-winning 2006 feature documentary *Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*. In 2008, Obomsawin received the Governor General's Performing Arts Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement.

**Wathahine (Mary) Nicholas**

Mohawk language educator  
Kanehsatà:ke, Quebec  
1994

Following the Oka Crisis of 1990, an armed standoff involving Mohawk warriors, the Quebec police and the Canadian army, Wathahine (On a Long Journey) decided to start a Mohawk language immersion school in Kanehsatà:ke: the Rotiwennakehte School. Today, she is principal of the Ratihen:te High School, and continues to help bring the youth of her community back to their language and their culture.

**Kanahstatsi (Nancy) Howard**

Mohawk educator  
Kanehsatà:ke, Quebec  
1995

As a child, Kanahstatsi (New Rafters) picked blueberries among the pines of Kanehsatà:ke. She was the first Mohawk principal of the Kanehsatà:ke Federal School, now called the Aronhiakha school. She has worked for many years in Mohawk language immersion and curriculum development.

**Annie (Coon-Come) Brien**

Cree traditionalist  
Mistissini, Quebec  
1994

When this photograph was taken Annie Brien would spend six months of the year living out on the land in northern Quebec, continuing the ancient hunting traditions of her people.

**Mina Tuckatuck Weetaltuk (1919-2005)**

Inuit Elder and activist  
Kuujjuarapik, Nunavik, Quebec  
1992

Mina Tuckatuck Weetaltuk was the oldest activist on board the “Odeyak”, a special boat (half-kayak, halfcanoe) that was paddled from Great Whale River to New York City in 1990 to protest hydroelectric development projects in northern Quebec.

**Elizabeth Dick (with her mother Anne Masty)**

Cree environmental activist and Elder  
Whapmagoostui, Quebec  
1992

Elizabeth Dick has fought all her adult life for her community’s right to live and hunt on Cree land – a right threatened by hydroelectric development projects. A respected Elder and cultural coordinator, she focuses today on bringing together youth and elders to share culture and traditions.

**Leah Nuteruk (1886-1993)**

Inuit Elder  
Iqaluit, Nunavut  
1991

Leah Nuteruk lived out on the land virtually all her life. She remembered the arrival of the first Qallunaat (non-Inuit) in the Canadian North.

**Monica Ittusardjuat**

Inuit educator  
Ottawa, Ontario  
1991

A survivor of domestic violence, Monica Ittusardjuat returned to school and earned a masters degree in education. Today, she is the community wellness coordinator with the cultural development department at Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated.

**Rachel Uyurasuk (1914-2009)**

Inuit Elder  
Iglulik, Nunavut  
1991

Rachel Uyurasuk was born in a traditional sod house out on the tundra near Baffin Island. She returned to the land each spring to hunt and fish with her family. A former midwife, poet and singer, she was a respected Elder throughout Nunavut. In the summer of 1999, at the age of 85, she played a major role in the film *Ningiura*.

**Therese Idjaggiaq (1923-2008)**

Inuit healer and midwife  
Iglulik, Nunavut  
1991

Therese Idjaggiaq was known as the “Nurse of the Inuit”. It is said that with a touch of her tongue she could heal all wounds. Between 1997 et 1998 she shared her knowledge of traditional Inuit health practices in a project organized by the Nunavut Arctic College: *Interviewing Inuit Elders. Perspectives on Traditional Health.*

**Susan Avingaq**

Inuit traditional seamstress and writer  
Iglulik, Nunavut  
1991

A renowned seamstress and artist, Susan Avingaq teaches sewing traditions to younger Inuit women. Writer and actor, she co-wrote the screenplay and was Art Director for the film *Before Tomorrow.*

**Josie Monette Hill**

Cree community activist  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
1991

Josie Monette Hill grew up in inner city Winnipeg. She has devoted her life to helping urban Aboriginal people in transition homes and family aid centres. Since 1997, she serves as Executive Director of the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre providing culturally relevant preventive and supportive programs and services for Aboriginal families.

**Verna Kirkness (Pinase – Little Bird)**

Cree educator  
Fisher River, Manitoba  
1991

For more than four decades, Verna Kirkness has been a major spokesperson for Aboriginal education and her work has been recognized in numerous honours and awards. Now retired, she was Director of the First Nations House of Learning at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

**Katsi Cooke**

Mokawk midwife and environmental health activist  
Akwesasne, New York  
1999

Katsi Cooke has conducted community-driven environmental, justice, health research, focusing on Akwesasne Reservation. She founded the Women is the First Environment,

Collaborative, which brings together Native American women's leadership in reproductive and environmental health issues.

**Rosie Okkumaluk (d.1999)**

Inuit Elder and hunter  
Iglulik, Nunavut  
1991

Rosie Okkumaluk was known best for having killed seven polar bears and was famous in the Arctic for her vivid memories of her childhood.

**Eva Mckay (The Good Food of the Buffalo Cow)**

(1920-2005)  
Sioux Elder and social activist  
Sioux Valley, Manitoba  
1991

The mother of thirteen children, Eva McKay was on the Manitoba Native Women's Council of Elders and co-founded the Brandon Friendship Centre. She was actively involved with the Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women and was on the Self Government Advisory Committee for Sioux Valley.

**Jane Gottfriedson (d. 2002)**

Okanagan-Similkameen Band political activist  
Keremeos, British Columbia  
1991

A long time activist and member of the Native Women's Association of Canada, Jane Gottfriedson fought fearlessly for the dignity and rights of all Aboriginal women. She believed that her work was part of a larger healing process that would improve the lives of her people's children.

**Terry John**

St'atl'imx social activist  
Lilloet, British Columbia  
1991

After a small child was killed by a speeding logging truck, Terry John, with other parents, took on the fight to stop logging on their traditional land. She is one of the leaders in her community's struggle for the recognition of Aboriginal rights.

**Elizabeth Chocolate Mackenzie (1917- 2008)**

Dene Elder and traditionalist  
Rae, Northwest Territories  
1991

Elizabeth Chocolate Mackenzie spent most of her life on the land, traveling, trapping and hunting with her husband. When her seven children began school she settled in Rae and took on the fight for the education of young children in a Dene cultural environment. She was one of the founding members of the Dogrib Divisional Board of Education in 1989 and was awarded the Governor General's Award for a life of dedication to her community in 1997.

## Words from the artist

My grandmother was born over a hundred years ago on the Akwesasne Mohawk reserve in upstate New York. She left as a young woman and moved to Syracuse. My father was one of sixteen children. He left home when he was nine, and memories of his Mohawk heritage were limited to a faded photograph of his grandparents in full traditional dress that sat on a windowsill in a cramped apartment in upstate New York.

After being adopted by the headmaster of a private boy's school, going to Princeton and enlisting in the army, my father recalled the photograph like a memory from someone else's life. He once told me that it reminded him of Halloween.

Maybe things like this skip generations. Maybe he was never meant to explore his Native heritage, but apparently I was. Thousands of miles and hundreds of rolls of film later, I would like to think I have gained some wisdom through the journey, forging a new connection with my ancestry. Mostly, I am left in awe of the resiliency and strength. It was the thread that held these very different women together. This exhibition is a tribute to that strength.

## Citations

*If women were running things here, it would be different. Clan mothers know better than anyone whose children make the best leaders, followers and workers.*

**Kanahstatsi (Nancy) Howard**

*The land is our mother, and the water is our father. He keeps his family alive. He feeds his wife, the earth.*

**Mina Tuckatuck Weetaltuk**

*I look at myself as though I'm in a doorway... between the way I grew up and the modern world.*

**Susan Avingaq**

*I chose my own mother. When I was in the womb, I could hear the dog teams outside. I wanted to go and see them, and soon I found that the womb was getting too small for me. On the right side of the entrance to my mother's womb lay a harpoon and a hunting knife. On the left side, lay cooking utensils – a lamp, a cooking pot and a ulu knife. As I was being pushed out to be born, I grabbed hold of the woman's tools.*

**Rosie Okkumaluk**

*They tried — the missionaries and teachers — to make us something that we were not. They wanted us to be like them and it failed. And when it failed it also broke up our way of life. I hated anyone that was white. I fought my battles. I was fighting the world for what they had done to me and others.*

*Then, I found peace with myself. I went back to my traditional ways of a woman. ...It's always the women that are always in front. We are the mothers of these men that make decisions — these chiefs and politicians. Women... we are the mothers of every living being.*

**Eva Mckay (The Good Food of the Buffalo Cow)**

## **Katsi Cook**

For Katsi Cook, the Mohawk songs, plants and medicines all serve as inspiration for her life as a midwife and healer. This film explores her deep connection to both the dreamworld and her beloved Mother Earth.

### **The dream**

*"I was dreaming. And in the dream was this beautiful Corn field. The sky was full of stars. And I walked through there in the dark, towards these stars that began to twirl in the sky. And it took the shape of a turtle. The turtle itself began to spin around and spun off into a long line of single stars and as they came towards me, I began to notice that it was just an endless line of Iroquois women. Pregnant women and women with babies in cradleboards. And I wanted to go back in that dream because I felt so indescribably joyful."*

### **Corn**

*"When Sky Woman fell, she grasped at the base of that Sacred Tree. And when she did that, what was under her fingernails was this Onasteh, the Corn. We learn a lot from the corn about human reproduction. The silks is like a fallopian tube. And the corn, when it gets ripe in the Fall, often there is a smut or a fungus that grows and that powder is what we used to use to bring on contractions, stronger labour.*

*"Within Corn, can be found knowledge and instructions on how to be a women, a mother, a grandmother and a midwife."*

Credits of the exhibition *Wathahine - Photographs of Aboriginal Women by Nance Ackerman*

An exhibition produced by the McCord Museum under the direction of Nicole Vallières, Ph. D., Director, Collections, Research and Programmes.

**McCord Museum's Exhibition Production Team**

Geneviève Lafrance, Head of Exhibitions  
Guislaine Lemay, Curator, Material Culture  
John Gouws, Exhibitions Technician  
Denis Plourde, Conservation Technician  
Marilyn Aitken, Photographer

**External Exhibition Production Team**

Nance Ackerman, Photographer and filmmaker  
Hélène Joly, Translator  
Line Villeneuve, Designer

**Film by Nance Ackerman**

Music written, performed and mixed by Jamie Alcorn and Nance Ackerman at Heartstring Productions, Halifax, NS.

Mohawk traditional song performed by Katsi Cook and, Augie Green, Dari Gibson, Jean Square.

Katsi Cook sings a traditional Mohawk song that speaks of Mohawk ways and the good medicines that come from Mother Earth.

Video Post Production by Ron Illingworth

Produced with the support of the McCord Museum and the Ronathahon:ni Cultural Centre, Ahkwesahsne, Ontario

This photography project was made possible through funding from the Canada Council Explorations Programme and the Secretary of State, Multiculturalism. The following institutions and individuals also provided assistance: Pauktutit (Inuit Women's Association), Jessica Hill of the Kanien'kehaka Onkwawén:na Raotitiohka Cultural Centre, and the Native Women's Association of Canada.