

SUGGESTED GRADE LEVELS: Grade 7 – Grade 12
CURRICULUM LINKS: Visual Arts, Science, Geography, Social Studies

RUTH CUTHAND DON'T BREATH, DON'T DRINK

2016

“I don’t like the word activist attached to my work. An activist is someone who dedicates their life to a cause and puts all their energy into it. I hop around from project to project. The art gallery is seen as a place for a rarefied audience and I still persist in making art. I wish everyone would feel comfortable enough to visit art galleries.”

—Ruth Cuthand



Ruth Cuthand, *Don't Breath, Don't Drink*, 2016. 112 vessels with glass beads and resin, hand-beaded blue tarpaulin tablecloth. Installed dimensions variable. Purchase, with funds from Karen Schreiber and Marnie Schreiber through The American Friends of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Inc., 2017. © Ruth Cuthand.

GUIDED OBSERVATION

- What is happening in this work? What are the various components of this installation?
- Read the title of this installation. What do you think the subject of the work is?
- What puzzles you when looking at this work?



CONTEXT

Cuthand made *Don't Breathe, Don't Drink* in 2016. Her delicate beadwork, suspended in “water” (resin) in various drinking glasses, is eye-catching as gallery lights bounce off the surface, making the entire installation dazzle. Looked upon closely, one will see that the beadwork looks like insects (they are actually magnified pathogens). It is a reference to the deadly diseases that affect water supply for reserves across Canada. The bluntness of the title nods to the basic requirements of life that the Canadian government denies for many Indigenous Peoples living on reserves.

In Cuthand's own words,

“After Chief Theresa Spence alerted the Red Cross to the housing crisis on her reserve Attawapiskat, I started to think of conditions on reserves. As I watched the coverage on CBC, I was struck by the residents trying to build houses out of plastic tarps. This became the inspiration for the tablecloth. I wanted to make an embellished tablecloth out of the cheapest plastic tarp I could find. I beaded microscopic views of black mold in a decorative manner around the tablecloth.

I was also struck by the fact that there was unsafe drinking water on 94 reserves. They are forced to buy bottled water, have it shipped to the respective reserves and use it for everything from drinking to washing faces and bodies. If the reserves had to boil water for domestic use, then the house would be full of moisture and this added to the growth of black mold. In Canadian cities, we are taught that it is an immediate health crisis that needs to be dealt with. On reserve, the lack of decent, safe housing has forced more than one family to live in a house at a time. There is no place to go if black mold moves in.”

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau campaigned on a promise to end all long-term drinking advisories (longer than 12 months) by March 2021. By May 2019, 85 long-term advisories have been lifted, but 57 remain with new ones added every day because the problems are so severe and have not been properly funded for decades. Many experts have wondered if the funding earmarked by the Trudeau government will be enough to solve the problem. In 2017, an independent report stated that the government is spending only 50–70% of what it would actually cost to eliminate on-reserve advisories.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY:

Ruth Cuthand (born 1954) is an artist of Plains Cree, Scottish and Irish ancestry. When she was eight years old, she met painter Gerald Tailfeathers (1925–1975), who inspired her to become an artist. Cuthand is a member of Little Pine First Nation and lives and works in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. In addition to her art practice, she teaches studio and art history courses at universities in Saskatchewan.

Cuthand is a mixed-media artist but her most recent works have a focus on beads.

In her own words, “...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.”

Her first major beadwork series was *Trading* (2009), which featured magnified European viruses, such as smallpox and measles, made of beads. It is a sharp, darkly humorous juxtaposition of two settler imports that each had significant impacts on Indigenous Peoples.



EXTENDED EXPLORATION

- How do Cuthand's choice of materials add to the mood or themes behind this work?
- Has your initial reaction to this artwork changed? If so, how?
- How does the use of beads change or challenge the artwork?
- How many First Nations are under boil water advisories? How many First Nations do not have access to clean drinking water? How many are near your home? Cuthand's work draws our attention to these urgent questions, which many First Nations communities must face every day.

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