

Two-Spirits; Why Representation Matters

Dreamscapes

Kamisha Alexson

Tansi!

My name is Sisikwan Iskwew, and I am a Two-spirit Nehiyaw from Kahkewistahaw First Nation. I grew up here on Treaty 6 territory, but travelled throughout Turtle Island to find a sense of belonging within community. While studying Indigenous arts in Tkaronto I found that kinship, and I began creating these type of “Dreamcatchers” as art installations in 2017 to promote sustainability. I use the word ‘Dream Catcher’ quite loosely, as they are not made by the Anishnaabe (Ojibway) where they originate from. They are combined with medicines and poetry to express my connections as an Indigenous femme with the spirits and medicines that flow between the realms.

I began by foraging natural materials made from Red Willow, a traditional Indigenous medicine, for the hoops as well as drift wood from the South Saskatchewan River that brings the connection between the materials back to Nipi (water). The rest of the materials used in the installation were gathered by donation, thrifted or found objects.

I created over sixty pieces for the 2SLGBTQPIA+ communities to enjoy by using the many colors of the rainbow to include everyone in the pride acronym. Originally an installment created to take up physical space for OUTSaskatoon Winter Festival, I wanted to continue to showcase them in places of significance for Pride as well as Indigenous peoples’ month.

I chose Wanuskewin to hold my pieces during this sacred time for the histories held on these lands from the Indigenous perspective as well as the connections between Indigenous and settler.

I want to express the fluidity of two-spirits as the colorful dreamcatchers flow with the grandmother wind. It is important to me to display these in a circle to imitate life’s cycles, hence why I choose to use the tipis as the base of my installments.

What does Two-Spirit mean?

Two-spirit people have existed since time immemorial.

In many of our cultures, before contact, “Two Spirit” referred to the ancient teachings. Our Elders tell us of people who were gifted among all beings because they carried two spirits: that of male and female. It is told that women engaged in tribal warfare and married other women as there were men who married other men. These individuals were looked upon as a third gender in many cases and in almost all cultures they were honoured and revered.

Today to be Two Spirited is meant to be an umbrella term that acknowledges the historic acceptance of gender and sexual diversity prior to colonization; however, as an umbrella term, specific teachings, roles, meanings, and language must come from the community. It is being reclaimed as Sacred; it also encompasses individuals who identify within the LGBTQPIA communities. Gender and sexuality are two very different things combined in many different ways, and we don’t have to understand that but we must respect it.

Two Spirit Roles and Histories

The identity itself was introduced by the Elder Myra Laramie through a vision she had prior to the 1990 gathering in Winnipeg. Within this vision, Myra shared the vision she had of her Anishinaabemowin name of niizh manidoowag; which roughly translates to having the ability to be neutral through the lens of having both a feminine spirit and masculine spirit within one's body.

Two-Spirit people were often the visionaries, the healers, medicine people, story tellers, peace keepers, as well as community protectors and “adoptive parents”. They were respected as fundamental components of our ancient culture and societies. This is our guiding force as well as our source of strength. This is the ancient heart of Two-Spirit People.

“They are known as those who walk between worlds, those who are able to stand in the middle, creating harmony. They are called the ‘Gifted Ones’, blessed with two spirits, who are able to provide balance and facilitate healing in individuals, and nations.”-Eaglefeather news

Why Representation Matters

Unfortunately, due to many of the colonizing forces and experience that Native People have gone through, the roles of Two-Spirit people have been lost in our consciousness and many Native People have adopted homophobic attitudes that are present in today’s society. With the coming of the Seventh Generation, Two-Spirit people are slowly relearning their traditional roles in Native Communities.

Ongoing education for all the Native communities, along with the Two-Spirit youth, is very important to our future. We believe that only when Two-Spirit People are brought back to their respected places as teachers, artists and healers will all Native People of Turtle Island, and by extension, the world, begin massive healing of spirit. We begin by greeting one another.