
ZOE IMANI SHARPE is a poet, essayist and workshop-maker. Her current writing explores intersections of architectural aesthetics, linguistics, grief, labour and contemporary experimental poetics. Her recent or forthcoming work can be found in *CV2*, *GUEST*, *Room*, *The Writers' Trust of Canada* and *Best Canadian Poetry 2021*. She is author of the chapbook *Sullied* (Trapshot Archives, 2011), and co-hosts collaborative working-groups with a focus on poetic form and embodied reading. She lives and works in Tkarón:to/Toronto.

CEDAR EVE is a visual artist currently based in Montreal. She is Anishinabae (Ojibway), from Saugeen First Nation and Wikwemikong Unceded Territory, but born and raised in Toronto. She graduated from Concordia University in 2012 from Studio Arts, where her focus was primarily on painting.

She is a full-time bead artist. Her company Cedar Eve Creations focuses on beaded jewellery and limited edition screen printed clothing. During the school year, she works with Cree youth in James Bay (Northern Quebec) teaching art.

Through her paintings she explores her world-view and identity while also being inspired by the idea of shapeshifters—creatures on the border between human and animal are painted in bright, bold colours. Communication, and symbiotic energies are prevalent within her work. She has come to view these creatures as her spirit beings or guides. They are inspired by the stories she has heard growing up, her dreamworld and her need to remember her ancestors.

Her work is meant to question the viewer about what they know about First Nations culture. The language of art allows for communication by non-verbal means and is integral to keeping First Nations cultures alive.

10 NOTES ON SPIRIT BERRIES

BY ZOE IMANI SHARPE

1. In an interview with Yedda Morrison, poet Myung Mi Kim explains her thinking on poetic process: “[there is] always some kind of invisible, constant, millisecond-by-millisecond negotiation between the form and its divestment, between the [artwork] and the world, that you’re engaging every time you decide to [make] anything.” The register in which Tiohtià:ke-based muralist, photographer, educator and beadwork artist Cedar Eve approaches micro and macro communication—between maker and material, landscape and its perceiver—has something of the poetic or poetical in it. In *Spirit Berries* (2021), Cedar uses the gestural dynamism of mural painting—itself a matter of scale—to envelope us in rippling visual syntax.
2. Cedar and I speak over the phone. She is in Tiohtià:ke, while I’m parked on the couch in my apartment in Tkarón:to, our shared hometown. We’ve known each other for over 15 years, during which I’ve followed the many strings of her practice. I know her to be attentive and persistent in her handling of materials-in-process, whether photographing herself every day for over seven years (*Cedrus Annum*, 2012–2019) or composing complex beadwork design. To watch her develop film in the darkroom is a lesson in *working with* material, millisecond-by-millisecond, rather than imposing one’s will on a substance with its own flow. Her devotion to the accumulations, erosions and absolute dailiness of process synchronizes a multiplicity of compositional time.
3. *Spirit Berries* shows a series of shapeshifters (spirits who border human and animal) as they float or swim along the blue expanse of the gallery wall, shrinking the viewer by comparison. Each is encased within a protective membrane—a rope of yellow paint—while their motioning faces and bodies carry a range of emotional expression.
4. Linework is Cedar’s syntax. It is through her line—loosely weighty and intricately detailed—that circular and triangulated connections between spirits, perceivers and landscapes are made, broken, redefined and rearranged. She references the communicative repetitions of street art and honours the narrative vitality carried by Ojibwe visual lineages. In her mural, spirits pass through the space (or we pass through them) in a rhythm of contour that has nothing to do with linear, A-to-B temporalities. Instead, her lines pose the possibility of durational thresholds; gateways between encounters that face one another in space and time.
5. *Spirit Berries* references Manitoulin, the island of her paternal family, where Cedar remembers berry-picking with her aunt, cousins and late brother, Zach. The largest freshwater island in the world, Manitoulin is also known as Gichi Manidoo or Manidoo-Minising: Island of Spirits. The mural’s blueberry design is pulled from a painting her father made years ago, which her brother Zach later referenced in a childhood painting of his own. The design is resonance between antecedents, several generations of artists re-telling the other’s work through a syntactic repetition that collects sequential morphemes.
6. Cedar explains to me how she came to add strawberries to the piece: “As someone who works more intuitively—I never create sketches beforehand unless it’s absolutely necessary—I like the sentiment of ode’min, or *heartberries*. During this time of extreme grief [after Zach’s passing]... *Spirit Berries* was very healing to create. I didn’t fully realize the significance of the berries I painted and what they mean to me and my family, until [you and I] spoke.”
7. Our conversation ripples: we talk about sturgeon, waterways, the work of *Unceded Voices: Anticolonial Street Artists Converge* and the durability of house-paint. Cedar mentions a story about Nxaxaitkw (Ogopogo) and The Loch Ness Monster as the same creature, one who shapeshifts while swimming the geographic marathon from the Okanagan to Loch Ness. “It reminds me of the possibility of being in two places at the same time,” Cedar says, “in different realms of existence.”
8. Public mural painting is a strenuous, energetic, whole-body practice. As ephemeral work, it requires an understanding of the varying modes of perception created by an amplitude of space. What is seen from eye-level differs from what is seen from a rooftop, from a balcony, from across the street or while walking through an underpass. For as long as I’ve known Cedar she’s made street art, from tagging with a sharpie to slicking drawings with wheat-paste over payphones and hydro poles. Her consistent collaboration with the city - working paint into textures of groove, ditch and crack, using stilts to reach the full length of high walls, getting out to paint while there’s enough daylight and using a headlamp to adjust to the lightlessness of nightfall—is a constant negotiation between physical artistic form and the geography of the outside world.
9. In *Spirit Berries*, shape, like fruit, propagates. Both are enclosed by colour, as skin and as juice. It’s as if the berries are leaking colour, so that the gallery wall, now covered in purples and pinks, begins to *advance toward us*. There is subtle synesthesia: we *feel* visual tone, saturation and vibrancy as physiological envelopment. Cedar often mentions the healing capabilities of colour as a substance that acts *on us* as much as we try to (cognitively) categorize, name and fix it. In her work, the reflection of light produced *in us* via the retina becomes a pulsing and somatic spatiality.
10. Spending time with *Spirit Berries*, one thinks immediately of cave networks: those diffuse inlets of interlocking fissures, built by tectonic shift, pressure, atmospheric change and the persistent worming of microorganisms through sediment. Although each spirit is a kind of figurative ‘event’ in the piece, their segmentation does not move toward any singular culminating phrase. Our eyes move vertically, horizontally *and* diagonally, through entrances and exits, across varying curved and implied directions. The line is container.