

Reality, Virtually

Casey Koyczan

As told to Jessica Davey-Quantick

ABSTRACT

Casey Koyczan is a Dene interdisciplinary artist from Denendeh whose work plays on all your senses. He's displayed around the world, from Finland, Columbia, Chile and Mexico to the Netherlands, the USA and the UK. Now, he's taking his work to a digital space: his series of walk cycles create literal characters, digitally, out of antlers, beading and caribou tufting. In June, 2023, he shared his thoughts on the future of Indigenous art and bringing traditional materials to the digital space in an interview with Jessica Davey-Quantick.

OK RIGHT OFF THE BAT: YOUR WORK IS GETTING PROGRESSIVELY WEIRDER AND I'M INTO IT. YOUR WORK HAS UNDERGONE A CREATIVE AND INTERPRETIVE SHIFT INTO THE DIGITAL REALM. WHAT'S GOING ON?

Since the pandemic I've been focusing more on my digital practice as it has been more accessible to the public. I still create physical art but nowhere near as much as I used to pre-pandemic. Within my installations I used a lot of earth materials, and now I'm capturing these materials with Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) scans and experimenting with them in a digital space; it seems like a natural evolution of my aesthetic because I've always loved working with materials from the land.

YOU'RE DEALING IN INDIGENOUS FUTURISM, WHICH HAS ALWAYS BEEN LINKED TO RESISTANCE WITHIN YOUR WORK. IS THIS INTENTIONAL? HAS YOUR PERSPECTIVE ON FUTURISM OR RESISTANCE CHANGED OVER TIME?

I like to think of Indigenous Futurisms as a way of seeing our people, places, and stories in the future; a way to remind ourselves and others that we always have and always will be here. My short film "Ełeghàà ; All At Once" is a representation of the past, present, and future of Denendeh that is experienced at the same time: the giant animals and legends of the past, the current landscape on the lake at my mom's cabin outside of Yellowknife, and the futuristic buildings of Yellowknife where the city has grown so much in size that it now stretches past Prelude Lake on the Ingraham Trail. I wanted to further expand on the futuristic elements so it features space stations that rotate in the sky, flying cars that are travelling in the sky, and an underwater city with transport tunnels as my depiction of Ole Slavey swims around you.

LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR WALK CYCLE VIDEOS. HOW DID YOU DO IT?

I wanted to create characters that were inspired by Indigenous materials; to re-imagine them as surreal looking characters. The first piece I made in this way was "BEADWORK" which was inspired by a beaded

card holder that I was gifted after teaching a music workshop at the Tłıchq Annual Youth Conference. I used the photos to texture the character's skin, and implemented physics to a sort of star field of beads that the character is walking through as the beads ricochet and bounce off of it. These are created with a variation of tools but I mostly do my 3D / VR modelling in Gravity Sketch VR, and then bring everything together in Blender 3D.

I have just released my "DENTALIUM" piece online, and it's inspired by Dentalium shells. For this work I did quite a bit of research as honestly I didn't know exactly what the mollusk looked like before it just becomes the shell. To pay tribute to its natural habitat, I created an underwater landscape for the character to walk through. My next piece will be inspired by Caribou, Moose, and Deer antler and I'm in the process of modelling those in VR while at the same time brainstorming how the character will look and what environment it will live in and walk through.

HOW DID YOU LEARN TO DO THIS? WHAT INSPIRES THIS?

Ever since I was a kid I've been really inspired by Sci-Fi, especially by watching the Alien & Predator movies. I suppose this is the root cause of why I work the way I do, but in a technical sense I want to credit Davis Heslep and Jeremy Emerson for first getting me into VR when they lent me a gaming laptop and an HTC Vive VR headset from Western Arctic Moving Pictures (WAMP). To be honest my main reason for wanting to try VR was to play a game called "Super Hot", which kind of makes you feel like a superhero, but after playing that a bit they suggested that I try a program called "Tilt Brush", which I can describe as a virtual reality painting program. Immediately I started making creations that are inspired by Dene legends and animals from the North, and the first major breakthrough piece that I made was called "Raven Gods" which pushed the aspect of scale for me in a VR setting. At the time I knew it was a great way to work, especially living in Yellowknife where studio space is hard to come by; being able to create massive artworks within the confines of a 6' x 6' space just made sense to me.

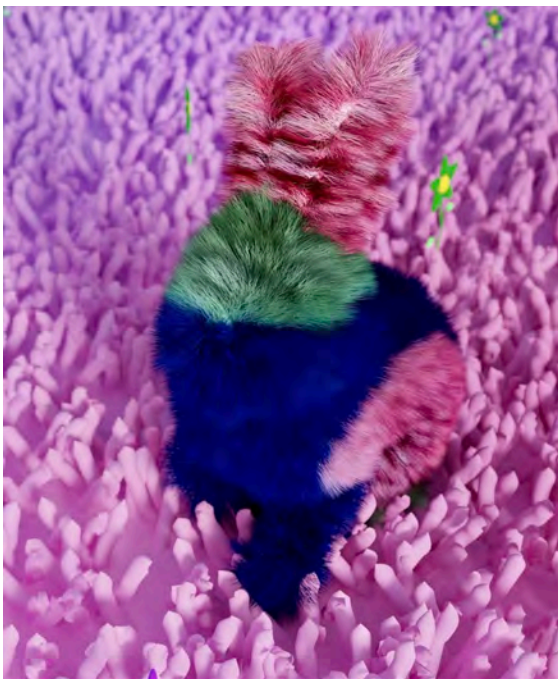


Photo Credit: All photos courtesy of artist

SOME OF THESE NEW WORKS ARE BEAUTIFUL, EVEN ADORABLE—ESPECIALLY YOUR TUFTING CHARACTER. THAT’S A BIG PIVOT FROM A LOT OF THE WORK YOU DID BEFORE. WAS THIS INTENTIONAL?

Yes, it was very intentional. Throughout my career I’ve always tried to push my limits; whether they be physical or mental, and this piece was a test to create completely out of my comfort zone, as the majority of my work has a sort of “dark” aesthetic. I felt that with the texture of tufting, that I wanted the character, the landscape, and the animals within the animation to all fit together in some way, so almost everything is textured with hair emitters and it really lends itself up to the cute, cuddly, and colourful atmosphere. After creating and posting this work I received a bunch of feedback and messages asking if I was okay because it was so different from previous work, and saying that it would make for a great kids TV show, so maybe at some point that will happen?

IT’S SO REALISTIC- IS IT BASED ON SPECIFIC REAL-WORLD TECHNIQUES? WHY REIMAGINE INDIGENOUS ART MATERIALS IN THIS WAY?

Mahsi, I try to find this balance between realistic and surreal with my creations; to sort of blur those boundaries in order to elicit various feelings and emotions for the viewer. My artwork has been a mix of material and technology for a long time, and I found this series was a great way to honour the materials that have had such a strong presence within my life. I really admire and respect artists that work with these materials in a traditional sense, so I suppose this is my way of working with them but with a different approach.

WHY BRING THESE NATURAL ELEMENTS—CARIBOU TUFTING, DRIFTWOOD, BEADING—TO A DIGITAL WORLD?

When you’re working in a VR / 3D environment, you’re not bound by the laws of physics; anything is possible and you can let your imagination run wild. That is something that really drives my creations and gets me thinking about what I’d like to see or experience that isn’t possible in the real world.

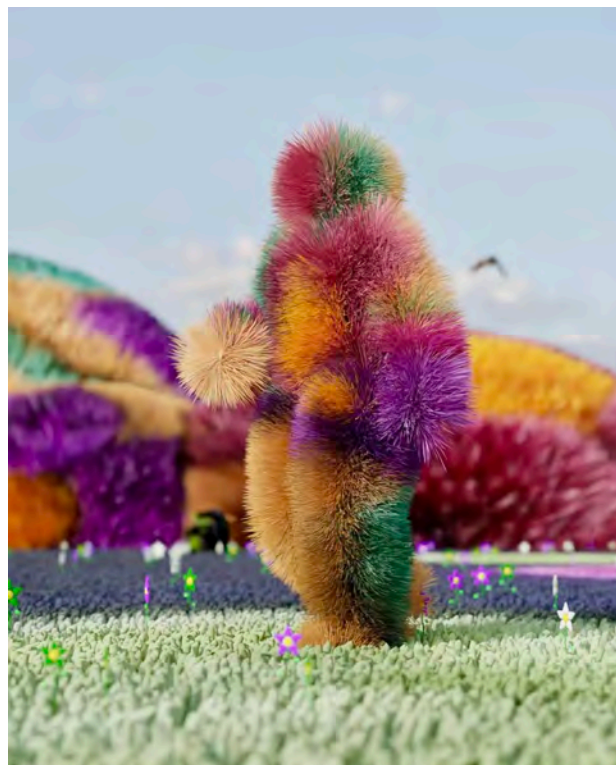
WHAT ARE YOU EXPRESSING WITH THE 3D CREATIONS YOU’RE WORKING ON?

For my 3D work overall, I’m just having fun while expressing my ideas in various ways. It’s also a way to assert that digital art is a real art form that belongs in galleries, exhibits, and is a big part of my career and livelihood.

DOES YOUR CONNECTION TO THE MATERIALS CHANGE GOING FROM REAL-WORLD SCULPTURE TO DIGITAL OR INTERACTIVE WORK?

Yes and no. Yes, in the way that you can actually touch, smell, and hear the materials; I love the smell of tanned moose-hide, and whenever it’s around the first thing I do is take a big whiff of it and it brings me back to being a kid in Yellowknife. During an Indigenous Culture class within my BFA our professor brought in some moccasins that he purchased from a trip to the NWT and passed them around the class. When they got to me I buried my nose in them and a classmate exclaimed “Did you just smell that?!” and I just laughed with a big smile on my face.

No, in the sense that I try to treat the materials with the same amount of respect as I would within the real world, but it allows me to experiment with them much more in order to explore all of the possibilities.



WHAT ABOUT VIEWERS—HAVE YOU NOTICED THAT THE VIEWERS EXPERIENCE CHANGES FROM A TACTILE, REAL WORLD SCULPTURE TO A DIGITAL PIECE?

The experience is much different; with a real-world installation people are able to walk in and around it, they can feel the aura of the materials, they can feel the reverberations of the sound, they can smell the materials. That is something that isn't present within a digital work as they're mostly on a two-dimensional screen. However, that's what I really enjoy about VR, as you're able to put someone inside of your idea in order to give them a sense of what it's like to actually be there, albeit without being able to experience it with some of the bodily senses.

WHAT KIND OF REACTIONS DO YOU GET FOR THIS WORK? IS THERE ANY RESISTANCE TO TAKING THESE TRADITIONAL SKILLS, TECHNIQUES AND MATERIALS TO A DIGITAL SPACE?

The reactions that I get are mostly positive, I don't really experience any negative feedback because people understand my style and the willingness to experiment and evolve our culture; it's all about progression and inspiration. When I first started putting my Tilt Brush works out there Davis was hosting a VR workshop in Deline and asked if I can show elders "Raven Gods," I was hesitant as at the time I was wondering what elders would think of me working in this way, but agreed under the condition that he let me know what their reaction was afterwards. When the elder took the headset off they said "You know I didn't know what to think about VR at first, but if it's going to be used like this it's okay with me". To me that was one of the best pieces of feedback I've ever received as the respect of our elders is so important to us, and was also the biggest green light I needed in order to feel comfortable in pushing the limits of what our culture is and how it's perceived.

YOU'RE TAKING IT A STEP FARTHER, BRINGING THE VIRTUAL BACK INTO THE PHYSICAL SPACE WITH "ONEIROPHYTE" AT THE ART GALLERY OF SOUTHERN MANITOBA IN SEPTEMBER, 2023. FOR THAT SHOW, YOU'RE DOING LIDAR SCAN WORKS ON TREES THAT IMPLEMENT DIGITAL PHYSICS. WHAT IS THAT EXACTLY?

Doing LiDAR scans of trees and earth materials feels like a natural progression within my career in order to keep working with elements from the land. I am creating a physical installation made up of four computer screen monitors that will hang from the ceiling alongside pieces of driftwood. I am going to have a large circular piece of astro-turf / fake grass on the floor to invite people to stand on while they view the works on the screens. The screens will feature the various 3D LiDAR scans of trees and earth materials with different physics elements implemented into them and animated in order to elicit a sci-fi nature to the works. The installation overall is meant to serve as a futuristic garden or time capsule where people can view elements of nature from the past, even though we are in the present.

IN WORKS LIKE YOUR PIECE [NÌ ; SPIRIT, YOU'RE REALLY PLAYING WITH CONNECTION—IS IT POSSIBLE TO BRIDGE THAT GAP BETWEEN THE NATURAL WORLD AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE WITH THE DIGITAL?

"[Nì ; Spirit" was an artwork created specifically for the BACA Bienalle in Montreal, QC, where the title of the show was "Land Back". For this I wanted to showcase the aura's of the animals in the North and how their presence impacts nature in many ways; how they're so important and that they should be respected by all walks of life, as we are on their land and living in their ecosystems. We tend to forget that which is why taking the time to be in nature is such an effective healing practice for humans.

YOU'VE BEEN BOUNCING ALL OVER THE WORLD—VENICE, AMERICA, ALL ACROSS CANADA—WHAT ARE YOU HOPING VIEWERS TAKE AWAY FROM THE DIGITAL WORK YOU DO? DO PEOPLE OUTSIDE THE NORTH RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MATERIALS YOU'RE USING?

First off I want to thank all of the people that have provided me the opportunity and have helped me to showcase my artwork around the world, I could not have done it without them. I know as the artist I have a major responsibility in order to make the work, but it's the facilitators and grant writers who help to make it a reality. I have worked extremely hard at what I do, and I'm glad my efforts have paid off, as in many ways I still feel like that wild and uncontrollable Dene kid growing up in Yellowknife. I want the youth of the NWT to know that if you work hard enough and stay focused on what you are passionate about, that you're able to accomplish what you set your mind to.

When showing my work around the world, it's an expression not only of who I am, but where I come from. It's providing an opportunity to showcase our way of life and how we express ourselves through our artwork. Sometimes it takes some explaining as it can be confusing to some people, but it's important for us to take the time to explain. We shouldn't expect someone on the other side of the planet to know about who we are, and that patience is important because everyone is different and we all come from various backgrounds.



DO YOU THINK THIS IS THE FUTURE OF INDIGENOUS ART?

I don't think so, I know people will always create Indigenous art in a traditional sense in order to keep those teachings and techniques alive, and I have so much respect for that. However the way we showcase our artwork definitely has more of a digital presence as our Instagram accounts are basically our portfolios now. People still view my website but it seems like Instagram, Facebook, and other platforms are the first place people go to check out artworks. Accessibility is a big part of viewing artwork now, and I noticed a big shift to online sources since the beginning of the pandemic. I am getting into creating virtual tours (similar to Google Street View) as it's a great way for people from all over the world to have the opportunity to remotely visit gallery spaces.

Casey Koyczan is a Dene interdisciplinary artist from Yellowknife, NT, that uses various mediums to communicate how culture and technology can grow together in order for us to develop a better understanding of who we are, where we come from, and what we will be. He creates with whatever tools necessary to bring an idea to fruition, and specializes in sculpture, installation, 3D/VR/AR/360, video, and audio works such as music, soundscapes and film scores.

He has a Multimedia Production diploma from Lethbridge College, a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Thompson Rivers University, and a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Manitoba.

Follow Casey Koyczan on Instagram at @caseykoyczanart, on Facebook as Casey Koyczan / Casey Koyczan Art, and my website at www.caseykoyczan.com.