Cultural Identity is a running theme in this dual-artist exhibition featuring Sarindar Dhaliwal (b. 1953) and Nadia Myre (b. 1974). Both artists have used their cultural identities as a point of departure for the subjects and issues depicted in their artworks. In doing so, the objective is to reclaim personal, familial, or collective pasts to foster healing and acceptance for themselves and others. The artworks in this exhibition visualize stories related to loss, cultural displacement, disputed boundaries and social rejection.

Having grown up in England, Sarindar Dhaliwal, was all too aware of the obvious disconnection between her family’s Punjabi heritage and traditions and those of her English neighbours and friends. Nadia Myre, a member of the Algonquin tribe Kitigan Zibi Anishnabeg, also contends with post-colonial issues of dislocation and social exclusion, in terms of loss of land, language and aboriginal rights that Native people still contend with today. The artists however diverge on the level of the private and public spheres. Dhaliwal engages with personal and familial concerns to consider experiences that embrace a common humanity, whereas Myre explores the collective human experience as it relates to First Nations people. Through the use of traditional symbols, materials and techniques borrowed from their respective cultures, the artists transport the viewer into a world that encourages collective participation in the experiences of people different from themselves.
Sarindar Dhaliwal

*Green Fairy Storybooks*

2009

14 x 56 x 14 in.

Paper, thread, embossed words

Sarindar Dhaliwal’s autobiographical works evoke memories of her family experiences, and the disconnection she felt as a young person between the expectations she had of how her life should be led and what her family believed was right for her. *The Green Fairy Storybooks* (2009) is an example of a work that was created in this vein. It is a set of blank books with covers and pages of different colours that was modeled after Andrew Lang’s *Fairy Books of Many Colours*. These were the storybooks the artist read as a child. The embossed titles on the spines of the books with names of different colours tell the story of the artist as young girl who was an avid reader and whose initial love of colour can be traced to this particular moment of her girlhood. She explains how the fairy books were like “coming home to the place where all the narratives she has written began.”

Compiled between 1889 and 1910, Andrew Lang’s twelve collections of stories contain a total of 437 fairy tales, myths, and legends from around the world. Each fairy book in the series is named after its color: blue, red, green, yellow, pink, grey, violet, crimson, brown, orange, olive and lilac. Lang’s books were consistent with an “important strain in Victorian thought, in which fantasy and imagination were recognized as important seats of learning and education.”¹ Dhaliwal’s *Green Fairy Storybooks* is inspired by her love of reading, Lang's collection of tales in particular, and her desire to include myths and symbols as the narrative foundation of her work.

*Green Fairy Storybooks* also alludes to the artist’s relationship with her mother, in particular on the subject of reading. Dhaliwal's mother, who never learned to read or write, did not understand, nor did she approve of her daughter’s love of reading. The artist would bring books home from
the library, to her mother’s dismay. Though a straight A student, her mother thought reading was detrimental to her daughter’s academic performance.

Sarindar Dhaliwal

*Punjabi Sheets #2: Family Tree*

1989

Mixed-media installation, slabs of slate, hollowed out coconuts, powdered pigment

[Link to the artwork](http://ccca.concordia.ca/artists/work_detail.html?languagePref=en&mkey=73479&title=curtains+for+babel%3A+x+y+%26+z&artist=Sarindar+Dhaliwal&link_id=883)
"Punjabi Sheets #2: Family Tree" (1989) consists of sixteen slabs of black slate laid in a row like railroad ties; seen here on the wooden floor of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario. This work is part of a series titled *Punjabi Sheets* where the artist attempts to visualize issues related to globalism (as a network of socio-political connections) and transnationalism (as an ongoing migratory movement of people between two or more geographical locations), using elements from the Punjabi culture in which she was raised. In this work, family member's names and relationships are etched onto the slabs and organized into explanatory sentences. The names of the artist's relatives are written in Punjabi and highlighted in white whereas the relationships, raw and uncoloured, are written in English. The slate slabs are to be read from top to bottom. To the right of each slab is a halved and hollowed-out coconut containing pigments whose colours refer emotionally to the ordering of these complex family ties.

The narrative of this work is about family and the fusion of cultures and languages. The artist is reclaiming her experiences growing up in a Punjabi household and going to school in England. A lack of explanation and the nuanced way of stating in one or two Punjabi words how someone is related to you maternally, paternally, through blood or through marriage, can create dissonance in a young child’s mind. This incongruity, mixed with a supposedly rational British versus an emotive and by extension irrational view of Punjabi culture, created confusion for the young artist. Dhalwal straddles these two vastly different societal traditions. She attempts to repair, re-imagine, and reconcile these familial relationships that she is expected to respect, understand and adhere to. The artist explores these inconsistencies and conflicts from her childhood, almost as a way of learning and filling in her lack of knowledge, by using a hybrid mixture of Punjabi and English words.
Language in this work is used critically. The slabs of slate, reminiscent of a classroom blackboard, evidence the artist’s uncertainty of the Punjabi culture, and her willingness to make public the idea of learning through rote memorization. The poem-like layout of the names and relations is a direct reference to the way school children are taught to spell and memorize words. In a similar way the artist as an adult had to go back and learn the words and associations she refused to learn or could not learn when she was a child.
Nadia Myre

*Scar Project*

Ongoing since 2005

unknown

canvas, string, volunteer participation

Nadia Myre Website

http://www.nadiamyre.com/Nadia_Myre/portfolio/Pages/The_Scar_Project.html
Like Sarindar Dhaliwal, Nadia Myre’s works can be described as a therapeutic act and source of healing. Dhaliwal's art practice, however, is private, whereas Myre invites others to participate in the creation process. In 2005 Nadia Myre began *The Scar Project* as a vehicle for individuals anonymously to share personal narratives of physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual wounds with one another. The workshops with youth and adults, at cultural centres, senior homes, prisons, and schools are organized and run by Myre. In these settings individual participants picture the scar on canvas by sewing, puncturing severing, painting and, or suturing the fabric. In addition to creating these canvases, the participants write about the event that led to the scar and describe the scar they have created. The working space of this project is a table where participants work on their canvases with materials Myre provides, such as thread, scissors, and a typewriter. The workshop also functions as a gallery. The participants work as people from the community view the artworks and read the associated stories, to learn about these scarring experiences. In reliving and sharing their own scars with other people the participants and viewers became more open and sympathetic to one another.

With the integration of community and participants, the canvases of *The Scar Project* represent the collective human experiences of trauma, pain, scarring, and healing. According to Myre’s website, by 2011 she had accumulated over 800 “scared” canvases that she displayed in different exhibitions across Canada and the United States. In addition, the images and texts have now published in a book also titled *The Scar Project*. 
Nadia Myre

*Indian Act*

Photograph from exhibition Cont(r)act, Gallery Oboro, Montreal, May 18 to June 25, 2002

2000-2003

15 x 18 x 2 in.

Shroud cloth, Indian Act, beads, thread, wood frame

Imbued with her Native heritage, Nadia Myre utilized the tradition of glasswork beading as a means of protest in her 2000-2003 project, entitled Indian Act. For this project, at her workshop at the Gallery Oboro in Montreal, she enlisted over 230 volunteers, recruited from all over city, to help her bead the 56 pages of Canada’s Annotated Indian Act. The Indian act, enacted in 1876 by the federal government, outlines the basic legal rights of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. The Act defines who may be registered as a Native person, outlines the rights that accompany status, and lays out the system of reserves and self-government.\(^5\) In Myre's Indian Act, red beads cover the page, while white beads cover partially or totally the letters of the law. Thus, Myre obscures the Indian Act with beadwork.

Volunteers for this project were recruited from Concordia University’s Faculty of Fine Arts, the Native Friendship Centre of Montreal and Concordia’s Centre for Native Education, as well as through ads in the Montreal Mirror, a weekly independent newspaper. The many participants anonymously accomplished the beading process to reinforce the idea of collective identity and communal action. By acting upon the document in this way Myre's intention was to mute the influence the document wields over Native peoples.\(^6\) She describes beading as a form of silent resistance since the beads prevent any reading of the Indian Act’s content. By using a traditional Native glass bead working technique to conceal the document Myre’s message is that Native people will not be defined by the colonial power that took over their land and restricted their rights.\(^7\) Indian Act, consisting of 56 red and white pages mounted with tape on a black backing and hung in two rows the full length of the gallery is a powerful declaration. As Myre's explains the work empowers Native peoples to reclaim the document for themselves.
NOTES

3 Sarindar Dhaliwal, interview with Stephanie Raudsepp, December 1, 2012.
7 Nadia Myre: En[counter]s.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


