

# Exhibit Review

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## Resounding Resistance in Rebecca Belmore's *VALUE*

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The Museum of Anthropology (MOA), perched on the edge of the University of British Columbia's Vancouver campus, overlooking cliffs that lead down to the Pacific Ocean, recognizes that it is built on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded land of the Musqueam people (MOA 2025). Outside the building are towering monumental carvings by Haida, Kwakwaka'wakw, and Musqueam First Nations artists, and inside are two exhibitions, *Nuxalk Strong: Dancing Down the Eyelashes of the Sun*, curated by Snxakila–Clyde Tallio and Jennifer Kramer, and Rebecca Belmore's complex and intimate exhibit, *VALUE*, comprised of four pieces distributed throughout the museum. This review focuses on *VALUE*.

Belmore, a renowned Anishinaabe multidisciplinary, award-winning artist, has long commented through her work on worth, possession, and the body as an ongoing site of Indigenous political struggle. *VALUE*, her latest exhibit, guest-curated by Jeffrey Boone, is an engagement with the notion of value, resounding loudly the question of what value is and who has the authority to determine it—a sentiment of significance within an anthropology museum.

To discuss anything *with*, *in*, and *around* a university and any museum it governs is to begin by unequivocally acknowledging the active backdrop of suffering and dispossession of First Nations communities. MOA's enduring work with origin communities aims to rectify past wrongdoing in the acquisition of many of its collections. This is an ethical response and a critical contribution to the dialogue on Indigenizing and decolonizing museums. In this context, museums like MOA are questioning the very value of museums in their current forms and practices (Adebayo 2024). Established in 1947, MOA houses 50,000 ethnographic objects, the most significant holdings of cultural materials from Northwest Coast First Nations communities. While MOA has been commissioning and exhibiting the work of First Nations and Indigenous artists

since the late 1970s, in Belmore's solo exhibition, *VALUE*, nestled alongside these collections, fosters an opportunity for critical, reflexive engagement through contemporary Indigenous work that evokes conversations on agency, power, and belonging.

Belmore's exhibit comprises four artworks from her larger oeuvre. As you enter the museum into the Great Hall, you first encounter *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother* (1991), a large wooden megaphone, approximately two metres wide, originally installed in a mountain meadow in Banff National Park (Alberta). When it was first installed in response to the Oka Crisis, people engaged their voices with the land to recognize that acts of speaking and listening are figured as gestures of reclamation. In the museum, it becomes an artifact not to speak with, but to listen to, as recordings of stories emanate from a speaker installed inside.

Moving further through the museum into the Koerner Ceramics Gallery, you encounter *Wild* (2001), a work that bridges Belmore's two practices—installation and performance—while its placement engages with critiques of European history from the same era. In *VALUE*, artifacts from a 2001 performance at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (Canada) include a Victorian lacquer four-post bed covered in red satin, stitched with human hair and beaver pelts. In the original and subsequent performances of this work, Belmore plays with the tension between the luxurious comfort and intimacy of the bedroom offered by her host and the overt hostility and discomfort of being unwelcome. “Through this work she enacts a layered redressing of history while fulfilling the fantasy of finding a comfortable, even luxurious, place to stay in a hostile world—a world that saw her ancestors as potential aggressors to be feared” (Belmore 2025).

Wandering further along the galleries, you experience *Worth* (2010), which is a memorialization of the sign from her 2010 protest performance in Vancouver, declaring: “I AM WORTH MORE THAN A MILLION DOLLARS TO MY PEOPLES.” Its inclusion in *VALUE* is an essential reminder of how Belmore's work consistently challenges capitalism's dispossession of her artistic contributions and cultural heritage.

The fourth—and the keystone piece of *VALUE* —is *Fountain* (2005). It is prominently displayed alone in one room in the O'Brien Gallery. Upon entering, the long, darkened room furnished only with a single bench, one is enveloped in a soundscape of pounding rain. The soundscape suddenly shifts to rolling thunder, and a guttural conflict unfolds on a large curtain of water, each droplet

forming a film projection surface. The light from the projector becomes sun-like as it illuminates a scene of an ocean shore not that far from MOA. A fire erupts, sending a plume of smoke into the sky. Belmore appears waist-deep in the water, gripping an orange bucket. Her struggle to rise from the water seems to represent the metaphorical clutches of colonialism. The film projection extends beyond the watery screen, inverted across the floor. Perhaps the water enveloping her indicates a site of survival? A site of value. The film slows as Belmore stands and carries the bucket to shore, but then the bucket's contents violently explode across the screen. No longer water, blood oozes down the fountain's curtain of rain, bathing viewers in a red reflection, which makes visceral the colonial histories Belmore has consistently addressed throughout her art practice. As the video ends, Belmore confronts the lens directly with her body and her stare. One is left to reflect on this legacy as Belmore's figure and the scene fade from red to clear, leaving just the fountain, where water becomes the medium and the message.

Individually, each work evokes complex aspects of colonialism's entanglements ("colonial silencing, alienation, and violence inherent in the commodification of land, Indigenous bodies, and material culture" (MOA 2025)). Collectively, the curation of these works in relation to one another interrogates a unified statement on value, while simultaneously encouraging each visitor to reflect on institutional notions of value from within. *VALUE* deliquesces the institutional boundaries of the concrete walls that separate the lands and waters they overlook, positioning the Museum of Anthropology as an evolving space of transformation through valuing contemporary Indigenous art.

## References

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