

POWER *in* NUMBERS

By Bryan Hansen

The Anemki Art Collective brings together a group of Indigenous artists to support their work and amplify their visibility

The Anemki Art Collective is an innovative collaboration of 20 Indigenous artists. Founded by Jean Marshall, an Anishinaabe member of Fort William First Nation in Northern Ontario, it exists to support, encourage and celebrate Indigenous makers from Northwestern Ontario while exploring the deep connections between mainstream fashion, Indigenous art and traditional practices. In so doing, the collective amplifies the visibility and voice of Indigenous women.

Marshall has long mentored Indigenous makers in various aspects of values-based entrepreneurship. A maker herself, she saw a need to support the resilient women who are empowering their community through creativity and knowledge transference. Out of this need, the Anemki Art Collective was born. "This started because I remember being a young artist and not having a lot of opportunities or support, so I created them myself," explains Marshall, noting that Anemki is the Ojibwe name

for Thunder Mountain, a geographical formation found on Fort William First Nation.

The Collective represents makers of many forms of traditional Indigenous art and practice, often using materials from the land such as birch bark, porcupine quills, fish skin leather, and tanned moosehide to create items ranging from purses and medallions to ribbon skirts, earrings and other jewelry.



The Anemki Collective is comprised of 20 Indigenous artists — some pictured here — to help support their work and amplify the visibility of their creative



The Anemki Art Collective's stand at the Indigenous Fashion Arts Festival held at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre



This past June, the Collective participated in the Indigenous Fashion Arts Festival (IFAF) at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre — an event that gave its members a unique opportunity to showcase their talent to a wider audience. "The whole event was [intended] to celebrate people who are oppressed — to celebrate their greatness [and show] how Indigenous women can represent themselves in the world," says Marshall. "I really wanted to give Fort William First Nation the

opportunity to let themselves shine for the rest of the world to see."

Low self-esteem is a common symptom of intergenerational trauma and is especially prevalent in Indigenous women. "IFAF for the Anemki Art Collective celebrated people who are unable to see their greatness, their beauty," says Marshall. "This was an opportunity for them to see value in not only their time, but themselves. To feel worthy as the resilient Indigenous women that they are."

THE ANEMKI ART COLLECTIVE CONSISTS OF:

Karina Terry
Meaghan Anishinaabe
Danielle Pelletier
Audrey Dero
Serena Kenny
Chloe Baer
Mary Magiskan
Shannon Crews
Shannon Gustafson
Justine Gustafson
Anna Fern Kakegamic
Melissa Twance
Cher Chapman
Samantha Chapman
Marlene Kwandibens
Leanna Marshall
Bess Legarde
Chelsea Morrisseau
Helen Pelletier
Claudette Penagin



The Anemki Collective often uses natural materials from the land like birch bark and tanned moosehide to create a range of stunning items.

“My hope is to lift these artists and value their work,” adds Marshall. “Many of these women have been oppressed for so long they don’t see greatness in their work. They’re unable to look at the time and value of their work as significant.”

A hide tanner herself, Marshall knows the amount of time and effort that goes into each piece. “[These women] often would say ‘This isn’t worthy,’ when the truth is that they should be saying ‘Wow, I am amazing.’”

There is a significant amount of time invested in each piece that is part of the Collective’s work. “All of us in this group are bead workers, leather workers – the slow art movement,” explains Marshall. “Everything is unique and takes an incredible amount of time to create, which is why the collective has 20 members. There is no way I could have had an event at a booth selling what I made in a year – there wouldn’t have been enough. That’s how the Collective came together.”

SHARING KNOWLEDGE

Bringing Anemki’s work to Toronto was a way to showcase not only its talent, but also the transference of cultural knowledge in a form of storytelling to the mainstream world of fashion. “It allowed people in an urban area to talk to the makers and express the time it took to make them,” says Marshall. “[It’s about] sharing the knowledge and stories behind each piece, which people are interested in hearing, as opposed to simply focusing on cost. It’s enabling knowledge transfer from the crafter to the consumer.”

Bringing the Collective to Canada’s largest city also helped boost the platforms of individual makers. “When people with larger public profiles buy these pieces, it generates more interest in Indigenous makers and our stories, which then self-generates,” notes Marshall.

While the quality of the Collective’s art is exceptional, Marshall says that there is more to it than standards. “Everyone invited [to IFAF] did great work, but it’s not just about that,” she explains. “It’s also about how [members] expressed themselves, and how this connected them back to community and showed their value as resilient women.”

Non-Indigenous purchasers of Indigenous art tend to question the fine line between appropriation and appreciation, so for Marshall, in-person attendance of Anemki’s makers at IFAF was important. “Connecting Indigenous art to mainstream fashion you find a lot of non-Indigenous folks asking, ‘Can I wear this if I’m not Indigenous?’” she says. “Of course, you can! The entire point is to support these makers; it doesn’t matter who you are.”

“What’s important,” continues Marshall, “is that those who buy the work educate themselves about who the maker is – they are all different and unique. People are going to ask you where you got it, if it was gifted or purchased. You should be able to help tell a story about the piece; it’s about sharing an identity, where the maker is from and what you’re doing with their art. Essentially you’re carrying a stamp signifying culture and identity.”

Marshall explains how even a pair of earrings can carry significance: “They’re not just aesthetically beautiful, there are stories to them that are deeper than you think. You’re buying the piece, but you’re also becoming part of the process of healing and reconciliation behind that. It’s subliminal but very beautiful.”

Not everything has to carry a story, however. Marshall explains this through her own relationship with bead working, and the diversity of storytelling through Indigenous art creations. “As a beader myself, I never really talk to people or feel the need to,” she says. “Sometimes it’s just

private and meant just for you. [Other times] there are pieces that come with messages that makers want to share. I love that about beadwork. It can be really quiet, or really loud.”

CONTINUITY

While the pieces created by Indigenous makers in the Collective are all unique, there is a thread of continuity that ties them all together: their relationship with the land. “It’s so intricately connected,” says Marshall. “It’s the one thing we always have in common as Indigenous peoples – our connection to the land and love for it. All these women are working with materials from the earth.”

Although the Anemki Art Collective’s name implies artistic expression, there is no word for art in the Anishinaabe language. “You have crafters, you have carvers, but they don’t ever call themselves artists... that’s a new word for our people,” says Marshall. “Indigenous art practice is the way people live their lives and, with the evolution of time, it’s now [about] people creating contemporary things out of earth’s material.”

Along with an existing connection to the land comes an even deeper linkage for Indigenous makers: reconnection with their heritage. “We have this entire generation of young people who have been disconnected from their heritage for so long but want to reconnect, and this is one way they are doing this,” comments Marshall.

Helping to lift Indigenous women from generations of systemic oppression is important. “My hope is to lift these artists, all these women who have been systemically oppressed for generations,” Marshall says. “When people they don’t even know come to admire their work and express love for their craft, it truly makes a difference for them.”

Like with all art, it is the creative cultural expression that is deeply personal to both the maker and the consumer. “There’s a conversation about cultural assimilation around [Indigeneity],” says Marshall. “The beautiful thing about Indigenous Fashion Arts (IFA) is celebrating the fashion and the makers. It’s okay [for non-Indigenous people] to wear these things... celebrate life with us, but with all things, it’s extremely important to educate yourself and to be respectful.”

In summary, says Marshall, “I really love this opportunity to transfer knowledge through Anemki because all the work is inspired by land and water, and when you’re able to empower others with this knowledge, it’s a beautiful, powerful thing.” ●