

FOREWORD BY KATHERENA VERMETTE

KC Adams

Perception: A Photo Series



PERCEPTION

KC Adams

Perception: A Photo Series

Foreword by Katherena Vermette

Critical Essay by Cathy Mattes



© 2019 by KC Adams

Excerpts from this publication may be reproduced under licence from Access Copyright, or with the express written permission of HighWater Press, or as permitted by law.

All rights are otherwise reserved, and no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means – electronic, mechanical, photocopying, scanning, recording or otherwise – except as specifically authorized.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested \$153 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout the country / Nous remercions le Conseil des arts du Canada de son soutien. L'an dernier, le Conseil a investi 153 millions de dollars pour mettre de l'art dans la vie des Canadiennes et des Canadiens de tout le pays.

HighWater Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Province of Manitoba through the Department of Sport, Culture and Heritage, and the Manitoba Book Publishing Tax Credit, and the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund (CBF), for our publishing activities.

HighWater Press is an imprint of Portage & Main Press.
Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens
Design by Frank Reimer
Photos page 14, 17, 18 by David Hoffos
On the cover: *Self-portrait*, KC Adams

23 22 21 20 19

1 2 3 4 5



THE DEBWE SERIES

Exceptional Indigenous Writing from Across Canada



www.highwaterpress.com

Winnipeg, Manitoba

Treaty 1 Territory and homeland of the Métis Nation

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Adams, K. C., 1971-, author, photographer

Perception : a photo series / KC Adams ; foreword by Katherena Vermette.

ISBN 978-1-55379-786-9 (hardcover)

1. Photography, Artistic. 2. Adams, K. C., 1971-.
I. Vermette, Katherena, 1977-, writer of foreword II. Title.

TR647.A325 2019 779.092 C2018-906345-9

Contents

- 7 Foreword** KATHERENA VERMETTE
- 9 Preface** KC ADAMS
- 15 The Perception Series: KC Adams, and the Value of Socially Engaged Art** CATHY MATTES
- 23 Perception: A Photo Series**



Before Words

I first heard of *Perception* in the summer of 2014 when someone had forwarded KC's request for models for a new project. As soon as I saw her beautiful face, first in a grimace, then in pure happiness, I knew I wanted to be a part, and messaged her before I could chicken out. I had known of KC's work for years and greatly admired everything she did. She immediately invited me to her home, to have tea and take some photos, and within a week, I was sitting in her big back yard having tea. She had a big garden, swing, firepit, a kiln in her garage – an artist's paradise – and I liked her immediately. We had known of each other and moved in almost the same circles for years, but I don't think we had ever met before then. We hit it off right away and talked for a long time. By the time she went to take my picture, I had nearly forgotten why we were there.

The setup was as unpretentious as the artist. She stood me in the light she wanted, and then said she was taking the first shot. I forget the exact words she used as she directed me, but it was something about remembering a time I was made to feel worthless, less than, either in my personal life or in public, a time when I felt like I didn't belong or was unwanted. I don't remember what she said, but I will never forget what it made me think of –

walking down the street in Winnipeg, getting honked and leered at by men in passing cars. That feeling of being looked at and not being seen. I nearly cried looking into KC's camera. And was awestruck I could go so deep so fast just from a few simple words.

For the next one, and I remember this completely, she told me to remember the first time I kissed my husband, and I laughed out loud. Okay, she didn't say "kiss." Man, I laughed. It wasn't just the memory, but also the relief of getting out of the previous memory. That's what you see in my pictures – sadness, smallness, and wanting to retreat, and then joy, love, and pure relief. Both are true, and both are only parts of the greater whole. That's what you see in all the photos of *Perception*, and that's the beauty of the project – it's about looking again, looking deeper, and to me, it's also about kindness.

A friend of mine said something brilliant recently – she said kindness is a privilege. Many of us are too often not the recipients of kindness – people are kind to those they relate to, those they are not afraid of. I am talking about the run-of-the-mill, stranger kind of kindness, – the hold-the-elevator-door and smile-on-the-street kind of kindness. It's an overlooked fact because there are so many bigger fish to fry, so to speak, but it's true. Too often others look too quickly and not deep enough. Too often we are not related to, or are found wanting, or worst of all, not even seen as human. But we are. We all are, and we are worthy, as all beings are, of a moment, of consideration, and of kindness. So please, consider these faces in *Perception* and let the project teach you what all great art teaches us: to look, and then look again.

In the Beginning

I stood before my father and cried. I was getting ready to say goodbye after visiting my parents for the weekend, and I suddenly became emotional. Prior to this moment, my career as an artist had been good. Over the period of seventeen years, I had had many solo and group exhibitions, residencies, publications, public art commissions, and so forth. However, I was getting constant requests to show work that I had created years before. I felt stuck, uninspired, and lost. The moment I stood before my father crying, I was facing the reality that I might not have anything left inside of me, that I was washed up as an artist.

Two weeks later, on August 11, 2014, I was on Facebook when a story hit my newsfeed. It was about a Winnipeg mayoral candidate's wife (a prominent woman in Winnipeg) who had written a disparaging post about "drunken native guys" that she posted on Facebook February 11, 2010. It read:

...really tired of getting harrassed [sic] by the drunken native guys in the skywalks. we need to get these people educated so they can go make their own damn money instead of hanging out and harrassing [sic] the honest people who are grinding away working hard for their money. We all donate enough money to the government

to keep their sorry assess [*sic*] on welfare, so shut the f**k up and don't ask me for another handout!

I consider myself a social-practice artist. I highlight social-political issues using the interaction of the audience. I start with an idea and then choose a medium that best represents that idea. I have worked in video, installation, painting, digital photography, ceramics, printmaking, performance, beading, and kinetic art. For ten years, I had been thinking about creating an artwork about stereotypes of the original people of Canada, which was sparked by a comment made by my sister-in-law. My brother, my sister, and I had played on an all-Indigenous softball league, and my sister-in-law would often come to our games. One day she came up to me and said, "Other than your family, I never really had contact with Native people. I had no idea how normal they were." I was taken aback by her comment, but she explained that her exposure was based on media and seeing drunks on the street. My artist mind started to work, and I thought, "What if the majority of the people of Winnipeg thought the same way? How do I combat people's stereotypes towards Indigenous people through art?"

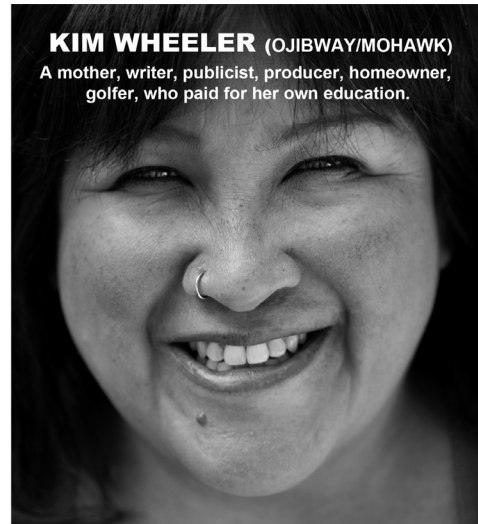
Fast forward ten years later. As soon as I read the disparaging Facebook post, my artistic mind crafted both answer and solution. I was spurred into action, and on Tuesday, August 12, 2014, I sent out a request on social media asking for participants who were Métis, First Nations, or Inuit living in Winnipeg to participate in a new photo project to combat racism. By late Friday afternoon, I had five photos ready to edit over the weekend. I wanted to post the art project first thing Monday morning, since it was the busiest time for people to log on to social media. I posted the images on August 18 at 12:01 a.m. because I was so excited to get this artwork out to the public. Sadly, I found out later that day

that the Winnipeg police had pulled two bodies out of the river the day before. One was Faron Hall, the homeless Anishinaabe man who had saved two people from drowning on two separate occasions. He went into the river to wash himself, got caught up in the strong current, and drowned. The other was Tina Fontaine, a young girl from Sagkeeng First Nation. Beloved by her family, she was found floating in the water, murdered and stuffed in a garbage bag. Both deaths were shocking and disturbing, a hero and a child both meeting their ends in the river. The people of Winnipeg were moved by this little girl's death; they wanted the senseless killing of Indigenous girls to stop. Tina became the poster child for murdered and missing Indigenous women.

My *Perception* photos came out during this dark time, and it sparked conversations about racism. One strength of this work is that it doesn't point fingers at people – it emphasizes the injustice towards the original people of this land. The lack of confrontation allows viewers to react and ponder their own prejudices. At the same time, it gives a voice to the participants and shows the audience that they are staring into the eyes of human beings that deserve respect.

Kim Wheeler was the first person to contact me to participate in the project. We sat down in her kitchen and had a wonderful and insightful conversation that helped shape the protocol for working with the participants thereafter.

Since the project was about racism, I wanted to hear from her about her experiences with it. I already knew that Kim was an educated, intelligent, and talented woman. What she shared was her frustration with people assuming that her education was paid for by the government and that she doesn't pay taxes. It was then I asked her how she would like to be perceived. What



did she want the general public to know about her? Listening to her answers, I realized that I needed to present her the way she defined herself. It was through our conversations that I decided I would use two photos to present this work. The first one would be how people see her — as a “government mooch” — and the second photo would represent how she wanted people to see her.

My technique was simple. I asked her to look into the camera lens and listen to my words. It was important that she hear my words and have an intuitive reaction to them. I asked her to imagine a scenario where she was walking down the street with her daughter, and someone would drive by and call them a bunch of “whores and squaws.” The reaction I got from her was classic “mama bear protecting her cub.” Her stare was so powerful, I got chills. In the second photo, I asked her to clear her mind. Once she relaxed, I totally threw her off when I asked her to think about when she married her husband, Jordan Wheeler. The shot that I got was of genuine happiness and joy. The experience I had with Kim formed the protocol for the collaboration with each participant.

Once I sent out those first five images on social media, I was flooded with requests from people who wanted to participate in the project. National and local media outlets approached me for interviews. In one of the interviews, I explained how I would like to have the work seen on billboards, bus shelters, and posters. A few months later, Urban Shaman Gallery in Winnipeg reached out to me to make my dream a reality. They had contacted numerous businesses and organizations and raised the monies to launch an ambitious campaign. My art was seen on posters, bus shelters, and billboards all around Winnipeg from March to June 2015. The campaign was so successful, I was invited to Lethbridge, Alberta in 2016 to create a *Perception* campaign through IINNII, an artist-run centre there. They were impressed by the project's ability to address serious issues without alienating the viewer.

When I started this project, my intent was to combat racism and present First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people in the ways they see themselves. I expected some backlash, but instead got nothing but support. Strangers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, were telling me about their positive experiences after seeing the work. My mother's cribbage group explained how they talked about discrimination during their card games. An aspiring lawyer told me that he started a discussion with his close friends about invisible racism in hiring practices. An Indigenous woman thanked me for giving us a voice and platform. These are just a few examples of how this art has affected people's lives. My intent for this book is to give hope to the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people for a better future and to remind people that discrimination must never be tolerated.

WAGON BURNER?

LOOK AGAIN...

**FUTURE PRIME
MINISTER.**

www.kcadams.com/Perception

IINNII Artist-Run-Centre

#ChangeYourPerception #RacismHurts



LE00077A

PATTISON

1-877-399-1999

ROYAL CANADIAN
LEGION
RESTAURANT & BAR

Sep 20, 2016
7:26 pm
15.0 °C

National
Real Estate Ltd.

Collette's
Real Estate Ltd.

FOR SALE
S&B Home
BOWMAN COMMERCIAL
403-307-2221

DALE NEWMAN
JEREMY EDDY



CATHY MATTES

The Perception Series: KC Adams, and the Value of Socially Engaged Art

Art is a catalyst for social change, and Winnipeg-based artist KC Adams (Oji-Cree) is a social-change agent. Her work addresses racism toward Indigenous peoples, engagement with the land and ceremony, the association between nature and technology, and the benefits of community and kin. With ceramics, photography, beadwork, collaborative performance, and installation, she holds up a mirror to society, and provides opportunities for viewers to participate, reflect, and strategize to make personal and collective change. Adam's photo-based series *Perception* challenges racist stereotypes and remedies the aftershocks of historical colonization and its continuous and present hold on contemporary Canadian society. The series relies on willing participants and an invested audience, and is best described as socially engaged art.

Although all art invites social interaction, socially engaged art depends on the involvement of others. Historically, it occurred in art galleries, where artists made artworks which were participatory and appealing, like convening visitors to share food or personal narratives in exhibition spaces. This blurred the lines between artist and audience, and broadened understandings of what constitutes art. Physical art objects or video recordings became the residuals or documentation of the process-based artwork instead of the main component.¹

1. For example, in 1992, Rirkrit Tiravanija created *Untitled Free/Still* at 303 Gallery in New York, where he served visitors curry and rice and encouraged them to convene together and eat in the gallery space.

Socially engaged art now often happens *outside* of gallery spaces, and artists are driven to not only challenge understandings of art, but also to make social change. They address concerns like gender inequality, poverty, or the effects of colonial oppression. They collaborate with the public to paint murals on buildings, make posters for distribution, organize pop-up exhibitions in storefronts, and create performance works at community gatherings. They activate conversations that promote self-reflection or cross-cultural education and respond to the current issues of their time. For Indigenous artists, socially engaged art is more than a yearning to make right in society; it is also about their own relationships to the land, and a way to personally and collectively heal from the negative impact of colonization. It requires making art in a good way, grounded in culture, community, and kinship ties.

KC Adams began the *Perception* series after the Idle No More movement had greatly increased conversations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, with teach-ins, flash mobs, and a strong social-media presence. Around the same time, the body of 15-year-old murdered Tina Fontaine and that of 50-year-old Faron Hall, a homeless man known for saving two drowning people, were found in the Red River. These deaths, combined with a racist rant by a mayoral candidate's wife circulated on social media, were stark reminders of the disparaging impact injustice, faulty government systems, and racism has on Indigenous lives.

There were also inspiring socially engaged art projects initiated by other Indigenous artists that addressed the high number of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) in Canada. *Walking With Our Sisters* (2012–18) was conceived by Christi Belcourt (Métis), and was a travelling commemorative art project that featured over 1800 pairs of moccasin vamps (also called

P E R C E P T I O N : A P H O T O S E R I E S



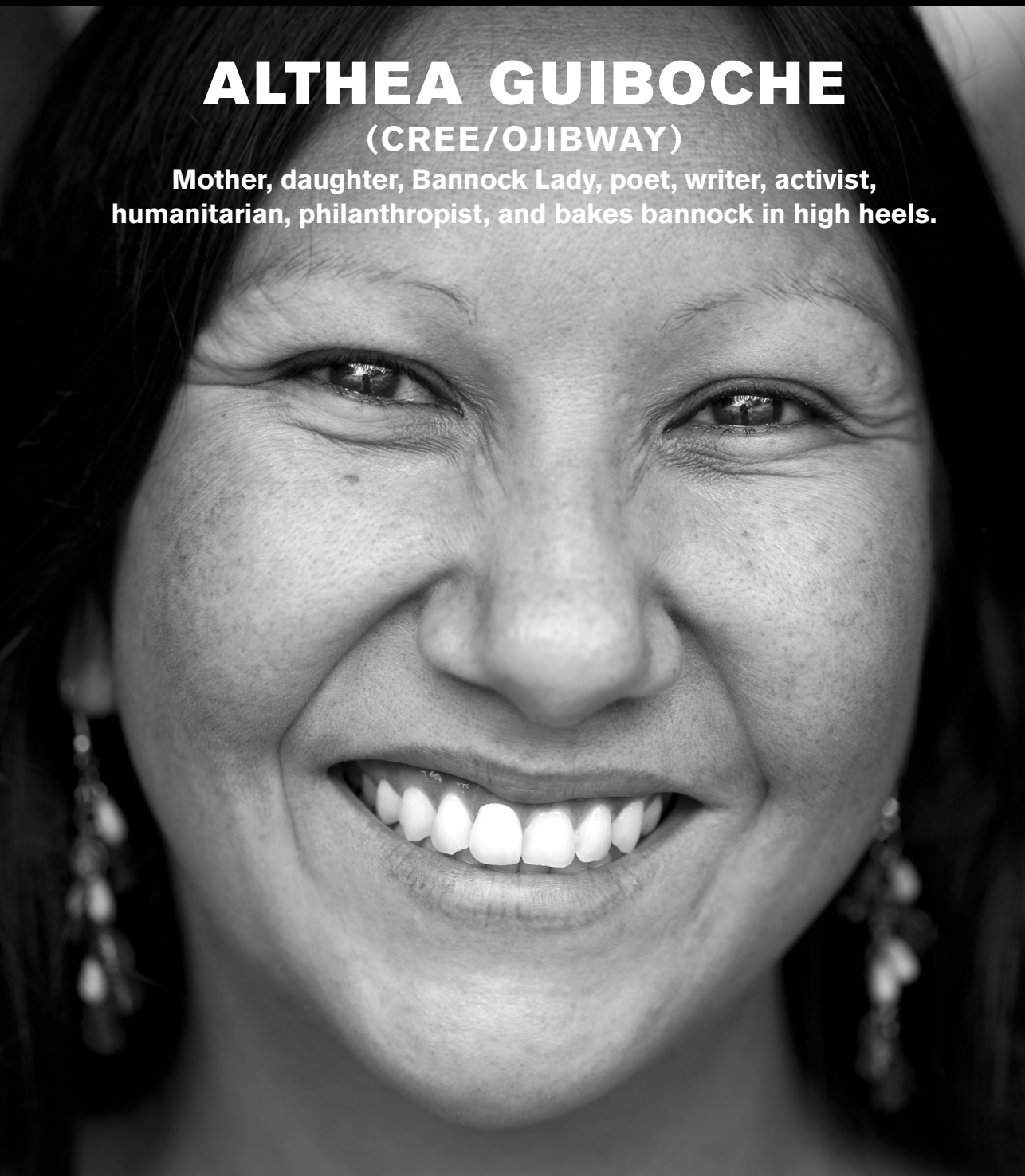
WELFARE MOM?

Look Again...

ALTHEA GUIBOCHE

(CREE/OJIBWAY)

**Mother, daughter, Bannock Lady, poet, writer, activist,
humanitarian, philanthropist, and bakes bannock in high heels.**





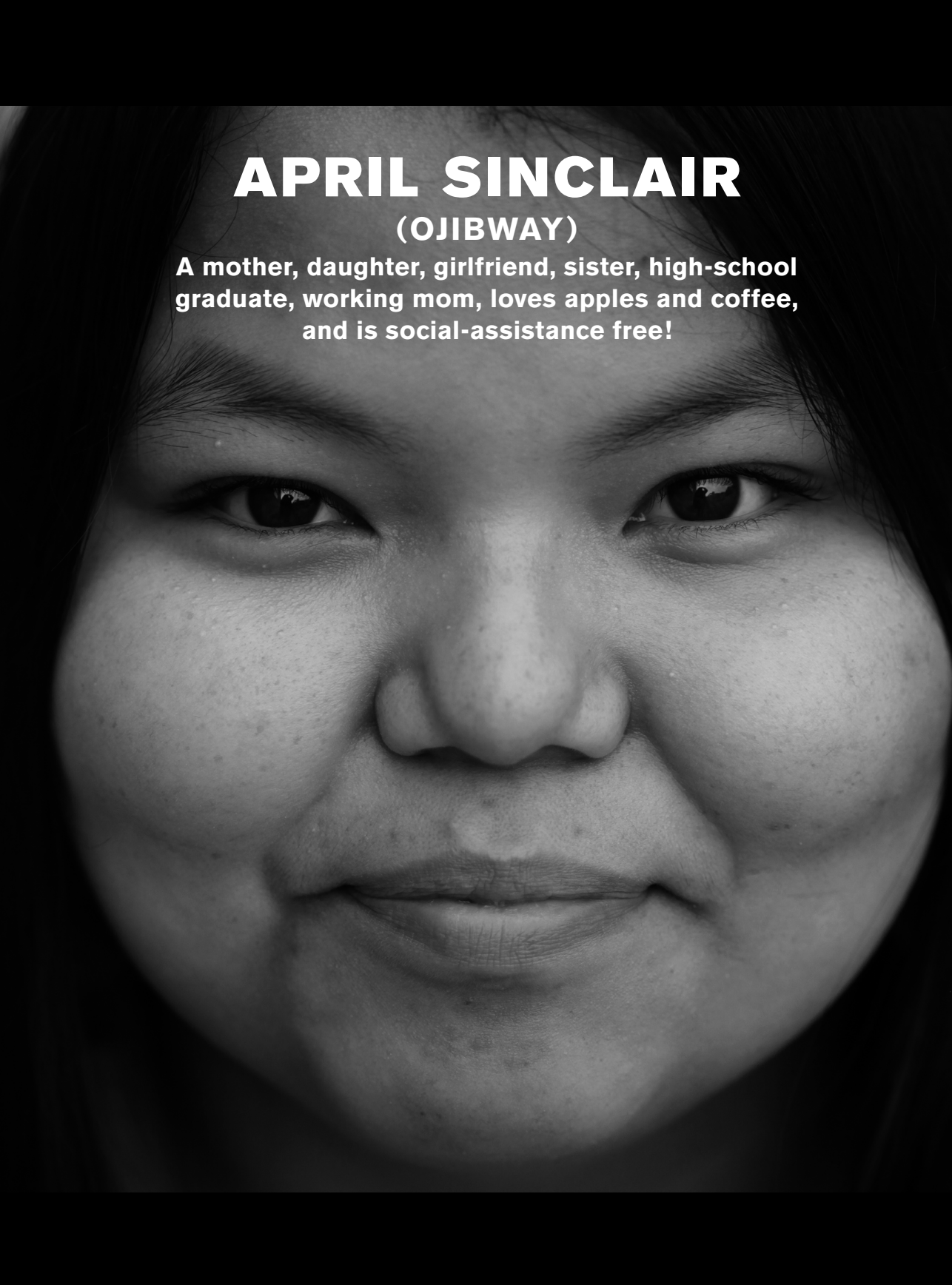
HOOKER?

Look Again...

APRIL SINCLAIR

(OJIBWAY)

A mother, daughter, girlfriend, sister, high-school graduate, working mom, loves apples and coffee, and is social-assistance free!



KC ADAMS is a Cree/Ojibway/British Winnipeg-based artist. Her work has appeared in solo and group exhibitions and can be found in many permanent collections nationally and internationally. Adams was the set designer for the acclaimed Royal Winnipeg Ballet's *Going Home Star: Truth and Reconciliation*, has designed public art sculptures, and contributes her talents to the annual nibi (water) gathering at Whiteshell Provincial Park. KC recently won the Winnipeg Arts Council's Making A Mark Award and the Aboriginal Circle of Educator's Trailblazing Award. She is an instructor in Visual and Aboriginal Art at Brandon University. https://twitter.com/KC_Adams_art



THE DEBWE SERIES

The Debwe Series features exceptional Indigenous writing from across Canada. Named for the Anishinaabe concept *debwe*, meaning "to speak the truth," the series showcases both established and new Indigenous writers and editors producing and publishing stories from their communities, experiences, and cultures.

Series Editor: Niigaanwewidam Sinclair PhD.,
Department of Native Studies, University of Manitoba

A Blanket of Butterflies, by Richard Van Camp

Fire Starters, by Jen Storm

The Gift Is in the Making: Anishinaabeg Stories,
by Leanne Simpson

*Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis,
and Inuit issues in Canada*, by Chelsea Vowel

Manitowapow: Aboriginal Writings from the Land of Water,
Niigaanwewidam Sinclair and Warren Cariou, editors

Perception: A Photo Series, by KC Adams

The Stone Collection, by Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm

Surviving the City, by Tasha Spillett

Three Feathers, by Richard Van Camp

*As Adams shows through this incredible exhibition of faces and feelings,
we are beautiful, whole, and complex peoples irreducible to stereotypes and slander.*

– Romeo Saganash (Cree, father, activist, and dreamer)



THE DEBWE SERIES

Artist KC Adams's Perception Photo Series first appeared on billboards, in storefronts, in bus shelters, and projected on Winnipeg's downtown buildings. The photographs confronted common stereotypes about First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people to reveal the contemporary truth. Gathered here in the book *Perception: A Photo Series*, Adams's images will inspire viewers to act against prejudice of all kinds.




HIGHWATER
PRESS

highwaterpress.com