

Exhibition Essay: Line / Space Continuum

By Carling Spinney

The theory of “spacetime” is the combination of space (consisting of three dimensions: height, width, and length) and time (the fourth dimension) to create one universe, or continuum. *Line / Space Continuum* takes its name from this concept. However, in this instance, artist Quinn Smallboy combines space, line, and time to create a universe of minimalist artwork that includes photographs, sculpture, and drawings.

Smallboy is a current MFA student at the University of Western Ontario. Interdisciplinary by practice, Smallboy is best known for rope installations and sculptures. Originally from Moose Factory, ON, he initially moved to London, ON, to complete his BFA. As Smallboy advances into his second year of the MFA program, he continues to investigate what it means to be a contemporary, indigenous artist in the present moment. But the artist’s work is informed by more than just the present—it also points to both the past and the future. For example, sculptures from the drum ring series make reference to traditional indigenous symbols: sacred, ceremonial drums. Because of their traditional role, the drums are rooted in the past yet extend into the current moment. Traditions are timeless—they are what we choose to continually remember in the present, thereby securing their place in the future as well. In this way, the drum ring series reflects a fluid interaction between past, present, and future. This sense of continuity is then emphasized by rope lines, themselves continuous trajectories through time.

“Symbols certainly play a big role in my work. It’s an area of my practice that I put much consideration into as many Indigenous symbols are sacred and forbidden ... Using such icons, I am able to create a dialogue of what influences the way Indigenous peoples are affected by time and change.”

Symbols of indigenous culture are integral to Smallboy’s practice. He uses commercially accessible—and decidedly non-traditional—materials to subvert common indigenous symbols. According to the artist, “Many of these symbols serve a ceremonial purpose and, therefore, are not to be taken lightly. At the same time, I find engaging ways to create a dynamic piece of work. The most common symbols I use in my work are the Teepee and the hand drum structure, also known as the drum ring.” In this regard, there is a clear influence by fellow contemporary artist Brian Jungen (b.1970). Jungen frequently merges commercial and indigenous icons, commenting on traditions of corruption and acculturation in society.

While Smallboy’s indigenous heritage certainly plays a crucial role in his practice, not all of his work engages with such themes. His ink drawings, for example, are based on architectural structures. However, the building is removed, leaving only intersecting lines behind. What, then, is the

drawing *of*? On a fundamental level, it renders lines existing in space. The original building itself exists in time, witnessing change and enduring the physical effects of time. Susceptible to its eventual erasure, the building is removed from the drawing visually. It is still there, but subtly—invisibly.

The artist notes that, at times, it is as if he has two separate artistic practices: one explores indigenous culture while the other is divorced from such subject matter. This binary emphasizes Smallboy's ultimate question of what it means to a contemporary, indigenous artist. Of course, this duality does not consist of mutually exclusive categories. Rather than accepting stagnant classifications, Smallboy considers these typical labels more akin to amorphous descriptors, refusing to settle in any one place. Such categorical markers soon appear invalid, if not useless. The artist's bi-fold practice embodies many more fluid binaries as well. For instance, the diversity of mediums used parallels a diversity of binaries, including: absence/presence, materiality/immateriality, and calm/tension. The sculpture *Yellow + White + Red* is an example of the latter binary. Pared down materials, most often wood and nylon rope, offer a sense of calm, yet the taut rope conveys a sense of tension. Additionally, many layers of intersecting, colourful rope create complexity, disrupting Smallboy's straightforward minimalism.

"A common ground between the indigenous subject matter and the minimalist aesthetic in my artistic practice is the use of rope and its characteristics. Such a material links the two sides of my practice with a duality that activates discussion."

Many of the artist's works have a distinct meditative quality. Indeed, his creative process is often guided by intuition and chance. When creating one of his signature rope installations, Smallboy is primarily guided by instinct. The lines do not carve out planes of space; instead, they respond to the surrounding space, making the invisible visible. *Mask*, a sculpture from the drum ring series, further exemplifies the artist's affinity to chance. Smallboy allows the natural gravitational pull to shape his sculpture. The ropes hang from the wooden ring organically. Receptive to chance inspiration, the artist will occasionally toss rope around his studio just to see what forms might appear. He is receptive to chance inspiration. This intuitive approach opens up the potential for infinite possibilities—for both artistic production and object interpretation. He remarks, "A good portion of my practice relies on placing material in ways I see fit. Working this way allows me to be very active with my work. It's an engaging process and sometimes a laborious one."

But it is *Line Morphing* that is at the crux of *Line / Space Continuum*. The sculpture's multiple ropes represent the theme of continuity that runs through the exhibition. The ropes are perpetually caught in an extended moment that encompasses past and future, continually suspended in time and space. The many ropes are bookended by two white, wooden blocks, as if a chunk of the spacetime continuum was excised from the universe itself for our contemplation. *Line Morphing* also illustrates formalist qualities such as form and sightlines,

while simultaneously representing continuous narratives and perspectives; all of which hurtle through space and time together, yet always remain separate from one another.

Increasingly, Smallboy is exploring the medium of photography in his practice. The two photographs included in this exhibition, *Line Spacing I* and *II*, signal this new territory. These two works also underline Fred Sandback's (1943-2003) influence on Smallboy's practice. Best known for his yarn sculptures, prints, and drawings, Sandback also worked in a minimalist

"We need to see more Indigenous artists achieve greater recognition in the contemporary art world."

aesthetic. Of course, line continues to underpin Smallboy's new, photographic work. While the photographs included here picture rope installations that also function apart from the photographs, in the future, Smallboy plans to create line installations and sets solely for the purpose of the photograph.

The spacetime continuum endures, and with it, countless realms of continued artistry. Visitors to exhibitions are perhaps comparable to intergalactic travellers—they visit distant and varied artistic continuums, each with their own dialect and conventions. Smallboy's minimalist world of line, space, and time is but one of many, yet it carves out a distinct place. *Line / Space Continuum* offers a place of quietude, of contemplation. We are invited to consider the questions that drive Smallboy's practice—questions that need to exist in past, present, and future.