

Unsettling the Homestead

KELLY KING

Unsettling the Homestead was an exhibit that examined settler colonialism in the Maritimes, including my personal genealogy and the Mi'kmaq histories of the Stewiacke Valley. This work came from research I conducted, which investigated the origins of my paternal grandmother's side of my family and how my ancestors came to arrive in Mi'kma'ki—what is now known as Nova Scotia.

My paternal grandmother, Kelly Banks, was born and raised in Stewiacke, Nova Scotia; she passed away before I was born. Being her namesake, my initial curiosity for this project began with her. I travelled to Nova Scotia to stay with family and learn more about her life along the Stewiacke River. My inquiries led me to the central region of Nova Scotia, extending all along the Shubenacadie River system, and to histories going as far back as the 1700s. During this research, I spent most of my time at various kitchen tables, collecting stories of the Banks family farm and the land around it. I heard stories of the Mi'kmaq who stayed on the banks of the Stewiacke River during my great-grandfather's time and of the interactions that my family had with them as far back as ten generations. Without the assistance of the Mi'kmaq of the region, or the land that my family was granted by the British Crown, my settler ancestors could not have thrived in Mi'kma'ki in the ways they did.

Mi'kma'ki has been inhabited since time immemorial by the Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, and Passamaquoddy people. It is a place of complex politics, treaties, trade relationships, and deep spiritual connections to the land. On top of larger colonial narratives of *terra nullius* (empty land) and the Doctrine of Discovery, settler history in Mi'kma'ki is—more often than not—void of stories of displacement, attempted assimilation, and extreme violence against these Indigenous nations. In my work, it was impor-



The artist, Kelly King, working on the braided rug component to the exhibit, *Unsettling the Homestead* (2017).

tant for me to balance family narratives with the history of settler colonialism in Mi'kma'ki. Using autoethnography as a research method, I placed family stories into the historical context of colonization in Nova Scotia.

Beginning in the 1720s, the British entered into a series of Peace and Friendship Treaties with the Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, and Passamaquoddy nations. None of these negotiations of Peace and Friendship ever included the ceding of any Indigenous lands. Instead, they were meant to lay the groundwork for peaceful and mutually beneficial relations in the region. The British Crown was never granted the right to divide and give land to incoming settlers from other colonies. Therefore, my ancestors settled on land that was not theirs to settle; this implicates me in legacies of settler colonialism and violence on the land.

The exhibit, entitled *Unsettling the Homestead*, was modeled in the likeness

of an East Coast kitchen. I wanted to recreate the intimate feeling of the kitchens where I conducted my research, learned these stories, and experienced the rich oral history of my family. I hoped to create a space where visitors could pour themselves a cup of tea, reflect on the family stories playing audibly through speakers throughout the space, and make connections to their own histories and family spaces. By repurposing crafts traditionally present in settler homes, such as braided rugs, cross-stitches, and quilts, I aimed to reframe these arts that have been passed down through generations and interrogate what it means to be a settler on Indigenous land.

A major aspect of my research was to look into the creation of braided rugs in Nova Scotia. Braided rugs can be found in most maritime homes, but their histories are much older than that of Nova Scotia. Settlers of New England began making them from old fabrics

when confronted with the harsh winters of the 'New World.' They repurposed worn-out clothing and other heavy fabrics, weaving them together into rugs that would, economically, keep cold drafts out of their homes. My Planter ancestors (New England settlers) would have brought this knowledge with them when they moved into the Stewiacke Valley. I began the process of making such a rug, to emulate the one that my Grandma Kelly made herself.

By unwinding several coils from the outer edges of Grandma Kelly's rug, I salvaged the old strands for my own work. Incorporating this old fabric was a long and arduous task of unbraiding her work, watching years of dirt fall from its weave, and finding holes in the fabric where the rug had been worn down by years of wear and tear. After hours of unbraiding, I was left with hundreds of feet of fabric strips, all with different textures, colours, and stories attached to them. They came from my Grandma's friends, neighbours, and family, and they took years for her to collect. I collected my own fabric from

friends and family, including clothing from Grandma Kelly's other grandchildren, to weave together with hers.

By unbraiding, washing, and re-braiding her fabric, I was able to give new life to much of it. It was a process of re-strengthening the fabric and, by extension, re-strengthening the stories attached to it. This work became a metaphor for the re-telling of family stories: I was finding the holes in our stories, but by folding and sewing them together again, they were re-strengthened for future generations of our family. Creating this one long braid became a process of weaving my ancestors with our current family members; the three strands representing the past, present, and future. This meditative work allowed me to process much of the deep history that I was wrapped into during this research.

For the exhibit, I suspended the braid from the ceiling of the room and periodically moved it throughout the space to reflect the nature of oral histories that were playing in the kitchen. It was a way of acknowledging the biases within these stories and how they

slightly change depending on the storyteller, time, and greater context. Oral histories have a tendency of moving and bending with their surroundings, impacted by the space they are within. I aimed to create a space that you could not enter without being touched, both emotionally and physically, by the stories. While listening and re-listening to these stories, I was able to put my reflections and thoughts directly into the weaving, combining modern stories with the older fabrics and deeper histories with fabrics from our current generation.

The act of braiding does not warrant hasty actions. Every crossing of fabrics must be thoughtful, gentle yet firm, calculated yet inquisitive. Every fabric must complement the ones it is being woven with, and they all must stagger in a way that looks seamless. With each motion, I learned more about my ancestors and became more confident in my ability to complete the arduous task. There is a gentle strength in braided rugging, both in the creation as well as the end product. There is a



Unsettling the Homestead aimed to recreate the feel of a Nova Scotian kitchen, while showcasing the intersecting histories and narratives of the land it is situated upon.

calmness in the action but a durability in the time and labour that the process demands.

In addition to the braided rug, I also incorporated cross-stitching and quilting into the exhibit. To create the cross-stitch, I found examples of traditional cross-stitch designs and crafted my own image around the foundational aspects of traditionally designed cross-stitch “samplers.” I noticed that these samplers almost always displayed the date and the name of a location, had a flowered border, and showcased a form of European settlement or presence. From these traditional samplers, I designed a cross-stitch pattern to emulate the layered histories of the land where the Banks farm stands.

Through conversations with my family, I learned about historically significant items found in and on the land around the Banks farm. My great-grandfather often found arrowheads while tilling the land, many of which my family still has. Neighbours of the Banks farm also found stashes of Acadian coins around their homes. Acadians purposefully buried these coins in strategic places within their farmlands just prior to their violent expulsion in 1755, in the hope that they could one day return and retrieve their savings. Very few, if any, were able to return to their original homes as it was another thirty years before Acadians were allowed to return to Nova Scotia, finding many of their settlements now occupied by American settlers and Loyalists.

Starting from the bottom and layering these histories vertically in the cross-stitch, a row of arrowheads is followed by a row of Acadian coins and stars. These items not only exemplify the physical layers of history of the land, they also represent waves of communities pushed from the land through processes of colonial imposition.

The next layer of the cross-stitch is the word “Sipekne’katik,” which means “the place where the wild potatoes grow.” It is the name of the Mi’kmaq political district where Stewiacke and Shubenacadie (its anglicized name) now stand, and it stretches across a large portion of inland Nova Scotia. Sipekne’katik is a very significant meeting place, trade



Sediment or Settlement (2017)
Counted Cross-stitch sampler
11 x 20"

route, and negotiating region due to its proximity to the Stewiacke and Shubenacadie tributaries. This river system is the only tidal river system in Nova Scotia that runs directly across the

province, from the Bay of Fundy to the Atlantic Ocean, making it an ideal location to hold political negotiations, trade, hunt, fish, and gather with other communities.

Above the place name are layers of the Banks farm. Here, horses, cows, corn, and a replica of the Banks farmhouse are presented, with the date “1881” stitched at the top. This is the year when my great-grandfather was officially signed as the owner of this land, which the British Crown had stolen and passed on to settlers through overt colonial policies. The Stewiacke tidal river is represented in front of the Banks farmhouse, as a prominent fixture in both Indigenous and settler relationships and dependence on the land.

Lastly, the flowered border of the piece is that of the s'gepn—the wild potato plant that the territory is named after. The wild potato was a key staple in Mi'kmaq diets and still grows in marshy regions of the Shubenacadie tributary.

The third and last artistic element of *Unsettling the Homestead* was my

great-grandmother's quilt, hung with a number of family photos placed in its gridded pattern. The photos displayed three generations of the Banks family enjoying daily life on the homestead. I attached these black and white photos of my ancestors with one small alteration: the land in each photo was animated with colour. I wanted to show how, if you actually unsettled the homestead, the land would remain virtually the same. This piece also commented on who is missing from the images. Narratives of *terra nullius* were prominent in both North America and Europe during the colonization of Mi'kma'ki, declaring that this 'new land' was empty of inhabitants—before colonial powers encroached into the region. It was the violent beginning of the attempted erasure of Indigenous peoples from the land that is now called Canada. Giving agency back to the land also warranted the inclusion of plants that are integral to the area. Once again, s'gepn was represented in this work, weaving its way up the settler home and along the Stewi-

acke River. The image of s'gepn turned into a symbol of the histories that are more profoundly rooted in that place than those of my ancestors. As was the case with each work of art in the exhibit, the aim of the edited farm photos was to encourage the viewer to reconsider the unsettling nature of the imagery.

Utilizing traditional settler crafts, *Unsettling the Homestead* provided familiarity for many people who visited the exhibit, but it also created space where people could feel unsettled in the comfortable. The aim of this project was to disturb notions of planting, homesteading, and settling by investigating and critiquing my personal positions within these narratives. By combining traditional English art forms with modern multi-media art forms, the exhibit worked to braid stories and experiences from multiple generations in order to critique ideas of what it means to clear land, homestead, and settle.



Our Home on Native Land (2017)

Edited photographs affixed to hand-stitched quilt. Quilt made in 1915 by artist's great-grandmother Edith Augusta Banks. 70" x 88"

