**Clara Ursitti: Amik**

24 June 2022 – 26 January 2023

Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow

In a small, round room at Glasgow’s Gallery of Modern Art a wooden pole dissects the space above head height. Over this pole, hanging heavily, is a work whose title deftly describes its form. *One of the largest castor glands I have ever seen* (2022), ostensibly a mixed-media sculpture with sound, is a gargantuan set of (what appear to be) beaver testicles, convincingly made of recycled leather jackets. As the last work in a large solo show it is an incongruous and comedic conclusion to a sobering exhibition by Glasgow-based Canadian artist Clara Ursitti, exploring the connections between Scotland and Canada through the historic fur trading of beaver pelts. The exhibition’s title is translated as ‘beaver’ in Algonquin and Ojibwe languages and it can be seen as a defining symbol of the relationship between colonial settlers and indigenous communities and their land.

Since the mid-1990s, Ursitti’s expansive practice has encompassed handmade sculptural objects, found objects, film and video, sound, installation, performance and (most notably) scent-based interventions. The sound element of *One of the largest castor glands I have ever seen* invokes scent in a jarring attempt at synaesthesia, whereby the voice of a seductive, French-accented woman describes various epicurean delights while the audience stare at the unlikely source of these pleasures: castoreum, a natural food flavouring used to replace vanilla, is harvested from beaver glands. This history formed Ursitti’s starting point for *Amik*. The by-product of trapping, castoreum has also been used to scent tobacco and perfume and is used as a hunting lure. In the artist’s hands, it forms a subversive base note to an exhibition examining human, animal and botanic migration.

The exhibition venue, once the Royal Exchange Building, provides further context for the exhibitions’ themes. Amongst the objects on display many reveal Scotland’s colonial history including *The Woolsack* (2022), Hudson Bay blankets of Perthshire wool and fleece, a 1967 advert for the blankets, and an antique print reproduction of *The Right Hon. Lord Chancellor on the Woolsack* (1858). In *Important People (*2022) hats made of silk, beaver felt, birchbark, deer skin and spruce root also recall colonial legacies. The blankets are perhaps the most poignant symbols — in one of two major film and sound installations which form the centre of the exhibition, the artist and her interviewees debate the veracity of widely-circulated claims that the British deliberately used smallpox-infected Hudson Bay blankets to subdue First Nation people as part of the colonial project in the 1700s.

The works themselves, *Not Land. Not Water* (2022) and *A Space for Listening. A Space for Future Exchange* (2020-22) record Ursitti’s research residency with White Water Gallery in North Bay, Canada, and visits to Nipissing Nation Territory (where the artist was born) and the Teme Augama-Anishnabai Nation Reserve where she spoke with elders, trappers and community workers. Against the historical context of the objects and displays, the films present a contemporary portrait of traditional economies and ways of living on and from the land, the men’s deep understanding of biodiversity, of what can be eaten, foraged, exchanged, which animal is prey for another, and who wins or loses in such survival tactics earning.

In the 45-min video installation, *A Space for Listening. A Space for Future Exchange*, the screen is flanked by a felled tree whose smell infuses the space. The images show the trapper’s land from moving vehicles, on foot and from interior windows. Arial drone footage shows the sheer scale of the territory. Expanses of forest, snow, lakes and rivers are overlaid with running commentary and conversation offering meaningful insights into the lives of First Nation people and their relationship with the environment.

In the last few years Glasgow Life, which manages eleven museum sites in the city, has attempted to begin much-needed work on decolonising Glasgow’s collections, making visible Scotland’s legacies of colonialism and empire. *Amik* handles such aims with care. Ursitti’s work is elucidatory without slipping into didacticism, presenting its subjects and objects with respect and close attention to both form and content. The films balance a mesmeric, meditative representation of landscape which can appear abstract in its sheer scale, as *Not Land. Not Water* demonstrates. In the artist’s efforts to creating a genuine ‘space for listening’, her own voice is largely absent. Rather, she foregrounds First Nation perspectives directly, allowing people who continue to be marginalised a place to speak and be heard.