

● Forum 88

Marie Watt:

LAND

STITCHES

WATER SKY

Carnegie

Museum

of Art

In her practice, Marie Watt purposefully collects materials that hold multiple, intertwined histories and personal narratives. Her studio brims with what she calls “a library of blankets,” vintage glass beads, blocks of cedar, steel offcuts—all things with which the sculptor has cultivated an intimate relationship, respecting their past lives and learning their transformative and plastic capacity.

The artist’s collection process is foundational to her sculptural experiments, and to her creation of forms that speak to both her Indigenous culture and heritage and an enduring legacy of Minimalism—an art movement that explored abstraction through industrial materials. Watt’s sculpture *Skywalker/Skyscraper (Dawn)* (2021), for example, is a monumental vertical form anchored by a steel beam, reminiscent of Minimalist works that emerged in the 1960s. Unlike the Minimalist artists before her, Watt, drawing on the cultural significance of her materials, envelopes the beam with a tower of blankets on a stack of cedar; the soft textile and fragrant lumber point to their own history as prized commodities at the heart of trade and colonial history in North America.

The title also announces an Indigenous history. The Skywalkers are the generations of Haudenosaunee ironworkers who walked the I beam skeletons of skyscrapers in New York City as much as they are a family of Jedi in the Hollywood blockbuster *Star Wars*. Picking up echoes of popular culture and holding Indigenous knowledge as a member of the Seneca Nation, Watt approaches steel—one of the most recycled metals—with a

curiosity toward working with the same material her ancestors once used to build today’s modern cities. Watt foregrounds the human relationships forged by objects, including an industrial remnant, such as an I beam.

In Pittsburgh and elsewhere, steel conjures an industrial legacy in a shifting global economy that has shaped its broad-reaching significance—as a site of labor struggles, a technological innovation, a symbol of modern infrastructure, and a cautionary tale of financial downturn. Having worked with steel I beams for over a decade, Watt remains attuned to what this metal alloy can connote. In her new sculptures, *Quilt (Legendary)* and *Quilt (Lost Thunder Chorus)*, presented as a pair of nested arcs, Watt uses the material as literal signifiers in a response to Western Pennsylvania’s industrial history and present-day concerns. Showcasing a range of size, color, and markings from its past use that makes each beam distinct, the arcs invite a close look at the text welded onto their surface. The inscription includes words that directly address steel production (*coal, blast, pollution*), human relations (*father, grandmother, sister*) and the natural environment (*river, sun, sky*). The beams, thus assembled, transmit words in ever-shifting permutations that stretch their meaning.

The artist refers to these sculptures as “quilts,” expansively regarding the welded steel fragments as similar to scraps of cloth stitched together. A careful look at these unusual quilts reveals a glass I beam accenting the otherwise metal form. Another material that shaped the industrial landscape of

Pittsburgh and urban skylines of metropolitan centers worldwide, glass holds Watt's interest in its seeming opposition to steel. The insertion of glass, with its perceived fragility, questions the symbolic solidity of steel, and, by extension, urban infrastructures that it undergirds. The glass addition is also a reminder, according to Watt, of an Indigenous weaving tradition that intentionally places an extra knot or a small gesture that disrupts the woven surface in an admission of the imperfection of human hands. This act of humility addresses limitations and possibilities of human-made materials and creations.

Watt's expansive conception of textiles extends to *Placeholder (Horizon)* and *Placeholder (Companion Species)*. On a pair of double-wide trade blankets, clear beads respectively outline the words "TRANSPORTATION OBJECT" and "MY NEIGHBOR" in a declaration of their purpose. For Watt, a blanket can physically and metaphorically transport people and their stories, and in the process, help forge, affirm, or evolve their relationships. Trade blankets have come to emblemize the early commerce and exchange of goods between Europeans and Indigenous peoples in North America, all the while holding harrowing histories of the spread of smallpox and resulting decimation of Indigenous populations. As prized gifts and heirlooms, trade blankets can hold difficult knowledge as well as comforting familial stories, making them a loaded and complex signifier. Weighed with this historical context and radiating with inviting warmth, Watt's beaded blankets

broadcast the artist's intention and desire to have her work connect across generations and places. The beaded letters that call out "my neighbor" is a prompt to forge a relation based not on a given, familial tie, but one that is created by a shared understanding that individuals collectively form a larger whole.

As a sculptor, Watt amplifies intersecting histories that each component in her work carries and shares the responsibility of their stewardship with those who encounter her art. Her works are points of connection in a practice that honors interconnectedness of all relations. The words "MY NEIGHBOR" beaded on a blanket and "WON'T YOU BE" welded on a steel I beam resound as an invitation to consider what it means to build a relationship.

—Liz Park, Richard Armstrong Curator of Contemporary Art

WON'T YOU BE

arc, arc

Marie Watt's I beam quilts are sculptures composed of steel offcuts. Inscribed on these reclaimed and patchworked planks are words: singular and repetitive, simple and complex, human and nonhuman, personal and regional, declarative and imploring, sparse and abundant. The created language emerges from the depths of each metal surface.

As part of her process, Watt collected fragments of text associated with Pittsburgh's industrial history and legacy. She invited community members of all ages to contribute to the collection of words. For over a year, Watt heard a multiplicity of voices of Carnegie Museum of Art's educators and the Pittsburgh Poetry Collective. Watt asked participants, "What's going on?" in our region to the symphonic stylings of Marvin Gaye. The workshops provided participants an opportunity to share their writing with the group and encouraged a multigenerational exchange. Words become both the medium and tool for constructing new vocabularies on the relationship between visual art and language.

Here, we present the word selection inspired by these groups of educators, poets, and artists welded onto Watt's work.

—Alyssa Velazquez, Assistant Curator

Silence Silence
Father
Legendary
Ore Ore
Extraction
Auntie
Lantern
Grandmother
Homestead
Mill Mill
They
Sacrifice
Black
Birch
Lung
Pride Pride
Tradition
Steel Steel
Steward
Natural Natural
Uncle
Sky Sky
Walker
Brother
Silence
Resource
Talk
Sister
Heirloom Heirloom
Hive Hive
Mother
Bobcat Bobcat
Garden

Brownfield
Community
Gather Gather
What's Going On
Grandfather
Water Water
Ghosts
Generations
Generations
Sapling Sapling
Grandmother
Step Step Step
Auntie Auntie
Air Air
Waste Waste
Father
Hill Hill
Mother
Bear Bear
Talk
Sister Sister
Pops
Elder Elder
Spirit
Wrought
Soot Soot
Darkness
War
Future
Scarcity
Ancestor
Cloud
We

Rain Rain Rain
Uncle
Labor Labor
Light Light
Bridge Bridge
We
Limestone Limestone
Pollution
Grandfather
Grandfather
Land
Mother Mother
Catenary
Father
Immigrant Immigrant
Family
Refuge Refuge
Brother Brother
Grandfather
Carbon Carbon
Grandmother
Sister
Library
Fire
Family Family
Archive
Plant Plant
Legacy
Rise Rise
Twin
Storyteller
Cycle
Recycle

Sun Sun
Songbird
Burden
My My
Neighbor Neighbor
Earth
Underground
Chorus Chorus
Won't You Be
Auntie
Railroad
Plateau Plateau
Coyote Coyote
Peregrine Falcon
Uncle
Timber Timber
Slip Slip Slip
Grouse Grouse
Deer Deer
Citizen
Firefly
Hemlock Hemlock
Collective
Ohi:yo'
Poet
Hearth
Allegheny
Grandfather
Steeler Steeler
Sister
Mother
Grandmother
Moon Moon

Coal
Skyscraper
Uncle
Ember Ember
Lost
Cake Cake
Auntie
Father
Flint
Landmark
Voice Voice
Brother
Iron
Thunder Thunder
Ancestor Ancestor
Hellbender
We We
Protest
Strike
Generator
Blast Blast
Glass Glass
River River
Furnace Furnace
Trade Trade
Monongahela
Vulnerable
Union Union

Exhibition Checklist

All works are by Marie Watt.
Marie Watt is represented by
PDX Contemporary Art, Portland,
OR; Catharine Clark Gallery,
San Francisco, CA; and Marc
Straus Gallery, New York, NY.

Placeholder (Horizon), 2024
reclaimed double long wool trade
blanket, Czech seed beads

***Placeholder (Companion
Species), 2024***
reclaimed double long wool trade
blanket, Czech seed beads

Quilt (Legendary), 2024
reclaimed steel I beams

Quilt (Lost Thunder Chorus), 2024
reclaimed steel I beams and
cast glass

On view in Scaife Collection Galleries:

Skywalker/Skyscraper (Dawn), 2021
reclaimed wool blankets, steel I
beam, cedar
Carnegie Museum of Art, The
Henry L. Hillman Fund, 2023.19

Programming

April 13, 3:30–5 p.m.

● **Carnegie Museum of Art, Art Theater**

Celebrate the opening of the exhibition by joining Marie Watt and her local collaborators in conversation. Museum art educators will present sensory activities inspired by the artist's practice.

This gallery brochure is published on the occasion of *Marie Watt: LAND STITCHES WATER SKY* organized by Liz Park, Richard Armstrong Curator of Contemporary Art, and Alyssa Velazquez, assistant curator, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, April 13 through September 29, 2024.

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4400 Forbes Avenue
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Erin Barnhart, Design and Publishing Studio Manager
Shaheen Qureshi, Associate Editor
Brette Richmond, Senior Designer

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Partnership workshops were made possible by Carnegie Museum of Art's educators and the Pittsburgh Poetry Collective, specifically the leadership of Lori Beth Jones with the participation of Cheney, Chris, Kevin B Complimnt, Donna Wojnar Dzurilla, Emily De Ferrari, Harly, Colter Harper, Kathleen Hellen, IncoMEplete, Jai, Gabby Kolencik, Trevone Quarrie, Sarah Rose, and Shockie.

The handwriting featured in this brochure and on Marie Watt's sculptures *Quilt (Legendary)* and *Quilt (Lost Thunder Chorus)* is by Pittsburgh's creative community, including the 5th grade class at Winchester Thurston School and Carnegie Museum of Art staff.

Forum Gallery presents the work of living artists in an ongoing series that invites them to expand their practice through a commission or new presentation of existing works. Initiated in 1990, and with 88 projects to date, the Forum series is an opportunity for artists to deepen their relationship to and understanding of the museum.

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