

Nico Williams

*The Gift*

With the participation of Stevi Riley and Burlington Tooshkenig

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An Anicinabe artist based in Tiohtià:ke/ Monymy'yank / Montreal, Nico Williams draws on the traditional art of beadwork to create sculptural pieces rooted in representations of our contemporary realities, heavily shaped by the legacy and impacts of colonialism—particularly through the reproduction of consumer objects. Intrigued by the bankruptcy of the Hudson's Bay Company in the spring of 2025, the artist undertook extensive research that led him to uncover the close ties between Indigenous communities in North America and the first French settlers.

Deeply affected by the violence of colonial history—through the appropriation of land, resources, and the bodies of Indigenous peoples—he continues a creative practice in which he denounces this dispossession with candor and a certain irreverence toward convention. This exhibition, *The Gift*, will be an opportunity for him to share knowledge and deepen an understanding of the historical and contemporary connections among the various nations across the territory.

In 2025, Nico Williams initiated a collaboration with artist Stevi Riley, based in Bkejwanong ("where the waters divide," formerly known as Walpole Island), and connected to neighbouring Aamjiwnaang ("at the spawning stream"). At the time, Williams was researching the many recorded spellings and archival traces of the Anishinaabe nation across territories spanning over 8 million acres in the United States (Detroit, 1807) and 2.2 million acres near Sarnia, Canada (Amherstburg, 1827).

He invited Riley to create medallions based on seventeen recorded names of the Anishinaabe. In response, she developed distinct woven patterns informed by these narratives, translating archival fragmentation into material form. Guidance for the project is provided by Linda Grussani, ensuring the work remains grounded in ongoing Anishinaabe stories and lived knowledge.

This collaborative project supports broader efforts to rebuild nationhood, address histories of displacement, and celebrate contemporary Anishinaabek/Neshnabék *mamazinibii'igewein* (First Nations art practices). Williams also invited Burl Tooshkenig to respond to the otterbox pattern, an important geometric motif in Anishinaabe visual culture. This is the pattern painted on the wall.

The exhibition *The Gift* brings together artifacts, beaded works, and sculptures that reflect the relationships and cultures of exchange between First Peoples and early French settlers. Beyond the political dimension of his art, Nico Williams emphasizes the richness of materials, as well as the color and brilliance of the beads. He invites visitors, as he once was, to fall in love with the art of beadwork and the cultural knowledge it carries.