

Presented by Latcham Art Centre

Relative Gradient

Vanessa Dion Fletcher



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Front cover:

Vanessa Dion Fletcher, *Two Hoops* (detail), 2022, Quillwork on paper, 11 x 15 in.
Courtesy of the artist.

Relative Gradient

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Traditions rarely remain the same. As young generations learn their craft, they transform its methods and materials little by little, moving legacies into the future.

For *Relative Gradient*, Vanessa Dion Fletcher presents recent quillworks that exist alongside, and have a kinship with, her study of the Lenape language. Allowing her geometric patterns to inform the creation of large-scale photographs, sculptures, and performances, the artist carries this tradition forward, lending new energy to an art form and language.

Leading Lines

On July 14, 2022, when I entered Vanessa Dion Fletcher's shared studio for the first time, nearly every surface was dotted with remnants of her creative process. We sat together at a central worktable, and I looked around, taking it all in. My eyes wandering over the three-quarter-height walls that divvied up her space from other artists' spaces. Sketches and material tests were tacked up with green tape. Glossy photos rested on thin metal shelves and ledges. Small Ziplock baggies filled with dyed porcupine quills added pale dandelion yellow and hibiscus purple to the dull drywall. Hung side by side, these bits and pieces from past works and works to come clearly had relationships with one another, but the conceptual lines that linked them weren't immediately clear.

Relative Gradient takes its cues from Dion Fletcher's studio. It borrows her studio's sense of material play and experimentation; it similarly highlights the beauty (and necessity) of working slowly, using non-linear modes of thinking and alternative ways of learning; and it groups artworks together in a way that reveals conceptual linkages, ones that might make us consider more complex interpretations of the works.

Focusing on her tabletop, Dion Fletcher pulled out materials for a work in progress: a tiny pair of scissors shaped like a stork, a small case of dyed porcupine

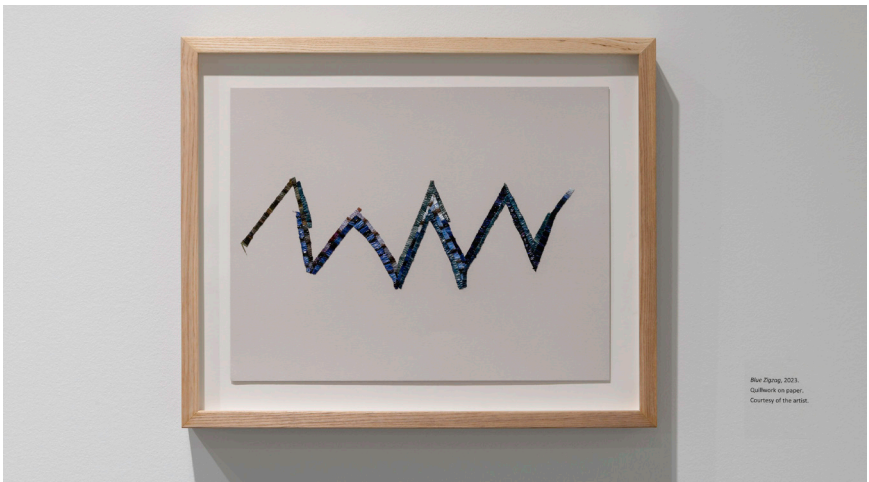
quills, and a sheet of paper with half a quillwork on it. She explained how the quillworks come to fruition, from sourcing porcupine quills, to experimenting with natural and synthetic dyes, to processing them for embroidery. The quills must be soaked in warm water to be flexible enough to flatten and bend. Only then can they be tacked onto the paper with a needle and thread. All in all, the process is inexorably slow. But giving in to this pace has real benefits: it allows for time to think through the artistic process, to honour this Indigenous artform, and realize connections between the artwork being made and other parts of the larger practice.

Behind me, on a table outside of her designated space, Dion Fletcher had laid out completed quillworks (at the time, she was preparing for the 2022 Toronto Outdoor Art Fair). As we walked toward them, chatting while looking down at the framed pieces, her studio space was now squarely in front of us and the conceptual lines between her quillworks and other works became clear. On the back wall of her studio, she had pasted an enlarged vinyl quillwork. As I followed the stitches with my eyes, the hoop's gradient shifted from yellow to pale purple to black and back again, almost emblematic of change. To the right of it, part of a white quillwork-patterned garment was hanging. In manipulating the quill patterns scale and function, she lends new energy to an artform and carries that tradition forward through transformation.

At Latcham, the quillworks sit in the southeast corner of the Gallery with sightlines to other works in the space. From here, traces of her intricate stitches are visible as patterns in those

works. *Blue Zigzag* (2023) is an enlarged photo of a quillwork with the same name, blown up to ten times its original size, so that details of the stitching process highlight the power of slow, attentive working. In the centre of the Gallery stands *Relative Saturation* (2023), the second iteration of a sculpture made for a performance in 2021 at Shallmar Parkette, Toronto¹. Both sculptures contain enlarged versions of an original double-hoop quillwork, also called *Relative Saturation*. By making these works monumental, the artist shifts our physical relationship to her work and allows space to ask what happens when traditional techniques and materials that are usually experienced intimately now occupy more space than we do.

Before the original performance at Shallmar Parkette, the artist had a garment made using a repeating pattern from one of her quillworks. During the performance, she donned the garment and suspended glass jars and vessels from the sculpture, filling them with natural dyes made from edible plants: hibiscus,



Vanessa Dion Fletcher, *Blue Zigzag*, 2023, Quillwork on paper, 11 x 14 in. Photo: Dennis Hristovski.



Installation shot of *Relative Gradient* by Vanessa Dion Fletcher. Photo: Dennis Hristovski.

blueberry, marigold, and onion skins. The artist posed and stretched out under the sculpture, and as the jars slowly dripped their contents onto her body, they stained the black and white fabric a vibrant fuchsia. *Relative Saturation* took the process of dyeing porcupine quills and transferred it to the body; this gesture helped to manifest the question of how bodies are defined physically and culturally, a question that Dion Fletcher has investigated in her practice for some time.

The conversations that happened between her works, despite the diverse materials and different times they were made, had me thinking critically about them all in the context of one another. Each time I thought about one, I instinctively found a connection to another and another, each time looping back to other works with an idea from the last that enriched it. As we chatted about

the potential of her exhibition, this interconnectedness gently helped to rule out the idea of a traditional show – one that focused on a single, complete body of work – because severing the entanglements that Dion Fletcher had crafted seemed to limit the possibilities of the group.

Alongside her studio work Dion Fletcher is studying the Lenape language, the implications of which encompass more than words and grammar. An oral language, speaking and learning Lenape is intricately entwined with community². It acts as a conveyor of histories, culture, and identity, and it functions as a means to comprehend and embody the intricacies of cultural heritage. In this light, like her quillworks, sculptures, and performances, learning Lenape is an essential part of Dion Fletcher's investigation into how culture is expressed and defined.

When the artist creates versions of her artworks in new media, or re-examines them in different ways, she is subtly acquainting us with atypical methods of learning³. For her, slowness is at once an attempt to disarm a derogatory term aimed at those who think differently, and also a pace of working that allows for deeper understanding. But if we can accept that making is a form of questioning and knowing, then Dion Fletcher's overarching practice subverts the Western idea that learning is linear – that we should learn a thing, and know all of it, and then move on to the next thing without going back. This conceptual loop, where she investigates a material or an idea, experimenting with its forms, then brings those processes into a new material, are crucial to addressing questions of personal identity. As Dion Fletcher's works sit next to each other, on the same wall or in the same room, they enrich and influence each other. When we recognize that influence, the leading lines that connect each

work together become visible, looping from one to another in playful and atypical ways.

- T.D.

Footnotes

1. The performance *Relative Saturation* (2021) is on view on the east wall of the gallery, and contains the original sculpture made from wood and printed vinyl. The 2023 version of *Relative Saturation* was remade with dibond aluminum, steel, and printed vinyl.
2. I am paraphrasing from personal conversations with Vanessa Dion Fletcher planning stages for this exhibition (2022-2023) and from her 2021 interview with Max Ferguson, entitled "Finding language: A word Scavenger Hunt," originally published in *Studies in Social Justice*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 180–183. Available online here <https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v15i2.2663>.
3. Baumer, Nicole, and Julia Frueh. "What Is Neurodiversity?" *Harvard Medical School*, Harvard Health Publishing, 23 Nov. 2021, www.health.harvard.edu/blog/what-is-neurodiversity-202111232645.



About the Artist

Vanessa Dion Fletcher is a Lenape and Potawatomi neurodiverse Artist; her family is from Eelūnaapèewii Lahkèewiitt (displaced from Lenapehoking) and European settlers. She uses porcupine quills, Wampum belts, and menstrual blood to reveal the complexities of what defines a body physically and culturally. Reflecting on an Indigenous and gendered body with a neurodiverse mind, Dion Fletcher primarily works in performance, textiles and video.

She graduated from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2016 with an MFA in performance and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from York University in 2009. She has exhibited across Canada and the USA at Art Mur Montreal, Eastern Edge Gallery Newfoundland, The Queer Arts Festival Vancouver and the Satellite Art show in Miami. Her work is in the Indigenous Art Centre, Joan Flasch Artist Book Collection, Vtape, Seneca College, Global Affairs Canada and the Archives of American Art.

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