

Kristin L. Dowell

Lindsay McIntyre: Indigenous Handmade Cinema

There is always the mark of me as a maker in my works.
—Lindsay McIntyre¹

Lindsay McIntyre is an award-winning analog experimental filmmaker of Inuit and Scottish heritage who has made over forty short films in the last twenty years. She has contributed a body of knowledge to the practice of silver gelatin emulsion for motion picture film. In this essay, I explore how her analog filmmaking practice indigenizes handmade cinema as she breaks settler colonial silences to recuperate her Inuit matrilineal family history through film. Making her own film stock is an act of creative sovereignty and a way to reclaim 16mm film from the apparatus of the film industry while exerting control over the means of production. This is an especially powerful and salient reclamation given the long history of misrepresentation and extractive practices of the dominant film industry with regard to Indigenous stories and knowledge. There is a rich materiality to her films as her high-contrast 16mm film stock shows textures and marks of her own hand while also bearing the traces of the environmental conditions under which the film footage was shot including on her traditional territory in Qamani'tuaq (Baker Lake), Nunavut. I argue that McIntyre's inventive celluloid-based

1 Robert Enright, "The Hand Made's Tale: An Interview with Lindsay McIntyre," *Border Crossings* 38, no. 4 (December 2019): 59–67.

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artistic practice reveals 16mm film to be a dynamic and vibrant medium that speaks to an Indigenous creative resurgence while reflecting Inuit principles around resourcefulness and innovation.

McIntyre's commitment to analog practices as a maker of emulsions has deepened the global movement of artist-driven, experimental, and handmade cinematic practice as well as Indigenous film practice. There are other Indigenous filmmakers who utilize 16mm film, such as Alexandra Lazarowich for *Lake* (2019), Rhayne Vermette for the feature film *Ste. Anne* (2021), and Alanis Obomsawin for her vast filmography, including the groundbreaking film *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993). That McIntyre was the cinematographer for *Lake* and was one of five cinematographers for *Ste. Anne* speaks to her prominence within the Indigenous film world, where she's known for her exceptional skill with 16mm. Many other filmmakers rely on commercially made 16mm film and commercial labs for film processing (instead of hand-processing their own film as McIntyre often does). Their films have also been produced on a larger scale and with the support of the National Film Board of Canada or other national film funding agencies and institutions.

McIntyre was first trained in painting and drawing, and she turned to filmmaking with a creative interest in pushing the material limits of film itself. In an interview she explains, "I came to film from drawing and scratching on the film to seeing what I could do to change its physical properties and push up against boundaries."² She is part of a wider artist movement of process cinema and handmade cinema. Film scholars Scott MacKenzie and Janine Marchessault define *process cinema* as "a creative tradition in alternative filmmaking that is unscripted, improvisational, participatory, and based on the manipulation of the very materiality of film."³ McIntyre's interest in pushing the limits of the material possibilities of film align her within the community of non-commercial, experimental, and avant-garde filmmakers who have utilized 16mm film as their artistic materials. What differentiates McIntyre's filmmaking practice is her engagement with these materials through her unique visual sensibilities, which are informed by her learned and embedded Inuit values, and narratives that privilege Inuit stories.

While experimental filmmakers have long utilized 16mm film, there are far fewer filmmakers who make their own emulsions. This is a very time-consuming and labor-intensive process that McIntyre first became involved with as a response to Kodak's abrupt discontinuance of her favorite film stock. The short documentary *Handmade Film* (Christina Ienna, 2017) is a compelling portrait of McIntyre's process in which she notes that it often takes her three days to make an emulsion resulting in a medium-sized batch of about five hundred feet of film, with thirty or forty feet being used to test while the remaining footage contains about nine to thirteen minutes of actual film time available for a project. She is drawn to the improvisation, alchemy, and spontaneity of the practice of handmade emulsions. The

2 Enright, 61.

3 Scott MacKenzie and Janine Marchessault, eds., *Process Cinema: Handmade Film in the Digital Age* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), 3.

process of making her own emulsions and affixing them to stock is an act of self-determination and reclamation of this cinematic artistic material, of wresting it from the industrial and commercial apparatus to make it her own. There is creative sovereignty in this act, and McIntyre draws a connection between Inuit self-reliance and her own independence as a filmmaker making handmade emulsions, stating, “I think that film is my material practice in the way that paint might be for a painter or beadwork might have been for my grandmother.”⁴ I argue that this is also reflective of *qanuqtuurunnarniq*, one of the guiding principles of Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit, described by Inuk art historian and scholar Heather Igloliorte as “the complex matrix of Inuit environmental knowledge, societal values, cosmology, world views, and language.”⁵ *Qanuqtuurunnarniq* is the ability to be innovative and resourceful, to improvise, and to make creative use of the materials that you have to solve problems.⁶ McIntyre’s commitment to crafting handmade emulsions speaks to this resourcefulness; she adapts to the challenge of losing access to a commercial film stock by creating her own, enabling fierce self-sufficiency in her analog filmmaking practice.

The high-contrast black-and-white film stock that McIntyre creates for her film projects bear the marks of her own hand, the particular environmental conditions under which the film footage was shot, and how the emulsion was made. In an interview McIntyre explained, “When I’m using film it’s a locational experience—it’s a record of me being in a place in time in a very specific way. It’s a coming together of me and the place and the environment along with the emulsion or tools that I have at my disposal. I think of making films with handmade emulsion very much as a collaboration.”⁷ Besides the chemistry itself, factors in the process of making emulsions that can impact the visual qualities of the 16mm film include the temperature, how long or how fast it is stirred, what type of gelatin is used, humidity, and how it adheres to or coats the stock. All of these variables impact the contrast, tone, sharpness, and sensitivity, which are characteristics that affect the range of whites and blacks in the final images seen on-screen.

Once McIntyre makes an emulsion, she either sprays it or dip-coats it onto the acetate stock, and coating and emulsion consistency influence still more the aesthetic quality of the film. Another factor in the visual qualities of the final film is how that particular batch of film runs through the camera and whether it stays on or comes off onto the device’s internal mechanisms. Sometimes, especially when working with self-made subbing layers, parts of the image flake off and remnants appear elsewhere in the footage. The subbing layer is an adhesive layer used to bond the emulsion to the base. If the subbing layer hasn’t adhered as strongly, parts of it can flake off when running through the film camera leading to images appear-

4 Enright, “Hand Made’s Tale,” 60.

5 Heather Igloliorte, “Curating Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit: Inuit Knowledge in the Qallunaat Art Museum,” in *Becoming Our Future: Global Indigenous Curatorial Practice*, ed. Julie Nagam, Carly Lane, and Megan Tamati-Quennell (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2020), 157.

6 Igloliorte, 159.

7 Lindsay McIntyre, interview by author, November 2, 2021.

ing partly in multiple frames or giving the effect of double exposure. What animates McIntyre's artistic engagement with the precarity and possibility of ever-changing variables of emulsions is the fact that one can never exactly reproduce an emulsion.⁸ Other filmic qualities that characterize the visual aesthetics of McIntyre's films include repetition, slow motion, split-screen, superimposition, and reversal. Scholar Robert Enright notes, "McIntyre has an instinctive sense of visual rhythm, and her films move at radically different speeds, sometimes so slow that were it not for the faint movement of grass in the foreground of a landscape, you would think you were looking at still images. At other times her footage flashes by so quickly that your recognition has to play a game of catch-up with your perception."⁹ The power of McIntyre's films is rooted in their material qualities reflecting the contingencies of the conditions in which they were made as well as in their filmic narratives that recuperate silenced stories regarding her Inuit matrilineal family history.¹⁰

McIntyre was raised in Edmonton, Alberta, but her great-grandmother, Kumaa'naaq, was from Qamani'tuaq. In the late 1930s, Royal Canadian Mounted Police Officer Ray Ward took her and her two youngest children—one of whom was McIntyre's grandmother—from her home community to live in Edmonton. The particular circumstances around this rupturing event were silenced within McIntyre's family, and McIntyre's efforts to uncover more about the generations of Inuit women in her family resonate throughout her five-part film series *Bloodline* (Lindsay McIntyre, 2007–2012).¹¹ The five films that make up *Bloodline* include *what she would not leave behind*. (2006), *though she never spoke, this is where her voice would have been*. (2008), *where no one knew her name*. (2011), *where she stood in the first place*. (2011), and *her silent life*. (2012). With the exception of *where no one knew her name*. and a few scenes from *her silent life*., which were shot digitally, all of these films were shot in 16mm employing a variety of DIY techniques and practices, including hand-processing and her own handmade emulsion. Describing the impact of McIntyre's filmmaking practice, Inuk scholar Taqralik Partridge proclaims, "The results are tender and revealing works that skirt the periphery of art-house, documentary, and narrative genres and present complex shifting surfaces of the medium—capturing the unique materiality of film through its most fugitive element: light."¹² The material engagement with light through handmade emulsion is evident in a high-contrast black-and-white image from *her silent life*. of McIntyre's grandmother's hand holding a string of beads

8 Enright, "Hand Made's Tale," 61.

9 Enright, 59.

10 Given the emphasis on handmade emulsions within my essay, I focus on the material and visual qualities of McIntyre's films. It is important to note that McIntyre's films also include richly complex soundscapes deriving from archival recordings, ambient sounds recorded on location, musical compositions, and audio recordings of interviews with family members. She records and mixes her own audio in addition to making her own emulsions and shooting, hand-processing, and editing her films.

11 To view these films, as well as McIntyre's larger filmography, visit her website: <http://tinymovingpictures.com>.

12 Taqralik Partridge, "Between Making and Telling: The Experimental Films of Lindsay McIntyre," *Inuit Art Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 48–55.



Figure 1. Image from *her silent life*. (Lindsay McIntyre, 2012), courtesy of the filmmaker.

(see Figure 1). The beads are in sharp focus while a remnant of the sprocket of the film frame is visible on the bottom right side of the image. The use of light and exposure interacting with the handmade emulsion renders a textured materiality to this film.

McIntyre lived in Qamani'tuaq for a year between 2009 and 2010, during which time she filmed *where she stood in the first place*, and connected with her family and community. This film is an environmental portrait and provided McIntyre with “a way to let the land and the place speak for itself rather than have me speak for it.”¹³ McIntyre experienced some challenges while filming in the North. Access to chemicals was difficult. The grease in her lenses would often freeze when she went outside.¹⁴ Additionally, her preferred high-contrast film stock, 7363, requires a lot of light to be exposed. So shooting worked well in the summers but less so in autumn, winter, and spring. The reverse was true for developing her footage; development film requires dark spaces, hard to find in the near twenty-four-hour days of summer sunlight. Partridge describes the film as “a contemplation on the land Kumaanaaq was taken from and the effects of human activity on the land.”¹⁵ The images of the land across the seasons as well as the remnants of human presence, such as carcasses left after a hunt or a boat parked on land waiting for warmer weather, create a haunting and deeply moving film revealing an ethics of place. The 16mm techniques used also bear the traces of McIntyre's hands-on process. Whether through her own emulsions, shooting through

13 Enright, “Hand Made's Tale,” 64.

14 Enright, 64.

15 Partridge, “Between Making and Telling,” 51.

handmade filters, or the static flashes captured on the film stock, her filmmaking is integral to what the viewer sees. Handmade emulsion is one tool among many that McIntyre utilized to create the films that make up the *Bloodline* series. All of the films reveal a textured and layered visual narrative that honors the complexity of McIntyre's family history and relationship to Qamani'tuaq. Her works bring about their own becoming and are "not simply about the kind of works made, but the process of making them."¹⁶

Lindsay McIntyre is a remarkable filmmaker adamant about carrying the knowledge of handmade emulsions and analog techniques forward and the importance of making the practice more accessible, in every sense of the word. This reflects the Inuit principle of *pilimmasarniq*, a concept that guides the acquisition of knowledge in ways that support shared learning through observation of techniques and hands-on practice from other Inuit artists.¹⁷ McIntyre shares her knowledge with other artists and Indigenous community members, through her work as associate professor of Film + Screen Arts at Emily Carr University of Art + Design and her workshops for Indigenous creators at Inuit Futures, National Indigenous Media Arts Coalition, and the Indigenous Screen Office as well as artist collectives and artist-run centers such as Cineworks in Vancouver, FAVA in Edmonton, AFSCOOP in Halifax, and Filmpool in Regina. McIntyre's handmade cinema reveals that 16mm film is not a technology conscribed to the past; in her hands, it is a tool creating vibrant Indigenous cinematic futures. McIntyre's expertise has been shared at international venues as well including: Filmverkstaden in Finland, Filmwersplaats in Rotterdam, Mire and l'Abominable in France, and Kinosmidja in Reykjavik.

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16 MacKenzie and Marchessault, *Process Cinema*, 9.

17 Iglooliorte, "Curating Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit," 158.