

QUINN SMALLBOY

STRING THEORY





*There is geometry in the humming of the strings,
there is music in the spacing of the spheres.*

Pythagoras¹

In physics, string theory proposes that the elemental particles in our universe are composed of one-dimensional “strings” of energy. Not only does this help to explain the laws of everything in the universe, but it also suggests that there are several other dimensions besides those we experience. In several of these dimensions, it is possible to transcend space and time, thereby seeing the past, present, and future simultaneously. String theory is important because it helps to explain what happened before the Big Bang, but in a hypothesis extremely difficult to test and prove convincingly.² So it remains, at its core, a theory.

String theory presents a useful framework for explaining the various meanings, dimensions, and metaphors present in Cree artist Quinn Smallboy’s sculptural work and installations because string is his primary material. For Smallboy, the value of string can be found in its potential as an aesthetic object that prompts us to see the world in novel ways; yet, it also speaks to the complex functions of memory itself: string is often used as a metaphor to connect together points in space and time, to manufacture planes of recollection that allow us to make sense of our past history and experiences. Put another way, Smallboy’s string vibrates with possibility for reflection and transcendence.

With his installation work, Smallboy punctuates empty space with rhythmic lines of colour. Viewers encounter the result of an elaborate dance with the laws of gravity to create pure form. The attempt to connect points on the wall, floor, or ceiling is frequently plagued with accidents that see the string slump, curl, or fall in undesirable ways. As such, Smallboy’s installations take on a renewed life that is noticeably different from the original concept in his preliminary sketches, experiments, or maquettes. For this reason, he persuasively argues that “working with string is a *process* and a *performance*.”³ Here, the physical body and movement of the artist is implicated in determining the completed work, as is the viewer’s body in navigating through, around, and under the spaces he demarcates out of emptiness.

Though string is a central facet of his practice, Smallboy’s work is indebted to his interest in drawing, draughting, and design. Drawing commonly employs graphite, paint, or ink on two-dimensional space, however Smallboy conceives of his installations as three-dimensional drawings of visual space using string. This approach expands the dimensional boundaries and limitations of two-dimensional structures. “Actual space” is, as Minimalist Donald Judd describes, “intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface.”⁴ Smallboy’s connection to artists such as Judd and the caveats of Minimalism is strong, particularly in works like *Divided* (2021) that embrace monochromatic colour palettes, flatness of form, and amplification of negative space.



Smallboy's series of drums began in 2017 with *Mask* where he jettisoned the traditional hide skin that covers the drum in order to reveal its underlying frame and subsequently added his signature nylon string. By doing so, he incidentally forged visual associations with historical Indigenous masks, which hold important spiritual and ceremonial value; moreover, he also removed the material that lends its "voice" to the drum and again unsettled cultural objects that have been employed by nations for millennia. "My contemporary interpretation of the drum," responds Smallboy, "brings a new idea of Indigenous storytelling into the exhibition context."⁵ In new works such as *Sun* (2020), he subtracts the voice of the drum, believing that the expressions of the storyteller takes its place.

Smallboy's latest sculptural installation combines his interests in sculpture, installation, and string by constructing four hand-made, to-scale snowshoes built using historical methods. While snowshoes were used in Asia several thousand years ago, their prevalence in North America was common among the Cree and other nations of the Anishinaabay (People of the Great Lakes). French and English colonists quickly adopted the snowshoe for their own ends; namely to move quickly over snow to hunt, fish, or trap game. Ever since, snowshoes have become an icon of Canadiana and simultaneously a symbol of colonialism's destruction of natural resources. Smallboy's interpretation of the snowshoe revisits this multifarious history and attempts to reclaim the snowshoe as elemental to Indigenous survival and cultural identity.

String theory marks a point of departure for understanding the breadth of meaning inside Smallboy's practice. Through lines of colourful material, he draws pathways through negative space using the invisible weight of gravity. This play with physics, with the dimensions of the laws that organize the universe is precisely why his work goes well beyond the surface tension of string.



Above installation work: *Grid* (2021), black nylon string.
 Opposite page top and bottom right: Installation photographs.
 Opposite page left: *Two Bars* (2021), wood and string.



Quinn Smallboy was born in Moose Factory, Ontario and is an enrolled member of Moose Cree First Nation. He received a diploma in multimedia and production design from Fanshawe College in 2004 and completed his MFA in Visual Art (studio) at Western University in 2017. Smallboy is recognized for examining what it means to be a “contemporary Indigenous artist;” he questions how customary symbols and icons of Indigenous culture translate into painting, sculpture, and installation. His work resides in several public and private collections. It has been displayed at galleries and museums throughout Canada including the Woodland Cultural Centre, the Art Gallery of Windsor, and Museum London. His major public artwork, *Drum Circle*, was permanently installed in Kagawong, Manitoulin Island, in 2017.

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Cover image: *Sun* (2020), nylon string on wood.

Inside cover image (detail): *Missed Step* (2021), wood and string.



Notes

- ¹ Pythagoras quoted in Louise B. Young, *The Mystery of Matter* (Aspen, CO: American Foundation for Continuing Education, 1965), 113.
- ² Philip Perry, “Physicists Outline 10 Different Dimensions and How You’d Experience Them,” in *Big Think* (12 May, 2017), <https://bigthink.com/philip-perry/physicists-outline-10-different-dimensions-and-how-you-d-experience-them> (accessed 1 January, 2021).
- ³ Quinn Smallboy quoted in Matthew Ryan Smith, “Moose Cree Installation Artist, Painter, and Sculptor Quinn Smallboy,” in *First American Art Magazine* 21 (Winter 2018/19), 68. My emphasis added.
- ⁴ Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” in *Art and Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1992), 813.
- ⁵ Smallboy quoted in Smith, “Moose Cree Installation Artist, Painter, and Sculptor Quinn Smallboy,” 70.