BOMB

If Not Now, When?: AA Bronson and Adrian Stimson by Bellamy Mitchell

Launching our new series on civil action, AA Bronson and Adrian Stimson discuss their apology project, which was inspired by their opposing connections to an extremely oppressive residential school, and what individuals and communities can do to address colonial violence.

Oct 5, 2023

Installation view of AA Bronson, *A Public Apology to Siksika Nation*, 2019, books available to be taken by members of the public at the Toronto Biennial of Art. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy of the artist and the Toronto Biennial of Art.

AA Bronson and Adrian Stimson make art that brings the past into conversation with the present. Their first collaboration, a public apology and a form new to both artists, asks what kinds of truth-telling and relationships are possible in the wake of genocide. Stimson, two-spirit artist and member of the Siksika (Blackfoot) Nation in Southern Alberta, Canada, is best known for his satirical and camp performances as Buffalo Boy and The Shaman Exterminator. He also produces sculpture, photography, video, painting, and books, through which he explores the legacies of settler colonialism. Bronson is a Canadian artist living in Berlin, Germany. He was a member of the pioneering art collective General Idea, and in the wake of his collaborators' deaths from AIDS he has worked with younger queer artists in a variety of forms, including séances, video installations, and photography. Bronson also has a career-long engagement with education, publishing, and curating.

The two artists' biographies converge at what was once a historical lacuna, one obscured by bureaucratic mismanagement, cultural genocide, and the attempted elimination of Siksika ways of knowing and transmitting their history: the story of Old Sun Residential School. Stimson is the great grandson of the Siksika warrior and chief Old Sun (Naato'saapi) for whom the school was named, who resisted the signing of Treaty Seven, and whose children and grandchildren were forced to attend the school. Bronson is the great grandson of Reverend John

William Tims, who established and ran the school on Siksika Nation land until he was forced to leave. The "conflict" that forced Tims to leave was passed down as family legend to Bronson, but the details were only revealed after research by the American scholar Ben Miller and through conversations with the tribal Chief and Council: after years of enduring the Anglican church's banning of Siksikaitsitapi religious and social rituals, mandatory boarding school attendance (students were not allowed to visit their parents even on holidays), ration cuts, and poor conditions on the reservation, it was the death of Mabel Cree, a child enrolled at Old Sun, that sparked the Siksika uprising of 1895.

In the text of the apology and the constellation of additional publications, performances, and installations that are a part of it, Bronson and Stimson offer a "public rehearsal" that asks how individuals and communities—rather than institutions and colonial governments—can take on the work of addressing and taking responsibility for ongoing colonial violence. The project poses questions about what exactly an apology is and what apologies do. While the text written by Bronson is an apology and an "invocation of Love," how can one apologize for genocide? Surely an apology is not enough or even fathomable: "I have no apology for genocide: my words make no difference." The two artists spoke with me on a video call about how this apology started, its impact, what research, publications, and conversations it comprises, and what futures the (yet) unfinished apology might enable.

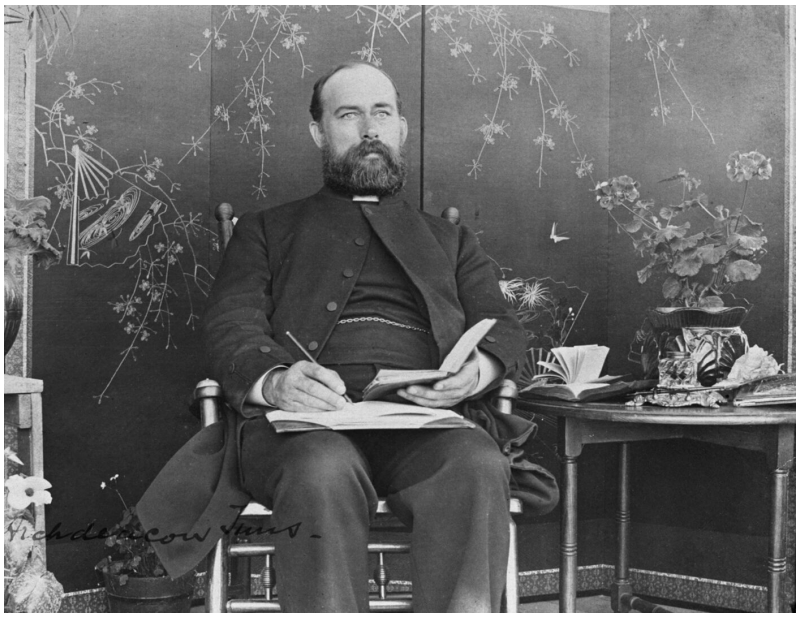
Bellamy Mitchell
I am calling in from Chicago, part of the traditional territories of the Council of Three Fires and a place that is currently and was historically a site of trade, gathering, and healing for numerous tribal nations. I am a settler in this place, and I'm also a graduate student at the University of Chicago, an institution with its own ambivalent positions and inheritances, which is part of how I became interested in work that places fraught first-personal and shared histories in conversation. I am very grateful you're talking with me today about your ongoing project. I know that it has been growing for a while, so let's start at the beginning: how did you two come to know one another?

Adrian Stimson
The curator and First Nations scholar Candice Hopkins introduced us, right?

AA Bronson
Yes. That was before I came to Calgary to do research. But in a sense, I've been working on this project all my life because my great grandfather was the first missionary to the Siksika Nation in Western Canada in 1883. He came over from England and got as far as Chicago by some sort of transport. He went by horseback from there and ended up being set up as an Anglican missionary to the Siksika reserve. The reserves had just been started in Canada that year and each of them received a member of the clergy on their grounds. When my great grandfather arrived, he was gifted all sorts of stuff, including his own teepee and honorary headdress. I believe he was made an honorary chief. Would that have been right?

AS
Most likely, yeah.

AAB
Anyway, he established one of the first infamous residential schools there. When I grew up, my father was very silent about family history. He had run away from home when he was fourteen. I can only guess why. He ran north, and became an assistant cook in a logging camp and, oddly enough, eventually became a cowboy outside of Calgary. When World War II broke out, he joined the Canadian Air Force. He stayed in the Air Force after the war and retired in the mid-sixties, around the time I graduated from high school. We were in Ottawa at that point. He moved back to British Columbia, not far from where he had been born. And there, he bought himself a fruit orchard and became a farmer for another twenty-five years after that. He had what was considered by the neighbors the most peculiar ways of doing things. He hired only Indigenous families. That was his policy. The wives would be paid in cash every Friday, and they would hand off some drinking money to their husbands every Friday night, and then my father would turn up at the town jail on Saturday morning—



Archdeacon John W. Tims, ca. 1896–99. Anglican missionary, Blackfoot reserve, 1883–95; Sarcee reserve, 1895–1930. Courtesy of the Glenbow Archives, Calgary.

AS
Oh my god! *(laughter)*

AAB
—to get his employees out of jail. As time passed, and as the truth of the residential schools started to come to light, the real story of my great grandfather also began to reveal itself. And I knew I wanted to research this family story. I conceived of it as an art project, but I didn't know what that meant. When I received a grant from the Canada Council, I began to do research with a young and extraordinary scholar, Ben Miller.

BM
He has been very helpful.

AAB
He dug up so much shit! Then Candice Hopkins invited me to show the public apology project at the Toronto Biennial and that's when she introduced me to you, Adrian.

AS
Yeah. We met in 2017.

AAB
Ben and I came out west and had an extraordinary visit with you. And an amazing week at the Glenbow Museum, which is where all my great grandfather's papers were at that time. Digging very, very deep, we found all sorts of crap and pieced together the real story. That all became part of my book, *A Public Apology to Siksika Nation* (2019), which includes an essay by Ben. It's the story of how ten years into my grandfather's presence at the nation, the church, his house, and the school were all burned to the ground, and he and his family had to flee for their lives. Not without good reason, as it turns out. And none of that appears in the Anglican records; it's all been smoothed over. The Siksika are known as the most ferocious of all tribes and the great warriors of the plains. My grandfather was replaced with another person, no reason given, and transferred to a small tribe of milder-mannered people, just west of Calgary, I think.

AS
That could have been either the Tsuut'ina Nation or Stoney Tribes, one of those.

Left: Old Sun, head chief of the North Blackfoot (Siksika), Alberta, 1883.Old Sun wears his chief's coat and treat medal and holds an eagle wing fan; hat trimmed with bright ribbons by Mrs. J. R. Tims. Courtesy of the Glenbow Archives, Calgary. Right: AA Bronson and Adrian Stimson at the site of the Old Sun residential school, 2018. Photo by Mark Krayenhoff van de Leur.

AAB
Adrian, you were the perfect partner for this project. You had just moved back to your historical lands. But since that 2019 Toronto Biennial, there've been these nonstop findings of thousands of unmarked and previously unacknowledged graves of First Nations children all across Canada. Suddenly, my apology project didn't seem like very much anymore in the face of all those graves and the disappearing of people still going on today. I feel like I've done nothing at all in the face of that big picture. I find this violence overwhelming, despite all the storytelling that's happened and despite people being in a different relationship to it now compared to ten years ago. Women are still disappearing every day and graves are constantly being uncovered.

AS
Yeah, you're right, since we originally met, there's been an onslaught of new information that has really tempered the environment. But through your apology, you did touch the hearts of many people of our nation. So don't underestimate the power of that in our individual lives.

BM
Would you like to share how this project started for you, Adrian?

AS
I lived away from my nation, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan for about thirteen years. I did my MFA there, and that's where my art career started. But my home is here on Siksika Nation and after my father had passed, I felt it was time to move back. During that time, Candice approached me, mentioning AA and this history. I think we all believe in a bit of magic. In a sense, AA's great grandfather and my great grandfather were connected. History brought us together. Also, we're both queer, two-spirited. It's like the universe aligned and opened up this space for dialogue.

AA approached us and asked us if he could apologize. So I went to my elders, saying, "There's this fellow AA Bronson, and he wants to apologize." The name Reverend Tims was familiar to them. This was outside the Anglican

Church, although the church was the main cause of this colonial history. The elders said, “Okay, let’s hear him out.” They delegated me to meet and talk with AA, and that’s when we extended the invitation to the nation.

I know AA was a little apprehensive coming to the nation, given the history. But I promised we wouldn’t chase him out. *(laughter)* CBC Documentary was doing a profile of me at the time. I deal a lot with colonial history and genocide in my work, and in particular with the residential schools, which the majority of my family have attended, including myself. It seemed right to include the apology in the documentary. When they started filming, the director wanted us to do certain things but, thankfully, AA said, “No, just film us. Don’t make us say things over and over again.” It was a historical moment in so many ways: it was your return to the Siksika, representing your family to apologize and make those connections.

I called it Buffalo Boy’s *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*. *(laughter)* We all know the story of the movie *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*. I invited the elders, Romeo Crowchief, Leticia Red Crow, Gregory Big Eye, and Myrna Youngman. Sean O’Neill was there, Ben and AA, and my partner Happy. We sat around the table and had a lovely dinner and talked about the history. And there was a very meaningful moment during that dinner when AA used the term genocide, and emotions took over. It was a reckoning that cemented our ongoing relationship and what we see as conciliation, not reconciliation—as the latter would indicate this happened before, and it hasn’t. That moment of conciliation is acknowledging history and moving forward. It’s not about forgetting or getting over it. It’s about understanding what happened in the context, the damage it has done, and how we are moving through it. Part of moving through it is creating new relationships, and that speaks to hopes for the future.

Our Chief and Council at the time were given all the information and they were very receptive. In fact, a number of counselors indicated that the research that you and Ben had done might be useful for our own historical purposes and for our claims. So, good things came out of it.

Part of the process was the nation giving the blessing for me to go to the Toronto Biennial and have the first reading of the apology given with some of our elders, and then bring that back home with the understanding that hopefully, at some point, AA would be able to come to the nation and deliver the apology in person. But then Covid happened, and it threw everything off. We’re still trying to have AA here at the nation. I do know that people are still receptive, even in light of the recent findings. As AA mentioned, we are the lords of the plains, we’re pretty fierce, we have a very large territory, but we can be a very forgiving people. Part of our teachings are humility, grace, and the importance of giving and forgiving. In this whole process, I looked to my ancestors and elders for guidance.

The book that AA published, *A Public Apology to Siksika Nation*, is being distributed widely around the nation. So many people have it in their possession, as well as the other book that you helped me with, *Old Sun Boys* (2020), which has touched a lot of people.

BM
What a wonderful, sprawling pair of answers. In watching this project unfold, I’ve found it difficult to keep tabs on what exactly is and is not a part of this project. There are the performances and the documentation of Adrian’s 2019 installation *Iini Sukumapi: Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*. AA’s book includes the text of the public apology, a timeline, a bibliography of suggested readings, and an essay by Ben Miller, entitled “Determined to Keep Up Their Dances.” The book was distributed at the Toronto Biennial in 2019 and then published by Mitchell-Innes & Nash in 2020. But then, there are the additional deliveries of the apology to various publics. Adrian, I know that you’ve worked with the Glenbow Archives and other collections of the historical documentation of the Old Sun Residential School and its students. There are also the furnishings and materials of the school building itself across a number of installations and projects, which move the photographs and objects out of an archival or historical colonial space—into new rituals and relationships. There are a lot of gestures happening here. Are they all part of the apology?

Performance still from AA Bronson, *A Public Apology to the Siksika Nation*, 2019, at the Toronto Biennial of Art. Photo by Triple Threat. Courtesy of the artist and the Toronto Biennial of Art.

AS
I believe they're all part of the apology. AA asked me to respond to the apology as an artist, so I created an installation, which became part of the Remai Modern's collection, which tours on different occasions. So the public apology to the Siksika Nation is multifaceted because it's about building relationships, and how do we repair historical trauma. The message is out there and gets around. And that happens also outside of the art aspect of the project: for instance, in negotiations over health and wellness and governmental policy. There is a repatriation aspect too, because the Blackfoot regalia originally given to Reverend Tims and gifted back to the Siksika Nation were stolen and then sold to the British Museum. After AA and I met, I had the opportunity to go to the British Museum and see the objects. Perhaps one day they will come back to us.

AAB
The British Museum is very adamant that they're not giving anything back. But in another twenty years things might change.

AS
There's a strategy with the British Museum that Siksika has been chipping away at for a number of years. We'll see what happens there. But no, we'll never give up on that. One of their explanations as to why they don't give things back is that they want to return them to a facility that's comparable to the museum. Siksika Nation has the Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park, which is a newly constructed museum. Shoreditch is the British Museum's outdated storage facility and having been there, I can attest that it has problems with moth infestations. It is ironic that they demand a proper facility when their own doesn't meet museum standards for archiving. And as a colonial institution, they don't understand that these are living objects that need to be circulated and be part of the culture. So that repatriation is a part of this journey.

BM
I'm moved by the transformations facilitated by this apology. One of the most striking formal features is the invocation, or the call into relationship and responsibility. Altogether the list of people to whom this apology is addressed and on behalf of whom this apology is made—the "to/ from" section in the book—takes up nine and a half pages of the fourteen-page apology! In an interview with Frédéric Bonnet about your project *Invocation of the Queer Spirits* (2008-2009), you, AA, described your work as a task of building out "a community of the living and the dead" after AIDS—a phrase you also use in the apology—for people younger than yourself to access. Why did you choose the form of the apology, and what does it offer as you take up these inheritances and responsibilities?

AAB
The idea of an apology was there right in the beginning. Apology was my original title. It's a historical form. I mean, the word has become degraded. To me it's much more than saying sorry; it's a formal concept taken from the First Nations traditions. I'm trying my best to perform within the seeker context, to use the format of address that would be expected in that situation. And also, by doing so, to show the breadth and depth of that history.

Whenever I've been asked to present the apology, somewhere where it's clearly more of a performance, for example in Germany, I'm usually asked to drop the From and To part because they don't see it as being part of it. Because in a Western European tradition that wouldn't normally be there. They don't get it. But I've always insisted on keeping it, because that's the format.

BM
It's interesting how the different performances and iterations of this project change according to who is in the room.

AAB
But who it is that's doing the speaking does not change. That's usually the same, although I'm a bit of a multiple personality. Who I'm speaking to is different every time.

AS
I was just thinking about the importance of modeling. What we're doing in a sense, is showing people ways of being that are conducive to building relationships. You have to start somewhere, you know, and the apology is where AA started. I also think of the Blackfoot way of transferring knowledge to a new generation. Part of that transfer is ritual. I just recently got the rights to paint on bison robes, and I had to go through a whole ceremony in order to do that. I experienced the importance of the transfer in Blackfoot culture.

A lot of the elders who are most familiar with this history are passing. They are the ones who are most impacted by the apology. The youths don't have that direct connection. So you're right, it becomes tricky—how do you educate and help this generation understand and look at ways of transferring knowledge and ways of being? Oration and storytelling are important parts of Blackfoot culture. The way AA apologized—in creating that story, that history, and bringing it all together—is oration, which is expected to be given to the people. Having done that, he's been able to create that space of transformation, understanding, and building for future ways. Also, AA has been very humble in how he's approached us, and that's a Blackfoot way. I think the elders recognize that.

I've been away from my nation for thirteen years while a whole new generation of people grew up. We're still going through a number of issues regarding addictions and stuff like that. It's not always easy, but I do believe that there are a lot of people of my nation who are relationship builders in the way we've always been. That's why we entered into treaty. *(laughter)* I think we're trying to find the right opportunity at this point.

BM
Adrian, I want to ask you what this apology from AA does for you as a residential school survivor and as someone whose work and life continues in connection to the Old Sun Residential School in all its iterations. How do you see this particular form of bringing the past into conversation with the present—in contrast to other forms of repair (and refusal) found in the social, political, and art worlds today? Your work also often features the monumental, the place, the memorial, the statue—I am thinking specifically of *Iini Bison Heart* (2020) and *The Spirit of Alliance* (2014). Is there a place, a monument, a sculpture in the present or future of this project? If not, why?

AS
I am a residential school survivor. I've gone through the horrors of those places. I know very well what they're about. So for me, it was the first time that somebody actually really recognized that history of genocide and trauma. From a personal standpoint, it is highly meaningful. It takes a long time to get over the hurt. And we live in a time when there's still a lot of—excuse my language—bullshit going on. Not only here, but south of the Canadian

border. The rise of fascism, white supremacy, and all these things—it's a battle that continues, and it's exhausting, quite frankly.

Just recently I came upon a group of curators in Alberta who I thought were very, you know, aware. But they were all anti-woke and anti-this and anti-that! How can you even work with Indigenous people if you have these feelings? So it's part of my job to suss them out and expose them, which makes me an unpopular person at times. *(laughter)* I continue that because I believe it is activism. The apology project is activism, too: it's putting this history into people's faces to help them understand, but also to look at themselves. You can only, as I like to say, hang on to a cactus for so long. *(laughter)*

I've noticed it in my own practice. It's not about getting over it, but it's moving through it by moving on to other things that I'm finding. Maybe it's a result of becoming older and at the same time, standing firm, but also bending a bit. I've been trying to think, Well, what is life after an apology? I know that my nation is very interested in monuments, even given the discussion around the toppling of monuments. They are trying to figure out a way of memorializing or, as you say, monumentalizing some of our history, like the signing of Treaty Seven, the residential schools. We still have a residential school on this nation, and I know many people, including AA, want it burned down and destroyed, which I can totally understand. I've felt that way myself. But you know, you also look at history and the importance of these physical locations. I think of Auschwitz and all those places that still exist and the importance of going to them and actually seeing them, and recognizing, Yes, these places existed! Because once they're gone, they become nebulous entities. I think the physical presence brings it home.

The residential school physically still exists—it is a community college now—and it has taken on a new history. And yet, as you walk through those doors, you know where you are. My chief has asked me to put together a proposal on monuments for the nation. They're looking more at the tourism aspect of it and—let's be practical—a source of potential income. How to recognize and physicalize bad history? I'm still thinking about how that can be done.

Even for myself, it's tough sometimes. There's compensation by the Canadian government for having gone through residential school. Former students have to apply and tell their story. Telling our history has opened a can of worms for many people who are dealing with a lot more trauma than expected. This includes myself. And you then end up in a bureaucratic government system, where your application and experience are being questioned. It's now three years later, and they're still mussing about what happened to me. So I have those feelings of, Oh, they'll just never get it because they're all bureaucrats, and they are doing this by rules that don't fit with Blackfoot ways of knowing. So I have to step back into my Blackfoot self and say, Let it go. It's not about that. It's about the future. So I keep my focus on that.

Installation view of AA Bronson, *A Public Apology to Siksika Nation*, 2019, 259 Lake Shore Boulevard East, Toronto Biennial of Art, 2019, commissioned by the Toronto Biennial of Art. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy of the artist and the Toronto Biennial of Art.

BM
AA, can you talk about your choices in composing the apology? You previously brought up St. Paul's "Letter to the Galatians" as an intertext. Your artwork moves through various relationships to adopted religions and practices. Your great grandfather was using Christianity as a tool to eliminate Indigenous cultural knowledge. I am curious about what that particular biblical text means to you in this context?

AAB
One thing that struck me was the similarity between Paul's letter and the Siksika form. I had abandoned Christianity when I was seven years old, but in my sixties, I thought maybe I should take another look at it. Making the decision at age seven was maybe a bit hasty. *(laughter)* So I went to the Union Theological Seminary for three years and found it very interesting, especially because the history of Christianity as we normally conceive of it as North Americans isn't all that accurate. For one thing, for its first 300 years it's a primarily Black religion. It was founded in North Africa. And as my history teacher in the seminary said, "You'll be lucky to find half a page in a book about the first 300 years." It only really starts once Rome gets involved—let's say, once white people get involved. But it comes from very different cultural traditions, those of North Africa and the Near East. Christianity spread along the highways of the Roman Empire. Those were the available routes to travel on physically, established by the Romans. So St. Paul in particular was known for the way he set up institutionalized Christianity: taking the hierarchy, the very vertical structure of Roman culture and politics and then throwing it on its side and making this incredibly horizontal structure of Christianity. You know, the early Christians lived in communes. I mean, the structure of the early days is very radical; it comes very close to the communes I lived in as a hippie in the mid-sixties. I could really relate to it from that perspective. But Christianity traveled on the roads of the Roman Empire and so is found wherever the Roman Empire was found. That's how it began. The format of the apology comes out of Paul's vision also.

BM
In queer and camp ways, both of you play with the line between seriousness and irony in your work. There is joy but also violence, and playful sexual fantasies. How has queerness factored into your engagement with apology as a form?

AS
I remember first reading AA's apology, and noting the seriousness of it, but there were also a few things in there that made me giggle. Like reading the part about spanking, I thought to myself, Well, how will the elders receive this? But then I thought, Oh, for goodness sakes, we have these sexual references in our language too. Sometimes there are these perceptions of Indigenous people being all spiritual and holier than thou. But no, we're actually more human than that. *(laughter)* And so I thought to myself, I bet the elders will get it. And of course, they did. Also, the apology wasn't filtered through some "I can't say this, or I can't say that," and that brought honesty and a levity that is a part of Blackfoot being as well. We use humor a lot to open up spaces where we can talk and get to the serious stuff.

With regards to queerness from a Blackfoot perspective, while the two-spirited being is a recent term, two-gendered being has actually been a big part of Blackfoot culture. But of course, due to colonialism it was practically erased. So for myself, being a two-spirited person of my nation means reclaiming that history, but also researching and trying to find exactly what we did as two-spirited people. Apparently, we had a very strong role in the sun dance. And we're also knowledge keepers and medicine people.

In my practice as a performance artist, queerness shows up subtly in the rituals I do. Also, things can manifest in outrageous and obscene ways. Overall, I do see this apology project as being spirit-driven; it has relied on how we feel and where we're at. I always trust that by taking that into consideration, something will present itself. As an artist, sometimes I do a performance and don't even know what I've done until years later.

AAB
I think sometimes it only becomes a performance once you look back and call it that.

AS
Absolutely. And when we really think about it, we're performing every day in our lives. I've been thinking about Blackfoot ways of dealing with grief and how to bring that out in performance. Genocide and the history of colonization, the exact things that AA has spoken to, in some way manifest in everything I do.

AAB
Yeah, I have the feeling that there's another stage to come to this project, but I have absolutely no idea what it is.

AS
Part of it is keeping the dialogue going with my nation, continuing to field any questions that come to me in relation to this project. I live in the former Old Sun Residential School garden. And just recently, they put up a little plaque where Old Sun is buried, not too far from where I live. I'm a part of the Old Sun clan, but because we were polyamorous and Old Sun had five or six wives, I don't know the exact ancestral lines. Trying to parse who's who is an exciting process because we're rebuilding not only our external relationships but also our internal ones.

Leticia Red Crow, Adrian Stimson, Myrna Youngman, and Romeo Crowchief witness and receive AA Bronson's *Apology to Siksika Nation*, Toronto, 2019. Photo by Triple Threat. Courtesy of the artist and the Toronto Biennial of Art.

Installation view of AA Bronson, *A Public Apology to Siksika Nation*, 2019, 259 Lake Shore Boulevard East, Toronto Biennial of Art, 2019. Left to right: AA Bronson, *A Public Apology to Siksika Nation*, 2019; and Adrian Stimson, *Iini Sookumapii: Guess who's coming to dinner?*, 2019, commissioned by the Toronto Biennial of Art. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy of the artists and the Toronto Biennial of Art.