

# Faye HeavyShield: Confluences

Over the course of her four-decade career, Faye HeavyShield (b. 1953) has created multidisciplinary work that explores identity, family, and place. She is a member of the Blackfoot Confederacy from the Kainai (pronounced “guy-nuh”) or Blood First Nation and she lives and works on her community’s reserve in the foothills of southern Alberta. HeavyShield studied sculpture at the Alberta College of Art and Design. Over time, as she forged her own art practice, she decidedly rooted it in her personal history, community, and connection to the land.

The poetry and power of HeavyShield’s work lies in its visual simplicity. Her pared-down, minimal forms bring together complex and layered references. This includes her homeland—a windswept prairie with expansive grasslands and wide-open skies. HeavyShield’s use of spare lines, earthen colors, and natural imagery reflects these surroundings. Her connection to the land is deep rooted. She has said:

The environment is an extension of myself because it’s always been there. It was one of the first things that I saw and smelled. I consider it a part of me. The landscape is an extension of the body because we’re dependent on it, and to flip that, the landscape is dependent on us. We’re sharing a space.

In addition, HeavyShield frequently draws on her heritage and relationships to people in her community, such as her late grandmother, Sommitsikana/Kate Three Persons, who taught her the Blackfoot language and traditional Kainai stories. HeavyShield's work also addresses the legacies of European colonization on the Canadian prairies, including her experiences at a residential school. This education system forcibly separated Indigenous children from their families in an attempt to erase their culture, language, and religion. HeavyShield uses a range of these and other references to assert her own agency as an artist and a Kainai woman.

*Confluences* features a selection of HeavyShield's drawings and sculptures from the 1980s to the present, alongside two commissions that respond to the landscapes and histories of the greater St. Louis area. All together these works demonstrate HeavyShield's ongoing exploration of the beauty of spare forms, the power of humble materials, and the meditative and generative qualities of repetition.

Starting in May 2023, HeavyShield's work will also be featured at the Saint Louis Art Museum. As part of the Native Artist Collaboration series, she is developing an installation that responds to historic art from the Great Plains in the Museum's collection.

It is with immense gratitude that the Pulitzer team thanks Faye HeavyShield for her time, trust, and good humor in working on this exhibition.

This exhibition is organized by Tamara H. Schenkenberg, Curator, Pulitzer Arts Foundation.



*Faye HeavyShield: Confluences* is on view from Mar 10 – Aug 6, 2023. Scan for digital exhibition guide.

# Faye HeavyShield: Confluences

## Early Works

- 1-3. *trap in yellow ochre 1*, 1989  
*trap in yellow ochre 2*, 1989  
*trap in yellow ochre 3*, 1989

Wall-mounted sculpture, three-dimensional, mixed-media, paint, wire and cloth

Collection of the Kelowna Art Gallery.

Purchased with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program, 2001.

To make these sculptures HeavyShield wrapped cloth around wire and painted it in a warm yellow hue. Each work has an open, hoop-shaped form with spiny offshoots. While these toothed shapes are reminiscent of hunting traps used to capture wild animals, the artist relates them to a range of other references including bones held together by sinew and the windswept, rustling grasses of her home territory. Through their allusions to the land and its life-sustaining resources, the works in this series capture the idea of relationality and kinship that HeavyShield considers a key notion in her work: namely that humans, animals, plants, and all living things are fundamentally interconnected.

4. *fort belly*, 1992

Wood, molding compound, wire, acrylic

Collection of John Cook

*fort belly* resembles a body part, a landscape, or even a building. Its rounded form references the fertility of the earth, while the ring of wooden stakes relates to the ways in which its resources have been staked and claimed. HeavyShield links this

work directly to the architecture of forts built by European settlers who colonized territories that we now know as Canada beginning in the late fifteenth century. These colonial structures were used as trading posts and military headquarters. They were typically bordered by tightly spaced wooden fences designed to keep people in—and out.

In contrast HeavyShield places poles sparsely around the sculpture's outer edge, challenging the notion of land and body as sites that can be controlled and settled. Her open arrangement of wooden poles also references the architecture of Blackfoot lodges that can be found in HeavyShield's community. For centuries these structures have been used to celebrate the annual Sundance. Although made illegal in Canada between 1895 and 1951, this sacred ceremony continues to be a critical way for Indigenous peoples of the Great Plains to renew their relationships with the land and all living beings.

5. *untitled*, 1992

Wood, molding compound, paper, acrylic

Collection of John Cook

This tall, cone-shaped sculpture recalls the shape of a tipi. The peoples of the Great Plains, which include HeavyShield's Blackfoot ancestors, developed this ingenious architectural form as early as 4,000 years ago. Made of animal hides stretched over a frame of wooden poles,

these historical dwellings were portable and could be packed up and moved to support a migratory lifestyle that followed game animals and the seasons. In HeavyShield's community, women were historically in charge of building and breaking down tipis. With *untitled* HeavyShield pays homage to their sophisticated design and labor as well as the protection that their shelters offered to the community.

Although *untitled* references historical tipis, it is different in design and material. As in many of her works, here HeavyShield uses materials that can be readily found, including fragments from the Yellow Pages. When she created *untitled* in the early 1990s, the Yellow Pages were used as the primary directory for businesses and organizations. They were also both commonplace and abundant, offering HeavyShield readymade material that lends the work its warm color and subtle texture.

# Faye HeavyShield: Confluences

## Early Works

6. *twelve wives*, 1989  
Wood, wire, molding compound, acrylic  
Collection of John Cook
7. *my spine, my spine 1*, 1987  
Oil stick and fabric on paper  
Collection of John Cook

In this early work HeavyShield creates a column of six raised lines amid a murky, oil stick surface. The lines are rendered from cotton strings that have been twisted together, evoking vertebrae as well as fibrous clusters of scar tissue. These parallel and repeated vertical lines echo the title—*my spine, my spine*—which comes across as a cry of anguish.

HeavyShield attended St. Mary's residential school. She grew up during the time when Canadian law compelled Indigenous children to attend these Catholic Church-run schools so they could be assimilated into Euro-Canadian, Christian society. From the ages of 6 to 15, HeavyShield was forced to part with her family during the school year and live many miles away at the residential school. There, attempts were made to teach children that their culture was inferior. They were also forbidden to speak their language. These experiences left an indelible mark on HeavyShield's life and were often present in her early work. Ultimately it was the strength of families that ignored these regulations in the home, away from school, that rescued the language and culture of the community.

**One of my earliest and strongest memories is that of my father skinning a deer... the beauty of the animal's eyes, serene in death, the smell of blood, the crackle of fat as the hide was peeled away, and the great taste of the meal my mother cooked.**

**This image and others I saw later in statues of Jesus on the cross, in the architecture of the old homes—tipi poles before the skin/canvas [covered them] and structures left over from the Sundance, in the bodies of the old. When I began my formal art training, these influences surfaced in the form of biomorphic images, skeletal armatures with vestiges of “flesh,” using architectural and figurative language. Monochromatic, after the solitude and simplicity of the prairie. Sometimes building the surface up and then working back from there, peeling the layers.**

—Faye HeavyShield

# Faye HeavyShield: Confluences

## aiyo niitahtaan

The Missouri River and the Mississippi River meet in St. Louis, a confluence that has connected humans for millennia. This historic location served as a starting point for HeavyShield's latest site-specific work, commissioned by the Pulitzer Arts Foundation. This installation is also inspired by the architecture of the Pulitzer's Tadao Ando-designed building, including its rectangular layout and central reflecting pool.

With *aiyo niitahtaan* (pronounced "eye-oh knee-tuh-taan"), HeavyShield focuses on the grandeur and poetry of rivers. The title of this work combines two words. The first, *aiyo*, is a Blackfoot expression that is used to open a prayer or a blessing. The second, *niitahtaan*, means "river." Together, they convey HeavyShield's deep reverence for Earth's waterways.

The installation is made of over 3,500 printed images showing close-up views of rivers, stacked in an irregular grid formation. All of the images come from HeavyShield's vast photographic archive of rivers across North America that she has been documenting for over a decade. This includes three rivers that

are central to her home community: the Old Man River, the St. Mary River, and the Belly River. Photographs of the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers, just north of St. Louis, are also included in *aiyo niitahtaan*.

The images are printed on seven different types of paper that absorb and reflect light to varying degrees. They are attached only at the top edges in order to generate a sense of movement. These choices create a subtle sense of ebb and flow, like rippling water. The contrast between the monumental dimension of the work and the small sizes of the individual images alludes to the fragmentation and fragility of rivers but also to their connectedness and formidable power.

HeavyShield's decision to surround the river images within an aluminum frame speaks to how humans have encroached upon and altered waterways, inviting viewers to consider the impact of industrial development and climate change on our environment.

**I have been near rivers from childhood on, and its blessings include ever changing sight, sound, and scent. And always giving. For this, I'm thankful.**

—Faye HeavyShield

# Faye HeavyShield: Confluences

## Honor Cahokia

*Honor Cahokia* is the second of HeavyShield's site-specific commissions at the Pulitzer. Here, the artist responds to the mound-building practices of the thriving and highly advanced civilization now known as the Mississippian culture. Between ca. 1050-1500 CE this culture extended across much of what is today the southeastern and central United States. Cahokia near East St. Louis was one of the most significant Mississippian sites.

At its peak (around 1200 CE) the Cahokia complex was the largest settlement north of Mexico. Present-day St. Louis was also the site of dozens of these ceremonial and burial mounds. Over time these ancient monuments were leveled by the city's Euro-American settlers, mostly to make way for modern-day St. Louis and its expanding infrastructure. Among these earthworks is Sugarloaf Mound, which remains within the city's boundaries. To this day, mound sites have historical, cultural, and spiritual significance to the descendants of the Mississippian peoples. This includes, among others, the Osage, who consider this region a significant part of their homelands.

*Honor Cahokia* consists of two related parts: a group of dome-shaped sculptures arranged in a grid and a drawing on the wall. Both are colored red, which HeavyShield often uses in her work as a reference to blood. For

this particular installation the color is meant to honor the continued vitality of the mounds, which have endured, despite centuries of destruction and neglect. The color is also meant as an expression of this region's ecology, specifically the red clay that is reflected in the city's brick architecture.

With the geometric formation on the floor, HeavyShield pays tribute to the careful arrangement of the historic mounds, which were aligned according to celestial systems that combined Indigenous science and spirituality. The drawing points to the relationship between the mounds and the materials used to construct them. The dips in the line recall the "borrow pits," or areas used to excavate the massive amounts of soil the Mississippian peoples used to construct the mounds. The peaks signify the built earthworks.

With *Honor Cahokia* HeavyShield pays homage to the Mississippian peoples and their creations. At the same time she also seeks to create a respectful distinction between these ancient and sacred sites and her contemporary work. She describes her installation as a response to, rather than a direct representation of, mounds. Ultimately, *Honor Cahokia* points to relationships of reciprocity and exchange, including between individuals and their communities, people and their environments, and the past and present—each one shaping the other.

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### 9. *Honor Cahokia*, 2023

Mixed-media

**In childhood, I learned by experience the meaning of and importance of hospitality; by extension, I also learned the responsibility of being a guest. My visit to Cahokia was and is a blessing in every sense: humbling, welcoming, inspiring.**

—Faye HeavyShield



# Faye HeavyShield: Confluences

## Recent Works

### 10. *the red line*, 2021

Beads and cord  
Collection of the artist

HeavyShield beaded this sculpture by hand over many months during the Covid-19 pandemic. She has continued to lengthen it by adding extensions that join to the main loop in meandering lines.

*the red line* expresses layered meanings through color and form. It is a meditation on line as a formal element in art, a metaphor for rivers and other natural forms, and a visual symbol of HeavyShield's lineage as a member of Kainai (Blood) Nation.

Beadwork is an important art form in Blackfoot culture. Historically, women have been the main practitioners of this labor-intensive form of artmaking. Beading is an act of repetition, which is also a crucial part of HeavyShield's working process. She describes repetition and the making of multiples—which are defined as works produced in more than one copy—as acts of mindfulness and opportunities to be in the conversation with the materials and ideas in her work.

***the red line was a refuge  
for me at a time when  
this was much needed.  
It stood in for family  
when we couldn't share  
in person solace,  
laughter, and grief.***

—Faye HeavyShield

# Faye HeavyShield: Confluences

## Recent Works

11. *i'll know you when i see you*, 2021

Mixed-media on paper

Collection of the artist

The title of this work addresses HeavyShield's late mother, Issitaki/Adelaide. The artist based this series of portrait drawings on a photograph taken of her mother when Issitaki was a child. Pinned directly to the wall, these sketches depict only the outline of her mother's body, with her facial features noticeably absent. The repeated act of drawing Issitaki's shape suggests the loved one's ongoing presence while the hollow form speaks to a sense of longing that seeks to be fulfilled.

**It is in the immediacy of making these marks and in the repetition that I sense a response. From her maybe, from me certainly: continue.**

—Faye HeavyShield