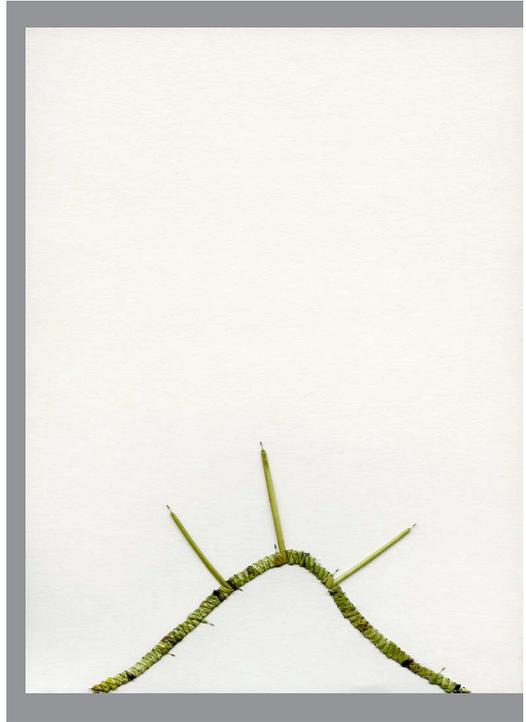




Zig Zag In Twenty Nine Parts  
Porcupine Quills, Synthetic Dye,  
Thread, Paper  
9 X 6 1/2  
2019



## Essay By Aram Han Sifuentes

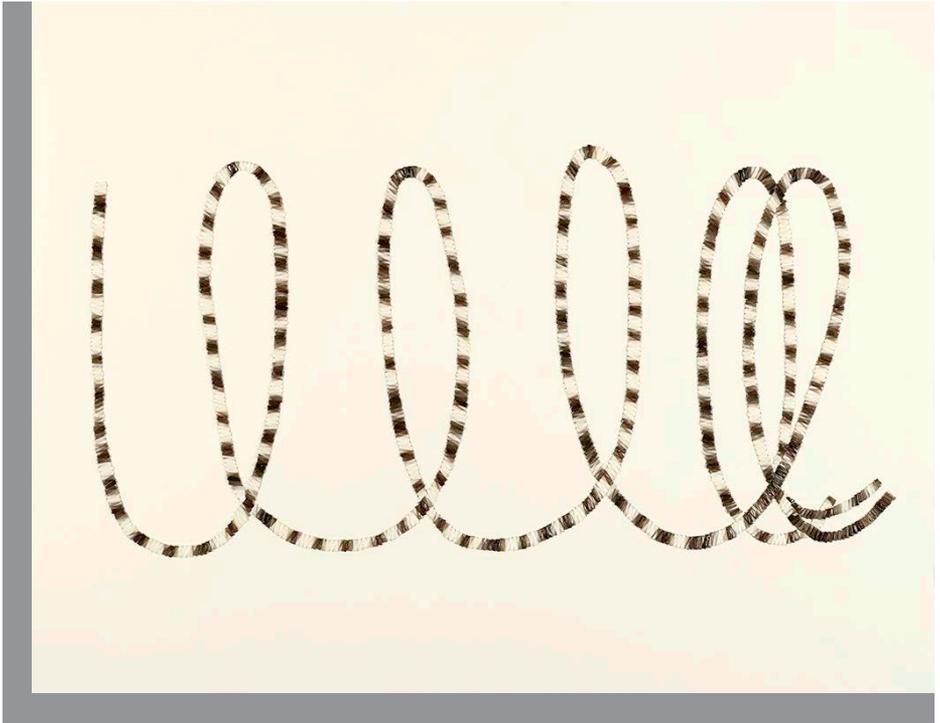
Backwards and Forwards: Reflections in Porcupine Quills features recent quillworks (2020-present) by Vanessa Dion Fletcher. These works range from intimate pieces on paper to large mural installations. At the core is a negotiation between the artist's hands and porcupine quills. And with this anything but simple and intimate interaction between artist and natural material, the gestures of the work are profound.

Dion Fletcher is a Lenape and Potawatomi neurodiverse woman who pushes against the false binaries of craft and art, and traditional and contemporary. She claims In-

digeneity in process and craft, Indigenous abstraction, as well as approaches and understandings of disability. She makes work about her lack of access to her Indigenous languages. Quillwork is one of these languages, taught to her by Brenda Lee in 2017.

Dion Fletcher carefully observes each porcupine quill that she uses. Porcupines are often the victims of road-kill. The deceased porcupines are found on the side of roads and the quills are harvested. Each quill is pulled, cleaned, dyed using natural and synthetic dyes. She then handpicks each one based on its color, shape, and size, and then bends them onto paper tacking them down with thread. Similarly, Dion Fletcher also has this relationship with many of the dyes that she uses. She collects vegetables, plants, and flowers to stain the porcupine quills with these natural dyes to create the range of colors that she needs to create her color gradations.

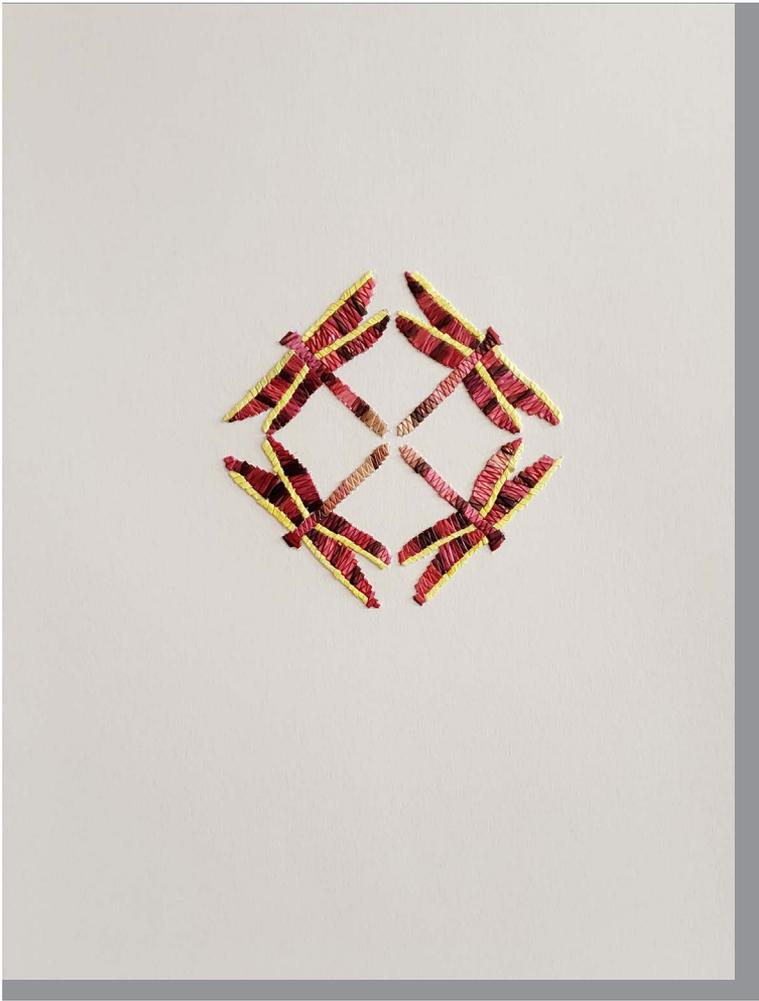
The building up of the quills form abstract shapes and lines that are elemental and can be interpreted in multiple ways. The visual language of these works can be read as Western Modern Abstract Art, however the power in this gesture is Dion Fletcher's reclamation of it being Indigenous Abstraction. Jason Baerg in *Teachings: Indigenous Theories and Methods for Indigenous Art Histories in North America* speaks to how "Today Indigenous Abstraction is still recovering from the colonial absorption of appropriation into Western Art History." In this text and in Dion Fletcher's work is a legitimization that abstraction has always been a "vital indigenous space of creative inquiry." Dion Fletcher highlights the rich prac-



Long Loops  
Porcupine Quills, Thread, Paper  
11 x 14 in  
2022

tices of Indigenous Abstraction but also doesn't shy away from Western Art History, where she often refers to the circular forms in her works as 'color wheels'. She embraces all reads of the work where a circle in quillwork can represent time, a way of reading, a color wheel, and a portal all at once. And in this way, it keeps true to indigenous abstraction that welcomes the interpretation of abstract symbols to shift in context over time while still being able to transmit the original intention of the thoughtful design.

The works in the exhibitions fall into two categories:



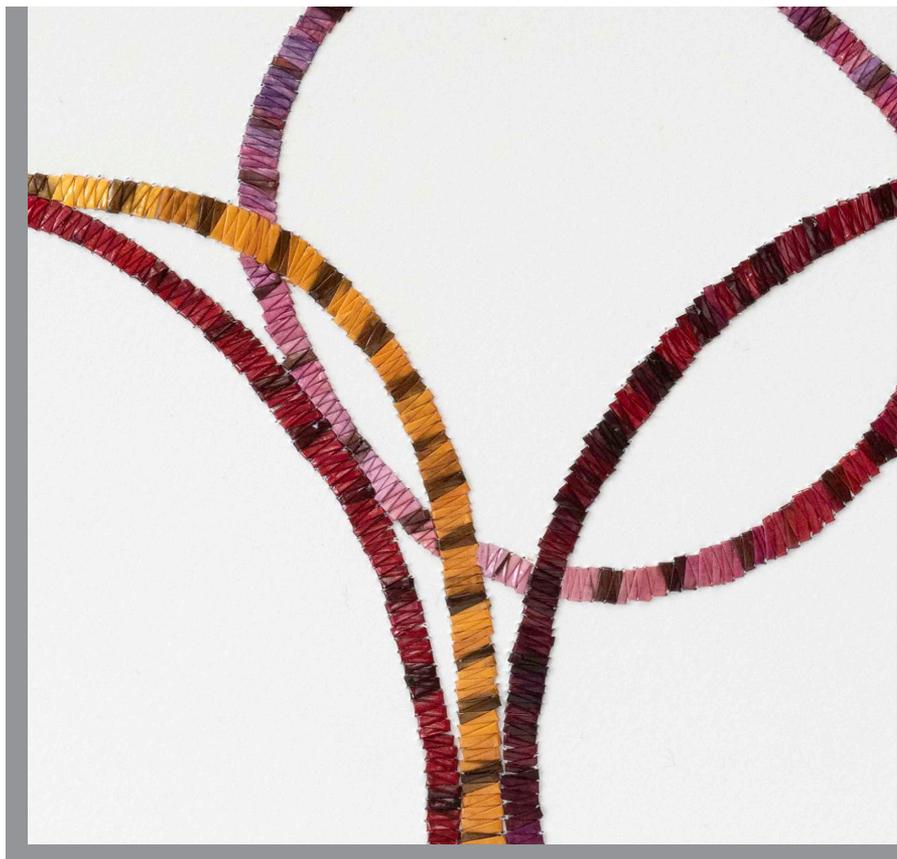
Four Directions  
Porcupine Quills, Natural Dye,  
Thread, Paper  
12 x 9 in  
2022

one is vinyl photo prints of quillwork installed as murals on the walls of the gallery; the other are quillworks on paper. The two speak to one another where many of the vinyl photo prints are directly of the included smaller quillworks on paper. In this way, there is a visual conversation between the two works where they are repeating, rotating, zooming in and out, and flattening and textural-

ly raising. Each has a different relationship to the body of the viewers, where one is fine and detailed, and the other transforms into hoops, doorways, portals and celestial eclipses. When enlarged and created into murals, each quill becomes magnified, where one can zoom in to see the intimate details of the record of the hand and quill.

Slowness is an important political aspect of Dion Fletcher's practice. The making is inherently slow. From searching for the porcupine, harvesting the quills, dying, and sewing them onto paper, the process is meticulous, time-consuming, and slow. The intended experience for the viewers is also slow, where one slowly follows the lines and details of the quillwork and gradations of color. Visually following a line in quillwork, particularly on a large scale, becomes like reading a story. Slowness is also a reflection on neurodiversity, where 'being slow' is a derogatory term used for those who are neurodiverse.

For Dion Fletcher this process of reading a line in quillwork is like learning a new language, where to learn Lenape, she has been learning each syllable of each word forwards and backwards and then again backwards and forwards. Learning in this way breaks down the Euro-western understanding of language where there is only one direction of understanding a word – from left to right. Dion Fletcher's practice is rooted in Indigenous perspectives to reframe ableist structures imposed by colonization. In this way, Backwards and Forwards, in title, not only suggests an indigenous way of learning and a neurodiverse way of reading, but also a looking back to be able to move forward.



Five Hoops  
Porcupine Quills, Natural Syn-  
thetic Dye, Thread, Paper  
22 x 15 in  
2022

# Bibliography

Curator's note: When I was first invited to be the guest curator for this exhibition I asked Vanessa Dion Fletcher to share a few resources that are most important to her practice. In response, she graciously shared the texts in this bibliography. As I made my way through them, I found these resources profoundly important in understanding not only Dion Fletcher's work, but also indigenous practices and perspectives in North American contemporary art and craft history.



Relative Gradient  
C-print 26.5 x 36.5 in  
2020

Baerg, J. (2018). Teachings: Indigenous theories and methods for Indigenous art histories in North America [Unpublished manuscript]. Faculty of Art, Ontario College of Art & Design University.

Deloria, P. J. (2019). *Becoming Mary Sully: Toward an American Indian Abstract*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.

Dickenson, R., Myers, L., Art Gallery of Peterborough, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, MacLaren Art Centre, & Museum London (London, Ont.). (2014). *Reading the talk: Michael Belmore, Hannah Claus, Patricia Deadman, Vanessa Dion Fletcher, Keesic Douglas, Melissa General*.

Dion Fletcher, V.A., & Huard, A. *Curiosity & Quillwork*. Toronto, Canada: Ontario College of Art & Design University, 2019. Exhibition catalogue.

Miner, D.A. *gaawayag quillwork* (2018). (1st ed. ) [Chapbook]. Amoxtli Press.

Myers, L.R. *Beads, they're sewn so tight*. Toronto, Canada: Textile Museum of Canada, 2019. Exhibition catalogue.

Phillips, R. B. (1998). *Trading identities : The souvenir in native North American art from the northeast, 1700-1900*. McGill-Queen's University Press.

White Hawk Polk, D. (2020). *The Long Game*. *Arts*, 9(2), 67. Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute.

# Artist Biography

**Vanessa Dion Fletcher** is a Lenape and Potawatomi neurodiverse Artist. Her family is from Eelūnaapèewii Lah-kèewiitt (displaced from Lenapehoking) and European settlers. She Employs 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 creates art using composite media, primarily working in performance, textiles, and video. She graduated from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2016 with an MFA in performance at York University in 2009 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts. 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, and the Archives of American Art.

# Curator Biography

**Aram Han Sifuentes** is a fiber and social practice artist who creates participatory projects that center immigrant and disenfranchised communities. Her work often revolves around skill sharing, specifically sewing techniques, to create multiethnic and intergenerational sewing circles, which become a place for empowerment, subversion, and protest. Solo exhibitions of her work have been presented at the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum (Chicago), Hyde Park Art Center (Chicago), Chicago Cultural Center (Chicago), Pulitzer Arts Foundation (St. Louis), moCa Cleveland (Cleveland), and Skirball Cultural Center (Los Angeles). Aram is a 2016 Smithsonian Artist Research Fellow, 2016 3Arts Award and 2021 3Arts Next Level Awardee, 2020 Map Fund Grantee, and 2022 Joyce Award Recipient. Her project Protest Banner Lending Library was a finalist for the Beazley Design Awards at the Design Museum (London, UK) in 2016. She earned her BA in Art and Latin American Studies from the University of California, Berkeley, and her MFA in Fiber and Material Studies from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is currently a professor, adjunct, at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and a board member of the National Korean American Service & Education Consortium (NAKASEC) fighting for Citizenship for All 11 million undocumented immigrants and adoptees.