

# MARIE WATT



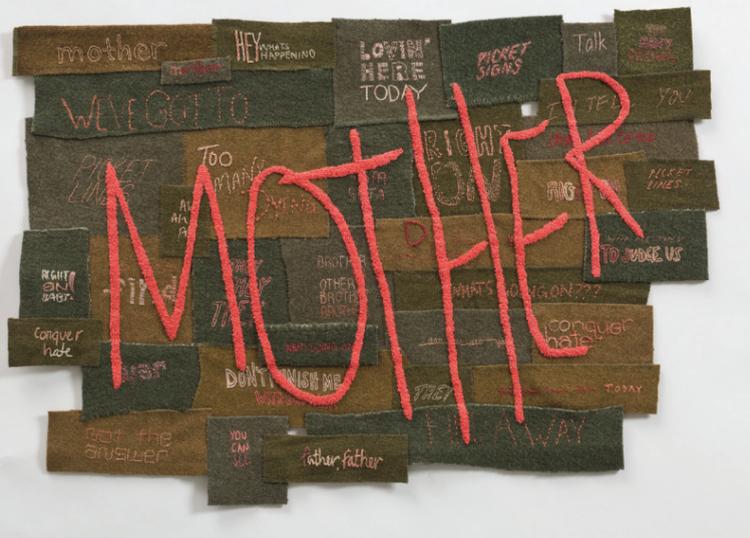


*Companion Species (We Are Here Now)*, 2018  
 Reclaimed wool blankets, embroidery floss, thread  
 14½ x 37 in  
 Photo: Aaron Johanson

*Companion Species Calling Companion Species*, 2018  
 Reclaimed wool blanket, embroidery floss  
 32 x 32 in  
 Photo: Kevin McConnell



*Companion Species (Underbelly)*, 2018  
 Aromatic cedar  
 130 x 183 x 136 in  
 Photo: Benjamin Benschneider/OTTO



*Companion Species (Declaration)*, 2018  
 Reclaimed wool blankets, embroidery floss, thread  
 25½ x 34½ in  
 Photo: Aaron Johanson



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*Companion Species (Underbelly)*, 2018  
 Aromatic cedar  
 130 x 183 x 136 in  
 Photo: Benjamin Benschneider/OTTO

## A CALL TO REPAIR

by Sarah Sentic

What would the world look like if we were to live as companion species? This question animates Marie Watt's work. Blanket, rock, dog, human, star, wolf, flower, word, sheep, tree—all kin. A contemporary artist and citizen of the Seneca Nation, Watt creates sculptures, paintings, and large-scale installations. She understands her artwork as "transportation objects," language reclaimed from the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian's labeling of an infant cradleboard in its collection. And her art does transport viewers, carrying us from one place to another, from misunderstanding to shared story, from forgetting to remembering.

In "Queer Belonging," theorist Elizabeth Freeman generates an imagined etymology for the word belong, linking it to the Middle Dutch *langen*, meaning "to be or seem long; to think long, desire; to extend, hold out, offer." For Freeman, a longing to belong is a longing to *be long*—"to be bigger not only spatially, but also temporally, to 'hold out' a hand across time and touch the dead or those not yet born, to offer oneself beyond one's own time."<sup>1</sup> In *Witness* (2015), Watt holds out her hand across time by stitching herself and her two daughters into a recreation of a 1913 photograph of a First Nations Quamichan Potlatch, off Vancouver Island. Because potlatches were banned by the Canadian and US governments from 1885 to the 1950s, this 1913 gathering is an act of civil disobedience and resistance. The word potlatch comes from the Nootkan—and, later, from the Chinook jargon word *patchille*, which means "to give."<sup>2</sup> The host stands on a rooftop and throws a blanket to the gathered guests, whose hands are outstretched, whose fists are raised in solidarity, who are ready to catch the flying gift. Here, imagining herself and her daughters present, Watt reveals the unbroken—though sometimes invisible, denied, or violated—lines of history and belonging.

For *Companion Species (Underbelly)*, 2018, Watt used aromatic cedar to build a larger than life wolf. Viewers are invited to be cradled by the wolf, to nestle in her underbelly. Watt was captivated by the story of the she-wolf nurturing Romulus and Remus back to health; instead of dominion, this is a tale of intimacy, shelter, sustenance. Watt's tribe, the Seneca Nation of Indians, is one of six tribes that comprise the Iroquois Nation, or the Haudenosaunee. She told me that in their creation story, Sky Woman is pushed from a hole in the sky world where the sacred tree once stood. As she falls, animals help her settle on what becomes Turtle Island, or the continent we also call North America. "In recognition of the role Animals played in helping Sky Woman," Watt said, "we consider them our First Teachers."

Decades ago, Watt saw John Singer Sargent's portrait of Asher Wertheimer. What drew her attention in that painting was the dog in the lower left corner with an unfurled tongue. The dog's tongue reminded her of her own tongue. "An emblem of our relatedness," she said. In her studio, she drew and painted tongue after tongue, studying the shape, and she told me that after a while the tongues began to look like flower petals. "They share a similar function," Watt said. "Both deliver water and nutrients that feed and sustain."

"Tongues allow us to speak," Watt said, "and they come with responsibilities to speak up for those in need of protection." *Companion Species (Speech Bubble)*, 2019—reclaimed wool blankets, embroidery floss, thread—looks like a tongue, and you can almost hear its voice: *Companion. Hate. Ancestor. Grandmother. Conquer. Separate. Here today. Understanding. Too many. Sister. Crying. Mother. Mother.* Every word is hand stitched, sometimes by more than one person, by strangers and neighbors, who attended Watt's open-to-the-public sewing circles. "With hands busy, stories flow," Watt said and described the circles' silences, the breathing, the bodies shifting. Recalling Joseph Beuys's Free International University, Watt's mother's work as a public school Indian education specialist, and Iroquois proto-feminist wisdom that inspired the suffragists in Seneca Falls, Watt's sewing circles embrace multi-generational exchange, call and response, and improvisation. Like fingerprints, every stitch is different. "These gatherings subvert the history of missionaries' attempts to colonize Indigenous women and girls through quilting bees," she explained.

Blankets are Watt's primary material, and with their colors she paints. Watt scavenges some wool blankets at thrift stores. Others are gifted to her, having once belonged to grandmothers or been loved in childhood or passed down through generations. She acknowledges rips and tears, stains and mended spots, evidence of use, story, and repair. The word *repair* comes from the Latin *reparare*—from *re* meaning *again*, and *parare* meaning *make ready*. To repair is "to make ready again." It can also mean "to return to one's own country." Watt's work readies viewers for the world she'd like us to return to, a world she remembers how to make.

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, "Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory," in George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (eds.), *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Studies* (New Jersey: Blackwell, 2009): p. 298-299.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mariewattstudio.com/work/project/witness-2015/>



*Companion Species (Cosmos)*, 2017  
Reclaimed wool blankets, 24 karat gold wrapped silk thread, embroidery floss, thread  
31 x 37 in

Photo: Aaron Johanson



*Totem: Blue Four-Point, Lavadour and First Born*, 2006  
Bronze, wool blankets, salvaged red cedar  
94 x 27 x 27 in



*Companion Species (Twins)*, 2019  
Reclaimed wool blankets, thread, Czech glass  
12¼ x 13½ in  
Photo: Kevin McConnell



*Companion Species (Sapling and Flint)*, 2019  
Reclaimed wool blankets, thread, Czech glass  
12 x 14¼ in  
Photo: Aaron Johanson

## MARIE WATT (Seneca)

*b. 1967. Lives and works in Portland, Oregon*  
2017 Hallie Ford Fellow

Marie Watt is a citizen of the Seneca Nation with German-Scots ancestry. Her work draws from history, biography, Iroquois protofeminism, and Indigenous teachings; in it, she explores the intersection of history, community, and storytelling. Through collaborative actions she instigates multigenerational and cross-disciplinary conversations that might create a lens for understanding connectedness to place, one another, and the universe. Watt holds a Master of Fine Arts in Painting and Printmaking from Yale University. She has received fellowships and awards from the Joan Mitchell Foundation, Anonymous Was a Woman, and the Seattle Art Museum's Betty Bowen Award. Selected collections include the Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Washington; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York; the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas; the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian and the Renwick Gallery, Washington, D.C..

**Hallie Brown** was born in 1905, outside of Tulsa, in Indian Territory that would become the state of Oklahoma. She supported herself as she earned a bachelor's degree at East Central University and taught in Oklahoma before her parents moved their family to rural Oregon. In 1935 Hallie married Kenneth W. Ford and together they established Roseburg Lumber Company in the midst of the Great Depression.

Hallie Ford was drawn to art all her life, specifically the accessibility of artmaking. She took classes with the painter Carl Hall at Willamette University in Salem, and painting became a central part of her life. Her philanthropy established and supported key Oregon visual art museums and universities.

After Hallie's death in 2007, The Ford Family Foundation's Board of Directors honored our co-founder by establishing a Visual Arts Program. The first element of this program was the Hallie Ford Fellowships in the Visual Arts, awarded since 2010. Through these unrestricted fellowships, we seek to make significant awards to visual artists who have worked to establish their voice and craft.

Another of our goals is to help support the ecology that builds connections and capacity in the visual arts community of our state. As the Fellows become the focus of exhibitions throughout the world, they bring more attention and support to their Oregon peers. We are certain that Hallie Ford would be pleased to see how both individual artists and the visual arts community in Oregon have flourished since the establishment of this program in her honor.

We could not be more excited each year to bring new Hallie Ford Fellows into this family, and to share their work with you.

*Anne C. Kubisch*  
*President, The Ford Family Foundation*

The Hallie Ford Fellowships are the flagship element of The Ford Family Foundation Visual Arts Program. The Foundation commits to an ongoing relationship with our Fellows through exhibition support, convenings, and professional development opportunities. In addition, the Visual Arts Program offers grants to visual artists for unanticipated career opportunities; supports artists-in-residence programs in Oregon and nationally; brings curators and arts writers from outside the region to Oregon for studio visits and community dialogue; commissions arts writing and publication; supports exhibitions, catalogues and other forms of documentation for Oregon artists; and awards grants to enhance exhibition spaces.

The Foundation is pleased to partner with the Oregon Arts Commission, University of Oregon, Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA), Portland State University, Reed College, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA), Creative Capital, Native Arts and Cultures Foundation, United States Artists, and the artists and visual arts organizations of our state.

The Ford Family Foundation was established in 1957 by Kenneth W. and Hallie E. Ford. Its mission is "successful citizens and vital rural communities" in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California. The Foundation is located in Roseburg, Oregon, with a Scholarship office in Eugene. For more information about the Foundation and its Visual Arts Program, visit [www.tfff.org](http://www.tfff.org).



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*Companion Species (Twins), Companion  
Species (Sapling and Flint), Companion  
Species (Cosmos), Companion Species  
(We Are Here Now), Companion Species  
Calling Companion Species, Companion  
Species (Declaration), Companion  
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*Totem: Blue Four-Point, Lavadour and  
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