

Broken Treaty Medallion Statement by Gina Adams

My interest in peace treaty medals started in 2013 when I found photographs of chiefs from the plains wearing medallions in the archives of the Spencer Museum in Lawrence, Kansas. Peace treaty medals were presented to “deserving Indians” or chiefs who did the bidding of the Indian Agents of the U.S. government. They complied by signing treaties and were forcibly removed to reservations. Their children were taken from them and sent to assimilation boarding schools, many to never return.

In 2015, during the opening of my solo exhibition at the Nerman Museum a friend gifted me an original Grover Cleveland 1885 peace treaty medallion, placing it around my neck. I immediately felt the weight of it. The experience was life changing. I felt the weight of the years that had passed since the medal was made, but most importantly, the weight of the fact that very little has changed in 135 years. The words on the back read “peace and friendship”, but they are hollow. The promises of truth and honor the medals were supposed to represent were never kept.

President Grover Cleveland created the Dawe’s Act, which enabled the division of Indian lands into individual allotments. (*) This act has had long-lasting and devastating effects on Native American tribes, forcing private land ownership with the promise of United States Citizenship only after 25 years.

I have wanted to create a new peace treaty medallion for a long time, one that instigates change for the future, one where the wearer will commit to honoring the treaties and becoming an ally to Native American Nations and to Indian Country. How do we exist in contemporary society as healthy healing Ancestors and Allies? This question crosses race and class divides and asks our hearts and minds to do better.

The Broken Treaty Medallions were created through a family collaboration between myself and Annie Buchholz. Annie is engaged to my son Chad and they live in our homelands in southern Maine. My husband Mark, Annie, Chad and I began the journey of creating the medallions more than a year ago starting with the idea to use imagery from a Broken Treaty Quilt I created in 2016 during my Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship (SARF). The Treaty with the Chippewa of the Mississippi 1867 Broken Treaty Quilt has deep meaning to our family as our great great grandfather Waabaanaquot signed the treaty, as did a great great uncle Mishugiiziguk, which I discovered during the SARF fellowship. Sometimes things that seemingly happen by accident are not meant to be kept quiet. For me this discovery signified the need to educate people about the existence of the treaties, making it personal so that more will take up the cause of honoring the treaties.

In December of 2019, Annie and I went for a walk in our Maine woods, gathering large pieces of birch bark from the forest floor. There the final design for the medallions came to us. Our

collective vision was to use bark as the ground to imprint clay. The medallion would be an embossment with bark on one side and decals from abstracted excerpts from the broken treaty quilts on the other.

We created these works together.

We want you to wear them to know about the treaties.

We want you to tell people about the history of broken treaties.

We want you to wear your commitment to a better future.

We can all be allies in this.

We thank you whole heartedly for considering collecting a Broken Treaty Medallion.

- Gina Adams