

Frank Shebageget and Michael Belmore: *Scout's Honour*
**Urban Shaman Gallery, inquiries@urbanshaman.org, January
16 - February 21, 2009**

David Garneau

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FRANK SHEBAGEGET AND MICHAEL BELMORE *SCOUT'S HONOUR*

David Garneau

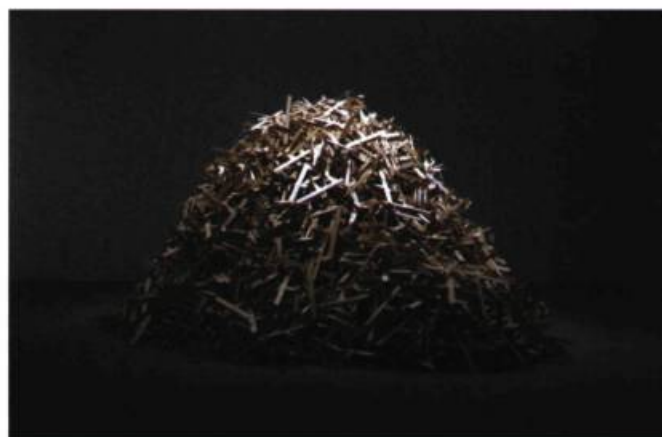
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January 16 – February 21, 2009

In 2006, Anishnaabe artists and childhood friends, Michael Belmore (Toronto) and Frank Shebageget (Ottawa), reunited for a road trip to their hometown, Upsala, and to the abandoned camps of their respective grandparents, at Lac Des Mille Lacs and Lac Seul in Indian country, northern Ontario. The plan was to reconnect with the places that shaped them. Once there, they saw that their relations, like themselves, had left the towns for the city and even the seasonal settlements were reclaimed by wilderness. A way of being with the land was fading. Even so, they felt the rocks, trees, water and air, saturated with presence and memory and sought to memorialize these sites through sculpture. The result, *Scout's Honour*, is a poignant and clever exhibition that captures an authentic relation to place.

We join the men on their drive north through Belmore's *Snag*, a long row of ten small,

thin aluminium rectangles set a few inches from the wall. The negative shape of a telephone pole pierces each plate. If you walk parallel to the line, the staccato images animate like film frames. The scene shows passing poles seen from a speeding car window. No longer joined by lines because the communities they once served are shuttered up, the communication poles stand as mute sentinels, ironically, resembling the trees they once were. Belmore explains that he and Frank "were returning to reclaim a little of ourselves. *Snag* suggests that the experience was more documentary than nostalgic.

Landing I and *Landing II* are two thick copper rectangles. One end of each rests on smooth stones. The metal is beaten to look like waves lapping a rocky shore. Belmore explains that they are thick maps of his and Shebageget's family's territories. They are heavy tokens of home to remind the citified of where they come from. The region where his ancestors trapped and fished is also evoked in *Ridge*. A rectangle of light, white mosquito netting is suspended from the ceiling by fishing lines connected to leaders and hooks that pierce the screen. The varying lengths of line shape the net



Frank Shebageget
Lodge
Installation
Curtesy Urban Shaman Gallery

into a topographical map of the Upsala region.

Frank Shebageget's *Lodge* is a large pile of simplified, wooden, scale model deHavilland DHC-2 Beaver float planes assembled into the shape of a beaver lodge. Built between 1947 and 1967, these bush planes linked remote communities throughout the north. The number of planes, 1692, is also the date of the arrival of Columbus, making the plane synonymous with contact. The artist seems to implicate the Beaver as the agent of the accelerated collapse of traditional lifestyles. Like Belmore's telephone poles, the wooden planes have been reclaimed by nature, this time by their namesake. Shebageget explains that the lodge is a powerful symbol of endurance. The lodges were there before the people, while the people lived in those lands and they will continue long after everyone has left.

Scout's Honour is not a record of authentic, old time "Indian" life. The artists seem uninterested in sentiment or in calling First Nations folks to take up traditional lands and lifestyles. They bring us to these sites as scouts, to show us how things are and hint at how they were. But they also show how every place is re-formed by time and dislocation. The works have a slight melancholic tone; there is a sense of loss but also distance, perspective. The world moves on with or without us, only our engagement produces meaning. Belmore and Shebageget appear neither inspired to return to the land nor to abandon it. These places are in their blood, only contact can refresh those relations. □