

# Frank Shebageget: Model Life



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## Frank Shebageget: Model Life

Frank Shebageget's wondrous miniature sculpture and drawing explore the boundaries between the planning model and the model replica, community and nation. Through the careful assembly of everyday building materials the artist creates finely detailed artworks that point to the ever present role of shelter and transportation in building and dividing communities. Of particular interest to Shebageget are the structures of house and home, and infrastructures of mobility and travel, as they relate to his own experience growing up in a remote First Nations community in Northern Ontario. As an Anishinabe artist, Shebageget's artwork seeks to question how these forms of home and transport relate to First Nations' history and identity in Canada. Yet, the artwork simultaneously asks questions about the role of planning and mass production in North American culture more generally.

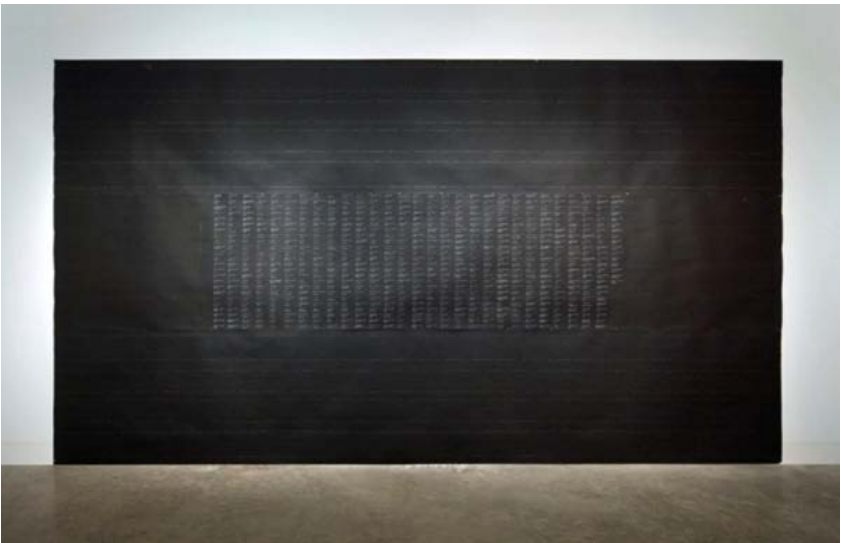
A reoccurring technique used by Shebageget is to create miniature models *in series* and to align them in geometrically precise ways within the space of the gallery. When the viewer first observes *Beavers* (2003) the artwork appears as a series of methodically separated wooden



strands hovering just above the gallery floor. As the viewer moves around the artwork, the garland-like columns collapse into a large amorphous cloud of replica airplanes. On closer inspection, the intricately cut basswood models represent the iconic form of the de Havilland Beaver airplane. While the Beaver has become an icon of Canadian twentieth century design, the large constellation of aircraft, in this context, also signify the role that this aircraft has played in connecting many of Canada's more remote aboriginal communities to the broader world. The uniformly reproduced objects and their uncanny armada-like formation suggest a more ominous colonial history and separation exacerbated by the federally administered reserve system. At the same time *Beavers* suggests how these communities, both rural and urban, have built strong ties and relationships across geographical distance and often untenable social conditions.



The miniature and the grid, and their relationship to the language of governmental control, arise in other ways in Shebagueget's artwork. In *Communities II* (2003) the artist inscribes a chart of names against sheets of tar paper typically used in modern house



construction. The artwork is presented to the viewer in the same manner that this material commonly applied to a roof or the outer wall of a domestic home. The white acrylic grid of words present an alphabetical list of reserve-based (and several non-reserve-based) aboriginal communities across Canada. Compiled from a government website and Native American Atlas the list speaks to official culture's tendency to classify and quantify people as a means of power and control. Like tar paper itself, which normally remains hidden between the outer and inner walls of modern dwellings, the placement of Shebageget's drawing directly onto the wall's surface has the quality of a secret being revealed. The artist presents the names of the communities normally obscured to the average citizen. As in *Indian House Type One* (1998), an enlarged blueprint much like the one he discovered in his childhood home, *Communities II* is a form of blueprint from which identity gets constructed— a blueprint which becomes restrictive if histories are not carefully examined.



*The Housing* (2010) presents Shebageget's central interest in the generic materials found in modern houses and domestic forms of display. However, departing from his earlier interest in the grid, *The Housing* aligns the circular shape of a coffee table with that of

the typical rounded suburban cul-de-sac. The coffee table—constructed of cedar two-by-four more commonly used for patio decking—functions here as a form of museum plinth on which a series of miniature houses are positioned. Constructed of millboard, the houses are placed in the shape of a cul-de-sac—only in this turnaround there is no entrance or exit. As is common in earlier Shebageget's works, *The Housing* operates somewhere between museum miniature and toy. Influenced by a real life cul-de sac in his childhood hometown, which locals commonly referred to as “the Housing”, Shebageget's sculpture speaks of both the banality, and oftentimes unsuitable nature, of this architectural form. The closed circle orientation of the homes suggest both the social cohesion of such urban forms at the same time that it raises the spectre of inwardlookingness that this type of urbanism can often propagate.

*Frank Shebageget: Model Life* presents a series of objects and drawings that raise questions about how models and modelling inform our contemporary culture. Shebageget understands that the model can be both *anticipatory*—looking ahead into what the future might look like—and *preservational*—seeking to save elements of the real world from disappearing. Shebageget's art seeks to collapse this distinction in order that we might consider the model's many effects. While each artwork is created by the artist's own hand, he uses the process of copying and repeating forms to comment on the generic and industrially manufactured objects that have fundamentally affected First Nations and Non-First Nations life today. The artist's stripped-down, miniaturized, and multiplied forms create elegant clusters of shape and line, all the while connecting these objects and pictures to their administered origins.

Jordan Strom,  
Curator of Exhibitions and Collections

## Artist's Statement

My previous work mainly used references to native history, achieved through the use of historical information and images, and employed conventional art techniques to manifest contemporary issues. My focus on historical and contemporary intercultural history was an attempt to locate positive connections that have been established between native and non-native cultures, without falling into tropes of stereotypical issues about native culture. This conceptual framework spoke to both the historical and contemporary relevance to both native and non-native identity in Canada.



Currently and throughout all of my work I rely on both repetition and the hand-made object, a time induced and labor-intensive process. Execution of the work physically and conceptually is the essential element of repetition and mass production. Both of the latter artistic elements form part of a larger critical conversation about the production and consumption of contemporary aboriginal art; their implementation simultaneously allows me to use objects and space in a manner that reveals a unique view of my culture.

## About the Artist

Frank Shebageget (Ojibway) is from northwestern Ontario, and currently resides in Ottawa. As an installation artist, his work reflects his continued interest in the geography of the Canadian Shield and the aesthetic qualities of everyday materials. Through the use of repetition, he explores the tense relationships between production, consumption, and the economics of beauty, often by playing with the incongruity of mass production versus the handcrafted object.

Shebageget graduated with his A.O.C.A. from the Ontario College of Art in 1996, and received his Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Victoria in 2000. Shebageget maintains a professional exhibiting artistic practice, with a studio at Enriched Bread Artists. Recent exhibitions include: 2009 – Scout's Honour, Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe, NM, Museum London, London ON and Urban Shaman Gallery, Winnipeg MB; Planet Indigenous, York Quay Centre, Toronto, ON and Greater Toronto Airports Authority Toronto Pearson International Airport, Toronto, ON; Flight Dreams, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, (Satellite Gallery) Yarmouth, NS; CODE Screen 2010 – The Art of Knowledge. Online exhibition, [www.vancouver2010.com](http://www.vancouver2010.com). Shebageget's work is in the collections of the Ottawa Art Gallery, Ottawa; the Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa; the Dorothy Hoover Library, Ontario College of Art, Toronto; and the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation, Toronto.

## List of Works

### *Communities II* (2003)

acrylic on tarpaper

274 x 4.93 cm

Courtesy of the Artist

### *Beavers* (2008)

basswood and metal

1692 airplanes

each airplane 14.7 x 8.8 x 2.5 cm

Collection of the Ottawa Art Gallery

### *The Housing* (2009)

millboard, cedar, particleboard

66 x 150 cm

each house 16.5 x 14 x 14 cm

Courtesy of the Artist

### *Indian House Type One* (1998)

ink on paper

61 x 91.4 cm

Courtesy of the Artist

## Photography:

Cover: *The Housing* (2009), detail – photograph by Jack McKeown

Page 2: *Beavers* (2008), installation view – photograph by Scott Massey

Page 3: *Beavers* (2008), detail – photograph by Jack McKeown

*Communities II* (2003), installation view – photograph by Scott Massey

Page 4: *The Housing* (2009), installation view – photograph by Scott Massey

Page 6: Frank Shebageget installing *Beavers* (2008) – photograph by Brian Foreman

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