

NITASSINAN

YANN DATESSSEN

30.01 – 25.04.2026



STIMULTANIA
STRASBOURG

Pôle de photographie

EDITORIAL

An exhibition organised by Stimultania photography centre in Strasbourg. In collaboration with the Innu Museum in Mashteuiatsh, where the project archives will be kept. With the support of the Quebec Government Office in Paris. In Canada, this documentary was supported and supervised by the Mashteuiatsh Museum, one of the leading Innu institutions. It is also co-financed by the French and Canadian consulates and is a winner of the 'France-Quebec Cooperation' programme.

Photo credits:

Untitled, Nutashkuan, September 2024.

Stella et Ussiniun, Matimekush, April 2025.

Eva, Uashat, December 2023.

Sébastien, Unamen-Shipu, February 2024.

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THE SONG they rise / they chant / their history / Nitassinan our land / the caribou / the furs / the hunger / the residential schools / our father who art in heaven / they never had horses they say / there are twenty thousand of them what do we do now

THE MISSING IMAGE he ties his ponytail with four coloured elastic bands, puts on his pearl bracelets / she doesn't care, the photographer can do whatever he wants, her hair and cardigan hang loosely over her hoodie / he keeps his boots and lumberjack gloves on his knees / looks at the camera / without smiling / he takes his drum and stands up / his checked shirt / or the antlers of a caribou / she agrees but she'll come with a wolf skin / or a lion skin / he wants a feather

THE PHOTOGRAPHER Yann Datessen is Arthur Rimbaud's photographer / of the Ardennes and Ethiopia / the one who throws bottles into the sea, a poet and a chess player / he says "[...] if only one thing were to remain, it would definitely be that [the suns that prevent silence], that and walking, walking in the shade, because walking means not sitting down, and not sitting down is essential. " / one day Yann came to create images with the residents of a boarding house / later / he left along the St. Lawrence River / the inhabitants of the Innu reserves in his head why / the changes the transmission / it was the time of national reconciliation / the time when the colonising peoples and the first peoples took news of each other / they think we're starting from scratch but

THE INDICATIVE IMAGE Yann wants narrative sovereignty / how to escape theatricality since / what I want to be / what I believe myself to be / what the photographer believes me to be / so everyone decides how / too bad if / Pocahontas / the Apaches / new clues / the photographer listens to the silence and the Innu people

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NITASSINAN

Nitassinan (our land) is the name given by the Innu to a territory stretching from the banks of the Saint Lawrence River to the borders of the boreal regions of eastern Canada. They have lived there for at least 10,000 years, not without difficulty: dependent on the migratory movements of caribou, nomadic life in the taiga, the vagaries of the Arctic cold, devastating fires, and sometimes bloody feuds with their regional cousins. They themselves say that this territory is harsh and fierce, that it can be a green hell in summer and a white hell in winter. Yet Nitassinan is rich, rich in game, wood and minerals. It is a paradise for animals, humans and spirits, to such an extent that everyone, literally, has desired this territory for at least 10,000 years, and still does today.

The Innu are one of the first North American nations to encounter white travellers: first the Vikings, then the Portuguese, later the French, and finally the British. By welcoming these new arrivals, more or less equitable exchanges were created. There is room for everyone, we think, and Europeans love furs and pay dearly for them. Quite quickly, the Innu went from the fundamental freedom of the hunter to the narrow constraints of the trapper. Their territory was shrinking. Increasingly, the effects of this excessive hunting pushed the Innu to the Saint Lawrence coast, into contact with trading posts. Missionaries and traders took advantage of this, multiplying scams and evangelisation, and when the forestry industry added to their exile, Nitassinan was reduced to a shadow of its former self. In barely 300 years, Innu society was considerably disoriented. In the 19th century, everything accelerated: the end of wars between colonial empires and the decline of the fur trade made cooperation with the indigenous peoples less necessary. The Innu, former allies of the French, were considered by the British authorities to be savages, animals to be civilised. In 1876, the Indian Act was passed: this deeply paternalistic text sought to 'encourage' indigenous peoples to become Canadian citizens. To this end, they were forbidden from practising their traditional ceremonies and wearing their traditional costumes, and even from speaking their own language: the acculturation that had already been underway for centuries became dizzying. In the same vein, the Innu were encouraged to gather in prefabricated villages. Often isolated, always controlled and, above all, poorly funded, these reserves quickly became plagued by alcoholism, suicide and malnutrition. Finally, at the height

of this assimilationist policy, a boarding school programme was launched, forcing all young indigenous people aged 7 to 15 to attend Catholic schools, often hundreds of kilometres from their communities, with the avowed aim of cutting them off from their roots as much as possible. Living conditions there were terrible: in addition to a lack of food, there was the spread of disease, excessive work, brutality and rape. Many recounted the humiliation of having their names replaced by numbers. It is estimated that around 6,000 children (out of 150,000 placed in these institutions) died there until the 1990s.

Forty years after this ultimate trauma, what has become of those known as the laughing people*? When asked this question, the response is always the same: 'We are still here.' Indeed, it is clear that the Innu communities are resisting, developing and seeking self-determination. Everywhere, its members are multiplying political, economic and cultural initiatives, everywhere they are seeking to reclaim an identity that they were led to believe was extinct. Yes, it is obvious: we still dance and sing on Nitassinan... It is to document this renewal, but also to bear witness to the road that undoubtedly remains to be travelled, that between 2022 and 2025 I regularly visited seven of the 11 communities of the Innu nation, portraying in turn, and according to different seasons, its members, their living conditions and the state of the surrounding territory.

These communities are (from west to east): Mashteuiatsh (Pointe-Bleue), Essipit (les Escoumins), Pessamit (Betsiamites), Uashat mak mani-utenam (Sept-Îles), Matimekush (Schefferville), Nutashkuan (Natashquan), Unamen-Shipu (La Romaine).

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YD.

*The expression was coined by Quebec anthropologist Serge Bouchard.



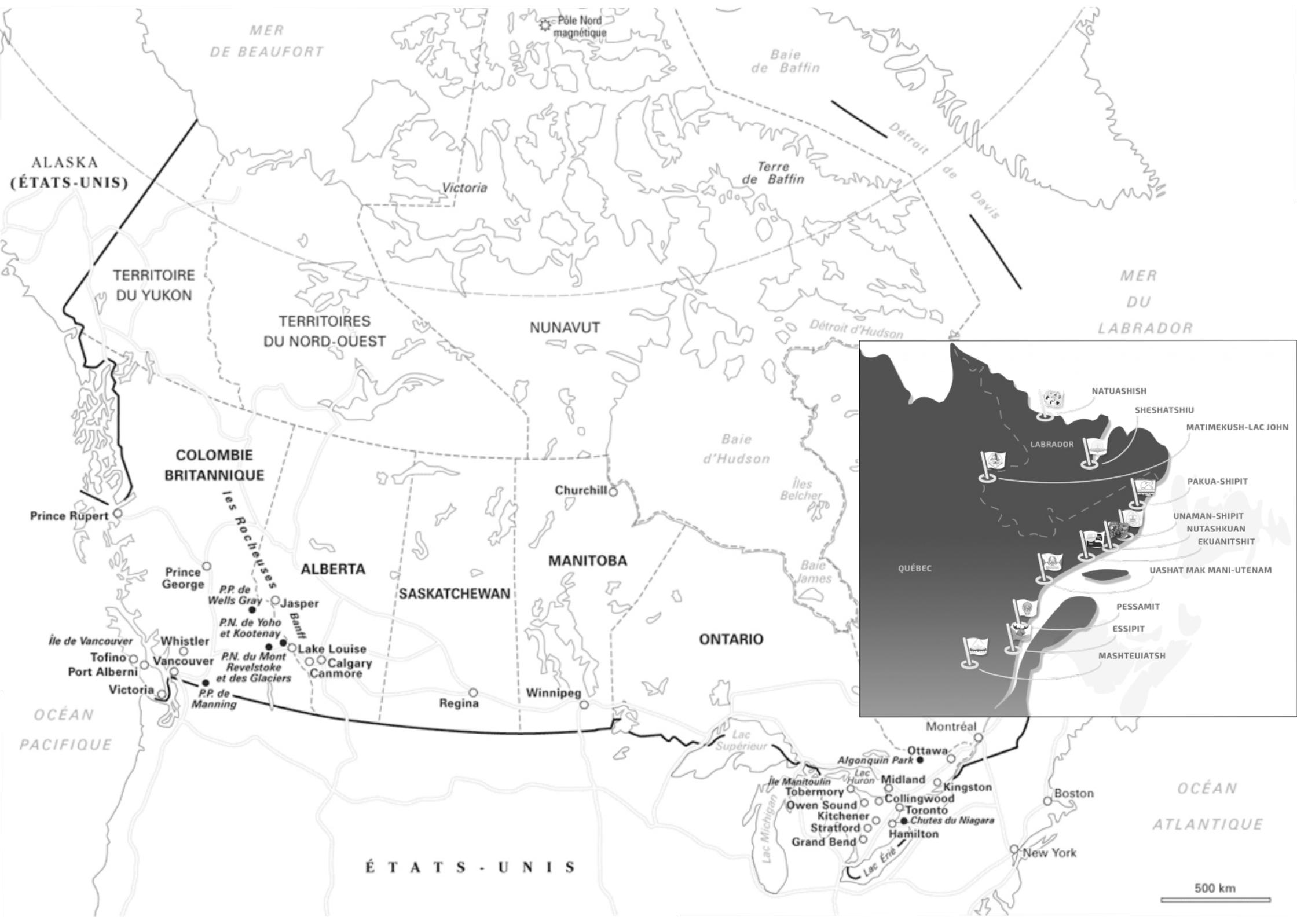
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In Mashteuiatsh: Hélène Boivin, Isabelle Genest, the community's Innu museum, Lenny Valin, Gabrielle Raphaël, Valéry Larouche, Raphaëlle Langevin, Johanne Blacksmith, the Tshishemishk Centre, Donald Launière. *In Essipit:* Johanne Bouchard, Edna Canapé, Marie-Immaculée school in Les Escoumins. *In Pessamit:* Louise Canapé, Jenny Rock, Mali Rock-Hervieux, Suzanne Charland, Anne Claire St-Onge, Uashkaikan Secondary School. *In Uashat:* Jean-Pierre Fontaine, José Thibault, Frédéric Chambers, Manikanetish Secondary School, the Sept-Îles Native Friendship Centre.

In Maliotenam: Eva Fontaine, the Innu-Nikamu Festival. *In Matimekush:* Marie-Aimée Einish, Langis Fortin, Héloïse Tremblay, Sylvain Lamothe and Chantal Dufour, Alexandre McKenzie. *In Nutashkuan:* Anna Stadelmann, Uauitshitun High School, the Montagnais Health Centre, Germaine Mestinapeo, Marguerite Mestinapeo. *In Unamen Shipu:* Marie-Pierre Ouellet, Dieudonné Uzubahimana, Kanité Mestinapeo, Marie-Aimée Bellefleur, Geneviève Mark, Lysanne Napeo, Annie Baron, Isabelle Lalo and Raymond Bellefleur, Olamen Secondary School.

In France: The Quebec delegation in France (Solène Vinck-Keters), the France-Quebec cooperation programme, Maïté Smerz, Aïda Ali Saïd. *In Canada:* The French Consulate in Quebec City (Margaux Bruet and Pauline le Vaillant).

This project is dedicated to all my Innu friends, their children and grandchildren, the land, and the memory of Alexander McKenzie.



ETHICS

Texts by Yann Datessen

Narrative sovereignty

In a world where, more than ever, stories and images shape reality, the question of who is the one who 'creates' them, how and why they do so, is paramount, especially when these stories are set in a context where colonial scribes have already had a lasting impact on a caricatured narrative landscape. For an outside observer, allowing oneself to tell the story of a society whose customs, traditions, habits and lifestyles are far removed from one's own raises many issues, such as the very nature of the documentary style and its memorial, scientific and historical value. The content of their work questions the notions of power and narrative sovereignty, issues that are too often overlooked in this type of endeavour.

If, moreover and more generally, we agree that objectivity and truth do not exist in the realm of images, that they are always the result of choices, biases and sensitive points of view, then how can we give the most honest account possible of an encounter? In practical terms, when a young girl or an old man agrees to pose for you and asks you how they should dress, how do you respond? Should you direct the other person's face: let them smile, chew gum, look away from the camera? Which lighting should you choose, and for what purpose? There is no perfect methodology, no way to transcribe without interfering: photography is often a matter of misunderstandings, trial and error, projections, flashes of inspiration, temptations to make something 'beautiful' rather than 'accurate.' But if truth is impossible, we must still seek to reduce misinterpretation and falsification and challenge stereotypes as much as possible.

So how do we go about it? Through listening, always listening, curiosity and immersion, collaborative imagery, participatory visuals, and the contribution of subjectivity, certainly, but a conscious, thoughtful and explained subjectivity... This work does not claim to speak on behalf of the Innu; it is not a documentary in the strict sense of the term, but rather a hybrid project between art and inventory, an intercultural dialogue in which the societal changes and cultural continuities of a people, their hopes, struggles and doubts, attempt to coexist with the filter of the author who has received them.

Curtis syndrome

Before each project, a photographer checks how others have dealt with a similar subject in the past. For the indigenous question, the most famous predecessor was Edward Sheriff Curtis. At the beginning of the 20th century, this photographer, supported by the Theodore Roosevelt government, spent 30 years documenting the main tribes of the United States. The portraits resulting from this lengthy study remain famous for their visual beauty, reminiscent of the photographic romanticism of the era, and have had a lasting impact on the white collective unconscious on the subject. The problem is that Curtis is also known for staging his subjects to fit an idealised vision of Native Americans: by asking them, for example, to wear anachronistic traditional clothing and/or pose in artificial settings, he removed all traces of modernity and acculturation. By focusing on pre-colonial imagery, Curtis unwittingly obscured the adaptations to the social and economic changes of his time, reinforcing the idea that indigenous cultures were dying out.



The method

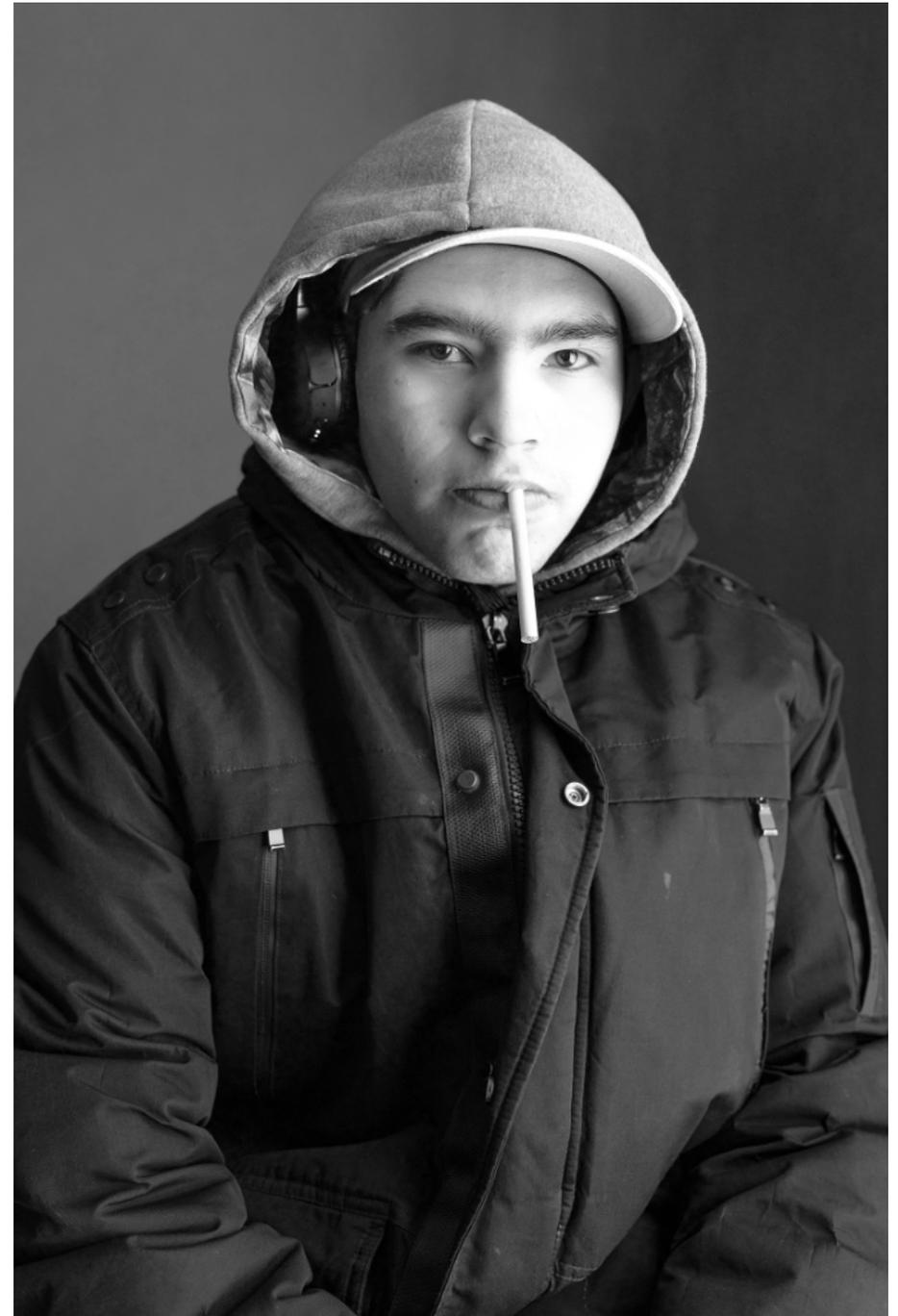
The primary aim of this work is to shed contemporary light on the Innu nation, particularly in its urban setting (the reserve), taking into account the nuances, and sometimes differences, specific to each village (some of which are more than 1,000 km apart). The aim was to immerse myself as much as possible by living on site, with local residents, for as long as necessary, through spring, summer, autumn and winter, meeting as many people as possible, of different genders, ages, backgrounds and roles in the community.

Anticipating that the portraits in this collection of images would be archived by my main partner, the Innu Museum in Mashteuiatsh, and would later serve as a testimony to the families, it was necessary, in addition to wanting to move away from the Curtis syndrome, to propose a method that, while affirming the dignity of the hundreds of people encountered, remained perfectly 'legible' and useful... The methodology thus focused on assisted self-portraiture*, with each model free to come dressed as they wished, with whomever they wanted, free to choose between studio and/or natural lighting (and in this case to choose the location for the shoot themselves).

To complement this approach, and in order to reconcile documentary rigour with poetic reflections, particularly by evoking the spirit world so dear to the societies I was travelling through, some of my images are the result of staged scenes (still lifes, landscape circles), most of which are the result of conversations with friends, elders, resource persons, guardians of the territory, and members of band councils.

Finally, in the hope that the next photographer to travel across the nation will one day be Innu themselves, I offered all community schools an introduction to photography and storytelling through images.

*The expression comes from German photographer August Sander, who devoted his life to portraying German society in the 20th century.



YANN DATESSSEN



Yann DATESSEN © Aïda Ali Saïd

Born in 1977 in Saint-Étienne, Yann DATESSEN has lived and worked in Paris for twenty years. Consumed since childhood by the need to create images, he spent many years producing drawings, paintings, photographs and videos in private; he learned photography late in life, teaching himself, and only began exhibiting his work later on.

In 2012, Paris-Sorbonne University asked him to set up a photography workshop for its students; he took the opportunity to launch an online media outlet dedicated to emerging photography, called 'Cleptafire'. For the past ten years or so, he has been dividing his time between creation, curation and teaching. He now lectures at Paris 1, Paris 3 and Paris 4, and Sciences Po Paris.

More of a visual artist, his practice focuses on reflections related to image format. He attempts to develop a grammar focused on the polyptych. Feeling close to the approach of the 'Land Artists', he also develops most of his projects with the ambition of presenting them outdoors and in an ephemeral way.

In 2015, he installed his series 'Le Léthé' along the Ourcq Canal in Paris: the images were displayed on locks, bridges and riverbanks. In 2020, he handcrafted 100 copies of his series 'L'Achéron'. The waterproofed book was thrown into Europe's largest rivers to be swallowed up by the current or washed up at random on the banks and encountered by chance.

Alongside these visual experiments, he makes documentaries whose subjects explore different figures of marginality. In 2014, for example, he lived for five months in the free town of Christiania in Copenhagen, where he portrayed its libertarian community. From 2016 to 2020, he followed in the footsteps of Arthur Rimbaud around the world (*AR*; *Arthur Rimbaud*, ed. Loco, 2022). Since 2022, he has been working on Nitassinan, an ambitious immersive reportage on the Innu communities of Quebec and Labrador.

TO GO FURTHER

SELECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY BOOKS

- *AR*, Yann DATESSEN, Editions Loco, 2022.
- *Visage. mis à nu*, Olivier Roller, Editions Chic Médias, 2014.
- *FACE[S]*, Olivier Roller, Editions Argol, 2007.

BOOK SELECTION

- *Eka Ashate ne flanche pas*, Naomi Fontaine, Éd. Mémoire d'Encrier, 2025.
- *Manikanetish*, Naomi Fontaine, Éd. Mémoire d'Encrier, 2017.
- *Des tentes aux maisons. La sédentarisation des Innus*, Paul Charest, Éditions GID, 2020.
- *Kukum*, Michel Jean, Éditions Libre Expression, 2019.
- *Le peuple rieur*, Serge Bouchard et Marie-Christine Lévesque, Lux Éd., 2017.
- *Chasse dans le Nutshimit*, les élèves de 5^e et 6^e année de l'école Teueikan à Ekuanitshit, Collection Histoires de notre village, Éditions Gran Élan, 2023.

DOCUMENTARY SELECTION

- *Le pays de la terre sans arbre*, Pierre Perrault, 1980.
- *Laissez-nous raconter*, Série documentaire TV5 MONDE+, 2023.

STIMULTANIA

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Exhibition: free admission
Wednesday to Saturday
2pm to 6:30pm

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