Espace Sculpture

Brian Jungen: Contemporary Mythologies
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Aboriginal-style masks on stands in glass cases, an enormous tepee, and gigantic whale skeletons impose a visually dramatic introduction to this comprehensive survey on exhibit in the Vancouver Art Gallery's lofty spaces. But it is evident that a trickster has been at work: the whale skeletons are made from cheap plastic chairs, the masks from Air Jordan running shoes, and the tepee consists of reconfigured leather chesterfields. A huge "aha!" factor is created as the masks from Air Jordan running shoes restructured Aboriginal-style masks on stands reconfigured leather chesterfields. shooes, and the tepee consists of stands made from cheap plastic chairs.  

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While leather furniture is associated with the modern gallery, its implied luxury can now be found in low-budget copy. While original tepees were made from material at hand, i.e. skins, Jungen uses ones commonly found within modern consumer culture. Similarly, the whale carcasses are chopped and reassembled plastic lawn chairs, low-budget items that eerily mimic the skeletal structure of a major west coast icon. Rich in the mythologies of many cultures around the world, the image of the whale evokes a range of sympathetic associations, through literature, economics, and geo-political issues. Whale oil was an earlier carbon fuel source than the petroleum that has been used to create the plastic chairs. While it might have been both visually interesting and more environmentally sensitive to make them from pitted and worn ones, Jungen intentionally selects factory-new materials found in the throwaway world of daily life.

Some of the pieces in the exhibition possess an easily accessible wit and instant visual gratification. They are invested with irony and humor, transmitted through several discursive contexts including art historical, post-colonial, and sociological. Factory-made baseball bats are incised with mirror-imaged slogans suggestive of totemic carving. These militant totems say "work to rule," heroes of labour," "thieves of freedom" and "unite to crush." Layers of meaning intersect: romanticized American dream fantasy clashes with class struggle and civil unrest. Jungen intercepts these ideas with the suggestion of native judicial practices through the title Talking Sticks. Possibly his most famous are the Prototype for New Understanding pieces, a series of Air Jordan running shoes restructured
as native ceremonial masks. Jungen was impressed by the similarity in graphic design between the Nike brand and Haida/Kwakwaka'wakw imagery, and in particular the use of black, red and white with strong distinct shapes. He has added straight black human hair to enhance their visual power and resonance as ritual artefact.

Beyond the connecting tissue of native symbolism, there exists a dialogue on the iconic nature of sport and sports design in general, its impact on the public psyche, and its relationship to global issues. Michael Jordan is an ideal, an icon, and finally a relic, as are the shoes that his image sells. However, Nike has been excoriated for its poor labour practices and urged to become a better world citizen.

While a great deal of the exhibition can appeal to the larger viewing public, as demonstrated by the masses of parents and children enjoying March Break at the gallery, some of the work functions at a more esoteric level. Arts and Craft Book Depository/Capp Street Project 2004 consists of a one-quarter-scale version of this edifice from San Francisco’s California College of the Arts. While the Arts and Crafts movement emerged as a reaction to the ugliness of mass-produced goods, Jungen presents a flippant twist by building his replica from roughly hewn plywood. He also pulls in a reference to conceptual art by chopping it into fourths, a homage to conceptual artist Matta-Clark.

Conversely, he builds loading pallets from the finest cedar, and applies fine printmaking to Nike shoeboxes. Counterpoised against the roughly constructed Arts and Crafts style structure, questions arise as to both the blurring of art and craft and this problematic categorization in general. Another rugged piece is Inside Today’s Home (version a). Plywood hoarding with peep-holes allows viewers to see into a newspaper-lined avairy, where little birds move in and around an assemblage of file boxes and woven baskets from IKEA. Jungen inverts notions of precious versus disposable, and questions the roles of both.

Other art-historical references for the cognoscenti include a visual discussion of Minimalism and its impact on the public psyche, and its relationship to global issues. Michael Jordan is an ideal, an icon, and finally a relic, as are the shoes that his image sells. However, Nike has been excoriated for its poor labour practices and urged to become a better world citizen.

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