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 chestfields. A huge "aha!" factor is created as the masks from Air Jordan running shoes, and the tepee consists of material at hand, i.e. skins, Jungen uses ones found in the throwaway world of current methods of mass production. Factory-made baseball bats are pitted and worn ones, Jungen intentionally selects factory-new materials found in the throwaway world of daily life.

While most of the pieces here have been previously exhibited, a black leather tepee was created on site; its construction documented in an accompanying video. The artist had eleven sofas delivered to the gallery from The Brick, a common furniture retailer. The video depiction of Jungen dismantling the sofas parodies the gutting of whale carcasses. They are then sewn together and the wooden supporting poles, Jungen and his crew erect the tepee as his relatives do each summer when they gather for visits. A pointed irony resides in this synthesis of old ways with the useless, into a space where art, identity and cultural traditions can transgress preset and inflexible versions of history. This resulting intersection/clash/synthesis of cultures and aesthetic theories has contributed to a focused brilliance, leading to the artist being awarded the inaugural Sobey Award in 2002.

Jungen is from north-eastern B.C. near Fort St. John, of aboriginal and Swiss descent. Arriving at Emily Carr when Conceptualism was the dominant art movement, he was encouraged to explore his aboriginal heritage and its iconography from this perspective. The conceptual breadth of the work on exhibit here is amplified by its context, suggestive of a museum of anthropology or natural history rather than art gallery. Inherent value systems are called into question, and numerous associations emerge, such as colonial exploitation, the subliminal implications of display and exhibition, and the whole institutionalised notion of "other."

The metonymic Field Drawings are crude gouguings on white gallery walls, blowups from a Calgary project where Jungen asked people on the street to draw something that could be associated with Indians. Predictably represented are the dream catcher, drum, canoe, Inukshuit, tepee and totem, but also included are a beer can and Lysol bottle. On the floor sits a cooler decorated in biker/tattoo parlour gothic. Due to accretions of paint on the walls, the routings display a layering of colour — tiny slices that, while barely visible in some areas, are more prominently striped in others and become an echo of other exhibitions over many years, underscoring the gallery's institutional memory.

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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 flip 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 disposable, and questions the roles of both.

Other art-historical references for the cognoscenti include a visual discussion of Minimalism and its relationship to Donald Judd. The incorporation of socio-political comment into Minimalist-styled works such as ten furniture-finished red cedar pallets, ten stacked shoe boxes bearing the screened image of Michael Jordan, or five amorphous pieces constructed from the polyhedral facets of soccer and football, is an art-savvy tease on the empty austerity of Minimalism. While this resonates for some viewers, the Nike refers and the iconic presence of Michael Jordan make huge inroads into the sensibilities of a larger audience. As in the commercialised popular culture that it imitates, the work can communicate to many audiences simultaneously. Jungen's art training during the primacy of Conceptualism is also evident in Isolated Deposition of the Passage of Time, where one of the beautiful cedar delivery skids holds stacks of trays from which muffled sounds emanate. The story upon which this piece is based clarifies its meaning. Originally created for an exhibition in the prison town of Kingston, Ontario, the piece works very well here in this former courthouse. It refers to an escape attempt where a prisoner in a maximum security carved a hiding place inside a stack that was destined to be moved to a minimum-security facility. The number of trays corresponds to the number of indigenous prisoners currently incarcerated, while different colours symbolize the number of years in a sentence. The suggestion of cheeky plastic trays counterbalances the grim reality of daily life in prison. T.S. Eliot's "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons" comes to mind. Whether intentional or not, the side edges of the trays suggest UPS symbols, representatives of commerce and the economic issues that surround native poverty and criminal activity. Any number of films might have been selected for the DVD playing in the interior space—Jungen has chosen The Great Escape.

Connections are made between form and context, culture and economics. Where some earlier native artists have been criticized for reproducing myths for art world consumption, Jungen rewrites the parameters, using aboriginal aesthetics to articulate contemporary mythologies. While his native heritage is clearly a major source of subject matter, the synthesis of playful mechanisms and intricate craftsmanship might also be pushed into a discussion of his Swiss background. In locating himself and his art at an ambiguous and problematic cultural intersection, Jungen truly proffers a prototype for a new understanding.

Brian Jungen
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NOTES

Margaret RODGERS is the author of Locating Alexandria, a book about artist Alexandra Luke, and has had writings published in Canadian Art, ArtFocus, and the Journal of Canadian Studies, among others. Also, as director/curator for VAC Clarington from 1989 to 2004, she contributed essays for numerous exhibitions.