Brian Jungen: Contemporary Mythologies
Margaret Rodgers

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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 an aboriginal artist 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 "ahah!" factor is created as the masks from Air Jordan running shoes are chopped and reassembled into a space where art, identity and cultural traditions can transgress preset and inflexible versions of history. This resulting intersection/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.

Layers of meaning intersect: Aboriginal is brought together with the colonizer, the rural with the urban, the natural with the artificial, the useful with the useless, into a space where art, identity and cultural traditions can transgress preset and inflexible versions of history. This resulting intersection/synthesis of cultures and aesthetic theories has contributed to a focused brilliance, leading to the artist being awarded the inaugural Sobey Award in 2002.

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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 4). Plywood hoarding with peep-holes allows viewers to see into a newspaper-lined aviary, where little birds move in and round 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 with references 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 referents 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 Depiction 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 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 aboriginal prisoners currently incarcerated, while different colours symbolize the number of years in a sentence. The suggestion of cheery 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
Vancouver Art Gallery
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NOTES

Margaret RODGERS is the author of Locating Alexandria, a book about artist Alexander 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.