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, and the tepee consists of reconfigured leather chesterfields. A huge "aha!" factor is created as B.C. artist Brian Jungen challenges the museum's traditional role as enforcer of ethnographic hierarchy 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 wry humour, 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 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 with its 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. Elliot'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
3. Margaret RODGERS is the author of Locating Alexandria, a book about artist Xenia Luke, and has had writings published in Canadian Art, Artforum, 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.