

Brian Jungen: Contemporary Mythologies

Margaret Rodgers

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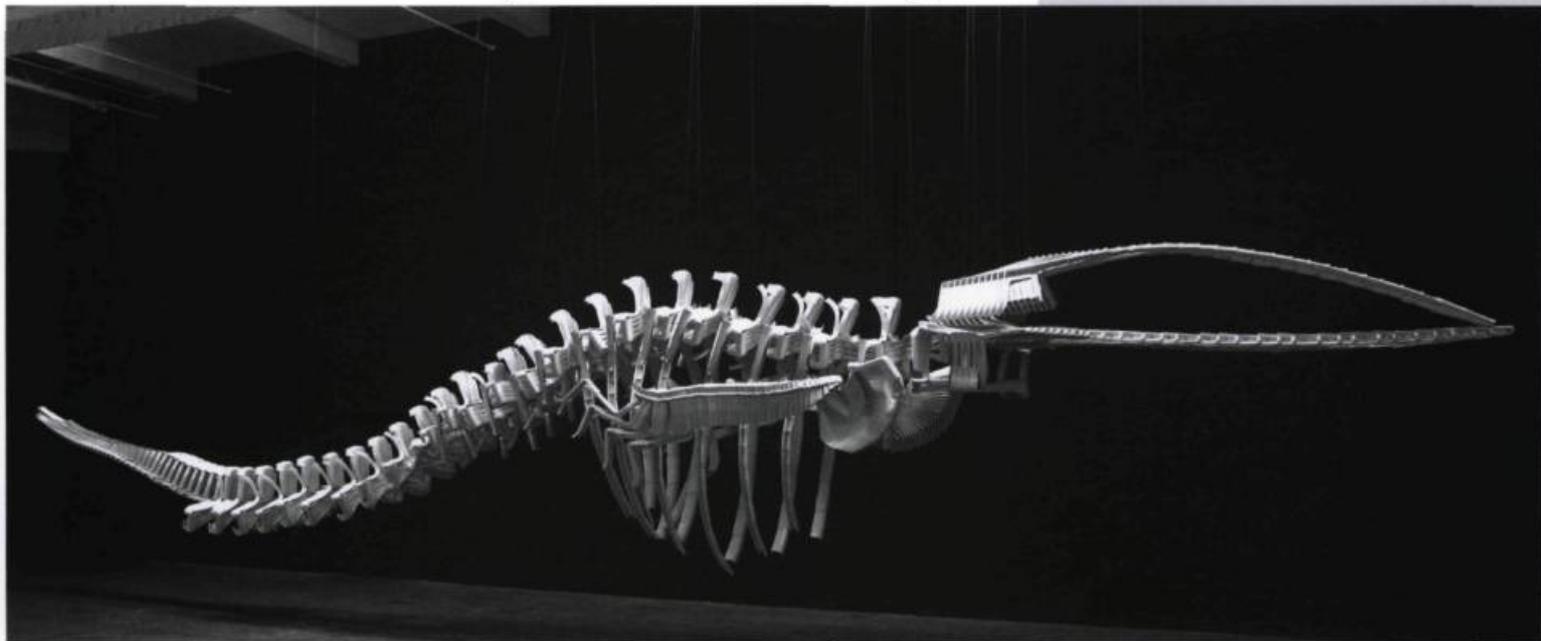
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Margaret RODGERS

Contemporary Mythologies



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 B.C. artist Brian Jungen challenges the museum's traditional role as enforcer of ethnographic hierarchy by presenting a panoply of multiple histories and their dialectical relations.

VAG is housed in neo-classical grandeur in a massive structure that was originally the provincial courthouse. All of the authority and power that a colonial government could wield is expressed in its columns, marble staircases and vaulted ceilings. Jungen's art subverts this authority by creating what exhibition curator Daina Augaitis refers to as "a new world hybridity," where "the 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."¹ 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 gougings 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.

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 substructures used to form 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 current methods of mass production. 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 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

Brian JUNGEN, *Cetology*, 2002. Plastic chairs. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Purchased with the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program and the Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund, 2003. Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery.



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 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

Brian JUNGEN, *Isolated Depiction of the Passage of Time*, 2001. Plastic food trays, television monitor, DVD player, wood. Collection of Bob Rennie, Rennie Management Corporation, Vancouver. Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery.

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.² 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
January – April 2006

NOTES

1. Daina Augaitis, *Prototypes for New Understandings*, exhibition catalogue.
2. T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *Prufrock and Other Observations* (London: The Egoist, Ltd, 1917; Bartleby.com, 1996. www.bartleby.com/198/. [04/07/06]), line 31.

Margaret RODGERS is the author of *Locating Alexandra*, 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.

Brian JUNGEN, left to right: *Collective Unconscious*, 2005; *First Nation Second Nature*, 2005; *Work to Rule*, 2005. All: carved baseball bats, test artist proofs. Produced with support from the Province of British Columbia Spirit of BC Arts Fund. Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery.

