

Dana Claxton: *Made to be ready*

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L'avancée du visiteur aboutit enfin à une silhouette drapée de noir, de brun et d'écru, qu'il contourne pour trouver une alcôve remplie d'icônes. Suspendue à des bandelettes de toile, une multitude de petites images sacrées tracées schématiquement sur le tissu brut et provenant de cultes divers se révèle à la vue. Les images des religieuses y retrouvent celles des Saintes, de la Vierge et des déesses hindoues. Parmi celles-ci, on remarque une représentation du voile de sainte Véronique. Vidé du visage du Christ, il souligne la filiation de la tradition iconographique au miracle de l'image acheiropoïète, le rapprochement entre le voile et la toile du peintre, et il pose la question de la source de la représentation.

L'expérience intime vécue au sanctuaire, le visiteur pourra la prolonger en pénétrant dans la seconde salle de la galerie où le bruit régulier d'une sculpture-fontaine incite au recueillement. La contemplation s'achève finalement dans la découverte d'un autel joliment fleuri; sur des socles de bois, des petits objets évoquent le travail textile et l'artisanat des femmes (les broches à tricoter, la laine, la porcelaine); d'autres formes, des têtes de bois tourné, portent une longue chevelure que le voile ne cache plus.

Le carré enveloppant de la pièce et le parterre fleuri sont une référence au jardin enclos (*hortus conclusus*) que l'on retrouve normalement dans l'architecture religieuse et qui constitue un autre thème important de la peinture. La sœur, la femme, la source et la forme fermée sont liées dans cette formule du *Cantique des cantiques* : « *Hortus conclusus soror mea, sponsa; hortus conclusus, fons signatus* », « ma sœur et fiancée est un jardin enclos; le jardin enclos est une source fermée ». À sa sortie du jardin, le visiteur surprend, dans le drapé du sanctuaire, un profil familier, comme une image imprimée dans la toile.

Dans *Vœux*, Marie-Claude Bouthillier déploie la peinture dans l'espace, la déplace *hors d'elle-même* à un point tel que celle-ci, n'étant presque plus visible, imprègne néanmoins toute chose. Minimale, la forme n'est pas vidée de son contenu, mais elle s'avère, bien au contraire, porteuse d'une puissance de révélation.

1. Texte de présentation du projet sur le site Internet de l'artiste.

Gabrielle Desgagné-Duclos a terminé depuis peu sa maîtrise en histoire de l'art à l'Université de Montréal. Sous la direction de Johanne Lamoureux, elle s'est intéressée au tableau vivant comme dispositif esthétique et à sa réappropriation dans l'art contemporain en tant que stratégie de remédiation opacifiante. Elle travaille actuellement au Centre d'exposition de l'Université de Montréal.

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**AUDAIN GALLERY
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
VANCOUVER
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When you first walk into Dana Claxton's new exhibition at the Audain Gallery in Vancouver, you see a pair of silk banners hanging in front of the window. Two images: a woman raising a buffalo skull, a woman lowering the skull. The works are called *Buffalo Woman I* and *Buffalo Woman II* (both 2015). Behind, but also through, the images, one can see West Hastings Street in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES). The neighbourhood, that is, frames the images. Or are these images an intervention into the neighbourhood? Vancouver's DTES is often, and lazily, referred to as Canada's poorest postal code, as Skid Row, as a neighbourhood of gentrification (to which Simon Fraser University's campus contributes) but also of Canada's first safe injection site for drug users. And yet, to insist on the neighbourhood's role in framing or contextualizing art can be as simplistic as referring all of Claxton's art practice to her biography, to her identity as a Plains Indian, a Lakota artist.

More frames, and framing, however, are apparent in two works on either side of the *Buffalo Woman* pieces. On the left is *Headdress* (2015), a transmounted photograph on a lightbox, on the right is *Cultural Belongings* (2015), similarly mounted. *Headdress* looks like a Plains Indian veil, or necklaces of bone and needlework hanging from a headband itself made with needlework. In *Cultural Belongings*, a woman wears the veil, a sleeveless dress, and on her feet, platform shoes. She is in profile, holding a rattle or club, and trailing a cape (of animal hide) and assorted other "belongings:" a drum, needlework, baskets.

These photographs are both studio shots (thus, as Vancouver artist Althea Thauberger noted, they are not located "in the street" as prompted by the gallery's locale). And the edges are fogged or shaded, suggesting the melancholic nostalgia to be found in various Instagram effects. Or, perhaps the studio scenarios and melancholic framing are connotative of the source of that Instagram nostalgia: late 19th century photographic pictorialism. In that latter image-repertoire, American Indians and Canadian aboriginals were often photographed in "traditional" dress, to better locate the indigene in a "vanishing race" ideology (they are the past, the photographs declared, and the viewer and photographic technology are in the present).

The framing of *Headdress* and *Cultural Belongings* suggests another way of doubling that melancholy or nostalgia. We have the fuzzy or shadowed edges or frames: such effects both work against the documentary impulse of photography, and refer, as I've already said, to an earlier form of photographic production. But this melancholy or nostalgia — here problematized because it is, after all, a colonial use of photography — suggests a blurring of the object — what is being missed, earlier photography or earlier cultural (indigenous) traditions?



We can compare Claxton's exhibition with another one concurrent in Vancouver: that of Brian Jungen, who, at Catriona Jeffries Gallery, returns to his 1990s practice of cutting up Air Jordan sneakers, only this time making less recognizable First Nations masks. Again, is Jungen expressing nostalgia for indigenous cultural artefacts through nostalgia for 90s skater culture, or the other way around? In both Claxton and Jungen's exhibitions, then, Indigenous cultural objects are presented dialectically with the aesthetics of their production.

And there is another way of looking at Claxton's show, one the curator Amy Kazmerchyk suggests. Here we begin with a piece not mentioned yet, *Uplifting*, a 15 minute video that faces the *Buffalo Women* works. In the video, a woman crawls across a screen, eventually standing on her own: here a politics of sovereignty or perhaps agency is suggested. But this reading suffers from being too oblique, perhaps: one person standing, does she represent a community, a First Nation? Is standing itself enough for political agency? Then we see *Cultural Belongings* and now that agency is joined by objects of expression, regalia and ceremony. Next is the *Buffalo Women* works, which, it turns out, are lifting up (rather than being, as in the video, uplifted), lifting up, that is, the buffalo skull. Finally we have *Headdress*, and the circuit in the gallery is complete with an artifact (and not the skull, which carries connotations of nature).

That circuit of Claxton's show, one authorized, as it were, by the curatorial agenda of the Audain Gallery, however does not address two problems. Both have to do with an evacuation of political content or agency in the works. Consider, for example, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's discussion, in *Metaphors We Live By*, of the cross-cultural way in which "up" functions as a positive metaphor. From saying "I'm feeling up" (to mean happy) to "Get up" (consciousness is up), spatial and orientation metaphors seem to generally mean a positive connotation with upward motion, and a negative connotation with those that are downward.

Does this mean, then, that the politics of Claxton's artworks is universalist, is a politics that would mean the same thing regardless of context, of her national background, of the viewer's own identity? Yes and no. By way

of explanation, it is useful to turn to Claxton's most prominent museum appearance in recent years, her work that was part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition *The Plains Indians: Artists of Earth and Sky* last year in New York. For that show, Claxton brought together Lakota/Sioux objects and practices noting that rattles, mirrored images, and deer hide incorporate a mixing and melding of material and process not unlike contemporary performance art.

And so it is with Claxton's mobilization of spatiality and politics in *Made to be ready* (an exhibition title reminiscent of Duchamp's readymades, and which may, indeed, be a gesture that *indigenizes* that benchmark of conceptualism). Yes, the work argues, there is a universalism of spatiality here, but it is one also grounded (another metaphor) in the history of anti-colonialism.

Claxton also performs as part of another First Nations exhibition in Vancouver, that of Kwakwaka'wakw carver Beau Dick at the Belkin Gallery in March. The simultaneity of new works by Claxton, Jungen, and Dick on display in Vancouver suggests, finally, not only the crucial role that Aboriginal art plays in this city, but the necessity for the rest of the country to pay attention.

Clint Burnham's latest book of poetry, *Pound at Guantánamo*, will be published in April 2016 by Talonbooks; his *Fredric Jameson and the Wolf of Wall Street* will be published in October 2016 by Bloomsbury. He is currently writing about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and he has published reviews of Duane Linklater (*Canadian Art*), Brian Jungen (*The Globe and Mail*) and the politics of First Nations art (Momus.ca), as well as catalogue essays for the grunt gallery (Vancouver), the Witte de With (Rotterdam) and the Kunsthalle Wien (Vienna), among others.