



conférences

qu'elles

DÉFINITIONS DE LA CULTURE VISUELLE V

MONDIALISATION ET POSTCOLONIALISME



MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL
Québec

9

CONFÉRENCES ET COLLOQUES

DÉFINITIONS DE LA CULTURE VISUELLE V.

MONDIALISATION ET POSTCOLONIALISME

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PRESENCE AND ABSENCE: INDIAN ART IN THE 1990s
RYAN RICE

An excerpt from the full article

THE INDIAN ART CENTRE¹⁰

The Indian Art Centre of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada is one of the only cultural programs remaining in this government department (the Inuit Art Centre is the other). The role of the Indian Art Centre is to foster and promote the visual arts of Indians, in Canada and abroad, through an exhibition/acquisition program, manage the National Indian Art Collection (3,885 works), maintain a research and documentation library on contemporary Indian visual arts and culture, and organize thematic travelling exhibitions of works from the National Indian Art Collection. The Indian Art Centre also partners with, and loans work from the collection to, museums, art galleries, government departments as well as artists in the collection and curators.

In 1965, the Indian Art Centre began collecting through departmental purchases, regional acquisitions and selections made by the Indian Art Centre's managers to support and encourage practising Indian artists. The collection also includes works purchased by Indian and Northern Affairs before 1965. These pre-Indian Art Centre works were selected and purchased by Indian agents and department officials who often visited reserves across Canada. Other works were acquired through gift-giving by Indian bands to department officials. The artworks were not acquired with the

intent of establishing a national Indian Art Collection, but rather to support economic growth in the places the department visited. These works eventually furnished office decoration for Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

With an increase in the production of art and the number of active Indian artists in Canada, the Indian Art Centre, the largest and most concentrated collector of contemporary Indian Art in Canada, had to re-evaluate its collecting process. In order for the collection to continue its significant development, in 1990 the Treasury Board of Canada reaffirmed the department's authority to purchase artworks from new, emerging and established Indian artists. It also authorized the ongoing maintenance for preservation and care of the Indian Art Collection. The future looked bright, and in July 1990, a consultation group consisting of former Indian Art Centre managers Tom Hill, Rick Hill, Stephen Rothwell and David General, artists Ron Noganosh, Allen Edzerza and Helen Wassegijig, and Indian Art Centre staff, manager Viviane Gray and collections keeper Gilles Henry, met to discuss the Indian Art Centre's programming and acquisition policies. They recommended that the Indian Art Centre maintain a quality national public collection of contemporary Canadian Indian art. The Indian Art Centre was mandated to continue acquiring artworks for the collection; 60 % of the works from new and emerging artists with the remaining 40 % to be acquired from established artists of Indian ancestry.

The jury, made up of Indian artists, art administrators and curators, recommended and selected works for the collection. Criteria for selecting work are based on artistic value (both traditional and contemporary), and also recognize historical references, social critique, and traditional values that significantly reflect upon nationalism, post-modern paradigms, community and culture. Roger Simon's *The Art Collector*, 1993 (oil on paper, 76 x 65 cm) encompasses all of our collecting criteria while parodying the status of "art collecting." He embraces elements of the traditional and contemporary aesthetic while he acknowledges "western art histories" and places us in the forefront. Simon reminds us how we collect.

New and emerging artists like Eric Robertson, Greg Staats and Mary Longman were included in the collection alongside mid-career and senior artists as an attempt to achieve and maintain a balanced representation of those who contribute to the continuity of Indian art. This objective to include new and emerging artists was a bold move to keep the collection contemporary. It put forth faith and gave support to those artists and their work. It also emphasized the strength and integrity of the collection as a national cultural asset representative of the finest Indian art produced. The importance of being in a national collection proved vital for many artists trying to break into a mainstream art milieu. It was an endorsement and incentive that gave the artists a stamp of accreditation they needed for the advancement of their careers.

A considerable number of significant works were added to the Indian Art Centre's collection through the input of a group of artists from Alberta. On December 19, 1992, in Edmonton, Alberta, the Indian Art Centre purchased an important collection of contemporary Indian art at a public auction. This collection belonged to the Alberta Indian Arts and Crafts Society which was selling off the works in order to pay its debts. There was much interest in the collection and many public and private sectors were planning to bid on selected works. The break-up of the collection seemed inevitable. Artists whose works were in the collection were concerned that the entire collection would be disbanded and its integrity and legacy would be lost. After the Indian Art Centre received an official request, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development purchased the entire collection for \$75,000. The presence of the Alberta artists was felt as they unnerved potential bidders from purchasing the works. They let it known that the collection was to stay intact and supported the Departmental bid. The 507-piece collection contains 92 contemporary works by artists such as Alex Janvier, George Littlechild, Kim McLain, Lauren Wuttunee, Ken Swan, Faye Heavyshield and others. Other works include traditional media such as beadwork, pottery, carvings, masks and textiles.

The Indian Art Centre's collection grew substantially over the years, due to the national acquisition program introduced in 1990. Space, location and conservation were becoming factors to be considered in the process of collecting and maintaining the collection. In 1990, the Indian Art Collection moved from a small inadequate office space with shelving into the former Inuit Art Collection storage space, an adequate facility that houses approximately 2,500 works of various sizes and media. Since much of the collection is loaned regularly for exhibitions and for offices, the storage facility, known as "the vault," remains sufficient. The collection acts as an Art Bank that we often refer to as a "working collection." The offices of Indian and Northern Affairs across Canada receive artwork as part of an exhibiting program to promote the artwork and the artists in the collection.

Special juries were convened as well. In 1994, the Deputy Minister of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Dan Goodleaf, visited Russia and promised to transfer works from the Indian Art Collection to the Canadian Embassy in Moscow, in celebration of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples. However, it was decided that the transfer of some works would undermine and jeopardize the integrity and reputation of the collection as a public national collection. This initiative to promote Indian artwork at an international level nevertheless prompted a collaboration between DIAND and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT). A budget was allocated between both parties and a call to artists was announced for this special

transfer/acquisition program. This link to international relations foreshadowed the Indian Art Centre's appeal to foreign countries and their willingness to host contemporary Indian art.

In 1990, the Indian and Inuit Art Gallery opened in the lobby of DIAND at Les Terrasses de la Chaudière, Hull, Québec. Thematic exhibitions were planned to rotate every two months to highlight acquisitions from the collection. The intent of the gallery was to provide new and emerging curators the opportunity to develop curatorial skills by coordinating exhibitions. With a staff of two, the gallery mounted seven exhibitions in the first two years. It was a huge undertaking for a small staff to properly curate exhibitions, so the gallery focused on exhibiting recent acquisitions from the national juries. As well, thematic shows of specific mediums and cultural/traditional art from the collection were presented on a rotating basis. In seven years, most of the works in the collection were shown at least once. Seven years later, in 1997, Chief Curator Barry Ace re-examined the mandate of the gallery and introduced an idea to re-establish the efficient operation of the gallery that, at the same time, would heighten the awareness of Indian art. Ace's idea was to exhibit works by resident artists from the local Ottawa/Hull area in solo exhibitions. In addition, it was recommended that acquisitions of new works come from the exhibitions. Increasing demand for loans had resulted in a decrease in available works from the collection. This initiative emerged in direct response to a verbal ministerial recommendation that DIAND could provide economic opportunities for artists to exhibit and sell their works. It was also a response to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples recommendation regarding the promotion of Aboriginal culture.

In May 1997, Ron Noganosh opened his exhibition *Bee That As It May*. It was well attended and attracted not only the public but representatives from neighbouring institutions—including the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the First Peoples Secretariat at the Canada Council, the National Gallery of Canada and the Ottawa Art Gallery. Three other solo exhibitions, Mary Anne Caibaiosai's *Encounters*, Don McLeay's *The Wolf Shadow Within Me* and Leo Yerxa's *Come Twilight*, and a group exhibition organized by Aboriginal Art Leasing titled *The Earth Sings* featuring Simon Brascoupé and Joe Jacobs, followed the same success as Ron Noganosh's exhibition. The profile of the gallery and Indian art was heightened. Barry Ace went one step further with Jeff Thomas's exhibition *Inter/section*. Together, Ace and Thomas established a curatorial partnership that was lacking in our communities. An Indian curator and an Indian artist collaborated to begin a critical dialogue regarding art and its relationship to ourselves and our place. Though it was not the first exhibit curated by an Indian, it established a direction for the Indian Art Centre to go in. With the success and recommendation from the participating artists of the first resident artists'

exhibitions, a new program was established to replace the national juried acquisition program. The Artist-in-Residence/Acquisition program was developed in 1998 to give artists an opportunity to exhibit and to gain insight on installation and promotion of their work. The 1990 mandate to include both established and emerging artists was maintained. A national call for submissions was announced and the Artist-in-Residence program opened in September 1998 with Shelley Niro's exhibition *For Fearless and Other Indians*. The jury process remained a crucial part in distinguishing who would get an exhibition. Artists were asked to submit slides, résumé and statement, but also to submit a proposal for an exhibition. The recommended acquisition was selected by the Chief Curator and Assistant Curator based upon their knowledge of the collection in terms of media and genres that weren't represented, as well as concerns about conservation and space limitations. The artists each receive an exhibition fee, a vernissage and a critical essay addressing their work. In-house production by the staff of the Indian Art Centre provides all the necessities for the exhibition; we prepare the food, design the invitations, lick stamps and write the essays. The essays are presented in a 'zine style format, collected by those attending the opening. The artists receive copies for future reference. Many artists have used their essays in their proposals for grants and to access other venues for exhibitions. The Artist-in-Residence program is filling a void in the Indian art world that institutions such as the National Gallery of Canada and the Canadian Museum of Civilization are neglecting in the national capital region.

The profile of the Indian Art Gallery continues to rise. The exhibitions receive attention in local newspapers and are reviewed by the alternative press. New and emerging artists like Audrey Greyeyes, Tracey Anthony, Jerry Evans and Linda Young had their first solo shows. David Hannan, Janice Toulouse-Shiingwaak and Leonard Beam followed their exhibitions to other venues such as Urban Shaman, Winnipeg, and the Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Ontario. Rosalie Favell's exhibition *Longing and Not Belonging* was purchased in its entirety, due to its thematic and narrative viewpoint that encompasses identity, gender and race. The 43 works are photo-based digital outputs, a new medium to the collection. The exhibition has been travelling nationally and in Taiwan since it opened at the Indian Art Gallery in February 1999. Mid-career artist Mary Anne Barkhouse presented her *Pelage* series of button blankets with a twist, which were then included in *Ravens Wait*, curated by Lynn Hill at the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia in 2000. Barkhouse's work led to a commission for the Indian Art Centre that would summarize the *Pelage* series. Established artists Rick Rivet, Shelley Niro and George Littlechild showed new works, and Roger Simon exhibited some of his last paintings before his untimely death in 1999.

Senior artist Judith Morgan exhibited works that complemented her book *Celebration: Paintings and History*, a history of the Gitksan through her paintings. Morgan has produced artwork since the early 1940s but has been ignored by critics and curators specializing in B.C. art. Her voice, though very dynamic, wasn't heard in the same capacity as George Clutesi, Bill Reid, Robert Davidson or Frieda Diesing. Yet Morgan continues to paint and has exhibited in many prestigious institutions in Canada: National Museum of Man, Ottawa, Ontario, Royal Museum of Victoria, B.C., Vancouver Art Gallery, Greater Victoria Art Gallery, University of Northern B.C., Prince George, B.C. A painter whose narratives convey Gitksan tradition and Nationhood, Morgan writes a strong statement that reflects her pride.

My paintings are my reflection of a very proud people called the Gitksan. To paint them accurately would be to portray a Nation under siege and put aboard a space ship that has an umbilical cord anchored to a snag that was once a green tree and labeled a "Reserve." The other image is that of a broken mirror reflecting multimillion dollar Museums that house the finest three dimensional Art, representing this Northern Hemisphere that was made by hands that owned land. The question that needs to be addressed is this, "What crime did this Nation do to be uprooted and left afloat without land to pass down to their children?"

The above summation may sound harsh, but the Gitksan people have been downtrodden because they lived under the Indian Act Laws which are separate from the Canadian Constitution. To live in valleys surrounded by mountains of forest that once was theirs and watch logging trucks hurry by, and wake up to see another mountain grazed, is to kill the heart and soul of the Elders.¹¹

Her paintings do not convey her strong words literally, but they do convey her survival, her memories and her reasons to celebrate.

The conceptual and minimalist photographic exhibition *Renewal*, by photographer Greg Staats, concentrated on the Iroquoian philosophy of condolence. His show was timely and complemented two other exhibitions in Ottawa (May 2000) which featured his work. Staats' exhibition was the last of the first 18 months of programming from the Artist-in-Residence program. It was a fitting exhibition to close the first series of programming, since *Renewal* granted the viewer liberty to reflect upon time and space in the capacity of peace, thanksgiving and spirituality. It left our minds good and open for the future of the Indian Art Gallery. In addition to the program, and in keeping with the original intent of the gallery, Indian writers and curators were

included to fulfil the concerns of the artist. Inaugurating the inclusion, Lynn Hill curated and wrote on Judith Morgan's work while Audra Simpson authored "Renewal in New Works from Greg Staats." In this dialogue around aesthetics, politics and history, the artists, curators and writers are contributing to the evolution of Indian art history, from a significant, community-based perspective. The infinite success of the program will evolve around this community-oriented initiative. More Indian curators and writers will be approached to provide a critical yet comprehensive dialogue that will encourage our people and the general public to recognize our artists' contributions, which will be appreciated forever.

Since 1990, approximately 1,000 new works have been added to the collection, making it the largest contemporary Indian art collection in Canada, totalling 3,885 pieces. The collection has been referred to as a bundle; like a bundle, the Indian Art Collection contains narratives, dreams, magic, medicine and necessities of life. The objects that testify to our artistic and creative achievements bring a "sacredness" to our bundle. The bundle will continue to grow in the new millennium. It will contain new stories, new technologies and inspire new generations. Our bundle will continue to be cared for by Indian curators, arts administrators and artists as we document our own art histories, theories and genres. The bundle will travel throughout the world and "Cyberia," allowing other cultures a glimpse of our unique vision of ourselves, our philosophies, histories and territories. The bundle will continue to hold onto traditions, but will also allow them to continue to change. We will watch the transition of the Centre unfold, as we have for 35 years. The bundle will continue to be upheld as a national cultural asset with historical significance for the use and benefit of present and future generations of Indians and Canadians. The bundle is ours.

In 1995, the Centre was involved in various projects regarding the promotion of Indian art at an international level. These included the Le Printemps-Pinault department store Christmas Promotion in Paris, France, which promoted and marketed Indian and Inuit art and craft-oriented works, and the international exhibition *Transitions: Contemporary Canadian Indian and Inuit Art*, 1997, co-curated by Barry Ace and July Papat sie of the Indian and Inuit Art Centres. These international initiatives prepared the Indian Art Centre for future international possibilities. In the spring of 1996, Minister Ron Irwin visited the Waikato Museum of Art and History in New Zealand, which requested an exhibition of contemporary Indian and Inuit artwork at its institution. In August 1996, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade approached the Indian Art Centre regarding an exhibition of contemporary Indian and Inuit art for the official opening of the newly renovated Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris, France. In order to accommodate both requests, a meeting was held with Valerie Raymond, Director, Arts and Cultural Industries

Promotion Division, DFAIT, Yves Pepin, Head, Visual Arts, Arts and Cultural Promotion Division, DFAIT, and the Indian and Inuit Art Centres. With a curatorial prospectus, the exhibition was green-lighted and a cost-share between DIAND and DFAIT was established. The joint fund covered new acquisitions, display cases, exhibition catalogues, framing, shipping and travel. The Indian artists included Robert Houle, Shelley Niro, Lance Belanger, David Hannan, Joane Cardinal-Schubert, Jane Ash Poitras, Ron Nogansoh, Carl Beam, Marianne Nicholson, Jim Logan and Thomas Simeon. The exhibition *Transitions: Contemporary Canadian Indian and Inuit Art*, was opened in Paris, France, in January 1997 by Prime Minister Jean Chrétien. It then travelled to the Waikato Art and History Museum, Hamilton, New Zealand, the National Gallery, San Jose, Costa Rica, the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C., and on a tour of museums, cultural centres and art institutions in Taiwan. Considered a great success, *Transitions* was the first exhibition to be curated by Indian and Inuit curators. Its thematic intent was to introduce the world to the sophisticated and diverse forms created by indigenous people in Canada. The catalogue produced for *Transitions* ensures its lasting effect. *Transitions 2: Contemporary Indian and Inuit Art of Canada*, also curated by the Indian and Inuit Art Centres, began its journey in 2001.

The 1990s offered an assortment of experiences, events and processes that will provide us with the strength and skills we need as we enter a new millennium. It is clear that we have arrived; Indian art and its makers have found a niche within our communities and a larger art world. Artists have freedom to experiment with genres and styles that issue both from our traditions, from our collective experiences, as well as from Western art forms. Artists grasp, without cultural shame, all of the tools and techniques available to them. Our established presence catapults us into a national as well as an international realm that recognizes our contributions to contemporary artistic development and practice. Our works are being included in collections, private, public and personal. The impact of our presence has established new granting categories and a secretariat at the Canada Council for the Arts, and other granting agencies across the country. Yet we are still faced with our absence from the country's major art institutions. The question these places continue to ask is: Where does Indian art fit in? Maybe the answer is simply, we don't.

1. Audra Simpson, "Renewal in New Works From Greg Staats" (Indian Art Centre, Hull, Que., March 2000).
2. Chuck Heit, artist statement (Indian Art Centre, 1992).
3. AFN and CMA, *Turning The Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples*, 3rd edition (Ottawa, Ont., 1994).
4. Eric Robertson, artist statement, September 2001.
5. Robert Houle, artist statement, April 1992.
6. Audra Simpson, "Making Native Love" (www.nation2nation.org, 1995).
7. Skawennati Fragnito, "A Chatroom is Worth A Thousand Words" (www.cyberpowwow.net, 2001).
8. Karen Huska, artist statement, 1997.
9. Barry Ace, artist statement, September 2001.
10. Ryan Rice, "Collecting Ourselves" (Indian Art Centre, INAC, 2001).
11. Judith Morgan, *Celebration: Painting and History* (Terrace, B.C.: Terrace Press, 1999).

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