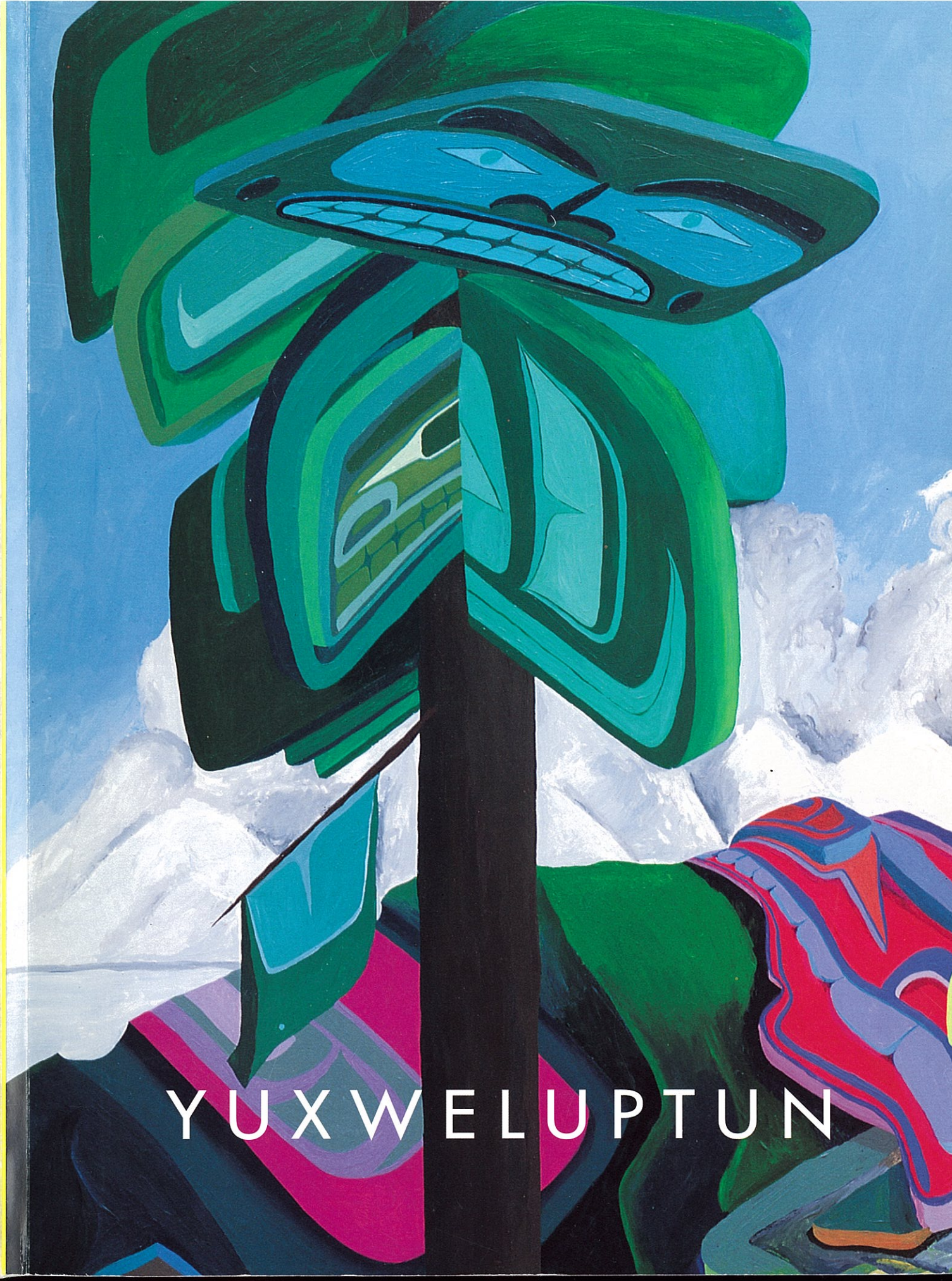




The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery

YUXWELUPTUN

Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia



YUXWELUPTUN

The Modernist Past of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's Landscape Allegories

Scott Watson

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's polemical works are a challenge to the eye of the dominant culture. They confront the viewer with the social and historical characteristics of a contested territory. They bring something new to the problem of landscape by replacing the theme of "wilderness" with the issue of land claims. Yuxweluptun's work, in this context, is in a dialectical relationship with the entire tradition of Canadian landscape painting. That is, it casts that tradition in a new light as it opposes it. This light searches through the archive of Canadian images and dispels illusions, particularly those that have built up over the years based on the relationship between the land and nationhood.

For the Group of Seven the land was a cradle for the birth of a new Canadian race. For subsequent generations it has been a sign of regional identity, a topography upon which to cultivate identity. The first duty of the Canadian artist, wrote Northrop Frye, is to establish psychic ownership over the land. If we take this injunction literally – the first move in a deconstructive reading – the contestation of ownership and the erasure of Native land claims, cultures and economies becomes the grand unifying "subject" of the Canadian landscape tradition. Yuxweluptun's relation to the Canadian landscape tradition, although oppositional, is also energizing as it demands that we look again at something familiar, something securely and soothingly part of Canadian identity, for signs of conflict, anxiety and doubt. And just as this reawakening to the historical content of the landscape tradition brings forward a shameful legacy of injustice and suffering there appears, albeit etched in a fainter light, the possibility of justice and redress.

Yuxweluptun's work also appears in the not-unrelated context of the First Nations contemporary art movement in Canada and in the context of that movement's own relation to other movements of cultural empowerment. Here the work openly contests what once seemed received and settled versions of, among other things, the revival of the Northwest Coast design and carving tradition. Yuxweluptun interrupts the appeal to timeless form and ancient tradition that that revival nourishes, displacing the aura of native design from carvings or prints of mythological or heraldic creatures to contemporary objects. In *Haida Hot Dog* (1984), for example, his "Salish" use of Haida ovoid forms to picture a hot dog, aggravates the distance between the Haida arts and crafts movement, its white audience and the icons of popular culture that infiltrate the lives of ordinary Haida much as they do everyone else.

A small drawing of a car, again using Haida ovoids, both pricks this aura with satire – we are forced to question why the design is inappropriate, to ask what canon it violates, and simultaneously to notice the ovoid's stream-lined, functional design character and to imagine it as a modernist template whose

potential has yet to be realized. These simple “cartoon” upset what we already “know”: that we place Haida art with “high” decorative art like Japanese coromandel screens, Art Nouveau furniture or Egyptian antiquities, and not with the Bauhaus/industrial design and interventions into mass production. Isn’t it their “high art” and low technology that keeps Indians in their place in the first instance? Isn’t there, Yuxweluptun seems to ask, a negative stereotype still kept in circulation by the revival of traditional design that serves to keep First Nations people outside the inner circles of modernity?

Yuxweluptun’s paintings are the most recent gesture in the decades old attempt to ally the Canadian version of Western Modernism and the revival of traditional native arts and crafts. And his art is the first to bring this relationship into question. His use of traditional design elements doesn’t merely guarantee the “Indianness” of his paintings. As a Salish artist, he disregards the rule that ethnicity must authorize tribal styles by making use of Haida and Kwakwaka’wakw design in his work. In some quarters his “misuse” of those forms is seen to abrogate the authenticity of his images. Instead, his use is critical in the sense that he restores history and memory to forms that have been received as timeless and universal. He animates the design forms as actors in the historical struggle over land and the fight for human rights.

The story of Canadian Modernism and Indian art needs to be sketched here as it is so fundamental to the stories in Yuxweluptun’s paintings. The strategy or thesis of the early Canadian modernists involved notions of exchange, appropriation and assimilation – all of which have their counterparts in government policies towards Native people.

In order to create an authentic, modern art, reasoned the early modernists, Canadian art must have a rooted relationship to place, it must assimilate the native arts of what was Canada before the Europeans came – Canada’s “timeless” past. In turn, those arts must be contextualized as high art within a modern discourse about art; their purely aesthetic qualities must come to the fore. Native art was accordingly stripped of local meaning and placed within the horizon of universal expression and timeless form. Its greatness ensured that it belonged to “mankind”. It was necessary to wrest native art from anthropological discourse and its emphasis on the specifics of culture and to make the art speak again in a language of humanist aesthetics.

The urgency of bringing native art into the fold of modern contemplation was urgently felt by, for example, Emily Carr. The grand, “initiating” gesture, and the one that brought Carr herself to belated national attention, was the 1927 National Gallery of Canada exhibition, “Canadian West Coast Art, Native and Modern”, organized by Director Eric Brown and anthropologist, Marius Barbeau.¹ This exhibition placed works with Indian themes by Carr, A.Y. Jackson, Edwin Holgate and other Canadian modernists among Northwest Coast “antiquities”.²

The exhibition argued that Canadian Modernism must appropriate the legacy of native art in order to have an authentic relation to the land. Native arts and crafts, at a low ebb in the 1920s largely due to government programs of persecution such as the banning of the potlatch (1884-1951), would, in turn, be revived under the aegis of a modernist aesthetics and be assimilated into the construction of a Canadian cultural identity. Carr’s pottery and hooked rugs

¹ The National Gallery of Canada, “Canadian West Coast Art, Native and Modern,” December, 1927. Much of what I am saying here is cribbed from Ann K. Morrison’s *Canadian Art and Cultural Appropriation: Emily Carr and the 1927 Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art, Native and Modern* (M.A. Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1991).

² One contemporary native artist, Fred Alexee, was included. His “naive” paintings were classed with the anonymous native crafts, themselves organized by object-type rather than tribal style. He was *not* listed with the “Canadian Artists.”

³ Eric Brown in the Introduction to the catalogue, *Canadian West Coast Art, Native and Modern*, op cit.

were featured in “Canadian West Coast Art, Native and Modern”, as an example of the “invaluable mine of decorative design which is available to the student for a host of different purposes ...”.³ Indian art, for the exhibition organizers, was seen as a decorative tradition that identified Canadian nationality and which could be easily assimilated into the already arts and crafts based, Art Nouveau inflected, national landscape school epitomized by the Group of Seven. The exhibition resulted in a reinvigoration of Carr’s own art but had little effect on the production of contemporary native art – an art it had positioned in the past tense anyway. In history, the exhibition took place in the very year, 1927, when an amendment to the Indian Act made it a criminal offense to raise money to represent Native land claims.⁴ The nadir of the native arts and crafts movement roughly encompasses the same decades, from 1927 to 1951, that this amendment remained in effect.⁵

In Vancouver, during the years following WWII, perhaps as nowhere else in Canada, a loose grouping of artists, architects, designers, writers, anthropologists and academics enacted a regional identity through cultural and institutional reforms which introduced Modernism to a then emerging generation of middle-class professionals. It was here that the relationship between Modernism and a native arts and crafts revival was successfully forged.

In British Columbia the native arts and crafts movement has a long history. It should be clear that by the use of the phrase “arts and crafts movement”, I mean to define an activity encouraged by whites for a multitude of purposes and uses of their own construction, but which derived, however prosaically, from the ideals of William Morris and his circle.

By that I do not mean the history of the production of art by First Nations peoples for purposes of their own. In the 1920s, children in some residential schools were encouraged to make objects based on “Native” design provided them by the staff of the Provincial Museum. Thus, in its very inception, the attempt to make a space for the reception of native art in white high culture rested on the notion that the indigenous and historical forms of native arts and crafts production were dead or dying out and could only be revived through the

⁴ Paul Tennant, *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics, The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849-1989*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990), pp. 111-112.

⁵ The relationship between oppressive legislation, aboriginal politics and the reception of the carving tradition into fine arts museums was first pointed out to me in Marcia Crosby’s *Indian Art/Aboriginal Title* (M.A. Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1994).

reintroduction of native design into native communities – in this case, those held captive in residential schools.

As the main project of the schools was to modernize and assimilate the children, the native visual arts they were introduced to came under the category of “heritage”, as if they were like Scottish children learning to name clan tartans. The arts would help the children not only imagine their past as a wellspring for their identity, but they would be taught the uses of ethnicity to legitimize the establishment of a lower-class status within the dominant order and discouraged from imagining their own community. Any attempt to reintroduce the economy of the potlatch, of which native arts were the sign and currency, was to be forestalled by the illegal and forbidden nature of that economy, the very “shame” whose influence and stain the schools set out to eradicate, often by force.

This effort to inculcate Native children with native designs aimed toward a vague arts and crafts/light industrial goal was cited as precedent by the first organized, serious effort to establish a native arts and crafts industry in the province with the foundation of the B.C. Indian Arts and Crafts Society in 1939. The woman who founded the society, Alice Ravenhill, had had a career as a hygienist and educator in Victorian England before extending her eugenicist goodwill and energy to B.C.’s Indians. She was interested in how native designs could be adapted to “modern objects”. In this she was heir to a school of thinking that had animated “Canadian West Coast Art, Native and Modern.” The society organized a conference and exhibition at UBC in 1948.⁶ The records of the conference offer a fascinating tour through the ambitions of the society and give a picture of the situation for native art in the beginning of the postwar era.

The exhibition, about which one would surely want to know a great deal more, was held at UBC’s Brock Hall, in May, 1948. It included paintings by Emily Carr, M. Armitage Moor, Judith Morgan, George Clutesi, A.M.D. Fairburn, Sis-ult, carvings in wood by Ellen Neel (the carver of UBC’s Thunderbird Totem that now stands on a plaza in front of the Student Union Building) and Leslie John, as well as paintings and handicrafts from the Alberni, Christie and Inkameep Residential Schools. To these exhibits was added a selection of “antique pieces” from the Pickford Collection as well as handicrafts for sale and a collection of Miss Ravenhill’s own needlework based on native design.

The formula is almost too complete. Modernist depictions of native art and life were shown next to antique carvings and work by contemporary native artists as well as instructive applications of native designs to marketable arts and crafts goods. Even at this time, issues that seem to belong to our generation were articulated, albeit in the fading imperial language of the time. A primary difference between this “amateur” exhibition and the 1927 exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada was the inclusion of “authored” works by living native artists and not just the anonymous antique productions of “vanished” cultures. Native artists spoke at the conference and may have had a hand in organizing the exhibition.

The business of the conference, as it concerned arts and crafts, was to develop a local native arts and crafts movement and suggest reforms to various sectors which were required to encourage such a movement. The Society already offered a trademark that authenticated crafts which were submitted to its adjudication.

⁶ Documented in Report of Conference on Native Indian Affairs at Acadia Camp, (Victoria: Provincial Museum). Papers from the conference given at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, April 1-3, 1948), sponsored by the B.C. Indian Arts and Welfare Society.

The problem of cheap, shabby tourist curios was discussed with surprising sophistication. In terms of labour, it was more profitable, reported one carver, to make a number of quickly produced objects than expend time on one. The delegates had to face a contradiction.

A revival of native art was seen to be beneficial to native self-esteem and pride. But the production of arts and crafts objects was, in 1948, practically an economic dead-end for native producers. As one conference delegate put it: “Art must be used to improve the lives of the Indians. We must not sacrifice the Indians in order to keep art artistic.”⁷ The ambition to raise the standard of curio production to arts and crafts status would have to be accompanied by a massive effort to educate a white public in the differences between a cheap curio and an authentic, original work of Indian art.

In 1948 native arts and crafts were in a crisis, although the idea that they had vanished was an exaggeration. In her conference presentation, Ellen Neel, herself a master carver trained by her uncle, Mungo Martin, using her work as testament, pointed out the relevance and vitality of the carving tradition. Yet she lamented the decline of the tradition in her time. She attributed this decline to the suppression of the potlatch, while also crediting white intermediaries for keeping the interest alive: “The production of art was so closely coupled with the potlatch that without it the art withered and died. Were it not for the interest created by universities, museums and the tourist trade we would not have any people capable of producing any of the art.”

Neel’s comment on the potlatch appears to have caused embarrassment.⁸ Other speakers remarked on the decline of the curio trade itself during the Depression and warned that some age-old practices, especially those traditionally belonging to women, were then only in the hands of a group of old and frail people and thus in danger of being lost.

Neel believed in the harmony of the carving tradition and modern life, calling for new and modern techniques; new and modern tools; “new and modern materials.” She also endorsed a plan dear to the heart of Alice Ravenhill – light industrial design uses of native design: “I believe it [native art] can be used with stunning effect on tapestry, textiles, sportswear, and in jewellery. Small pieces of furniture lend themselves admirably to the Indian designs. Public buildings, large restaurants and halls have already begun to utilize some of the art.”⁹

The Society’s emphasis was also on modern applications of traditional design. Alice Ravenhill had, in 1942, attracted the attention of the Style and Design Committee of the Manchester Cotton Board with her submission of B.C. tribal designs.¹⁰ The demands of war precluded any production based on native designs at the time. The Vancouver Art Gallery’s 1948 “Design for Living” exhibition featured a chair designed by Catherine Wisnicki with woven panels by Salish artist, Mrs. Jim Joe; David Lambert, Ellen Neel and others received mural commissions.

Such are the rudimentary and fragmented traces of an effort to join a native arts and crafts revival to modern design and production in the beginning of the 1950s. Emily Carr’s ceramics and hooked rugs featuring native designs which she made and sold in the 1920s, should also be seen as feeble but significant markers in the attempt to establish a native arts and crafts movement integrated

⁷ *Report of Conference on Native Indian Affairs*. p. 16. The speaker is identified only as Miss Bennett.

⁸ *Report of Conference on Native Indian Affairs*. Neel’s presentation is on pp. 11-15. Lt. B. Hawthorn in his foreword to the published proceedings noted: “Some aspects of Indian culture, such as that grouped around the word potlatch, drew contradictory opinions, and therefore no agreement on the processes of cultivation or replacement.” p. 2.

⁹ Alice Ravenhill, *The Memoirs of an Educational Pioneer* (Vancouver: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1951), p. 219.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

into Modernism. It would be difficult to imagine, given the web of legislation and institutions that kept native communities powerless, just how this was to be achieved in 1948. George Clutesi and Judith Morgan, included in the 1948 UBC exhibition, both had careers as native artists who worked with traditional designs in the medium of oil on canvas. Neither artist was received into the white art world.

It would be a subsequent generation who would usher in the revival itself. Revisions to the Indian Act included the repeal of the anti-potlatch law and the lifting of the prohibitions against launching land claims (1951); as well, enfranchisement (Provincial, 1947; Federal, 1960) made some judicial space for Natives in the dominant culture. The late 1960s and early 1970s were a time of renewed will and organization within the world of B.C. Native politics. Native political actions often hit the mainstream news. This, combined with perceived alliances between Native land claims and the environmental movement, shattered stereotypes of waning cultures and the inevitability of assimilation. By the mid-1960s dozens of artists, anthropologists, curators, critics and enthusiasts finally succeeded in establishing native carving and design as a high art practice with an international audience and market.

Several aspects of the 1960s revival differ from the earlier and less successful revivals. Most significantly, the idea that native design could be applied to utilitarian objects faded and was supplanted by the emergence of viable markets for prints, jewellery and carvings. Several of Canada's most renowned and most successful artists emerged from this movement, notably Bill Reid and Robert Davidson. The Vancouver Art Gallery's 1968 exhibition, "Arts of the Raven," placed high quality "antiquities" next to the work of a young generation of living producers. The exhibition set standards of quality for the new connoisseur and legitimized the living artists it featured as authentic heirs of a high tradition.

In Vancouver, Haida art was privileged among the West Coast native arts, and Bill Reid among the artists. Reid was given a one-person show at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1974. The reasons Haida art should have been so privileged are undoubtedly complex and are rooted in opinions dating back to the beginning of the century. Then, Haida art, of all the coast styles, was seen to best conform to notions of organic design and of the exotic and ancient already found in Aztec, Egyptian and Mayan art. Like these styles, it became absorbed into the universal canon around the time Art Nouveau was at its height. The compelling figure of Bill Reid himself had something to do with the reinforcement of Haida art's supremacy in the 1960s.

While he was raised in white society and fully conversant with Modernist paradigms, he also had the ancestral pedigree, as a descendant of the nineteenth century Haida artist, Charles Edenshaw (1835-1920), with which to claim his roots in a tradition. But, like the residential school students of the 1930s, Reid's access to Haida art was mediated by anthropologists.

In his early career, Reid framed his interest in Haida art with talk of the universal value and message of the art. This was before his activism and awakening to the art's context in communal values. In the 1960s, Reid was instrumental in "freeing" native art from an association with native life and politics where it connoted land claims, or other issues uncomfortable for whites, during the very years that native politicians were, for the first time, receiving

national attention for their claims. This operation was probably critical to the success of the movement, for it allowed the circulation of the art without the history and without alluding to the crisis implicit in unresolved land claims. In a way, Reid's early career was the realization of the native arts and crafts movement's dreams and contradictions.

Although previous generations of anthropologists and connoisseurs proclaimed it as the high point of West Coast art, Haida art undoubtedly has intrinsic qualities that made it especially appealing to the Modernist taste of the 1960s and 1970s. Paramount among these qualities were the restraint, monumentality and formality that coincided with the Minimalist movement of the time. It could be, too, that the distance and isolation of Haida Gwai' from Vancouver and Victoria allowed the urban imagination to think of Haida art in mythic, rather than social and historical, terms. The hierarchy of coastal art traditions evidenced in the exhibitions and writing of the period, headed by Haida, then Kwakwaka'wakw art and bottoming out in Salish art, only confirms the geopolitical dimension to the reception of native art into urban modernist taste. In the 1960s, the native political scene was often fractured along lines that divided the Salish and North Coast groups. Since the renaissance first focused on Haida art and had had long nurturing in Kwakwaka'wakw circles, including those of Mungo Martin and Henry Hunt, such exclusionary politics may also have played a role in the practical invisibility of Salish art in the native arts and crafts revival. For whatever reasons, Salish art has often been dismissed by the advocates of a native arts and crafts revival. The imbrication of ethnicity and authenticity, while it may have been constructed to protect native producers, also encouraged a racial prejudice that the Salish did not and do not create art.

The 1968 "Arts of the Raven" exhibition had once again established that native art was "art." Part of the strategy in introducing contemporary work was to show it with antiquities, emphasizing that the contemporary work had an authentic relation to tradition. Contemporary native artists thus became beholden to a tradition while their non-native modernist peers struggled to break or overcome tradition and to invent their own expression of the age. Furthermore, ethnicity remained the main aspect of authenticity for the native arts and crafts movement. Reid himself became an example of how "Indianness" could be recovered through art. Even in the 1940s, long before cultural appropriation became an issue in the art world, the largely white supporters of a native arts and crafts revival determined that the link between ethnicity and style could not be interrupted. Even though she herself copied designs in needlework, Ravenhill approvingly cited an "expert" who stated, "Haida art copied by the Salish tribes is little better than having it copied by the Japanese."¹¹ The crucial emphasis on ethnicity, even more than on cultural experience, as an authenticating factor in the production of native art, contradicted all the arguments made for its universality—the very quality that made it high art.

The downside of this situation was that the vocabulary of a revived tradition became the overwhelmingly dominant language of native artists. This tradition had been "revived" in a Modernist context that yearned for universal and timeless values in native art, not news of contemporary life and its politics. While this aspect of Modernist aesthetic ideology was still making inroads into a broad section of educated white culture, in the upper reaches of the art world and the academy Modernist aesthetics were collapsing under the insistent logic of deconstructive

¹¹ Alice Ravenhill, *A Cornerstone of Canadian Culture: An Outline of the Arts and Crafts of the Indian Tribes of British Columbia* (Victoria: British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1944), p. 219.

readings that located more and more of the so-called “universal” with the interests and traditions of the Europeans and their North American progeny.

The mediation of anthropologists, who collect, codify and commission works, creates a history that threatens the deepest wish-illusions whites cultivate when they patronize the native arts and crafts movement. For the gallery-goer and the collector, a great deal of the aura of contemporary native arts and crafts objects depends upon an authentic relationship to ancient and past practices. Even if there are breakages in the transmission of the tradition from generation to generation, the message can still be heard in bloodlines. There must be a guarantee that the objects, even if made today, bear witness to the world of the West Coast before contact and before colonization. This is the world, or feeling for the world, that the white art world wished to possess and which they imagined they could glimpse when they involved themselves in a Haida silver bracelet or a carved ceremonial mask. But discussion of the work in aesthetic terms served to jam the signals that might have come from such contradictions. That is, until Yuxweluptun's paintings gave these contradictions visual form.

The immense success of the movement's leading practitioners inevitably increased, rather than stemmed, as the Modernists hoped, the industry in native curios which degrades such notions as tradition and muddies the market with fake goods. Their success also presents a limit. As in any revival, the past is found to be not only a nourishing spring for identity and community, but a set of limits and strictures that can forestall imagination of the present and plans for the future. The greatest ideological irritant of the native arts and crafts movement is the misleading set of signs it provides of harmony and of ahistoricity for a situation that is, in reality, conflicted and far from resolution. It refuses historical truth while simultaneously calling upon heritage, legacy and tradition. This is why the work of Yuxweluptun is so pointedly apostate from the past and why, one supposes, his work is received so antagonistically in certain sections of the local anthropological community.

Yuxweluptun, like other First Nations artists, has had to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of a situation where a space has opened up for native artists in the Canadian art world – a world that is not as stable in its values as it might seem from the outside. In large group exhibitions in 1992 at the National Gallery of Canada and the Canadian Museum of Civilization, native artists were called upon to testify to their “Indianness.” White artists are never called upon to display their whiteness: it is already the colour of high art and its institutions. The current demand for the voice of the Other is coming from an institution of Canadian Art that has yet to revisit and re-examine its own past. The relationship between native art and the consolidation of Canadian Modernism is nowhere on permanent display. Emily Carr's pictures of native art have a permanent place in the nation's Canadian galleries, but the objects she depicted do not. Native art is still mostly to be found in ethnographic settings. The resistance of the mainstream art world to native art has been hard to crack. Some of this resistance is due to racial prejudice. Some can be attributed to anxiety about what native identity implies for a national culture built on the elimination of native polity. But some resistance is based on a recognition that the native arts and crafts movement, which could be said to have been the vanguard for the current situation for native art, is riddled with counter and anti-modern tendencies. Only recently are we seeing one-person shows by native artists in non-ethnographic art

contexts. In Vancouver, only Bill Reid and Robert Davidson exhibit in non-specialist private galleries. In a way, the situation for native artists reflects the crisis for Native people as a whole when they are asked simultaneously to “revive” their heritage and define Indian identity while also assuming the mobility and opportunities of assimilation.

Yuxweluptun's work, I will argue, contains the ghosts of this situation and its history. It is important to realize, for example, that being of Salish ancestry, his use of Haida and Kwakwaka'wakw ovoid design forms can be seen as a contentious appropriation. Yuxweluptun uses these ovoid design forms in an historical way. A Modernist myth, supported by some romantic anthropologists, held that native design did not merely represent nature in a highly stylized and codified vocabulary, but was the language of nature itself. Both Emily Carr and Jack Shadbolt painted pictures that depict the rocks and trees of the West Coast emerging into native design forms. It was as if the Indian arts merely mediated nature. Yuxweluptun's landscapes and figures also seem to depict a world of continual transformation in which the truth of appearance is expressed in the elements of ovoid design forms. The difference is that while Carr and Shadbolt are attempting to draw out a correspondence between native design and natural form, Yuxweluptun uses the forms to demarcate a reality that has less to do with local natural form than with the history of property and culture.

Despite early calls for new technologies and media, made, for example, by Ellen Neel, Yuxweluptun's use of canvas and oil and acrylic paint – to say nothing of his exploration of virtual reality – disturbs the unspoken purity of the arts and crafts carving tradition of the coast. His hybrid practice has historical roots. His landscapes owe their basic scheme to Dali's oneiric desert landscape, calling forth a reminder that Surrealism itself once drew upon the West Coast tradition as source material. Yuxweluptun is an artist – one also thinks of Faye HeavyShield and Robert Houle in this context – who positions native art within the history of Modern art, noting that primitive ideas have animated twentieth century art while privileging white artists. The use of Western idioms like oil painting is not then an “appropriation”, but a reclamation of transformed goods.

Yuxweluptun's landscapes are not tourist landscapes, nor are they meditations on the presence of a Western God in the cedar boughs and mountains of the coast. Their topography is the dream world of the land as apprehended by the eyes of an initiate. Hollowed-out hills and figures with holes in the middle tell us that the spirit dream world and its inhabitants are ailing. Little white figures bearing chain saws and charters are like termites devouring the land and enervating its people. The figures interrupt the complex economy between people, mountains, trees, water, animals, spirits and fish. They have one function, to extract and excavate. Sooner or later they will destroy the world.

It is the oneiric quality of Yuxweluptun's landscapes, urban and spirit-dance scenes which allows them to realize the historical energies of the designs they depict. His bright colours allude to old stereotypes of the love of “primitive” people for bright colours as much as they call forth a constellation of contemporary subculture taste that includes Heavy Metal and New Age design. Bright colours applied to traditional ovoids enact a return of the repressed, just as bright colours applied to ancient Greek sculpture might recreate ancient Greek practice, but contaminates the “purity” of worn white marble. His “anti-

painterly” use of paint, using colour to highlight drawn form, is a shadow of the carving tradition itself. The colours also belong to the history of curios, where they are at “home”, rather than to the arts and crafts movement where they are always an external threat, a potential desecration. Curios are tied, in a negative way, to the history of Salish art itself. A typical observation from an early commentator equated the lack of refinement of the curio with its Salishness. He states, “Haida art copied by the Salish is little better than having it copied by the Japanese. The true art of the Coast Salish being quite distinctive. One only has to note the stock type of totem poles on the market, quite rudely cut wood, smeared with paint, no skill or feeling shown by the carver. Why? Because ninety percent or better of the specimens are carved by the Salish or the Nootkan from an original type by the Kwakwiltl.”¹² Yuxweluptun’s technique of miniaturization, where he carefully renders the details of small figures with a single-hair brush, mimics the “hand-painted” miniature totem poles of the curio industry, evoking the piecemeal labour of the past. This technique liberates the curio from its non-history as the rejected past of the native arts and crafts movement and brings it forward both as a sign of economic oppression and of the continuity of political resistance.

For decades, the curio was the repository of Indian identity in white culture. The “revival” of native art, in the context of the potlatch itself and in the sphere of the native arts and crafts movement, is dependent on the suppression of the curio. But the vitality of the curio, like Yuxweluptun’s paintings, also resides in the free admixture of national or tribal styles. To some extent, the purity of these styles is the construction of white anthropology. The polyglot, impure curio foresees the politically necessary pan-Indianism that has moved Native land claims and the issue of Native self-government onto the national agenda. It is as if, in Yuxweluptun’s paintings, the relation of curios to arts and crafts carvings comes to life. In his dream landscapes, the little figures remember historical narrative and find a home away from the mantle shelf and coffee tables of white suburban homes. There they are no longer souvenirs for tourists, used to remember their vacations in “SuperNatural” British Columbia; nor are they talismans of Canadian heritage, used to establish Canadian ownership and identity; rather they act out their own stories, stories which contest Canadian ownership of the territory, actors who lament the horrible ruination of the resource extraction industries. The Native arts and crafts movement is synthesized in Yuxweluptun’s paintings, returning it to a living politic that involves land claims and protests against deforestation and extraction economy.

By posing the question of ownership, Yuxweluptun recasts the Canadian landscape as a field of contested territory. Instead of offering to fulfill the wish-images of Canadians for uninterrupted access to a past that is not their own, his paintings indict a condition of the present. They are remarkable works whose real interest is to displace the European-based national landscape school with a vision that is critical, contemporary and based on native experience. Like all important art, Yuxweluptun’s paintings re-align tradition. They shed a critical light on the past and show us a new topography. In this case, a highly politicized landscape that calls into question the fundamental assumptions of Canadian landscape painting. After Yuxweluptun, we can no longer think of the relationship between native art and mainstream modernism in quite the same way.

¹² Ravenhill, p.9

Yuxweluptun’s paintings demand a new way of seeing. And, as might be expected, there is resistance to this work. Modern art in B.C. is bound to the genteel variations on the grey-scale that characterized a school of lyrical landscape abstraction in the 1950s. Yuxweluptun’s highly saturated colour disputes the psychic ownership of nature that the grey-scale school of painting and architecture had claimed. They make another claim of ownership and in claiming the land they claim a position for the artist.

The near future, I believe, will recognize Yuxweluptun’s work as the heir to Emily Carr and Jack Shadbolt’s great imaginations of place. They will also recognize that in his work a shift has occurred and that it is now white culture, not native, that is presented as exotic, other and troublesome.