

REVIEW ARTICLE

“LOWER THAN THE ANGELS” THE WEIGHT OF JIM LOGAN'S ART¹

Jim Logan is an artist of Métis descent. He was born in 1955, and grew up in a middle-class neighbourhood of Port Coquitlum. His mother painted landscapes and wildlife in her spare time and she encouraged him to draw and paint, a subject to which he gave close attention during his school years.

When he was twenty, Logan travelled to Europe, studying the works of Van Gogh and Edvard Munch. He continued to develop his technique through wildlife and landscape paintings. In 1982 he enrolled in the Graphic Design programme at David Thompson University. After his graduation in 1983 Logan took up a job as a graphic designer for a Native communications firm in Whitehorse.

It was in Whitehorse that Logan first became aware of the oppressed social condition of Native life from which his middle-class background had sheltered him, an awareness that grew through his activities as a lay missionary to the Kwanlin Dun Village. His experiences were quickly transferred to his artwork, which he began to sell locally and develop into a series of increasingly successful thematic shows and public commissions through the next five years. Growing financial security from the sale of his paintings has allowed Logan to devote his time exclusively to his art since 1988, when he moved to Prince George, where he has lived since.

It is my intention in this short essay to attempt to ground the work of Jim Logan in its social context. It is my belief that the subject of Logan's work is encapsulated within a more general historical flow and that the art itself reflects—and as good art must—nurtures the development of an emerging world view, not only of the artist but also of his audience and peers. This world view is one which is culturally pluralistic, historically critical, politically aware, and millenarianistic.

In order to elaborate this contention, I will discuss each of these attributes in turn with reference to specific works from Logan's artistic output.

While my focus is on the content and interpretation of Logan's subject matter, I believe it is important to note that the cultural pluralism of his work is apparent in both the medium and the form of his creative expression. His emphasis on bold, primary colours and firm, black outlines for his figures reflects a traditional Native art form inherited from such predecessors as Norval Morriseau. His use

of European realist perspective crosses the boundary of traditional Native art styles, allowing him to communicate more effectively and completely with the non-Native or indeed non-traditional Native viewer.

Consider, for example, the traditional conservatism of contemporary Northwest Coast art. The relation between form and subject is relatively rigid, and the iconography of the subjects portrayed is largely inaccessible to all but the most informed: the portrayal of Bear is so stylized as to be only “visible” to the untrained eye if one is encouraged, and perhaps if one squints a little, while the full message of the portrayal is utterly lost.

Still, we can appreciate Northwest Coast art as “beautiful,” graphically innovative, and can even, with a critical eye, define its formal stylistic attributes (Holm, 1965). But we cannot “understand” Northwest Coast art as it was meant to be understood, in its own terms, because its cultural context has been systematically oppressed and to a large extent eradicated. In many respects, at most we can view it with a half-formed nostalgia for something which once was, or which was perhaps only dreamed (Duff, 1983).

Logan's work, on the other hand, is grounded on a realist style which is immediately accessible to most Canadians. The images are recognizably from our own, that is contemporary Canadian, experience—men, women, and children, houses, cats, and cars—and while they are images which are nonetheless as charged with layers of meaning as any traditional art form, they are meanings written in a contemporary syntax. Logan speaks directly and plainly to his audience.

The danger of artistic expression in such a syntax, the sight of everyday existence, is the ease with which one might react to it in an everyday manner, to respond not directly to the unique artistic image but to a body of stereotypical assumptions which reside nowhere in the art but rather in ourselves. In the worst examples of such a naive realism the artist has become propagandist, pandering to our existing preconceptions and values, with the explicit goal of reifying them.

Such an approach, then, is full of difficulty from the outset for the most simple of subjects. It is even more difficult when one's subject matter crosses cultural boundaries to focus with attentive detail on the nature of life in those Canadian communities which many of us, in our comfortable middle and upper class existence, have made it our historical business, if not to oppress directly than at least to ignore systematically. In this sense Logan is attempting to create a new Canadian iconography, bringing to our attention the imagery and meaning of life in a sector of our political economy with which we have had little previous knowledge or experience, but which is an undeniable and forceful component of our national history, as recent events in such diverse areas as Northern Alberta, the Queen Charlotte Islands and many other places across the country are bringing to our attention.

With so little experiential or even conceptual reference points it is small wonder then that we might tend to view the images in a stereotypical fashion. But it is critical for us to recognize that it is not Logan's *portrayal* but our *reaction* which is stereotypical. Logan's subjects are real people placed in their real social context. *The Artist's Father* (1985), for example, portrays a man in Logan's childhood kitchen as he recollects it: the fridge, the dividing counter with little shelves, and a man, dressed in a familiar yellow shirt, slumbering at a small table on which rests a half-finished glass of domestic wine; the young girls of *They Put Their Flowers In Discarded Bottles* (1988), stopping to collect fireweed from amongst the detritus of everyday life; and the crutch-burdened lady of *The Weight* (1987), standing in the winters night, with a seemingly impassable snow-lined crevasse of a roadway separating her from the warm refuge of the houses across from her: these are all real people in real situations, recreated in the artist's chosen medium (interview with the artist, 10/08/89).

It is not Logan's portrayal but our reaction which may transform his personal experience into stereotypes. Many of the images are too disturbing to react to as portrayals of objective reality; to do so would disrupt the non-Natives' social assessment of his images which might classify them into more familiar and less disturbing categories: the Indian as drunk, the Indian as devil-may-care, the Indian as dumb, or at least dull-witted, the Elder as sage, the little Indian child as innocent hope for the future.

But those of us with even a passing exposure to the true nature of life in many Native villages in the North today can recognize the stark reality of Logan's images, not as stereotypes, but as complex and often contradictory elements of the contemporary North. This fact may partly explain why his work gained a greater initial acceptance within the Yukon; living with less sharply defined boundaries between Native and Non-Native, if only physically, means the cross-cultural communicative event inherent in Logan's work has in some sense already been initiated. Skeptically, it may simply be that we in the North are more used to something like these images and thus are able to assimilate them into our consciousness with less dissonance than southern urbanites. More graciously, it is clear that for some it is precisely because of their familiarity that the images have great resonance and thus an effective power to cause us to contemplate their place in our lives.

This is precisely the goal of any cross-cultural communication, whether it is an anthropological presentation or a performance of ethnic dance: to transmit the life experience of one to another in such a fashion that it is taken seriously enough for the communicants to struggle with both the message and themselves in order to reach some, even though imperfect, understanding of the other. In this sense Logan's art is culturally pluralistic, perhaps even ethnographic.

When I say that Logan's work is "historically critical" I refer to the inherent rage at the conditions of contemporary Native life in the villages of the North which much of his work expresses.

Consider the awkwardly aligned, sagging buildings, with their haphazard multi-colored sashes, doors, and asphalt roof tiles, the solitary outhouses, fractured chimneys, and derelict automobiles of paintings such as *Coming Home* (1987) and *Brother and Sister* (1985). These are attributes which in a Ted Harrison or Jim Robb painting might be regarded as quaint or "the colourful 5%."

These same attributes in Logan's work contextualize the daily existence of his human subjects. It is not a romantic northern context but rather the context of poverty found amongst oppressed minorities world-wide: the sashes are multi-coloured because they have been painted with half tins of paint, while the roofs have been repaired with just as many tiles as needed replacing; the buildings sag because their foundation logs are rotten and crumbling beneath their burden; the broken car may no longer carry passengers but remains a valuable resource of metal and spare parts for those that still do; and the outhouse is only a romantic rural image to those who have never had to live with the daily trial of its use: in Logan's world they tell us that we are in a Third World devoid of public plumbing and running water. These are the images of Northern shanty-towns.

Many of Logan's paintings take us inside these houses, as in, for example, *Sneaking a Taste of Sugar* (1986), and *Listening to the Radio* (1987). In doing so our uncomfortable embarrassment increases, as when we visit the homes of our less well-to-do relatives. In *Sneaking a Taste of Sugar* the cupboards are missing their doors, and inside them we see a motley collection of ill-matching tableware. In *Listening to the Radio* the walls serve to hang up both kitchen utensils and coats, two double beds are separated by a row of stacked boxes which seem to serve as drawer-chests, a solitary highbacked vinyl chair is pressed up against one of the beds facing pants and socks which are hung over the small tin stove to dry, while a simple shelf holds a sparse collection of cups, cans, and the radio. The large form of the listening man emphasizes the cramped one-room, multi-functional character of the small cabin.

And yet, for all their squalid appearance, again and again Logan forcefully reminds us that these houses are homes. He does this most often by the appearance of the people themselves within these surroundings, conducting the daily business of their lives: the young boy, body stretched to tip-toes, dipping a wet finger into the sugar bowl on the counter; the solitary Elder listening to the radio while his kettle warms on the stove for tea. These are homes in which generations have been born, lived, and died, real people, in real poverty, who have come to some accommodation with their oppressive reality.

And this may be one reason why it is hard to have a Logan in one's house: the object physical poverty which is their given context stands starkly and accusingly amidst the clutter of the middle-class

materialism in which the art merchandizing market is embedded. I've heard it said on several occasions that while an individual thought highly of Logan's work they couldn't bring themselves to buy one, and the artist reports that his "lighter" paintings have, in the past, sold much more quickly than his "darker" work. In point of fact, this market reaction has exercised its subtle social control with its desired results: Logan's most recent showing in Whitehorse (November 1988) was a collection entitled "The Lighter Side of Life," in which the themes of poverty and oppression were significantly softened in their imagery, though they remain a notable subtext of many of his paintings.

It is not surprising that the artist has bent to the market; rather, what is notable is the consistent body of work which he has produced prior to this event, and his personal determination to return, again and again, with a fresh vigor to his original vision. In Logan's words, "It is tempting to paint the nice stuff, I have decided to make a living on art, but I want to tell the truth, to be honest, not to deceive the viewer" (interview with the Artist, 14/09/89).

In the long term "the Lighter Side of Life" may be regarded as more of a feint than a capitulation, providing Logan a vector by which to break into the popular imagination by subterfuge and, once within, take up once again his critical agenda. It is in this way that I mean that Logan's work is "politically aware." He has channelled his rage at the economic and social conditions of Native life in the North into what he sincerely believes to be an effective medium by which to promote social change (interview with the artist, 10/08/89).

It is not mere idealism to believe that the portrayal in art of the desperate plight of Native people in Canada today may promote social change. As a means of social activism art is a valid and well-proven method by which to develop political consciousness. It is consciousness which is the necessary precursor to the exercise of the political will required to bring about fundamental social change. The artist's role here can be critical, for it is in art that the intellectual merit of political ideology might be welded to an emotional sympathy, which can in turn coalesce and activate political action around central and shared images. For examples we could turn to Goya's *Third of May, 1808*, and Picasso's *Guernica*.

Here, too, the artist faces the risk of becoming propagandist, a risk which no doubt prevents many artists from engagement. Many contemporary Canadian artists have such a self-conscious view towards posterity that they would rather conduct a dialogue with themselves than with society at large, in the rather facile belief that at least their peers will remember them; and after all, whose opinion is really important anyways: the informed critic or the hoi polloi? As a result, they have produced for us elegant and sometimes even meaningful abstractions of their focussed attention towards their craft, but seldom a body of work which sparks or even reflects real social momentum or movement, merely the general self-indulgent

malaise of post-industrial capitalism.

When we reflect on the artists whose corpora have indeed stood well the test of time — measured in centuries, not decades — we consistently find most to have been dedicated to a social and ideological vision shared with the masses: the anonymous sculptors of Greece; the mosaic designers of Islam; the Bhuddist calligraphers of China; Michelangelo's frescos; Brugel's countrysides; Hogarth's satiric etchings; Dega's candid ballet scenes. Their work was not merely the expression of their private genius; rather their genius was a product of their times, stimulated, nurtured, and inspired by the prevailing forms and subjects of the day, which they chose to master in a new and indomitable fashion.

Even such renegades as Da Vinci, Blake, and Van Gogh engaged the existing social order, if only as a springboard towards a revolutionary emancipation, in art as in life. I believe that this is a tradition in which Logan can place himself, or, at least, we him.

A cigar is sometimes just a cigar, and for many people a telephone pole, but in a Logan painting the regularity of their appearance within the portrayal of communities in which telephones can be rare, is clearly more meaningful than corporeal communication. The implicit Christianity within Logans's work is not just telephone poles suggestive of crucifixes, but is embodied in his focus on regular themes which millenarianistic Christian artists have pursued for centuries: man's fall from grace and the possibility of redemption and salvation.

This should not surprise us, given Jim Logan's own Christian heritage. He spent a number of years as a minister, visiting the Native village at Whitehorse, where he would attempt to bring spiritual comfort by prayer and counsel. But, he says, over time the overwhelming poverty and oppression of so many people, and the seemingly entrenched systematic racism which dominated so many lives, was greater than one man's personal faith.

Logan tells of how his spiritual angst coalesced in reality on a night that he took a crippled woman to visit her son in the hospital. She could not climb into his truck on her own. And so he lifted her

I had never carried an adult in my arms before and I was struck, physically burdened, by how heavy she was and how difficult it was for me to carry her—she was just this tremendous weight, and it was all I could do just to hold her (interview with the artist, 10/08/89).

The weight of that moment convinced him of the impossibility of his missionary vocation. His prayers alone would not relieve the suffering of these people any more than they would have moved that woman into his truck. If there was to be any movement at all it would be through some physical, this-worldly effort, motivated and strengthened by faith to be sure (or else surely despair is the only recourse), but some movement in the world both within and without

the village was needed. It is in this way that there has developed in Logan's work a self-reflective expression of his own personal experience; an experience which has led him increasingly towards an idiom of millenarianistic salvation reminiscent of William Blake.

That crippled woman became the central figure in his painting *The Weight* (and she appears in others as well). It seems clear that if she is to reach the warmth and security of the house which beckons to her she must walk, as best as she is able, on her own. But a chasm extends between the woman and the warmth, a roadway which seems impossible for her to negotiate by herself, burdened by the crutches, hobbling artifacts of a crippling relationship with a foreign culture. There is no one visible in the night to carry her. But in that dark there is something more, someone else—we can feel the presence but cannot see him, or her, or them, nor can the old woman. And so she stands, alone, cold, dark, waiting.

Other images which portray the fall are more stark and direct, such as *Sitting in the White Man's World* (1989), or *The Betrayal*, the latter showing a crying, tightfisted child thumping her hand against a table littered with empty beer bottles. These are images of people who have fallen far lower than the angels, the ones which, it seems, even God has forgotten.

But in the work of Logan, God does not forget, not entirely, for Logan is concerned not only with the fall but with redemption and salvation. Redemption and salvation, or at least their possibility, are also recurrent themes in his art. The merging of the image of the telephone pole and crucifix reflect this. It represents not only the presence of God in the community but the fact that there is also a means by which to communicate with Him. *The Gift*, which portrays a young girl's present of fireweed and dandelions left on the table amongst the overturned bottles and a slumped, sleeping figure, speaks directly to the theme of redemption, and is an invigorating counterpoint to the anguish of *The Betrayal*. So too do the basic instincts of play and positive social intercourse displayed by many of his other subjects within their oppressive surroundings, as in *Friends* (1986), *They Put Their Flowers in Broken Bottles* (1988), and *Five Brothers* (1986).

I think it is pertinent to ask if the artwork of Logan's self-identified peers—Jane Ash Poitras, Joanne Cardinal Schubert, Bob Boyer, Eddie Poitras, and Carl Dean (interview with the Artist, 14/09/89)—share any of the characteristics of Logan's art which I have discussed here, and to explore sometime what implications, if any, they might have to the production of Native artists during this last decade of the 20th century.

However, regardless of Jim Logan's place on the larger canvas of social history, he has demonstrated a continued commitment to the pursuit of what must often be a painful personal muse. In doing so, in a rather direct way, he continues in his evangelical vocation. His paintings may be seen as attempts at conversion. By appealing

to our basic sense of human dignity and worth, his images urge us to apply the fundamental tenet of Christianity: to do unto others as we would be done by. By asserting the dignity and worth of Native or, indeed, any human life, as in *And You Know What Grandpa?* (1987), *She Was So Happy I Came To Visit* (1987), and *A Sunny Morning With Elvis On The Radio* (1988), and exposing the tragic denial of opportunity and expression afforded Native people in contemporary Canadian society, as in *Sitting in the White Man's World*, *The Betrayal*, and *The Weight*, Logan's corpus has all the emotional charge of a Pentecostal preacher shaming his flock for their sins and showing them the way to salvation through the discovery that while we are lower than the angels we are all higher than the beasts of the earth.

As oppressive as *The Weight* is, it too has its possibility of redemption. It is not just in the presence of the lights ahead of the old woman. More significantly it lies behind, in the area in the foreground of the picture, the area which we ourselves occupy. She waits in the cold and darkness and we watch her, and we realize she is facing the wrong way. Or perhaps, more appropriately, that we are occupying the wrong space: she waits for us.

This essay has discussed the art of Jim Logan from 1984 through early 1989. Since that time his artistic output has continued to be vigorous, and is now expanding into new media. Two recent shows, not commented on directly in this essay, are worthy of note. His most recent commercial show in Whitehorse, "A Northern Mosaic," included several sculptural pieces, in addition to a collection of paintings. A thematic unit, "A Requiem for Our Children," has been shown in Whitehorse and Vancouver, with plans for further showings developing in Calgary, Saskatchewan, and points east. "A Requiem" is a collection of 11 paintings and 3 blanket designs on the mission school experience. The materials address the themes of the pervasive and perverse psychological, physical, and sexual abuse which dominated the lives of many Native people within these institutions. It is perhaps his most powerful show to date, evoking a strong response from those who have viewed it. Some have believed it represents a subject matter best left forgotten, while some others have gone so far as to label it obscene, in particular "The Visit," which portrays the sexual exploitation of a child by a priest. Given the subject matter, and Logan's own Christian beliefs, the show represents a tremendous artistic effort to represent one of the most disturbing episodes of the Canadian Native experience, and should do much to consolidate Jim Logan as an important Canadian artist.

N. Alexander Easton
Yukon College
Whitehorse, Yukon
Canada, Y1A 5K4

NOTE

1. I would like to express my thanks to Jim Logan for his co-operation in the development of this essay and the permission to study and reproduce his private collection of photographs of his work. *Masi Cho*, Jim.

REFERENCES

Duff, Wilson

- 1983 *The World is as Sharp as a Knife: Meaning in Northern Northwest Coast Art*, pp. 47-66, in Roy Carlson, (Editor): *Indian Art Traditions of the Northwest Coast*, Burnaby, British Columbia: Archaeology Press, Simon Fraser University.

Holm, Bill

- 1965 *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.