

ART THIS WAY: DECOLONIZING ART WITH ARTHUR RENWICK

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Abstract / Résumé

Honoring the interpretations, naming and theorizing of Haisla artist Arthur Renwick, we explore the complexity and consistent invocation of Aboriginal identity in his art exhibits *Undertow* (1996), *Deeply Felt* (1999), *Stately Monuments* (2002), and *Delegates, Chiefs of the Earth and Sky* (2003). In discussing Arthur Renwick's struggle for recognition and respect in art circles, we challenge ongoing colonial practices in art education and art review. We explore ways Indigenous artists create their own directions focusing on issues relevant to their communities, in both urban and reserve locations and create communications and shared interactions that support the lives of peoples in interconnected communities.

Tout en honorant les interprétations et les explorations théoriques de l'artiste haisla Arthur Renwick, l'article explore la complexité et l'invocation continue de l'identité autochtone qu'il a manifestées dans ses expositions intitulées *Undertow* (1996), *Deeply Felt* (1999), *Stately Monuments* (2002) et *Delegates, Chiefs of the Earth and Sky* (2003). En discutant du combat d'Arthur Renwick pour obtenir la reconnaissance et le respect des milieux artistiques, on questionne les pratiques coloniales continues dans le secteur de l'éducation et de la critique artistiques. L'article présente les moyens utilisés par les artistes autochtones pour définir leurs propres orientations en se concentrant sur les questions pertinentes à leurs collectivités, tant dans les milieux urbains que dans les réserves, et pour établir les liens de communication et d'échange interactif qui soutiennent la vie des gens dans des collectivités apparentées.

Introduction

Indigenous arts are a potent way of presenting, representing, and reclaiming Indigenous knowledges. Indigenous artists continue their role as producers and creators of knowledge and pose alternatives to colonial discourses while presenting and sustaining Indigenous practices, processes, knowledges, and cultures. The heterogeneity and complexity of Aboriginal arts are evident in the “recognized and celebrated genre of Canadian Aboriginal art which includes a wide variety of expression” (Newhouse, Voyageur, & Beavon 2005, 10). As authors, we take our distinct positions and lived experiences as points of entry for the paper.

By honoring the interpretations, naming and theorizing of Indigenous artists, we illustrate the ways that Indigenous artists are engaged in producing, reproducing, and sustaining Indigenous knowledges. This paper shares the story of the artistic endeavors of Haisla artist Arthur Renwick, exploring the complexity and consistent invocation of Aboriginal identity in his art. This paper is a response to Joan Cardinal Schubert’s (2004) call “to support and encourage critical writing...in all spheres of the art environment...because so many diverse perspectives on Aboriginal arts exist.”

Academics, Indigenous artists, and activists continue to examine, explore and produce knowledge through art works and the written word to express creativity and resistance to dominant discourses, and demand appreciation and appropriate treatment of Indigenous peoples and art globally. It is within the framework of contemporary Indigenous art that we “further examine our art forms in relation to the existing repositories of this cultural knowledge and acknowledge it as a contemporary continuum of the people we come from – the people we still are” (Cardinal Shubert, 2004, p. 34).

But the story of Indigenous artists is also a story of struggle for recognition and respect. Colonial and imperialist ideologies are still reflected in educational experiences, in homogenizing and ‘othering’ by the mainstream art world, and in representational practices in museums. These challenges, while daunting and often destructive, have also lit the fires of Indigenous artists to sustain their art practices, to continue to challenge the dominant, homogenizing, and imperialist ideologies, and to make evident the struggles of Indigenous peoples globally. In this paper we explore challenges and struggles of artists and specifically Arthur Renwick’s discussion of a particular struggle as well as the art he created in response.

Arthur Renwick: Contemporary Haisla Artist

Arthur Renwick, Haisla, is a renowned Canadian artist who works in

multiple media. Born in Kitimaat Village, northern British Columbia, he lived there for 19 years experiencing life both in the Village (a small fishing settlement) located on the First Nations reserve and populated by about 1000 people as well as in the town of Kitimat across the water and populated by about 12,000 people. The Kitimat townsite is also called aluminum city or Alcan, a name taken from a multinational company which located an aluminum manufacturing site at Kitimat in the late 1940's.

Arthur Renwick now resides in Toronto, Ontario, and is part of a group of Indigenous artists who tap into the cultural knowledge learned from their Indigenous communities, from living an urban Indigenous existence in Canada's largest city, and from their artistic abilities. This knowledge lies at the heart of a trajectory that connects Arthur's personal history and culture to the Haisla communities. His photographs and mixed media works respond to and reflect the dynamic nature of Haisla culture through his contemporary art practice.

Arthur Renwick provided a personal account of his art practice in November, 2004 at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. Information for this paper is drawn from excerpts of transcripts from this seminar, discussions with the artist, documentation from his exhibits, a published interview with Arthur Renwick in *PhotoEd*, as well as from additional articles which discussed Arthur's art and art practice (Offenbach, 2004). Arthur also reviewed a draft of this paper and together we made corrections to the text. He also provided photographs of his artwork that are presented with these discussions. In his University of Toronto presentation, he discussed the struggles he faced in attending various educational institutions, his transition from reserve to townsite life due to educational requirements, and his calling as an artist based on his talent in the visual arts. His personal journey both as an artist and as a political activist is reflected in his art which speaks directly to issues of representation, history and political activism. Some of his work challenges the colonial notion that Indigenous peoples have nothing to contribute to society if their work does not follow the narrow definition of what mainstream society has come to understand as "Indian art," namely artifacts and pieces that use images and symbols of Indigenous cultures as their subjects. Arthur's art moves beyond the aesthetic to embrace the political and provides a visually politicized history.

Exploring Arthur's art exhibits as examples, we illustrate how Indigenous artists continue to take ownership of the process, aims and interpretation of contemporary Indigenous art. The resistance to domination honours the knowledge, wisdom, beauty and resistance of those who

Figure 1

Details of the first panel of ‘Bulis Hulap: To Stumble onto the Beach as a Result of Circumstances’ from exhibit Deeply Felt

**Figure 2**

All three panels of ‘Bulis Hulap: To Stumble onto the Beach as a Result of Circumstances’ from exhibit Deeply Felt



came before us because “holding on to culture is an act of resistance” (Thompson in Alfred, 2005: 170).

Deeply Felt – 1999

Arthur Renwick produced an exhibit entitled *Deeply Felt*, for the Museum of Textiles (Toronto, Ontario) at their request for art using various fabrics. He worked on a button blanket using felt they provided.

Onto the felt he placed a 1914 photograph of a boatload of early surveyors who pulled their boats up on the shore near his hometown of Kitimat with the words “bulis.hulap.” In Haisla, this expression means “to stumble onto the beach as a result of circumstances.” Arthur describes the central panel as “an image of hands [with] abalone shells to outline it...the buttons ... [which] are all marine buttons—antiques. And they all have anchors on them and ships.” He received them from a friend. The buttons look “like they are spilling out the hands...[or] the hands are...throwing them.” This relates to the title “to stumble upon the beach.” This art challenges the viewer to consider the colonial, military, and economic motivations which brought surveyors to the beach at Kitimat. Why were they surveying Haisla territory? What form of colonization and land theft is this?

In this art presentation, Arthur draws his inspiration from Haisla culture using felt fabric to produce a button blanket and expresses a resistance to colonization. Button blankets have been produced by Haisla people for many generations. Living his identity as a Haisla community member, he illustrates how art can incorporate images and materials to address historic and contemporary issues and concerns. The meaning of art is enhanced by using buttons from military uniforms—the military that was part of a colonial process that brought surveyors and who claimed the land of the Haisla people.

“Deeply Felt” is about the history of change and colonization and the effects still felt today. The notion that colonization is insidious and legitimates outside voices is still prevalent today, and this is reflected by the exhibit’s reference to a book written by Elizabeth Varley, whose husband is one of the Group of Seven. Varley was a friend to Arthur’s grandparents. He recounts that “she wrote a book called ‘Kitimat – My Valley’ (1981) and Native people from the community got really upset with her as she claimed it as her own.” In the book, she included many photographs of Arthur’s family members in it. Arthur said that “it’s this push and pull; like it’s great she is writing about us but where is our voice? It’s all from her perspective and her romantic vision from her growing up.”

This romantic vision is what travel writers, anthropologists and ethnographers have produced and disseminated since contact (Doxtator, 1988). And her writing, as romantic as it is, does document the presence of non-Indigenous peoples—the colonizers in the region. But Arthur wishes to re-write and re-right the story from Haisla perspectives. Therefore his art documents the Haisla perspective on the colonizing of the community and the complex social relations resulting from the threat of genocide. He explained in his University of Toronto presentation that his “community was actually one of the last to succumb to Christianity and

trade.” Another community, Clio Bay, refused to trade and the colonizers – the British Navy on the H.M.S. Clio (Varley, 1981) fired their canons on the community. When a Hudson’s Bay Company ship, with British Navy support, arrived on the shores of Arthur’s community with their “trade or else” stance, there was initial resistance¹. But this was an offer they could not refuse so they did begin trading. This raises the question of what kind of ‘trade’ is it that can occur between parties when one group of so-called traders threatens the life of the other group. Can this really be called ‘trade’ or is this forced turnover of goods?

Valuing Indigenous Arts

There is power and healing for Arthur and his community in knowing and telling this story and in sharing this history. Gerald Vizenor (1991, 1994), an Anishnawbe author, has demonstrated that there is a healing power to story. In sharing stories there is creative energy and celebration of relationships to earth. There are original stories or creation stories, and stories that restore balance or aid in finding resolutions through the imagination used in them. Through stories communities and listeners to stories can gain understandings necessary for survival including ideas of continuance, interconnection, humor, as well as guides in finding balance and freedom (Vizenor 1991 1994, Blaeser 1996). Arthur’s sharing of these stories in his art and his discussion demonstrate the powers of art to sustain and to heal, to engage in imaginative liberation and to recover from a colonial history and its current forms. Arthur’s art holds many of these characteristics precisely because it is his community, history, identity and day-to-day living as a Haisla member that informs his art. It is also his knowledge of colonialization and resistance to it that continue in his art.

Indigenous knowledges are carried and shared through various forms of verbal and non-verbal communication – in ceremony, storytelling,

Figure 3

Image from *Stately Monuments* – “The People of the Falling Snow”



dance, song, painting, embroidery, weaving and visual arts (Holmes 2000; Little Bear 2000). The manner in which these knowledges are shared with the outside world are often restricted, guided, mediated and/or translated by those who have the power to define what is “worth knowing” and what is not. But here, Arthur produces an exhibit strongly tied to his community and its history and locates himself within his culture by using materials from the museum and his own contacts. It encourages us to engage with the history and knowledge of the Haisla people.

Stately Monuments – 2002

Stately Monuments includes some of Arthur’s early work as well as more recent entries in his body of work. Richard William Hill, an Indigenous artist and curator, narrates examples from Arthur Renwick’s 2002 exhibit at the Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography (Toronto, Ontario). From Hill we learn that the Haisla people had their own name for themselves but the colonizers used the name from the Tsimpsonian people who called them Kitamaat meaning people of the falling snow and the townsite of Kitimat even used a snowflake as its symbol. Hill describes a set of Arthur’s photographs that he called *The People of the Falling Snow* that are

arranged side-by-side in a horizontal format. Bracketed by two smaller images of Kitimat’s [townsite] welcome sign (a giant snowflake) set against a black background, the central panels are formed by two large photographs taken in Kitamaat Village. On the right, we look down a pier and across Douglas Channel. Visible on the far shore is the Alcan smelter. In the far background sulfurous smoke escapes from the Eurocan Pulp and Paper Mill. On a pole in the foreground is a poster warning people not to eat shellfish from the contaminated waters. In the image on the left, power lines cut through the reserve on their way to the Kemano power generating station, created to supply the enormous energy needs of the Alcan plant. For this purpose, the company dammed the Nechako River, some fifty miles away, ultimately flooding the home community of the Cheslatta First Nation. The totem pole pictured in the image is a replica of one that was burnt down in the late 1800’s, possibly by newly converted Haisla Christians, later re-carved and raised in the 1970’s.

Arthur describes the influences reflected in *Stately Monuments*. This is when Arthur “started really taking into account totem poles and the structure of the totem poles.” He stated that “when you see a totem pole with all these abstract figures and animals and people, each one

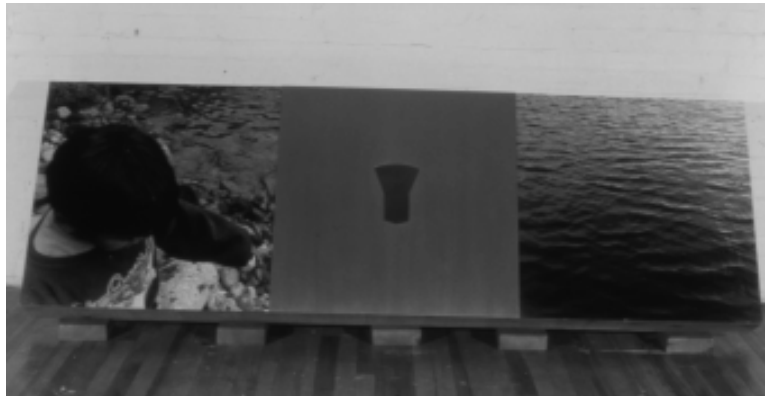
Figure 4
Dptych from the Stately Monuments series entitled “Totem Café”



has its own story.” Arthur considers photographs as capable of telling stories. He recalled the saying ‘a picture is worth a thousand words.’ But more than that, he started using photographs within the totemic structure and realized he could tell a number of stories within a picture and with a selection of images. Also, in the process of creating his Stately Monuments exhibit, he mounted the photographs on a free-standing cedar structure ten feet tall. The photograph is taken “standing at the beach in front of my uncle’s house...looking across the water, because water is what brought whole communities together, the people that lived in the reserve”; as well as those across the water in the townsite built by the aluminum industry. Each of these communities depends upon the water but the nature of the communities’ needs and relationship to water are different. Kitamaat Village is the Haisla community with a long history of its people using water as a cultural and sustenance resource. The Kitimat townsite was built post World War II by the aluminum industry using water to produce hydro-electricity to serve this multinational company (summarized from Renwick presentation). The photograph in Figure 3 shows hydro poles towering above the reserve. “The hydro pole looks like a totem pole with spread wings.” The hydro poles reflect a history of colonization, change and domination over Haisla people. They suggest Haisla cultural history now transformed through images of historic and current colonization.

Peter Goddard, in an article entitled “Poles and Portraits leave an impression” (The Toronto Star, 06 January 2002, pp. D06) describes the exhibit Stately Monuments as “Arthur Renwick’s cool, calm and should-be-collected show...loaded with irony.” He states that “The monuments

Figure 5
“The Great One” – Image From Stately Monuments



in question are two sets of totem poles, one group found around... Kitimat, British Columbia, the other in Arthur's imagination. All of them are about power and mystery." Arthur's work is what Goddard calls "a series of unsettlingly quiet photos,...[in which he] pairs black and white photos of stately carved totem poles" with images of survey markers and images of artificial totems created by mainstream appropriation of totem poles.

In this exhibit, Arthur describes the process of the destructive forces of colonization which works to suppress the Indigenous peoples of Kitimaat with the creation of the Alcan town of Kitimat. Goddard describes another portion of the show, a triptych, which "has a vibrant photo of a young boy on the left" which is "paired with a soothing image of water on the right." In between is a square of aluminum. The aluminum reflects the light and the history of Alcan development in the area and its devastating impact on the water that is so important to the Indigenous peoples of Kitimaat.

Arthur's art piece, *The Great One*, references the Creator and water which in Haisla traditions is a spiritual relationship. The aluminum and copper represent the 'Super-Companies'² that create these metals and the water used to produce them. When looking at the photograph of the boy, the onlooker is reflected in the copper but the reflection makes the onlooker seem very small next to the larger image of the boy. On the boy's shirt is a picture of the hockey star also known as "The Great One" – Wayne Gretzky. Super-companies and superstars, dominant culture and society are intertwined. These images and metals are mounted on cedar, referencing the museological display of totem poles and domi-

Figure 6
Detail of lower image of “Conductor”



nant culture appropriation and misrepresentation of Indigenous knowledges and peoples.

In a public presentation (November 2004), Arthur described making another piece at the same time as “The Great One” which he called “Conductor.” Its title references the fact that water is an effective electrical conductor. Water is also required in the production of electricity to create aluminum. The artwork uses a sheet of copper because copper is an effective electrical conductor. In the piece there is a Heiltsuk Chief from Bella Bella who is standing on a stage addressing the Qatwas Festival in 1993. At this gathering, the Chief received a Copper [a copper plate with markings] from a neighboring community, to commemorate the gathering of canoes. The act also served to redress historical wrongs and represented an act of empowerment for the community and the Chiefs. In the photograph

“The Chief...is standing in front of the microphone on the

stage ...[offering] greeting. He is one of the biggest Chiefs in the area so he is operating as a conductor.... This Chief here is holding the Copper which is made out of copper.”

A Copper is a symbol of power for a Chief and made of the mineral copper which is used to conduct electrical power. So the work “Conductor” references the power of water, of copper, and of traditional Haisla Chiefs. In the photograph

The microphone is operating as a contemporary talking stick and certain ironies are involved because electricity is required to feed the lights and the microphones so it's not always a [case of] bad industry versus good Indians...it could be good and bad.... We are all part of the equation.

The use of industrial metals in the artwork alludes to this complex relationship of industry and Native peoples in contemporary culture. But it is important to address the complexity of issues, hear voices of Native peoples, and acknowledge hereditary knowledge and inherent rights to lands that were never signed over to the government. This individual art piece questions ideas of power and redresses colonial history.

Arthur's art has the intention to make known what is silenced and make visible the presence of 'othered' histories. 'Othering' is done through the mythical creation of a center (Europe) that makes Indigenous knowledges the 'other.' Making western European art as “central” and Indigenous as “other” presumes that the goal is to eventually make the “other” gravitate toward the centre and become one with western European art. Arthur's art is opposed to this and instead centers Indigenous stories and histories in a critique of colonizing practices. Aboriginal art, like Arthur's, can re-centre Indigenous perspectives in a modern world. Edward Said's (1978) idea of imperialism is useful because not only did imperialism facilitate the delegitimization of Indigenous voices and perspectives, it also allowed for the appropriation of Indigenous knowledges without proper acknowledgement and retribution. Were Indigenous peoples compensated for the outright theft of their poles? Are museums that hold these stolen masks, poles, and ceremonial artifacts required to give them back? Arthur disrupts the imperial gaze which takes for granted European centeredness. He legitimizes Indigenous voices and perspectives through reflecting their cultural practices of using Coppers and he acknowledges that Indigenous peoples, knowledges, and communities are continuing despite colonization.

Undertow – 1996

Shortly after the totemic pieces of *The Great One* and *Conductor*, Arthur created “Undertow” from his interest in archival imagery. He used

Figure 7
Undertow - 1996



a photograph of totem poles taken by Marius Barbeau in 1929 (from the Canadian Museum of Civilization that was located through Riley, 1988) which shows totem poles cut with a chain saw—without the consent of the Nishga people—and taken from the reserve close to Kincolith, then covered with tar, and towed to Prince Rupert where they were loaded on a train and taken to the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) where they grace its stairwells. Arthur places these images of the theft of the totem poles into a vertical structure to create a “photographic totem pole” about the theft of a totem pole. His intention was to address this history so those interested in history would engage with the artifact, become familiar with Marius Barbeau, come to understand that he took this photograph of stealing a pole, and to critique the ROM’s complicity in the ongoing colonial theft by continuing to possess and display the poles. It is a critique of this history and draws into question the continuation of this practice and suggests knowledge of this history and reciprocity are required to heal these wounds.

Again Arthur's art speaks to a colonial history – this time the theft of culturally significant art from his community. His art challenges the viewer to think about this theft and those who continue to profit from the display of items seized through theft. The art pieces for Undertow were created prior to 1996 when court trials were focused on what is sometimes referred to as land claims. Arthur explained

I don't like to call it land claims because they are not claiming land. They are trying to make it known that the land has always been theirs and so they are not trying to claim anything. They are just trying to make white people understand that this is ours...you took it from us. You claimed it from us, but it has always been ours and we still know we own it. [Treaties were never signed between the west coast peoples and Canadian government.]... There is a huge history around the ROM...they have a huge collection of Native artifacts. And you don't see any of them. (Renwick, Nov. 2004 presentation)

Arthur creates art pieces which reflect North American history in relation to Native communities. These pieces also convey the political realities and ongoing struggles of Native communities to know what has happened to their ceremonial and cultural objects, to repatriate them, and to challenge the colonial powers which sustain a system that allows stolen objects to remain in the hands of thieves or those who have purchased stolen property.

Politics, Art, and Education

Struggles for repatriation³ of Indigenous bodies collected from graves, ceremonial and sacred objects, and Indigenous art are significant activities amongst Indigenous peoples (Battiste 2000, Brown 1998, Forde 2004, Glass 2004, Jacknis 2002, Kramer 2004, Myers 2004). Arthur's art brings awareness to the histories that precipitated these struggles and contribute to these struggles by making these histories visible. He helps us understand art as political activity and educational practices.

The politics of knowledge production is about power relations and thus determining who gets to speak, write or portray whom. In Euro-Canadian settler society, this has often meant that Indigenous peoples have been spoken for and mediated through lenses that make invisible the meanings and understandings Indigenous peoples have of history, identity and cultural production. The politics of knowledge production also determine who gets legitimized as a "valid authority" on any particular subject. When it comes to Indigenous peoples, the tendency of the academy and colonial institutions has been to translate the signifi-

cance, meaning and histories of Indigenous art. But Arthur's art stands to challenge these taken-for-granted assumptions about knowledge as well as cultural practices of theft that are sanitized into the idea of merely 'collecting.' It is his contribution to resistance to these mainstream cultural practices.

A participant in the November 2004 panel discussion with Arthur asked "What do you tell young artists that are facing the very same things you face today? It seems that the whole art discipline has not created a lot of space for anti-colonial art or art that is not mainstream?" Arthur responded to this question:

To fight back. When you are an artist, you are asked who you want to be like and usually it is a white male. And I didn't want to be like that but I still wanted to be an artist. This was a medium where I felt that I could express exactly what I thought. And photography was this medium. I wanted to be an artist. I didn't know why and I just followed my impulses. As a result I have been able to do work like this and give talks like this, but I have also been a curator.... Art exhibitions are educational experiences.... [A show Arthur curated] was called Reservation X. It was all contemporary media: clay, video, performance. Shelley Niro was there and Max Stevens. It toured down to New York City and the catalogue is also educational. And so it is a way for artists to convey their artwork and use it as an educational tool and curators can use a bit of that history to explain their work and put into publication format and it becomes an educational tool. So it's a way to use art to share ideas, beliefs and traditions.

Challenging Colonization in Education

The idea of education as expression of and in service to community is related to Arthur's early art education experiences. As a child, in every possible moment, Arthur would be drawing. "I actually didn't take my first art class until I was in grade 10. I did and my art teacher told me I could draw better than her. And for me I sort of took it for granted. It was something that came very easy. Going through high school I got a lot of support from my instructors as well as from a lot of my friends who would hire me to do projects for them, for their classes...drawing maps for their social studies class, making a bit of pocket change." Upon completing high school in 1983, despite his obvious talent, Arthur was not certain what he would do and got a job in a hardware store. A band councilor came into the store one day and asked Arthur what he was doing and suggested that the band had funding and encouraged him to

go on to study art. Teachers and community members supported Arthur in making his application. In college, which Arthur first attended for two years, he won the drawing award at the end of each year. He was really good “at rendering how light falls onto an object” (Renwick Nov. 2004 presentation).

These positive and supportive educational experiences can be contrasted with those Arthur had when he began taking an art history college course in 1985-86. He says “this is where things got a bit sticky for me.” This was a time before First Nations or Native Studies programs had appeared and before Native student support services existed in colleges. Arthur found himself “floundering” having grown up on a small reserve until the age of 19. Moving to Vancouver to learn art was a big adjustment. But because there were lots of relatives and family in Vancouver he was able to deal with his alienation by spending time with them. He explains that

one thing that really bothered me about the art history courses was that of course, everybody knows that when you study art history, everybody thinks of art as coming from Europe and immigrating into North America. And the things that we were looking into the art classes were cave paintings...from France and Spain. But meanwhile, in Vancouver everywhere you look there are the masks, there are the West coast designs everywhere. Which is part of my culture, part of my identity. At the same time, there are places that I know, ancient places around my reserve and in Vancouver, pictographs and petroglyphs. And I just kept thinking why aren't we studying this. I mean this is just as important and is just as valid. And doesn't it make sense being in Vancouver, to be studying something that is West Coast ancient art rather than looking at something that came from Greece and Egypt. It just didn't make sense to me.

Arthur had discussions with the instructor about the instructor's concerns but was unsuccessful in changing the mind of his instructor. The final exam was set as an open-book exam for which students were given the exact question they were to answer. They were to discuss the Lascaux-Altamira caves. Arthur had no experience with open-book exams. Students brought in their textbooks and notes. Arthur, like other students, pre-wrote his essay. Others just copied their essays into the exam booklet and handed it in 15 or 20 minutes after the exam had begun.

And I was getting furious; I thought this is a complete waste of time. We hadn't learned anything. People were just regur-

gitating information to get a credit [...] so I scrapped everything that I was going to write and instead I decided to write him a letter [...] how I thought it was important that we look into the history of the region and acknowledge the art of the First Nations people. And this was crucial to our understanding and he had to be a bit more flexible in understanding the context.... I made some remarks about colonialism [...] but then I chickened out so I stuffed it in my back pocket and then I walked out. But the whole time I was walking home I was upset with myself. And then when I got home I decided to call him to talk to him.

Arthur did talk to his instructor, reading him the letter he had written, and he “felt like I had just gotten this huge weight off my chest and I felt a lot better. I felt relieved.” He had finally had the opportunity to acknowledge and make room for First Nations’ art and history at school. But his instructor’s response was not what he had hoped. His instructor’s first question was “have you ever been in jail before?” Arthur “thought he was joking” but then the instructor asked “have you ever seen a psychiatrist? You should see our counselor who can help you with your problem.” Arthur realized that his instructor thought he was crazy. Arthur was shocked and hurt and he realized that his instructor could not see Arthur’s point of view. The instructor set up a meeting for the following day with Arthur and another art history instructor to discuss his so-called problem. But when Arthur arrived only a woman was there. She indicated that the instructor had discussed ‘Arthur’s problem’ with her and that they had decided to just give Arthur grades for the two classes for which the exam was to be written. Arthur says “I was really angry, really upset. And I just thought, I couldn’t understand what I was doing wrong. What was I doing that could be so wrong?”

Arthur was not doing anything wrong. He was writing “righting” back (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) to colonialism and insisting that his culture and that of Indigenous peoples be acknowledged. Arthur has never painted since! But he continues to make art using photography and other media “as a means of communicating to the world around...[him] the ideas that some other histories existed in the world.” His photographs leave a legacy! Carol Geddes, a Tlingit film producer, describes a similar legacy of photographer George Johnston whose work was ‘to help us dream the future as much as to remember the past’ (Geddes, 1997). Arthur’s work, in reflecting the colonial history and ongoing reality as well as using his imagination and cultural knowledge also helps us dream a future. Indigenous artists have confronted these histories and are challenging the structures that have made it difficult to be artists in a main-

stream world.

Colonization and Art – Indigenous Artists Struggle for Recognition and Respect

Over the last few hundred years, Indigenous peoples globally have endured genocide in the name of so-called 'progress.' Colonial and imperialist ideologies and assimilationist government policies supported practices of theft and destruction of Indigenous art. Historic treatment of Indigenous artists and arts by mainstream forces which, in Canada, followed the imposition of the Indian Act in 1876 through which all cultural and artistic expression was completely suppressed or controlled by government agents (McMaster, 1989). For example, in the 1920's the Department of Indian Affairs began exhibiting art products of students in residential schools "as a showcase for the Department's policy of assimilation" to prove that students were being 'civilized' (p. 209). In 1936 the Department organized the Welfare and Training Division to coordinate the collecting and marketing of what they termed 'Indian arts and crafts' – "a set list of handicraft items with catalogues containing price lists" (McMaster, 1989: 210). Art as an economic factor was paramount for the Department of Indian Affairs but not the creativity or cultural value of arts.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a Maori scholar from Aotearoa (New Zealand) writes about a process of stereotyping and classification of Indigenous arts as a global imperial project in which surface understandings of Indigenous art and culture revisit early racist ideas about Indigenous peoples. To further understand "how fragmented this process was one needs only to stand in a museum, a library, a bookshop, and ask where Indigenous peoples are located. ...For indigenous peoples fragmentation has been the consequence of imperialism" (Tuhiwai Smith: 28).

Indigenous cosmology or epistemology, which is deeply embraced in Indigenous art, demonstrates that in the Indigenous world there is "a powerful need to give testimony to and restore a spirit, to bring back into existence a world fragmented" (ibid). This is the historic context and current political reality to which today's Indigenous art speaks in Canada and globally.

Art galleries and museums control and represent Indigenous art and artists through controlling contents and structures of exhibits and by denying Indigenous artists the opportunity to exhibit their work. This control significantly impacts on Indigenous art and Indigenous artists. Archuleta and Strickland (1991: 9) describe "bias which sees Indian art exclusively as 'ethnic art' that does not flow from or into the mainstream, regardless of the training, experience, competence, professionalism, or

inspiration of the Native American artist.” McMaster (2004), in his discussion of Contributions to Canadian Art by Aboriginal Contemporary Artists, describes the inability of mainstream Canada to recognize the diversity of Indigenous peoples which enables the othering of Indigenous peoples and the homogenizing of identities.

Alfred Young Man (1998), Chair of the Native American Studies program at the University of Lethbridge and significant Indigenous artist from Canada, provides a potent example of these othering and homogenizing practices and ways they are affecting Indigenous artists. He describes visiting the Museum fur Volkerkunde in Vienna, Austria where he came across items that had been created very recently, perhaps only a few months or years earlier, which were being displayed in the museum. A poster he had created “for a University of Lethbridge Native American Studies Department conference on border-crossing issues relative to Jay’s Treaty of 1794” (p. 51) was hung next to an American flag. He further describes “a common Oglala Sioux ‘tribal’ license plate ...becomes an object of curiosity to the average Austrian when in the hands of the specialist” (p. 51). It was difficult for Young Man, the artist and scholar, to see his art and scholarly work displayed next to “Mayan art objects and artifacts from long since [assumed to be] ‘dead’ civilizations” (p. 50). Here Young Man critiques the racist practices which locate his recent artwork with the artwork of ancient peoples. But such practices are pervasive. He might be further distressed to learn that his 1998 book is being held in the ‘rare books’ collection at the University of Toronto (<http://www.utoronto.ca>), a location commonly understood as a location for out of print materials.

“The troubling of these universalizing, master narratives in modern art, particularly for their silencing of identity and difference has been one of the noisiest, most gregarious and important projects of the last quarter century” (Martin, 2004, 13). Further, Martin (2004, 17) describes that “over the past decade in Canada, heightened activity related to Aboriginal art by mainstream institutions rarely involved Aboriginal curators. Too frequently, the practice of interpreting both historical and contemporary Aboriginal art has fallen to European-Canadian curators, art historians, and writers.”

Eurocentric claims purport to authenticate what is ‘real’ Aboriginal art. Lee-Ann Martin, a curator and ally with many Aboriginal and First Nations artists, contends that “ongoing critical discourse challenges the privileged frameworks for selected art histories and contemporary art practices associated with most public art galleries in Canada today” (2004, 18-19). Until 1962, Canada presented a tradition of excluding Aboriginal artists from fine art exhibitions. Norval Morrisseau went on to

change the folklorist perspective of Aboriginal art and artists (McMaster, 2004: 143). For Aboriginal artists, art is also about healing, and this comes through “righting” (Smith, 1999) history by making clear the silences and negations of Aboriginal peoples in the history of Canada while simultaneously maintaining their distinct culture and identity.

Joane Cardinal-Schubert (2004), a Blood (Blackfoot) and Peigan writer, artist, curator and activist, stated that “artists have been and continue to be on the front line of this battle of recognition as advocates” (28) and are “in a position of taking a stand (28) [...] and carr[y] the voices of the ancestors forward, acknowledging and demonstrating a cultural continuum” (33). Cardinal-Schubert further contends that “we must continue our process, begun from inside our own cultural contexts, to further examine our art forms in relation to the existing repositories of this cultural knowledge and acknowledge it as a contemporary continuum of the people we come from—the people we still are” (34).

Delegates: Chiefs of the Earth and Sky

Arthur is a contemporary artist who refuses to comply with Eurocentric and static notions of what constitutes “Native art.” He has experienced difficulty with acceptance of some of his art. In spite of these challenges, he asserts his intention to continue with art which is culturally relevant and responsive. In this section, we highlight the continuous struggle with colonizing understandings of history exemplified by the dismissal and ridicule of Arthur’s art by a mainstream reviewer/critic. In a discussion of the exhibition *Delegates: Chiefs of the Earth and Sky* we highlight this assault on Arthur’s work to demonstrate the ongoing struggles for Indigenous artists, mainly the complexities in conveying historical connections in an artists’ life and that of his peoples. We highlight the need to challenge the misunderstanding of Indigenous art inherent in art criticism that fails to comprehend the location and knowledge base from which Indigenous art originates.

Arthur’s exhibit of eleven large works in *Delegates: Chiefs of the Earth and Sky* (Leo Kaman Art Gallery, January 2003) presented photographs of lands in what has become known as South Dakota. As a contemporary photographer, the works revealed his wit and gift for non-verbal cues in relating a story. The upper half of each work is an aluminum sheet into which a punctuation mark has been cut so that an underlying copper sheet appears through the hole. Each piece bears the name of a Chief who signed the Fort Laramie Treaty.⁴ The pieces honor these great Chiefs who, after considerable resistance, were forced to sign this treaty that they knew would irrevocably change the lives of their people. The peoples who were affected had already been subjected

to ongoing attacks and the genocidal efforts of the American government and its cavalry. Many of these nations were remnants of much larger nations that had been decimated. The living conditions today on reserves created by this treaty include the worst in the American states with appalling social and living conditions and communities rampant with suicide, addiction, and abuse. The plight of these peoples, a direct consequence of the Fort Laramie Treaty and American genocidal policy, has in recent years become a public embarrassment for the American government that has tolerated third world living conditions among its own citizens for many years. The colonial history and ongoing reality of Indigenous peoples affected by the Fort Laramie Treaty is an important topic for an artist to engage in his art.

But Gary Michael Dault, an art critic, is not interested in this history nor its trajectory to today which is reflected in Arthur's art. Dault acknowledges in his *Globe and Mail* Article on January 17, 2004 the beauty of the art pieces but asks "Why South Dakota? Why isolated punctuation marks?" These are good questions. Arthur has provided an explanation – that these Chiefs played a key role in the signing of the treaty in Washington (for territories that would become South Dakota) and that they were invited to gather to attend English-language negotiations that would give their land to settlers. Dault states that this is "All very historically distressing, certainly, but scarcely a situation high on most of our lists of social and political evils to be now fretted over and redressed." Of course, the Indigenous peoples still living in abysmal conditions on reservations created by the Fort Laramie Treaty would disagree. These are precisely issues that need to be understood and redressed.

That Dault is not concerned with the historical realities resulting from the treaties is not surprising. His lack of interest in finding out what the historical importance of this moment, before attacking the art, illustrates Brenda Croft's (Gurindji Nation, Western Australia) notion of imperialism in the arts:

"[...] a critic's position from within the "centre" [...] There is still the desire to safely corral Indigenous existence into ever-decreasing categories. This extends to contemporary Indigenous artistic/cultural practice." (Croft, 2004: 113)

She argues that in the Australian context, "in the last two decades, considerable polemic has revolved around a range of issues concerning contemporary Indigenous art and cultural practices including the provenance and authenticity/homogeneity of artworks from a number of leading Indigenous artists; quality of works created/produced; locating artistic styles in relation to cultural specificity; and whether work should be defined by such values, among other topics" (p. 110). In this way,

Indigenous art that is defined from the Indigenous artists' point of view, lived experiences and traditions are a way to challenge these outside definitions of art, of Indigenous cultures and identities.

Arthur resists the myth that Canada's history started with European contact and reinvigorates discussion and debate about colonial history. Similarly, the work of Jeffrey Thomas "place[s] quotation marks around the monuments of settler historical memory" (Phillips 2003, 300). Ruth Phillips describes the work of Jeffrey Thomas that "interrogates the Champlain monument [on the parliamentary grounds in Ottawa] by juxtaposing the images that contrast the specificity and immediacy of living people and popular culture with the generality and romanticization of historic monuments" (p. 286).

Is Dault aware of the impact that colonization has had on Indigenous peoples across the Americas and the political nature of their artwork which works to raise awareness of ongoing colonizing images and practices? Does he understand that all Indigenous peoples have been

Figure 8a
"Art with No Name"



Figure 8b
“Art with No Name”



impacted by policies of genocide including outright slaughter, residential schools, land theft, segregation, oppressions, violence, and conquest? Is he aware that artists raise awareness with their work of the ongoing struggles of Indigenous groups? We would hope so.

Arthur explained in his own words

I didn't write the words of the Fort Laramie Treaty in there but it is meant for you to do the research yourself. If you type in the words in Google you can download many documents. And my work is not meant to lead people by the nose. I am an artist and I make art and it is meant to be understood but it is also grounded in history just as much as historical paintings are grounded in history. It's not really a history lesson but it can be used as a history lesson. Which is

what my work is all about and it is grounded in that first experience I had with the first art history instructor. But at the same time I want people to also just look up and enjoy it for what it is: Art. Which is what I wanted to teach, on what I wanted to be: an artist.

Returning to the critique provided by Gary Michael Dault, in his review he says:

[...] what about all those punctuation marks — isolated commas, semi-colons, dashes, periods? Well, you see, Renwick's idea is that rather than quoting the words used in the Fort Laramie Treaty (which all of us are so eager to hear), he would “incise the blank portion of the aluminum with the punctuation marks that produced the pauses when the text was read. No word was written here,” intones the artist's gallery statement. “No voices represented. We are granted a marker, a moment's peace before moving on.” Now I don't know about you, but I think this is just about the silliest idea I've ever seen. These are cut-outs of the punctuation marks used in a 19th-century land treaty? One punctuation mark per landscape? Renwick says the completed works are meditations on absence and acts of remembrance. “In silence little is said,” he writes enigmatically, “but much is spoken.” I'll go along with the “little is said” part.

Richard William Hill provides a review in *FUSE Magazine* (2004) of the *Delegates: Chiefs of the Earth and Sky* exhibit that is in sharp contrast in orientation to Dault. Hill is an Indigenous artist deeply concerned with Indigenous art.

Similarly, George Johnston, a Tlingit photographer, showed two styles of photography, one being as an aesthetic collection of images divorced from history and cultural context and the second a more familiar and engaging sort of photography that preserved and reinforced oral histories (Geddes, 1997). Johnston expressed in his photographs the importance of knowing who a person is, where she or he comes from and knowing that history. Clearly, respecting and honoring the history and lived experiences are fundamental characteristics of Indigenous art, evident in Johnston's art and Arthur Renwick's art. Acknowledging change and Indigenous perspectives and ways of knowing also are fundamental to Indigenous art (Castellano, 2000; Ermine, 1995; Battiste, 2000).

Arthur explains that he was asked “to create an artist spread in *Fuse Magazine* as a response to the article by Dault.” He said

I fretted over it and then I thought ‘Why should I give him

that?’ But I created this spread and it’s called Art with no name. So it’s just a simple piece that can be opened and read in different ways. I wanted to acknowledge that it is art.

Young Man (2003), an accomplished Aboriginal artist himself and associate professor of Native Studies at the University of Lethbridge, explains that “the new Native art is being perfected” and “was made possible because of the kind of ‘landscaping’ of the political environment that many of the previous generation of Native artists accomplished ... just as their generation depended on the generation before them for answers to get to where they could openly practice their art in relative freedom” (50). This art “advances the argument, the theory, of Native art another step further. But the cultural and social fabric is still in evidence to be built upon.”

Conclusions

Clearly it is a struggle where many obstacles block artists from creating contemporary Indigenous art. But we are blessed to have the gifts of these talented artists like Arthur Renwick. His work acknowledges his urban Aboriginal location, his connection to Haisla community and culture, past and present, and the importance of knowing one’s identity and the history of one’s people while engaging in self-expression through the arts.

A recent discussion at the Ontario College of Art and Design of Indigenous art was called “Art Creates Change.” What are the changes Arthur has in mind in his art? His art and discussions suggest freedom from colonial forces and freedom to express Indigenous perspectives and to write back to the center. His art also enables us to see that culture is an active process of changing while deeply rooted in traditions. Art is also important as an educational experience and environment to increase interest in Indigenous articulations of history, to create opportunities to examine these histories and provide critiques of the past and to shape futures that are informed by Indigenous perspectives and not only mainstream perspectives. That these histories of colonization and resistance are deeply felt by Indigenous peoples today may be a point that is so obvious to Indigenous peoples that it does not need to be repeated. But for critics like Dault, who seem to think that the past is the past and that colonization has ended, there is a need to repeat these concerns. It is important to engage with these stately monuments – totem poles which reflect a history, culture, and current reality of Indigenous peoples, along side power poles and road signs which are monuments to contemporary culture that dismiss or appropriate Indigenous lands and knowledge. The contrasts are very relevant in Arthur’s art.

Reflecting upon a colonial past of theft of sacred cultural objects in “UnderTow,” Arthur documents events so we will all know what that history is about and perhaps the work will aid in garnering further support for the repatriation efforts that are ongoing in Haisla territory where so-called ‘artifacts’ need to be returned to their original locations and people.

These exhibits and Arthur’s stories call us, as educators, to reconsider what we teach and assume in the practice of education. Whose perspectives are shared? How is it portrayed? Do we glorify so called ‘modernization’ and ‘progress?’ Do we discount Indigenous perspectives on history, art, and education? We are challenged to think about how we might ensure that Indigenous perspectives are legitimated and validated. Arthur’s art suggests that if we continue to fight back and write/right back our stories can be told and heard—not by all perhaps—but by many. And he suggests we also need to move away from only the continual process of writing back to the colonial center and which maintains the power of dominant society to control artists and scholars.

Arthur’s art piece *Indian Art this Way* shows us that with wit and tenacity, Indigenous artists can avoid the trap of only writing back and instead can create their own directions focusing on issues relevant to their communities, in both urban and reserve locations, and create communications and shared interactions that support the lives of peoples in interconnected communities. Arthur is a prime example of just such an artist. We are thankful to him for sharing his art and story with us and most of all, for continuing his art practices despite obstacles. His example is inspiring!!!

Notes

1. For more information, see NFB’s film “The Other Side of the Ledger: an Indian View of the Hudson’s Bay Company,” directed by Martin Defalco and Willie Dunn (1972).
2. “Super-Companies” is an NFB film (1987) directed by Boyce Richardson who was asked to create an anthropological film on industrial companies in Canada. After his research, he decided to direct his film to discussion of Alcan and the exploitation of land, resources, and people
3. Resolution 36: Assembly of First Nations, July 20, 1999 see <http://www.afn.ca/>; Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 1990 see <http://www.nps.gov/history/nagpra/>
4. The Fort Laramie Treaty is the treaty which created the Pine Ridge

reservation, and the Wounded Knee reservation, two of the poorest reservations in North America. For further information, see: <http://www.firstpeople.us/fp-html-treaties/FortLaramieTreaty1868.html>; <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/ntreaty/nt001.htm>; <http://www.aics.org/WK/treaty1868.html>

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