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# Gary Wyatt: Seekers and Travellers Contemporary Art of the Pacific Northwest Coast (Book Review)

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D., *OCAD University*

Gary Wyatt, *Seekers and Travellers: Contemporary Art of the Pacific Northwest Coast*. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2012. 160 pages. ISBN 978-1-55365-953-2. \$29.95 paperback.

Gary Wyatt's *Seekers and Travellers* is the third and final installment in a compelling series of publications dedicated to showcasing contemporary First Nations visual art of the Pacific Northwest coast. While his first book in the series, *Spirit Faces* (1994), concentrated on emerging trends in mask production and his second book, *Mythic Beings* (1999), illustrated aesthetic engagements with the supernatural world, *Seekers and Travellers* features developments in contemporary Aboriginal art of the Pacific Northwest coast from the last ten years. While the subject area and historical trajectory of contemporary art represent a particularly disparate cosmology, Wyatt's book works against this idea by focusing entirely on sculptural objects.

Wyatt provides an exceptionally brief three-part introduction. First, in three pages, he gives a generalized overview of influences on First Nations cultural production along the Pacific Northwest coast, from its earliest beginnings thousands of years ago to the present. He includes information on migratory passages, complex spiritual traditions, establishments of permanent settlements, inter-village trading and the socio-political implications and cultural value of potlatches. Wyatt provides strong insight on potlatches by examining how they stimulated periods of intense artistic creation: "artists were delegated to produce ceremonial pieces such as masks, headdresses, regalia and props for the theatrical presentations, as well as more beautiful and ornate objects to be given as gifts" (3). While Wyatt presents a compelling distillation of important events in First Nations cultural history, his analysis remains fragmentary and without substantiation by either primary or secondary research sources both in this section and in the remainder of the introduction.

Second, he quickly surveys the influence of European contact and Asian trade on First Nations art in relation to the proliferation of such material in museum collections, a consequence of the Canadian government outlawing the potlatch in 1884 in order to promote assimilation (4). The period from the First World War to the 1960s is overlooked by Wyatt who deems it, as have other critics, artists and historians in Canada, "a period of cultural darkness" (4). But such statements are outdated: cultural production among First Nations artists during this period did not grind to a halt but took to other forms, including what we now consider today as public art. Ronald W. Hawker's *Tales of Ghosts: First Nations Art in British Columbia, 1922-61* (UBC Press, 2003) has served to debunk the "dark period" narrative with conviction.

The third section, "Contemporary Northwest Coast Art," is perhaps the most relevant to the central subject matter of the book. For Wyatt, "the biggest influence on contemporary [A]boriginal art internationally is cross-cultural pollination, and Northwest Coast art is no exception" (5). His observation is incisive because sharing, interaction and dialogue between contemporary Aboriginal artists and other cultures have driven recent Aboriginal cultural production, of which the Vancouver Art Gallery's 2012 exhibition "Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture" serves as a strong example. Even so, the sixty artworks featured in the book make only minor aesthetic references to different cultural traditions and instead remain firmly indebted

to Aboriginal aesthetic customs, mainly carving, metalwork and weaving.

After the introduction, *Seekers and Travellers* is organized by three categories: Traditional, Cross-Cultural, and Contemporary. Sixty object-based artworks are assigned a category and photographed against a black backdrop. On the facing page is found basic object information and a statement written by the artist(s) which serves to explain the artistic licences, historical influences or spiritual practices that informed the work. Some of the objects included are masks, helmets, bowls, frontlets, headdresses, totems, bags, rattles, robes, jewellery, boxes, glassworks, paintings, baskets, cradle boards and combs. The artworks typify innovative and dynamic engagements with First Nations aesthetic traditions combined with exceptional skill, technique and sophistication. Pieces by both early-career and established artists such as Meghann O'Brien, Keith Wolf Smarch and Francis Horne Sr. are certainly no exception.

Though some artists are concerned with other, more autobiographical facets in their written statements, it is the stories that shaped the creation of the artwork that are the most fascinating and useful to scholars. For instance, Tom Hunt relates a story by Mervyn Child to explain how his mask is based on the story of Raven who crossed to the supernatural world and used the scales of a salmon to feed Bear in the sun world. Later, Susan Point tells us how the carving of a comb was influenced by the story of Qululil, a woman who was cast out of her village because of her tremendous size and who exacted revenge, only to be left to die off the waters of Point Grey, BC. These stories hold meaning because they contextualize an iconography that is dedicated to oral history.

Although Wyatt has sought to demonstrate "some of the best" contemporary Aboriginal art of the Northwest coast with his book, there are two main areas of concern. First, of the thirty-six artists that Wyatt has chosen to represent here, thirty are male and six are female. This glaring gender imbalance points to a serious problem which has long beset Aboriginal art discourse. Second, Wyatt has been the co-owner of the Spirit Wrestler Gallery in Vancouver since 1995, a commercial gallery that exhibits contemporary Inuit, Northwest Coast and Māori art. Nor ought one ignore the detail that the vast majority of artists featured in *Seekers and Travellers* are associated with the gallery in some capacity. While Wyatt's selection may indeed represent some of the best contemporary Aboriginal art, a commercial self-interest is evident.

This book is recommended as a non-scholarly introduction to several of the leading contemporary Aboriginal artists of the Northwest Pacific coast who explore object-based practices and to the autobiographical and mythical stories that have helped shape the creation of their artwork.

Matthew Ryan Smith  
Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences  
OCAD University