Public 54, Indigenous Art: New Media and the Digital

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.
in thanks. In 1974, the community built its own Sacha Museu to showcase its culture to visitors; however, the rainforest museum was not economically stable, so community leaders asked the Whittens to sell ceramics in the United States to raise funds to sustain it. In 1976, the couple founded the Sacha Runa Research Foundation, a nonprofit that sold ceramics to provide medical care and support to the Canelos Quichua. Besides selling pottery, they also curated several exhibitions in Ecuador and the United States.

Based on input from the artists, the Whittens defined four broad themes in which to frame the artwork in subsequent exhibits in the US and Ecuador: Control of Power, Self-Presentation, the Sounds of Spirits, and Sustaining Life. These became the organizational framework for the permanent exhibit at the Spurlock Museum.

With barely any English-language material available about Indigenous Amazonian artwork, particularly literature directly informed by the artists, From Myth to Creation is a valuable resource and one I would recommend to anyone interested in Indigenous art of the Americas as an introduction into an understudied but fascinating region.

---America Meredith

Of the important arguments presented in the essays published here, several contributors reinforce the idea that Indigenous cultures have always been immersed in new technologies that shape and twist the fabric of cultural knowledge. Nagam’s essay, “Deciphering the Refusal of the Digital and Binary Codes of Sovereignty/Self-Determination and Civilized/Savage,” proposes that new media in particular is a furtherance of technological experimentation since time immemorial, affecting the ways that information and forms of communication are interpreted, circulated, and made anew.

Laura E. Smith echoes a similar line of inquiry by paraphrasing Angela Haas’s notion that “American Indians [are] the first skilled multimedia workers and intellectuals in the Americas,” specifically in the use of wampum as a coded political and aesthetic signifier.

The innovative technology found in new media and the digital permits the deconstruction and transmission of old and new stories, which builds upon the tradition of storytelling in Indigenous communities. Moreover, the artist projects in the publication including—but not limited to—Skawennati (Mohawk), Jordan Bennett (Mi’kmaq), Amanda Strong (Cree-Métis), and Scott Benesiinaabandan (Wasauksing Ojibwe), speak directly to the concept that new media and the digital offer productive means of thinking about the powerful relationship between aesthetics and resistance. While these artists gather to question new media and digital environments today, writers such as Jason Edward Lewis (Native Hawaiian-Samoan-Cherokee descent) and Elizabeth LaPensée (Anishinaabe-Métis) imagine the future of new media and digital practices for Native artists and designers. For example, in his essay, “A Brief (Media) History of the Indigenous Future,” Lewis investigates new media’s impact.

**JOURNAL**

**PUBLIC 54, Indigenous Art: New Media and the Digital**

Heather Igloliorte, Julie Nagam, and Carla Taunta, eds.

Public Access Collective, 2016

PUBLIC is a double-blind, peer-reviewed, academic journal featuring interdisciplinary scholarship with a special focus on art and visual culture. For issue 54, PUBLIC invites scholars and curators Heather Igloliorte (Inuk), Julie Nagam (Métis), and Carla Taunta to unpack the ways that contemporary Indigenous words of the editors, new media is “a significant tool of conveyance in a longstanding relationship between people, the cosmos, and the land.”

As the editors correctly emphasize, the critical response to the “explosion” in production surrounding new media and the digital is severely lacking. The opportunities (and problems) presented by the Internet, software, hacking, remix culture, social media, “apps,” video games, surveillance states, virtual reality, and so forth, strengthen the potential to further develop this rich field of study. By gathering scholars, curators, and artists together, this publication creates a decolonized act of community founded upon pedagogy and knowledge sharing.
MONOGRAPh

Yakugas' Legacy: The Art and Times of Charlie James

Ronald W. Hawker

University of Toronto Press, 2016

Ronald Hawker's Yakugas' Legacy: The Art and Times of Charlie James offers new insight into the career of the eminent Kwagiulth and Kwakwaxut'inuxw carver Charlie James (ca. 1867–1938) and presents images of artwork, souvenirs, and ceremonial regalia attributed to James that are now housed in collections around the world. The book sets out to rekindle art-historical interest in James who, as Hawker notes, a significant contributor to Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonies and "part of the first generation of artists to be known by name among Euro-Canadians."

Hawker presents James as a cosmopolitan figure who readily adapted from one cultural environment to another.

James's name may not be especially familiar outside of Northwest Coast art-historical and Native circles, but his poles are noted in the writings of anthropologists Franz Boas and C. Marius Barbeau. Perhaps the most familiar image of totem poles worldwide is of his pair of Thunderbird house poles, now in Vancouver's Stanley Park since their removal from the Kwakwaka'wakw village of Alert Bay in the 1930s. James's carving also appears in Emily Carr's paintings of Alert Bay and in Edward Curtis's film, The Land of the War Canoes (formerly known as the Land of the Head Hunters). Given such exposure, it is surprising that prior to the publication of Hawker's book, the only significant publication about James's art and life is the first chapter of Phil Nuytten's The Modern Art catalogue, "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern (1984) and the Vancouver Art Gallery's The Colour of My Dreams: The Surrealist Revolution in Art (2011). The cross-cultural discussion was significantly recalibrated to the experiences of Kwakwaka'wakw artists with Aldona Joanitis's Chiefly Feasts: The Enduring Kwakiutl Potlatch (1991) and then Leslie Dawn's essay, "Cross-Border Trading: Mungo Martin Carves for the World of Tomorrow" (2008). Yakugas' Legacy builds upon this work, showing us how Northwest Coast carving, and James's practices of carving in particular, fit into that world in the early 20th century.

The main body of the text is composed of six chapters, beginning with "James' World." This chapter