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Nicholas Galanin: Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan

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Ojibwe *Anishinaabemwin* refers to the idea of everything being alive and responsive, not in a stasis but constantly growing and renewing.

not define a specific group but rather a way of being between a community's members with each other and all life around them, including people, plants, animals, and even inanimate objects. Ojibwe *Anishinaabemwin* refers to the idea of everything being alive and responsive, not in a stasis but constantly growing and renewing. Working from a unique curatorial viewpoint allowed Manning to consider "how Indigenous peoples might construct 'authentic identity' in relation not only to derogatory stereotypes and romantic ideals but also to externally imposed distinctions."²

The four artists chosen for the show conducted "investigations via 'traditional' Aboriginal iconography, not as romantic reiterations from the past but as an unavoidable and perpetual collision within their conflicting composite realities," Manning writes on page 18. Their art in the exhibition demonstrated the *gashka'oodé* between different media, different cultures, and different subjects, yet all return to their Native themes.

In her black-and-white photographs of tall trees, *Thunder Connector I* and *Thunder Connector II*, Beverly Doxtator reversed the color scheme and intentionally exposed the images twice to blur the outlines. Within a single image, Doxtator looked in multiple directions, inside and out, old and new, Native and not. The trees suggest multiple referents, both the Iroquois reverence for trees and the story of Sky Woman, the figure who fell from the sky to the earth through the hole linked by a tree. The trees link the sky with the earth and "stand as ever-present electrically charged lightning rods that transmit the thunderous heartbeat

of *Minwaasgay* into past and future exaltations."³

In the work of Wally Dion, "fragments from obsolete and defective chronicles are reclaimed, rewritten and redeployed like so many Indian cars and reservation gadgetry, inventions retooled from salvaged remnants and forgotten histories that deftly speak of new forms of digital interfacing and ever-increasingly entangled intersubjectivities."⁴ Dion created a curved wall of six shields hung from the ceiling and made out of computer circuit boards harvested from old computers. The motherboards and other components were cut into diamond shapes and stitched with brass wires looped and twisted together to form the morning star-blanket common among the Cree and Saulteaux. The blanket/shield forms are complete with wire tassels that reach down to the floor, recalling the grasses on the Plains that are gathered in preparation for ceremony. The circuit boards, representations of globalization, are intentionally old; using pieces from defunct antiquated computers to reform a new image suggests the potential for renewal. Dion's work bridges the old with the new.

Jason Baerg's brightly painted laser-cut aluminum abstract lightning forms referenced both the hard-edge abstraction from the 1960s and '70s as well as Cree cosmology. Manning writes on pages 13 and 14, "these paintings/sculptures the sense of hereness and a concomitant everywhere, devoid of any definite and singular place or identity" suggesting turbulent skies and lightning bolts and creating "a controversial land where

heated ideas of authenticity merge and bend around cold-colored concepts."

Dressed in a brightly colored unitard that covered her head and hands, Amy Malbeuf interrupted the events by creating an eight-foot circle of salt by walking around with a fertilizer-spreader, using "silence, repetition, anonymity, and an exaggerated foreignness to explore the contradictions posed by that very identity."⁵ Malbeuf's performances were about the audience as much as the performer, trying to jar the viewer into a new awareness of the world. On page 24, McMaster compares Malbeuf to a spiritual healer, unable to speak or see but aware of the terrain. Malbeuf combined the sacred with the destructive: the circle suggests the eternal, but the salt never goes away and causes irreparable damage to the planet. By using a circle and salt, the artist "[juxtaposed] an outright defilement of this iconic symbol of cyclic renewal with an unexpected reversal in the metaphorical deployment of salt, fertilizer, and by implication, static demarcations as both poison and cure."⁶

The exhibit explored the "fluid notions of identity" and the "complicated interrelations between people of Aboriginal ancestry and other Canadians" which are "still haunted by the shadow of colonialism." The work of the four artists tied together the idea of ceremony, stories, and songs of with the challenges of contemporary life. As suggested in Dion's work, these artists combined the "[t]echnological excess tinged with sentimental yearnings for by-gone thrift and an uncomplicated age."⁷

—Suzanne Newman Fricke

Video

Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan

Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit-Aleut)

FIRST ENCOUNTERED Nicholas Galanin's *Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan* at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in December of 2012, where it featured in one of Canada's most successful traveling exhibitions in recent years, *Beat Nation*, organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery. At the time of the encounter, the space was mired with a fleet of enthusiastic German tourists, whose cinema and popular culture have, historically speaking, been hopelessly infatuated with everything Aboriginal. Soon after, I was given the opportunity to write a review of the show by the website *ARTINFO Canada*,¹ and, though I only briefly mention of *Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan*, I always felt like there was more to be said, more that I could say, and it nagged at me like a splinter. So, with this is mind, I've returned to the work nearly two years later.

Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan, translated as "We Will Again Open This Container of Wisdom That Has Been Left in Our Care," is a transmedial video cut into two distinct, but not wholly separate, parts. The first displays hip-hop dancer David Elsewhere popping-and-locking inside an empty studio to the tenacious beat of a traditional tribal drum and song. In the second, Dan Littlefield, dressed in traditional garb, rises from his knees to perform a ritual dance before a massive Tlingit painted screen; however, the music accompanying Littlefield is a tinny dub-step rhythm that is more Super Mario Bros. than familiar

Aboriginal sonicism. Here Galanin renders aesthetic and historical tensions explicit, if not painfully transparent, existing, as they do, between white kicks and ritual dress, urban studio and Tlingit backdrop, electronica and ancestral song. These tensions therein serve to make the traditional urgent, and, dare I say, very cool. Not disrespectful, perhaps not even radical, but something different. Almost immediately I reached a telling conclusion: I didn't know you could do that. For one of those rare but important moments, my ignorance precipitated fear, more precisely, the fear of not knowing.

That being said, Galanin has been frequently criticized within Aboriginal communities and by elders for doing precisely what I, at that time, didn't think was possible: conflating deeply-entrenched Aboriginal forms of expression with contemporaneous Western media and popular culture. To some, *Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan* inflames a profound ethical conundrum, whether the video is fundamentally "wrong" or "disrespectful," one that brings to question the very idea of Aboriginal cultural appropriation in the digital age. To others, including Ryan Rice, "The sentimentality and visions of ethnographic purity imposed from the outside and from within are the principal mis-users or abusers of the word 'tradition' and have created the distorted lens through which many people, unfortunately, view Native art."² The rupture in the field of acceptable subject matter for contemporary Aboriginal art, of its cultural appropriateness, is intended to deconstruct feelings and beliefs that reinforce the status quo. Essentially, *Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan* performs a valuable

task: it arouses reflection of established meanings by embodying change itself. However, it's more than that.

As I later discovered, another crucial element to Galanin's *Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan* is its color. Not only does Elsewhere, Littlefield, and their surrounding environments become veiled in rich chiaroscuro, but also shooting in black-and-white is symptomatic of the fluidity of time itself; in the video, time—the gradations between the past and the present—are rendered as a synonymous whole. Some speak of this temporal phenomenon as "dreamtime," others as "time eternal;" either way, it points to the existence of time within a non-linear, proverbially Western framework, respectfully placating the fluidity between the traditional and the contemporary. Ultimately, the video's black-and-white color may be a metaphorical embodiment of fluidity and transformation itself—the more I watch, the more I come to recognize that *Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan* looks in the past as it surges in the present.

Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan is a deceptively simple mash-up of dress, music, spirituality, and movement—characteristics of almost any given culture in the world. To paraphrase French curator Nicholas Bourriaud, in the West's "postproduction" society, expressions of originality and creativity are blurred in order to produce new and exciting forms of artistic production.³ Hence, the collision of Aboriginal and hip-hop cultural signifiers in the video are not an example of Galanin's insensitivity but represent a deep concern for regeneration.

—Matthew Ryan Smith



1. See: Matthew Ryan Smith, "Aboriginal Artists Engage with Urban Youth Culture in the Urgent and Timely 'Beat Nation,'" *ARTINFO Canada* (December 20, 2012).
2. Ryan Rice, as quoted in Karen Kramer Russell *et al. Shapeshifting: Transformation in Native American Art*, exhibition catalogue (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 32.
3. For more on Bourriaud's theory of postproduction, please see: Nicholas Bourriaud, *Postproduction* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002).

2. Dolleen Manning, ed., *Gashka'oodé (Tangled)* (Toronto, ON: Forest City Gallery, 2014), 10.
3. Ibid., 12
4. Ibid., 16

5. Ibid., 17
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 15