

Reshaping Tradition: Linking Continuity, Change, and Formline Design in Contemporary
Northwest Coast First Nations Art

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A Thesis
In the Department of
Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of Master of Arts
(Art History) at Concordia University Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April 2012

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

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in Contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations Art

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Master of Art (Art History)

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Abstract

This thesis explores contemporary artistic production by First Nations artists along the Northwest Coast of Canada. Focus is given to an exploration of the choices made by a growing number of emerging artists who are challenging conventions recognized as the visual language of Aboriginal artists of this region, namely formline design. Two Northwest Coast First Nations artists are my focus: Sonny Assu and Shawn Hunt. A complex intersection between tradition and contemporaneity is revealed in the work of Assu and Hunt. An exploration into the artistic practices of these two contemporary artists leads to an important question: why does formline continue to circulate in contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations art and what meaning(s) does it convey in the present moment? This thesis seeks to uncover how Assu and Hunt manipulate and challenge Northwest Coast aesthetic conventions, raising questions regarding how Native art of this region is defined, interpreted, and valued. Attention will also be given to the work of historical and established Northwest Coast First Nations artists who have set artistic precedents and greatly influenced this emerging generation of artists. Discussion will include Charles Edenshaw, Bill Reid, Robert Davidson, and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun. Assu and Hunt push aesthetic boundaries, challenging the notion that formline design circulates within a historical context that does not allow room for innovation. This thesis highlights artists who are mastering and manipulating “traditional” aesthetics in a journey to achieve balance between an articulation of Aboriginal traditions and community belonging, and expressions of individual ingenuity and voice.

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Anne Whitelaw. I would not have survived this process without her constant encouragement and support. She went above and beyond to help me through the Masters program and the thesis writing process and I am eternally grateful. Working under her guidance has been such an enriching and rewarding experience and I am so thankful to have had the opportunity to do so. Additionally, I thank Dr. Alice Jim who has been another important source of inspiration and support.

I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to Sonny Assu and Shawn Hunt. Without the incredible work of these two talented artists I wouldn't have a thesis.

Additionally, I am grateful to my dear friends in Montreal and across the country. I am proud to call you friends and I thank you all for your love, patience, and support.

Finally, words cannot express how thankful I am for my family. My Mom and Dad have loved and supported me unconditionally. No matter how stressed I might be or how foul my mood, my parents were there with a smile and encouraging words. My brothers too had unfailing faith in me. When I wasn't sure I would make it through, their calm belief I would get things done was a huge comfort to me. Also, as my number one person to call and complain to, I am especially thankful for my brother Gareth's ability to listen, to put me at ease, and make me laugh no matter what the situation. Love and thanks goes to my entire family, near and far, for all their encouragement and support.

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INTRODUCTION

Seek out contemporary First Nations art on the Northwest Coast of Canada and you might be surprised by what you find and where you find it. Whether exploring contemporary artwork alongside nineteenth century totem poles in an anthropology museum, admiring graffiti murals on the wall of a contemporary art gallery, or discovering masks depicting mythological beings situated next to tourist key chains and trinkets, we are met with a diverse range of cultural production by Aboriginal artists along Canada's Northwest Coast. Critical opinions about the work we discover vary just as broadly as the price tags for these objects, and play an important role in shaping what is being produced within the contemporary sphere as well as the context within which it is seen. What becomes clear is that no singular, homogenous view of Northwest Coast First Nations art, historical or contemporary, is adequate. Whether museum, gallery, tourist shop, or other site of consumption, we are confronted with art that not only reflects the significance of historical cultural traditions and expressions but also the contemporary concerns of artists who refuse to be limited by expectations. My exploration into contemporary art production by First Nations artists along the Northwest Coast is driven by a desire to understand the choices of a growing number of emerging contemporary artists who are challenging the very conventions recognized as the visual language of Aboriginal artists of this region. Modern and innovative approaches to social, cultural, and political issues are revealed in the art of contemporary First Nations artists. Even more intriguing, the individual voice and ingenuity of an artist is embodied in art that simultaneously reflects group identity and cultural belonging. The expression of cultural traditions and use of a common aesthetic language seems to counter a

challenging of conventions and the expression of individuality. On the contrary, however, an exploration into the artistic practices of contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations artists reveals a complex relationship between tradition and innovation; contemporary artists are choosing to reference “traditional” practices and aesthetics in new, unusual ways as a subversive strategy that undermines the notion that art of this region is valid only when it closely adheres to aesthetic precedents established in years long past. Tradition and innovation are often regarded as mutually exclusive ideas, one belonging to the past and the other to the present or future. Contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations artists, however, demonstrate that these two concepts can co-exist within a work of art as a reflection of cultural continuity. On the Northwest Coast, experimentation with aesthetic conventions coincides with and perhaps even complements the preservation of Aboriginal cultural traditions. But in order to recognize the creativity behind the choices made by contemporary Native artists, it is necessary to explore what defines the aesthetic conventions that have come to signify cultural production in this region. An examination of aesthetic traditions uncovers the significance of formline design, the term used by scholar Bill Holm in 1965 to refer to the “traditional” aesthetic of the Northwest Coast First Nations. Holm used this term to describe formal elements of design unique to material production by First Nations communities on the Northwest Coast. Formline design was (and continues to be) regarded as an essential tool for visual articulations of Aboriginal traditions and worldviews. But Holm also established formal criteria to evaluate Northwest Coast art based upon the assumed authority of the past. Notions about what constituted “traditional” or “authentic” First Nations art of the Northwest Coast are inextricably linked to an adherence to the stylistic conventions of the formline aesthetic.

This is seen as problematic by a number of contemporary Native artists who wonder: if artistic production by Northwest Coast First Nations artists is defined according to a governing system of principles, what room is there for growth? Many artists challenge the idea that formline design defines First Nations art of the Northwest Coast and reject the notion that adherence to the principles of the formline aesthetic defines a work of art as “authentic” or relevant only as a “traditional” form of art. Further, many dispute the idea that cultural production does (or ever did) exclude innovation and expressions of individuality.

Two emerging Northwest Coast First Nations artists are my focus: Sonny Assu and Shawn Hunt. Assu uses satire to great effect, incorporating elements of popular culture into his practice while revealing aspects of our consumption-driven lives in an attempt to subvert preconceptions about First Nations art. Hunt combines themes, imagery, and narratives related to his First Nations ancestry and cultural affiliation with contemporary culture in an effort to “subvert, hijack and remix”¹ cultural categories. A complex intersection between tradition and contemporaneity is revealed in the work of Assu and Hunt. Deference to cultural conventions is clear, seen in the application of the shared visual language of formline design. While each artist stresses creativity and prioritizes his goals as an individual, each does so while employing an aesthetic (that of formline design) that is considered by many First Nations artists to be restrictive and limiting. Thorough knowledge of the language of formline design and the traditions of the Northwest Coast is clear in the work of Assu and Hunt, but the ways by which each artist chooses to interpret and apply the aesthetic however, are quite different. While

¹ “Artist Statement,” Shawn Hunt, accessed March 3, 2011, <http://www.shawnhunt.net/>.

Hunt maintains clear, definable ties to the inherent “rules” of formline design, Assu takes a much more relaxed approach, applying the aesthetic and related imagery as a signifier of Northwest Coast Aboriginal cultural traditions. Both artists, however, employ the very conventions that define their art as that of an Aboriginal artist of the Northwest Coast as a subversive strategy to challenge those same assumptions. Art historian Charlotte Townsend-Gault explains that within the sphere of contemporary artistic production, adherence to the “rules” of formline is now seen as inhibiting rather than legitimating the creativity inherent in cultural production.² She writes, “Referring to a demonstrable ability to adapt to new ways and new materials, many First Nations artists have articulated the notion that ‘our tradition is to innovate’.”³ By using the aesthetic principles deemed by so many First Nations artists to be limiting, contemporary artists such as Assu and Hunt push aesthetic boundaries, challenging the notion that formline design circulates within a historical context that does not allow change. Assu and Hunt reflect a growing number of contemporary artists who are reclaiming and redefining such terms.⁴ An exploration into the artistic practices of these two contemporary artists leads

² Charlotte Townsend-Gault, “Hot Dogs, a Ball Gown, Adobe, and Words: the Modes and Materials of Identity,” *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century*, W. Jackson Rushing III, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999) 117.

³ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁴ There are a number of additional contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations artists that share Hunt and Assu’s concerns, interests, and desire to challenge aesthetic conventions. Marianne Nicolson is among this younger generation of artists whose work greatly contributes to discourse concerning the treatment of formline design by contemporary artists on the Northwest Coast. Nicolson’s art is deeply rooted in her Kwakwaka’wakw cultural ancestry. Nicolson celebrates the continuity of culture as she explores and plays with a cultural system of values and aesthetic traditions. As a scholar in Kwakwaka’wakw culture, Nicolson’s art functions as a way for the artist to explore the history of First Nations on the Northwest Coast while expressing her own unique way of understanding the world. Due to the brevity of this thesis, however, the work of Nicolson, among others, has had to be excluded.

to an important question: why does formline continue to circulate in contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations art and what meaning(s) does it convey in the present moment? I will uncover how Assu and Hunt manipulate and challenge Northwest Coast aesthetic conventions, raising questions regarding how Native art of this region is defined, interpreted, and judged. While I will be concentrating on the work of Assu and Hunt, this thesis is not meant to serve as a comparison between the two artists' work. Indeed, while there are many overlapping themes and similar methods in the work of Assu and Hunt, these two artists were chosen just as much for the distinctive ways each interprets contemporary themes and integrates Northwest Coast aesthetics into their practice.

An examination of Aboriginal history and practices in Canada is necessary in order to recognize how historical events and cultural traditions inform the practice of contemporary Native artists. Choices made by contemporary artists often reflect larger historical and cosmological contexts. The development of what has come to signify the aesthetic of the Northwest Coast First Nations is crucial. For this purpose, Bill Holm's text on Northwest Coast aesthetics, *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form* (1965), is an essential contribution. Holm provided a verbal language to describe the basic system of principles governing the aesthetic. Holm intended his published research to serve as a standard introductory text to the field rather than an instructional tool.⁵ Nevertheless, many Native artists have adopted his analysis as a 'rule book' or technical guide to Aboriginal artistic production of this region. As evidence of his continued influence, "formline design" as well as Holm's analysis, is referenced again and again by

⁵ Bill Holm, *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1965), vii.

scholars and artists. Aldona Jonaitis is among those who acknowledge Holm's impact. In *Art of the Northwest Coast* (2006) she explains that Holm's text clarifies elements of design, providing a much-needed vocabulary for a highly complex system.⁶ Using the language of formline design throughout her text, Jonaitis demonstrates that with an understanding of the basic principles of the formline aesthetic one is able to recognize the subtle differences between works of art. These subtleties reveal the hand of the artist, reflecting creative artistic choices dating from pre-contact days. In a similar vein, Holm believed the more skilled the artist, the more adept s/he would be at expressing individuality while retaining the essential qualities of the formline aesthetic.⁷ Linking cultural traditions, cosmology, and aesthetics, Jonaitis and Holm reveal an important relationship between historical and contemporary artistic production. Aesthetic continuity in Northwest Coast artistic traditions is central in both texts. Holm's and Jonaitis's foundational research on the development and initial articulation of Northwest Coast First Nations aesthetics helps reveal the manner in which formline design has circulated in art historical discourse as a signifier of the Northwest Coast aesthetic. While Jonaitis and Holm provide the foundations for a comprehensive understanding of the historical development of the aesthetic principles of the Northwest Coast First Nations, a great deal more analysis is necessary to understand how historical practices and traditions inform the work of contemporary artists and the resulting reception by the larger public, Native or non-Native, artistic or not. Additional points of view provide critical perspective, rigorously challenging standards by which art of the Northwest Coast First Nations is

⁶ Aldona Jonaitis, *Art of the Northwest Coast* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 27.

⁷ Bill Holm, *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form*, 92.

defined, interpreted, valued, and judged. Scholars such as Charlotte Townsend-Gault fill voids in scholarship by exploring how artistic and cultural production is being used by First Nations as “a form of resistance, as a counter hegemonic strategy and as a way to reshape their own social world.”⁸

As it is clear that one single approach to research having to do with First Nations culture is not adequate, my research has explored a number of important avenues of scholarship. In order to understand the complexity and dynamics of this area of study, it is essential that I am open to the crossing of the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines as well as the consideration of different perspectives and sources of knowledge. This opens the door for new questions, allowing for a deeper analysis of Native issues, the inclusion of First Nations perspectives, and the valuing of Aboriginal knowledge and oral traditions. When considering the practice of Assu and Hunt, and the work of Northwest Coast Native artists in general, the consideration of a plurality of perspectives is essential. An integral method to my research was to interview Sonny Assu and Shawn Hunt. Each artists’ popularity has gained momentum in recent years, reflected in their inclusion in such group exhibitions as *Beat Nation* (2012 Vancouver Art Gallery), *Continuum: Vision and Creativity on the Northwest Coast* (2009/2010 Bill Reid Gallery), and *Challenging Traditions: Contemporary First Nations Art of the Northwest Coast* (2009 McMichael Canadian Art Gallery), and the recent awarding of the 2011 BC Creative Achievement Award for First Nations Art to both artists. However, little scholarly attention has been paid to the work of the individual artists, either in relation to

⁸ Charlotte Townsend-Gault, “Art, Argument and Anger on the Northwest Coast,” Jeremy MacClancy, ed., *Contesting Art: Art, Politics, and Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 1997): 151.

one another or to the work of their predecessors. Access to these artists contributes a new dimension to my explorations, including, but not limited to, reflections on the reception of their work by art institutions and the pressure to adhere to particular standards of First Nations cultural aesthetics such as formline design. Additionally, as a non-Native I must address my limitations in approaching research about Native cultural and artistic practices. My interest in and understanding of First Nations artistic production in British Columbia is something I recognize to be separate from the historic experience and understanding of many Native people. Despite the efforts of non-Native researchers, such as myself, who use methods that try to capture the voice and perspectives of First Nations peoples, the research is still from the perspective of western mainstream society.⁹ Additionally, there are many avenues of exploration in which I am limited most especially when it comes to access to ceremonial practices or the knowledge that comes from familial relationships and traditions passed down through generations. In order not to perpetuate an imbalance of power, one that has in the past led to negative, insensitive, or inaccurate portrayals of Native peoples, I must be aware of my own biases and assumptions. A respectful relationship between myself and the First Nations artists involved in my research was essential. By involving both Assu and Hunt, I offer the artists an opportunity to have a voice in the research process, a right often denied to

⁹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London; New York: Zed Books, 1999). In Linda Tuhiwai Smith's text, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, she writes of Indigenous knowledge and representation. Smith addresses scholars researching and writing through "imperial eyes". Smith explains that for Indigenous people who have experienced unrelenting research of an exploitive nature, Western research brings to bear a cultural orientation, a set of values, a different conceptualization of such things as time, space, and subjectivity, structures of power, and so on. Instead she offers guidance to those who aspire for a respectful, equitable relationship with Aboriginal people in the completion of ethical research.

Native people in the writing and representation of their history by non-Native scholars. While in many ways I identify separately from the lived realities of B.C.'s First Nations, a "partial perspective"¹⁰ allows me to find commonalities that contribute to an understanding of the art and issues I approach, while an inclusion of the voices of the artists ensures I do so in a thorough, respectful, and mindful way. Both Assu and Hunt are adamant that their art reach and speak to audiences beyond a local or culturally specific context. Many themes and concepts arising out of each artist's work resonate cross-culturally with universal implications and it is with this in mind that I engage the work of these artists.

As so much of my research revolves around a visual handling of shared aesthetic principles, visual analysis of each artist's work was essential. Information and context gathered from Assu and Hunt as well as other contemporary First Nations artists and scholars also contributes to my understanding of the work at hand. While researching contemporary practices, consideration was also given to historical and cosmological contexts so as to allow for a better opportunity to juxtapose the work of these two contemporary artists with those artists that 'paved the way' for this younger generation, such as Robert Davidson and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun. Both of these artists have contributed to the increase in production of and global interest in Northwest Coast First Nations art in recent years, their practices of these established artists forming the

¹⁰ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," Jaggar, Alison M, ed. *Just Methods: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Reader* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008). In her article, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", Donna Haraway asserts that all knowledge is partial embodied knowledge, produced by particular groups and persons for particular purposes within particular contexts. An acknowledgment of our situatedness leads to a plurality of perspectives and greater tolerance of others.

foundations from which Assu and Hunt explore the complex intersections of tradition and contemporaneity.¹¹ Beyond the insights of the artists and their contemporaries, research by numerous scholars in the field of First Nations art was sought as their contributions help situate my thesis within the social and historical context of Canada's Northwest Coast.

¹¹ Karen Duffek, "'Authenticity' and the Contemporary Northwest Coast Indian Art Market," *BC Studies* 57 (Spring) 1983, accessed August 2, 2011, <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/bcstudies/article/viewArticle/1152>. In her essay "'Authenticity' and the Contemporary Northwest Coast Indian Art Market", Karen Duffek notes the increase of interest in Northwest Coast Aboriginal art by a non-Native public since the "revival" of the 1960s. Duffek asserts that this created a climate wherein art production increased exponentially (and was sold internationally) to meet the demand of buyers.

CHAPTER 1

Formline Design

In *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form*, Bill Holm describes the formline aesthetic as a highly developed system for the organization of space and form. Holm provides the tools necessary to extrapolate the various, repeated elements of formline design and by doing so, understand these conventions to be part of a larger visual language shared amongst First Nations communities of the Northwest Coast. According to Holm, Native artists of this region retained the essential character of the art style even as materials and interests progressed over time; artists successfully transferred principles of design from old media to new.¹²¹³ Holm writes, “Almost every specimen is unique, further attesting to the virtuosity of native artists, who were able to achieve originality within the framework of rigidly observed rules.”¹⁴ Further, he explains, the artist must be aware of the entire space they work within and the effect of each element introduced into that space.¹⁵ Holm begins by identifying the primary formline (Figure 1), a continuous outline that swells and constricts as it delineates design units. The primary formline, the author writes, is the single most characteristic quality of art by Northwest Coast First Nations artists.¹⁶ The exact structure and application of the primary formline however, varies from the rigid, almost square or rectangular shapes of the northern communities to the free-flowing style of the southern communities. The primary formline changes

¹² Holm, *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form*, 19.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 67.

¹⁶ Ibid.

constantly, in both thickness and direction, in any given design. Despite this continuous movement, however, the line always appears taut. Artist Bill Reid referred to this quality as “restrained tension”, which could not be achieved without a full understanding of the aesthetic.¹⁷ In fact, Reid believed that the depiction of stress or tension was the essential device from which the principles of formline design emerge.¹⁸ According to Reid and Holm, all elements must remain in tension to form a cohesive image, as though, if one were to release the tension, the design would collapse. Holm goes on to explain that within the primary formline, additional design units are contained. He lists the ovoid (Figure 2) and U-form (Figure 3) as the two most common. These interior design elements are delineated by secondary formlines. Ovoids, regarded as essential building blocks of the formline aesthetic, often help determine the shape of the primary formline and are regularly used to signify main body, head or eye shapes when used in a representational context. The shape of the ovoid resembles a distorted oval, or in Reid’s words, a “cross-section of a bean”. The top edge of the ovoid stretches upwards as though pushed from inner pressure while the lower edge mirrors the movement and bulges inwards slightly. The shape of the ovoid can be manipulated to fit a given space. And yet, whether elongated, shortened or otherwise manipulated, an “elastic tension”¹⁹ contained within the shape of the ovoid, remains constant. There is a feeling that if the pressure were to be released the lines of the ovoid would spring outwards. The second shape to be identified by Holm as one of the most common components of the formline is the U-form. Depicted precisely as it sounds in the shape of the letter ‘u’, the U-form can be

¹⁷ William Reid and Robert Bringhurst, *Solitary Raven: The Essential Writings of Bill Reid* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009), 175.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

inverted, rotated, widened, or otherwise modified in order to represent various features such as cheeks, lips, fins, feathers, and so on. Further design elements, known as tertiary forms, are found between primary and secondary formlines and assume many forms, most common of which are solid and split U-forms. Various other components further contribute to the flow and movement of the formline, connecting design elements and ensuring a harmonious overall design. Colours used traditionally included black, red, and blue-green. Black is believed to be the predominant colour for the primary formline, while the secondary formline is traditionally coloured red. On occasion these two colours will be inverted, with the primary formline coloured red while the secondary formline will be black. Blue-green colours are generally found in the tertiary elements of the design. The formlines, ovoids, U-forms, and the variations of these components and others, facilitate the specific design concept of the artist. When carefully assembled, even the negative space found between the various shapes and lines of the aesthetic become an essential part of the overall design. Holm writes, “The total effect of the system was to produce a strong, yet sensitive, division of the given shape by means of an interlocking formline pattern of shapes related in form, colour, and scale.”²⁰ Various techniques and choices by artists belie the notion that the elements of formline are rigid and limiting. As Bill Reid wrote, “The rules, once you understand them are pretty easily discernible and can be followed. What happens after that depends on the personality of the artist – the talent and genius...”²¹

²⁰ Holm, *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form*, 92.

²¹ Reid & Bringhurst, *Solitary Raven: The Essential Writings of Bill Reid*, 115.

Introducing Sonny Assu and Shawn Hunt

The artistic practices of Sonny Assu and Shawn Hunt demonstrate a thorough knowledge of Northwest Coast traditions and shared aesthetic practices, demonstrated most clearly in each artist's use and manipulation of formline design. Curator Ian M. Thom writes that a central question drives the work of many contemporary First Nations artists: "Does the contemporary artist try to adhere to the past as closely as possible? Or should he or she change tradition, adapt it or even deny it?"²² Thom's query holds great resonance. Assu and Hunt both wrestle with this question in their artistic practice.

Sonny Assu was born in 1975 in Richmond, B.C. Assu is of Kwakwaka'wakw descent of the Weka'yi First Nation (Cape Mudge, B.C.) on his mother's side. The artist did not learn of his Native heritage until the age of eight. Following a school lesson on the Kwakiutl people (an older term for the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation) he told his mother of his interest in the art of the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations and was only then informed of his Native heritage – "Well, that is who you are," his mother is said to have replied.²³ Assu grew up in North Delta and was interested in art as a child, holding a deep desire to learn more about his Native heritage and related art practices. Upon entering the Kwantlen University College art program in 1997 where he concentrated on figurative painting, Assu describes an encounter with an art teacher who encouraged him to pursue the traditional aspects of his work. The teacher initially questioned why Assu was using an important Northwest Coast First Nations symbol (the Raven) when he was not First Nations. After explaining that in fact he was of Kwakwaka'wakw descent, the professor

²² Ian M. Thom and McMichael Gallery, *Challenging Traditions: Contemporary First Nations Art of the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009), 6.

²³ "Sonny Assu," Beat Nation, accessed March 3, 2011, <http://www.beatnation.org/sonny-assu.html>.

sat down with Assu and discussed the art of the Northwest Coast First Nations, encouraging Assu to pursue these practices in his own work and to think about applying formline design. While he was eager to work with (and learn more about) the aesthetic practices of the Northwest Coast First Nations, Assu's desire to push boundaries and challenge conventions is evident even in this early stage of his career. After receiving his diploma from Kwantlen, Assu entered the painting department at, what was then, Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in 1999, graduating in 2002. Later transferring to the printmaking program, Assu explored his First Nations heritage, which up until that point had not been a major focus of his artistic practice. The Aboriginal Program run by Brenda Crabtree allowed Assu to access Aboriginal content curriculum as well as Aboriginal art history and studio classes, which included the chance to work with Master First Nations carvers. Assu explains how this program helped him explore his culture:

I felt my experience at Emily Carr was really beneficial... I was able to connect with our culture because I've always been a sort of outsider. I grew up in the city. I didn't grow up on a reserve. I was always kind of knowing the culture but never immersed in it. So coming in to Emily Carr really helped me develop my skills, not only as an artist but as an Aboriginal person and an Aboriginal person who's an artist.²⁴

As Assu came to explore his interests and range as an artist, an important relationship developed in his work between the traditions of his ancestors and the modern imagery surrounding him on a daily basis. The various, often humorous, ways Assu adopts and manipulates recognizable symbols of popular culture has come to be identified with his practice. In *The Breakfast Series* (2006) (Figure 4), Assu merges Northwest Coast aesthetics with the iconography of popular culture. Subtly commenting on our consumption driven lives, Assu humorously transforms and repurposes

²⁴ Ibid.

recognizable and beloved children's cereal brands. Kellogg's Frosted Flakes, for example, have become Kwakwaka'wakw Treaty Flakes (Figure 5). Kellogg's iconic image of Tony the Tiger is present on the front of the box but now bears the markings of formline design. Upon closer inspection, additional clever details become apparent. The side of the box now offers information on the history of land treaties across Canada. Displaying this information in the same format as nutritional panels traditionally found on food products, Assu satirically comments on the role marketing plays in the dissemination of information. By doing so, the artist inevitably causes us to question our acceptance of information within this format as "truth", when in reality it is a product of a specific brand and marketing campaign. Assu too presents us with a particular "brand", that of the Northwest Coast First Nations. Formline design and its inherent imagery becomes a signifier of this "brand", an immediate, visual marker of Aboriginal artistic production from this region. However, despite the popularity of the "brand" he promotes, Assu is not selling a fixed product, nor a rulebook of unchanging aesthetics. Instead the artist repurposes the "brand" of the Northwest Coast First Nations as a tool to respond and draw attention to important contemporary issues. Rather than sell us "truth", Assu is offering information. Member Nations are listed on the side panel, as are the hectares of land subject to treaties. The "GOVERNMENT" is listed as composing 100% of the included ingredients with the text "DOES NOT CONTAIN A GOVERNMENT REFERENDUM" written below, suggesting the Canadian government's total inequitable control of land and treaties.

Assu uses a number of tactics, including humor and recognizable symbols of popular culture, to draw viewers into a conversation regarding important Aboriginal

concerns, making us active participants in the artistic experience. In the *Trickster Shift: Humor and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (1999), Allan J. Ryan highlights the use of humor and play in the work of contemporary First Nations artists as a strategy to shift viewer perspectives and suggest alternate viewpoints.²⁵ Rather than allow issues such as land treaties to be relegated to the past, Assu firmly contextualizes this issue in the present. In doing so, he asks us to question what we know of contemporary Aboriginal issues, the extent to which we identify with and consume these symbols and products, and the role and effect marketing has in our daily lives. Affiliation with particular brands as well as our related expectations of these brands also furthers a discussion regarding conformity through consumerism. We cannot help but consider the strategic ways such items have been marketed and what particular brand loyalties might suggest about how we define ourselves as individuals. In this context, formline design as a “brand” speaks to a larger conversation about the identity of First Nations people on the Northwest Coast. Artists use these design principles to construct and communicate individual and collective identity. While Assu did not consider Northwest Coast First Nations art as a brand while making this series of work, he recognizes a connection exists:

A lot of Aboriginal artists try and call on the imagery, they try and own that brand. And that's where a lot of people [...] doing “traditional work”, are trying to own that brand – that tradition. Some artists are trying to make up some kind of way that you can identify yourself as an Aboriginal artist by branding your work “authentic” Aboriginal work.²⁶

By merging the aesthetics of the Northwest Coast First Nations with items of popular culture, Assu establishes a discourse that challenges the social and historical values

²⁵ Allan J. Ryan, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 4.

²⁶ Personal interview conducted with Sonny Assu, August 26th, 2011.

accepted and perpetuated on a daily basis. Further, the artist provides an accessible platform upon which he might educate viewers (and/or encourage viewers to educate themselves) about First Nations culture and contemporary issues. The artist articulates this thought: “That is where I feel my work is successful; it’s not only aesthetically pleasing, but it challenges the viewer to educate themselves because they might not know the true history of the treatment of the First Peoples of North America.”²⁷

A mastering of the “techniques of the traditional” was necessary before Assu felt comfortable in asserting his own personality and style.²⁸ Thom writes that it is the creative tension between elements of the traditional and those of the contemporary that is the hallmark of Assu’s career so far.²⁹ “I’m a contemporary artist,” Assu states, “My art is rooted in tradition, but it is not traditional.”³⁰ Challenging traditions and playing with the aesthetics associated with Northwest Coast Native artistic production is Assu’s way of encouraging a discussion that questions perceived notions about Aboriginal art, undermines stereotypes, and claims a place for First Nations art and artists in the contemporary art world. The artist explains, “I’m always going to be challenging what is considered traditional. I always find that I’m creating new ways to talk about art and our culture. Essentially, I am creating new traditions.”³¹

²⁷ “Sonny Assu - Laich-kwil-tach (Kwakwaka’wakw),” Phone Interview conducted by Crystal Baxley, *Contemporary North American Indigenous Artists*, accessed August 22nd, 2011, <http://contemporarynativeartists.tumblr.com/post/6030123932/sonny-assu-laich-kwil-tach-kwakwakawakw>.

²⁸ Thom, *Challenging Traditions*, 14.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 15.

³¹ Personal interview conducted with Sonny Assu, August 26th, 2011.

Shawn Hunt was born in 1975 in Vancouver to a family of Heiltsuk descent on his father's side from the Bella Bella region. Hunt was exposed to the art of the Northwest Coast First Nations at an early age by his father, J. Bradley Hunt, an art teacher and important carver. He describes making art "from the time I could hold a pencil."³² While Hunt did not initially plan on being an artist, his creative drive was clear throughout grade school where he describes little regard for note-taking: "All I did was draw."³³ Due to what he describes as a lack of art being made by Heiltsuk artists (his father being an exception) while he was growing up, Hunt looked to the art of the Haida and Tsimshian people for a better understanding of the artistic practices of the Northwest Coast First Nations. Following an unsuccessful attempt at admittance to the Studio Arts Program at Capilano University, Hunt worked on a commission with his father that included the carving of a large-scale totem pole. This project provided Hunt with the technical skills, focus, and material necessary for a second successful application to Capilano. After completing his diploma, Hunt entered the Fine Arts Program at the University of British Columbia. While Hunt struggled with the more conceptually-based program at UBC, he recognizes that his experience at the University was incredibly influential. The Fine Arts Program taught him not only to conceptualize and speak about his practice, but also offered "little intricacies"³⁴ (such as art history classes for example) that helped him focus his work, reassert himself as a contemporary Native artist and in turn, make his art more powerful and effective.

³² Personal interview conducted with Shawn Hunt, October 12th, 2011.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

After graduating from UBC, Hunt describes feeling unsure of what to do next. With no job, his father suggested he begin carving jewelry, a popular and potentially lucrative creative avenue for Northwest Coast Native artists. While not initially taken with the medium, Hunt eventually became quite adept in his exploration of jewelry, due in large part to the persistence and encouragement of his father. Hunt distinguished himself from other Native artists making jewelry at the time, who he felt looked to this artistic medium as a moneymaking strategy to fund larger projects. By contrast, Hunt describes wanting to “redefine jewelry.”³⁵ His hope was that the medium be held in the same regard as “higher art forms” such as masks.³⁶ In a piece of jewelry entitled, *I’m Selling My Ovoids* (2008) (Figure 6), Hunt’s desire to reinvent the medium is clear. Depicting Raven attempting to sell his ovoids after realizing their value, the silver bracelet evokes a number of issues central to the discourse surrounding contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations art. Raven is the predominant figure seen on the bracelet depicted with a strong, straight, tapering beak that holds a number of ovoids. The bird is bracketed on one side by two bidders, human-like figures that resemble the flat, shield-like shape of coppers (symbols of status and wealth among Northwest Coast Native communities), and on the other side, a frog. The figure of Raven is of central importance in Northwest Coast First Nations cosmology. Tales of Raven vary from one cultural group to the next. To the Heiltsuk for instance, he is regarded as noble and serious. The Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian, and Kwakwaka’wakw in contrast, regard him as a more contradictory figure: a greedy trickster and impulsive practical joker, but also an

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

intelligent cultural hero and chief spirit.³⁷ Raven is also responsible for numerous acts of creation and in fact is credited with discovering humankind and all other creatures. In the scene set by Hunt, Raven recognizes he can profit from the popularity of Northwest Coast designs; formline design has value, not only as a symbol of the endurance and creativity of the Northwest Coast First Nations, but also as a commodity that can be bought and sold. While humor is apparent in the trickster-like, mischievous actions of Raven, we must also consider the darker implications of the story. Here is a resonant and powerful figure among coastal First Nations communities, seemingly exploiting its peoples' cultural traditions for profit. We naturally come to wonder whether there is harm in profiting from the popularity of the designs and aesthetics associated with Northwest Coast Aboriginal artistic production. Raven is a trickster after all, known for actions that repeatedly get him into trouble. Raven's choice to sell his ovoids could also suggest the exploitation of Northwest Coast Aboriginal people. But if this is the case, it does not appear to be an external non-Native force that sets these events into motion, but a figure from within the community, Raven, who recognizes the opportunity to profit. Hunt does not cast Raven in the role of villain in any clear way however, and instead leaves analysis dependant on individual interpretation.

Following several years devoted to jewelry making, Hunt was commissioned to complete the entrance and fireplace of a private home. Devoting himself to woodwork and carving in completion of the project caused the artist to leave jewelry behind and work primarily in wood for a number of years. While Hunt had always admired painting, he did not initially think the medium was for him. But as the artist explains, he was

³⁷ Cheryl Shearar, *Understanding Northwest Coast Art: A Guide to Crests, Beings and Symbols* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000), 88.

always looking for a new challenge and due in large part to his own uncertainty painting presented a new challenging yet natural step in his progression as an artist.³⁸ While occasionally drawn back into carving, Hunt's current artistic practice revolves around paint. In *Three Watchmen* (2009) (Figure 7) the artist once again employs Raven as a maker of mischief. Raven is shown stealing a valuable piece of gold jewelry but is caught on camera by three Watchmen. Like Raven, the Watchmen are recurrent figures in Northwest Coast First Nations cosmology. Generally associated with northern cultural groups, the Watchmen are often found on the top of totem poles. From atop their perch the Watchmen look in several directions as human guardian figures responsible for protecting property, or in some cases entire villages or regions.³⁹ In Hunt's painting, the watchmen are unseen, appearing in camera form alone. And yet, they are vigilant, protecting cultural property as they catch Raven in the act of thieving. In the artist's clever take on the scene however, the Watchmen are less reminiscent of the figures one traditionally associates with Haida totem poles, and instead more readily call to mind the paparazzi of today who so regularly catch unsuspecting celebrities in compromising positions. The omnipresent role of technology and resulting lack of privacy in our daily lives is at the core of the scene set by Hunt. The artist subverts our expectations and remixes cultural categories, weaving themes and symbols of First Nations cosmology with the contemporary realities of western mainstream society.

While the dynamics of culture remain at the core of his practice, Hunt describes his art as "a realization of who I am."⁴⁰ For the artist, an expression of his identity and

³⁸ Personal interview conducted with Shawn Hunt, October 12th, 2011.

³⁹ Ibid., 112.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

personality contributes to a larger discourse about First Nations cultural issues and aesthetic practices. Hunt does not view what he does as a radical challenge to traditional aesthetics. Instead, he believes that by subverting expectations and destabilizing exclusive cultural categories, he is in fact reinventing tradition, thereby facilitating an important dialogue regarding how the viewer perceives contemporary First Nations art.⁴¹ Hunt introduces contemporary narratives and visual language into an already established framework of aesthetics, and in doing so, demonstrates the merging of tradition and innovation at the core of so many works of contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations art. In the artist's own words: "If I just talk about old myths, I am partially responsible for killing culture. New iconography is about not just Native issues but human issues; it is helping to propel the culture forward."⁴²

History of Northwest Coast First Nations Art

To understand the present, one must consider the past; this philosophy rings especially true in the work of contemporary First Nations artists. A careful examination of Aboriginal history along the Northwest Coast is necessary in order to recognize how historical events and cultural traditions inform the practice of contemporary Native artists. The Northwest Coast is comprised of a thin strip of land roughly 2400 kilometers long, extending from the Copper River in southern Alaska down to the Pacific Coast of British Columbia and then south to the Oregon-California border. My focus settles on the Northwest Coast of British Columbia, which spans the southern border with Oregon to the province's northern border and includes over 40,000 islands of various sizes.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Thom and McMichael Gallery, *Challenging Traditions*, 66.

Anthropologists have determined that humans first settled on the Northwest Coast some ten to twelve thousand years ago, and by the time first European contact was made during the late eighteenth century, the coastal area was one of the most densely populated in the world. This would dramatically change following the arrival of Europeans. The introduction of disease ravaged coastal First Nations communities, decimating populations, and along with assimilation and increasing dependence of First Nations peoples on a wage economy, what is frequently characterized by scholars as a progressive breakdown of cultural traditions and material production occurred.⁴³ By the nineteenth century, the consensus among missionaries and ethnographers alike was that First Nations cultures were disappearing. The term “salvage paradigm” describes the historically inaccurate, general assumption that First Nations people were a dying culture and the collection of what remained of these fragmenting Native communities was an urgent task. Ethnographers such as Franz Boas came to the Northwest Coast of B.C. to record and collect items of First Nations material culture so they could be preserved “in a large and accessible museum” before they were “lost to us”.⁴⁴ According to James Clifford, near the end of the “collection period” around the 1920s, awareness of “primitive art” was quite prevalent among non-Native communities and was exhibited in art galleries.⁴⁵ Appreciation by the art community led many ethnographers including Boas, to examine collections in more detail. Aldona Jonaitis writes that the purpose of Boas’s analysis was in part “to stress the roles that culture, history, and the artist’s

⁴³ Lisa P. Seip, “Transformations of Meaning,” *World of Archeology* 31.2 (1999): 281.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 281. Boas 1897c.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 282.

psychology and creative processes play in the development of style.”⁴⁶ Ironically, while interest in cultural material produced by First Nations communities increased, so did the repression of the ceremonies, traditions, knowledge, and resources required to sustain a viable and developing artistic production. Government laws culminated in 1876 with the passing of the Indian Act in Canada, making traditional First Nations rituals illegal. A later amendment made Potlatches⁴⁷ illegal in 1884. Consequently, while the collection of First Nations artistic material increased, production decreased. Much of the knowledge, resources, and skills associated with First Nations material production were lost. In “The Revival of Northwest Coast Indian Art”, Karen Duffek explains,

By the mid-twentieth century, few artists who had been trained in the traditional apprenticeship system remained on the coast, and although some production of traditional art continued through the early decades of the twentieth century, namely among the Kwakwaka’wakw, the demise of a culture based on deep-rooted traditions appeared inevitable.⁴⁸

Marked by the amendment of the Indian Act in 1951, which no longer made Potlatches and other ceremonial practices illegal, and followed by renewed interest in “traditional” forms of art, the second half of the twentieth century is seen as the revival of artistic production among Northwest Coast First Nations communities. Duffek notes that from 1960 until the 1980s, political activity by First Nations peoples led to a reassertion of cultural and artistic identity and “a realization of the value of heritage and tradition for

⁴⁶ Jonaitis, Aldona, “Introduction,” *A Wealth of Thought: Franz Boas on Native American Art*, Aldona Jonaitis, ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press; Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyr, 1995), 4.

⁴⁷ Aldona Jonaitis, *Art of the Northwest Coast* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006). The potlatch is an event historically common to most Northwest Coast First Nations groups. Potlatch ceremonies were social occasions that validated status, rank, and established claims to names and privileges. Potlatches were also held to mark special events such as the birth of a child, a marriage, or so on.

⁴⁸ Karen Duffek, “The Revival of Northwest Coast Indian Art,” *Vancouver: Art and Artists 1931 – 1983* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983), 312.

native people.”⁴⁹ A resurgence in artistic production included traditional art made for ceremonies and potlatches, the carving of architectural forms and masks, as well as the introduction of new media such as printmaking. By the 1970s the Northwest Coast art market had developed into a profitable industry. In 1983, Duffek observed that the “non-Indian public has almost totally replaced native society as the primary consumer of the art.”⁵⁰

Haida artist Bill Reid is in large part credited with the “rebirth” of the creation of and interest in artistic production among First Nations communities of the Northwest Coast. Aldona Jonaitis writes that in addition to the work of Bill Holm, historians often credit Reid with “initiating what is commonly called the ‘Northwest Coast renaissance’, during which northern artists turned away from the poorly executed works of their twentieth century predecessors and drew inspiration from nineteenth century masterpieces.”⁵¹ Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, among others, spoke of Reid tending to and reviving a flame that was close to dying.⁵² Born in 1920 to a mother of Haida heritage and a father of European descent, Reid learned of his Native ancestry from his maternal grandfather. Upon his death in 1998, Reid, described as an “acclaimed Haida master goldsmith, carver, sculptor, writer and spokesman...” was lauded as one of the single most influential and successful First Nations artists on the Northwest Coast.⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Karen Duffek, “‘Authenticity’ and the Contemporary Northwest Coast Indian Art Market,” *BC Studies* 57 (Spring, 1983), accessed August 2, 2011, <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/bcstudies/article/viewArticle/1152>.

⁵¹ Jonaitis, *Art of the Northwest Coast*, 256.

⁵² Reid, *Bill Reid: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1974) 2.

⁵³ “Bill Reid,” *Bill Reid Foundation*, accessed July 15th, 2011, http://www.billreidfoundation.org/bill_reid.htm.

While contemporary Western notions of art often suggest a privileging of the new, innovative, and avant-garde, Reid on the contrary, looked to the past. Seeking all the information and material he could about the historical traditions of the Haida people as a source of artistic inspiration, Reid referred to his process as “walking forward into the past.”⁵⁴ A trip to Haida Gwaii⁵⁵ in 1954 is said to have sparked Reid’s interest in and passion for Haida art.⁵⁶ It was there that he saw a pair of bracelets carved by Haida artist Charles Edenshaw (1839 – 1920) and “life was not the same after that.”⁵⁷ Reid was not alone in his fascination and admiration for his great-great-uncle’s work. Edenshaw is hailed as one Canada’s greatest carvers and is repeatedly drawn upon as the quintessential example of the “style” of the Northwest Coast First Nations. Boas repeatedly referred to Edenshaw by name in his text, *Primitive Art* (1927), and described the Haida Master as “one of the best artists of the cultural region.”⁵⁸ Holm believed Edenshaw conformed entirely to the system of precepts outlined in *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form*. In reference to Edenshaw, Holm writes, “It seems that every Haida artist of any consequence was an innovator, and each developed his own distinctive handling of form and space within the prescribed system.”⁵⁹ Jonaitis likewise writes that the work of artists such as Edenshaw is considered the “epitome of aesthetic

⁵⁴ “Permanent Exhibition,” *Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Coast Art*, accessed March 3rd, 2011, <http://www.billreidgallery.ca/Exhibition/PermanentExhibition.php>.

⁵⁵ Haida Gwaii is situated north of Vancouver and west of Prince Rupert off the coast of British Columbia. In December 2009 the B.C. government officially changed the name of the islands from the Queen Charlotte Islands to Haida Gwaii as part of a historic reconciliation agreement between the province and the Haida Nation.

⁵⁶ “Bill Reid,” *Bill Reid Foundation*.

⁵⁷ “Who Was Bill Reid,” *The Raven’s Call*, accessed February 12th, 2011, http://theravenscall.ca/en/who/life_story/young_man/2.

⁵⁸ Franz Boas, *Primitive Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 275.

⁵⁹ Holm, *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form*, 24.

achievement of the entire region.”⁶⁰ The idealizing of a highly formalized set of rules in the application of the formline aesthetic among northern Native communities such as the Haida, was for many collectors, admirers and scholars, reflective of “refinement, elegance, and exquisite craftsmanship”.⁶¹ The result was (and continues to be) high praise for these Master artists. Reid believed Edenshaw provided people of his generation (i.e. those First Nations artists without direct experiential access to art being produced by the Haida people) with an opportunity to access the creativity inherent in ancestral traditions.⁶² Likewise, Reid hoped he too could act as a bridge between the past and the present, offering visual evidence of the ongoing continuity and existence of what he considered to be vital cultural practices. Speaking of his wish for the future, Reid writes, “I hope that somewhere some young people are actually growing up with enough authentic knowledge of their ancestry to have pride in the true accomplishments of their forebears... I hope that pride in the deeds of their ancestors is creating a desire to emulate them in new and useful ways [...]”⁶³

Reid would gradually explore his Haida cultural heritage, at first pairing what he knew of jewelry making with what he learned of Haida artistic traditions, later branching off into other media. Michael Ames writes that when Reid embarked on this exploration into his cultural heritage, “knowledge of the highly conventionalized system of ‘rules’ that characterize Northwest Coast two-dimensional design had been lost.”⁶⁴ Reid shared this sentiment stating, “Haida culture has been wrecked. Their language is gone. Their

⁶⁰ Jonaitis, *Art of the Northwest Coast*, 168.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² “Bill Reid,” *Bill Reid Foundation*.

⁶³ Reid and Bringham, *Solitary Raven: The Essential Writings of Bill Reid*, 143.

⁶⁴ Karen Duffek, *Bill Reid: Beyond the Essential Form* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia and University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, 1986), 6.

mythology is gone. The genealogies of the big families are lost. If they're going to find their way back to the world of cultured men, then they have to begin at the beginning.”⁶⁵ With a lack of contemporary artistic production to draw upon as a source of knowledge and learning, Reid sought out and studied early ethnographic research and museum collections, working to master the visual forms of the past. Jonaitis writes, “Through careful study of objects in museums and in-depth analysis of the elements of design and how they fit together, Bill Reid [...] led the way for the return to the nineteenth century canon and the creation of contemporary artworks of considerable aesthetic merit.”⁶⁶ Beyond all else, Reid believed that a mastering of the elements of formline design was necessary in order to produce “fine art” or “good pieces”, something he saw in opposition to objects made for the tourist trade.⁶⁷ As Reid explained, “It is the direction of the line, the expression of the curve, the purpose of the brush stroke that moves or excites us, but without that old casual mastery of technique, the message is muddled and obscure, or so poor in the shades of meaning that constitute human communication, that it becomes meaningless, or even worse, boring.”⁶⁸ For Reid, formline design was the single most characteristic and important quality of art being produced by First Nations artists of the Northwest Coast – that which made the work unique, and the inherent skills invaluable. Reid further elaborated, “The formline is the basis of all the art. It is the essential element

⁶⁵ Richard Wright, “The Spirit of Haida Gwaii: La renaissance de l'art haïda,” *Enroute* (March, 1991): 90.

⁶⁶ Jonaitis, *Art of the Northwest Coast*, 255.

⁶⁷ Bill Holm, William Reid, and Rice University, *Indian Art of the Northwest Coast: A Dialogue on Craftsmanship and Aesthetics* (Houston: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1975), 35.

⁶⁸ Duffek, *Bill Reid: Beyond the Essential Form*, 13.

that sets the art from the north coast apart from any art in the world. If you don't conform to it you're doing something else."⁶⁹

While Reid's priorities clearly lay in exploring and mastering the historically practiced aesthetics of the Haida people, due to his focus on and adherence to the tenets of formline design, innovation is a largely overlooked aspect of his practice. Tradition and innovation are often regarded as isolated components, one belonging to the past and the other to the present or future. In actuality, the art of First Nations peoples of the Northwest Coast incorporates both tenets as expressions of cultural continuity. In contrast to the perception that Native art of this region is represented by a singular, shared, unchanging aesthetic, artists of the Northwest Coast have historically employed formline design in a variety of novel ways, of which Reid was keenly aware. In conversations discussing a number of historical Northwest Coast Native objects, Holm and Reid elaborate upon these themes. The two men discuss a pipe that consists of a bird with a hooked beak (Figure 8). A human-like creature emerges from the chest and belly of the bird. As Holm and Reid detail the intricacies of the object, the artist's ability to express individuality while remaining faithful to the aesthetic "rules" of the Northwest Coast becomes apparent. Despite the small size of the object, Reid highlights the power conveyed by the artist in his/her use of the formline aesthetic. Referring to this "tremendous, compressed power" and "tension"⁷⁰, Reid calls to mind Holm's discussion in *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form* of the unique ability of Northwest Coast Native artists to convey constant tension through the use of the various principles

⁶⁹ Duffek, "'Authenticity' and the Contemporary Northwest Coast Indian Art Market," 106.

⁷⁰ Holm and Reid, *Indian Art of the Northwest Coast: A Dialogue on Craftsmanship and Aesthetics*, 35.

of formline design. Reid states, “The fact is, this is a pipe, not an important ceremonial or religious object, yet it has its own intrinsic importance, its own being.”⁷¹ Both Holm and Reid admire the artist’s “courage” to push the boundaries of an application of the aesthetic principles of the Northwest Coast aesthetic. Holm speaks of his admiration for the artist: “What constantly amazes me about these pieces is the balance between the courage to go beyond logic and, at the same time, to hang in there with tradition [...] The detail of this wing follows a set of clear rules: it doesn’t violate one. Yet it’s unique, all part of this courageous act on the artist’s part.”⁷²

Western notions of art tend to view individual expression freed from cultural “inhibitions” in opposition to art of and for the community, which is regarded as collective in form and function. Rather than view these two artistic concepts as oppositional, Reid moved between the two, allowing cultural values and traditional aesthetics to co-exist in a work of art with an assertion of his individual goals. The need to recognize the individual in the production of Northwest Coast art was recognized by Hermann Haerberlin in 1918. One of Boas’s Anthropology graduate students, Haerberlin wrote, “We tend too much towards conceiving the art of a primitive people as a unit instead of considering the primitive artist as an individual. It is necessary to study how the individual artist solves problems of form relations [...] in order to understand what is typical of an art style.”⁷³ Duffek speaks of a common misconception regarding artistic production by First Nations communities of the Northwest Coast: “It may appear that the rules and conventions of northern Northwest Coast art are so strict as to stifle individual

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid, 37.

⁷³ Hermann Haerberlin, “Principles of Esthetic Form in the Art of the North Pacific Coast: A Preliminary Sketch,” *American Anthropologist* 20 (1918): 263.

expression. In truth, the constraints are characterized by great variability, and compel rather than restrict personal creativity.”⁷⁴ As Duffek further explains however, the extent to which an artist might “escape” the control of these design elements and their application is limited.⁷⁵ If adherence to the essential formlines and components is not met, according to Duffek, the structure and logic behind the artistic expression collapses.⁷⁶ This was an idea Reid agreed with and it would guide his exploration into the artistic traditions of his people as he experimented and mastered the elements of formline design. Reid looked to balance the constraints of a highly structured framework of tradition with the desire to stretch conventions to new limits. In his view, “In Northwest Coast art, perhaps more than in any other art, there’s an impulse to push things as far as possible.”⁷⁷

Reid saw himself as contributing to a continuation of cultural practices that had always made room for creativity. Speaking about her late husband’s ability to incorporate innovative materials and techniques to a practice that was by all intents and purposes traditionally based, Martine Reid noted, “Tradition is alive. Tradition is not something fixed. Things have always been borrowed since the beginning of time. Ideas as well as things – tangible and intangible things. This is how a culture remains alive.”⁷⁸ Others also recognized Reid’s skill in this respect. Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss observed, “While remaining completely faithful to its roots, Reid’s art is deeply infused with the

⁷⁴ Duffek, *Bill Reid: Beyond the Essential Form*, 10.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Holm and Reid, *Indian Art of the Northwest Coast: A Dialogue on Craftsmanship and Aesthetics*, 32.

⁷⁸ “Tradition in the Making,” *Vancouver Foundation*, accessed September 20th, 2011, <http://www.vancouverfoundationstories.ca/story.php?recordID=256>.

personality of its creator.”⁷⁹ While articulating the subtle differences between a number of historical objects produced on the Northwest Coast, Reid stated, “An artist, in a rigidly structured society, must express his individuality to the utmost, but within that structure. Men utilize what they have at hand to express their personalities. Northwest Coast artists used the structure of art itself. So you get both very open and very concentrated formlines.”⁸⁰ Like Reid, Holm believed that the continuity of cultural traditions was important. A “great” work demanded an assertion of individuality, something that could only be successfully achieved when one had mastered the tenets of formline; “The rules are only part of the story,” Holm stated, “A piece that obeys all the rules doesn’t automatically wind up as a great thing. It takes something beyond that.”⁸¹

The development, recognition, and recording of formline design by Northwest Coast Native communities far precedes the dubbing of the term and subsequent analysis by Holm. While Holm provided a verbal language with which to describe the various visual elements of formline design, it is essential to explore its development in order to understand how contemporary artists use and most importantly, manipulate this aesthetic. The formation of the main features of art by First Nations communities along the Northwest Coast is thought to extend back at least 4,500 years.⁸² Janet Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips write that by about 800 B.C., some elements of the formline aesthetic were already present in the art of the Coast Salish communities of the Fraser River delta

⁷⁹ Martine Reid and Muriel Tohme, “Bill Reid ou la renaissance de l’art Haida,” *Geo* 229 (March 1998): 49.

⁸⁰ Holm and Reid, *Indian Art of the Northwest Coast: Dialogue on Craftsmanship and Aesthetics*, 110.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 123.

⁸² Annie Khatchadourian and Concordia University, *Raven's Reprise: A Significant Juncture in the Developing Exhibition Practices of Canadian Museums with Regard to First Nations Art* (2006), 12.

(modern-day Vancouver).⁸³ Archaeological research determines that the principal stylistic elements were established among Northwest Coast First Nations communities by the year 1,000 A.D.⁸⁴ Formal visual elements of the formline aesthetic varied amongst different cultural groups along the Northwest Coast. Historically Northwest Coast First Nations communities have been grouped into three geographical regions: southern coastal, central coastal, and northern coastal. Communities of each region have their own unique qualities, including a number of distinct languages, but in general, share similar social and cultural structures. While the artistic practices of these various communities differed in a number of ways, the governing system of principles was considered similar enough for researchers to bracket art from these cultural groups under the general heading of “Northwest Coast Indian art”.⁸⁵ Jonaitis highlights particular admiration bestowed upon artists from northern First Nations communities. She writes, “If there is one type of Northwest Coast art universally admired, and thought of by many to be the epitome of aesthetic achievement of the entire region, it is the creations of the Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian Masters.”⁸⁶ In the face of potlatch prohibition and pressures to

⁸³ Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 179.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ While early explorers, collectors, and anthropologists wrote of the Aboriginal material culture they encountered along the Northwest Coast as early as the mid-eighteenth century, it was in the mid-twentieth century that scholars such as anthropologist Marius Barbeau, began to more extensively refer to and write about “Northwest Coast Indian Art”. Exhibitions and related catalogues were common including a number of exhibitions organized by anthropologist Erna Gunther such as, “Indians of the Northwest Coast” (La Jolla Art Centre 1951), “Northwest Coast Indian Art” (Seattle Art Museum 1962), and “Art in the Life of the Northwest Coast Indians” (Portland Art Museum 1966). “Arts of the Raven: Masterworks of the Northwest Coast Indian” (Vancouver Art Gallery 1967) is thought to have marked a transformation in thinking and discourse surrounding Northwest Coast Aboriginal material production from “artifact” to “art object”.

⁸⁶ Jonaitis, *Art of the Northwest Coast*, 168.

assimilate, it is believed that the Kwakwaka'wakw communities of the central coastal region were the most successful in continuing their artistic traditions.⁸⁷ Perhaps due to the high esteem afforded to art produced by northern communities such as the Haida, and the persistence of artistic traditions by the Kwakwaka'wakw, an amalgamation of the aesthetic particularities of these communities came to be regarded as a singular "style" reflective of artistic production by Northwest Coast First Nations communities as a whole.

Referring to the work of early anthropologists, Levi-Strauss wrote in 1979: "Perceiving indigenous items as bearers of complex cultural messages, they acted as decipherers trying to break the local code."⁸⁸ Northwest Coast art is historically contained within this unchanging anthropological framework, an approach that does not recognize the innovative endeavors of Aboriginal artists. While adherence to the "rules" of formline design is generally considered "traditional" and representative of a singular shared style, so too can these formal design elements suggest the unique skills and goals of the artist. As Jonaitis explains: "Differing characteristics of formlines in designs can be diagnostic of individual artists' hands, and indicate that considerable license existed for creativity within the canons that developed over the years."⁸⁹ Duffek asserts that if there is one overriding feature of the development of Northwest Coast art, it is the art's connection to

⁸⁷ Karen Duffek, "Northwest Coast Indian Art from 1950 to the Present," *In the Shadow of the Sun: Perspectives on Contemporary Native Art* (Ottawa: The Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1993), 213.

⁸⁸ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture* (New York: Schocken, 1979), 7.

⁸⁹ Jonaitis, *Art of the Northwest Coast*, 33.

tradition and a “cultural imperative” that demands the artist not only express their personal identity, but also a collective identity.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Duffek, “Northwest Coast Indian Art from 1950 to the Present,” 213.

CHAPTER 2

Robert Davidson and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun

The work of contemporary artists such as Assu and Hunt who combine traditional aesthetics with contemporary concerns and individual “style”, is not without precedent. A number of established, well-known contemporary artists from the Northwest Coast incorporate contemporary ideas and techniques in ways that can be seen as both a challenge and a complement to the conventional aesthetics of this region. Two artists in particular are of interest to me both for their successful artistic practices and their specific influence on Assu and Hunt. Robert Davidson and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun each offer a different approach to the formline aesthetic. Davidson was born in 1946 in Hydaburg (Alaska) and Yuxweluptun in 1957 in Kamloops (B.C.). A generation older than Assu and Hunt, these two artists are often looked to as mentors by an emerging, younger generation of artists seeking to push the boundaries of cultural production and aesthetic traditions to new limits. While Davidson and Yuxweluptun incorporate techniques, concepts and aesthetics that could be interpreted as “traditional”, such as the inclusion of formline design and recognizable Northwest Coast mythological symbols and stories, both artists’ work clearly leans towards the unconventional, the innovative, and even the defiant. Artists such as Davidson and Yuxweluptun along with many others, struggled against expectations that stifled artistic expression, and established themselves as successful contemporary Native artists. In 1968 the Vancouver Art Gallery’s exhibition, “Arts of the Raven”, featured historical Haida-made objects alongside work by contemporary Haida artists (including Edenshaw, Reid, and Davidson). In his essay

“The Modernist Past of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun’s Landscape Allegories” (1995), Scott Watson writes that the exhibition set a precedent of legitimizing the work of contemporary artists as “authentic heirs of a high tradition.”⁹¹ In this way however, as Watson points out, many established Native artists felt beholden to tradition, and emerging generations of Northwest Coast Native artists struggled to establish new traditions that answered their contemporary needs and concerns.⁹² Davidson and Yuxweluptun’s forays into canvas and paint were perceived by some (whether Native or non-Native) as a threat to the “unspoken purity of the arts and carving tradition of the coast.”⁹³ As a result, both Davidson and Yuxweluptun have received their fair share of antagonistic responses to their work. However, despite criticism, both artists have enjoyed a great deal of critical and commercial success. Whether this success was marked by acceptance and financial rewards from the commercial art market, or the interest of public art galleries and museums, and praise from art critics, these artists have established significant precedents for those that follow. In reference to the two artists, Townsend-Gault writes,

Artists as different as Robert Davidson and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, while adamant about the Native status of their work, quote and incorporate modes from Western art history at will. They are allowing themselves to make new meanings for new audiences, Native and non-Native... These artists are not to be controlled by policing for authenticity.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Scott Watson, “The Modernist Past of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's Landscape Allegories,” *Born to Live and Die on Your Colonialist Reservations*, Charlotte Townsend-Gault, Scott Watson, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, eds. (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 1995), 61.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 66.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁹⁴ Charlotte Townsend Gault, “First Nations Culture: Who Knows What?” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 22.1 (1998): 31.

Renowned as a “leading figure in the renaissance of Haida art and culture,”⁹⁵ Robert Davidson comes from an extended family of talented carvers and artists, including his late grandfather, Charles Edenshaw. Davidson launched his career following an eighteen-month apprenticeship with Bill Reid and works with a variety of media as a painter, carver, printmaker, and jeweler.⁹⁶ His art is sought by collectors, museums, and galleries across the world and he has been the recipient of numerous awards including the Order of Canada in 1996. Davidson describes being saddened as a young man by the lack of art in his hometown of Masset (Haida Gwaii).⁹⁷ In 1969 at the age of twenty-two Davidson was inspired to carve his first totem pole. He describes becoming emotional after a visit with elders in Masset when he came to realize the significant ways meaning (culture and traditions) had been robbed from their lives and replaced with Christian ideals.⁹⁸ At that time, there were no totem poles in Masset, and Davidson sought to provide an occasion for his elders to celebrate. He completed a forty-foot totem pole that depicted a Tsimshian legend, though the Haida also tell the story (Figure 9). The artist explains that at the time, with little cultural knowledge, he attempted to create a “neutral totem pole” for the whole village.⁹⁹ He now recognizes however, that the story he chose, that of the Bear Mother, represents the Raven clan. To create a neutral pole he would have had to include crests from both the Eagle and Raven clans.¹⁰⁰ Undertaking a task far

⁹⁵ “Robert Davidson,” *Robert Davidson: Haida Artist*, accessed October 22nd, 2011, <http://www.robertdavidson.ca>.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ulli Steltzer and Robert Davidson, *Eagle Transforming: The Art of Robert Davidson* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1994), 20.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 22.

¹⁰⁰ The Haida people are divided into two social groups: the Eagle clan and the Raven clan. Clan affiliation is passed down maternally.

beyond anything he had previously attempted, Davidson relied on the training and knowledge he had gained from Reid. Reid stressed the need to maintain high standards of quality, something Davidson learned quickly while apprenticing with the elder artist, and put into practice in his own designs. Davidson explains that he did not initially realize how important this work would come to be: “I didn’t understand what a powerful symbol the pole was until the day came to raise it.”¹⁰¹ He explains, “It was the reawakening of our souls, our spirits.”¹⁰² Davidson immersed himself in Haida knowledge, traditions, and aesthetics, and from these foundations created work that reflected not only the highly developed art form of the Haida people, but also his own vision as an artist. Referring to the way Davidson meshes Haida artistic conventions with innovative concepts and techniques, Townsend-Gault explains, “He was one of the first of the new generation to demonstrate that the forms themselves, where line controls space and space solidifies to produce line, where proportion, scale, and relationships work together, were capable of infinite, labile inventiveness.”¹⁰³

Thom observes that Davidson’s career has been characterized by “a willingness to continually challenge himself and expand his horizons.”¹⁰⁴ Often labeled a “traditional” artist due to his incorporation of the formline aesthetic, Davidson is adept at maintaining connections to the past while introducing unconventional elements to his artistic practice. Townsend-Gault contends that to view Davidson’s art as being more “traditional” than

¹⁰¹ Steltzer and Davidson, *Eagle Transforming*, 22.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁰³ Charlotte Townsend-Gault, “Northwest Coast Art: the Culture of the Land Claims” *American Indian Quarterly* 18.4 (1994): 453.

¹⁰⁴ Thom, *Challenging Traditions*, 29.

“innovative” is to miss its potential.¹⁰⁵ Jonaitis extends this conversation in her introduction to the 1994 exhibition catalogue, *Eagle Transforming: The Art of Robert Davidson*. As she explains, Davidson’s assertion of his people’s art as “great art”¹⁰⁶ that should be recognized on an international scale raises interesting questions. Labeling Davidson’s practice as “traditional” too easily excludes him from international art conversation and instead confines his work to the sphere of “Indian art” or even “Primitive art”. Jonaitis explains, “Any contemporary Native art that adheres to tradition might be interesting as anthropology, but would not be acceptable in the international art world because of its lack of genuine rebelliousness and its foundation in an old style and iconography.”¹⁰⁷ Davidson’s work however, like the work of many contemporary First Nations artists, challenges singular categorization and thereby contradicts such notions. Jonaitis writes, “Modernists dismissed contemporary Native art because of its connection to tradition; ethnographic purists dismissed it because those connections were too weak.”¹⁰⁸ Davidson transcends cultural boundaries and ethnographic categories, having established his prominence within the international art world while reflecting the standpoint of a proud Haida artist.

Davidson speaks of the need to maintain tangible connections to the past through his art: “We have many threads connecting us to the past. My grandparents were one of those threads, and when these threads come together they form a thick rope. It is that

¹⁰⁵ Charlotte Townsend-Gault, “The Raven, the Eagle, the Sparrows, and Thomas Crow: Making Native Modernism on the Northwest Coast,” National Museum of the American Indian, ed. *Essays on Native Modernism: Complexity and Contradiction in American Indian Art* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2006), 90.

¹⁰⁶ Steltzer and Davidson, *Eagle Transforming*, 9.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰⁸ Steltzer and Davidson, *Eagle Transforming*, 11.

thick rope that is connecting us to our cultural past, the values which we are reclaiming.”¹⁰⁹ Maintaining a connection to his cultural history is essential for the artist; an exploration into Haida visual language is closely connected with the restoration of the cultural and social health of the Haida people. As Charlotte Townsend-Gault explains, for Davidson “assimilation is the enemy” and is resisted by maintaining a defining tradition.¹¹⁰ Davidson is decisive that he will not create art outside of the formal language of Haida visual expression.¹¹¹ While he does not shy from challenging expectations, rather than break entirely from conventions, Davidson continues in the same vein of inventiveness as his ancestors, and in doing so facilitates a conversation about tradition as dominant culture has come to define and promote it. In this way, he demonstrates that by perpetuating principles of formline design he not only ensures cultural continuity (and thereby resistance to “assimilation”) but also highlights the important role of innovation in Northwest Coast cultural practices. In a 2006 exhibition of Davidson’s work entitled, *Robert Davidson: The Abstract Edge*, Karen Duffek curated thirty paintings and sculptures by the artist alongside a number of nineteenth century painted First Nations objects from the northern coast. The exhibition highlighted work by Davidson that challenged the notion that Haida art involves “a closed visual language, a set formula, or a fully understood tradition.”¹¹² What becomes clear upon viewing the work included in the exhibition is that Davidson has made it his focus to engage contemporary ideas and values. Davidson challenges modernist discourse’s rejection of “tradition-based” work

¹⁰⁹ Townsend-Gault, “Northwest Coast Art: The Culture of the Land Claims,” 446.

¹¹⁰ Townsend-Gault, “Hot Dogs, a Ball Gown, Adobe and Words,” 114.

¹¹¹ Karen Duffek, “Northwest Coast Art: At a Crossroads,” *Galleries West*, accessed December 2nd, 2011, <http://www.gallerieswest.ca/Features/Articles/6-96637.html>.

¹¹² “Past Exhibitions,” *McMichael Canadian Art Collection*, accessed December 2nd, 2011, <http://www.mcmichael.com/exhibitions/robertdavidson/past.cfm>.

observed in his choice of media, the abstraction, the expression of innovation and individuality, the way he plays with form and scale, and each paintings’ “ability to stand alone as autonomous works of art.”¹¹³ The duality at play, between contemporaneity and tradition, brings to the forefront a discussion of how the recovery of First Nations visual traditions destabilizes the categories by which contemporary art is understood. Davidson’s work remains rooted in Haida visual style, but despite his profound respect for the traditional forms of Haida artistic practice, he refuses to be limited by expectations, nor by what was (or was not) practiced historically. The artist explains: “My passion is reconnecting with my ancestors’ knowledge... When I go outside the Haida boundaries, I am challenged, too — I want the art to be recognized as a high art form. I feel it is up to the artists to bring it into that arena [...]”¹¹⁴ Davidson maintains threads to the past even as he pushes beyond boundaries of “traditional” cultural production and in doing so situates Haida art as a present, inventive, and resilient force.

In the artist’s own words:

My challenge is to go beyond those recycled ideas and create a new vocabulary for myself [...] Once I learned the vocabulary of the art, it became my privilege and responsibility to create within those boundaries and to challenge them within the language. I draw on Haida images to express the present moment, and the present moment encompasses the past. That’s true for all generations. My paintings are from an ancient language, but they still speak of today.¹¹⁵

Like Davidson, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun casts notions of “tradition” in a new light. In a style distinctly different from that of Davidson (or any other contemporary

¹¹³ Karen Duffek, “The Present Moment: Conversations with guud san glans, Robert Davidson,” Karen Duffek, ed. *Robert Davidson: The Abstract Edge* (Vancouver: Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia in association with the National Gallery of Canada, 2004), 3.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

artists on the Northwest Coast) Yuxweluptun blends Coast Salish cosmology and Northwest Coast formal design principles with elements of European surrealist and landscape painting traditions. In these vividly colored, often darkly humorous paintings, Yuxweluptun tackles contentious social, political, environmental, and cultural topics. Townsend-Gault points out that while Yuxweluptun clearly incorporates formal principles of Northwest Coast aesthetics into his practice, elements of formline design are treated as a resource rather than a rulebook.¹¹⁶ In other words, the artist wants to give voice to his concerns but feels that the “traditional” forms of the Northwest Coast are not sufficient. Rather than adhere to the “rules” laid out in the work of the Northwest Coast artists who have come before him, he reimagines the qualities and principles of the formline aesthetic for his own purposes. Yuxweluptun openly contests the notion of a revival of Northwest Coast art, which he believes appeals to an unchanging historically framed view of tradition. Instead, the artist reinvents tradition and by doing so, highlights a shameful legacy of injustice and suffering of First Nations people to contemporary discourse. He challenges the privileging of unchanging design and traditions by replacing carving and prints of mythological creatures and symbols with objects of contemporary significance. In an early work, *Haida Hot Dog* (1984) (Figure 10), Yuxweluptun adorns a hot dog, an icon of popular culture, with a traditional Haida motif. Yuxweluptun is Coast Salish but does not limit himself to the specific design traditions of his heritage. Instead, he defies cultural boundaries, making use of imagery associated with a number of different cultural groups including Coast Salish, Haida, and Kwakwaka’wakw. The

¹¹⁶ Charlotte Townsend-Gault, “The Salvation art of Yuxweluptun,” *Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun*, accessed October 22nd, 2011, http://www.lawrencepaulyuxweluptun.com/assets/Salvation_Art_Townsend_Gault.pdf.

perceived “misuse” of these forms is seen by some to negate the “authenticity” of his work.¹¹⁷ Yuxweluptun however refuses to abide by steadfast “rules” that suggest he is violating some sort of canon, and as seen in *Haida Hot Dog*, playfully combines Northwest Coast Native aesthetics with familiar imagery from day-to-day life. The shapes manipulated in the service of his painting subtly reflect that of formline design, such as the hot dog which becomes reminiscent of a lengthened ovoid. The hot dog bun is outlined by a thick formline that tapers to a point as it meets the shape of the hotdog/ovoid. As is often the case with formline design, the negative space found between forms, in this case the hot dog and outline, is just as significant as the solid forms, suggesting the substance and weight of the hot dog bun. A Haida motif is vertically ‘stamped’ across the hot dog, imbuing the object with cultural resonance.

In his unconventional use of Northwest Coast aesthetics and choice of subject matter, Yuxweluptun is addressing a blending of cultures. In doing so, he subverts notions of “tradition” as this term has been applied to Northwest Coast Native art as a method of denoting value and “authenticity”. Yuxweluptun’s satirical upending of what is conventionally considered “traditional” art calls into question how and why “traditional” applications of Northwest Coast design elements are so highly valued. He seems to ask what negative stereotypes are perpetuated by a so-called “revival” of traditional design and how this serves to exclude contemporary First Nations people from the realm of modernity. For Yuxweluptun’s purposes, the inability to partake in a modern discourse leaves more at stake than his progression and freedom as an artist. An artist with a fine-tuned political consciousness, Yuxweluptun’s work serves as a vehicle to

¹¹⁷ Watson, “The Modernist Past of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's Landscape Allegories,” 62.

discuss urgent social issues including racism, land-claims, and the self-determination of Native peoples. While his art is clearly immersed in the visual language and symbology of his Native heritage, Yuxweluptun creates meaning in his art that can be read by several different audiences. According to the artist, “traditional art” has failed to evolve along with the processes that have shaped British Columbia and thus, cannot speak to contemporary concerns in any tangible or significant way.¹¹⁸ He explains: “An artist can’t do anything if he doesn’t watch, observe and participate in what’s going on.”¹¹⁹ By challenging the “rule book” as he does, Yuxweluptun contests limited notions of Northwest Coast Native art. In reference to Yuxweluptun, Townsend-Gault writes: “His work stretches elements of a generic Northwest Coast style further than they have been stretched before.”¹²⁰ By doing so, Yuxweluptun paves the way for a younger generation of artists looking to push the aesthetic boundaries and “rules” of the Northwest Coast in new and inventive ways particularly as a method of social enquiry. As he explains, “I am reinventing, rediscovering, everything, anything about Native art and reimagining it. [...] Nothing is out of bounds to me. I am not confined to a traditional three-dimension format. My hands are not tied. Artists should challenge everything.”¹²¹

Though Davidson’s and Yuxweluptun’s artistic practices parallel one another in a number of ways, the wide aesthetic and conceptual differences in their work underscores the mistake in interpreting art of Northwest Coast First Nations as cohesive. Townsend-Gault writes, “Referring to a demonstrable ability to adapt to new ways and new materials, many First Nations artists have articulated the notion that ‘our tradition is to

¹¹⁸ Townsend-Gault, “The Salvation art of Yuxweluptun,” *Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun*.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Townsend-Gault, “Hot Dogs, a Ball Gown, Adobe and Words,” 114.

¹²¹ Thom, *Challenging Traditions*, 181.

innovate’.”¹²² This philosophy is particularly apt when considering the work of these two influential artists. The privileging of visual associations with historical First Nations traditions and aesthetics by influential non-Native institutions and collectors has largely dictated what is considered valuable within the art market. Yet, despite challenging expectations and producing work that is firmly planted in the present, both Davidson and Yuxweluptun have enjoyed a great deal of commercial and critical success. Moreover, they have become two of the most influential forces on an emerging generation of contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations artists. Known well to artists such as Assu and Hunt, the work and careers of Davidson and Yuxweluptun are often aspired to as examples of how and why it is important to push the aesthetic and conceptual boundaries of cultural production. Hunt expresses this influence when he says, “I couldn't do what I do without Lawrence Paul, Robert Davidson, Bill Reid [...]”¹²³ By shaking the often rigid categories of the art world and thereby facilitating discourse that questions limited notions of contemporary Native art, Davidson and Yuxweluptun encourage those that follow to further push boundaries, redefine notions of contemporary Aboriginal art, and contribute to contemporary discourse by evolving cultural practices. As demonstrated by these two influential artists, cultural continuity is achieved by actively contributing to the evolution of traditions. In opposition to long held beliefs regarding the value of “traditional” unchanging aesthetics, stagnation of tradition seems to ensure the demise of cultural production. Tradition as seen and interpreted by these artists is not static but instead is a contemporary device to make sense of the past, to reconstruct and reinvent, in

¹²² Townsend-Gault, “Hot Dogs, a Ball Gown, Adobe and Words,” 117.

¹²³ Personal interview conducted with Shawn Hunt, October 12th, 2011.

an effort to adapt and redefine what is considered “tradition” and “traditional”.¹²⁴ As Yuxweluptun states, “Someone had to change the order of things. The gauntlet had to be thrown down to challenge the whole notion of what art is.”¹²⁵

Shawn Hunt and Sonny Assu

Shawn Hunt’s most recent artwork, exhibited at Vancouver’s Blanket Gallery in October 2011, was curated by Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun. Working in cooperation with the Gallery and the artist while steering the direction and intended message(s) of the exhibition, Yuxweluptun plays an important role in shaping how we understand the work on display. Yuxweluptun claims that Hunt has “done away” with formline.¹²⁶ Text for the exhibition reads, “Hunt radicalizes tradition by removing the formline, suggesting an identity in flux.”¹²⁷ While Hunt is flattered by Yuxweluptun’s assessment, the artist clarifies his treatment of formline: “I didn’t really realize I had eliminated formline and in a way I haven’t [...] But if I’m not eliminating it, I’m definitely fucking with it. It’s to the point where it’s almost gone [...] So I think formline started to disappear. I think there’s different ways formline has disappeared.”¹²⁸ Undoubtedly, the principles of formline are still in effect in Hunt’s work; formlines, ovoids, U-forms, and other recognizable elements of the aesthetic populate the artist’s work. Hunt communicates with his audience in the language of formline design, if a manipulated, unconventional, and original interpretation of it. Hunt is clearly redefining Northwest Coast conventions

¹²⁴ Townsend-Gault, “Northwest Coast Art: The Culture of the Land Claims,” 449.

¹²⁵ Thom, *Challenging Traditions*, 181.

¹²⁶ Personal interview conducted with Shawn Hunt, October 12th, 2011.

¹²⁷ “Shawn Hunt,” *Blanket Gallery*. Accessed September 25th, 2011.

<http://www.blanketgallery.com/exhibitions/exhibition50/exhibition50.php>.

¹²⁸ Personal interview conducted with Shawn Hunt, October 12th, 2011.

and in doing so, he subverts expectations, including his own. He explains, “This is all for me. Each piece is taking aim at even my expectations of what Native art is.”¹²⁹ In conversation, Hunt regularly refers to the “rules” inherent in the formline process. Adherence to these principles, however, serves a purpose greater than cultural continuity. The use of conventional aesthetics meets the artist’s desire to innovate and challenge preconceptions. Merging his Native heritage with urban, street, and hip-hop culture in *Master of Ceremony* (2011) (Figure 11), Hunt paints what appears to be an Aboriginal person adorned by a clan hat performing in the fashion of a hip-hop artist. In this clever subversion of expectations, Hunt appropriates objects and symbols from mainstream culture and repurposes them in a way that still communicates his Aboriginal heritage. By visually intersecting signifiers of two very diverse cultures, Hunt paints an unexpected, playful scene that resonates beyond the borders of a local First Nations community. To realize the communicative potential of the symbols he employs, fluency in the language of formline is essential. In the words of artist Dempsey Bob: “We come from a society that is very old in art. We have rules within those arts, but you have to know those rules so well that you make them your own.” Hunt expertly demonstrates the “rules” of the formline aesthetic even as he defies them. *Northwest Coast Knot* (2011) (Figure 12) is another excellent example of the artist’s playful challenging of conventions. Hunt paints an ovoid, one of the single most characteristic shapes of the formline aesthetic. Here, however, he has interrupted the normally smooth, continuous line of the ovoid by inserting a knot. With this gesture, the artist has both visually and conceptually defied a conventional understanding of Northwest Coast art, thus challenging preconceptions

¹²⁹ Ibid.

regarding the aesthetics of the Northwest Coast. The insertion of a new visual element, the knot, disrupts the continuous flow of the line defining the shape – something Hunt explains is the “worst thing you could do to a formline.”¹³⁰ The tension of the line of the ovoid is mirrored by a creative tension resulting from the artist’s unconventional handling of the principles of formline.

Hunt is keenly aware of the limitations of the formline aesthetic even as he works to redefine the language. Referring to his process Hunt explains that he enjoys, “...pushing the boundaries and in fact breaking the rules but within that structure.”¹³¹ He tests the boundaries of formline design, introducing a knot or employing only tertiary forms and erasing the primary formline all together. For example, in *Raven GT* (2011) (Figure 13), the shapes of the mask suggest the principles of formline design, such as the elongated beak of the raven, the U-forms found on its head, and the secondary formline that shapes the over-pronounced brow of the bird. However, the primary formline, traditionally an essential component of the formline aesthetic, is nonexistent. Another work included in the exhibition, entitled *Restraint* (2011) (Figure 14), reflects upon the inherent limitations of formline design as well as the pressure on First Nations artists to adhere to a particular formula for creative production. Hunt presents viewers with two ovoids linked by a chain. The ovoids are handcuffs. The artist states, “...you can bend things, you can pull and distort but you can’t break them.”¹³² Despite repurposing the shape of the ovoid as handcuffs, Hunt is careful to maintain tension, an integral quality of an ovoid. With the background painted black another important aspect of the formline

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

aesthetic becomes apparent, that of negative space which denotes the shape of the handcuffs. The restrictive nature of operating within a set of rules or according to shared aesthetic principles is clear. The ovoids of *Restraint* are not only representative of an aesthetic that could be considered limiting but the shapes themselves have become restraints. In opposition to the limitations implied by *Restraint*, a very different perspective is offered by *Ascension* (2011) (Figure 15). In this painting Hunt suggests the possibility of ascending beyond formline. Ovoids, freed of the primary formline, float up the canvas transforming into butterflies. Not only is Hunt challenging the concept of formline, but he literally shows the aesthetic undergoing transformation; the ovoids have been liberated from the rules of formline design. Ironically, the concept of ascending beyond formline is presented to viewers in the very language of formline. Like so much of Hunt's work in this exhibition, *Ascension* reflects both the artist's desire to reinvent the formline aesthetic as well as his reliance on the visual language. In challenging formline design, Hunt is also legitimizing its continued use.

While Hunt demonstrates a clear understanding of the "rules" of formline design, the potentially restrictive nature of the aesthetic is secondary to the ingenuity of the artist. Hunt's creativity, interests, sense of humor, and desire to "play" with the accepted conventions of the Northwest Coast First Nations are powerfully communicated to viewers. Rather than an aesthetic solely reflective of his First Nations heritage, Hunt uses formline design as a subversive tactic to challenge the branding and marketing of Northwest Coast Native art as a singular historical "style" that excludes innovation or an expression of individuality. Thereby, Hunt communicates his First Nations heritage but also his identity and concerns as a young, contemporary artist from B.C.

Like Hunt, Sonny Assu's artistic practice also challenges perceptions of what it means to be a contemporary Native artist on the Northwest Coast by provoking questions regarding Aboriginality. By highlighting the value bestowed upon "traditional" Native objects by anthropological museums, art collectors, tourists, and many admirers of Northwest Coast Native art, Assu calls into question the authority of those defining, interpreting, writing about, and marketing Native art. Ironically, it is often by engaging stereotypes directly in his work that Assu most effectively challenges the authority of these same stereotypes. Shifting between abstract and representational images the artist blurs boundaries between the two. In *iDrum* (2008/2009) (Figure 16), *iHamatsa* (2006/2007) (Figure 17) and *iPotlatch* (2006/2007) (Figure 18) series, Assu blends Northwest Coast aesthetics with an important symbol of popular culture: the iPod. The iconic symbol of this product is stylized to resemble the aesthetic traditions of the Northwest Coast First Nations; the silhouette of the iPod seamlessly melds with abstracted elements of formline design suggesting the shape of an ovoid. In this case however the ovoid we see does not adhere to the "rules" of the formline aesthetic as a bilaterally symmetrical shape with a characteristic convex upper side and a slightly concave lower side. In contrast to Hunt, Assu is far less concerned with the "rules" inherent in formline design. Instead Assu applies the formline aesthetic as a style without barriers and uses its inherent shapes and designs as powerful signifiers of his Aboriginal heritage. Resembling an iPod, the ovoid's merit is not only as a characteristic symbol of the Northwest Coast aesthetic but also as a recognizable product of popular culture. Assu's use of the shape of the iPod recalls Apple Inc.'s marketing campaign for the product. Known as the "silhouette campaign", black silhouettes of people dancing

holding white iPods (also seen in silhouette) became one of Apple's most successful ad campaigns and is said to have dramatically helped the iPod product move to the forefront of the market for portable music.¹³³ Most importantly for Assu's purposes, this marketing strategy embedded the silhouette of the iPod in the minds of consumers as an instantly recognizable symbol of consumer culture. Rather than provide viewers with the narrative cues they might expect when presented with a work of art by a Northwest Coast First Nations artist, Assu presents an abstracted, contemporary approach to Northwest Coast Aboriginal art. By manipulating and repurposing the formline aesthetic, Assu challenges the notion that a Native artist on the Northwest Coast must conform to particular aesthetic conventions. In doing so, tension arises between notions of "traditional" and "contemporary" art. Just as Assu manipulates formline design he repurposes symbols of popular culture and merges them with Northwest Coast aesthetics. Among topics that arise from this series of work is the issue of marketing and branding. As he did in his series using recognizable breakfast cereal boxes, Assu once again employs a recognizable symbol of popular culture to facilitate a discourse regarding the role and effect of marketing in contemporary culture. The extent to which the viewer identifies with such symbols suggests more than an attachment to particular consumer products. Assu explains: "With the iDrum and iPotlatch series, I'm using the iPod as a mode of totemic expression. The iPod itself is just a symbol really, it could be any form of device that has been touted as bringing us closer together as a society, yet drives us apart."¹³⁴ According to the artist, we adopt these items of popular culture into our daily lives as a method of

¹³³ "Silhouette Campaign," *Marketing Campaign Case Studies*, accessed January 5th, 2012, <http://marketing-case-studies.blogspot.com/2008/02/silhouette-campaign.html>.

¹³⁴ "Sonny Assu," *Beckoning4Change*, accessed August 13th, 2012, <http://beckoningforchange.org/2009/11/sonny-assu/>.

shaping our personal and cultural lineage. A “totemic expression” the symbol of the iPod has become just as fundamental to the forming of individual and group identity in contemporary culture as the formline aesthetic has been to defining cultural production and community belonging for the Northwest Coast First Nations.

In his recent body of work entitled *Longing* (2011), Assu steps away from the formline aesthetic almost entirely, referencing the traditions and aesthetics of the Northwest Coast First Nations through situational context alone. A recent exhibition of *Longing* at the West Vancouver Museum in October 2011 consisted of a number of “masks” and accompanying photographs. The masks were made of what the artist refers to as “off-cuts”: large chunks of cedar considered waste and left behind by log home developers (Figure 19). Assu collected these leftover remnants of development on the traditional territory of the We Wai Kai Nation. Log homes were constructed on a small parcel of land leased by the Band and then sold as export commodities on the international market. Through the masks, the artist expresses his disappointment at the Band’s complicity in the waste of resources: “I found it comical that my nation leased a plot of land, on un-ceded territory, to a company that exploits our resources to assemble log homes to be shipped off to the wealthy around the world.”¹³⁵ Assu saw potential in the cuts of cedar left behind. In what the logging company viewed as waste the artist saw “inherent beauty and inherent wealth.”¹³⁶ Historically, cedar has been a common choice of material in art production and holds great value within Northwest Coast First Nations communities. Commonly used in the production of masks, Assu believed the off-cuts

¹³⁵ Wall Text, *Longing*, Museum of West Vancouver, Vancouver, B.C.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

looked “remarkably like pre-fabricated Northwest Coast masks.”¹³⁷ Exhibited within the museum space on pedestals, the masks were lit and presented in a similar fashion to traditional museum displays of Northwest Coast First Nations masks (Figure 20). By recontextualizing the off-cuts as art objects, Assu challenges notions of waste and further, how contemporary art is labeled and defined. The artist is well aware of the assumed authority of the art museum and the legitimization such a display lends his work. Rather than ceding authority to the art institution, however, Assu undermines the very notion that the institution be recognized as the sole authoritative voice. In doing so, he calls into question the labels, classifications, and boundaries imposed on work made by Native artists. As the artist explains: “I’m challenging the viewer to consider what is art. This essentially is garbage. I’ve collected it and made it into art. But I’m also challenging the institutions to consider: what is Aboriginal work? What is Aboriginal art?”¹³⁸

Two additional series of work in the *Longing* exhibition challenge viewers to reconsider how authenticity, value, and originality are assigned to art objects. In *Wise Ones* (Figure 21), a series of five colour photographs, Assu presents and labels the cedar masks as though portraits of First Nations elders. *Artifacts of Authenticity*, a second series of photographs, lends further dimension to the exhibition. A collaborative project with Eric Deis, a contemporary photographer from Vancouver, Assu tackles concepts of display and the reclaiming of space. *Artifacts of Authenticity* challenges concepts of authority from three different perspectives. The anthropological museum, the commercial art gallery, and the “tourist trap”: each becomes a location for the display of one of Assu’s masks. In one location, Assu was granted institutional approval to place a mask

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Personal interview Sonny Assu August 26th, 2011.

within a display of nineteenth century Northwest Coast ceremonial masks at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology (Figure 22). Positioned behind glass and in close proximity to “traditional” Northwest Coast masks defined by their adherence to shared aesthetic principles, one could easily overlook Assu’s contemporary interpretation of a cedar mask. Despite a very different aesthetic, the artist’s mask blends seamlessly into its surroundings as though it too were a valued object of anthropological study. One values, interprets, and judges the work according to the authority of the museum. Though not the case with all anthropological institutions or scholars, many anthropological interpretations of First Nations cultural production have in the past excluded contemporary art. Traditional aesthetics representative of group identity are arguably privileged over the creativity of an individual artist. By presenting the mask in this space, Assu challenges the authority of the anthropological institution. Ironically, he could not complete this project without simultaneously deferring to the authority of the institution by requesting approval of his project. Instead of dictating his intent to viewers, Assu provokes questions. What authority does the anthropological institution have to label and define Northwest Coast art? How does one judge the authenticity of First Nations art objects? How does one value Native art?

These questions and more are echoed in two other spaces of display. In a photograph of the Equinox art gallery (Figure 23), we see Assu’s mask exhibited in a similar fashion to the display seen in the West Vancouver Museum. The mask is placed on a pedestal displayed as one might expect to see a Northwest Coast First Nations mask when singled out in exhibition. In this setting however, Assu’s mask is further contextualized by neighboring works of contemporary art. Once considered waste, a

byproduct of consumer culture, when presented by the artist within an art gallery it is bestowed value as an art object. In contrast, the mask's presentation inside the Roberts Gallery and Gifts tourist shop (Figure 24) offers a very different perspective. Placed on a shelf amidst other artworks made for sale and available to be touched or held, Assu's mask becomes just another "souvenir". No longer valued or exhibited as art object within a museum or gallery setting, the authority of the tourist shop has in fact devalued the mask as "tourist object". The commercialization of Native art becomes an important part of our dialogue with the artist. While the cedar off-cut is already a reflection of our consumer culture, Assu extends the conversation by reintroducing the once-discarded object within a commercial setting. The piece of cedar is now just another tourist object reflecting a monocultural view of Northwest Coast Native art. Northwest Coast First Nations art as a brand that sells is paramount within this context; the substance or quality of the piece is inconsequential when compared to its commercial appeal as a Native-made object of the Northwest Coast. This new perspective highlights an interesting hierarchy within the art world, causing us to question how specific institutions are valued and ranked, and in turn, how this informs the context within which we assess works of art.

CHAPTER 3

Reconsidering Continuity and Change on the Northwest Coast

Whether reflected in the demand for formline design or the perceived link between “authenticity” and expressions of cultural traditions, the expectations of those viewing, buying, exhibiting, interpreting, and/or writing about works of Northwest Coast First Nations art, play an integral role in understanding the artwork being produced by contemporary Aboriginal artists of this region. Karen Duffek asserts that the overriding feature of Northwest Coast First Nations art is its connection to tradition and the imperative to express not only personal, but collective identity.¹³⁹ The contemporary artist chooses to balance the possible constraints of viewer expectations and collective aesthetic traditions with the desire to push the limits of cultural expression and imposed definitions of what constitutes art of the Northwest Coast First Nations.¹⁴⁰ The preservation of traditions and adherence to a set of aesthetics principles on the Northwest Coast is accomplished through a number of avenues. While in the past artistic traditions and knowledge were often passed down within First Nations communities through apprenticeships and training with older Master artists, many emerging First Nations artists on the Northwest Coast now receive training through art schools.¹⁴¹ Whether learning about art history, acquiring skills in various mediums and techniques, or exploring and articulating the theoretical concepts behind their work, opportunities and

¹³⁹ Duffek, “Northwest Coast Indian Art from 1950 to the Present,” 213.

¹⁴⁰ Duffek, “‘Authenticity’ and the Contemporary Northwest Coast Indian Art Market,” 85.

¹⁴¹ Robert Davidson, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Sonny Assu, and Shunt Hunt all received training within various academic arts arenas.

knowledge beyond the boundaries of particular communities or cultural groups are offered to artists within these settings. The difficulty is then to blend what they have learned with the aesthetic practices that reflect and embody their cultural affiliation. The result is work that often challenges the very aesthetics associated with cultural continuity and belonging. While contemporary artists including Assu and Hunt produce work that reflects a relationship with Northwest Coast shared aesthetic practices, they do so while navigating western contemporary art models taught by academic art institutions. These artists resist attitudes that consign their work to the past with such terms as “traditional” and “authentic”, which prevent them from belonging to the here and now or responding to issues of contemporary concern. Further, these labels and attitudes become irrelevant given the scope and nature of each artist’s work. Townsend-Gault explains that such labels “tend to make a mythologized past into the sole determinant of their artistic activities.”¹⁴² According to the author, however, concepts regarding tradition and authenticity call for scrutiny and redefinition within the current social and aesthetic climate.¹⁴³ By disputing definitions of contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations art according to the past and inserting contemporary narratives that confront the authority of labels such as “authentic”, these artists complicate and extend the frame of reference for Northwest Coast Aboriginal art in a multitude of productive ways.

In his essay “On Collecting Art and Culture” (1984), James Clifford dissects notions of authenticity as they have related to the collecting and valuing of anthropological artifacts, asking, “What criteria validate an authentic cultural or artistic

¹⁴² Townsend-Gault, “Northwest Coast Art: The Culture of the Land Claims,” 446.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 448.

product?”¹⁴⁴ On the matter of the art museum, Clifford asserts that a critical history of collecting must consider how specific groups, institutions, and individuals have chosen to preserve, value, and exchange objects. The author identifies an art-culture system within which these objects have been contextualized and assigned value.¹⁴⁵ In the West, as he explains, collecting has long been a strategy for the assignment of self, culture, and authenticity.¹⁴⁶ Collected artifacts function within a “capitalist system of objects” wherein some objects are discriminated against while others are assigned great value.¹⁴⁷ Thus, a world of value is created, predicated upon the contexts in which these objects belong and circulate. The author explains that the art-culture system at play assumes the intrinsic interest in and value of collecting objects from times past.¹⁴⁸ Older objects are considered to be endowed with a sense of historic depth and given the label of “authentic”, thereby justifying their value. Contemporary objects that cater to the continuity and depth implied by an adherence to conventions that denote “authenticity” can thus be valued according to these same standards. The author asserts that anthropologists and art collector most value objects considered “traditional” which according to the author, is opposed to modernity.¹⁴⁹ Should objects circulate with an

¹⁴⁴ James Clifford, “On Collecting Art and Culture,” *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 222.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. Classifying “art” and “culture” as separate categories, Clifford deems that it is the singular, original, and “authentic” work of “art” that is considered a “masterpiece”. Within the realm of “culture”, the traditional, collective, and “authentic” object is labeled “artifact”. If “artifact” or “masterpiece” falls under the category of “inauthentic”, such as fakes, tourist objects or curios, the art-culture system classifies the object “not art” and “not culture”.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 218.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 221.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 231.

“aura of cultural production”, the value assigned is that much more substantial.¹⁵⁰ Clifford explains: “With the consolidation of twentieth-century anthropology, artifacts contextualized ethnographically were valued because they served as objective “witnesses” to the total multidimensional life of a culture.”¹⁵¹ Naturally the art market responds in equal measure, identifying and circulating these objects according to their perceived value. Rather than a “traditional” view of culture signifying a historical context alone, according to Clifford, culture changes and develops as though a living organism.¹⁵² Consideration of such a view demands a reevaluation of the term “authentic” and its implied static nature.

In *Authentic Aboriginal* (Figure 25), a work created as part of a project for the 2010 Winter Olympics, Sonny Assu confronts this issue directly, using the problematic term in the title of his piece. Assu presents a canvas in the shape of an inverted longhouse.¹⁵³ Abstracted shapes populate the canvas resembling such markers of formline design as the primary formline that varies in width from thick solid line to delicate tapered point, as well as shapes that resemble split U-forms and ovoids. The designs are not meticulously rendered according to the “rules” of the formline aesthetic and instead appear to move about the canvas, overlapping colours of bright blue, red, and black, never finding representational form. The topic of authenticity arose for Assu after learning of a failed initiative by an Aboriginal business owner. The business owner campaigned for an authoritative body to be put in place that would supply stickers to

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 225.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 228.

¹⁵² Ibid., 235.

¹⁵³ Longhouses are prominent among Northwest Coast First Nations communities. Longhouses are long, narrow, single-room buildings traditionally constructed from cedar planks. Historically, they housed several families.

artists denoting their Aboriginal status and art as “Authentic Aboriginal”. Assu disagreed strongly with the idea as he explains, “From my standpoint, I am an Aboriginal person and therefore the work that I make is a part of authentic Aboriginal culture, authentic Aboriginal art; I don’t need a sticker to say that my work is authentic.”¹⁵⁴ Questioned as to his Aboriginal status, the issue of authenticity is something Assu has been faced with on a number of occasions. Titling his piece as an intentional tongue-in-cheek jab to the campaign, Assu raises questions regarding what it means to be an Aboriginal artist and further what constitutes an “authentic” work of art. Assu asks, “Who is the judge of authenticity?” He further elaborates: “Some people will say that if you're not traditional, you're not an authentic artist but I say 'Well I am authentic because I am producing my view of my culture'... it's been a constant battle for every Aboriginal artist stretching back thirty, forty years.”¹⁵⁵

The art market has largely dictated the terms of debate concerning what constitutes “authentic” Aboriginal art. Art that conforms to society’s expectations is work that sells.¹⁵⁶ Assu recognizes the role of art market expectations stating: “I think the market dictates sometimes what people should be making.”¹⁵⁷ Hunt has also been faced with the same issue explaining that he fights others’ expectations “all the time” but has learned to navigate within the Northwest Coast art market in a way that satisfies his own

¹⁵⁴ “Sonny Assu - Laich-kwil-tach (Kwakwaka’wakw),” Phone Interview conducted by Crystal Baxley, *Contemporary North American Indigenous Artists*, accessed August 22nd, 2011,

<http://contemporarynativeartists.tumblr.com/post/6030123932/sonny-assu-laich-kwil-tach-kwakwakawakw>.

¹⁵⁵ Personal interview conducted with Sonny Assu, August 26th, 2011.

¹⁵⁶ Ruth B. Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700-1900* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 182.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

goals and expectations.¹⁵⁸ In her essay “‘Authenticity’ and the Contemporary Northwest Coast Indian Art Market”, Karen Duffek examines authenticity as the concept relates to contemporary Northwest Coast Native art produced for the marketplace. Duffek asserts that consumer expectations and demand greatly affect contemporary art production by Native artists on the Northwest Coast; consumers impose conceptualizations of “Indian-ness” on Native art, revealing emphasis placed on authenticity and what role this factor plays in Native art production. Referring to museum visitors and buyers of contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations art, the author writes, “Viewers’ expectations of what constitutes authentic native art and traditions are major factors qualifying their aesthetic judgments and influencing their definitions of acceptable Indian art.”¹⁵⁹

In the introduction of her text, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth Century Northwest Coast* (2005), Paige Raibmon examines how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people on the Northwest Coast have shaped current conceptions of authenticity based on late-nineteenth century colonial ideology. Raibmon recognizes authenticity as “a powerful and shifting set of ideas that worked in a variety of ways toward a variety of ends.”¹⁶⁰ According to the author the great division between high art that was deemed “authentic” and mass culture that was viewed as “inauthentic” took hold at the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁶¹ Colonial conceptions of what constituted “authentic” works of art prescribed a singular Aboriginal culture, a culture that could be “preserved in the static representations of ethnographic texts, museum cases, or stylized

¹⁵⁸ Personal interview conducted with Shawn Hunt, October 12th, 2011.

¹⁵⁹ Duffek, “‘Authenticity’ and the Contemporary Northwest Coast Indian Art Market,” 100.

¹⁶⁰ Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth Century Northwest Coast* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 3.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

performances...”¹⁶² Raibmon recognizes that this ideology persists in the contemporary realm; in order to gain access to an international public forum wherein dynamic assertions of identity, culture, and politics can be made, Aboriginal artists often conform to colonial expectations.¹⁶³ Notions of authenticity are integral to an understanding of aesthetic judgments imposed by a non-Native audience. For many viewers, the degree to which the work of contemporary First Nations artists on the Northwest Coast conforms to the materials, forms, styles, subject matter, meaning, and so on, of “traditional” art is often looked to as a method of determining authenticity. Formline design, as the signifier of “authentic” art from the Northwest Coast, becomes a powerful brand viewers look to as basis for value judgments. Duffek points out the folly in this ideology explaining, “While traditional art and culture is sometimes referred to as if it were a closed or static system, Northwest Coast art was always incorporating change, whether it stemmed from outside sources or individual innovations.”¹⁶⁴

Even with this in mind, however, the continuity of aesthetic conventions by First Nations artists provides viewers with the opportunity to judge design quality on a basic level by its adherence to conventions, most especially the formline aesthetic. Naturally, questions arise regarding who qualifies as a legitimate Northwest Coast Native artist, a question Duffek deems irresolvable.¹⁶⁵ Thus, according to the author, “The contemporary revival of Northwest Coast art has depended on a reconstruction, reinvention and

¹⁶² Ibid., 9.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶⁴ Duffek, “‘Authenticity’ and the Contemporary Northwest Coast Indian Art Market,” 106.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 100.

reinterpretation of these forms and rules...”¹⁶⁶ Ironically, it is often in mastering the “rules” of formline design that contemporary artists realize potential beyond the perpetuation of a homogenous aesthetic. With the tools necessary to bend and manipulate artistic conventions, these artists are more freely able to respond to expectations and challenge the very brand (“Northwest Coast First Nations Art”) upon which they are based. When one challenges and/or departs from standards of “authenticity” however, the artist must prepare to be met with resistance. As Duffek explains, “Where contemporary native art productions are evaluated in terms of their re-creation of the past, a departure from the traditional is often interpreted as a degeneration of the art.”¹⁶⁷ Work created outside of the parameters of the “traditional” and “authentic”, be it art that embraces a “modern” approach and distances itself from shared aesthetic conventions, or art made strictly for tourist trade, is often seen to be polluted by a “dense aura of inauthenticity.”¹⁶⁸

In “Art, Authenticity and the Baggage of the Cultural Encounter” (1999), Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher Steiner explain that First Nations art made for the tourist trade finds itself at an intersection between the discourses of art, artifact and commodity.¹⁶⁹ This further blurs classifications employed by the contemporary art market to understand, judge and give value to the Northwest Coast Aboriginal art. After all, according to Clifford, the art-culture system in place deems commercial objects, such as those found in tourist shops, to be “inauthentic” and “not culture”.¹⁷⁰ Phillips and Steiner point out

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 106.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 107.

¹⁶⁸ Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher Burghard Steiner, “Art, Authenticity and the Baggage of the Cultural Encounter,” *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 4.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ James Clifford, “On Collecting Art and Culture,” 218.

that the visual aesthetic traditions of the majority of Native cultural communities do not easily “fit” into the western classification system of fine and applied art.¹⁷¹ The authors go on to explain that in efforts to establish a market for First Nations materials, scholars have arbitrarily privileged certain objects, communities and regions over others. In doing so, the meaning and inherent value based on Aboriginal systems of knowledge was disregarded.¹⁷² In a separate essay, Phillips asserts that a modernist “paradigm of authenticity” has been used to construct canons of Native North American art that have directed larger value judgments.¹⁷³ A privileging of timeless aesthetics has resulted in the restriction of cultural growth and change. Phillips writes that the “quest for the authentic and uncontaminated often masked the [...] innovation that underlay even the productions they [the cultural evolutionist] valued.”¹⁷⁴ Add to this an increase of contemporary First Nations art that successfully undermines the value system in place and the result is a further confusing of art market categories and classifications. Therefore, as Judith Ostrowitz observes, “These postcolonial artists on the Northwest Coast, who are generally encouraged by the art market and by non-native scholarship that identifies them by means of their heritage, are nonetheless excluded from contemporary art discourse.”¹⁷⁵ Raibmon also recognizes the impossible standards of “ahistorical cultural purity” upon which contemporary Aboriginal art is so often judged.¹⁷⁶ Aboriginal

¹⁷¹ Phillips and Steiner, “Art, Authenticity and the Baggage of the Cultural Encounter,” 7.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ruth B. Phillips, “A Proper Place for Art or the Proper Arts of Place?” Lynda Jessup, ed. *Aboriginal Representation in the Art Gallery* (Ontario: Canadian Museum of Civilization), 59.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Judith Ostrowitz, *Privileging the Past: Reconstructing History in Northwest Coast Art* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1999), 109.

¹⁷⁶ Raibmon, *Authentic Indians*, 9.

people naturally deviated from prescribed cultural conventions, she explains, because “no culture conforms to an unchanging set of itemized traits.”¹⁷⁷ According to Phillips, it is not within the art market system in place, where value and meaning is based on museological narratives, the perpetuation of labels such as “traditional” and “authentic, and a value system that demands adherence to a static formula of aesthetics and traditions, that dominant culture might form the foundations for a better understanding of contemporary practice by First Nations artists. Phillips explains: “We need to ask not only how indigenous peoples have historically defined authenticity and value, but also how they define these criteria today.”¹⁷⁸ For Phillips this conversation extends beyond the walls of the museum or gallery and into the tourist shop. While she is discussing Native-made objects intended for commercial sale, Phillips’ discussion illuminates the importance of recognizing both continuity and innovation within Aboriginal traditions and material production in order to appreciate the full spectrum of objects being produced regardless of their eventual destination.

Both Assu and Hunt are keenly aware of how discourse revolving around issues of “authenticity” and the value systems placed on First Nations art circulates within the contemporary sphere. While Assu and Hunt have enjoyed recent success and critical praise, they have also been confronted with a fair share of criticism. Judith Ostrowitz explains that acceptance by the mainstream was not forthcoming for Native artists who chose to push the accepted boundaries of cultural production.¹⁷⁹ In her article “Reconnecting the Past: An Indian Idea of History”, Deborah Doxtator explains, “Public

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Phillips, “A Proper Place for Art or the Proper Arts of Place?” 46.

¹⁷⁹ Ostrowitz, *Privileging the Past*, 4.

expectations that Indian art and culture are confined to the forms of past time periods has further complicated the acceptance of Indian art as contemporary art.”¹⁸⁰ Faced not only with an art market value system guided by mainstream Western ideology and all too often, enduring hegemonic attitudes, both artists have also found themselves at odds with the expectations of those within the First Nations community. While divergence from the “traditional” practices of the Northwest Coast First Nations confuses how the art world chooses to categorize and value works made by these artists, issues often run far deeper within First Nations communities. Departure from the accepted historical artistic practices of the Northwest Coast First Nations is often viewed as a threat to the continuity of cultural traditions. Such a perspective however demands a static view of culture, where innovation and change had (and continue to have) no place. Neither Assu nor Hunt however sees his methods as something entirely separate from the traditional cultural practices of the Northwest Coast First Nations. On the contrary, by manipulating and challenging conventions and introducing his own visual vocabulary, each artist contributes to a more inclusive and expansive understanding of Northwest Coast Aboriginal artistic production. Assu explains, “My discourse is about evolving our culture – evolving and expanding our culture. So people will understand where we're coming from. If we don't do that [...] we become stagnant.”¹⁸¹ According to Assu, those artists who refuse to respond to the contemporary world and instead produce work according to a “traditional” aesthetic that meets the demands of the tourist trade are far more harmful to the preservation of cultural practices and values. A culture that does not

¹⁸⁰ Deborah Doxtator, “Reconnecting the Past: An Indian Idea of History,” *Revisions* (Banff, Alberta: Walter Phillips Gallery Press, 1983): 31.

¹⁸¹ Personal interview conducted with Sonny Assu, August 26th, 2011.

adapt, change and respond to a world in constant development, is a culture destined to disappear. For Assu, it is supremely important that contemporary First Nations artists challenge perceptions regarding what is considered Aboriginal art because “it helps us grow”.¹⁸²

Hunt shares a similar view. While he does not object to those artists who choose to create within the boundaries of “traditional” Northwest Coast art, Hunt views his role as something different. Despite his desire to play with conventions, Hunt does not see his art in opposition to the work of “traditionalists” but instead understands it as the natural progression of culture and tradition. He explains, “I don't see myself as somebody who is really that radical - just someone who is simply following the tradition of my people [...] we take what we have, we observe what we see, and we display it through our work. I'm just continuing the tradition more than anything.”¹⁸³ Hunt elaborates that one need not exclude tradition entirely in order to make a work of art “contemporary”. Instead, he is far more interested in evolving traditions. He admits that in his recent work this has included a manipulation of the formline aesthetic and in many cases an exclusion of the primary formline. However, rather than interpret this as a departure from tradition, Hunt sees it as the natural progression of his own style within the context and traditions of the Northwest Coast. He extends the same courtesy to others creating art on the Northwest Coast, explaining, “There's no use in me saying 'Your work is too traditional for my taste'. That's where that person is in their growth.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Personal interview conducted with Shawn Hunt, October 12th, 2011.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

By stretching the boundaries of what is conventionally understood to be the aesthetics of the Northwest Coast, both Assu and Hunt offer an accessible platform upon which a productive dialogue regarding these important topics may take place. Grappling with a wealth of contemporary issues and topics that resonate far beyond the coastal First Nations communities of B.C., both artists provide accessible opportunities for multiple audiences to engage with their work. As Hunt states, “I want to make my work more inclusive, less exclusive.”¹⁸⁵ Understanding that a great deal of work produced by Native artists on the Northwest Coast, whether historical or contemporary, requires a thorough understanding of Aboriginal traditions including related iconography and mythology, Hunt seeks to provide an accessible experience to those without access to these Aboriginal knowledge systems. Whether employing symbols of popular culture, referencing modern artists such as Picasso¹⁸⁶, or using humor to break down barriers, Hunt draws viewers into a conversation. Instead of concentrating on what makes us different from one another, Hunt believes we must seek out commonalities. While his work is rooted in a cultural context, Hunt highlights issues that he hopes will speak to a broader global community. In doing so, he contributes to the evolution and reshaping of cultural traditions and practices that ensures Northwest Coast First Nations people and culture a place in the contemporary world. He explains, “If I just talk about old myths, I am partially responsible for killing culture. New iconography is about not just Native issues but human issues; it is helping to propel the culture forward.”¹⁸⁷ Assu uses similar tactics to great effect. Combining Northwest Coast aesthetics with recognizable, often

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ In his recent painting, *Seated Nude with Hand Outstretched* (2010/2011), Hunt makes reference to twentieth century painter, Pablo Picasso (1881 – 1973).

¹⁸⁷ Thom, *Challenging Traditions*, 66.

iconic, symbols of popular culture, Assu creates a visual language that translates cross-culturally and further, resonates universally. Speaking about his strategic use of humor in his practice Assu explains, “As soon as the humor and laughter sets in, you're opening yourself up to a dialogue... So when I start telling them (viewers) the issues of Aboriginal people in Canada they're going to be more willing to accept it.”¹⁸⁸ By endeavoring to raise important contemporary themes, issues, and questions, both Assu and Hunt contribute to a better understanding of contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations art. The contemporary inquiries of these artists offer new insights not only into the historical and artistic traditions of Canada’s First Nations but into the global circulation and impact of this art today. As such, both artists demonstrate the potential for art by contemporary First Nations artists on the Northwest Coast to speak on a local scale while just as significantly finding its place and impact within the global art market.

¹⁸⁸ Personal interview conducted with Sonny Assu, August 26th, 2011.

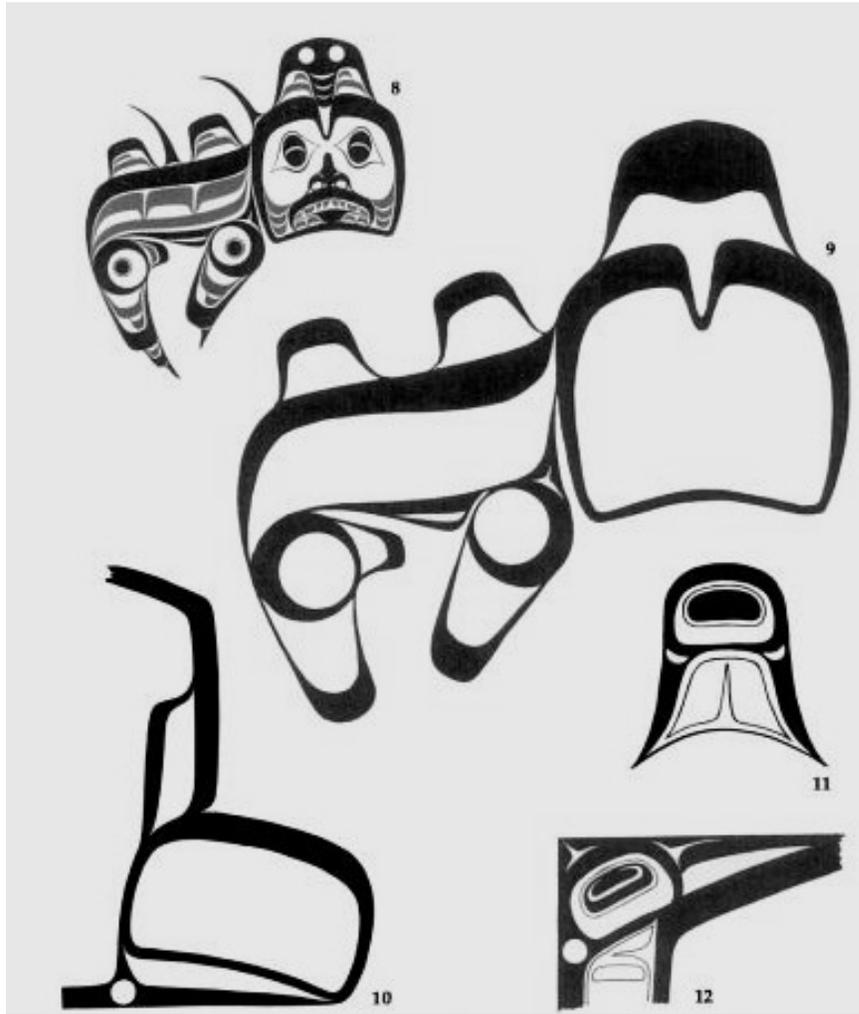
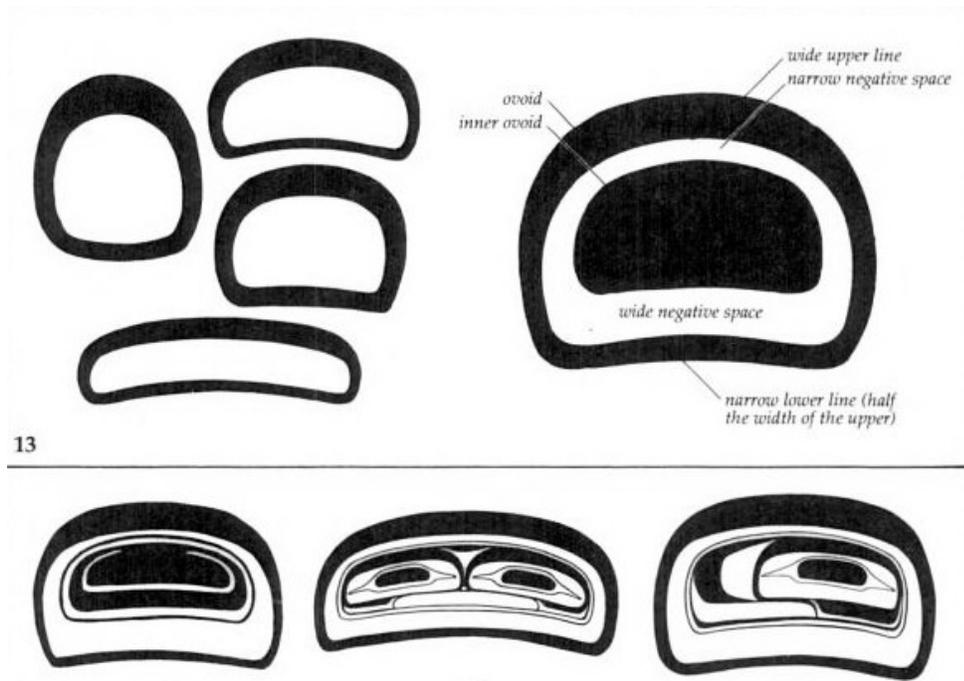


Figure 1. Primary Formline [Hilary Stewart, *Looking at Indian Art of the Northwest Coast*, p. 18.]



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Figure 2. Ovoid [Hilary Stewart, *Looking at Indian Art of the Northwest Coast*, p. 21.]

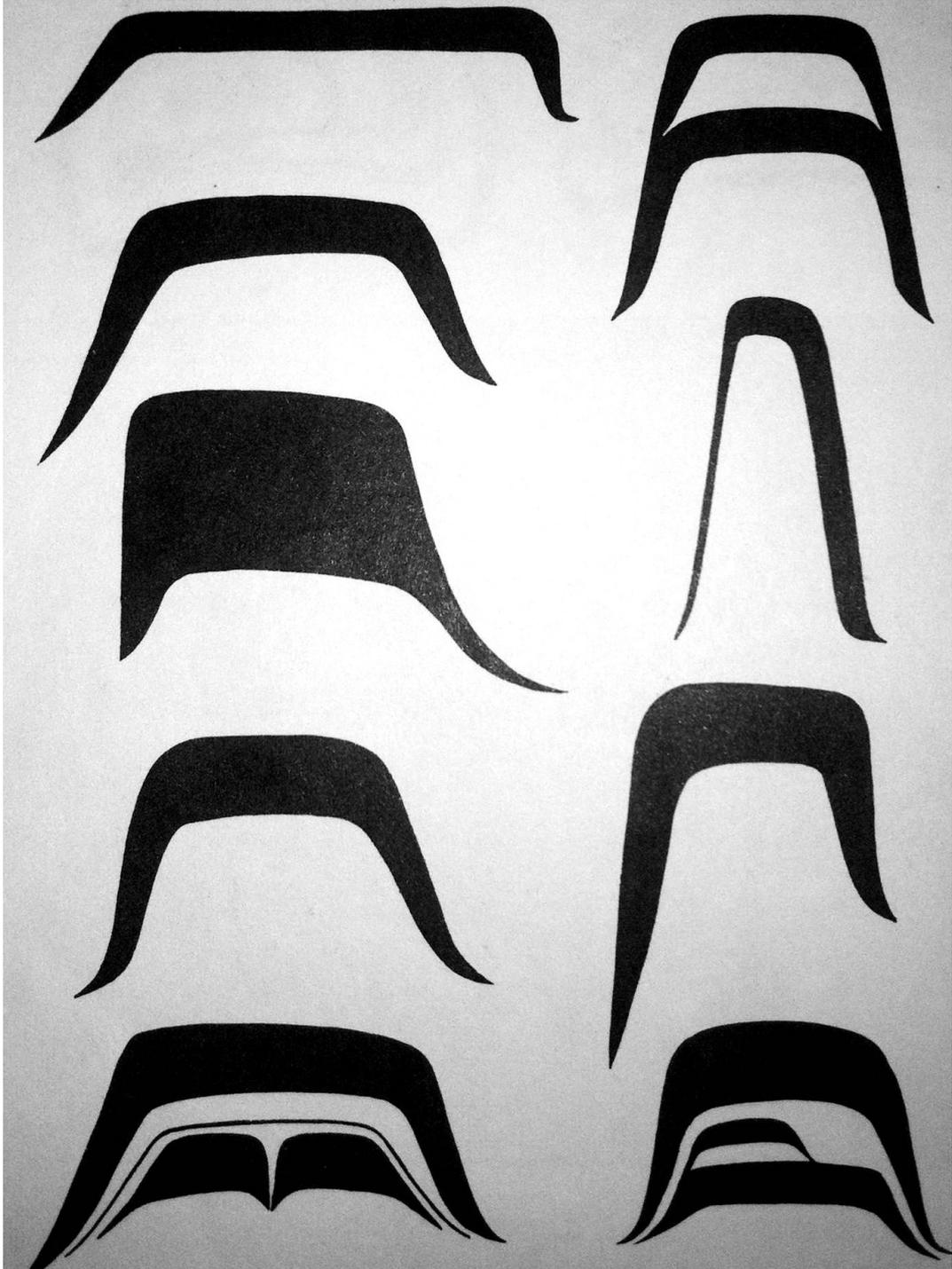


Figure 3. U-Form [Hilary Stewart, *Looking at Indian Art of the Northwest Coast*, p. 22.]



Figure 4. Sonny Assu, *The Breakfast Series*, 2006 [Sonny Assu, <http://sonnyassu.com/work.html>.]



Figure 5. Sonny Assu, *Treaty Flakes*, 2006 [Sonny Assu, <http://sonnyassu.com/work.html>.]



Figure 6. Shawn Hunt, *I'm Selling My Ovoids*, 2008 [Shawn Hunt, <http://www.shawnhunt.net/>.]



Figure 7. Shawn Hunt, *Three Watchmen*, 2009 [Shawn Hunt, <http://www.shawnhunt.net/>.]



Figure 8. Pipe [Bill Holm and Bill Reid, *A Dialogue on Craftsmanship and Aesthetics*, p. 34.]

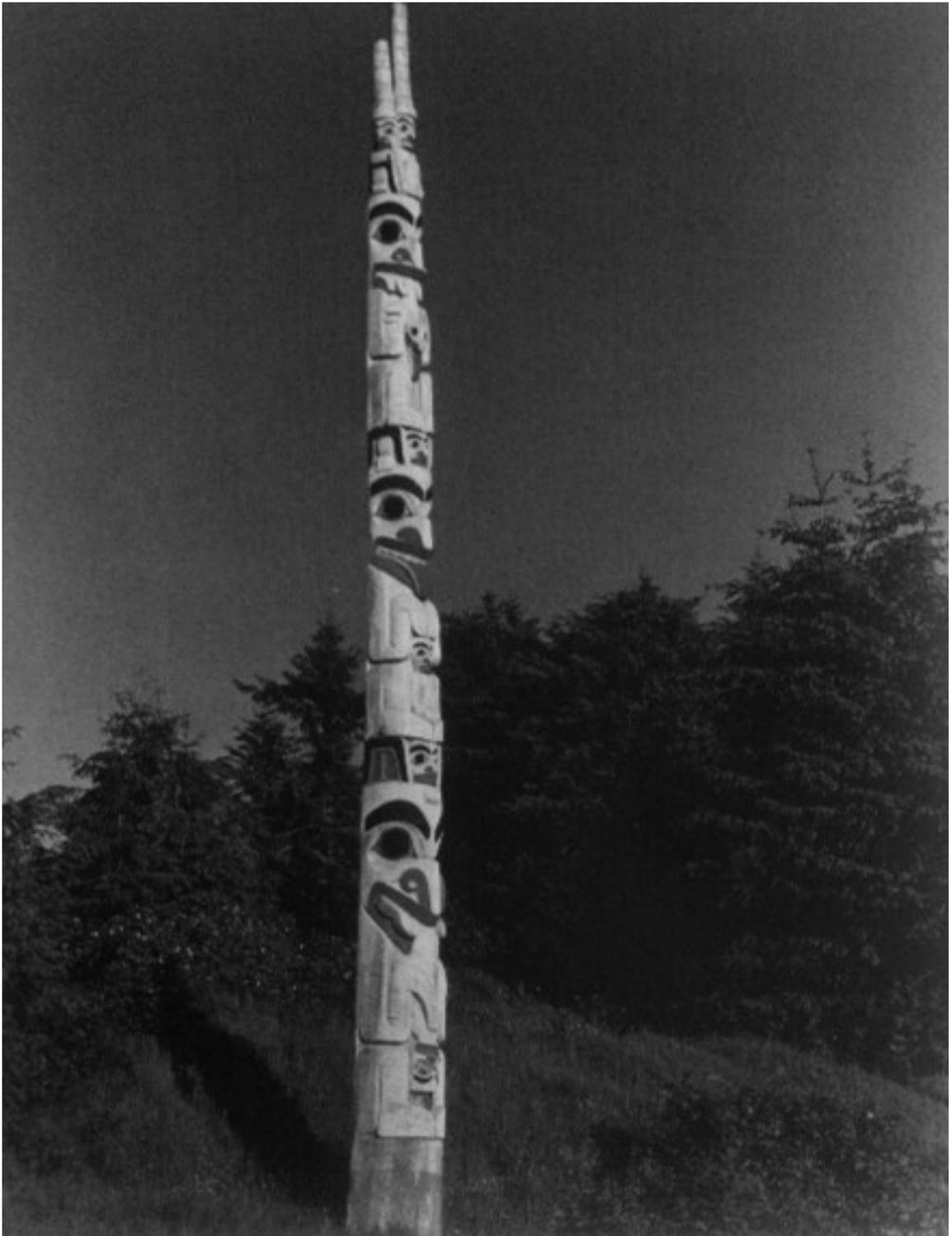


Figure 9. Robert Davidson, the Bear Mother Pole, 1969 [Ulli Steltzer and Robert Davidson, *Eagle Transforming*, p. 24.]

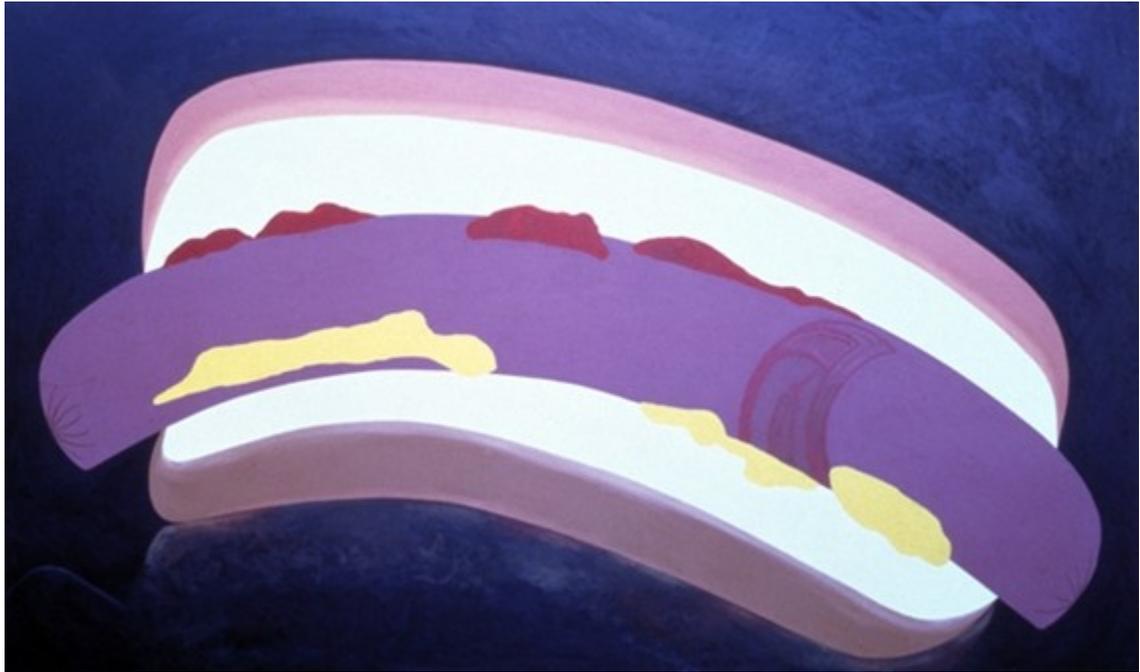


Figure 10. Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Haida Hot Dog*, 1984 [Paul, Lawrence, George Harris, Annette Schroeter, and Two Rivers Gallery. *A Bad Colonial Day: Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun*, p. 6.]



Figure 11. Shawn Hunt, *Master of Ceremony*, 2011 [Shawn Hunt, <http://www.shawnhunt.net/>.]



Figure 12. Shawn Hunt, *Northwest Coast Knot*, 2011 [Shawn Hunt, <http://www.shawnhunt.net/>.]



Figure 13. Shawn Hunt, *Raven GT*, 2011 [Shawn Hunt, <http://www.shawnhunt.net/>.]



Figure 14. Shawn Hunt, *Restraint*, 2011 [Shawn Hunt, <http://www.shawnhunt.net/>.]

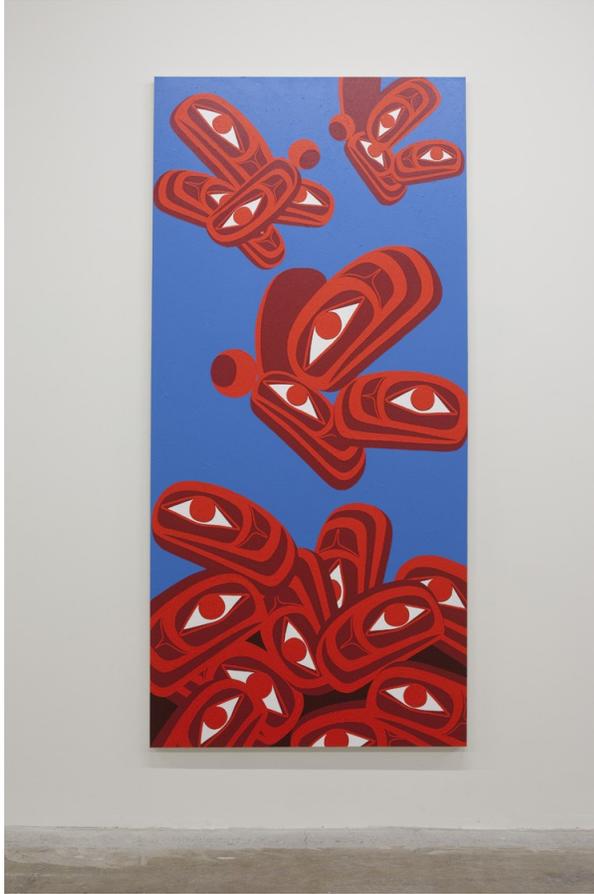


Figure 15. Shawn Hunt, *Ascension*, 2011 [Shawn Hunt, <http://www.shawnhunt.net/>.]



Figure 16. Sonny Assu, *iDrum Nude Classic*, 2008/2009 [Sonny Assu, <http://sonnyassu.com/work.html>.]



Figure 17. Sonny Assu, *iHamatsa Dancer*, 2006/2007 [Sonny Assu, <http://sonnyassu.com/work.html>.]

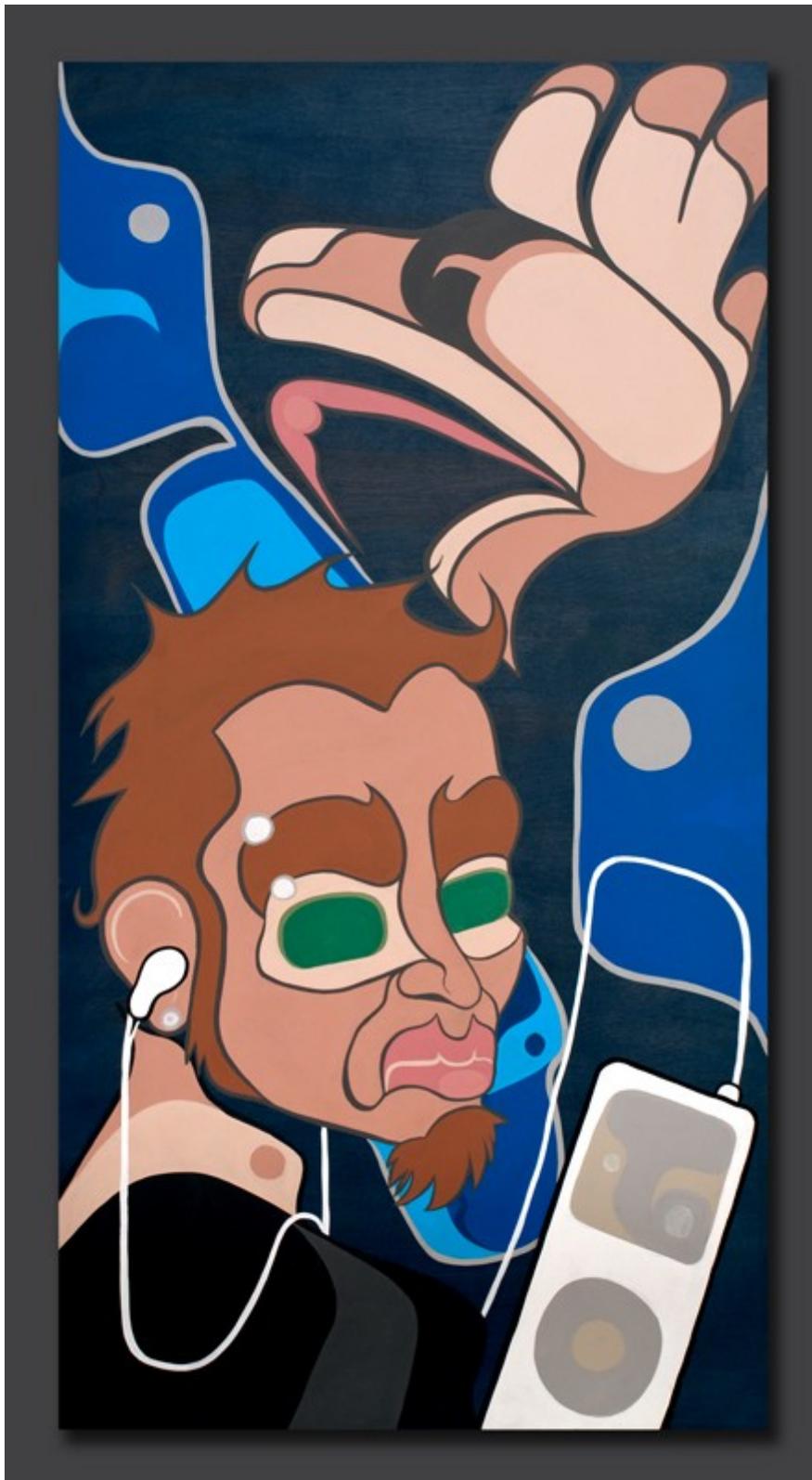


Figure 18. Sonny Assu, *iPotlatch Ego*, 2006/2007 [Sonny Assu, <http://sonnyassu.com/work.html>.]



Figure 19. Sonny Assu, *The We Wei Kai (Warrior #1)*, 2011 [Image courtesy of the artist.]



Figure 20. Sonny Assu, Installation view, *Longing*, Museum of West Vancouver, 2011
[Image by www.urbanpictures.com.]



Figure 21. Sonny Assu, *Wise Ones I*, 2011 [Image courtesy of the artist.]



Figure 22. Sonny Assu and Eric Deis, *Museum of Anthropology*, 2011 [Image courtesy of the artist.]



Figure 23. Sonny Assu and Eric Deis, *Equinox Gallery*, 2011 [Image courtesy of the artist.]



Figure 24. Sonny Assu and Eric Deis, *Roberts Gallery & Gifts*, 2011 [Image courtesy of the artist.]



Figure 25. Sonny Assu, *Authentic Aboriginal*, 2010 [Sonny Assu, <http://sonnyassu.com/work.html>.]

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