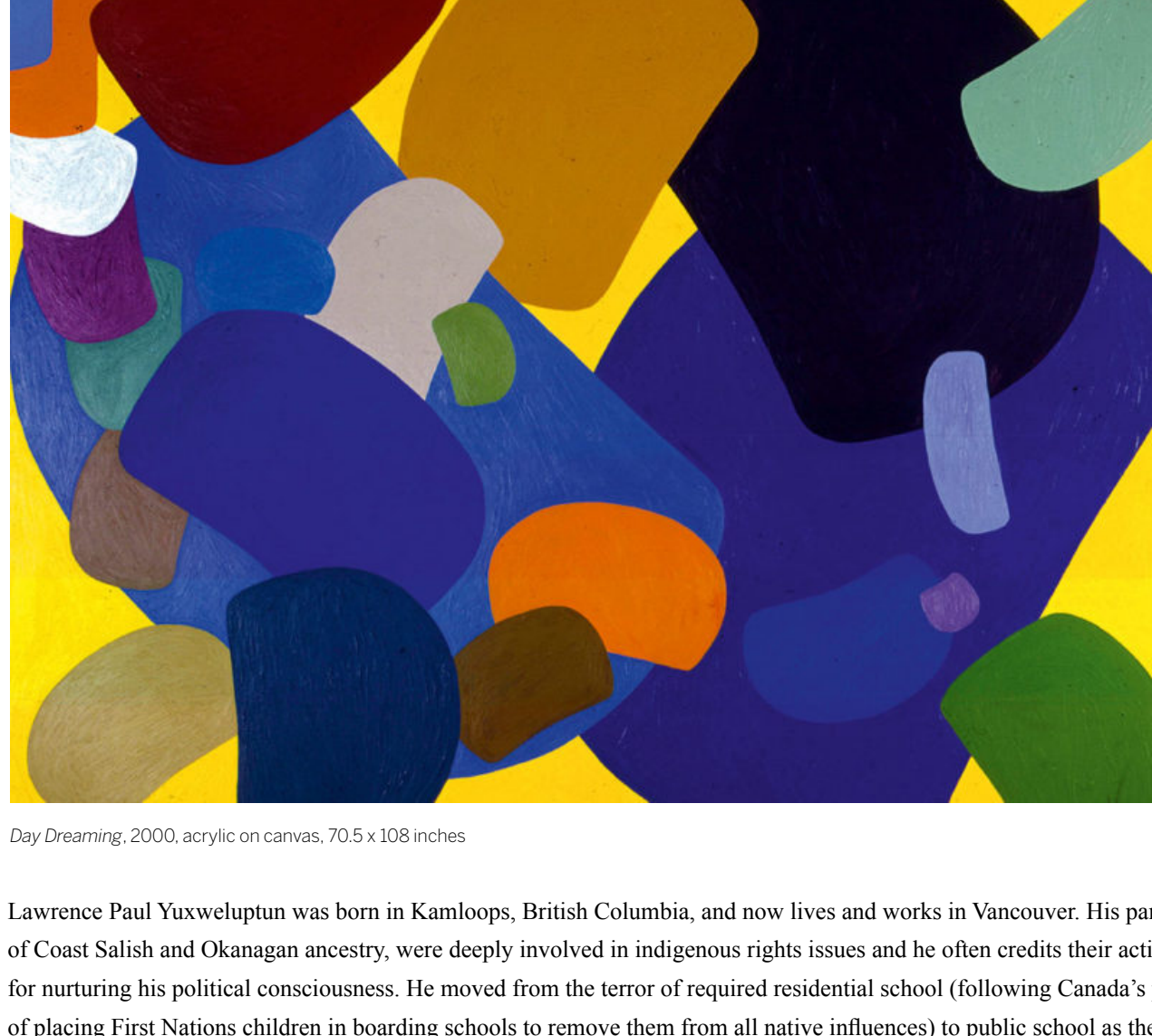


Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun

by Ammiel Alcalay July 15, 2016



Day Dreaming, 2000, acrylic on canvas, 70.5 x 108 inches

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun was born in Kamloops, British Columbia, and now lives and works in Vancouver. His parents, of Coast Salish and Okanagan ancestry, were deeply involved in indigenous rights issues and he often credits their activism for nurturing his political consciousness. He moved from the terror of required residential school (following Canada's policy of placing First Nations children in boarding schools to remove them from all native influences) to public school as the law allowed it.

Yuxweluptun showed artistic talent from a young age and, in 1978, he entered Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver. Though thoroughly conversant in his culture's traditional art, he was one of few indigenous artists to choose European modalities of training rather than continuing in the expected mode. This was as much a political as an aesthetic decision, and has allowed Yuxweluptun to intervene directly in the image-making process that affects how we conceptualize land, race, politics, and our place in the cosmos. Having uniquely transformed the language of traditional shapes while also drawing on colonial Canadian landscape painting as an archive to reinhabit, Yuxweluptun's work is phantasmagoric, ferocious, loving, and deeply disturbing.

Reminiscent of the great Cuban artist Wifredo Lam, Yuxweluptun reclaims the traditional surrealism of indigenous art from the Surrealists. His work is not nearly well-known enough outside of British Columbia and Canada, but *Unceded Territories*, an exhibit at the University of British Columbia's renowned Museum of Anthropology, promises to showcase Yuxweluptun's extraordinary oeuvre to new audiences (May through October 2016). After being introduced at Gene's Café in East Vancouver, where Yuxweluptun and his dog, Rez, are well-known fixtures, the artist and I continued our conversation in his studio.

Ammiel Alcalay: I'm honored, really, to have the opportunity to get to know your work better, think about it, and share it in the US, where much less of the history of the world you inhabit is known. You've been painting for close to forty years. What do you think has changed along the journey?

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: Some things change and some things don't. When I was young, I went to New York City to try to get a gallery there, but America is a difficult place—I mean, they're still trying to figure out if they want to take down the Confederate flag. I went in thinking the world of art was for everyone, but it never really was. I understood that race was an issue. When I went back to the US years later, in my forties, it was the same thing: "We don't show your kind." Have I gone back? No. Have I given up on the world of art? No.

AA: In 1992, you were a key figure in the *Land, Spirit, Power* exhibit at the National Gallery in Ottawa. It included artists like Jimmie Durham and Edgar Heap of Birds. I'm wondering whether those connections to other artists continued?

LPY: We weren't making romantic art or tourist art. There were more interesting things to deal with, and that was part of who we were, of the time we were in, and the movement we created. That is, being artists who tried to be freer as human beings rather than contained in this romantic, Hollywood-driven market and traditional style, like those in Santa Fe or Guatemala. Traditionalism is not really dead, it's just that we decided that we're human beings. It has been difficult to get the rest of the world to understand that.

For most of my life, indigenous peoples were not a part of this country. We were kept, technically, wards of the Crown, which is to say we were prisoners of war—interned, since the confederation of Canada, in reservations. The war on Indians in the Americas was actually the first world war: the Spanish, the French, the English, the Russians, they all came here, and millions and millions of native people died as a result. What is a reservation? It's a colonial internment camp, a concentration camp.

These are not pretty pictures to paint. People want this romantic, noble savage. If you want a romantic Indian, you can find one. There are lots of them. But, natives are suffering from post-traumatic colonization stress. Waking up to this every day is not a pretty picture. I went to residential school. I was there. I went to a funeral. I know what I'm talking about. I knew that there were graveyards. All Indians had to go to residential school and wake up to fear and the fact that they could be next. That's fucking stressful! When Canada changed the law for me to go to public school, I asked my dad, "How come there's no graveyard at this public school?" It was bizarre to walk around a playground and go, "Where are all the dead kids?" So in terms of living through that experience and going through it, how do you deal with that? The Catholic Church is such an army of vicious creepy people, and they'll never pay a single dime for any of their sins if they don't have to. They molested, raped, and murdered kids. They tortured them, beat them, starved them, did experiments on them. We have to deal with our own history. We have to analyze and look at ourselves and see what has happened to us. When people are in the midst of all this, it's hard for them to look at that and at themselves. But that's my work, to give that history to the world.

AA: Coming from the United States, there are some real differences here in Vancouver. I was on Commercial Drive the other day, and a young native guy was walking down the street and looks were exchanged with two workers on a scaffold. The young guy was yelling, "Fuck you, I was just asking you a question, and besides, you're on my fucking land." That would be unimaginable anywhere in the United States. The fact that this whole province is under claim is extraordinary.

LPY: It is under claim, but many natives don't want to settle land claims. The Canadian government thinks that we're going to say: "Yes, we will extinguish our rights forever, and we're going to get this little bag of peanuts for the land and be happy." A lot of people are not happy with Canada. If I had a choice, I would be like the French and leave the confederation. This is the conflict we have with colonialism in terms of comprehensive land claims. Why should I surrender? Why should any native surrender? Why are we having this conversation? Because this is the politics of the day: our government chiefs, who get government salaries, are paid to surrender traditional lands forever. I'm saying, "Fuck you, government chief. You're a sellout. I don't want you to sell my land or my ancestors' land, or land that belongs to my children's children, future generations. I can agree with sharing it. If you want to cut down a tree, pay for it. If you want to take some gold, pay for it. If you want to take some fish, pay for it. Don't just steal." We're in a usufructuary position under Canadian law. Tired of day every native person is being fucked around by the usufrucker. I have been under the usufrucker since I was born. I'm every day.

This is my land! They use it, they take the trees, they take the fish, they take the mines, they don't pay for anything, and then they say, "Well, it's yours, it belongs to you, but it's in trust to your Queen, for your own protection, while you sit on reservations."

AA: Yet, over the years, younger people have been responding to and picking up on what you're up to. What do you see happening?

LPY: I've been a mercenary of art for close to forty years and I think the younger kids are starting to catch up to me. For the longest time, for maybe thirty years, they didn't know me. If you're not making "native art"—masks, regalia, traditional designs for the community in the reserve—your own people will not know who you are, because who the fuck are you?

AA: What about younger native people living in Vancouver or other urban places?

LPY: For the longest time they didn't really know who I was because I was making art on behalf of them but not for them. I was speaking in general terms about the conditions and plights of aboriginal people. They were not the audience that I was trying to educate because they were the ones who were suffering. I'm not here to make art for Indians, art with the word *Indian* or *native* in front of it. I just make art. A traditional artist said that I hid behind color, and my rebuttal to him was that he hides behind tradition. The only traditionalist I've known who has ever said anything political is Beau Dick. The rest of the traditional carvers are market-driven. They can't say anything political. How do you carve a priest raping a native boy and make that traditional?

AA: I have a friend from Lebanon, filmmaker and writer Jalal Toufic, who has this concept about when a people undergoes what he calls a "surpassing disaster," then their "materials are withdrawn," and you have to find other ways to get to them.

LPY: I was born in a time when all of this shit had already gone down, like the smallpox epidemics that native people suffered dearly from. They rebounded back from that, they're very resilient. A lot of native people are more charming and not as angry as I am. You know, losing one's language—growing up and listening to other people's language and not having your own—was a very difficult thing. It's a very, very sorrowful feeling. How do you destroy somebody's culture and take away their language? I had no choice; there wasn't anybody to teach me the native language. But I did learn the English language, and I read dictionaries and understood the concepts and legalities of land claims and familiarized myself with the Indian Act and read books like *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. I read a lot of history about native people. I know all these things, so I do get upset.

This *Bury My Heart* is a global problem. I am no different than the modernist First Nations Indian. Red Skin, native, aboriginal—from Australia to South America. I look at what is being done to the Palestinians. Their land was stolen, and they are being killed for wanting to be on their land. These are world problems.

AA: Related to how you reaccess your own traditions, I wanted to ask about your work with the ovoids. There's a strong sense of how you've created a new language, abstracted a form to posit a whole world view, a method of thinking.

LPY: The ovoids deal with the Indian Act. There's a lot of legislation under the Indian Act, but there was not a defined position of power over the thinking mind of an Indian. Can an Indian have an existential thought in this country without someone coming over and saying, "Hey, fucking Indian, what the fuck are you thinking about?" It's the tunnel vision and attitude of Destination Canada: "You Indians are supposed to be making this tourist stuff where you make us look good and pretend we're treating you really well . . ."

AA: So you've taken the traditional shape of the ovoid and expressed whatever you want to express with it.

LPY: It's like looking at a priest with a piece of dynamite trying to figure out how fast he can destroy this culture—this whole process of genocide, the 1969 White Paper policy to abolish all reservations and to assimilate all Indians. The failure to do so was a tragic event for colonialism. However hard they tried, they could never do it. What is it like to destroy somebody's culture and leave them with very little, to destroy the family unit and their ceremonies, to outlaw potlatch? So I was just looking at this and saying, "You know, I can think for myself. I can have an existential thought, and I'm going to create Ovoidism to make work. I designed Ovoidism to say that we can think about anything and express anything to our political hearts' content."

It has to do with the collective versus the individual. You would say, "I think, therefore I am," and the native would say, "I think, therefore I am them." I am *them*. We know we're Indians. We know how natives get done by the police. The midnight ride with the prairie Indians. We know the fucking routine. We know how much you guys hate Indians. So how does one paint hate? I want to show you what you are—to think about it, to talk about it. Or am I supposed to be one of those shut-the-fuck-up Indians and say nothing?

My position is: Why piss off one person at a time when I can piss off all of Canada, all of the colonialists, at the same time? Around the world, all the white supremacists everywhere. It's my job to say, "Hey, lighten up. We are human beings, and you have to get over these things." Race is a strange thing that's going to take this planet a long time to get over. Can we do it? I don't know. It just so happens that I'm interested in looking at this ugly, creeping thing. Somebody has to do it. It's a dirty job and nobody wanted to do it. So I stuck my hand out and said, "Oh! I'll take this job and see how far I can go."

AA: Do you think you've put a dent in something after all these years?

LPY: I made paintings about spirituality, and the natives looked at me and said, "Why are you making this religious kind of work?" I don't like priests in black clothes and things that they are good people. I am praying to the killer whale. The killer whale has a vision, he comes and talks to me. When the bear has a vision, he visits me and talks to me. These are things that I have to show people.

When I was a kid, I used to hear songbirds. And the forest was filled with songbirds and humming with bees. Now there are barely any humming bees and the forest is quiet. If you leave this planet, at least make a recording of the birds so that in the future they'll know what a bird was, what it used to sound like. Don't blame the Indians because we didn't kill all the songbirds. We believe that songbirds have sovereignty. Songbirds have rights. They have a right to be on this planet. Do we have to kill them? Do we have to kill all of them? Is it really necessary?

I make these paintings because these are religious beliefs: talking about the spirit world and the animals, praying for the thunderbirds and the bears and the salmon and all sorts of things. I like our traditional history, it is not something that all artists can deal with. I am dealing with land claims, with landscapes, with history—the history of the world, the history of time. I am dealing with everything from the past to the present, weaving my way through the history book and saying, "You guys really fucking left out a lot." And that's why I made *Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in the Sky*. I am a history painter. I go back and sometimes come forward. The European language of painting is a language I was taught. I looked at Rembrandt, Miró, Michelangelo, Degas, Cézanne, Rodin, Brueghel, Bosch. . . . I have been all around the world and seen many paintings, museums, and artworks. I have seen the artists that represent the world.

It's part of my job description as an artist to enlighten the world, to entertain the world, to record the history of the world. My job is also to piss everybody off, to critique the world, to mirror history back to the world.

AA: Maybe you could talk a little bit about how you brought Surrealism back to its roots in native art?

LPY: Creating landscapes, inventing a style, writing the manifesto of Ovoidism. The Surrealists went all over the world and looked at indigenous peoples, and then they created their Surrealist manifesto. But if it wasn't for the indigenous peoples of the world, they could not have written the Surrealist manifesto. I don't have to go all over the world to create visionary "visionism" as a concept. Somebody asked me why I haven't traveled for fifteen years. Because my bible is here in this country. So that is a good reason to paint.

AA: Can you talk more about how you've thought about politics in your art?

LPY: I was trained as a politician, and I became an artist. My dad was trained as a shaman, but he became a politician. I traveled around with my dad every year, and he trained me all his life. We talked about everything, and it just so happened that I became an artist. I love my land. I like to go out and catch fish, go out and hunt, go down to the longhouse and sit around the fire with a bunch of savages. Because I am that wild Indian. Why not put paint on and have spirit dances? You can't take that away. I like having my drum. I like painting my drum and singing Indian songs around the fire. I am here in my natural habitat. This space, my studio which we're sitting in, is our traditional Indian land. My energy, everything about me, is from here. I take traditional belief from natives and from our shamans and our elders. I'm becoming an elder now. We modernists, we aren't here to disrespect the traditionalists. We are saying, "That traditional stuff is always going to be there." I'm not against it, but I do have to talk to the rest of the world. I have to make the metamorphosis of language into culture, into form and space and design, and into a language that can be understood. Simultaneously, I have to metamorphose this art language of native traditionalism into a modern form that natives can see and understand themselves. So the work is moving in two directions at the same time.

AA: How does this affect how someone working in traditional forms might react to your work?

LPY: I had a carver come look at that work the other day, and he was just cheerful. Laughing, he said, "It's so beautiful." So it gave him joy and uplifted his heart. It is overwhelming him, but he understood it. When the natives see the work, they understand that—it is natural for them to read these forms, where for a European it isn't. Europeans have to understand the language of what I'm doing, and only then can they understand what it creates in a painting. You know, when I make a forest, the natives look at it and go, "Whoa, man. This feels like the love of every tree that I have." I feel like I've been here 10,000 years, 20,000 years. And I have. I capture that all the time.

I know that I hurt the feelings of the traditionalists, but for the good of aboriginal people I had to break some rules somewhere. And it just so happens that I broke every rule by not doing anything traditional: I'm a nontraditionalist being a traditionalist creating nontraditional art, which means that I'm just making art. Technically, I'm just like any other painter in history.

I have to think of the protection of my hundred-mile radius. If I can look after my hundred-mile radius and teach people to look after theirs the same way, to love the land as much as I do, then we may have some songbirds in two hundred years. For now, we still like to pray to the birds, listen to songs from the songbirds. Spiritualism from the songbirds, animals, totems—it's just a part of our nature. We've been here thousands and thousands and thousands of years. I like walking with grizzly bear. He may not like me sometimes, but it's do believe that the bear has sovereignty. That he has a right to exist. We don't have the right to exterminate animals. We think it's wrong when we try to exterminate human beings.

AA: Over all these years of painting, what kind of responses have mattered most to you?

LPY: I was with my dad at the National Gallery show in 1992, and we were asked before the show, "What are you guys talking about? What is the show about?" I said, "What do you mean show? This is our land, our spirit, our power, and that's who we are as natives. This is about we want to express." And so the museum people decided to simplify that and call the exhibit: *Land, Spirit, Power*. And my dad understood then, when we were in the National Gallery, that I was communicating more than the chiefs. Chiefs don't get to talk to the public. You can silence the chiefs, but you can't hide my paintings. They can talk. I also do public talks and public speaking. My dad realized that the training he gave me was good training, and I just happened to transform it into the arts. I think I made the right decision for what I was trying to do. I could have gone into politics, but the country was just not ready to think of us natives as free human beings yet.

AA: Can you speak some more about that choice you made to be trained within the language of European art?

LPY: I chose modernism. I didn't choose to go to Santa Fe [Institute of American Indian Arts] or Saskatchewan Indian Federated College. I chose Emily Carr University because I felt that I could challenge the world and that I could be an artist like everybody else. My training is from a European perspective, and I was grateful for the instructors that I had and for my art history teachers. I liked listening to their stories, listening to their world culture, learning about art, and reading about artists and their lives, what they were confronted with, how they resolved the issues that were around them, the wars, all their troubles and plights. So learning those things helped me understand who I was and what I was trying to project.

When I was a student, there were five of us natives. Now I think there are hundreds. We were the first group moving in to take on the establishment. I like things like "Fight The Power!" but I'm here to play, I'm here to talk. Let's be civilized. Let's discuss this. You don't have to point your guns at me. You don't have to bring out your tank. Don't be so angry! Come on, Canada, let's talk.

AA: At this stage, your work matters to many audiences and, while you've paved the way for younger native artists to take different approaches, your core intention seems to have never changed.

LPY: I've always been part of the collective—I'm no different than any other native in this country, and I'm treated like every other native in this country. I know what it's like. I may not have lived the experiences of other people in the world, but we share the same Indian Act—like any other Indian who has suffered under the same extreme conditions. That's why I shot the Indian Act. It is a very hateful piece of legislation. So I physically brought it over to London and shot it at the Healey Estate and Bisley Camp. That's where they tested soldiers in World War II in rifle shooting. I shot the Indian Act there. When asked why I went over there to shoot it, I said, "Well, it's British legislation. It stems from the Royal Proclamation, the British North America Act, the Indian Act, and then the British Constitution. So it is about your Queen. She is about your Queen, your Queen is on my dollar. She is my problem." I went there to tell that Queen bitch that I was shooting her Indian Act in your country, legally, at a rifle range, with a shotgun. They could not stop me. I sent a copy to the Queen with the shot-up document and a video telling her, "This is what I think of your Indian Act." Never got a word from them.

AA: I didn't think you would have.

LPY: But I did tell her what I thought. I sent one to the Prime Minister and members of Parliament, too. They all got copies. I got some letters back from them in which they said that things are going to get better. I took their word for it. I put it all in an exhibition. The natives loved the show; they just laughed and chuckled. I still have natives coming up to me, shaking my hand and thanking me.

Shooting the Indian Act was funny, it was nasty, and it was serious. Sometimes you get so mad at something you just want to—

AA: —shoot it. (laughter)

LPY: Yeah. The work is called *An Indian Act Shooting the Indian Act*.