

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun exhibit captures Vancouver's surging interest in Indigenous art

The show's opening at the Museum of Anthropology was the best-attended in its history

BY SAMIA MADWAR MAY 26, 2016



Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in the Sky, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 56 × 89 inches. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada.

With an estimated 2,000 guests, the opening of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: *Unceded Territories* at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver this month was the largest in the institution's history. The Vancouver-based artist is of Coast Salish and Okanagan descent, and the exhibit, which runs until mid-October, covers 30 years of his work.

With titles such as *Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in the Sky* (1990) and *Christy Clark and the Kinder Morgan Go-Go Girls* (2015), Yuxweluptun's art strikes at corporations, government, and other supporters of the status quo. With its depictions of environmental destruction, the exhibit comes at a poignant time as British Columbians are currently debating the expansion of an oil pipeline.

But according to the show's co-curators — Karen Duffek, a curator with the MOA, and Tania Willard of the Secwepemc Nation, an independent artist and curator based in Chase, B.C. — the artist's popularity also reflects a shift in how Indigenous art is viewed.

Why do you think *Unceded Territories* attracted such a large crowd?

KD: In the 2,000-plus people we saw here, there was a huge range of ages. There were people of all nationalities, many aboriginal people and young people. Lawrence Paul's directness, his relevance, his in-your-face fearless artwork and how he speaks publicly; it just really seems to be grabbing many people.

TW: He always considers that he's not painting for a specific audience; he's not only painting for his community. He always discusses that he's a history painter and a modernist. Much as these things can seem incongruous, he is painting a history of now.

How are people's views of Indigenous art changing?

KD: I think Vancouver is a hotbed for new ways of presenting Indigenous art. There is quite a diverse range of galleries and institutions that are incorporating the art in different ways, being challenged by the work of Indigenous artists and being challenged to look differently at their areas of focus as well as to be more inclusive in the art they show.

TW: What I think is really important is that there's also representation of curatorial, administrative, board of director positions that are also open or there's opportunity there for Indigenous roles further than just an artist showing.

How do you think the historical collections housed in the MOA, largely featuring Northwest Coast objects, affect the way people view Yuxweluptun's contemporary art?

KD: There's a common tendency to look at historical Indigenous collections as somehow timeless. But when Lawrence's paintings refer to legislation that has affected Indigenous people, such as the Indian Act and anti-potlatch legislation, it's the same period of history as when the museum's collections were made.

Anti-potlatch legislation, which outlawed a central ceremony of Northwest Coast peoples, was in effect from 1885 to 1951. That period of colonization and massive culture change is where all of these historical objects were made and used. I'm hoping this exhibit will help historicize and politicize what is exhibited in the modernist framework of the museum.

Yuxweluptun has expressed his opposition to the MOA, calling it an "Indian morgue." How did he agree to have his work exhibited there?

KD: I think it was of interest to him because he could see his work intervening in this space. He said, "I don't need the museum to validate me." And one could argue he brings a new kind of validation to the museum by being shown here.

At the end of the exhibit, there's an interactive space where viewers are invited to suggest a new name for the province of British Columbia. Why did you incorporate that element in the exhibition?

TW: It positions us to think about the future, and to think about what it would look like if we renamed this province in a way that acknowledges that colonial history and acknowledges the place we're in today.