

Museum of Anthropology at UBC Presents Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: *Unceded Territories*

BY KELLY O'CONNOR AUGUST 4, 2016



Fish Farmers They Have Sea Lice, 2014 acrylic on canvas 162.6 x 244 cm

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, a celebrated Vancouver-based artist of Cowichan (Hul'q'umi'num Coast Salish) and Okanagan (Syilx) descent, has a style that is bold and vibrant, playful and politically charged, exploring themes of colonialist suppression and the struggle for Indigenous rights to lands, resources, and sovereignty. The Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at University of British Columbia (UBC) is proud to exhibit *Unceded Territories*, an impressive collection of his work on display May 10 to October 16, 2016 in the museum's Audain Gallery.

Curated by Karen Duffek and Tania Willard, *Unceded Territories* showcases Yuxweluptun's remarkable 30-year career and includes over 60 of his most significant drawings, paintings, and other works, as well as brand new art on display for the first time. A full-colour publication accompanies the exhibit, beautifully illustrated with selected works, and a series of public programs at the MOA will also compliment the exhibition. Visit [moa.ubc.ca/lawrence-paul] for details.

Highly respected locally, Yuxweluptun's work has been displayed in numerous international group and solo exhibitions. He has called the MOA the "Indian morgue," but *Unceded Territories* brings something current and vibrant and loud to a space where people and the past usually talk in whispers. Tania Willard (artist and independent curator from the Secwepemc Nation) explains that showing Yuxweluptun's work there is a statement, "a way for him to speak to an audience, an institution, a collection, a past, and his very own ancestors." Museums have an important place in the process of reconciliation. They can be an active site for facilitating discussion and articulating history for the wider public, "places of conversation, sharing, respect, celebration, and laughter," Willard explains. "There is medicine and spirit in this place, and though Lawrence's paintings are often dominated by their bold politics, they are also about medicine and spirit. Today we as Indigenous people come to this museum to speak to the poles, to laugh with the stones, to cry with the water, to struggle with weapons built on our culture, and to celebrate with colour our ancestors' carvings, weavings, and other objects."

MOA curator Karen Duffek predicts the exhibition will "undoubtedly fuel dialogue, indignation, and even spiritual awareness" about land rights, environmental destruction, and Indigenous art from the Northwest Coast. "The issues Yuxweluptun addresses are impossible to ignore," she explains. "Environmental concerns and debates around topics such as oil pipelines, liquefied natural gas, and fracking are no longer predictions for the future, but reflective of what is happening now in Canada."

Yuxweluptun is a free-thinking modernist, a graduate of the Emily Carr College of Art and Design "taking the translation of our cultures in new directions." He sees the land "in a Native way" as he was born to do, envisioning landscapes animated with spirit beings, "living components of the land, water, and atmosphere," Duffek explains, sometimes "wounded and grieving" from the ravages of industry and environmental toxins.

Larry Grant, an elder-in-residence at UBC First Nations House of Learning, first saw Yuxweluptun's work at the Vancouver Art Gallery. "I came around the corner and BOOM, there it was: a huge outcry coming from this painting," Grant recalls. "I could see the artist's anguish and anger." Grant says the conflict revealed Yuxweluptun's work is "not an imaginary thing—it's real." It is "an outcry about the injustices perpetrated by Canadian society on Aboriginal people." Grant sees Yuxweluptun as "a frontline activist" breaking free from cultural restraint with artistic license, "taking us out of the ancient terminology into contemporary terminology." In the process, there is a broader realization that we are all connected.

Yuxweluptun "Man of Many Masks" was given his name at the age of 14 during initiation into the Sxwaixwe Society, but Yuxweluptun doesn't claim to be making Native art. "I'm not a traditionalist," he says, "though I did my Black Face dancing, I did my masked dancing, and I have traditional philosophy. But my work is for the world. Natives already know what it feels like having a bad colonial day. We wake up to it."

Yuxweluptun uses the visual language of Northwest Coast art (classic formlines, U-forms, and ovoids of the Haida, Kwakwaka'wakw, Tlingit, and Tsimshian traditions), but pushes against those artistic boundaries. In the earliest painting on exhibit, "Haida Hot Dog" (1984), the artist took liberties with traditional ovoids, the split-U form, and the salmon-trout head to comment on "hot dog culture," assimilation, and the politics of identity. "Northwest Coast art is serious," Yuxweluptun says. "Haidas don't eat hot dogs."

Willard suggests he is responsive to, rather than influenced by, modernist masters like Salvador Dali, Pablo Picasso, and Max Ernst. The surrealists coveted and rabidly collected Northwest Coast art and objects, some of which were actually confiscated during potlatch raids when the ceremonies were illegal in Canada. Yuxweluptun has taken artistic elements of classical European styles like surrealism and cubism and fired them right back at colonialism.

"Man's job on this planet right now is to learn from our mistakes," Yuxweluptun says. He was working on a painting called "Killer Whale Has a Vision and Comes to Talk to Me about Proximological Encroachments of Civilizations in the Oceans" when the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill happened in 2010 along the Gulf of Mexico. "If you can't eat the fish, then there's something wrong," he says. On the rez, people watch the complete destruction of the biosphere of their territories. "It's a very sorrowful feeling," Yuxweluptun says, and disheartening that Aboriginal people don't have the right to say "No, you shouldn't have done that in the first place."

"Land is power; power is land," Yuxweluptun says. "For Indigenous people, it's all Indian land in desperate need of Indian caretakers." The largest clear-cuts in the world are not in the Amazon, they are in British Columbia, and you can see them from outer space. Yuxweluptun has been compared to Emily Carr, who also saw the destruction of the natural world as matricide. His painting "Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in Sky" (1990) was an early comment on global warming, illustrating the absurdity of scientists trying to fix the hole in the ozone layer with a screwdriver. "Do we continue to make a big hole in the sky?" the artist asks. There will be consequences for generations. "This is my homeland. I have to stay here and look after it, clean up this mess," Yuxweluptun says. "It's time for change. Canada has to grow up. We are the caretakers. The biosphere is too fragile for pipelines. Let us move in a new direction."

Yuxweluptun considers himself an "urban Indian" and thinks of reserves as "internment camps for glorification of the colonial regime." He wants to be emancipated from the oppressive legislation Indian Act and its assimilation policies designed to absorb Aboriginal peoples into "mainstream" Canadian life. The potlatch, one of the most important ceremonies among west coast First Nations, was seen as a threat to assimilation tactics, so it was outlawed, and the impact was significant. For 75 years this law prevented the sharing of cultural values and oral history. "How do you exile people and limit rights and call it democracy? How will we move forward if you're going to keep us prisoner on our own land?" he asks. "This is not my dream."

In 1997, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun went to Healey Estate, Northumberland, UK for a defiant act of performance art: "An Indian Act Shooting the Indian Act." On September 14th, he tied copies of the Indian Act to posts and "fired a shot at colonialism" while the national anthem played in the background. The British were "a bunch of assholes," so he shot it to "teach them with their own power." He decorated the sacred guns and mounted them in display cases along with the empty bullet casings and the executed legislation, and they can be seen in the *Unceded Territories* exhibit. The work was "blissful," he said, "one of the most loving things I've ever put my hands on."

Truth and reconciliation is a difficult thing to deal with in the face of the "global atrocity of genocide." In Canada, the United States, South America, Australia, everywhere Indigenous cultures met colonialism, "first contact" quickly became conquest. In pursuit of resources and real estate, colonists took the land, took everything, and left scars on the landscape and spirit of every community they touched. Lack of understanding easily turned to fear, and the First Peoples of North America were forcibly assimilated. Their children were taken away and put in specialized boarding schools with the express directive to "kill the Indian in the child."

Cultural and religious practices were outlawed, but they were not destroyed. Colonialism took Yuxweluptun's language, but he can talk to the world through his body of work. "Spirit Dancer Dances Around the Fire" is a religious painting that shows the world "this is how we pray." It is his most recent work, completed just weeks before the exhibit opened, and it takes up an entire wall. There is a spirit dancer in the longhouse, a black face dancer, spirit guardians in green and red, and sacred ground inside and out. Culture and spirituality remain unceded territory. To the Catholic Church, Yuxweluptun says "Thanks, but no thanks." The land is his sacred ground, and he has the right to be a spiritual person. "I will not get down on my knees and pray to your god," he says with conviction. "I'm always going to pray this way."

Some of his works evoke a deep human sorrow. There is no national monument for residential school children, so Yuxweluptun made his own. Laying on the gallery floor is *Residential School Dirty Laundry* (2013), a Christian cross composed of hundreds of pairs white underwear, some splashed with red. Another white ceramic cross in the centre reads "For this child I prayed . . . (1 Samuel 1:27)." Like war veterans, Aboriginal children gave up their lives and innocence to the Crown. It's an unflinching indictment: "This is what Canada did."

A pair of untitled ovoid portraits, described simply as Priest and Woman (2003) use singular ovoid forms outlined on white paper and detailed in inky black scribbles full of thought. They are facing you, but they have no face. They could be anyone. They are so simple in their form and colour, but they speak volumes and evoke a remarkable array of thoughts and feelings considered in the context of residential schools.

Yuxweluptun's work is both delicate and raw, and he pulls no punches. Each work makes a statement, tells a story. His vivid landscapes are visually alive, filled with animated spirits in the trees, mountains, and water, illustrating the symbiotic relationship of all things and the need for healing. He is a master colourist, with a vivid and broad "chromatic vocabulary" that earned him a second name: Let'lo:ts'teltun (Man of Many Colours). "I paint the colour of life," he says."

"I have been an artist all my life," he says. "It's been my life's goal to portray the negative and positive realities of this world." He refers to his work as "history painting," taking possession of history in his own hands. "The things I see are very hard, depressing," Yuxweluptun admits. "My job is to enlighten people to see the world in a different way. I'm not asking for much. It's simple. Look after our people, look after our children, make a better world." As for National Aboriginal Day: "Make it a national holiday. Celebrate with me. Make change properly, together," he says. "It's time to take the walls down."