

## Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: Canada Is Not a Pretty Picture

BY BEVERLY CRAMP APRIL 29, 2016



*Fish Farmers*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 162.6 x 244 cm

It doesn't take long for visitors to the Vancouver studio of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun to discover what's on his mind. A sign next to the door reads: "Studio on unceded native land." Inside are several completed paintings, some with images of people in business suits, their heads depicted in traditional formline. It's hard to miss the snaking forked tongues.

But then anyone with even a vague knowledge of Yuxweluptun's work over the last three decades knows he's going to get political. Whether the topic is aboriginal rights, land claims, reservations, missing and murdered women, or environmental degradation, he's got plenty to say.

Politics is a cornerstone of Yuxweluptun's art – he's best known for large acrylic canvases that blend traditional Coast Salish and modernist styles, often incorporating vivid acid-toned, almost brutal colours. He has also levelled sharp critiques in video, sculpture and performance works.

Even the title of his retrospective, *Unceded Territories*, at UBC's Museum of Anthropology from May 10 to Oct. 16, makes a point. The show includes more than 60 pieces, mostly paintings and drawings, some so new they've never been exhibited. But several of his best-known works are also on display: *Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in the Sky* and *The Impending Nisga'a Deal*. *Last Stand*. *Chump Change*, for instance. The show also features *An Indian Act: Shooting the Indian Act*, which documents a 1997 performance in Britain at the Healey Estate in Northumberland, where Yuxweluptun shot 20 paper copies of Canada's Indian Act.

Recent media coverage of First Nations' issues will likely boost interest in *Unceded Territories*. "It's extremely timely what with environmental issues and First Nations' land rights being in the consciousness of Canadian people," says Karen Duffek, a curator at the museum who organized the show with Tania Willard, an artist and independent curator from the Secwepemc Nation in the B.C. Interior. "There has been so much coverage about oil pipelines, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, the Idle No More movement, and similar topics. Many Canadians are better informed of these issues."

Yuxweluptun got his introduction to politics early. His father, of Coast Salish (Cowichan) heritage, was an official of the North American Indian Brotherhood, a short-lived national lobby group that morphed into other significant First Nations' organizations. His mother, from an Okanagan First Nation (Syilx), was executive director of the Indian Homemakers' Association, a provincial women's group that drew attention to gender issues in aboriginal politics and government legislation.

Yuxweluptun's earliest formal education was at the Kamloops Indian Residential School. Remembering that period, he asks: "Do you know what the difference is between a residential school and a public school?" The answer: "There are no graveyards." Black humour, so much a part of Yuxweluptun's art, is linked to the pain and attendant anger of First Nations' life in Canada.

After Yuxweluptun went to a public school for the first time, he asked his father why there was no graveyard. "My dad's reply was, 'No, they're not like that.' And that's when I knew that there was something different in this country. Those were the kinds of events that were ongoing in my life – the kinds that were ongoing for all native people. Whatever they were experiencing, I was experiencing, especially in human rights."

Yuxweluptun began making art while he was at school. His father carved totem poles and he wanted to learn. "His assistants gave me a piece of yellow cedar with the design of a thunderbird cut out as much possible on a band saw. I had to hand-carve the rest." Yuxweluptun worked after school hours on his budding passion. "I would sit on the steps of the residential school and carve," he says.

Over the years, Yuxweluptun says he learned to question accepted wisdom and draw his own conclusions. Thus, when listening to a lesson about Canadian Confederation, he thought: "They annexed this province into Confederation without consent . . . Then Canada interns Indians on reservations. Are we talking democracy or are we talking fascism? If it quacks like a fascist duck, looks like a fascist duck, it's a fascist duck. Putting Indians into internment camps is no way to celebrate. Don't expect me to celebrate Canada Day. It's just not a pretty country."

Yuxweluptun completed high school in Richmond, B.C., when his family moved there from Kamloops. He attended what is now the Emily Carr University of Art and Design, graduating in 1983 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting. He soon began making references to Surrealism, Pop Art and Abstract Expressionism in his paintings. He has never claimed to be working within First Nations' art traditions. It has led some to refer to his work as Neo-Native, particularly pieces that isolate the oval forms often seen in traditional Northwest Coast art.

"People use surrealism to describe his landscapes," says Duffek. "But he calls it visionist. Lawrence speaks of himself always as a modern artist. He stakes his territory by being First Nation and asserting that he has the right to use all art styles and forms as he wishes." She talks about Yuxweluptun's application of European abstraction in his so-called ovoidist paintings. "He uses the non-referential aspect of abstraction, that is, isolated forms on a canvas that have no cultural references but that direct back to his titles with the political points he is making."

Other First Nations' artists have used ovoidism. "Doug Cranmer did it in the 1980s and 1990s," says Duffek. "And Robert Davidson used it as well with Haida notions of abstractions that read as modernist paintings. Lawrence Paul is also isolating ovoids and creating abstract images, but these are direct commentaries against confining aboriginal art and thought. He is using it as a declaration of his existential right as an artist to say and do what he wants."

Yuxweluptun draws explanations back to the political realm. "I'm looking at history," he says. "This body of work is about unceded territories. It's like saying, 'Okay, now that I'm in the Bill of Human Rights as a native, and that you want equality for everyone, if you want to cut a tree down, pay for it. If you want a glass of water, pay for it. If you want electricity, pay for it. If you want to build a mine, pay for it. Why should native people be sitting on reservations and be sitting in poverty when this whole province is ours? The colonial free ride that I see, and those trying to keep it, well, it's like talking to a bunch of chronic, habitual thieves."

His anger over environmental degradation can be seen in a painting he did last year, the darkly humorous *Christy Clark and the Kinder Morgan Go Go Girls*. It's a figurative work that shows three women in business suits, their heads painted in formline. The middle figure, with a forked tongue, is clearly the B.C. premier. All three women have long, talon-like fingernails. Talking about last year's spill of bunker oil in Vancouver's English Bay, Yuxweluptun's frustration shows: "Now we're talking about having 400 oil tankers off the coast?"

Yuxweluptun's artistic commentary does not let First Nations off the hook, although most of his critique is about the damage inflicted on them. "I look at it all," he says. "That's my job – to handle life's history.

"What is a reservation in Canada? This is where we segregate national aboriginal people. These are the Canadian legacies – the treaties and reservations. It's not a great relationship that this country has with aboriginal people. We have a very racist, segregated country. It's not a pretty picture, so this is what I paint."