

Spirit shining through: Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun

BY MICHAEL ABATEMARCO AUGUST 3, 2018



Floor Opener, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 76 × 96 inches. Courtesy of the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art.

In Salish longhouses among the Northwest Coast tribes, certain ceremonies begin with songs sung by guests who are selected by the host. They are the “floor-openers,” whose spirit songs open the way for ceremonial evenings that can last until the dawn.

“There’s a religious war going on in this world,” said Vancouver-based artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, who is of Salish and Okanagan descent. His painting *Floor Opener*, on view in SITE Santa Fe’s biennial exhibit Casa tomada, was made in response, he said, to “fear of the other,” as a way to counteract the sensibilities that drove the abhorrent treatment of indigenous peoples under colonial rule throughout the Americas. “I think that type of painting can clarify and help people understand that there are different ways of worshipping and not always one set way,” he said. The painting depicts an interaction with the spirit realm inside a longhouse, with dancers in transformative states of being. It is unclear, perhaps deliberately so, if the dancers are people embodying spirit forms or spirit forms themselves.

While it has a surrealist tone in terms of imagery, the painting reflects something of Yuxweluptun’s real-life experience. “It is a religious painting,” he said. “It makes people more aware of what it’s like. If you can’t be in a longhouse, I bring the longhouse to you. I’m trying to make it timeless and visionary. A lot of my work is from memory, so it becomes more timeless in its vision. I’ve been in longhouses where I’ve felt like I was there five thousand years ago. There’s no electricity, you have a sense of the fire, and then you’re listening to 500 drums, seeing somebody’s spirit song. That’s some of the things that go on in the spirit ceremonies in the winter. It’s about that part of my life.”

The religious practices of the peoples of the Northwest Coast were outlawed by the Canadian government throughout much of the 20th century. The impact of colonialism on Northwest Coast tribes is part of the context Yuxweluptun addresses in his work. “They send out the Catholics first, and they come and put the children in these residential schools,” he said. “Then they start to molest them, then they start to kill them. Then they start to do experiments on them. Then they starve them. They’re expendables. This is what colonialism is about. It gives nothing but death in the name of God, country, queen, or whatever.”

Yuxweluptun’s work as a painter and sculptor preserves aspects of Northwest Native culture from a contemporary and personal standpoint. He takes the ovoid forms traditionally incorporated into the masks, carvings, and other art forms of the Northwest Coast tribes, and uses them as the major visual motif of his works. He refers to the practice as “ovoidism.” In his “Manifesto of Ovoidism,” he writes, “The rule of ovoidism is to maintain some part of, or all of, the shape of the ovoid. At the same time, the ovoid serves as a philosophy to think about such things as land claims, Aboriginal rights, self-determination and self-government, social conditions and environmentalism, Native reason and Native philosophy — all of these things have to be synthesized together. I am simplifying a way to discuss my mind and how I feel. This body of work is a new way for me to express Native ‘modernities’ and to intellectualize place, space, and Native reason.”

In addition to the painting, SITE is showing a number of Yuxweluptun’s Neo-Totems, new sculptures that adhere to the principles of ovoidism. According to his manifesto, “Ovoids can be made into sculptures and all other forms of art as long as you retain the principles and guidelines that are deemed absolute” — for example, that ovoids can be any color, and only ovoids can be used. The sculptural works include abstract ground totems — one blue, one white — as well as animal forms: a bear and a snake. “The snake looks like a chain,” he said. “I’ll leave that up to people’s imaginations about where that came from.” The sculptures are additive, assembled works made of cedar and Douglas fir. “They’re quite modern. The process I use is creating the ovoids, cutting them, and putting them together. It’s completely the opposite of traditional carving as a concept.” In combining ovoidism with imagery drawn from the representational traditions of the Northwest Coast, the works in the Neo-Totems series retain a connection to the spirit world of the Salish.