

Colour becomes symbol in these dazzling paintings

BY ROBERT ENRIGHT FEBRUARY 24, 2001 (UPDATED APRIL 9, 2018)



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, Ottawa.

Vancouver's Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun is probably the best, and certainly the most innovative, aboriginal painter working in Canada today. His exhibition at Winnipeg's Plug In Gallery, which travels shortly to Montreal's Saidye Bronfman Gallery, marks the first time viewers outside British Columbia have had an opportunity to see his challenging and beautiful work in the scope of a one-person show.

Born in 1957, Yuxweluptun has exhibited extensively in Europe (where there is a ravenous commercial demand for his paintings), but his exposure in his own country has been limited to group shows. What makes this exhibition so welcome is that it indicates the quality and kind of his achievement. It also suggests that his inability to carve a niche for himself in the traditional world of West Coast aboriginal art comes from his critical questioning of its values and practices. He is uncomfortable with the designation of aboriginal artist; he considers himself a contemporary artist who happens to be aboriginal.

In a career that began before he graduated with honours from Vancouver's Emily Carr College of Art in 1983, Yuxweluptun has made art that "was about looking at images of power and betrayal." The main target of his gaze were the forces destroying native culture and the environment (which for him are one and the same thing). His large landscapes were populated by figures that were themselves hybridized from various West Coast motifs. The signature painting within this style, *Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in Sky* (1990), shows a white man in a lab coat perched precariously on the shoulders of his blonde assistant, trying to patch in a huge piece of sky that has fallen out. The whole enterprise is constructed to come down like a house of cards. While he might have had Chicken Little and the parable of the falling sky in mind when he made it, the painting has since been adopted for loftier purposes and has become the poster image for environmentalists. The protectors in these remarkable paintings are remnant spirits, an equal product of traditional Salish forms and surreal imaginings.

But Yuxweluptun has not been content to take visual aim only at the industrial world-destroyers. His temperament runs toward trickstering, and the questions he directs at white culture he has been inclined to reframe for his own. In *Haida Hot Dog* he used another West Coast tribal identity to make a ridiculous lavender hot dog; in *Alcoholism on the Rez* he looked squarely at a social problem in which, he has said, "sometimes a bottle is bigger than a reservation." His candour and tendency to play with traditional forms has not ingratiated him either with mainstream culture or with other First Nations artists. Nor have the transformations through which he has taken the formal components of his art made him an easy fit into any school or movement.

On the evidence of the work in *Colour Zone*, that outsider position is one he will continue to occupy. He still makes his brand of figurative surrealism, but three years ago began a series of paintings that reduced his subject matter to a single, simplified form. Initially, he placed black shapes on snow-white grounds; then he stacked various colours to make neo-totems; and recently he has employed these shapes in multiple sizes and unpredictable colours to create paintings that look as if a kaleidoscope has been freeze-framed.

He calls this work "ovoidism." The shape is a Salish form that has been extracted from its normal use in traditional culture and used to compose a new visual syntax. So the source of these paintings remains culturally specific, while their look can be more broadly interpreted. At times, the stacked ovoids look like early Adolf Gottlieb; his coloured shapes on white look like Jules Olitski circa 1963, or Ken Lochhead from 15 years later; his black-and-white palette-knifed canvases seem close relations to Borduas. But saying which other painters these pieces put you in mind of is only a way of acknowledging how good they are as paintings. For all of his awareness of other art, these works unmistakably belong to their maker.

I know of few painters who can make you feel silly because of the smile that creeps across your face in the presence of their work. In the Plug In exhibition you feel giddy with pleasure. The totems are especially fine — a joyous reduction of the totem's narrative to a story about radiant colour. As the composition of the ovoid paintings becomes more complicated, their colour sense gets more audacious — reminiscent of Jack Bush. One of his paintings is called *Caution: You Are Now Entering a Free State of Mind Zone*. There is no need to worry; the zone Yuxweluptun occupies is one in which he is making up the rules as he goes along. So far the game is dazzling.