

## Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, the indigenous history painter of modern life

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN MAY 5, 2016



Christy Clark and the Kinder Morgan Go-Go Girls, acrylic on canvas

Just who does Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun think he is?

He's blunt and direct in ways we don't often associate with indigenous people — or at least with those quoted in the media. As an artist, he doesn't have to speak in coded terms like a politician; he can speak truths many people would rather not hear.

He sees himself as a history painter whose works are about putting indigenous people and issues in stories about contemporary life. He does that with figurative and abstract works that are full of striking and vibrant colours.

Ask Yuxweluptun a question about art, for example, and he usually doesn't stay there for very long. He'll soon point out how most of British Columbia has never been ceded by treaty and that back rent is due because it's pretty well all "Indian land." He'll say that indigenous people like him have been living under occupation and colonialism since Confederation. The Indian Act? He calls it the White Supremacy Act.

He gets angry about missing and murdered aboriginal women and the role played by residential schools in dismantling indigenous culture. He thinks National Aboriginal Day on June 21 should be declared a national holiday on par with Victoria Day. He also thinks there should be a referendum on a new name for British Columbia that recognizes aboriginal sovereignty. One of his suggestions is Traditional Native Territories.

Yuxweluptun has even come up with a term to describe the effect of settler culture on indigenous people: he calls it "colonial stress disorder syndrome."

He doesn't limit himself to what might be called B.C. issues; he's also passionate about global concerns such as the hole in the ozone and how the one-per-centers of the world — he calls them super predators — are getting richer at the expense of the planet's health.

He makes art about all these so-called taboo topics because he sees himself as a history painter in the European tradition. In the world of painting, that means placing the present rather than the past in a certain kind of narrative. Yuxweluptun's narrative puts indigenous people in contemporary settings to take possession of them.

"It's part of being a history painter," he said in interview in his studio. "You don't always like the subject matter, but someone has to do it. That's the difficult thing of gazing at your own culture: you have to accept what's in front of you."

An exhibition of Yuxweluptun's paintings and other works opens May 10 in the Museum of Anthropology at the University of B.C. Called *Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: Unceded Territories*, the exhibition is Yuxweluptun's first major solo exhibition in the country in 20 years and features more than 60 of his paintings, drawings and other works in the Audain Gallery.

Of Coast Salish and Okanagan descent, Yuxweluptun was born in Kamloops but grew up in the Lower Mainland. Part of the first generation of indigenous people who didn't go to residential school, he went to public school and played hockey with non-native children in Richmond. Although he didn't play on a native team, he did play for two years for B.C.'s aboriginal all-star team. He's a graduate of Emily Carr College of Art and Design and is the father of six girls. He's 58 years old.

In terms of art made in Vancouver, Yuxweluptun stands out for achieving success as a painter in a city known for photo and camera-based art. At the recent auction for the Vancouver Art Gallery, for example, a new painting by Yuxweluptun went for \$100,000.

One of the most distinctive series in Yuxweluptun's works are paintings that put Northwest Coast forms in 3-D landscapes like those found in traditional European historical paintings.

*Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in the Sky* depicts an indigenous figure constructed Humpty-Dumpty-like of ovoids of various Northwest Coast shapes watching as scientists in white lab coats try to fill the hole in the blue sky. In the foreground, Northwest Coast totem pole figures are draped Salvador-Dali like on the mountains where they look on helplessly at the environmental disaster taking place in front of them.

Besides the overt political content, Yuxweluptun's work also has another quality: humour, and it's part of what makes his paintings more than didactic statements.

In *Christy Clark and the Kinder Morgan Go-Go Girls* the three women are all dressed in smart yellow, blue and red business suits. Their heads are in profile, like Northwest Coast creatures, with one eye. Their nails are long, pointed and threatening. The central figure is Clark. Yuxweluptun said he enjoyed painting her forked tongue.

It was Yuxweluptun's cheekiness that first caught the attention of Museum of Anthropology's Karen Duffek, the exhibition's co-curator with Tania Willard. Willard is an artist and independent curator from the Secwepemc Nation, whose traditional territory is in interior of the province around Kamloops and Shuswap.

In 1985 at the Bentbox Gallery on South Granville, Duffek saw Yuxweluptun's *Haida Hotdog* — an acrylic painting of a hotdog that seemed to be saying that the emerging Northwest Coast art market was producing art similar to mass produced commercial hotdogs.

Duffek had never seen anything like it before.

"It just seemed so sacrilegious," she said. "It was thumbing its nose at the Northwest Coast art market, in a sense, and what constituted appropriate subject matter."

For the exhibition at MOA, Duffek said she, Willard and Yuxweluptun were aware of the context of showing his work at an institution with such a significant collection of Northwest Coast art.

Duffek said MOA felt the subject matter in Yuxweluptun's work would be extremely timely to address in an exhibition.

"We think his themes and concerns will resonate hugely with audiences, because in B.C. the subjects of oil pipelines and indigenous histories and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and grassroots movements like Idle No More have really brought the kind of histories he's talking about to the fore," she said.

"We think the climate has literally changed for his work."