

Humour in Contemporary Indigenous Photography: Re-focusing the Colonial Gaze

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Abstract: Although photography has long been used as a tool of colonial oppression to portray Indigenous peoples as either a “vanishing race” or to confirm their assimilation into the dominant colonial culture, contemporary Indigenous photographers are using humour to turn the colonial gaze back on itself. This article discusses the use of humour as a teaching tool by exploring the role of the “trickster” as a mode of subversion. Five Indigenous artists’ works are analyzed through this lens in order to show how contemporary Indigenous photographers employ elements of irony and satire to reveal the insidious nature of colonial stereotypes.

Key Terms: Indigenous Photography; Colonial Gaze; Trickster; Ethnographic Photography.

Introduction

Contemporary Indigenous photographers in Canada exist in a world saturated with images of Indigenous peoples that act as propaganda for a dominating colonial system. These images empower a colonial narrative by emphasizing that Indigenous peoples are subjugated, disempowered, and in the process of inevitable assimilation (Spears, 2005). As such they are relegated to a static historical past, and any Indigenous artwork created within this narrative is treated as evidence of a rapidly disappearing culture. These attitudes are perpetuated in mainstream culture today despite the fact that Indigenous artists have fostered, and continue to foster, a flourishing artistic community in the face of hegemonic cultural oppression, which has often forced them to work underground (Man, 1997). Today Indigenous photographers are stepping proudly into the limelight.

The purpose of this article is to provide a brief introduction to how Indigenous people have been represented by North American photographic media in particular, and more generally how Indigenous artworks have been displayed and interpreted by a non-Indigenous population. I first provide an overview of these ideas in order to create a foundation for the discussion of several contemporary Indigenous photographers. These artists, using a complex system of tools, are disrupting the colonial gaze and re-claiming Indigenous identity. They are

not only de-constructing the colonial past, but are transforming it in order to express both individual and community identity. I focus specifically on artists using photography tinged with humour and irony in order to convey their cultural and political messages to a modern audience. Contemporary Indigenous artists are de-constructing the myths that have pushed them aside and are re-creating a new identity for themselves from their own perspectives using a 'trickster' paradigm.

The Colonial Gaze

The ways in which Indigenous peoples have been studied and understood has been obscured by knowledge constructed about them by others (Townsend-Gault, 2006). Settlers have created a colonial mythology that is shaped by the colonizer's fantasy of the 'Native' (Spears, 2005). Through this colonial gaze the colonizer's sense of place is confirmed, and colonizers perceive only what they believe to be fundamentally true of Indigenous people and culture. This mythology reinforces a sense of superiority and maturity over the people that it sees and has become so entrenched that in some cases even Indigenous people themselves have come to believe these fictions (Spears, 2005). This oppressive system continually perpetuates the myth of the 'Indian'. This imagery is visible in mainstream news, magazines, literature, art, advertisements, and in Hollywood movies such as Disney's *Pocahontas*.

Many of these media are aimed at vulnerable youth (Warn, 2007). As a result, every Canadian has been influenced by these conceptions of Indigenous people to varying degrees. The reality is that there is no "mythical Hiawatha...saddened Chief Joseph...scowling Sitting Bull... [or] sullen Geronimo" (Warn, 2007, p. 75). Like the savage warrior, the noble feathered brave, the lusty woman in double braids, and the magical medicine man, these images represent a colonial fiction. The images that perpetuate this rationalizing fiction effectively transform myth into nature (Spears, 2005). If an individual comes to understand their assumptions about Indigenous people as biological, their attributes and behaviours can be understood as natural and unchangeable. These naturalizing myths relieve the colonizer of any responsibility in the creation of social problems within Indigenous communities (Spears, 2005). It allows for the idea of Indigenous people as naturally prone to issues such as alcoholism, ignoring the historical use of alcohol in order to oppress Indigenous peoples (Spears, 2005). Indigenous people are seen as biologically prone to sickness, dismissing a lengthy and devastating history of disease-spreading by colonizing forces (Spears, 2005). These notions therefore

purify the history of colonialism and provide justification for the displacement, oppression and continued abuse of Indigenous peoples. Images of Indigenous peoples are one of the principal means of communicating these myths and allowed settler populations to re-assert their relationship of power over the colonized since the “gazer [was] superior to the object of the gaze” (Spears, 2005, p. 10).

Photography & Myth-Making

Photographs have been particularly effective in perpetuating oppressive ideas as a result of the assumption of truth inherent within the medium. Since they are representations of real people, the viewer is more likely to believe that they are being shown truth rather than a construction. Photographs therefore become divorced from their creator, history, editing and construction processes (Spears, 2005). Assumptions drawn from photographs of Indigenous peoples are effective because while they work through a connotative process, the audience comes to understand their meanings as “denotative, or, literally, the truth” (Spears, 2005, p. 6). In order to further examine how these ideas were first perpetuated it is important to discuss two principal types of colonial era imagery. The first is the early photographs created to document the assumed disappearance of Indigenous peoples (Walsh, 2002). The second is the group of photographs produced to further the narrative of Canada’s economic expansion and the assimilation of Indigenous peoples into Canadian society (Walsh, 2002).



Figure 1. *Cowichan Indians Performing Whale Dance, 1945.* Image 1-27569 courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives.

The first type of photograph created many of the signs of cultural identity that people now associate with Indigenous peoples (Walsh, 2002). Their narratives tended to focus on portraying Indigenous life before contact with Europeans. A large portion of these images show Indigenous peoples dressed in traditional regalia or set against a natural landscape (Walsh, 2002). One such example is titled *Cowichan Indians Performing Whale Dance* (Figure 1). This image shows a group of Cowichan men dancing in regalia with drummers in the background. It is an excellent example of how Canadian authorities attempted to collect information about Indigenous cultural traditions (Walsh, 2002). What should be noted about these photographs is the lack of contextual information that is included with them. There are no specifics provided, and the individuals and communities remain anonymous entertainment for consumption by the non-indigenous viewer. They remain part of the popular non-indigenous experience and tend to emphasize Indigenous peoples' identity as collective or as deriving from a particular Nation (Walsh, 2002) despite the fact that Indigenous peoples of the Americas were divided into approximately two thousand distinct cultures and societies at the time of first contact (Berkhofer, 1978). By creating a singular idea of the "Indian," settlers were able to categorize, describe and analyze diverse cultures more easily (Berkhofer, 1978). This oversimplification has today formed the basis of the "Indian" stereotype that stands in for all Indigenous peoples, regardless of their cultural, social and linguistic differences (Berkhofer, 1978).



Figure 2: *Harrison River: Chehalis Indian Confirmation Class, 1938.* Image F-00167courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives.

The second type of photograph typically depicts an important part of the colonial narrative, emphasizing Indigenous peoples' religious and

scholastic re-education and assimilation into mainstream white culture (Walsh, 2002). The photograph, *Harris River: Chehalis Indians Confirmation Class* (Figure 2), dated to May 16th, 1938, is an example of this trend. It shows a group of approximately a dozen Indigenous children on their day of Confirmation (Walsh, 2002). Sitting in front of the youths is a non-indigenous priest and a bishop of the church (Walsh, 2002). To the left stands a group of younger children who may represent the next generation of converts. This image is a glimpse into the wider narrative of cultural assimilation of the early 20th century. This type of photograph utilized imagery of Indigenous children dressed in European clothing to demonstrate that Indigenous peoples could be molded to fit within the colonial order (Spears, 2005). They reassured a non-indigenous audience fearful of the ‘barbaric Indian’ that Indigenous people were still disempowered and subjugated and would not challenge the order of Western settler society (Spears, 2005).

Both types of photograph either showed Indigenous Canadians as completely distinct from mainstream Canadian society or in some stage of the assimilation into the dominant social order (Walsh, 2002). They are generic in their documentation of the Indigenous experience and give little insight into the lives or conditions of individuals at any point in history (Walsh, 2002). It is important to note that although these images were accepted at face value by settler society, they were themselves constructed and manipulated (Spears, 2005). They acted as deliberately engineered propaganda that allowed settlers to maintain their authority and power over the Indigenous population. Both types of photograph served to eclipse Indigenous creative pursuits, since all Indigenous artwork was deemed merely a product of a rapidly disappearing culture.

Indigenous Art as Exotic Curiosity or Ethnographic Specimen

The exhibition of Indigenous art on its own terms in the mainstream art world is a relatively new phenomenon. The collection and display of Indigenous art since colonization has mostly been as exotic curiosities, antiquities, and remnants of a cultural past (Clifford, 2006). Attempts to create parallels between Indigenous art and European art were often made with the former being considered inferior to the latter. Indigenous objects were classified either as ethnographic specimens or archaic art (Clifford, 2006). Exhibitions of Indigenous art, including contemporary art, usually labeled the works as ‘primitive’. This description was first encouraged by exhibitions held in the 1920s and 1940s (Warn, 2007). Later, the distinction between ethnographic specimen and art object was put in

place on an institutional level (Clifford, 2006). In ethnographic museums Indigenous artworks were displayed within a cultural context, while in art galleries they were displayed based on perceived aesthetic qualities (Clifford, 2006).

Even in the 1980s this distinction was evident as Indigenous arts were relegated either to a “vanishing past or an ahistorical, conceptual present” (Clifford, 2006, p. 156). If an object was classified as being of anthropological interest, its aesthetic qualities were overlooked. If an object was classified as art, this meant the exclusion of its cultural context. When Indigenous art was called ‘art’ its complex cultural background was replaced with ambiguous definitions of its primitive qualities (Clifford, 2006). Objects in this system are placed in a vague and distant past and described as having qualities such as ritualism, magic and closeness to nature (Clifford, 2006). Applying these qualities to anonymous art objects and individuals further homogenizes the cultural identity of the artists who are exhibiting their works. In this vein an art object must be detached from its cultural context in order for it to circulate in the world of markets, museums and connoisseurship (Clifford, 2006). Both narratives supported the idea of Indigenous art as primitive and in need of preservation. Indigenous artists are therefore denied the ability to exist as contemporary artists who have been influenced by both their cultural past and their modern reality.

“The Trickster Shift”: Humour as Didactic Tool

Contemporary Indigenous artists exist in a world of multiple meanings. There is no singular definition of Indigenous art and any attempt to define Indigenous artists using a two-dimensional framework would force them into the same narrow set of thoughts that have long been used to oppress and control Indigenous peoples and culture. One way in which artists are subverting the colonial gaze is through humour, much of which plays on the multiple layers of identity present in Indigeneity. This trend in contemporary Indigenous art is called the trickster paradigm (Warn, 2007), or trickster shift (Ryan, 1999). As art historian Allan Ryan explains, this aesthetic is a movement of politically conscious, socially active, and professionally trained Indigenous artists using humour in their art in order to relay important cultural messages (1999). Some of the most prominent artists in this movement include Carl Beam, Rebecca Belmore, Bob Boyer, George Littlechild, David Neel, Shelley Niro, Jane Ash Poitras, Bill Powless, Alex Janvier and Lawrence Paul Yuxwelupton, among many others (Ryan, 1999). What unites the work of these artists is

the use of an ironic and wry sense of humour. There is a spirit of play in these artists' work that is grounded in a comic worldview central to Indigenous thought.

Ryan points out that many artists who work within this aesthetic identify the role of the 'trickster' as central to their work (1999). Rather than being a homogenizing generalization, most of the artists and writers who discuss the issue of humour suggest that a comic attitude is shared by diverse Indigenous cultures, which is communal and transcends tribal and geographic boundaries (Ryan, 1999). Teasing is a cultural practice in many indigenous cultures and is linked to the trickster figure (Spears, 2005). The trickster is a central figure in many Indigenous epistemologies, known for his ability to transform and his love of play (Warn, 2007). Since figures such as the trickster are spiritual rather than physical beings they are often not easily defined. Many oral traditions use the trickster as a model for how to survive (Warn, 2007). The character is often portrayed as flawed, making humorous mistakes that are used to educate and entertain. This is a duality that is important to the trickster and his function, and Indigenous peoples have been telling stories of this figure and using humour since long before contact. Techniques such as teasing, parody, pun, satire, irony and double entendre are often employed (Warn, 2007). Teasing is often used as a means to control social situations (Warn, 2007). Instead of publicly embarrassing members of the community, those who step out of line with social norms are teased (Warn, 2007). This sense of humour can also be turned inwards, and individuals use this method in order to demonstrate their humility (Warn, 2007).

Humour continues today as a way through which Indigenous communities can begin to tackle a long and painful history of oppression (Fagan, 2001). Indigenous artists today use humour not only as a healing mechanism within their own communities, but also to confront sensitive issues which are often deliberately ignored or unacknowledged by a settler audience. Humour in this way acts as a type of 'Trojan Horse' which has the ability to create common ground with a non-indigenous audience without being threatening or confrontational (Gruber, 2008). Thus a basis for communication is maintained and issues such as "justice, loss of land, discrimination, [and] racism" can be openly explored (Gruber, 2008, p. 118). Humour in Indigenous art therefore acts as a way of directing the response of the audience (Ryan, 1999). It can be used as a sort of "spiritual shock therapy" that deconstructs patterns of rationality and thought in the viewer (Ryan, 1999, p. 11). The audience may then

potentially “align their empathy with Native viewpoints,” creating a sense of solidarity (Gruber, 2008, p. 118). In this way, contemporary Indigenous artists are continuing the tradition of the trickster through photography, using humour to confront and question their own assumptions. As Oneida Comedian Charlie Hill points out, humour has the ability to “[turn] poison into medicine” (Warn, 2007, p. 76).

Re-claiming the Myth: Chris Bose



Figure 3. *Thomas Moore*, Chris Bose, 2009. Image courtesy of the artist.

Chris Bose is a member of the Nlaka’pamux Nation and is a self-described “poet, musician, photographer, filmmaker and digital storyteller” working out of Kamloops B.C. (Urban Coyote TeeVee, n.d.). In his digitally created image *Thomas Moore* (Figure 3) Chris Bose reclaims the second type of photograph discussed earlier, those showing Indigenous children in the process of being ‘re-educated’. Bose utilized two original photographs from Library and Archives Canada in order to create a striking, and ironic, message. The original photograph shows a typical colonial image in which an Indigenous child is shown in the process of transforming from ‘primitive’ to ‘civilized’. The child in question, Thomas Moore, is shown on the left before his entrance into the Regina Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan in 1874 (Urban Coyote TeeVee, n.d.). In this image he is shown in elaborate regalia with his hair in two long braids that fall down his sides. He is set against a

natural landscape, maintaining his connection to the natural world, a feature which is also prevalent in salvage portraiture. His violent nature is emphasized by the inclusion of what appears to be a gun in his right hand, with his finger menacingly poised on the trigger. On the right we are shown the same child after having been put through the ‘civilizing’ process of residential school. He is shown in a military-style suit leaning casually on an armoire. He appears much smaller than in the first photograph, dwarfed by the Western-style furniture that surrounds him.

The irony Bose plays on is already inherent in the photographs themselves. The idea of the young ‘before’ child being a threatening figure who needs to be tamed would be laughable if it did not demonstrate such a frightening attitude in the minds of colonial powers. We are shown the development of this ‘wild’ boy into a demure young man. The effect of the imagery is to showcase that the threat has been neutralized through assimilation. Over top of these images Bose places his own stream-of-consciousness poetry, deliberately disrupting the gaze of the colonizer. His words are rife with sarcasm and irony as he discusses contemporary attitudes towards Indigenous peoples. He suggests that it is only from an Indigenous perspective that the pain of this history can be understood, and that “the ones in power,”:

Ask childlike questions about my race about why my people
seem so lost so timid revealing something so sad about
themselves...they just want to empathize and feel it for half an
hour not even to understand it but to hold it for a little while to
study it and they will go back and write a grant about it and get
some money to study it further and perpetuate the dumb.

His message is clear and directly confrontational, addressing a highly sensitive subject with a dose of irony. By providing the viewer with familiar images of the ‘Indian’ he draws them in. It is through the direct juxtaposition of colonial images with his own satire that he has created an expression of frustration and anger which re-asserts control and ownership of the colonial photograph.

Moving Forward: Contemporary Indigenous Photographers

Shelley Niro

Other artists create works that are somewhat less overt in their message but nevertheless tackle difficult issues using contemporary mediums. One such artist is Shelley Niro, a Mohawk artist from the Six Nations of Grand River in Ontario (McMaster, 1998). Niro’s Art takes the form of *funny and sharply ironic* photographs which force the viewer to question

their own ideas about indigeneity. Her works *The Rebel* (Figure 4) and *Mohawks in Beehives I* (Figure 5) portray contemporary middle-aged Mohawk women in poses that do anything but evoke colonial myths of Indigenous peoples. Instead we see a reversal of gaze, especially in *The Rebel*. *The Rebel* shows an older Mohawk woman, Niro's mother, in everyday clothing posed in a jokingly provocative pose over the trunk of an old car (Ryan, 1992). Here we see not only a redefined image of a Mohawk woman which leaves no room for colonial fiction, but also a critique of the over-sexualized Western media which aims to sell "fast toys to big boys" (Ryan, 1992, p. 61). It criticizes the values of sexuality and materiality upon which Western mainstream society is based and creates a suggestion of a new standard of beauty (Ryan, 1992). In *Mohawks in Beehives I* we also see a great sense of play as Niro creates a highly personal image which both accurately reflects individual experience and the contemporary experiences of a larger community.

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See this image on the artist's website
at http://www.shelleyniro.ca/Shelley_Niro_Works.php?type=photo

Figure 4: *The Rebel*, Shelley Niro, 1987.
Image courtesy of the artist.

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See this image
at http://www.britesites.com/native_artist_interviews/sn27.htm

Figure 5: *Mohawks in Beehives I*, Shelley Niro, 1990.
Image courtesy of the artist.

So while Niro recognizes that there is a great deal of pain in the lives of Indigenous peoples, her photographs attempt to show a lighter side of things using a “strong sense of fun [to show] there’s something else going on” (Ryan, 1999, p. 66). These works therefore act as a way of “taking things back, taking control, and seizing power by refusing victim status” (McMaster, 1998, p. 110). These works are highly accessible and act as a means of humanizing Indigenous peoples to an outside audience. Despite their often light-hearted subject matter, Niro’s photographs carry significant weight considering the history of abuse and violence towards Indigenous women in Canada. By showing these women as they really are the stereotype of the ‘Indian Princess’ is effectively dismissed through parody. In Niro’s world there is no room for the sexualized stereotypes of Indigenous women, a point which she communicates and maintains through her work.

Dana Claxton

A later addition to the trickster paradigm is another female artist, Dana Claxton. Claxton is an interdisciplinary artist of Hunkpapa Lakota heritage whose work includes performance, photography, film and video (Berson, 2010). Both *Daddy’s Got a New Ride* (Figure 6) and *Baby Boyz Gotta Indian Pony* (Figure 7) are from her 2008 *Mustang Suite* series.

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Please see this image at
http://www.winsorgallery.com/artists.php?artwork=claxton_11

Figure 6: *Daddy’s Got a New Ride*, Dana Claxton, cprint 4 x5 ft., 2008. Image courtesy of the artist.

This four part series of photographs explores consumer and popular culture and is deliberately political in nature. Nevertheless viewers are

struck by the beauty and humour that spills from each of these unique takes on stereotypes of the ‘Indian.’ The series was inspired by Sioux medicine man Black Elk who retold his stories of sacred rituals, which included a horse dance, in his biography *Black Elk Speaks* (Griffin, 2010). Claxton’s images show Indigenous subjects against plain backdrops in a way that evokes staged colonial images. Her subjects remain anonymous in much the same way that historic photographs of Indigenous peoples taken by settlers were, yet each individual is treated with respect and appears comfortable (Berson, 2010). In *Daddy’s Got a New Ride* we see an Indigenous man standing casually in front of a red mustang. Although he is dressed in a black business suit and red dress shirt his indigeneity is communicated through his face paint and braided hair, markers which are readily recognized by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences. The subject stands against a blank background forcing the audience to confront the gaze of the subject who looks confidently and directly at the viewer. In *Baby Boyz Gotta Indian Pony* we are shown a younger man on the back of a mustang horse wearing only a pair of red track pants and red sweat cuffs. Although it has been suggested that the pants are an allusion to “buckskin leggings beaded in the traditional Lakota style” (Berson, 2010, para. 9) he does not have any

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http://www.winsorgallery.com/artists.php?artwork=claxton_12

overt markings of Indigeneity besides the ‘Indian Horse’ he is riding.

Figure 7: *Baby Boyz Gotta Indian Pony*, Dana Claxton, print 4 x5 ft., 2008. Image courtesy of the artist.

The *Mustang Suite* series acts as a way to “collapse the traditional and the contemporary to indicate that Indigenous people have the best of

both worlds” (Berson, 2010, para. 7). By taking elements from both Indigenous cultures and non-indigenous society Claxton creates a statement about the hybrid nature of indigeneity in the 21st century. The mix of traditional elements with modern clothing references colonial photography but rejects the narrative of creating images of “racialized, ethnographic bodies” (Rony, 1994-1995, p. 25). Instead it shows a distinct hybridity demonstrating the reciprocal cultural exchange between the colonizer and the colonized (Berson, 2010). Indigenous peoples are shown not as distinct from the contemporary world, but as a formidable force within it. These images provide an example of the double meanings that exist in contemporary Indigenous art. The modern Indigenous artist creates art in a world that is both culturally defined and modern. The duality of that identity is evident in these powerful photographs, which use a unique sense of play in order to confront the audience.

Arthur Renwick

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Figure 8: *Michael*, Arthur Renwick, 2006. Image courtesy of the artist.

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Figure 9: *Monique*, Arthur Renwick, 2006. Image courtesy of the artist.

Arthur Renwick is a Haisla artist from British Columbia. His images *Michael* (Figure 8) and *Monique* (Figure 9) are part of a series of photographs called *Mask*. When looking at these images the most striking aspect is the humour of the facial expressions. While Dana Claxton did not encourage any participation from the anonymous “actors” in the *Mustang Suite* series (Berson, 2010), Renwick sought to directly engage his subjects in the production process (Face: Aboriginal Life and Culture, 2010). The subjects that agreed to pose for Renwick were asked to think about the relationship between the ‘Indian’ and photography (Face: Aboriginal Life and Culture, 2010). The result was highly individual close-up portraits of Indigenous writers, artists and intellectuals who

created masks with their own faces (Baird, 2009). These images effectively penetrate the relationship between Indigenous peoples and representations of them. Colonial fantasies are shown as contorting individual and cultural identity, which can be seen in the skewed faces of Renwick's subjects. Their faces are distorted versions of their natural selves, a representation of how the idea of the 'Indian' has altered reality beyond recognition.

The tight framing of the individuals is unavoidable and challenges the audience to question their own ideas about Indigenous identity. By choosing not to include the bodies of the individuals, Renwick undermines the history of ethnographic photography (Rony, 1994-1995). By showing the viewer only a small portion of the subjects, markers of indigeneity are left out and the anthropological thirst for the study of the whole is purposefully neglected (Rony, 1994-1995). With no background or clothing to situate the viewer in time and space the images become timeless representations of a more general reality. There is no ethnographic attitude present here, but rather a keen interest in the ways that narratives of representation have influenced and controlled Indigenous peoples. Renwick's audience is subtly reminded of the history of colonial myth-making while being very directly confronted with a contemporary Indigenous reality.

Terrance Houle

Terrance Houle is a performance artist, filmmaker, and photographer from the Kainai Nation in Alberta (Grainger, 2009). In every aspect of his career Houle drives his distinctly Indigenous message home. Houle has a knack for addressing even the most sensitive issues with a sense of humour and openly suggests that he uses a style that is accessible to non-Indigenous viewers in order to deliver that message to a wider audience (Grainger, 2009). He makes full use of the myriad of stereotypes that have been created about Indigenous peoples by others, and even occasionally receives complaints that his art is bordering on racist (Grainger, 2009). Houle responds to these attacks by maintaining that his works are "culled from [his] experience as an Aboriginal person" (Grainger, 2009, para. 5). Indeed, his work suggests an acute awareness of the schism between indigeneity and life in a dominantly White Canada. His *Urban Indian* series, which began in 2004, examines and confronts these issues in a humorous and approachable way. The series showcases Houle donning full Powwow regalia while performing the most mundane of everyday activities. One image, *Urban Indian #6* (Figure 10) shows

Houle dressed in full regalia leaning over the produce section in a grocery store. He is gently examining a bunch of fresh herbs with his left hand, while holding his half-full grocery-basket over his right arm. The absurdity of the scene is what makes this image, and others from the series, so striking, and funny. Other images from the series show Houle taking a bubble bath with his regalia piled unceremoniously on the floor, getting dressed, working in a cubicle, buying CDs, kissing a woman goodbye, eating dinner, and riding the bus.



Figure 10: *Urban Indian #6*, Terrance Houle, 2006. Image courtesy of the artist.

All of the images act as a poignant commentary on what it means to be an indigenous man living in an urban environment and communicate a sense of isolation and estrangement (Whyte, 2010). Nevertheless they seem to suggest an avenue forward with no room for colonial fiction. Houle asserts that he can be, and is, both modern and traditional. Perhaps the most important message to both an Indigenous and a non-indigenous audience is that this is both possible and realistic. Houle suggests that while the history of colonialism should be acknowledged and condemned it must eventually be adapted to (Whyte, 2010).

Conclusion

When interpreting the art of Indigenous peoples it is important to remember that the mythologies, histories, languages and protocol that make up the culturally specific knowledge of Indigenous Canadians can only be completely understood by those who live them. To an outsider,

these works provide a meaningful challenge in understanding and interpreting them (Townsend-Gault, 2006). As Walla Walla painter James Lavadour points out, “Art has a use as a force vital to society- in this way it is recovering its aboriginal function...Art shouldn’t be an homogenizing force worldwide, but be generative and illuminative in specific ways” (Townsend-Gault, 2006, p. 522). Instead of simply reconstructing a singular identity of the Indian, modern exhibits should focus on the complex and highly individual experiences that define what it means to be Indigenous. This is exactly what the artists featured in this article do. By fighting a photographic history that aimed to frame Indigenous peoples as vanishing or assimilating, Indigenous artists are creating a new paradigm in which Indigenous arts can be understood as both modern and traditional, past and present.

The jarring honesty of these works is what makes them so exceptional, and powerful. By re-appropriating the images and myths that have oppressed them, these artists are taking back control of their representation, and humour remains an important feature. Indigenous humour is often quite surprising to Western sensibilities and has been described as toxic (Warn, 2007), yet it also has the ability to act as a bridge between cultural worlds. As Cree playwright Tomson Highway points out “the poison must first be exposed” before healing can begin (Warn, 2007, p. 85). Contemporary Indigenous artists use humour to treat the wounds of colonial myth-making and in doing so are re-defining themselves and giving new power to their art. By re-claiming and taking control of the colonial ideas that have so long restricted Indigenous Canadians they are taking back control of their identity, re-defining how they are visualized and interpreted.

It has been suggested that by using images and stereotypes created by colonial myth-makers that Indigenous artists will inevitably fall into the trap of perpetuation. I argue the opposite. By taking these ideas and re-shaping them these artists, and many others like them, strip these ideas of their power and control. Others have deemed the use of photography, “the media most associated with Euro-American appropriation and exploitation” (Rony, 1994-1995, p. 22) problematic. Again I suggest that this is a natural, and effective, way to address issues of representation. By using oppressive technologies in order to strip myths of their meaning contemporary artists are beginning to ‘shoot back,’ “reversing the colonial gaze by constructing their own visual media, [and] telling their stories on their own terms” (Wilson and Stewart, 2008, p. 3).

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