RE-PRESSED: HOW SERIGRAPHY RE-ENVISIONS NORTHWEST COAST ICONOGRAPHY*

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Abstract

In 1986 Andy Warhol silkscreened a series of cowboys and Indians. In 1978 Roy Henry Vickers, a Tsimshian artist, silkscreened Jesus as well as a lacrosse player. Since the time of the Campbell's Soup Can (1962), Northwest Coast Indigenous artists have been silkscreening fine art in their own vernacular. They have used the medium to reclaim heritage, to share histories, to educate, and to demand Western recognition through visuality. Today, as Western serigraphy has receded back to the commercial medium it was before Pop art, Indigenous artists continue to envision the possibilities serigraphy provides to challenge the art world and popular perceptions of Indigenous cultures. In this paper I reveal the modes of discourse opened through Indigenous people's use of serigraphy. Since its inception into Northwest Coast culture, the serigraph has been used to tell the story of Northwest Coast tradition and progress: politically, economically, artistically and culturally.

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Because the history of First Nations serigraphy has been largely ignored by the academy, this paper works to highlight some of the major contributions serigraphy has made to Indigenous art of the Coast.[1] To help frame my argument, I activate Maori scholar and researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith's call to research on Indigenous terms as a means to engage the reader in this post-colonial discourse. Tuhiwai Smith suggests twenty-five strategies for Indigenous peoples to reclaim

[1] Anthropologists Edwin Hall and Margaret Blackman, along with printer Vincent Rickard printed the only (short) monograph of Northwest Coast silkscreens, *Northwest Coast Indian Graphics: An Introduction to Silk Screen Prints* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1981). Hilary Stewart, Leslie Dawn, and Karen Duffek each produced small works on silkscreens during this time, respectively: *The Northwest Coast Native Print: A Contemporary Tradition Comes of Age* (Victoria: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1985); *New Visions, Serigraphs by Susan A. Point, Coast Salish Artist* (Vancouver, Museum of Anthropology, 1986); *Robert Davidson, Haida Printmaker* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre,1979). Since then references to silkscreens have become footnotes in essays on other First Nations topics.

their heritage.[2] Throughout the essay I highlight the ways that serigraphs employ means of *recording, creating, storytelling,* and *indigenizing* to engage in and reflect Indigenous issues. This work is intended to serve as a foundation for future research.

From the mid-1960s through the 1970s silkscreens inundated the visual culture of North America through Andy Warhol and the Pop artists. This new Pop Art used the silkscreen dually as a fine art and a medium that could contest cultural assumptions.[3] Lucy Lippard has observed the confrontational but positive position of Pop Art. She sees its naissance in the 1960s as a reaction to the limitations of high art of the period, but also as a place to incite larger discourses about the common state of the middle-class North American.[4] She said:

> …Pop Art's alternative to the emotional and technical impastoes of its immediate predecessor was clearly based on a tough, no-nonsense, no-preciosity, no-refinement standard appropriate to the 1960s. The choice of a 'teenage culture' as subject matter contains an element of hostility towards contemporary values rather than complacency; it marks a new detachment from the accepted channels of art. Yet pop is nowhere a nihilist trend… the underlying mood everywhere seems one of determined optimism – optimism against odds…[5]

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[2] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies,* "Twenty-Five Indigenous Projects" (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), 142-62.
[3] Lucy Lippard, *Pop Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1985), 9.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.,10.

These goals of Pop Art – to cultivate an 'alternative' culture, to confront a domineering art world, and to do so with enthusiasm – mirror the goals of the Northwest Coast revival.

From the beginning of its employment by Northwest Coast cultures, it has been the *storytelling*[6] that accompanies native prints that sets them apart from the narrative of Western printing. This capacity to tell a story, to share a culture, has perpetuated the serigraph as an Indigenous mode and allowed it to maintain a nebulous place "between tradition and innovation."[7]

The idea of the story is often a conflicted one for the modern art curator. Where, in the modern art world, the artist is being divested of the larger responsibilities to make meaning or to unite society, the Indigenous artist is tasked with feeding a family by maintaining a culture. Pop icon Andy Warhol could afford to mock his personal income, while Henry Speck, chief of the Kwakwaka'wakw people, had a responsibility to provide an income through his artwork. With Modernism, as content diminished in symbolic importance, the individual and individuality became the centralized aspect of the art. That idea of the lone artist has continued through to today. In contrast, the Indigenous artist was often viewed - and encouraged to be perceived - merely as a medium through which his or her culture spoke. Moreover, the Indigenous artist had a critical responsibility to maintain the visuality of his or her culture. I suggest the individual's story has become so deeply embedded in the Western psyche that the cultural story depicted through 'traditional' Indigenous art has caused this type of artwork to be classified as secondary. Indeed, First Nations serigraphy has almost completely escaped critical investigation.

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[6] Tuhiwai Smith, 144.

[7] See Leslie Dawn, *The Northwest Coast Native Print: A Contemporary Tradition Comes of Age* (Victoria: Art Gallery of Great Victoria. Exhibition Catalogue: 1985) 7.

> In 1989 Vancouver curator Barbara DeMott wrote:
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> Much of contemporary non-native art is produced for a consumer elite…who (has) specialized knowledge to understand avant-garde approaches, and who can appreciate culture-specific conceptual play. In contrast Native Northwest Coast artists take fewer risks. Meaning can be explained quite clearly by the artists who often include written presentations of the mythic sources for their images.[8]

Of course, this perspective can be inverted. Indigenous artworks require a specialized knowledge needed to understand the cultural roles a work fulfills, which specific culture a work might come from, and the symbolic or spiritual iconography present in the piece. Abstract appreciation - possibly romanticised with "ethnic" significance - is always possible. Nevertheless, as with all contemporary artwork, layers of implicit meaning cannot and should not be explained, but unveiled through the viewer's personal understanding. Meaning *can* quite clearly be explained by *any* artist. And the tension between explanation, recognition, and understanding makes meaning for both contemporary Western and non-Western printmaking.

I suggest the *storytelling* aspect accompanying Northwest Coast serigraphy *indigenizes*[9] the form, making it separate and distinct from Western serigraphy. Unlike Western printwork, almost all Northwest Coast prints are sold with an accompanying "story" that communicates a message about the image. Sometimes it is a myth, sometimes it is a narrative of the artist's history, sometimes it is a cultural history. The interconnection between recognizably Native imagery and textual representation of one facet of a larger cultural identity asserts a particular and

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[8] Barbara de Mott, "Introduction," in *Beyond the Revival: Contemporary North West Native Art* (Vancouver: Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr College of Art and Design. Exhibit Catalogue: 1989), 11.
[9] Tuhiwai Smith, 146.

culturally unique perspective. Text, when intrinsically linked to image, harkens to Indigenous oral traditions as well as to traditions of ceremony and performance. This linkage illustrates the inseparability of performance from ceremony and history from story. The art object is activated by its story and it begins to function as other First Nations art objects – as intrinsic to culture, history, and tradition.

Figure 1. Robert Davidson, *Mother's Memorial*, serigraph, edition 90, 1973. Image courtesy of Robert Davidson.

Haida artist Robert Davidson was one of the first Native artists to employ the serigraph to bring meaning back to his culture. *Mother's Memorial* and *Birth Announcement* (figures 1 & 2, respectively) are two works that use serigraphy to

connect personal and cultural meanings. The first is a serigraph made to commemorate his mother's death. It was distributed as a gift at two memorial potlatches hosted for her.[10] The design employs his mother's family crest: the eagle. The second design was a card made to announce the birth of his second daughter, Sara. Davidson continues a personal tradition of card making: Christmas cards, change of address-cards, and like this one, cards that commemorate life-events. Often in these instances the imagery creates the story as much as the story defines the image.[11]

Robert Davidson, *Sara's Birth Announcement*, serigraph, edition 503, 1973. Image courtesy of Robert Davidson.

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[10] Hilary Stewart, *Robert Davidson, Haida Printmaker* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre: 1979.), 71.

[11] The concept of a card should not be overlooked. A card is almost necessarily a gift; in this case, a gift of a culture. Symbolically, it harkens to traditions of gift-giving. Cards represent shared wealth. Robert Davidson produced them as a commodity as well as a cultural representation.

Joe David's *Ka-Ka-win-chealth* (figure 3) offers another example of that tension between explanation and recognition and understanding. Here is a wolf transforming into a killer whale. David (Nuu-Chah-Nulth) suggests that the image represents a legend about why killer whales are half white and half black and travel in groups—but he lets the image tell that legend—he does not textually translate the legend.[12]

Figure 3. Joe David, *Ka-Ka-win-chealth*, serigraph, edition 75, 1977. Image courtesy of Joe David.

[12] *Northwest Coast Indian Artists Guild: 1977 Graphics Collection.* Ottawa: Canadian Indian Marketing Services: 1977.

The image itself is in transformation between many things. It combines three distinctly different Northwest Coast design traditions to arrive at something completely new. The face and body of the animal are done in broad, fluid strokes with no particular formline quality.[13] Yet, Northern formline style, which David was formally trained in by Bill Holm and Duane Pasco,[14] enter into the design at several points. The ear of the wolf is a classic u-form complex; the upper leg joint is a flicker feather; there is mirroring between the o-void of the tail and of the crown figure. These formations demonstrate a classical understanding of Northern formline. But David is also very playful. The u-form on the ear is curved to lend fluidity to the design. Inside the o-voids are classic Nuu-Chah-Nulth design elements: the eye of the wolf, rather than continuing in a Northern style, uses the distinctive Kwakwaka'wakw design, where one circle rests within another. This eye design is contrasted by a Nuu-Chah-Nulth eye, used as the foreleg of the figure, and is mirrored in a lucent circle design below the arm, connected to the fin, implying transformation. Also, along with "classic" Haida black and red, David has used ultramarine blue, a color often favored in historic Nuu-Chah-Nulth carved pieces.[15]

David's habit of revealing only part of a story through text hints that each design carries dual cultural and personal meanings. Ka-Ka-win-chealth was the name given to David by his father, and he views this image as representative of his

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[13] For an understanding of Northwest Coast Formline, see Bill Holm, *Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2070).

[14] Joe David, interview by author. Port Townsend, WA. 13 October 2010.

[15] Nuu-Chah-Nulth painting did not have a restricted colour palette. Indeed, artists used all available colours. In particular black, red and blue are found on many of the masks that survive today, but green, yellow, white, orange, gold and silver were also used. See Peter Macnair, Alan Hoover & Kevin Neary in *Legacy: Tradition and Innovation in Northwest Coast Indian Art* (Victoria: British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1984), 39.

personal transformation from boy to man, and from youth to artist; his life story is implicitly connected to this cultural history.[16]

A lithograph by Roy Henry Vickers offers another example of the kind of intertextual play between image, title, story, artist and culture. The Government of British Columbia commissioned the piece as a gift for the heads of the Commonwealth in 1987. British Columbia gifted the original painting to Queen Elizabeth II during her visit to the province. In 1989 curator Maureen Milburn described the work in a catalogue:

> Vickers addresses the problems of cultural interface and mutual understanding through pictorial realism. The thrust of Vickers expression lies in a belief that the old forms have a purpose for those who are educated in them. In order to reach a wider audience, Vickers chooses to speak in what he believes to be a less complicated mode of expression. Vickers links aspects of the historic culture to present realities in order to promote respect and understanding for Indian culture.[17]

To suggest that Vickers integrates pictorial realism to speak to a wider audience is to heavily underplay the message within this work. Vickers' artist statement regarding the work makes no mention of pictorial realism and its accessibility; he gives *testimony*[18] to the history of his land. Vickers, like Davidson, did not need to reach a wider audience in terms of market success. I imagine Vickers' conception of 'a less complicated mode of expression' is indeed a satirical one, considering the print is titled *Meeting of the Chiefs* (1987) and was gifted to the 'chief' of the

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[16] Joe David, 13 October 2010.

[17] Maureen Milburn, "Dancing to the Music of its Own Song," in *Beyond the Revival: Contemporary North West Native Art* (Vancouver: Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr College of Art and Design. Exhibit Catalogue: 1989), 52.

[18] Tuhiwai Smith, 144.

Commonwealth. Indigenous humor, much like tradition, has often been misunderstood by the postmodernist.

It seems that from the moment the silkscreen entered into 'tradition' it fell from the small space of critical acclaim it had only just garnered. Today, art historical critics still largely eschew traditional native art. I believe this has been caused by two colliding factors: the taboo of discussing the 'traditional' in the wake of post-modernism and the intentional subterfuge Indigenous artists exert in order to maintain the cultural property of their work.[19] Whether there are universal, cross-cultural standards for critiquing art, and who has the right to do that criticism is a debate for another paper. Here, I acknowledge that Indigenous artists consciously engage in particular Western art practices and markets; I assert that these facts merit art historical scrutiny.

By the end of the 1980s a new wave of artists developed hybridized stylings of "modern" and "traditional" in many more provocative art forms than silkscreening, such as large scale glasswork and metal installation. By the 1990s art historians would qualify these directions as more significant by default; the 90s saw a proliferation of criticism on the newest innovations of Northwest Coast Indigenous art movements. Reviewers rarely discussed the role of serigraphs in the foundation of Northwest Coast Indigenous art movements, nor did they note that this elite tier of artists still practiced serigraphy.

In 1993, Martine Reid, writing on the transformation of the Northwest Coast Native arts scene, qualified tradition: "Reference to tradition becomes a cognitive way of assuming or reinforcing cultural identity. A traditional object becomes one that does not need an explanation but is sanctified by the past usage."

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[19] By this I mean to suggest that Indigenous peoples continue to be wary of Western practices. Often, in order to maintain Indigenous structures, it is necessary to find ways of seemingly participating in the dominant structure while ultimately circumventing it.

Reid goes on to assert that contemporary modes of creation have "robbed Northwest Coast art of many of its original messages…[the art] has become a pseudo-language shared and produced by an elite because the created objects no longer signify potent cultural messages."[20] The passage of time has revealed that the situation is actually more complex. Twenty years later, Reid's statement on tradition in fact validates the artwork she dismissed; that pseudo-language of the 'elites' has become the bible of Northwest Coast design, resurrection included. And the silkscreen has become its gospel, bespeaking the presences of Northwest Coast cultures.

The serigraph, as a traditional medium, implicitly asserts cultural identity, even when the imagery is not necessarily recognizably Indigenous. Simplistically, many have said that the two-dimensional form of serigraphy has made Northwest Coast artistic culture accessible to Western audiences. However, I contend Indigenous resistance to Western painting suggests something more complex. In an essay on the contributions to Canadian art by Indigenous artists, Gerald McMaster, a Cree and Blackfoot artist and curator, writes that considering the history of oppression of native peoples, it is no wonder they are sceptical of revealing themselves, but nevertheless, native artists continue express their identities through art.[21]

I view the appropriation of the serigraph as an *indigenizing* project. The iconography of design becomes less important than the messages carried by the works. Those messages, which only come by a confluence of knowledge, image and

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[20] Martine Reid, "In Search of Things Past, Remembered, Retraced, and Reinvented," in *In the Shadow of the Sun.* Ed. by The Canadian Museum of Civilization. (Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization: 1993), 75-76.

[21] Gerald McMaster, "Contributions to Canadian Art by Aboriginal Artists," in *Hidden in Plain Sight: Contributions of Aboriginal Peoples to Canadian Identity and Culture.* Eds. David R. Newhouse, Cora J. Voyageur, Daniel Beavon (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 140.

text, illustrate an Indigenous way of knowing and sharing. In 2000, Susan Point *created*[22] three prints: *Images, Imagination,* and *Imagism* which riff off an artefact fragment owned by the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. In 1995, she was asked by UBC to *restore*[23] several ancient objects. The impression of one wood fragment lingered with her and in 2000 she designed three prints to make meaning for the lost history of that fragment.

Each print reinterprets the fragment, first as a bentwood box, then as an author's stamp, and finally as a reflection on past and present. The images play with history and cultural relevance. Each work is elaborated upon by both Point and Gary Wyatt, in Wyatt's book *Susan Point: Coast Salish Artist* (2000).[24] A short poem is also included to allow the reader to extrapolate meanings. When regarding the woodblock, *Imagination,* I wonder if Point was commenting on the tradition of serigraphy and her role as an innovator within tradition. Her third interpretation of the work suggests just such complexity of meaning.

On *Imagism,* she commented:

> I considered what the fragment says to me about the past and what its presence has meant in the present, as well as how it will affect my work in the future…The fragment has become a seed for me, which has given rise to suggest in *Imagism* how humanity takes from the past as we begin to shape the future of our evolution. I guess my third tribute to the fragment is meant to reflect the hope I wish for future generations and my belief in the human spirit to continue forever.[25]

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[22] Tuhiwai Smith, 158.
[23] Ibid., 154-55.
[24] Gary Wyatt, *Susan Point: Coast Salish Artist* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre: 2000), 102-105.
[25] Ibid., 103.

Tuhiwai Smith insists the term 'indigenizing' centers on a politics of Indigenous identity and Indigenous cultural action. In this way, the act of privileging serigraphy over other Western forms *claims*[26] the medium for Indigenous purposes. I propose these claims can be taken further. The continued preference of serigraphy over painting among Northwest Coast natives must be an intentional separation. These peoples have painting histories of their own. While it is certain that serigraphy is a recognizable, accessible medium for a Western audience, it is also true that there is a distancing through the process of production. As a native design is translated into a serigraph, a lens of viewing is created – a Western lens. Perhaps the irony within Vickers' work is activated for all native prints by that process of translation.

The acculturation of the serigraph has certainly been ironic. Its capacity to dually bespeak 'tradition' and to integrate itself into Western art markets reflects the position that native peoples have carefully cultivated for themselves. First Nations artists seem to have actively positioned themselves in a space between the Western and the traditional; it is a place of power and mobility.

Today, Robert Davidson almost exclusively paints as a preparatory means of creating a serigraph.[27] This is characteristic of Susan Point and Roy Henry Vickers, as well as the younger generation of artists, such as lessLIE, Alano Edzerza and Maynard Johnny Jr. Many of these younger artists work exclusively in two-dimensional serigraphy design, only painting for that purpose. They do not carve, weave, or engrave jewellery, yet consider themselves artists and cultural ambassadors.

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[26] Tuhiwai Smith, 143.
[27] Ian Thom, *Art BC: Masterworks from British Columbia* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000), 176.

lessLIE, of the Coast Salish Nation, uses the medium to provoke and question. He has not attended art school, nor apprenticed as a carver or jeweller. He does not pull his own prints. Yet, he considers his work a traditional art form. In the 2010 print *Patron*, lessLIE plays on the spindle whorl and the interconnections of the native art market to question his own role in the history of serigraphy.[28] The spiralling inseparability between the two figures captures the complex relationship between the native artist and his or her patron.

The "story" is always connected to its cultural antecedents. McMaster referred to this type of connection as a "strategy," suggesting, "…tradition is transformed into a new strategy…. [which maintains] a self-conscious link with the past and intentionally oppose[s] repeated efforts by governments and other state-sanctioned institutions to sever native peoples from their roots…"[29] This connection as strategy gives significance to the print as a native tradition. It is this connection between seeing and sharing that has allowed the serigraph to make meaning for Northwest Coast cultures.

The investigation of how this significance functions within Northwest Coast cultures begins here. Serigraphy has been used by Northwest Coast Indigenous cultures to reclaim and maintain traditions, to share histories, to educate, to explore and to provoke. With the serigraph's history of significance established, each aspect of that significance demands further attention. The strategy of using tradition to create ambiguity and retain authority should be examined. The relationship between the art historian, the patron and the market for serigraphy should be juxtaposed with the Indigenous objective of reclaiming and restoring through

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[28] lessLIE, artist statement <www.alcheringa-gallery.com/artists.html/v1/artwork_details/v2/2/v4/1939/> (May 2010).
[29] McMaster, 146.

storytelling. And certainly, the internal dialogues of design between artists and cultures should be celebrated and chronicled.