

Yuxweluptun, Nicolson and Assu:  
Land, Environment and Activist Art in British Columbia

By

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## **Abstract**

Land rights and environmental issues have long been the cause of fiercely intense and heated disputes between the Canadian government and Aboriginal communities in British Columbia. As a province rich in natural resources and with much unceded Aboriginal territory, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have been times of intense discussion and debate as to how to address and resolve these issues. Contemporary Aboriginal Northwest Coast artists have become powerful voices for facing issues that affect their communities and Canadians at large. This thesis focuses on the representation of land loss and environmental concerns in British Columbia through the work of contemporary Cowichan Coast Salish and Okanagan artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun and Kwakwaka'wakw artists Marianne Nicolson and Sonny Assu. The objective is to bring a fresh perspective to understanding the politicized artistic practice of these three artists by considering their work as a form of environmental activism. I examine the relationships between the three artists while contextualizing their work within twentieth-century developments in Northwest Coast art. This research is informed by in-person interviews with the artists conducted in January 2016, as well as the work of scholars Gerald Vizenor, Philip J. Deloria and James Clifford among others.

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## Introduction

*The history is quite clear; everybody knows what was done so my work was going back and recording land... We've gone from a complete control to an apartheid despotism system for a usufructuary right of land.* – Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun<sup>1</sup>

*I see my art as being my voice in this environmental debate. That land is my father, my mother.* – Marianne Nicolson<sup>2</sup>

*Through my work as a whole I want to challenge people to think outside that box of how we are treating ourselves in relation to one another and how we are treating our environment.* – Sonny Assu<sup>3</sup>

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's *Scorched Earth, Clear-cut Logging on Native Sovereign Land. Shaman Coming to Fix* (1991) explores the destruction of nature in the artist's home province of British Columbia [Figure Intro.1]. The painting depicts a shaman looking over a devastated landscape, while elements of the landscape weep due to their destruction, thereby personifying nature's grief. This work relies on traditional Northwest Coast design mixed with bright colors and surrealist imagery to address land claims and the threat that the logging industry presents to the environment.

Marianne Nicolson's *Foolmakers in the Setting Sun* (2014) is a comment on how the modern economic approach of massive resource extraction in a short period of time for monetary gain is foolish, and not consistent with traditional Indigenous worldviews [Figure Intro.2]. The installation was on display at Gallery 2 in Grand Forks B.C. in

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, interview by author, Vancouver, British Columbia, January 11, 2016, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Marianne Nicolson, interview by author, Victoria, British Columbia, January 14, 2016, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Sonny Assu, interview by author, Surrey, British Columbia, January 17, 2016, 5.

2014, consisting of a backlit glass casting of ceremonial power boards, picturing supernatural beings and a ghost. The light shining through mimics the setting sun, as its shadows grow longer over the image on the floor and opposite wall of the Alberta Oil Sands at dusk, a project that threatens the coast of British Columbia through the Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline. The reference to dusk is a metaphor for the sustainability of the planet, considering implications of global warming and the availability of sustainable resources.

Sonny Assu's *There is Hope if We Rise* (2013) was created as part of the grassroots Idle No More movement, a peaceful revolution to honour Indigenous sovereignty and protect land and water [Figure Intro.3]. The work consists of twelve posters that combine traditional Northwest Coast forms with words like Rise, Never Idle, Decolonize, Confront and Challenge Stereotypes in shades of reds, yellows and blues – with the image in the background and text at the bottom. Assu has described the piece as being a call to action for people who were viewing the work in the gallery, while the individual images were printed in poster size to be given out and used at Idle No More demonstrations.

Land rights and environmental issues have long been the cause of fiercely intense and heated disputes between the Canadian government and Aboriginal communities in British Columbia. As a province rich in natural resources and with much unceded Aboriginal territory, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have been times of intense discussion and debate as to how to address and resolve these issues.

Contemporary Aboriginal Northwest Coast artists have become powerful voices for facing issues that affect their communities and Canadians at large. My thesis focuses on

the representation of land loss and environmental issues in British Columbia through the work of contemporary Cowichan Okanagan Coast Salish artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun and Kwakwaka'wakw artists Marianne Nicolson and Sonny Assu. The objective is to bring a fresh perspective to understanding the modern politicized artistic practices of these three artists by considering their work as a form of environmental activism. I will contextualize the work of the three artists within twentieth-century developments in Northwest Coast art and briefly compare their concerns to those of important forebearers.

The artists selected for this study are part of a larger movement among Canadian Aboriginal artists who use their artistic practice as a political tool to fight the legacy of colonialism. I argue that these artists demonstrate their commitment to land, and the reclaiming of this land, through their environmental concerns. They can be considered activist artists and their work the medium with which they engage in this ongoing discussion about the environment and Indigenous rights to land. Aboriginal artists in British Columbia play a unique role in the environmental debate because the Province has a troubled history of land rights and many of the traditional communities of Indigenous peoples are among those most affected by environmental issues. The artistic practice of these contemporary Aboriginal artists demonstrates their deliberate and intentional engagement in a global conversation on the urgency of land and environmental issues. It appears that while representing their own communities' concerns, these artists speak to a wider global audience. They achieve this, in part, by using modern materials and popular cultural icons to create iconic works of their own.

Aboriginal Northwest Coast art has seen a number of developments throughout the twentieth century. Important forbearers like Kwakwakw'wakw artist Douglas Cranmer (1927-2006) and Haida artist Bill Reid (1920-1998) are part of a previous generation of artists whose work originated in a time of cultural suppression by the Canadian government. These artists were tasked by their people with the resurgence of artistic and cultural traditions. Their work was not overtly political in subject matter, and mostly remained true to traditional Northwest Coast imagery.<sup>4</sup> These artists were successful in bringing back traditional forms of carving and painting, which ultimately paved the way for the generations of artists who emerged during the 1980s and 1990s.

Yuxweluptun (1957-), Nicolson (1969-) and Assu (1975-) are contemporary Northwest Coast artists active today who began working at different moments during the last forty years. Yuxweluptun was a pioneer of the environmental activist art movement beginning in the early 1980s, followed by Nicolson in the 1990s and Assu in the 2000s. As I will discuss in more detail, there is a movement to be traced through the work of the three artists as they acknowledge their links and influence on each other's practices. Yuxweluptun emerged onto the art scene in the early 1980s with large oil and acrylic paintings that fused traditional Northwest Coast design and surrealist imagery. Throughout his career he has maintained his provocative style addressing issues of land rights, over extraction of resources and the legacy of colonialism. Nicolson emerged onto the art scene in the early 1990s, with very personal works addressing her Indigenous identity, family history and language. Her work has evolved into large-scale public

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that they were not politically involved, for example Bill Reid attending the Lyell Island logging blockade in 1985 off Haida Gwaii was a political act of resistance. Here, however, I am referring to visual representation in their art works specifically, which largely remained true to traditional Northwest Coast design elements.

commissions that address the environment and Indigenous rights, giving her an international platform. Assu is the youngest artist in this study, making a name for himself in the early 2000s by fusing Northwest Coast imagery with popular brands and cultural icons. He uses humour and irony to address serious issues that deal with the legacy of colonialism and land rights.

As John Ralston Saul argues in *The Comeback* (2014), the single most important unresolved issue in Canada today is the “Aboriginal reality”.<sup>5</sup> My research is designed to contribute to a deeper understanding of this unresolved Aboriginal / non-Aboriginal relationship by highlighting the importance of artists as catalysts for society’s difficult conversations. Aboriginal artists in British Columbia play a unique role in the global environmental conversation because they often speak both from personal and community experience and because the ancestral homes of many are located in some of the most sensitive and potentially most affected areas of the Province. Although the global environmental crisis has gained wide public awareness, an art historical analysis, which explores contemporary art in relation to environmental politics and traditional Aboriginal spiritual connections to the earth and artists’ passion to protect it, is still missing.

### **Brief History of Land and Environment in British Columbia**

In 1992, following heightened numbers of protests over land and environmental concerns from Aboriginal activists in British Columbia, the governments of B.C. and Canada, along with the First Nations Summit, a group of Aboriginal leaders involved in the treaty process, created the British Columbia Treaty Commission to facilitate treaty

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<sup>5</sup> John Ralston Saul, *The Comeback*, Toronto: Harper Collins Publishers Ltd., 2014.

making in a province with very few treaties in place.<sup>6</sup> Although the commission has facilitated discussion, these discussions have been slow moving and burdened with red tape and colonial attitudes so much so that by 2006 it had still produced no treaties.<sup>7</sup> Marianne Nicolson has critiqued the Treaty Commission, saying that it has not gone back and acknowledged the way in which the government acquired these lands in the first place, acquisitions she deems as unfair, inequitable and inhumane: "...the current B.C. Treaty process that they have in place is a joke that doesn't address these issues. There are fundamental ideological premises that if we don't look to shift or change are going to force us all into a position of destitution."<sup>8</sup>

Between 1850 and 1854, B.C's first governor, James Douglas, negotiated fourteen local treaties with tribal groups on Vancouver Island. In 1899 the Dene in the northeast corner of British Columbia signed Treaty 8, one of the eleven numbered treaties signed between the Government of Canada and First Nations.<sup>9</sup> One hundred years later, on December 11, 1997, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled on *Delgamuukw V. British Columbia*, proceedings which had begun in 1984 by the Gitksan and the Wet'suwet'en Nations who were claiming ownership and legal jurisdiction over 58,000 square kilometers of northwestern B.C. Although the Court declined to make any definitive statement on the nature of Aboriginal title in Canada, it did acknowledge the validity of oral histories that were at the centre of the case. 'Maas Gaak (Don Ryan), the chief negotiator for the Gitksan Treaty Office wrote of the ruling:

The centerpiece of the *Delgamuukw* trial was our laws, oral histories, songs, crests, dances, social institutions that govern us, language, and notions of land

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<sup>6</sup> Tony Penikett, *Reconciliation: First Nations Treaty Making in British Columbia*, B.C: Douglas and McIntyre, 2006, 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Nicolson, interview by author, January 14, 2016, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Penikett, *Reconciliation*, 5.

title, along with our own expert witnesses who testified on our behalf. The Supreme Court of Canada acknowledged parts of this worldview and ruled oral histories as valid evidence...After 152 years of saying our rights and title were extinguished, the Province of British Columbia must now come to terms with Delgamuukw.<sup>10</sup>

On May 11, 2000, the Nisga'a Final Agreement was signed, the first treaty in British Columbia to provide constitutional certainty in respect to an Aboriginal person's right to self-government.<sup>11</sup> The Treaty recognized 2,000 square kilometers of Nisga'a lands and gave the Nisga'a control over these lands, including forestry and fishing resources contained within them. On June 26, 2014, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled on *Tsilhqot'in Nation v. British Columbia*, issuing its decision to grant Aboriginal title<sup>12</sup> to the Tsilhqot'in people over 1,700 square kilometers of traditional land in B.C.'s interior. In addition to granting title, the decision states that the Tsilhqot'in have the right to decide how the land will be used and the authority to manage the land and its economic benefits.<sup>13</sup> This was the first time that Aboriginal title had been confirmed outside an Aboriginal reserve. It is interesting to note here that B.C. was the only British colony that refused to extinguish Aboriginal title through treaties.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that not one treaty was signed throughout the twentieth century in a province with a diverse Aboriginal population highlights that land rights issues are a major concern. There are a number of reasons for this lack of settlement of land claims,

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<sup>10</sup> Stan Persky, *Delgamuukw: The Supreme Court of Canada Decision on Aboriginal Title*, The David Suzuki Foundation Series, Vancouver: Greystone Books, 1998, V.

<sup>11</sup> Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, *Nisga'a Final Agreement: Implementation Report 2010-2011*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Aboriginal title refers to the inherent Aboriginal right to land or territory. The Canadian legal system recognizes it as a unique right to the use of and jurisdiction over a group's ancestral territory. It is still murky, as over time various court decisions have contributed to the term's meaning, setting parameters that not all Aboriginal people agree on. In B.C. treaties were not negotiated between the government and Aboriginal peoples, so Aboriginal groups argue that their Aboriginal title was never extinguished, and legally they retain ownership and jurisdiction over their territory. Lengthy court battles have ensued over this matter.

<sup>13</sup> *Give Indigenous People Veto Power over Development on Their Lands, Report Urges*, CBC, September 21, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Duncan McCue, *Tsilhqot'in Land Ruling was a Game Changer for B.C.* Prod, CBC, December 23, 2014.

for example, the fact that from 1927 until 1951, Canadian law forbade Aboriginal people from hiring lawyers to pursue their land claims.<sup>15</sup> Tony Penikett writes that in the Northern regions Canada has signed modern treaties that deal honourably with Aboriginal claims to land and demands for self-government, however, "...in British Columbia, settler resistance, Aboriginal anxieties, and political indifference have for too long hobbled treaty negotiations."<sup>16</sup> As is being evidenced in the twenty-first century, positive steps are being taken to resolve the land issue. On September 21, 2015, the Boreal Landscape Leadership Council, which is a coalition of resource companies, financial institutions, First Nations and conservation organizations, recommended that Aboriginal bands have veto power over the development of their traditional lands.<sup>17</sup> The report states that, "Free, prior and informed consent – the right of Indigenous peoples to offer or withhold consent to development that may have an impact on their territories or resources – is the key to development, not a barrier."<sup>18</sup>

There are a number of pressing and current environmental issues that exist in the province of British Columbia: climate change, the damming of waterways, clear cutting, over extraction of resources, pipelines, and all the negative effects that these interventions have on wildlife and nature. The Federation of BC Naturalists, known as BC Nature, lists the Northern Gateway Pipeline, the Trans Mountain Pipeline and the Site C Hydroelectric project as three current developments that threaten the environment of the Province.<sup>19</sup> These are the types of threats that the three artists in this study aim to bring awareness to by addressing them in their artistic practice.

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<sup>15</sup> Penikett, *Reconciliation*: 5.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> "Current Issues," *BC Nature Federation of BC Naturalists*, <http://www.bcnature.ca/conservation/current-issues/> (accessed April 1, 2016).

## Northwest Coast Art in the Twentieth Century

Aboriginal peoples of the Northwest Coast have a long and multifaceted history of artistic production that includes many different cultures, aesthetic styles and meanings. The latter half of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth saw Aboriginal artistic production suffer greatly under intense cultural suppression by the Canadian government with the Indian Act (1876), which included oppressive policies like the Potlatch Ban (1885 – 1951) and the implementation of Residential Schools. This oppression can be attributed to the rapid expansion of permanent white settlement on the Northwest Coast during the nineteenth century. Missionaries and government officials introduced competing religious and political ideals, and put pressure on the traditional ways of life and art of Aboriginal peoples.<sup>20</sup> Despite these threats to the survival of Northwest Coast culture and artistic traditions, by the mid twentieth century an active resurgence of culture was evident and it became clear that oppressive government policies that had dominated for a century had not succeeded. In the words of Aldona Jonaitis, “Considering the effects that Euroamerican settlers had on the Northwest Coast, Native artistic culture demonstrated impressive resilience.”<sup>21</sup>

Kwakwaka’wakw carver Mungo Martin (1879-1962) is an example of one of only a few artists trained in traditional carving who was still alive by the mid twentieth century. Martin had been trained by his stepfather Kwakwaka’wakw carver Charlie James (1870-1938), who had kept artistic traditions alive despite government bans.<sup>22</sup> Upon James’ death, Martin took over many carving commissions that would have gone to James, so when a number of totem poles that had been placed outside the University of

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<sup>20</sup> Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art*, Oxford University Press, 1998, 201.

<sup>21</sup> Aldona Jonaitis, *Art of the Northwest Coast*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006, 222.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology needed to be restored in the 1950s, Martin was hired by museum curator Audrey Hawthorn to undertake the restoration.<sup>23</sup> Younger carvers such as Henry Hunt, Bill Reid and Douglas Cranmer worked alongside Martin, ushering in a new era of Northwest Coast artistic production throughout the 1960s and 1970s that included the revitalization of traditional practices that were once thought to be lost, as well as the production of new hybrid art forms. Douglas Cranmer, a Kwakwaka'wakw artist from Alert Bay, was a part of this new era of Northwest Coast artistic production, and can be considered one of the most important precursors to the artists in this study because of his transcultural aesthetic. Jennifer Kramer writes in *Kesu*, her book on Cranmer, that: "Doug's individualism gave him the freedom to pick and choose inspiration, combining what he liked in order to propose something new."<sup>24</sup> I argue that like Cranmer, Yuxweluptun, Nicolson and Assu embrace hybrid art forms and their roles as modern Aboriginal artists to propose new dialogues as activists through their art.

## **Methodology**

I conducted primary research by interviewing Yuxweluptun, Nicolson and Assu in Vancouver, Victoria and Surrey in January 2016. My questions focused on motivations and inspirations that inform their artistic practices. Through the interview process the artists discussed what they see as being the most pressing environmental issues facing B.C. today, how they see their practice as contributing to this discussion and whether they feel their artistic practice speaks for their Indigenous communities at large. Because the interview process is personal and central to the methodology of this project, I speak in

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>24</sup> Jennifer Kramer, *Kesu: The Art and Life of Doug Cranmer*, Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2012, 121.

more detail about the nature of the conversations in each chapter. I consulted the Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada artist files on Yuxweluptun and Nicolson in February 2016, which proved to be valuable resources on the trajectory of the artists' careers.

It is important to acknowledge that I am a non-Indigenous person dealing with potentially culturally sensitive subject matter. My goal in this project is not to speak for anyone else, but rather, to study, analyze and shed light on land and environmental issues that affect all Canadians. Scholar Paulette Regan has written extensively about non-Indigenous decolonization, stressing that as non-Indigenous scholars we must face our difficult history honestly and debunk myths about our shared history as a way to work together towards common goals.<sup>25</sup> Scholars Leah Decter and Carla Taunton have also discussed settler responsibility and decolonization, stating that as non-Indigenous scholars it is important for them to unsettle their settler identities and contribute in meaningful ways to the communities in which they have lived and worked.<sup>26</sup> Scholar Damian Skinner has also written about settler-colonial art history in his article "Settler-colonial Art History: A Proposition in Two Parts" (2014).<sup>27</sup> Skinner proposes a model for writing a new kind of art history that examines the impact of settler colonialism and aims to understand what decolonization might mean from the position of a settler art historian. He writes: "Settler-colonial studies is allied to postcolonial studies in the sense that both are practices that seek to reveal – and thus disrupt – the ongoing legacies of European

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<sup>25</sup> Paulette Regan, "An Unsettling Pedagogy of History and Hope," in *Unsettling the Settler Within*, 19-53, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Leah Decter and Carla Taunton, "Addressing the Settler Problem," *FUSE Magazine* 36, no. 4, September 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Damian Skinner, "Settler-colonial Art History: A Proposition in Two Parts," in *The Journal of Canadian Art History*, Volume XXXV:1, 2014: 131-171.

colonialism.”<sup>28</sup> I hope to act as a settler ally to the artists that I have interacted with throughout this project and recognize the importance of giving back to Indigenous communities. I hope to bring this research to a wide Canadian audience that includes both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, as environmental issues affect us all. My aim is to gain a deeper insight into the drive and goals behind the artistic practice of these three artists and bring that message to a broad audience. With the permission of the artists I include the transcribed interviews as appendices to my thesis in order to put their voices on the record and make them available to those who wish to better understand and contextualize their work. In the words of Marianne Nicolson:

I’m telling you my story and you have an opportunity to frame that in your own way within your own experiences, and express that within your writing and then place that within an institution, however you want to navigate that. But in a way, what I’m hoping for when I talk to students is that it’s another layer of the advocacy, so I want people to understand these pieces and I want dialogue around these pieces and I want engagement with these pieces...<sup>29</sup>

As a lens through which to interpret my research I will use the theoretical models presented in Anishnaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor’s book *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*,<sup>30</sup> specifically the concepts of “manifest manners”, “survivance” and “postindian”. “Manifest manners” are the actions, beliefs, attitudes, images and terminology that reinforce stereotypes about Aboriginal people, and often reinforce the binaries of savagism and civilization. “Survivance” can be understood as a cross between survival and resistance, the idea that Aboriginal people are not only surviving, but thriving. “Postindians” are responsible for the resurgence of tribal cultures while countering “manifest manners” with their own stories of culture and native

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<sup>28</sup> Skinner, “Settler-colonial Art History,” 133.

<sup>29</sup> Nicolson, interview by author, January 14, 2016, 13.

<sup>30</sup> Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*, First Bison Books, 1999.

modernity. Vizenor writes, “Native American Indians are the originary storiers of this continent, and their stories of creation, sense of imagic presence, visionary memories, and tricky survivance are the eternal traces of native modernity.”<sup>31</sup> I argue that the three contemporary artists chosen for this study practice active “survivance” and can be identified as “postindian warriors”. Scholar Jennifer Kramer reinforces this idea of “postindian warriors” specifically referring to Northwest Coast Aboriginal artists in her article “Figurative Repatriation: First Nations ‘Artist-Warriors’ Recover, Reclaim, and Return Cultural Property through Self-Definition” (2004), in which she discusses the work of Marianne Nicolson.<sup>32</sup> These theories will help me to explain the larger implications of Aboriginal artists as catalysts for change in their communities, and will help to chart the differences between the artistic practices of Aboriginal Northwest Coast artists from the early and mid twentieth-century and those of today. These theories provide an excellent framework to explain the shift to “postindianism”, in which Aboriginal peoples take back their own history and stories, question “manifest manners”, and actively practice “survivance”.

Much like Vizenor, Dakota scholar Philip J. Deloria defines specific terminology as a way to question stereotypes of Indigenous peoples throughout the twentieth century and addresses critical problems in the writing of American Indian history in his book *Indians in Unexpected Places* (2004).<sup>33</sup> Deloria suggests an alternate history to the dominant euro-centric narrative that denied modernity in Indigenous communities in North America. He writes: “I argue that a significant cohort of Native people engaged in

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>32</sup> Jennifer Kramer, “Figurative Repatriation: First Nations ‘Artist Warriors’ Recover, Reclaim, and Return Cultural Property through Self-Definition,” in *Journal of Material Culture*, Volume 9 (2), 2004: 161-182.

<sup>33</sup> Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2004.

the same forces of modernization that were making non-Indians re-evaluate their own expectations of themselves and their societies.”<sup>34</sup> Although he is speaking from within an American context, the theory and terminology he presents is equally applicable to the Canadian context. Deloria theorizes and defines the terms stereotype, ideology, discourse and power and explains how to question and move past historical inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Deloria writes about ideological fictions, “The key ideologies describing Indian people – inevitable disappearance, primitive purity, and savage violence, to name only a few – have brought exactly this kind of uneven advantage to the social, political, economic, and legal relations lived out between Indians and non-Indian Americans.”<sup>35</sup>

Another Indigenous scholar who shares aspects of Vizenor’s approach is Gerald McMaster, who has written extensively on colonial history, museum studies, decolonization and the resurgence and “survance” of Aboriginal art and artists. His essays in the *Reservation X* exhibition catalogue, as well as in *On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery*, discuss issues of Aboriginal representation using an Indigenous epistemology, while his introduction to the *Indigena* exhibition catalogue (co-authored by Lee-Ann Martin) speaks specifically to a “postindian” narrative.<sup>36</sup> McMaster, writing in 1992, discusses how Aboriginal people need to write their own histories in the significant year of the five hundredth anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus to the Americas. Yuxweluptun’s work was included in the *Indigena* exhibition and

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<sup>34</sup> Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Lee-Ann Martin and Gerald McMaster, "Introduction," in *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, 11-23, Gatineau: Canadian Museum of Civilization and Douglas & McIntyre, 1992; McMaster, “Living on Reservation X,” in *Reservation X*, 19-30, Gatineau: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1998; McMaster, “Our (Inter) Related History,” in *On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery*, 3-8, Lynda Jessup with Shannon Bagg, Gatineau: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2002.

Nicolson's work was included in the *Reservation X* exhibition, therefore, both artists are discussed in the catalogues making McMaster's writing particularly relevant.

Non-Indigenous scholar James Clifford's book *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (2013) is the third volume in his series that includes *The Predicament of Culture* (1988) and *Routes* (1997).<sup>37</sup> *Returns* covers the Indigenous histories of survival, struggle and renewal that became widely visible during the 1980s and 1990s, and argues that cultural endurance is a process of becoming.<sup>38</sup> He writes: "They [Indigenous people] reach back selectively to deeply rooted, adaptive traditions: creating new pathways in a complex postmodernity. Cultural endurance is a process of becoming."<sup>39</sup> In Clifford's terms, I argue, the three artists in this study are part of this process of becoming, as they are working in a time period preceded by intense cultural suppression and through their artistic practice become activists.

## **Literature Review**

As an interdisciplinary study that combines art history, environmental studies, anthropology and history, this study will draw on literature from a range of fields and link art historical literature that addresses the art of the Northwest Coast with scholarly writing on the history of treaties and the environment in British Columbia. Due to the nature of this topic, one that bridges activism and art, activist literature as well as non-academic writing, such as that of Saul, play a pivotal role in this analysis. When working with a topic that is evolving and contemporary, it is important to consider the popular

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<sup>37</sup> James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

writing found online, in newspapers and magazines on the subject, as well as the voices of the larger population that scholarly writing tends to exclude.

This research focuses on three contemporary artists, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Marianne Nicolson and Sonny Assu, focusing specifically on a topic that has not yet been extensively written about. There is, therefore, a lack of relevant critical writing pertaining to the artists in relation to environmental issues. Exhibition catalogues and interviews are the main published resources available on these three artists. The exhibition catalogue *Born to Live and Die on Your Colonist Reservations* (1995), and Allan J. Ryan's *The Trickster Shift* (1999), include essays and interviews on Yuxweluptun.<sup>40</sup> The exhibition catalogues *Marianne Nicolson: The Return of Abundance* (2008), and *Reservation X* (1998), include interviews and essays on Nicolson.<sup>41</sup> Assu has been interviewed for numerous articles, including "Form With Function: 7 Canadian Artists Muse on the Meaning of Environmental Art and Why We Need It" (2013), "Sonny Assu: Finding Art in Surprising Places" (2011) and "Sonny Assu" (2014).<sup>42</sup> A central focus of my thesis will be the interviews with the three artists that were conducted in January 2016.

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<sup>40</sup> Critical writing on Yuxweluptun is more widely available, as he has been working longer than Nicolson and Assu. The exhibition catalogue *Born to Live and Die on Your Colonist Reserves* (1995) includes five articles written on the artist, including one by Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "The Salvation Art of Yuxweluptun." Allan J. Ryan's book *The Trickster Shift* (1999) has extensive writing on Yuxweluptun. Recent articles such as "On a Good Day: Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun Stands His Ground" by Christina Ritchie for *Canadian Art* (Winter 2014) discusses the artists' recent work and touches on land and environmental concerns. Two exhibition catalogues edited by Petra Watson: *Colour Zone: Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun* (2003) and *Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: Neo-Native Drawings and Other Works* (2010) include essays by scholars and the artist himself on his diverse practice.

<sup>41</sup> The exhibition catalogue *Marianne Nicolson: The Return of Abundance* (2008), contains an article on the artist by Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "Outside Galdas – and Inside?" as well as an interview with curator Lisa Baldissera. The catalogue *Reservation X* (1998) contains an article on the artist by Gerald McMaster, "Maintaining Identity in the Modern World."

<sup>42</sup> Assu has been interviewed in numerous publications, most relevantly he was featured in an article for *Alternative Journal* by Julie Belanger titled "Form With Function: 7 Canadian Artists Muse on the Meaning of Environmental Art and Why We Need It." (2013), an article in *FUSE* by Elyn Walker titled "Sonny Assu" (2014), and an article in the *Vancouver Sun* by Kevin Griffin titled "Sonny Assu: Finding Art in Surprising Places." (2011). The exhibition catalogue *Longing: Sonny Assu* (2013) contains scholarly essays on Assu's practice as well as an artist statement. Assu's work was also featured on the cover and in an article in *First American Art Magazine* in its summer 2014 edition.

Charlotte Townsend-Gault is one of the key figures in writing on the history, politics and visual culture of Aboriginal art of the Northwest Coast. Her writings will be key resources in this project. The anthology *Native Art of the Northwest Coast* (2013), edited by Townsend-Gault, Jennifer Kramer and Ki-ke-in, aims to present an evolving history of the diverse artistic practice of the Northwest Coast through essays by Townsend-Gault, Ira Jacknis, Karen Duffek and Dana Claxton. These recent essays are combined with excerpts from historical literature that act both as reference points for the reader as well as providing a historical context.<sup>43</sup> In “The Material and the Immaterial across Borders,” Townsend-Gault refers to the way that Sonny Assu and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun re-appropriate pop-culture icons. She emphasizes that borrowing from different cultures contributes to making their artistic practice vibrant and powerful.<sup>44</sup>

In *Art of the Northwest Coast* (2006), Aldona Jonaitis discusses the resurgence in Northwest Coast art in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s by artists such as Bill Reid and Douglas Cranmer, who paved the way for the highly politicized artistic practice that is evident today.<sup>45</sup> Jonaitis argues that contemporary Aboriginal artists have powerful voices and are practicing “survivance”, stating that, “The artists were saying, on behalf of their communities, ‘We exist, we have survived, we are now a force to be reckoned with.’”<sup>46</sup> This background aids in charting the changes in Aboriginal art that are evidenced by the contemporary practice of Yuxweluptun, Nicolson and Assu. Jennifer Kramer’s exhibition catalogue on Doug Cranmer, *Kesu* (2012), the key source on the artist, is an important resource when considering the work of contemporary artists in the

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<sup>43</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault, Jennifer Kramer and Ki-ke-in, ed. *Native Art of the Northwest Coast: A History of Changing Ideas*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Townsend-Gault, “The Material and the Immaterial across Borders,” in *Native Art of the Northwest Coast: A History of Changing Ideas*, 978.

<sup>45</sup> Jonaitis, *Art of the Northwest Coast*.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

context of the history of Northwest Coast art.<sup>47</sup> The catalogue includes essays by Kramer, Gloria Cranmer Webster and Solen Roth, and offers insight into Cranmer's life and artistic practice.

Two in depth studies on the environment in British Columbia, *Pipeline and Tanker Trouble: The Impact to British Columbia's Communities, Rivers, and Pacific Coastline from Tar Sands Oil Transport* (2011), co-authored by the Natural Resources Defense Council, Pembina Institute and Living Oceans Society,<sup>48</sup> and *Environmental Assessment in British Columbia* (2010), by Mark Haddock from the University of Victoria,<sup>49</sup> offer extensive information on the state of the environment in British Columbia. Both reports contain a section on Aboriginal rights and concerns and discuss the infringement on traditional lands and potential destruction of those lands through the depletion of natural resources and the Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline. These reports offer valuable insights into the current environmental state of the Province, and aid in the understanding of the artists' environmental concerns.

The field of environmental and activist art history provides an appropriate context within which to read the politically charged works of the artists in this study. Scholar and artist Nicolas Lampert's book, *A People's History of the United States: 250 Years of Activist Art and Artists Working in Social Justice Movements* (2013), argues that activist art can exist both in an institution and on the street.<sup>50</sup> Although Lampert writes about activist art in the American context, he touches on the Native American Civil Rights

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<sup>47</sup> Kramer, *Kesu*.

<sup>48</sup> Natural Resources Defence Council, Pembina Institute and Living Oceans Society, *Pipeline and Tanker Trouble: The Impact to British Columbia's Communities, Rivers, and Pacific Coastline from Tar Sands Oil Transport*, Environmental Report, New York: Natural Resources Defense Council, 2011.

<sup>49</sup> Mark Haddock, *Environmental Assessment in British Columbia*, Victoria: British Columbia, Environmental Law Centre, University of Victoria, 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Nicolas Lampert, *A People's History of the United States: 250 Years of Activist Art and Artists Working in Social Justice Movements*, part of the People's History Series, New York: The New Press, 2013.

Movement and the environmental movement that are both referenced in my research.

Lampert makes the distinction between activist-artists and artist-activists, and explains the significance of art in social justice movements, writing:

Both paths taken – movement culture and work created by “artists” aligned with social-justice movements – are equally significant. And both paths fundamentally change the role of art in society. Likewise, the definition of an artist becomes more flexible...it breaks down the elitism in the visual arts and challenges the notion that only a select few people with special talents can participate in the visual-art field. In short, it makes art accessible to all.<sup>51</sup>

Scholar John K. Grande’s book, *Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists* (2004), is made up of interviews with twenty-one artists from Europe and North America each of whom has a particular way of working with nature and expressing art in tandem with nature.<sup>52</sup> The interviews contextualize the work of this diverse group of artists and offer insight into how other contemporary artists approach environmental concerns through their practice. Scholar Lucy R. Lippard’s book, *Undermining: A Wild Ride through Land Use, Politics and Art in the Changing West* (2014), discusses her concerns with how humans intersect with nature in the Southwest United States.<sup>53</sup> Lippard’s title, *Undermining*, refers literally to mining and gravel pits that have popped up in the Southwest and altered irreplaceable ecosystems, and in turn undermining as a political act, how artists use subversion as a form of resistance.

Tony Penikett’s book, *Reconciliation: First Nations Treaty Making in British Columbia* (2006), examines the current B.C. Treaty Commission.<sup>54</sup> Andrew Woolford’s *Between Justice and Certainty: Treaty Making in British Columbia* (2006), also examines

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<sup>51</sup> Lampert, *A People’s Art History*, X.

<sup>52</sup> John K. Grande, *Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.

<sup>53</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *Undermining: A Wild Ride through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West*, New York: The new Press, 2014.

<sup>54</sup> Penikett, *Reconciliation*.

the B.C. Treaty Commission.<sup>55</sup> *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* is examined at length in Stan Persky's book, *Delgamuukw: The Supreme Court of Canada Decision on Aboriginal Title* (1998), published as part of the David Suzuki Foundation Series.<sup>56</sup> The Nisga'a Final Agreement is explored extensively in Tracie Lee Scott's book, *Postcolonial Sovereignty?: The Nisga'a Final Agreement* (2012),<sup>57</sup> as well as in Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada's *Nisga'a Final Agreement: Implementation Report 2010-2011*.<sup>58</sup>

Moving beyond the historical and art historical literature, activist literature provides a valuable resource for understanding relationships between people and environmental issues. Canadian environmental activist and scholar David Suzuki's book, *The Legacy: An Elder's Vision for Our Sustainable Future* (2010), provides insight into how we must change the direction in which the world is going and find a new path to sustainability and responsible consumption of resources.<sup>59</sup> Suzuki presents his vision for the future, one that is very much in line with a traditional Indigenous worldview that respects the natural world, and which is of interest when analyzing the work of the three artists. *Alliances: Re/Envisioning Indigenous-non-Indigenous Relationships*, edited by Lynne Davis (2010), contains articles by scholars, activists and environmentalists on how to improve Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relationships in our current world.<sup>60</sup> Of particular interest to this study, is an article by environmental studies and ecosystem-

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<sup>55</sup> Andrew Woolford, *Between Justice and Certainty: Treaty Making in British Columbia*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006.

<sup>56</sup> Persky, *Delgamuukw*.

<sup>57</sup> Tracie Lee Scott, *Postcolonial Sovereignty?: The Nisga'a Final Agreement*, Saskatoon: Purich Pub, 2012.

<sup>58</sup> Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, *Nisga'a Final Agreement: Implementation Report 2010-2011*.

<sup>59</sup> David Suzuki, *The Legacy: An Elder's Vision for Our Sustainable Future*, David Suzuki Foundation Series, Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2010.

<sup>60</sup> Lynne Davis, ed. *Alliances: Re/Envisioning Indigenous-non-Indigenous Relationships*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010.

based management expert Caitlyn Vernon entitled “What New Relationship? Taking Responsibility for Justice and Sustainability in British Columbia.” Vernon outlines her recommendations for a sustainable and responsible way of using resources in British Columbia that involves cooperation between Aboriginal peoples and the provincial government. Vernon’s article provides a framework for understanding what is happening in British Columbia, and offers a way of interpreting the artists’ environmental concerns for their communities as seen through their work.

There is a wealth of non-academic writing that deals with Aboriginal engagement with environmental issues and treaties in Canada. Thomas King’s novel, *The Back of the Turtle* (2014), centres around two Aboriginal people who have left their home communities only to return and find those communities destroyed by an environmental disaster caused by a large corporation, not unlike current fears in British Columbia as to what could happen if the Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline was to go ahead.<sup>61</sup> In his book, *The Comeback* (2014), John Ralston Saul discusses reconciliation between Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian government in terms of treaties and environmental issues. Saul argues that the “great issue of our time” is the lack of justice for Aboriginal peoples.<sup>62</sup> These texts serve to affirm that an investigation into this research topic through the lens of contemporary artists is current, relevant and necessary.

While Townsend-Gault and others have written about the history and politics of British Columbia in relation to contemporary Aboriginal art, there remains a lack of analysis and writing that links land claims and environmental issues in the Province. My research aims to fill this void in the current literature.

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<sup>61</sup> Thomas King, *The Back of the Turtle*, Harper Collins Publishers Ltd., 2014.

<sup>62</sup> Ralston Saul, *The Comeback*, 137.

## Chapter Breakdown

This thesis addresses a complex and trans-cultural theme: how Aboriginal Northwest Coast artists engage with land rights and environmental issues through their art, and in doing so, become activist artists. The first chapter is dedicated to the artistic practice of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun. A selection of Yuxweluptun's figurative works are analyzed in depth through the use of Kramer's theorization of modernist Aboriginal artists, Vizenor's theory of "survivance" and Clifford's theory of "becoming". Townsend-Gault's writings are cited as tools to describe Yuxweluptun's formal artistic practice, and Lampert's definition of an artist-activist is applied to Yuxweluptun. Yuxweluptun's own words on how his work deals with land and the environment, and how he sees his position in this ongoing debate are central.

The second chapter is dedicated to the work of Marianne Nicolson. I analyze a selection of Nicolson's installation works in depth through the use of Deloria's theorization of modernity in Indigenous communities, Townsend-Gault's writing on modernity in Nicolson's work and Vizenor's theory of "survivance". Nicolson's advocacy for an Indigenous worldview as a way to help solve environmental crises is featured based on the interview conducted.

The third chapter is dedicated to the work of Sonny Assu. A selection of Assu's works are analyzed in depth through the use of Kramer's theorization of modernist Aboriginal artists borrowing from scholar Judith Ostrowitz, Clifford's theorization of globalization and Townsend-Gault's description of Assu's hybrid artistic style. The use of humour and irony in Assu's work is explored as well as his involvement with grassroots Indigenous movements that make him an artist-activist, as defined by Lampert.

Based on the interview conducted, the inspiration that Assu has taken from the work of Yuxweluptun and Nicolson is addressed, as he is the youngest artist of the group and still developing an individual style.

In addition to summarizing my argument, in the concluding chapter I elaborate on the trend of contemporary Aboriginal artists aligning themselves with social movements. I use Assu's work *There is Hope if We Rise* (2013) as an example of this practice, suggesting that this is where the activist artist movement is heading. I reinforce Nicolson's position that one way to begin to solve the environmental crisis is to employ an Indigenous worldview rather than a Western one in relation to nature, a position that is supported by Ralston Saul and Suzuki. I conclude by emphasizing the power that Aboriginal artists have in the fight for land rights and the environment.

## **Chapter One: Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun – Land is Power, and Power is Land.**

*We [Indigenous peoples] came from a time of pure ownership of everything, this is our territory, this is our land, this is our sovereignty, these are our Nations – and then the colonialists came along and fucked everything up, just completely.*<sup>63</sup>

*The Universe is so Big, the Whiteman Keeps Me on My Reservation* (1987) is a large painting, two by two-and-a-half metres, depicting a broken and decimated landscape with a barren river and melting mountains [Figure 1.1]. Nature itself, personified by the parched mask on the right, is crumbling, implying that all humanity must live in this ruined landscape where trees, mountains and waterways cease to function. The title, in line with Yuxweluptun's provocative style, is referencing the fact that Indigenous people are denied access to land and that the destruction of the natural environment is an imminent threat. This large-scale colourful work is characteristic of the artist's combination of traditional Northwest Coast formlines and ovoids with surrealist imagery, a style he has been working in consistently throughout his forty-year career.

This chapter is dedicated to the artistic practice of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, with a focus on his figurative paintings. I interviewed the artist in Vancouver on January 11, 2016 and I open with a description of how I experienced our conversation before turning to the artist's biography and an analysis of his work. I will focus on environmental issues addressed in Yuxweluptun's works, as well as the way in which his modernist aesthetic aids in allowing his work to reach a diverse audience. Addressing pressing and longstanding issues that are the result of colonialism, Yuxweluptun acts as an advocate for change, and through his artistic practice becomes an activist.

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<sup>63</sup> Yuxweluptun, interview by author, January 11, 2016, 1.

Yuxweluptun states that so many of his paintings address environmental issues because the environment directly affects Aboriginal rights. Native land claims are not worth pursuing if there is not a living land to claim.<sup>64</sup>

I first got the opportunity to meet Yuxweluptun and spend a few hours at his East Vancouver studio in May 2015 through a connection with a mutual friend. Located in a repurposed factory with high ceilings and an unfinished industrial feel, I was able to view a number of large scale works in progress and speak candidly with Yuxweluptun about his artistic practice and his historical and political beliefs. This first visit laid the groundwork for the interview I hoped to conduct in the coming months. Arranging for this interview required time and patience, as Yuxweluptun is not one for schedules and planning in advance, but we made plans for me to visit his studio and conduct an interview in early January 2016. It was pouring rain on January 11 when I nervously walked to his studio. Yuxweluptun's reputation as a tough, unforgiving and outspoken commentator of Aboriginal issues in Canada had me feeling apprehensive about how he would react to my questions, since, unlike my previous visit, this was not a social occasion but an interview for a Masters thesis. I knocked on his studio door and was immediately greeted by Yuxweluptun's tiny Yorkshire Terrier Rez, followed a few minutes later by Yuxweluptun himself. I was surprised at how open and willing to share he was, any nerves that I had felt on the rainy walk over quickly evaporated and we ended up speaking for two and a half hours among the paints and canvases that filled the large open space. I brought a list of interview questions to guide our conversation, but Yuxweluptun knew what he wanted to say and ended up speaking for most of the two and a half hours. Yuxweluptun has very strong opinions and can articulate exactly how he

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<sup>64</sup> Robin Laurence, "Man of Masks," *Canadian Art*, Spring 1995.

feels on a number of tough issues. Although I come from a settler background, with European immigrant grandparents, we enjoyed a positive rapport that resulted in intense discussion and allowed me to gain some real insight into the drive behind Yuxweluptun's work. I am very grateful to him for allowing me into his studio and offering insight into his life and artistic practice. For Yuxweluptun, Canadian history, politics and his art are all linked. His artwork is a direct reflection of his experience as an urban Indigenous person dealing with the legacy of colonialism in British Columbia. Yuxweluptun's practice is based in what James Clifford calls "ethnographic and historical realism – recognizing that ideas of history and the real are currently contested and also inventively translated in power-charged sites from land-claims courtrooms to museums and universities."<sup>65</sup> Yuxweluptun sees himself as a history painter, recording the colonial wrongs perpetrated on Indigenous peoples, "...I was painting these things to translate them for Natives to understand and to record what the Europeans were doing to Aboriginal peoples. Fundamentally, it is about colonial destruction and Aboriginal reconstruction."<sup>66</sup>

### **Beginnings**

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun was born in 1957 in Kamloops, British Columbia, although most of his life has been spent in the Vancouver area. His father is a member of the Cowichan Salish First Nation and his mother the Okanagan First Nation. Culturally his roots are mainly Cowichan, though he views himself as one of the many urban Indigenous peoples living in greater Vancouver. "Yuxweluptun" is Salish for "Man of Many Masks". This ancient and honourable name was bestowed on him at the age of

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<sup>65</sup> Clifford, *Returns*, 7.

<sup>66</sup> Yuxweluptun, interview by author, January 11, 2016, 1.

fourteen when he was initiated into the Sxwaixwe society. The Sxwaixwe is a supernatural being who descended from the sky to dwell at the bottom of a deep lake; the Cowichan Salish traditionally only have one masked dance associated with the Sxwaixwe.<sup>67</sup> Yuxweluptun explains: “You carry the mask that belongs to your family, and you identify with the animal on the mask.”<sup>68</sup> Yuxweluptun will not say more than this, however, as this is culturally sensitive information that he is not willing to share with researchers and journalists or even in his paintings.

From an early age, Yuxweluptun was introduced to cultural and social issues affecting his people by his parents, who knew how important it was not to shield their son from the realities of life as an Indigenous person in Canada. His father was at one time the President of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs and his mother was a Vice-President of the Indian Homemakers Association. One event that made a strong impression on him occurred when, at the age of thirteen, his father brought him to a correctional institution in Mission, B.C. He sat down with an Aboriginal man who was serving a life sentence for murdering his wife. When Yuxweluptun asked the man why he had killed his wife, he responded that he had been drinking and had hit her with an axe. Yuxweluptun remembers: “I was sitting there at thirteen years old, and this guy was probably thirty-five, he was a young man, and right then I knew that Natives had problems living under colonialism. It is very oppressive and there are a lot of social problems that come from that.”<sup>69</sup> I asked Yuxweluptun if it was around this time that he became aware of environmental issues and land rights, to which he responded that it was around the age of thirteen he was enlightened and everything became clear:

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<sup>67</sup> Laurence, "Man of Masks," 55.

<sup>68</sup> Laurence, "Man of Masks," 55.

<sup>69</sup> Yuxweluptun, interview by author, January 11, 2016, 5.

I was walking along one day, and then I was just aware of everything. I know the exact day, it was a nice sunny day, July I think it was, July the 17 or something. And I was walking along Richmond 2 Road towards Blundell. So I actually know where I was ...when all these little puzzles in my brain started to connect together, and I started thinking yeah that's right...this is the world.<sup>70</sup>

Yuxweluptun says he has always been an artist. From his earliest years as a six year old in Residential School, he was carving tiny totem poles on the porch of the wood shop: "Artists think differently in many ways, and I think that's what makes artists different. I think we are wired differently."<sup>71</sup> Yuxweluptun attended a Residential School in Kamloops, B.C. from the age of six to eight years old, from 1963 to 1965. He told me that when he was eight the laws were changed and he was sent to public school, "so I'm first generation public school."<sup>72</sup> We did not discuss his time in Residential School any further, but it did seem as though his earliest memories of creating art stemmed from this time.

Yuxweluptun attended the Emily Carr School of Art and Design from 1978 until he graduated with Honours in 1983 with a Diploma in painting, after which he embarked on a career as a professional artist with the goal of documenting and promoting change in contemporary Canadian history through the creation of large-scale paintings. To express his views about the destruction of the B.C. natural environment and the plight of Aboriginal peoples, through his acrylic and oil paintings, Yuxweluptun draws on Coast Salish cosmology, Northwest Coast formal design elements, and Western painting traditions.<sup>73</sup> His first solo exhibition, *Lawrence Paul*, was presented at The Bent-Box Gallery in Vancouver in 1985, with a number of group and solo exhibitions in the

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Saw Gallery, "Bullets Over Kitigan Zibi," Ottawa, 2003.

following decades. He has regularly been included in group or thematic exhibitions focussing on land and environmental issues, beginning in 1991 when Yuxweluptun was included in an exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery titled *Lost Illusions: Recent Landscape Art*. The exhibition aimed to address the sometimes problematic relationship between humans and their natural environment. The Vancouver Art Gallery's press release for the exhibition, dated October 4, 1991, states that: "rather than being an apocalyptic accounting of the extent of the environmental crisis, the exhibition examined reasons why changes occur in the landscape."<sup>74</sup> Yuxweluptun was also included in another related exhibition, *Who Speaks for the Rivers?*, held in 1995 at the Derek Simpkins Gallery of Tribal Art in Vancouver, which addressed issues including industrial pollution, land development, hydropower dams and poor logging practices.

### **Yuxweluptun the Modernist**

Perhaps one of the main reasons that Yuxweluptun is so successful in conveying these concerns to a wide audience and in participating in this contemporary conversation is the power of his hybridized aesthetic style and its masterful combination of Northwest coast imagery with Western painting traditions. He sees painting as a way to depict and convey whatever he wants; he says there are no rules to painting, unlike with traditional Northwest Coast carving. An early work, *Outstanding Business, Reservation Cut-Off Lands* (1984), stands at two by three metres, and depicts a landscape at dusk with his characteristic mountains made up of Northwest coast masks, formlines and ovoid designs melting into the water in a distinctly surrealist style symbolizing the loss of land [Figure 1.2]. Writing on Yuxweluptun's depiction of land, Townsend-Gault has stated: "His animation of land literally shows that what in another historical tradition is thought of as

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<sup>74</sup> Vancouver Art Gallery, "Lost Illusions: Recent Landscape Art," Vancouver, October 4, 1991.

inert matter, possesses *anima*, or spirit, and is alive.”<sup>75</sup> Discussing the coming together of two cultures in his work, Yuxweluptun stated: “...So the idea of *Outstanding Business* allowed me to take the concept of land claims and symbolically show it. That’s important...those early studies were ground breaking because it was a translation of two cultures meeting simultaneously, and painting was a medium of...a mutual ground.”<sup>76</sup> Further discussing his hybrid Northwest Coast and Western style, Yuxweluptun referred to another early painting, *Haida Hot Dog* (1984), as the “first pop art ever created by Natives in British Columbia.”<sup>77</sup> [Figure 1.3]. This large two by three metre painting depicts a huge purple hot dog with ketchup and mustard in a white and purple bun that has an ovoid shape, reminiscent of an Andy Warhol lithograph. On the hot dog is a traditional Northwest Coast mask-like face. *Haida Hot Dog* is one of very few pop art genre works by Yuxweluptun, although younger artists like Sonny Assu would take up this style in the late 1990s and 2000s, signifying the influence Yuxweluptun has had on the younger generation of artists.

Yuxweluptun has expressed how much he enjoyed studying the works of European painters stating: “I know they had great painters, Vermeer, Michelangelo, Bosch, Van Gogh, Bruegel, Rembrandt...and I studied them all and I enjoyed them.”<sup>78</sup> According to Gerald McMaster, this combination of “traditional Northwest Coast art with vivid colours in a surrealistic landscape disrupts the logical order inherent in the art

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<sup>75</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "Struggles with Aboriginality / Modernity," in *Bill Reid and Beyond: Expanding on Modern Native Art*, ed. by Karen Duffek and Charlotte Townsend-Gault, Washington: University of Washington Press, 2004, 235.

<sup>76</sup> Yuxweluptun, interview by author, January 11, 2016, 18.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 12.

of the region and suggests a dream-like world inhabited by remnants of Native culture.”<sup>79</sup> *Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in Sky* (1990), a painting included in the 1992 exhibition *Indigena* at the Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, is a compelling example of this practice [Figure 1.4]. In this work, the “Red Man” stands in the foreground made up of multi-coloured Northwest Coast formlines and ovoids. To his left a large arm, made up of the same elements as the “Red Man” comes out of the ground to support two lab-coated characters (presumably the “White Men”) in their pathetic attempt to patch a large hole in the sky. In the background mountains look to be melting, they are made up of Northwest Coast masks whose tongues are out and look to be panting and exhausted as if they have been defeated in a tiring fight to save themselves. Yuxweluptun told me that he painted this work while on an Aboriginal reserve, and it reflected his belief that Aboriginal chiefs had no real power at the time and were forced to watch from the sidelines as the Government dealt with issues that affected them. This work is an obvious comment on the gaping hole in the ozone layer and the threat of global warming, and how inefficient those in power (read: settlers) are at dealing with these types of environmental concerns. Townsend-Gault writes of this work that Yuxweluptun has positioned the “Red Man” according to post-Renaissance conventions for rendering the “figure in the landscape”, while assembling him out of formlines and ovoids.<sup>80</sup> She writes that: “Paul appropriates figural and landscape conventions from the Western art tradition in which he was educated, including oleaginous quotes from surrealism, to picture what he calls the ‘toxicological environment’.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Lee-Ann Martin and Gerald McMaster, ed. *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives*. Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992, 157.

<sup>80</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "Impurity and Danger," *Current Anthropology* 34, no. 1, February 1993, 93.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

Yuxweluptun is aware of his role as a modernist Aboriginal artist, and of the influence he has had on younger artists. When I asked him if he considered himself a modernist Indigenous artist he stated: "I've had a big influence on the Northwest Coast, Brian Jungen, Sonny Assu... a lot of artists were able to grapple modernism because I tackled it as a concept. What do you mean you're an Indian artist and you don't carve? That's absurd."<sup>82</sup> Yuxweluptun went on to explain that he could not abide by the rules of traditionalism and convey the kinds of messages he wanted to convey. In 1998, when interviewed for an article in the *Vancouver Sun* entitled *Reshaping Modern Art*, Yuxweluptun was quoted as saying, "Where were we [as Indians] when the first confrontation with modernist ideas was going on? Where was our freedom to express ourselves or to join in the debate? We were free. Free to march on to reservations, free to go to residential schools."<sup>83</sup> Yuxweluptun stated in 1992 that:

My work is very different from traditional art work. How do you paint a land claim? You can't carve a totem pole that has a beer bottle on it... I paint this for what it is – a very toxic land base. This is what my ancestral motherland is becoming. Painting is a form of political activism, a way to exercise my inherent right, my right to authority, my freedom... I can speak out in my painting even without the recognition of self-government.<sup>84</sup>

Although Yuxweluptun has been a practicing artist since the mid 1980s and sees himself as one of the first Aboriginal Northwest Coast artists to grapple with modernism, I would argue that his highly politicized work was made possible by the previous generation of Northwest Coast artists that included Kwakwaka'wakw artists such as Mungo Martin and Doug Cranmer, and Haida artist Bill Reid. Their visual art constituted a form of activism even though it did not use overtly political imagery and largely

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<sup>82</sup> Yuxweluptun, interview by author, January 11, 2016, 18.

<sup>83</sup> Michael Scott, "Reshaping Modern Art," *The Vancouver Sun*, September 1998, D5.

<sup>84</sup> Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, "Scorched Earth, Clear-Cut Logging on Native Sovereign Land. Shaman Coming to Fix." *National Gallery of Canada*, <http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=42661> (accessed September 15, 2015).

remained true to traditional Northwest Coast design. They would not for example have produced a work such as Yuxweluptun's *Thou Shalt Not Steal* (1991), a text-based painting featuring the words "NATIVE LAND CLAIMS".<sup>85</sup> Rather, this generation of artists was successful in bringing back traditional practices like carving and painting, which ultimately paved the way for Yuxweluptun and other artists belonging to the second wave that emerged during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Gerald Vizenor's 1994 book *Manifest Manners, Narratives on Postindian Survivance*, introduced concepts that are useful when looking at the art of that decade as well as other contemporary Aboriginal art. Vizenor defines "survivance" as "an active sense of presence, the continuance of Native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Survivance stories are the renunciations, or rejections, of dominance, tragedy and victimry."<sup>86</sup> "Survivance" can be understood as Aboriginal people not only surviving, but thriving, and involves resistance and resilience in the face of the dominant forces of colonialism. This active "survivance" can be seen in the work of contemporary Aboriginal artists like Yuxweluptun who were working at a time that had begun to encourage political resilience and power to fight for Aboriginal rights.

In line with Vizenor's work, James Clifford writes about Indigenous histories of survival, struggle and renewal that became widely visible in the 1980s and 1990s in his 2013 book *Returns*. I find his theory of becoming particularly relevant when discussing the work of Yuxweluptun and the previous generation of Northwest Coast artists. Clifford writes that Indigenous peoples, "...reach back selectively to deeply rooted, adaptive traditions: creating new pathways in a complex postmodernity. Cultural

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<sup>85</sup> *Thou Shalt Not Steal* (1991) is reproduced in the *Indigena* (1992) exhibition catalogue on page 158.

<sup>86</sup> Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, vii.

endurance is a process of becoming.”<sup>87</sup> Yuxweluptun is certainly part of this process of becoming, he looks to the past for inspiration through his use of traditional Northwest Coast formlines and ovoids combined with Western painting traditions and mediums. Through this process he becomes a new kind of Indigenous activist artist.

The work of Doug Cranmer (1927-2006) offers an instructive comparison. Cranmer was active in the latter half of the twentieth century and has been written about extensively by Jennifer Kramer in her book *Kesu* (2012). Kramer identifies Cranmer as a modern Indigenous artist, because he exemplifies qualities she associates with all modern artists such as having the drive to innovate through experimentation and participate in the commercial art market while fostering a strong individualism.<sup>88</sup> Kramer writes that: “Doug’s individualism gave him the freedom to pick and choose inspiration, combining what he liked in order to propose something new.”<sup>89</sup> Although he understood and had mastered Northwest Coast design, Cranmer’s experimentation with new techniques and materials, and his pioneering abstract and non-figurative paintings using Northwest Coast ovoids and U-shapes, symbolized his political contribution to validating modernity in Aboriginal communities and were an important precursor to the work of Yuxweluptun. Cranmer, like Yuxweluptun, was thus part of a process of “becoming” in the sense that Clifford describes, because, as an Indigenous artist in the modern era, he created a new previously untraveled pathway. Kramer explains that modern art creates new and universal forms of access, allowing the viewer to appreciate the aesthetic without prior cultural or contextual knowledge about the work. Cranmer’s work, especially his *Abstract Series* of paintings, exemplified a transcultural aesthetic that could be

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<sup>87</sup> Clifford, *Returns*, 7.

<sup>88</sup> Kramer, *Kesu*, 120.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

appreciated by a wide variety of people without specific knowledge of Kwakwaka'wakw culture.<sup>90</sup> As mentioned above, Yuxweluptun's hybrid practice embodies this transcultural aesthetic and can be read by Indigenous and non-Indigenous viewers alike.

However, one significant difference between the practice of Cranmer and Yuxweluptun is indicative of the different motivations behind their works. Many of Cranmer's works were consciously devoid of specific meanings in order to prove to the art world and Canadian society that Aboriginal artists and people were active participants in modernity and not stuck in the past.<sup>91</sup> Kramer writes that Cranmer "...remained aloof from others' expectations and need to know or define."<sup>92</sup> Yuxweluptun, on the other hand, favours specific meanings and representations in his work, especially through his descriptive and often explicit titles. For instance, his painting *Scorched Earth, Clear-Cut Logging on Native Sovereign Land. Shaman Coming to Fix* (1990), is a work that critiques the logging industry's threat to the environment in B.C. A shaman looks over the damaged earth, while elements of the landscape weep over their destruction, personifying nature's grief [Figure Intro.1]. The viewer does not need knowledge of Cowichan Coast Salish history to understand what is happening in this painting – it is blatant, "in-your-face". Cranmer's work was successful in bringing back traditional practices and innovating on those traditions in a way that had not been possible previously. He and his contemporaries paved the way for Yuxweluptun's highly politicized work by providing evidence of Indigenous modernity while working in a more colonial climate than exists today. Yuxweluptun states that his historical moment required something different: "Somebody has to paint these feelings. Traditional Native

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

art never had to deal with the realities that I have had to deal with. I had to transcend traditional ideas and concepts into a modern time to deal with these things.”<sup>93</sup> Cranmer in his time and Yuxweluptun in his have been trailblazers and innovators, both doing work that had not been done before to the same extent. This modernity is exemplified by their invention of hybrid art forms that allow for their work to resonate with a wide audience. In the case of Yuxweluptun what makes his work so effective is his focus on pressing environmental issues.

### **Yuxweluptun the Activist Artist**

Writing about activism in the art world, Nicolas Lampert states that politically engaged art can and does exist in museums and galleries, but activist art is firmly located in movements and in the streets.<sup>94</sup> He makes a distinction between activist-artists and artist-activists, and argues that their roles are equally significant in the activist movement. Activist-artists are those who do not necessarily identify as an “artist”, but those who consider themselves activists who organize and at times employ visual tactics to promote their causes.<sup>95</sup> Artist-activists, on the other hand, do identify first and foremost as “artists”, are often trained in art schools and choose to locate their art within a movement.<sup>96</sup> Lampert argues that both roles are equally significant in social-justice movements. Yuxweluptun’s work is evidently part of the second category, that of the artist-activist, because of his strategic use of his formal art training and his strong self-identification with his role as an artist. In the same vein as being an artist-activist, I would identify Yuxweluptun as a “Postindian warrior”, to borrow another term from Gerald

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<sup>93</sup> Polina Bachlakova, "Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun and Canada's Ugly History," *Beatroute*, April 2, 2013.

<sup>94</sup> Lampert, *A People's Art History*, ix.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

Vizenor. Vizenor explains “Postindians” as “...the *new* storiers of convergence and survivance; the tricky observance of native stories in the associated context of post modernity.”<sup>97</sup> “Postindians” counter past histories that are based in false colonial ideas by telling their own stories of culture and Native modernity, relating to land rights, sovereignty, natural resources, the environment and other current issues. Through his politicized practice, then, Yuxweluptun counters past hegemonic views about Indigenous peoples and Canadian history and becomes a “Postindian warrior” practicing active “survivance”.

Lampert goes on to address the cultural biases and stereotypes often associated with “visual artists”, as being isolated, aloof and eccentric, when in fact, “*most* visual artists are much like everyone else – working-class people with working-class concerns.”<sup>98</sup> This is particularly true of how Yuxweluptun feels about himself. When I asked him how he felt about his role as a voice for his community he responded, “I speak like every other Native. We are a collective; you can never leave a collective. I am only part of a collective that is saying the same thing; I am just another average Indian.”<sup>99</sup> When I pointed out, however, that he has a platform to reach a wide audience because of his role as a successful mainstream artist, he responded, “Oh yeah I do. People have to change to solve the problems of this country environmentally, and you know that takes a lot of direction.”<sup>100</sup> Yuxweluptun sees the power and voice he has through his paintings as part of a movement for Indigenous rights to land and the environment. “I’m an artist,”

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<sup>97</sup> Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, viii.

<sup>98</sup> Lampert, *A People’s Art History*, x.

<sup>99</sup> Yuxweluptun, interview by author, January 11, 2016, 8.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

he said, “politicians come and go. I’m here for life, my pictures will stay for a long time.”<sup>101</sup>

Even beyond the paintings I have been discussing, Yuxweluptun’s first performance piece is perhaps his most obvious piece of activist art. The work, entitled *An Indian Act, Shooting the Indian Act*, was first performed in the United Kingdom in 1997, and then in Surrey, B.C. later the same year and on the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg Reserve in Quebec in 2003 [Figure 1.5]. The Canadian performances were organized in collaboration with the Grunt Gallery in Vancouver and SAW Gallery in Ottawa. Yuxweluptun took a number of copies of the Indian Act and literally shot them with shotguns and rifles. The final products of the performances were the shot Indian Act document, the spent shotgun cartridges or rifle shells and, in some cases, the weapons used. Yuxweluptun stated in 1997 that: “This performance is a symbolic act of how much hatred, anguish and anger I have towards this legislation. I am symbolically trying to extinguish Canadian colonial supremacy over Aboriginal people by showing a physical act in the spirit that some day this type of legislation will no longer exist on the face of this sacred mother earth.”<sup>102</sup> Yuxweluptun recreated the final products of the performances as installations that are now in the collections of museums and galleries. The National Gallery of Canada exhibited the installation in the 2013 exhibition *Sakahana*. Yuxweluptun’s performance itself can be considered an act of extreme resistance against colonial policies and constitutes activism outside of institutional walls, while the

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>102</sup> Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Locus +*, locusplus.org.uk/paul.htm, (accessed September 5, 2015).

installations, as well as the filmed documentation of the performance by Dana Claxton, act as lasting records of this extreme resistance accessible to viewers.<sup>103</sup>

### **Recent work and Environmental Concerns**

Now well into the twenty-first century, Yuxweluptun continues to produce large-scale works that express scathing critiques of the Canadian government and the lasting effects of colonialism. *Indian World My Home and Native Land* (2012), which was featured on the cover of *Canadian Art* magazine in winter 2014, is a surrealist landscape made up of ovoid pine trees and multi coloured mask mountains [Figure 1.6]. Northwest Coast masks are hidden in the clouds in a blue sky while a killer whale leaps from one. In relation to this painting, Yuxweluptun stated: “We are very rooted to our traditional and sacred lands. This painting, *Indian World*, is about who is the caretaker. Who owns this land? I am not willing to give this land, my motherland, to the province of British Columbia. Why do I have to extinguish my rights? Why is there this colonial extremism?”<sup>104</sup> *Fucking Creeps They’re Environmental Terrorists* (2013), depicts three characters in business suits with serpentine tongues [Figure 1.7]. In the background a dark and devastated landscape can be seen, as the figure on the right spews waste onto the land. The figure on the left looks suspiciously like former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, with grey hair that resembles a wig and a tie with the Shell logo on it as he holds a pump that is dripping gas onto the land. I asked Yuxweluptun what this painting represented, to which he responded: “The painting is about the tar sands, British Petroleum, Shell... all those motherfuckers that are destroying this land. I know what

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<sup>103</sup> The film *Yuxweluptun: Man of Masks* (1998) was directed by Dana Claxton and produced by The National Film Board of Canada, and documents Yuxweluptun’s performance starting in the United Kingdom.

<sup>104</sup> Christina Ritchie, “On a Good Day: Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun Stands His Ground,” *Canadian Art*, winter 2014, 124.

they're doing, and so...it's not a pretty picture sometimes what I paint."<sup>105</sup> I was curious about what kind of reaction Yuxweluptun has received to particularly politically charged and provocative paintings like this one. He said that overall, the feedback has been positive; people enjoy his "in-your-face" style and have come to expect it from him, although he says there are always those critics who find him crass and unnecessarily aggressive. "A lot of people say I am a very antagonistic kind of person, they say that I am disrespectful towards people, but I think if you have been treated like shit for most of your life as a person, you have to be really careful about how you talk to other people and how you feel about things."<sup>106</sup>

There have been positive steps in recent years to move towards more respectful relationships between Aboriginal communities and the B.C. Government. One example is "The New Relationship", an agreement between the province of B.C. and The First Nations Leadership Council in 2005 that intended to improve economic, social, and cultural opportunities for Aboriginal people, involve First Nations in natural resource management and share the benefits from resource related activities.<sup>107</sup> Environmental studies and ecosystem-based management expert Caitlyn Vernon explains two very different views of the history of British Columbia and explains why this New Relationship is so important.<sup>108</sup> The settler story is one of development, where land wrongly considered 'unused' was exploited for forestry, fishing and mining practices that operated under the assumption that resources were limitless and inexhaustible.<sup>109</sup> The

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<sup>105</sup> Yuxweluptun, interview by author, January 11, 2016, 8.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Caitlyn Vernon, "What New Relationship? Taking Responsibility for Justice and Sustainability in British Columbia," in *Alliances: Re/Envisioning Indigenous-non-Indigenous Relationships*, ed. by Lynne Davis, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010: 282.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 281.

Aboriginal story on the other hand is one of dispossession, where land was taken away and forced assimilation was implemented for generations.<sup>110</sup> Yuxweluptun's *Clear Cut to the Last Tree* (1993) is a perfect example of what Vernon is referring to here. In this painting, a lone tree is left surrounded by stumps of what was once a forest [Figure 1.8]. In the background is a mountain against the backdrop of a blue cloudy sky and a sun, and three small figures who seem desperate in the hot environment that was once shaded by trees. This work highlights the exploited landscape and the dangers of clear-cutting to the environment and its inhabitants. Through her research with various people involved with the agreement, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, Vernon concluded that in contrast to previous attempts by the provincial government to erase colonial history from the official discourse, "The New Relationship" recognizes that "the historical Aboriginal-Crown relationship in B.C. has given rise to the present socio-economic disparity between First Nations and other British Columbians."<sup>111</sup> Vernon provides her three top recommendations for moving forward: decreasing consumption, shared decision-making and being an ally by acknowledging the past and bearing witness to the present.<sup>112</sup> Yuxweluptun's work can be seen as a reflection of the current realities on the Northwest coast, and can aid in visualizing Vernon's recommendations.

Two large-scale paintings that Yuxweluptun is currently working on caught my attention while I was in his studio, and we discussed those briefly at the end of my visit. *Indian Land, You're on My Land* is much like a number of his other paintings that address land, and consists of a landscape of his characteristic pine trees with a large wolf

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 283.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 290.

in the center made up of formlines and ovoids melting into the ground.<sup>113</sup> He had been working on this painting for about a month, which is set to go to the Royal Bank of Canada head office in downtown Vancouver. Another work that Yuxweluptun recently finished, resting against a wall in the studio, is entitled *Kinder Morgan Go Go Girls*, and is part of his *Super Predator* series.<sup>114</sup> The work shows three figures with mask-like heads, much like his 2013 painting *Fucking Creeps They're Environmental Terrorists*, although the figures are women – a rare occurrence in his work [Figure 1.7]. The mask heads in *Kinder Morgan Go Go Girls* resemble Hamatsa masks, associated with the highest ranking Kwakwaka'wakw secret society. Hamatsa masks are worn during a traditional Kwakwaka'wakw dance ceremony that represents a dangerous cannibal spirit who lives in the sky named Bakbakwalanooksiwae coming down to earth to initiate new members into the Society. I did not ask Yuxweluptun if Hamatsa masks inspired the heads, but it would make sense considering that the figures in the painting represent super predators. Yuxweluptun explained that “the feminists” were asking him why he was not representing any women in his *Super Predator* series, to which he responded, “... Well who do you guys have to offer?”<sup>115</sup>, implying that the most evil actors in our society were men. Yuxweluptun described the content and characters of the painting for me, stating:

Our premier [Christy Clark] wears a pearl necklace, so I don't have to say who that is. Kinder Morgan wants to put a pipeline through, so the company has hired these go go girls to go around and dance, and so they have these light shows and the go go girls stand up and dance to the tunes and tell everybody that Kinder Morgan is a really good thing.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Yuxweluptun is still working on *Indian Land, You're on My Land*, and therefore there are no images of it available yet.

<sup>114</sup> Yuxweluptun had just recently finished *Kinder Morgan Go Go Girls* and it has not yet left his studio, therefore there are no images of it available yet.

<sup>115</sup> Yuxweluptun, interview by author, January 11, 2016, 18.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 & 19.

The painting is a reaction to the proposed expansion of the Kinder Morgan Pipeline, and expresses Yuxweluptun's view of those who are promoting and supporting the development as evil super predators.<sup>117</sup>

The Kinder Morgan Pipeline, or the Trans Mountain Pipeline, has been named as one of the three proposed projects most threatening to affect the environment of B.C. by the Federation of B.C. Naturalists (B.C. Nature).<sup>118</sup> Kinder Morgan is the largest energy infrastructure company in North America, operating approximately 135,000 kilometers of pipelines and 180 terminals. Their pipelines transport natural gas, refined petroleum products, crude oil, carbon dioxide and more.<sup>119</sup> The Trans Mountain Pipeline has been in operation since 1953, and transports both crude oil and refined products from Edmonton, Alberta to terminals and refineries in central B.C., the greater Vancouver area, Washington State, California, the U.S. Gulf Coast and also ships overseas from a marine terminal in Burnaby, B.C. Its proposed 6.8 billion dollar pipeline expansion would triple the capacity of the existing Trans Mountain Pipeline and increase the number of tankers carrying the product overseas seven-fold.<sup>120</sup> The National Energy Board, Canada's energy and safety regulator, is scheduled to make its recommendations on the pipeline expansion by May 20, 2016, however, the Province of B.C. announced in January 2016 that it cannot support the project at this juncture because the company is not offering sufficient details of its spill-response plans.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> I was not able to verify that Kinder Morgan had hired any kind of dancers to promote their pipeline project, so this is purely on the word of Yuxweluptun.

<sup>118</sup> "Current Issues," *BC Nature Federation of BC Naturalists*, <http://www.bcnature.ca/conservation/current-issues/> (accessed April 1, 2016)

<sup>119</sup> "Corporate Profile," *Kinder Morgan*, [http://www.kindermorgan.com/pages/about\\_us](http://www.kindermorgan.com/pages/about_us) (accessed March 23, 2016).

<sup>120</sup> Laura Kane, "Kinder Morgan Alleges Intervenors Broke Rules in Trans Mountain Pipeline Hearings," *The Canadian Press*, February 2016.

<sup>121</sup> Brent Jag and Jeffrey Jones, "B.C. Rejects Kinder Morgan's Bid to Expand Trans Mountain Pipeline," *The Globe and Mail*, January 2016.

In its final written submission to the project's National Energy Board (NEB) review, the Province said it had asked Kinder Morgan on three occasions for detailed information on preventing spills along the pipeline route and at the Westridge Marine Terminal in Burnaby, B.C., and on responding to emergencies that might occur. It has not received timely responses and details of the company's emergency management program were heavily redacted, it said.<sup>122</sup>

Despite these setbacks, Kinder Morgan has stated that it is reviewing the project and expects an in-service date for the expanded pipeline to be December 2019.<sup>123</sup>

Yuxweluptun and a number of B.C. artists including Marianne Nicolson, are vocal opponents of the proposed new pipelines and expansions. They draw attention to the risk of oil spills off the coast of B.C. that would have devastating ramifications on wildlife and ecosystems. In relation to the Kinder Morgan pipeline expansion and his work *Kinder Morgan Go Go Girls* specifically, Yuxweluptun stated:

I don't want Alberta's tar sands oil pipelines coming through here. I don't need 400 tankers, oil tankers, off the coast. Christy Clark is wrong. She has no right to do that, as a provincial person, any provincial person, to go in the direction of forcing something that is just viable to a few people. So the rich can get richer and the poor stay poor is not a way to go. I really don't care about Alberta and the person who owns the tar sands. I think that he's a real fucking asshole creepy person, and he doesn't give a flying fuck about any human beings but his own greed. And those types of people are super predators on the world, and they are a detriment to civilization. And nothing good will come of it, so I say no to pipelines.<sup>124</sup>

## Final words

Yuxweluptun has continued to record and discuss environmental and land claims issues throughout his lengthy career. Along with his visual art, Yuxweluptun has recorded his message through the written word and on film. In a statement penned for the 1992 exhibition catalogue *Indigena* titled "Red Savages meet Tight Pink-Skinned Men: 1491-1992" he writes:

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Kane, "Kinder Morgan."

<sup>124</sup> Yuxweluptun, interview by author, January 11, 2016, 7.

I cannot celebrate toxicological environmental hazards that are disrupting ecosystems, creating health hazards, causing toxic death as a result of the industrialization of the resources of ancestral lands by civilized men. I cannot celebrate oil spills, *Exxon Valdez*, hydrogen sulphide, mercury poisoning of fish by the James Bay flooding, pulp mill contamination released into the oceans and rivers...<sup>125</sup>

Almost twenty-five years after he wrote this statement, Yuxweluptun is still dealing with the same issues. When I asked him if he felt he was still conveying the same message after all these years he responded: “I’m still saying the same thing, I haven’t changed. Nothing has really changed environmentally, we’re going down a one way street...”<sup>126</sup> Although he does not seem without hope, he acknowledges that he is not seeing the changes he has hoped to see throughout his career, making the point that we need his work now more than ever.

After a career spanning forty years, the second major Canadian solo exhibition of Yuxweluptun’s work opens at the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology in May 2016. The exhibition, curated by Karen Duffek and Tania Willard, is called *Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: Unceded Territories*, and brings together new and existing works that span four decades. When I asked Yuxweluptun how he felt about the upcoming show as well as his last Canadian solo exhibition held at the Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery at U.B.C. in the summer of 1995 he said: “Well that was just a show [Belkin, 1995], it wasn’t really a retrospective. I’ve never really had a retrospective. I never did it, they asked me quite a few years ago if I would go there [to M.O.A], but I didn’t need to be validated by them.”<sup>127</sup> When I asked him what had changed, he replied that he was still dealing with the same issues in his work as he was forty years ago, so he

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<sup>125</sup> Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, “Red Savages Meet Tight Pink-Skinned Men: 1492-1992,” in Lee-Ann Martin and Gerald McMaster, ed. *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives*. Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992, 158.

<sup>126</sup> Yuxweluptun, interview by author, January 11, 2016, 10.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

felt it was time to have a solo show, and M.O.A. seemed like a good place to start. When I asked if he felt ready for the upcoming exhibition Yuxweluptun replied: “I’m ready for it, but I don’t think the rest of the country is.”<sup>128</sup> Only time will tell if Canadians are ready for the exhibition, which is sure to incite diverse reactions and discussion.

At the end of our interview, I asked Yuxweluptun what I anticipated would be a hard question: to identify the most pressing environmental issue that exists in B.C. today.

Without hesitation he answered:

Land claims. I don’t want to settle land claims, I’m telling you this is Indian land and you can’t force me, you can’t torture me, you can’t pour water over my head and make me sign land claims. I will never settle land claims with B.C. because I don’t trust British Columbians environmentally. So environmentally I am the landlord, every Native is a landlord, and your rent is due, and I don’t like what you’re doing and I want you to change. And environmentally this is a very fragile land base, so either we look after it together, or we just separate and segregate.<sup>129</sup>

Considering the large number of works that Yuxweluptun dedicates to land rights, this was not a surprise. *The Impending Nisga’a Deal. Last Stand. Chump Change.* (1996), addresses the specific land claim case between the Federal Government and the Nisga’a that was finalized on May 11, 2000 and gave the Nisga’a control over 2,000 square kilometers of their traditional land, including forestry and fishing resources contained within them [Figure 1.9]. In this painting, a white man with a briefcase skulks off looking pleased with himself while two Aboriginal figures look transfixed with despair and worry. This work can be read as Yuxweluptun’s comment on the terms of the agreement, which, when he made the painting in 1996, had not yet been finalized and which he deems unsatisfactory and as a selling out of Aboriginal concerns. Charlotte Townsend-Gault wrote in 1995 that Yuxweluptun is not painting landscapes, but land claims,

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 7.

asserting a right to his homeland that is being destroyed.<sup>130</sup> The issue of land was a recurring theme throughout the interview as Yuxweluptun continues to acknowledge the significance and importance of land rights, and has stated on numerous occasions, “Land is power, and power is land.”<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "The Salvation Art of Yuxweluptun," in *Born to Live and Die on Your Colonialist Reservations*, Vancouver: Hemlock Printers, 1995, 7.

<sup>131</sup> Yuxweluptun, "Artist's Statement," in *Born to Live and Die on Your Colonialist Reservations*, 1.

## Chapter Two: Marianne Nicolson – Art to Advocate for an Indigenous Worldview.

*I was learning and coming to understand all these things [environmental issues] in order so that I could advocate on our behalf through my art practice – that's been a developmental process.*<sup>132</sup>

Near the head of Kingcome Inlet, an isolated fjord set against the backdrop of towering mountains carved into the Coast Mountain Range of mainland British Columbia, stands a sheer rock face that drops thirty-six metres into the water. Upon closer inspection, a massive red ochre painting, over 15 metres high and 10 metres wide reveals itself, visible only by boat – the only way other than plane to get to the community of Gwa'yí. The image represents a copper, a shield shaped object that is a traditional emblem of great wealth, power and prestige in the lives of Northwest Coast Aboriginal peoples. Within the copper is a wolf, one of the original ancestors of the Dzawada'enuxw people. The copper is painted in the style of a pictograph, a type of pre-historic rock painting that along with petroglyphs, which are rock carvings, are prevalent throughout British Columbia. This work, *Cliff Painting* (1998), which is still clearly visible almost twenty years after it was painted, was Nicolson's first large scale work, done as a symbol of the past, present and future resilience of the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples [Figure 2.1]. Nicolson states:

My first large-scale piece was in 1998 in Kingcome, and I really just did it for the community, and I did it to validate our ancestral understanding and rights. I still think it's the best work I have ever done, and I actually think it will be the best...I will never create anything as dynamic, because it wasn't done for a gallery or an institution. I think this thing is going to be here long after I'm dead.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Nicolson, interview by author, January 14, 2016, 2.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 3.

This chapter is devoted to the artistic practice of Marianne Nicolson, focussing on her installation work that began in the late 1990s. I interviewed Nicolson in Victoria on January 14, 2016. We discussed the environmental issues she addresses as well as how she reaches a diverse and international audience through her public art installations and how she has to be strategic in conveying her message through this medium. Like Yuxweluptun, Nicolson is a modernist and sees her nuanced artistic practice as a way to advocate for an Indigenous worldview that she feels is not acknowledged by the governing bodies in B.C. Using her artistic practice as her voice in the fight for land rights and environmental concerns in her home community of Gwa'yí in Kingcome Inlet, Nicolson becomes an activist by advocating for a reciprocal relationship to the environment, "...we're not in the driving seat, it's a reciprocal relationship. If we don't take care of this being that we are in a relationship with, that being is not going to take care of us."<sup>134</sup>

It was no easy task to reach out to Nicolson. I began by e-mailing her through her website, but I received no response. I then contacted museum professionals I knew in B.C. on Vancouver Island and in locations I knew where she had held exhibitions, but no one seemed to have or be willing to share her contact information. I was becoming resigned to the idea that I might not meet her in person, and that my research would be limited to her writings and exhibition catalogues. As a final effort, about two weeks before I was to head to B.C., I wrote her a Facebook message. A few hours after sending the message she responded enthusiastically saying she would be happy to meet with me if I was planning on coming to Victoria where she was based. I was elated, and we set a date for early January when I knew I would be in town. Nicolson suggested a small local

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<sup>134</sup>Ibid., 9.

coffee shop in downtown Victoria. This would be my second interview of the trip, as I had interviewed Yuxweluptun in Vancouver a few days prior. On January 14 I drove to the coffee shop and waited for her arrival. I was very nervous about this interview, perhaps even more so than about the interview with Yuxweluptun, because I did not know much about Nicolson as a person and was unsure what to expect. When she arrived the mood was very casual, comfortable and calm, and we began chatting right away as if this was something we had done many times before. The interview went on for about an hour and ten minutes, and Nicolson answered my prepared questions honestly and thoughtfully while sharing personal information about her artistic practice and cultural history. As a scholar herself, she understood what I was trying to accomplish through my research. At the end of our interview she left me with these final words that continue to resonate with me: “I’m telling you my story and you have the opportunity to frame that in your own way within your own experiences, and express that within your writing and then to place that within an institution however you want to navigate that.”<sup>135</sup>

### **Beginnings**

Marianne Nicolson was born in 1969 in Comox, British Columbia to a Kwakwaka’wakw mother of the Dzawada’enuxw Tribe and a Scottish immigrant father from the Isle of Lewis. She was not exposed to her Indigenous heritage until the age of ten when she first visited her mother’s home community of Gwa’yi in Kingcome Inlet off the northern coast of Vancouver Island, a remote community reachable by a one hour plane trip from Campbell River, or eight hours by boat from Alert Bay.<sup>136</sup> Nicolson feels that she is in a position of privilege because she comes from two cultures, which allows

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>136</sup> Martin and McMaster, ed., *Indigena*, 95.

her to navigate and think about the complicated relationships between settlers and Indigenous peoples from a dual perspective. “I had grown up on reserve and off reserve, mostly off reserve, but I would get sent home [to Gwa’yi] in the summers as a teenager, and the contrast between those cultures was so extreme, so strong, that it really marked my understanding personally.”<sup>137</sup> Nicolson wanted to be an artist from an early age: “I was five when I decided I wanted to be an artist...there was absolutely no veering from that objective through my whole childhood, youth everything.”<sup>138</sup> In her early teenage years Nicolson discovered the artistic legacy of her mother’s people, the Kwakwaka’wakw, and since then has dedicated herself to “learning everything I could about the arts and culture of the Kwakwaka’wakw, a culture that encompasses every medium within dancing, singing, performance and visual arts.”<sup>139</sup>

Nicolson graduated from the Emily Carr School of Art and Design in 1996 with a Bachelor of Arts, where she worked closely with master Kwakwaka’wakw artist Wayne Alfred. While at Emily Carr, Nicolson acquired a deep appreciation for Western art history and broadened her knowledge of the arts outside of her culturally specific interests. She began to create works that incorporated both Kwakwaka’wakw and Western forms and concepts, working mainly in photography and painting. Nicolson cites her time at Emily Carr as being a turning point for her in shaping what kind of artist she would become later on:

At Emily Carr in the 1990s there was a lot of critical thinking going on around art...I took a course with Sarah Diamond and everything that she was teaching about feminism I translated into race issues...the translation was racial

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<sup>137</sup> Nicolson, interview by author, January 14, 2016, 1.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

oppression. Everything she was pointing out related to my experience as a First Nations person.<sup>140</sup>

It was during her time at Emily Carr that Nicolson realized that she wanted to produce artwork that contained a social critique, reflecting what she had been experiencing all her life as a First Nations person. Unlike Yuxweluptun, who found his calling through his upbringing, Nicolson credits her time in the educational environment as setting the path she has taken throughout her career. After her time at Emily Carr, Nicolson studied at Simon Fraser University for a year, and it was here that she began to learn about the colonial history of B.C:

It was at SFU that I started to really realize that the interpretation of our legal relationship to lands and territories was extraordinarily different from our traditional comprehension of that relationship...that we were technically squatters on Queen's land restricted to very small postage stamp allocations of land called reserves.<sup>141</sup>

Nicolson continued her education at the University of Victoria graduating with a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1999, after which she spent a full year living in Gwa'yí. She finished her formal education in 2013, graduating with a PhD in Linguistics, Anthropology and Art History from the University of Victoria.

Since 1992 Nicolson has exhibited work locally, nationally and internationally, participating in a number of group and solo exhibitions and working in the mediums of photography, painting, installation and multi-media. Her first solo exhibition, titled *A House of God*, was held in 1992 at the OR Gallery in Vancouver, and featured an installation that referenced the conventions of Western photography and Northwest Coast art practices. The installation, also titled *A House of God*, took up the entire exhibition space and combined photography with traditional Kwakwaka'wakw painting and a button

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 2.

blanket.<sup>142</sup> A rectangular wooden structure hung from the ceiling in the centre of the installation, over which the button blanket was draped. On the four walls of the room life sized photographs were mounted depicting totem poles, trees and Indigenous villages. Interspersed with the photographs were vertical paintings in red, black and white, depicting traditional Northwest Coast imagery. On opposing walls facing each other Nicolson juxtaposed a photograph of a Longhouse with that of a Presbyterian Church, thus the title of the work *A House of God*, questioning the similarities and differences between these two institutions of power and in turn reflecting her dual identity. Also in 1992, Nicolson's work was included alongside that of Robert Houle and others in *Travelling Theory*, an exhibition of contemporary Canadian art on display at the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts in Amman, Jordan. Interestingly, she would return to Jordan when one of her major installation works, *A Precarious State*, was installed at the Canadian Embassy in Amman in 2013 [Figure 2.2]. In 1998 Nicolson's work was included alongside six other contemporary Indigenous artists in the Canadian Museum of Civilization exhibition *Reservation X*. The piece, *House of Origin* (1998), was a conceptual "Big House" made from angled cedar planks suspended from the ceiling to form a roofline.<sup>143</sup> Two large painted panels hung opposite each other forming the ends of the house, while twelve smaller photographic Plexiglass panels made up the sides. The panels incorporated photography, traditional and contemporary Northwest Coast designs.<sup>144</sup> Nicolson stated about this installation: "In the paintings, I've used traditional forms and incorporated contemporary styles. They express ideas about community, about

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<sup>142</sup> A small image of the installation *A House of God* (1992) is reproduced in the *Reservation X* (1998) exhibition catalogue on page 98.

<sup>143</sup> Installation views from *House of Origin* (1998) are reproduced in the *Reservation X* (1998) exhibition catalogue on pages 102 – 105.

<sup>144</sup> Gerald McMaster, ed., *Reservation X: The Power of Place in Aboriginal Contemporary Art*, Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1998, 98.

the individual within a community, and how one relates. The big house is predominant in all my work. It represents the idea of self.”<sup>145</sup> The installation became an immersive one, where viewers felt as though they were entering into a delineated space. The suspended panels combined Kwakwaka’wakw text and photographs, on the panels that faced inward were photographs of people from her community, while the outward facing panels featured photographs of the landscape around Kingcome Inlet. The installation could be looked at from many different angles and viewpoints, highlighting the various perspectives through which outsiders have viewed her community.

### **Nicolson the Modernist**

Much like Yuxweluptun, Nicolson has taken elements of traditional Northwest Coast design and combined them with contemporary mediums and aesthetics. She has learned and borrowed from her forbearers but sees the importance of maintaining a relevant voice in today’s art world, stating: “It is not my desire to separate from tradition in a forced and obvious manner, but to exhibit the natural passage of time and the adaptation of our ideas to a modern world.”<sup>146</sup> Philip J. Deloria has written about “expectations” of Indigenous people throughout the twentieth century, and how they have been historically excluded from modernity.<sup>147</sup> Deloria writes: “Primitivism, technological incompetence, physical distance, and cultural difference – these have all been ways many Americans have imagined Indians...and such images have remained familiar currency in contemporary dealings with Native people.”<sup>148</sup> The works of Nicolson and her contemporaries, as well as Doug Cranmer before them, have helped to counter these

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<sup>145</sup> Marianne Nicolson, *Reservation X*, 101.

<sup>146</sup> Marianne Nicolson, "Smithsonian Institute Artist Fellow Statement," *Press Release*, New York: The National Museum of the American Indian, 2001.

<sup>147</sup> Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 6.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

ideas of primitivism that are engrained in much of North American society. Nicolson sees the importance of integrating her traditional historical legacy into the rich and complex contemporary existence of her people. As discussed in the previous chapter on Yuxweluptun, Nicolson, like all modern artists, has the drive to innovate through experimentation and embraces new techniques and materials in diverse media like photography, painting, glass and metal.<sup>149</sup> Nicolson's work *Even though I am the Last One. I Still Count* (2000), included in the 2000/2001 UBC Museum of Anthropology exhibition *Raven's Reprise*, is an example of such a work [Figure 2.3]. Nicolson used a series of painted and photographic frames to draw the viewer's eye to a large photograph of a number of her family members as children.<sup>150</sup> Eight bumblebee masks appear in the installation, four above the photograph and four below, all enclosed in a glass display case. The bumblebee masks included in the work were sold to MOA by Nicolson's grandfather in the 1960s, but the right to use them is still held by her family.<sup>151</sup> By including the masks in her installation with contemporary media, and by choosing to present this work in a museum environment, Nicolson is teaching a non-Indigenous audience about the linkages that exist between the past and the present. Jennifer Kramer explains that: "Through her re-contextualization of the bumblebee masks, Nicolson is reclaiming the right to explain these works and how they reflect her identity. By choosing to install her work in the museum, she acknowledges that they should exist in a space of interaction."<sup>152</sup> It is through these types of works that I argue that Nicolson is practicing what Gerald Vizenor refers to as "survivance". As defined in Chapter One, "survivance"

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<sup>149</sup> Kramer, *Kesu*, 120.

<sup>150</sup> Kramer, "Figurative Repatriation," 176.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

can be understood as Aboriginal people not only surviving, but thriving, and involves resistance and resilience in the face of the dominant forces of colonialism.<sup>153</sup> In *Even though I am the Last One. I Still Count*, Nicolson is claiming her Kwakwaka'wakw cultural property, the bumblebee masks, while asserting her presence as a contemporary Indigenous person.

Nicolson's solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in 2007, *Marianne Nicolson: The Return of Abundance*, included paintings and sculptural installations that dealt with the temporal relationship of contemporary and historical Kwakwaka'wakw experiences. This exhibition also signified a turning point in Nicolson's practice towards works that dealt explicitly with natural resources on traditional Kwakwaka'wakw land, moving towards the politicized practice seen in her more recent installation works. It is interesting to note here that in 2007 both the exhibition *Transporters: Contemporary Salish Art* and *Marianne Nicolson: The Return of Abundance* were on display at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria at the same time. *Transporters* included works by ten Salish artists including Yuxweluptun, and addressed themes to do with land and post-colonial critiques. Yuxweluptun and Nicolson both participated in a symposium held in conjunction with the opening of the exhibition on November 3, 2007 at the University of Victoria that dealt with issues of public art and the influences of traditional culture on contemporary expression, and examined the relationship between the two as a location from which to consider new expression.<sup>154</sup> The intersections between the careers of Yuxweluptun and Nicolson are evidenced in these

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<sup>153</sup> Vizenor, *Manifest Manners* vii.

<sup>154</sup> Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, "Transporters: Tradition and Innovation in Contemporary Aboriginal Art," *Press Release*, November 3, 2007.

types of interactions, as well as the fact that they both attended Emily Carr, and reinforce the similarities in their modern artistic practices.

Charlotte Townsend-Gault has written about the linkages and differences between the modern practices of Yuxweluptun and Nicolson in her essay, “Struggles with Aboriginality / Modernity” (2004), stating that although she sees their practice as different in many ways, “the shared effort of working out the contemporary significance of Aboriginality overrides conventional distinctions between tradition and innovation.”<sup>155</sup> Townsend-Gault goes on to discuss Nicolson’s *Cliff Painting* (1998), in terms of its modernity arguing that the pictograph brings the past into the future, positioning the past as evolving and continuous and as a lasting representation of cultural belief systems [Figure 2.1].<sup>156</sup> Yuxweluptun does the same kind of work, creating visually breathtaking representations of traditional Salish belief systems by picturing cultural elements and bringing them into the present to produce scathing environmental critiques.

### **Nicolson the Activist Installation Artist**

While many of Nicolson’s works share similar themes of memory, place, family and Kwakwaka’wakw history and the need to grapple with modernity in the contemporary world, her recent large-scale conceptual installation works address issues such as land loss, natural resources and the coastal environment of B.C. Nicolson’s installations can be considered as activist art. Although in contrast to Yuxweluptun’s aggressive and political titles and imagery, her messages are more concealed and strategic. Nicolson’s installations exist for the most part outside of museum and gallery walls in the public domain. They exemplify Nicolas Lampert’s observation that

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<sup>155</sup> Townsend-Gault, “Aboriginality / Modernity,” 233.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

politically engaged art is, “firmly located in movements and in the streets and communities that produce these movements.”<sup>157</sup>

*A Precarious State* (2013) is a six by thirty-five foot carved and lit site-specific glass installation made for the Canadian Embassy in Amman, Jordan [Figure 2.2]. Carved into the blue glass is a submerging killer whale with various characters riding on its back. The whale looks to be struggling under the heavy burden of the numerous characters. This work can be read in a number of ways, one being that the whale is a metaphor for the B.C. environment and the figures on its back are those who are endangering this environment through massive resource extraction and unsafe environmental practices. I asked Nicolson about the meaning behind this work:

*A Precarious State* is pretty up front I think...it has this tension, you're not sure if the whale is actually being inundated by all these beings that are trying to ride on it. In my mind the whale was the land and all the beings on its back were competing interests. And then *A Precarious State*, you know it's a double meaning.<sup>158</sup>

Nicolson explained that the work was meant to be open to multiple meanings and not limited to a Canadian reading, and that it can apply to the conflicted nature of all nation states including those in the Middle East where the work is displayed. Although this is a conceptual work, with a punning title, it seems quite obvious that this work has elements of environmental critique. I was curious about how this piece was received on the international stage, representing the Canadian Government at a Canadian Embassy overseas:

I don't know if they knew how intensely loaded *A Precarious State* was... a lot of the stuff I am putting out there, and this is strategic in the long run, is subversive...I'm really hyper-aware of all the nuances and people's expectations,

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<sup>157</sup> Lampert, *A People's Art History*, ix.

<sup>158</sup> Nicolson, interview by author, January 14, 2016, 4.

and in that piece I was impressed that it was executed and it showed up at the Embassy...I think to more open minds its an entirely appropriate piece...<sup>159</sup>

Another recent installation work, *Foolmakers in the Setting Sun* (2014), was on display at Gallery 2 in Grand Forks, B.C., in the spring of 2014 and consists of a backlit glass casting of ceremonial power boards, picturing supernatural beings and a ghost [Figure Intro.2]. The light shining through mimics the setting sun, as its shadows grow longer over an image on the floor and opposite wall of the Alberta oil sands at dusk, a project that threatens the coast of British Columbia through the proposed Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline. The reference to dusk is a metaphor for the sustainability of the planet, considering implications of global warming and the availability of sustainable resources. The term “setting sun” refers to the imminent threat of global warming, and the term “foolmakers” refers to those who disregard environmental concerns for financial gain. Through this work, Nicolson is commenting on how the modern economic approach of massive resource extraction in a short period of time is foolish, and not consistent with traditional Indigenous worldviews. Nicolson explained that the reaction to this work, which was on display for about four months and is now in the artist’s studio, was non-existent: “You know what’s interesting, there’s almost like a flat line. Some of these pieces people are, like, I don’t know what to say, I don’t know how to process this, or I don’t know how to relate to this...maybe the dialogue that I was attempting to join into wasn’t quite there for that audience or that location.”<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 9.

The proposed Northern Gateway Pipeline would move 525,000 barrels of bitumen<sup>161</sup> – which is much thicker than crude oil – from northern Alberta to the northern British Columbia coast. There, it would be loaded onto tankers that would have to navigate chains of islands and narrow channels before reaching the open sea en route to Asia. An oil spill in or around the area would be devastating to the landscape and wildlife such as salmon, shellfish, seals, whales and bears. In August 2015 Enbridge confirmed that the Northern Gateway Pipeline would not be in service as of 2018, as was previously predicted.<sup>162</sup> This is due in part to the 18 court cases it is currently subject to and the over 130 First Nations – from Haida Gwaii to the Northwest Territories – who are opposed to the project.<sup>163</sup> Insights West, a Canadian market research firm released their latest survey on Enbridge’s Northern Gateway and Kinder Morgan’s Trans Mountain pipeline projects in early 2016 noting that support for both projects has dropped since July 2015.<sup>164</sup> They credit this drop to a number of factors, the biggest being the more environmentally friendly tone of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s new federal government and the financial hardship of the oil industry in Alberta.<sup>165</sup> Nancy Nyce, a member of the Haisla Nation, stated in 2011 that: “The money from the pipeline is there for a short time. The land is there forever,”<sup>166</sup> echoing the meaning behind Nicolson’s *Foolmakers in the Setting Sun*, and concerns for sustainability when it comes to land and resources.

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<sup>161</sup> Bitumen is what is extracted from the oil sands, a dense form of petroleum (colloquially referred to as tar due to its similar appearance, odour and colour). Often referred to as ‘unconventional oil’ or ‘crude bitumen’ to distinguish it from liquid hydrocarbons produced from traditional oil wells. Oil sands have only been used rather recently as higher oil prices and technology allow for profitable extraction and processing.

<sup>162</sup> Gillian Steward, "Why B.C. First Nations Oppose the Northern Gateway Pipeline," *The Toronto Star*, August 28, 2015.

<sup>163</sup> Natural Resources Defence Council, *Pipeline and Tanker Trouble*, 21.

<sup>164</sup> Matt Kieltyka, "Pipeline Popularity Tanks: B.C. Poll," *Metro*, March 2016.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

Nicolson's *The Rivers Monument* was unveiled at Vancouver International Airport (YVR) in August 2015. This work was commissioned by YVR as a monument to the mighty Columbia and Thompson Fraser Rivers that flow through B.C. and the United States [Figure 2.4]. Two lit glass-etched poles stand approximately twenty-six feet high and five feet wide in a twenty-foot long pool of water. Each pole represents a river, the top of the pole the surface of the water and the bottom the riverbed. Perched on top of each pole is a carved and painted red cedar eagle; together they stand watch over the two rivers. Each pole represents the different histories of each river, and is carved with pictograph-like images of people, fish, wildlife and water. Nicolson wanted to contrast the history of the Columbia River that has been dammed fourteen times on its main line with the Thompson Fraser River that has never been dammed on its main line. To reflect this, the pole representing the Columbia features officials holding onto dams while the Thompson Fraser pole features fishermen holding nets. This was meant to signify how dams can negatively affect the health of river systems and traditional fishing grounds of Indigenous peoples. Nicolson explained the negative effects of the damming of the Columbia:

In damming the Columbia fourteen times on its main line...the traditional fishery had almost been completely destroyed. You think about it, this river system for thousands and thousands and thousands of years had fed thousands and thousands and thousands of people and it was a sustainable reciprocal relationship and then that was taken away and translated into power and electricity...I was critiquing it as an example of a Western and colonial capitalist approach to the relationship to land, resources and water.<sup>167</sup>

Nicolson was also commemorating and telling the story of the Dalles Dam at Celilo Falls on the Columbia River at the border of Oregon and Washington as a cautionary tale about the dangers of damming. Celilo Falls was a series of waterfalls on

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<sup>167</sup> Nicolson, interview by author, January 14, 2016, 6.

the Columbia surrounded by a number of Indigenous settlements. These villages had existed for over fifteen thousand years and represented the oldest continually inhabited areas in North America until 1957 when the Dalles Dam was built and flooded the entire region.<sup>168</sup> Nicolson told me about the history of the Falls:

...so the reason it was continuously inhabited for so long was that it was a really rich fishing site, so Indigenous Nations were coming from all over to fish at this site and it was covered in pictographs and petroglyphs. When they built the Dalles Dam it flooded Celilo Falls, so it silenced the falls and the Indigenous peoples scattered and went away...and this is all in fairly recent history.<sup>169</sup>

Nicolson relayed another story to me from her personal experience about a community tradition her people have in Kingcome Inlet to make grease from the eulachon run that comes through the community each year. Writing on eulachon grease and its value, scholar Harriet V. Kuhnlein writes:

Marine fat, derived from several sources, has been used to great extent by Northwest Coast Indians as a flavour enhancer of many foods as well as for medicinal and ceremonial purposes. The most prominent source of food fat used by British Columbia native people has been from the *eulachon*, a small fish which is harvested in bulk in early spring, allowed to ripen in large bins, and then rendered to give a pungent, golden, thick oil called "*eulachon* grease".<sup>170</sup>

Kuhnlein goes on to say: "The cultural significance of *eulachon* grease cannot be underestimated...it is a prominent food and gift during feasts and potlatch ceremonies...among the Nuxalk and the Kwakiutl [Kwakwaka'wakw] it was a sign of poverty for a family to be without *eulachon* grease."<sup>171</sup> Nicolson echoed the cultural impact this tradition has on her and she told me that there "is a real spiritual component to the whole event that just blows me away" but that the eulachon run has now become

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<sup>168</sup> "Celilo Falls," *Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission*, <http://www.critfc.org/salmon-culture/tribal-salmon-culture/celilo-falls/> (accessed March 3, 2016).

<sup>169</sup> Nicolson, interview by author, January 14, 2016, 5.

<sup>170</sup> Harriet V. Kuhnlein, Alvin C. Chan, J. Neville Thompson and Shuryo Nakai, "Ooligan Grease: A Nutritious Fat Used by Native People of Coastal British Columbia," *Journal of Ethnobiology*, December 1982, 154.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

very sporadic.<sup>172</sup> Their neighbours to the north, the Nuxalk, lost their eulachon run completely about fifteen years ago she told me. Losing the eulachon run that had been coming each year for thousands of years was devastating she said, but “all it does for me is strengthen my resolve around the advocacy that I’m trying to do.”<sup>173</sup>

I thought it was interesting that the YVR would commission a work that was so potentially environmentally critical. Nicolson explained that they wanted something that would recognize the Columbia and Thompson Fraser, and that it was Nicolson who embedded the environmental critique into the work. This brought up the issue of how Nicolson must be strategic in her artistic practice, how public installations can be difficult for her to navigate without compromising her message and beliefs. She explained that she has to be very careful if she wants the expression and ideas that she is addressing to actually get out there, she has to be subversive to some extent in all her works. Nicolson also explained how traditional Northwest Coast designs are fetishized and appropriated, and she must walk a fine line when incorporating social critiques: “There’s an expectation that exists in general society, especially around public artworks, and they just love Pacific Northwest Coast work. You know what I mean? Oh my god how exciting! Political commentary? Uhh we’re not used to this.”<sup>174</sup> She explains that she is completely aware of the fact that the Northwest Coast aesthetic has been appropriated by Canada as a symbol of national identity, but if she is able to get her message across and be subversive she feels she is doing good work:

I don’t just want to create pretty pieces, I understand there’s an aesthetic expectation because of my background, but I want to connect in a real and fundamental way, and the only way to connect with the audience is to be honest.

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<sup>172</sup> Nicolson, interview by author, January 14, 2016, 12.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 5.

And to say look, I'm not just selling you a surface engagement with an Indigenous piece, I'm asking you to truly meet me and consider these issues.<sup>175</sup>

## Final Words

At the end of our interview I asked Nicolson what she thought was the most pressing environmental concern in B.C. today, to which she responded:

Climate change. I think it's accelerating at a pace that people have not anticipated, so we don't really know what the outcomes are. Kingcome was flooded out in 2010 – we'd never seen a flood like that in our lives. I'm experiencing this first hand, in a really massive way because we're out on the land...we don't feel them as much in the cities and urban centres...In the context of an Indigenous belief system we are supposed to be mapping out actions in accordance to our ancestors but also our children, and what we are being asked to do in our lands and territories is really just to join in with the capitalist system that has as its ideology individualization, privatization and the accumulation of wealth.<sup>176</sup>

Nicolson's close connection to her home community of Gwa'yí and the traditional knowledge that has been imparted to her by Elders is central to her activist art practice. Her work seeks to advocate for an Indigenous worldview as a way to save and preserve the fragile environment in which she, and all Canadians, are living. Something Nicolson really imparted to me through our conversation was how fast the natural environment on the Northwest Coast is deteriorating, and how some Indigenous traditions are no longer possible, such as the Nuxalk not being able to make grease from the eulachon run. Seeing this type of environmental destruction only strengthens Nicolson's resolve to be an activist and fight. "What these types of things [loss of the eulachon] did for me was strengthen my resolve to fight for everywhere where there are these systems that are under threat to industry and development."<sup>177</sup> Nicolson comes from the position of an Indigenous person originating from two cultures who is very connected to her traditional

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 12.

territory and who is also an artist and a scholar. These elements combine to make her strategic artistic practice very powerful, with a voice that resonates clearly through her works.

Nicolson has a number of upcoming projects in the works that will continue to develop her interest in dealing with land and environmental issues. I asked her what other artists were influencing her right now, and was surprised when she said British street artist Banksy. When I asked her why, she explained that:

In terms of a non-traditional approach to art making and that his awareness of the system and how it operates is exactly the position that I want to occupy. I want to be perfectly aware of the system so that I'm not just a pawn or just a producer of art. I don't just create objects, I'm dealing with ideas. So I admire the work he does, it's very challenging to the systems of art.<sup>178</sup>

As an artist working in large public commissions, navigating the art world and being aware of the system is of the utmost importance to Nicolson, and I believe her practice will continue to evolve and become even more subversive as she continues to speak her truth in the public domain.

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 9.

### Chapter Three: Sonny Assu – There is Hope if We Rise.

*I've become more politically and environmentally aware in the past five years or so and I think that injecting that into my work has definitely been a product of the environment that I'm living in.*<sup>179</sup>

The years 1884-1951 are significant in the history of colonialism on the Northwest Coast as they signify the sixty-seven years that the Potlatch Ban was in effect, making this traditional Aboriginal ceremony illegal and punishable under Canadian law. This lengthy ban is represented in the installation piece *1884/1951* (2009), which is made up of sixty-seven copper coffee cups strewn on a red and black striped Hudson's Bay Blanket [Figure 3.1]. The coffee cups are based on a Starbucks Grande size cup, and are universally recognizable as disposable objects. Enlisting the use of humour to comment on the legacies of colonialism in Canada, Kwakwaka'wakw artist Sonny Assu is making a comment on the contemporary world's unsustainable consumer culture. In this work Assu combines historical information with highly recognizable contemporary corporate imagery as a way to connect to a diverse viewership, something seen throughout his artistic practice. By casting the Starbucks cups in copper, Assu references the high value of copper within Northwest Coast potlatch traditions. During these ceremonies the hosts, often high ranking Chiefs, would give away large sheets of shield-shaped coppers decorated with tribal crests as a symbol of their wealth. The wealthiest of Chiefs would even smash coppers at potlatches, demonstrating their extreme wealth through the destruction of valuable property. This work brings up the different ideologies that exist

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<sup>179</sup> Assu, interview by author, January 17, 2016, 5.

surrounding the distribution of wealth in Indigenous and Western societies. It also deals with the environment, as Assu states:

The whole idea of making a copper Starbucks cup was funny, but then I was able to think about it in a broader context, in a broader conceptual way, with a broader impact, and so that's why I was able to influence it with elements of traditional culture and colonialism and to an extent environmentalism in terms of the actual culture of disposable stuff from throwing away a cup.<sup>180</sup>

This chapter is dedicated to the artistic practice of Sonny Assu. I interviewed the artist in Surrey on January 17, 2016 and I open with a description of how I experienced our conversation before turning to the artist's biography and an analysis of his work. As in my discussions of Yuxweluptun and Nicolson, I will focus on environmental issues addressed in Assu's works, but I will also attend to his use of humour and mainstream cultural icons as tactics to connect with viewers, specifically youth, on serious issues surrounding the history of colonialism, land and the environment. Assu is the youngest of the three artists in this study, and emerged onto the art scene in the early 2000s. Because he has not yet produced as large a body of work, Assu's environmental critique is not as obvious or developed as Yuxweluptun or Nicolson's. He acknowledges the influence that older artists are having on his practice, and sees it as an evolving one that is moving in a more political and critical direction. Like Yuxweluptun and Nicolson, Assu too is a modernist who combines new media with traditional imagery to reach a wide audience. Assu reflects on his evolving art practice by stating: "I definitely do recognize that I have a voice, and I think a lot of my work picks up on that and uses it...take a look at my most recent works, especially in the past five to ten years, there's definitely a bigger political twist to it, and when I say political I mean environmental as well."<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 4.

I wanted to include Assu in this study because he represents an up and coming Aboriginal artist working in a political and modernist style influenced by the work of his contemporaries and forbearers like Yuxweluptun and Nicolson. I was able to get in touch with Assu rather easily through a former professor who is a friend of the artist. We connected by e-mail and he invited me to his home in Surrey, which doubles as his studio, for the interview. Assu's was the last of the three interviews to be conducted on the trip, and I felt more confident about this meeting because I knew my questions well and Assu's casual writing style in our initial correspondence put me at ease. On January 17 I made the forty-minute drive from downtown Vancouver to Surrey for our interview. I pulled into the driveway and rang the doorbell, and was greeted warmly by Assu. I felt as if I had known him for years. Since it was a Sunday morning, Assu's wife and young daughter were doing crafts in the kitchen, so I was able to meet and talk to them briefly before we moved into Assu's studio for the interview. I glanced around his studio and to my delight saw his *Breakfast Series* (2006) placed on a shelf, a work I had never seen in person [Figure 3.2]. The conversation began very organically, as Assu and I share a personal connection. My grandmother, Joy Inglis, is an anthropologist, and co-wrote the book *Assu of Cape Mudge: Recollections of a Coastal Indian Chief* (1989) with Chief Harry Assu, Sonny Assu's great-uncle on his mother's side.<sup>182</sup> We laughed about what a small world it was, and I shared with Assu how I had just returned two days prior from a visit to Quadra Island to see my grandmother and visit the Nuyumbalees Cultural Centre at Cape Mudge. The center is located in Assu's traditional home community of the We Wai Kai Nation, one of the Kwakwaka'wakw communities off the coast of Vancouver

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<sup>182</sup> Harry Assu and Joy Inglis, *Assu of Cape Mudge, Recollections of a Coastal Indian Chief*, Vancouver: The University of British Columbia Press, 1989.

Island. After some informal discussion about family histories, we began the interview and Assu answered my questions with the discussion flowing smoothly. The interview lasted for about an hour, after which we discussed Assu's current work. As I was preparing to leave and say goodbye, Assu's young daughter gave me a painting that she had made for me while I had been interviewing her father. I very gratefully accepted this painting and carefully brought it back to Ottawa with me – it now hangs on the wall in my office.

### **Beginnings**

Sonny Assu was born in 1975 in Campbell River, British Columbia, but has spent most of his life in the Vancouver area. His mother is Kwakwaka'wakw of the Ligwilda'xw Tribe, from the We Wai Kai Nation. The original village of the We Wai Kai Nation is located at Cape Mudge, on the southern tip of Quadra Island, a fifteen-minute ferry ride from Campbell River. Assu is a descendent of the last hereditary chief of the We Wai Kai, Chief Billy Assu (1867-1965), who was his great-great-grandfather. The village of Cape Mudge is still inhabited with a population of 356 as of February 2016, but Assu says that he does not go to Cape Mudge often because most of his immediate family lives at the Quinsam reserve on Vancouver Island. At the age of seven Assu moved to Vancouver, but returned to Campbell River to spend the summers with his extended family who were commercial fishers.<sup>183</sup> When I asked Assu if he became aware of Indigenous colonial history and land rights issues through his childhood he explained that he only became aware of them in his early twenties. He explained how he learned about his Kwakwaka'wakw heritage at the age of eight:

...it was just a random happenstance in school where I was learning about the Kwakwaka'wakw in the past tense in grade three, and so the teacher was going off about these people: where they used to live, what they used to eat, what they

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<sup>183</sup> Tanya Harnett, "Sugar and Grit: Sonny Assu Mixes Cultures," *Canadian Art*, October 2014.

used to make, and then I brought that home and told my mom about these cool people who ate the same food that we eat, who make the same kind of artwork that my stepfather at the time was making and where they lived was where we spent our summers. And she's like well that's who you are, in a nutshell.<sup>184</sup>

As an adult, Assu speculates that his grandparents withheld this knowledge about his cultural history in the hopes that he might slip by unnoticed as an Aboriginal person and be spared the colonial racism that they had experienced.<sup>185</sup> Assu's fair hair and light skin would have made this possible, as his First Nations heritage is not visually evident.

Like Yuxweluptun and Nicolson, Assu told me that he had always wanted to be involved in some form of arts, leading me to conclude that artists are born not bred. After high school, Assu debated between going to acting school or art school, landing on art school by default because his application to acting school was submitted too late to be considered. He started studying art at Kwantlen Polytechnic University in Surrey in the late 1990s, where he was exposed to a wide variety of art making techniques and styles and began drawing traditional Northwest Coast designs that he had never explored before. Assu told me a story from this time about his first experiences with Northwest Coast imagery:

...I was making an image for silkscreen prints and my instructor just sat down beside me and said you can't do that, and I'm like well why? And he said well that's First Nations art and it's sacred and protected, you have to be First Nations to do this, and I said well I am. I mean you look at me and you would never assume. And he said oh you are? Yeah, I am totally. I whipped out my status card and everything. I had to go that route, and then he got more comfortable and said you have to explore this.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Assu, interview by author, January 17, 2016, 4.

<sup>185</sup> Harnett, "Sugar and Grit."

<sup>186</sup> Assu, interview by author, January 17, 2016, 3.

For the remainder of his time at Kwantlen, before transferring to the Emily Carr School of Art and Design, Assu began focussing more and more on Northwest Coast imagery, exploring his Kwakwaka'wakw heritage through the arts of his people.

Assu graduated from Emily Carr in 2002 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Visual Art. Of his time at Emily Carr he stated that that was where he seriously focussed on First Nations Kwakwaka'wakw art practice through his studies with Brenda Crabtree, the First Nations coordinator who taught basic weaving and drum making and other types of traditionally based practices.<sup>187</sup> His practice was always a hybrid one, however, and he describes it as a combination of ways of making, painting and figurative work that were heavily influenced by Western art combined with First Nations imagery. When I asked Assu who was inspiring him in the early 2000s he responded:

Lawrence Paul was definitely an inspiration to my work at the time. Brian Jungen, he was just starting to blow up at that point. Those two guys mainly...I was working a lot with Dana Claxton, she was one of my instructors at Emily Carr, in one of the art history programs I had to take so that was really interesting...People like Rebecca Belmore, seeing what she was doing, this was the early stages of her career...her work started to really inform my way of thinking both politically and creatively.<sup>188</sup>

Assu has continued his education, beginning a Master of Fine Arts in studio arts at Concordia University in Montreal in 2013, which he is now completing long distance from his home in Surrey.

Assu began to exhibit his work in 2003, with his inclusion in the exhibition *Thinking Textile* at the Richmond Art Gallery in Richmond, B.C. In 2004 his work was included in *Futuristic Regalia*, which premiered at the Grunt Gallery in Vancouver and travelled throughout B.C. in 2005. His work was included in the group exhibition

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Assu, interview by author, January 17, 2016, 3.

*Changing Hands: Art Without Reservation*, shown in New York, Santa Fe, Indiana and Florida, in 2005 and 2006. This exhibition provided Assu with widespread exposure outside of Canada for the first time. His first solo exhibition was held in 2006 at the Belkin Satellite Gallery in Vancouver. Its title, *Sonny Assu: As Defined by the Indian Act*, made ironic reference to Indian Status cards and the failed attempt of the Indian Act to limit and define Aboriginal identity. The exhibition included a number of paintings and installations that experimented with the notion of commodification, Aboriginal identity and the ready-made, including Assu's well-known, *The Breakfast Series* (2006), which I will discuss in further detail in this chapter. Throughout the 2000s Assu continued to show his work regularly, and has been included in major exhibitions like the National Gallery of Canada's 2013 *Sakahān*, an exhibition of international Indigenous art and *Beat Nation*, which traveled across Canada between 2012 and 2014 and focussed on hip-hop, youth and street culture in contemporary Aboriginal art. For *Sakahān*, Assu created a special installation of his work *1884/1951* (2009). At the entrance to the exhibition space four standing copper cups greeted the viewer, representing the four founding women of the Idle No More movement. He thus aligned himself with the grassroots activist movement that advocates for Indigenous sovereignty and the protection of land and water. In the summer of 2015, Assu and Mi'kmaq artist Jordan Bennett were the only two Canadian artists to be included in the exhibition *Hip-hop du Bronx aux rues arabes*, curated by French rapper Akhenaton at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris. The exhibition traced the development of a cultural and musical movement from the underground to the mainstream and was dubbed an international hip-hop showcase.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> "Aboriginal Artists Sound off in Paris," *The Globe and Mail*, July 2015, L2.

Assu's work *Ellipsis* (2012) was included in the show [Figure 3.3]. Comprised of a series of one-hundred-and-thirty-six copper LPs mounted on the wall, each representing one year of the Indian Act, it acted as a "record" of the years of oppression of Aboriginal peoples. Assu sees the linkage of the hip-hop culture that emerged out of New York in the 1970s and the resurgence seen in Aboriginal art, as a way to assert identity and culture and bring tradition back through new mediums.

### **Assu The Ever Evolving Modernist**

Like Yuxweluptun and Nicolson, Assu combines elements of Northwest Coast design and mixes them with contemporary media and aesthetics, although he does this in a way that differs significantly from his forbearers. Assu's use of humour and irony to connect with his viewers contrasts with the work of Yuxweluptun and Nicolson, because they make far less use of these tactics. Assu explained the strategic use of humour in his work: "You've got to understand what we're talking about as Indigenous people, but I think if I sugar coat it a little bit and bring them [the viewer] into that they feel more comfortable with it."<sup>190</sup> Assu also strategically enlists iconography and language from youth and Internet culture, to connect with the future leaders of our country, because they are, arguably, among the most important in this battle for the environment and land. In this sense, Assu's approach resembles that of Doug Cranmer. Jennifer Kramer quotes scholar and artist Judith Ostrowitz's discussion on Cranmer: She "reminds us that modern art is about access. The viewer is as significant as the creator in defining the work."<sup>191</sup> Even more than Yuxweluptun's and Nicolson's work, Assu's is a compelling example of this type of accessibility in that anyone who is familiar with capitalist consumer culture

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<sup>190</sup> Assu, interview by author, January 17, 2016, 4.

<sup>191</sup> Kramer, *Kesu*, 121.

will recognize elements in his work and therefore feel like they have some understanding of his practice. Assu's work is also distinctly global in nature, in the sense expressed by James Clifford in his discussion of globalization in his 2013 book *Returns*, "Globalization is the multidirectional, unrepresentable sum of material and cultural relationships linking places and people, distant and nearby."<sup>192</sup> By making strategic links between his Kwakwaka'wakw cultural heritage and the contemporary world in which he exists, Assu allows his practice to become far reaching and global in line with Clifford's definition, as will be demonstrated through a more detailed discussion of his works described below.

Two works from the beginning of Assu's career are excellent examples of his use of humour and global popular culture to convey serious messages. *The Breakfast Series* (2006), is an installation piece made up of five cereal boxes with familiar imagery of well-known cereal brands that the artist has altered to reflect Indigenous histories and cultures and digitally printed onto the boxes [Figure 3.2]. The five brands Assu has altered are Lucky Charms, which becomes Lucky Beads, Corn Pops, which becomes Bannock Pops, Frosted Flakes, which becomes Treaty Flakes, Sugar Crisp, which become Salmon Crisps and Fruit Loops, which become Salmon Loops. Assu has maintained the colour and overall imagery of the original brands, so that when the viewer glances quickly at the boxes it is not obvious at first that anything has been changed – they could be the cereal boxes found in anyone's kitchen. Upon closer examination, however, the viewer sees that the names have been changed, Kwakwaka'wakw appears instead of Kellogg's and images of mascots like Tony the Tiger have been re-drawn using Northwest Coast formline designs. The nutritional information contains humour and

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<sup>192</sup> Clifford, *Returns*, 6.

commentary on colonial issues: for example, on the Treaty Flakes box it is stated as: total land: “14,000 hectares, Government BS 100%, does not contain a government referendum.” The ingredients list includes “sugar coated lies,” “government bureaucracy,” “self-governance,” “land resources,” “broken promises,” “acknowledging the past” and “securing the future.” In this work Assu is making a critical comment on the lack of land rights, traditional food practices, natural resources and sustainable fisheries which trouble the Indigenous peoples in B.C., but he uses an accessible mode to convey these messages. Assu states about this work: “...Because I still want to slap them in the face! Like hey this is funny, but I want them to understand there is something there. And I think that that is most seen with the *Breakfast Series* and *Coke Salish*, because there are always these elements of me using humour as a construct.”<sup>193</sup>

*Coke Salish*, another installation work from 2006 deals with the same issues with a twist of humour; it presents the iconic Coca Cola logo altered to say “Enjoy Coast Salish Territory,” a comment on how coastal lands have been denied to Indigenous peoples [Figure 3.4]. The work is presented as a large light box that is mounted on the wall, reminiscent of a vending machine with a Coca Cola logo on it. As with *The Breakfast Series*, at first glance the viewer might not even realize that the logo has been altered, although once read it is clear what Assu’s message is, making this work both subtle and obvious at the same time. Assu states of his goals in these types of works that: “There are little subtexts here and there which is what I like about the work that I do, there are always little things in there that some people will pick up on more than others, and they might even pick up something new, and that’s exciting.”<sup>194</sup> This work was

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<sup>193</sup> Assu, interview by author, January 17, 2016, 5.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

created after the announcement that Vancouver would host the 2010 Olympics. Coca Cola was a major sponsor of the 2010 Olympics, and Assu wanted people to be aware that they were coming to largely unceded Coast Salish land on which Vancouver is located. This appropriation of highly recognizable corporate imagery, coupled with the use of humour, is one way in which Assu engages in political discussion to reach a wide audience. Assu states of *Coke Salish*: "...there was this strong element of humour behind it, and I remember making that work and thinking about it in terms of making me laugh at first. And then using that humour as a way of talking about these issues around land and the environment and cultural identity, and using that humour as a tool to bring people in."<sup>195</sup>

Assu's *#selfie* series (2013), exemplifies how media savvy Assu is and how he artfully combines tradition with contemporary culture. The entire series is made up of traditional Northwest Coast design elements with a street art twist painted in acrylic on elk-hide drums with titles such as *#shamelessselfie* and *Do You Want to See My Status Card? #selfie* [Figures 3.5 & 3.6]. These works reflect Assu's identity as an urban Aboriginal person, as "selfie" culture refers to people using their smart phones to take pictures of themselves as a form of self-representation. In this case, the painted drums can be considered as Assu's form of a selfie, he sees himself as a traditional Kwakwaka'wakw person in the form of a drum, but at the same time, marks himself as part of mainstream contemporary society with his use of the graffiti style and hashtagged titles.

Diverting from his use of explicit humour and Internet culture, *Longing* (2011) is a ready-made series of works in the tradition of conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp – a

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 4.

modernist reference not often seen in Northwest Coast art [Figure 3.7]. The series is made up of thirty-one pieces of cedar which Assu terms masks. He ‘discovered’ them in 2006 when exploring piles of discarded cedar at a log home development site on his reserve, Quinsam, near Campbell River. When installed in a gallery they are mounted on rods on pedestals that measure about five feet tall to resemble masks. Depending on his or her height, the display most often brings the viewer face to face with them. Along with the physical objects mounted in the gallery, Assu photographed them to produce what he refers to as their “portraits”, images floating against a black background which he included on the walls of the exhibition. Assu comments on this installation that:

The way the masks caught the light at times sparked me to emote a feeling of *Longing* onto them. It almost seemed like the object longed to be an object of culture...but through colonization, it became a waste by-product of our consumption culture. However, in mounting these thirty-one objects to museum-quality standards, photographing them as portraits, and as in situ interventions, I gave them what they longed for, and they became culture.<sup>196</sup>

Through this work Assu shows respect for traditional materials and natural resources that are now considered cast-offs by corporations, and makes a comment on the lack of respect shown towards natural resources in the consumer driven society in which we now exist. It is through these types of works that Assu practices the active quality of “survivance”, that we saw in the work of Yuxweluptun and Nicolson, asserting his sense of presence as a contemporary Kwakwaka’wakw person and acknowledging his modernity in a global world.

### **The Up and Coming Activist Artist**

Assu’s multidisciplinary practice is an evolving one that is extending to different mediums and themes. Although he mentioned to me that not all his works explicitly deal

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<sup>196</sup> America Meredith, "Sonny Assu," *First American Art Magazine*, no. 3, summer 2014, 17.

with land and the environment, he sees himself as moving towards those concerns in his practice as he continues to be inspired by artists like Yuxweluptun and Nicolson who have made those themes central in their work. In a 2013 article by Julie Bélanger, for *Alternatives Journal*, titled “Form with Function,” Assu was featured as one of seven Canadian artists who stress the importance of creating environmental activist art. In the article, Assu discusses his work, *There is Hope if We Rise* (2013), describing it as a work that “challenges all Canadians to stand up, move past their apathy and see the hope if they rise.”<sup>197</sup> [Figure Intro.3]. The work consists of twelve posters that juxtapose traditional Northwest Coast forms with words like “Rise,” “Never Idle,” “Decolonize,” and “Confront and Challenge Stereotypes,” in shades of reds, yellows and blues. The work was inspired by street artist Shepard Fairey’s iconic “Hope” poster used during President Barack Obama’s first presidential campaign in 2004, so Assu’s works are organized in the same way, with a background image and text at the bottom. *There is Hope if We Rise* was commissioned by the Burnaby Art Gallery in 2013 and the images were adopted as part of the Idle No More movement. Reflecting on the work Assu says: “It’s also part of the Idle No More movement, acting as a call-to-action for all Canadians. It challenges us to preserve the fabric of our perceived cultural identity while encouraging a new relationship with First Nations to help protect the environment.”<sup>198</sup> The work functions on different levels: Assu described the piece as being a call to action for people who were viewing the work in the gallery, while the individual images were printed in poster size to be given out and used at Idle No More demonstrations and were printed in smaller fine art size for framing. In terms of Nicolas Lampert’s description of

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<sup>197</sup> Julie Bélanger, "Form with Function: 7 Canadian Artists Muse on the Meaning of Environmental Art and Why We Need It," *Alternative Journal* 39, no. 3, 2013, 44.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

activist art, *There is Hope if We Rise*, is an example of an activist art work as it exists both inside and outside of gallery walls and is part of a social movement in real time.

The Idle No More Movement is an ongoing protest movement founded in 2012 by four women, three of whom are members of First Nations in Saskatchewan and one of whom is a non-Native ally. This grassroots movement calls on all people to participate in a peaceful revolution to protest parliamentary bills which will erode Indigenous sovereignty and environmental protections. Its goals are to deepen democracy in Canada through proportional representation and consultation, recognizing and affirming Aboriginal title and land rights, honouring the spirit and intent of historic treaties, and actively resisting violence against women.<sup>199</sup> The movement has pushed thousands of people into action and spawned a number of teach-ins, marches and protests revolving around land and environmental concerns. One of the most dramatic and well-known protests associated with the movement was Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence's six-week hunger strike in an effort to convince the country's top leaders to take First Nations concerns seriously. Representatives from the Assembly of First Nations, the NDP caucus and the Liberal caucus all signed a declaration of specific commitments asked for by Spence, making her lengthy demonstration a success. The Idle No More website describes the movement as follows:

The impetus for the recent Idle No More events lies in a centuries old resistance as Indigenous nations and their lands suffered the impacts of exploration, invasion and colonization. Idle No More seeks to assert Indigenous inherent rights to sovereignty and reinstitute traditional laws and Nation to Nation Treaties by protecting the lands and waters from corporate destruction. Each day that Indigenous rights are not honoured or fulfilled, inequality between Indigenous peoples and the settler society grows.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> "Calls for Change," *Idle No More*, [http://www.idlenomore.ca/calls\\_for\\_change](http://www.idlenomore.ca/calls_for_change) (accessed March 5, 2016).

<sup>200</sup> "The Manifesto," *Idle No More*, <http://www.idlenomore.ca/story>, (accessed March 5, 2016).

Assu's *There is Hope if We Rise* is a perfect example of a work that can be aligned with this movement since, much like his practice, the movement is promoted heavily on social media and technology outlets that reflect twenty-first century accessibility. Assu represents an emerging type of Aboriginal activist artist whose work responds to these types of grassroots movements.

### **Current Work and Final Words**

Assu's current project, *Interventions on the Imaginary* (started in 2015), involves taking scanned images of Emily Carr paintings and other romanticized versions of the North American landscape and digitally inserting three dimensional Northwest Coast abstracted images of the ovoid, U-shapes and S-shapes so that they act as tags on the landscape. The romanticized landscapes appear exactly as they were made, while the digitally inserted tags appear in fluorescent pinks, yellows, purples, blues and oranges, thereby creating a stark contrast between the historic and the contemporary. This work uses terminology from Internet and youth culture. For example, Assu's "tags" on the landscape refer to graffiti and, the artist says, also serve to bring youth into these types of conversations and help them understand the colonial space in which we live.<sup>201</sup> One work that includes this type of terminology in its title, is called *It Was, Like, A Super Long Time Ago That Ppl Were Here, Right?* It reproduces an Emily Carr painting of a totem pole on Haida Gwaii but interjects the internet slang "ppl" as the stand in for people [Figure 3.8]. So far, Assu has done fifteen works in the series and plans to continue the project. It is, he says, particularly enjoyable to create because, as a digital project, the results are immediate. "...I don't have to wait for paint to dry or any of that, I can make

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<sup>201</sup> Assu, interview by author, January 17, 2016, 8.

as many mistakes as I need to and it's completely fun and fine.”<sup>202</sup> This work addresses a central theme in Assu's art practice by countering the narrative that Canada was a vast uninhabited landscape ripe for the picking by early colonizers.<sup>203</sup> Through this series, Assu is asserting his right to land and history that was stolen through thefts that were largely unrecorded. He states:

...I am a testament to the fact that we are still here, my daughter is a testament to that, my whole family is a testament to that. So I am inserting these shapes on the colonial landscape to reclaim it, and then I am using humour again, probably a little bit more heavily than in the past decade, through the titling of these works.<sup>204</sup>

This series deals specifically with the reclaiming of Indigenous histories in Canada, but also with land and environmental concerns. In another work in the series, *What a Great Spot for a Wal-Mart* (2014), Assu superimposed abstracted Northwest Coast tags over an Emily Carr painting of the Campbell River Indian cemetery, the area from which Assu's family originates [Figure 3.9]. The Carr painting is titled *Graveyard Entrance, Campbell River* (1912), and is composed of a wooden picket fence with a large gate in the foreground that acts as the wall surrounding the graveyard and coniferous fir trees in the background. On top of the gate is a totemic carved eagle with outstretched wings, welcoming visitors to mourn the dead. Assu has superimposed his tags on the painting in bright red and brown, reinscribing a living Indigenous presence onto the space. Assu states in reference to this work: "...with titling specifically, I wanted to convey that we shouldn't be selling out our land and our resources to build this kind of bubble economy.”<sup>205</sup> Although Assu's comments may not address environmental issues

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

as explicitly as do those of Yuxweluptun or to a degree Nicolson, he is clearly aware of the extent of these problems in British Columbia and uses witty humour to convey his message.

At the end of our interview I asked Assu what he considered to be the most pressing environmental issue in B.C. today. He responded:

The Site C Dam has been weighing on me heavily quite a bit...The provincial government wants to build this new dam to provide power to the people but I've been reading up on it and we don't really need the power...the unfortunate thing is that it will cause flooding, its damming a river and its flooding a region. This is a region that has been used by farmers, Indigenous peoples for centuries, and the farmland is going to get washed underwater for the sake of making power that we don't need.<sup>206</sup>

The Site C Dam is an 8.8 billion dollar project proposed by BC Hydro to build a large scale earth fill hydro electric dam on the Peace River in north-eastern B.C. Site C would be the third dam and generating system in the Peace River area and would provide 1,100 megawatts of capacity, or enough to power the equivalent of 450,000 homes.<sup>207</sup> The B.C. government approved the project in December 2014, after the federal-provincial Joint Review Panel concluded that there are clear benefits to the projects that would outweigh the high financial costs and the large area of the Peace River Valley that would be flooded.<sup>208</sup> As Assu mentioned, there has also been doubt as to whether the power is really necessary, as the Joint Review Panel stated in their report that, "there is some uncertainty about when the power would be needed," and "The panel concludes that the proponent has not fully demonstrated the need for the project on the timetable set forth."<sup>209</sup> First Nations, environmentalists and the farmers of the area are all strongly

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>207</sup> "About Site C," *Site C Clean Energy Project*, <https://www.sitecproject.com/about-site-c/project-overview>, (accessed March 20, 2016).

<sup>208</sup> "Site C Dam Approved by B.C. Government," *CBC News*, December 2014.

<sup>209</sup> Mike Laanela, "Site C Dam Review says Benefits Outweigh Costs," *CBC News*, May 2014.

opposed to the project, with the President of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, Stewart Philip stating: “We believe it to be an incredibly short-sighted and stupid decision. It’s not about the money. It’s about the environment, it’s about the land – about constitutional rights, treaty rights and so on and so forth. It’s about a way of life.”<sup>210</sup> Ken Boon, the president of the Peace Valley Landowners Association, spoke on behalf of about seventy land owners in the Valley who are opposed to the project stating: “Personally we lose our home and farmland. We will pretty much lose everything we have there.”<sup>211</sup> Premier Christy Clark said the Site C Energy project will provide B.C. residents with a reliable source of power for the next 100 years, meaning that the project would not be a long-term or sustainable form of power and would result in extensive flooding within the traditional territories of Treaty 8 Nations.<sup>212</sup> This project brings to mind Marianne Nicolson’s advocacy of an Indigenous worldview that would take into account the negative long-term environmental ramifications versus the short-term benefits. Assu also expressed this perspective, stating: “...the Site C is a mega dam and it’s environmentally disastrous because it’s going to affect the fish, the wildlife, but then also the ability to grow our own food.”<sup>213</sup> Assu went on to mention his worry about the various pipelines that are currently under consideration, that were touched on in both Yuxweluptun and Nicolson’s practice, stating: “The coast is very sensitive and so you know if any of those tankers crack and spill multiple millions of litres of crude oil into the water, that’s a complete disaster for the local ecosystems.”<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> "Site C Dam Approved by B.C. Government," *CBC News*.

<sup>211</sup> Tina Lovgreen, "Site C Dam: Landowners Back in Court," *CBC News*, April 2016.

<sup>212</sup> "Site C Dam Approved by B.C. Government," *CBC News*.

<sup>213</sup> Assu, interview by author, January 17, 2016, 7.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid*.

As I prepared to leave Assu's studio at the end of our interview, he reflected on environmentalism in his practice and how he saw this theme evolving in his work:

I think taking a look at environmental messages in my work it sort of comes and goes, bits and pieces here and there. I haven't really done any major pieces that definitely explore that, you know, I take a look at pieces that Marianne has done and pieces Lawrence has done and they have definitely taken it upon themselves to tap that as a succinct message within those pieces, and if anything that is an inspiration to me to step up and think about that more often, and think about how I could utilize that more to definitely embrace the conversation.<sup>215</sup>

Assu's practice is an evolving one that continues to move towards becoming more a part of the environmental activist artist movement pioneered by Yuxweluptun and embraced by Nicolson.

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 6.

## Conclusion – The Future.

*...We have to stand up and say no to pipelines, say not to the tar sands and to clear cut logging and environmental disasters and the gutting of various acts to protect the environment...I think some Canadians have, but I think we need to do more! – Sonny Assu<sup>216</sup>*

*The situation is simple. Aboriginals have made and will continue to make a remarkable comeback. They cannot be stopped. Non-Aboriginals have a choice to make. We can continue to stand in the way so that the comeback is slowed and surrounded by bitterness. Or we can be supportive and part of a new narrative. – John Ralston Saul, *The Comeback*.<sup>217</sup>*

The wrongs of colonialism that have been perpetrated on Indigenous peoples in Canada are still prevalent issues today. These wrongs include, first and foremost, the seizure of land and along with that, the attempted destruction of culture and traditional ways of life. In this thesis I have charted how Aboriginal artists in British Columbia have asserted their cultural resilience and practiced active “survivance” to counter those lingering colonial wrongs. By bringing a fresh perspective to understanding the modern politicized artistic practices of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Marianne Nicolson and Sonny Assu, I have argued that their work constitutes a form of activism to fight for land and environmental rights. My goal with this project was to feature the voices of these three artists and position them as powerful forces in the environmental crisis that affects all Canadians.

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<sup>216</sup> Assu, interview by author, January 17, 2016, 6.

<sup>217</sup> Ralston Saul, *The Comeback*, 137, 6.

I have highlighted the links between Yuxweluptun, Nicolson and Assu to demonstrate the changes seen in Aboriginal art on the Northwest Coast. One of these links is evidenced by the influence that Yuxweluptun and Nicolson's practice have had on Assu, as his evolving practice continues to focus on more politically engaged subject matter. Scholar Richard Hill recently wrote about the different roles of Aboriginal artists who emerged in the 1980s and 1990s versus the 2000s. He writes of the artists emerging in the 1980s and 1990s: "...that period was defined by the struggles of the first large wave of art-school trained Indigenous artists to make a space for themselves in galleries, museums and magazines...they changed how we imagine ourselves and our place in the world."<sup>218</sup> Yuxweluptun and Nicolson are part of this group, whereas Assu is part of the next generation emerging in the 2000s of which Hill states: "There is a genuine sense of debt to artists who cleared space for those of us who followed and we often want to see ourselves as helping to continue or fulfill their projects."<sup>219</sup> In speaking with Assu, it is clear that he has a sense of respect for Yuxweluptun and Nicolson, and sees his practice as continuing the legacy of his forbearers – not through mimicry, but through innovation.

The trend of Aboriginal artists aligning themselves with social justice movements, evidenced in Assu's work, *There is Hope if We Rise*, created in response to the Idle No More movement, is one that I see as continuing and becoming stronger. A current example of this practice can be seen in the work of Angela Sterritt, a Gitksan artist, journalist and writer from British Columbia. Sterritt is a vocal proponent for missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada. She is in the process of writing a book on the subject and a number of her paintings and posters have been used to brand this

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<sup>218</sup> Richard William Hill, "Was Indigenous Art Better in the 1980s and Early '90s?" *Canadian Art*, March 2016.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

movement. Like Assu's *There is Hope if We Rise* posters, Sterritt's images combine both Northwest Coast and Western designs and have been used at marches and demonstrations while simultaneously trending on social media. Artists aligning themselves with social justice movements can be seen in a number of artistic mediums, as a recent Toronto Star article by Karen Fricker entitled, "Stage Spotlight Falls on First Nations Activism as an Art Form," claimed when reviewing the play *Reckoning*.<sup>220</sup> Produced by Indigenous arts activist company Article 11, *Reckoning* aims to remind audiences that the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) findings in June 2015, and its final report in December 2015, does not mean that the legacy of Residential Schools should be forgotten. Similarly, Joseph Boyden and the Royal Winnipeg Ballet's, *Going Home Star – Truth and Reconciliation*, was the first major artistic project to come out of the TRC as a way to inform Canadians about the history and legacy of Residential Schools. These types of movements need strong visual imagery to identify their causes. With the youth suicide crisis in Attawapiskat and other remote communities and the ensuing #OccupyINAC demonstrations that are currently unfolding, this type of activist imagery is all the more necessary. In the future, I would like to further this study to include performing as well as visual arts, and go outside the bounds of environmental art to include Aboriginal activist art dealing with a variety of societal issues.

Where do we go from here? John Ralston Saul argues, much like Nicolson, that adopting an Indigenous worldview is one way to save the environment:

Most of us agree that we are in some sort of environmental crisis, brought on in good part by a Western model that removes all effective philosophical brakes on human activity by interpreting the planet as our passive servant...this accounts for the ease with which we slip into violence and, today, for our incapacity to take the environmental crisis seriously...On the other hand, the northern Indigenous

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<sup>220</sup> Karen Fricker, "Stage Spotlight Falls on First Nations Activism as an Art Form," *Toronto Star*, April 2016.

philosophy sees the human as an integral part of the whole... This could now be described as an appropriate, even as a highly contemporary philosophical, model for us all.<sup>221</sup>

Environmentalist and activist David Suzuki echoes Ralston Saul and Nicolson's views stating: "We are so dazzled by our own inventiveness that we are blinded to the consequences of technology. We have very suddenly become a major planetary force and have discarded traditional perspectives, believing that what's most recent is best."<sup>222</sup>

Suzuki goes on to state that it is not too late to take another path, echoing the views of Ralston Saul as well as the artists in this study, although the time is upon us to make a change. Now more than ever it is important to think about these issues in a broader context. While British Columbia presents an apt case study for thinking about land and environmental issues, this is a global struggle not limited to one geographic location.

The power of Aboriginal artists cannot be understated in this challenge. Their work serves as a call to action by reminding us of the dismal state of our natural environment. It was the Metis politician and activist Louis Riel who said on July 4, 1885 that: "My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back."<sup>223</sup> Riel's remarkable foresight proved accurate, as I have argued in this thesis that the revival and resurgence of culture in Aboriginal communities were performed largely by artists throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. Now, well into the twenty-first century, Aboriginal artists continue to have powerful roles as voices for their communities, and all our communities, in the fight for land and environmental rights. In the words of Nicolas Lampert:

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<sup>221</sup> Ralston Saul, *The Comeback*, 19-20.

<sup>222</sup> Suzuki, *The Legacy*, 2.

<sup>223</sup> Max Wyman, *The Defiant Imagination: Why Culture Matters*, Quebec: Douglas & McIntyre Inc., 2004, 85.

When social movements embrace artists, they harness the power of those who excel at expressing new ideas and reaching people in ways that words and other forms of media cannot. They harness the power of visual culture. And when artists join movements, their work – and by extension their lives – takes on a far greater meaning. They become agitators in the best sense of the word and their art becomes less about the individual and more about the common vision and aspirations of many. The art becomes part of a culture of resistance.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Lampert, *A People's Art History*, xi.

## Appendices

These appendices have been edited to avoid repetition and improve clarity and have been approved by the artists.

### Appendix One

Transcribed interview between Jasmine Inglis (interviewer) and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun (interviewee), January 11, 2016, Vancouver, British Columbia.

**Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun:** Land since contact, putting it into perspective B.C. went into confederation without the consent of Aboriginal people. They did that at a time when there were 37, 000 Natives, they purposely used small pox blankets to totally annihilate the Native population here and we all know the history of the disease, the books about guns, steal, disease everything. The history is quite clear, everybody knows what was done, so my work was going back and recording land [...] When Natives first met the people who were coming here they weren't allowed to get off their ships, if they wanted water they had to pay for it, we came from a time of pure ownership of everything, this is our territory, this is our land, this is our sovereignty, this is our Nations, and then the colonialists came along and fucked everything up, just completely, said well we have guns we have cannons, we'll use whatever is at our disposal, and they successfully wiped the Natives off the face of the planet, which they were trying to do [...]

Native people were in power of all of these lands when Cook came by, so there was no control by the Europeans; it was all in Native control. We've gone from a complete control to an apartheid despotism system and for a usufructuary right of land, so, as a modernist I was looking at what is usufruct? How can a carver carve, I've never seen a carver carve the usufruct, so the modern dilemma was how do you translate, tell every Indian that you are being usufruct everyday? And your usufructuary rights are being violated everyday. The problem became quite clear: [...] technically we were not citizens of this country, we were wards of the Crown and we were placed on internment camps or reservations. [...] We still have reservations, so define reservation, what is a reservation? On the planet you have all races [...] but there is a certain selected group of races of people [...] that are designated to reservations and those groups of people are First Nations, Aboriginal people of traditional territories. Australia, New Zealand, United States, Canada, this is a global problem that we seem to glorify colonialism as though it was might is right, Darwinism, you can explain it to any manifestation of destiny, that's why I was painting these things to translate them for Natives to understand and to record what the Europeans were doing to Aboriginal peoples.

**Jasmine Inglis:** So do you see your work as history paintings then? Re-telling this history?

**LPY:** I am considered a history painter [...] When you say democracy it's a very gray area, colonialism is fascism in the very sense of the word that we're just going to fuck these Indians over and we're not going to say anything. [...] When I went to residential school, I went to a funeral, so I know that kids died there because I was there, I know that

kids were dying because I saw the graveyard. When I went to public school I came back to my dad and asked how come there is no graveyard at the public school? And he said no they're not going to kill you there. So that's the difference in terms of treatment of Aboriginal people that in Residential School [...]. That's why my work was to record time, because we didn't have the time. When you are so busy being oppressed by colonialism, when can an Indian have the right to have an existential thought in this country, when can a Native person be free? These are simple things to say, I am a prisoner of democracy, every Native is a prisoner in this country, we are treated like prisoners on our own land [...]. Canadians really hate Natives very extremely with passion. And because they are Canadians...

**JJ:** Are you referring to the government or Canadians in general, anyone walking down the street?

**LPY:** I'm talking about the average Canadian person. [...] This is the position that we are in, this is an Us and Them country. I sit on my reservation and you take everything else, so this is part of this country. Canada, I would say I have no problems breaking up this country. The French did it wrong, they don't know how to separate; they are a too needy greedy people. What I mean is that you have to settle the land claims with the people that you took the land from. The French came into confederation with what, with sweet fuck all, and then they took a whole province. You want to leave the confederation? You don't leave with a whole province. You leave after you've talked to the Aboriginal people and negotiated with them on what terms you want to leave, you don't just take everything! They're so Eurocentric, [...] I told them before the difference between the east and west is that in the east they ram French down the Natives throats in the west they ram English down our throats. Why do I say that? Why can we sit here and talk right now, because my language was destroyed at Residential School. Who destroyed that, who created this genocide, why do we have this postcolonial stress disorder syndrome? All Native people who suffer from these things suffer from not having a language [...]. So I was making paintings that were dealing with some of these issues [...] They thought it was political, I would say this is just my everyday normal life of being an Indian in this country. It's not my fault that you guys are being a bunch of fucking assholes. If you're going to treat Indians like shit, you're going to get shit art. And so I made really nasty paintings about issues and lands, land is always...we don't want to settle land claims basically, why would I surrender my land, traditional lands, to the province of British Columbia and all our traditional territories? [...] Christy Clark is not ready and is not capable of running this province properly, no government is, not just her, it's her system that is not functioning right. [...] These people don't give a flying fuck about this land, they're not here for this, they have dual citizenship, they can go back to the countries from where they came from, I don't have anywhere to go. People have that luxury to get on a fucking plane and fuck off any day they want, they can get on a boat and go back to wherever they fucking came from, after they've fucked everything over here? This country has an attitude of throw away, we stole it for nothing anyways, [...] the difference is that this is my homeland, this is my motherland, and I am not a patriotic person. I don't like your fucking Queen and I don't like this government, and I don't like what they're doing, and I don't want them to have this land. I think that the government Chiefs are a bunch of sell

outs, and I think that any Chief that wants to settle with these fucks is a very dangerous person who should be grabbed and used as a human fucking shield. [...] How long are you going to keep us on reservations, how long are you going to oppress the Aboriginal people? Another 200 years? How long are we going to have the Indian Act? Which is nothing more than a white supremacy act of Canada. The rate of the planet that it's going at with global warming what is really going to left for me to say I can protect?

**JJ:** So do you see your role as an activist artist then? Is that how you see yourself? Instead of being a politician for instance, you're an artist, so how do you see yourself in this role?

**LPY:** I'm an artist. Politicians come and go, I'm here for life, and my pictures will stay for a lot longer and the issues are going to be there for a lot longer and are not going to change. [...] I'd like to think that someday we will have equality, but I don't see it, I'll never see equality in my lifetime, that dream is gone. I always said that if Canadians hate Indians so much why don't you guys just have a fucking referendum to say let us leave the Confederation of Canada. If Canadians have that much hate that they would bestow the Indian Act upon us why don't you take it a little bit farther, if you don't want to be around us or near us or associate with us let me go. Free from you. Completely, I want no longer to do anything with you in this country, I no longer want to be a forced Canadian citizen. [...] I'm not the only Indian that feels like this. [...] It's like well, we have global warming and I don't want you to cut down trees, and if you do want to cut down a tree I want to know what tree you are cutting down. I want a moratorium on how many fucking logging trucks there are in British Columbia. This is not a free for all to steal all the trees that you want. [...]

**JJ:** What about the Tsilhqot'in agreement in 2014 in the interior of B.C.? They were granted Aboriginal title over their lands, right?

**LPY:** Any extinguishment policy is not a good thing. If there were any solution in this province I would say it would be a taxation, Native tax. I'm still wanting back rent for land, to hell with fucking land claims, there's been so much mooching, freeloading, stealing, theft; billions of dollars have been taken from this land and they want to sit down at a table and tell me that they want to settle land claims for millions? Comprehensive land claims? When they are taking billions? Like, fuck off. Like get the fuck out of here. There's no point in talking, there's no point in talking to any British Columbian whatsoever on any negotiations. I say to British Columbians you guys are a bunch of assholes and bullshitters. You're playing bullshit poker with natural resources and you don't want to pay for it. You had this freeloading mooching ride for the last couple of hundred years, and now it's over, and so the natives are saying, I'm saying NO! [...] At some point somebody has to say No to all of this country. [...] If I'm going to be equal, if you want to include me into the bill of human rights, then I will take equality and I will take it to the max of what it is. The day of the usufructuary right should be over.

**JJ:** Do you think the new Trudeau government is a step in the right direction?

**LPY:** Oh I think the government is willing to do this I think that Canadians will be in total shock to realize that Aboriginal people are human beings, its very difficult for people to wake up and say they're no longer prisoners, no longer slaves of our Queen.

**JJ:** Do you think it's the general population that will have trouble?

**LPY:** [...] The real situation that we are dealing with, is that I am still painting and our Chiefs are still negotiating and trying to resolve the human rights violations of colonialism, so that is basically where we are. [...] I think *Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in Sky*, I was on a reservation when I painted it, it reflects how emasculated our Chiefs were at the time, how powerless, Native Chiefs have zero power in this country. [...] The Natives were asking for an inquiry into the missing women for years and years and years, finally it was put on television and Harper was asked about it, and so the rest of the Canadians could see who they elected and what his response was. And his response was well they're not on my radar, and they're not a priority, so it was like saying if you're sitting there watching the news, and you're an Indian killer and you've killed Native women, he's like saying well the party is on. This is just like another free for all that just validates that Native women were not worthy of anything. And if the Native women are not worthy of anything, Native people in general are not worthy of anything, so it was a free season, an open season to kill Native women. [...] I don't like violence at all. My dad took me to Mission when I was 13, to a correctional institution. He wanted me to go with him and so I went, I was sitting down having a coffee with this Indian guy and I said how come you're here? And he said I'm in here for murder, and I said Murder!? Who did you kill? And he said I killed my wife, and I said how did you do that, and he said he hit her with an axe, and I said to him well that's not very good, that's not being very nice, and then asked how long he was going to be in there for, and he was doing a life term. He said he regretted it because he was drinking, and I said that's no excuse, that's no excuse whatsoever. I was sitting there at 13 years old, and this guy was probably, 30-35, he was a young man, I know that Natives have problems, living under colonialism, its very oppressive and there are a lot of social problems that comes from that. Its like, how do you...you have to record these things so, I am a modernist and I have to record the postmodern era and modernism of everything. I had to go back in time, virtually, to talk about comprehensive land claims, to talk about land claims period, to say that this is Indian land. Prior to the Europeans coming here, we were here first, get over it Canada, we are the First Peoples, you all are second. [...] This province is really fucking creepy. And that's what I really hate about waking up to go out, you motherfuckers are really having a bad colonial fucking attitude today, you're really fun and really sweet that you think that you can tell Aboriginal people that we can't catch salmon anymore. [...] So I say to the Natives catch as many fish as you can right now, because the longer the gillnetters are not catching anything it keeps their boats on shore, and they'll go out of business. So yes Aboriginal people go out and catch as many food fish as you need. [...] So we know what you guys past and present are capable of doing, that's why they tried to make laws claiming that Indians were poaching and making it illegal for Natives to catch fish. It's alright for me, for us, to catch fish but them Indians can't, so its like, you have a system in place for fisheries, where you have the right to

catch as many fish as you want, but when it comes to Aboriginal food fishing, no you can't do that.

**JJ:** Why do you think that is?

**LPY:** They're Canadian, pure satanic white supremacy, immigrant supremacy. [...] I can resolve the salmon fishery today. The first thing I would do is shut down every fish farm in British Columbia, ban them completely, and say your license has expired, thank you very much, compensation, maybe only for the value of the fish but not for the company.

**JJ:** So no more commercial fisheries?

**LPY:** I would shut down the commercial fishery completely for the next 50 years. The only fishing that would be done would be native food fishing and sports fishing. Let all the salmon go, let them replenish, I would say 50 years is not really enough – I would say 100 years. To do that you would have a surplus amount of salmon, plus I would make the distance between deforestation a lot larger, away from the salmon estuaries [...]. Deforestation has somewhere between 100-500 years where erosion can happen, so I would say that they have to go into all those places and recheck them, double check them, there's enough immigrants here that are unemployed, you could put them to work, to do these things, to clean up this land. You know, either we're going to do something together or are you just going to keep us on reservations? You have 51% of Native people under the age of 16 right now, so you can't ask Native people to settle land claims when 51% of the Native population doesn't have a voice to say anything. So how can you ask one group to extinguish the rights of another? The Native Chiefs have taken millions and millions of dollars in perpetuity of land claims that they're supposed to pay back. My Chiefs are a bunch of hacks, and I say no, you fuckers go pay that back. We're not going to settle land claims, I don't want to settle land claims, so I'm more interested in the average Native person who says we must want to look after this, what's the rush? The sun has an estimated 500 billion light years, in less than 300 years we have global warming, so we can completely fuck this planet up in less than 300 years but this planet has 500 billion light years, yeah that's really nice. Are we going to have 500 billion light years of reservations? [...] I say fuck off. We live in an Us and Them situation. This is colonialism, this is racist bigotry, fascism.

**JJ:** So do you even think its possible to live in a post-colonial world, then? A post-colonial Canada lets say?

**LPY:** Free me.

**JJ:** Well what does that look like to you?

**LPY:** Tear down the reservations. This is my land. You want to build a house, pay for that land. You want to build a mine? Pay the Indian for the mine, for the resources. Share, pay for it, don't steal it. If you want equality, if you want Indians to pay taxes, Indians can pay taxes. I say well you pay yours, pay up. Its not just a one way street to say we're

just going to fuck you over and you should all become Canadian citizens, and we don't agree with you having any rights whatsoever. Well that's not what we agreed to. If you are going to be this way, let me go. If you don't want to have me as a human being free in your country, then I don't want to be a part of it. I don't need this country. I don't need to be treated this way anymore; I don't need our Aboriginal people to be treated this way. I'm going to come back reincarnated as bear, and I'm going to be in a park, and every tent that has immigrants in it I'm going to chase it.

**JJ:** This might be a really hard question, but if you had to choose one pressing environmental issue that exists in BC today, what would it be? The biggest issue, if that's even a possible question to answer. In 2016.

**LPY:** Land claims. I don't want to settle land claims, I'm telling you this is Indian land and you can't force me, you can't torture me, you can't pour water over my head and make me sign land claims. I will never settle land claims with B.C. because I don't trust British Columbians environmentally. So environmentally I am the landlord, every Native is a landlord, and your rent is due, and I don't like what you're doing and I want you to change. And environmentally this is a very fragile land base, so either we look after it together, or we just separate and segregate, and I think that...it's a very difficult...I don't like seeing tail end ponds and mines exploding, bursting out into the water reservoirs. I don't want Alberta's tar sands, oil pipelines coming through here; I don't need 400 tankers, oil tankers, off the coast. Christy Clark is wrong. She has no right doing that, as a provincial person, any provincial person, to go in the direction of forcing something that is just viable to a few people. So the rich can get richer and the poor stay poor is not a way to, I really don't care about Alberta and the person who owns the tar sands. I think that he's a real fucking asshole creepy person, and he doesn't give a flying fuck about any human beings but his own greed. And those types of people are super predators on the world, and they are a detriment to civilization. And nothing good will come of it, so I say no to pipelines.

**JJ:** So does your painting *Fucking Creeps They're Environmental Terrorists* refer to those people?

**LPY:** Yeah, yeah the painting titled *Fucking Creeps They're Environmental Terrorists* is about the tar sands, British Petroleum, Shell all those motherfuckers that are destroying this land. I know what they're doing, and so...not it's not a pretty picture sometimes what I paint. People say it's political and try to dismiss it...I didn't make the big hole in the sky, and you can't blame the Indian 200 years from now saying well it was those fucking Indians that made that big hole in the sky. And then they'll go no, you can't say that, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun made this painting in such and such a time that explained the history, and that's a historical painting, and you can't use the Indian as an excuse. So that's important to say that you can't use the Native as an excuse all the time. And yeah I know a lot of people enjoy my paintings but they sure as hell don't like what I have to say about them.

**JJ:** How do you find the feedback to those extremely political or aggressive paintings like that one (*Fucking Creeps*) What is the response?

**LPY:** A lot of people say that I'm a very antagonistic kind of person. They say that I'm disrespectful towards people, but I think if you've been treated like shit for most of your life as a person, you have to be really careful about how you talk to other people and how you feel about things. I think I'm a normal Native person who feels about the same sentiments as any other Native person in this country. That we know that the colour of our skin just irks people, and I know that walking down the street that if you look at women, they get so fucking creeped out. Its like wow, I just have to walk this way, I don't mean to really look at you but I still have to walk this way. Like that is, that's what this country is like, its like I have to look at these things, and I know that getting on a bus I will sit down and people will get up and move.

**JJ:** That's something you still experience?

**LPY:** That happened 2 weeks ago. Some Asian people just cannot sit beside Indians. So there's a lot of national racism that is not leaving, that takes time. It's not me, I understand it, you know. But I've been considered an environmentalist in many ways, or an activist, I just don't belong to Greenpeace because...I'm Brownpeace, I'm a brown environmentalist and every Native is a brown environmentalist. They're sovereign environmentalists. Greenpeace is just Greenpeace. They tried to adopt and encompass Native people into Greenpeace but Native people have had a hard time trusting. [...] So to me, I have to speak for myself.

**JJ:** Do you think you have a voice for your community at large? Do you see yourself as a voice for those who cant speak?

**LPY:** I speak like every other Native; we are a collective, you can never leave a collective. I am only part of a collective that is saying the same thing. I'm not a spokesman; I am just another average Indian.

**JJ:** But you have a platform to speak to a wider audience.

**LPY:** Oh yeah I do, people have to change to solve the problems of this country environmentally, and you know that takes a lot of direction, and do we have enough capability of doing it? Can we protect the shorelines of British Columbia from Alberta?

**JJ:** It's hard to say, I mean for now it seems to be sort of halted. But is it an inevitability that it will happen [the pipeline].

**LPY:** They shouldn't be out in the waters. British Petroleum is an example of what not to do, when you have power gone mad. I did a painting titled *Killer Whale has a Vision Comes Talks to Me*, I had the drawing done about 20 or 30 years ago, and then a client came to me and said I want you to make a painting of that. And I said you know I have this painting, its time to do this painting [...]. So I started to paint the painting *Killer*

*Whale has a Vision Comes Talks to Me* and, the second day that I started [...] I woke up in the morning and I heard this British Petroleum off the coast of the United States has this huge oil spill out in the water. [...] I have an insight to things and I'm lucky that I use them, the visions that I get to create the things that I create. So will the world listen to the messages? That's part of it; I'm on the Internet. My work is on the Internet, people can read and look at things. This is my homeland, I want people to love my homeland, and say no I don't think we need a pulp mill; your children have to live here too. And your children have to breath that air, and your children have to go down to the ocean there and eat those salmon when they come back through that pulp mill water. [...] So it's no longer just me that you're hurting, you're hurting yourselves, but I'm still sitting on my reservation, and you're still not recognizing that I said no.

**JJ:** So you've had a career that's spanned almost 30 years...

**LPY:** 40, this is my 40<sup>th</sup> year.

**JJ:** Ok 40, so have you seen a change in the work you are producing or the issues that you represent because of political and environmental changes, or do you think you are doing really similar work to what you were doing in the 1980's?

**LPY:** I'm still saying the same thing, I haven't changed. Nothing's really changed environmentally, were going down a one way street, were going to come to a conjunction at some point...but I think its already too late and that road is already determined.

**JJ:** Is that frustrating to you, that over all these years you are doing the same...trying to say the same things?

**LPY:** The Kyoto Accord, the American Accord, the Environmental Accord...Accord for environmentalism, governments, global warming, to say that I want to save this planet, then I say shut the tar sands down. And tell the person that's very wealthy and I think that he's made enough money and you have to tell all those people that they're unemployed and they have to go do something else, that the planet really has to save itself, and you're the problem. Not the people of Alberta, you're just employing them. Yes they'll boo hoo and cry and whatever, what about my job? Well sorry but you are the problem, you created this problem, now you have to fix it. How do you tell all those people to quit?

**JJ:** You can't really. I mean all the people who are working in the tar sands you mean?

**LPY:** Well we are talking about global warming. So you know, I say quit!

**JJ:** Yeah...I agree with you, I just don't know if that's realistic, I don't think that those people can just give up their jobs. It has to be from a higher level.

**LPY:** The problem is that it just becomes a position of colonialism, might is right, I don't care about the problem right now, all I care about is myself right now that I get a pay check and my rent is paid for. Fuck you all, fuck civilization. [...] This is the problem

with this system, is that it's unaccountable, it has no accountability. I would say to the world, if you're a shareholder to the tar sands, then you should pay a pollution tax.

**JJ:** To the Native people?

**LPY:** Everyone that has shares. If you leave, so, why is it that shareholders are not accountable for their actions? You have super mines in the United States that go bankrupt and then the families of all the wealthy people who made the money turn around and say well were not responsible for this, its not my company. All those wealthy people sitting there and a super toxic site that takes anywhere from...some of them are in the millions, 300, 400 to a billion dollars to clean up. But the people who created these mines made billions and billions, and are not responsible or accountable. So this is what when I come back to you get nothing for nothing begets nothing. My dad kept on saying that for years to me, we had this talk about the world when I was 13. The same discussion of the world.

**JJ:** Do you think that's when you became aware of environmental issues and land claims, was it around 13?

**LPY:** Yeah I had an early enlightenment, everything became clear.

**JJ:** Through your parents?

**LPY:** No I was walking along one day, and then the world, everything became in tune, I was aware of everything. I know the exact day, it was a nice sunny day, July I think it was, July the 17<sup>th</sup> or something like that it was around there. And I was walking along Richmond 2 Road between, walking towards Blundell. So I actually know where I was when I became...that all these little puzzles in my brain started to connect together, and I started thinking yeah that's right, I was like God, this is the world.

**JJ:** And it just became clear to you?

**LPY:** After that I was...but I've always been an artist. Artists think differently in many ways, and I think that's what makes artists different. I think we are wired differently.

**JJ:** Do you think you are born an artist?

**LPY:** Oh yeah. I was carving at the residential school in Kamloops, sitting at the porch of the wood shop carving a totem pole when I was 6. So I've been an artist all my life. I went from residential school and then they changed the law and I went to public school, so I'm first generation public school.

**JJ:** How old were you when you went to the public school?

**LPY:** To public school? 8.

[...]

**JJ:** Are there any artists from the previous generation that you look up to or that inspired you, either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal?

**LPY:** Well...in a quirky way, I always said Guernica gave me a woody [...]. The world, to relate to the world of time, Breughel, Bosch, Rembrandt, Vincent, Vermeer, Bugs Bunny...have all played, Gandhi, Sitting Bull, Chief Seattle, Geronimo, have all influenced, the Longhouse here in the West Coast, the Salish Longhouses, were a big influence of philosophy, being a masked dancer, a spirit dancer, Longhouse dancer [...]. They all gave information, the surrealists...so I realize that this language is for the world, there's nothing like these things when you see them, and they portray certain messages and you have to decipher these things and go well that's a tree, that's a sun, that's a cloud, there's some more trees, ok so there's some sort of animal, ok so then we have to decipher these things, so then it becomes a language that I've created ...they're paintings that are transformed into modern more formulized conceptual treaties of symbolism, so, people love the paintings...a wolf has a space, that's why I made the wolf [referring to a painting in his studio that he is currently working on] so the wolf, the wolf has a right to be, you know the act of the wolf on this planet has been a very enduring problem.

[...]

**JJ:** Do you think your painting is the way that you are taking care of your spiritual beliefs?

**LPY:** I think in time people will look at them and we will come to terms with, either we're too late, which the way I see it right now I think we're almost too late for global warming.

**JJ:** A lot of people are saying that.

**LPY:** And so most of them are saying, well its going to happen, so lets just continue the way we are, it can't get any worse than what it is. Well, yes it can because it is going to get worse, it will get very worse because it takes longer to bring back the north and south poles that have melted, we can go into a nuclear cold freeze for a 1000 years, you know we could have a super volcano. [...] That's the system that we have right now. Shut the fuck up, we are the rich, you are the poor, fuck off, we don't care, and that's the way it's going to be. That is the problem with the human civilization as it stands. As soon as the shut the fuck ups realize that they're getting fucked over, do they have a chance to do something about it. And they better wake up soon, because in 300 years global warming is going to hit the fucking fan, and certain families are going to be responsible for that, only certain families. The one percent is mostly responsible for global warming. In a big way, the rest of us are just a bunch of sheep following so, can we save the planet? Good luck with that, because the G-7 refused to try and create any real policy that will affect this planet. And they're calling the environmentalists terrorists and now they try and put them in jail? They're not terrorists, they're human beings who love this planet, and the real terrorists are the ones who have no accountability in the direction of this planet, so

the more protesting, the more environmental people wake up, the better it will be. Yes, they will have fights and confrontations and yes they're going to start to kill them, but you can't stop that movement [...]. The richest person in the world is responsible for a lot of environmental problems on this planet.

**JJ:** Who is the richest person?

**LPY:** I don't know there's a list. He's mostly in mining and steel and what not, he's made billions. We're not looking at the problem. People are afraid of socialism. But you can't have a world...capitalism globally is failing. And so we've never had a planet of true socialism, will it work, we don't know, because something has to give other than what it is. What is in store, I think that we're going to have to come to some agreement at some point that no you can't do that, no it is not your God given right to do that, and he's going to turn around and say yes it is and I have a gun, and the rest of us are saying well we don't give a flying fuck about your gun because the rest of us are going to use our guns on you [...].

**JJ:** How do feel about your upcoming show at MOA, *Unceded Territories*? Did you come up with any of that?

**LPY:** Yeah, they asked me what title I would put. I would have been happy with just the title Us and Them.

**JJ:** Did you suggest that?

**LPY:** Well, no I thought about it. Artists have gone all over the world to be recognized. I didn't go anywhere. I've stayed here, my battle has been here in this backyard for most of my life, because the treatment of Aboriginal people by Canadians was really ugly [...]. They would sooner kill me, so I know how dangerous people are, but I have to look at the survival of Aboriginal people and so I make this art, and are they ready for it?

**JJ:** Canadians?

**LPY:** Yeah, no I don't think they are. They are so used to the shut the fuck up Indian, or the fuck off Indian.

**JJ:** That's why it's important that you do what you do.

**LPY:** Yeah, so its like no I'm not going to shut the fuck up, and yes you guys are a bunch of fucking assholes and I want you to change your attitudes and get over it [...]. So, yeah they may not like it, but I don't give a flying fuck, I'm here to...somebody can paint a pretty picture, in 200 years from now maybe things will change, but at this point in history things are not that great and we don't get along and we don't see eye to eye and we're not nice to each other, and it's not a good day...I'm still having a bad colonial day. So yeah I'm...it's a dirty job and somebody has to do it, somebody has to say it [...]. I was kicked out of history class because you know to say that we joined the confederation

of British Columbia, and I said you know this is bullshit that you're telling these students, and you're feeding them colonial dreams, this majestic kind of fucking attitude that is so white supremacy. You annexed it in confederation we were put on reservation for fucks sake. The teacher said you have to leave this class.

**JJ:** Was this in high school?

**LPY:** Yeah, so, the system was so full of bullshit, so I just said you know, you can't really follow this bullshit and expect people to eat it all up [...]. This is a very white supremacy country, and that's what I have to deal with, I have to talk to these people, I have to talk to this world. I have to say we can get along. I mean if me and you can sit down and discuss these things in a reasonable manner without chocking eat other and saying you know this is...no we can't do this, no I wouldn't do this, or yeah, maybe, or what is the solution, well we have to go toward a solution of emancipating the First Nations of this country, and the Indian Act is such a...some Natives uphold it as though it's the salvation of their own being. They're such a brainwashed bunch of idiots. I did a whole television interview, and at the end the woman turned around and said well the Indian Act is something that saved Aboriginal people, and I disagree. So she was putting her own opinion on it after I went out and shot the damn thing.

**JJ:** Was she an Indigenous person?

**LPY:** Yeah, so you have Natives that feel that, government Indians, so we have to move in a new direction, eliminating the Indian Act would be my dream come true. I would probably be in the spirit world looking down at it, and doing a very good Sundance to it, jumping around with joy, but yeah that's what I expect from this world if they want equality and freedom for all, then we have to go towards eliminating racist literature, government indoctrinations that are out-dated. Yes, you know the French got it right, they guillotined all of them, and we just have to get it right here. I don't mind this country going into a republic; I don't need the blue bloods. I volunteered my services to give cyanide pills to every member of the royal family.

**JJ:** You actually did that?

**LPY:** Yeah I publicly say this, I would give my service to any day take every one of the royal family and give them the cyanide pill and be done with it. The planet will not move forward as long as there are blue bloods on this planet. We will not have equality; I am not going to go down the road for the next 300 years, 400 years, to be ruled by this system. Why should we? I will protest it all, I am not going to be a voluntary Indian saying yes, I really love your Queen, and I really think that if she bends over I'll kiss her ass, and I think that she's a beautiful person, that marched us and told us we should sit on reservations and go to Residential School and be good little Indians. I'm not her ward of the Crown, I don't like the family, what it stands for, everything. I fucking hate them. I don't like them being in this province, I don't like the royal family period. They're just creepy fucking people that have no right or any business here in my traditional territory.

And Canada is hiding behind the skirts of this queen and this royal family. For what, to oppress me? For how long, and why? [...] I want the name of British Columbia changed.

**JJ:** What would you want it changed to?

**LPY:** I want to change it to Traditional Native Territories. Province of Traditional Native Territories. With the abbreviation TNT.

**JJ:** So are you excited about your show at MOA?

**LPY:** I'm ready for it; I don't think the country is ready for it.

**JJ:** Is there a lot of new stuff?

**LPY:** There's about 40 years of work, some new stuff some old stuff.

**JJ:** This is your second solo retrospective show right?

**LPY:** Kind of.

**JJ:** There was one at the Belkin Gallery?

**LPY:** Well that was just a show, it wasn't really a retrospective. I've never really had a retrospective. I never did it, they asked me quite a few years ago if I'd got there, but I didn't need to be validated by them.

**JJ:** What's different now?

**LPY:** Still have to deal with all this shit. The anthropology museum [MOA] is a good place to start. I'm just a living Indian. Probably one of the biggest influences on the Northwest Coast...*Shooting the Indian Act* was a great piece of work.

**JJ:** Yeah! One of my professors at Carleton showed me he has one of them, its pretty amazing. Is that going to be included in the show?

**LPY:** Yeah. I've created pieces of work that have been interesting. *Haida Hot Dog*, that's a great painting. It's the first pop art every created by Natives in British Columbia. Yeah *Haida Hot Dog* was a hilarious piece.

**JJ:** What year did you do that?

**LPY:** That's an early 1990s, 1994 or something like that. It's on the Internet. I've had a big influence on the Northwest Coast, Brian Jungen, Sonny [Assu]... a lot of artists were able to grapple modernism because of what I... because I tackled it as a concept. What do you mean you don't carve? What do you mean you're an Indian artist and you don't carve? Its like, that's absurd.

**JJ:** Do people say that to you?

**LPY:** [...] Nothing is really going to change in this country...traditionalism had a rule, and I couldn't abide by those rules. With painting you were allowed to paint anything...so the idea of *Outstanding Business*, a painting that I made, allowed me to take the concept of land claims and symbolically show it. Those early studies were ground breaking because it was a translation of two cultures meeting simultaneously, and painting was a medium of...a mutual ground. I know they had great painters, you know Vermeer, Michelangelo, and I studied them all and I enjoyed them. That was the great thing about public school, I enjoyed it. I knew that the stuff that was happening to Aboriginal people had to be recorded because it wasn't being recorded. I just had to do it.

**JJ:** What's the title of this painting? [work he is doing right now in the studio]

**LPY:** *Indian Land You're on my Land*. This is all Indian land. I've been working on it for about a month. This painting is going to the Royal Bank of Canada head office downtown. This painting is *Kinder Morgan Go Go Girls*. [Christy Clark is one of them] Our premier wears a pearl necklace, so I don't have to say who it is. Kinder Morgan wants to put a pipeline through, so the company has hired these go go girls to go around and dance, and so they have these light shows and the go go girls stand up and dance to the tunes and tell everybody that Kinder Morgan is a really good thing. Its part of my super predators series. The feminists were asking me to do...how come I don't do any women super predators? And I said well what do you guys got to offer, Martha Stewart, Thatcher? She was a bitch. Yeah and then somebody asked me the other day, they said Trump could get elected, and then he said between Hillary and Trump who would you choose, and I said, well, do you want to listen to Hillary? [...] Americans are so gun happy. It's scary.

## Appendix Two

Transcribed interview between Jasmine Inglis (interviewer) and Marianne Nicolson (interviewee), January 14, 2016, Victoria, British Columbia.

**Jasmine Inglis:** When did you know you wanted to pursue a career as a professional artist? And did your schooling influence what kind of artist you were going to become?

**Marianne Nicolson:** Yeah ok, I was 5 when I decided I wanted to be an artist. In a 5-year-olds mentality I was like I want to make pictures, that's what I want to do. There was absolutely no veering from that objective through my whole childhood, youth, everything. So then I went to the Emily Carr School of Art and Design and [...] all I knew was there was something in me, I wanted to express it, I seemed to want to put it down on paper. At that time at Emily Carr there was a lot of critical thinking going on around art, what does it really say? There was a really engaged discussion around semiotics which was coming out of feminist study. This was in the 1990s so it was coming off this kind of feminist wave of critique. I took a course with Sarah Diamond and everything that she was teaching about feminism I translated into race issues. I'm like, for me, the translation was racial oppression, I'm like wow, everything you're pointing out relates to my experience as a First Nations person, and I had grown up on reserve and off reserve, mostly off reserve, but I would get sent home in the summers as a teenager, and the contrast between those cultures was so extreme, so strong, so that really marked my understanding personally. The feminist discourse and the discussions around semiotics really did affect the way...I guess mapping, or finding a structure in terms of how I produce work, and I knew that I wanted to produce artwork that contained within it a social critique, of what I had been experiencing all my life as a First Nations person.

**JJ:** So was it your time at Emily Carr that really fostered that social critique way of thinking?

**MN:** Yeah I think so, I think at that point in time people were questioning everything, it was kind of a postmodernist discourse. They were questioning everything, it was a really intellectually engaged time, and what I have found since is that it's not always like that. You know society has a tendency to open up to certain ideas and then shut down depending on a whole number of factors, so at that point in time people were wanting to look at race issues, wanting to look at feminist issues, there was all kinds of dialogue happening around that, museum institutions were starting to change the way they were set up because they were acknowledging these power structures and saying can we make this better for everyone? And so there were all kinds of things happening. So I came out of that kind of an educational setting.

**JJ:** When did you become aware of environmental sort of issues in the province of B.C., and traditional land and things?

**MN:** I come from a really small village on the coastal mainland, and you know as I was growing up we would travel in and out of the territory, so travel in and out through the

Broughton Archipelago, which is a series of islands in the Queen Charlotte Straight, and always, from my families perspective we were taught that these were our lands and territories and we were in stewardship of them and we had a certain relationship with that place. When I started to go to... after I was at Emily Carr I went to SFU for a year to do academics, and I started to really realize that the interpretation of our legal relationship to those lands and territories was extraordinarily different from our traditional comprehension of that relationship, it was a real shock to me to realize what the realities of our legal position was. That we were technically squatters on Queen's land that we were restricted to very small tiny postage stamp allocations of land, which were called reserves. So I started learning about what that really was, and I was like this is not my reality, this is so incomprehensible to me, and so I started to look at those histories, how did this happen? How it was that these layers were kind of situated onto the landscape that I had understood in a completely different way as a member of a nation that lived within those lands.

**JJ:** So these different viewpoints really.

**MN:** Yeah and I seriously could not uphold the exterior viewpoint, I could not uphold and abide by the western colonial imposition of their rules and regulations on our relationship to that place. So I moved home after I was done at Emily Carr and SFU and I think I did a year at UVIC here, and I moved home to Kingcome, and while I was living there I got a real sense how things happen in the valley. There was one particular incident that really bothered me and that was that the logging company wanted to come in and spray insecticide through the valley, and the issue came in to the community and the band was kind of looking at it, and I thought that there would be a big discussion or debate surrounding whether this was going to happen or not, but apparently, technically somehow the company had the rights and came through and sprayed the valley.

**JJ:** Without consulting?

**MN:** Well that's the thing, consultation in quotation marks right, so the process existed to deal with those issues. So I was in my house one day and I saw the planes coming over and I thought oh they're spraying the valley, you know, we're just here, and it became really clear in my mind, we're just here and we're so inconvenient, how inconvenient that those Indians live in that reserve on those lands, that you know it's such an inconvenience to have to consult with them, and look at them they live in the middle of nowhere, like who cares, just go and like do what you need to do from a corporate or business point of view. [...] I looked more and more and more into the histories behind all these structures you know, how is it that people came to believe that, you know certain things, and all the history behind our fight against the way that industries and government had been coming through our lands and territories, basically shoving us off to the side and then I looked at the relationship that they actually had to those territories. You know the best people to make decisions in regards to these lands are us, we live in these territories, we know them best, we're looking at sustainability because you know we're not just looking to live here until the valley is logged out and then we'll leave, which is what the logging company was doing. So you know all of these things were happening and I was learning and

coming to understand all these things in order so that I could advocate on our behalf through my art practice, but that's been a developmental process.

**JJ:** So have you seen your art practice shift then in response to changing political and environmental issues?

**MN:** I would say yes just to an extent. Initially I think I was just trying to express validation for our cultures, and our ideas, so I was creating artworks that I felt were reflecting those ideas, into a kind of broader society, and that my role was to express those ideas so they continue to have a form of existence, and then I really started to look at the structures surrounding the dissemination of that knowledge, who's really got access to it you know, so I realized wait a minute I have to be more strategic here. I can't just be thinking ideally like if I make a painting and it sells somewhere and its exhibited somewhere that that's true advocacy or that that is truly creating any sort of change, in fact what I found was wait a minute I am just being appropriated myself into a larger system. So how do I become more conscious of how that system works and how do I become more conscious of how I insert that voice, and utilize that platform to be more effective, so I started to change my strategy so that my ways of working, you know.

**JJ:** Do you see yourself as an activist artist? Do you see your art as a way, as your platform to rebel against the system?

**MN:** Yeah I do, I see my art practice as a way to advocate for an Indigenous worldview, and way of understanding, and it's my way of keeping it alive, and what I do is that I am very conscientious of the galleries, and the western art world tend to have a way of appropriating that into its own power dynamic [...] I have found that within the public art system, and I don't know about America but in Canada there are many many curators and other artists who are really interested in these ideas and will advocate for them, and provide platforms for them, publications, writers, all of that then becomes politicized. And those are the avenues that I want to foster I guess, those relationships and those engagements.

**JJ:** So you do a lot of large-scale commissions, is that something you have been doing for a long time? Or how did that come about?

**MN:** Well it's interesting, because my first large-scale piece was in 1998 done in Kingcome, and I really just did it for the community, and I did it to validate our ancestral understanding [the pictograph of a copper]. And I still think it's the best work I have ever done, and I actually think it will be the best...in my whole life I don't think I will create something as dynamic, you know it was like in a sense, you know it wasn't done for a gallery or an institution. [...] It was a real free expression, and because I did that people were interested in me in terms of a public art sense, and I did think that this is a different audience than gallery spaces which are highly conventional to a certain extent, and then public artworks are another opportunity to reach a different kind of audience, so I did start to kind of create these public artworks.

**JJ:** So that work was specifically for the people of Kingcome, of your community?

**MN:** Yeah.

**JJ:** Is it still there?

**MN:** Yeah!

**JJ:** Is it faded?

**MN:** No! That's what amazes me, I mean I think when it was first done it almost had a...it was so shocking to see it in real space, because it was like whoa, but it has settled in, it has been over 10 years. It's amazing, I'm like this thing is going to be here long after I'm dead, it's weathering so well.

**JJ:** So what about, I was just looking up two of your commissions: *The Rivers Monument* in YVR and then also *A Precarious State*, which is at the embassy in Jordan.

**MN:** Yeah that one I have never seen.

**JJ:** You've never seen *A Precarious State*?

**MN:** No. Do you have a picture of it?

**JJ:** Yeah. It's this.

**MN:** That's all I ever got too. You know what happened with this is they started to install it, and then the panels started shattering, and it was because the company that they had hired in Jordan to install the work wasn't doing it properly, and so we went through this whole thing of re doing the stuff. And then somehow, they said it got all installed and that it was all complete, but I never got any photographs, and somehow the embassy stopped talking to me, just like it never happened. It was such a bizarre scenario.

**JJ:** And this was in 2013?

**MN:** [...] I've never seen it myself or seen it installed. And I have to be careful because I was realizing...see that commission, *A Precarious State*, is pretty upfront I think. And you know basically the imagery is like a large killer whale, this is long it's like 35 feet, it's this large whale, and there's all these characters and beings riding on its back, and it just has this tension in terms of...you're not sure if the whale is actually being inundated by all these beings that are trying to ride on it, and in my mind the whale was the land, if you wanted to say Canada you could if you wanted, but there's lots of different ways to read it, but the whale was the land and all the beings on its back were competing interests. And then *A Precarious State*, you know it's a double meaning.

**JJ:** It was the Canadian Embassy that commissioned it? That's the kind of thing I am just fascinated by because, I mean its international obviously its in Jordan, what do you think it means that they are commissioning these kinds of intensely loaded sort of works?

**MN:** I don't know if they knew it was intensely loaded, this is a little bit of the issue with me even talking to you is because I feel like a lot of the stuff I am putting out there, and this is going to be strategic in the long run, is subversive. There's an expectation that exists in the general society, especially around public artworks that they want, and they just love Pacific Northwest Coast work, put it in glass, even better. You know what I mean? Oh my god how exciting. Political commentary? Uhh were not used to this. So I have to be careful [...] if I want the expression and the ideas that I am addressing to actually get out there, I have to be subversive to some extent. I have to make sure the work is layered enough. There's an aesthetic. So I'm really hyper aware of all the nuances and peoples expectations and the history, and in that piece I was impressed that it was executed and it showed up at the embassy, and I thought well I think to more open minds its an entirely appropriate piece, but if you're just wanting a piece of propaganda it becomes, you know its like...

**JJ:** Well yeah I guess to a lot of people, or Canadians, a totem pole or this kind of imagery represents Canada, to them that's all it is.

**MN:** Yeah, it's an appropriation and I guess my frustration is that there's an appropriation of our aesthetic, but there's been an appropriation of our lands, of our bodies, I'm not willing to just say I am not aware of it. You know I am going to say that I am totally 100 percent aware of the fact that we have been exploited and that these relationships exist. I think in order to truly achieve some degree of reconciliation between the peoples who live within those territories we have to come to a resolution on those issues, and that's *A Precarious State*, it is exactly that expression. It's saying we live in a precarious state all of us together, how are we going to map this out. Are we going to go down? Or are we going to come up?

**JJ:** What about this work [*The Rivers Monument*]?

**MN:** Yeah this went in about a year ago. Well this is interesting, it is probably the most monumental piece publicly, YVR commissioned it.

**JJ:** And were they commissioning something specific?

**MN:** Well they wanted something that would recognize the Thompson Fraser river system, so what I looked at was the history of the Thompson Fraser and the Columbia [...]. Basically one of them represents the Thompson Fraser system and the other one represents the Columbia, and what I wanted to address I guess was that the Columbia had been dammed 14 times on its main line within a 50 year period, and the Fraser had never been dammed on its main line, and in some ways it was somewhat of a political strategy because of the bad publicity of what happened to the Columbia. In damming the Columbia 14 times on its main line, and Canada was involved in this too because the

Columbia runs through Canada, but its mostly in the United States, that the traditional fishery had almost been completely destroyed. You think about it, this river system with thousands and thousands and thousands of years had fed thousands and thousands and thousands of people and it was a sustainable reciprocal relationship, when you took that away, and you translate that power, energy whatever into electricity, all of a sudden that becomes highly regulated ...you know what I'm saying? There's a power structure in place that actually has jurisdiction and control over that energy. And so, I was critiquing it as an example of sort of a western and colonial capitalist approach to the relationship to land, resources, water, whatever terms you want to use for it. So it was a critique, you know, and the images, you can't see them in these pictures but basically it's a cut through of the river, and on this one are fishermen at the top, and on this one are officials. So the the fishermen had nets and the officials had dams. On this pole the fishermen are holding onto nets that are made out of fish, and on this one the officials are holding onto nets that are made out of dams, and then I tried to tell a little bit of the story of Celilo Falls, the oldest continuously inhabited site in North America, and I think it was in 1957 they dammed, they built the Dalles dam, and in building the Dalles dam at Celilo Falls...so the reason it was continuously inhabited for so long was that it was a really rich fishing site, so Indigenous nations were coming from all over to fish at this site and it was covered in pictographs and petroglyphs. When they built the Dalles dam it flooded Celilo Falls, so it silenced the falls and the Indigenous people there were no longer, you know they scattered and went away, anyway so the Celilo people actually ended up with I think it was like the largest settlement in money, and this is all fairly recent history.

**JJ:** What year are we talking about?

**MN:** The dam was built in 1957, so it wasn't that long ago.

[...]

**JJ:** It must be hard to navigate what you're willing to give up or willing to cede to in and then your practice yourself.

**MN:** It is really tough, because I think I'm speaking a truth, and people don't like to hear it, and I think if I'm not careful about it I will be persecuted for it and I will no longer have a voice in those arenas, so I have to be very very careful about what I'm doing because you know if I don't have a voice or if I am pushed to the periphery, or when people label you as a radical, it diminishes your ability to communicate and speak and address issues because it's like your relevancy and all of that is pushed to the side, so people are less inclined to take seriously what you are trying to say. When you are pushed to the periphery, which is what I have found has happened to Indigenous people all along, we are always being pushed to the periphery of discussions, even the discussions around lands and territories. We are constantly being pushed to the outside.

**JJ:** So it's a fine line you have to navigate to be able to stay.

**MN:** It's a fine line I have to navigate, do I dig my heels in ideologically and say hell no I'm not going to change my work for you, or do I say ok if I change this, if I change that, if I make a nuanced change here can we allow this thing to be? And then on the other hand I think well this response initially is good because it's obviously hitting home. I'm not creating a piece that people would just be like that's lovely, I'm creating a piece that some people will be like I feel uncomfortable, I need to say something, I need to challenge this. I'm like oh no not yet, wait until it's made!

**JJ:** This might be a tough question, and there are a lot of answers, but what would you say is the most pressing environmental concern right now in B.C.?

**MN:** Climate change. I think its accelerating at a pace that people have not anticipated, so we don't really know what those outcomes are, I think we're...in Kingcome, Kingcome was flooded out in 2010. We'd never seen a flood like that in our lives. Basically we wondered can we even live here anymore? I mean we've lived there for thousands of years, and we don't know if we can live there anymore. I'm experiencing this first hand, in a really massive way, it's just because we're out on the land, these things are happening but we don't feel them as much in the cities and the urban centers. And even when they do happen, we're dismissive that they are happening, so I feel like all the drive towards gas and oil is basically almost like a...the running of a cliff basically, that's how I see it, in the context of an Indigenous belief system we're supposed to be mapping out actions in accordance to our ancestors but also our children, and what we're being asked to do in our lands and territories is really just to join in with this capitalist system that has as its ideology individualization, privatization and the accumulation of wealth. Well with those ideals as the forefront for our economic engagements like if we just build our communities on those premises, we're just jumping into that bunch of lemmings who are heading over the cliff. So when we talk about the land, I really feel fundamentally that capitalism is a huge problem. The fact that we all seem to just accept it as a given, this is the way that our society functions and we're not really quite willing to exchange that for a different way of living and what I was finding, that the more I understood our traditional culture and our traditional ways, I was realizing that an alternative exists, but Native peoples voices just keep getting pushed to the periphery. And it's just like with my art practice, they're like what you are saying is making me uncomfortable, we'd prefer you not say those things, you know just make some pretty pictures, so that we can add that to our collection on our wall. And I'm like implicated in this system and that's a tough place to be because the people who support that system are the people who have basically generated enough wealth off the system in order to be able to purchase totem poles and masks and put them in their houses, and even the general public in a sense has appropriated Indigenous iconography as a way to feel a connection to this place, but also to feel in a way a bit of conscious ease on the fact that all of the wealth in this province has been generated off the lands that have basically been stolen from Indigenous peoples and when, this is basically my problem, it seems like I'm too extreme, but the reality is, I studied the McKenna McBride commission, the lands, the process that the government went through in terms of acquiring access to lands and resources in this province was not a fair and equitable, and humane process, and we have not gone back and addressed that. And the current BC Treaty process that they have

in place is a joke that doesn't address those issues either, so there's fundamental ideological premises that if we don't look to shift or change its going to force us all into a position of destitution.

**JJ:** So do you see your art as being your voice in this debate, in this situation?

**MN:** Yeah and I think it's really important to point those things out and talk about them because I feel like I'm in a position of privilege because I come from two cultures, I feel like I wish everyone could have experienced what I experienced growing up on the reserve you know that you could see that there's a different way to live, there's a different way to relate to the land that isn't just about what can I get from this? It's so distanced, you know for me to go home and be home in that place where we've lived for thousands of years is a spiritual experience, you know, to me that land is my friend, that land is my father, my mother, you know, like I don't know how to express that. But I wish that other people could experience that, because if you felt that connection to a place you would never dig a gigantic hole in it and start sucking out what's underneath it, or blow up a mountain.

**JJ:** There seems to be a lack of respect for the land.

**MN:** Yeah! Or even that that thing, those places have a right to be. Our position as kind of, society basically feels as though they have a right to go in and exploit and take what they can, and there's this sense that mankind, humankind is in the driving seat, and I'm like we're not in the driving seat it's a reciprocal relationship, if we don't take care of this being that we are in a relationship with that being is not going to take care of us, when they talk about the great flood and things like that, that's exactly what happens, the land has a way of taking care of itself, and it will be at our expense eventually.  
[...]

**JJ:** Are there any artists, either Indigenous or non, that have been a really big influence on you?

**MN:** Yes, well most currently I would say Banksy. In terms of a non-traditional approach to art making and that his awareness of the system and how it operates is exactly the position that I want to occupy. I want to be perfectly aware of the system so that I'm not just a pawn, or I'm not just a producer of art, I don't just create objects, that I'm dealing with ideas and so I really admire the work that he does, its very challenging to the systems of art [...]. It's so amazing, and that's what I want to do in my work, I don't just want to create pretty pieces, I understand there's an aesthetic expectation because of my background, but I want to connect in a real and fundamental way, and the only way I can truly connect with an audience in a real and fundamental way is to be honest. And to say look, you know, I'm not just selling you a surface engagement with an Indigenous piece I'm asking you to truly meet me and consider these issues.

**JJ:** Well I think that that comes across in your work. Do you see yourself as a voice for your community at large in terms of these issues?

**MN:** Yeah I do. I feel like I'm in a privileged place and I have two choices: I could sell out, which is I could make a lot of pretty works, sell them for money and live a pretty nice padded independent life or I could strengthen and build on all the relationships that I've had all my life with my community and advocate for change because what I've seen and what I've grown up with is wrong. So I have that choice to make and I have to make it ever day [...].

**JJ:** I've never really considered how much you have to navigate in this system.

**MN:** It's horrible because so many people just want you to be a prostitute, seriously [...]. And it's hard because then I see people, and I can't judge it too much because that's their survival, so they just prostitute, prostitute, prostitute themselves, sell the culture, sell the culture, because I feel like its all I have to sell. And I'm like you don't have to be a product of society, in fact you hold the key to the most valuable thing ever offered to this society, and that's an alternative way of living, and being, that acknowledges human relationships and land and how amazing is that, so don't sell yourself short. That's what I'm trying, to lead the way for Indigenous artists to say like don't just...but then I understand too that the system is pretty powerful.

**JJ:** Well I guess when you are working in the public domain and doing these sorts of commissions it can be difficult. I loved your text for the Emily Carr catalogue, you wrote about a weather dance mask. And it is very relevant to what we are talking about and you talked about the environment, and about the eulachon run. These issues are really tangible to you and your community. You can see them pretty bluntly. So what was the story with that, you weren't sure if they were going to come?

**MN:** Where we live we have fish come up the river every year, and we make grease out of it. Which is interesting, it's probably our last truly communal social ritual. We make the grease and then the grease is divided up. And there's a level of leadership around that right no one is doing it for money. Few people would ever experience something like that, but we started up a relationship with the Nuxalk, we used to be at war with the Nuxalk in the last century, and in fact some of my Nuxalk friends their great grandparents killed my great grandparents, so we started up a relationship with them and we agreed to have a real relationship. Not realizing that real relationships are very very hard. They lost their eulachon run about 15 years ago, their eulachon stopped coming up the river system, they just stopped.

**JJ:** Are they further north than you?

**MN:** Yes, they're further north than us, and ours has become sporadic but it still comes. So we are building up these relationships, so we decided we would do a joint project together and invite some of the Nuxalk to Kingcome to the run last year. So a group of them came, it's hard to predict when the run is going to happen, and then we thought it was going to happen, and it wasn't coming, and there was stress and anxiety in the community. They were coming everywhere on the coast but not here, this is really

devastating to us. And then they came, and it turned out that it was the largest run in living memory. And I had gone home to help with the process with the Nuxalk, and I thought I would be home for like 2 weeks maximum, so I had committed to it and went home for what I thought would be 2 weeks and it ended up being a month. But it was really fundamental, and it was important for me to be home for that length of time, there was a spiritual component to that whole event that just blew me away. And I just thought all this does for me is strengthen my resolve around the advocacy that I'm trying to do. And when those eulachon finally came, and were coming up the river, I remembered them from my childhood, but I took it for granted you know, and then to see this procession, to stand in the river and witness this procession you know it was like 2 weeks that these fish, like millions of them coming up the river in a straight line. You could stand in the river and they would hit your gum boots and they would just go around your boots, and the determination, and all it did for me was really bring it home and make it clear for me the power and the strength of the land and the being in that land, and that we're a part of it we are separate from it, we don't own it, we don't have a right to destroy it, or to alter it, we're a part of it, and if we don't take care of it then... what it did for me was strengthen my resolve to fight for the... in our case its eulachons, but everywhere there are these systems that are under threat to industry and development I guess.

[...]

**JJ:** Any final thoughts you would like me to take back?

**MN:** Yeah, what I would want is for all these systems to work together, I'm not working in isolation, I don't just do my thing and it's just a closed story. I'm telling you my story and you have an opportunity to frame that in your own way within your own experiences, and express that within your writing and then to place that within an institution however you want to navigate that. But in a way, what I'm hoping for when I talk to students and stuff like that is that it's another layer of the advocacy, so I want people to understand these pieces and I want dialogue around these pieces and I want engagement with these pieces, and it's not a one way thing where I'm like oh look what I did, it's more like how do you insert yourself into this, how do we talk about this as people, its not just me creating... the artwork is a canvas for discussion, so this too is a part of my practice, and now it includes you.

### Appendix Three

Transcribed interview between Jasmine Inglis (interviewer) and Sonny Assu (interviewee), January 17, 2016, Surrey, British Columbia.

**Jasmine Inglis:** I wanted to ask you a few basic questions about how you got into being a professional artist, and then go a little bit from there about land and the environment. So how did you become interested in this kind of subject matter?

**Sonny Assu:** Well it was a long road to get to where I am today. I think I've always been interested in some form of arts, looking back at my life I was always involved in something artistic. Before I became an artist I wanted to become an actor. That was definitely 20 some odd years ago that was in my head. I remember going through high school heavily involved in acting and theater and music, and then art was always there in the background as well. It's funny because I'll run into people I went to high school with, this is probably a few years ago now, and they didn't know I was an artist and assumed I was an actor. So yeah I was always involved in something cultural, and so then when I decided to go to school for art, I was debating between art school and acting school, and I was applying in January, so that was halfway through the semester so by default I went to the art school because the drama school couldn't take me. And that's how that started, and so by that point I had no idea what I wanted to do with it, I just wanted to go to school because I was tired of working minimum wage jobs and not really doing anything with my life. So I started to go to college out here in Surrey and then I started getting more and more exposed to ways of art making, and in my last year before I switched over to the Emily Carr School of Art and Design I was working...and sort of drawing Northwest Coast stuff, because I had never really explored that stuff before, personally or through my art, and as I was drawing in the studio I was just making an image for silkscreen prints and my instructor just sat down beside me and said you can't do that, and I'm like well oh, why? And he said well that's First Nations art and its sacred and protected, you have to be First Nations to do this, and I said well I am. I mean you look at me and you would never assume, and he said oh you are? Yeah, I am totally. I whipped out my status card and everything, I had to go that route, and then he got more comfortable and said you have to explore this. So at first he went from you can't do that, to you have to go with this. And this was, probably about 20 years ago now, and at that point you know this kind of art was something, not new but it was exciting it was up and coming, and that's what he said that this was going to be something major and important. This is something that you should definitely explore, and from that I just started taking little bits in more and more, and then I transferred over to Emily Carr and started really focussing my practice on First Nations Kwakwaka'wakw practice, because I started working with Brenda Crabtree who was the first Nations coordinator at Emily Carr, and she was teaching you know basic weaving and drum making and this kind of traditional based things and that's how that kind of started.

**Jl:** So at that time you were doing really traditional sort of NWC work?

**SA:** A little bit, it was actually a combination of heavily Western influenced ways of making, painting and figurative work, with more of a curiosity towards the First Nations stuff in the background. And I think probably by the time I started getting into my second year at Emily Carr, is when I started to really change my focus and get really involved into the First Nations way of things.

**JJ:** Was there any First Nations artists that really inspired you at that time?

**SA:** Lawrence Paul was definitely an inspiration to my work at that time, Brian Jungen, he was just starting to blow up at that point. Those two guys, I was working a lot with Dana Claxton, she was one of my instructors at Emily Carr, in one of the art history programs I had to take so that was really interesting. Brenda Crabtree is an artist herself so I was getting influenced by her, and you know some of the other people like Rebecca Belmore, seeing what she was doing, this was the early stages of her career, some of her earlier work, started to really inform my way of thinking both politically and creatively.

**JJ:** Were you always aware of environmental and land rights issues to do with First Nations people in B.C., was that something you knew since you were a child?

**SA:** No that didn't really come into my life until I was in my early 20's. My personal story goes that I didn't find out I was First Nations or Kwakwaka'wakw until I was about 8 years old. And that's just a random happenstance in school where I was learning about the Kwakwaka'wakw in the past tense in grade 3, and so the teacher was going off about these people: where they used to live, what they used to eat, what they used to make, and then I brought that home and told my mom about these cool people who ate the same food that we eat, who make the same kind of artwork that my step father at the time was making and where they lived was where we spent our summers. And she's like well that's who you are, in a nutshell. So looking back at my past work, I did take that point in my life and I used that to inform my work at the time, and that's how I started coming up with the series of work I was doing which was exploring the use of superheroes in comic books and cartoons and melding that with NWC iconography, and I think it was at that time as well that I started to think about my work and the bigger picture of being out there in the world, out there outside of school, and then being kind of influenced by the politics of the day, that's when I really started to think about my work and centering it around political and environmental issues.

**JJ:** So do you see your cultural heritage and your work as very much one together?

**SA:** Now yeah, for sure. I think that definitely. There are elements of my culture and the exploration of it, you know taking what I had learned through going through school, through reading books, and then bringing that information back to my community and saying is this accurate, is this right, am I allowed to do this.

**JJ:** Do you see yourself as a voice for your community in any way? Because you have this presence in the art world and this certain power because you are a well-known artist.

**SA:** I guess so; I'd rather let them say that than me.

**JJ:** Is that something that you think about when you're working?

**SA:** Yeah I think that I used to think about that a lot more, I used to think about being a voice. I definitely do recognize that I do have a voice, and I think a lot of my work picks up on that and uses it, because there's, take a look at my most recent works especially in the past 5 to 10 years, there's definitely a bigger political twist to it. Whereas if you take a look at my work previous to that there was always a political twist to it, and when I say political I'm thinking about environmental as well, there was always that twist to that but I think by that point I was more focussed on the humour of it. Like *Coke Salish* or the *Breakfast Series* or the *Challenging Tradition Series*. I was always trying to use humour as a tool to bring people into the conversations, and I think that that is an important point about my work, there's always this element of humour there that brought people into it. So if you look at the cereal boxes for example, the *Breakfast Series*, there was this strong element of humour behind it, and I remember making that work and thinking about it in terms of making me laugh at first. And then using that humour as a way of talking about these issues around land the environment the salmon and cultural identity, and using that humour as a tool to bring people in. You know because I am talking about these things that have a very heavy construct and a heavy subtext to them, and I think it's important that people feel welcomed into that conversation, instead of feeling like they are being berated into a situation. You got to understand what we're talking about as Indigenous peoples, which they do, but I think if I sugar coat it a little bit and bring them into that they feel more comfortable with it.

**JJ:** So you see humour as a way of opening the dialogue in a more friendly, approachable way?

**SA:** Yeah, because I still want to slap them in the face! Like hey this is funny, but I want them to understand that there is something there. And I think that that is probably most seen with the *Breakfast Series* and to an extent *Coke Salish*, because there are always these elements of me using humour as a construct. And even if you take a look at 1884 – 1951, which is my copper cups installation that was done as something funny at first. The whole idea of making a copper Starbucks cup was funny, but then I was able to think about it in a broader context, in a broader conceptual way, with a broader impact, and so that's why I was able to influence it with elements of traditional culture and colonialism, and I guess to an extent environmental in terms of the actual culture of disposable stuff from throwing a cup away. There are little subtexts here and there which is what I like about the work that I do, there are always little things in there that some people will pick up on more than others, and they might even pick up something new, and that's exciting.

**JJ:** You said you think your work has become more political in the past 5 years. Do you think that's in relation to what's going on around you in the world: in B.C., in Canada and internationally? So issues like the pipeline for example.

**SA:** Yeah, I haven't really tackled that kind of stuff, I've become more politically and environmentally aware in the past 5 years or so and I think that even injecting that into my work has definitely been a product of the environment that I'm living in. [...] I take a look at back when the Harper government was first elected in and I was very politically aware of what was going on, and challenging friends and people to rise up above that, because it was a very bad situation that did arise from that, that we just didn't think about at that point, you know it will be over we'll vote him out in 4 years, but no, it happened that we ended up voting him back in and he ruined a lot of things.

**JJ:** Can I read you a quote from 2013, from an article called "Form With Function" that was in the *Alternatives Journal*, and you said that "Environmental art can be used as a tool to inform the viewer about preservation and protection, by stressing the importance of limited natural resource extraction, clean water and preservation of environment, I hope to inspire all Canadians to stand up for what we used to protect and champion." And I think you were talking in relation to your work *There is Hope if We Rise*, so do you see this as the goal of your work in any way?

**SA:** I think in some of my pieces. You know definitely *There is Hope if we Rise*, I would definitely see that as one of those comments and conversations that I am definitely trying to create with that piece. I think in terms of my work in general, tackling issues around the environment and water, air, all that kind of stuff, it floats in and out of the pieces and the conversations, but definitely through my work as a whole I want to challenge people to think outside that box of how we are treating ourselves in relation to one another and how we are treating our environment and I think *There is Hope if We Rise* is to challenge people to stand up and that we can't just sit on our hands anymore and it'll rectify itself. I think a lot of people think it took us 10 years to vote out Harper, and we finally got him out, now we've got Justin Trudeau in there and he's going to do things that are better, well is he really? We have to hold these people up and we have to hold them accountable to make sure they are following through with their promises. And if they are not, what are we going to do? Are we going to step up and have demonstrations, are we going to step up and have protests, are we going to allow ourselves to possibly get arrested for what we are believing in and what we used to champion. You know I think there's this assumption around the world that Canada is this very tolerant and environmentally conscious place, but over the past 10 years with the Harper government that's all been destroyed, and you know as soon as we hit the reset button this past October with the new liberal government coming in, I don't know if this is the core or not but it almost seems that with their history, how Canada has been voting and how Canada has been reacting to these types of things is that as soon as we hit that reset button we wash our hands of it all, and say its going to get fixed now, he's got 4 years ahead of him to fix things and we'll just let him do it, but you know that's not going to be the case, we have to stand up and say no to pipelines, say no to the tar sands and to clear cut logging and environmental disasters and the gutting of various acts to protect the environment, and I think we have, I think some Canadians have, but I think we need to do more.

**JJ:** So do you see your art as your way of doing something?

**SA:** Yeah I think so, on various levels, I think taking a look at environmental messages in my work it sort of comes and goes, bits and pieces here and there. I haven't really done any major pieces that definitely explore that, you know I take a look at pieces that Marianne has done and pieces Lawrence has done and they have definitely taken it upon themselves to tap that as a succinct message within those pieces, and if anything that could be an inspiration to me to step up and maybe think about that more often, and think about how I could utilize that more to definitely embrace that conversation, because I think what I talk about when I'm thinking about change and challenge people to stand up and rise up has more to do with colonial effects and colonization and perceptions of who we are as Canadians. But that does have little fingers in those pies of the environment as well.

**JJ:** So you see Canadian history as a big part of your practice.

**SA:** Yeah, for sure. I call it the parallel history or the parallel narrative. I refer to it as the hidden history quite a lot, because that's what I'm doing with my work is I'm bringing that hidden history to the forefront so people understand where my work is coming from and where we are coming from as Indigenous peoples across this country, so we can talk about the things that are important to us. Standing up for our rights, standing up for the environment, because if we are able to put that into a broader context it becomes more important, and I think a lot of those conversations that I talk about in terms of hidden history, not many Canadians know the true history of this place, and that will definitely have consequences into how we think about this place in terms of the environment as well.

**JJ:** So the work *There is Hope if we Rise* was that made...it was used in the Idle No More movement right? The individual images? So when you made that work was that the purpose of it?

**SA:** Yeah, so it was made in response to the Idle No More movement.

**JJ:** And is it one piece, or its individual pieces?

**SA:** They're all individual. So every piece was a call to action for people who are viewing it and they were printed sort of like larger poster size to be used at demonstrations, and they were printed as a smaller fine art size for framing.

**JJ:** This might be a difficult question, but what do you see as the most pressing environmental issue in B.C. today?

**SA:** That's tough because there are so many. Yeah that is tough. The Site C Dam has been weighing on people heavily quite a bit. That's a dam they're going to be building in the interior I think it is. So the provincial government wants to build this new dam to provide power to the people. I've just been reading up on it and we don't really need the power. So they're building this project which is going to cost up to 10 billion dollars, the unfortunate thing about that is that its flooding, its damming a river, and its flooding a

region. So, this is a region that's being used by farmers, Indigenous peoples for centuries, but the biggest thing is that the farmland is going to get washed underwater for the sake of making power that we don't need [...]. I think that one dam in terms of the Site C because it's a mega dam and it's environmentally disastrous because it's going to affect the fish, the wildlife but then also the ability to grow our own food. We're looking at food insecurity around the whole world; you know the majority of our food we bring into Canada, in terms of our produce it's mostly from the U.S. But we have the ability to grow our own food here, you know sure we aren't going to get a lot of the fancier things but we're still going to be able to make food that we can eat and sustain ourselves, even in terms of producing cattle and livestock and those kinds of things that land is going to be completely wiped out. Then you know there are the various pipelines that are being considered, that are going across and you know one of the things that I constantly worry about is tanker traffic going up and down the coast. The coast is very sensitive and so you know if any of those tankers crack and spill multiple millions of litres of crude oil into the water that's a complete disaster for the local ecosystems, depending on where if this were to happen, it doesn't matter where it happens actually it would just be disastrous, just depending on where the population is.

**JJ:** And it seems like every time I see someone from Enbridge talking they are never saying it won't happen, its like it seems they know that it will happen and then we'll deal with that when it happens, so its kind of an insane thing to even propose.

**SA:** I wouldn't even know why they would want to do something like that through this territory just because its so sensitive and hard to navigate. These massive ships going through these little tiny channels, some of these channels could be no wider than a ship itself, so can you imagine if the ship were to crack a leak then in that place. Complete disaster. And then the currents will carry it all up and down the coast. It would be devastating for a lot of things.

**JJ:** Well I think we have covered most of what I wanted to get. If you could just tell me briefly what you are working on these days?

**SA:** That's tough! Just getting used to getting back to working in B.C. I'm working on this series called *Interventions on the Imaginary*, which I started last year, where I'm taking scanned images of Emily Carr paintings and other kind of Group of Seven romanticized landscapes of Canada and I'm inserting 3D NWC forms, but they're all abstracted images, so I take the shapes of the ovoid and the U shapes and the S shapes and I combine them in my own little way just to make these 3D shapes which act as tags on the landscape, to counter this narrative that Canada was a vast uninhabited landscape that was ripe for the picking for the early colonialists. I was inspired by Marcia Crosby's essay "Construction of the Imaginary Indian," where she was talking about how Emily Carr was going up and down the coast and documenting these villages and these peoples, but it was from a very colonial viewpoint. Then after reading the essay and looking at these paintings, I kind of saw that the Emily Carr paintings have been interpreted to be the documentation of the perceived ruins of a civilization. Whether or not she was doing that is kind of up for debate, but if you take a look at the work now through that kind of

romantic lens, there's this kind of salvage or documentation of a long gone culture, but you know I am testament to the fact that we are still here, my daughter is testament to that, my whole family is testament to that. So I am inserting these shapes on the colonial landscape to reclaim it, and then I am using humour again probably a little bit more heavily than in the past decade, through the titling of these works. So there's one that I have done that's an Emily Carr painting of the Campbell River Indian cemetery, and I call that one *What a Great Place for a Wal-Mart*, and I want to talk about how through that, with titling specifically, we shouldn't be selling out our land and our resources to build this kind of bubble economy, we need to be conscious of where and what we are building to satisfy the needs of our peoples as Indigenous peoples, and I'm also using terminology from internet and youth culture to bring youth into these conversations to help them understand this colonial space. So there's one painting of an Emily Carr painting of a Haida pole on Haida Gwaii, and it's called, *It was a long time Ago that there were ppl here right?* I've done 15 images in the series so far; I'm going to be doing more. Its been a completely fun series to do, what I like about it is its fairly immediate because I'm doing it all on the computer. So I don't have to wait for paint to dry or any of that, I can make as many mistakes as I need to and it's completely fun and fine.

**JJ:** Then you print the images?

**SA:** Yeah, so it was first done as a completely digital series, living on the computer. The work was featured in Canadian Art last fall I think it was, and they gave me the opportunity to produce the series for their digital publication because I was featured in their magazine that fall, fall 2014 I think, so they did a digital supplement and the article was in that as well and they give the featured artist the opportunity to do a digital feature, and so I kind of constructed the first 12 of these images and made them to look like an Instagram feed, like a de-colonial gram, people click on them and they blow up and all that kind of stuff, but what came out of that series, as sort of a subseries, was how a lot of these shapes look like they're floating, like they are UFO's, so I want to talk about kind of like an otherworldly encounter, and they was inspired by petroglyphs that you can find around Quadra. When I look at some of these I think they look like aliens, so I speculated that maybe at some point in our past my ancestors were visited by aliens, and so the first intervention that tackled that was called *Home Coming*, with these kind of 3 green ovoid shapes coming down from the sky, it was a Paul Kane painting. It was a scene of these First Nations people fishing, I think its in Wala Wala Washington actually, and you can kind of see the one guy on a rock with a dip net and a spear and just by chance the way that he's looking up at the sky it looks like he's looking up at some UFO's and there's two people on a canoe in the foreground and it looks like they are actually looking at the viewer, breaking the fourth wall, and they're like do you see this?...

## Illustrations



**Figure Intro.1** Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Scorched Earth, Clear-cut Logging on Native Sovereign Land. Shaman Coming to Fix*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, collection of the National Gallery of Canada.



**Figure Intro.2** Marianne Nicolson, *Foolmakers in the Setting Sun*, 2014, carved glass and moving light installation, collection of the artist.



**Figure Intro.3** Sonny Assu, *There is Hope if We Rise*, 2013, posters, collection of the Burnaby Art Gallery.



**Figure 1.1** Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *The Universe is so Big, the Whiteman Keeps Me on My Reservation*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, collection of the Canadian Museum of History.



**Figure 1.2** Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Outstanding Business, Reservation Cut-Off Lands*, 1984, acrylic on canvas, private collection.



**Figure 1.3** Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Haida Hot Dog*, 1984, acrylic on canvas, collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery.



**Figure 1.4** Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in Sky*, 1990, acrylic on canvas, collection of the National Gallery of Canada.



**Figure 1.5** Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *An Indian Act, Shooting the Indian Act*, 1997-2003, performance piece, collection of the National Gallery of Canada.



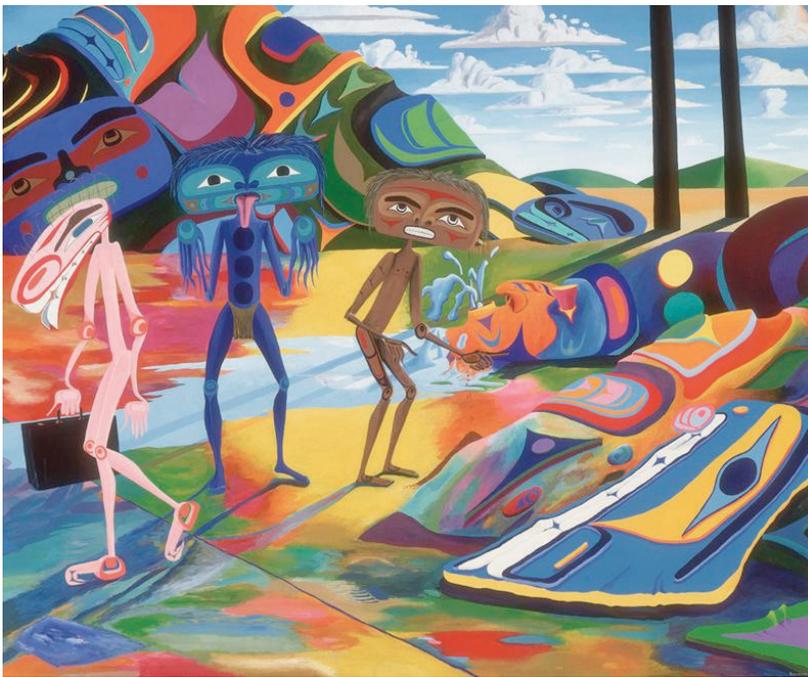
**Figure 1.6** Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Indian World My Home and Native Land*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, Macaulay & Co. Fine Art.



**Figure 1.7** Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Fucking Creeps They're Environmental Terrorists*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, Macaulay & Co. Fine Art.



**Figure 1.8** Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Clear Cut to the Last Tree*, 1993, acrylic on canvas, collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery.



**Figure 1.9** Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *The Impending Nisga'a Deal. Last Stand. Chump Change*, 1996, acrylic on canvas, collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery.



**Figure 2.1** Marianne Nicolson, *Cliff Painting*, 1998, rock painting in Kingcome Inlet, British Columbia.



**Figure 2.2** Marianne Nicolson, *A Precarious State*, 2013, carved and lit site-specific glass installation, Canadian Embassy, Amman, Jordan.



**Figure 2.3** Marianne Nicolson, *Even though I am the Last One. I Still Count*, 2000, installation combining photography, painting and masks, collection of the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia.



**Figure 2.4** Marianne Nicolson, *The Rivers Monument*, 2015, lit glass and cedar installation at the Vancouver International Airport.



**Figure 3.1** Sonny Assu, *1884/1951*, 2009, copper and Hudson's Bay Point blanket installation.



**Figure 3.2** Sonny Assu, *Breakfast Series*, 2006, 5 boxes made of digitally printed photographic paper over foam-core, collection of the National Gallery of Canada.



**Figure 3.3** Sonny Assu, *Ellipsis*, 2012, 137 copper LP's mounted on a wall.



**Figure 3.4** Sonny Assu, *Coke Salish*, 2006, duratrans and light box mounted on a wall.



**Figure 3.5** Sonny Assu, *#shamelessselfie*, 2013, acrylic on Elk-hide drum.



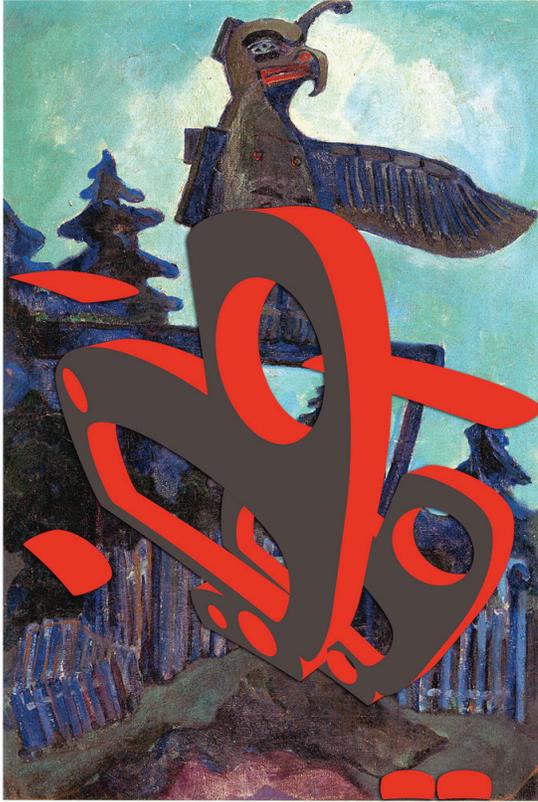
**Figure 3.6** Sonny Assu, *Do You Want to See My Status Card? #selfie*, 2013, acrylic on Elk-hide drum.



**Figure 3.7** Sonny Assu, *Longing Series*, 2011, found cedar and brass.



**Figure 3.8** Sonny Assu, *It Was, Like, A Super Long Time Ago That Ppl Were Here, Right?*, part of the *Interventions on the Imaginary Series*, 2014, digital intervention on an Emily Carr painting, collection of the artist.



**Figure 3.9** Sonny Assu, *What a Great Spot for a Wal-Mart*, part of the *Interventions on the Imaginary Series*, 2015, digital intervention on an Emily Carr painting, collection of the artist.

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