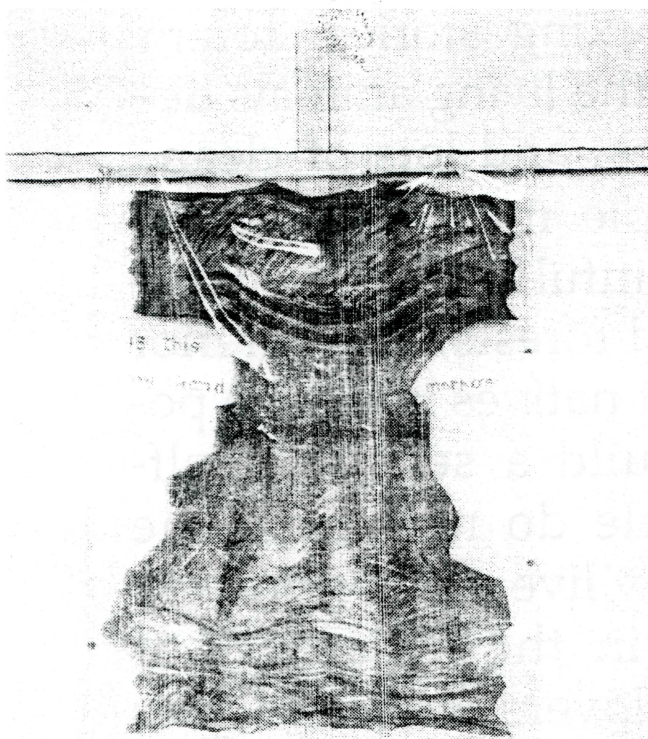


ARTS

THE GEORGIA STRAIGHT 19 JUNE 16-23, 1989



Joane Cardinal Schubert's Six War Shirts (detail): "I don't do Native art. I do art." Trevor Mills photo.

Show of Native Art Not Limited by Traditional Images

By Laura Busheikin

In the early 1970s, a gun was fired at a performance of traditional Native dance and song in the Vancouver Art Gallery. A member of the dance troupe, pretending to be a member of the public, interrupted the show by standing up and accusing the performers of selling out to the white man—they were killing what remained of traditional Native culture by presenting it as spectacle outside Native communities. Then, he pulled a theatrical prop gun and dramatically shot the dance leader.

Beyond History is the legacy of that performance. An exhibition by 10 contemporary artists of Native descent now showing at VAG, Beyond History reflects a new political awareness in Native art today, provoked by the statement the dance troupe made.

Until about the time of that gun shot, Native art in Canada has simply been "discovered" and appropriated by the mainstream art establishment. Native artists worked with traditional imagery and in traditional mediums—they expressed tribal culture. Their work didn't make direct social or political comment, and as artists their status was very low.

Native communities in the '60s were proud of the success of their art, and saw it as a positive expression of their identity. But there were also genuine fears about selling out, and a growing realization of the limitations of working in traditional modes.

As a result, a new kind of Native artist emerged: an art-school educated, sophisticated artist who shifted away from tribal expression to a consciously individual and political point of view.

The artists in Beyond History use their works to confront stereotypes of Native art, to insist that mainstream art institutions not display Native artwork simply as curiosity pieces. These artists see their art as rebellion: it expresses anger, and they want it to effect change.

"This is changing people's understanding of Native people," says Mike MacDonald, whose work is part of the exhibit. "We don't just make masks, bowls, silkscreen

prints—we use 20th century media to say the things we have to say.

"There are a number of things we're asking people to give attention to: environmental issues, exclusion of Native people from the Canadian constitution, alcohol and substance abuse, and Native spirituality."

With *Seven Sisters*, MacDonald, the only British Columbian in the show, illustrates how Native spirituality and environmental concerns can be expressed with contemporary media. Seven television show multiple images of the Seven Sisters mountain range, with a soundtrack of traditional Native healing songs. Most of the images are beautiful, but others show the devastation of clear-cutting which threatens the whole area.

Both MacDonald and fellow artist Joane Cardinal-Schubert reject the "Native artist" label. "We describe ourselves as Canadian artists of Native ancestry," MacDonald says.

"It's not that I'm ashamed of being Native," says Cardinal-Schubert, "but we're the only people that have an adjective in front of their name, in every profession. I don't do Native art. I do art. If it's not art, it doesn't belong in the gallery."

Cardinal-Schubert, who uses everything from skulls to plastic wrapping in her assemblages, feels all art should be judged by the same basic aesthetic rules, not pigeonholed according to the artist's cultural background.

The rejection of the term "Native art" doesn't mean that art by Native people will be indistinguishable from art by artists from other cultural backgrounds.

"Of course our work will talk about where we come from, who we are, our history, and our backgrounds," Cardinal-Schubert says. "There is a common denominator in that we're using our backgrounds in our work."

Asked if the show chronicles a new movement in Native art, Cardinal-Schubert's reply is tart: "There's a new movement in that curators are just discovering us. We're always being discovered. Columbus discovered us and now the curators are discovering us." ■