

Indian art bares both meanings of spirit world

By ELIZABETH GODLEY

IN BEYOND HISTORY, the current show at the Vancouver Art Gallery, most of the native Indian artists represented bare their wounds and scream their fury at a system they feel has ignored and reviled them.

Not that there aren't moments of humor — but be prepared for scorching irony and jokes drenched in bile.

Vancouver has seen very little of this type of native art, created with non-traditional media and techniques and influenced by modern and post-modern artists. There are no totem poles or carved cedar bows in this show, curated by Karen Duffek of the UBC Museum of Anthropology, and Tom Hill of the Woodland Indian Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ont.

Ron Nagonosh uses assemblage in his lament for Canada's indigenous people. In Lubicon, an installation, liquor bottles spell out the title. Liquid flows from bottle to bottle until it pours into a figure in traditional beaded clothing laid out on a hospital gurney.

(The Lubicons have, for 49 years, campaigned to establish a reserve around the land they hunt and fish on in Alberta's Peace River district. Their fight came to national attention during the Calgary Olympics, when Lubicon members demanded a boycott of The Spirit Sings, an exhibition of native artifacts.)

Nagonosh's installation portrays a culture force-fed poison and murdered by alcohol. He brings home the destructive effect of liquor on individuals, especially women, with the chilling tape of sobs and laughter that accompanies the piece.

Joane Cardinal-Schubert, in an installation titled Preservation of a Species: Deep Freeze, uses wadded newspaper, masking tape, plastic wrap, wood and black paint to evoke ancient burial rituals and sterile

schoolrooms, churches and offices.

Cardinal-Schubert's work is a catalogue of the sins against her people, committed by well-meaning bureaucrats and missionaries who shredded a people's self-esteem and sense of belonging by banning potlaches and sun-dances, imposing

BEYOND HISTORY

Non-traditional art by native Indians
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their own notions of right and wrong.

The Indians' two worlds, reserve and city, is Edward Poitras' theme. He uses photographs to document a land installation he created last year for his one-man show at Saskatoon's Mendel Gallery. Titled Offensive/Defensive, the piece records Poitras' exchange of a strip of prairie grass from a reserve, with a strip of the gallery's manicured lawn.

As Duffek explains in her informative catalogue essay, the transplanted prairie grass, because it was being watered, gradually greened to blend in with the gallery lawn. But the strip of lawn that was moved to the reserve withered and died.

In his tongue-in-cheek installation, Bob Boyer plants a plastic teepee, filled with tacky Indiana — a souvenir tomahawk stamped Made In Canada, a man's shirt patterned with a fake Navajo design, a packet of Red Man tobacco — in front of a TV-set totem pole emblazoned with ads for Dodge Dakota Sports and Jeep Comanches, and flanks the lot with a pair of painted blankets.

The message is clear: Indian words and images sell goods to the same North Americans who denigrate flesh-and-blood Dakotas and Comanches. This is the cigar-store Indian syndrome, 1980s style.

After viewing so many powerful works of art — and there's not enough space to do more than mention Carl Beam's photo-based murals, Domingo Cisneros' bone and wood constructions, Robert Houle's highway-sign-like reminders of lost tribes, Pierre Sioui's searing collages, Jane Ash Poitras' haunting paintings — it's a relief to sit down to watch Mike MacDonald's video, Seven Sisters.

On seven TV screens, MacDonald offers images of the wildlife and flowers of the Skeena Valley and the Seven Sisters mountains. Accompanied by native Indian singing, the video reminds you there is the good in the world, to be cherished and protected.