

'Beyond History' is disturbing and powerful show by Indian artists

By Regina Hackett
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VANCOUVER, B.C. — An exhibit delayed several years by staff changes is finally opening today at the Vancouver Art Gallery, whether the public is ready or not.

Titled "Beyond History" and organized by Tom Hill and Karen Duffek, it features 10 Canadian artists of Indian ancestry. Since they think of history as a loaded issue, these artists claim the right to be beyond it and to shape the expression of traditional native considerations (spiritual, geographic, political) through their own freewheeling sensibilities.

Although they don't presume to speak for "their people," they are determined to employ whatever means necessary to make art that is dangerous to the established order.

Applause isn't what they are after, even though it's likely to be what they get. They want to change minds, confront, amaze and comfort.

The Vancouver Art Gallery has never hosted an exhibit like this one, not even in the anything-goes "happening" era two decades ago. A number of the installations weren't finished when I saw them Monday. Even so, I can't think of a group show I've enjoyed more, particularly as it contrasts to today's money-mad art scene.

Here is art that hasn't — yet — been reduced to commodity.

Reasons abound. A good number of these artists are fond of temporary and clearly uncollectible installations.

Making a huge sand painting in front of the museum, partly inspired by a medicine wheel and partly by the crater caused by the 1945 nuclear test explosion in New Mexico, Robert Houle shrugged when asked what would happen to it in the rain.

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Beyond History, featuring the works of 10 Canadian Indian artists, opens today at the Vancouver Art Gallery, 750 Hornby St., Vancouver, B.C., and continues through July 17.

"It will be ruined," he said, smiling sweetly.

Not only is much of this work temporary, it's also aggressive, even shocking in content and unglamorized, deliberately crude in technique.

With the possible exception of Pierre Sioui, whose deeply poetical and disturbing assemblages bespeak of an entirely private sensibility, the artists in this show take stands on large, public events. Because they are genuine artists, art is glad to be their vehicle.

Ron Noganosh makes a standing billboard out of part of the Canadian flag. At least 10 feet tall and painted red and white, it shows the familiar red maple leaf design reduced to one spiky frond at the bottom.

For Noganosh, the board is a base for a waterfall, and he helpfully supplied a video of splashing water effects, laughter and crying to further locate the viewer.

Water flows through whiskey bottles perched on seven descending ledges into a tube in the open mouth of a skull and back again.

The cheap, plastic skull is lovingly laid out on a rough-planked, hand-hewn funeral pyre, with a traditional dance costume of Noganosh's Eastern woodland tribe laid out before it. Blue, white and red flowers are beaded into the pants and shirt, a virtuoso display of craft not done by Noganosh but bought by him. The suit's

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display as his own work marks him as a mainstream artist, cognizant of the culture of appropriation that started with Picasso.

Noganosh thinks of the waterfall, titled "Lubicon," as a metaphor for the white way of negotiation: get Indians drunk and they'll sign their land away.

Houle has a starker, less ribald touch. One of his series, titled "Lost Tribes," is laid out on the wall like open pages of a long, narrow book. Each painting is striped on one side with the yellow/black lines found on cautionary signage. On the other side is the name of an extinct tribe.

His large installation, "Zero Hour," places the viewer in a room riddled with a laser light, suspended between destructive space technology and Native American lyricism.

Subtlety is not this show's strong suit, but subtlety seems dainty and fainthearted in the face of this power.

Joane Cardinal-Schubert was outraged by museum control over native heritage when she visited Canada's Museum of Civilization in Ottawa several years ago. There she saw war shirts from the 1880s encased in plastic, tagged and filed in drawers, all that strength and beauty stored away from its

people. Her vigorously painted, cutout shirts are a rejoinder, sealed roughly in plastic, life-sized and ornamented with mementos from her own family life. Her art is a process of claiming her own culture back from the museums.

Domingo Cisneros wraps sticks and bones, making new creatures with a squat and terrible grace. Made entirely of natural materials, they look devastated and deformed by suffering.

Mike MacDonald gives a mountain range of TV sets, seven greater or lesser-sized boxes to evoke the ragged Seven Sisters mountain range. Clear-cutters want to raze the area, says MacDonald, and why do they get to, particularly when the Japanese want to pay \$50 a pound for pine mushrooms and nobody's paying that for timber.

Edward Poitras creates a Space-Age, dreamy landing strip for horse skulls. Jane Ash Poitras paints collages of plague-year torments. These are fierce, big-hearted paintings full of asides, patches of blue, writing, lost language syllabics and figures.

Carl Beam is the only Canadian Indian artist whose work has been collected by the National Gallery of Canada, and his only in the last several years. He's a formidable painter, cool as Ash Poitras is hot, and his massive,

pale, photo-linen paintings seem set in a remote, cerebral kind of dream time. In "New Fish," a nuclear sub rises, the ocean breaking on its back, just as the whale is rising in the parallel scene above it.

Beam pretends to calibrate the water's depths by marking off inches, smears the scene in white toner and scribbles a small "Moby-Displacement Theorem Koan" at the bottom, double talk for loss and destruction.

Bob Boyer paints on quilts and tears up Canada's national anthem with a chain saw. His heavily patterned paintings never falter into the merely decorative.

Sioui's small assemblage, "Olga's Baby," faces his own baby picture with a reproduction of Picasso's most famous painting of his first wife, Olga. Both the baby and the woman bear the same wistful expressions, and they are linked by something more ominous: a smear of blood at the baby's temple, foreshadowing Olga's suicide and toying with the possibility of his own.

Hill, leading a group of docents through the show Monday afternoon, allowed that Sioui's work might be a bit difficult to present to viewers.

To the museum's credit, the same could be said for the entire show.