

The art and life of a 'Vidiot'

By SYS RICHARDS

In the early 1900s, pioneer photographer Edward Curtis chronicled the classical Northwest Coast Indian culture, believing it to be near its death throes. In 1986, Mike Macdonald, armed with the media tools of the technological age, the video, is making a visual documentation of that culture, very much alive.

Macdonald is involved in the documentation process of the Gitksan Wet'suwet'en Tribal Council commissioned evidence. He has been in Hazelton since April, 1985, video-taping the testimony of those Elders who may find it too difficult to physically attend court hearings.

Macdonald is an artist and a visual recorder. He is also a humanitarian, deeply steeped in native political and social consciousness. He is struggling with the problems of how to make us better at living in the world. "The real crime," he says, "is not the post contact native treatment, but that the people who came denied themselves the culture."

Macdonald's art-documentation may best be exemplified in his "Electronic Totem," a 55-minute video installation of native people, with an emphasis on the Tahltans. Across a series of seven vertically stacked video screens flow multiple

scenes of various aspects of native culture and environment. At one given time, one may be viewing images of masks, a singer, dancers dancing to the singing, carvings, and fishing. On smaller, outpost screens are eagles, or scenes from the air.

The images are related. Often they repeat themselves, solidifying the references. The scenes flow smoothly. Nothing jags our consciousness. Accompanying is a sound track which includes Jackson Brown, John Lennon, Buffy St. Marie and Indian music.

In calling his installation, "Electronic Totem", Macdonald is making immediate

connections to the idea of totem images, the visible, tangible emblems after which a tribe may be named, and sometimes ancestrally related.

Totems have guardian properties. Macdonald may be making an important metaphor. His images are shot on location and record, within the realms of his discrimination, what he sees.

Being but moments of a real life activity, they are symbols of that activity or event. They guard a reality of the heritage and life style of native people. They are emblems dispelling myths and ignorance. When viewed at Video Inn in Vancouver,

and Newcombe Auditorium in Victoria in 1984, they were called education ("I didn't know the people lived like that") and hailed as having a relaxing, healing effect.

Documented by the sophisticated communica-

tion tools of high technology, they make connections between contemporary life and age-old traditions. The visual and oral aspects of video reflect the visual and oral traditions of native people.

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Mike MacDonald (left) at work with assistant Fred Mowatt

By its very nature such documentation is a matter of the control and imagination of the artist behind the video camera. How deeply he delves into the cultural structure, how he composes and organizes the whole, how he lights and positions his subject, and what details he uses or eliminates, are his choice.

"I'm here to bear witness. I take pictures of what happens and try to show the truth." He looks for the essence of what someone says, listening to the words, reading the body language.

Behind the camera, he likes to be facially animated, to achieve eye contact with his subject. He feels he has a responsibility to make people look as good as he can. "You don't take pictures of people picking their nose."

One can question then, with such control to juxtapose and manipulate impact, what is the truth? What reality does he really capture?

The beauty of "Electronic Totem" is that many realities are presented simultaneously, multiplying our impressions. Through a diversity of interpretations, our awareness is increased.

In the autumn, Macdonald will be showing his new "Electronic Totem" reflecting local native culture at the Northwest National Exhibition Centre, before

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heading it down to the Vancouver Art Gallery. The place should be packed.

Macdonald first came to the Hazeltons in 1983, accompanying science fiction writer Judy Merrill, who read at K'san. He loves the hospitality and friendliness of the north where "everybody says hello and smiles."

He is now here part time, occupying both a studio at N.A.T.A.P. and a studio in Vancouver. He has made his skills available to the community. Two of his students include Fred Mowatt and John Olson. Macdonald may be seen video taping or photographing community events, feasts, conventions, and other assorted functions.

A recent acquisition of a good camera has resulted in some quite marvellous photographs. The sensitivity and integrity of his portraits of the Elders reflect his deep respect. His coloured collages of photographs of local totem poles are a rhythmic pattern of images in various perspective which glow with inner mysteries.

Macdonald grew up in Nova Scotia. He has Mic Mac connections from his father. His mother is from Ingonish, a daughter of ancestors who escaped across the winter ice from the sport hunters of Newfoundland.

As a youth, he wanted to be a writer, and he still pursues his ambition with occasional stories and articles to various publications. But he has been influenced by Marshall McLuhan and modern media and has found a more effective communication means in the visual and oral aspects of video.

Macdonald moved to Toronto at age 21 and worked as a taxi driver and a social worker. With government funding, he initiated a rural drug-out farm, the Toronto Free Youth Clinic, and Red, White and Black, a referral service for draft dodgers. He became involved with a radio show where he mingled interviews dealing with drug abuse and related music.

After 10 years, he decided to pursue academic media studies. But on a trip to Vancouver, he met a disc jockey friend who needed a camera man and he was on another path. He worked with a community access video studio which dealt with environmental and native issues. Here, he introduced a large scope and variety of Indian music. Macdonald is basically self-taught, tuned by his experience.

A many faceted man, of diverse interests and commitments, Macdonald seized

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ed the moments of opportunity to enrich his experience and awareness and to advocate for political and social change.

From 1977-1983 he was seriously involved in the anti-nuclear movement. He has increasingly and intensively been involved with native and environmental issues.

Included in his video library of 1000 tapes are early rock videos and documentary tapes which reflect his concerns and commitments.

His extensive knowledge of Northwest Coast Indian Art and Indian Music nudge his filming instincts. He has experimented with rock video, especially with Vancouver punk rock group D.O.A.

He is interested in recycling, incorporating the concept into his lifestyle and work. Mutual concern has resulted in video tapes with Vancouver recycle artist Evelyn Roth.

Part of his experience has been as video operator for Night Dreams, a Vancouver based cable T.V. Sunday night live show, which in-

terspersed music with comedy fill.

Macdonald has also used video as an effective tool for native advocacy. In 1980, he interviewed native leaders, fishermen and government officials with regards to the role and future of native fishermen. The tape was influential in the 1980 changes within native fishing regulations. He also bushwhacked along survey lines on Meare's Lisland, video taping the controversy of 1983-84.

In Hazelton, Macdonald may be seen packing his video equipment, a tripod and a separate microphone, sacrificing portability for quality. He calls himself a "Vidiot". Video is a large part of his world.

Macdonald's creativity and vitality, his intense native environmental and human concerns, his generous accessibility, and his worldly experience contribute greatly to Hazelton's small town isolation. He broadens our horizons and connects us to greater Canadian consciousness. He brings us in touch with the warm seeds of the 21st century.