

Indians have culture, whites just get art

by Jon Whyte

One day in New York my itinerary included both the American Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Too full a day, but one whose time

is limited makes the most of it.

I had returned to the American Museum to bathe in its richness of West Coast Indian materials, a superb trove of 19th century Haida and Kwakiutl material. I spent a couple of hours in those galleries and the adjacent ethno-

graphic rooms which display the almost as wonderful materials Roy Chapman Andrews brought back from the civilizations of Northern China and the Gobi Desert where he went in quest of dinosaurs.

After lunch I crossed Central Park to the Met to look at the Egyptological material — to settle an argument with some Egyptians I likely will never see again — and I took in a lot more than the great art museum offers: Frank Lloyd Wright rooms, Louis Tiffany stained glass, a Renoir or two, the Picassos, the big Seurat. That kind of thing.

The finest stuff I saw all day was in the American Museum of Natural History. In peckish mood I wondered why other people get to have culture while we have to be satisfied with art.

That issue hovers over Re-Visions, a Walter Phillips Gallery exhibit at the Banff Centre (Jan. 8-28) of art and videos that comment "on the history of native culture."

In the finest work in the Phillips exhibit, On Loan from the Museum of the American Indian, Jimmie Durham — an Arkansas Wolf Clan Cherokee living in New York City — slyly, wryly and acidly parodies ethnographic exhibit cases. Artifacts of a generic plain brown wrapper Indian are brutally laid out: here an Indian leg bone (!), there pictures of his relatives, The Indian's Aunt

and Uncle. His individuality, personality, his achievements have all vanished. What is left is the detritus of a dead man representing a dead society.

"You killed him, you museums, you with your damnable curatorial desire to collect, classify, encapsulate and eviscerate everything that once lived," the piece seems to shout. "That's the way you like to see your Indians — dissected and defunct," is another of its suggestions. Living culture has become dead exhibitry.

The piece fails to take into account what museums have become to many Indians, the major repositories of their material past. The Indians of North America are among both the major contributors and users of museums. I have never been in the Archives of the Glenbow Museum when a Sarcee, Blood or Stoney has not been working. But Durham is subtle enough to know good irony need not flow in two directions.

What else is good? The piece about the Little Big Horn by Edward Poitras of Regina. Small, but it's elegant: a postcard size picture of Custer beneath a wire grid in the shape of a Maltese cross, almost invisible lettering saying Yellow Hair above a glass vessel filled with sage ("etc." written on it). Its haiku-like simplicity gripped me before I knew Mr Poitras collected the sage at a battle site.

Mike MacDonald (born in Nova Scotia, living in British Columbia) demonstrates in Electric Totem 87 that video (art) need not be dull, didactic nor dolorous. On five stacked televisions, he presents images of a woman singing, salmon in a red, men spear-fishing in a river, fragments of totem poles, the ceremonial houses of the Gitksan Wetsuet'ain Nation at K'san on the Pacific Coast. As its vertical imagery moves by, we swiftly learn to cohere five images into one realization as he graciously reveals the people's traditional activities. I have never before associated grace with video.

Joane Cardinal-Schubert (born in Red Deer, living in Calgary) has ventured into far more elusive and abstract forms than I have been familiar with in her work. Keeper of the Vision, a four-panel painting, encrusts recent newspaper clippings in a swirling surface, while a sweat lodge frame hovers over everything. Elsewhere bison and hands and fragments of dream imagery hesitate. Her *bois brule* umbers and ochres recall the Earth, as well as agony, distress, and harmony. A complex work, difficult to integrate in a single view, but poetically evocative and disturbing.

Five of the artists gathered with Helga Pakasaar, curator of Re-Visions, for a discussion the

Re-Visions: Art or the expression of a people?

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morning after the show opened. Edgar A. Heap of Birds, Cheyenne and Arapaho Nation, Geary, Oklahoma, asked the toughest questions. He is a person with a sense of place and a sense of language.

Re-Visions, he observed, resembles many other exhibits of native peoples' work he has seen: short in representing people from the reserves, satisfying "quality" by sacrificing the values of the people who have suffered and are suffering inequities today, showing people who have already proved their excellence rather than risking those whose concepts may be less sloppy than those of better trained artists but who may not be technically proficient. To be fair, he was talking about problems associated with exhibits of this nature, not this particular show.

He made several recommendations to overcome the deficiencies he perceived in non-native exhibits of native artists: that Indians themselves participate in determining who's to be in a show; that curators look at the works of individuals, the specific tribal worlds they come from, seek to understand a native's world, and recognize that their place may be intrinsic to the content of their works; that curators recognize native peoples are not going to prepare slides and videos of their works for their expedience; and that art institutions seek to know their own regions first, or, as he put it, "know your own place before you go out to look at Oklahoma."

Mike MacDonald observed that "if this were 1488 — and four

years before Columbus and not 500 years after — I think we'd all (the artists in the exhibition) be medicine people."

Alan Michelson (Boston) de-claimed the popularly received prophesy: "Native culture is strong and will survive catastrophes worse than post-modernism!"

Edward Poitras related a personal anecdote that distinguished a native attitude to art. On a car trip through the western United States he remarked to a medicine man that "ceremonies and rituals are the high point of native artistic expression." The elder regarded him with a disinterested look and shrugged as if to say, "what are you talking about?" However, Mr Poitras said, the exchange taught him something, that most American native peoples do not have a concept or a concern for art; what they do isn't art but rather an expression of people and that "all art comes from a primal experience of some sort."

As you may suspect, I agree with many of the points of view expressed. Re-Visions could have been stronger if it included, say, contemporary competitive chicken dancing costumes or even photographs of Stoney Christmas lighting. Isolating works in a sterile art gallery, the exhibit may present "art" but it's a long way from "culture". As Edward Poitras says, "what natives do isn't art." Culture is society oriented; art is individual and ego-driven. Culture is continuous and engaging. Art is sporadic and exclusionary. Why are other people so lucky as to have culture, when all we get is art?



"Keepers of the Vision", an oil, graphite on ragboard by Joane Cardinal-Schubert, appearing in Re-Visions.