

Mike MacDonald

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Mercer Union



Interview by Tom Sherman

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TS: Could you tell me about your installation, the *Seven Sisters*?

MM: There is a mountain range in B.C. called The Seven Sisters and the piece, as well as being a video or seven videos (all seven minutes long) about the mountain range, is set up so that it is sort of a sculpture of the mountains with seven different sized TV's. The peaks of the mountains are all different and that's why the televisions in the piece are all different sizes.

TS: You form a complex analogy with a video installation like this. It's a very large physical and temporal experience you're dealing with. What is the level of compromise in making it to reach an audience at this diminished scale and duration?

MM: I think when it's set up in a museum or gallery, the piece takes up a lot of space and the soundtrack echoes and reverberates and it does bring something of the experience I had in visiting the mountains to the viewer. The helicopter shots, the soundtrack — something of the grandeur comes through.

TS: Although you start out with video of the scenic mountains, the tapes end with images of clear cut forests and dead (mounted) animals in a museum. Why did you decide to run this linear, tragic chronology of images in parallel with this beautiful timeless soundtrack?

MM: One of the things I'm trying to do with the piece is to suggest that if we don't change our methods of resource extraction then the only place our grandchildren are going to see the wildlife is stuffed in museums or on laser disks. That's why, that's the message.

TS: You present an environmental dilemma rather than offering solutions to the problem. What's the solution?



Mary Johnson, *Woman of the Whirlpool*, is the voice of the *Seven Sisters* installation. She lives in Kispiox.

MM: The present resource extraction methods have got to change. We go into hemlock forests and clear cut them. The wood is not that great for building houses. It warps and twists and most of the Hemlock in fact goes to pulp. These forests take hundreds of years to grow. They provide an environment for hundreds of species of plants, many of which were exploited by the native people for foods and medicines, many of which are still exploitable. The Japanese will pay up to \$60 a pound for Pine Mushrooms that grow in the hemlock forests. Canada Ginseng grows there. It's an endangered species in Eastern Canada but False Sarsparilla, Canada Ginseng, grows all over the place in northern B.C., and outside of occasional native usage to make beverages, it's not being exploited. It sells for a couple of dollars an ounce in health food stores. There are a number of things there that could be harvested and potentially would generate more revenue than hemlock, which takes hundreds of years to grow and provides this environment that nurtures all of these other plants. Most of the plants we see are in blossom and that's deliberate. I'm suggesting that there's an incredible promise and potential in the area if we deal with it in the right way.

TS: The *Seven Sisters* soundtrack is of a lone native woman singing a song which is transformed into a chorus of seven voices (another seven sisters) by the seven playback systems. I'm interested in the gentleness of the soundtrack — why this soundtrack with this video message?

MM: Well it's indigenous to the area. It's healing songs and they were songs that were used to cure people of illnesses and I'm hoping that maybe in a small way they are going to help to cure this situation on earth. One of the reviewers referred to me and the piece as a form of 'electronic shamanism' and I rather liked the phrase.

TS: Who is Mary Johnson, the woman who sang the healing songs?

MM: She is a chief. She lives in Kispiox about 30 miles from the Seven Sisters. She's about 80 years old and is quite a wonderful lady — a gold mine of stories and anecdotes and music.

TS: Do you think of yourself as an environmentalist?

MM: I have some reservations about that. Being an environmentalist has become more fashionable than disco once was. I've stepped away from working with environmental groups. I feel I accomplish more working on my own than working with the groups. I have a lot of problems with what I call sob-sister ecology. If my ancestors hadn't eaten seals I wouldn't be here.

TS: What is your ancestral background, where were you born and what is your native ancestry?

MM: I was born in Sydney, Nova Scotia. My ancestry is Scotch, Irish, Portuguese, Micmac and Beothuk.

TS: Is there an equivalence for you with the terms naturalist and environmentalist? Can you be one without being the other?

MM: I don't think you can, although I think at this point in time there are more environmentalists than there are naturalists. I lean more more towards being a naturalist than an environmentalist.

TS: What is your training as an artist? Where did you develop your sense of the formal aspect of your work?



MM: I've never had any formal training in art or in video. I've given courses in video production but I've never taken any. There are a few people who were helpful to me in terms of instruction, but that was more with the technical part in the beginning. I guess one of the most important things to me in terms of learning my craft was reading *The Technique of the Television Cameraman* by Peter Jones, who used to teach television camera work at the BBC. I'm more influenced by the BBC style of camera work than by the North American style. In North American television work you put the nose in the centre of the screen. In British television you allow for looking room.

There are particular artists, like Emily Carr, that are very important to me. Langdon Kihn is very important to me. I like the work of Edmund Curtis. I don't see myself as doing the same thing as they did but I'm very conscious of working in the same geography. There are a number of cases where I've done portraits of chiefs that, without having seen the Langdon Kihn portraits, I'd end up doing a photograph of a man who bears the same name and is a descendent of someone who was painted 60 years ago. And I'd have the man in the same pose, the same composition, the same framing. There are many cases where I've done photographs of totem poles that Emily Carr has painted.



Detail of the Seven Sisters mountain range.

In many cases my shot of the totem pole is the same point of view as Emily took on canvas or on paper.

TS: What do you think about taking a work like the *Seven Sisters*, which was created so specifically in a wilderness environment, and transporting it into an urban context?

MM: I think it's relevant. Too often the decisions about places like The Seven Sisters are made in the high-rises in the big cities and in the future more of the decisions about resources are going to have to be made by the people who live in the area with the resources and have a better understanding for the geography and the resources.

TS: I'm struck by your concern towards conserving nature and native culture. Are you comfortable with the term conservationist?

MM: It's not a label I would apply to myself, but yes.

TS: What about the information on the tapes which can't be read by the

uninformed? Things like the names of the individual mountain peaks or the species of wildflowers on the tapes — do you have any urge to make this kind of information more accessible?

MM: I'm not trying to convey a lot of facts, I'm trying to convey an attitude and feelings and values more so than data and if I were trying to communicate data, then a single channel piece with a traditional narrative would be a better way to do it.

TS: I'm interested in what you've told me about your background, that you were raised as a Nova Scotian and didn't know much about your native background, you were assimilated and then you've come West and have only really been able to be your native self since you've come here. When did that happen for you?

MM: Well in the late '70s a number of times "environmentalists" had suggested that I do video about native topics and I had reservations about that. I wasn't sure that video technology was appropriate to communicating native stories and my reaction was to say if native people ask me to do it, maybe, but these were non-native people who were suggesting it. In 1980 I went to a Nuclear-Free Pacific conference in Honolulu and we were welcomed to the area by the chief of the area. She has since passed on — they called her the Old Lady with the Laughing Eyes. She came over to me and engaged me in conversation during a social event and asked me questions in such a way that for the first time in my life I had to say us, meaning native people, and she wouldn't let me qualify or get out of that. She forced me into doing that. I ended up staying up all night that night and walking on the beach and thinking about that, and when I came back to Vancouver I was asked to make a tape for the Native Brotherhood about native fishing and that lead to tape after tape and for the last ten years 80% of my work has been native work. I've become very comfortable with it. I've learned a lot about native cultures here in B.C. There's an incredible richness of culture and language and stories here and I think having as small a percentage of native ancestry as I have is still very real to me. Having the blood



False Sarsparilla of the Ginseng family is abundant in the Seven Sisters region, but is an endangered species in Eastern North America. It is used by natives as a beverage and tonic and has economic potential.

of a tribe that no longer exists makes me appreciate even more the cultural things that are still alive and happening and rejuvenating here in B.C.

TS: You seem to place a priority on those things which are the most likely to completely disappear — like native culture and rituals which are disappearing because of assimilation...

MM: No I don't agree with that at all. There are as many or more totem poles now than there were in Barbeau's time in the '20s. I don't see like Emily Carr, Langdon Kihn and Curtis and others who have come through here painting pictures or taking pictures. They saw themselves recording a way of life which was disappearing. I don't see that, I see myself playing a part in a kind of renaissance. The court case which has been happening with the Gitksan suing the provincial and federal governments for title to their land, the process is making these people incredibly strong. They're learning a lot by doing this and I think we're going to see more and more totem poles going up in the future. More and more native people are teaching their own languages in schools. They're taking control of the education systems in their areas. They're having elders come into the schools to talk to the kids. When I visit native homes in the north, I'm seeing parents learning a native language from their children, because they weren't allowed to speak it when they were young. But they've set it up so their kids are learning it from an earlier generation — and then the generation who missed the opportunity are learning it from their children and it's good to see this happening.

TS: The *Seven Sisters* installation is the construction of a message for a strategic purpose. Could you spell out what you hope to accomplish with this work?

MM: I'm hoping that this work will get people to think about the Seven Sisters and the resources — and the Stein, Meares Island, Strathcona Park. I'd like people to think about these places and to make decisions about them, the right decisions about them. I think the time has come for more regional resource control. The people who are living in a geography have to make the decisions or have more input to the decisions about what's happening to the resources in their geography, as opposed to the decisions made in the boardrooms of multinational corporations that may not even be in the country. Decisions being made in boardrooms in Vancouver and Ottawa affect people in remote little communities that these people in these corporations don't even see or touch in a meaningful way. If we're going to have forests and wildlife and fish in the future, then the people who live with these resources are going to have to have more control of the harvesting and conservation than is now the case. To me this is what land claims are all about — regional resource control. If we win land claims for native people, everybody wins. The people in a geography must have more control over the management of it. I don't think people should be threatened by land claims because I think with the solution of land claims there won't be winners and losers. Everybody will be winners.

Mike MacDonald is a video artist and photographer who works in British Columbia.

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