

Whose Nation?

Two recent exhibitions at the National Gallery of Canada and the Canadian Museum of Civilization raised disturbing questions about the positioning of First Nations art in the white mainstream.

Scott Watson investigates.

Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada was mounted last fall at an extraordinary time in the struggle of First Nations peoples for recognition of their rights and title to their land. Part of that struggle has been for access to the cultural institutions of Canada where, as in the case of this exhibition at the National Gallery, non-native Canadians might begin to question the various fictions most of us hold about native people.

The exhibition catalogue went to press in the summer of 1992, when post-Meech constitutional talks — talks which included First Nations representatives — were underway. In her essay, National Gallery curator Diana Nemiroff drew an analogy between these negotiations and the occasion of the exhibition. She wrote, unfortunately too optimistically: "Aboriginal issues, in particular the inherent right to self-government, are a central part of the discussions and are being formally recognized for the first time. This has come about as a result of the insistence of native leaders themselves that their voices and concerns be heard in the forums that count. By analogy, the belated recognition now being given contemporary



Joane Cardinal-Schubert
Preservation of a Species: DECONSTRUCTIVISTS (This is the house that Joe built) 1990
 Installation detail
 Mixed media
 Photo: John D. Dean
 Courtesy: Canadian Museum of Civilization



Foreground: **Faye HeavyShield**
Untitled 1992
 Rear wall: **Dorothy Grant**
Seven Ravens (two blankets) 1989
 Left and right walls: **Robert Davidson**
 (left) *Gagiiit Mask* 1984
 (right) *Eagle Transforming into Itself* 1990
 Photo: Louis Joncas
 Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada

native art is the result of a similarly favourable conjuncture of circumstances." Those circumstances include lobbying by native artists themselves, especially the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA). They also include recent shifts in how historians, critics and curators deal with culture and art. The challenge to the monolithic, European-based version of history now cuts across whole fields of inquiry into culture. The way history is written can be a powerful instrument by which one group may dominate or even obliterate another. Thus the debate about whose version is being staged, or whose voice is being heard, has a highly political character.

The version staged by the National Gallery took the tone of redress and tried to strike an optimistic note about the possibilities for change. The exhibition was solid but cautious, even conservative. Most of the artists have established reputations. None of them used the occasion to challenge the institution that, after all, has on permanent display elsewhere in the building a very Eurocentric version of Canada's

art history. But it is hard to see how an exhibition like *Land, Spirit, Power* could avoid perilous contradictions. It is wrong and racist to exclude native artists from national cultural life, yet it ghettoizes these artists to mount exhibitions based on their race. When does inclusion become assimilation? And can the recognition of difference become the grounds for exclusion? In an unjust society, does an exhibition like *Land, Spirit, Power* allow us to think that the Canadian art world accepts First Nations artists on equal terms when this remains to be seen? It is too early for congratulations.

At its best and most provocative, the exhibition caused us to question the cultural assumptions that underlie judgments about the quality and authenticity of works of art. Yet contradictions abounded. The claim that this art must be seen quite differently to be understood surfaces repeatedly in the catalogue. For example, Charlotte Townsend-Gault, one of the exhibition's three curators, suggests that the works in *Land, Spirit, Power* spring from values and ways of knowing that are "fully comprehensible only to those who live them..." (that is to say, the work is to be understood as *outside* the art world's mainstream). On the other hand, she proposes that the artists share a sense of investigation and exploration that positions them "within the discourse of postmodern art" (that is to say, the work is to be understood as *inside* the art world's mainstream). Her co-curator Diana Nemiroff also credits "the crisis of representation

associated with postmodernism" for opening the institutional space to these works and these artists.

Robert Houle, the third curator to join the project — himself an artist and First Nations activist — takes a more polemical position. Apparently disagreeing with his co-curators, Houle sees postmodernism as a smoke screen — a way of talking about social change in a society where power relations are actually rigidifying, not breaking down. Many First Nations artists must deal with the conflict between collective identity and individuality. As Houle rightly points out, "individuality operates in the language of paradox, irony, and ambivalence." But a collective sense of identity requires a unifying language of spirituality.

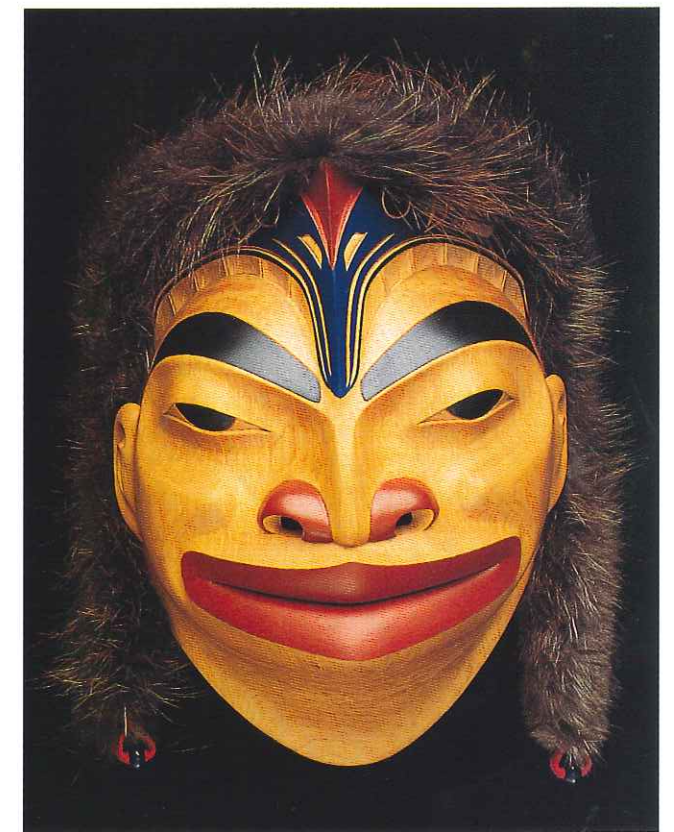
As well, Houle insists that his artist colleagues must straddle two histories, that of the modern world, and that which tradition has handed down from time immemorial. Houle, like the other curators, wants the work in *Land, Spirit, Power* to be seen differently — as part of a non-European aesthetic tradition. But Houle then adds a twist: modernism in art was not derived solely from European sources. Barnett Newman liked to say that Kwagiuith art served as his teacher, just as Jackson Pollock often told people that Navajo sand paintings inspired his drip technique.

The exhibition revealed right away the dichotomy between contemporary experience and tradition. Take the works of Faye HeavyShield, who, like others in the exhibition, was punished as a child at a residential school if she spoke her native language. HeavyShield studied art at the Alberta College of Art and later, as an adult, began to reclaim the heritage from which she had been disenfranchised as a child. Houle sees her art as drawing on two heritages: minimalism and the ceremonial art of the Blood people. Hers are disarmingly simple works, but it's not clear that their elegance has much to do with minimalism. One untitled work consists of twelve thin wooden pointed stakes, mounted on cement bases suggestive of the shapes of bones. Arranged in a circle in the middle of the gallery, this was the first work one encountered at the entrance to *Land, Spirit, Power*. The work has a powerful physical and psychological presence; the circle demarcates a special place. The stakes are a uniform monochrome of soft ochre, making the transition between the wood and cement seamless. The references are floating, evoking structures for shelter, protection, ceremony — a bridge between the organic world of nature and the dream world of the artist.

In an alcove of the same gallery were two masks by Robert Davidson and two blankets made after Davidson's designs by his wife, Dorothy Grant. Davidson is the pre-eminent artist of his generation working with traditional Haida designs, and these were spectacular pieces. There were other traditional works in the exhibition — carvings by Tahltan-Tlingit artist, Dempsey Bob. Again, these are superb sculptures by an artist who is recognized as a master. But the inclusion of these artists posed a problem that the exhibition did not address. The practices of HeavyShield and Davidson, Grant and Bob are profoundly

different. HeavyShield works with cultural memory and traditional form to make works that are ultimately to be understood in the idiom of modern art. Their strength comes precisely from the cultural straddling Houle talks about. Davidson, Grant and Bob work within the inherited lexicon of traditional design and iconographic convention now supported by the art market, with its earnest but unreflective desire to incorporate a non-European art tradition into a supposed universal aesthetic. Their work seemed to avoid the central issue of the exhibition: the question of identity and how it is to be negotiated between cultures. This is all the more striking because there is plenty to reexamine about how Northwest Coast carving was revived in the sixties as a battle between white anthropologists and white connoisseurs of modern art. Interestingly, Northwest Coast carving had to undergo a process of modernist aesthetic legitimization to escape from the anthropologists and get into the art galleries. The objects in this exhibition seem singularly untroubled by this history.

Perhaps if Davidson, Grant and Bob had been grouped with Alex Janvier and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, this problem of legitimization might have taken on a more critical, even dialectical character. Janvier is a senior artist in the First Nations art movement, self-proclaimed as the



Dempsey Bob
The Smart One! 1989
 Alder, fur, beads, acrylic
 14 x 10 in.
 Photo: Louis Joncas
 Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada

"first Canadian native modernist." He is known for a body of work and a style of painting that claims its worth from its authentic relation to a visionary spirit world. His new works appear to advance the same claim. Dividing the canvas surface into the same floating curvilinear areas as in his famous abstract works, Janvier has filled in the areas with pictures of teepees, braves, Indian maidens and buffaloes. In one monumentally huge canvas, *Nehobetthe (Land before they arrived)*, vignettes of life in harmony with nature before the conquest are depicted in bright, chalky colours. These stylized scenes reminded me of stereotypical representations from the fifties of the happy Indian. To my eyes, these works are major kitsch.

Nemiroff suggests in the catalogue that Janvier intends these paintings as a critique of the kitschified pan-Indianism that some native people have absorbed from Hollywood clichés. But that explanation doesn't really account for their fascination, nor does it confront their dreadfulness. To read them as ironic is a weak defense against their overwhelming sentimentality. But it is here that Eurocentric criticism and what might be Janvier's standard clearly clash. I think Janvier's paintings are an accurate account of how he envisions paradise. His sentimentality for the cultural symbols and the land he depicts has been come by honestly. Raised as a member of the Dene Nation near Cold Lake, Alberta, he was witness to the end of the way of life of his father when the Canadian military took over traditional hunting grounds for bombing ranges.

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's paintings were in the adjacent gallery and the juxtaposition with Janvier highlights Yuxweluptun's equally problematic relation to kitsch. Yuxweluptun paints large allegories of the toxic, industrialized and ruined land. He refers to traditional West-Coast design traditions in his animal figures and mountains, but the style of the paintings is New-Age psychedelic. Like Janvier, he paints a visionary dream world. Unlike Janvier, he chooses the present, depicting a spirit world eroded by the destruction of the natural world. There is controversy about Yuxweluptun's work in B.C.; his use of traditional design for surrealist fantasy is criticized by traditionalists, who see the translation of the traditional designs into contemporary, politicized statements as a rebuke. Likewise his use of virtual reality technology in his *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights*. When it was working, the viewer could approach and enter a simulated cartoon longhouse inhabited by a variety of Yuxweluptun's typical animal spirits and ghosts. The imaging capacity of virtual reality still falls short of what this artist achieves as a painter.

There were many modernisms in this exhibition. One large gallery was given over to the works of Carl Beam, James Lavadour and Truman Lowe. Their pieces commanded the gallery space through scale, all emphasizing structure and an expressive use of materials. If appearances count for anything, these works looked modernist, even academically so. Beam's paintings were from his *Columbus Project*, a compendium of images about history and autobiography.

Using photo emulsions, Beam transfers a montage of images to the canvas. He allows the medium to drip and flow, creating rivulets that sometimes all but obscure the photographed image. The catalogue claims that Beam is inventing a new epistemology and that the *Columbus Project* paintings "attempt to recover a narrative mode of knowing that has been systematically devalued in scientific thought, yet survives in each of us." But I found the work a great deal more elusive than this schema would suggest. For example, his work appears to owe much to the example of Robert Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg's use of images is, however, detached and aestheticized. His montages don't hanker after meaning. Beam's do. The difficulty they present is compounded by their size and monochromatic colouring. In modernist practice, the monochrome avers a kind of silence and a refusal to mean very much other than the objecthood of the painting. Beam breaks that silence with an insistence on meaning and reading.

From a distance, James Lavadour's sectional paintings seem to be apocalyptic landscapes evocative of Albert Bierstadt and the Romantic tradition. As you approach them, you see that they are really abstractions. In his statement, Lavadour expressed a special annoyance with those who, like me, would see his paintings as apocalyptic landscapes with a reference to nineteenth-century European traditions. Instead, he wants us to see them as the result of painterly processes "that are merely microcosms of the forces that shape the earth and mountains." Lavadour is not concerned with the painting's meaning, he says, only with "what it does and how it does it." Yet the viewer whose terms of reference come from the tradition of European art will see apocalypse in mountains, fire and smoke where someone whose terms of reference come from First Nations culture will see the renewing force of nature. Rather than experiencing the awesome scale of a sublime landscape in which man feels puny, a viewer with a First Nations frame of reference sees, as Lavadour does, a picture about a person's harmonious place within nature.

The large wooden construction by Truman Lowe, a member of the Winnebago nation from Wisconsin, also investigates the hidden forces in natural structure. His sculpture, entitled *Ottawa*, is a big wooden cataract. Strips of pine imitate cascading water. The scaffold supporting the grade is like a house frame or the support for a temporary platform. Like Lavadour, Lowe sees his work as a deep dialogue with nature. *Ottawa* is a freeze-frame picture. While the structure of the piece is apparent, the materials create an illusion. Lowe uses wood with an awareness of that material's relation to water. The sculpture is impressive but overly literal.

The works of Beam, Lavadour and Lowe represent an aspect of *Land, Spirit, Power* that was engaging but puzzling. Their work formally appears to come out of modernist convictions. But a closer reading, taking into account the artists' statements, reveals how appearances depend on one's cultural point of view. It often seemed that the artists' commitment to fairly conservative media and modernist



Alex Janvier
Enattserie (His power within) 1992
Acrylic on canvas
78 x 120 in.
Photo: Louis Joncas
Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada

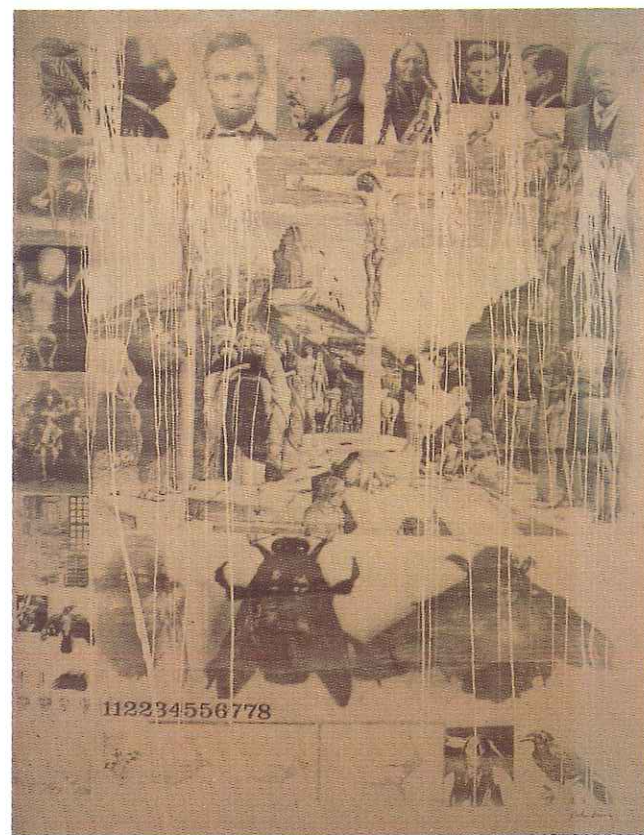


Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun
Toxicological Encroachment of Civilization on First Nations Land 1992
Acrylic on canvas
96 x 200 in.
Photo: Louis Joncas
Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada

visual strategies worked against the subversive stance they want for their work.

If there was, as Houle claims, a negotiation about identity going on in most of the works in the exhibition, nowhere was that more movingly enacted than in Rebecca Belmore's work, *Mawu-che-hitoowin: A Gathering of People for Any Purpose*. On a plywood floor, partly laid with bits of old patterned linoleum, sat a circle of chairs, all of them different, all of them worn with use. The chairs were fitted with audio tapes; the viewer was invited to sit in the chairs and use headphones to hear the voices and stories of the seven different women who had donated them, each one telling of her own experiences. (One recording was of bird song.) This work's power depended upon the voices and stories Belmore had collected and brought to this context, stories of loved ones, community, children and parents. It was a political gesture for Belmore to feature those voices in the space allocated to her art. Here it was perfectly clear that narrative, identity and subjectivity are not just abstract issues, but concrete ones, tied to life.

As luxurious as the National Gallery's video screening room is, the works of filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin and video artist Zacharias Kunuk belonged downstairs in the main exhibition space. Kunuk's epic video works show the



Carl Beam
Time Dissolve 1992
Photo emulsion, acrylic, pencil on canvas
108 x 84 in.
Photo: Louis Joncas
Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada

details of traditional ways of living among the Inuit. Using the memories of elders, Kunuk reconstructs life as it was as recently as the 1930s. The conversation in *Nunaqpa (Going Inland)* is casual and present-tense as a contemporary group, dressed in traditional clothes and equipped with traditional gear, go about the late summer hunt. There is a poetry in the recovery of the material culture of everyday. Kunuk shows how modern technology can be used to record history and empower communities. Again — as in Belmore's work — narrative is used as a potent political tool.

Shortly following the opening of *Land, Spirit, Power*, the gallery screened a work in progress by Alanis Obomsawin, footage she shot at Oka during the 1990 crisis. It was painful to watch nervous Canadian soldiers on the verge of hysteria because some eggs had been thrown at a tank, spliced with a scene of a badly beaten Mohawk being tended by his companions. The film reminded us all of how close the Oka crisis came to utter disaster. It reminded us as well that the veneer of civility is very thin, and that Canadians are not exempt from the racism they love to accuse others of.

The premise for *Land, Spirit, Power* turned again and again on the theme that the work of these artists represents a special, non-Western relation to the land and spirituality. Theirs is the pain of dispossession, and the cosmological view that our relationship to the land is not — as Jewish and Christian theologies assert — to have dominion over it, but to be one with it. Our power and self-definition come from this controlling relationship. *Land, Spirit, Power* presented itself as occurring in a crisis, not just that of the struggle of First Nations people for their rights, but of impending ecological disaster that the rest of us might avert if we'd listen to what our First Nations teachers are telling us. But this approach is troublesome. It downplays the grievances and anger of First Nations people and instead argues that we ought to be nicer to natives because they hold the secret key to ecological harmony. This is ungracious. First Nations people deserve a break from five hundred years of attempted cultural genocide because genocide is wrong, not because we want yet more from them.

An exhibition called *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives* at the Museum of Civilization in Hull coincided with *Land, Spirit, Power*. This exhibition took a different approach. Curated by Lee-Ann Martin and Gerald McMaster — both native, as were all the contributors to the catalogue — it was presented as an exercise in self-representation. In the end, it was more political, more uneven and more interesting than *Land, Spirit, Power*.

No one I've talked to about *Indigena* let it go unremarked that the galleries for contemporary art in the \$300-million Museum of Civilization are badly designed. And that would be putting it politely. The galleries are small and dark. They seem to have been conceived to house artifacts in cases, not contemporary statements. The exhibition suffered as a result. Large paintings simply couldn't be seen and there was too much work in too tiny a space.

There were many angry works and statements in *Indigena*.



Artist Bob Boyer opens his catalogue remarks with the sentence, "My statement is basically 'it stinks'." The first work one encountered was Joane Cardinal-Schubert's *Preservation of a Species: DECONSTRUCTIVISTS (This is the house that Joe built)*. The title refers to the death-bed admonition from the artist's father, Joe Cardinal: "If I had made a stand — you wouldn't have to. You've got to stand up to them." In this installation, Cardinal-Schubert has painted the walls black and covered them with writing in chalk, invoking the memory of the schoolroom, a site highly charged with memories of brutality for many First Nations people. Mixing memory, polemic and history, the artist has written accounts of oppression and defiance. As a Non-Status Indian, she protests, "What does part Indian mean? (which part?) You don't get 50% or 25% or 16% treatment when you experience racism — it is always 100%." One had to peer into a small room to see her statement. It felt like one was intruding.

There were other objects in the installation: photographs, drawings, a painting, a small picket-fenced enclosure containing poles topped with kerchiefs. Taken together, they offered a kind of shock-treatment history lesson all the more powerful for being staged in an institution wholly devoted to nostalgic, theme-park versions of history. It was

James Lavadour
(Left to right): *Loop* 1990, *Star* 1990-91, *Blossom* 1990
Oil on linen
Private collections
Photo: Louis Joncas
Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada

impossible to quibble with the force of Cardinal-Schubert's work as an activist statement. It stared you down without blinking and was fiercely honest. But as an artist, Cardinal-Schubert deployed strategies that worked against the message she wished to convey. There was a sense that much was executed in haste, that the installation was provisional. While this created a feeling of urgency and readiness for action, it also undercut the seriousness and deliberation of what she had to say. It's the difference between scattershot and a well-aimed bullet. But this is a critical problem with no answer. More refined, finished works run the risk of accommodating themselves to the very structures of authority they oppose.

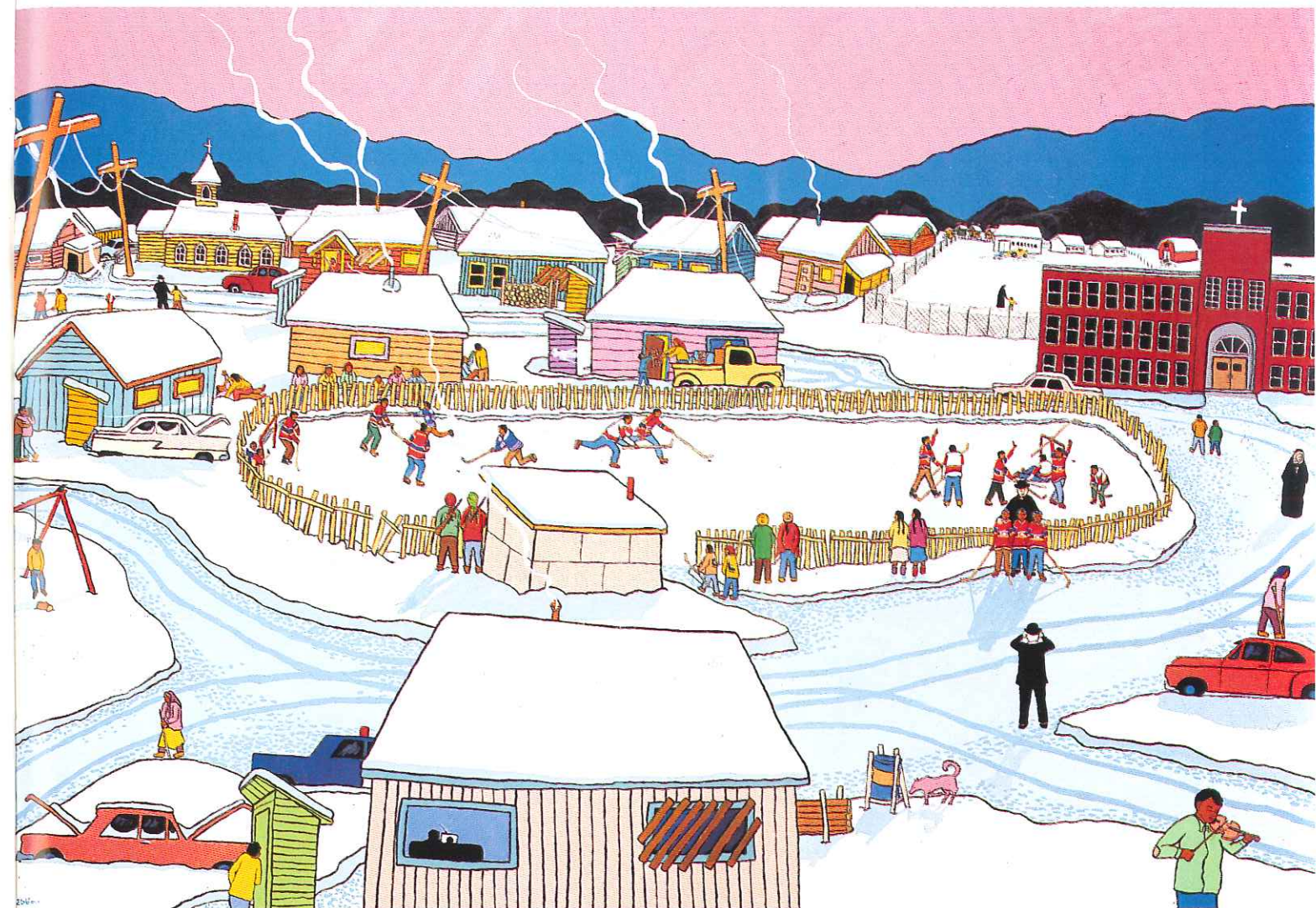
If Joane Cardinal-Schubert confronts the viewer with plain-speaking and anger, the paintings of B.C. artist Jim Logan invite us into a realm of experience. Logan presented *National Pastimes*, a large painting of a scene of a small reserve town in the interior of British Columbia. Kids are

playing hockey in the iced-over town square. It seems like a sleepy, cozy place untouched by the problems of the outside world. Painted in a reassuring, naïve style that is also evocative of the solid values of small town life, *National Pastimes* slowly reveals the town's true life. Vignettes and anecdotal detail tell of the overbearing presence of the church, violence, alienation, suicide and decrepitude. A hanged man is suspended from the playground swing. Elsewhere, a couple are brawling in a snowbank. But there are also moments of family harmony, friendship, creativity and work. Smaller paintings surrounding the large overview take up the viewpoints of various figures, intensifying the contrasts to be found in the community.

While the works in *Land, Spirit, Power* did nothing to unsettle the institutional context of the National Gallery (whose Nation?), several works in *Indigena* seemed aimed at the very foundations of the dubiously named Museum of Civilization. Mike MacDonald's video installation, *Seven*

Sisters, was situated in one of the ersatz longhouses in the museum's Great Hall. An absurd and disturbing simulacrum, the Grand Hall jumbles cultures, places, histories, art and artifacts, both authentic and reproduced. The museum hides its collection. One can only imagine what went on in the mind of the exhibition designer who placed rows of masks behind a cedar barricade in almost total darkness. Most visitors probably don't know they're there. Other cases containing carvings light up for a moment every half hour or so.

MacDonald's piece worked well as a commentary on all this. Seven monitors displayed vistas of the Seven Sisters mountains in Gitksan territory. The camera dwells on the plant and animal life the mountains harbour. The final images are of stuffed animals in a natural history museum. *Seven Sisters* celebrates the beauty of the land while confounding the notion of wilderness that looms so large in the white, mainstream Canadian psyche. Take, for example,



Jim Logan
National Pastimes 1991
Acrylic on canvas
48 x 72 in.
Photo: Harry Foster
Courtesy: Canadian Museum of Civilization

the notorious 1991 decision against the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en by B.C. Supreme Court judge Allan McEachern. According to McEachern, the territory in question was a "vast emptiness" (although he allowed that there were still valuable stands of timber to be exploited). The Seven Sisters are in the centre of that "vast emptiness." The land, of course, is deeply known — the plants that grow there are all named, used, medicinal. But the people that know them struggle against invisibility.

MacDonald's work was the only piece that strayed outside the confines of the gallery devoted to contemporary art to mingle with the circus that is the rest of the museum. It would have stood out more from the museum's plentiful audio-visual stimulants if it had been operating properly. When I saw the work, one of the monitors was off.

Both *Indigena* and *Land, Spirit, Power* were mounted to mark the 500th anniversary of Columbus' landing in the Caribbean. Both exhibitions asked viewers to revise their notions of history and recognize the grievances of First Nations people and the vitality of their cultures. There was concern expressed at the National Gallery's symposium

following the opening that once this sense of occasion has passed, major institutions might feel that the pressure is off and that they could move on to other issues. First Nations artists are understandably cautious and unwilling to take this centre-stage treatment for granted.

The group show is an unwieldy format. Questions of who's in and who's out deflect criticism of the issues, while the issues artificially homogenize the very real differences in practice and belief among the artists. (My own candidates for the overlooked include Ron Noganosh and Shelley Niro.) The problem of exclusion is only partly ameliorated by shows such as these. Now that, in these museums, the shows are over, we are left with the permanent displays. These are also essays on land, spirit, and power, containing narratives of history that are up for revision. ■



Rebecca Belmore
Mawu-che-hitowin: A Gathering of People for Any Purpose 1992
Mixed media installation
Dimensions variable
Photo: Louis Jonas
Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada