

WASHINGTON, DC

Brian Jungen

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN

In a gallery adjacent to Canadian artist Brian Jungen's survey "Strange Comfort" is a show called simply "Our Lives." In this exhibition, to quote the introductory text, "members of eight communities describe how they work to remain Native in an ever-changing world"—a powerful condensation of the museum's charter. The National Museum of the American Indian recognizes expressions of native cultures not as strictly historical phenomena, preserved in and understood through dusty artifacts and aging fables, but rather as mutable and alive, with the potential for being creatively perpetuated in contemporary life. Jungen's work, as demonstrated by this exhibition, evidences a related commitment.

The literature on Jungen, whose mother is a member of the Dunne-za First Nation of Alberta and British Columbia and whose father is of European stock, invariably notes that the artist is principally concerned with the seamless subsumption of native iconography into Western capitalist image culture—the "vast heaving mass of ephemeral and disposable forms," to quote art historian Charlotte Townsend-Gault's essay on the artist. While this is an unmistakable, even central, dimension of



Jungen's ongoing project, the experience of his work en masse suggests both a greater urgency and a greater depth of feeling than this very rote critical position would indicate. The endgame for Jungen is not simply critique. Critique is implicit in the work, of course, but it is the consistently propositional quality of his sculpture that defines his practice, and those propositions more often than not articulate a commitment to finding new possibilities for native expression in, quite literally, the fabric of contemporary culture.

For example, Jungen's well-known "Prototype for New Understanding," 1998–2005, is made from Nike Air Jordan basketball shoes, cut apart and restitched to resemble Aboriginal Northwest Coast Indian masks. Installed under glass atop immaculately finished pedestals, these sculptures don't—or don't only—take aim at the museological conventions that have objectified native artifacts in institutions historically. The pedestals also propose a contemporary "native" culture worthy of serious consideration. Jungen incorporates and instrumentalizes the pedestal as vigorously as his Minimalist forebears rejected it. While the Minimalists' disavowal of the pedestal ushered in an era of sculpture in the expanded field that still resonates today, Jungen's use of rarefied display techniques to frame his artifacts reflects a desire for his work to be understood as a determined extension of native traditions into the present, a purpose only amplified by the commitments of the museum in which this exhibition is housed.

Other works evincing native culture in transformative, craft-based manipulation of consumer culture's banal detritus include *Skull*, 2006–2009, made of well-worn softballs and baseballs; *Blanket #7*, 2008, composed of two systematically interwoven professional sports jerseys; and works like *1960*, *1970*, and *1980* (all 2007), grand, totemic structures made of stacked golf bags. *Carapace*, 2009, the newest work in the exhibition, however, signals a shift in emphasis: It moves away from a questioning of the display and consumption of cultural objects and provides a site for the physical and discursive participation *in* culture. Composed of green and blue plastic trash containers, the room-size sculptural habitat takes a shape approximating a tortoiseshell, igloo, amphitheater, or adobe home, but does not fully register as any of these things. The structure invites the audience to enter and compels one to stay, not because there is anything to do or to look at, but because the interior feels like a gathering place. While many of Jungen's sculptures elaborate on and animate historical native imagery by incorporating contemporary material culture, *Carapace* is more indeterminate, neither of the past nor the present, neither an object for display nor a structure to be used, but rather a model—or, better, a proposal—for a function that has yet to fully crystallize. The best description of the sculpture is also the most speculative, dovetailing nicely with the National Museum of the American Indian's charter, and amplifying Jungen's ongoing propositional address: It is the site for a ritual yet to exist.

—Christopher Bedford