

Close to the bone . . . A life-size Jungen whale skeleton made from plastic chairs and a mask made out of Nike Air Jordan shoes Photos: Jason Mandella

Mirror in the mask

Blake Gopnik reflects on Brian Jungen's re-imagining of 'native' crafts

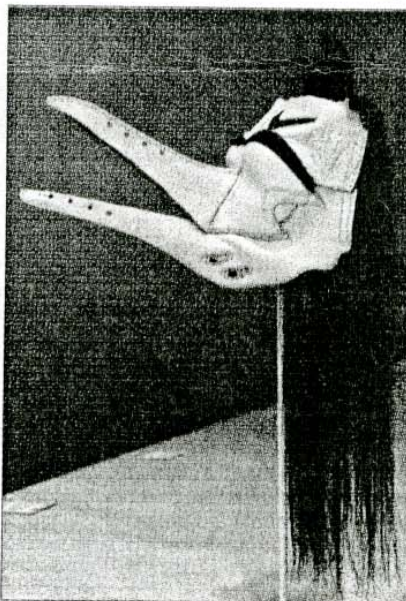
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Circa 1535, Spanish priests offered bounties for the sacred objects of Mexico's defeated natives. They wanted to smash and burn those sculptures as false idols. "You want idols?" said the exhausted locals. "OK, we'll give you idols, if that's what it takes to make you happy," and they set about making works of "native" craft whose only function was to sate their conquerors. This may be the first example of native peoples making art to fill colonial demand. But it was not the last.

Brian Jungen, whose mother is from British Columbia's Dunne-Za native group, is just the most recent in a long line of aboriginal artists making art built to fulfil others' notions of their identity. It just so happens that the art Jungen makes is so subtly complex and deals so tellingly with the whole predicament of what native art is all about that he counts as one of today's most interesting and widely acclaimed younger artists of any ethnic group. That must make his Swiss father just as proud as his Dunne-Za mother.

Jungen's first retrospective, a touring show that recently premiered at the prestigious New Museum in New York, presents a sampling from almost a decade's worth of work.

The pieces that first gained him attention may still be his best. Starting in 1998, Jungen began working with Nike Air Jordan athletic shoes — fetish objects up there with sacred eagle feathers — which he cut up, then reconfigured into credible facsimiles of native masks from Canada's northwest Pacific coast. He lucked out with his source material, because the red, white and black of the Air Jordans as



of old native art and new western commodities, to construct a hybrid that fully partakes of both. His "Prototypes for New Understanding", as he calls these works, are a re-imagining of what native culture might be if it took account of all the forces acting on it, from spirit dances to the National Basketball Association.

You would imagine that one of the most powerful of those forces would be a treasure trove of ancient traditions. Jungen's work, however, suggests that just as powerful would be a kind of feedback loop of purely fashion-

because I'm supposed to be a native artist? OK, here are forms that ought to fit the bill."

The fact that Jungen's native ancestors occupied lands hundreds of kilometres and a mountain range away from the rainforest carvers of the coast hardly seems to matter when it comes to making art that satisfies the modern art world's "Indian" ideals. (Even a sophisticated essay in the exhibition catalogue, which presents the story of those conquistador priests, does not acknowledge that the Dunne-Za are absolutely different from the coastal groups.) It is as though Jungen is stuck with other people's weirdly artificial ideas of his identity — as perhaps most of us are — and tries to live up to those notions, using the materials that come to hand in the mixed-up urban culture that is truly his.

So he gives us "classic" native masks cobbled from Nike shoes. Or, in more recent works, life-size models of huge whale skeletons — Jungen's a British Columbia native, right, so aren't he and whales supposed to have an almost sacred link? — which he hangs overhead like natural-history displays. Except that the hundreds of "bones" of his whales have been cut from cheap plastic lawn chairs. Jungen has also used the "traditional" skills and materials of native art to duplicate icons of international capitalism. The coarse pine shipping pallets that literally underlie global trade have been remade by Jungen in gorgeously finished, hand-pegged red cedar, as carefully crafted as any potlatch tray — or high-end airport souvenir.

Not all of his work involves questions of "Indian" art and identity. For all his semi-native roots, he is a full-fledged, card-carrying member of the western art world, and he has