

BRIAN JUNGEN

LEE HENDERSON



THE Vancouver artist Brian Jungen was born in 1970 in Fort St. John, in the northeastern interior of British Columbia. The son of a Swiss father and a First Nations mother, his artworks explore the contemporary status of his own multiple heritages, and more importantly for viewers perhaps, Jungen explores this cultural plurality on a global level, if not a universal level. His works contrast stereotypical, even multinational, ethnic and Pop iconography, using sculpture, painting, and site-specific installations. His most commonly cited work might be the suite of 26 West Coast Native-inspired masks, *Prototype For New Understanding*, (1998–2005) made of reconstituted Nike Air Jordan basketball sneakers. He has also turned generic white plastic chairs into the skeletons of three species of whale; and Moshe Safdie's Habitat 62, the failed utopic housing project in Montréal, he turned into a carpeted home for the city's stray cats. His works can also be self-referential, as in the case of Jungen's basketball court made of sewing machine tables which he installed at Triple Candie, a non-profit art space in Harlem. This year, Jungen is the subject of a retrospective, with stops at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, the Vancouver Art Gallery and Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.

LEE HENDERSON: For the installation at Triple Candie, I really like how you related the local history of Harlem back to your own work, and I'm interested in how that show came about.

BRIAN JUNGEN: I was invited by the folks at Triple Candie to do this big installation, because they had this huge space. They were really excited to invite someone outside the greater New York area, because their mandate is to show New York based artists. So everybody was really excited for someone else to have their take on the architecture of the space. I didn't even visit the site, but I started reading about Harlem, and what types of industries happened around that area. I've always been interested in ideas of labour and sites of production and that installation came directly out of the work I was doing with the Nike Air Jordan sneaker.

LH: Where were you looking for information about labour history in Harlem?

BJ: Online, and the California College of Art Library where I was doing a residency for *The Capp Street Project* (2004) at the Wattis Institute. There was also a textile department at CCAAL, and I would walk past it all the time and see these tables, and I would sometimes ask these students what they thought about the politics of outsourcing and they were totally oblivious. So I started doing my own research, going to the library, reading stuff about the labour history on the East coast. I called and asked the gallery if there was much street action around the gallery, if there were kids playing basketball, and they said there was always a game going on somewhere, and so I said, 'Okay, I know what I'm going to do then.'

LH: It must have felt good to have all those different pieces come together like that.

BJ: I was working at such a breakneck speed at that time. My *Capp Street Project* opened and then I went directly to New York and did this piece, and then I went straight to Montréal, where I did the *Habitat 04* (2004) piece. I was researching all of them when I was in San Francisco. It was kind of a logistical artwork in and of itself.

LH: Your early work was mostly drawings. I was looking at a book last night of yours called *Brown Finger*. And they reminded me also of Geoffrey Farmer's early drawings – highly eroticised, sociopolitical...

BJ: Well, we made those drawings for each other. That was the impetus. We shared a studio. We went to high school together. We just go way back. And we had a third friend, Jonathan Wells. Jonathan made video. We were all into queer politics. We were like three partners in crime. Living in the Downtown Eastside ... I used to wheat-paste my drawings up around the neighbourhood and people would write stuff on them, because they were quite provocative. We never thought to get them shown.

LH: But they started to get known...

BJ: When I was living in New York after high school, Geoffrey came to visit, and through a mutual friend we met Nichole Eisenmann. And holy shit, meeting her, it validated all the same things we were interested in. It was very impressive, because at the time she was getting a lot of attention, and we felt like she was way more serious about it, and doing a much better job. It kind of



Above: *Prototype for New Understanding #14*, 2003. Below: *Prototype for New Understanding*, 1998–2005. Opposite: *Variant I*, 2002. All images courtesy: Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

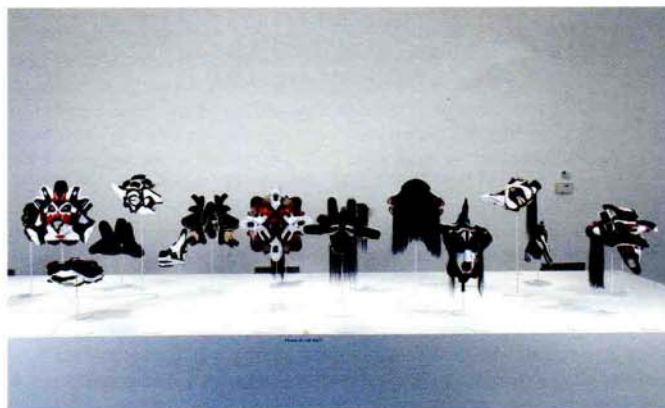
shamed us. When I moved back here we were both still doing drawings, but we started doing other work as well. We were sharing a house with some other people and doing some installations. Geoffrey also started to show in the artist-run culture and I started doing some paintings. But when I started putting my drawings on the street, I became interested in how people reacted to them and eventually I just started directly asking people to draw them.

LH: Right.

BJ: Around that time Reid Shier, the Curator of the Or Gallery, met Geoffrey and realised there was this resource here. And we also knew Jason McLean, who was doing very similar drawings, but coming from a different direction – more from the alternative comic book culture way. But it was a nice kind of group.

LH: And that became the 'Buddy Palace' show at the Or.

BJ: Right, which I did the *Brown Finger* book for as well.





Arts and Crafts Book Depository/Capp Street Project, 2004

LH: It's strange to look at some of those drawings and see the resemblance to Kara Walker's work.

BJ: I know.

LH: I assume you weren't aware of her.

BJ: Never even heard of her.

LH: And yet it's strange how similar your drawings are, not just stylistically, but thematically.

BJ: I think 'marginalised' artists – you know, coloured or queer – started playing around with pop culture images and doing them in this explicit way. I think Sue Williams was a real pioneer in that regard. So after the Buddy Palace show I did this show at the Truck Gallery in Calgary ['Half Nelson', 1997] that was getting more conceptual, and that's when I stopped drawing.

LH: Do you still draw ever?

BJ: No ... this is kind of how I am. I work until I exhaust a medium, and then I lose interest in it.

LH: There are certain things you haven't lost interest in though.

BJ: I've lost interest in the studio, handmade sculptural thing. I'm getting more interested in installation work, and proposals for public artwork, and actually going back to sound and video, which I was interested in at art school but I didn't think I could handle it, didn't have the patience for it. It's like anything – if a musician gets known for something they get bored of it.

LH: I can't even imagine how much time it must have taken you to make those white plastic lawn chairs into whale bones.

BJ: I worked on the first one for the Or Gallery for a month. I tried to make other things with those chairs and felt like they hadn't resolved.

LH: So you were already used to their structure.

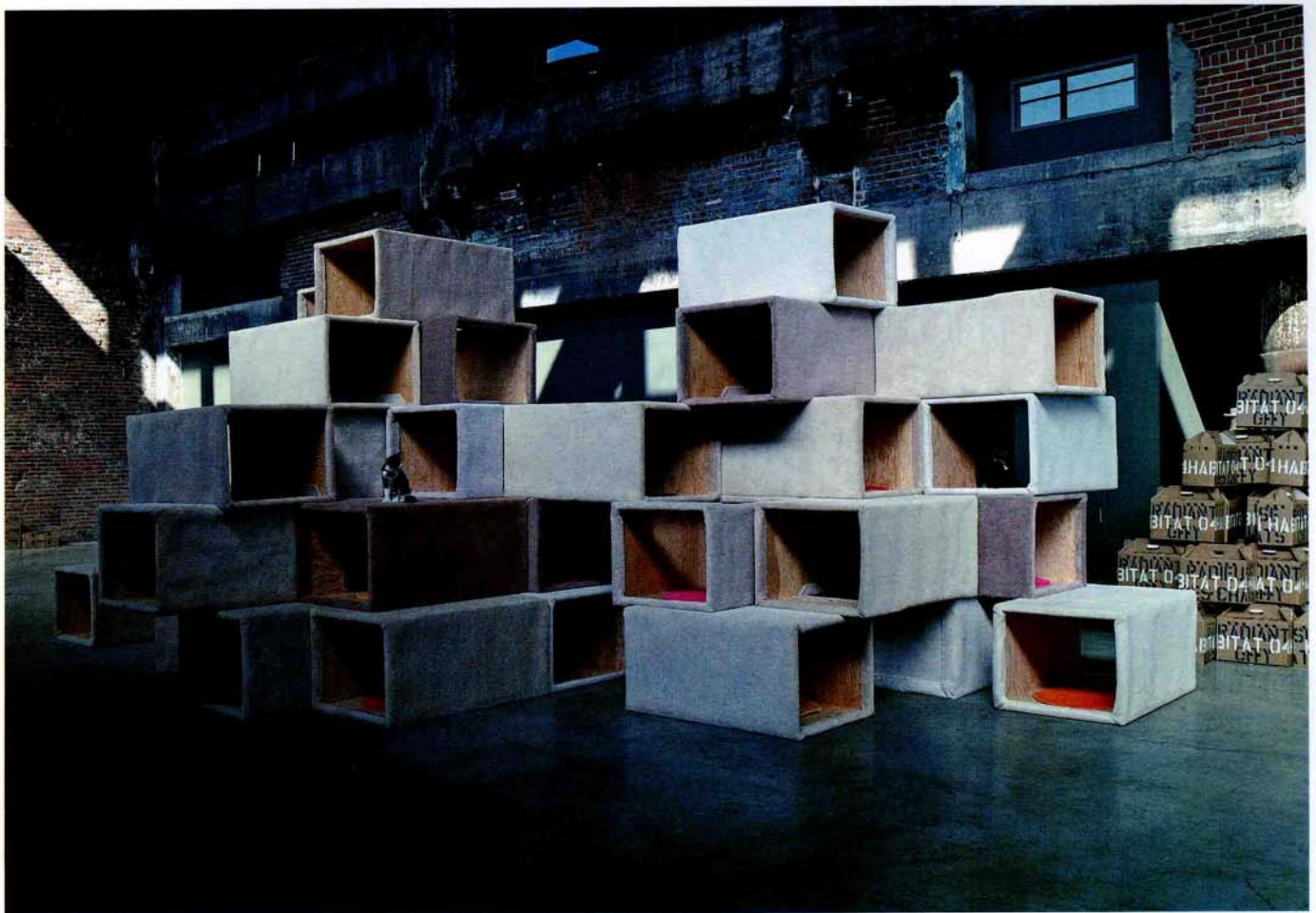
BJ: And their structural limitations. It was really a matter of just figuring it out as I went along, which is an exciting way to work. This may sound terribly romantic, but you can get lost in something, and the work takes over; that's very exciting. That doesn't always happen. I think that's one of the joys of working with the things yourself. Working with a group of people and building something with your hands – that's a very pleasurable thing. And you also have to recognise that there are some things you just can't do.

LH: The whales began to appear when issues surrounding Native whaling were very prominent out here.

BJ: Oddly, the Macah whale hunt was around the same time, but I never really considered that. It was very strange, because I was doing all this research about the history of First Nations and European whaling, especially on the West Coast, the history of Greenpeace and the history of the aquarium... maybe it's because I didn't have a television. I remember thinking, 'Oh, that's cool, they're doing a whale hunt.' I never saw any of the footage, then Michael Turner brought it up in an interview, and I thought, 'Oh, right: *that*.'

LH: In relation to your work, there was the controversy over how extinct these whales were. And here were yours with a half-life of a billion years.

BJ: Well, it's not that long. I wanted to make representations of these species



Habitat 04 - Cité radiieuse des chats [Cats Radiant City], 2004

with such an iconic image, and use something that was completely inorganic; something totally recognisable but also invisible at the same time. I've loved those chairs for a long time. They have some beautiful lines in them, but most people hate them.

LH: At least the ubiquity of them drives people mad.

BJ: When they break, people just chuck them out. I think that was the initial spark - I saw a pile of them broken and I thought, 'oh, that's fantastic.'

LH: Do you feel like there are two art histories, or multiple art histories: one, the canonised Western history of modern art, and then a West-Coast Native art history?

BJ: Definitely. I think there are many art histories.

LH: When you made the Nike masks did you wonder which art history you were appropriating and which art history you existed in?

BJ: That's the duality. Both conceptual art and Native art kind of claim me. Although I would have to say, I'm not a Native artist in that way. I don't mean that in a derogatory way. I'm not saying that it's something I'm not interested in; but my training is in conceptual contemporary art. In these works, I'm referencing the idea of Native art, but I'm not part of any of these traditions I'm referencing. People find that very confusing.

LH: It's maybe the best thing about them - how confusing it is. Appropriation of voice was such a hot issue in the late 1980s and 90s. Was it an issue for you?

BJ: It was an issue in art school. I felt like I was being recruited into a PC gang.

They were reading Cornell West and Bell Hooks and others, and there was this doctrine I wasn't interested in - this carbon copy of identity politics. I was interested in my identity, but I was also interested in how it can be diffused and embraced by pop culture; especially in British Columbia, where very specific ceremonial practices of Indians have become generic. And can I, and the fact that I'm First Nations, cross-culturally appropriate that?

LH: And to the same extent that you're appropriating a BC carving tradition, you're also appropriating...

BJ: ...basketball culture...

LH: ...and the story of Michael Jordan. I was curious if he's seen the works.

BJ: He owns one. His people saw the story in the *Washington Post* in October for my show in New York at the New Museum and they got all excited. Jordan read the article and thought it was hilarious. And his group, or whatever, contacted my gallery, Catriona Jeffries, and she said, 'Well, you can't have one, there's none available.' They got all disappointed, and they asked if I could make one for him. I thought that was a perfect end to it. I made him not a mask but one of the variants. But I never followed basketball. I mean, I watched Michael Jordan on TV when I was a teenager. He was outstanding - groundbreaking - in the way that Wayne Gretsky was a pleasure to watch. And growing up, I watched sports just to have something to talk about.

LEE HENDERSON IS CONTEMPORARY MAGAZINE'S VANCOUVER CORRESPONDENT AND A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR FOR BORDER CROSSING MAGAZINE. HE IS THE AUTHOR OF *THE BROKEN RECORD TECHNIQUE* (PENGUIN)