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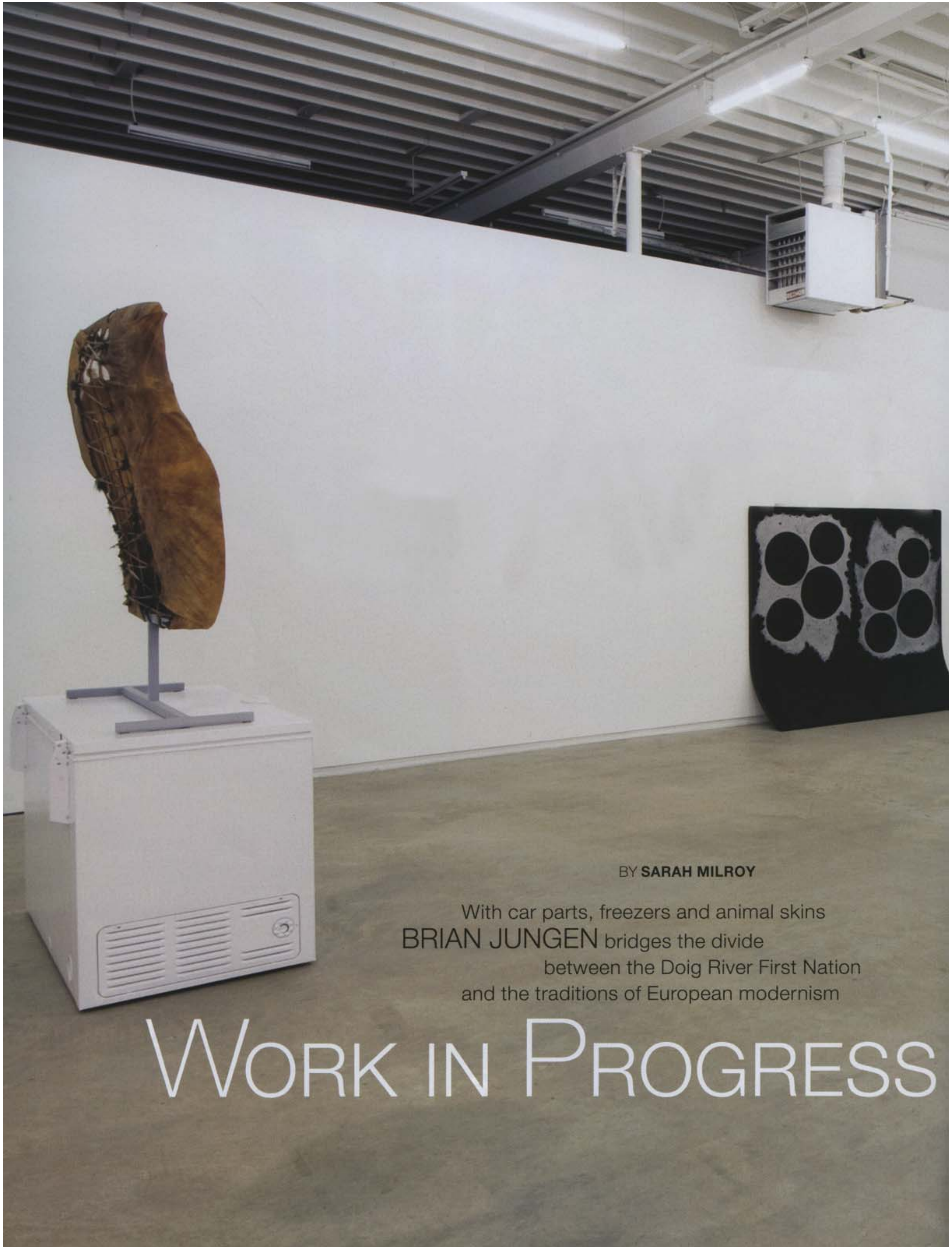

BY **SARAH MILROY**

With car parts, freezers and animal skins BRIAN JUNGEN bridges the divide between the Doig River First Nation and the traditions of European modernism

WORK IN PROGRESS

Sarah Milroy, 'Work in Progress', *Canadian Art*, Spring, 2011

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A BIG DOG IS BARKING behind the metal fire-door entrance to Vancouver's Catriona Jeffries Gallery, but it's a friendly bark. When I step inside, I'm greeted by a giant, brindled husky-wolfhound, with dark-rimmed eyes and a long, swooping tail. His lips are pulled back in a toothy smile, and his body is writhing hello.

The artist Brian Jungen holds open the door. Ed is four, Jungen tells me, but was big even as a puppy —"like this," he says, making a two-armed gesture like he's hugging a beach ball. These days, the artist doesn't go anywhere without him.

I have not seen Jungen in a number of years, and when he shakes my hand—no art-world air-kissing here—I can see that time on his face. At 40, his dark hair has started to silver, his body is a little thicker, and there is a new look of solitude in his eyes. The meteoric career sweep of the past 15 years, and all the air miles that have gone with it, have weathered him.

Behind him, two sculptures stand in the space. Jungen made them last year in his Vancouver studio, mounting cut-up car-body parts onto metal armatures, and then stretching animal skins over top. They are positioned on two white, brand-new chest freezers. One of the forms is sheathed in a large moosehide, which has been stretched and then lashed top to bottom at the back, like a corset. The other is outfitted in circular drum-skins of various sizes; the circles are stitched together with strips of rawhide and stretched over two red car fenders. The first sculpture has the look of rugged endurance and quiet, earthbound dignity. The second suggests more buoyancy, with a graceful, lilting gait.

"People from up north understand these materials. They get the language," Jungen says, stepping back and looking around the gallery while Ed finds his place on a blanket in the corner. I have forgotten how soft-spoken the artist is. I have to lean forward to hear him.

By "up north," Jungen means the reserve at Doig River First Nation, north of Fort St. John—where he spends a lot of time these days—and the hundreds of small communities like it that lie far from the big Canadian cities to the south. "People up there, on the reserve, have freezers everywhere, they have car parts everywhere and they have animal parts everywhere," he says. "Stretched hides are just part of the landscape." Jungen, who is part European (on his father's side) and half Dane-zaa (on his mother's), is aiming to create a kindred space in the gallery for tinkering, problem-solving and hanging out.

But while Jungen may see intimations of the Doig River reserve in his new installation, I see the ghosts of modernism: not only the string sculptures of Naum Gabo, but also the primordial shapes of Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore, who, like many modernists following in Picasso's footsteps, struggled to recapture a more immediate connection to nature through an imagined primitivism.

The new works also remind me of a Jungen sculpture that startled me in Jeffries's booth at Art Basel last June: a composition of willow drum-hoops arranged into an abstract form, with the drum heads removed and then stretched over the whole. The work emanated presence and distilled thought, a standout amid the go-go frenzy of the fair. It made me curious.

I have watched Jungen's career since the mid-1990s, and I can remember every episode. It began with the shock of the first *Prototype for New Understanding*, his series of ingenious, mask-like sculptures made from cut-up Nike sneakers. These were creolized expressions of Jungen's mixed heritage, and an ironic riff on the tourist industry's Aboriginal branding of so-called "Supernatural British Columbia." Back then, bursting on to the scene, Jungen was the boy genius, the postmodern trickster scavenging in the junk pile of pop culture, and the maker of cheeky, homerotic drawings of Mounties and Indians.

I recall the rainy morning in 2000 that I visited Or Gallery in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside to discover how Jungen had spent his summer residency there: cutting up white plastic lawn chairs and reassembling them into the shape of a giant whale skeleton. (He would go on to make two more.) I also remember the opening of his survey show at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2006—for which he raised a giant teepee made of black leather culled from mass-produced sofas—and that show's earlier incarnation at New York's New Museum, where one of his giant whales took on a nostalgic aspect, magnificently adrift in the international waters of the art world.

For a spell, it seemed as if Jungen had been swept up in the warm currents of global fame and opportunity. Exhibitions of his work popped up in Vienna, San Francisco, Munich, Lyon, Rotterdam, New York, London and Los Angeles. The curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, from Castello di Rivoli in Turin, included Jungen in her exhibition "The Moderns," alongside such fellow rising A-listers as Simon Starling, Sarah Sze, Jorge Pardo and Liam Gillick. At Tate Modern, Jessica Morgan gave him a solo show.

Then, a few years ago, I came across an image of a work that Jungen had shown at New York's Casey Kaplan gallery. It looked like a cigar store Indian on wheels, the body and head fashioned from cut-up baseball gloves and other leather sports equipment. The piece, titled *The Prince*, was made in 2006, and it seemed caustic, even glib. I thought of Basquiat, and his harsh, racial *cris de coeur*. I started to wonder if this, too, was some pained form of self-portraiture, evidence of biting self-scrutiny by an Aboriginal art star on the fast track—a star I knew to be sharply intelligent and almost magically inventive with materials, but also sensitive, vigilant, private. After that, I didn't see anything for a while.

As I would learn over the two days I spent with him in Vancouver, Jungen had created this piece at a moment when he was making a change in his life, returning to spend time with his family and community on the Doig River reserve. A speaking engagement at a three-day Aboriginal wellness clinic turned into a three-month-long prodigal homecoming. Jungen started spending his summers there—living in a trailer, hunting and trapping, helping out the old folks, and, when he felt like it, making some art. In 2009, he stayed from June through February. He still goes up there whenever he can, particularly for long stretches in the summer, making the drive with Ed up and down the highway from Vancouver.

Here at the gallery, Jungen was working on a printmaking project, devised in response to his solo exhibition last summer at Washington's National Museum of the American Indian. "That was a totally different experience for me," he said. "It was the first time I had shown my work in that kind of an institution. Up until then, it had only been in museums of fine art or contemporary art." A lot of the First Nations artists he met at the opening offered to trade prints with him, but Jungen had never made multiple works of that sort. At Catriona Jeffries, he was experimenting, making monoprints using moosehides from Doig River. Some of the hides were whole, but others were remainders with circles cut from them—leftover skins that had been culled and prepared by his maternal great-uncle Jack, a drum maker.

The results were staple-gunned on to the gallery walls around us: long rolls of paper and small scraps of pinstriped suiting fabric stamped

Tomorrow, repeated 2010 Moose hide, car fenders, chest freezer and steel 2.43 m x 1.55 m x 74.9 cm

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with silver and magenta inks, transferred from moosehide. They were abstractions—ghostly, flesh-like textures suggesting bodies, both human and animal. They reminded me of the body prints of Yves Klein, and their silvering suggested Warhol (this space, after all, was a kind of Factory), but Jungen mentioned the work of African-American artist David Hammons. To make his 1970s body prints, Hammons greased his body with oil and pressed himself on the printing ground, then dusted the marks with pigment or powdered graphite, making his crushed body parts visible. It was the human figure under duress.

The morning we met, Jungen had just come back from a supply shop, where he had discovered a new material: black polyurethane foam, cut into large, thin sheets. These sheets were providing an unexpectedly satisfying printing surface for the silver monoprints, but he was also reviewing a few tests he had made on smaller, inch-thick castoff pieces from the store. These were even better, with a kind of fleshy presence, like slabs of spongy, black whale blubber. When printed, the result was a somatic fusion of eye and anticipated touch—a meaty pleasure. He was going to go back for more.

In the gallery, while I watched, Jungen prepared two of these big foam slabs, cleaning them with soap and water, then laboriously, patiently rinsing them and propping them against the wall. As they dried, they slouched—evoking both mattress and body.

I asked him about the radio station he had tried to start at Doig River a few years ago. "I really liked the role the radio played when I was growing up," he remembered. "I would listen and it was like: 'Bill, don't forget the laundry,' or 'Angie, your mother is drinking again. Please call.'" The radio created a community in which there were no secrets, in which everyone shared their successes and their sorrows. Jungen had imagined building a radio tower in the form of a leaning spiral, à la Vladimir Tatlin, but he soon realized it would have to remain a dream. The red tape was considerable—the CRTC, Industry Canada and Transport Canada would all have to approve it—and the band was unconvinced about an economic return on the investment. Thinking back, he adds, "my cousin made the point that we have a really high suicide rate." For a moment, a horrific, unspoken thought filled the room: build something tall and people might jump off it.

We talked about the sense of connection he feels with Doig River's old people, whom he helps out now that so many of the community's young men are working in the oil patch, or on survey crews—as he once did in his 20s. (When he was 24, Jungen worked cutting line for a seismic survey. Slicing a straight line 15 kilometres long through heavily forested terrain was "like being involved in a giant earth-art project," he recalled. The experience encouraged him to think about making artwork in three dimensions.)

We discussed the public-art project he is currently completing for the Banff Centre. He has made three wire sculptures based on the forms of elk, moose and caribou antlers, which will serve as outdoor seating around the new Kinnear Centre for Creativity and Innovation. The sculptures have the graceful, biomorphic look of Henry Moore or Jean Arp, but they are gridded, like digital 3-D sketches. The pieces were inspired, Jungen said, by Dane-zaa mythology, which tells how humankind is descended from giant animals, ten times the size of those today.

Jungen told me, too, about his decision to stop making on-site installations for large group shows, and his desire to avoid the "insane biennale bullshit breathing down your neck." It was the only expletive he uttered in our two days together, and it sounded like a door slamming on the past. But he talked with pleasure about his solo show this year at the Art Gallery of Alberta, and about his upcoming show at the Art Gallery of Ontario—where he plans to show the new skin-and-car-parts sculptures. These, he said, are "manageable pressures." The good kind.

Most of all, though, Jungen likes to talk about hunting and trapping, childhood practices that he has returned to in mid-life. Animals have played a role in his art from the very beginning—from the photo-realist paintings of horses and wolves that got him into art school ("My teachers at Emily Carr told me I had to find more interesting subject matter," he said), to the giant whale skeletons that clinched his international reputation—but the animals' role is more visceral today.

To "come out of the closet" as a hunter, Jungen said, is not without its dangers. "People just don't understand. A friend of mine took a video of me skinning a lynx. When I watched it, I was shocked by what it looked like. I thought, I can't show this to anybody. It just looks so violent. But if you experience the whole process—the hunting and trapping, the skinning and preparing of the hides, the using of the parts, making things from them, whether you call it craft or art—I find that process very beautiful. If you just take out one part of it—like me skinning the lynx—you just can't get it."

Jungen is at pains to distinguish his new work with hides from that of possible feminist precursors like Jana Sterbak, Marina Abramović, Eva Hesse and Janine Antoni, who used real or simulated hide, or the metaphor of dried flesh and skin, to evoke the more harrowing aspects of female embodiment. Lacerated, dried, perforated, all strung out, the works were often painful to look at, redolent of trauma.

"That is the association that worries me the most," Jungen said. "It's a completely different body politic. I am referencing my own specific culture. I am trying to show respect for the animals. I know where these animals came from. I helped with the harvesting of them. I know how it's all done and I was a part of it. But it's a very graphic thing to do."

Of course, those of us who live in Canada's southern cities and buy our meat sanitized and shrink-wrapped will be the queasiest viewers. I find myself ruminating on the white laminate facades of the freezers in Jungen's new works. These mass-produced, pocked surfaces subtly simulate animal skin, making them synthetic signs of a now-abstracted referent.

We are caught up, Jungen said, in a profound hypocrisy. "Hunting and trapping are a huge part of the history of this country. It's the reality. Most Canadians who live outside the city still have a relationship to natural resources that is very direct. They understand their relationship to animals in a completely different way. The real division in this country now is not between French and English, or east and west," he adds. "It's between north and south." For his part, Jungen has navigated this different set of solitudes with honesty, with difficulty and with deep insight.

Jungen told me that the sculptures in the gallery are, in a sense, portraits of people from his northern community, and there is no doubt that they have personalities. Through my eyes, though, I see something different: the animal and the car, a kind of head-on collision between natural and manmade materials, and also between traditional, collaborative working processes and industrialized mass-production—two different ways of making and being. But there's no roadkill here. Jungen's sculptural solutions transcend these tensions, finding beauty and a balance that has been hard-won. They signal a new way forward. ■

View of exhibition installation
in process, January, 2011

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