

REVIEWS

## Brian Jungen Shows Continuity & Contrast in German Survey

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Brian Jungen *Eero* 2011 Womb chair seat, elk hide, tarred twine, steel, granite 168.9 × 94 × 108 cm Courtesy Gluskin Sheff + Associates Inc.

Brian Jungen's recently opened exhibition at the [Kunstverein Hannover](#) is comprised of eight years of work, almost all of it produced since the artist's survey at the [Vancouver Art Gallery](#) in 2006. That survey, which included touring stops at the New Museum and Museum Villa Stuck, was comprised of 13 years of work, much of it drawn from the artist's first solo exhibition—at Calgary's [Truck](#) in 1997—forward.

While the temporal before-and-after quality of these periods—before 2006 and after—has the critical eye on contrasts between the two exhibitions, continuities pervade. Indeed, it is situations like these that remind us why an artist's work should be assessed with respect to the larger practice, particularly an artist for whom time and space are less a linear—or divisible—construct than a dialectical one.

The Kunstverein Hannover is a space divided into seven rooms connected in a fairly linear fashion.

The first room is sparsely arranged and features three works: *The Prince* (2006), *Skull* (2006–2009) and *Blanket No. 2* (2008). While these works are unmistakably Jungen (a cigar-store Indian "greeter" made of baseball gloves, a skull made of softballs and baseballs, and a warp-and-weft blanket made from football jerseys), it is their supports as much as their narrative source material that preface what follows: free-standing works, works atop plinths,

and wall works. In other words, no masks on armatures and nothing hanging from the ceiling—modes of display with which Jungen initially became associated.

In the next room, a larger display consists of plastic gasoline and water canisters into which designs have been drilled; an arrangement of women's gloves; and a deer hide stretched over a jumble of drum frames. Just as the minutely drilled designs deny each canister its utility, the same could be said of the muted (perhaps interior) relationship between the hide and the drum frames.

If a prompt is required to signal these inversions, it can be found in *Wieland* (2006), where a handful of red leather gloves have been modelled to approximate a bird, or an angel, or an inverted maple leaf, like the one at the centre of an upside-down Canadian flag. Either way, *Wieland* can be read as both an homage to influential Canadian artist (i.e. [Joyce](#)) and a critique of the Trudeau-era nation-building project that Wieland was considered to be included in (a project that did not, for the most part, include the work of First Nations artists).

With material and political-economic inversions in place, the room that follows is the most ambitious one in the show.

For *Five Year Universe* (2011), Jungen used five stretched elk hides to create 20 silver-ink relief mono prints on large rectangles of thin black foam. These prints are arranged vertically, aligned side-by-side and top-to-bottom to form two horizontal rows of 10, making it the largest work in the exhibition. Past configurations of this work have left the images of the hides relatively intact; in this new configuration of the work at the Kunstverein, the prints suggest antlers more so than hides, and they occasionally meet to suggest new forms (like birds' wings, say), though mostly they do not. Instead, this is an abstract composition, concerned not with the noun form of process, but its verb.

At the groundbreaking 1999 show of Jungen's *Prototype for New Understanding* series at the [Charles H. Scott Gallery](#) in Vancouver, it was not just the Nike-trainer masks that drew attention, but also the wall murals which were sometimes reflected in the masks' museum-style vitrines. These murals were based on drawings solicited by volunteers on the city's Granville Island, who stopped passers-by to ask what they think of when they think of "Indianness."

With *Five Year Universe*, however, the primacy of the wall is undeniable. On the floor before it, atop plinths made not of wood but of metal (think autopsy lab), elk hides have "body-snatched" that which Jungen once reconfigured to make his whales. Not blow-moulded plastic chairs, in this instance, but something less disposable, more "refined"—expensive chairs made not by Wal-Mart but by modern designers in service of a discriminating clientele, items such as cone chairs and womb chairs sold (at the lower end) by outlets like Design Within Reach.

For those seeking a more spectacular, less abstracted reconfiguration, the room's final element, *Blanket No. 7* (2008), provides both a road in and a road out. This symmetrical (and equally stretched) work is comprised of LA Lakers and Denver Nuggets basketball jerseys.

Continuing on this road is a grove of five free-standing totem poles made of golf bags. Each one is named for the decades since First Nations people earned the right to vote federally in Canada, and each one is a monument as much to time as to space.

For fans of Jungen's masks and whales, and admirers of the artist's uncanny ability to find in tailored materials the [northwest-coast ovoid motif](#), this totem-pole room (the largest and longest of the gallery spaces) will come as a respite from the mesomorphic abstract sculptures that preceded it.

But for those wanting more of Jungen's elk hides, the room that follows marks a return to form, with hides stretched over car parts set atop unplugged freezers, the same freezers used by consumers who purchase their meat in bulk (or those who bag, skin and apportion it themselves). On the wall at the end, visible through the totems, is the exhibition's first instance of electricity: a blue LED tube light arranged in loops around a stretched deer hide.

While the penultimate room is the smallest in the gallery and functions as something of an intermezzo, it is in *Thunderbirds* (2006), a wall-mounted array of five rear-view mirrors, that the last trace of the ovoid appears—and in found form, no less. (Could this be the artist's last "look back" at his use of a motif associated not with his native Dane-Zaa, but with the Haida, Kwakwaka'wakw, Tlingit, Salish and Tsimshian?)

As for the final room, the inversion that has run through much of Jungen's work since the late 1990s (and certainly through this exhibition) completes itself in a series of commercially produced multi-coloured feedbags bound with belts and placed upon on the floor—the same type of bags, I understand, that are thrown from pick-up trucks to nourish the farmed elk and deer that have supplied Jungen with his hides.

Also included in this final room, as in most of the rooms in the exhibition, are blankets, as well as the exhibition's oldest piece: the oxymoronic *Portable Still* (2003–2005), a poignant work that is improvised (as only a still can be) from materials that include a baby carriage.

When it was announced in 2003 that Jungen would be the subject of a touring survey organized by the VAG, some of his sharpest supporters wondered if such an exhibition was premature—that despite the artist's astounding modulations from masks to whales to Minimal-esque palettes, additional movements, as opposed to additional works, were required.

Similar questions were raised over the Hannover exhibition given that much of the work debuted not at public institutions (be they artist-run centres or the National Gallery of Canada) but commercial spaces, where a perception continues to exist that work presented in these settings is geared more at ends than at means.

However, what is most apparent from this exhibition is an artist who, regardless of the setting, continues to make work using the same processes (both poetical and political) that informed his masks and whales. Only now, his source materials are increasingly less mediated, the forms closer to an earlier (Arpian) modernism, their presence gentler, quieter, more open to outcome.