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**VISUAL ART**

# A Totem Pole Made of Christmas Lights

Bringing Superwrongness to Life

by JEN GRAVES

At the turn of the 20th century, the identity of the barely formed city of Seattle depended on a single visual symbol: the totem pole. Postcards bearing the image of the Alaskan totem pole that was erected in Pioneer Square in 1899 traveled the world, expressing "Seattleness" for all to see.

A totem pole still stands in Pioneer Square. It's not the first edition, which contained the remains of a revered Tlingit woman; it had been chopped down and stolen from an Alaskan village, then was set ablaze by arsonists, who were never caught, one night in 1938. Seattle was not Seattle without the pole, so city fathers sought Tlingit carvers to do a remake. They happened upon the best-known local carvers in the tradition playing baseball, which seemed too American, not native enough, so the work was outsourced to some Tlingits still living in Alaska—to whom many relocated Tlingits would send money they earned from doing tourist-based work like carving in Seattle. None of the Salish tribes—the tribes of this land—carve totem poles at all. The symbol that meant Seattle was imported, burned, then reimported, until finally it was replaced by a flying saucer on legs.

Not far from where the Pioneer Square totem pole stands, across an old, pockmarked street and between the tall trees of Occidental Park, there's currently another totem pole, decked out in Christmas lights, sparkling in the window of a storefront on Main Street. It beckons from across the park. The storefront is in the Union Trust Annex building, which also went up at the turn of the 20th century (to house the Superior Candy and Cracker Company). Today, it's the home of the second iteration of the once-very-large contemporary-art gallery Lawrimore Project. Before the economy tanked, Lawrimore Project was a 5,000-square-foot wonderland on Airport Way; now it is one chastening room, a pointed reflection of what Seattle will support when it comes to contemporary art now. These small shows are teasers for artists; the gallery spends as much energy representing artists in faraway art fairs.

The totem pole that's currently at the gallery is not a purist vision of nativeness, but neither is it an empty joke. It's flat, but it's three-sided. Each side is like two segments of a folding screen, the pieces of plywood joined together with metal brackets in the center. The plywood still bears the black-ink stamps of its manufacturing, and the brackets still bear bar-code stickers. These materials are all transitional. They are, as the title of the show—*The Spirit of Inconstancy*—suggests, inconstant.

They are not the traditional, beautiful cedar used in Northwest carving. They are not joined as if they came together naturally; it is easy to imagine taking them apart.

On each of the three open-book-like plywood surfaces, strings of multicolored Christmas lights have been secured with nails in a pattern taken from a souvenir totem pole the artist found (he thinks it was produced in China). The pattern is an adaptation from Northwest Coast formline, a style marked by bold shapes and colors developed by the Haida and Tlingit tribes of what's now known as Alaska and Western Canada. The artist, Raymond Boisjoly, uses flatness for humor. Each outer plywood edge is laser cut into a cartoonlike silhouette of a totem pole.

Boisjoly has taken a mass-produced, hollowed-out version of a Haida totem—great Vs made by the twinkling lights of the pagan version of a Christian holy day seeming to form the eyebrows and beak of a raven, but who can say exactly what animal this is?—and made it into even more of a pancake, while somehow bringing it back to superwrong life. For all the cultural critique embedded in this rendition of a rendition, there's joy in its soft radiance; it is not a cynical object. Boisjoly is based in Vancouver, BC. He grew up in Chilliwack, BC, about 100 kilometers east of Vancouver, son of a Haida mother and Quebecois father. Throughout his life, he has been asked to represent one side of himself or another, isolate and present one facet at a time. In his suburban grade school the aboriginal students were separated and talked to about their aboriginalness. Meanwhile, Boisjoly doesn't speak the native tongue of his father, French. He seems to have responded to the whole thing with curious amusement leavened by sincere compassion.

Boisjoly made this sculpture four years ago, when he was graduating with an MFA from the University of British Columbia. He called it *Expanding Fields*, in a reference to the 1970s art-historical theory of "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," which Rosalind Krauss devised as a way to look at new intersections of art, architecture, and landscape—each category changing when they came together rather than remaining stable. He was also influenced, early on, by accounts of aborigines (including the Haida) by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Translation has been a running theme in Boisjoly's work—his other piece on display at Lawrimore Project is called *The Writing Lesson: Seattle*, and it is a pictogram of the city's name.

It's part of a series of pictograms of indigenously derived local place names (Chilliwack, Seattle, Yakima). For *Seattle*, a white vinyl stencil is applied to the front of a half-inch-thick piece of Plexiglas with black construction paper on the back. The paper is fading constantly in a fuzzy silhouette around the raised vinyl stencil. You will get a changing view through the glass as the light marks the paper over time.

The vinyl stencil is a jagged, Rorschachy script that brings to mind a splayed insect or a masked face. *S, E, A, T, T, L, E*—the word is rendered angrily and unrecognizably. You can't read the Duwamish chief's transliterated name in this drawing, you can only guess at which lines are meant to form an *A* or a *T*, the same way you can only sort of make out a raven in the lights of *Expanding*

Fields. The script for *Seattle* is adapted from the logo style of Norwegian black-metal bands that emphasize the violent Christianization of Scandinavia, where pagan holy sites were destroyed in order to throw an entire aging culture into crisis. *The Writing Lesson: Seattle* is an anti-postcard. It will fall in on itself, then it will disappear. ★