Jonah Gray, 'Raymond Boisjoly: From age to age as its shape slowly unravelling...’ CMagazine, Artist Project, Issue 125, Spring 2015
The picture on the overleaf, like the larger body of work to which it belongs, was obtained by using a document scanner to capture the fleeting frames of a video displayed on the screen of a digital tablet. To make these works, the artist Raymond Boisjoly combined two seemingly incompatible technologies, placing the tablet on the scanner bed while a video was playing, thereby creating a mangled still that freezes a kind of interstitial moment between frames. The source video in this case is the anti-colonial short Statues Also Die (1953), by Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, and Ghislain Cloquet (previous sources for Boisjoly have included TV performances by Buffy Sainte-Marie, and vocal duo Pat and Lolly Vegas, among others). But these are not snapshots simply arrested from the illusory flow of motion that would otherwise be glossed over by the persistence of vision. Rather, they are unique images arising from an unlikely interfacing of technologies that stretch, blur and disintegrate the video signal with phantasmagoric results. In the process of its transmission, the original material is changed almost beyond recognition.
Artist Project

This enfoldment of form and content is indicative of a larger commitment within Boisjoly’s oeuvre to a rigorously analog (that is, capable of thinking through an infinite gradation along a finitely specified dimension) rather than binary (or digital – on/off) politics. Boisjoly’s scanner works, in particular, have no time for the cultural power structures that depend on the propagation and maintenance of binaries like colonizer/colonized and us/them, but neither do they take an oppositional stance that can be defined according to those binaries. This is because the critique immanent in these works is not rooted in negation, but instead sets about detailing the qualities of difference itself.

As their titles attest, the suite of scanner works shown at Catriona Jeffries Gallery in 2013 – *Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)*, *Write Me Baby, He’s a Keeper of the Fire* – constellation around the theme of identity and its mediation. Dominant cultures throughout history have marginalized “others” by categorizing them as out-of-time or out-of-history. In the early 20th century, Edward S. Curtis justified his efforts to catalogue the “North American Indian” on the basis of a widely held belief at the time that Indigenous cultures were dying out. Similar logic also underpinned far more sinister projects such as the Government of Canada’s genocidal starvation policies of the late 1800s. Boisjoly’s works for the Catriona Jeffries exhibition use historical material not only to demonstrate the persistence of Indigenous peoples through history but also to highlight examples of performers (both from Indigenous backgrounds, like Buffy Sainte-Marie and the Vegases, as well as the mixed-race funk group Sly & The Family Stone) who have adapted dominant cultures to meet their own needs. By calling up these exemplary moments of cultural production from the past for our contemplation in the present, these works wrest identity, in general, and indigeneity, in particular, out of the realm of archaic stereotypes and situate them firmly in the contemporary moment.
Statues Also Die, which provides the basis for Boisjoly’s image here, was banned in France for 15 years after its initial release. Over a montage of dramatically lit African statuary and footage of French museum-goers, a voice-over critiques the European colonizers’ desire to inscribe their own meanings onto ethnographic objects independent of their originary contexts, significance and uses. In the charged climate of 1950s France, particularly in light of the Algerian anti-colonial struggles that would escalate into full-scale war in 1954, such commentary was obviously not welcomed by those in power. Still, it was apparently only banned outright when censors determined that excising the offending messages would require the film to be completely re-edited.1 Serendipitous as it might be, this quirk of the film’s history seems to me especially apposite to Boisjoly’s project. There is something perversely legitimizing about this anecdote, as if the ban were an implicit acknowledgment of the unique expressive weight afforded by a rigorous integration of form and content. At the same time, this is precisely the sort of historical re-evaluation that Boisjoly’s works promote: a kind of sifting through the past for images and ideas that can take on a fresh importance as we try to anticipate and shape the future. Like Boisjoly’s earlier scanner works, the picture on the overleaf emphasizes the now of our encounter with it, rather than simply passing on the historical images to which it refers. It achieves this effect by calling attention to its own mode of expression. The signal from the past is distorted in the process of its transmission. The work thus implicates and empowers us as viewers both in deciphering the traces of history in the work and in actively imagining what might come next.

Endnote

Raymond Boisjoly is an Indigenous artist of Haida and Quebecois descent based in Vancouver, Canada. His work has been shown in numerous galleries and artist-run centres in Canada and abroad. This past year, Boisjoly presented solo exhibitions at Platform Centre for Photographic + Digital Arts (Winnipeg), Urban Shaman (Winnipeg) and Carleton University Art Gallery (Ottawa). His work was included in Unsettled Landscapes at SITE Santa Fe, L’avenir (looking forward) at The Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal for La Biennale de Montréal, Sympathetic Magic at Mendel Art Gallery (Saskatoon), The Militant Image at Camera Austria (Graz) and Moucharabieh at Triangle France (Marseille).

Jonah Gray is an independent curator and former co-publisher of Pyramid Power, a contemporary art periodical based in Vancouver. He holds an MA in Critical and Curatorial Studies from UBC. His most recent curatorial project was Where Does it Hurt, a group exhibition at Artspeak.