

Here's what whales, basketball and Nike Air Jordans have to do with the art of Brian Jungen



By **Christine Sismondo** Special to the Star
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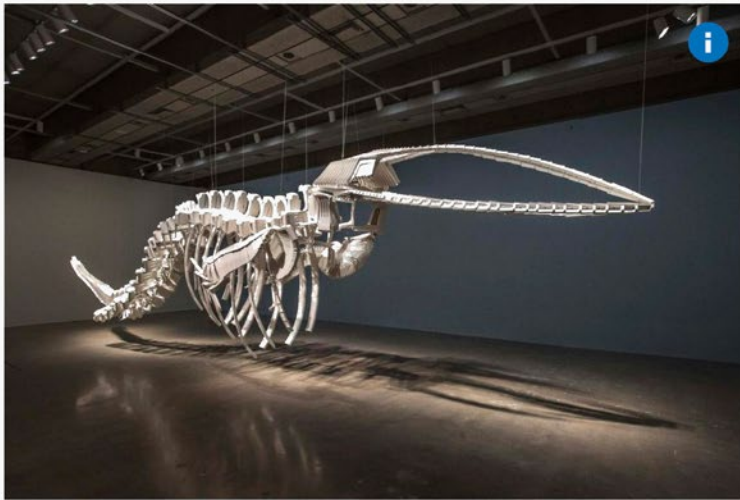
For a lot of visitors to the [Art Gallery of Ontario](#) this summer, the biggest takeaway from the *Brian Jungen: Friendship Centre* exhibition will likely be the memory of the breathtaking, show-stopping *Cetology*, a roughly 15-metre-long sculpture of a whale skeleton made entirely from white plastic patio chairs.

The selfie sticks are sure to come out. And we should probably go easy on them this time, given that it's easy to get swept up in a little emotion when you take in the grandeur of this white whale, a 2002 installation that's here on loan from the Vancouver Art Gallery for

celebrated contemporary Canadian artist's new solo exhibition in Toronto.

Cetology stirs up memories from childhood visits to natural history museums, manages to almost magically capture the motion and energy of marine life and, simultaneously, makes a point about plastics and the environment.

"People can relate to the plastic chair, but they don't see it at first, so there's a really nice thing that happens when they see what it's made of, like a kind of spark," says Jungen. "My choice to use it was because the whaling industry used to produce oil for lighting the streets. It was all whale oil until it was replaced by petroleum, so that was kind of the motivation for this piece."



Jungen, an artist of mixed European and Indigenous heritage who lives and works in British Columbia, is known for his use of unusual raw materials in the construction of his art — most famously, Nike Air Jordan shoes, which he cut up into small pieces to make various sculptures evocative of First Nations war bonnets.

It's his third solo show at the AGO, but this impressive multimedia exhibit, which curator Kitty Scott is calling a "mid-career retrospective," is by far the largest. Since Jungen is turning 50 next year, he quipped that it was also his mid-life crisis.

That playful humour is present in Jungen's work, even when the pieces deal with serious contemporary issues: cultural inequality, cultural appropriation, consumer capitalism and child labour. And

that unique, slightly dark yet paradoxically bright perspective and approach are an important part of the story that *Friendship Centre* is trying to tell.

Some will be drawn in by the whale; others by the vivid main space full of sculptures made from sporting equipment. Still others, who are interested in the artistic process and gaining insight into Jungen's way of seeing the world, will surely be drawn into *Vernacular* (1998-2001), which welcomes visitors at the entrance.

On loan from the National Gallery of Canada, *Vernacular* is a sketch/work sheet he used to make notes, doodle on and work out ideas and, since he's still intrigued by a lot of the same contradictions and contemporary problems, it serves as a fascinating portrait of the artist as a young man. It's also like that map you find at the beginning of a fantasy novel that helps you navigate the journey you're about to take into the artist's life, process and perspective.

"It's a lot," says Jungen as we walk past the archival photos flicking by on a five-hour slide show in the second "transition room," which is outfitted as a locker room on the way to the "gym."

“It’s a lot for me to see because it’s my life. It’s a bit uncomfortable, but I think it’s interesting enough for people to see a little bit of where I come from.”

When you walk into the gym, the largest gallery space, you step onto a slightly cushioned piece of artwork: the entire floor is painted like a basketball court. The room is a stunning collection of diverse pieces, towering totem poles made out of stacked golf bags, horse masks made from neon Nikes and the vast majority of his celebrated Air Jordan war bonnets from the series *Prototypes for New Understanding*, many of which have never been exhibited together.

“I started making them when I was reading about the labour practices of Nike, which was really big in the news in the late ’90s,” he recalls. “But then I saw some of their prototypes and I thought they looked like handmade trainers. I thought they were outstanding things. But I was also linking it to the commodification of native art and how that’s bought and sold, and the disparities between the communities the art comes from and where it winds up ... in wealthy collections.”



It’s obviously not just Air Jordans that work as an access point for investigating cultural inequality for Jungen, who’s interested in the use of Indigenous and First Nations names for sports teams. There’s also the general observation he makes that the role of sports in settler society might be comparable to traditional dance or ceremony among First Nations people. Basketball, though, he thinks is particularly significant.

“I used to have a studio in Vancouver right behind the Friendship Centre on East Hastings,” says Jungen. “So I started spending a lot of time there and, just like at my home community, that has a big gymnasium as part of the community centre. And so much happens in the gymnasium, not just basketball but, like, powwows, dance practices and community meetings.”

“It all happens on the basketball court and I thought it was this funny universal thing about Friendship Centres that maybe a lot of Indigenous people don’t really recognize. But it’s there.”

Brian Jungen: Friendship Centre is at the AGO, 317 Dundas St. W., until Aug. 25. See ago.ca for information.