

Brian Jungen

by Earl Miller

Shooting baskets while avoiding bumping into sculptures may not be an anticipated activity for Art Gallery of Ontario visitors. However, that has changed, at least temporarily, with Brian Jungen's recasting of the Sam and Ayala Zacks Pavilion as a nearly-to-scale basketball court, a striking installation at the centre of the artist's massive, career-spanning "Friendship Centre," 2019, exhibition. As well as nodding to Jungen's ongoing use of sports equipment (running shoes and golf bags) as sculptural material, it references how gymnasiums often double as community centres on reserves: social meeting places not strictly for sports but for socializing and traditional ceremonies as well.

Jungen's direct response to site ensures this exhibition is as much about museum intervention in the present tense as it is about a retrospective. Locating a community meeting place for Indigenous people transforms the museum from an elite, sequestered space to a more open, informal one and, in doing so, by implication, decolonizes it. Such a methodology of cross-cultural transformation is what characterizes the best work in this retrospective.

Curated by Kitty Scott, "Friendship Centre" is Jungen's first major exhibition since his 2006 early career survey at the Vancouver Art Gallery; accordingly, this current later career exhibition is more expansive. The basketball court, functioning as an athletic-themed sculpture garden, houses a collection of sculptural works and wall drawings spanning two decades. Many are from the artist's iconic "Prototypes for a New Understanding," 1998–2005, for which Jungen transformed, through sculptural collage, Nike Air Jordan sneakers to resemble Northwest



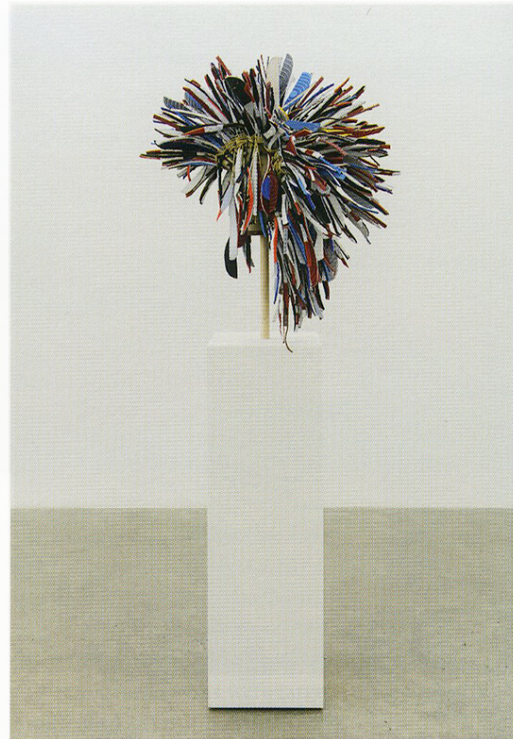
Coast masks. Consider, for example, *Prototype for New Understanding #5*, 1999, with strands of human hair streaming down from cut-up and adhered-together runners—an uncanny merger of consumer goods and human form. The mask's colours—red, black and white—are characteristically Northwest Coast. Meanwhile, the product name “Nike,” inscribed prominently on the mask's nose, leaves a profane blemish on tradition.

In 2017 Jungen returned to building “Nike” pieces, again with Air Jordans, after just over a decade's hiatus. This most recent incarnation, however, adds interactivity in wearable pieces such as *Warrior 1*, 2017, one of four recent war bonnets that Jungen based on Plains Indian headdresses. Thinly sliced runners cluster together with laces underlying them to form a sculpture that, from a front view, is nearly abstract. With vivid colours and the wavy, wandering nest of lines formed by the cut soles of the running shoes, the freely composed piece channels abstract expressionism. Consequently, this newer series grants the aesthetics of 20th-century modernism the task of conveying political content: the loss

of Indigenous culture via global consumerism. Yet, like the “Prototype for New Understanding” series, the “Warrior” series uses humour as an additional vehicle to communicate cultural disappearance.

Jungen's work, then, is as much about the vanishing of traditional culture as it is about the juxtaposition of Indigenous and settler cultures. Here, tracing the roots of that pairing to Jungen's biracial background (his father was the child of recent Swiss immigrants to Canada; his mother was Dane-zaa) leads to a dead end. It is worth paying attention instead to Jungen's observation of “Nike Air Jordan's popularity with Indigenous youth,” which suggests that he is not sandwiching two disparate cultures together but commenting on how they have become so intermeshed they are nearly unrecognizable.

Beyond the cultural intermix—some would say “absorption”—the exhibition's tightest connective thread is how Jungen imbues everyday objects with uncanny strangeness. Exemplary of this transformation are five altered jerry cans he produced between 2008 and 2012. Jungen drilled intricate abstract or subtly imagistic



patterns—for instance, of dragonflies (*Dragonfly*, 2008)—into vessels used to carry gasoline. Given the banality of the jerry cans, adding decorative detail alluding to traditional beadwork is an ironic if not outright comical gesture.

Jungen's transformational works are his strongest, but the ambition of the exhibition at points lets it run wayward. Consider the included 46-minute film converted to five-channel video, *Modest Livelihood (Director's Cut)*, 2019, made in collaboration with Duane Linklater. It depicts Jungen moose hunting with Linklater and Jungen's uncle, Elder Jack Askoty. Shot in real-time cinéma-vérité, it sharply differs from his sculptural works in lacking multiple cultural sources and interpretations. Not lapses in coherence but overcrowding causes problems in the central basketball court. Jammed with sculpture and wall

1. Brian Jungen, installation view, “Friendship Centre,” 2019, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON. © Brian Jungen. Courtesy the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

2. *Warrior 2*, 2017, Nike Air Jordans, hide glue, deerskin, 86 x 72 x 61 centimetres. Photo: SITE Photography. © Brian Jungen. Courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. Collection of Nancy McCain and Bill Morneau.

3. Brendan Fernandes, installation view, “Commons Artist Project: Brendan Fernandes,” 2019, MCA Chicago, Chicago. Photo: Nathan Keay. © MCA Chicago. Courtesy MCA Chicago, Chicago.

drawings, the community centre, despite its scale, is too overwhelmed to serve as a visual link.

Typically, like-minded people meet in community centres and form groups to pursue common interests, from chess to badminton. Extending this metaphor to “Friendship Centre,” selective editing would have benefited this retrospective. Brian Jungen is one of Canada’s most important artists; this exhibition requires focus on Jungen’s maverick admixture of transformation, humour and cultural barrier breaking. ■

“Brian Jungen: Friendship Centre” was exhibited at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, from June 20 to August 25, 2019.

Earl Miller is an independent art writer and curator based in Toronto.