

Fetishism, Curiosity, and the Work of Brian Jungen

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*Brian Jungen at the Vancouver Art Gallery
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It may have been my imagination, but the crowds thronging the halls of the Vancouver Art Gallery on the evening of February 3, 2006 seemed slightly more animated than usual, the atmosphere more charged, conversation more electric. The occasion was the opening of Brian Jungen's much-anticipated exhibition. The Vancouver-based Emily Carr Institute graduate, noted for his inventive appropriation and reconfiguration of common, industrially produced consumer items, particularly those that have a powerful identity on the global market, has become something of a desirable commodity himself as of late. His work re-crafts prefabricated commodities into sculptural objects, a practice which, according to Jungen, arose in part from witnessing his mother's habit (out of practicality and economic necessity) of "constantly extend[ing] the life of things"¹ by recycling household items for new uses. For Jungen, the transformation of these objects is a strategy of exploration and critique, an interrogation of the messy and often uncomfortable intersection of the global economy, the discourses of art, and his own, part aboriginal ancestry and its cultural stereotypes.

The exhibition debuted at New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art in the winter of 2005 and, after its installment in Vancouver, will close at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal in September. It is curated by Daina Augaitis and is significant for the fact
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that it marks the first opportunity to consider the full scope of Jungen's oeuvre. Many of the works on view here, including the artist's earliest drawings as well as his more recent projects, are gathered together for the first time, and several pieces, such as the almost six-meter teepee constructed from the "skin" and "bones" of eleven Natuzzi leather sofas, were created especially for the Vancouver exhibition.

As the Natuzzi teepee suggests, the criticality of Jungen's practice hinges upon the confounding of essentialist cultural assumptions, on rendering things impure and unstable, on the double shock of recognition and misrecognition. His work has a particular resonance in and for Vancouver, a place where First Nations culture (and its cultural politics) is especially visible. From the International Airport to Stanley Park, from the newly opened Aboriginal Media Centre to the official insignia of the 2010 Olympic Games, native objects and images not only function centrally in the city's social imaginary and touristic spectacle, but also in local aboriginal communities' own claims to economic

and cultural capital. Far from a simple comment on the commercialization of First Nations culture, Jungen's work reveals the production and circulation, aestheticization, and politicization of native objects as a complex and unstable field of negotiation. Writing in the exhibition's catalogue, Cuauhtémoc Medina calls his pieces "games that mobilize aesthetic and cultural misunderstandings to explore ways to politicize cultural stereotypes in the age of global capitalism."²

By far the most well known works on view, and perhaps those which still most adeptly activate these issues, are Jungen's *Prototypes for a New Understanding* (1998–2005), created through the patient dismantling and reassembling of Nike Air Jordan trainers, transforming the objects with needle, thread, and glue from iconic footwear into something that resembles the ceremonial masks of the Northwest Coast. Together they comprise a limited series of twenty-three, a reference to the same number made hallowed by Michael Jordan. The idea came, he states, after visiting Manhattan's Nike Town, where he was

overwhelmed by the historicizing self-aggrandizement of the brand, the presentation of the athletic footwear in a rarified, museum-like setting, and the near magical elevation in global popular culture to the pinnacle of consumer excess through endorsement by a celebrity cult figure.³ With the *Prototypes*, Jungen purposefully confuses the normally discrete categories through which we apprehend such seemingly different commodities as expensive footwear and tribal objects, frustrating the viewer's desire for the "traditional" and the "authentic." To quote Richa Lacayo in *Time Magazine*, these mask-like forms raise pointed questions, about "magic and the objects that presume to have it, [and about] power and the gaudy ways it announces itself,"⁴ by conflating consumer trophies with tribal fetish. In a fitting final turn and in a manner which could not have more sharply underscored the series' critical force, the *Prototypes* themselves have become highly desired commodities; one has even been purchased by Michael Jordan himself.

The notion of the fetish, that object endowed with a special force or in-



BRIAN JUNGEN, *Furniture Sculpture* (2006) Natuzzi sofas, wood.
Courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Tomas Svab, Vancouver Art Gallery

dependent life, provides a crucial entrance point into the reading of much of Jungen's practice. The concept, employed ironically by both Marx and Freud to describe how bourgeois economies and culture were permeated by the very same irrationalities the West used to characterize the "primitive" beliefs of Africa,⁵ points to an overvaluation of things, to that which "exceeds their mere materialization [...] or mere utilization as objects,"⁶ in the words of theorist Bill Brown. With their nod to minimalism's preoccupation with the repetition of forms, works such as the luminous *Mise-en-scène* (2000), a tower of plastic patio chairs bound in shrink wrap and lit from within, or *Untitled* (2000), meticulously hewn and finished red cedar (material of choice for Northwest Coast carvers) sculpted to simulate a stack of the ubiquitous wooden pallets used to ship and stockpile consumer goods, speak about the fetishization of the art object in the rarified space of the gallery, implicating the discourse of high culture in the global circulation of commodities. Like Meret Oppenheim's celebrated surrealist assemblage *My Governess* (1936), with its suggestively bound and trussed high heels, Jungen lures the viewer into a place of profound ambivalence, simultaneously offering up both a pointed critique of fetishism (of the commodity, of celebrity, of cultural difference, of the art object) and the object of desire itself (albeit reassembled in the case of the Air Jordans).

The seductive means by which Jungen implicates the audience in his critique is perhaps most compellingly revealed in the way his objects function within the space of the gallery itself. With the *Prototypes* presented in sealed glass vitrines, and a suspended pod of whale skeletons constructed from white plastic patio chairs resembling those often visible in natural history museums (*Shapeshifter* [2000], *Cetology* [2002], and *Vienna* [2003])—one of which hangs from the ceiling of the VAG's central rotunda, its spiral staircases encircling the strange, articulated form as though built specifically for the purpose of viewing it—the Jungen exhibition, like the work of Joseph Beuys and Fred Wilson among many

others, performs a kind of ethnography on the museum as a knowledge producing institution. Jungen's objects are always made with the gaze of the gallery visitor in mind with an inherent understanding of what Svetlana Alpers has called "the museum as a way of seeing," with its capacity to isolate things and offer them up for attentive looking.⁷ In mimicking the museum's practices of taxonomy and display, as well as its ability to inspire curiosity and wonder—for indeed the very materiality of these objects, the sheer feat of their construction, imbues them with a kind of Benjaminian aura—Jungen not only critiques those practices but compels the visitor to act in conscious complicity with them.

There is another aspect to the fetish and its function, however, that might suggest a final way in which Brian Jungen's work functions for the Vancouver Art Gallery and the city itself. The success of the fetish, as psychoanalytic film theorist Laura Mulvey informs us, depends upon its ability to *disavow*: in the case of the commodity, the marks of production—the grime of the factory, the exploitation of the worker; for Freud, the absence of the mother's phallus. At the same time, however, the fetish-as-substitute "does not want its form to be overlooked, but rather to be gloried in,"⁸ thus acknowledging its own process of concealment. There is always an oscillation, therefore, between "what is seen and what threatens to erupt into knowledge."⁹ With its confounding of cultural stereotypes, its embrace of impurity, Jungen's work provides a necessary corrective to the modernist, primitivist narratives on view elsewhere in the space of the gallery (particularly evident, perhaps, in the permanent Emily Carr exhibit on the fourth floor). Simultaneously, however, they allow the city to marvel in and consume these desired objects of aboriginality, to disavow the persisting asymmetries in Vancouver and elsewhere between aboriginal and non-aboriginal experience. In covering over an uncomfortable reality, then, and despite its sharp critique, its clever "mobiliz[ation] of aesthetic and cultural misunderstandings,"¹⁰ Jungen's work itself threatens to become fetishized in and for the

city—a possibility of which the artist himself is no doubt aware. Perhaps the most telling pieces in the exhibition, therefore, are the ones which threaten to upset this fragile balance between knowledge and belief: those drawings Jungen solicited from strangers of images typifying "Indian art" to them, enlarged to a massive scale and routed, painfully, into the very walls of the gallery itself. In this *Field Work* series, simplistic and clichéd renderings of totem poles, dream-catchers and beer cans reveal the continued social construction of "Indianness" as the Other of mainstream Canadian culture. The dismaying persistence of such stereotypes is embarrassing to see carved into the walls of the Vancouver Art Gallery's grand neoclassical space. There is something fittingly disturbing about the fact that after the exhibition is dismantled, someone will come along to fill in the routed marks, but just beneath the smoothed-over surface, the trace of their shapes will remain.

Notes

1. Brian Jungen quoted in Danielle Egan, "Aboriginal Art Turned Inside Out," *The Tyee* January 2006, www.thetyee.ca/gallery/2006/01/26/AboriginalArtinsideOut.
2. Cuauhtémoc Medina, "High Curios," *Brian Jungen* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2006), 29.
3. Jungen quoted "Aboriginal Art Turned Inside Out."
4. Richard Lacayo, "A Commercial Vision," *Time Online Edition*, 6 February 2006, www.time.com/time/canada/article/0,8599,1156780,00.html.
5. Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 2.
6. Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 2001), 5.
7. See Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 25-32.
8. Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, xiv.
9. *Ibid.*, 14.
10. Medina, "High Curios," 29.