



1 | Brian Jungen, *Wieland*, 2006, leather gloves, 64 × 65 x 5 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Gift of Yvonne and David Fleck, Catherine Barbaro and Tony Grossi, Theresa Burke, Patrick Burke, and Karen and Michael Vukets, 2018. © Brian Jungen, courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery. (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2018/3617)

Brian Jungen's *Wieland* (2006)

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Brian Jungen's soft textile-like sculpture *Wieland* (2006) takes the form of an upside-down maple leaf and through its title refers to the well-known Canadian artist Joyce Wieland (1930–1998) (Fig. 1). As with many of his works, Jungen (b. 1970) uses ordinary materials, in this case women's red leather gloves, which he has cut up and machine sewn back together again to reimagine what is usually a potent Canadian symbol. Where an upright hard-edged version of the maple leaf appears on the nation's flag and on its money and is central to Canadian identity, evoking nationalist sentiments and patriotic fervor, Jungen's saggy upside-down leaf with its odd thumb-shaped protrusions appears limp and deflated.

Wieland is suggestive on many levels and ultimately pays homage to its namesake. Jungen has described his admiration for the artist: "I always loved Joyce Wieland's work. I saw her present her films and speak at the Pacific Cinémathèque when I was in college. Her material sensibility and politics appealed to me, as well as her character and her openness. I was saddened by her death and wanted to make a piece for her."¹ It can be said that Jungen responded to Wieland's radical feminist approach to making art. As with many of his previous works he adopts craft-based methods, including machine sewing and leatherwork, and elevates them to the realm of fine art. In doing so he echoes Wieland's deep love of craft, which in her case encompassed embroidery, knitting, and quilting. And like Wieland he too uses a variety of unconventional materials.

However, the two artists do have different perspectives with regard to questions of nationalism and patriotism, and Jungen's respect for Wieland did not stop him from tackling these differences, and indeed he says about his work named after her, "*Wieland* deliberately questioned her patriotism, in a critical but loving way. Or at least I hope." In the late 1960s and 70s Canadian nationalism had become a central concern for Wieland. One of her well-known quilts, *Reason over Passion* (1968), featured the infamous titular phrase spoken by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. Another work, *O Canada* (1970), depicted erotically charged lipstick traces of Wieland's mouth as she sang the country's national anthem. And then, the maple leaf flag can be found in multiple works – the knitted, painting-like *Flag Arrangement* (1971), as a silky



2 | Joyce Wieland, *Flag Arrangement*, 1970–71, knitted wool, installation view, National Gallery of Canada, Collection of the *True Patriot Love* installation at the National Gallery of Canada. (Photo: Courtesy of the Visual Collections Repository, Concordia University)

insert in her *True Patriot Love* bookwork (1971), and as a prop in *Four Flag Costumes* (1970). To emphasize this preoccupation with Canadian nationhood, the title of her major survey at the National Gallery of Canada was “True Patriot Love,” words taken from the English version of the country’s national anthem. Wieland’s nationalism was inflected by leftist and countercultural politics, but she was nonetheless a proud Canadian.

Jungen is highly distrustful of such an affirmative position. For him, the formation of the Canadian nation came at an incalculable cost to Indigenous people, and the country is still coming to terms with the legacy of that nation-building project. Jungen is much less interested in joining in nationalistic rhetoric, instead it could be said that he renders it null and void when he turns the maple leaf on its head and leaves it to droop so dramatically. It must be said that Wieland had also manipulated and distorted this prime national symbol, and *Flag Arrangement* in particular seems to imply that national identity is something mutable, since the efforts of four different knitters have resulted in four non-identical flags (Fig. 2). As Johanne Sloan has commented

on Wieland's philosophy regarding these iconic symbols, "it could be said that Wieland's *True Patriot Love* exhibition functioned as a kind of exhortation to her fellow citizens to follow her example, by not taking for granted the state's monopoly over such images and icons, and instead becoming actively involved – materially, aesthetically, politically – with the unfinished process of becoming Canadian."² It is as if Jungen has listened to Wieland. He goes beyond her playfulness, and generously brings Wieland's politics and practice into the present. While the sculpture no longer registers as a symbol of Canada, it begins to take on an almost heart shape. If we see *Wieland* through this lens, Jungen lovingly reminds of us of Wieland's place in Canadian art history, while also questioning her love of the country. Simultaneously, he establishes his own more resistant, Indigenous counter-narrative with respect to the nationalist focus inherent within much of Canadian art history.³

While Brian Jungen shares Joyce Wieland's fixation on sewing, his foundational material is often leather or vinyl instead of fabric. Leather has a powerful resonance within the Indigenous cultures that hunt large animals such as moose, deer, and elk. In the mid-aughts Jungen, an artist of mixed Dane-Zaa and European heritage, was living in Vancouver, British Columbia. He was 36 years old and he had just had a hugely successful survey exhibition that started at the New Museum and travelled to the Vancouver Art Gallery and later the Witte de With. The focus of the exhibition was Jungen's *Prototype for New Understanding* series that he made between 1998 and 2005 – using Air Jordan sneakers. There were two huge sculptures that also garnered a great deal of attention: namely *Cetology* (2002) which was suspended from the ceiling and carved out of the ubiquitous white plastic patio chairs and resembled the whale skeletons one might find hanging in a natural history museum; and another work fabricated out of leather, *Furniture Sculpture* (2006) which approximated a tipi (Fig. 3). Instead of using traditional animal hides for the cover, Jungen looked to consumer goods and harvested black leather from eleven Natuzzi sofas and he sewed the pieces together to create the tent's covering. The tall poles of the tipi were constructed out of the wood frames inside the couches.

2006 – precisely the moment when he made the work *Wieland* – signals an important turning point in Jungen's life and career. At this time he had achieved great success and he became a poster boy for contemporary art in Canada. His photograph graced many newspapers and magazines. While Jungen enjoyed the adulation that came with success, he sought other outlets and turned his back on the urban world of culture and begin to spend more time in northern British Columbia with his Indigenous family in Fort St. John. During this time, he learned many traditional skills including tanning and stretching hides and drum-making.



3 | Brian Jungen, *Furniture Sculpture*, 2006, 11 black leather couches, wood, 620 × 589 × 721 cm, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Purchased with significant financial support from the Audain Foundation, and additional contribution from Rick Erickson and the Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund, VAG 2006.2.1 a-ee, © Brian Jungen. (Photo: Tomas Svab, Vancouver)

At the same time, he was increasingly drawn to soft materials such as leather and fabric, but always by way of some commodity. The tipi was made from leather that had been subjected to a number of industrial processes and had already been allocated a use function, to cover a sofa. In this way, Jungen changes the usual narrative of commodification; he redirects the materials used to make such commodities, reappropriating the animal hides. Soon after, he made *The Prince* (2006), his take on a cigar shop Indian, constructed out of many parts of softball and baseball gloves; this large-scale figurative work was followed by *Wieland* (2006) a more modest wall work, fabricated out of numerous pieces of women's red leather gloves that had been cut up and sewn back together. Like Jungen's best works, it registers on many levels.

Jungen has consistently made works that call out to other artists and individuals. *Furniture Sculpture* is an homage to Ken Lum's series of furniture sculptures and, in particular, Lum's *Red Sculpture* (1986) which was shown in exactly the same space at the Vancouver Art Gallery when it hosted Lum's survey exhibition in 1990. *Cassius* (2016), a beautiful and delicate hybrid insect – one part butterfly and one part bee – is drawn in loopy black sneaker

laces and can be understood as a memorial to the great boxer and human rights activist who died in the same year and famously said of his fighting style, “Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee. The hands can’t hit what the eyes can’t see.” Like these works that Jungen has made for his heroes, the very direct naming of *Wieland* conjures the person, the conceptual artist Joyce Wieland and her artistic legacy.

Wieland is a highly representative work in that it exemplifies Jungen’s method of reworking ordinary commodities and transforming them into new forms that resist dominant narratives and paradigms. Here the leather glove fragments are sewn together, the tops of the different lengths of the fingers of the gloves are conjoined to form sections of the multi-pointed red maple leaf. What results is baggy, impotent, and pendulous with dangling thumb protrusions. While the maple leaf should be a potent national symbol of Canada, Jungen’s version refuses any easy relation to nationalism and certainly departs from Wieland’s fundamental patriotism. While Wieland’s incorporation of craft in the 1960s and 70s was linked to an exploration of the traditional labour carried out by women, Jungen’s work *Wieland* must be understood in relation to Indigenous livelihoods and the right to hunt. Jungen’s upending of Canada’s national symbol speaks loud and clear. This new symbol, the upside-down leaf, is less about his love of the country and more concerned with justice and democracy for Indigenous people and others that has yet to be realized.

NOTES

- 1 Brian JUNGEN, in an email to the author, 28 Apr. 2016.
- 2 Johanne SLOAN, *Joyce Wieland’s The Far Shore* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 41.
- 3 Wieland was not oblivious to the plight of Canada’s Indigenous people, as is evident in some artworks (for example the Inuktitut syllabics she added to her *True Patriot Love* bookwork), and she got involved in the James Bay protests organized by Cree militants in the 1970s.