

ENTITLEMENT

Brian Jungen's *Untitled*

Lindsay Brown

In most cities you will find stacks of industrial forklift pallets everywhere, sitting in various states of decrepitude as they wait for pickup, recycling or removal as garbage. They are ubiquitous while existing below the threshold of notice. Designed to be loaded with commodities and then lifted by forklift, pallets provide the primary means of transport of commodities between manufacturing locations, ships, trucks and retail stores. Brian Jungen had been photographing pallets for a long time. He had said that he was struck by their strange loneliness, their lowliness, the fact that they seemed orphaned or abandoned. The orphan-like quality of these objects is particularly resonant for those living in a resource-based economy like that of British Columbia, which, like most resource-based economies, has its own end perennially in sight. The ongoing softwood lumber war with the US is just the latest in a long string of signals that the lumber industry, the founding industry of the region, is in decline: the closing of mills due to the unprofitability of processing increasingly smaller trees, the intensified fighting over the few remaining ancient forests, the volatility of markets in a fluid global capitalism, and European boycotts of BC wood due to environmental degradation. Distressed softwood pallets in back alleys already carry the sense of an economy and a life that has passed and a plenitude of riches that has been depleted. They bring with them that peculiar nostalgia that always seems to accompany the transition from one mode of production into another.

As the North American lumber supply is depleted, pallets are increasingly made of other things: old recycled pallets, plastic, recycled pop bottles. The economy is a shapeshifter, and it forces the shapeshifting of everything it touches.

The idea of producing pallets and stacking them in the gallery was for Jungen instantly reminiscent of the piles and arrangements of Minimalism, in particular of the early Minimalist work of Carl Andre. Some of Andre's earliest work was in western red cedar. He arranged thick square lengths of milled red cedar and presented them, without ornamentation, hand finishing or pedestals, on the floor of a New York gallery. In 1960 this was an unmistakably avant-garde gesture, pressing the limits of what could be accepted and defined as art. Its claim, like the claim of much work that came to be known as Minimalist, was that the work alluded to nothing beyond itself, that it existed literally as its material, ideally referring to nothing but its own construction and pointing to nothing beyond the structure of the particular space in which it found itself, free from symbolism or pictorialism.

Jungen reproduced ten pallets out of red cedar. He built them to exact local specifications, but he pegged rather than nailed them, and then sanded and oiled them as if they were fine furniture. For any artist from British Columbia, western red cedar has an unavoidable and distinct specificity beyond its existence as wood or as mere generalized sculptural material. And for an artist with native ancestry like Jungen, red cedar could never function "literally" in the Minimalist manner. As a material it does not signify merely as a simple abstracted column, pile, geometric zigzagged arrangement or its own plinth, nor merely as means of drawing out a gallery space. Not only does red cedar locally reference a key commodity for the resource-based economy in western Canada, with the politically and environmentally fraught lumber industry at the centre of it, but it has also historically been a prime resource for many of the British Columbia First Nations as textile, building material, and above all as prized wood for carving. In fact, red cedar is so associated with mask and totem pole carving that when Jungen arrived at the specialty lumberyard to choose planks for the pallets, he was asked if he intended to carve masks. The Minimalist idea that this material could signify nothing beyond itself is repudiated and made poignant by context.

It is not surprising that Brian Jungen's new work is untitled. A title confers meaning or directs the viewer to the work's context or allusions. This piece's namelessness is not just a joke on minimalism and its infinitely hopeful refusal of allusion. It somehow also refers to the orphaned or hiding-in-plain-view quotidian invisibility of the pallets he is reproducing. Jungen's pallets refer: they deliberately reference the whole commodity chain in which his material and in fact his own art is implicated. Yet he underlines



their peculiar mute invisibility by leaving them unnamed. The pallets are a plinth for a sculpture that does not appear. As the surface on which all commodities are carried in their various transits, these pallets support no commodity other than the load of themselves and their own meanings, while their craftsmanship makes them a commodity finer than their predecessors might once have carried. But they still bear no title, as if they are not entitled to be anything but a means. The title is as strangely blank as the pallets themselves, even as it echoes the word title in negative, as if the pallets might have been called *Unentitled*, or *Without title*.

In light of the public acclaim for his recent sculptural works, several of which were not only spectacular in their public impact but also spectacular in their physical manifestation, Jungen began to contemplate his own growing image as producer of a particular kind of hot commodity. The near-Pop shock sensibility of his *Prototypes for a New Understanding*, a collection of native-style masks made from the parts of dismantled Nike trainers, and of *Shapeshifter*, an enormous museological whale skeleton ingeniously constructed from "bones" cut from common white plastic patio chairs, had created the kind of public expectation that itself had become a dominating feature of the environment in which Jungen produced his work. The specific elevation of commodity goods into art or icon status in the Pop Art tradition is uniquely complicated when the artist is known to be native. In that case there is always some public expectation that the artist's elevations of everyday materials will also involve the injection of some sort of manifestation of "spirit" or spiritual dream life into everyday materials or objects, and not merely the celebration, creation or critique of some luminous commodity value. Jungen's work can be exoticized even when the work itself challenges the idea of that exoticization. Had Jungen not been identified so thoroughly as a native artist, the distinct pop element of some of his pieces might have been more remarked upon. Both the pop sensibility and the spectacularity of previous works seems deliberately

devoid in *Untitled*, and yet it is on the curve of a similar ascension, the aesthetic elevation of goods and materials from the low to the high, to a new level of commodity value, to a charged new status.

Untitled sits at the confluence of its own opacity and transparency. Its form is clear, but its internal incongruities, many of which arise from context and from the conditions of its making, are more oblique. These are industrial pallets handmade by a First Nations artist with the assistance of two blue-eyed university graduates working in 2001 in Industrial Revolution conditions in a Vancouver art studio while listening to electronica. They are hand-produced in order that they might have the factory-produced look of the 1960 minimalist sculpture they reference, and which they resemble except for their deliberate and obvious reference to something outside themselves, a reference both industrial and art historical, thereby breaking all the tenets of stated minimalist intention. The pieces mimic a utilitarian object but are made of a wood far too soft for that use, making them a highly aestheticized version of something never meant to be looked at. They are a perfectly fitted misfit and a repository of contradictions. All of these reversals and incongruities coexist in the most quiet, subdued manner, containing in their stillness the sense of the near asphyxiation of the gallery space, with its strangely appropriate shop front boutique corner windows, where the pallets sit loosely stacked, their politics in suspension, their shape shifted for view, their life cycle at some sort of end and poised for oblivion.