

Artists from Canada's First Nations go hunting with a film camera

Not a whole lot happens during the 50 minutes of "Modest Livelihood," a film that follows Brian Jungen and Duane Linklater on two hunting trips they took in northern British Columbia in the autumn and early winter of 2011.

This isn't entirely true, however. Try sitting in the forest for the better part of an hour. Say little. Look. On some level, a level that might be termed contemporary urban consciousness, hardly anything occurs. On other levels, though, a sunset explodes through long grasses; bare treetops dance in the wind; leaves of gold and fire clash against cool green pines; spindly trunks sway darkly against the setting sun.

If such understated naturalist observations were the whole of what "Modest Livelihood" conveyed, that would in a sense be enough. A 50-minute reprieve from traffic and cellphones and crowds and clocks ought not be rebuffed; certainly this one is more accessible than an actual trip to the wilderness.

But Jungen and Linklater aren't naturalists or outdoorsmen. They're artists, Jungen one of Canada's most famous, with solo exhibitions of his trenchant, fanciful sculptures — Native American masks fabricated from Nike Air Jordan high-tops, whale skeletons constructed out of plastic chairs — at the Tate Modern in London, the New Museum in New York and the Musee D'Art Contemporain in Montreal, among others.

They're also part of the First Nations, the Native peoples of Canada. Jungen, who is of mixed Dane-zaa and European descent, grew up on Dane-zaa land in northern British Columbia. Linklater says he is an Omaskeko Cree, born in Moose Factory, on a Native reservation located near the bottom of James Bay, in northern Ontario. They met on a residency at the Banff Centre, an arts incubator in Alberta.

Like all First Nations people, Jungen and Linklater have the right to fish and hunt on their own territory, based on treaties dating back to the mid-1700s. But these freedoms have been as fraught as the rest of the history to which they belong, beginning with the decimation of Native populations from European infectious diseases, followed by the virtual extinction of the North American buffalo on which many bands depended for food and clothing. Forced acculturation, the expropriation of communal lands, and federal prohibitions on potlatch and sun dance ceremonies bring this history up to the mid-20th century. Native Canadians couldn't even vote until 1960 without forfeiting their "Indian" status.

But "Modest Livelihood" is no polemic on the current or past state of Native life. It wouldn't exist but for it, I don't doubt, nor would its title, which refers to a 1999 Supreme Court of Canada decision confirming First Nations' hunting and fishing rights but clarifying their limitation to the earning of a "moderate livelihood" and not the "accumulation of wealth."

Instead, "Modest Livelihood" is more like an invitation, a generous gesture on the part of the artists to include the patient, attentive viewer on an expedition that most do not have the legal right to join, never mind the necessary ancestral and cultural knowledge.

Through the camera's lens, Jungen and Linklater share a tradition of major significance to their two cultures, but they open it up in a way that is neither anthropological nor educational. On the contrary, it's paradoxical, as quiet and slow and enigmatic as an excursion into a rainbow- and sunset-filled wilderness can be, one whose participants wear baseball caps and drive an old pickup truck on roads formerly used for oil exploration.

Their camp includes a beat-up trailer, a blue plastic cooler and those ubiquitous folding chairs with cup holders, but also a shelter mounted from three felled tree trunks with the help of Jungen's uncle Jack Askoty, a Doig River elder.

Romantic nostalgia for a lost way of life this is not. Tenacious persistence of it in the present tense — that it is.

Not much seems to be said between the men, and in any case none of it is audible. The film is absolutely silent, making no personal drama out of the artists' conversation nor any narrative drama out of the constant, careful listening so crucial for moving knowingly through the wilderness.

We watch the artists listen for the sounds of animals, and watch them respond to what they hear. Meanwhile, a 16 mm projector, running a short companion film in an adjacent gallery, whirs constantly, a reminder that "Modest Livelihood" was shot by a cinematographer (Jesse Cain) on celluloid. Though the film was eventually transferred to Blu-ray to make large-scale projection easier, the artists decided to forgo the immediacy and pervasiveness of video on the actual hunt, in favor of the patience and acceptance of uncertainty demanded by film — and hunting.

And hunt they do, though for the first three-quarters of the film it isn't clear what Jungen and Linklater intend to shoot with the rifles slung over their shoulders. When three plump deer hop aimlessly by in deep snow, they watch them go. Finally, in the dark of a winter dawn, light flashes from the ends of their guns and a moose falls to the ground. The film's longest scene intimately follows the artists as they skin and dress the animal's steaming body, brown and blood red against crisp white.

The film ends not with people but with animals, two crows flying high in the sky. Nothing could be more fitting. The Dane-zaa traditionally believe that an animal must choose to give itself to a hunter. "Modest Livelihood" may be a gift from the artists to their audience, but the livelihood itself remains a gift from the moose to them.

"Brian Jungen and Duane Linklater: Modest Livelihood" runs through Feb. 3 at the Logan Center Gallery, 915 E. 60th St., 773-702-6082, arts.uchicago.edu/logan/gallery.

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