



Brian Jungen and Duane Linklater

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Brian Jungen and Duane Linklater, *Modest Livelihood*
Curated by Monika Szewczyk, Visual Arts Program Curator
Logan Center for the Arts, University of Chicago
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Review by Lucas Freeman

Artists Brian Jungen and Duane Linklater [1] recently exhibited two silent films under the title *Modest Livelihood*, at the new Logan Center for the Arts (University of Chicago). The shorter of the two, *lean* (2012, 8 min, 16 mm), making its debut, looped on a 16 mm projector in the smaller of two screening rooms. The work follows Jungen and Linklater who, with the help of Jungen's uncle, assemble a temporary shelter in a clearing using young tree trunks, ropes and tarps. *Modest Livelihood* (2012, 50 min, 16 mm) played in the adjacent, pitch-black and cavernous room as a repeating large-scale digital projection. The film, which premiered last year at the Banff Centre's Walter Phillips Gallery as part of *The Retreat* chapter of *DOCUMENTA* (13), offers fragments of two off-season hunts undertaken by Jungen and Linklater in late 2011 on Dane-zaa territory (Treaty 8) in Northern British Columbia. Jungen is himself partly of Dane-zaa ancestry, while Linklater is Omaskêko Cree from Northern Ontario.

Several points of connection brought *Modest Livelihood* to Chicago's South Side. Curator Monika Szewczyk had previously collaborated with Jungen as an assistant curator at the Vancouver Art Gallery. She offered them the space to co-exhibit a film loop (ultimately *lean*) alongside *Modest Livelihood*, something the artists wanted to try out

following the Banff premiere. Zach Cahill, head of the UChicago Visual Arts' Open Practice Committee, who also attended the DOCUMENTA (13) screening, organized a well-attended artist talk to coincide with the exhibition, giving Jungen and Linklater the chance to complement the show with additional works and ideas.

Before getting into the films, it's worth dwelling on the exhibition title. *Modest Livelihood* is a twist on the infamous notion of "a moderate livelihood." The Supreme Court of Canada employed this loose idea in its 1999 *R. v. Marshall* decision, the outcome of a six-year legal battle between the Nova Scotia Provincial Courts and Donald Marshall Jr. — a fisherman of Mi'kmaq ancestry who was given a three-count conviction for fishing eels off-season, fishing without a license and using an illegal net. Marshall appealed based on treaty rights established in 1761 between the British Crown and the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet. The federal court sided with Marshall, affirming that these First Nations had the right to provide for their sustenance by hunting, fishing, gathering and trading for what were then called "necessaries." While the federal court upheld Marshall's rights as a First Nation member, it added that these rights were in place to allow First Nations, unrestricted by industrial licensing and seasons, to pursue *no more* than a moderate livelihood, no more than necessities. And so the question: where does moderation end and excess begin? [2]

Do Jungen and Linklater's films engage with the broader context of the exhibition title? Not explicitly. The films have no polemical thrust. They are silent documents, with no audible (and few visual) exchanges between the men, no words to read, and the action is too fragmented to pursue a narrative. Then again, the films do show glimpses of generational knowledge sharing and support, a visceral connection to land and sources of sustenance, having patience, respecting life and death, needing to make do. Necessaries are meant to be the fruits of a modest livelihood.

As we follow the artists on their hunts in *Modest Livelihood*, it's unclear whether they're showing us a way of life in which either feels entirely at home. They may well identify strongly with their ancestral livelihoods, but that matters little for how these films play out. As films, they are not exercises in self-portraiture; rather, they show practices (shelter building, hunting) employing modern tools on an ancient landscape.

While we see a lot in *Modest Livelihood* — varied landscapes and wildlife, the hunters, their tools and campsite, mining roads, a thorough moose cleaning and carving — it's unlikely most viewers will feel an intimate involvement in the experiences depicted. For the most part the work keeps an intriguing distance, due in large part to the decision to mute the film. We see verbal exchanges between the hunters, but these are not for audience ears. We're not sure what language they're speaking, let alone what's being said. Hence, we only see a surface rendering of the experiences actually shared. At the artist talk, Jungen explained that withholding the audio was a means not only of keeping the viewer's focus on the action but also of protecting the ancestral knowledge discussed during filming. In this sense, muting the film was a political as well as aesthetic decision.

Editing and cinematographic choices also contribute a great deal to the film's sense of distance. From a vast pool of footage, Jungen and Linklater assembled scenes that build a sense of viewer presence, alongside the hunters; there, but observing either one or both hunters from a distance; there (at the campsite, say) and the hunters are gone; or there, and chasing after the hunters in the dark, unsure of what's happening or, at moments, what we are seeing on the horizon. The effect is that we as viewers are there but only tenuously, as though recalling childhood memories of being brought along on these hunts. The silence, amplified by the large scale and darkness of the venue, and the warm, vague texture of the 16 mm film certainly support this sometimes eerie, recollective effect.

The big exception to this formal distance comes when, nearing the end of the film, Jungen and Linklater clean, skin and carve a moose. The consummation of the hunt is filmed in sustained closeness; we're at close range, and it's a compelling experience not only because of the demonstrated craftsmanship and respect shown for the animal, but also because we're now intimately involved in the dismemberment, in moments at the knife's edge. It's an affective transition and viewers leave the film having witnessed a timeless form of exchange — hunted, given over to hunter). And being witness to this is itself rewarding, a gift from the artists, albeit a modest one compared to what the hunt, this project, gave them. In a sense, this is the film's high point; while Logan Center audiences were free to enter and exit the repeating film at random, it would be a shame if anyone missed this consummation.

NOTES:

[1] Jungen is well known for his sculptural work in *Prototypes for New Understanding* (1998–2005), while Linklater's work ranges from video to sculpture to performance.

[2] The meaning of *Marshall* — the level of open season hunting and fishing activity it intended — was and is a matter of bitter contention for those directly involved in fishing the waters in those regions. As Alanis Obomsawin's 2002 film *Is the Crown at War with Us?* vividly demonstrates, non-Aboriginal fishing communities in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick were quick to cry foul and violently protest the decision, insisting that First Nations off-season fishing undermined conservation efforts and general standards of fairness. Aided by the RCMP and the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans, commercial fishermen have, in instances such as the Burnt Church Crisis (1999), violently opposed First Nations off-season fishing, despite evidence that these activities have a marginal impact on fish stocks compared to commercial yields. Kenneth Coates, *The Marshall Decision and Native Rights* (Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2000) 128–9.

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Image Credit: Brian Jungen and Duane Linklater, *Modest Livelihood* (2012). Film still; Super 16mm film transferred to Blu-ray, 50 minutes. Courtesy of the artists and Walter Phillips Gallery, The Banff Centre.