

**Brian Jungen
and Duane Linklater**

MODEST LIVELIHOOD

Dec 11, 2012 - Feb 3, 2013

So far, this is what I have gathered from Brian Jungen and Duane Linklater about their hunting trips and the two resulting film works shown here:

The idea of documenting a hunting trip came to the artists shortly after they first met while on a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta, Canada. An initial trial involved video documentation, but this instant-feedback medium proved too distracting. In conversation, they recall a constant temptation to check what was being recorded – a sensation too close to the total mediation of contemporary life, where it sometimes seems that only that which is recorded and disseminated exists. The artists broke with this condition in two ways. They chose to use actual film and to hire a cinematographer (Jesse Cain), finding that indexing their experience on celluloid came closer to the act of hunting: with both filming and hunting, you need great patience and “you simply don’t know what you are going to get.” They also chose not to include any sound: thus, the viewer will never know exactly what they said in the course of the hunt, even as we clearly see them having conversations.

Jungen is known internationally for his shape shifting sculptures, which transform materials (ranging from mass-produced commodities to hide or cedar wood) into symbolically charged forms that confound First Nations iconography with modernist art and design and the language of global branding. Linklater has worked across media, though perhaps most consistently with a combination of video and performance; he involves others in transformative conversations that are rooted in the oral traditions and attentive to disappearing knowledge, all the while honing a distinct form of deadpan humor.

For both artists the act of hunting remains fundamental to their First Nations identity: Jungen is of Dane-zaa and European ancestry while Linklater is Omaskéko Cree. Yet, in both their nations and other native communities, hunting is deeply fraught with the debate over the current legal status of ancestral ways of living. In 1999, the Supreme Court of Canada upheld First Nations’ rights to fish and hunt on their own territory, but with the proviso that this activity did not exceed the sustenance of a “moderate livelihood,” which “includes such basics as ‘food, clothing and housing, supplemented by a few amenities,’ but not the accumulation of wealth.” The wording of the decision was highly controversial among native communities, given their

history of dispossession and in many cases virtual decimation since the earliest encounters with European settlers. The artists have given the legal jargon a poetic twist, asserting their own limits; hence *Modest Livelihood*.

The project encompasses a very specific time and terrain: namely, two hunting trips on Dane-zaa Territory in Northern British Columbia in late September and early December of 2011. The artists hunted off-season, on land covered by Treaty 8, which guarantees First Nations peoples such use of their sovereign territory. The roads they maneuver in their pickup truck were formerly used for oil exploration – testimony of abundant resources and the competing claims that continue to arise over its use. The film could, perhaps one day, be used as evidence in a court of law or the tribunal of history.

For now, it is art. Nine hours of footage have been carved into a 50-minute film, transferred to BluRay for large-scale projection. I say carved because it seems to me that Jungen’s sculptural sensibility is as present in this project as Linklater’s foundation in the moving image. And part of the reason for my interest in working with both artists was to make the Logan Center Gallery a space for their dialogue to continue. They responded by creating a new 8-minute Super 16mm film loop, projected small on the wall. It shows three men – the artists and Jungen’s uncle, Jack Askoty, a Doig River First Nations elder – maneuvering three large, raw logs into place. This is the most basic of architectures – the minimum one needs to hang a tarp and set up camp. If this artwork is a chance for the artists to learn from each other, the hunting trip was an opportunity for both men to learn from an elder. And we might ask what we learn in turn from watching them – what these forms of learning have to do with the learning that goes on in a university, even.

We are given few words to help us make sense of this project. *Modest Livelihood*, the title of the longer film and the project as a whole, carries overtones of (self-imposed) restraint. *lean*, the title of the film loop, indicates a relation, some form of dependency, but also an adjective that might be applied to a meager budget. Slim pickings.

And so we’ll sit in silence, save for the purr of the film projector, watching men watch the land for animals. One moose will pass from life to livelihood.

In discussing the work, Jungen and Linklater noted: “when we go hunting with

our families, we never talk about contemporary art or music.” This time, however, they did. Part of the reason why these documents are compelling as art works may have something to do with the fact that we are also watching artists reflecting on their own way of life. We could, if we wished, place this project in a continuum that is as old as art history, which some say began circa 1550, when Giorgio Vasari first published *The Lives of the Artists*. But there is also a deep tension here with European traditions, with urban living, with the industrial killing of animals in Hogtown.

Asked about film references Jungen and Linklater mention Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (1979) and his more auto-biographical *Mirror* (1975); attempts to document First Nations lives made by the National Film Board of Canada, such as Tony Ianzelo and Boyce Richardson’s *Cree Hunters of the Mistassini* (1974); and the earliest deployment of ethnographic lenses, like those of Edward S. Curtis or Robert J. Flaherty who made *Nanook of the North* (1922). But seeking such references one realizes this may be a compulsive response to the utter discomfort of confronting a film that is as stripped of effect as the moose may be stripped of its skin.

Maybe it’s me – my inner projector – but, working towards the opening of *Modest Livelihood*, it has been difficult not to think of the current economic crisis. Not only is the title of Jungen and Linklater’s project evocative of recent talk of humble means,

restraint and austerity, the substance of their films, while difficult to slot into any single genre, certainly participates in the evolution of the landscape tradition. This tradition has always existed in some relation to the political economy. In North America, we can observe how certain stunning vistas – such as those painted on the edge of Algonquin Park where the Canadian Group of Seven worked and where Linklater lives – pictorially cleared the land for settlement by virtually obliterating all signs of native life in the most pastoral and quiet of ways. Today the bind of landscape and economy persists as national budgets are narrated in the language of landscape – some say that we are on the verge of a ‘fiscal cliff.’

Still, others look for different features in the land. We see Jungen and Linklater looking for a moose, for instance. But they also place themselves *in* the landscape, inviting us to watch them as participants in its construction. There are not one but several variations, several figure-ground relations, several landscape traditions rehearsed in their two films. There is also a notable absence of the cliffhanger vision of emergency.

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Photo by Jessie Cain from Brian Jungen and Duane Linklater’s *Modest Livelihood* project, courtesy of the artists.