

ARTS

JUNGEN



Nancy Tousley, 'Jungen', *The Calgary Herald*, 1 December 2001



# Brian Jungen is a fast-rising star in a new generation of Canadian artists

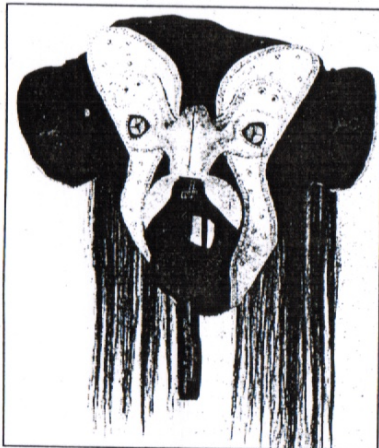


Photo Linda Chinfen, courtesy  
Catriona Jeffries Gallery

**Prototype for New Understanding #4  
(1998) by Brian Jungen.  
Nike Air Jordans, hair.  
Private Collection, Vancouver.**

## SPOTLIGHT

HAPPY MEDIUM, A SHOW OF DRAWINGS BY BRIAN JUNGEN,  
CURATED BY GREGORY ELGSTRAND AT THE ART GALLERY  
OF CALGARY, THROUGH JAN. 27.

NANCY TOUSLEY  
CALGARY HERALD

**S**ay you are a young artist, not long out of school, who packs up and heads for New York. When you get home, you still have to find a studio and figure it out — what to do, how to do it — but you have gathered clues.

That's how his real education began, says Brian Jungen, a 31-year-old Vancouver artist, who finds the encomium "wunderkind" stuck to his shoe everywhere he goes these days. He's not exactly a child prodigy, but his development has been on a fast track. So much so that Happy Medium, a show of his drawings from 1993 to 2000, at the Art Gallery of Calgary, looks a little like this super-smart, engaging sculptor's juvenilia.

The quickly sketched sheets and torn-out sketch book pages on view represent only a tiny fraction of his prodigious output, especially from 1994-98. These years bracket a period of creative ferment when Jungen, back in Vancouver after a year in New York, was indeed working it all out: creating an identity for himself as an urban Indian.

Jungen's ideas about identity, race, gender, culture and stereotyping — which led to the "masks" made from Nike Air Jordans that appeared as if from nowhere three years ago — became focused in drawings whose sources were in pop culture, cartooning, the National Geographic, art history and the street. The Nike masks were "the bomb," as he puts it, that launched his career in 1999. But in his early drawing practice, he was prepping the ideas that would turn into combustible material for sculpture.

It's as if the process was a way of literally drawing them out to produce ideas as visual forms. Drawing lit the fuse.

At the time, Jungen was a self-described "starving artist." Born in 1970 in Fort St. John, B.C., he was raised in a series of small

B.C. towns by an aunt and uncle. Although his father was Swiss and his mother was Dunne-Za, a small tribe related to the Dene who live near the Alberta border in Peace River, Jungen was not brought up in native culture. Still, he is often classified as a native artist, a category that does not fit him well. He says, "I have always talked about my history as a native Canadian as being totally assimilated."

Living on Vancouver's rundown east side, he shared a studio with Geoffrey Farmer, a friend from their days at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, who also has enjoyed a swift art-world ascent. In fact, their class at Emily Carr included Damian Moppett, Stephen Shearer and Ron Terada. The five of them, who showed here last year at the Illingworth Kerr Gallery, form the core of the most exciting generation of new artists to emerge from one Canadian city in years.

Jungen and Farmer were keen on identity politics. They drew together, made drawings for each other, passed them back and forth in the Surrealists' game of exquisite corpse, and drew grim reapers on pages they ripped out of snowboarding magazines, ironically likening themselves to the uber-male snowboarder cult.

Among Jungen's funny, subversive drawings at AGC is the black silhouette of an Indian in a Plains feathered headdress astride a board. The headdress, of course, makes the figure a generic image: Hollywood and pop culture's idea of an Indian. On another sheet, an Indian silhouette stalks the foreground in high heels. Some images are sexually explicit.

Several drawings are populated by little figures with naked human bodies and flat, round noggins with a feather sticking out. They are based on the Indian "feather-in-the-head-men" caricatures of sports logos, like those of the Chicago Blackhawks or the Cleveland Indians, which Jungen took over and turned into a cartoon tribe of alien look-alikes.

Jungen didn't think his drawings were important, though, until Scott Watson, director of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia, bought several of them for the Belkin's collection. Jungen had given most of them away, lost or destroyed others (he papered a whole wall of his studio with them). Nevertheless, lifting material from a familiar context, working it over conceptually and transforming it physically and formally has been Jungen's strategic and esthetic modus operandi ever since.

He moved his work into three dimensions

ing a 1998 residency at the Banff Centre out of Air Jordans he bought in Calgary.

Several encounters helped Jungen make the leap. When he went to New York in late 1992, after fleeing only two months of graduate school in Montreal, he met artist Nicole Eisenmann and became her studio assistant. Her primary medium was drawing — ram-bunctious, cartoony, sexually extravagant, sometimes wall-size drawings that confronted issues of interest to Jungen with outrageous humour. His own use of it to soften apparently violent or taboo images takes a page from her book.

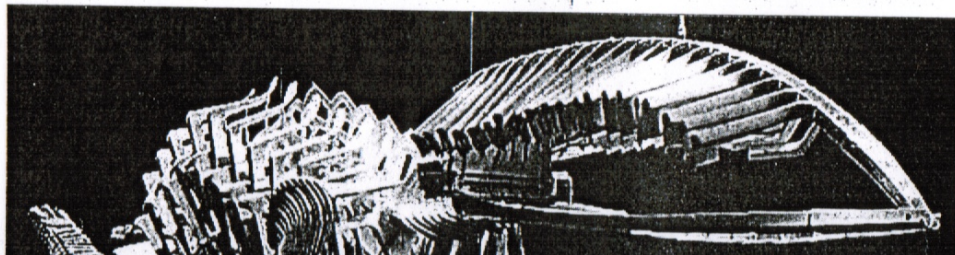
He also made the rounds of galleries and museums. He spent time amid the "dusty vitrines" of the "depressing" Northwest Coast galleries at the Museum of Natural History and looked at the huge whale skeletons in the adjacent room. He saw compelling work by Rober Gober and by Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss, collaborators on works that defamiliarize the everyday who've made breathtaking objects out of ordinary knives, forks and plates. And he paid a visit to the newly opened Nike-town.

"I thought it was the best museum I saw that day," Jungen says, with not a little irony. He was blown away by the spectacle of the store's displays. When he later started cutting up pairs of \$200 Air Jordan trainers, he felt a thrill of illicit pleasure. Reconstructed into masks, given hair and set on stands inside Plexiglas cases, the masks, with their uncanny likeness to their Northwest Coast sources, are brilliant objects with complex multiple references.

Jungen makes full use of the trainers' markings and their resemblance to the formlines of Northwest Coast art, their red, black and white colour schemes used in the palette of contemporary Northwest Coast prints by native artists, and the shapes of traditional masks.

The series, called Prototype for New Understanding (1998-99), weds Niketown and the Museum of Anthropology in a piece about fetishism and display. Shapeshifter, the sculpture that followed at Or Gallery in 2000, was another knockout. Made from white moulded-plastic chairs, cut up into pieces assembled to look like the skeleton of a great whale, the piece hangs from the ceiling suspended in air. Like the masks, it is another specimen returned to the world and realities of contemporary culture from the sanctifying confines of the museum.

Jungen works from inside the frameworks of institutions and reverses their terms. He's interested in what happens to objects like Northwest Coast masks when they enter the







Apeshifter (2000) by Vancouver artist Brian Jungen  
Plastic chairs  
Collection: National Gallery of Canada

Photo Linda Chinfen, courtesy Catriona Jeffries Gallery

First Nations, the other to Second Nature — and made it look as if they were planted in mounds of dirt and grass on the floor.

Not long afterwards, he had an important solo show at Truck Gallery in Calgary. Here, the wall-size drawings were based on images solicited from people on the street, who were asked to portray their idea of native art. He made the first Nike masks dur-

He continues to work off of objects — outdoor equipment, shipping palettes, cafeteria trays — that are loaded with meaning to examine the construction of identity in a globalized world.

He doesn't draw anymore, though, not that he might not go back to it. Right now, Brian Jungen is fully confident and at ease working it all out in three dimensions.