

Milroy, Sarah. "Shaman of the Sofa." *The Globe and Mail*, Tuesday, February 14, 2006, R1, R2.

Globe Review

Shaman of the sofa

Masks made from Nike shoes, a teepee stitched from cheap leather couches: Brian Jungen turns cultural friction into extraordinary art, writes **SARAH MILROY**

VANCOUVER

At the press opening for Brian Jungen's outstanding new exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery last week, a reporter was asking the show's curator, Daina Augaitis, for some help in fleshing out a sidebar for her forthcoming Jungen review. Who were the other native art stars in Canada that one could name, she asked, her pencil poised? Augaitis hedged, and finally answered that she thought such categories did a disservice to aboriginal artists. What was the point of such pigeonholing if not to delimit the scope of their accomplishments? Jungen, she implied, is a major contemporary artist of the 21st century, a citizen in global culture. He deserves that wide stage. White artists routinely assume for themselves that claim to universality.

She had a point, and yet beside us rose the 20-foot (6-metre) teepee made from skinned black-leather sofas from The Brick discount furniture store, a structure saturated with irony that Jungen and his colleagues had erected in the traditional way, without the aid of the gallery's mechanical lift. During the week before the opening, the artist could evidently be found in the gallery, bowie knife in hand, scraping down the hides (removing the foam lining) and extracting their wooden armatures in order to reconfigure the lumber as supporting staves.

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Forged from friction between cultures

JUNGEN from page R1

Everything had been recycled and reconfigured from available materials at hand and, in the process, those materials had undergone an almost magical-seeming transformation. You can't get any more aboriginal than that.

Also, teepees come from the prairies. Jungen is half Swiss, half Danezau, from northern British Columbia. What is he doing erecting a teepee if not to provoke such essentialist presumptions about his ethnicity as a force shaping his production?

Of course, Jungen is playing with precisely that. This work is not best understood as native art (I can understand Augaitis's reluctance; this has been the media's prevailing view), but rather as a hybrid art arising from the friction between white culture and aboriginal culture. Like a number of artists who have been most successful in the white mainstream (one thinks of Carl Beam and Bill Reid), Jungen comes from a mixed background, and his work can be seen as expressing equally both sides of the cultural divide.

In this new work, for example, the animal of the hunt (that most essential commodity in a hunter/gatherer society) is reimagined as a consumer good (the sofa). From the anthropological standpoint, they function the same way in the society — as sought-after objects required for subsistence — and Jungen helps us to hear the rhyme between them.

His now famous masks, fash-

ioned from cut-up Nike sneakers and ingeniously reconfigured, are the result of a similar move. Here, the mask, an object imbued with power from the spiritual realm, is made from dismembered Nike shoes, similarly imbued, in contemporary consumer culture, with transformative powers, or so their multimillion-dollar advertising campaigns would have us believe. The power of the mask and the power of the brand are conflated into one tight package, the sacred and the secular fused together.

Perhaps the most magnificent of Jungen's accomplishments so far, though, is his series of whale skeletons fashioned from dismembered white plastic lawn chairs. These reflect his indisputable brilliance at understanding and manipulating form — his ability to see materials in new ways — that calls to mind the sculptural improvisations of Picasso, who famously fashioned a bull's head from the conjoining of a bicycle seat and a set of handle bars (along with a thousand other dazzling manoeuvres).

In these enormous whale-skeleton sculptures — and the show includes three of them, suspended dramatically in midair — Jungen marries contradictory signifiers in an ingenious way. The whale is the ultimate sign of the freedom and magnificence of nature, endangered by commerce and environmental degradation. Perhaps it even serves here as a stand-in for beleaguered indigenous culture, likewise commodified for the tour-

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ist industry. The plastic lawn chair, on the other hand, is the paradigmatic mass-produced consumer product. In myriad shipping containers, it, too, roves the seas; manufactured in China, these endlessly replicated commodities travel outward to Bahrain, Berlin and Santa Barbara. Into one concise visual idea, then, Jungen has packed a bundle of meaning, creating objects that comment on the displacement of the natural by the synthetic, while also invoking the awe-inspiring scale of global commerce and our place within it.

The show offers other, smaller-scale pleasures, like the superb gouache *Bush Capsule Study* (2000), in which Jungen explores the Haida-like ovoid shapes to be found in moulded plastic furniture (in this case reformatted as a kind of igloo). His series of cartoon drawings of Indian braves from the mid-1990s reveal a raunchy and irreverent take on aboriginal identity, deftly drawn. But so far, Jungen seems to be at his best when he works the seam between native and white cultures. Some of his other projects in the show — such as his metal screen-

printed replicas of Air Jordan shoe boxes (among other things, a homage to Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes), or his *Arts and Crafts Book Depository/Capp Street Project* (a homage to Gordon Matta-Clark and the arts and crafts movement architects of Gamble House, Charles and Henry Greene) — feel conceptually laboured and visually dry, largely without the pleasurable visual surprise and ingenuity to be found in the other work. These seem like ideas that work better on the page than they do in three dimensions.

The exception to this are his *Modern Sculptures*, a suite of blob-like shapes that are silver and quilted like the skin of a soccer ball. Nike swooshes are found here and there scattered across their shiny surfaces, along with the odd bar code, and their presence leads us to consider the "brand" at issue: modern minimalist sculpture, beginning with Constantin Brancusi (whose work *The Kiss* is loosely quoted in one) and running through to the biomorphic abstractions of, say, Anish Kapoor, working today. These creations also seem to borrow something from the grotesqueries of Vancouver sculptor Liz Magor, a mistress of the ever-so-faintly horrific. Intriguing and hard to pin down, they satisfy endless speculation — the works of a major artist in his prime, at home and at play in the history of modern art.

The Brian Jungen exhibition is on view at the Vancouver Art Gallery until April 30 (604-662-4700).