



REVIEW - 11 OCT 2016

Duane Linklater

BY FRANCES LOEFFLER

Mercer Union, Toronto, Canada

In 1982, the Ontario Crafts Council organized an exhibition entitled 'From Our Hands: an Exhibition of Native Hand Crafts'. It toured to several places in Ontario and items from it were subsequently donated to the Thunder Bay Art Gallery. Duane Linklater has a personal connection to this history: the show included a group of works by his grandmother, Ethel Linklater – a fact that only came to his attention when a registrar noticed the association.

For a new exhibition at Mercer Union, Linklater has borrowed these works and displayed them alongside an installation of his own. Sumptuous caribou-hide and rabbit-fur mittens and boots for children and adults are presented on museum-style steel and concrete armatures. Linklater constructed each support with hooked and curved rods to hold aloft the exquisitely beaded and tasselled objects. A museum accession sheet from 1985 lists the price of a pair of baby boots as CA\$22, revealing the diminutive value ascribed to such items. The artist counters this devaluation by installing them on a raised platform, literally lifting them up so they might transcend their categorization as 'mere' craft.



Duane Linklater, *Speculative apparatus 5 for the work of nohkompan* (detail), 2016, concrete, welded stainless steel, tape, 41 x 122 x 6 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Mercer Union, Toronto

Elsewhere in the exhibition, a series of columns – constructed from steel studs, plywood, drywall and gypsum – measure the exact dimensions of the artist's height and chest span, with arms extended. These are 'clothed' with bison hide, faux fur, anti-vapour plastic, blankets and carpets: objects that reference gallery

construction materials as well as a complex history of gift-giving, trade, colonial violence and dispossession. Linklater has also removed the drywall from the gallery's east wall, where he has written the words 'what then remainz' powder-coated on steel beams. This is a direct reference to the Supreme Court case *Dollar General Corporation v. Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians* (2016), which raised vital questions about how, and by whom, indigenous independence in the US is determined. In her closing remarks, Justice Sonia Sotomayor asked: 'What, then, remains of the sovereignty of the Indians?' These charged words will endure as part of the gallery's substructure long after the show has closed and the walls have been re-clad.

Linklater's work infers that it is equally important to question the power dynamics of the contemporary art world as those of government institutions. By quite literally displacing the gallery's infrastructure, the artist points to the potential of art spaces to act as cultural gatekeepers, capable of legitimizing certain narratives while marginalizing or suppressing others. Excavation was a favourite strategy of artists, such as Michael Asher, who first explored institutional critique in the 1960s. But in the decades since their work was first seen, however, how much progress has really been made?



Duane Linklater, *Speculative apparatus 7 for the work of nohkompan* (detail), Concrete, stainless steel, tobacco, 41 x 122 x 6 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Mercer Union, Toronto

Above all, Linklater's exhibition foregrounds that which remains: personal memory, family lineage and collective history. In addition to the pieces by his grandmother, the artist has also included a work by his 12-year-old son, Tobias. This charming Claymation film, *Origin of the Hero* (2016), which retells the story of the courageous Link in Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda*, offsets the show's solemn undertones with gentle levity. At times, the film by Linklater's son resonates formally with his grandmother's works: flowers, hands and a shared handmade ethos form a poignant cross-generational dialogue. By including these pieces, Linklater deftly imbues a language reminiscent of the Western minimalist canon – a pyramid of stacked cigarette packs evoking work by Carl Andre, for instance – with meanings separate to these traditions: the significance of manual labour, for example, or indigenous religious practices.

'From Our Hands: an Exhibition of Native Hand Crafts' occurred at a pivotal moment: within two years, shows such as 'Primitivism', held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1984, would begin to prompt debate about the way institutions represented indigenous art. These were later followed by more forward-thinking initiatives, such as 'Land, Spirit, Power' (1992) at the National Gallery of Canada or Jimmie Durham and Jean Fisher's collaborations. Linklater reminds us that the questions raised at that time are still critically urgent – not only for our art institutions but also for the world at large.