

Two artists go moose hunting: Modest Livelihood at the AGO

By [MURRAY WHYTE](#) Visual Arts Critic
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In a huge, otherwise-empty gallery at the [Art Gallery of Ontario](#), Duane Linklater and Brian Jungen are flaying the still-warm carcass of a freshly killed juvenile moose calf, steam billowing from its upended rib cage, still full of wet crimson meat.

That this is happening onscreen — of course — and not directly in front of you mediates the intensity, though not entirely, and this is surely part of the point. Jungen and Linklater, both First Nations artists, both riding international careers, both tied to their respective tribal lands, set out to capture an unvarnished representation of daily life when they're not rubbing shoulders with the art world cognoscenti at museums and art fairs. Mission accomplished.



Brian Jungen, left, and Duane Linklater, two of Canada's most prominent First Nation contemporary artists, have collaborated on a video called *Modest Livelihood*, on now at the AGO. (COLIN MCCONNELL / TORONTO STAR)

"We wanted to show people it's not a heroic endeavour," says Linklater, who is Omaskeko Cree from [Moose Cree First Nation](#) in Northern Ontario. Jungen nods.

"It's a family thing," he says. "I think for most Indian folks, hunting is really just going hiking, but with rifles." It opened Saturday.

Linklater, 36, [won the Sobey Art Award earlier this month](#), likely Canada's most prominent contemporary art prize, given each year to an artist under 40.

Jungen, 43, who won the first [Sobey](#) in 2002, is among the country's best-known artists here and abroad, having built his considerable fame on his sculptural works that have typically plied a cheeky hybridization of Indian and contemporary culture, to both amusing and unsettling effect.

Linklater made a mark with a practice that's collaborative and open-ended, built on gesture and process more than making things, and his influence here is clear, and strong. But there's a mutual truth to be told here, and the duo had a strong affinity in telling it.

The film is called *Modest Livelihood*, and its 50 minutes have a decidedly homely quality. The artists trudge stoically through bush and across alpine fields, scanning the near distance for signs of their quarry. The final scene notwithstanding, *Modest Livelihood* is languid and broadly peaceful, punctuated with brief, infrequent spurts of ominous anticipation. It's a quotidian ritual of shared experience; even the butchering of the moose is practical, useful, matter-of-fact. ("We were always talking, about music, art, culture," Jungen said. "We thought we'd transfer the conversation to something else we shared.")

For all its plainspoken, documentary quality, there are powerful undertones. *Modest Livelihood* takes its title from a 1999 Supreme Court decision to allow Donald Marshall, a Mi'kmaq Indian in Nova Scotia, to sell eels he had caught without a permit under an 18th-century treaty between the crown and his band.

The decision, however, stipulated limits: Marshall could only sell enough to constitute a "moderate livelihood" ("moderate" became "modest" for the piece; the artist felt it more loaded). That ambiguous term was precedent-setting, and became a benchmark for resource management among First Nations.

In Jungen's home turf of [Treaty 8](#) in Alberta, it takes on heavy freight. "If Treaty 8 were a country, it would be rich," Jungen says, smiling slyly. In the film, Jungen and Linklater quicken their steps along a gravel road carving its way through the bush, and the camera shakes and blurs as they break into a run past a huge compressor pump that serves a pipeline running through the wilderness.

As they practice their "modest livelihood," all around, famously immoderate oil and gas conglomerates siphon Jungen's treaty territory. The government that administers it, of course, is the same one that granted treaty rights to Indians for such things as hunting, here and across the country.

In this uncomfortable intersection lies an explosive disconnect. Linklater, whose territory includes rich veins of diamonds and gold, and decades' worth of mining to extract it, nods knowingly.

"We both thought that limitation, in terms of the court's decision, was extremely problematic, in terms of the context of capitalism, where there seems to be no limit to what you can accumulate in terms of wealth," he says.

Onscreen, in close sight of the compressor pump, Jungen and Linklater skin the moose calf, gently removing its hide, methodically carving the meat into legs, shoulders and entrails as the snow turns a deep, furious purple. When they're finished, they fold the skin and roll it neatly, to be tanned for later use.

Jungen says when the film was shown in Vancouver, it was seen as fiery, "a proclamation," he says. "People couldn't watch it. It was too much."

Linklater demurs. "Ultimately, it's about self-determination," he says. "We knew what we wanted to do with the moose, and we had control over that." Over anything else, treaty or not, is the eternal question, and *Modest Livelihood* asks it as well as any.

Modest Livelihood continues at the AGO to June 15.