

Lost in Translation: Duane Linklater

by Andrea L. Ferber

“salt 11: Duane Linklater”
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In the eleventh installment of the Utah Museum of Fine Arts’ (UMFA) “salt” exhibitions, artist Duane Linklater cut to the heart of the fundamental museum claim that objects can be understood as *prima facie* evidence of cultures. Linklater, who is Omaskêko Cree, selected 17 American Indian artifacts in the museum’s collection and replicated them as 3D printed sculptures or inkjet prints on linen. These doubly decontextualized entities, mute yet (theoretically) endlessly reproducible, suggested that translocation has its limits.

Each of the textiles, carvings and pottery was chosen because fundamental information, such as the maker’s identity, is unknown to the museum. Such “authorless” objects pose a number of questions: in many cultures, culturally significant objects may be created and owned collectively so the name of an individual maker is irrelevant; in others, makers may be known and celebrated, but that information can be lost over time (as indeed it has been for much Western art); in still others, both modes may be at work, depending on circumstance. In the absence of deep knowledge of both the originating culture and the specific object’s subsequent passage through time and space, filling in the blanks can be an insurmountable difficulty, and the objects are left to “speak for themselves” to people unfamiliar with their language.¹

Linklater’s purpose was not to correct the readings of these artifacts, but to illustrate the slippage that occurs as artifacts become untethered from their own specific histories. To emphasize this point he made his selections, not by close study and handling, but by logging into the UMFA database from his studio in North Bay, Ontario.

The low resolution of the 3D-printing and inkjet technologies he used dramatized the loss of information. As UMFA curator Whitney Tassie observes:



Duane Linklater, *UMFA1977.099* (2015), inkjet print on linen, 85 x 44 inches. Courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery.

the copying process physically expresses the loss of information that occurs as American Indian objects transform into Westernized ethno-

graphic objects. Rather than manually reproducing the objects with skill and precision, he uses mechanical filters to produce copies that might be more

accurately described as translations ...
*The data lost in this imperfect process echoes the names, stories, purposes, and meanings that are erased during an object's cultural translation and ethnographic transformation in a museum.*²

The inkjet-printed imitations of weavings appear lifeless. The vertically hung ersatz Navajo *Hanoolchaadi* striped blanket is flat, drab and blurry in contrast to the commanding blood-red dye of the horizontally presented original, whose thickness and corner tassels cast shadows on the wall. Though the original is visually compelling and a testament to the weaver's virtuosity, neither it nor the copy can be used for the purpose for which it was woven.

The sculptures were printed in ivory-colored plastic. In some cases—a Hopi katsina doll, a large Kwakwaka'wakw raven mask—the original could be easily deduced from the copy. But a Cowichan painted wooden headdress, robbed of color, texture and material specificity, was unrecognizable.

In the exhibition, the authentic objects and the copies were separated into adjacent galleries, such that the copies began to take on independent life. The mirrored tables on which the sculptures sat offered views of all sides of the object, but no additional information. In the absence of contextualizing knowledge, neither the contemporary translation nor the artifact in the other room was able to offer insight about, say, the Cowichan people and their culture.

In this installation Linklater calls attention to the role of the museum as an instrument of history, inevitably written by the victors. His indigenous perspective, however, shines a slightly different light on this question from that provided by such postcolonial critiques as Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992–3) at the Baltimore Historical Society. Since the enactment of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990, ethical questions about the things museums hold and the rights of the originating cultures have been much discussed, but Linklater is not challenging the ownership of the objects in the UMFA's collection; he is asking us to consider the interaction of "history, art, repetition, and semiotics."³ How much can we actually learn from a mask with moveable parts created for a ritual dance



Installation view: "salt 11: Duane Linklater," Utah Museum of Fine Arts, 2015. Courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery.

as it lies still and lifeless in a vitrine? Linklater has given literal form to the phrase "pale imitation."

The late museum director James Wood defended mass replication, writing, "All reproductions of works ... ultimately stimulate a desire to experience the original."⁴ The question is what exactly that experience teaches us. ■

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Notes:

1. *The documentary* Inuit Piquitingit (What Belongs to Inuit) (2006) by Zacharias Kunuk and Bernadette Dean addresses this subject by taking Nunavut elders to five North American museums to discuss objects taken from their Inuit ancestors.
2. salt 11: Duane Linklater. *UMFA exhibition brochure*, 2015, n.p.
3. Duane Linklater, "Tautology," accessed 7 Sept 2015, <http://www.duanelinklater.com/index.php?/recent/tautology>.
4. James N. Wood, "The Authorities of the American Art Museum," in *Whose Muse? Art Museums and the Public Trust* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 111.



Navajo, *Hanoolchaadi* (Chief's Blanket) (late 19th century), wool, 71 x 77 inches. Judge Willis W. Ritter Collection of Navajo Textiles, UMFA1977.099.