

RE-VISUALIZING A HISTORY: FIRST NATIONS, CHILDREN AND COSTUMING - EXHIBITION

Anna Edell

Sydney Houston

Zoe Koke

Drawing from the essay “Shaping Modern Boyhood: Indian Lore, Child Psychology, and the Cultural Landscape of Camp Ahmek” by Abigail A. Van Slyck in *Depicting Canada’s Children*, our exhibition explores First Nations children’s dress and the appropriation of Native culture costuming throughout Canadian history. Inspired by the enactment and adaptation of First Nations ceremonies at the Camp Ahmek Council Ring, our selection of works investigates the romanticization, erasure and appropriation of the images of First Nations culture. In this presentation of historical paintings, vernacular photography, contemporary sculpture and recent artistic photography, our objective is to contribute to the discourse of re-visualizing and relocating a marginalized history of visual art. We have chosen to include the opposing two voices that speak strongly either of colonial ideologies, or of their self-representation as members of the First Nations.



Unidentified students. Garrison Jones Pioneer Elementary School. 1992. 4 x 6 inches. Photograph.
Dunedin, Florida, United States of America. (Image: Personal Collection of Edell Family).

As part of a learning unit about Native American ‘Indians’, Garrison Jones School hosted a ‘Pow-Wow’ day, where students in small groups presented different Aboriginal regions of the country. The sign on the left hand side of the picture reads ‘Northern Region’ and highlights the upper-east corner of the United States, suggesting that the housing structure and mask seen in the photo resemble those used by tribes in that geographical area. The school employs the motto ‘Pioneers for the future!’ and the icon of a covered-wagon as a method of expressing its ‘trailblazing’ spirit¹, but the pioneers are also part of colonial settlement problematic to the First Nations people. This re-enactment of the First Nations culture through costuming raises questions of appropriation, authenticity and sensitivity.

Anna Edell



Brian Jungen. *Prototype for New Understanding #8*. 1999. Nike athletic footwear, human hair.
 (Image: <www.ccca.ca/artists/work_detail.html?languagePref=en&mkey=20377&title=Prototype+for+New+Understanding+%238&artist=Brian+Jungen&link_id=1898>).

This sculpture is a part of a series of ‘masks’ included in Brian Jungen’s exhibition titled *Prototype for New Understanding*. The masks are made of deconstructed Nike Air Jordan’s sneakers sewn together in a way so as to resemble the wooden ritual masks of the Pacific First Nations. Jungen is using the Nike shoes to draw attention to the relationship between consumerist culture and the ritual, fetishized object, especially when it comes to costuming and the link to the human body. Jungen’s family is a member of the Doig River Band of the Dunne-za First Nations². His work often examines both his Native Canadian background and western culture, re-contextualizing mass produced commodities and various sources of imagery.

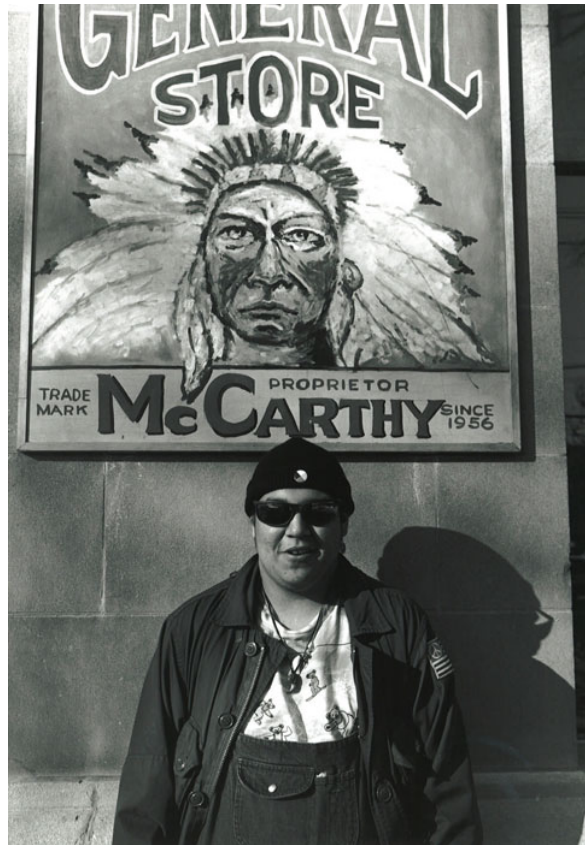
Anna Edell



Annie Leibovitz, *Dream Portrait* series. Photograph.

This photograph is from Annie Leibovitz's *Dream Portrait* series. It is a photograph of Jessica Biel clad as Disney's *Pocahontas*, running through the forest trailed by falling leaves. This eroticized, fairytale-like photograph represents Pocahontas's story as entirely changed from its historical source. In actuality, Pocahontas was twelve years old when she supposedly rescued John Smith, and it is unlikely she ever had romantic relations with him. This image of Jessica Biel, a white woman, scantily dressed, running to John Smith's boat at the finale of the movie depicts an invented narrative. Most Disney movies were based on adapted fairytales. But *Pocahontas* is the history of a real woman whose identity has been dismantled and replaced. This picture highlights Disney's Pocahontas as operating on a number of problematic levels. In addition to erasing a history, the film offers up a sexualized portrait of Native women, one whom was actually a child to be commodified, and consequently consumed by white North Americans. This is the Pocahontas the Disney film has disseminated to children. Its social consequence is far reaching and very wrong in reducing the complex and diverse history of First Nation culture to a sexualized child's cartoon character. Leibovitz's photograph reinforces the troubling legacy of Disney, in depicting Pocahontas as a white westerner, thus extending the debasing her history further.

Zoe Koke



Jeff Thomas. *General Store: How Do You Measure Up*, from the series *Bear Portraits*. 1994. Photograph.
Collection of the Artist.

(Image: <www.scoutingforindians.com/bear.html>).

This portrait is from the *Bear Portraits* series by Ottawa based First Nations artist Jeff Thomas. The photographs are various images of the artist's son Bear in an urban landscapes. In this picture Bear is representative of what Thomas calls "The Urban Iroquois." Thomas refers to his work as a "Study of Indian-ness" with the goal of representing Native Americans in urban settings. This image is significant in that Thomas places his son, a First Nations person to-day, against an outdated image of the Native American as a warrior. In doing so the artist, calls into question the way that his culture is represented both historically and in contemporary society.

Sydney Houston



Unidentified artist. *Pocahontas*. Oil on canvas. After 1616.

This historic portrait depicts Pocahontas in London at age 20, dressed for the court of King James. She died within months of this rendering. The painted engraving contradicts the mythology of Pocahontas typical of media representations and euro-centric culture. Here we see a colonial representation of Pocahontas in one of the very few images of her on record after her famous rescue of the colonial settler, John Smith, in Virginia. Her facial features and traditional attire have been changed to westernize her appearance, to represent directly her forced assimilation. In actuality, Pocahontas was kidnapped and brought to Britain as a social experiment, after the supposed rescue of Smith, when she was twelve years old. Today, she is inseparable from the images of popular western culture, such as Disney's movie, *Pocahontas*. This engraving represents the beginning of our reductive understanding of Pocahontas's history through a western lens. As such, it emphasizes the transformation of First Nations body and biography into an eroticized and racist form.

Zoe Koke



Unknown artist. *The Bear Dance*. 1932-1942.

Collection of Osoyoos Museum, Osoyoos, British Columbia.

(Image: <www.osoyoosmuseum.ca/inkameep_index.htm>).

Two young boys of the Inkameep First Nations (Frank Stelkia, drummer; Raymond Baptiste, dancer) enact a dance based on their traditional ceremonial performances. Anthony Walsh, a teacher at the Inkameep Day School recounts the story of Frank Stelkia approaching him at a festival and performing this dance. From this, he encouraged the children to create their own dramas based on their traditions. This idea was a great success and the art and drama that was created during the years 1932-1942 at the Inkameep Day School became known internationally with performances that were scheduled throughout Canada and the United States as well as artworks that were sent to England to be exhibited.

Sydney Houston



Anonymous. *Women and child outdoors, BC(?)*. About 1910. Silver salts and transparent ink on glass, gelatin dry plate process. 8 x 10 centimeters. (Image: McCord Museum Collection).



Imkameep students. Archival Footage of Performances at Thunderbird Park
Film Still. The Virtual Museum of Canada.

(Video: <www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Imkameep/english/catalogue/video/clip22_h.html>).



Jeff Thomas. *Cultural Revolution*. 1984. Photograph.
Collection of Artist. (Image: <www.scoutingforindians.com/bear.html>).

ENDNOTES

¹ "About Garrison-Jones Elementary," *Pinellas County Schools & Teachers*
<<http://it.pinellas.k12.fl.us/schools/garrison-es/about.html>>.

² Julia Dault, "Art & Design - Shapeshifter," *CBC.ca* (25 Nov. 2005)
<<http://www.cbc.ca/arts/artdesign/jungen.html>>.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"About Garrison-Jones Elementary." *Pinellas County Schools & Teachers*. Web. Accessed Nov. 3, 2010.
<http://it.pinellas.k12.fl.us/schools/garrison-es/about.html>

Dault, Julia. "Art & Design - Shapeshifter." *CBC.ca*. 25 Nov. 2005. Web. Accessed Nov. 3, 2010.
<http://www.cbc.ca/arts/artdesign/jungen.html>