Close Encounters

["Traditional Futures" (Close Encounters: the Next 500 Years). *BorderCrossings*. Spring 2011, vol. 30, #2. 72-78.]

There may come a day when the idea of an Aboriginal-only exhibition of contemporary art will seem quaint. Quaint because, for example, in a Neo-Modernist future where everyone agrees that art and the individual talent is beyond ethnicity, 'ghetto' exhibitions would be considered retrograde. Such shows would also appear antique if future First Nations, Métis, and Inuit artists saw themselves as more *artist* than *Aboriginal* and produced de-indigenized art. In a related possible world, Aboriginal folks who ceded their land claims, forgot their history and who they are, and assimilated into mainstream society have no need for artists to communicate and perpetuate their different worldviews and lived experiences because they no longer exist.

In yet another, though very different alternate future, the idea of an Aboriginal-only exhibition would be redundant because there are so many of them in the network of on and off-reserve public art galleries; spaces devoted to local and inter-Nation exhibitions of Indigenous art and in displays of work by Settler artists who contemplate their current and historical entanglement with First Peoples.

In the meantime, in our actual world, because most Aboriginal artists still identify as Indigenous and their work is informed by their cultures and their re-formation within a colonial setting, and because this art has some interesting things to show and say, an exhibition such as *Close Encounters: the Next 500 Years* is still a relevant idea.

Close Encounters (January 22 - May 8, 2011) features work by more than 33 Indigenous artists from Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand (Aotearoa), and Brazil. It occupies two large exhibition venues and several satellite installations, but also includes numerous talks, performances and ancillary displays, a film series and other events throughout Winnipeg. The scale of these activities, the breadth and depth of public and private sponsorship—it is the main project of Winnipeg's Cultural Capital of Canada Program—suggests that contemporary Aboriginal art is of interest to more than just Indigenous people; it is an aspect of Canadian culture and identity that is growing in significance.

For the most part, *Close Encounters* is a breath of fresh air. It was assembled by four independent Aboriginal curators from across Canada— Lee-Ann Martin, Steve Loft, Candice Hopkins, and Jenny Western—who were relatively free agents: they had enough resources, were not beholden to an institution, and had nearly enough time to put together a show that needed to be made. Earlier ground-breaking, Aboriginal-curated exhibitions had to carry much heavier pedagogic burdens. They were primarily addressed by national institutions to non-Aboriginals, and, because they were designed to update perceptions of Indigenous people and art, the tone was suitably educational and serious.

Here, the curatorial touch is lighter, the artists freer and the work more wide-ranging. There are heavy pieces to be sure, but most are more evocative than onerous, suggestive instead of didactic, and funny rather than sarcastic. The leavening comes from the theme. The curators selected and commissioned projects about the future. Unburdened from having to explain

history, yet again, the artists imagine futures and selves mostly untethered by the too-familiar tropes of retrospect and victimhood. This exhibition is about adaptation and perseverance, and playful independent thought that is nevertheless rooted in shared experiences.

On the serious side, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun (Vancouver, BC) offers "Killer Whale Has a Vision and Comes to Talk to Me about Proximilogical Encroachments of Civilization in the Ocean," a large painting in his unique surrealistic West Coast mash-up that combines anti-colonial anger and environmentalist outrage. Mary Anne Barkhouse's (Minden, ON) is similarly moved but is having a little more fun with her end-of-the world vision. *The Four Horses of the Apocalypse* re-imagines figures from the Book of Revelation as coin-operated steel steeds of the sort once found in shopping centers. Each is rehabilitated and altered to include animal crests to suggest that forces of nature will come to restore balance. Where Yuxweluptun's figures are intelligent but helpless witnesses, Barkhouse generates a whimsical revenge fantasy.

Wally Dion's (Saskatoon, SK) gorgeous "Thunderbird" emerges like a fossilized Archaeopteryx from a metallic field of computer circuit boards, suggesting that this supernatural force persists even in the digital age. Brett Graham (Auckland, NZ) seems unoptimistic that Aboriginals are any more benevolent than other peoples. "Te Hokioi" a large, black, wooden stealth bomber is an Indigenized death machine decorated with Maori designs and symbols. On the other hand, the deeply incised carvings defeat the plane's aerodynamics and 'stealth' technology, making this a reclaimed and repurposed artifact.

Colleen Cutshawl (near Brandon, MB) and James Luna (La Jolla Indian Reservation, California, USA) are senior artists who also renew the traditional. Luna's installation in the main exhibition site includes traditional shirts decorated with odd embellishments such as a round thermometer, which, like Public Enemy's Flavor Flav's big clock, might be poking fun or celebrating bling-adorned youth and modern powwow dancers. Or perhaps he is showing that even traditionalists take and adapt what they need from the new world—they also know how to take and tell the 'temperature' of the times. Cutshawl's room is a mini-retrospective of visionary paintings that chronicles Lakota prophesies and worldview. They are engaging but their deeper meanings are hard to follow without a guide.

Skawennati's (Montreal, QC) "Time Traveler" uses Second Life animations to project a Mohawk explorer from the future into various historical moments to show the continuity of Aboriginal lives. The project is D.I.Y. inventive and informative, and Indigenizing new mediums is important, but the present format is less engaging than the stories it tells.

It is difficult to tell if the Postcommodity collective (USA) are serious or camp. Their installation features musical instruments made from animal parts and electronics. Four video projections show young, bare-breasted women playing these discordant hybrids. The conceit may be that is an alternate, Edenic present as if contact had not happened, and Aboriginal people developed these technologies on their own. Or this is a post-apocalyptic world. In any case, it looks like something Captain Kirk stumbled across. The women in the videos are not laughing, but I couldn't help myself.

The most subtly moving works in the main exhibition space is Michael Belmore's (Toronto, ON) "Smoulder," fifty-one fist to nearly head-sized river smoothed rocks set in a tight circle, made tighter than in nature because at the points where each rock touches another, the stone is carved to match and nestle into its neighbour. The rocks are pulled apart slightly to reveal a mellow glow coming from the copper lining that protects each side of the wound. The effect is mesmerizing. While it might evoke a fire pit for most, there is also an Indigenous specific association. Because the stones are not in a ring but a filled circle, it evokes a sweat lodge; in which case the plain interlocking rocks with glowing cores suggests the Indigenous recognition of spirit in all things. It is a beautiful sculpture that offering Indigenous meanings without curtailing others.

Of the two main venues, the works in the new Plug In gallery are more consistently rewarding. Among the best there is Kent Monkman's (Toronto, ON) untitled installation and Rebecca Belmore's (Vancouver, BC) short video "The Blanket." A full-sized mannequin of Monkman's alter-ego, Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle, sits in a Victorian drawing room and listens to her own recordings. Though dressed in fabulous finery, she is melancholic. Miss Chief gazes out a window at one of her own paintings of a glorious past and bucolic setting. I swear I saw real tears roll down her cheeks. In Belmore's "Blanket," A woman struggles in the snow with an iconic Hudson's Bay blanket that seems at first a necessary comfort then a threat. Eventually, she abandons the blanket, preferring to freeze than endure the possessed thing—a token of the Bay and colonialism. Gorgeously shot by Noam Gonick, the video is cannily installed on two monitors; one faces the interior of the gallery, the other looks out at the edifice of the historic Hudson's Bay department store. The choice to cast Chinese-Canadian dancer, Ming Hon, rather than an Aboriginal actor suggests a more inclusive and expansive vision than many Aboriginal artists often extend.

In such a sprawling exhibition there are bound to be weaker works or installs. While the wonderful drawings by Shuvinai Ashoona and Pudlo Pudlat (Cape Dorset, NT) at the Winnipeg Art Gallery expand the expressive range and contemporary subject matter of Inuit art, Faye HeavyShield's (Blood Reserve, AB) delicate weavings of digital images that unite the Assiniboine and Red River, is all but lost in the cavernous Eckhardt Hall.

The curators promise that a big catalogue stuffed with terrific essays will come out this summer. In the meantime, the minimal text in the exhibition has mixed blessings. On one hand, the lack of authoritative curatorial voices contributes to the relative lightness of the experience. Like an elder's story, the audience is not told what to think but encouraged to get what they can. On the other hand, many pieces could use some contextualization. This is particularly true of Jonathan Jones' (Sydney, Australia) large, florescent tube sculpture of a distorted infinity symbol. Having discussed the work with the artist, I know that his use of the Métis flag (in Winnipeg, Métis central!) is conscious and respectful. Knowing that he is of French and Aboriginal descent, fascinated by the Métis experience and is, through this work, sounding an accord, makes much more sense of what otherwise might have been taken as a provocation.

Close Encounters offers many aesthetic, emotional and intellectual rewards, but the event is also important for being the largest Aboriginal-curated, international Indigenous exhibition ever held. It challenges Canadian Aboriginal artists to look beyond the local to resonate practices and

people around the globe. The event attracted scores of Aboriginal artists and curators to Winnipeg in an atmosphere of fun and critical attention and encouraged all involved to improve in every imaginable and unimaginable way. *Close Encounters* is the first of many like events to come. In 2013, The National Gallery is launching an exhibition of international Indigenous art, the first of a series that will happen every five years. There are signs in *Close Encounters* that contemporary Aboriginal art and curation are ready for the exposure.