‘Terribly Beautiful’: Joane Cardinal-Schubert’s ‘Intervention of Passion’

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A Native woman sits on a park bench; her infant son wrapped in a blanket and her arms. A white woman approaches smiles at the scene and declares, “What a cute baby!” “Cute now,” says the mother, “but when he grows up you might not like him so much.”

Joane Cardinal-Schubert told me this story. Like her paintings, the narrative combines the beautiful and the terrible. It lingers in the mind as a parable demanding the occupation of an Indigenous point of view. The homey tragedy is infused with Joane’s ironic humour and urge to unearth the disturbing realities lurking beneath the seemingly innocent and mundane. I often watched with surprise as she turned a sweet scene or compliment into an acidic teaching:

> *I like turning over rocks to see what is under them.....moving carcasses, turning them over, seeing what they are helping create. I am driven by not understanding how people have all this power. I pour in all those experiences, the good with the bad, and within the composition their energies are transformed into beauty and a new truth. So, you might say my art heals me. I was taught to believe that there is always something good to be found in bad.*[i]

Joane was an empathetic witness driven to creative activism by a sense of justice. She was fueled by her convictions, energized by art’s ability to inform and transform, and centered by cultural knowledge and community. Through this personal remembrance, and a visit with her essay “Flying with Louis,” I hope to convey some of Joane’s passion and outline her vision for the future of Indigenous art.

She told me her dark Madonna story thirty years ago as we walked across the University of Calgary campus from my studio—I was a first-year art student—to the Nickle Arts museum, where she was a curator. I don’t know how or when we fell into this communion. Our acquaintance consisted of one conversation divided into bundles and strung in a spiral whose beginning and end are indeterminate. I hear her still. Did we meet at the Muttart Art Gallery in 1979 while I was in high school? I think so. Were we friends? She was my casual mentor, then colleague. We showed together,[ii] I curated her work,[iii] and reviewed her survey exhibition[iv]. She helped me cast a video and provided the location.[v] And, a year before she died, Joane collected one of my paintings for the Alberta Foundation for the Arts. We met, say, fifty times over a quarter century,[vi] and never had a small talk. We visited each other’s homes only once or twice, and didn’t break bread outside of a group setting until a few months before her death when I took her to dinner to thank her for her positive role in shaping my life.

The story was followed by a long pause, which I silently filled with possible meanings while we walked. I knew it was autobiographical—she was the mother and Christopher or Justin the son—and enough not to ask questions. Our conversation was a river, mostly rapids, mostly her talking and me ruminating; asking questions only during portages. We were still in the water. “All kids

are cute," she finally explained, her expression shifting from smile to pain, "Indian babies especially. But then they grow up and their very existence is a problem for mainstream society." Joan worried about her sons' future: smiled upon while darling, helpless, and mute—but what about when they grew up, and spoke up? Perhaps she was also talking about herself and her art—her unsettling messages in beautiful bundles.

Many considered Joane difficult. The difficulty being she was a strong, intelligent Indigenous woman fallen into a racist, colonial, patriarchal society. Even on the sunniest days she felt the shadows. She knew where the bodies lay. Joane was the first artist I knew who not only talked about Indian Residential Schools but made public art about it.[vii] Despite her many successes, she did not place herself above anyone. She always considered who was missing from the table, and who would be helped or harmed by this or that decision. She didn't just want to support Indigenous people, she wanted to comprehend, expose, and fix oppressive systems so Indigenous people could support themselves.

Joane challenged privilege, even at the risk of appearing rude. She could be diplomatic, play ball, if that is what it took to make positive and lasting change: "I too have toed the mark—sometimes, if you can believe it."[viii] But she could also be counted on to blow the whistle if the playing field was uneven. I once invited her to the University of Regina to be the external examiner for a First Nations MFA candidate. After she had discharged her duties, Joane spent an extra half hour deconstructing the institutionalization of art and schooling the faculty on the difficulties First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students face in the colonial education system. It was a rough ride, and no student or university was better served.

Not a dreamer, but a visionary leader, Joane not only saw what needed doing, she did it. She worked tirelessly to achieve her goals: attending meetings, cajoling colleagues, founding societies, writing letters and grants, lobbying politicians and bureaucrats, making the calls and the coffee. Well, not *her* goals. Joane's mission was not a solo act. She saw it as a collective responsibility that included her: "As Aboriginal people…we have a sense of urgency to fix things," and as artists "we see an even greater urgency to do so."[ix] She knew how things should be and was as impatient with Indigenous people who were not awake to their history, duty, potential agency, and destiny as she was with non-indigenous art-world power brokers who refused the obvious fact of Indigenous oppression and their continuing role in the colonial enterprise. What she said of the path-making artists who preceded us is true of her: "they are our heroes. They had the vision; saw the need for an intervention of passion to achieve the benefit of equality. No one can deny this fact."[x]

The voice in her paintings sings. Swoon over her undulant, melodic lines. Rise with her high notes as they emerge from the dark, moist earth to meet the sun. Luxuriate in her luminous colours—oxidizing blood reds and browns, sulfurous yellows mellowing to ocher, and blues that know every sky and cool mood. Marvel at her research with elders, on the land, and in the museum vaults, and their embodiment in her canvases. The voices in her installations are louder, angrier, instructive, daring. But there is always care, craft and beauty in these subversive devices:

> *"What I usually try to do is make something terribly beautiful so that if people don't get it on an intellectual or emotional layer, then they'll get it on the personal layer of 'it's nice*

> *to look at'. Then, when they finally figure out what it's really about, it gives them a double whammy because they probably feel guilty for thinking it was beautiful in the first place—it's part of the strategy."*[xi]

Much as I want to swim in her bitter-sweet paintings, drawings, sculptures, installations, and videos, I am compelled to remember Joane Cardinal-Schubert the writer, the theorist, and poetic warrior. I feel called to direct your attention there by Joane herself who ask that we write our own art history in our way: "It is time for a huge wake-up call regarding practice. We have an arts history within a greater history that has not been recorded by ourselves, not been embraced, not been written about by us. When will that begin?"[xii] A consideration of her life's work is incomplete without at least a glance at her intellectual legacy.

Joane Cardinal-Schubert was not a prolific writer, but what she did publish had an impact that continues to reverberate. Her exhibition essays not only offer a glimpse at Indigenous curatorial thinking in the recent past, but also reveal insights about issues that hound us still. She insisted, for example, on linking contemporary Indigenous art with customary First Nations' creative works, objects that at that time (*Mark Makers* 1985) were still deemed craft or ethnological artifacts. She wanted to show that contemporary Indigenous art was part of continuous cultures, and that American modernist art (Pollock, Barnett Newman, etc.) owed as much to Native American art as contemporary Indigenous art learned from them. And her essay, "In the Red" (*Fuse* 1989),[xiii] about the misappropriation of Indigenous culture by settler artists and commercial industries was incendiary, sparking national debates that continue to flare up.

On the occasion of a survey exhibition of two decades of her work, Joane told a First Nations reporter: "I seem to work in a big circle with smaller circles spinning off of it. I can cross over the circle, too, and redo things, rethink and readdress what I've tried to express before."[xiv] In the Indigenous world-view, time is non-linear and everything is related. I am a Métis man who grew up in the city, mostly detached from Indigenous life ways. Now that I primarily associate with Indigenous people and strive toward a non-colonized personal state, I increasingly feel the truth and power of this worldview and Joane's presence and prescience.

I am, at this moment, experiencing time looping and the intimate complexity of our connections. "Flying with Louis" was the keynote talk at the ground-breaking gathering *Making a Noise!: A forum to discuss contemporary art, art history, critical writing, and community from Aboriginal perspectives*, held at the Banff Centre in November 2003. I am writing this text at that same place thirteen years later. Tomorrow, I co-lead the latest iteration of the Indigenous Arts Residency, a program made possible, in part, by Joane's lobbying. She and Edward Poitras were its first artists (1988). Candice Hopkins, my co-facilitator, helped organize *Making a Noise!*, and, six years earlier, was one of my students. Our residency symposium springs from the *Making a Noise!* publication. I have had two Indigenous art-world mentors, Joane and Bob Boyer (1948-2004). Joane's essay is in that book and that book is dedicated to Bob. Our Indigenous art community is like intricate, looping beadwork, "a big circle with smaller circles spinning off of it." I feel it.

"Flying with Louis" begins with a formal welcome to the territory and conference, and previews the journey. The second section is a "soap opera," a fictional gathering of Indigenous artists and

others set on the Concorde. The large third part reviews recent advances made by Indigenous artists and curators in the mainstream art world. Well laudable, Cardinal-Schubert laments that we—including her—as individuals, have been tricked and seduced by mainstream rewards and distracted from the goal of collective self-determination. Indigenous artists, she explains, should now attend to our own communities and develop an art history and art theory apart from the Western tradition. The fourth section returns to the Concorde allegory with Louis Riel as pilot and Pauline Johnson as co-pilot. The conclusion reinforces Cardinal-Schubert's call for a shift from demanding space within the dominant culture to improving sovereign aesthetic practices and institutions on and with our own terms.

The essay's opening is both unsettling and settling: it unsettles Settlers and sites First Nations, Inuit, and Métis (as) readers. Cardinal-Schubert offers a "formal welcome to this part of the country;"[xv] matter-of-factly explaining that Banff, the Park, these sacred mountains are Indigenous country and, as a Blackfoot person, she has the responsibility of welcome/declaring territory. This sort of address—one that reminds rather than petitions—often surprises non-Indigenous people who identify as Canadian rather than experience Canada as something pulled over their territory, community, and selves. This welcome/reminder applies not only to Settlers, but also to First Peoples from other places—thus disturbing a pan-Indianist imaginary before it can get going. Significantly, the welcome not only includes the conference participants of thirteen years ago, but also the present reader who soon discovers that the book, too, is Indigenous space, one they have to re-figure themselves in relation with.

This formal welcome is non-colonial protocol rather than an anti-colonial strategy. It does not confront colonialism but does an end-run around it to link one Indigenous person (the author) to another (the reader) in an Indigenous space. This (re)addressing is perhaps even more profoundly felt when you discover that the text assumes that the reader is Native. The "I," "you," "us," and "we" in these pages are all figured as Indigenous. Most texts, even those authored by First Peoples, comport themselves to a 'general' reader—read 'Settler'. By Indigenizing the space of reading, Cardinal-Schubert produces an oscillating alienation/empathy response in Settler readers and provides Indigenous minds a singular yet collective Indigenous reading consciousness rather than the "double consciousness" that Settler texts usually compose/impose.[xvi] By addressing readers as "we" and "us," Cardinal-Schubert leads us into community or alliance. The Indigenous "we" can picture our participation in her vision.

The next part, the Concorde section, is over-stuffed with hilarious characterizations of Native artists of the era, insider-jokes and references that only an Indigenous hub personality like Cardinal-Schubert would fully catch. Like her welcome to country, it lets readers know that they are visiting the land of another—even if the reader is Native, this is a rarified space. The more respect we give to its keepers, the more we listen, the more understanding we gain, the more members we know, and the more we identify with the cause and companions, the more likely we are to be good guests, allies, or even members.

The conceit of the Concorde allegory is that First Nations, Inuit, and Métis artists "have been placed in an imposed holding pattern, barely visible to others on the global radar, without runways and land bases formerly familiar in our journey through history."[xvii] Invasion, land theft, broken treaties, forced removal, and aggressive assimilation, especially Indian Residential

Schools, prevented Indigenous people from either following their natural course or achieving "parallel equality" with Western culture in shared territories. So, here we—the "we" of the text's construction, contemporary Indigenous artists raised in the Western tradition—are suspended above our land and traditional ways, seeing but not quite engaging. However, Cardinal-Schubert provides an alter-native reading in which Indigenous pilots, Louis Riel and Pauline Johnson, take the wheel and repurposed the flight. Instead of being in suspense, the group is on a "final historic voyage of destiny"[xviii]—and will soon be landing, be grounded.

Indigenous artists—in First Class!—sip Saskatoon berry juice, swap professional stories, gossip, and ideas. The raucous scene suggests that despite being "in a holding pattern" and "barely visible to others," an exciting intellectual, political, and creative culture has fermented in this chamber. The back of the plane is filled with "Aboriginal art viewers and patrons" who sleep "the deep sleep of boredom, and disconnectedness." Between the Indigenous artists and their public are "the directors, administrators, curators, historians and critics."[xix] Typing and talking on phones, they are awake but not a community and not attuned to the excitement in front of them.

The image of the awakened Indigenous artists and their sleeping audiences separated from each other by the dominant art world is meant to trigger an association familiar to most Plains people. Answering her own question about why Louis Riel is the pilot, Cardinal-Schubert explains that he was "far-seeing," a visionary reported to have said: "My people will sleep for a hundred years; when they awake it will be the artists who give them their spirits back."[xx]

Next, Cardinal-Schubert details many ways Indigenous artists have fought for mainstream recognition and inclusion: "We have kicked down doors having to assume dual roles of curators and historians lobbying with governments, educational institutions, funding agencies, galleries, and even our relatives, friends and peers."[xxi] We have secured special funding for Indigenous arts, won curatorial internships at museums, learned Western critical theory and museum conservation. We have been, she writes, "a bunch of really 'good' Indians." However, it is time for a turn, "time for a communal act of faith; a leap into "self-determination."[xxii]

Her "soap opera" ends with Indigenous audiences waking up. Curious about what's happening in the forward cabin, some push past the blinkered denizens of the dominant art world. They are thrilled by what they see—the vital artists and their work. Two kids go back and rouse their parents exclaiming "I WANT TO BE AN ARTIST." They see figured in the artist an ideal of contemporary, self-determined yet communal Indigeneity: "No one tells them what to do or how to do it!" Approaching the runway, Riel announces "MISSION ACCOMPLISHED."[xxiii] Cardinal-Schubert's mission is that the future of Indigenous art does not consist of success within and recognition by the dominant art world, but reaching and awakening Indigenous people with our art, restoring their spirits, their desire for collective self-determination.

In the next section, Cardinal-Schubert describes the recent (1980s) history of Indigenous artists fighting their way into the mainstream—battles in which she often participated—only to achieve, she thinks, Pyrrhic victories because they lead to individual achievements at the expense of community. Though she does not use the term, she cautions that Indigenous art programs assimilate Indigenous people into the mainstream art world. Speaking of the second wave of

artists who fought for inclusion in the established art spaces, "I maintain that our efforts have been misunderstood; we have been co-opted."[xxiv] Indigenous contemporary art, she argues, is now consumed and celebrated by non-Indigenous audiences in Canada and overseas but has little presence or impact on local First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. If we continue to pour most of our energies into global exhibitions and group shows curated by non-Indigenous people for non-Native audiences, all of which are "too far away" from local communities, it contributes "to a further identity crisis"….and "we will not be able to advance an Aboriginal art theory."

Cardinal-Schubert explains that our new role is "to give back the spirit, to wake everybody up." Culture and its people are not lost, just asleep. Awakening requires that we refresh ourselves by looking not to Western art history and institutions, but to "examine our own art theory," create "our own language of art: 'Aboriginal Art Speak';"[xxv] recover what we can of our aesthetics, modes of making, and display from the time before we were asleep, before contact. The purpose of this work is to make aesthetic things and sites that are relevant and revelatory for Indigenous audiences. She says,

> *"Let us not be too eager to fit into Western European art paradigms, to continue to see our work acceptable only on those imposed terms….We must continue our process, begun from inside our own cultural contexts, to further examine our art forms in relation to the existing repositories of this cultural knowledge and acknowledge it as contemporary continuum of the people we come from—the people we still are."*[xxvi]

This means linking contemporary Indigenous art with the art of past generations, but also blurring the lines between customary work and Western-style modern and contemporary art.

She maintains that by turning from the lure of art stardom our humility might make us receptive to the intelligence woven into customary and seemingly naïve work: "Sometimes one of these relatives teach us by the work…and we find ourselves humbled within our acquired wisdom."[xxvii] Cardinal-Schubert does not fall into the trap of seeing customary work as the only site of cultural authenticity. Colonialism seeps into traditional culture, if only in its commercial incentive program that encourages folks regurgitate past art forms without engaging the practice as a living form of existential inquiry. She is as demanding of local artists as she is of international ones: "In this country, some young Aboriginal artists are working with absolutely no knowledge of (their) art history or how that art history provides a place for them that they presently enjoy."[xxviii] "We need time to internalize, to rethink, to digest our own material, to write, to publish, and to celebrate and share knowledge within our own communities—first."[xxix]

Throughout "Flying with Louis," Joane Cardinal-Schubert describes the need for autonomous Indigenous art history, theory, and exhibition spaces. Exhausted by perpetual lobbying for temporary spaces to exhibit Indigenous art within mainstream artist-run centres and public art galleries, in 2001, she founded a small gallery within the already Indigenous space of the Calgary Aboriginal Arts Awareness Society's office, where she was a volunteer. She christened it the F'N Gallery(!)—which eventually featured a café, literary society, and theatre group. "It is not unreasonable to think that shortly Aboriginal public galleries and museums and universities will be the new normal, staffed by Aboriginal people."[xxx] Even at the time of her writing, sovereign Indigenous aesthetic spaces existed. On the Plains, F'N Gallery was preceded by

Indigenous artist collectives and centres: Sâkêwêwak Artists' Collective (Regina), Tribe (Saskatoon), and Urban Shaman (Winnipeg). And the First Nations University of Canada (Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert) has been a reality since 1976.

The sort of rebirth Cardinal-Schubert envisioned was already underway. She noted that there were very few Indigenous studio professors in Canada in 2003. That number has grown to nearly a dozen. There are perhaps six First Nations, Inuit, and Métis tenure-track art historians, and many Canadian Universities and Colleges are making concerted, public efforts at Indigenization. The art, exhibition, and scholarship that they are producing and facilitating are just beginning to swell. The renaissance was underway but she was calling for a deepened criticality and history building apart from colonial formation and institutions. That struggle continues.

Always critical, Joane's Concorde passengers are cacophonous rather than sonorous or melodic. In her conclusion, she argues that it is no longer enough to make a noise. Our new sounds must be our own and "more than an annoying noise."[xxxi] As always, hers is a call that our interventions of passion be beautiful.

Several months before she died, upon the invitation of curator Gerald Conaty (1953-2013), I was surveying the Glenbow Museum's rich cache of Métis material culture when I had a rush of feeling. Twenty five or so years earlier, I saw Joane after she had spent time with the Blood First Nation war shirts at the Museum of Civilization. She was, characteristically, both profoundly moved and outraged—moved at the power and beauty of the shirts, outraged that they were not in the hands of their rightful keepers. She was particularly disturbed that these sacred things were in plastic bags on a shelf. Her encounters with the shirts inspired numerous paintings and an installation, *Preservation of the Species* (1988), that commented on the difference between Indigenous use and Western fetish for the object and conservation (of things belonging to seemingly extinguished Peoples). The rush of memory and affect rhymed with my experience with the Métis clothes. I was impelled to call Joane up. I felt the need to share my experience, our parallel quests, but more importantly to let her know how much I valued her work, advice and friendship. It was a beautiful meal. She was sore from house renovations; happy for the break. We resumed our endless conversation.

Joane's sons are now grown men, and the many artists she mentored and blazed trail for have also come of age. We are fulfilling her vision while pursuing our own. Thinking back on her park bench story, I feel that while Joane was anxious about how the world might treat her mature children, perhaps she anticipated reasons for this beyond their Indigeneity. She may have been concerned that they would inherit her outspokenness and sense of justice; qualities that do not make for an easy life.

The Indigenous "renaissance"[xxxii] that began in the late 1960s continues. Like the Italian Renaissance, ours will not only revive sleeping cultures, it will respond to new conditions and relations. And, in Joane Cardinal-Schubert's words, the sounds we make "will truly be our noise, not a bad imitation"[xxxiii] of either our traditional cultures or adjacent ones. Joane's paintings embody her vision. Through this legacy we can see the complexity of her thought and depth of her heart.

[i] http://www.gallerieswest.ca/artists/profiles/joane-cardinal-schubert,-at-the-centre-of-her-circle/

[ii] *Alberta Biennial*. Curators: Catherine Crowston and Cathy Mastin. Glenbow Museum, Calgary, AB, 1999. Edmonton Art Gallery, AB, 1998.

[iii] *The End of the World (as we know it)*. Thirty artists. National. Calgary ArtWeek '99. Barron Building, Calgary, AB. 1999.

[iv] "Eyestreaming." *BorderCrossings,* Feb., vol. 17, #1, 1998. 53-57.

[v] *Black Pepper* (1999, 4 min.) was shot on the exterior wall of the CAAAS (Calgary Aboriginal Awareness Society), where Joane's studio also was.

[vi] We were closest from the mid 80s through the 90s before I moved to Regina, in 1999.

[vii] The Lesson (1989). See: http://www.glenbow.org/collections/stories/joane-cardinal-schubert/index.cfm Also: http://vandocument.com/2013/09/the-lesson-witnesses-art-and-canadas-indian-residential-schools/ Accessed Jan. 18, 2016.

[viii] "Flying." 28.

[ix] Joane Cardinal-Schubert. "Flying with Louis." *Making a Noise*. 47.

[x] ibid. 28.

[xi] Bissley, Jackie. "Joane Cardinal-Schubert: An Artist Setting Traps." Windspeaker. Vol. 17. Issue 2. 1999.http://www.ammsa.com/node/22163 Accessed, Jan 15, 2016.

[xii] "Flying." 47.

[xiii] Republished: Cardinal-Schubert, Joane. "In the Red." In Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation, eds. Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, 122-133. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997.

[xiv] Bissley.

[xv] "Flying." 27.

[xvi] See, for example: Dickson D. Bruce Jr. "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness." *American Literature*. Vol. 64, No. 2 (Jun., 1992), pp. 299-309.

[xvii] ibid. 27.

[xviii] ibid. 29.

[xix] ibid. 29.

[xx] ibid. 28

[xxi] ibid. 27.

[xxii] ibid. 27.

[xxiii] ibid. 32.

[xxiv] ibid. 42.

[xxv] ibid. 34.

[xxvi] ibid. 34.

[xxvii] ibid. 34.

[xxviii] ibid. 41.

[xxix] ibid. 44.

[xxx] ibid. 40.

[xxxi] ibid. 47.

[xxxii] ibid. 41.

[xxxiii] ibid. 48.