# “The North American Iceberg”: the Role of Indigenous Art in Indigenization

[“’The North American Iceberg’: the Role of Indigenous Art in Indigenization. CARFAC Newsletter; July/August, 2014. 8-10.]

When I see Mary Longman’s sculpture at the Mackenzie Art Gallery, Lionel Peyachew’s statues in Yorkton, Leah Dorian’s book illustrations, Bob Boyer paintings in the Mendel, and stand inside Douglas Cardinal’s glass tipi at the First Nation’s University of Canada building, I experience these things not only as works of art but also as markers of First Nations and Métis presence.

Indigenous art in both Australia and Canada has a paradoxically peripheral yet central status. It is produced by tiny populations[i] that nevertheless play out-sized roles in shaping the visual identities of nations not their own. Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders represent only 2.5% of the Australian population,[ii] stunningly, their art sales outstrip “non-Indigenous artists three to one.”[iii] To many outside that continent, Indigenous art *is* Australian art—a phenomenon that white Australian artists find incredibly frustrating. These colourful and inventive abstract paintings grace public buildings, offices and private homes, and Indigenous designs decorate clothing, furniture, advertising, everything. Their ubiquity is not only a recognition of design genius, it indicates the general population’s growing acceptance of the fact that Indigenous people co-exist with them, and, to some degree, that the territories proliferated by these patterns are also Indigenous.

While Inuit carving and prints, Woodlands style painting, Plains beading, West Coast totem poles and design generally, are popular signifiers of Canada, and while Indigenous art is more visible, it is nowhere near the saturation of Australia. Even so, every serious art gallery and museum has First Nations, Inuit and, occasionally, Métis art. These things are prized not only for their aesthetic value but because they represent complex networks of meaning that express the values of those who collect and display them. For example, that the National Gallery of Canada did not obtain a work of First Nations contemporary art until 1986 and that they now employ Indigenous curators who recently mounted Sakahàn (2013)—the largest international exhibition of contemporary Indigenous art in the world—tells us a great deal about the mainstream’s evolving attitudes.

While I would like to see Saskatchewan, like Australia, blanketed in First Nations and Métis art, the fine artist in me, or perhaps it is the curator, is attracted to a more focused approach that emphasizes quality, content, and strategic placement. Like most artists, I want my paintings in major collections. But my reasons go beyond personal satisfaction; I have a Métis mission. Through my objects, I want to occupy these places with Indigenous content in the hope that these accumulating fragments—my work and the work of other Indigenous artists—will eventually alter the collecting institutions from within. Witness the National Gallery example. Their website explains that “Carl Beam’s *The North American Iceberg*” was “the first work by a First Nations artist to be” purchased for their “collection of contemporary art, thus opening the door for a new generation of First Nations artists to enter.”[iv] Once the door is open, and the vault fills,

there is a natural demand to do something with these things. This critical mass inspires the inclusion of more First Nations, Inuit and Métis art in exhibitions. Eventually, this requires the hiring of Indigenous curators and educators who increase the quality of their engagement not only with the art work but also with Indigenous communities, who in turn will want some say in Indigenous education and representation. This dialogue constitutes the Indigenization of the institution. Instead of expressing the values of their non-Indigenous managers alone, the art gallery now includes Indigenous worldviews and values. The art is just the tip of the iceberg. Fine examples of this sort of co-managed transformation can be seen throughout New Zealand/Aotearoa where, as in Saskatchewan, the Indigenous population is about 14%.

I suppose that this is how colonization works. A few Xs are permitted into a territory. They co-habit with the indigenous peacefully. Then they invite their family and friends to join them. Their hosts think this is fine, after all, the first bunch are so nice. Before you know it, the growing group, if not assimilated, begin to agitate for accommodations for their differences. Well, it is kind of like that; except that Indigenous people were here before the Settler institutions. What is happening now is more of an extension of treaty, of how best to share this territory.

In the following paragraphs, I will describe how one of my paintings was recently not only recognized as a work of art but, to my astonishment, elevated to a status beyond even that lofty pinnacle. I have been asked to tell you this tale, and do so, not out of pride—though I am proud—but as a lesson about how our art system works and how it might be used to promote Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenization.

There is not enough space here to explain why I made "Evidence," a painting based on Neil Stonechild's autopsy photograph, or to do justice to his life and tragic death. There is only room to provide a sketch to contextualize my larger point. Neil Stonechild, a boy of 17, froze to death in a field on the outskirts of Saskatoon in November, 1990. The death was determined not to be the result of foul play. A decade later, Darrell Knight complained that he was dumped on the edge of town by police officers in freezing weather. Officers Dan Hatchen and Ken Munson were jailed for the offence. This set in motion a massive R.C.M.P. investigation. In 2004, a public inquiry concluded that the initial investigation was "botched" and that Stonechild and Knight were not the only Aboriginal people taken by police on "Starlight Tours." The inquiry did not determine that Neil was murdered by police.

Sometime in 2000, I heard on CBC radio that there was an autopsy photograph showing that Stonechild had probably been hit in the face with handcuffs wielded like brass knuckles. I found the horrible image on an internet site, *Injustice Busters*[v]. Moved more by feeling than thought, I made a charcoal drawing of the image on a large, light blue canvas I had prepared for a landscape painting. I felt the need to record the evidence in case it was covered-up. I made it for myself. It was too brutal, ugly, to exhibit, to be art. A few years later, in a sweat, I saw dancing little flashes of light and the face I had drawn. So, I laid a field of red dots over Neal's cool face. I was thinking about the little sparks in the sweat, Métis beading, and wanting to veil him with stars.

I showed “Evidence” to a few Aboriginal people who reacted strongly. In 2008, Dunlop Art Gallery curator Amanda Cachia asked to show it in an exhibition, *Diabolique*, that would tour Canada. Before the show, a First Nations friend, artist, and professor saw “Evidence” in my studio. She enthused that it was a powerful and what a shame it was that it could not be exhibited because it violated Cree protocols regarding representing those who have passed. Another Indigenous friend, artist and professor, agreed. I was floored. I knew this prohibition but had seen it broken many times before—the image I used was on the internet and, later, in the inquiry.

Not wanting to offend, I thought I would exhibit the painting veiled. I later rejected that idea because then it would be a conceptual art piece about protocol rather than a political history painting about the unresolved crime and on-going issues. I talked to several Elders about the role of the artist. They agreed that artists are like shaman or contraries—not all, not always, not literally. To pursue their research, they may need to violate protocols. They are granted a certain license, though, because their results often provide a social good greater than the harms their research may inflict. And, in any case, it is not up to the community to punish. If the artist is not doing things in the right way, there will be metaphysical consequences. One knowledge-keeper, Rodger Ross, while in front of “Evidence” said that it would be wrong not to show it. I feel this way, too. One of my colleagues suggested I contact Neil’s mother—she even got her number for me—but I didn’t want to drag all this up for her and I questioned whether I should be asking for permission at all. Another colleague argued that no individual could grant or deny permission to violate a protocol. It seemed to me that my head and heart were right on this, that these issues are too important to be covered up.

“Evidence” was shown in *Diabolique* and attracted a good deal of press. There was an online debate on CBC. There were many objections, among, as far as I could tell, non-Indigenous people. Many First Nations and Métis people told me they were glad the story came out in this way; that it would persist beyond the headlines.

Around 2010, the SaskArts Board expressed interest in acquiring the painting. I was torn. I saw the value of having a record of these events in the collection—as per my mandate—but remained uncertain of the painting’s status; was it really a work of art, of culture, of therapy? In short, with the guidance of Indigenous leadership, Carol Greyeyes, the painting was collected under three conditions: it would be gifted; it would only be shown under the guidance of an Indigenous curator; and Stonechild’s family would be notified if it were exhibited. These are unusual conditions. It suggests that the object has an ontological status beyond being a work of art.

In case this sounds like an Indigenous thing, and egotistical—I do wish someone else was telling this story!—I should add that “Evidence” was collected under the authority of the federal government’s *Cultural Property Export and Import Act*. The act has two interesting clauses. It explains that work accepted by them is “of such a degree of national importance that its loss to Canada would significantly diminish the national heritage,” and its “outstanding significance and national importance transcend the collections and mandates of individual organizations.”[vi] Clearly, some Indigenous folks, and the state, recognize or invest qualities into this thing that are far beyond my original intentions. “Evidence” is not only more than a mere real thing, it is even now designated as more than just a work of art, it is has cultural properties that even exceed the collections that keep them.

The art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto explains that there are mere real things and then there are works of art. Art works are things but they also have an extra quality that makes them special. He says, for example, that works of art have titles while mere things are "unentitled to titles." Works of art also have "aboutness,"[vii] they refer to things beyond themselves. Mere real things are simply themselves. It could be that we recognize the importance of works of art and so, like out children, pets, and big boats, give them names. Or, perhaps we title things in order to elevate them. By naming and titling we try to convince others that the things and people we value ought to be similarly valued by everyone. In either case, in societies that have the art concept, works of art are recognized as being above mere real things. They are sometimes even accorded a value above individual persons, as when paintings, sculptures, and nice furniture are insured and poor people are not; or when art works are hidden and protected during war-time but citizens are not.

Traditional Indigenous societies do not have this sort of art concept, and I suggest that in our evolving art institutions we need to balance between European art ontological hierarchies and the traditional Indigenous worldview that recognizes the inter-relationships of all things. What the collection of "Evidence" shows is that works of art are not neutral objects of aesthetic pleasure but are things with social meaning inseparable from community. The contemporary making, collecting, curating, and use of Indigenous art are an inter-cultural dialogue with implications beyond the iceberg's waterline.

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[i] According to Statistics Canada, 1,400,685 people reported Aboriginal identity in the 2011 household survey. This puts First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations of Canada at 4.3% of the total Canadian population. http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-011-x/99-011-x2011001-eng.cfm (Accessed Nov. 15, 2013).

[ii] http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1301.0~2012~Main%20Features~Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20population~50 (Accessed Nov. 20, 2013).

[iii] Susan McCulloch referring to figures produced by research conducted in 1996. As cited in McLean, Ian. "Aboriginal Art and the Artworld." *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art*. Ian McLean ed. Institute of Modern Art, Power Publications: Sydney. 2012. p. 329.

[iv] http://www.gallery.ca/beam/en/ Accessed June 19, 2014.

[v] The updated site can be found at http://injusticebusters.org/04/Stonechild_Neil.shtml. Accessed June 19, 2014.

[vi] http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-51/ Accessed June 19, 2014.

[vii] Danto, Arthur C. *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: a Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 1981.