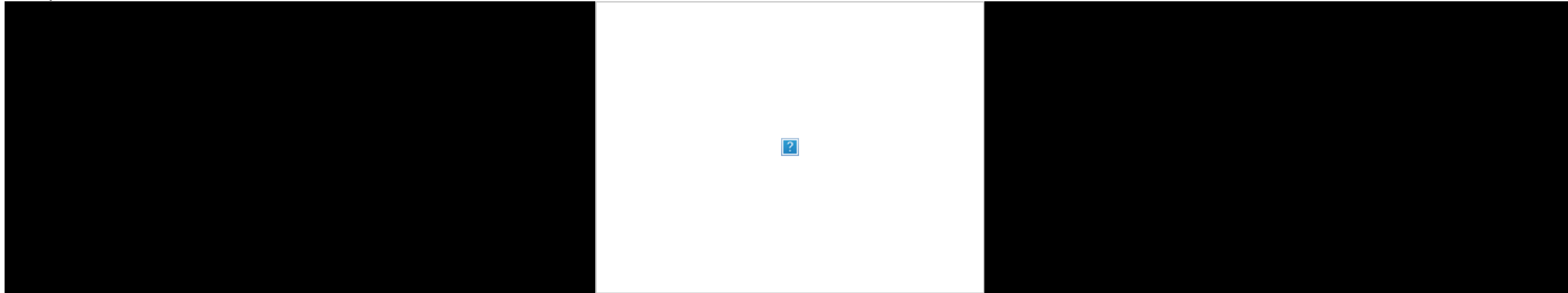


Review of 'Brian Jungen: Strange Comfort' at the Museum of the American Indian



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"Brian Jungen: Strange Comfort" at the National Museum of the American Indian offers a unique view of Native American art.

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By Blake Gopnik
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You could say that Brian Jungen, an Indian artist of the Dunne-za First Nation in British Columbia, is a classic shape shifter: He's taken Air Jordan running shoes and turned them into ritual animal masks.

Or you might say he's been possessed by the trickster spirit: He's assembled the skeleton of a whale, sacred to so many of this continent's first peoples, out of fragments of cheap plastic lawn chairs.

If you said either of those things, you'd be playing into Jungen's hands. His new show at the National Museum of the American Indian, called "Brian Jungen: Strange Comfort," is all about probing such cliches of Indianness, which stick like glue to anyone with native roots. That probing puts him on the leading edge of native culture, as well as in the thick of international contemporary art.

Those red, black and white Air Jordans, pulled apart and reassembled into masks, look a lot like the most famous Indian carvings of British Columbia and Washington state -- but what's that to Jungen? The coastal groups that make such carvings have almost nothing to do with his people, who occupy farmlands a thousand miles away, on the other side of the Rocky Mountains.

Natives are supposed to be in touch with nature in a way that all the rest of us no longer are, right? And yet Jungen's own people are more likely to know plastic lawn chairs than an aquatic mammal that swims in oceans they may never have seen, except on TV.

Outsiders, and some natives, have often bought into a notion of "Indianness" that risks leveling such differences. It's easy to act as though there's some Indian essence underlying groups that are actually more different from each other, by far, than the French are from Norwegians. Though we'd never make the mistake of imagining Parisians eating lutefisk, we're happy to imagine Dunne-za communing with whales.

We also wouldn't demand that every Frenchman wear a beret, but we do something close to that in dealing with the Indians who live right among us.

"Native cultures are living, and shouldn't be in the Museum of Natural History. . . . It's good for people to realize native art isn't just beads and carving," says Jungen, giving me a tour of his show at NMAI. (There's always a risk in reviewing art alongside the people who've made it: They can be their own worst interpreters. But because the content of Jungen's art partly comes from our reading of its maker, it seemed sensible to look at it with him. It felt almost like looking at van Gogh's "Postman" under the eye of his mail carrier.)

Jungen, a compact 39-year-old with cropped hair, a goatee and mustache, admits he has dabbled in the same weaving his native aunts are expert at. But whatever an outsider might think, it's important to Jungen that the patterns in his textiles have nothing to do with tradition, and that they be woven from sports jerseys cut into strips. A piece called "Blanket No. 7" basket-weaves together one NBA jersey marked "Iverson" with another that says "Bryant," forcing those famous rivals into a permanent coexistence.

Jungen says he is just as interested in "the role of sports fans in culture" -- in "the ceremony and pageantry of it all" -- as in any ties that pageantry might have to Indian culture and ceremony. But he also knows he's stuck with being an "Indian artist," and with being read as such, by whites and by his fellow natives. Culture is our biggest business, except for gambling," writes NMAI curator Paul Chaat Smith, a Comanche, in his catalogue essay.

"Everything in here, because this is the Native American museum, will be read as Native American," says Jungen. There's no way around the fact that, stretched taut in their display case at NMAI, the woven basketball jerseys of "Blanket No. 7" read as halfway between a home-tanned hide and some kind of pseudo-Indian rug. (The piece has actually displaced a traditional Navajo textile that used to fill its vitrine.)

New venue, new effect

Jungen says this is the first time he's shown in an Indian art museum. Until now, his success has come from showing in major "white" institutions such as the New Museum in New York and Tate Modern in London, as well as in group shows and biennials all around the world. The effect of the new Washington venue has been strange.

When Jungen made "People's Flag," a huge scarlet banner sewn together from red clothing, red umbrella skins and other mass-produced red textiles, it was to show at the Tate in 2006. The piece paid homage to the long history of popular protest and to England's left. "It seemed awkward for me to make some sort of statement about the native condition in London," Jungen recalls.

But as it hangs in his show at the NMAI, Jungen has discovered that "People's Flag" is being interpreted as the flag of a united Red Nation of Indian peoples -- a concept that doesn't really exist in Canada, he says, where native groups tend to retain their separate identities. (Here in the United States, we've got such things as Rednation.net, a Web site for Indian issues, and the Red Nation Film Festival in Los Angeles.)

Jungen has made plenty of other art that isn't native-themed: He's worked on urban buildings and their history, as well as on the idea of shelter for both humans and animals. At NMAI, a monumental piece called "Carapace" is assembled entirely from green plastic garbage cans, and looks like a cross between a geodesic dome and a mammoth tortoise shell.

When he was making his lawn-chair whale skeleton back in 2000, Jungen imagined that it was mostly about "the interaction of whales and humans." He says it was inspired by his many visits to see Bjossa, the last of the killer whales held in an aquarium in downtown Vancouver. (She was moved to SeaWorld in San Diego in 2001, and died shortly thereafter.) But the simple fact that the piece was made by someone with native roots means it gets read as being about Indians and whales, rather than cetaceans and all the rest of us. Of course, Jungen wouldn't have titled it "Shapeshifter" if he hadn't known that was coming.

Jungen's dad was Swiss Canadian, and he says it was his father's family who first took him in after both his parents died in a fire when he was 7. But somehow only his late mother, as a Dunne-za, manages to count in the interpretation of his art.

Her artist son has embraced her culture. He's spent long spells with his Indian relations on farms near the far northern town of Fort St. John, on the border of British Columbia and Alberta, and hopes some day to build a home there. (He now lives mostly in Vancouver, where he moved to attend Emily Carr College of Art and Design. After finishing there in 1992, he lived for a few years in New York but wound up "too poor" to stay.) Jungen insists, however, that "my involvement with my family and traditions is personal -- it's not where my art comes from."

From public perceptions

At least some of his art comes from much more public perceptions, and misconceptions, of Indianness in the contemporary world. It's as though Jungen has figured out that his best chance at undermining the cliches is from within, by inhabiting them.

That's why he is happy the NMAI is displaying the Air Jordan masks in deluxe plexiglass cases, with the kind of theatrical spotlighting usually reserved for "exotic" ethnographic artifacts. It gives his art, though clearly sourced in mass-market retail culture, the potent aura of ritual objects. That is close to what Air Jordans really are in the larger culture all of us swim in. Jungen says that some kids see only the cut-up shoes, and don't get the native references at all -- and that doesn't leave them any less intrigued. "People respond to the work so well because they have a personal relationship to mass-produced materials," Jungen says.

The way he hybridizes shoes and masks -- or golf bags and totem poles, as in six soaring sculptures now at NMAI -- may in fact have more to do with the sampling and mash-ups of mainstream DJ culture than they do with any esoteric native traditions.

But even those traditions are often less about static custom than borrowings from outside. Jungen cites the elaborately costumed "Fancy Dance" performed at Indian powwows, which he says was originally invented to please white audiences. "And now it's become its own tradition. I love things like that. It's like a remix or something -- like when hip-hop borrows a Balinese beat."

You could say that every bit of Jungen's work is about the Indian experience in the 21st century -- which includes having interests, and experiences, that have absolutely nothing to do with being Indian.

Brian Jungen: Strange Comfort is at the National Museum of the American Indian through Aug. 8. Call 202-633-6985 or visit <http://www.nmai.si.edu>.