

The Salvation Art of Yuxweluptun

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“Salvation art” is Yuxweluptun’s own term. I first heard him use it about five years ago, when he was talking about his interest in Salvador Dali, what he owed to Dali and where the essential difference between them lay: “Dali wasn’t doing salvation art,” he said. Salvation from what, and for whom, are questions that can only be answered in terms of the artist’s politics and the particularities of his own position within Coast Salish culture and outside it.

There has been little space for the representation of communicable, established, religious beliefs in the history of the 20th century avant-garde. An aspiration towards social, political and personal utopias certainly, but on the whole the salvation envisaged has been a rescue from the bounds of established religious and other constraining regimes. So it was, for example, for the Surrealists. At the end of the 20th century, however, much of this looks like the pursuit of a chimerical freedom, with the avant-garde all too clearly implicated in the same politico-economic system as everyone and everything else. It has no position from which to offer an alternative, it lacks criteria.

Amongst influential voices who have expressed this view in Vancouver have been the social art historian T.J. Clark and the artist Jeff Wall¹. Paradoxically, it has characterized the strength of the strategies and position-taking of the local discourse over the last ten to fifteen years. But it has meant that evincing interest in a spiritual dimension in anyone’s work involves an awkward, perhaps impossible, maneuver.

Yuxweluptun’s position is interesting. He is heir both to an avant-garde opposition that is, in this version, now seen to be not so, and simultaneously to an uninterrupted cosmology that has itself become oppositional. So when he draws an expiring Sxwayxwey figure - its penetrating tubular eyes rolled upwards, the conspicuous tongue which denotes plenty, distorted and desperate - he is using his pencil to liberate these signs from their conventional forms so that they can picture the problem. He is also proposing that the solution lies with the beings who first appear to an individual during the spirit quest and the relationships established between them and humans.

Over the past decade Yuxweluptun has attempted to make a space for himself within contemporary art discourse where the idioms and cosmology of his own Coast Salish culture can be a serious and inevitable vehicle for topical thought and social enquiry and an excoriating critique of systemic racism. Simultaneously, his social concerns have increasingly come to focus on the toxicological intrusions into his land. The colonizers are meeting the effects of mining, clear-cutting and other toxicological intrusions into his land. The colonizers are meeting the effects of their power to pollute, physically and morally, both on the colonized and on themselves. He paints this muck in all its toxicological bliss as he puts it, not to set himself up as a new stylist for some green party but to assert his right to the land that is being destroyed. He is painting not landscape but land claims.

Your Home, My Native Land

“I can touch the earth with my bare feet and understand that it’s still my native land,” Yuxweluptun says. He knows that land is power. Being an inherent right, he argues, land claims cannot be a Supreme Court issue. His position is that since it joined Confederation in 1871, the province of British Columbia, in refusing to recognize Aboriginal title, has usurped those rights and that change has been slow to come because of the calculation that “it’s cheaper to have uneducated Indians on welfare than to settle land claims.”² His most recent painting, *Pierre Elliot Trudeau and Jean Chretien’s White Paper Policy* (1994), fights political amnesia – very recently assimilation was official policy; and unofficially? Yuxweluptun is not alone in seeing Meech Lake and subsequent constitutional debates as the continuation of this policy, effectively a deflection of land claims. He sees clearly enough through the strategies to deflect criticism and distract attention by such means as the creation of personal recreation areas. National parks have a greater land base than native people. The grossness of this statistic is painted in *The Universe is so Big the White Man Keeps me on My Reservation*, (1987). What is required he concedes, are co-habitation agreements that would satisfy all parties. In many parts of Canada there is still a long way to go before anything of the kind could be reached.

Although reservations are little different from internment camps (they may have provided a model for the management of apartheid in South Africa, and their residents often suffer horribly as a result, i.e., *Alcoholics on the Reservation* 1988, and *Ten Little Indians* 1991), it is important to him to live on the land. It is a position of power from which to work. Until recently he has been living on the Carrier reservation at Fort St. James. The land there has been ravaged with clear-cutting – including the world’s largest clear-cut – and intersected with logging roads.

Yuxweluptun was born in Kamloops in 1957. His mother is Okanagan. Originally the Okanagan were nomadic hunters, dependent on the land. Yuxweluptun became a hunter rather than a fisher, ensuring his passionate concern with animal habitats, mines, roads, the incursions and depredations that accompany largely unregulated resource extraction. He grew up in Vancouver, played hockey like everyone else and counts himself as one of the more than 40,000 urban Indians living in the Greater Vancouver area. His cultural affiliation is with the Coast Salish, his father’s people, with long houses and dancing as part of his childhood. He began dancing a fourteen when the right to dance the Sxwayxwey mask was inherited from his father. At seventeen he was initiated as a Black Face dancer at Brentwood Bay (at the southern end of Vancouver Island). *Red Man! Dance on Sovereignty. Dance Me on Outside Anywhere I Want* (1985), shows clearly the conflation of cultural form and political act. Much of his recent work is rooted in this experience. Initially it allowed him to take a stand on “the religious wars that are still raging on reservations. All denominations are still missionizing. Aren’t they satisfied that in many places they have totally eradicated the culture?” It is the central theme of *Throwing their Culture Away* (1988)

Yuxweluptun has long been familiar with native British Columbian politics in which his parents have always been active. They were involved with the North American

Indian Brotherhood; his father headed the Union of B.C. Chiefs while his mother was closely involved with the Indian Home-makers Association in B.C. His father, Ben Paul, an astute politician, has been called one of the most perceptive anthropologists of the white man on the Coast. As a boy Yuxweluptun traveled with his parents all over the province to meetings; their hope was that he would become a politician. Now his father sees that he is concerned with the same politics as himself, if “in different ways.”

It is a politics that leads to an uncompromising address to the non-native audience: “I am concerned with the colonial mentality that is directly responsible for the toxicological disaster... the European ethos – your utilitarian, imperious, imperialistic power and your capitalistic value of authoritarianism,” which has “destroyed First Nations ancestral sacred lands in fewer than five hundred years.”³ His combative exhortations and in-your-face, cyber-punk techniques are, like his politics, rooted in the land.

The Loophole in The Indian Act

The Indian Act, racist and paternalist, (passed in its original version in 1868 and with amendments, still in effect) is a quintessential colonialist effort to subdue and control. In attempting to define “Indians” it almost succeeded in defining away Indian culture, but as Yuxweluptun points out gleefully, offered no definition of what an Indian artist can do. To take advantage of this loophole is to pit himself against the Indian Act. Yuxweluptun shares the anger and frustration of most First Nations people who make their twin goals self-determination and the repeal of the Act. He also takes it as licence to do precisely what he likes in his art. Artistic freedom, being relative, and having a history of its own of which he is well aware, is totally implicated in his socio-political ethics. “I give you a picture of what despotism looks like.”

His position is clear. In deciphering the power of one culture for another, which has thought of itself as having all the power, he addresses both. Annoying many, he has made few compromises in the demonstration of despair at a culture’s forced decline, tolerance for its adaptability, fierce defence of spiritual practices, with loyalty to edicts of secrecy (even if it were not a matter of keeping what is left from the white man) and undisguised pride, a clear view of debilitating, sectarian disputes and power struggles, not least those based on gender which cut across the simple distinction between tradition and assimilation. His position has lost none of its potency in the decade since he painted *The Environmentalist (1985)*. “Lots of people think this way. Someone has to have the balls to say it.”

His earliest surviving works, two drawings filled in with coloured crayon, done when he was fourteen, set a course from which he has never deviated – the forms and the figures of the Northwest Coast, reconfigured to serve his own purpose. He enrolled at Emily Carr College of Art and Design in 1978. Having always drawn, having taken courses in art, knowing he didn’t want to be anyone’s protégé, as was the procedure at “Ksan, he decided it would serve his purpose to learn to control his means of expression.

By the time he graduated in 1983 he had acquired enough proficiency in the modes that would seal his complex art historical pedigree.

That they have remained relatively constant can be seen in this exhibition which represents a decade of work. At Emily Carr he learnt photography, but never as a substitute for painting. The affinity between his painting and virtual reality was, intriguingly, prefigured in Dali's speculation: "We're finally about to obtain the third dimension with machines that produce images emerging from the canvas or appearing to plunge deep into it. After Velasquez and Vermeer, it was believed that we could not progress any further in spatial illusion. We had attained the maximum. Today, we can really make images loom into space even though they don't exist spatially. This process will revive the artist's interest in painting objective reality."⁴ Virtual reality allows Yuxweluptun to extend the use of high contrast colours which has remained a constant in the definition and articulation of figure and ground.

Experiments with mobiles and shaped canvases, such as *Facing the Changes* (1985) and *Small Ovoid* (1985), were based on ovoids as isolates, which have come to play a constant role in the surreal allegory of breakup and destruction. The mechanistic, robotic figures that populate many of the paintings similarly grew from the attenuation of formlines. These are the well-known elements of Northwest Coast style which Yuxweluptun treats, properly, as resource rather than rule book. The addition of wool, feathers, hair, nylon fibers used in commercial car washing, extends their use in Coast Salish dance costumes. The four feather dusters in *Transformation of Bill Wilson* (1991), for instance, mimic the plumes of the Sxwayxwey regalia.

He began making word paintings at art school and took the idea up again years later to deal with, for example, the Sparrow decision and the Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en land claims case. *Indian Fishing Rights* (1991) and *Thou Shalt Not Steal* (1991) make interventions into the political discourse, the sloganeering, in which we are engulfed, as do for example, works by the Guerrilla Girls or Hachivi Edgar Heap-of-Birds. Starting as he did from a combative position, it is evident that at Emily Carr he also absorbed the doctrine, encompassed by the Western art tradition and most recently articulated by disciples of the Frankfurt School, that art can unsettle, contest and challenge.

Songs for my Drum (1984) is an early example of a painterly approach to pigment giving an unaccustomed soft edge to elements abstracted from the Northwest Coast repertoire. This treatment is often incorporated into later works. But Yuxweluptun's "abstraction" should, he would say, more properly be called "the esoteric perspective." Seen in a number of works done soon after graduation, it is more fully resolved in *Severing Aboriginal Birth Rights and Extinguishment Policy* (1986). A stroke from an axe, perhaps a chain saw, has severed the formlines, wrecked the form, in the artist's words "extinguished my human-beingness." It uses the concept of splitting the atom as an allegory for might being right. Blatant racism at its most conceptual - like the Indian Act.

Although clearly derived from different sources, an interest in an esoteric knowledge which can repair the consequences of the separation between humanity and the world it inhabits, whose initiates are empowered to demonstrate their insights into such a recovered state, is one of the links between Yuxweluptun's work and Surrealism.

Recuperation of a lost time and place, where man lived in a sort of wonderland, in perfect harmony with the forces of nature and the divine energy, is not, for Yuxweluptun, an idle fantasy. This idea underlaid the Surrealists' interest in other societies, which were seen not as primitive antecedents in line with a Social Darwinism, but as being closer to the state from which historical progress and technological advance has separated us.

Faced with a situation of dangerous absurdity, Yuxweluptun himself has always shown an affinity with certain aspects of Surrealism. It was at art school that he was first exposed to ideas about colour, space and form from a tradition in one sense far removed from the Northwest Coast. However, the formative influence of Surrealism can be overstated. "My reality was surreal." It offered no cosy norm against which juxtapositions could be measured as bizarre or disturbing. Yuxweluptun asserts not a dream world but a spirit world of his own, not open to interpretation in the same way. Free interpretation is deflected. In uncompromising terms you are told what to make of it.

While situating himself as an individual artist Yuxweluptun may be able to set himself against the Indian Act. One of its most pernicious effects, in its misguided attempt to focus rationally on economics, has been the destruction of First Nations' cultural economy. It has also drawn far too much energy into the web of bureaucracy, hence *Indian Bureaucrat* (n.d.) and *Leaving My Reservation and Going to Ottawa* (1986), in which a figure, with a briefcase but no heart, sets out, for the nation's capital (not his own) across a terrain of hanging files. The prosperity of the First Nations can now only be measured in terms of the size of their reservations (often ridiculously small or misappropriated by some self-interest group, the fate of the oil-rich land of the Lubicon), and not in terms of their wealth in poles, or other forms of once-integrated cultural wealth. This separation between the goals of economic and social prosperity has severed the possibility of cultural evolution and fossilized the romantic notion of Northwest Coast art, or so-called "traditional art."

"An artist can't do anything if he doesn't watch, observe and participate in what's going on. My work is to record." Yuxweluptun pits this self-definition against the "traditional art" which has failed, he argues, because it has not evolved along with the processes that have shaped British Columbia. Some argillite carvings are exceptional in their attempt to document something of the colonial reality. Tradition, to mean anything, has to be at least 200 years ago, he explains. If things are only made for museums, however beautiful, "culturally they go nowhere." Too much new traditional art has made, for example, the Museum of Anthropology "a dead-man's zone, an Indian morgue." This view does not, however, engage with the fact that museums can be incorporated into the processes of cultural revival and that his own paintings have found a place in them. When their traditional culture has become a saleable commodity, what, he asks, is the cultural direction for off-reserve Natives, people for whom "assimilation is part of their identity?" (In B.C. that means some thirty-five percent of the native population). "They don't know how to hunt or fish. They do know how to hunt down a good book, track a channel on TV." He wants them as one of his audiences.

At the same time Yuxweluptun upsets the genteel responses of those who, because he makes use of the colonisers' tools and means of expression, expect him to keep to the

colonisers' rules. He also side-steps every etiolated debate about how "meaning" is created in the visual arts, creating his own meaning in pictures that tell stories, stories that he knows can be read, in the here and now, by several distinct audiences. There is nothing simplistic, or one-dimensional about telling stories. Slurring them as "cartoons" misses the point. There are for example, a number of ways in which his paintings connect with the sophisticated history of Coast Salish visual culture, closely linked as it is to an oral and performative culture and full of robust stories.

Yuxweluptun is doing with paint what the Salish have always done with words – through oratory and allegory picturing the meaning of their universe; telling stories. "Do you need a written language to think about what a hole in the sky looks like?" he asks. A pictorial one can do it. The house posts, the speaker's staffs, spindle whorls and power boards depict beings, from both the animal and mythological realms, in such a way that they synthesize the stories told about these beings and their relationships. Yuxweluptun tells stories in this way in his paintings.

But his pictures also resemble house posts and the rest in another way. They are inherently powerful objects – each one imbued with a specific, not generic, force by its maker; the force of an individual story. Like the stories told in the long house, his may be well-known to their listeners, or they may hint at secret knowledge. The characteristic individualism of Salish society leads to a reticence on spiritual matters. The individual's spirit helper and their personal "vision rights", although collectively sanctioned when they are shown and danced, are seldom fully disclosed to others. For the audience it is a matter of deciphering and not deciphering at once; for the artist, a way of sharing and, simultaneously, of withholding, of keeping control.

Yuxweluptun has observed a system of power brokering that has made things go terrifyingly wrong, and, wanting to do something about it, proposes, through the equivalence between story and powerful object, the experience of an altogether different kind of power, the operation of spiritual forces. That is why he calls his work "salvation art."

Salvation Art

Yuxweluptun's outrage at the blight of the land, his outrage at the trespass that preceded it, that he is drawing on Coast Salish cosmology and that he is deploying a complex art historical pedigree – this much seems clear. What lies beyond the uncompromising socio-political indictment, beyond the risks taken with everyone's art historical traditions, beyond the games with parody and banality, important tactics as they are, that would justify the label "salvation art"?

This is an art where, despite the hopelessness, the possibility of reprieve is held out. Where even the ones who must bear the brunt of the criticism, who must be made to take responsibility, may share in the possibility of salvation that is an offer. The interesting difficulty presented by these paintings is that they have determinate meanings which the artist is not averse to articulating, nor is he shy of announcing his intention with respect to them. At the same time they participate gleefully in an interweaving of multiple

codes and fragments of codes more commonly associated with open-ended or ambivalent readings. The paintings are at once hermetic worlds where a drama of destruction is being played out (a drama which can be glossed with various codes, amongst them, longhouse dramas and Brechtian “estrangement effects”) *and* are contingent on a cosmology, on a corpus of beliefs and knowledge that is extrinsic to the work.

How you deconstruct the term “salvation” depends, of course, on where you stand. With words like “apocalypse” and “damnation,” it appears inseparable from the Biblical representation of humanity made in the image of the Divinity who has endowed that humanity with dominion over the rest of creation. It is a belief and a representation that Yuxweluptun sets out to challenge. However, there is a sense of salvation which Christianity itself has made familiar – that there is reason to believe in the possibility of spiritual rescue for fallible humanity. The possibility he endorses.

“Salvation” must not be glossed here as some vague mysteriousness, pitting techno-rationality against ineffability. The work contravenes such tired oppositions. It is important that he co-opt conflicting painting conventions, technological innovations and tropes from all over the place. He declines to take a position of impotent protest. He declines to offer utopian dreams of a perfect past as a solution. Just as he pictures oppression, so he pictures redemption. He lives with both and translates both. This can also be expressed as an attempt to override the conflict between conservatism associated with drawing on the cultural forms of the past, and the innovation associated with being modern – a conflict that is not resolved, or dissolved, by the weak solution of post-modern permissiveness.

“Salvation” is a borrowing from Christianity with which, while rejecting it as a theodicy, Yuxweluptun is very familiar. The conversion of the Okanagan to Catholicism was nearly total. The Coast Salish “spirit quest,” which results in the establishment of a relationship with a spirit being as guide and protector for life is, however, based on a radically different notion. This is the spirituality in which he was raised and to which, as an adult, he has been reintroduced.

How is this aim, spiritual, in some quarters unfashionable, apparently grandiose, apparently apolitical, realized in his work? I think it is done through his ability to combine idioms from a number of rich traditions simultaneously. (They can only be inadequately hinted at by using terms like “salvation,” “Mother Earth,” Surrealism”). He then fearlessly combines and re-combines them to destabilize perception and to administer what might be called spiritual shock. Most of the works on paper in the exhibition have been taken from the two sketchbooks that he carried around with him between 1985-89 and in which his ideas take shape in a manner both fierce and laconic. They show him roaming around and helping himself from at least two visual cultures, show him learning how to take a reflective position, succinct, witty and devastating. What then are some of the reflexive combinations, some of the arguments in these paintings which Yuxweluptun has been doing since about 1987, these salvation paintings?

Yuxweluptun uses idioms from what could be termed a generic Northwest Coast style, indebted possibly to the hybrid style developed at ‘Ksan, for which he has been criticized. He would argue that the Northwest Coast tradition is moribund if it cannot be

treated inventively by its members. There are, however, references to much that is specific to his own Coast Salish band - some of the masks, the talking sticks and power boards, the dances, initiation ceremonies and some of their protagonists: *Sneak-up* (1985) portraying the *shatla* or ancestral spirit, and *Scorched Earth, Clear-Cut Logging on Native Sovereign Lands, Shaman Coming to Fix* (1991).

While it has to be recognized that Yuxweluptun is not at liberty to disclose everything about the masks, dances and spiritual practices, these are not in any event missionary paintings. I don't think he is advocating a widespread adoption of Coast Salish spiritual practices as such. I think he is implying that adopting the understanding that the natural world is animate, and that there are intermediaries who make possible a transference between the spirit world and the one inhabited by humans, which are fundamental to those practices, does offer the possibility of salvation.

In a number of paintings, *Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in Sky* (1990), *The Environmentalist* (1985), or seen clearly in many of the preparatory drawings in his sketchbooks such as *Protector* (1987) and *A Native Fishing* (1988), the "red man" is positioned according to post-Renaissance three-dimensional space from generic Northwest Coast formlines and ovoids. This makes him skeletal, a hollow man. His face is a mask, the mask his face, and this mask is a combination of wolf, and exactly who or what the other being is he does not wish to specify.

The Western landscape tradition is present in these paintings through its very denial. Here are no bosky distances, no sublime summits; this land is not represented as embracing, awe-inspiring, consoling. The land is a kind of deterrent - the denuded hillsides and parched earth left by strip-mining and clear cutting; the incisions and partitions made into the land by the logging roads and highways built for the constant passage of log-carrying juggernauts. The paintings work, are effective, in part because they are uncomfortable to look at. Paint mimics a reality that is rebarbative, garish, denatured.

Other elements of his work derive from the forms of specifically Coast Salish work. For instance, the curved lines of swelling and narrowing but parallel bands of colour creating solid forms which are found in many of his paintings may owe something to the forms and contours of the Coast Salish *Sxwayxwey* mask. The wooden mask itself is only part of an assemblage of elements - feathers, embroidery, rattles - which impress by certain vivid and theatrical excess. The non-initiate, at least, might find this quality in the paintings.

The relationship between Northwest Coast art, Surrealism and abstraction is a complicated one. It has been pointed out by Elizabeth Cowling, Jackson Rushing and others that certain ideas and some de-contextualized objects from the Northwest Coast played a significant role in the development of Surrealism. Barnett Newman's involvement with Northwest Coast-derived ideas has recently been variously explicated by Jackson Rushing, Serge Guilbaut and Robert Houle. Newman is another artist for whom Yuxweluptun expresses admiration. Newman's colour and the Surrealists' juxtapositions may be part of his vocabulary. But then, again, Yuxweluptun complicates the situation through a process which Rennard Strickland has called "double cross-

fertilization”⁵ in a deliberate act of reciprocal appropriation. With another twist he will dismiss all such references with the assertion that the searing and contrastive colours are chosen to combat the sombre reality of reservation life.

Yuxweluptun appropriates the Surrealist use of myth, which frees him to add his own psychological reading to the figures from the established pantheon. In *Protector* (1990), for example, to the Coast Salish mythologically sanctioned belief in the shaman figure as guardian and guide, is added Yuxweluptun’s psychological or individually sanctioned reading. According to this reading, these shamanic figures are participating in the drama of destruction and salvation – their power is being used on behalf of the spirits of the land. By the transference of his own anger and bitterness, the physical distress of the spirits of the land and his own psychological distress become one.

In this way, a familiar Surrealist strategy is combined with a mythological universe to which this artist is arguably closer than the Surrealists were to the Greek culture that produced the myths of Oedipus, Narcissus or Theseus and the Minotaur on which they drew. It may be worth noting that Andre Breton, in the *First Surrealist Manifesto* (1924), uses the term “salvation,” albeit without the specificity implied in Yuxweluptun’s work, as a possible goal for the free exercise of the imagination and the “generous and far-reaching” ideas of the Surrealist program in contrast with a life lived enslaved to “imperative practical necessity.”

Morphologically, it is the Dali of the soft watch and the Dali of the disproportionate figure in the landscape which has interested Yuxweluptun. The affinity he feels with the technique of virtual reality, in which, by definition, there is no fixed point of view, helps to clarify the formal strategy of the paintings. Both Surrealism and hyperreal technology attempt to combat shared norms which would establish relative proportion and position. Using similar tactics Yuxweluptun dislocates expectations and destabilizes the point of view.

Virtual reality, amongst its other attributes, is animated by the progress of the viewer’s eye controlled by the viewer’s hand. But this progress must be made without help, without the directives that a stable object of vision can give. There are no compositional devices to help. As in many of the paintings, the point of entry into this landscape has been destabilized and the viewer takes an unguided lurch into what might once have been termed the middle ground but is here better described by Baudrillard’s; “hyperspace” without atmosphere. In Virtual Reality the viewer is directly implicated in her own disorientation and must find her own way round. In so doing, she constructs her own environment. The relative security of the various positions from which one can view a painting is lost; every view is contingent on position, is re-composed for that position. In a roughly similar way, the viewer of the paintings is implicated in the viewing, that is, the construction of the land. No one is allowed to remain a detached spectator of somebody else’s mess.

The tropes of several cultural traditions are evident in the allegory of a devastated, dying world. To give one example of an “idea” which is found in many cultures, Mother Earth, seen in *Mother Earth Giving Water to the Land* (1987) and *Protector* (1987) has been brought down, dismembered and corroded by acid rain. Yet in his representation of

this figure, amongst others, Yuxweluptun takes what some would see as the risks involved in parodying as well as combining idioms. Parody can be thought of as the ironic inversion of the “already-said” and as “repetition with critical distance.”⁶ The banality of the welling teardrop, for example; the use of perspective only to thwart its purpose; the repetition of certain compositional devices become compositional clichés. He risks too the clichéd affinity between native and nature which, as Maureen Ryan has shown, are exemplified in classics of nineteenth century landscape painting in Canada such as Frederick Verner’s *Shooting the Rapids* (displayed in 1873) and Lucius O’Brien’s *Lord of the Forest* (1874).

Meanwhile, Ted Perry’s famous version of Chief Seattle’s speech of 1853 is enjoying a wide currency in the discourse of the land claims.⁷ The popular PBS series and accompanying book, *Millennium*, by David Maybury-Lewis, are posited on the idea that tribal wisdom is humanity’s best hope, as is Peter Knudston and David Suzuki’s *The Wisdom of the Elders*. It is not necessarily clear that these are not further manifestations of the all too familiar turning to some idea of a primitive and antecedent “other” that Marianna Torgovnik, Daniel Miller (1991) and others have amply documented as an essential characteristic of European culture. Knowing this, the Saulteaux artist Robert Houle, developing a polemic to show that “artists who have been disinherited by history” still have “room to maneuver,” asserts: “It is important to acknowledge the basic fact that the spiritual legacy of art from any one culture offers reassurance that the human species has some commonalties which are important to knowing who we are, where we are, and where we are going.”⁸ Proposing salvation is a high-risk business and Yuxweluptun is raising the stakes as he becomes increasingly uncompromising in identifying the causes of distress. In *Toxicological Encroachment of Civilization on First Nations Land* (1992) the figures that may flank the entrance to a long house are rendered as demented whites. They recall the pathetic attempts of white techno-boffins to do something about the depleted ozone layer, as in *Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in Sky* (1991). In *MacMillan Bloedel’s Ecosystem Destroyers and their Preferred Weapons* (1993), pale pink wimps wield large weapons as they prance on the spirits of the stumps stretching without reprieve from the foreground to the horizon. This is not loggers vs. Environmentalists. Everyone loses as the viewer of these large canvases, just as in *Virtual Reality*, takes an unguided lurch into the middle ground; the centered human eye at a loss. The discomfiture intensifies.

In these and other ways he combines, re-combines and parodies elements from cosmologies, body languages, visual idioms to destabilized them and to disorient the viewer. But, just as we thought we were caught in a hybrid badinage serving only to put us into a predictably familiar and futile state of discomfort, it becomes apparent that aesthetic disjuncture in these works is meant to be taken allegorically. It is administering not the shock of novelty but a spiritual shock. Yuxweluptun has some moral high ground that he wants to share. And he does not share the modern and post-modern lack of faith in systems requiring external validation. Risking implausibility in terms of an existential world view of the individual alone in a secular universe, he eventually suggests a guide;

an external guide. This guide appears unequivocally in *Scorched Earth, Clear-Cut Logging on Native Sovereign Lands, Shaman Coming to Fix (1991)*.

The figures of Coast Salish cosmology are not tropes in a discourse consisting of ironic inversions of the already said. Yuxweluptun believes in what the shaman represents – that the natural world is animate, that it generates powers to which humans can have access and that human use of the land is sanctioned by the appearance of spirits. In this lies the hope of salvation from a course of action that is destroying the natural world and ourselves along with it. The implication of aesthetics with ethics is evident in a remark made by Ed Poitras: “Members of the dominant culture cannot always rely on what they have been taught before; that system does not always work ...Western aesthetics are not complete in their understanding on non-Western expression.”⁹

As I have tried to suggest, Yuxweluptun’s salvation strategy is inseparable from the aesthetic disjunctures implicit in his work – aesthetic disjunctures standing in for ethical crisis. The strategy, both aesthetic and ethical, depends on double cross-fertilization. Not a bland pluralism, it depends on the introjection of an iconography from one culture that does not blend in any comfortable way with the idioms of another. That is to say that these paintings are importing a cosmology, introducing the conventions for representing a spirit world, that have been adjusted to the art discourse in a surreal parody of “figures in a landscape.”

But what if this is mere hyperreality and beyond the reach of any such intentions? The answer must be that the shamans are whole figures in Coast Salish society. Yuxweluptun ensures that they retain their referents, their cultural rootedness, precisely through their detachment from the ruined, perhaps hyperreal, “landscape” depicted. In consequence, the ruin, the pain, can be treated but only by making a super-human effort – a point to be learned from the titles, if from nowhere else.

Redemption through art is hardly new, even in the twentieth century - Wassily Kandinsky, Frida Kahlo, Barnett Newman, Lawren Harris, come to mind. The difference is that although these artists had developed theories to account for their depiction of some species of the sublime, the kind of salvation Yuxweluptun has in mind is not brought about by fiat; at least not by human fiat. He is relying on the depiction of spirit beings, on the anima of trees, mountains and rivers. Can such a thing be capable of administering the required spiritual shock? Or is it too shocking to have much relevance? Is it mere millenarianism?

The argument might go something like this: The presence of these unknowns (unknown, that is, to a non-Salish audience) forces the realization that any solution, any hope of “salvation,” can only come about through means we do not yet understand, that we need to know more about. We literally don’t know what to do about the situation we have created. Our salvation must lie in something that we don’t yet know. In short, the physical mess is a spiritual mess. Rescue of the earth must be preceded by rescue of its inhabitants, culture reintegrated with nature.

In both painting and virtual reality, Yuxweluptun has developed a taxonomy of great pictorial inventiveness and ethical seriousness. In analyzing the interrelationship between pollution and power, scrutinizing its effects and deliberating solutions, he has disturbed the supremacy of the human eye as expressed through the conventions of visual representation, displaced “landscape,” and reinstated the powers of a spirit world upon which salvation depends.

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¹ Jeff Wall, “The Site of Culture: Contradiction, Totality and the Avante-garde”, *Vanguard*, May 1983, pp. 18-19. T.J.Clark, “More on the Differences Between Comrade Greenberg and Ourselves”, *Modernism and Modernity: The Vancouver Conference Papers*, ed. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut and David Solkin. (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983).

² The present New Democratic Party has changed this. Exceptionally in Canada, vvery few treaties were made in British Columbia. Along with earlier provincial governments’ refusal to acknowledge title and the federal governments’ reluctance to act, this forced B.C.’s First Nations, who for more than a century have been the most vocal in Canada, to turn to the courts for essolution. See Thomas R. Berger, *A Long and Terrible Shadow: White Values, Native Rights in the Americas* (Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1991) Paul Tennant, *Aboriginal People and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990).

³ Artist's statement in the catalogue for *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, ed. Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin (Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992)

⁴ *Conversations with Dali*, Alain Bosquet, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, 1969, New York: Dutton. P.23.

⁵ Remarks made by Rennard Stickland, Director of the American Indian Law Centre, University of Oklahoma, at the opening of *Shared Visions*, Heard Museum, Phoenix, 1990

⁶ Here, I am benefiting from Allan Ryan's (1992;59) use of Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody in his own discussion of humour in contemporary First Nation's Art.

⁷ For the history of this text and other best-sellers see Paul Chaat Smith "Home of the Brave," *C Magazine*, Summer 1994, pp.1-7

⁸ Robert Houle, "The Spiritual Legacy of the Ancient Ones," *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada*, ed Diana Nemiroff (Ottawa: National Gallery Publications, 1992), pp 71-72

Originally published in : *Born to Live and Die on Your Colonialist Reservations*. Catalogue essay. Eds. Charlotte Townsend-Gault, Scott Watson, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun. University of British Columbia: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 1995