

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun

I am an artist of two cultural circumstances. Since I happen to be a Native, I paint the colour of life; I see all this land, in a Native way. I was born to see it this way.

I find my life painting history from a Native point of view. I was born in the time of the nuclear weapon, which was invented even before I was born. I am documenting neotimes. I approach my work, and have always approached it, taking my social and ideological responsibilities as an artist first, as they relate to this time in history.

I cannot celebrate or feel any national allegiance to the Canadian flag while such racist legislation as the Indian Act remains in force; the system Native people are governed under is the despotism of white self-interest. Because of this, a lot of my pieces are historical. You can hide Department of Indian Affairs documents from the time of Confederation, but you cannot hide my paintings. They are there for all people to see.

I paint on a reservation, to feel this perspective on life—the racist segregation of Canadian history, the so-called “Indian problem.” I will paint you, O Canada, for all your atrocities face my paint, for they are part of my life. Try to read the symbols for what they are.

I am concerned with the colonial mentality that is directly responsible for the killing of wolves, buffalo, whales, grizzly bears, and migratory birds, to the point that some species are now extinct. It is behind the depletion of fish stocks on the West and East coasts, acid rain, nuclear waste, land fills, smog, the greenhouse effect, the emission of methane gas, mining tailings, endangered animals, pollution of freshwater reservoirs, toxic wastes of all kinds, oil spills, uranium mining, nuclear testing. The next step towards decolonization of First Nations must be recognition by the provincial governments of our sovereign indigenous government. As sovereign caretakers of the land, our forebears were the protectors of the biosphere.

My work is very different from traditional art work. How do paint a land claim? You can't carve a totem pole that has a beer bottle on it. I find myself coming back to the land. Is it necessary to totally butcher all of this land? The grizzly bear has never signed away his land, why on earth should I, or a fish or a bird? To slowly kill my ancestral land? All the money in the bank cannot buy or magically bring back a dead biosystem. I paint for this what it is—a very toxic land base. This is what my ancestral motherland is becoming. Painting is a form of political activism, a way to exercise my inherent right, my right to authority, my freedom. This is real freedom for me. I am proud these days; I have self-dignity in my art when I paint this world. I see environmental “shmuk,” so I paint “shmuk”—art in all its toxicological bliss. I can speak out in my paintings even without the recognition of self-government. I dance around in a longhouse. I dance around fires in turn, like my forebears have done since time immemorial. I am a preservationist, continuing my heritage.

Inherent Rights, Vision Rights is a virtual reality project I have been involved with for some time now. I approach it from the aspect of the fear others have of Native people, not understanding our spirit world. In it, the longhouse is a given space in time which I use to show a religious concept, to physically bring people into contact with a Native worshipping aspect of life, praying Indians—a way to bring others close to my heart so they can understand my belief system. What is it like being in a possessed state, feeling rhythmic sounds in a longhouse, feeling sounds go through one's own self, feeling a spirit

inside you. I have been a Blackface dancer eighteen years now, a masked dancer, a *Sxwayxwey* dancer since fourteen. I have been able to draw from these Native experiences, combining them with Western world experiences and technology to make my work, employing technology that in the past has been used against Native people. I created *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights* to show people what is happening to me spiritually. Always, I create art to communicate with others, to let other cultures see things for themselves. To show my world, *Indian* world, to show that we do have a spirit, a place to go to, so people will understand who I am as a West Coast Native person.

Although this particular “virtual reality” is very primitive at this point of evolution—it has limits in visual resolution—the capabilities of the technologies will change in years to come. At the moment, the piece consists of a white man’s mask, the “helmet,” as it is called by the computer program. A screen goes over your eyes covering part of your face, an electronic mask with an electronic-motion hand. You start to experience a new art form. As you look into the mask, the screen shows you a piece of artwork, computer-electronically stimulated into colour. Sound can be brought in at the same time. I think this first mask will end up in museums just like other masks! Very primitive, with numbers on them, and the date they were made.

I’m also a B.C. artist painting from a B.C. position. This is different from some other Native points of view. But ozone is still my problem. The ozone layer is a rare form of oxygen found nine to thirty miles above this planet’s surface.¹ The chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) used in spray cans, refrigerators, and air conditioners have gradually released chlorine atoms that have destroyed the ozone above the Antarctic and the North Pole. Ten percent of the ozone here will vanish by the decade’s end. In response to this threat the industrial nations have agreed to phase out CFCs and other ozone-depleting chemicals by the year 2000. It will take a hundred-year ban to bring ozone levels back to pre-1985 levels before the hole in the ozone layer can be fixed.

I don’t have any rights in this country, so I paint the ozone as a problem.

Other environmental hazards are destroying and disrupting the ecosystems of the First Nations’ lands. They include groundwater evaporation because of big cities, and clear cut logging, in both Canada and the United States. The province of British Columbia alone is sixty years behind silviculture; it is cutting trees faster than it is replacing them. There is a need for a moratorium on the number of logging truck licenses granted to the forest industry. There is a need overall for an environmental audit to track companies’ ecological performance on an annual basis and to inform the public, as well as for information-sharing on green environmental policies and programs at the governmental and community levels.

At the same time, the world’s population is growing and will double in the next thirty-eight years. It is imperative to apply First World environmental standards to Third World factories, but global treaties to extend economic and technical assistance to developing nations are needed to help themselves to develop ecologically safe practices. We need these treaties to integrate environmental criteria into economic practices, and to provide management, technical, and financial resources to tackle global problems. The economic efficiency of green policies must be improved, because the toxicological time bomb has already gone off, threatening all life forms with health hazards and, ultimately, toxic death.

Good luck, oh Civilization, for every hundred years I will ask you to drink the water
with me, my Brother and Sister, and I will wait for you to take the first drink

*Yuxweluptun (white man's alias: Lawrence Paul)
Fort St. James, British Columbia, 1992*

¹ Figures quoted in this essay are from "Poisoning of America," by Ed Magnuson, et al., *Time* (14 October 1985). p. 64-80; and "Report-card on the planet," by Melanie Menagh Omni (July 1992), p. 30-40.

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