

*'My World is Surreal,' or 'The Northwest Coast' is Surreal*

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“The Colour of My Dreams: the Surrealist Revolution in Art,” curated by Dawn Ades at the Vancouver Art Gallery in the summer of 2011, was the most comprehensive exhibition about Surrealism ever mounted in Canada.<sup>1</sup> Avoiding the simpler forms of postcolonial critique, “The Colour of My Dreams” chose to minimize the Surrealists’ own critique of the consequences—for the objects and their makers—of the colonial regimes whose disrupted histories yielded the objects of their fascination, histories which actually got the objects to Paris and New York. It was in these cities that some of the objects were acquired, for what now seem tiny sums, by Surrealists and their associates. By including masks and feast dishes acquired more recently by Vancouver collectors for reasons not dissimilar, although for much more money, the exhibition made the point that their spectacular autonomy as modernist pieces persists – their values essential rather than contingent.

For the purposes of the exhibition the Kwakwaka’wakw Peace mask displayed in the introductory gallery, the so called “Fathers’ Room,” was inseparable from André Breton’s ownership of it, and thus from his “fathering” of the movement. The mask became a point of access. Breton had always revered the mask for some inherent, perduring quality that he found in it for himself. Essential value residing in an object is the equally persisting animist credo around masks, poles, rocks, for many Native people—the recognition that material things can have their own power and agency. And, recognizing this recognition, after Breton’s death it was returned by his daughter Aube to its community of origin, Yalis, or Alert Bay, in Namgis (a band of the Kwakwaka’wakw) territory.

I do not fault this remarkable exhibition for not doing what it did not set

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Fig. 1. Installation view of “Surrealism, The Colour of My Dreams” exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery (May 28, 2011 - October 2, 2011). Photo: Rachel Topham, Vancouver Art Gallery



Fig. 2. Installation view of “Surrealism, The Colour of My Dreams” exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery (May 28, 2011 - October 2, 2011). Photo: Rachel Topham, Vancouver Art Gallery

out to do. Nevertheless the complex and on-going imbrication of Surrealism in the local, British Columbian, discursive economy around indigenous art was, given the venue, the more evident by its omission. Louise Tythacott, in *Surrealism and the Exotic*, uses the term “surrealization.” She writes: “while disavowing the discourses of evolutionism and aesthetic primitivism [the Surrealists] constructed in their place equally problematic discourses of the fantastic, the magical and the mythical.”<sup>2</sup> I would gloss “surrealization” locally as the manoeuvre through which surrealist accolades opened up “the Native” but at the same time contributed to the blanking out of the catastrophe that colonization brought to much of Native life. There is a disturbing doubling between spiritual richness associated with the mythical and the mystical, for which Native cultures continue to be revered, and the devastation caused by the colonial encounter. The former has been lauded, enhanced, no doubt often traduced, in the ensuing discourse.<sup>3</sup> The latter has resulted in the condition best described as political “exceptionalism,” to borrow Giorgio Agamben’s compelling term.<sup>4</sup>

One can hardly attribute to Surrealism alone the tropes of doubling, veiling, of the hidden, the disguised, given its debt to the master analyst, nor of course are such tropes confined to the Northwest Coast. However the fascination with objects, powerfully mysterious, because of what was not known about them as much as, if not more than, what was, has for decades been playing out in the region in ways not unconnected with the Surrealists’ legacy. Surrealists collected avidly from here. Wolfgang Paalen and Kurt Seligmann left records of their visits to BC in their own words and imagery. Paalen wrote: “[there was] the feeling of being on a long march through hidden depths” in that “*magic climate* in which the totemic world is to be found.”<sup>5</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss’ influential version of Structuralism drew heavily on the mythologies and visual forms of the region; Surrealism’s collecting and display practices, its language, its emphases, helped to popularize tropes of the supernatural and magical where things Native were concerned. The term ‘surreal’ itself—in its capacious vernacular usage—has become inseparable from the discourse that has for decades informed both the production and reception of Northwest Coast Native art.

“My world is surreal” maintains Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun (b. 1957).

A self-described urban Indian, and Coast Salish longhouse dancer, Yuxweluptun lives in British Columbia, and therefore on un-ceded native land. He has always described the paradox of indigenous life in western Canada as surreal. For him the winter ceremonial months are the time to attend to relations between human and non-human. In a community where the masks are danced and the ceremonial feast dishes brought out to honour and impress the invited witnesses, he has gone further than anyone else, although not without objections from within, to picture this spirit



Fig. 3. Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun. *Inherent Visions, Inherent Rights*, 1991 (stills from a work making early use of virtual reality technology). Reproduced with permission



Fig. 4. Advertisement for Prepaid Phone Cards in Vancouver, c. 1995

world for the “outside” world. These images mark a disclosure of the hitherto only insinuated. But this is a different matter from outsiders feeding their unconscious on it.

To the extent that there have been very few treaties in the province to date, in contrast to the rest of Canada where agreements of some kind, however unsatisfactory, were reached between settler and Native in the nineteenth century, what “land” means in terms of ownership and access remains undefined, always contested, as between the Crown and First Nations. But the lives of Native people themselves are still largely defined by the 1876 Indian Act, prey to the doublethink that is the normative response of authority to their predicament. “Unceded” is the colonizers’ legal term and recognition of “pre-existing Aboriginal rights” is dependent on Section 35:1 of Canada’s 1982 Constitution Act.

There is nothing new about this non-congruence. In the interlaced double-camera work of Stan Douglas’ *Nu’ka* (a 20 minute video projection), the canoes, the houses, and the voices of the Nuu-chah-nulth people whose land the exhausted and dispirited Spanish and English explorers were disputing in 1786, remain unheard and un-seen. Douglas renders the invisible presence of colonialism’s subjects with a lyricism that, self-reflexively, is deceptive. He picks up on, and up-dates, the



Fig. 5. Stan Douglas, *Nu’ka* (still), 1996, reproduced with permission



Surrealism of the colonial encounter. Nicholas Thomas, Michael Taussig, Elizabeth Povinelli and Mieke Bal amongst others come to mind as scholars whose work has aimed to reflect as well as to report on this doubling.<sup>6</sup>

Native people in Canada today constitute a category of citizens who for some reason (or none?) cannot be integrated into the political system. Only an explanation approximating Agamben's "state of exception" can account for their relation to the State. The 1886 Indian Act, still in effect, made them wards of the state, and thus "exceptional," in the state's terms, in relation to the rest of the population. What provokes and disturbs some is the grating friction between the mystic/mythical/supernatural of "surrealization" and the state of exception. It makes for a contradictory parallax, to borrow Slavoj Žižek's term.<sup>7</sup> (Žižek, it should be noted, credits Kojin Karatani's *Transcritique* as the main inspiration for his own ideas about the parallax that finds common ground between Kant and Marx.<sup>8</sup>) It is hardly the first time that "spirituality," a form of aesthetic sublimation, has been used to block and disguise the "political." "Surrealization" straddles the parallax.

The surrealist poet Paul Eluard's line "There is another world. It is in this one," is ambivalent enough to encompass the Northwest Coast, the South Seas, and the subconscious. Anti-imperialist as many of the Surrealists were, they were also

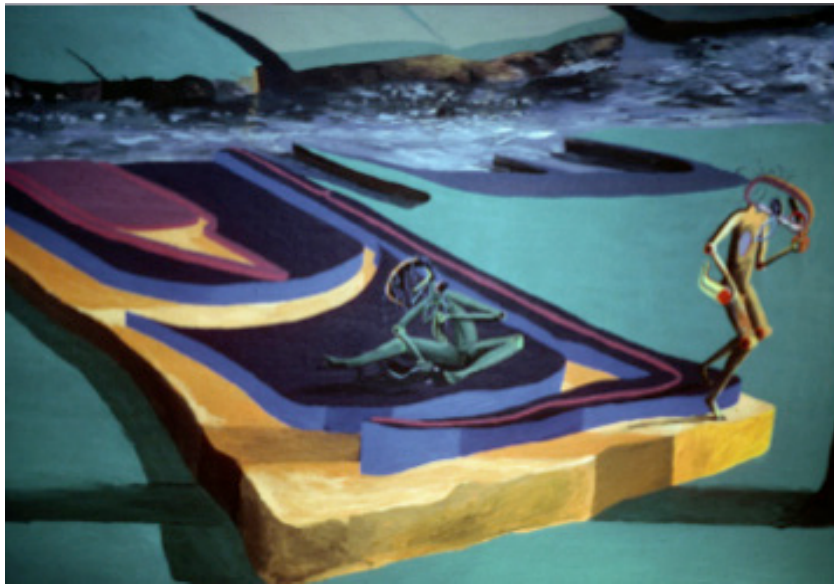


Fig. 6. Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *The Universe is so Big: the White Man Keeps me on a Reservation*, 1987, detail; reproduced with permission

pro-enchantment. First Nations inhabit (are imagined to inhabit) a world within, hidden from, the settler world. It is the perverted dream of apartheid that created the reserve system in Canada, one of the provisions of the Indian Act. Reserves, materializing the state of exception, are typically small and unproductive fragments of the territories historically associated with a particular indigenous group, or, if large, so remote from economic centres that they are another kind of trap. But they are not remote from the resources that drive the economy. Unwise as it is to generalise about reserves, they are by definition, and in a literal sense, worlds within worlds.

Yuxweluptun's paintings opened up, not without controversy in the Vancouver of the mid-1980s, the possibility that "contemporary" Native art could involve something other than the contemporary carving of masks and assorted "traditional" items for a non-native audience. This *idée fixe* may itself own something to the predilection of surrealist collectors. Commercially enticing as it has proved to be, and an operation of transcultural relational bricolage, the definition of native objects as "art," has been one of the features that has contributed to the stagnation of 'Native art' and to its de-politicization. Its connection to a "spirit world" has triumphed over its connection to any other kind of world. This point is made here in full recognition that for many Native artists their "traditional" work is inseparable from cultural continuity and restoration.

Yuxweluptun shows himself an heir to a cosmology, a player in a spirit world that yields the masks recognised as "art" by the same people who are cutting the ground from under his feet while legislating his "rights" to do what he has always done on it. Where the state simultaneously bestows on him his ancestral "right" to hunt and requires that he show his status card on demand when out hunting. It might be conceded that this variant of "exception" falls within a vernacular use of "surreal." In so far as his own paintings may, roughly, be described as "surreal"—it is perhaps in the way that psychedelic posters or punk cover art was surreal. Salvador Dalí has always meshed with teenage fantasy, and Yuxweluptun first encountered his work as a student at the Emily Carr School of Art and Design. He accounts for the debt of a work such as *The Universe is so Big*—a characteristic work from the very productive late 1980s and early 90s, with its melting-become-weeping, expiring landscapes—to Dalí, (synecdoche for "the surreal"), as retaliation for a "western" mode of expression that drew initially on indigenous trance, doubling, and transformations of the supernatural to define itself. His similar debt to Emily Carr is repaid by nativizing her trees, the coastal hemlocks and cedars that populate her landscapes of native land.

So Yuxweluptun uses the white man's modes to picture his particular version

of two worlds, the one obscuring while hinting at the other which, reciprocally, takes protective coloring from it. A form of mimicry, Homi Bhabha might say.<sup>9</sup> In this way the artist intervenes in the surrealist legacy, the part that recognises the cultural other's objects as "art," while at the same time he recovers for Surrealism its politics, its anti-colonialism. It is also possible that he wields a surrealist kitsch as critique of the judgement of taste—the arbitrations of non-Native taste that is. The contradictory thing is that Yuxweluptun's use of surreal modes to picture the surreality of his world is designed to blow open the cover, evasively genteel (and thus



Fig. 7. Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Throwing their Culture Away*, 1989, reproduced with permission



“surreal”) in which a discourse, grounded in the surrealist movement, has become complicit.

If, as First Nations insist, they do not live in a multicultural world, the extent to which they live in a supernatural world is their own business. Yet one of the paradoxes, in British Columbia as everywhere else (see John and Jean Comaroff’s *Ethnicity Inc.*, for example), is that Native people, and others, have made a business by marketing cosmology as commodity.<sup>10</sup> Vancouver’s international airport and the promotional deluge for the 2010 Winter Olympics, both branded with Native art and design schemes, ran concurrently with, but scarcely disguise, successive public crises around water and housing on reserves, or the disproportionately high rates of addiction and incarceration amongst Canada’s Native population. If it is conceded that Yuxweluptun’s world is surreal, haunted by the irrational and the incongruent, the assertion has a wider application in as much as the concession itself is caught up in a capacious discursive fold, encompassing the vernacular fascination with, and marketing of, “spirit.”

It seems appropriate to quote at some length a famous passage, a foundational text, enfolding “magic,” “dreams,” “superhuman,” and “mystic,” written by Lévi-Strauss in 1943 (around the same time as Paalen’s travels in B.C. and Alaska) when he and other exiles from the ravages of wartime Europe found an unforeseen “old world” embedded in the “new”:

There is in New York, a magic place where the dreams of childhood hold a rendezvous, where centuries-old tree trunks sing and speak, where indefinable objects watch out for the visitor, with the anxious stare of human faces; where animals of superhuman gentleness join their little paws like hands in prayer for the privilege of building the palace of the beaver for the chosen one, of guiding him to the realm of the seals, or of teaching him, with a mystic kiss, the language of the frog or the kingfisher. This place, [on which outmoded but singularly effective museographic methods have conferred the additional allurements of the chiaroscuro of caves and the tottering heaps of lost treasures,] may be seen daily from ten to five o’clock at the American Museum of Natural History.<sup>11</sup>

Lévi-Strauss, whose structuralism combined the scientific with the mythological, was talking about those masks and frontlets, food vessels, speaker’s staffs and rattles that fill the Northwest Coast Hall at AMNH. He saw them as markers of a different psychology, from a different world. The acquisition by Surrealists and their associ-

ates of masks and shamanic pieces confirmed a regime of value based on the access that objects afforded to another world. (“The Colour of My Dreams” expertly maps the routes taken by many Surrealists to the apprehension of any number of “other” worlds via objects.) And it caught on in the places where the pieces came from. Dream, magic, supernatural, spirit and the connections, personal and historical, between texts, works and their display, constitute a discursive intertextuality that has folded into both the recursive, contradictory production and the take-up of contemporary art on the Northwest Coast.

Recalling Lévi Strauss’ words: “this dithyrambic gift of synthesis, the almost monstrous faculty to conceive as similar what all men have conceived as different,”<sup>12</sup> Edmund Carpenter devised the term “tribal punsters,” a doubling mode he thought was shared between artists of the Northwest Coast and the American Southwest and that “had nothing to do with origins or meanings or functions. It lay at a deeper level, ultimately in a way of being.”<sup>13</sup> Haida artist Bill Reid, writing about totem poles still standing whose colors had been weathered away to the silvery patina of old cedar, observed: “it’s easy to become entranced by the soft curtain of age, seeing this instead of what it obscures.”<sup>14</sup> In his analysis of Coast Salish stone objects, anthropologist of art Wilson Duff writes: “The iconic level is ‘deeper’ within the art and intrudes itself less easily and less fully in the viewer’s consciousness . . . many of these meanings must have lain very close to the threshold of consciousness.”<sup>15</sup>

The passage just quoted from Lévi-Strauss continues, equally famously: “Surely it will not be long before we see the collections from this part of the world moved from ethnographic to fine arts museums to take their just place amidst the antiquities of Egypt and Persia and the works of medieval Europe.”<sup>16</sup> It is a foundational text for the canonization of the “curiosities,” the “crafts,” the “ethnographic data” of the Northwest Coast as “art” under the rubric of modernist universalism. Just this is evident in Lévi-Strauss’ championing of Reid’s work. James Clifford’s enormously influential *The Predicament of Culture* with its chapter devoted to “Ethnographic surrealism” secured the historical connectivity between Surrealism’s ambivalent doublings, the predicament of the “western” ethnographer and the predicament of those they would study.<sup>17</sup> Marie Mauzé continues the local variant of the struggle between essential and contingent meanings in *The Colour of my Dreams* catalogue when she quotes Breton’s question: “Isn’t the true meaning of a work not the one people think they have given it but rather the one it is liable to take on in relation to its surroundings?”<sup>18</sup> But equally Surrealism tapped into animist beliefs and lent support to the idea that these free-floating objects retain power and agency. If the Native voice is right, the demotic Surreal could be also.

These few instances hardly do justice to the discursive accumulation: dream,



Fig. 8. Sonny Assu, *Longing*, 2011, reproduced with permission

vision, magic, supernatural, other-worldly, spirit (count the book titles of the type *Native Visions*, *Mythic Beings*, *Spirit Faces*, *Spirits of the Water*).<sup>19</sup> It is complicated of course, if not paradoxical, because many Native people want the rest of us to realize that they have a viable spirit world inseparable from a profound cosmology and epistemology, and then they also want to protect it by not displaying, or, as in the case of Yuxweluptun, precisely by displaying, dancing or performing. Yuxweluptun's representations of those supernaturals provide a conduit of sorts, a route, to this "other world." But you are not part of it, except perhaps in your dreams, although you may be invited to observe it, or purchase it. At which point Sonny Assu, a Kwakwaka'wakw artist of the next generation, intervenes with what might be termed a surrealist ready-made.

In recording his 1947 travels in British Columbia Paalen had written: "the forest has silvergray trees, in the hues of very old whale bones. Oddly misshapen trees, natural totem poles."<sup>20</sup> In 2009 Sonny Assu's recognition of something in these chunks of cedar, off-cuts from the production of log-home kits on *his* home territory, is caught up in the surrealist readymade legacy as much as it is part of, and a commentary upon, his own Kwakwaka'wakw tradition. Recently, at the University of British Columbia, Dana Claxton, widely recognized Native performance artist and filmmaker, has instigated well attended studio courses in "re-enchantment" and "the supernatural."

- 1 Dawn Ades, *The Colour of My Dreams: the Surrealist Revolution in Art* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2011).
- 2 Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 14.
- 3 See for example Bill Holm and William Reid, *Form and Freedom: A Dialogue on Northwest Coast Indian Art* (Houston: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1975); Bill Reid and Adelaide de Menil, *Out of the Silence* (New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey; Harper & Row; Toronto: New Press; Fitzhenry & Whitesdie, 1972).
- 4 See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).
- 5 Wolfgang Paalen, *Dyn. Amerindian Number 4-5* (1943), in Christian Kloyber, ed., *Wolfgang Paalen's DYN: The Complete Reprint* (Springer Wien: New York, 1943), 18.
- 6 Nicholas Thomas and Diane Losche, *Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labour of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002); Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
- 7 See Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).
- 8 Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
- 9 Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).
- 10 John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity Inc.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- 11 Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Art of the Northwest Coast at the American Museum of Natural History" *Gazette des Beaux Arts* 24 (1943): 175.
- 12 Lévi-Strauss, 180.
- 13 Edmund Carpenter, "Introduction," *Form and Freedom: A Dialogue on Northwest Coast Indian Art* (Houston, Texas: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1975) 11.
- 14 In Steven C. Brown, ed., *Spirits of the Water: Native Art Collected on Expeditions to Alaska and British Columbia, 1774-1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press; Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000), 7.
- 15 Wilson Duff, *Images, Stone, B.C.: Thirty Centuries of Northwest Coast Indian Sculpture* (Saanichton: Hancock House Publishers, 1975) 177, 180.
- 16 Lévi-Strauss, 181.
- 17 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
- 18 André Breton, «The Disdainful Confession,» *The Lost Steps*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996) quoted in Marie Mauzé, "A Kakwaka'wakw headdress in Andre Breton's collection," *The Colour of My Dreams: the Surrealist Revolution in Art* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2011) 266.
- 19 Steven C. Brown, *Native Visions: Evolution in Northwest Coast Art from the Eighteenth through the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum; University of Washington Press, 1998); Gary Wyatt, *Mythic Beings: Spirit Art of the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1999); Gary Wyatt, *Spirit Faces: Contemporary Masks of the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1994); Brown, ed., *Spirits of the Water* (see note 13).