The Convergence of Intangible and Material Wealth

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BFA

A THESIS ESSAY SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF

MASTER OF APPLIED ARTS

in

Visual Arts

Emily Carr University of Art and Design

2012

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Abstract

My thesis explores traditional Northwest Coast cultural objects as a vehicle for contemporary narratives. I researched the premise that the narratives in contemporary Northwest Coast Aboriginal art are derived from the convergence of formalism and culturally specific visual language. Formalism in Northwest coast art began in the late 1950s. In 1951 the potlatch ban, which made it illegal for Aboriginal's to create or use cultural items in a traditional way, was lifted. I argue that the lifting of the ban allows for the challenging of formalist principles in Northwest Coast art. I situate my own practice as part of this legacy. I argue the convergence of formalism and the re-emergence of cultural teachings led to the formation of an approach to art practice I am calling Northwest Coast bilateralism. The artist creates and distinguishes between artworks for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences, the artworks may be aesthetically identical, but their context and use are very different. Northwest Coast bilateralism defines and is defined by this dual history of art production. It is what allows the contemporary Aboriginal artist to pull references from outside the traditional culture while still maintaining the aesthetics of traditional Northwest Coast Aboriginal art. The implication of bilateralism in contemporary Northwest Coast art is that it must always be interpreted according to two different systems of meaning and value. This thesis is a narrative account of my process of interpreting these theories.

Glossary

Binary Practice. In a binary practice the artist deliberately distinguishes between objects created for cultural use and objects created as art works, although the objects may look the same, the context of their creation and their use is different.

Contemporary Northwest coast art. I am defining it as any Northwest Coast Aboriginal art done after 1951.

Formalism is "[a]n artistic and critical approach which stresses form over content in a work of art. According to the formalist doctrine, the qualities of line, colour, and shape are sufficient, and other considerations—be they representational, moral, or social—are deemed redundant or secondary"(Clarke 2001). The way I am using formalism is in the context of NWC Aboriginal art. Formalism in NWC Aboriginal art is the removal of cultural values from the art by using a strictly aesthetic approach to understand the art form.

Formline is the main design element in Northwest Coast art; lines of varying width, which are usually black, hold all of the secondary and tertiary elements, which are painted in other colours. The overall design can be used to fit within a specific shape (round, square, rectangle, etc.) it can be used in a naturalistic representation, and it can be used in an abstract form. Bill Holm describes formline in the following way:

> Formlines swell and diminish, rarely retaining the same width for any distance. Generally they swell in the center of a given design unit and diminish at the ends. The width of a formline usually changes with a major change of direction, these

changes of width are governed by the specific design unit formed and its relation to adjacent units. Formlines are essentially curvilinear. (37)

Northwest Coast Bilateralism. A bilateral practice infuses the dual histories of Northwest Coast Aboriginal art into contemporary artworks.

Northwest Coast art Market. The Northwest coast art market is a commercial art market that utilizes commercial galleries to sell artworks based on traditional Northwest Coast Aboriginal art aesthetics.

Traditional Northwest coast art. The convergence of intangible rights and privileges (rights to names, songs, trap lines, etc. and the privileges to perform certain songs, dances, ceremonies, etc.) and Material wealth (the objects that represented those rights).

Fig. 1: Luke Parnell, *Fall of man*, mixed media

Introduction

When I was a kid I wanted to be an Indian (Aboriginal) artist, then I wanted to be a comic book (sequential art) artist, then a conceptual (post-modern) artist, and finally a commercial (carver) artist. Now I do it all.

Northwest Coast (NWC) Aboriginal art is the traditional art form of Aboriginal peoples of the Northwestern region of North America. It consists of two and three dimensional arts; it was and continues to be, used in almost all aspects of life. The traditional arts were a convergence of intangible wealth and material wealth.[1] NWC Aboriginal art is made up of specific design elements referred to as formline, secondary formline, tertiary formline, ovoids, U forms and other design elements. The two dimensional design is a complex use of these elements; a good

[1] Intangible wealth was the ownership of rights and privileges, such as stories, songs and dances. Material wealth was the objects created to represent those rights and privileges.

design is the balance between positive and negative space, using one line to create two spaces. It decorates utilitarian objects such as bowls, chairs and boxes, used in ceremony, such as potlatches and feasts and as entertainment for fund raising and tourism. The most iconic use of three dimensional traditional arts continues to be the totem pole.

This thesis project is based on the use of narrative in contemporary NWC art. The written aspect of this project is a narrative account of the development of my ideas through making work and research. For artists working today, this narrative is influenced by the visual language of NWC art as well as popular culture. When I use narrative it is not only a direct association to story it is also the narrative of how the art works are created. The contemporary visual language is a complex binary that has its roots in the formalist study of NWC art that took place in the 1950s to 1970s after the lifting of the potlatch ban in 1951.[2] These formalist investigations were significant because they led to the so called "Renaissance" of Haida art specifically, and NWC art in general that took place in the 1970s and 1980s.[3] This led to the expansion of the commercial market for contemporary NWC art, simultaneously the lifting of the ban allowed for new work to be made for cultural use. Therefore contemporary NWC art practice is a binary that consists of artworks produced for sale outside Aboriginal communities and culturally important objects.

In the article "The Ethical Dimension of Aesthetic Research" Clive Cazeaux discusses Socrates' ideas about art as representation rather than the truth.

[2] In 1884 the Indian Act was amended to ban the potlatch.

[3] It could be argued that contemporary NWC art begins after the "renaissance", but in my experience the art form is divided into two categories, contemporary or traditional and it is on those terms I am defining it.

> SOCRATES: If you look at a bed, or anything else, sideways or endways or from some other angle, does it make any difference to the bed? Isn't it merely that it looks different, without being different and similarly with other things.
>
> GLAUCON: Yes, it's the same bed, but it looks different.
>
> SOCRATES: Then consider – when the painter makes his representation, does he do so by reference to the object as it actually is or to its superficial appearance? Is his representation one of an apparition or of the truth?
>
> GLAUCON: Of an apparition.
>
> SOCRATES: The art of representation is therefore a long way removed from the truth, and it is able to reproduce everything because it has little grasp of anything, and that little is of a mere phenomenal appearance. (Plato 1987: 598a-b)
>
> Thus, with Plato's concept of the Form, we have a metaphysics in which the structure behind a theory of morality is also at work in determining a theory of art: morality consists in the capacity to conform to one's essence, and artistic practice is the creation of a layer of imagery which distances us further from essences. (4)

Cazeaux's interpretation of Socrates draws a distinction between the spirit of an object and the object itself. The formalist approach to creating NWC aboriginal art is similar. Cazeaux uses

Plato's metaphysics to describe the artist versus the designer the way I am using NWC art object versus NWC cultural object; their form may be identical, but their intangible values are different. He describes Plato's Metaphysics as judging that "the work of artists as morally reprehensible and to declare that all artists should be banished from the state" (Cazeaux 4). But in regard to designers they pay "more attention to the use of an object or in Plato's terms the 'excellence' of an object" (Cazeaux 4). When a NWC Aboriginal artist creates an object for cultural use he or she is paying attention to the "use" or "excellence" of an object. When that same artist creates an object with little or no thought to the cultural or historical value of the tradition they are using, they are creating an "apparition of the truth" or a mere representation of the essential form.

Modernist notions of universal meaning that privilege visual form over use have had wide reaching effects for NWV art. Art historian Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse expands on this legacy and its implications:

> With the rise of postmodernism and the New Art History, scholarship that participates in privileging the visual is inherently suspect as colluding with the aspects of Modernism that verge on colonialism. According to art critic Thomas McEvilley, the universalist ideology effaces local knowledge through the use of universalizing standards and "modernist formalism was thought to contain universal values that Westerners could locate in the works" (McMaster 1999:83). If an object documented family and territorial prerogatives, then recasting it as

> “art” is “an act of suppression, even if it is done in the name of emancipation or cultural recognition” (Watson 2004:2009). (5)

While Cazeaux is discussing the ethics of representation versus the essence or truthfulness of an object, Bunn-Marcuse expands on what happens when that representation is taken as the essence or truth. Bunn-Marcuse goes on to say that the emphasis in NWC art on “visuality rather than function” led to conservative expectations of style. The contemporary NWC artist has to negotiate the binary that is NWC Aboriginal art; specifically the artist creates artworks for the NWC commercial art market (for a non-Aboriginal audience); or the artist creates culturally significant objects for use. Most contemporary NWC artist will create for both, or solely for western audiences. NWC bilateralism is the negotiation of these two histories, whether by having a dual practice or infusing his or her intangible cultural values into his or her contemporary material wealth.

Northwest Coast Bilateralism

The study of the NWC Aboriginal art was made available to a wider audience with the 1965 publication of the book, "*Northwest Coast Indian Art: An Analysis of Form*" by Bill Holm and the "Arts of the Raven" exhibition, curated by Bill Holm, Bill Reid and Wilson Duff, at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1967.[4] The text establishes English terms for the elements that make up NWC art and design with no reference to the terms used by the originators of the art form. This translation of formline allowed collectors of NWC art to have a greater understanding and increased interest in the arts of the NWC. As I will expand upon later, since the 1960s, Holm's text has also served as an entry point for many young aboriginal artists who have grown up in an urban environment or in an environment devoid of traditional culture.

The Arts of the Raven exhibition had the tag line, "art, high art not ethnology". Though there had been other major exhibitions of NWC cultural objects this was the first one to exhibit the work as "art" in a modern sense made by fine artists rather than as "artefacts" created by Aboriginal artisans. The cultural objects were "transformed, produced and legitimised under the national and international categories of 'Canadian Art, Modern Art, Fine Art'." (Crosby 10)

Yet the influence of these developments also extended into Northern B.C. with the opening of the Kitanmax School of Northwest Coast Art at the historical village of Ksan in 1969.

The school was part of the Ksan Historical Village which was created as a museum, and had aspirations for economic development in Aboriginal communities through the craft industry. Although the school was located in Gitxsan territory, Ksan developed an original style of

[4] Before this point the study of NWC culture was limited to experts and enthusiastic amateurs.

formline, not based on Gitxsan cultural creation.[5] There is no one author of the Ksan style; it is based on the convergence of anthropologists, young artists from many First Nations and the use of *Analysis of Form* as a text book.[6] Art historian Judith Ostrowitz noted, "the program (Ksan) is considered to have served some important purposes, but artistically is thought to have been a failure, almost across the board." (118) She goes on to state that of all the teachers at Ksan, not one take's responsibility for the Ksan style, but Vern Stevens probably had the most influence. One of the reason's Ksan style formline is so reviled is because it is not based in traditional cultural creation, it is based on analysis of form and has even been called "Holmian".[7]

Somewhat confusingly the Ksan style was included as its own category of NWC art in Hilary Stewart's seminal, and widely distributed text *Looking at Indian Art of the Northwest Coast*. It is situated next to the cultural art forms of Haida, Tlingit, Kwakiutl (now Kwakwaka'wakw), West Coast (Nootka, now Nuu-chah-nulth) and Coast Salish (91).[8] I have owned this text for most of my life and was unaware that Ksan style was not traditional until I began apprenticing with master Tsimsian carver Henry Green. In my experience since, it has been the subject of ridicule and used as a marker for bad design. During my apprenticeship if Henry didn't like one of my designs he would remark, "that looks like Ksan design" and then he would laugh.

[5] Ksan is located on traditional Gitxsan territory, the Gitxsan are a band located along the Skeena River in northern British Columbia.
[6] Some of the instructors at the school were Bill Holm, Duane Pasco, Freda Diesing, Doug Cranmer and Vern Stevens.
[7] Holmian, isn't a dictionary term, it's used to describe either the work of a group of artists known as the Seattle tribe or art work based on the research of art historian Bill Holm.
[8] I will use current spelling and names except when referencing older texts.

Bilateralism becomes prominent after the lifting of the potlatch ban in 1951. Even though NWC art did not stop being created, it is an important marker in NWC art history because once the ban was lifted NWC Aboriginals could legally create "traditionally" important cultural objects. Gloria Cranmer Webster has noted, during the ban "The potlatch went underground and some of the ceremonies were almost forgotten because there was no longer an opportunity to perform them openly" (Webster qtd. In. McLennan and Duffek 242). The ban also gave rise to alternate forms of creation and the creation of a NWC craft industry.

Bilateralism is not static; it changes with each generation, as shown through my analysis of artists statements collected from a large group of NWC artists born after 1950.[9] It is essential to recognize that the artists who help to create contemporary NWC visual language grew up after the ban was lifted.[10] The reason it is essential is because the lifting of the ban provided a counter balance to the rise of formalism in NWC art.

Most of the NWC artists born in the 1950's still have a direct familial connection to artistic cultural creation. Whether that be an uncle, father, grandfather or family friend. This direct connection to carving ancestry is revealing, considering that cultural production was effectively banned by the Indian Act. For instance Nuu-chah-nulth carver Tim Paul's grandfather was a canoe maker and his grandmother was a basket maker. Both were acceptable forms of cultural creation under the potlatch ban that kept the art alive. He learned to carve from family friend

[9] I gathered my information for this section from the text "Challenging Traditions". Written by Ian Thom for the exhibition of the same name it is essentially a collection of artists statements based on interviews with the artists. The text has a bias towards male artists.

[10] The artists in this section are Tim Paul, Bill Henderson, Richard Hunt, Susan Point, Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, Reg Davidson, Jim Hart, Beau Dick, Lyle Wilson, Isabel Rorick, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluption, Chuck Ya'Ya Heit, Chester Patrick, Wayne Alfred and Don Yeomans.

Percy Jones. Chester Patrick also had direct familial connection to carving but had a negative experience upon learning of this past. He recalls finding a roll of carving tools and asking his grandfather about it, "I asked him whose tools they were and he said I shouldn't ask" (Qtd. in Thom 109). Patrick's experience shows the reluctance of the previous generation to pass on the "old ways".[11] For this group of carvers born in the 1950s, cultural teachings are still important. Bill Henderson, who learned to carve from his father, became a more mature carver when he engaged in his traditional culture.

There is still a strong cultural connection between the art and the culture. Artist like Lyle Wilson and Henry Hunt worked with the museums as part of education and research programs. Of this group, Don Yeomans is the only one to say that he used Bill Holm's text. As this is the most mature group of artists their work embodies a large amount of experimentation and explorations of form. The artists that show a natural predilection for experimentation are Susan Point, Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, who says, "I was one of the first native artists to pry an anthropologist off my leg" (Qtd. in Thom 183).

Many of the carvers born in the 1950s were late comers to the carving lifestyle, including Susan Point, Lyle Wilson, Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas and Don Yeomans.

The NWC artists born in the 1960s still have a strong familial connection to their traditional culture, whether they were born and raised in isolated communities or heard stories from a maternal grandmother. This generation embodies the transition from learning solely from

[11] Personal experience has taught me that the older generations had painful experiences with the colonial repression of culture and language. They did not want to pass on that pain, which is why they were reluctant to pass on the language and culture.

family members to learning from the study of books and museums or a mixture of both, though none in this group actually had any lasting relationship with museums.[12] The books mentioned by the artists in this generation are; *Analysis of Form*, by Bill Holm, *Haida Carvers in Argillite* by Marius Barbeau, *The Legacy: Tradition and Innovation in Northwest Coast Indian Art* by Peter Macnair, Alan Hoover and Kevin Neary, and *Art of the Kwakiutl Indians and Other Northwest Coast Tribes* by Audrey Hawthorn, which Klatle-Bhi refers to as the "Kwagiuth bible" (Qtd. in Thom 83).

With the proliferation and exhibition of NWC art by contemporary NWC artists we begin to see this group, born in the 1960s, being inspired by the work of other artists whether they've met them or not. And much like Don Yeomans from the earlier grouping who uses Celtic designs in his work, Preston Singletary looks outside his culture for inspiration.[13] Many of this group mention studying older pieces from museums. A few artists like Marianne Nicolson and Tony Hunt Jr. were raised with the principle of creating for traditional cultural use, while some like Steve Smith were raised to create for the commercial market, and others had little more than stories from mothers or aunties or old masks on their grandmother's walls to inspire them to become NWC artists

The final grouping consists of artists born in the 1970s, and of this group only John Marston did not get his early education from studying books. It is important to note, however that his mother Jane Marston, who grew up outside her culture, went on a journey of rediscovery when he was young and taught him about his culture and how to carve. What remains consistent is

[12] The artists I looked at for this section are; William White, Tony Hunt Jr., Christian White, Preston Singletary, Joe Wilson, Klatle-Bhi, William Kuhnley, Steve Smith and Marianne Nicolson.
[13] Singletary has explored the traditions of other indigenous peoples, collaborating with Hopi and Maori artists.

the NWC bilateral practice and the importance of dance to a few of the artists, though less than the other groupings.[14]

Bill Holm's text is again mentioned as an early influence, but also mentioned is *Looking at Indian Art of the Northwest Coast* by Hilary Stewart, *Spirit Faces* and *Mythic Beings* by Gary Wyatt and *The Transforming Image: Painted Arts of Northwest Coast First Nations* by Bill McLennan and Karen Duffek. With this grouping, however, there seems to be a real separation of art from culture. Artists like Alano Edzerza and Phil Gray talk about "studying" Tsimsian formline. Peter Morin directly separates art and culture when he states that his "creative process is about reflecting on Tahltan art and Tahltan culture" (Qtd. in Thom 101). This group has no fear of looking outside of their traditional culture for inspiration. Sonny Assu says he is inspired by Pop art and comic books and Alano Edzerza's work draws upon the art of the Pacific Rim and Africa. What is consistent amongst this group is the sense that NWC art has universal elements. They describe the content of their work as dealing with human issues rather than being limited to Aboriginal issues. Sunny Assu and Shawn Hunt state that they feel it is important that "other" artists create traditional art. The market savvy of these artists is a reflection of their immersion in western culture. It is natural for them to believe that the art can function both within the culture and outside of it.

The artists born in the 1950s firmly believed that the art and culture were one and the same. Their attitude probably had to do with the fact that they more than any other group learned from within their culture. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the use of books and museums became

[14] The artists I am looking at in this grouping are Corey Moraes, Sunny Assu, Shawn Hunt, Jay Simeon, Peter Morin, John Marston, Alano Edzerza, and Phil Grey.

predominant to the point that the latter generations learning of NWC Aboriginal art is almost completely devoid of cultural teachings.

The formalist study of NWC culture also had an influence on a non-Aboriginal school of NWC art. Bill Holm is the most prominent member of a loose collection of non-aboriginal artists who are often referred to as the Seattle tribe.[15] Their practice is based on the analysis of NWC artefacts from the 18th and 19th centuries or the so called "classic period" of NWC art. The style they employ is known as "native style" art, and is based on their analysis. Though Bill Holm stopped creating "native style" objects later in his career, many other artists make no apologies for their artistic practice. Steven Brown even justifies his position by discounting the work of contemporary NWC artists as inauthentic:

> Today's Native culture is not the same as it was fifty years ago or a hundred years ago or more. Where, there was a very stratified society and unless you belonged to the upper class, noble classes, you weren't allowed to do that stuff. And certainly only certain families did this and that and certain skills were very closely guarded. Whereas now pretty much anybody with, you know, a little bit of native blood is, feels that they can participate in any, process. That hasn't always been the case. (Qtd. in Campbell 33)

Native style artist Dale Faulstich, who has done extensive work for the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe in Washington State, believes NWC art transcends any particular artist and shrugs off any criticism as mere politics:

[15] The other artists that make up the Seattle tribe are Duane Pasco, Steven Brown Jay Haavik, Dale Faulstich, John Livingstone and Barry Herem.

> You know, the whole political thing, the whole thing about crossing the line. It never enters into my thoughts, to me, I'm all involved in producing artwork. I go to work everyday, I'm thinking about what it is I'm making. I'm thinking about 'what do I have to do today? I have to get this face, how am I going to solve this design problem, how am I going to do that? (Qtd. in Campbell 34)

Faustich says he doesn't think about the politics of "Native style" creation, yet he has a letter from the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe endorsing his work as a NWC artist. The most destructive influence this kind of creation has on NWC art is the continued proliferation of art work based on artifacts from over 100 years ago. It creates a circle of production where the artists give the audience for NWC art what they want but they also tell them what to expect. It is important to include this group of artists in this survey of contemporary practice because the appropriation of NWC art is widely accepted. This is because the art is predominantly viewed as separate from the culture, especially within the NWC commercial art market.

What these examples show is that in order to understand NWC bilateralism it is important to understand the formalist history of NWC art. For better or worse formalism is essential to understanding the visual language of contemporary NWC art. This separation from culture is what makes it possible for me to create art works that use popular culture references or tell stories that have no relationship with my traditional culture. Another important aspect of formalism is that it allowed for collaboration within the culture. Art historian Judith Ostrowitz discusses a cross-cultural exchange between Aboriginal artists and says that "This illustrates the useful nature of these standardized terms in the contemporary environment of increased

contact and collaboration among those artists who were struggling to preserve and promulgate related traditions (114). NWC bilateralism is where the narrative in my work comes from; it allows me to look outside my culture, within my culture, or both.

The Lowly Conscript and the Abstract Edge

In this section I analyse the art production of Haida artists Bill Reid and Robert Davidson. Reid was instrumental in the formalist argument of art versus ethnicity. Davidson, who was once an apprentice of Reid, has been a long-term proponent of what I call bilateral practice.

In a discussion about formalism in NWC art Bill Reid's seminal role in that history must be understood. Formalist ideals were an early motivating factor for his artistic creation. The replica Haida village he built in 1959 at the University of British Columbia and relocated in 1976 to the grounds of the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) is an example of his early exploration of NWC culture. Reid and Kwakwaka'wakw carver Doug Cranmer created the totem poles for the village, using the salvaged/saved totem poles from the museum's collection as a guide. With no attention to the original narrative or context of the totem poles, they borrowed figures randomly based on their aesthetic qualities. As Karen Duffek has noted, "Reid's UBC poles were "modern" in their autonomy from the social relations that crest figures traditionally symbolized even as the new works replicated nineteenth-century totemic forms" (82). The totem poles they created are an assemblage of disparate crest figures. Reid believed he was using iconography from a dead culture, "I haven't made up my mind yet whether Haida culture is extinct… If it's become more than that, it's only recently" (Qtd. In Duffek 71).

Reid continued his formalist training in gold and silver jewellery and sculpture. He borrowed ideas most notably from his maternal grandfather, Charles Edenshaw. In this period Reid really felt he was creating art and made no apologies for his stance on art transcending ethnicity. In 1978 he carved "Tribute to the living Haida", a totem pole for his home village of Skidegate,

where he lived for the duration of the project. I believe this totem pole project was a way for him to add cultural context to his practice and allowed him to create more mature art works, such as "Raven and the First Men" and "The Spirit of Haida Gwaii".[16] Contemporary Kwakwaka'wakw artist Marianne Nicolson describes her response to the sculptures in the following terms:

> The Raven and the First Men and The Spirit of Haida Gwaii belong in the same continuum as the work of Auguste Rodin and Alberto Giacometti. These sculptures were not produced for a tribal ceremonial of memorial, but for exhibition. Reid used the formal visual language of his Haida ancestors, which he knew well, and inserted it into this continuum of western sculpture. This was why the sculpture that I encountered at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver did not disturb my sensibilities as the other older, traditional decontextualized works did. (250)

Nicolson's quote comes from her chapter "A Bringer of Change: 'Through inadvertence and accident'", which was written for the text *Bill Reid and Beyond: Expanding of Modern Native Art*. The edited volume is a collection of essays originating from a symposium organized in 1999 by Karen Duffek and Charlotte Townsend-Gault at MOA. The symposium was called "The Legacy of Bill Reid: A Critical Enquiry," and its purpose was to "create an occasion on which to reflect critically and in depth on his remarkable legacy…participants were invited to address Reid's legacy from a critical distance that begins to be possible after the artist's death"(Phillips

[16] "Raven and the first men" is located at the Museum of Anthropology on the University of British Columbia campus and "The Spirit of Haida Gwaii" is located at the Canadian consulate in Washington D.C.

3,5). However, shortly before the symposium, MacLean's Magazine published an article questioning Reid's authenticity. This "prodded many of the invited speakers to address central issues of art, identity, discourse and historical process with even more clarity and directness than might otherwise have been the case" (Philips 5). Though Reid is the catalyst for the chapter by Nicolson, the context in which it was written contributes to the discussion about issues that challenge all contemporary NWC artists. Bill was and continues to be a controversial figure in NWC art history.

Unlike Reid's controversial status, I regard Robert Davidson as embodying bilateralism more effectively, having created for both the commercial art market and for the benefit of Haida culture throughout his career. In 1969 he carved "The Bear Mother" totem pole for his home village of Massett. He was twenty-two years old and had already attended the Vancouver School of Art, apprenticed with master carver Bill Reid and made a living carving small argillite totem poles for the commercial art market. He says at the time he was "living in yahgu naas or "the middle house." I was suspended in midair between two cultures Haida and the white man's. In committing myself to carving the totem pole, I was moving into the circle of Haida knowledge" (Qtd. in Steltzer 24). Crucially this early experience made him realize how much he didn't know about Haida culture, and Davidson describes his realization in the following way:

> There is a lot of knowledge that can only be expressed in terms of ceremony. The totem pole became the medium though which to transfer that knowledge, knowledge that you cannot get out of a person by interviews.

> The totem pole caused an incredible change in my life, in my understanding of ceremony, of what art means to the people. (Qtd. in Steltzer 25)

Since that first totem pole, Davidson has gone on to host potlatches and start a Haida cultural dance group called the Rainbow Creek Dancers. He has created culturally important objects to be given away at these potlatches as well as for the use of his dance group. Davidson has been prolific in his creation of art works for non-Aboriginal audiences as well. He has done many commissions for corporate clients such as the Pepsi Company and the "Three Watchmen" sculptural installation at the Hunter McLean building in Toronto Ontario.

Davidson brought both his interest in the formalist qualities of NWC art and the use of Haida myth and culture to the exhibition *The Abstract Edge*. The exhibition consisted predominately of Davidson's explorations of NWC form; yet he also counter balanced this formalism with cultural contributions, such as a simultaneous naming potlatch and celebration in Old Massett (Duffek 9).

Davidson is testing the boundaries of Haida art as he is "provoked by the inventiveness of the earlier masters, while building dialectically and actively on his experience of the present" (Duffek 42). There is an almost scientific quality to the work in the exhibition. Some of the art works explore single elements of Haida art and examine it from the inside out. The other pieces in the exhibition, which seem to build on the single element pieces, use Haida myths and legends to create a new visual language within the well-traveled territory of Haida art. For

example the acrylic painting "nang sdang" looks like an exploration of form.[17] In fact, the name comes from the concept of sdang or "two". Duffek relates this painting to "the Chief's name nan sdins (anglicised as Ninstints), meaning a chief who was equal to two: literally, 'one that is two.'"(42). The idea or at least the interpretation of this work is that there is more than one way of looking at something and that one thing can have two meanings. For example, this painting has value as a Western art object, as it is acrylic on canvas, painted by a master artist and has a clear provenance.[18] From a Haida point of view, it honours a Haida name, which means a lot in all NWC cultures, in which names are passed down from one generation to the next and in doing so they gain prestige.

Davidson answers a lot of questions with the work in this exhibition, questions about Haida art's place in contemporary visual language. In his essay "A Context for Haida Abstraction" Robert Houle analyzes Davidson's work in *The Abstract Edge*,

> Positioning Haida art within contemporary culture requires that the ovoids and formlines from regalia in static museum display cases be seen as liberated. Raven, eagle, sea monster and killer whale become the living symbols, the ethnography of contemporary culture. The irony is that the mythology implicit in Davidson's abstracts would exclude them under colonial methodologies of classification.

[17] It is a painting of dual identical U-forms with split U's inside. They are painted in green line on a background of black and red. The red is a diagonal line moving from bottom left to top right, the left side starts at the corner and moves to the centre, while the right starts at the centre moving to the top right corner creating a parallel diagonal line splitting the background into three zones.

[18] Davidson is known for his carving and printmaking but his paintings are given prominence because of his status as a master artist.

> Davidson's art is not in between art object and material culture; it is contemporary, and its modern hybridity is culturally specific with universal appeal. (54)

Houle is describing Davidson's practice as a living one that expands the meaning of contemporary in NWC art.

Davidson is a master artist, his explorations and experiments with the contemporary visual language of Haida art are important. These explorations are just as important as the work he has done to elevate Haida culture within his community, by helping to bring back totem poles to Massett, hosting potlatches and writing and performing Haida songs. Like most artists working today the narrative in his contemporary practice is informed by both his cultural heritage and NWC art history of formalism. What distinguishes him from Reid is his accountability to his community; this is what makes him unique. His practice is *sdang* or one that is two and by my definition bilateral.

The Masquerade

My earliest memory of NWC art is a mask on the wall outside my parents' bedroom in the basement of our duplex. I remember living in fear of the mask; the eyes were hollowed out, it had an evil crooked mouth and pencil thin eyebrows. There was human hair on the mask and it made me uneasy because I assumed it came from a dead person. The mask was tilted down, so it always felt like this other-worldly being was staring down at me. Its gaze wasn't drawing in images from the world, like a human gaze; instead, its gaze was like beams from a ray gun. The mask drew in the evil from the world and shot it out those eyes. I could feel the beams hitting my back when I rushed past it. Through the art work I have made for my thesis project I want to capture this fear and abjection that I associated with NWC art as a child.[19]

Research has always been an important part of my professional practice. When I began my apprenticeship with Master Tsimsian carver Henry Green I didn't just learn how to use tools, I also studied books, went to museums and joined a Nisga'a cultural dance group. My early exposure to NWC art is similar to the grouping of artists born in the 1970s discussed previously, it was without cultural context. Studying the books helped me to see a wide variety of art works from my remote studio in Prince Rupert B.C. The research was limited as I had no idea of the scale of the cultural art objects or the true colour of the paints, or the textures of the wood. Studying cultural art objects in museums allowed for a more detailed analysis. For example, looking at a Tlingit war helmet in a book did not tell me which way the grain of the wood ran, but seeing one in a museum allowed me to see the logic of how the sculpture was pulled out of

[19] By abjection I refer to the horror, fear and repulsion I felt. The mask was out of the ordinary, it looked like a human face but it was not a human face.

the wood. Drumming for three NWC cultural dance groups, I was able to experience how functional NWC art was used. I used this research to develop my practice, and it also informed my decision-making process with regard to my career. One of those decisions was to limit my participation in the NWC commercial art market. My short career as a commercial Aboriginal artist shifted my methodologies to a place where I didn't feel comfortable and hindered my creativity.

Once I had established myself as a journeyman carver, my research changed. I no longer belonged to any cultural dance groups and I began to focus my research on contemporary issues facing Aboriginal peoples such as colonialism, appropriation, and post-contact Aboriginal history. These academic shifts lead to artworks that use NWC sculpture and formline to respond to and intervene in contemporary issues.

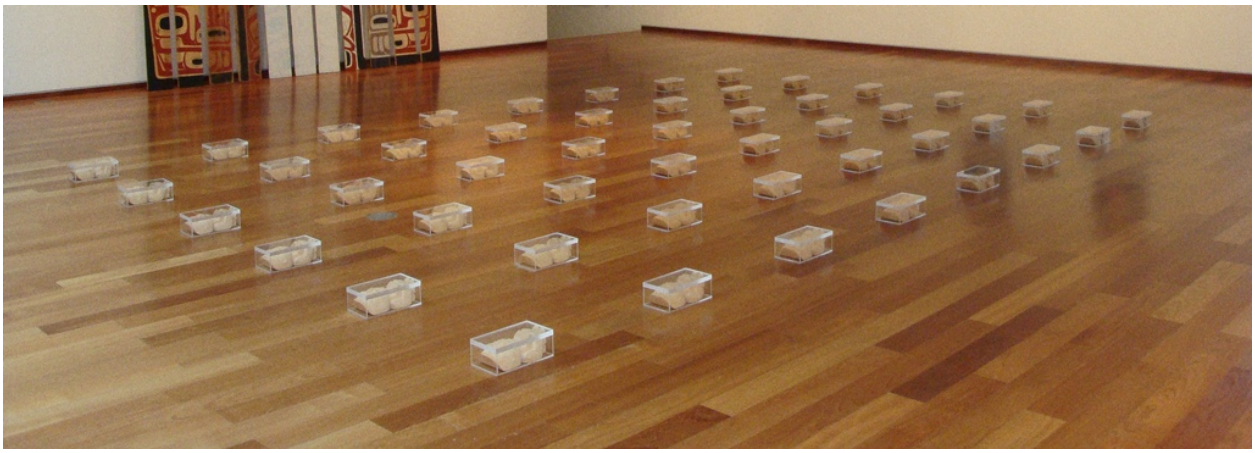

Fig. 2: Luke Parnell, *Phantom Limbs,* acrylic, wood, installed at Maclaren Art centre.

Phantom Limbs is an artwork based on my research of post-contact Aboriginal history, specifically the Haida repatriation project (1990-2005), which aimed to return all the Haida ancestral remains to Haida Gwaii from museum and private collections. The installation

consists of 48 carved wooden figures (each 9.5/5/3") encased in Plexy glass boxes, constructed in the style of traditional bent wood boxes.[20] The number is not arbitrary. Of the over 460 ancestral remains returned to Haida Gwaii, 48 came from the American Museum of Natural History[21].

The title of the artwork is based on the idea of loss and memory. *Phantom Limbs* is the logical integration of two paths of artistic research. I had been interested in using multiples for some time but had come to a dead end, until I came upon the story of the Haida repatriation project. While talking with Haida carver Christian White he mentioned a trip to New York City where he and a team of Haida's visited the American Museum of Natural History to negotiate the return of ancestral remains. I became more interested in the story after viewing an episode of the television program "Ravens and Eagles" that documented the trip entitled "The New Collectors: Repatriation".[22] This artwork depicts the ancestor's from their containment in museums and private collections and to their re-burial on Haida Gwaii. *Phantom Limbs* is a response to the history of anthropologic collection and repatriation of NWC material wealth.

[20] A single sheet of material is kerf cut in three places and then bent to create four sides of a box. The lid and base are then added later.
[21] Some research says 48 others say 46 + 2, 2 from Oakland via the American Museum of Natural History.
[22] Ravens and Eagles is a 26 episode documentary series about Haida culture.

Fig. 3: Luke Parnell, *A Fixed moment in Time and Space*, wood, chains, acrylic paint.

A Fixed Moment in Time and Space is a large red cedar mask suspended by chains in the middle of a square frame. The chains are taut, so the mask appears to be caught in a sort of web. The carving suggests a transformation mask, with the nose extended so that it curves back into the mouth. The transformation is reincarnation; the curved nose symbolizes the soul leaving the body and returning to begin the transformation process. A mask in the Aboriginal cultures of the NWC is meant to be danced. Although this art work appears to be a mask it is actually a solid block of wood; flat on the back; it is physically impossible to wear. Its un-wearability is emphasized by its suspension in space. The back of the sculpture was deliberately un-carved and is featured as prominently as the front. The metaphorical tension in the art work is between the widespread perception of NWC culture as static and the insistence of the artist to move beyond those perceptions. One of the reasons NWC art is perceived as static is because of the proliferation of art works derivative of 19th century artefacts.

The title of this artwork is appropriated from a character on the BBC television series "Torchwood". The character Captain Jack Harkness is immortal because he is a fixed moment in time and space; no matter how long he lives or how many times he dies, he will always be reborn. The association I made with this character is the nature of his immortality. As a person he changes, but on the surface he remains the same.

Appropriation is an issue that consumed most of my academic research and foreshadowed my thesis project. What I have discovered is that in dealing with NWC issues of appropriation is that I am actually struggling with issues of authenticity. I began to realize that authenticity could become a trap, which led to the creation of *A Fixed Moment in Time and Space*. In his paper, "Representation and Problems for Indigenous North American Agency", Richard Hill speaks to the troubling nature and limitations of authenticity:

> An enduring legacy of the vanishing Indian has been to lock "authentic"
>
> Indigenous identity in the past, leaving no possibility of contemporary Indigenous agency, since contemporary and Indian become pure contradictions. As Durham put it, "There is an unspoken demand that we do not exist ourselves in this world, this terrible week!, except as nostalgic echoes of our ancestors – the 'real' Indians.'"(13)

This academic research led me to realize that the reason I am not comfortable with the NWC commercial art market is that I want my art work to reflect my interests as well as the subject

I'm researching.[23] This is when I started using popular culture references in my work. For example the figures in *Phantom Limbs* are based on the Kodama Tree Spirits from the anime film "Princess Mononoke" and the face of the figure in my latest art work *Fall of Man* is inspired by a possessing demon known as Ranaq the Devourer from the comic book "Alpha Flight".

The methodology in my practice has been to explore the construction of narrative in my art works. I did that by researching the origins of the contemporary visual language of NWC art. I began with the premise of formalism versus cultural use; however my research leads me to believe that my practice dictates a symbiotic relationship between the two.

[23] When working as a commercial NWC artist, the galleries often tell the artists what they are buying.

State of grace

Prologue

He is a force of nature. Part human and part spirit, he has a foot in each world but he belongs to neither. His mother was a human woman and his dad was the mighty Raven. At least that's what his mother used to tell him. Every year on the day of his birthday she would say "your father was no human man; on the day you were born he flew away." And then she would show him the feathers, "he gave me 16 feathers and told me to give you one on the day of your birthday till you turned sixteen."

When he was nine he told his friends he was the son of the Raven. The next day when he walked into class his friends stood apart from him, from the other side of the room they stared at him, he stared back and said, "what?" His best friend spoke up,

"You're a liar"

"No I'm not"

"My dad said your dad isn't the Raven and that you're lying"

"My dad is the Raven"

"No he's not, your dad was a drunk and on the day you were born he got loaded and went down to the tracks and kissed a train"

It was a painful memory, he never mentioned who his father was to anyone again, nor did he believe his mother. For the next seven years on his birthday she would tell him the same story

and give him a feather. On his sixteenth when she was about to give him the last of the feathers he said to her,

"So what now?"

she gives him the last feather and twenty dollars and whispers to him,

"I don't know".

He left his house and laughed, "Is this all I am" he thought. In his left hand he held sixteen feathers, in his right twenty dollars. He tucked away the feathers and replaced his twenty dollars with a pack of smokes and a bottle of whiskey.

Sitting in the middle of the tracks, smoking cigarettes, and drinking whiskey, he waited for the one a.m. freight from the pulp mill. At twelve fifty six he could feel the ground start to shake, "its early" he thought and stood up.

Holding eight feathers in one hand and eight in the other he opens his eyes and stares at the train barreling towards him. A second before impact the light from the train nearly blinds him and he shuts his eyes tightly.

When he opens them he is standing on the tracks and the train is barreling through him.

He is no longer a child, he is a man, he is a transforming man and he has his feet in many worlds but he belongs to none.

His arms become wings and he flies away.

Fig. 4: Luke Parnell, *Savior*, mixed media.

Savior

She screams in pain as she pushes them out of her womb, two infants joined at the torso, the doctor gently holds them in her hands. The male twin cries the female twin does not, looking at the doctor the mother says, “Are they O.K.?”

“They’re twins”. So small and delicate and covered in birthing fluids they are beautiful.

“They’re conjoined twins” the doctor says, the mother leans forward to look and them and they both rear their heads to look back at her.

Fig. 5: Luke Parnell, *Savior*, mixed media

Moments later their small delicate little hearts stop beating.

Their little body is buried in a family grave and the mother grieves.

But the universe is sometimes unjust and their spirit remains there in the hospital, their immortal souls tied together. At first they did not have the capacity to understand what they were but as the years passed they could see the world change around them. The real world comes and goes and spirits arrive and quickly move on but there they remain, until he finds them.

The transforming man stands above them, like a light in the dark.

“I’m sorry it took me so long to find you”

He picks them up and holds them in his hands.

“I’m going to take you home; I know you’ve never been there before but it is where you belong.”

It’s a strange thing to see a grown man kneeling on the floor of a hospital cradling nothing and talking to thin air, but most people can’t see the world around them. Of course to the twins he didn’t look like a man, they’ve seen men. He was part bird and part man and he cradled them in his wings.

The years of being alone on the hospital floor had made the twins bitter, they had seen other spirits ascend and never had they, so they did not believe the transforming man.

“It’s time to go” he says as he drops them to the floor, spreads his wings and grabs them by the hair with his clawed feet.

“This won’t take long cherished ones” he says to them. His mighty wings flap and the three begin their journey to one of many heavenly worlds.

As they enter the void between worlds the male twin looks up at the transforming man and says,

“You’re a liar”

It was less than a second, less than a moment, but in that sliver of time the transforming man felt all too human. Taken aback by his deeply buried childhood pain he released his grip, but for a second, and the twins were lost.

The fall of man

The twins fall, their life in a state of purgatory which some say is a fate worse than death. They live on the edge of so many worlds with their feet in none. They can feel so many spirits around them, traveling like bolts of lightning from one world to the next. The male twin is enraged, he is starving and just beyond his fingertips is the sustenance he needs to survive. His sister who has only love for her brother feels his pain and weeps not for herself but for him.

She knows he needs strength to find his way home so she decides to allow her brother to absorb her spirit into his.

Fig. 6: Luke Parnell, *Fall of Man*, mixed media.

He doesn't hesitate he feeds on his sisters' spirit and grows strong, strong enough to catch a bolt of lightning. Still he falls but now alone his appetite becomes insatiable.

He becomes still, forcing himself into a near comatose state, with his eyes wide open he waits for time to slow and the spirits that once traveled past him like bolts of lightning now travel like the smoke from a cigarette. He reaches out and grabs one, it is old and frail, and with the veracity of a starving wolf he consumes it.

He has become a cannibal, he no longer wants to ascend to a higher plane, he only wants to fill his belly with the spirits of man and fauna.

His sister who sacrificed herself to save her brother stands beside him; she is unable to stop him and can only look on in horror.

She is no longer a character in this play she is now only a witness.

Fig. 7: Luke Parnell, *Fall of Man*, mixed media.

Punishment of the Grave

In this great and vast universe there is a balance, spirits travel between worlds never filling one world with so many spirits that it becomes unlivable or taking away so many that it becomes lonely. When a spirit leaves one world it is expected in the next and when those spirits start to disappear it creates an imbalance.

Charged to find the imbalance in the universe is the transforming man. Finding a needle in a haystack would be easy compared to finding an anomaly in an unending universe. He searches for years, guilt ridden because of what happened to the twins he has not lived as a man since. It was quite by chance that while riding a blue, green and yellow bolt of lightning, to a world without the colour red, he felt a hand grab him by the throat.

“You!” he screamed as he looked to see who had grabbed him.

“Yes me, Savior”, said the male twin who had become a horror, deformed by his greed.

“So what now Savior, you punish me?”

“No, my father will” and with that a raven appears. The male twin looks into the Ravens eyes and confesses, “I took the gift my sister gave me and created an imbalance in the universe.”

From deep down in his gut a lump appears and the Raven begins to choke, convulsing and shaking until finally he expels a small wooden box from his mouth. The Raven motions to the box and then to the male twin, but before the male twin can move the transforming man speaks up,

“Wait, it was my weakness that allowed him to fall into darkness. I will pay penance for any sins committed by him.”

And finally the Raven speaks, “but you are my son.”

“I know father.”

On a small island forgotten by the world there is a tree, and in that tree is a box. That box is the final resting place of the transforming man, but no longer transforming he is just a man, condemned to eternity in a state of neither life nor death.

But he is not alone; on either side of the box are two spirits, one male and one female.

They have made a vow to never leave their Savior.

The Raven saddened by the events of this story transformed himself and spent a hundred years traveling as a leaf on the north wind.

Fig. 8: Luke Parnell*, Punishment of the grave*, wood, acrylic paint.

Epilogue

Bilateralism is a concept I developed in order to understand my research and how it has influenced the narrative of my artwork. I looked at the contemporary history of NWC Aboriginal art with the purpose of understanding where I fit in this history. I discovered the influence that formalism has had on my practice, as uncomfortable as that made me feel. NWC

bilateralism in the beginning was a term intended to explain a dual practice of creating for "traditional" use and concurrently creating for a non-Aboriginal or commercial audience. I studied the work of other artists who had articulated their bilateral practices, such as Robert Davidson and Marianne Nicolson. The notion of bilateralism, as it turns out, does not seem to be able to encompass the full range of my practice; which is a contemporary weaving together of formalist and cultural concerns. In order to conclude this thesis, I want to return the question of how bilateralism is expressed in my work.

Mike Dangeli, artist and dancer responded to a blog post where I questioned whether or not a mask made for commercial use was actually a mask, had this to say:

> I think that our masks are Sm' (real) when we breathe life into them, treat them with the honor and respect that that we would another human being. When we breathe life into them, as a Nax Nox they become a living breathing beings. They need everything we need to survive, love, nourishment, and rest. Mique'l [Dangeli's wife] and I see the dancing masks on display in museums as being on life support, being taken care of but not living to their true purpose of life. If you look at what we call masks in our Sm'algyax language it's Amiilk, which means "serving for dance."
>
> I look at my masks for sale much differently than masks for use. I suppose that one could say that the masks for sale to be hung, are in the image of, not serving for dance. When I make masks for sale that are not going to be danced, I purposely do not carve out the eyes, mouth or nose the way they would be for

> dancers to see and breath through them. To me, this would make them Sm'. I think that in many ways it would be dangerous to give an untrained person this kind of power. (Dangeli)

I believe Dangeli is speaking about the morality of his practice and NWC bilateralism is about morality. If it isn't a question of morality than what would it matter if we sold stories related to title and privilege to collectors? But, while I agree with Dangeli, I believe our practices are different.

My practice speaks to a hybrid audience. That's not to say I don't create solely for "traditional" use but my primary practice speaks to both, albeit differently. *State of Grace* utilizes recognizable NWC iconography, such as the Raven, transforming characters and a mortuary box. Yet it is a constructed myth that contains references to non-Aboriginal religious concepts and popular culture. The story was molded by the triptych of the same name but the meaning of the triptych was also changed by the direction of the story. When I realized the story was actually about the transforming man and not the twins, it changed the final art work in the triptych. I had originally intended for the male twin to be imprisoned in the box and had even done a maquette. The story however took on a life of its own and the characters began to assert themselves.

State of Grace is therefore a bilateral exploration of narrative, in which research and narrative feedback into the formal properties of the artwork, including its meaning. It is built on the contemporary NWC art history I explored and my attempt to capture the experience I had when I first encountered a Haida mask on my parent's wall. NWC contemporary art and my

work in particular contain narrative significance and formal significance derived from contemporary and traditional culture, aboriginal and non-aboriginal. My concern is to protect cultural knowledge but to still create art that is not devoid of meaning, I've done that by showing that my work is part of a lineage and not a break from "tradition".

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Fig. 8: Luke Parnell, *Punishment of the grave*, detail, wood, acrylic paint, argillite.

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