

AGGV Aboriginal Curatorial Fellowship

'Here Now : Here Before'

Research by
France Trépanier & Chris Creighton-Kelly
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Context

Here Now : Here Before is a research project which will be undertaken with the support of the **AGGV Aboriginal Curatorial Fellowship**. This fellowship is a critical first phase in the development of this project. We will use the AGGV fellowship and its resulting research to leverage funds and resources for the next steps.

In the last two decades, Canadian visual art institutions have finally begun to pay some attention to the work of Aboriginal artists. It is often exhibited as 'new' or 'alternative', as if it had no history. Yet most Canadians know that Aboriginal people have been here, on this land, for thousands of years. And non-Aboriginal Canadians often struggle to make sense of this history. As Git'ksan artist or scholar Doreen Jensen suggested:

"Canada is an image that hasn't emerged yet. Because this country hasn't recognized its First Nations, its whole foundation is shaking. If Canada is to emerge as a nation with a cultural identity and purpose, we have to accept First Nations art."

The work of Aboriginal artists is exhibited in various ways:

1. as part of a group show, in which their work is contextualized by mainstream artists
2. in a solo show by galleries which still show mostly mainstream artists
3. in more 'Aboriginal-centred' contexts where an Aboriginal-based discourse can develop to inform the work directly
4. in relationship to Canadian artists of colour without referencing the mainstream

Here Now : Here Before will be part of this last tendency. There is an increasing interest, in Canadian arts and culture, in looking at the history and current reality of both Aboriginal peoples and persons of colour in relationship to each other - without constant reference to the mainstream.

In the visual arts, Ruth Philips and Elizabeth Harney are undertaking an international project, Multiple Modernities, "exploring the active engagements with artistic modernism that artists from colonized and indigenous societies have pursued..." Other recent, 2011 examples include Cultivating Canada, published by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (edited by Mathur, Dewar and DeGagné) and Vancouver Dialogues published by Social Policy, City of Vancouver (authored by Zool Suleman). The ongoing work of Centre A or Urban Ink, both in Vancouver explores these complex, sometimes overlapping histories.

Research

We will be researching contemporary visual artists, their artworks and the history of their communities on the west coast. We will be looking at work from Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands, a regional focus which emphasizes most of the AGGV's regular visitors (i.e. other than tourists). We will be researching these communities and artists:

1. Aboriginal Peoples, especially Coast Salish
2. African-Canadians
3. Chinese-Canadians
4. South Asian-Canadians, especially those with roots in India

Our central research concern will be:

What is the artistic history of Aboriginal artists and these 3 other groups? How do these histories overlap? How do these histories influence the contemporary work of artists from each of these groups? What type of art do they make?

Methodology

We will make a particular point of speaking with Aboriginal elders. Our approach will use an Indigenous Research Methodology based on the one we used in co-authoring Understanding Aboriginal Arts in Canada Today - A Review of Knowledge & Literature. This methodology both critiques the concept of 'research' and suggests new ways of doing research which do not automatically make colonial assumptions about the history of Canada or the art which is made here. We will use both conventional methods of literature review and interviews in the field. In addition, we will seek 'oral literature', words spoken out loud, not in an interview context, that have been transcribed into print.

Outcomes

1. research report by March 31 2012 - contribution to Aboriginal body of knowledge
2. a series of lectures/presentations conducted in 2012, both in Aboriginal venues and other venues which will help to bridge this dialogue
3. potential new audiences for AGGV - both Aboriginal and people of colour
4. an increased awareness of their histories in relation to contemporary art works
5. development of an ongoing dialogue with staff & board of AGGV

Stakeholders

1. The artists themselves
2. Their communities, families, ancestors
3. Aboriginal art communities and the visual arts discourses that they generate
4. The AGGV and its staff
5. New audiences for the AGGV
6. The Audain Foundation for the Visual Arts
7. The researchers

Possible Next Phases

Here Now : Here Before is the research phase of a project which will include a report and presentations. It may also lead to an exhibition, publications and/or a touring show.