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Decoding Double Desire A Conversation with Ian McLean

Marina Tyquiengco

Abstract

Ian McLean, editor of *Double Desire: Transculturation and Indigenous Contemporary Art*, discusses his book with Marina Tyquiengco.

About the Author

Ian McLean is currently the Senior Research Professor of Contemporary Art the University of Wollongong in Wollongong, Australia and adjunct professor at the University of Western Australia. He has published extensively on the subject of Australian Aboriginal art with a particular emphasis on contemporary art. His books include, White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art, How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art, and The Art of Gordon Bennett, with a chapter contributed by the artist.

Marina Tyquiengco is currently a Ph.D. student at the University of Pittsburgh. Her research explores the reuse of ethnographic photography by Aboriginal artists. Prior to beginning her Ph.D. in 2014, she served as collections assistant at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Museum, the only museum in the United States focused solely on Aboriginal art.

Decoding Double Desire

A Conversation with Ian McLean

Marina Tyquiengco

Double Desire: Transculturation and Indigenous Contemporary Art explores the emerging field of Indigenous contemporary art through the process of transculturation. Transculturation is the complex process by which traditions are appropriated, shared, or negotiated between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. This book is the result of the continuing research and conversation between art historians following the 2013 College Art Association conference session, "Engagements between Indigenous and Contemporary Art."¹ The

title "Double Desire" is shared by an article by McLean concerning the dichotomies in Aboriginal contemporary art.² The "double desire" McLean refers to is the often contrary desires of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, which have not been dissipated by repeated iterations or contemporary times. McLean references the "doubling and re-doubling of desire" that results from the strong legacies of colonial and Indigenous cultures.³

The fourteen contributors to the volume are experts in the fields of anthropology or art history, as the study of Indigenous art involves constant interactions between these two distinct fields. Rather than present any overarching narrative of transculturation or the Indigenous contemporary, the essays provide specific glimpses, narratives that work with Ian McLean's introduction to highlight important issues and questions in the field. The book is separated into four parts, "Rules of the Game," "Relational Agencies," "Contact Histories," and "Artworld." The "Relational Agencies" section is comprised of essays on collaboration, with particular emphasis on individuals' roles in collaborative projects. The "Contact Histories" section focuses on specific artists and movements, the descriptor of these histories suggesting clashing or confrontational (rather than collaborative) interactions. The final section, "Artworld" concerns reception, politics, and criticism of art, as well as the institutions of the artworld.

Ian McLean's "Part 1: The Rules of the Game" highlights the major issues involved with the study of contemporary Indigenous art. This section has two chapters: "Names," and "Theories." "Names" considers the history of the term "Indigenous" as well as related terms such as indigenism and modernism and how they apply specifically to contemporary art. "Theories" questions their usage and what if any role existing art theory can hold in their consideration. The interview questions concern mostly this section, which serves to outline and problematize rather than simply define Indigenous contemporary art.

The following interview provides some insight into Ian McLean's *Double Desire: Transculturation and Contemporary Art*.

Marina Tyquiengco: The contributions in this book focus on Indigenous art from many different countries and peoples, which seems to support a broad or inclusive definition of the term. David Garneau's "Indigenous Art: From Appreciation to Art Criticism" provides a more

¹ Ian McLean, "Introduction," *Double Desire: Transculturation and Indigenous Contemporary Art* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), 1.

² Ian McLean, "Double Desire: Becoming Aboriginal," *Broadsheet* 42 (2014): 65-71.

³ McLean, "Double Desire," 66.

limited definition, an actual short-list of artists and curators engaged with a very specific set of concerns. Is all art created today by Indigenous artists contemporary Indigenous art?

Ian McLean: The short answer is no. When some critics and curators define all art created today by Indigenous artists as contemporary art they are not just being lazy conceptually, they also miss the opportunity to engage with the artworld discourse of contemporary art found in museums of contemporary art and biennales, which does not define contemporary art as simply all art produced today. In this discourse “contemporary” is a critical term, just as “modernism” is. To make this point I tend to use the term “Indigenous contemporary art” (i.e. Indigenous art that aims to be part of this discourse of contemporary art), rather than the more usual expression “contemporary Indigenous art.” The focus of this book is not Indigenous art but contemporary art that happens to be made by Indigenous artists. Also, all the essays in the book, and not just David’s, focus on a limited number of players. The book is not a comprehensive account of Indigenous contemporary art.

MT: Your definition mentions art “from ceremonial, to folk, tourist and high art”⁴ as types of Indigenous art, but many of the examples would perhaps fit the category of high art, art exhibited in museums, private collections or performances at international festivals. Why are there not parameters placed on Indigenous contemporary art that are placed on other contemporary art genres? Or are the parameters simply not visible?

IM: Like Western and indeed all types of art, there are Indigenous artists making art across the whole range of genres and for many different markets. It is a good time to be an Indigenous artist in Australia because the idea of Indigenous being contemporary art is relatively new. For this reason, the definition of what comprises Indigenous contemporary art is still wide open, especially since curators of Indigenous art (who generally are Indigenous) tend to define any Indigenous art as contemporary. In defense of these curators, the discourse of contemporary art is one that challenges the limited parameters and genres that have generally been inherited from modernism: thus its post-Western character. So, biennales like to flout the conventional genres and even chronology. It is not unusual to see art made a long time ago in exhibitions of contemporary art, as in the last *Documenta*. Besides, these genres are artificial categories that reflect certain ideological agendas. One of the aims of the book is to interrogate the ideological imperatives of these categories, which are still used to sideline Indigenous art from contemporary art discourse.

MT: There are several mentions of artists who are Indigenous but do not wish for their art to be understood that way, Tracey Moffatt for example. There is also a quote from Lowitja O’Donoghue wishing to be called Aboriginal not Indigenous. Does this term only serve when speaking broadly about arts, as an overarching category, or could there perhaps be a time when it overtook local general terms such as Aboriginal or Native American? And people could be referred to by this international Indigenous or the local Potawatomi etc.?

IM: Lowitja O’Donoghue lived most of her life being called an Aboriginal, so it came as a shock to learn she was now Indigenous. But as you suggest many Indigenous people prefer Indigenous tribal names. Even though these are often also modern conventions, they have the advantage of seemingly refusing to acknowledge the sovereignty of the nation state. As I outline in the introduction to the book, the term “Indigenous” emerged as part of UN discourse and was largely driven by Indigenous activists responding to globalization—the same globalization that characterizes contemporary art discourse. Thus it is the most appropriate general term to use in connection to contemporary art made by Aboriginal,

⁴ Ian McLean, “Introduction,” 7.

Native American or Potawatomi artists. Tracey Moffatt is ahead of the pack in that she realized a long time ago that these categories are used to keep certain artists out of the discourse of contemporary art. Tracey doesn't deny her Indigenous heritage. She claims, like other artists such as Gordon Bennett, that she makes contemporary not Indigenous art. This is similar to Jackson Pollock saying he is a modern not American artist. Tracey's position might be savvy, but in my opinion it tends to close down the discussion that needs to occur to break the ghettoization of Indigenous art, which still renders it invisible in the powerhouses of contemporary art in the USA and Europe. So in a sense Tracey is protecting her international profile. I found that Gordon Bennett was to some extent willing to have his art included in the Indigenous category if it was in the context of opening up the discussion, but not so Tracey. She maintains a very hard line. Tracey is very approachable and friendly, but she won't even discuss this issue with me.

MT: An earlier writing of yours "Aboriginal Modernism in Central Australia," posits that the concept of modernism is a useful framework to consider Aboriginal art. In *Double Desire*, Indigenous modernism is contrasted with Western indigenism. Is this Indigenous modernism one particular type of Indigenous contemporary art?

IM: The main reason modernism is a useful concept with which to think about Aboriginal art is that it has so long been used to exclude it. Thus, it is useful as a deconstructive term in both the discourses of Aboriginal and modernist art, as each was defined against the other. However, it is most useful in respect to Aboriginal art made before 1970—just as the concept of modernism is most useful in respect to Western art before this period. More recent Aboriginal art is, I think, better understood in terms of contemporary art rather than modernism, as Terry Smith has done in his book on contemporary art, though I admit the relationships between contemporary art, modernism and modernity are far from settled.

MT: Western indigenism as a category is interesting, considering that many elements of Modern art were borrowed or appropriated from then so-called primitive arts. How is Western indigenism different? How does a style of art become 'Indigenous' without appropriation?

IM: The main reason I adopted the notion of Western indigenism as a mirror image of Indigenous modernism is because it illuminates the ideological issues at stake in what Okwui Enwezor has called Westernism. Since the first contact between Indigenous and Western societies, Indigenous artists have been as interested in Western art as Western artists have been in Indigenous art. Perhaps their interest was framed differently, but this interest, as evident in the modern as contemporary times is the currency of transculturation.

How does a style of art become 'Indigenous' without appropriation? How does any style become what it is without appropriation? Appropriation and mimicry are such universal strategies. The problem with the question, like many questions about Indigenous art, is that it aims to create a point of distinction between Indigenous and other art. My aim as an art historian has been to question and deconstruct these distinctions, as their purpose is invariably to other Indigenous artists.

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