



HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE
Contemporaneity

Vol 7, No 1 (2018) | ISSN 2153-5914 (online) | DOI 10.5195/contemp/2018.266
<http://contemporaneity.pitt.edu>

***Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun:
Unceded Territories***
Karen Duffek and Tania Willard, eds

Annika Johnson

Book Review

Karen Duffek and Tania Willard, eds. *Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: Unceded Territories*. With contributions by Glenn Alteen, Marcia Crosby, Jimmie Durham et al. Vancouver: Figure 1 Publishing and Museum of Anthropology at UBC, 2016. 182 pp.; 85 ills (chiefly color). Hardcover \$45.00 (9781927958513)

Exhibition schedule: Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada, May 10—October 16, 2016

About the Author

Annika K. Johnson is the 2017–2019 Wyeth Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts. Her dissertation, entitled "Agency at the Confluence of Euro-American and Dakota Art, 1835-1900," examines cross-cultural artistic exchange during the colonization of Dakota homelands.

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: Unceded Territories

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“Every Native person wakes up and they are usufructed.” – Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun (14)

Usufruct refers to one’s right to the nondestructive use and fruits of the land. The enforcement of such property law on stolen Indigenous lands exposes the colonialist attitude toward human-land relations. While, historically, several First Nations ceded their traditional territories to British, then Canadian, governments via treaties (official government-to-government agreements), present-day British Columbia’s

original inhabitants never surrendered their coastal lands that the government opened to settlement. Indigenous communities retain limited usufruct rights to fish, hunt, and perform ceremony on traditional lands, while—paradoxically—the government permits industry to irreparably damage waterways, forests, and sacred sites.

Such is the state of being “usufructed,” in artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun’s wry characterization of colonial property law. The artist materializes his memorable polemical statements (“your back rent is due, British Columbia!”) in supersaturated rainbow-hued paintings that demand recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty. *Unceded Territories*, a major retrospective of Yuxweluptun’s work hosted by the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology (MOA) in 2016, fittingly took place on lands that Coast Salish peoples never officially ceded to the government. The region’s unsettled land disputes provide fertile conceptual ground for the political aesthetics of Yuxweluptun, an artist of Cowichan (Hul’q’umi’num Coast Salish) and Okanagan (Syilx) descent.

This essay reviews the exhibition’s equally noteworthy catalogue edited by co-curators Karen Duffek and Tania Willard. Its seven essays range in format from Yuxweluptun’s artist statement to a curatorial dialogue, a short story by artist Jimmy Durham, and scholarly essays that contextualize his oeuvre. One hundred color reproductions of paintings, drawings, performances, and a few studio and historical photographs accompany the essays. Contributors explore the implications of Yuxweluptun’s refusal to be constrained by Western legal and analogously aesthetic boundaries. Broadly, this collection forwards a vision of a decolonized art world while remaining skeptical of its institutions and bounded territories.

The contributors position Yuxweluptun, a self-described history painter, within a long line of First Nations activists who have creatively combatted the government’s abuse of Indigenous land rights. Marcia Crosby’s historical essay examines how Tsimshian and Skwxwú7mesh leaders and other Indigenous organizations employed print media and public performance in the early 1900s to petition the Crown and reclaim Indian title. Yuxweluptun’s practice follows earlier leaders “who innovatively used the dynamics of Indigenous intercultural exchange to develop common political goals” (111). Knowledge of landmark land rights cases and key legal terminology, her essay makes clear, is essential to an art history of unceded territory.

In “A Free State of Mind Zone,” Lucy R. Lippard examines Yuxweluptun’s free use and subversion of Western aesthetics. For Lippard, the artist’s maneuvering between Western and Indigenous (i.e., “traditional”) art worlds subjects him to a double standard: critics dismiss his incisive appropriation of modernism’s primitivizing aesthetics as derivative (his paintings’ visual affinities with surrealism are well noted) (89). Conversely, some coastal communities criticize Yuxweluptun’s appropriation of their traditional designs and his depiction of restricted ceremonial spaces. To negotiate this double imputation, Yuxweluptun employs a philosophy he calls “ovoidism” to free himself from such constraints. He explains that the cultural ambiguity of the ovoid shape, a signature form in his abstract works, allows multiple visual grammars within Western and Indigenous languages to merge and collide.

Many essayists discuss this provocative engagement with “tradition.” Willard writes that, in works like *Night in a Salish Longhouse* (1991)—depicting as it does sacred space and knowledge, Yuxweluptun shows us “something of his own interior, his experience of ceremony. He is showing us not the artifact of ceremony, like a carved mask, but the vitality and continuum of ceremony as a living, breathing part of his culture” (39). Larry Grant, a Musqueam elder and hən’q’əmin’əm’ language educator, remarks in his preface that Yuxweluptun uses “cultural and artistic license to create the visions that he has,” such that “he’s being a frontline activist, trying to throw off the chains of cultural restraint” (2). Yuxweluptun’s provocative works combat urgent ecological and political injustices.

The heart of the catalogue features interwoven essays by artist and curator Tania Willard (Secwepemc Nation) and Karen Duffek, MOA curator of Contemporary Visual Arts & Pacific Northwest. They delve into unceded territories as a conceptual framework for interpreting Yuxweluptun’s art and Indigenous self-determination. They re-orient the paradigm of the painted landscape as a thing to behold (perhaps a metaphor for extractive, capitalist land use practices) toward land as experience and inheritance. Most interestingly, they provoke the connections between the lived realities of colonized land and the colonized territories of the art world (the museum, academy, market, and stylistic conventions) that Yuxweluptun’s highly political practice exposes. Whom is he beholden to, and what sort of action can his paintings elicit? Is Yuxweluptun “selling out” when an oil executive buys his paintings that criticize such “super predators” (33)? This difficult and fascinating question exposes the interface between two seemingly binary worldviews between which Yuxweluptun moves freely.

Through his drawings, large-scale paintings, and—as discussed in Glenn Alteen’s essay—performances, Yuxweluptun petitions a specifically non-Indigenous viewership. “Immigrants are my hobby. I want them to understand who they are” (14); that is, squatters on Indigenous land. Lippard acknowledges the reckoning required for non-Indigenous viewers and critics of Yuxweluptun’s works who “have to take a deep breath each time we undertake an essay like this one on a Native artist who has the courage to make it clear when and how often we screw up” (93). In his foreword, MOA director Anthony Alan Shelton reflects on the museum’s complicity in the colonial subjugation of the region’s Indigenous peoples through the collection and display of their cultural patrimony—which the museum seeks to amend. But can the art world ever truly de-colonize the museum, a quintessential colonial institution?

Exhibition visitors who viewed Yuxweluptun’s work in Vancouver experienced first-hand the artist’s reclamation of the museum space that currently occupies unceded Musqueam territory. But how might the catalogue conceptually re-position a global readership on Coast Salish land? As the topic and framework of discussion, unceded territory petitions for recognition of First Nations sovereignty by asking readers on whose ground they stand. Another question looms behind the essays: in the face of environmental destruction on a planetary scale, are we all totally “fructed”? Yuxweluptun’s focus on Indigenous land rights calls upon us all to consider our shared environmental future.



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