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A new look at our entangled worlds

This subtle exhibition asks us to deepen our understanding of the interaction between white and native culture, **Sarah Milroy** writes

It's been a while since we've had a large group exhibition of contemporary aboriginal art in a Canadian museum. Back in 1992, there were two landmark Ottawa shows: *Land, Spirit, Power* (at the National Gallery of Canada) and *Indigena* (at the Canadian Museum of Civilization). Then, in 1998, came Gerald McMaster's *Reservation X*, also at the Museum of Civilization.

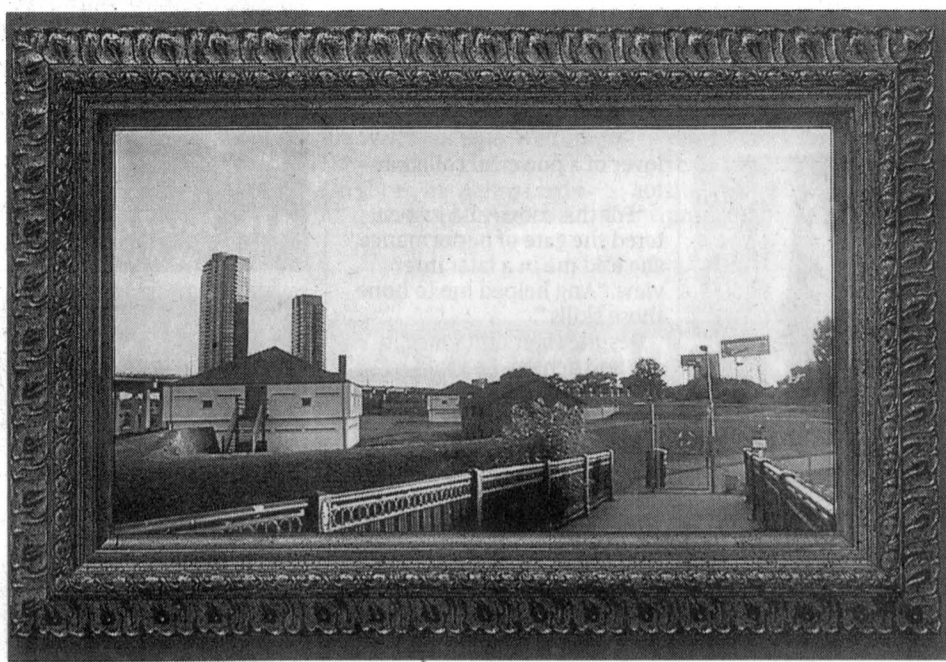
Since then, however, things have been pretty quiet, as if the battle for acceptance was won and the issues of cultural difference resolved and laid to rest.

Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. At Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum's Institute for Contemporary Culture, a new exhibition shows us how ideas about aboriginal culture have shifted over the intervening years, updating us on a few artists who are already well known on the circuit and introducing us to some new voices.

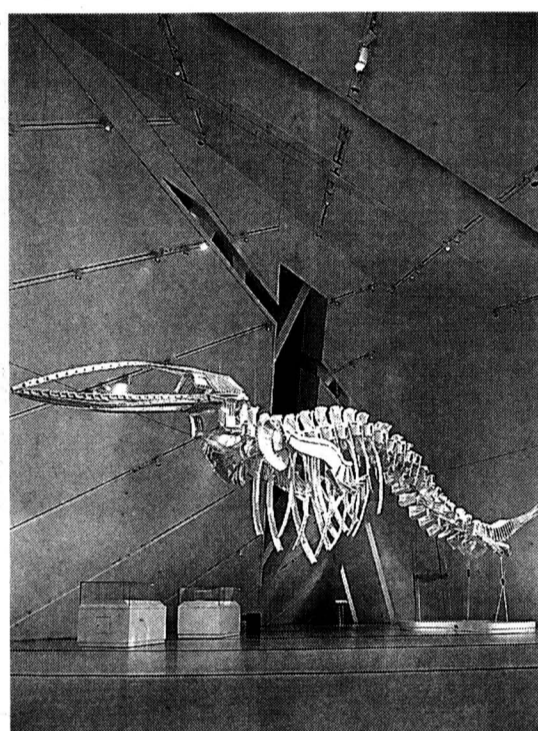
Where the earlier shows were sprawling, strident and often fiercely emotional assertions of the presence and vitality of contemporary aboriginal art, *Shapeshifters* is smaller, subtler and more modest in its mode of address. The aboriginal presence in contemporary art world is a given. Now, speaking from a position of empowerment, the show seems to ask: How can we deepen our understanding of the differences between white and native culture, and the ties of history that bind us together?

The show was organized by Candice Hopkins (of *The Western Front*, in Vancouver) and Kerry Swanson, executive director of the Toronto aboriginal film festival *ImagineNATIVE* (Oct. 17-21, and now, incidentally, the largest such festival in the world). Together, they have made some interesting decisions, such as the idea of including historical aboriginal art in the show alongside the contemporary work – a decision that allows them to make connections across time and explore a continuity of themes.

For example, Swanson and Hopkins are presenting the 13-part video series *Nunavut* by Isuma Productions, the Igloolik-based Inuit video and film



Alan Michelson's video *Gloom of the Approaching Night: Fort York, Toronto (2007)* is intentionally reminiscent of the Hudson River School. ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM



Brian Jungen's *Cetology (2002)*, a whale skeleton made from plastic chairs. ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

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Mark's Feet Strapped Down in Bed.

Milroy meets Mark

See a photo gallery and read Sarah Milroy's interview with famed U.S. photographer Mary Ellen Mark, whose works can also be seen at Stephen Bulger Gallery and NFB Mediatheque in Toronto. globeandmail.com/arts

collective lead by Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn. The half-hour tapes, released in 1995, document the traditional Inuit skills and way of life on the land. Some European trade goods and technology can be seen – from cooking implements to motorized boats – but hunting was still essential for subsistence. The tapes are shot to look as if the action takes place in the 1940s.

In a vitrine nearby, the curators have placed the tusk of a mammoth, a magnificent object from the ROM's collection inscribed, in 1899, with carving by a Yupik artist named Joe Kakarook. Imagery wraps around its surface, including scenes of walrus and caribou hunting, and images of nomadic tent encampments as well as the small post-contact settlements that were built after the arrival of the Europeans. From their divergent historical standpoints, then, and in materials by turns primordial and digital, these works reflect a moment of transition in the Inuit way of life with implications that are still being worked out today.

There were some familiar works here, like *Cetology* (2002), the giant fake whale skeleton made from cut-up white-plastic lawn chairs by Vancouver artist Brian Jungen, a by-now near-canonical work of aboriginal art that has swum in the international art-world waters from Vancouver to New York and back. On the wall beside it, the organizers are presenting a quote from Jungen describing how European trade goods have always historically found their way into the art of aboriginal people (*Cetology* would be the extreme version of this phenomenon, presumably, though now the trade goods are mostly made in China), asking why the white discipline of anthropology tends to denote as inauthentic anything that reflects that reality. A creepy kind of nostalgia for racial purity underlies such attitudes, and Jungen helps us to see the darker implications of that. Cultural hybridity is the universal condition of the 21st century, to which no culture should be expected to be immune.

Kent Monkman is another artist who straddles divergent contemporary worlds. A sculp-

tor and performance artist, his campy cross-dressing performances as Miss Chief Eagle Testickle tend to rev up any dust-gathering discussions about aboriginal otherness. In *Shapeshifters*, he offers us a little teaser, displaying a tantalizing selection of his recent regalia: the *Dreamcatcher Bra*, the *Raccoon Jockstrap* lined in red silk (a baby raccoon head dangles over the genitals), a pair of red-vinyl platform shoes decked out with dazzling beadwork (man-sized) and a set of arrows and quiver emblazoned with the logo of Louis Vuitton.

Monkman's blending of gay and aboriginal alterity is a riot; in a white straight world, some might say he has two strikes against him, but his pose is deliciously defiant. Monkman will be performing at the ROM on the evening of Oct. 19. (Rumour has it that he will be holding a séance for the spirit of Paul Kane, but that may be too much to hope for.)

While the show includes moments of subversive hilarity, it also provides some quieter pleasures, like the video landscapes by New York-based artist Alan Michelson, which document twilight in three Ontario locations. With their lavish gold frames, they are strangely reminiscent of the luminous paintings of the Hudson River School, and intentionally so. One of these depicts Fort York in Toronto, its stone retaining walls now ringed by concrete overpasses and commercial signage. Only the grass growing over the berm and the violet-coloured sky above recall the beauty of the land before the Europeans came.

One of the show's other triumphs is a group of drawings and prints dating from 1913-15, which the curators discovered in the ROM's Inuit collections. These delicate little works are gathered in a vitrine adjacent to the contemporary drawings of Cape Dorset artist Suvina Ashoona.

Unlike her aerial-perspective pen and ink works – views of the campsite lush with rich detail – these historic earlier works are spare to the point of near invisibility.

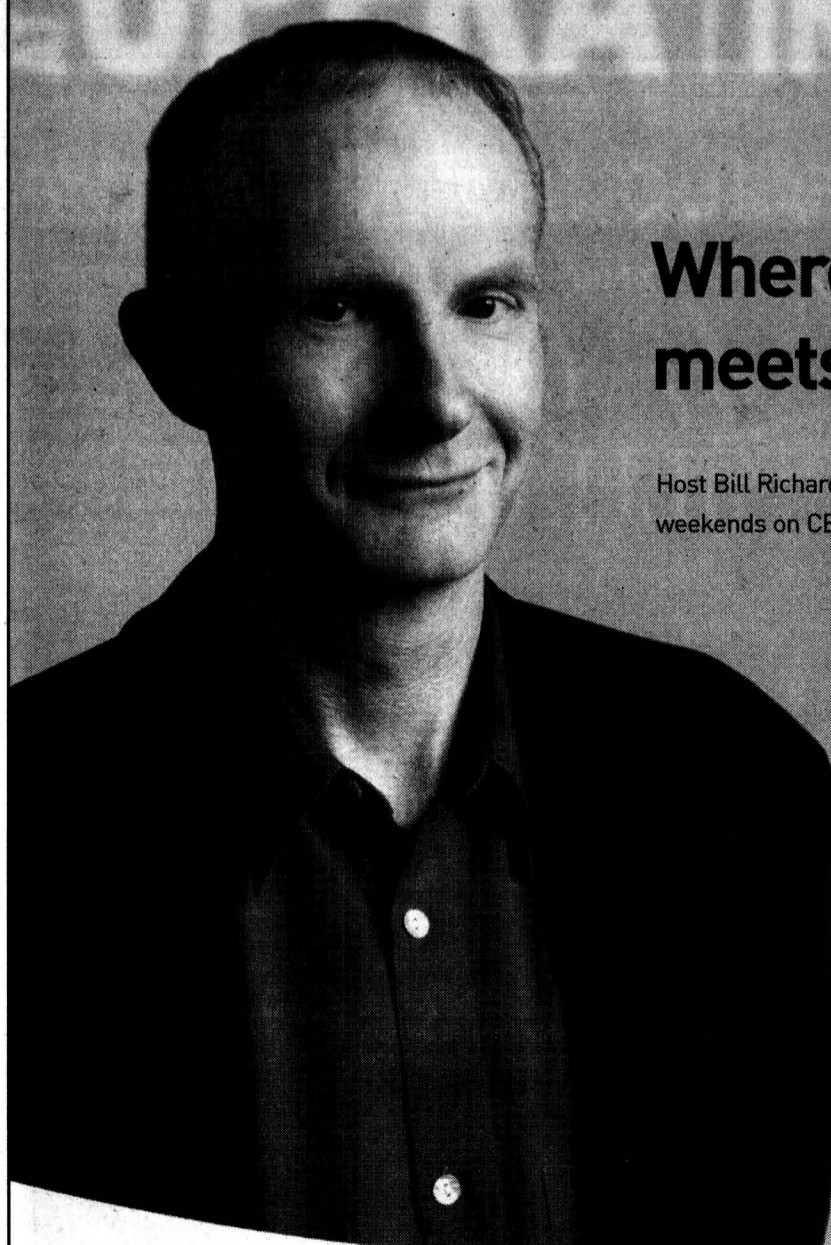
Close scrutiny, though, reveals their singular beauty and their extraordinary history. These were commissioned by filmmaker and explorer Robert J. Flaherty, maker of *Nanook of the North*. While some describe traditional pursuits – kayaking and walrus hunting – others reveal the interplay of European and Inuit, such as a pencil drawing of a European sailing vessel at anchor with a group of little figures playing a game of baseball beside it, or another that shows a group of Inuit making an igloo while onlookers capture the event on film. (We see the little tripod and camera standing in the snow.)

The proximity to Isuma's videotapes, whose sounds fills the gallery as a constant backdrop, makes this image all the more evocative. The camera has been a medium for communion between us for almost a century now. Brought to the North by Europeans like Flaherty, it has now become an instrument of Inuit regeneration and self-definition.

What stands out in these delicate drawings and prints is, first, the minute scale of the human body imagined in a waste of whiteness and, second, the liveliness and beauty of the gestures that the artist has recorded. Whether it's dogs playing at the end of their leashes, or a group of men tugging on a heavy walrus carcass, the artist conveys a sense of vibrancy. The Inuit print would be an art form grossly debased by commercialism in the decades to come, but here – in these prints and drawings – we see the first magical moment of contact with a new material: pen and paper. They seem precious.

In foregrounding such moments, *Shapeshifters* is an exhibition of its times. Scholars, artists and curators on both sides of the cultural divide are turning to consider the interaction between European and aboriginal culture as a rich subject in itself, exploring the experience of mutual curiosity, trade and exchange as well as the legacy of pain and brutality. For better and for worse, this exhibition seems to say, our worlds have become deeply entangled. There have been some losses in that, but there's also a fascinating complexity that we are only beginning to unravel. In its small and subtle way, *Shapeshifters* moves that discussion forward.

» *Shapeshifters* continues at the Royal Ontario Museum until Feb. 28, 2008.



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