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Constructing Locality in Contemporary Canadian Aboriginal Art

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis considers how contemporary art by First Nations artists can be 'read' as contributing to the construction of a distinct social 'space' for Aboriginal Canadians. Because social space in contemporary life is constructed and maintained in relation to larger global arenas, I refer to this Aboriginal social space as a particular 'locality.' I identify a distinct Aboriginal locality as one that is deliberately constructed and is a product of specific historical, social, and political conditions. I examine these conditions by investigating the period from the 1950-1980s to provide the context for the changing nature of contemporary Aboriginal art beginning in the early 1970s.

Locality is constructed as an oppositional space to an already existing social space. To address this point, I argue that contemporary Aboriginal art, as a discursive strategy, plays an important role in its construction in opposition to the discourse of authenticity.

Locality is also constructed in terms of materializing a distinct 'structure of feeling.' To provide an example of this concept I examine two exhibitions by the artists Rosalie Favell and Greg Staats.

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CONTENTS

Abstract ii

Acknowledgements iii

Introduction 1

1. Theories and Methods 9

2. The Discourse of Authenticity in Canadian Aboriginal Art 20

3. Political and Social Struggles by Aboriginal People in Canada: 1950-1980 36

4. The Oppositional Nature of Contemporary Aboriginal Art 50

5. *Sour Springs* and *Longing and Not Belonging*: Selected Works by Greg Staats and Rosalie Favell 59

6. Constructing Locality in Contemporary Canadian Aboriginal Art: An Analysis of *Sour Springs* and *Longing and Not Belonging* 70

Appendix 88

Bibliography 100

INTRODUCTION

> People who refuse to be who they are
> can't progress – they are not moving into
> a space that they have identified for
> themselves (Beam, 1989:22).

This thesis considers how contemporary art by First Nations artists can be 'read' as contributing to the construction of a distinct social 'space' for Aboriginal Canadians. In this thesis I use the term 'space' in both the literal (material) sense and in a metaphorical sense when considering how it enters into conceptions of identity and community that are subjectively held as a part of people's consciousness. Because social space in contemporary life is constructed and maintained in relation to larger global arenas, I refer to this Aboriginal social space as a particular 'locality.'

In anthropology a well-established tradition has focused on relationships between local and larger regional and global settings. However, the local is often represented as a given space in which the activities of culture occur, "without asking how perceptions of locality and community are discursively and historically constructed" (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997:6). The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai offers a similar argument, stating that most ethnographic descriptions have taken 'locality as ground not figure,' and arguing further that:

> The way in which neighborhoods [the material form of locality] are produced and reproduced requires the continuous construction, both practical and discursive, of an ethnoscape (necessarily nonlocal) against which local practices and projects are imagined to take place (Appadurai, 1997:184).

Based on these observations regarding locality, I draw on concepts that have shaped how locality has been reconceptualized in anthropology and related fields in recent years. That is, I take the position that conceptions of locality have to take into account larger interactions that affect their construction instead of considering locality as a 'given,' or as a simple 'ground.' For example, I identify a distinct Aboriginal locality as a social space that is deliberately constructed and affected by specific historical, social and political conditions.

An important perspective regarding the construction of a particular locality in contemporary life I draw on is Appadurai's conception that locality is constructed in opposition to something else, in this case, an already existing social space. This point highlights the oppositional nature of constructing a specific social space in the context of a pluralistic society such as Canada. Appadurai argues this point and states that the actually existing form of locality is a 'neighborhood,' explaining that:

> the production of a neighborhood is always historically grounded and thus contextual, that is, neighborhoods are inherently what they are because they are opposed to something else and derive from other, already produced neighborhoods (Appadurai, 1997:182-183).

All cultures, including Aboriginal cultures in Canada, consider the construction and maintenance of their own particular locality an important and ongoing concern. For Aboriginal people in Canada the construction of a particular social space that will permit them to pursue a way of life of their choosing is often at odds with constraints that derive from the larger Canadian society. In the ensuing struggle by Aboriginal people to maintain a distinct locality, one they have to 'identify for themselves,' they have had to work to confront the overwhelming practices and ideology of colonialism. Locality for Aboriginal people is therefore a product of specific historical, social and political conditions, and this is why its construction is of necessity oppositional in nature. In this thesis I argue that art, as a discursive strategy, plays an important role in its construction.

The oppositional nature of constructing a locality also highlights the connection between constructions of a social space and the construction of ideology. The French geographer Henri Lefebvre has noted this connection, arguing that the organization of space is a social product and that there is an ideological content to socially created spaces. His point is that the creation of a social space is an active, not a static process which works to maintain a particular world view, including, I would add in the case of Aboriginal people, a distinct identity and a sense of community. He remarks that:

> space is not a scientific object removed from ideology and politics; it has always been political and strategic. . . . Space has been shaped and molded from historical and natural elements, but this has been a political process. Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies (Lefebvre, 1976:31).

Aboriginal artists in Canada are well aware of the ideological and political processes of constructing a social space for Aboriginal people. For many of them art has played an important role in this struggle by contributing to an oppositional discourse. For example, since the mid 1970s Aboriginal art in Canada has become increasingly political as it contests how Aboriginal people in Canada have been (mis)represented. It aims to recover Aboriginal history and traditions and articulate the nature of contemporary Aboriginal identity.

Moreover, an aim of an oppositional discourse advanced by many contemporary Aboriginal artists is to confront, and thus expose, the ideological nature of the dominant discourse in Canada on Aboriginal people and their culture(s). For example, in her entry to the volume of essays for the 1992 exhibition, *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada*, the anthropologist Charlotte Townsend-Gault writes of the role of art in struggles by contemporary Aboriginal artists in Canada:

> Given a set of circumstances, historical and political, these artists are making a space for themselves; challenging the colonial discourse, they undermine the authority of the signs that constitute its knowledge, and reassert the authority of the signs of their own rightful knowledge (Townsend-Gault, 1992:80).

The struggle by Aboriginal people in Canada to create and recreate this social space is waged through discursive practices, which include art, and involves the deployment of discourses that are oppositional to the dominant discourses on Aboriginal people and Aboriginal culture in Canada. One of the important discursive methods that many contemporary Aboriginal artists employ in this oppositional discourse is a strategy that combines, or juxtaposes, signs of their own parent culture traditions with contemporary materials and Western aesthetic styles.

There are a number of contemporary Aboriginal artists who are involved as artists in this struggle. However, my focus in this thesis is on selections from two recent exhibitions of the works of Rosalie Favell and Greg Staats; these two artists exemplify the way art is implicated in this struggle. Both of these artists have worked for many years developing their ideas. Both have exhibited extensively both nationally and internationally.

Drawing on my examples from the art of Favell and Staats, I argue that contemporary Aboriginal artists are in the vanguard of efforts by Aboriginal people to construct and maintain a distinct Aboriginal social space. This space is constructed within the pluralistic nation state of Canada in order to sustain and dynamically recreate a distinct Aboriginal identity and distinct sense of community for Aboriginal people within the contexts of their current lives.

To summarize, this thesis explores conceptions of locality as they are produced and expressed in contemporary Canadian Aboriginal art. The argument that this thesis advances is that the identification of the process of constructing and maintaining a distinct Aboriginal locality is an important approach in the analysis of contemporary Canadian Aboriginal art.

This thesis is organized as follows: In Chapter One I provide the theoretical and methodological tools required to 'read' the selected images. This will provide the framework for my discussion later in the thesis of how the visual signs of art can be employed to construct a particular locality in contemporary Canadian Aboriginal art. To approach this goal I draw on the inter-disciplinary field of cultural studies, the aesthetic anthropology of Clifford Geertz, and discourse analysis.

In Chapter Two I foreground the historical relationship between Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian society. The purpose of this chapter is to identify the terms of the dominant discourse on Aboriginal people and culture, in particular, a discourse on authenticity that (mis)represents Aboriginal art. In this chapter I review two Canadian exhibitions that exhibited Aboriginal art to illustrate how the dominant discourse of authenticity is used ideologically to marginalize contemporary Aboriginal art and culture.

In Chapter Three I briefly examine the period of Canadian history from 1950–1980 with a focus on the political and social struggles by Aboriginal people against assimilation and marginalization. This provides the context for the second part of this chapter where I examine the growing political awareness by Aboriginal artists along with changes that occurred in the response by Canadian institutions and the wider public to contemporary Aboriginal art, beginning in the mid-1970s.

In Chapter Four my main focus is on how contemporary Canadian Aboriginal artists have used their art to struggle against the dominant discourse of authenticity that has (mis)represented Aboriginal culture in Euro-Canadian society. I draw from a selection of contemporary Aboriginal art exhibitions from the early 1980s to mid-

1990s in order to consider how contemporary Aboriginal art works against this dominant discourse. This also provides the context for reading the codes and conventions in my selections of artworks by Rosalie Favell and Greg Staats later on in the thesis (in chapter six).

In Chapter Five I describe the selection of works from Greg Staats, the installation *Greg Staats: Memories of a Collective Reality – Sour Springs*, (1995), and Rosalie Favell, selections from *Longing and Not Belonging*, (1998 – 2003). I provide a brief biography and a list of the artist's recent exhibitions.

In Chapter Six I analyze the selected works by Rosalie Favell and Greg Staats to provide an example of how contemporary Aboriginal art can be 'read' as contributing to the construction of a distinct Aboriginal locality. I draw on Geertz's concept that art is a method for 'materializing a way of experiencing' and I use Favell and Staats's work as examples of how their experience of displacement and the importance of understanding the past are conveyed in their art.

CHAPTER ONE

Theories and Methods

This chapter outlines the methods that I will use in later chapters to identify the dominant discourses on contemporary Canadian Aboriginal art and the methods I use to 'read' the construction of a distinct Aboriginal locality in contemporary Canadian Aboriginal art.

To move towards this goal I draw on the developments in the inter-disciplinary field of cultural studies and the aesthetic anthropology of Clifford Geertz. In particular I utilize the methods of semiotics, the study of signs within society, to analyse the selected artworks discussed in this thesis. The use of semiotics allows for analysis of non-linguistic signs, such as visual works of art, by interpreting them as components of a text.

An important feature of semiotics in cultural studies is that it interprets texts as located productions, and argues for the need to emphasize the historical, political and ideological features that inform how the signs that make up the artworks are to be analyzed and interpreted. Moreover, a semiotic perspective emphasizes the social and cultural construction of the codes and conventions that inform the choice of signs that encode artworks with meanings. A semiotic perspective also emphasizes how the artworks can be analyzed as site/sights where there are struggles over meanings.

As an example of how I apply the methods of semiotics to analyze visual images, let us consider a painting by the Métis artist Bob Boyer called *A Government Blanket Policy* (see Figure 1). Currently in the Canadian Museum of Civilization collection and on permanent display in its First Peoples Hall exhibition, this painting initially was part of the 1984 exhibition entitled *Horses Fly Too: Bob Boyer/Edward Poitras*, held at the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina, from June 8 - July 22, 1984.

A Government Blanket Policy consists of oil paint on a blanket. The picture plane is broken up into three vertical sections, the middle being the largest. In this middle plane, there is a backward flag of the United States that dominates the entire picture plane. Where there are usually stars in the American flag, Boyer instead has included the British flag and has placed a small black 'x' over the middle stripe to the far left. Underneath the American flag, Boyer has inserted three upside-down 'teepees' with two triangles touching the points of each of the teepees. In the picture planes to the left and to the right of the middle plane there are geometric designs in the upper-left, the upper-right, and the lower-right corners. Boyer has placed the letters 'U.S.' on the lower-left side.

Semiotics and the Sign

In cultural studies, the starting point for analysis of cultural products, such as artworks, is rooted in Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of language. Cultural studies and the aesthetic anthropology of Clifford Geertz draw an analogy between the operation of language and the operation of other sign systems, which include visual works of art, and which constitute 'signifying systems' that communicate meaning.

To begin to 'read' or decode the meaning of 'signifying systems' cultural studies utilizes the methodology of semiotics to read a work of art as a 'text.' In a semiotic analysis, a text is considered a collection of signs. Graeme Turner explains that a sign:

> can be thought of as the smallest unit of communication within a language system. It can be a word, a photograph, a sound, an image on a screen, a musical note, a gesture, an item of clothing (Turner, 1996:16).

In order for a 'unit of communication' to be considered a sign it must have two constitutive parts - the signified and the signifier. The analysis of a text begins with an understanding of the relationship between the two. To distinguish between the two, the signifier can be thought of as the physical form of the sign, for instance, something that can be seen, heard, or touched and the signified is the mental concept that the signifier evokes in the viewer (or reader or listener). The signified is not identified directly with a referent but is a concept; it is not an object but the notion of an object.

Artworks can be analyzed as being made up of signs and therefore they can be interpreted as texts. The forms that make up an artwork are thought of as the aesthetic signifiers (the physical forms). The anthropologist Valda Blundell expands on this point, writing that:

> Like the elements of articulate speech, *art forms can be employed as signs in the process of signification*. The perceivable forms created by artists constitute such aesthetic *signifiers*. Examples include the images of paintings, postcards, or television programs, the decorative elements of costumes, the sounds of music, or the movements of dance (Blundell, 2000:39, emphasis added).

Applying these concepts to Boyer's painting, *A Government Blanket Policy*, an example of one signifier in the painting is the image of the flag, and what this image evokes (or is intended to evoke) is the mental concept of the flag (the signified).

An important point in the relationship between the signifier and signified is that it is arbitrary; there is not a direct relationship or natural link between them. How then is the meaning of a sign (or collection of signs) determined if the connection between signifier and signified is arbitrary? Signs can only makes sense in their systematic relation to each other, and meanings depend on the position of the signs in sign systems. As Turner explains, the importance of this relational quality is that it:

> establishes categories and makes distinctions through a network of differences and similarities (Turner, 1996:15).

In order to establish categories and make distinctions, Saussure identified two kinds of systematic relationships that are important for semiotic analysis. The first is what he called the 'associative' or the 'paradigmatic' relationship and this highlights the importance of differentiation or the contrastive function of meaning in a text. This relationship refers *inter*textually to signifiers that are absent from the text but are all from the same specific category.

As an example, in *A Government Blanket Policy*, Boyer has chosen to paint on a blanket rather than on canvas. The blanket is related, in fact, it is located within the same specific category of supports for fine art painting – such as, canvas, paper, boards. This 'absence' illustrates the importance of what is not included, but nonetheless contributes to the meaning of the text.

A second systemic relationship is referred to as a 'syntagmatic' relationship. A syntagmatic relationship refers *intra*textually to other signifiers that are also present in the text and considers how these elements within the same text are related to one another. This highlights the importance of similarity among the signifiers in the text. The multiple images in an artwork are thought of as signifiers that work together to convey a meaning through their interplay in a particular 'text.' To illustrate this relationship, in *A Government Blanket Policy* a syntagmatic analysis focuses on the relationships between the signifiers that make up the entire work. Therefore one of the ways that meaning is generated is by considering how these elements work together: What is the relationship between the flags and the small black 'x,' or the upside-down 'teepees' and the geometric designs, or the flags and the geometric designs?

Cultural Studies: Texts as Located Productions

Localities in contemporary life, as mentioned above, are constructed in opposition to 'something else.' To begin to 'read' the oppositional nature of locality I draw on the view in cultural studies that art is contingent, that is, the artistic practice is situated in the cultural and social worlds in which it is produced and received. Cultural studies challenges the perspective that the meanings encoded in art are 'transcendent' and beyond the social world in which art is located. This 'transcendent' perspective, sometimes called 'perceptualism,' engenders analysis of artworks in terms of such formal qualities as color, shapes, size, and optical truth. The art historian Norman Bryson writes that 'perceptualism' asserts:

> the notion of the artistic process [as being] described exclusively in terms of cognition, perception, and optical truth. What perceptualism leads to is *a picture of art in isolation from the rest of society's concerns*, since essentially the artist is alone, watching the world as an ocular spectacle but never reacting to the world's meanings, basking in and recording his [sic] perceptions but apparently doing so in some extraterritorial zone . . . out of society, at the margins of social concerns (Bryson, 1983:66, emphasis added).

The cultural studies and Geertzean perspective on art challenge this notion that art can somehow transcend society and history. Geertz notes that the importance of the social and the cultural contexts for interpretation is in the way that the signs that make up the text are 'used' in a particular society. He calls this the 'history of signs and symbols,' stating that:

> Such signs and symbols, such vehicles of meaning, play a role in the life of a society, or some part of a society, and it is that which in fact gives them their life. Here, too, *meaning is use, or more carefully, arises from use, and it is by tracing out such uses . . . that we are going to be able to find out anything general about them* (Geertz, 1976:1498, emphasis added).

This perspective moves away from interpreting art as originating from an isolated individual outside the influence of society, where art forms are not "closed, self-contained and transcendent entities, but are the product of specific historical practices on the part of identifiable social groups in given conditions" (Wolff, 1993:49). Applying this perspective to Boyer's painting, interpretation of the artwork is not attributed to Boyer's individual genius but must instead take into consideration how the text is used and situated in society. For example, in order to further this interpretation, consideration needs to be given to placing this painting in its social and cultural context. Examples could include how the work is situated regarding Métis culture's relationship with Euro/Canadian society, because Boyer is Métis, as well as how the work is situated in respect to the developments of contemporary Canadian Aboriginal art.

Discourse Analysis

In this thesis I also employ discourse analysis. Like semiotics, the method of discourse analysis, or deconstruction, draws upon a now well-established tradition in cultural studies of reading the meanings of texts. In cultural studies, the concept of discourse provides a methodological tool for describing the different ways in which reality is constructed. The method of discourse analysis does not try to define, or deny, reality, but rather, in the case of written, or spoken language, it describes how sign systems construct meanings that reflect contexts (i.e. are ideological).

The way art is written and spoken about, that is, discourses about art are ideological in that they promote a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group. For example, in the case of Canadian Aboriginal art, a discourse of authenticity has been advanced by the dominant Euro-Canadian society, and this is a discourse that serves the interests of the dominant society, but not Aboriginal Canadians. Barthes's concept of myth is useful for understanding the importance of dominant ideologies and how they are maintained. For Barthes the concept of myth focuses on how the meanings of the dominant group in society are not only socially produced ideas but are also made to seem natural and inevitable. This is achieved through the "complex system of images and beliefs which a society constructs in order to sustain and authenticate it's own sense of being" (Hawkes, 1977:131).

In cultural studies, then, ways of writing and speaking about art are ideological. Furthermore, art forms themselves are considered to be ideological texts, so we can speak of visual discourses that are ideological. Therefore, art forms by Aboriginal artists may be thought of as counter-discourses, or counter ideologies. That is, artists like Boyer can be said to 'paint against' the dominant discourse of authenticity.

Codes and Conventions

Finally, in order to determine the meanings of signs, whether the signs are writings about art or images in art by contemporary First nation artists, it is important to consider the codes, or conventions, that are used. Both the producers of various types of texts as well as the interpreters select and combine signs following shared codes and conventions. These codes, or conventions, can be written, spatial, oral, visual, tactile, and/or olfactory. An understanding of the codes and conventions is important, as they are used, "in order to limit . . . the range of possible meanings they are likely to generate when read by others" (Turner, 1996:17). The meaning of a sign depends on the code within which it is situated and provides a framework, or the rules, within which signs make sense.

One of the codes for fine art painting is that the paint is generally applied on a support of canvas or paper. Boyer, however, uses a blanket as a support. To interpret this sign consideration has to be given to the codes that Boyer is using in order for the use of a blanket to make sense. For Aboriginal people, the blanket signifies the vehicle by which smallpox was distributed to Aboriginal people by the dominant society during the early years of colonization with the intention of exterminating the culture. Because Boyer makes reference to fine art with his use of acrylics and creates the painting to look like a recognizable fine art painting, he places the work in a contemporary context. The blanket, therefore, can be read as how Boyer, as Métis, understands the present political situation between Aboriginal people and the Canadian government as one that continues the policy of extermination. The meaning of the blanket makes sense in terms of it being read within an ideological code, one that is in opposition to the dominant discourse, as referenced by his subversion (painting on a blanket, not on canvas) of the Euro-Canadian fine art tradition. Finally, the use of the blanket also needs to be interpreted in terms of the codes that situate a reading of Aboriginal art, that is, the importance of understanding the past to provide meaning in contemporary life for Aboriginal people. The understanding of such codes, their relationships, and the contexts in which they make sense is important for understanding how a particular culture experiences the world and how the visual codes represent this concern.

CHAPTER TWO

The Discourse of Authenticity in Canadian Aboriginal Art

In this chapter I give a brief summary of the colonial relationship between Aboriginal people and Euro-Canadian society. The legacy of the colonization period continues to be felt in all areas of Aboriginal life, including the way Aboriginal art is thought about and represented in and by the dominant culture. The focus of this chapter is how Aboriginal art is represented in a dominant discourse of authenticity. To provide an example of how authenticity in Aboriginal art is constructed I analyze writings about two Canadian art exhibitions that included Aboriginal art. The goal of this analysis is to describe the discursive space that Aboriginal artists struggle against or are 'opposed to.'

The discourse of authenticity is embedded in the colonial relationship between Aboriginal people and Euro-Canadian society. This colonial relationship can be read as an ongoing attempt by Euro-Canadians to assimilate Aboriginal people into Euro-Canadian society. The Indian Acts of the late 1800s and early 1900s exemplify what the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP:

1996a; 1996b), written in 1996, states as 'stage three' in the relationship. Stage three is characterized as having the goals of displacement and assimilation of Aboriginal people - to transform Aboriginal people and their distinct cultures so they would conform to the expectations of what was considered the mainstream of Canadian society. The results of these 'stage three' interventions vis-a-vis Aboriginal communities were far-reaching, taking the form of relocations, the placement of youths in residential schools, the outlawing of Aboriginal cultural practices, and a variety of other interventionist measures.

For Aboriginal people, the impact of these measures was profound and continues to affect their lives today. In implementing these interventions, there were few, if any, discussions with Aboriginal people by the Canadian government of the policies that affected every aspect of their life and culture. For instance, in the *Indian Acts* of 1876 and 1880 and the *Indian Advancement Act* of 1884:

> the federal government took for itself the power to mould, unilaterally, every aspect of life on reserves and to create whatever infrastructure it deemed necessary to achieve the desired end – assimilation through enfranchisement and, as a consequence, the eventual disappearance of Indians as distinct people (RCAP, 1996a:180).

The intended result was that all Aboriginal persons would abandon their culture and their particular way of existing in the world to become 'civilized' and thus 'lose themselves' within the dominant Canadian society. Duncan Campbell Scott, the deputy superintendent general of Indian affairs during this period, exemplifies this position in the following statement to Parliament in 1920.

> Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is not an Indian question (RCAP, 1996a:183).

The interventions from the past continue to affect Aboriginal peoples today, and have had enormous consequences for Aboriginal culture, social, economic and political life. Across Canada Aboriginal people, in general, lead lives characterized by poverty, dependency, and occupy the lowest socio-economic rung in the larger Euro-Canadian society. For example, Aboriginal people as a whole consistently earn much less that non-Aboriginal peoples and have a greater reliance on social assistance that is higher than any other group in Canada where "over half of the total of Aboriginal population received social assistance or welfare payment since 1991" (Frideres and Gadacz, 2001:119). In terms of health and housing Aboriginal peoples consistently fall into the bottom of the scale (see RCAP,1996b).

How were the various 'stage three' interventions justified? And why has the continuation of the marginalization of Aboriginal culture generally been accepted by the dominant Canadian society?

One important method employed by the dominant culture is the discursive practice of representing Aboriginal people as savages, noble-savages, child-like (in need of protection), vanishing, and as static (occupying a space in the past). There is a huge literature on this subject, for example: Berkhofer (1978), Stedman (1982), Clifton (1990), Torgovnick (1990), Hiller (1991), Churchill (1994, 1998), Weston (1996), Bataille (2001), and Huhndorf (2001) and in art, Blundell and Phillips (1983), Rubin (1984), Doxtator (1988), and Rushing (1995).

These representations of Aboriginal people inform how the discourse of 'authenticity' has been constructed. An analysis of how concepts of authenticity are advanced reveals the ideology behind how, and where, Aboriginal art (and culture) is defined, and placed, in relation to the larger Euro-Canadian culture.

For instance, in an article based on media responses to the Woodland school of art, Blundell and Phillips examine the perceptions of contemporary Aboriginal art by the media and how this is reflected in the activities of human history museums and art galleries. Blundell and Phillips point out how the authenticity argument for Aboriginal art is structured. They write that for Aboriginal art to be considered 'authentic' it has to be recognizably 'tribal.' If it is not, then the artist is thought to have been assimilated, rendering the art object 'inauthentic.'

Blundell and Phillip state that:

> Many Euro-Canadians have equated 'traditional' culture with 'Indian' culture. This limited view of Indian cultural options draws support from a misunderstanding of Indian history. The only change through time for Indian cultures that many non-Indians can envision is progress toward a Euro-Canadian lifestyle. This viewpoint has important implications for the perception of contemporary Indian-produced art because it maintains that if Indian art is not recognizably 'tribal,' it cannot be considered authentic, and is instead the art of an assimilated person who has lost his or her sense of Indian identity (Blundell and Phillips, 1983:124).

Embedded in the discourse of authenticity, the concept of primitivism is defined as a search for origins and it also affects how Aboriginal art is interpreted by subjecting it to the authority of authenticity. In recent times the discourse of authenticity continues to be an important issue in contemporary Aboriginal art, particularly how it prevents Aboriginal art from participating in contemporary life. Barry Ace, the former Chief Curator at the Indian Art Center at the Department of Indian and Northern Development, comments on the idea of primitivism and its effect on how Canadian Aboriginal art is interpreted. Like Blundell and Phillips, Ace makes the points that because of the primitive label, Aboriginal art is considered 'unauthentic' if there are signs of contemporary life in the work.

Ace writes that:

> perhaps the most disturbing, yet challenging, barrier facing Indian artists today is posed by western art terms 'primitive' and 'ethnic.' (. . .) These terms have conveniently situated Indian artists into a stereotype that treats their art as something static and/or peripheral, or even worse, dismisses their art as 'unauthentic' for any noticeable signs of modernity (Ace, 1997:8).

In these two quotes the discourse of authenticity in representations of Aboriginal art contributes to the ongoing marginalization of Aboriginal culture by constraining 'authentic' Aboriginal art to its 'tribal' or 'ethnic' roots. The ideology of this perspective is that 'authentic' Aboriginal culture is located somewhere in the past. An important implication of this discourse is that contemporary Aboriginal artists (and by extension, Aboriginal people) are silenced; they are not allowed to comment on or make reference to contemporary life, and if they do they and their art are deemed 'inauthentic' and/or assimilated.

Description of Two Exhibitions

In the following section I explore further how authenticity is discursively constructed in the writings and presentation of Canadian Aboriginal art in two Canadian exhibitions that included Aboriginal art. These exhibitions took place in 1927 and 1969. My goal is to analyze the ideological meanings of the exhibitions by answering the questions: What are the implications of locating Aboriginal art and culture in the past? How is this perspective played out in textual and visual codes?

The first exhibition that I examine is the 1927 *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern* and the second is the *Masterpieces of Indian and Eskimo Art from Canada*, from 1969. In this analysis I describe how the Aboriginal art in the exhibitions is coded in terms of the discourse of authenticity.

In 1927 the National Gallery of Canada organized The *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern*. This exhibition included both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artworks. The Aboriginal artworks were represented largely by the 'decorative arts' that adorned a variety of cultural artifacts – carved house poles, dug-out canoe, masks, headdresses, carved and painted chests, food boxes and trays, laddles and spoons, charms, amulets, Chilkat robes, carvings, costumes, drums and rattles. Also included in this exhibition were two paintings by Fredrick Alexee. The paintings are described in the catalogue as 'primitive' and Alexee as 'an old Tsimsyan [sic] half-breed from Port Simpson.'

In the exhibition catalogue, Eric Brown, the director of the gallery, states:

> The purpose of the Trustees of the National Gallery in arranging this exhibition of West Coast Indian Art combined with the works of a number of

> Canadian artists who . . . have recorded their impressions of that region, is to mingle for the first time the work of the Canadian West Coast *tribes* with that of our *more sophisticated artists* in an endeavour to analyse their relationships to one another, if such exists, and particularly to enable this *primitive and interesting art* to take a definite place as one of the most valuable of Canada's artistic productions (Brown, 1927:2, emphasis added).

On the next page of the catalog, Brown states another objective for the exhibition, writing that,

> the disappearance of these arts under the penetration of trade and civilization is more regrettable than can be imagined and it is of the utmost importance that every possible effort be made *to retain and revivify whatever remnants still exist* into a permanent production, however limited in quantity (Brown, 1927:3, emphasis added).

The second exhibition, The *Masterpieces of Indian and Eskimo Art from Canada*, from 1969, was the first major exhibition of Canadian Aboriginal art to be shown internationally. Although there were a number of well-known Aboriginal artists producing contemporary art at this time, this exhibition also focussed exclusively on the 'decorative arts' that adorned a variety of cultural artifacts in Aboriginal culture across Canada. Some examples from the exhibition include: carvings of masks and animals in ivory, steatite and soapstone, Northwest Coast house poles and masks, a drum, decorated wooden chests, stone dishes, shield shaped 'copper,' clothing, and plumes.

The Commissioner of the exhibition, Marcel Evrard, in his introduction, stated that:

> It is significant, however, that early contact with European culture did not lead, as was so often the case, to a rapid degeneration of the *original art forms*. First contacts were with traders rather than missionaries . . . and had an enriching effect. This created a situation where, for a century, an art maintained its particular characteristics intact, borrowing only new materials and tools to give it wider expression. It is proof of the vitality of the people, that in spite of intrusive influences as a result of contact, they remained *uncorrupted* (Evrard, 1969:n.p., emphasis added).

Evrard continues with his discussion that:

> Few traces remain of the *original art* of the Indians of eastern Canada as contact with Europeans was well advanced by the middle of the seventeenth century. Iroquois masks represent the only *survivals* of indigenous wood sculpture. Wampum, on the other hand, is very rare. Most objects reveal European influence either in design or in the use of material (Evrard, 1969:n.p, emphasis added).

Analysis of the Discourse of Authenticity

In the quotes by Blundell and Phillips and by Ace above regarding the importance of the discourse of authenticity in Aboriginal art emphasis is placed on confining Aboriginal art to tribal and ethnic recognition. Any sign of contemporary life in the work deems the work as 'inauthentic' or the artist as assimilated. The effect of this perspective is that it places 'authentic' Aboriginal art in the past and any comment on contemporary issues is effectively silenced.

In the following discussion I identify how this is played out and the myth of authenticity 'naturalized' in the two exhibitions. These points will also provide the terms for analysis where I discuss in the next chapter how contemporary Aboriginal artists have worked against this discourse. In this analysis I focus on two points from the discourse of the two exhibitions, the first being that Aboriginal cultures need to be 'salvaged' and the second related topic that there exists an 'original' or a 'pure' period in Aboriginal culture.

Salvage and Redemptive Modes

In the *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern*, Brown acknowledges that the goal for the exhibition is that, 'every possible effort must be made to retain and revivify whatever remnants still exist.' This perspective, called the 'salvage mode' is highly ideological. In this statement Brown is concerned with representing what he believes to be the last chance to capture in writing the 'authenticity of changing cultures' before it 'disappears' due to the domination of Western civilization.

The problem with this perspective is that in this discourse the implication is that there exists an authentic period and Aboriginal art that exhibits influence from contemporary life is inauthentic. Changes in the culture as reflected in the art due to outside influence are simply written off as not being authentic, thus silencing comment on contemporary cultural conflict or, in general, on contemporary life. Marcus and Fischer comment on this point:

> The current problem is that these motives [the salvage mode] no longer serve well enough to reflect the world in which ethnographers now work. All peoples are now at least known and charted, and Westernization is much too simple a notion of contemporary cultural change to support the motif of anthropology's interest in other cultures as one of salvage (Marcus and Fisher, 1986:24).

Another highly ideological perspective reflected in these two exhibitions that employs the perspective of a 'pure' period is the 'redemptive' mode. The redemptive mode represents an eternalized past-in-the-present (ethnographic present) and inscribes a particular culture as made up of static or dying remnants of a prior 'authentic' period. This perspective can be illustrated in Brown's statement that the exhibition goal is to 'revivify whatever remnants still remain' and in the *Masterpieces of Indian and Eskimo Art from Canada* where Evrard states that, 'few traces remain' and that which has 'survived' represent the only 'survivals.'

Marcus refers to this perspective as the 'redemptive mode' where the,

> 'authentic' aspects of a Culture, now existing only as remnants from a past, 'pure' period that preceded the Culture's contact with the West (Marcus, 1986:165).

The implication of this discourse is that authentic Aboriginal culture (and art) occupies a time period in the static past. In this discourse, the prior static past is privileged as an original time period and is conceived as being 'pure.' On the other hand, contemporary influence is thought of as a 'contamination' to the authentic, thereby rendering it 'inauthentic.' This suggests that Aboriginal cultures are not dynamic and cultural changes are 'not allowed,' thus rendering contemporary art produced at the time of the exhibitions as not 'pure,' or not 'authentic.'

Original Period

The second point is that in the discourse of authenticity there is assumed to be a period in time where Aboriginal people made an 'original' art form. This can be demonstrated in the two exhibitions where the concept of 'originality' is placed in a dialectic relationship to 'civilization.' 'Original' Aboriginal art is described as 'uncorrupted,' or untainted from civilization and 'original' or 'authentic' Aboriginal art is disappearing, or 'limited,' because of Western civilization. In the *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern,* Brown indicates this point in his reference that "the disappearance of these arts under the penetration of trade and civilization" to its disappearance due to trade and civilization.

In the *Masterpieces of Indian and Eskimo Art from Canada* exhibition, this concept of an 'original' Aboriginal art is being uncorrupted by Western influence continues. In the quotes by Evrard, he mentions twice that there was a time period that produced 'original art.' According to Evrard, in spite of the influence of 'civilization, there still remains 'traces' and 'survivals' of this 'original art' as indicated in his comments: "an art maintained its particular characteristics intact," and "in spite of intrusive influences as a result of contact, they remain uncorrupted." This ideological perspective of an original, or pure, Aboriginal art contributes to the placement of Aboriginal culture into a time period (in this case, the past) that is different from contemporary life.

Fabian (1983) comments on this strategy of identifying a culture in the past (for example, the use of the term primitive) as a 'time-distancing device' or temporalization. Fabian identifies these time-distancing devices as the 'denial of coevalness' that places the culture being discussed "in their time, not ours" and states that there are many kinds of expressions that "signal conceptualization of Time and temporal relations (such as sequence, duration, interval or period, origins, and development)" (Fabian, 1983:75).

An example of a 'time-distancing device,' or the denial of coevalness, is demonstrated in Brown's reference to kinship in the artworks. For example, Brown uses the terms, 'West Coast *Indian* art,' and 'Canadian West Coast *tribes*.' He also contrasts 'Indian art' with that of 'Canadian artists' and again, 'West Coast *tribes*' with that of 'more sophisticated artists.' Evrard writes of the 'vitality of the *people*,' and the '*Indians* of eastern Canada.' The importance of this identification of kinship (rather than as individual artists) according to Fabian is that this:

> connotes 'primordial' ties and origins, hence the special strength, persistence, and meaning attributed to this type of social relation. Views of kinship can easily serve to measure degrees of advancement or modernization (Fabian, 1983:75).

How this ideology is worked through textual and visual codes can be demonstrated in the curators' choice of exhibiting (almost exclusively) decorative and craft cultural items to represent Aboriginal art in these two exhibitions. In the *Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern*, Aboriginal art were exhibited in the same exhibition space as the 'fine art' paintings of the Euro-Canadian artists but the 'time distance' between the two is maintained. For example, Aboriginal art as fine art is downplayed in the description of Alexee as 'primitive' and 'half-breed.' The absence of 'fine art' is especially significant in the *Masterpieces of Indian and Eskimo Art from Canada*, since at this time there were a number of Aboriginal artists working professionally.

Fabian discusses the importance for an ideological understanding of temporalization, stating that:

> Linguistically, temporalization refers to the various means a language has to express time relations. [. . .] Ideologically, temporalization has the effect of putting an object of discourse into a cosmological frame such that the temporal relation becomes central and topical (e.g. over and against spatial relations) (Fabian, 1983:74).

Finally, placing temporal relations as a central concern is an important strategy by the dominant society for making conflict invisible from the public arena. Drawing on Fabian, Blundell comments on this point by stating that a focus on temporal relations:

> . . . serves to mask the true nature of conflict between Western nations and other people whom they have subordinated. The true nature of this conflict is the problematic simultaneity of different, conflicting, and contradictory forms of consciousness (Blundell, 2000:87).

By focussing on temporal relations, the legacy of assimilation policies that have marginalized Aboriginal culture in respect to the dominant Euro-Canadian society is rendered invisible. What is not mentioned is the effect of relocations, residential schools, the outlawing of

Aboriginal cultural practices and a variety of other interventionist measures that have lead to the appalling statistics of Aboriginal people living at the bottom of socio-economic status in Canadian society. How Aboriginal culture has had to creatively adjust and change to survive these interventions by the dominant society is simply written off as inauthentic.

CHAPTER THREE

Political and Social Struggles by Aboriginal People in Canada: 1950-1980

In 1974 Tom Hill coordinated an exhibition of contemporary Aboriginal art entitled *Canadian Indian Art '74*, at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. This exhibition was held at the same time as the World Craft Council in Toronto and "integrated traditional Indian modes of expression with works embracing modernist interests" (T. Hill, 1989:9). An important theme in the exhibition was to document the changes occurring in contemporary Aboriginal art. These changes involved less concentration on depictions of parent culture Aboriginal motifs and more emphasis on current political issues affecting Aboriginal people in the wider Canadian State. In the exhibition catalog Hill writes that an important point of the exhibition was the 'merging of the traditional with the contemporary' to produce something that is new and to challenge the (largely non-Aboriginal) audience's 'preconceptions' of Aboriginal art.

What prompted contemporary Aboriginal artists at this time to start challenging viewers and changing the focus of Aboriginal art? And why was the merging of the 'traditional' with the 'contemporary' such an important aesthetic strategy? In this chapter, I address these questions by looking at the political and social changes that began in the 1950s as Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) people strongly rejected the assimilation policies of the federal government. This description provides the context for examining the changes that had begun to occur in contemporary Aboriginal art in the early 1980s and for examining how contemporary Aboriginal artists use their art to contest ideas about Aboriginal people and their culture, in particular, the discourse of authenticity.

Political and Social Context: 1950s – 1980s

Aboriginal people in Canada have always struggled against the colonial policies that have been instrumental in their marginalization and efforts to assimilate them to the dominant Euro-Canadian mainstream. After the Second World War the past policies of displacement and assimilation were challenged, and moreover the dominant society began to realize that they had failed to eliminate the collective identity of Aboriginal people.

> Far from vanishing through enfranchisement and assimilation, Indians were increasing in number, and existing reserves, with their limited resources, were less able to support this growth. The Indian affairs bureaucracy had no policies other than civilization and assimilation with which to cope with the continuing presence of Indian communities and their burgeoning populations. By the end of the 1940s it

> had become abundantly clear that Indian affairs were in disarray (RCAP, 1996a:308).

This realization and the changing climate after the Second World War which saw calls for respect for individual human rights along with the creation of the United Nations and the public's awareness of the contributions of Aboriginal servicemen during the war, highlighted the need for changes to the policies of the *Indian Act* legislation. In order to address these issues, in 1946 a joint committee of the Senate and the House of Commons was established to examine issues such as: treaty rights and obligations, band membership issues, taxation of Aboriginal people, enfranchisement, voting rights, encroachment on Aboriginal lands, Aboriginal day and residential schools, and other social and economic issues. The challenge for the joint committee was to "recommend equality without forcing Indians to abandon their heritage and collective and constitutional rights" (RCAP, 1996a:308) which represented a shift in policy away from displacement and assimilation.

In 1951, following the Joint Committee meetings, revisions were made to the *Indian Act*. These changes, however, did little to change the Federal Government's policy of assimilation and civilization toward Aboriginal people. Instead, the result of the 1951 revision was to "return Canadian Indian legislation to its original form, that of the 1876 *Indian Act*" (RCAP, 1996a:310). For example, the minister of Indian affairs and the governor in council maintained their 'formidable' authority in law-making, regulation-making, and other administrative powers in all aspects of Aboriginal life. Reserve lands could still be expropriated without band consent, and the definition of Indian status and control of band membership remained in non-Indian hands, and the notion of registration through the male decent replaced the mention of 'Indian blood.'

While these changes in the *Indian Act* reflected a continuation of the policies of civilization and assimilation by the federal government, there were also increasing calls by Aboriginal communities for control over their own social and political processes.

By the 1960s, the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, and then the antiwar movement in the United States provided a voice for North American minorities and other marginalized groups. A number of Aboriginal organizations in the United States began to use these groups as models for their own movements. Aboriginal people in Canada also began to look to these organizations for ideas as they organized similar activities, such as confrontation, protest, demonstrations, lobbying, and the use of the news media. Aboriginal people were also for the first time being taken seriously because of a perceived threat to law and order. Adrian Tanner writes that at this time Aboriginal people were also able to:

> obtain the services of lawyers who have expertise in Euro-Canadian formulations of Indian law and aboriginal rights, and can undertake litigation which may, for example, halt or delay massive development projects (Tanner, 1983:23).

In 1969 the federal government released a report called the White Paper on Indian Policy that outlined proposals to change the Aboriginal-Federal government relationship. This policy sought to terminate the federal government's special relationship with Aboriginal peoples by implementing a variety of changes, such as, an end to the collective rights of Aboriginal people in favor of individual rights, the elimination of the protection of reserve lands, the termination of the legal status of Indian peoples, and service delivery by provincial governments.

The White Paper on Indian Policy became an important symbol for Aboriginal rights in Canada and marked a turning point in the relationship between the federal government and Aboriginal people. This came as a result of the unexpectedly strong reaction of Indians in opposing the changes. The release of the White Paper:

> generated a storm of protest from Aboriginal people, who strongly denounced it main terms and assumptions. It left in its wake a legacy of bitterness at the betrayal of the consultation process and suspicion that its proposals would gradually be implemented. However, it also served to strengthen the resolve of Aboriginal organizations to work together for a changed relationship. This marked the beginning of a new phase in

> Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations
> (RCAP, 1996a:201).

One of the major changes has been the formation or expansion of regional and national native political associations. After the protests, financial support was available from the Canadian federal government for regional associations. These councils later developed into national associations and gained a degree of government support and were consulted on policy matters. At this time, Red Power led to the first cross-Canada political organization of Indian people – the National Indian Brotherhood. Created in 1969, this organization symbolized 'the beginning of the end of the struggle by the Indians of Canada to achieve unity' (Cardinal, 1999:90).

In 1969, Harold Cardinal, then president of the Indian Association of Alberta, responded to the White Paper with what became known as the 'red paper' which was published as his first book, *The Unjust Society: The Tragedy of Canada's Indians*. This paper addressed the issue of how Indian people, as people with distinct cultures wished to contribute to Canadian society while at the same time exercising political and economic power at the community level.

After the White Paper on Indian Policy the relationship between Aboriginal people and the federal government moved into a 'stage four' relationship, which is characterized by negotiation and renewal. The RCAP describes this relationship, where:

> non-Aboriginal society's admission of the manifest failure of its interventionist and assimilationist approach. This acknowledgement is pushed by domestic and also by international forces. Campaigns by national Aboriginal social and political organizations, court decisions on Aboriginal rights, sympathetic public opinion, developments in international law, and the worldwide political mobilization of Indigenous peoples under the auspices of the United Nations have all played a role during this stage in the relationship (RCAP, 1996a:38-39).

By the 1970s Aboriginal people in Canada began to direct their domestic concerns to international forums. At this time the United Nations was calling for the decolonization of all territories that were geographically and culturally distinct from the colonizing states that maintained them in a subordinate position. Aboriginal people in Canada saw the similarities of their own status in Canadian society and pointed to the 'internal colonialism' they suffered.

The World Council of Indigenous Peoples, which was founded in 1975 and met in Sweden in 1977 and Australia in 1981 was the first international organization of Aboriginal peoples. George Manuel, the past president of the National Indian Brotherhood (now the Assembly of First Nations) was chosen as its first president. In 1974 Manuel co-authored the book *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*, with Michael Posluns where he argued that all Aboriginal people in North

America live in a ‘fourth world’ subjected to internal colonialism, which is similar to the experience of colonization of the third world. They argued that they were a minority in their own homeland, yet governed by the laws and institutions of the dominant society.

The relations between Aboriginal people and the federal government were also driven by the growing consciousness by Aboriginal peoples of key decisions of the courts with the result that they were becoming more aware of their legal rights. For example, in 1973 the Supreme court decision in the *Calder* case led the government to establish its first land claims policy, and was important for directing the settling of comprehensive claims of Aboriginal groups that retained the right to traditional use and occupancy of their lands (RCAP, 1996a:205).

Contemporary Aboriginal Art

During this time, there were also changing relations between Canadian cultural institutions and Aboriginal artists. In 1951, with the changes in the *Indian Act,* the prohibition of traditional dancing was removed. By the 1960s and 1970s there was an acceptance, or at least some recognition, of contemporary Aboriginal art. In the catalogue for the exhibition *Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers*, Tom Hill, co-curator for the exhibition, provides two reasons for this. He locates this change in the various Aboriginal organizations and government support programs for Aboriginal art from the 1930s up to the 1970s. T. Hill also explains this phenomenon in terms of the need for a distinct Canadian identity that influenced the Canadian public's recognition of the value of traditional imagery in contemporary Aboriginal art. Hill uses the example of the Indian Pavilion at Expo '67 to indicate how Indian motifs were appropriated as a sign of a national Canadian identity and the reception of Aboriginal art by the larger public during this period. This reception of Aboriginal art by the general public can be illustrated in the emergence of contemporary schools of the Woodland style of art, Northwest Coast Indian art, and Inuit art during this period.

Norval Morrisseau, who is generally regarded as the 'founder' of the 'Woodland school' of contemporary Aboriginal art, is Ojibwe from the Sandy Point Reserve in Ontario and was born in 1933. The Woodland school has a distinct style with flat shapes, bold colors that are based on Ojibwe parent culture images from the birch-bark scrolls of the Ojibwe Midewiwin Society and the paintings that are found on the rock surfaces around the lakes in the pre-Cambrian Shield area. Ruth Phillips writes that when Morrisseau began exhibiting his work during the 1960s, the art world had changed and was more receptive to his work:

> There was an audience prepared to read his paintings not as curios or illustrations,

> but as they would any other works of fine art, as unique creations expressing broader cultural values and beliefs (Phillips, 1993:244).

Morrisseau's first solo exhibition was held at the Pollock Gallery in Toronto, Ontario, in September 1962. During the first days of the exhibition his works completely sold out. His success and style attracted and influenced a number of younger artists, among them Carl Ray, Daphne Odjig, Jackson Beardy, Roy Thomas, and Blake Debassige.

This period also saw a revival in the Native art traditions on the Northwest Coast. Beginning in the 1940s the carvers had the support of the large museums, for instance in 1949 – 1950 the University of British Columbia commissioned Mungo Martin and Ellen Neel to restore a number of totem poles that had been brought to the campus. Museum support continued throughout the 1950s. In 1954 the BC Provincial Museum hired Henry Hunt and in 1957, UBC Museum of Anthropology commissioned Bill Reid and Doug Cranmer to carve six totem poles. In 1967, the Kitanmax School of Northwest Coast Indian art, the artists training program, located at 'Ksan, was created. Instructors at the school included Tony Hunt, Robert Davidson, and Doug Cranmer. These changes raised the profile of Northwest Coast art and attracted public attention and support of the work which came primarily from the non-Native public located in the urban centers of Vancouver and Victoria, British Columbia and Seattle, Washington, USA.

At this time Inuit art also began to attract public attention. In 1971, funded by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs with support from the Nation Museum of Man and the Department of External Affairs, the exhibition *Sculpture Inuit: Masterworks of the Canadian Arctic* opened with more than three hundred pieces, including prehistoric artifacts and carvings made since the 1950s. This exhibition traveled to Vancouver, Paris, Copenhagen, Moscow, Leningrad, London, Philadelphia, and Ottawa.

During the 1970s access to higher education for Aboriginal peoples played an important role in the politicization of Aboriginal peoples. More Aboriginal artists were university art school trained, and this brought a political awareness to their work as well as the knowledge and access to a variety of methods and ideas that informed their art. In the exhibition mentioned at the beginning of this chapter entitled *Canadian Indian Art '74*, examples of a variety of ideas and political awareness in Aboriginal art can be seen in some of the artworks included in this exhibition. Among them are Robert Houle's installation of four large rectangular paintings called *Misquah* (the Ojibwe word for 'red') (see Figure 2), Sarain Stump's *The Pain of the Indian*, a sculpted construction of a screaming Indian face in the middle of a rawhide frame (see Figure 3); and *La Direction* by Guy Sioui, a giant arrow with a lead point splattered with red paint. The artwork by the Ojibwe artist Carl Beam at this time is also a good example of the changes occurring in contemporary Aboriginal art at this time. Beam's use of high-tech printing methods that juxtaposed images from the contemporary world with references of his Aboriginal culture were highly-charged images that challenged viewers perceptions of contemporary Aboriginal art. In the following chapter I take a closer examination of his work in his 1984 exhibition entitled, *Altered Egos: The Multimedia Work of Carl Beam.*

The relations between Canadian institutions and Aboriginal people began to change during this period. This can be demonstrated in the two large collections of potlatch regalia that were repatriated to the communities of Alert Bay and Cape Mudge in British Columbia in 1979. These artifacts were repatriated to museums that were specifically built to house these artifacts. These negotiations raised the importance of two issues: the illegitimate acquisition of artifacts in the past, whether confiscated or obtained through legal means, and the inappropriate use of Aboriginal cultural items.

In the late 1980s, one of the most important events that raised the awareness of the connection between art and politics was the organization of the boycott by the Lubicon Lake Cree community for the *Spirit Sings* exhibition, the cultural showcase for the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary.

Museums in Europe were asked to refrain from lending cultural artifacts for the exhibition, and many agreed. In Canada some people refused to attend the exhibit.

An important point of this boycott was that this exhibition included the display of Aboriginal artifacts while the exhibition's exclusive corporate sponsor, the Shell Oil Company, was at the same time being implicated in contentious land claim disputes between Alberta and the Federal Government and the Lubicon Cree of Alberta. The Shell Oil Company has been drilling on the claimed traditional land of the Lubicon, seriously disrupting their traditional economic activities. The important point of this boycott was that museum had hoped to avoid political issues such as land claims, fishing rights and the legacy of colonialism. They planned to artifacts in terms of the aesthetic value and not to engage in current political debates. In an interview, Chief Ominayak of the Lubicon Lake Cree, stated that:

> The Calgary Olympic Games are being organized by basically the same interests that are committing genocide against the Lubicon Indian people. We believe that the people of the world need to know . . .the truth about the situation in Alberta, the truth about the interests behind the Calgary Olympic Games, the truth about their lack of respect for human rights, the truth about their lack of basic human decency, and the truth about the horrendous effect their development activity is having upon the aboriginal people whose land and resources they are stealing (Goddard, 1991:142),

One of the important results of this boycott was the formation by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and the Canadian Museums Association (CMA) of a task force with the mandate to "develop an ethical framework and strategies for Aboriginal Nations to represent their history and culture in concert with cultural institutions" (RCAP, 1996b:592). The report of the task force set out the guiding principles for policies and recommendations on repatriation and called for the creation of new relationships between Aboriginal people and Canadian culture and heritage institutions.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Oppositional Nature of Contemporary Aboriginal Art

Over the past several decades, the political sentiments of Aboriginal artists have been fuelled by the political activities of Aboriginal organizations which brought them greater awareness of the nature of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations. Political activism by Aboriginal people (dealing with issues such as self-determination) helped to politicize Aboriginal artists by bringing questions of representation and self-definition to the foreground.

Overall the focus of these critiques was the demand by Aboriginal people that they be allowed to speak for themselves, to represent themselves, and to choose their own definitions of themselves. For example, in the early 1990s Rick Hill responded to stereotypes regarding 'authenticity' by writing that they "rang of racism, and questioned a group's right to determine its own art, regardless of form" (R. Hill, 1992:50). Carl Beam sums up this sentiment:

> We are insane if we allow someone to come over and impose a definition on us that we would believe to any great degree. We need champions for those kinds of

> thoughts. If we don't get them, we are just carrying on someone else's definition of who we are. That is not good enough now. . . . we need a *fresh definition* of who we are, made by people who know about us as human beings living in this geographic space, knowing something of our geography; knowing the forces at play that make this person do the kind of art work that they do (Beam, 1989:22 emphasis added).

By the early 1970s contemporary Aboriginal art in Canada had begun to undergo significant changes. Some Aboriginal artists had begun to deconstruct the ideological meanings of dominant representations of their culture and construct their own counter-hegemonic discourse in regard to how Aboriginal art and culture should be represented.

By the early 1980s more Aboriginal artists were becoming vocal in their criticisms of how their work was represented and consequently how the discourse of authenticity had limited the interpretation of their work.

Contemporary Canadian Aboriginal Art: 1980s to 1990s

In the following analysis, I focus on the changing nature of Aboriginal art at the beginning of the 1980s. One important aesthetic strategy that emerges involves the 'merging' of Aboriginal parent culture themes and motifs with contemporary materials and Western aesthetic styles along with depictions of contemporary life. Contemporary materials and Western aesthetic styles refer to a framework for organizing the artwork that draws from contemporary Euro/Canadian society, for instance the construction of assemblages, installations, and the use of modern techniques of printmaking, collage or bricolage techniques, photography, video, film, and computer-generated 'virtual reality.' For example, in the assemblage *As Snow Before the Summer Sun* (see Figure 4) Edward Poitras uses acrylic, plexiglass, and transistor components.

Contemporary Aboriginal art constitutes a response to the dominant ideology by providing a 'fresh definition' of who Aboriginal people are. In this analysis I draw from a variety of key exhibitions of contemporary Aboriginal art from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s. This analysis highlights the oppositional nature of constructing a locality in contemporary life. This analysis also provides an historical baseline from which to evaluate the selected works by Greg Staats and Rosalie Favell in the sixth chapter.

In this analysis I identify the strategy that a number of Aboriginal artists employ to argue, negotiate, and struggle against the themes that form the dominant discourse of authenticity that I identified in chapter two. To do this I organize my discussion by first focussing on the use of contemporary materials and Western aesthetic styles in contemporary Aboriginal art and then on the strategy of combining and juxtaposing with them signs that draw from the artist's Aboriginal culture.

Contemporary Materials and Western Aesthetic Styles

The curators of the exhibition, *Horses Fly Too,* Norman Zepp and Michael Parke-Taylor point out that because of the use of contemporary materials and Western aesthetic styles in the works by both Boyer and Poitras, their work reflects a 'contemporary lifestyle.' And furthermore they are said to be 'thoroughly contemporary' in their awareness of current trends in western art. Moreover, Zepp and Parke-Taylor continue, that Boyer and Poitras have:

> utilized their knowledge of abstraction, conceptual and performance art to produce works which can be approached on a formal basis alone (Zepp and Parke-Taylor, 1984:19).

Another example is Carl Beam's work from the exhibition, *Altered Egos: The Multimedia Works of Carl Beam* from 1984 (see Figure 5). This exhibition was held at the Thunder Bay Exhibition Center and Center for Indian Art from October to December 1984. Carl Beam exhibited a series of prints from the seven-year period of 1977 – 1984. The exhibition traveled to Kleinburg, Brantford, and Sudbury, Ontario from February to June 1985. In *Altered Egos* Beam employs the photo-lithic printmaking technique to produce highly-detailed images that includes contemporary images, such as self-portraits, helicopters, rockets and his Uncle Vic's van. Rather than coding his work as from the past, Beam's strategy is to employ images from contemporary society to place his work in the contemporary world, not in the past. Elizabeth McLuhan, curator of the exhibition, writes of Beams work, that:

> As an individual documenting his own subjective development, he refuses to allow viewers to dismiss, or distance, him generically as an Indian (McLuhan, 1984b:9).

There are many examples of Aboriginal artist utilizing contemporary materials and Western aesthetic styles in their art, but two I find particularly interesting are, Mike MacDonald's work entitled *Electronic Totem* from the exhibition *Revisions*, held at the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff, Alberta from January 8 – 28, 1988. This work is made up of five video monitors stacked on top of one another (see Figure 6). And for the *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada* exhibition, Teresa Marshall used concrete as a material for her work *Elitekey* to comment on the urban industrial environment in which she lives (see Figure 7).

The use of contemporary materials and Western aesthetic styles convey the message that Aboriginal people are living in the contemporary world. What is salient here is that artists use contemporary materials and Western aesthetic styles in ways that reflect a distinct Aboriginal experience that derives from a distinct Aboriginal history. Therefore, through their art the artists attempt to reclaim the idea that Aboriginal culture is not static and that the use of contemporary materials and Western styles does not make Aboriginal art, and by extension, Aboriginal culture inauthentic.

These artworks mentioned above, like others from the same period, redefine and reclaim change as an integral aspect of Aboriginal culture. One of the first exhibition in Canada to exhibit contemporary Aboriginal art that directly confronted the dominant ideology that had defined Aboriginal art up to that point in time was entitled *New Works By a New Generation* curated by Robert Houle and held at the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery and the Assiniboia Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan between July 9 to August 29, 1982. This exhibition coincided with the World Assembly of First Nation's conference and fifteen artists from Canada and the U.S.A. were included. Tom Hill commented on the significance of this exhibition, stating that:

> The *New Works By a New Generation* was the beginning of a movement in which Native artists would no longer accept a narrow anthropological view to their art, and warned of a more political form of expression (T. Hill, 1989:12).

In his writings for this exhibition, Houle proposed that rather than having Aboriginal culture defined as static, the idea of change is an important element in revitalizing culture, writing that:

> To perceive the new generation of native artists as a symbol of revolt against existing conventions, or as a touchstone

> of tradition in search of new methods to express a new vision, is to reaffirm one of the most important aspects of native cultures, the capacity to harness revolutionary ideas into agents of change, revitalizing tradition (Houle, 1982:4-5).

Furthermore, in the *Basket, Bead, and Quill* exhibition the curator, Deborah Doxtator, argues that Aboriginal knowledge is not something that is static, but instead is defined by the processes of how people use the knowledge and not how much 'static content is actually preserved' (Doxtator, 1995:12). The *Basket, Bead, and Quill* exhibition was held between September 8 to October 22, 1995 at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery. It exhibited both craft items and fine art. In the exhibition catalog Doxtator writes that the:

> continuity [of culture] depends not on exact sameness of form or interpretation, but on the process of continual interaction with these powerful cultural metaphors (Doxtator, 1995:17).

Strategy of Combining and Juxtaposing

Although these artists employ the use of contemporary materials and Western aesthetic styles in their work, they do not exclude the use of motifs that derive from their Aboriginal parent cultural aesthetic traditions. Instead many of the artist's use the strategy of juxtaposing parent culture motifs with images from contemporary life.

For example, in *Altered Egos*, Beam's prints include portraits of Sitting Bull and Big Bear and images of eagles and feathers juxtaposed with images of contemporary life (rockets and Uncle Vic's van). Beam's strategy is to 'reclaim' the signs from his parent culture tradition and place them within a contemporary 'reality.' E. McLuhan, writes:

> Beam reclaims these images and reinvests them with contemporary meaning. In the process he creates new icons for Indians and non-Indians alike; images of survival and continuity (McLuhan, 1984b:5).

In his work, *As Snow Before the Summer Sun*, Poitras follows a similar strategy of reclaiming traditional symbols (in this work the horned skull associated with the sun dance) and reinvesting them with new meanings. E. McLuhan, who contributed to the catalog, writes:

> The piece conjures up a lobotomizing of sorts, a transplant of cultural identity. The title is a poetic counterpoint to the grim reality of death represented by the skull and the romanticizing of the dying Indian culture (McLuhan, 1984b:14).

Another reason that these artist juxtapose imagery from their Aboriginal parent cultural aesthetic traditions with contemporary materials and Western aesthetic styles is not only to reclaim the past, but also to redefine the past as a 'continuum.' In this perspective the past is not something that is behind us and gone, but something that is present and continues to provide meaning and understanding for contemporary Aboriginal people. As an alternative to reading the use of parent cultural aesthetics (and

Aboriginal cultures) as opposed to modernity, the artists draw instead from both to provide a re-reading of history for Aboriginal people in contemporary life. Karen Duffek makes this point in the *Beyond History* exhibition held at the Vancouver Art Gallery, British Columbia, May to July 1989:

> Their art is based on more than a salvaged past. It involves a critical re-reading of history from a twentieth-century perspective, and presents a challenge to the prevailing stereotypes of Native art through the personal aesthetic vision it reveals (Duffek, 1989:27).

Instead of defining the juxtaposition of parent cultural aesthetic traditions with contemporary materials and Western aesthetic styles as signs of assimilation and loss of authenticity the artists instead claim the right to use both as 'signposts' rather than as limiting the signs of identity. Drawing from parent cultural aesthetic traditions provides important metaphors for Aboriginal artists to show how Aboriginal history continues to affect the present. By remembering, and using, parent cultural aesthetic traditions, they:

> continue to form an important part of our sense of ourselves as collective beings connecting us to other people, past, present, future and to other beings in the natural world (Doxtator, 1995:15).

CHAPTER FIVE

Sour Springs and *Longing and Not Belonging*: Selected Works by Greg Staats and Rosalie Favell

In this chapter I begin by introducing the artists Greg Staats and Rosalie Favell and presenting brief biographies and lists of their recent exhibitions. I then describe the exhibitions, *Greg Staats: Memories of a Collective Reality – Sour Springs*, (1995), and *Longing and Not Belonging*, (1998 – 2003).

Greg Staats: *Greg Staats: Memories Of A Collective Reality – Sour Springs*

Greg Staats is a photographer who has been working professionally since the mid-1980s. He was born in 1963 on the Six Nations Reserve, Brantford, Ontario, in the community of Sour Springs. He presently lives and works in Toronto. Although I was familiar with Staats's early black and white portraits of Aboriginal people, it was at the *Emergence from the Shadow: First Peoples' Photographic Perspectives* exhibition at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (1999) that I was introduced to the themes that inform his most recent work. One of the themes is the sacredness of the everyday. To explore this theme Staats draws from oral traditions from the Haudensaunee (the Iroquois), the People of the Longhouse, that embraces all life as sacred. He writes that his photographs,

> reflects a collective perspective of humanity within the landscape and its relationship with Nation, community, family, friends and oneself (Staats, 1997:4).

As Mary Anne Barkhouse comments on Staats's work, he does not engage in the salvage mode but instead his images record movement and change and are, "not about to be Silenced or buried alive, Staats continues to represent a positive and pro-active viewpoint in relationship to his own past and our collective future" (Barkhouse, 2000:np). His work has included images of the land and references to dwellings, such as tent poles. In his series entitled *Watchye II,* Staats combined portraits of elders from the Mushkegowuk First Nations of James Bay, with images from the surroundings such as the trees, the sky, and tent poles. Staats's work has been included in a number of significant nationally and international exhibitions featuring contemporary Aboriginal art. A selection of group and solo exhibitions include:

Perspectives from Iroquoia: Greg Staats and Jeff Thomas, Gallery 44, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Toronto, 1992 and Kulturhuset Cultural Center, Stockholm, Sweden, 1992

Multiplicity, Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 1993

Alter/Native: Contemporary Photo Compositions, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinberg, 1995 and Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa, 1996

Sprawl, Mercer Union: A Center for Contemporary Art, Toronto, 1997

Aperture: Strong Hearts, International Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1997

Emergence *from the Shadow: First Peoples' Photographic Perspectives*, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec, 1999-2001

Renewal, Indian Art Centre, Hull, Quebec, 2000

Animose, Mercer Union: A Center for Contemporary Art, 2000, Gallery 101, Ottawa, 2002; Gallery TPW, Toronto, 2002; Gallerie Séquence, Chicoutimi, 2003

Greg Staats: Memories Of A Collective Reality – Sour Springs was held at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery from June 2 – July 16, 1995 (see Figure 8). The installation is made up of fourteen silver print photographs mounted on gray davey boards that are 50 x 40 cm. They were mounted on a single wall (22.5 x 135 m.) at eye-level. The wall was covered in plywood sheets that were painted a rust-color red.

The photographs include two portraits combined with architectural forms, such as buildings and interior spaces, and landscape elements. The images are clear with strong contrasts of light and dark across the entire series with a black border between the images.

The photographs from the exhibition are described as follows, beginning from the left.

1. The first image is a clear picture of the exterior of a house. The house is centered and takes up most of the picture plane.

2. The next image is a close focus of a large tree-trunk in the left foreground with long shadows of the tree leading to another tree.

3. The next is an image of a door. The door is dark black with six small windows in the top center forming a square. One window is broken out giving a clearer view of the outside landscape. The image is mostly black, and there is a sharp contrast with the window.

4. The fourth is a close-up photograph of the ground containing windfall apples in a long pile.

5. The next is a self-portrait of the artist taken outside. The wind is blowing.

6. The sixth image is a picture looking up at an angle at two windows, the image being mostly black except for the two windows, that provide a sharp contrast with the windows.

7. The next is an image of the land. It is either early spring or late fall. The image focuses on the ground which takes up three-quarters of the picture. A small tree is in the middle right of the image and a house is in the background.

8. The eighth photograph is an image of the interior of an abandoned house. This is evident in the peeling paint and, except for an old chair leaning against the wall, the lack of furnishings. In the middle of the image there is a dark hallway that leads to a door. The door is in the far background and has a window where there is a blurred landscape. There is a lot of black, contrasting with the sunlight coming from the right.

9. The next image is a portrait of Staats's uncle, his father's brother. His uncle is looking directly at the viewer and is wearing a Reebok athletic sweatshirt. Like the house in the first photograph, he takes up most of the picture plane. He is standing outside.

10. The tenth photograph is an image of a row of three trees taken at an angle leading from the bottom left to the top right corners of the picture.

11. The next photograph is taken from the middle of a dirt road, the road leading to the horizon. This image depicts either early spring or late fall. There are leafless trees along both sides of the road and at the top of the image.

12. The twelfth photograph is an image of a street lamp. There is a sharp contrast between the old wood of the pole, the street lamp, and the connecting wire with the white sky.

13. The next photograph is an image of the ground. There are leaves on the ground and long shadows from trees reaching from the left and angling towards the top right corner.

14. The final image is a calm close-up photograph of a small pond. The edge of the pond begins just below the top right corner, angling in a soft curve to the left, just below the left top corner, down along the left, curving into the bottom right corner. There is a leaf-less tree that is reflected in the pond.

Rosalie Favell: *Longing and Not Belonging*

Rosalie Favell (Métis) was born in 1958 and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She received her M.F.A. from the University of New Mexico in 1998 and her Bachelor of Applied Arts in Photographic Arts from Ryerson Polytechnic Institute in 1984. She presently teaches photography and media arts at Algoma University College in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.

Favell's work is very personal, exploring themes of self, personal relationships, identity, sexuality, and family. In *Living Evidence* from 1994 she documented her relationship (and eventual) breakup with her partner with self-portraits and photographs that masked her partner's eyes combined with handwritten emotional notes. In *Longing and Not Belonging* (see Figure 9) Favell references the 'ledger drawings' of the Plains Indian warriors who were captured and taken by the United States government army to Fort Marion prison in Florida. Favell states that these 'ledger drawing' functioned "to record the exploits and history of the life of the maker" (Favell, 1999, np). *Longing and Not Belonging* incorporates a variety of photographic images including family snapshots, movies, television, and collected images from second-hand stores. Her work represents a personal record of her search for, and the reconstruction, of personal and cultural identity. And like the captured warriors in Fort Marion prison, Favell, too, understands the feelings of longing and not belonging in contemporary society. She writes:

> From an early age, I longed for a sense of belonging in the world. My identity is connected to my place in my family and in turn my family's place within a larger social context. I have been mining my families' snapshots, image of my own making, and images from popular culture, in search of visual evidence and the possibilities of new visual equations (Favell, 1999: np).

Favell has been exhibiting her work since the mid-1980s and has been included in numerous solo and group exhibitions across Canada and internationally.

A sampling of her group and solo exhibitions include:

Living Evidence, Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina, Saskatchewan.

Longing and Not Belonging, The Photographer's Gallery, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1998; Indian and Inuit Art Centre, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Hull, Quebec, 1999; New Phase Art Space, Tainan, and International Visual Art Centre, Taipei, Taiwan; Thunder Bay Art Gallery and Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, Ontario, 2000; Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, Brandon, Manitoba, 2002

Emergence from the Shadow: First Peoples' Photographic Perspectives, The Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec, 1999-2001

alt.shift.control: Musings on Digital Identity, Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ontario, 2000

Exposed: Aesthetics of Aboriginal Erotic Art, Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina, Saskatchewan, 2000

Reilisms, The Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba, and toured to Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina, Saskatchewan, 2001

Rosalie Favell: I Searched Many Worlds, The Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 2003

The work by Rosalie Favell, *Longing and Not Belonging*, is a series of forty-one giclée prints (digital output prints on watercolor paper) that are 28.0 x 38.1 cm. In my description of the works, I reference the exhibition catalogue, *Rosalie Favell: I Searched Many Worlds* in which the entire works from the *Longing and Not Belonging* exhibition have been reproduced (McAlear, 2003). This exhibition was held at the Winnipeg Art Gallery from May 1 to August 3, 2003,

The majority of these prints are set up in a triptych format (three separate images), many of similar images. Instead of analyzing all forty-one prints (for a total of 111 images), I will focus on six prints (a total of 18 images). I chose these six prints after examining the entire works, concluding that these six are representative of the main themes featured in this work, for example, landscape, family, real and porcelain flowers, family photographs (group and single), self-portraits (current and past), and popular cultural female icons Xena, Warrior Princess and Gabrielle, and the Bionic Woman.

Favell writes of *Longing and Not Belonging* in her artist statement for the exhibition:

> *Longing and Not Belonging* is a late 20th century view of a seventh generation child that felt she grew up invisibly in a mixed-blood urban family in the middle of North America. It is my hope that Longing and Not Belonging illustrates my desire to belong and that my visual documentation may serve to inform my future relations when they, too, are searching (Favell, 1999: np).

The following is a description of the selected prints. All of the selections contain three images.

1. Print # 4 (McAlear, 2003:40):

a. A close-up of pink and white flowers.

b. An early self-portrait.

c. An image of Xena Warrior Princess.

2. Print # 6 (McAlear, 2003:42):

a. A sepia-tone image of a broken religious statue.

b. A black and white image of a dancer at a pow wow.

c. Faded gray foliage.

3. Print # 10 (McAlear, 2003:46):

a. A close-up image of a bouquet of blue flowers with a black background.

b. An image of Rosalie and another person in front of a large stone sculpture of an Indian head.

c. A close-up of red flowers.

4. Print # 17 (McAlear, 2003:53):

a. A black and white image of a man standing outside leaning against a large boulder. It is smaller than the two images it is paired with. The cut of the border, being black and white (as opposed to color), the size of the image in comparison to the other two images indicate that it is an old photograph.

b. An image of a landscape (possibly the Prairies). It has a mostly orange foreground (grass or wheat field), green bushes in the middle ground, and a mostly yellow sky.

It is in a ‘Polaroid’ style (the bottom border being about twice the size of the other three borders).

c. A close-up color self-portrait. It is also rendered in ‘Polaroid’ style.

5. Print # 27 (McAlear, 2003:63):

a. A black and white image of a portrait of a young man in a suit. It looks like a high-school photograph.

b. A figure standing in the foreground in a winter landscape, also in black and white. There are trees and bushes behind the figure.

c. A black and white landscape with mountains in the distance and what appears to be part of the frame of a tipi in the middle of the image.

6. Print # 37 (McAlear, 2003:73):

a. A close-up image of red tulips.

b. Two young children in a yard with red tulips. There is a white picket fence and house, and a person’s arm is extending from the top left.

c. An image of a young child gazing at a lit sparkler on her first birthday. There is a candle in the shape of a number “one” on top of the birthday cake. A person’s arm is also extending into the image, holding the lit sparkler.

CHAPTER SIX

Constructing Locality in Contemporary Canadian Aboriginal Art: An Analysis of *Sour Springs* and *Longing and Not Belonging*

James Clifford writes about the Mashpee Wampanoag Indian community, near present day Cape Cod, Massachusetts, who have argued for tribal recognition by the United States government. Writing on the United States government's response to the Mashpee's argument Clifford comments that the stories of Aboriginal people told by the dominant culture are the same stories told over and over:

> These societies are always either dying or surviving, assimilating or resisting. Caught between a local past and a global future, they either hold on to their separateness or 'enter the modern world.' The latter entry – tragic or triumphant – is always a step toward a global future defined by technological progress, national and international cultural relations. Are there other possible stories? (Clifford, 1988:324).

In this chapter I consider Clifford's question of how 'other possible stories' are told through the artwork by Aboriginal people by looking more closely at the selection of artworks by Greg Staats and Rosalie Favell described in the last chapter. In general, what I am seeking to explore in this chapter is how their work can be ‘read’ as contributing to the construction of a distinct Aboriginal locality. In this analysis I structure my discussion around three questions.

The first question considers how the works are ideological. Wolff points out that ideology in a work of art is not expressed in ‘pure form,’ but rather the “work of art itself re-works that ideology in aesthetic form, in accordance with the rules and conventions of contemporary artistic practice” (Wolff, 1993:65). To determine how these works are ideological I focus on the ‘absences’ in the texts. These ‘silences’ are important for revealing ideology because they can be used to expose the limitations of the text and what “lies behind the text and speaks through it” (Wolff, 1993:65).

The second question asks how do the works transform (and construct) ideology in a particular way. This question follows from Wolff’s observation that the relationship of ideology and art is not an “exact replication, expression or reflection” (Wolff, 1993:65). Instead, Wolff argues that it is the aesthetic codes and conventions that transform ideology in a particular way. The focus of the analysis for the second question will be on how Staats and Favell utilize their own personal history in their work to argue that their past is not a ‘pure’ past that limits their identity but instead is something that is important for providing meaning in contemporary life.

The importance of locality in contemporary life is that it is defined by shared lived experiences. Thus, along with Appadurai I define locality as:

> a phenomenological property of social life, a structure of feeling that is produced by particular forms of intentional activity that yields particular sorts of material effects (Appadurai, 1997:182).

The third question asks how can the selections of work by Favell and Staats be read as contributing to the construction of such a locality by conveying a particular structure of feeling. I focus my discussion by drawing on Geertz's explanation that art can be used to 'materialize a way of experiencing' and look to how Favell and Staats draw from their own personal history to 'materialize' their experience of the contemporary life. I also discuss how their work can also be read in the context of a global experience of contemporary life.

How Are the Selected Works Ideological?

Staats and Favell's work can be read as continuing with the perspective that their work does not require tribal/ethnic recognition to be 'authentic.' What is absent in the text are explicit signs of an Aboriginal content in the images, or as Ace notes of Favell's work "there are no images of fluff and feathers, just intimate images of family, friends, travel and special occasions" (Ace: 2003:27).

However, a closer reading provides insight into the subtle references of signs that signify an Aboriginal content in the work. These signs do not dominate, but are a part of a complex mixing that shapes the world that the artists are describing. Their work may make subtle references to particular stereotypes but not to promote them.

In Favell's prints, there are subtle references, such as the almost invisible tipi-shaped open structure in the landscape, the black and white images of pow wow dancers, family snapshots of family members wearing headdresses, and a large stone sculpture of an Indian head. Favell's reference to her Métis parent culture is made by the personal nature of the images and the installation of the prints that suggest the Plains Indian 'ledger drawings.' The ledger drawing style that Favell references are the drawings made by captured Plains Indians in the Fort Marion prison in St. Augustine, Florida around 1875. The ledger drawings are an important reference to Favell in her work, as "It may be that ledger art . . . and was an earlier version of the family album of this century" (Favell, 1999:np).

Staats's portraits also give no clear indication of an Aboriginal content and neither do his images of the land or the architectural structures. Although he is aware of stereotypes such as those presented by Edward Curtis, the early 20th century photographer who popularized stereotypical images such as the vanishing Indian to the larger public, in these photographs (as does Favell) Staats does not attempt to deconstruct the historical past or does he look at it as nostalgia. The absence of a Curtis-like representation in the portraits effectively provides an alternative to these stereotypes. Janet Clark, the curator of the Sour Springs exhibition, indicates this perspective in a quote from Staats:

> Curtis is a footnote to us, we are not a footnote to him (Clark, 1995: np, quoting Staats).

For Staats his photographs are about the importance of using his work as a continuation of the oral tradition of the Haudensaunee. In this talk for the Sprawl Symposium entitled *At the Edge of the Woods: A Continuing Cultural Aesthetic*, Staats writes that the oral tradition is an important reference for his art as well as providing guidance for his relationship with the world:

> An oral tradition, which is grounded in visual images, reflects a collective perspective of humanity within the landscape and its relationships with Nation, community, family, friends, and oneself (Staats, 1997:4).

Additional examples of an implicit Aboriginal content in the works include the title of the exhibition 'Sour Springs' which is the community, located on the Six Nations Reserve, near Brantford, Ontario where Staats was born. Not visible to the viewer, Staats made moose-hide picture hangers that are on the reverse side of the mounted photographs. Also, the photographs were mounted on plywood that Staats painted an 'earthy' deep rust red, that could signify the stereotype of Aboriginal people as 'close to nature,' but Staats intention for this color is to evoke "a feeling of relatedness to the earth and warmth and security" (Clark, 1995: np).

When these points are read in the context of all of the images in each exhibition, there is no overt reference to tribal or ethnic origins. Instead, the works provide a counter discourse of the stereotypical Indian of popular culture. Taken as a whole *Longing and Not Belonging* is the flip side of the static image of the Indian; it is about change and movement. While the large stone sculpture is a popular stereotypical sign of the static Indian (wearing a headdress looking stoically into the distance) Favell has insisted on undermining this image by placing herself and a companion at the bottom of the image. This placement sets up a contrast between the stone, static, popular Indian image and her and her companion who are colorful and alive.

The images from *Sour Springs* do not represent a static Aboriginal culture but instead speak to the complexity of Aboriginal culture in contemporary life. Moving from one picture to the next provides a narrative quality to Staats's work and movement is also indicated in each of the two portraits. Because the figures are not centered in the picture plane Staats seems to capture the figures while moving. In the portrait of his uncle his right shoulder is outside the frame and in the self-portrait Staats's left shoulder is outside the frame and his hair is blowing in the wind to further suggest movement.

How does the Images Rework Ideology in a Particular Way?

Wolff makes the important point that signifying systems and aesthetic codes are not 'transparent' and are not an exact 'replication.' However, aesthetic codes and conventions "transform ideology in a particular way" (Wolff, 1993:65) by being mediated through materials and aesthetics, social conditions, and the existing aesthetic codes and conventions in which they are constructed.

To address how the images are mediated to transform ideology in a particular way, I focus my discussion on how the artists reclaim their personal history for a greater understanding of how the past (history) affects their identity in the contemporary world and provides meaning in the complexity of contemporary life. To address this point I look at how the artists employ the convention of juxtaposing their personal past with contemporary life to convey a sense of an 'historic syncretic space.'

The use of photography, installation, and high-tech printing methods of giclée printmaking indicate that the artists are a part of, and are participating in, the modern world. Favell searches for her sense of place by juxtaposing Polariod snapshots taken from family albums with images from Western popular culture. Her images from Western popular culture place her work in a contemporary setting as do the portraits of the subjects wearing glasses, dressed in contemporary clothes, an image of a contemporary house, and a birthday celebration. These images from Western popular culture, set against the references to her Aboriginal parent culture provides a representation of how Favell understands herself in the complexity of contemporary life. The snapshots (black and white and color) of family, travel, landscape, and the variety of different flora from her own geographical area as well as from other areas, suggests her concern for the complex nature of her identity.

> The variety of different flora is a metaphor for flux and hybridity; a reference to her mixed ancestry (Rice: 1999: np).

Staats also places his images in the contemporary world while referencing his past. Reading the *Sour Springs* exhibition catalogue, I learn that these photographs take on a strong personal resonance for Staats. They are photographs of personal memories of:

> his grandmother's house, in which his father was raised, a row of trees that his father and uncle planted, the hickory trees that he played in as a child, the churchyard where his father was buried, as viewed through a window, windfall apples gathered in piles on the ground, as his

> grandmother used to do, a road in the community (Clark, 1995: np).

Staats also clearly places his images in the contemporary world. This is indicated in the images of a modern (but old) frame house, the portrait of his uncle in a 'Reebok Athletic' sweatshirt, and Staats's self-portrait wearing glasses. Staats writes of his photographic project, stating that:

> The photographs of the landscape visualize my relationships with myself and how I imagine myself to be. I recognize that I exist in it. This recognition I can trace from the oral history of my culture. I am in the world; I am of today (Staats, 1997:4).

Favell and Staats understand the importance of reflecting on their personal past because the past and the present "are inextricably connected" (Doxtator, 1992:27). For Aboriginal people this connection provides an understanding of their place in contemporary life, or as Ace argues:

> The images and stories tell us and others who we are, where we came from and can even provide us with insight into where we are going (Ace, 1999:np).

Nowhere in Staats and Favell's work is there a sense of trying to maintain an authenticity based on a purity of the past, but instead, the artists fully participate in contemporary life. Aboriginal history is mixed in with contemporary life and, like Clifford's Mashpee Indians, Favell and Staats recognize that there can be "no return to a pure Wampanoag tradition" (Clifford, 1988:344).

Staats and Favell are fully aware that Aboriginal people in Canada have been historically displaced and the complex strategies that derive from this situation have to be continually negotiated. In this situation the references to parent culture traditions are more about the complexity of contemporary life than as a response to stereotypes by the dominant culture. Staats and Favell represent their version of the Aboriginal world in contemporary life by juxtaposing the past with the present to convey a sense of an 'historic syncretic space' or as Clifford suggests, "an impure present-becoming-future" (Clifford, 1988:344).

How can the Selections be Read as Contributing to the Construction of Locality as a Structure of Feeling?

Geertz wrote that the importance of art is that it provides a material form of our experience in the world. He argues that:

> Matisse's color jottings (the word is his own) and the Yoruba's line arrangements don't, save glancingly, celebrate social structure or forward useful doctrines. They materialize a way of experiencing; bring a particular cast of mind out into the world of objects, where men can look at it (Geertz, 1976:1478).

When the contemporary life of Aboriginal people is read against colonial relationships with the dominant Euro-

Canadian society, the experience of contemporary life is one that is informed by feelings of displacement and colonial interventions from the dominant Euro-Canadian society. For many Aboriginal people the contemporary world is one that is not only marked by complexity, sorrow, ambiguity, and a search for traces of their parent culture traditions, but also one marked by hope, strength, and continuity. By acknowledging these feelings in their work, Staats and Favell materialize this experience and in doing so they contribute to a sense of locality as a lived experience in the contemporary, globalized world.

In Staats's photographs, there is an ambiguous feeling evoked by the images of leafless trees, long shadows, and the play of contrasts between the dark blacks and the clean whites. Staats gives little evidence as to whether it is either late autumn (the end of growth), or early spring (the beginning of growth). The old house that his grandmother lived in and the interior room are in disrepair. The past is not remembered as nostalgia. Instead these are stark memories and the visceral feeling evoked by the photographs convey this emotion.

The polaroids in Favell prints with their soft focus also provide a somber feel to her work. The variety of images of family, flora and popular culture icons work together to try and fill the void of longing to be fulfilled. Favell wrote for the artist statement for this exhibition that, "from an early age, I longed for a sense of belonging in the world" (Favell, 1999:np). Are her many images of flowers a memorial or a celebration? The stories that Staats and Favell tell are not ones about dying or assimilating cultures or about entering the 'modern world.'

By juxtaposing their parent culture aesthetics with contemporary materials and Western aesthetic style, they define themselves as participating in contemporary life. This is a way for them to acknowledge the importance of their pasts, not as static, but as a source of their identities and forms of consciousness in the contemporary world. Their work both acknowledges and redefines their relationship to it as one of continuity. In this way these artists offer an understanding of the present for Aboriginal people in order to provide them with guidance and hope.

For example, Favell approaches the documentation of her past as one that helps to inform and make sense of the complexity of her identity in contemporary life. The 111 images that make up the *Longing and Not Belonging* exhibition we see a wide range of visual images that Favell draws from to construct a sense of this complexity. She writes that this exhibition is "a visual synthesis of my attempts to comment on, resolve, to construct and realize change" (Favell, 1999:np). For Favell, documenting the complexity and changing nature of her identity at the same time redefines her Métis parent culture as one that is dynamic. Marcia Crosby, the curator of the exhibition entitled *Nations in Urban Landscapes*, held at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, October 28 – December 9, 1995, argues that the method of referencing parent culture traditions by Aboriginal artists is a response to the complexity of diverse and heterogenous aboriginal communities as well as serving as "vehicles for continual 'reunion' of their roots" (Crosby, 1995:18).

For Favell, then, her past is one that speaks of hope and continuity. In her portraits, her subjects look straight at the viewer, and in many of them they are happy and laughing. The birthday photographs evoke the feeling of celebration, and when combined with the images from the entire installation, it is a celebration of her experiences, inclusive of both the somber and the bright. Ace writes that:

> The power of her visual images are medicine for our individual and collective healing, asking us to question the policies of exclusion (gender, sexual orientation, cultural, institutional) and look for positive sign-posts to guide us along the way (Ace, 1999:np).

In Staats's portraits, individuals also look directly at the viewer. However, celebration is hidden and instead there is a quiet strength in their faces as they dominate the picture plane. When combined with the long shadows that reach in to the distance, the placement of the portraits in the landscape evokes the feeling of the strength of Staat's ancestors. Staats celebrates their quiet strength and survival (persistence as resistance), one that brings hope for the future.

The past for Staats is one that is informed by the importance of memory. His intention is to share with the viewer the experience of remembering the past, "to take viewers to their own sites of memory" (Clark, 1995:np). The visceral and somber mood of the images along with their clarity and the strong contrasts of light and dark materialize the act of remembering. The long shadows, the positioning of viewers as looking up through windows, and the images of gray cloudy skies mounted on rust color backgrounds evoke the past, not as romanticized or nostalgic, but as past that requires contemplation. Clark writes about the importance of remembering the past:

> This installation asks us to reflect, as he has done, on our relationship with our past, and to consider that we are connected with the past through a process of reflection that allows us, in the present, to move forward (Clark, 1995: np).

The strength, then, of these images by Favell and Staats is that they materialize the way that many Aboriginal people today experience contemporary life. This experience consists of feelings of displacement that are the legacy of colonial interventions of the dominant Euro-Canadian society. At the same time, they convey a sense of hope, and celebration of strength and continuity. It is by expressing this combination of often-conflicting feelings that the artists articulate the complex nature of Aboriginal identity and forms of consciousness in contemporary life.

In Favell's work this celebration is more explicit it is in the quiet celebration of strength and memory in Staats's work. However, both bring an understanding of the importance of the past and how it affects the forms of consciousness of Aboriginal people today.

Conclusion

Importantly, it is in this way that the art of both Staats and Favell's construct a distinct Aboriginal locality. What other stories do they tell us? For many contemporary Aboriginal artists the choices are not between a 'local past and a global future,' or the need to 'either hold on to their separateness or 'enter the modern world.'' For many the stories they tell begin with the creation of 'something new.' By working in a space that is constructed as a result of specific historical, social and political conditions, these artists use their art to construct a counter discourse to confront, and thereby, (re)construct and 'identify' a particular space based on their own experience. By merging Aboriginal parent culture themes and motifs with contemporary materials and Western aesthetic styles, Aboriginal artists deliberately work against the discursive space of authenticity and expose the nature of this dominant discourse.

As we have seen for the artists discussed in this thesis, using this strategy they have deliberately constructed their own visual discourse in order to 'paint against' the views of outsiders and create their own definitions of themselves through their own strategies of representation. This oppositional nature of constructing a distinct discursive space in the contemporary world points to its ideological nature. It is this oppositional space, constructed deliberately that I call a locality.

In this way the artists construct the changing nature of culture as integral to Aboriginal culture and history and thus contest the view that authentic Aboriginal culture is static. The very survival of the various cultural motifs and metaphors that the artists draw from speaks in fact to the dynamic and inventive nature of Aboriginal culture throughout history. From Houle's painting *Misquah*, to Boyer's blanket and McDonald's video screens and Marshall's concrete figures, to the work of Staats and Favell, the complexity of Aboriginal identity in contemporary life is revealed.

By redefining the past points along a series or a continuum rather than as static 'original' time, art materializes an Aboriginal experience of contemporary life in terms of the legacy of colonialism, displacement, and outside intervention that has led to the marginality of Aboriginal culture along with feelings of hope and continuity.

The importance of the work by Staats and Favell, then, is that their work, although informed by their own personal histories can resonate with a wide range of viewers. By employing modern techniques of photography, printing, the use of polaroids, and installation, Staats and Favell provide an easily recognizable language that many viewers will relate to. The images in their art may be personal family snapshots and the reserve, but the lack of overt tribal/ethnic recognition allows a range of viewers to connect to the images. As we have seen, Favell's use of popular images, "entice the viewer to evoke these images of popular culture from their own past" (Rice, 1999:np). Staats wants the viewer to share in the experience of remembering. Although his memories of Sour Springs are specific, as Clark writes,

> It is, in effect, a collective reality that Staats is referencing with the intention of communicating the idea of memory to others (Clark, 1995:np).

In the contemporary world with the acceleration of the globalization process, Aboriginal people are not the only segment of Canadian society whose distinct histories of racial or social class locations have led to conflicting feelings of displacement and hope. For example, for many people mobility constitutes a normal condition of life, and not simply an interruption of ordinary, settled life. Appadurai write that deterritorialization is, "one of the central forces of the modern world" (Appadurai, 1990: 301) where people and cultures increasingly identify with a place or territory that is not their place of residence. It is by materializing the experience of displacement (and hope) that Staats and Favell use their own personal experiences to create connections, not only with other Aboriginal people, but also with others whose histories have engendered similar displaced situations in contemporary society. Like the captive Plains Indians in Fort Marion in the late 1800s, many people feel they are in a similar situation:

> Their dream to return to a happier time is not any different than our desire to revisit our past experiences to better understand ourselves (Ace, 1999:np).

From this perspective, then, the personal pasts of Staats and Favell can be used as metaphor for understanding contemporary life and world-wide concerns that "take on a broader message about empowerment and transformation" (Madill, 2000:23). It is in this project of drawing from an Aboriginal experience in order to connect with larger issues where I see directions for future work in contemporary Aboriginal art.

APPENDIX

FIGURE 1: Bob Boyer, *A Government Blanket Policy*, 1983, Oil on blanket, 195 x 121 cm. Collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec.

FIGURE 2: Robert Houle, *Misquah*, 1973, Acrylic on canvas, 201 x 406 cm. Collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec.

FIGURE 3: Sarain Stump, *The Pain of the Indian*, 1973, Acrylic on split sheepskin, mounted on wooden mask, 117 x 87 cm. Collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec.

FIGURE 4: Edward Poitras, *As Snow Before the Summer Sun*, 1980, Bone, transistors, feathers, plastic and various materials, 29 x 71 x 48 cm. Collection of Tom Hill and Roberta Jamieson.

FIGURE 5: Carl Beam, *The Spirit of the Eagle*, 1980, Photo-lithograph, 74 x 50.6. Collection of the artist.

FIGURE 6: Mike McDonald, *Electronic Totem*, 1987, 5 video monitors, wood, 5 videotapes, continuous loop, colour, 276 x 77 x 56 cm. Collection of the artist.

FIGURE 7: Teresa Marshall, *Elitekey*, 1990, Cement, three elements: Micmac Canoe, 88.5 x 98 x 375 cm. Eta Joe (Micmac figure), 184 x 63 x 61 cm. Canadian flag, 325 x 113 x 26 cm. Installation dimensions variable. Collection of the artist.

FIGURE 8: Greg Staats, *Greg Staats: Memories of a Collective Reality: Sour Springs*, 1995, An installation of fourteen silver prints (each 50 x 40 cm.) mounted on a single wall (22.5 x 135 cm.) covered in plywood sheets and painted a rust color. Collection of the artist.

FIGURE 9: Rosalie Favell, *Longing and Not Belonging*, 1999, Six prints from a series of 41 giclée prints, 28 x 38.1 cm each. Collection of the artist.

FIGURE 1: Bob Boyer, *A Government Blanket Policy*, 1983

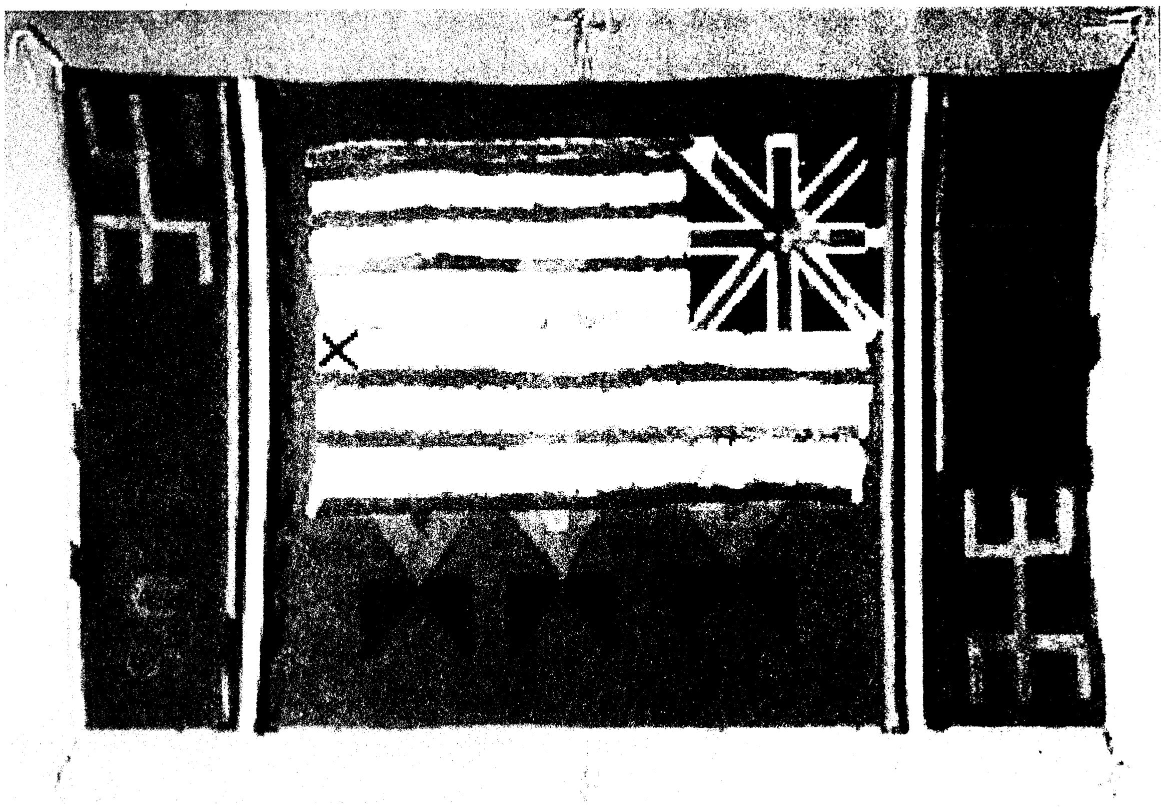


FIGURE 2: Robert Houle, *Misquah*, 1973

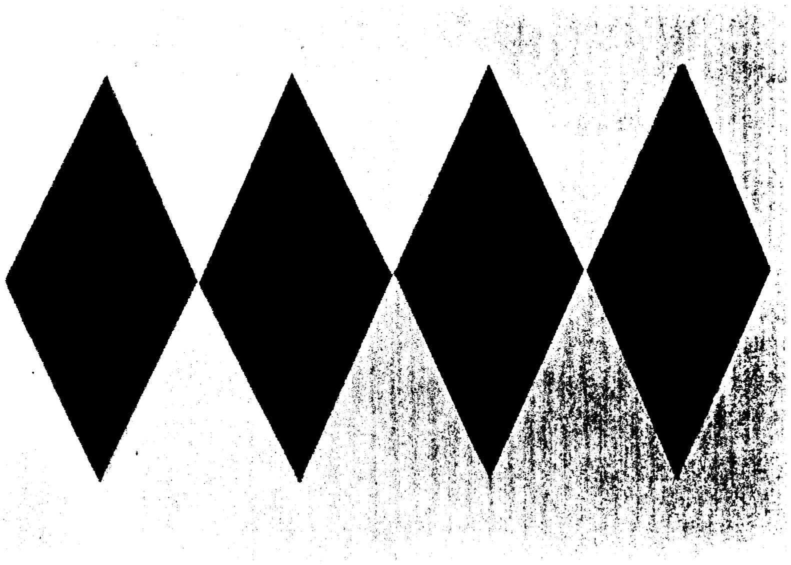


FIGURE 3: Sarain Stump, *The Pain of the Indian*, 1973

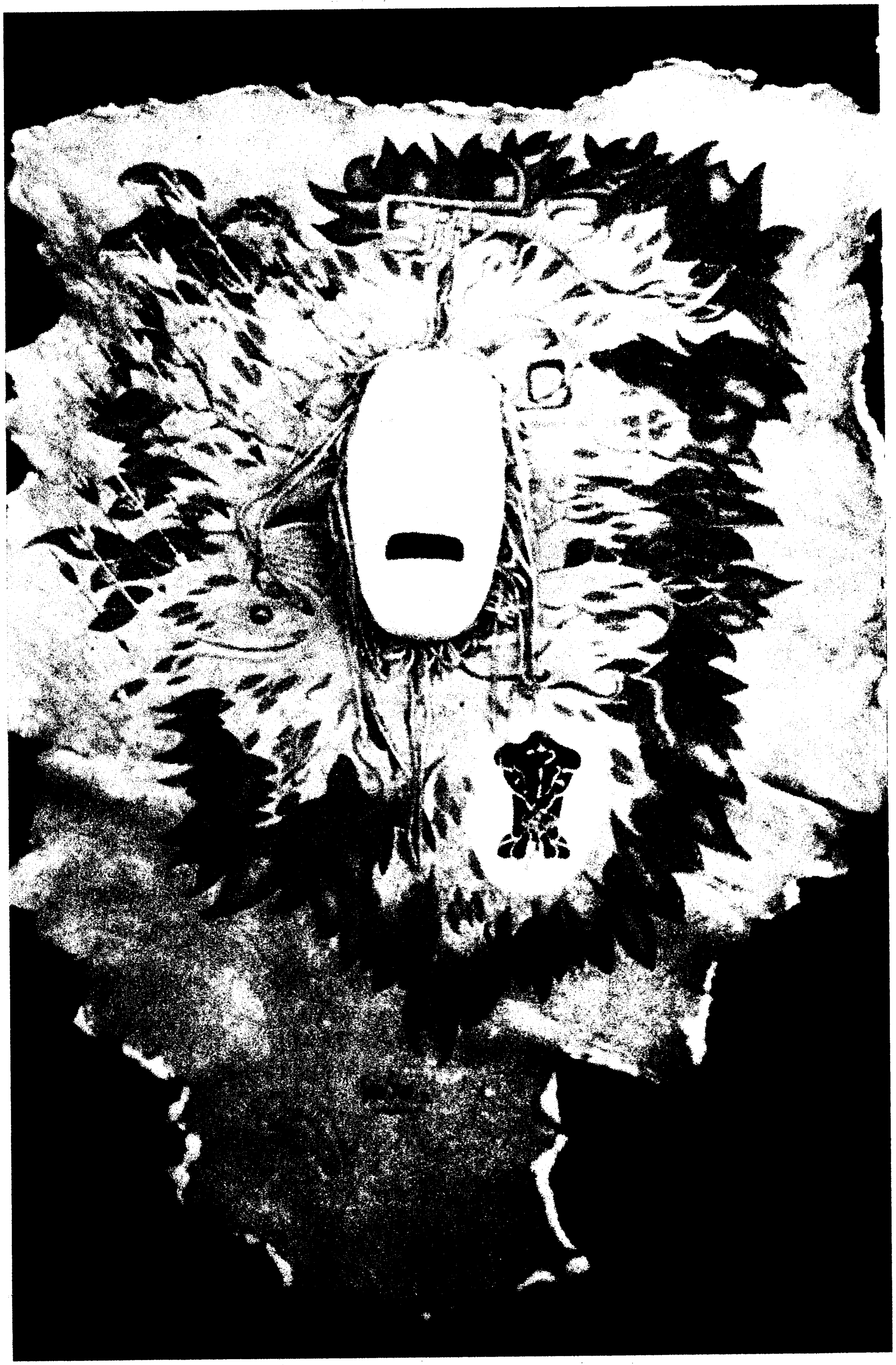


FIGURE 4: Edward Poitras, *As Snow Before the Summer Sun*, 1980

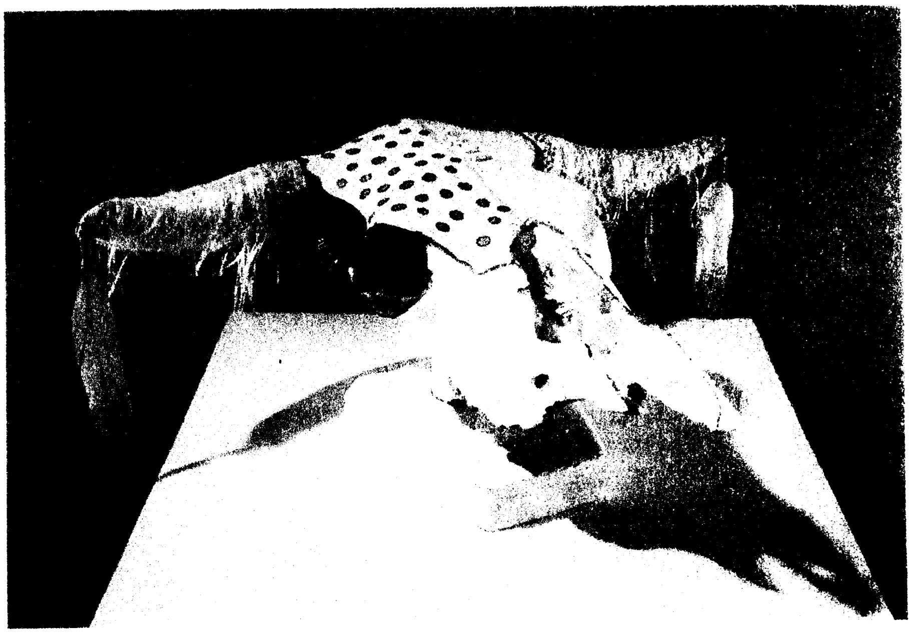


FIGURE 5: Carl Beam, *The Spirit of the Eagle*, 1980

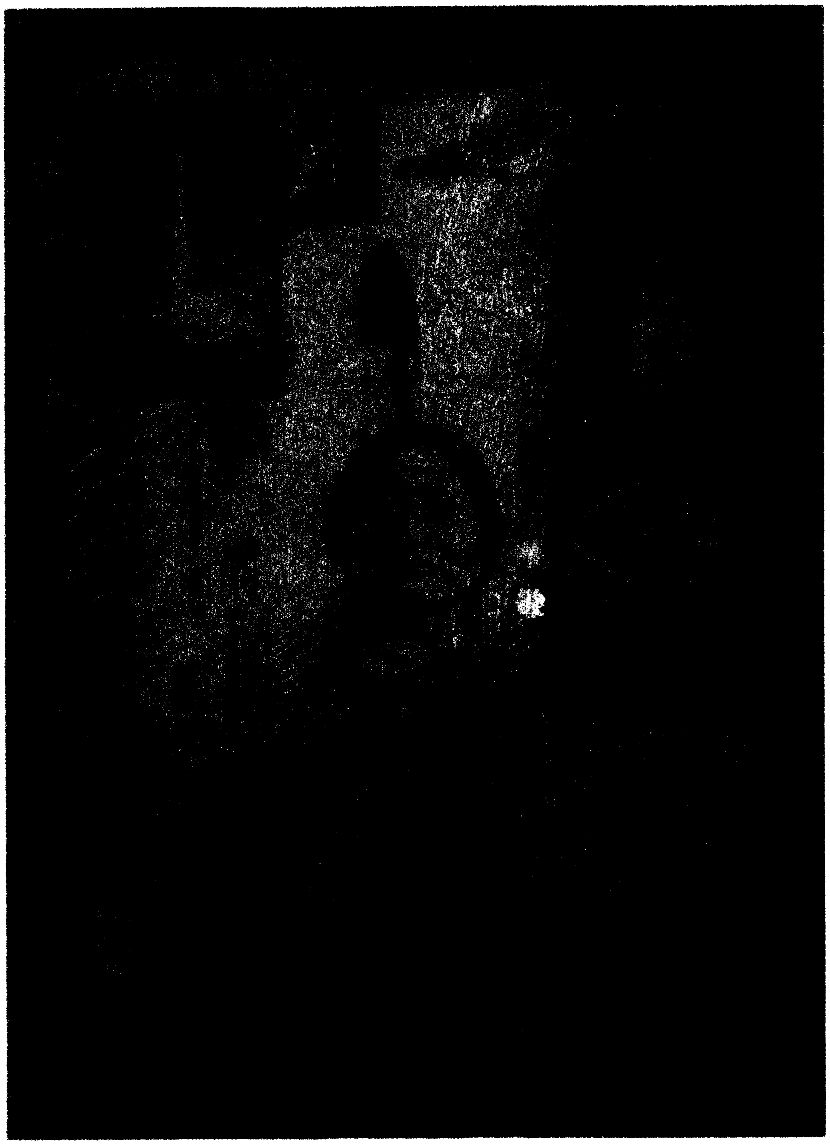


FIGURE 6: Mike McDonald, *Electronic Totem*, 1987

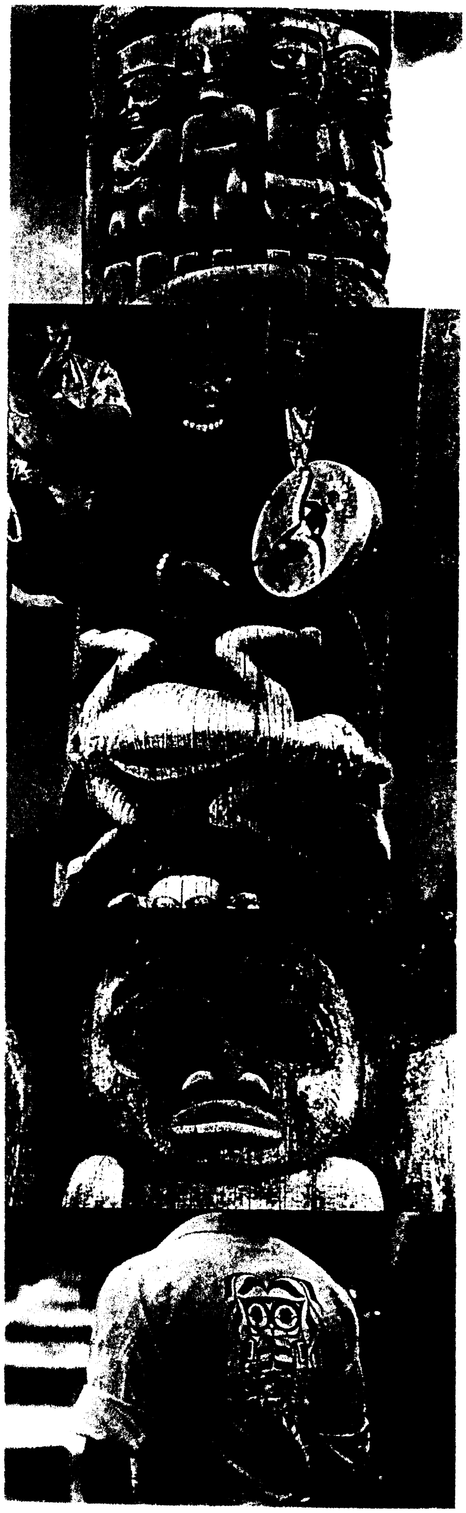


FIGURE 7: Teresa Marshall, *Elitekey*, 1990

FIGURE 8: Greg Staats, *Greg Staats: Memories of a Collective Reality: Sour Springs*, 1995

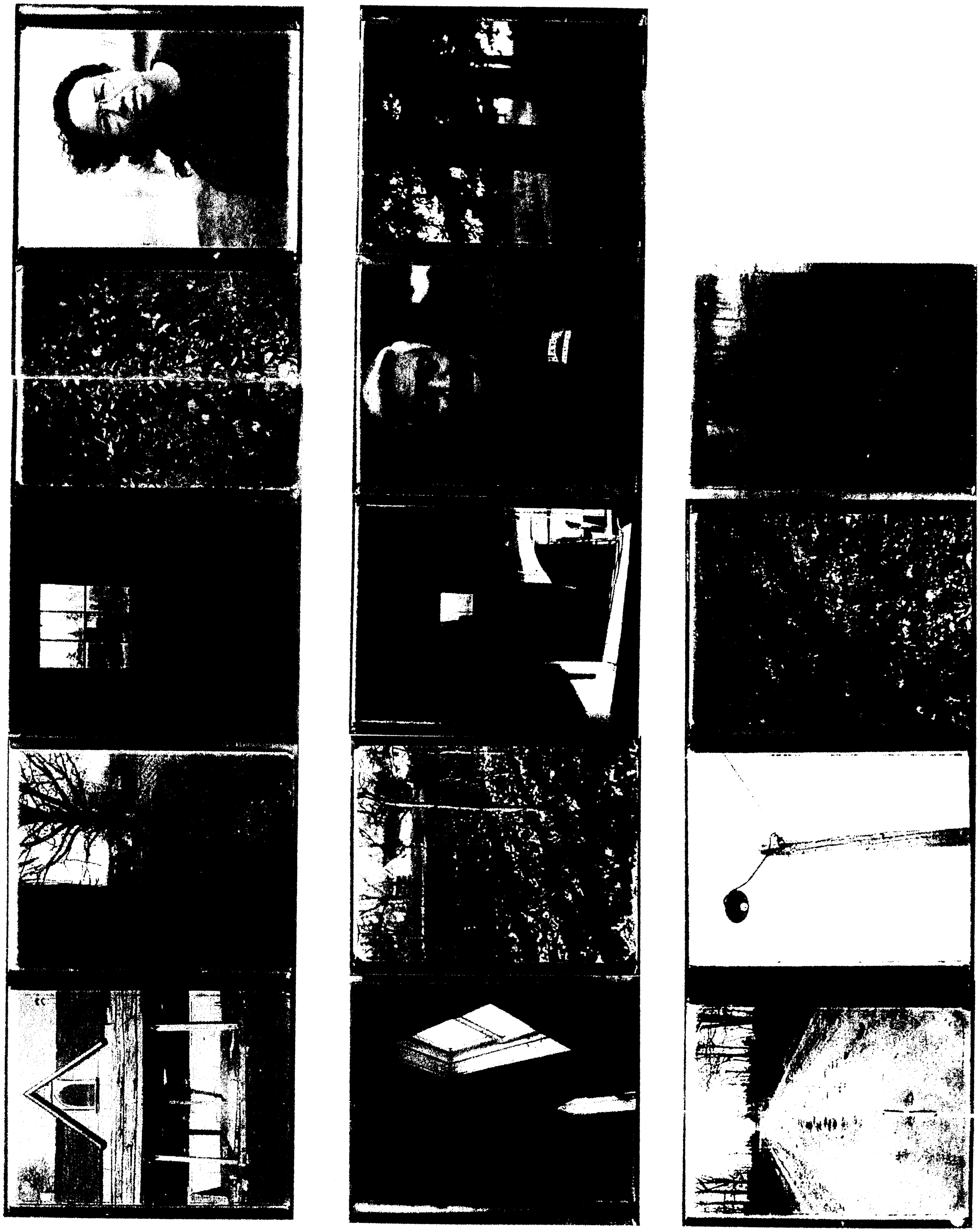


FIGURE 9: Rosalie Favell, *Longing and Not Belonging*, 1999

Prints #4, #6, and #10 (see McLear, 2003)

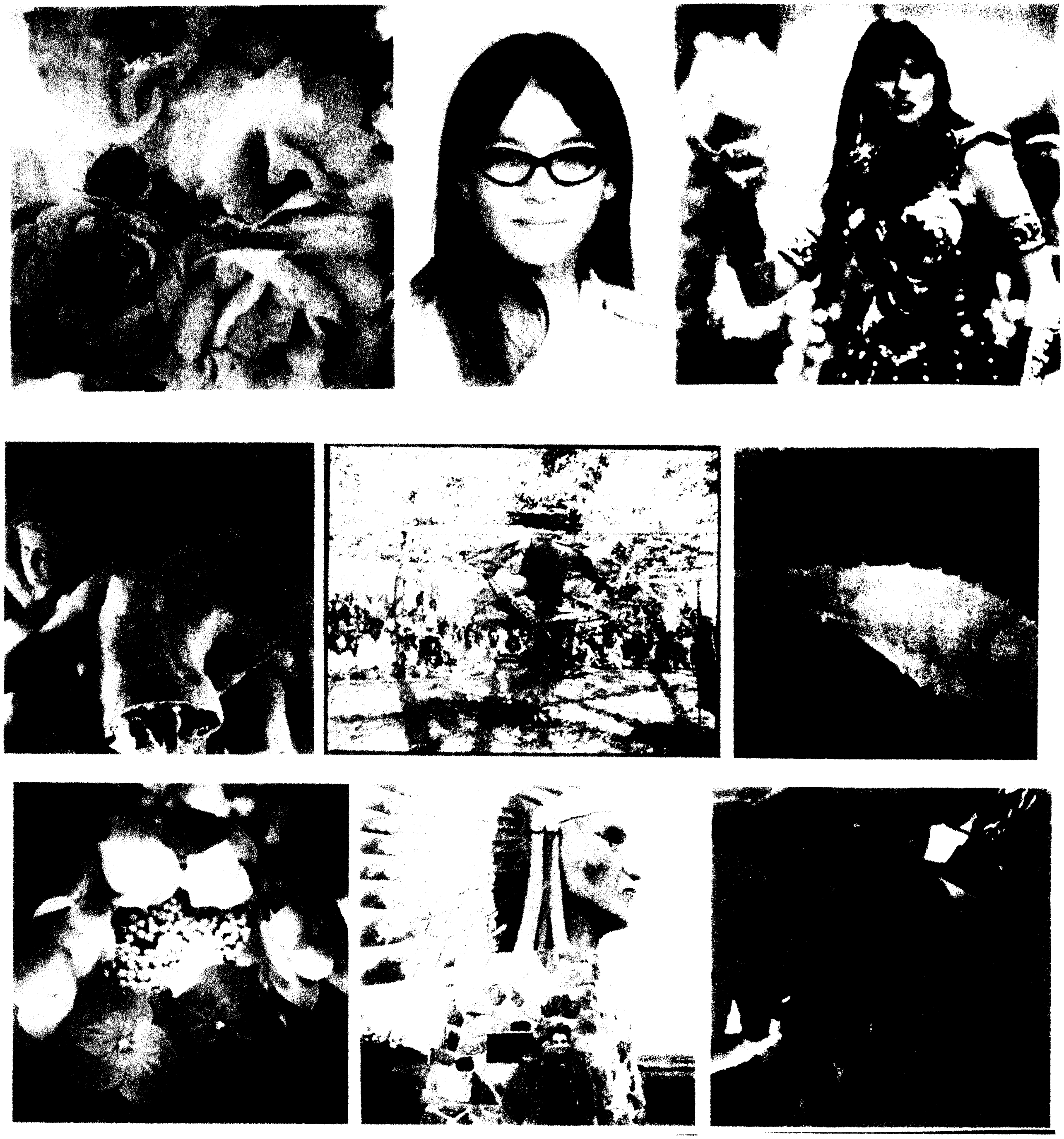
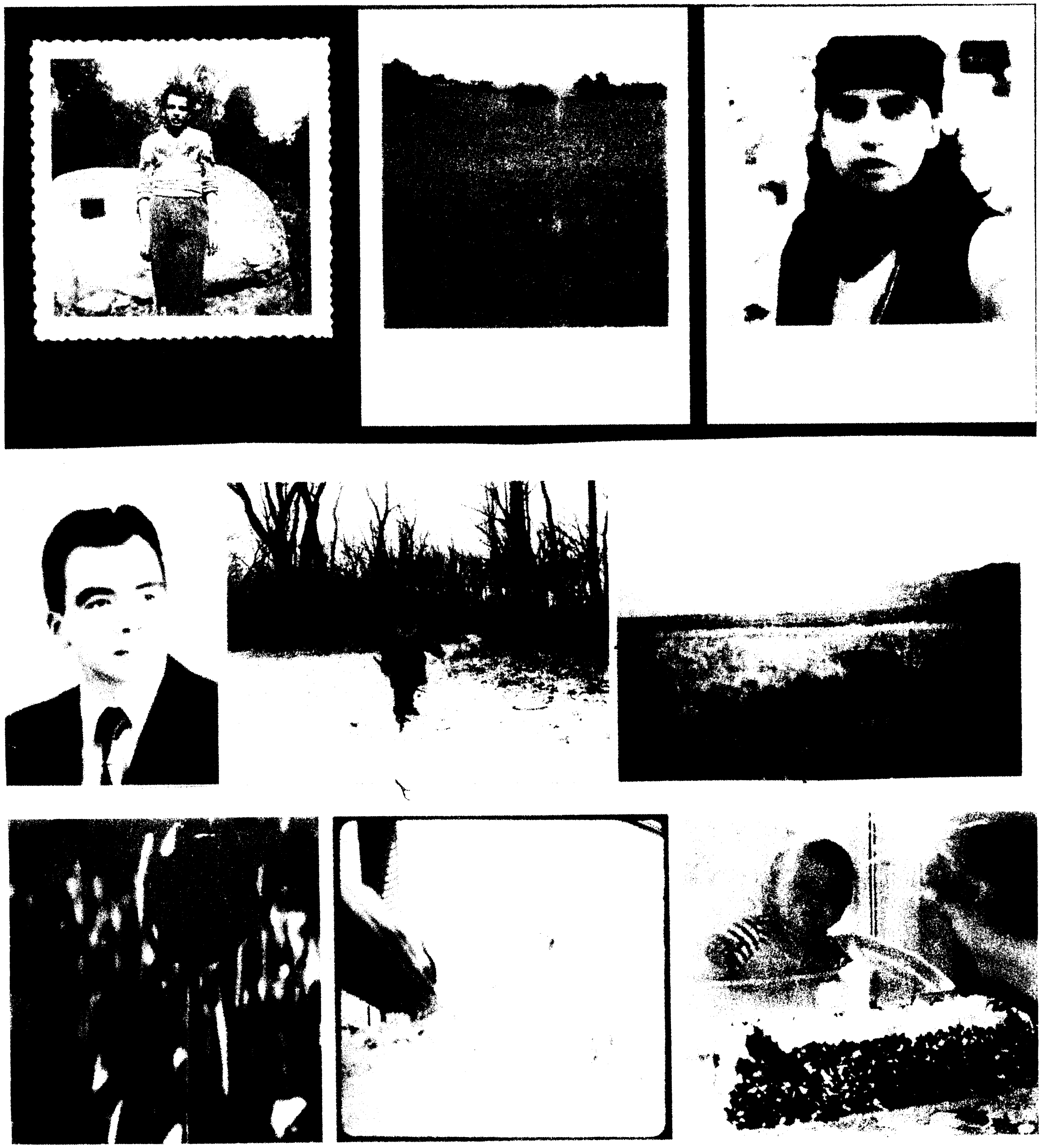


FIGURE 9: Rosalie Favell, *Longing and Not Belonging*, 1999

Prints #17, #27, and #37 (see McLear, 2003)



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