



David Garneau. *Indigenous. Academic. Solidarity*. 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 92 x 76.5 cm. (Image courtesy of the artist)

## *Indigenous Art: From Appreciation to Art Criticism<sup>1</sup>*

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The Brisbane-based Australian artist, Vernon Ah Kee, recently lamented the “dearth of criticism of Aboriginal art,” and suggested that the reason “no-one had ever criticized his work” was because “they were afraid.”<sup>2</sup> This plea, posing as a dare, expresses the ambivalent relationship many Indigenous<sup>3</sup> artists have with the dominant artworld. Ah Kee intimates that the artworld, happy consumer of Aboriginal art, has yet to engage it critically because its critics know that in engagement they would be found wanting. But until there is this intercultural discourse neither party will know for sure.

Many Indigenous artists in the territory now known as Canada, where I am from, echo Ah Kee. They reckon that the lack of critical attention is one of the barriers keeping them in a bubble at the edge of the artworld pond. If published criticism is what separates works of art from works of culture, then the refusal to treat Indigenous art critically may represent a race-based impediment, or, as Alfred Youngman describes it, a buckskin ceiling.<sup>4</sup> However, there is also concern among Aboriginal artists and their allies that bursting this protective sphere would lead to assimilation.

But Aboriginal art is appreciated. In Canada and Australia it has a paradoxically liminal yet central status. It is produced by tiny populations<sup>5</sup> that nevertheless play an outsized role in shaping the visual identities of nations that are not their own. Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders represent only 2.5% of the Australian population,<sup>6</sup> according to Susan McCulloch their art sales outstrip “non-Indigenous artists three to one.”<sup>7</sup> That is astonishing. In the last twenty-five years, Indigenous art and curation have developed a critical mass that exceeds the limits of its own communities and has begun to take on the larger artworld. What do dominant culture critics fear? Is it that the former objects of their gaze have become self-aware critical agents?

A new category of Aboriginal person, the Indigenous, has come to prominence in the last quarter century. “Indigenous” has come to signify global collective consciousness among First Peoples. To identify as Indigenous rather than, say, Gurindji or Blackfoot alone, is to claim that in addition to local belonging you have filiations with similarly positioned persons internationally. This expanded sense of belonging—of understanding the global forces that shape Aboriginal peoples and exploit their territories—has led to a new mode of social being and inter-national collaborations among people who identify as Indigenous.

Indigenous artists and curators work among and between the mainstream and the abjectionable, the recognized and the rejected. However, because of their perplexing and seemingly fragile status they are often held in protective custody, are rarely subject to criticism, and are therefore kept from a more complete dialogue with power—including their own. Ah Kee’s theory is that however popular Aboriginal productions are they are manufactured and contained within the dominant system without critically engaging with it. They “do not speak for themselves,” are not self-conscious, and do not resist or disturb the status quo.

To present yourself as an Aboriginal artist is not only to acknowledge your ancestry but also to declare a relationship between your creative production and your home culture. You are claiming Aboriginality as part of the content of both your self and your art. So, when Gordon Bennett rejected this public label he was not denying his heritage or even that it might inform his art. He is refusing the idea that it does so *necessarily*, that it must. Aboriginal artists who honour this designation produce works that are at once

works of culture and works of art. To work as an Aboriginal artist—in the sense that I have been describing here—may seem to confine you to following local protocol, to make for example Ligwilda'xw art that however modernized is still recognizably Ligwilda'xw (e.g. Sonny Assu).

Indigenous artists who wish to be recognized as artists first are clearly trying to step beyond these styles, associations, meanings and responsibilities. It may be that they want to burst the Aboriginal bubble and swim in the mainstream, to assimilate. But, more often, they want to operate in the Indigenous artworld, one that includes but exceeds the local Aboriginal sphere that participates in but also resists the mainstream art world. They want to engage the world without abandoning their Aboriginality; to express an Indigenous worldview rather than simply or chiefly illustrate their particular culture; but also to construct, within the safe realm of art, an autonomous space neither prescribed by the dominant culture or traditionalist Aboriginal culture.

Published critical attention almost exclusively occurs within the mainstream artworld. There, works of art are considered to contribute to the larger socio-political, emotional and intellectual debates of the day. Critical art writing deciphers, conveys, evaluates and wrestles with the ideas and attitudes thought to be expressed by the work. In fact and in deed, not every object labeled “art” is a candidate for such treatment. Commercial landscape paintings sold in shops that also do framing are rarely subject to published criticism. Only works that innovate the form and add something to the art discourse, or are expected to and don't deliver, are the proper subjects of critical writing. Works of art that imitate already digested styles (this includes most art), children's art, the products of art therapy, all can be subjects of appreciation or not, but not criticism.

Acres of Aboriginal art belong in this category. Very little of this sort of work is reviewed in the way that non-Aboriginal “high” art is. This is because it is not recognized as being part of that discourse. And indeed, it may not be. There may be critical things to say about the category as a whole, as a phenomenon, a market force, but few critics single out individual works for deep consideration. Only when works of Aboriginal art are engaged by convincing criticism, only when they are thusly altered by critical attention is the boundary designated by the category “Aboriginal” art disturbed. In the rare occasions that this is attempted, the reviewer usually resorts to an aesthetic appreciation. The Aboriginal work is valued for its formal reasons above other (cultural/Aboriginal) considerations.

An alternative to this critical approach is an *Indigenous* criticism, where the work is critically engaged from both the mainstream art world's various points of view and from Aboriginal and Indigenous perspectives. This is the sort of thing the work of Ah Kee seems to invite, as does that of Richard Bell. In “Bell's Theorem” he explains that Indigenous art is not reducible to the terms of the dominant culture artworld: “Why

can't an Art movement arise and be separate from but equal to Western Art – within its own aesthetic, its own voices, its own infrastructure, etc.?"<sup>8</sup> This idea is echoed by Hetti Perkins in her call for not only an Indigenous textual space but also a national Institution, an autonomous Center of Indigenous art operated by Indigenous people (what I have elsewhere referred to as sovereign Indigenous display territories).<sup>9</sup>

Criticism is the dynamic force that develops, reinforces and plays a little with the mainstream system's hierarchy and circuits of meaning and value. There is virtually no such attention paid to Aboriginal art when it fails to engage mainstream discourse, or does so but it in terms that the mainstream cannot recognize or prefers not to deal with (because it could challenge its internal hierarchy and networks of meaning). The paradox, then, is that by identifying and working as an Aboriginal artist you may be able to swim in the big pond but only if you swim as the other fish do. Alternatively, you could stay in your bubble, an exotic specimen, and beyond critical attention. But if you want to engage the world from an Indigenous point of view while not being confined to your specific culture's perspective alone, you need to swim both in the pond and through the bubble; you need a third space, the *Indigenous* current.

It is one thing to critique the colonial-capitalist-racist-patriarchy you find yourself born into; it is quite another thing to call-out your cousin in public. If this is the fear Ah Kee is talking about, then it is not something to be overcome but negotiated. Indigenous criticism is not about adopting the critical habits of the mainstream and forcing a rough translation on your colleagues. You have to build a multi-cultural toolbox – and that takes a great deal of time and work. You need to develop a critical approach that does not humiliate your colleagues or breach other Aboriginal protocols for being a proper human being. While the best critics are initially going to be Indigenous, they will not always be. One goal of the Indigenous is to indigenize. It is not simply to fight racism and stand for land and equal rights – though that work is essential – the project is to promote Indigenous ways of being and knowing that are better for our mutual continuance on this planet than the ways that currently rule us. Therefore, anyone who can combine the best of Western critical approaches and Aboriginal worldviews to produce an Indigenous criticism of Indigenous art is ready to contribute to the work of Indigenous artists and curators.

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<sup>1</sup> The following text is excerpted and adapted from "Indigenous Art: From Appreciation to Art Criticism," Double Desire: Transculturation and Indigenous Contemporary Art. Ian McLean, ed. Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. 2014. 311-326.

<sup>2</sup> Vernon Ah Kee, quoted in Radok, Stephanie. 2012. "Making history". Artlink. 32 (2): 32-33.

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<sup>3</sup> This paper draws a distinction between “Indigenous” and “Aboriginal.” Peoples tend to prefer to be conceptually collected under a common name of their own choosing. For example, the peoples that English-speaking Canadians refer to as “Plains Cree” generally prefer to be called *nêhiyawak*. They accept that “Cree” is a translation. They recognise that the term belongs to the dominant culture and is applied to them, while they are actually *nêhiyawak*. For a long time, peoples occupied by Canada were collected under the name “Indian.” By the 1970s, that term had been displaced by “Aboriginal” and “First Nations.” They wanted to reject the obviously absurd misname while knowing they needed collective names that the dominant would recognize. The recent and rapid preference for “Indigenous,” as I will soon explain, indicates self-conscious political alliances with other Aboriginal or First Nations peoples around the world—and especially with like-minded, politically aware, internationally connected, and therefore Indigenous folks.

<sup>4</sup> Young Man, Alfred. 2012. *The buckskin ceiling: a Native perspective on Native art politics*. Winnipeg: Aboriginal Issues Press.

<sup>5</sup> According to Statistics Canada, 1,400,685 people reported Aboriginal identity in the 2011 household survey. This puts First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations of Canada at 4.3% of the total Canadian population. <<http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-011-x/99-011-x2011001-eng.cfm>> (Accessed November 15, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> These figures are from the 2006 Census, as issued by the Australian Bureau Statistics, 2012. <<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1301.0~2012~Main%20Features~Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20population~50>> (Accessed November 20, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Cited in McLean, I. A. “Aboriginal art and the artworld.” *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art a documentary history 1980-2006*. Ed. I. A. McLean. Sydney: IMA and Power Publications, 2011, 17-76.

<sup>8</sup> Bell, Richard. 2004. *Bell's theorem, Aboriginal art: it's a white thing*. Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award: Celebrating 20 Years / Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Compiled by Margie West.

<sup>9</sup> Perkins, Hetti, and Daniel Browning. 2012. “A place of our own: a conversation between Hettie Perkins and Daniel Browning”. *Artlink*. 32 (2): 46-48. I make a similar case in an unpublished keynote: “Indian to Indigenous”.