

EXHIBITION STATEMENT  
 CAMPBELL RIVER ART GALLERY  
 16 JUNE - 21 JULY 2016

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Artworks are on loan from the Vancouver Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Equinox Gallery, and the Collection of the Artist.

*Assu spent part of his formative years with his grandparents. At the age of seven, he moved to Vancouver, but in his childhood summers, he would return to Campbell River to spend time with his extended family, who were then, and still are, commercial fishers. Given his fair hair and light skin, Assu's First Nations identity was, and is, not apparent to everyone. In grade three, his teacher once taught a class detailing the lost culture of the Kwakwaka'wakw tribes. [He] was unaware of Assu's Indian status. Excited about what he had learned in class, Assu ran home as fast as he could to tell his mother about these lost people from the place he knew well. "They fished for salmon, just like we fish for salmon; they ate salmon, just like we eat salmon," he said, "and they did wood carving, just like Jerry"—his former stepfather. Enthusiastically, he told his mother he wanted to be just like them. After giving pause, she said, "Well—that's who you are."*

— from Canadian Art Magazine, *Sugar and Grit: Sonny Assu Mixes Cultures*, Tanya Harnett, October 30, 2014

*Home Coming* is a solo exhibition by contemporary artist, Sonny Assu. This survey-style exhibition features specific artworks pertaining to Assu's familial lineage and the Northwest Coast. Assu is Ligwilda'xw (We Wai Kai) of the Kwakwaka'wakw nations and has recently relocated to Campbell River, British Columbia. The exhibition features sculptures, paintings, and digital intervention installation which comprise a spatial exploration of Assu's autobiographical artistic practice.

"Home coming" is defined as a tradition of *welcoming back* in the form of a social gathering to celebrate a return. One might think of parades, dances, costume – celebratory signifiers. Yet another meaning should be considered: home, as such, returning to us, out of the distance, emerging out of the past, out of the manifold distortions wrought by colonialist structures.

How does one conceptualize "home" in 2016? Assu's durational piece, *It's 2016!* cheekily re-visions a pop art Batman slapping his side-kick, Robin. The image incorporates the comic book ben-day dot technique, transformed into Northwest Coast First Nations symbols. The artist will add text to the empty floating speech bubbles with a dry-erase marker over the course of the exhibition. We think of comics, graphic novels, the plastic figures that litter our cross-generational imaginations, the rise of the Marvel blockbuster, bursting with words like POW! KABOOM!, and a lone spot-light shining into the night sky revealing nothing more than a bat symbol.

Rather than exploring the domestic "home", Assu transports figures into outer space and presents ghosts as material objects from the cultural zeitgeist.

Assu's most recent series, *Interventions on the Imaginary* (2014 - ), radicalize art historical paintings through digital intervention, exemplifying the artist's graphic sensibilities and interpretation of Northwest Coast First Nations art aesthetic. Assu notes that such "interventions participate in the growing discourse of decolonization, acting as 'tags' to challenge the colonial fantasy of *terra nullius* and confronting the dominant colonial culture's continued portrayal of Indigenous peoples as a vanishing race." In doing so, famous paintings by A.Y. Jackson, Emily Carr, and Paul Kane are re-contextualized through abstract form-lines reminiscent of the sci-fi ovoid, intended for transportation to---or return from---another world.

Propagated as defining the landscape and figures as "Other," the colonialist gaze is forced to submit to Assu's intervention: the Other is suddenly defiant in the face of heuristic distinctions, and sets upon the tasks of articulating new ways of seeing the future, one's identity in transformation, and redefining the natural as spiritual.

Assu's approach creates a powerful reclamation of the imaginary, as configured through the synesthesia of longing. A future dream in which the artist projects his visions directly into the cosmos. As Afrofuturist musician Sun Ra puts it, "Space is the place".

The artist notes that the *Interventions* series title is a clear reference to Maria Crosby's essay, "Construction of the Imaginary Indian" (2002). Through exposition, she critiques the academy's insistence on discussing Indigeneity, in written Canadian history and visual arts, that continues to place Indigenous peoples and culture within an archive built on resolutely past tense, eurocentric thinking. Crosby demands the non-fictional, non-patriarchal, non-european and non-homogenization contextualization of Indigenous peoples:

*[I]nterest in First Nations by Western civilization is not such a recent phenomenon: it dates back hundreds of years, manifest in many ways: collecting and displaying "Indian" objects and "Indians" as objects or human specimens, constructing pseudo-Indians in literature and the visual arts. This interest extended to dominating or colonizing First Nations people, our cultural images and our land, as well as salvaging, preserving and reinterpreting material fragments of a supposedly dying native culture for Western "art and culture" collections.*

— Giltrow, Janet (ed.), *Academic Reading - Second Edition: Reading and Writing Across Disciplines*, Broadview Press, 2002, 488

The *Longhouse series* (2009 - ) and *Chilkat series* (2009 - ) mirrors Assu's use of abstract design evinced in the *Interventions* series. Included are *#neonsupperclub* (*Longhouse series*, 2011), *erasure* (*Longhouse series*, 2013), *#MuseumSelfie* (*Chilkat series*, 2015), and *Ghost* (*Chilkat series*, 2015).

The *Chilkat series* are large, pentagonal paintings based on Chief Billy Assu's – the artist's great-great-grandfather – ceremonial Chilkat regalia presented to Chief Billy Assu at the time of the political marriage between the Martin family and Assu family in the early 1900s. Continued colonial threats manifest in the die-out of languages, ceremonies and customs, and this marriage signified a resistance against such losses. Sonny Assu draws from his great-great-grandfather's regalia as a symbol of status, reinterpreting the concept in the contemporary by employing a flattened perspective, Northwest Coast design, and abstracted imagery.

The *Longhouse series*, is an earlier exploration which led into the *Chilkat series*, wherein Assu articulated an exercise in abstraction. The works included in *Home Coming* from the *Longhouse Series* offer a visual proposition to the formal aspects of abstract painting and visual communication, specifically in regard to the development and re-creation of language in pre- and post-colonialist Indigenous cultures. Assu imagines the possibilities of contemporary Indigenous symbolism, language and communication had their lives not have been disrupted and destroyed by colonialists.

*#neonsupperclub* (2011) references stories told to the artist of his family traveling to Vancouver to attend then-popular supper clubs during the latter half of the potlatch ban (1884 - 1951). Forbidden to practice this key aspect of their own tradition, Assu's family and community resorted to Western European-sanctioned social practices which they modified to 'fit' their own cultural imperatives of reunion, exchange, and goodwill. The artist directly references this story in the hash-tagged title, seemingly pulled from Twitter or other social media platforms which we, in the contemporary, use to create/communicate our own status. Such reformulations inevitably involve negotiations between past and future, where identity and culture are always under perpetual reconstruction. Throughout formal aspects of the painting we find four colours – black, grey, grey-blue, and red, marked by thin curved and broken lines – intensifying through their articulation a longing for another place and another time: the Vancouver neon-clad streets at night of a bygone era, and the supper club that was a potlatch that was a supper club that was a potlatch...

The thin red line from *#neonsupperclub* (2011) continues

into the installation, *Silenced: The Burning* (2011), formed by sixty-seven painted animal hide drums counting the sixty-seven years of the potlatch ban. The drums, once rhythmic, active, unifiers of community, lay yet-resonant on the floor, waiting. Such transformational processes result in a powerful physical presence, articulating the sonic space through which many generations practiced their culture until suddenly the drums fell silent, muted by colonial rule. We are asked to confront this deafening silence, which reverberates through the gallery space: each year layered upon the next, each labour-intensive construction, one upon the other, each drum a play of surfaces over which representational imagery further evoke objecthood, resistance, and anamnesis -- the intentional act of not-forgetting.

The return home is an act, also, of self-discovery, of knowing oneself by coming to terms with place and with the past. Assu's active forms of lived ancestry weave in and out of Canada's colonial past, marked by it, scribing into it, drawing it out into the open through visual confrontation. And yet the past insists on taking part in the future, making its own incisions in the works, as our governments and academies attempt to reconcile their relationship with Indigenous peoples and cultures after a long history of denial and abuse.

On one such physical return to the artist's ancestral home -- of the traditional territory of the We Wai Kai nation -- Assu's reserve on northeastern Vancouver Island, the artist notes that he stumbled upon a site where his nation had "leased a plot of land, on un-ceded territory, to a company that exploits our resources to assemble log homes to be shipped off to the wealthy around the world." The artist "discovered a unique by-product of this industry: off-cuts that looked remarkably like pre-fabricated Northwest Coast masks." These off-cut wood pieces compose the found-object sculptures of the *Longing* series (2011), consisting of 31 sculptures in total. Included in *Home Coming* are seven works from this series - *Longing #23, #24, #25, #28*, which are borrowed from the Vancouver Art Gallery, and *Longing #20, #26, #30*, which are borrowed from the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. The off-cut reimaged as art object, seven of which are now housed in permanent collections, perched upon museum-quality stands. The installation and chainsaw markings suggest human profiles, reminiscent of traditional bust sculpture, exhibited dramatically and distinct from the main gallery space (located in the Discovery Gallery).

The found object as art object is further expressed through the conceptual sculpture, *The Value of What Goes On Top / The Value of What Goes Within* (2015). Composed of copper and maple, a three-dimensional object that twins the common museum plinth challenges the viewer's expectations of utility, display and art. Its' purpose is no longer about "What Goes On Top" but rather the object itself. Assu notes that "[t]he Kwakwaka'wakw people of [what is known as] British Columbia place conceptual wealth on objects made of copper and maple, elevating these to a higher status through the actions of high-ranking members of their society." Crisp edges, circular elevation, and the simplicity of construction reference traditional sacred practices, wrought by the artist's careful manipulation of these natural materials (copper and maple). Such a minimalist approach serves to conflate the viewer's gaze: while the simple form attempts to contain the viewer-as-witness, to absorb her completely, the materials reflect, breathe, morph. The artist asks, "Could we really contextualize the pre-colonial gaze, given we are yet living within a colonial construct?" The question, in and of itself, is a profound act of decolonization. To invoke decolonial theory, we free ourselves from the colonial subjugation of our art, art history, and conceptual theory.

The works, spanning the artist's portfolio, and the stories from the past and present in *Home Coming* are watched over by two school desks. Installed in the middle of the main gallery space, *Leila's Desk* (2013) and *Inherent* (2014), at once articulate the human form as well as the empty space of human absence. They are each perched upon a low platform, the artist interpolating through his coating the metal in copper leaf, intentional object placement, and carefully performed script. These found object sculptures are part of the Vancouver Art Gallery's Collection, and reference blatant racism directed towards the artist and the artist's grandmother, Leila.

While schools could be places marked in Canada's history as sites of brutal racial and cultural homogenization, they are here spoken of also as places where young people engage one another, learn, and reflect on society's teachings. Both-at-once. Neither-nor. Indignity and self-effacement reworked into knowledge of self, of one's culture, of a history re-told.

*Inherent's* 1960s desk is opened, revealing the scripted word "chug" painted on the inside. The work is derived from a confrontation between Assu and a fellow student wherein this derogatory term was uttered. As seen in other works in *Home Coming*, the artist reclaims agency through abstracted mark making, here in the tag-like script of the word.

In aesthetic contrast, we are also presented with *Leila's Desk*, a 1930's school desk modified with copper leaf and a Lifebuoy soap-box sitting atop. The desk's design is immediately evocative of the time period. The soap is included as a gleaming reminder of the colonial fear of bodily dirt and odour in a culture obsessed with ritualized cleaning. The work is powerful in its' very presence, but is amplified through Leila's story. Concurrent to the number of children sent to residential schools between the 1930s and 1996, *Leila's Desk* is a tribute to Assu's grandmother's experience on her first day of high school, where a fellow student left a box of Lifebuoy soap on her desk. Admitted to "regular" high school, Leila's excitement was forever tarnished with the indication that she was "nothing more than a dirty little Indian."

The viewer is charged with the task of acknowledging the racism experienced over many generations, within this and many other communities.

*Home Coming* teems with the challenging and resonant works by Sonny Assu, ideations that once more turn up in the historical moment, manifest as large images, drums, school desks, de-facto masks: physical forms assiduously culled from autobiography and family stories to divert forever the colonialist gaze. Assu brings wry humour to bear on his exploration of personal/public history, wherein his family and culture underwent consistent negation.

To see, with fresh eyes, through the decolonialist gaze means on occasion to abandon our own invented histories. This absenting ourselves from familiarity is made possible by *Home Coming*, a rare and powerful opportunity for re-visioning. As a means of inviting discussion, Assu invites all gallery patrons to come home, and take part in the larger conversation of whom we consider ourselves to be.

Because sometimes we can't see everything by standing in one place.

## B I O G R A P H Y

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### SONNY ASSU (b. 1975)

Through museum interventions, large-scale installations, sculpture, photography, printmaking and paintings, Sonny Assu merges the aesthetics of Indigenous iconography with a pop art sensibility in an effort to address contemporary, political and ideological issues. His work often focuses on Indigenous issues and rights, and the ways in which the past has come to inform contemporary ideas and identities. Assu infuses his work with wry humour to open the dialogue towards the use of consumerism, branding and technology as totemic representation. Within this, his work deals with the loss of language and cultural resources, and the effects of colonization upon the Indigenous people of North America.

His work has been accepted into the National Gallery of Canada, Seattle Art Museum, Vancouver Art Gallery, Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Burke Museum at the University of Washington, Hydro Quebec, Lotto Quebec, The Audain Museum and in various other public and private collections across Canada, the United States and the UK.

Assu is Ligwilda'xw (We Wai Kai) of the Kwakwaka'wakw nations. He graduated from Emily Carr University (2002) and was the recipient of their distinguished alumni award in 2006. He received the BC Creative Achievement Award in First Nations art in 2011 and was long-listed for the Sobey Art Award in 2012, 2013 and 2015. Assu is an MFA candidate at Concordia University.

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