

CALEB STOCKHAM

Sonny Assu: A Fresh Perspective on the World of Contemporary Art

Native American art has previously been out of the traditional scope of the art world; only recently has it begun to truly make its transition from the world of anthropology museums into the western contemporary art discourse. Even with this advancement and placement into the realm of contemporary art, most Native American art is grouped with the other worldly arts such as African, Meso-American, and Oceanic art; these world arts are often excluded from the galleries dedicated to the display of contemporary art. One artist has found a way to bypass this trend. Artist Sonny Assu, a Ligwilda'xw of the Kwakwaka'wakw nations melds the artistic traditions of his Ligwilda'xw background with contemporary art practices. His vibrant paintings link back to his First Nations heritage by combining Kwakwaka'wakw style with contemporary subject matter and materials. His paintings often adorn animal hide drums providing a sculptural aspect for Assu to explore as well as creating another link back to his Kwakwaka'wakw culture. By working in both the Native American and western contemporary art discourses, Assu has a chance to educate people about the struggles of the Kwakwaka'wakw people and ignite change within the Pacific Northwest Coast communities. The works of Sonny Assu spark conversation about First Nation peoples as well as pose important questions surrounding their history and treatment. Assu explores the role of the artist as an educator, the perpetuation of socio-cultural values of Native American people, and the function of totemic representation in the contemporary context. These central ideas shape his work and offer an important perspective on the concerns of contemporary indigenous artists.

Born in 1975, Assu was raised by his grandparents in a suburb of Vancouver until the age of seven (Assu, *Personal Totems* 137). He became interested in the arts after high school and attended Emily Carr University in Vancouver, where he started his artistic practice, graduating in 2002. Assu continues to show in Vancouver's gallery art scene as well as

exhibiting extensively throughout North America. Currently, Assu is a Master of Fine Arts candidate at Concordia University in Montreal (Assu, “Biography”). His work spans a variety of mediums; sculptural and installation works are Assu’s main focus, but digital practice has continued to be a common part of his art (Assu, Interview). Assu’s work is collected by many art institutions such as the National Gallery of Canada, the Seattle Museum of Art and the Vancouver Gallery of Art, to name a few (Assu, “Biography”). In addition to museum holdings and gallery shows, Assu’s work is held in private collections around the world. He is from the We Wai Kai nation, which is Ligwilda’xw of the Kwakwaka’wakw First Nations Native American group. These roots play an important role in his practice and can be seen most easily through Assu’s incorporation of Kwakwaka’wakw formline and design elements. The hardships endured by the Ligwilda’xw and other First Nations are embedded in his works, waiting to be seen and to spark critical conversations between viewers. His bright paintings combine the single line style and the use of ovoids (traditional First Nations symbolism and stylistic elements) with contemporary themes and materials. His work relies on the interplay between his tradition and contemporary culture to spark interest and raise awareness.

The Kwakwaka’wakw are one of the predominant indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest coast. The term “indigenous” or First Nations is used to describe the Native Americans who populated the Northwest coast of what is now known as Canada. The Kwakwaka’wakw tribe gathered their initial wealth through their trade of abundant natural resources such as salmon and cedar (The National Museum of the American Indian). The central festival of the Kwakwaka’wakw is known as the potlatch. Potlatch ceremonies are large gift giving celebrations held on many different occasions to celebrate births, commemorate deaths, and to pass down traditions from one generation to the next (The National Museum of the American Indian). These celebrations unite multiple, families, generations and villages. They combine feasts, speeches, dances, song, and gift giving. Potlatches could take years to plan. Wealthy families held them in their homes, known as big houses, and the festivals

were known to last for weeks. Potlatch hosts provided their guests with all sorts of gifts ranging from expensive “coppers” and Hudson Bay blankets to canoes and bentwood boxes. Contemporary potlatches distribute household objects such as toasters or silverware and art. To the Kwakwaka’wakw, the act of obtaining wealth is important, but another important aspect of wealth is the ability to give it away. It is not only those who can obtain great wealth, but those who also freely offer it during the elaborate potlatches who are considered truly wealthy. This ritual often would lead to tribal leaders from different villages competing to see how much they could give away and how large of a potlatch celebration they could hold (The National Museum of the American Indian). This idea, that wealth is based on how much you can give away, is contrary to the western and colonial concept of wealth in all western cultures where it is primarily a measure of how much an individual can obtain.

The Kwakwaka’wakw were not free from the influences of Western culture. As time passed the Kwakwaka’wakw people were urged to drop some of their beliefs in order to assimilate with the predominant Western culture. When assimilation was not happening as fast as Western officials would have liked, the urging evolved into force. In 1876 the Indian Act was passed, a set of laws aimed at forcing the population to assimilate into Western culture by prohibiting the practice of First Nation spirituality and language. The Indian Act, though amended many times, is still in place today. The National Museum of the American Indian states that the lawmakers at the time “saw native culture as a threat” (The National Museum of the American Indian). This perception was likely because lawmakers saw natives as uncivilized and possibly dangerous, a viewpoint that was placed upon them since first contact. To combat this “threat” the Canadian Government passed the Indian Act in attempt to force the indigenous people to assimilate and, in their minds, to eliminate it. The laws made many of the native traditions of the Kwakwaka’wakw (and other First Nations) illegal. Most harmful to the Kwakwaka’wakw was the potlatch ban an amendment to the Indian Act added in 1884. It reads: “Every Indian or other person who engages in or assists in

celebrating the Indian festival known as the potlatch or in the Indian dance Tamanawas is guilty of a misdemeanor and shall be liable to punishment” (The National Museum of the American Indian). The enactment of this law made it illegal to practice one of the main rituals of Kwakwaka’wakw culture. This law damaged the First Nations immensely; the potlatch ban was in force until 1951, a total of sixty-seven years. (The National Museum of the American Indian). This ban cut off the main networking festival of the Kwakwaka’wakw. Two generations of children were kept from engaging in native cultural practices that would have reinforced their sense of identity and community. Moreover, the effects of the potlatch ban lasted for years after it was revoked, thanks in part to the continuation of the Indian Act. Many of the Kwakwaka’wakw were afraid to organize these festivals. Many of the younger population had no real grasp of what a true potlatch celebration was because they never had a chance to experience it firsthand. Even during the potlatch ban (1884-1951), many individuals who dared fight against this legislation and continue their cultural practices were arrested and imprisoned (The National Museum of the American Indian). The preservation of the potlatch in spite of these adversities shows the commitment of the Kwakwaka’wakw people to their cultural practices. Assu reveals the long and troubled history of the Kwakwaka’wakw people and other First Nations groups and consolidates their cultural practices.

Assu adopts the role of an educator to disseminate information on the harmful effects of colonization, particularly in relation to the Kwakwaka’wakw, but in regards to all indigenous people in Canada and the US as well. This role stems from how he was educated about his culture. After being inspired by a lesson on the Kwakwaka’wakw in grade school when he was just eight years old, his mother revealed to him that he shares a common connection to the Kwakwaka’wakw art and culture. This inspired him to run home with excitement and share what he had learned. Assu himself writes: “I was just a white kid from the burbs although living in the city, playing cowboys and Indians in the alley, blissfully unaware that I was a double agent” (Assu, *Personal Totems* 139). After learning of his heritage, Assu

continued his research and discovered the long and troubled history of his people. He was often angered by some of the actions the dominating culture took in order to “eliminate the threat” of his people. Through his work, Assu tries to make a connection to the viewer. He says “I think that someone who might not know the traditional roots of my work or might not know what a potlatch is will be challenged to go and learn about it... that is where I feel my work is successful, it’s not only aesthetically pleasing, but it challenges the viewers to take it upon themselves and to educate themselves because they might not know the true history of the treatment of the First Peoples of North Americas” (Baxley). This is a stance that many contemporary artists hold. It represents hope that their work will inspire the viewer to go out and delve deeper into the concepts they are exploring. This is a stance that is especially important for contemporary artists with ancestry similar to Assu’s. By discussing his own lineage and combining it with the contemporary culture in which he grew up, Assu can bring forth the troubled history of his people in a very subtle way. Through the lens of education, Assu can show the reality of the censure against his people to the public, a knowledge that may have been previously hidden.

Assu is actively involved in public education programs throughout Vancouver. From time to time, Assu works at his former school, Emily Carr, and helps inspire students in the aboriginal program (Baxley). Assu believes it is important to discuss his artwork and often lectures at universities where he discusses the themes, symbolism and messages that he crafts into his bright and impactful works. In addition, Assu has been involved with many publicly commissioned works such as his poster series *Reconciliation* (Figure 1). This series was commissioned by the City of Vancouver Public Art program for bus shelters throughout the city for its year of Reconciliation in order to inspire all “Learn, Rise, and Lead” (Assu, *Reconciliation*). Assu states that, “I do call on all people, all Canadians, to stand up and learn about Canada’s hidden history. To invoke that famous Canadian compassion and step up, learn about the past, rise and lead into a better future.” (Assu, Interview) Assu sees the importance

of his work and the power that it has to incite change as many artists before him have. He states “I feel contemporary art is relevant to help push the culture forward... It’s a way of helping our culture grow and develop [and] it helps us as First Nations people reclaim our culture for ourselves” (Baxley). This ideology extends through Assu’s art practice, with many of the works calling for change but also aiming to educate the viewer.

This concept of the artist as educator is also at the core of the *Silenced* series created by Assu in 2011 (Figure 2). Assu paints elk hide drums with his unique take on Kwakwaka’wakw tradition. He covers them with the fluid, intertwining ovoid designs of Kwakwaka’wakw tradition. Assu arranged these drums in stacked form highlighting the disuse and the silence of their pounding for the sixty-seven years of the potlatch ban (Assu, *Silenced*). One can imagine they were stacked in storage somewhere longing to be played. The stacking of the drums was also a conscious connection by Assu linking to the history of Hudson Bay blankets. Throughout the series, marks reminiscent of the size markings on the Hudson Bay blankets adorn many of the drums (McDonald 109). Hudson Bay blankets were a very common trade material throughout the Northwest Coast; they often featured small markings on the side to indicate the size and quality of the blankets. By stacking the painted drums and including the size markings, Assu is mirroring what the blankets looked like when placed out for sale. Assu includes these to show another side of the purging of his people, what he refers to as a “forgotten genocide” (Baxley). Hudson Bay blankets led to the spread of Western diseases such as smallpox to the indigenous peoples, causing a large portion of the native population to die (McDonald 109). In this series, Assu tells the history of the potlatch ban. Assu describes it best when he says: “it’s not just about my family, it’s about the fact that all first people in Canada couldn’t practice their customs, speak their language, practice their religion or spirituality from 1884-1951... that is recent history...this is something my grandmother lived through.” (Baxley). This piece brings to light many of the hardships endured by the Kwakwaka’wakw, but does so in a subtle way through the inclusion of the Hudson Bay markings and the symbolically stacked drums.

These elements urge the casual viewer to ask questions and reflect on how these objects convey the actual history of indigenous people.

Coke Salish (Figure 3) illustrates Assu's views on the role of art as a media to educate (Assu, *Coke Salish*). This work was conceived of when Vancouver was awarded the 2010 Winter Olympics in 2003. It served as a reminder that visitors from all over the world would not only be coming to Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, but would be on Coast Salish Territory (Assu, *Personal Totems* 152). The piece has the familiar font and colors of the Coca-Cola logo, an element of branding that is easily recognizable in all corners of the world. Assu used this sign to grab the visitor's attention. Once the visitor discovered that this was not an ordinary Coke sign, the true intent of the work was revealed. Assu describes the work, saying: "I created this piece to speak to the notion that the Games, and the world, will be visiting Coast Salish territory—a reminder that the land and the original people need to be respected" (Assu, *Personal Totems* 152). After seeing the piece many visitors were incited to learn exactly what Coast Salish is and to respect the territory and its people.

Another central theme illustrated in Assu's work is the notion of idealism. Assu's ideal would be a world where his people were not put through the hardships that they have endured due to colonization. In many of his recent works, Assu explores the idea of what the art of the Kwakwaka'wakw people would look like today if it had not come into contact with the assimilating forces of the settlers and had continued to evolve (Baxley). Assu does this by adopting current pop culture elements and reimagining them through the lens of the Kwakwaka'wakw style of flowing curves and ovoid forms. The perpetuation of the traditional style as used by Assu shows his true reverence to his past and the many who came before him. The works that follow Assu's idea of idealism complement his practice as an educator teaching about the hardships of his culture. These works show a celebration of the Kwakwaka'wakw people and the elegance and craft of their art.

The *#selfie* series (Figure 4) illustrates Assu's form of idealism. Here Assu comments on the contemporary practice of taking selfies and shows how the Kwakwaka'wakw would incorporate this exercise into their traditional style (Assu, *#selfie*). The works are paintings made on handmade elk skin drums, recurrent components of Assu's works. Instead of the traditional folklore imagery that typically decorates these drums, they are painted with abstract depictions in the traditional formline style, using ovoids and single line drawing techniques. The formline style in itself is an abstraction, Assu plays with these abstractions and abstracts further, a practice he has coined as "abstraction of abstraction" (Assu, Interview). The works are realized in a palette of flesh tones ranging from peaches to whites to browns (Assu, *#selfie*). As one views the pieces, smiles, faces, and bodies seem to emerge from the painted forms. The titles also allude to the intended subject matter with names like *#selfie* and *Do You Want To See My Status card, #selfie* (Assu, *#selfie*). Assu aims to make a statement about the duality of the term "status" with this series. Historically "status" referred to one's social standing in relation to class and social hierarchy. Contemporary status can be described in a purely social sphere by people creating large amounts of social status simply by taking selfies and sharing images of one's breakfast. Assu relates to this practice through his *#selfie* series and continues to explore the term "status" throughout his continuing series.

Assu's idea about the duality of status continues in his newer *Chilkat* series (Figure 5). Like the *#selfie* series, the *Chilkat* paintings depict contemporary subject matter in the same Northwest Coast style. The images in this series have a pentagonal format inspired by traditional Chilkat blankets of the Tlingit tribes of the Northwest Coast (Assu, *Chilkat Series*). The Chilkat robe form is important to Assu: his great-great-grandfather was Chief Billy Assu who was given a Chilkat robe after the marriage of one of his sons by the wife's parents (Assu interview). The robe itself was intended as a symbol of status, presented to the Chief as a sign of respect. By integrating subject matter and references to popular culture themes, such as Angry Birds (*#angrybirds*), Twitter (*tweetblast*), and Facebook (*status update*) these works

continue the exploration of status in contemporary Western society (Assu, *Chilkat Series*). These works utilize the status suggested by the historical Chilkat form and replace the content with subjects that were matters of great social status at the time. The interplay between the dual definitions of status is on full display. This causes the viewer to question why things like Twitter and Facebook hold such a place in their society. Much in the way that his great-great-grandfather was gifted a Chilkat robe, one can imagine that these new status holding companies and ideas could be gifted through Assu's interpretations. The pieces are all made up of bright colors that pop from the page, seeming to relate in another way to contemporary advertising and media, which in turn helps proliferate these newfound social status symbols. These works also seem to suggest how younger generations of Kwakwaka'wakw artists can take advantage of social media and visual codes to popularize their traditions.

The idea of integrating the aesthetics and themes of popular culture into the work of the traditional Kwakwaka'wakw style is a key preoccupation for Assu and he believes that branding and totemic representation have a similar function (Assu, *Personal Totems* 147). In the Kwakwaka'wakw society, each family has a crest that is used by this family and this family alone (The National Museum of the American Indian). Any uses of this crest or its imagery, in totem poles, stories, or even in spoken word, must be approved by the family. This crest allows the families to communicate their sense of pride. For Assu, Western cultures' love of branding fulfills similar purposes. He states that "We grow up with these brand affiliations from birth. They could be electronics, they could be clothing, anything" (Thom). As in the Kwakwaka'wakw culture, these brands become more than just an image; they can become a lifestyle. Today people literally wear their brand loyalties on their sleeve, thus declaring their allegiance to them.

The main work that showcases Assu's idea of totemic representation is the *iDrum* series (Figure 6), which comprises acrylic paintings on animal hide drums constructed by the artist (Assu, *iDrum*). This incorporation of natural materials and methods extends throughout

many of his works. The paintings that adorn the traditional drum forms are in the single line style of the Kwakwaka'wakw and other Northwest Coast nations. The paintings feature Kwakwaka'wakw stylized iPods and ear buds on vivid backgrounds. These backgrounds represent the space in which the iPods are used; other times they represent the user of the iPod. The ear buds wrap around the drums, breaking up the surface of the drum and adding a visual flow to the piece. The bright colors that adorn many of the pieces in this series create a dynamic feeling within the pieces. These drums, while being contemporary in both mediums and style, could still be used in Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonies (Assu, *iDrum*). Unlike other drums from the Northwest Coast that have seemingly traditional depictions such as the raven and eagle or other clan based figures, these drums are adorned with iPods, a key item at present in terms of brand recognition and commercialism. By invoking iPods, Assu compares the clan structure and family ties to the images of the raven and the eagle to the ideas that current society has about branding. Assu states: "What we own dictates our lineage" (Assu, *Personal Totems* 139). His belief is that what we choose to buy and whom we choose to buy products from is highly important in today's society. He says: "I'll even admit that I am part of that conformity. For those immersed in the pop culture aesthetic, choosing a particular brand to represent yourself is a way to communicate to the world where your affiliations lie... in essence, it's choosing conformity to speak for individuality" (Assu, *Personal Totems* 146). Assu continues to explore the comparison of the iPod to the traditional totemic method of representation throughout his works. He highlights the fact that contemporary culture and the culture of his Kwakwaka'wakw ancestors share significant similarities.

Sonny Assu offers a unique perspective on the potential syncretism between Native American culture and Western popular culture. By combining traditional Kwakwaka'wakw art imagery with subject matter drawn from contemporary culture, Assu provides a new pathway into learning about the Native American culture and the hardships endured by the Kwakwaka'wakw people. Through his art, Assu has educated many who may have been blind

to the threats posed to his culture and many other First Nations cultures as a result of the oppressive impact and harsh assimilation policies of the dominating culture. Assu imagines a future where his culture is alive and thriving because it did not come into contact with the colonial forces that forced its suppression. He subversively suggests that Western cultures have in fact come to rely on totemic representation characteristics of First Nations culture given its extensive use of branding strategies. Assu offers a fresh perspective on global cultural representation and the world of Native American art. Ultimately Assu puts it best when he says, “I don’t want to refer to myself as an ‘Indian artist’; [an] ‘Aboriginal artist’; a ‘First Nations artist’, or a ‘Native American artist.’ I just want to be an artist...I want to be able to be able to push the perceptions of what is Aboriginal/Indian/North American Indian art, I want to blow those perceptions out of the water” (Baxley). This is something that Assu has achieved. Assu is an important force in the world of art in general; he defies boundaries and slips between any labels that are imposed upon his practice. His art not only educates, but also calls for socio-cultural change and emphasizes the value of Kwakwaka’wakw heritage.



Figure 1

Reconciliation

For the City of Vancouver Public Art Program

Photo: Lila Bujald Photography.

Courtesy of the Artist and the Equinox Gallery

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Figure 2

Top: *Silenced #1*, 2011.

Acrylic on Elk-Hide Drums

Bottom: *Silenced: The Burning*, 2011

Acrylic on Elk-Hide Drums

Photos: Scott Massey, Site Photography.

Courtesy of the Artist and the Equinox Gallery

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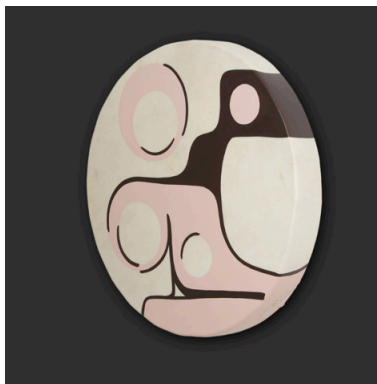
Figure 3

Coke Salish, 2006
 Duratrans and Lightbox,
 24" x 35"

Photo: Chris Meier.

Courtesy of the Artist and the Equinox Gallery

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Left: *#selfie*, 2013
 Acrylic on Elk-Hide
 22" Diameter



Right: *Do You Want To See My Status card*, *#selfie*, 2013
 Acrylic on Elk-Hide
 22" Diameter

Figure 4

Photo: Dayna Danger. Courtesy of the Artist

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Figure 5

Top: *#AngryBirds*, 2011

Acrylic on Panel

84" x 48"

Photo: Dayna Danger.

Courtesy of the Artist ©Sonny Assu

Bottom: *#TweetBlast*, 2011

Acrylic on Panel, 84" x 48"

Photo: Equinox Gallery.

Courtesy of the Artist and the Equinox Gallery

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Figure 6
Personal Totems 1 & 2, 2007
Sonny Assu
Acrylic on Deer Hide
16" Diameter
Photo: Chris Meier.
Courtesy of the Artist and the Equinox Gallery
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