

Defying the Limits

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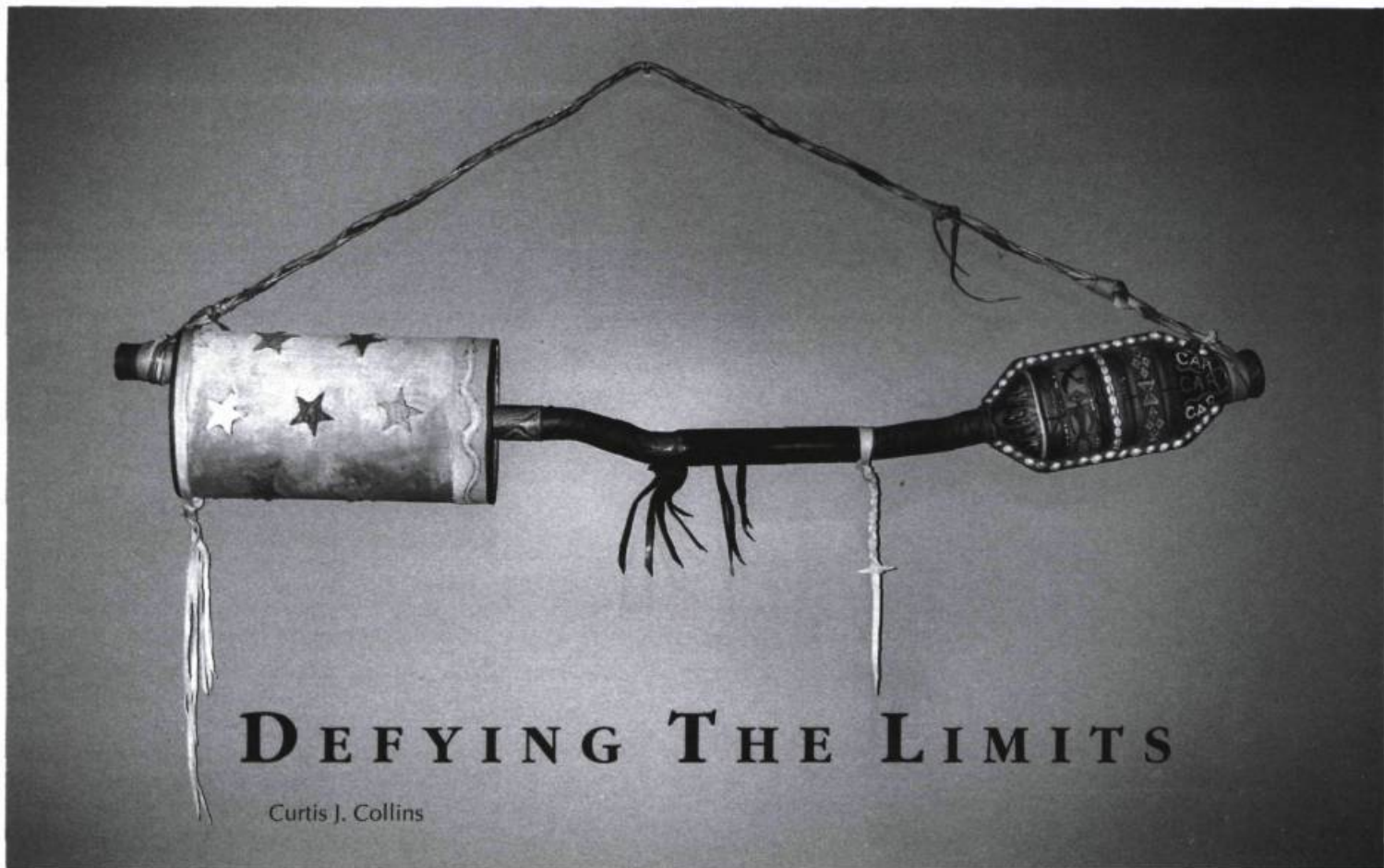
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DEFYING THE LIMITS

Curtis J. Collins

"For art is the product of mind and imagination. Like mercury it is an elusive substance that one cannot easily seize. Like taste and smell, again, it cannot well be explained. The wigwam, the canoe, and the Indian are facts, not objects of imagination... Where, therefore, if not to the aboriginal, should one look for the sources of art in Canada? The aboriginal we here credit with but little artistic accomplishment in the modern sense."¹

▲
 Jimmie Durham, *Bedia's Muffler*, 1985. Metal, leather, plastic, other mixed materials. Photo Credit: Brian E. Roy.

▶
 Ron Noganosh, *Does Anyone Know What Time It is?*, 1989. Wood, metal, plastic, acrylic, paper, bone, leather, glass. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada collection. Photo Credit: Brian E. Roy.

The marginalization of Indian art is deeply rooted in this country's aesthetic traditions, a situation which is slowly being reversed as Canada adopts a more pluralistic vision of its cultural identity. Rejecting the narrow Eurocentric model of art history is essential to this process of expanding the definition of art, ultimately leading to a greater appreciation of our cultural diversity as a nation. The advent of post-modern sculpture by artists of Indian ancestry is a vital development in Canada's art history, for it is the result of an alternative approach to the production of art.

First Nations sculpture that defied the limits of Western as well as Non-Western aesthetic traditions blossomed in Canada during the 1980's, and is playing a critical role in the re-interpretation of contemporary art in the 1990's. It exists in an enigmatic world that forces the observer to revise her/his perceptions of sculpture, and cultivate a broader view of Canadian art. Therefore, it is not surprising that examples of this provocative three dimensional art were exhibited concurrently in two of this country's major cultural institutions.

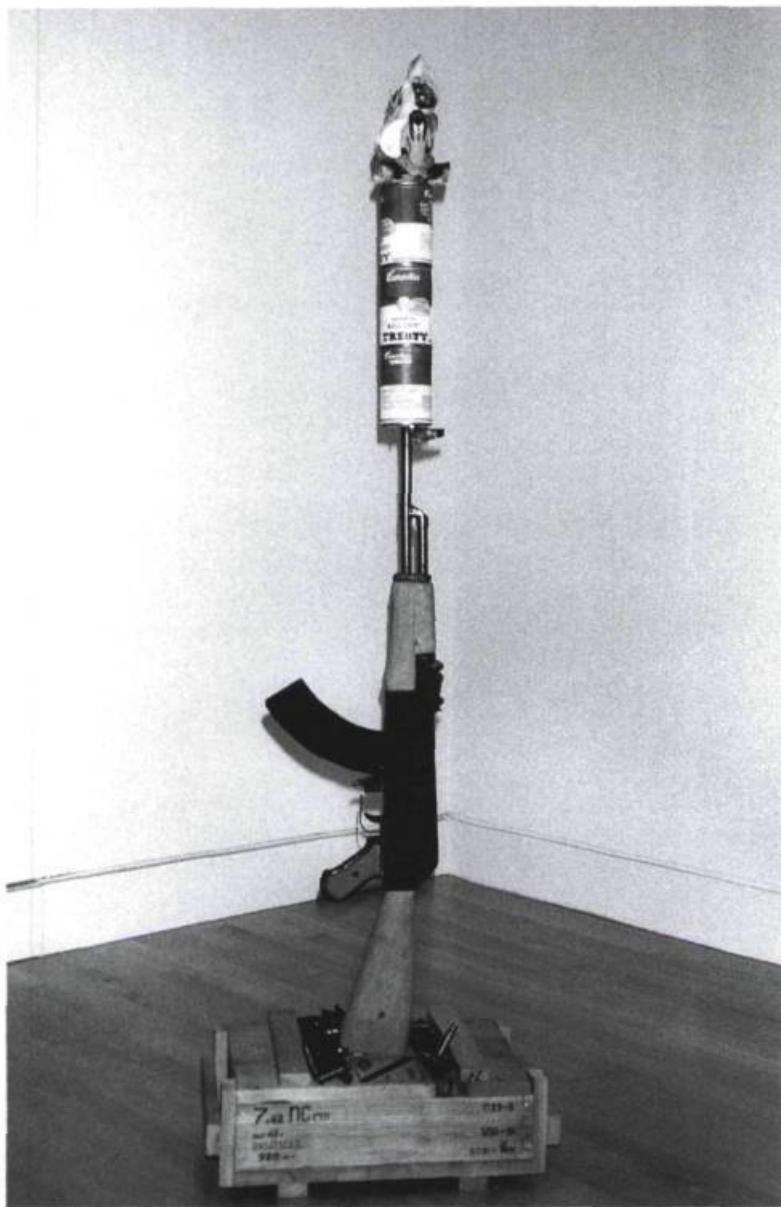
The *Strengthening the Spirit* exhibition featured thirty works of art by sixteen Native artists at the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) in Ottawa, from

November 9, 1991 to February 2, 1992, while in Hull the art of Robert Houle and Jimmie Durham was exhibited together at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) from November 14, 1991 to March 15, 1992. The disparate mandates of each institution serve to underline the paradoxical status contemporary Native art has recently achieved, and the sculptural works in each respective exhibition attest to the inherent limitations of traditional art history.

Since its inception in 1880, the National Gallery of Canada's mandate has been based upon traditional Eurocentric ideals, and it is only recently that this institution has become more responsive to an expanded view of art history. Sculptures and paintings produced in the 20th century by people of Native ancestry were long considered as aesthetically irrelevant by the Gallery², a belief sanctioned by this nation's art historians.

"Contemporary works by First Nations artists in Canada are alien to Euro-Canadians, who have dealt with them by denying them contemporary relevance, interpreting their message as the revival of legends and mores from a nearly forgotten past."³

However, the intolerance of the Canadian art world is slowly dissolving, and the *Strengthening the Spirit* exhibition represents a genuine effort by the



National Gallery to present a more comprehensive perspective on this country's art history.

Located in the NGC's Contemporary Art Galleries, the show presents a collection of recent works by Native artists from across Canada. Ron Noganosh's *What Time Is It Now?* (1989), is comprised of an assault rifle standing upright on a wooden base littered with cartridges. Balanced on the end of the weapon's barrel are three soup cans stacked one atop the other. One of the red and white Canada's soup cans (parody of the Campbell's logo) bares the title *Cream of Bullshit Treaty*, while the ingredients of a second read "land grabs, lies, cheating, hate, murder, hypocrisy, absolutely no truth", and the third can's instructions for cooking are "pit one tribe against another, simmer forever, patronize, dish out endlessly".

The Ojibway artist Noganosh's political message

is aimed directly at the inequitable history of Canada's Native/White relations, and his anger is tempered only by the novelty of his materials. The reclamation of objects is integral to North American aesthetics, and the artist manipulates products which relate to his position in a 20th century society that is dominated by Western ideals.

"We're a society that likes to throw things away and I don't like to see it, so I use it. I pick up off the street, along the rivers, or wherever I find it. I re-use it."⁴

The artist's use of everyday articles also relates to American Pop art trends of the 1960's, which utilized common commercial products as source material.

Modern art principles have exercised an important function in the development of contemporary Native sculpture, however this art form is impossible to define from a purely Western perspective. It maintains a diversity which transcends the dominant society's homogeneous conception of Native North American culture, and exercises a heterogeneous approach to the varied aesthetic traditions of this continent. Domingo Cisneros' *Moon Beast* (1988), possesses a shamanic energy which reflects the Tepehuane ancestry of its creator. The 60 centimeter high sculpture, in the National Gallery exhibition, renews the spirit of an immortal creature which

wanders through the forests of Mount Laurier, Quebec vandalizing the traps of local hunters. An information panel accompanying the bone, hair, fur, wood, and burlap being recounts the legend of the three legged Moon Beast, and breathes life into Cisneros's creation.

Cisneros has played a crucial role in the evolution of contemporary Indian sculpture as an artist and teacher. He was an instructor of Native arts at Manitou College in Quebec during the 1970's, and exhibits regularly in Canada.

"There is no name for this kind of art as of yet. Due to the nature of the materials, there is an immediate tendency to label it *primitive* or *ethnic*. It is neither of these. The origins of all of us, physical and artistic, lie in nature. I think a bear, or a bird, is as contemporary and as cross-cultural as an automobile."⁵

Moonbeast effortlessly travels between the post-

modern and ancient worlds, communicating with people from a multitude of cultures. The alternative values of this art form, and its pluralistic application of North American and European aesthetics place it in the forefront of avant-garde sculpture in Canada.

The mandate of the Canadian Museum of Civilization is the examination of culture, and the works of Jimmie Durham and Robert Houle are a reflection of contemporary Native North American society. The placement of post-modern art within the context of an institution that specializes in the exhibition of historical artifacts is problematic. However, the contrast between Houle's and Durham's works in the Indian and Inuit Art Gallery and forty weather vanes from the Museum's collection in the Arts and Traditions Hall, encourages a more pluralistic awareness of artistic production. The situating of these two artists in the CMC verifies the culturally specific character of contemporary Indian sculpture, and its direct relation to ancient aboriginal aesthetics. Durham and Houle are the descendants of this continent's original people, and their art represents the current state of First Nations society.

The Bishop's Moose and the Pinkerton Men exhibition in the Indian and Inuit Gallery featured a collection of sculptures and works on paper by Jimmie Durham. The American born artist is of Cherokee heritage, and one is tempted to define his art as a product of the United States. Durham's close ties with the New York City art scene have had a profound influence on his work, however pieces such as *Bedia's Muffler* (1985), transcend the national borders established by European colonists. It attests to a North American aesthetic that is distinctly Indian, revealing a culture that has survived the struggles of earthly existence.

The multi-coloured painted muffler is adorned with shells, hide, images, and feathers. This artist successfully transforms a common object from our post-modern society into a specific symbol of his

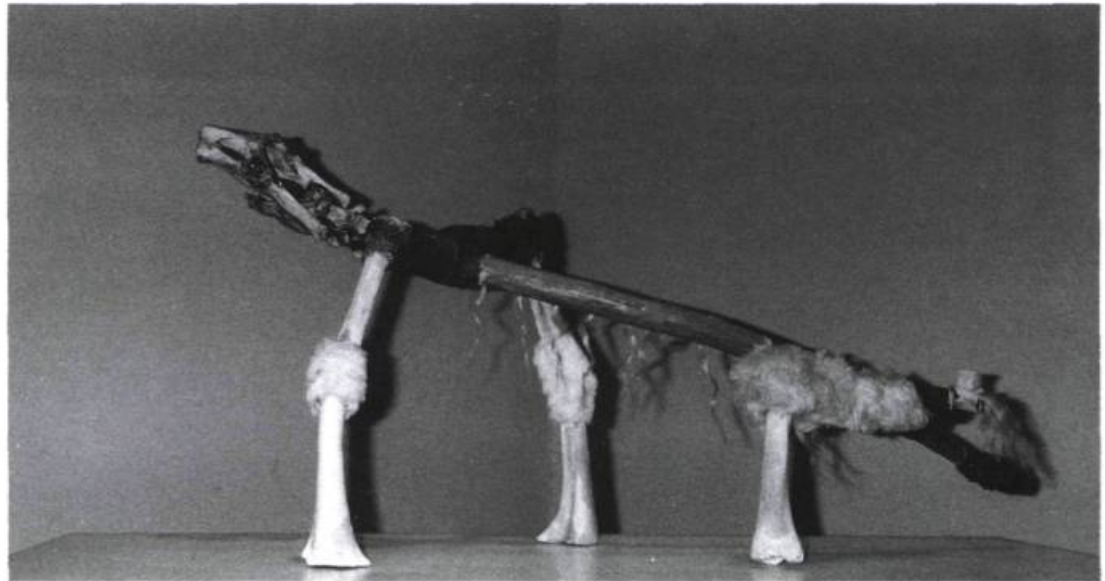
Native ancestry.

"...everything I do has an Indian context. To me that's a perfectly good role for an Indian artist, to look at this system, to talk about this system."⁶

Bedia's Muffler represents an artifact from a mysterious futuristic tribe which is discovered by the fictitious archaeologist Jose Bedia in 3026 AD. The fetish-like piece was assumed to be a product of the Plane White people, however Bedia determined that it belonged to an ancient Indian culture. The muffler with its hide strap is Durham's concept of a legendary bow or musical instrument from a lost people. Its myth relates to the actual history of Indian aesthetics, which have endured centuries of misinterpretation and marginalization.

Indians from A to Z examines the tragedies experienced by Native North Americans, as well as celebrating the beauty of their distinct artistic traditions. The travelling exhibition of paintings and sculptures by Robert Houle, organized by the Winnipeg Art Gallery, was featured with Durham's show in the Museum's Indian and Inuit Art Gallery. Houle is a leading force in the Native art community as an artist, curator, and teacher. He served as curator of Contemporary Indian Art at the National Museum of Man⁷ in Ottawa from 1977 to 1980.

Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians from A to Z, (1985) is composed of twenty-six parfleches neatly arranged on a wooden ledge affixed to the gallery's wall. The parfleche was originally used by ancient Plains Indians as a receptacle for its owner's power objects and ceremonial talismen. Houle renews the form of the parfleche within the context of post-modern sculpture, utilizing the same materials as his ancestors. Each rawhide piece is adorned with a letter from the Roman alphabet from A to Z, which correspond to the first letter of the aboriginal peoples' names stencilled on the ledge. The strictly ordered composition of the sculpture mocks European anthropological practises of categorizing cultures, and the narrow manner in which Native people have been defined by Western books. The Saulte aux artist Houle attempts to rescue tribal identities which have been lost or have se-



verely eroded in the 20th century due to the imposition of foreign ideals.

Houle's use of North American aesthetic traditions is complimented by his deft treatment of contemporary art practices in this conceptual assault on the detrimental effects of White contact upon the First Nations. Swatches and splatters of brightly coloured acrylic—paint on each parfleche serve as the artist's personal vocabulary of symbols, and communicate his association with the tenets of American Post-Painterly Abstraction. Houle's unique combination of diverse artistic conventions in *Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians from A to Z* characterizes the vitality of contemporary Indian sculpture, and affirms its position as an important factor in the development of post-modern Canadian art.

"The exclusion of contemporary Native art from the mainstream as a result of its specificity continues to relegate and subjugate one to marginality. And to recognize that acrimony is to give the artist the freedom to be sovereign from dictums and rhetoric. It is conceivable that two seemingly diametrically opposed polemics can be harmonized."⁸

The art of Ron Noganosh, Domingo Cisneros, Jimmie Durham, and Robert Houle emerges from the consolidation of North American and European aesthetic traditions. Contemporary Native sculpture's pluralistic nature defies the limits of traditional Western art analysis, and challenges the practice of exclusion that has dominated Canada's art history. It is imperative that this art form be considered within an expanded view of our nation's diverse aesthetic history, as a culturally specific contribution to post-modern art. A broader understanding of art and culture is gradually being validated by institutions such as the National Gallery of Canada and the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and this process must continue in order to eliminate the narrow aesthetic perceptions that linger within the Canadian identity.

"The marvelously vital and inventive Inuit and Indian artists, for example, are not here; in my judgement they do not influence, and are not influenced by, most of the artists this book features. Inuit and Indian art need to be treated separately, as they often are..."⁹ •

- 1 MacTavish, Newton. *The Fine Arts in Canada*. (Toronto: MacMillan Company of Canada Ltd., 1925), p. 3.
- 2 Contemporary Native art was not exhibited at the National Gallery of Canada until the 1987 *Cross Cultural Viewsshow*. The NGC's first purchase of contemporary art by an artist of Native ancestry took place in 1986 with the acquisition of Carl Beam's *The North American Iceberg*.
- 3 Podeworny, Carol. *First nations Art and the Canadian Mainstream*, C magazine, (Fall 1991), p. 29.
- 4 Noganosh, Ron. *Will the Canoe Ever Look the Same?*, *Artscraft*, (Winter 1990), p. 15.
- 5 Cisneros, Domingo. *New Work By A New Generation*. Regina: Norman MacKenzie Art Gallery, (July 9 to August 29, 1982), p. 23.
- 6 Durham, Jimmie. *The Bishop's Moose and the Pinkerton Men*. New York: Exit Art, (November 1 to December 2, 1989), p. 33.
- 7 The Museum's title was changed in 1986 to the Canadian Museum of Civilization.
- 8 Houle, Robert. *Contemporary Rituals*. North Bay: White Water Gallery, (June 1 to 30, 1990), p. 10.
- 9 Murray, Joan. *The Best of Contemporary Canadian Art*. (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1987), p. viii.

L'art autochtone contemporain trouve l'origine de sa marginalisation dans l'histoire de l'art canadien. Cet article traite des pratiques d'exclusion qui ont dominé l'analyse esthétique traditionnelle européenne et favorise une vision élargie de notre héritage artistique. L'auteur explore dans une perspective expansionniste les sculptures de Robert Houle, Ron Noganosh, Domingo Cisneros et Jimmie Durham exposées au Musée des beaux-arts du Canada ainsi qu'au Musée canadien de la civilisation. Ces artistes amérindiens ont apporté une précieuse contribution à une forme d'art alternatif. Leurs oeuvres présentent une combinaison unique des traditions esthétiques de l'Europe occidentale et de l'Amérique du Nord, ce qui les place en première ligne de l'art postmoderne. La nature pluridimensionnelle de l'art contemporain autochtone défie les limites occidentales de l'analyse de l'art, et questionne les idéaux eurocentriques qui ont dominé l'histoire de l'art de notre pays. La validation graduelle par les institutions culturelles nationales est un pas important vers la reconnaissance de la diversité de la véritable identité du Canada.

Domingo Cisneros, *Moonbeast*, 1988. Bone, hair, fur, wood, burlap. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada collection. Photo Credit: Brian E. Roy.