

Challenging Traditions: Contemporary First Nations Art of the Northwest Coast.
Ian M. Thom. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009. 176 pp.*

Reviewed by Aldona Jonaitis

This stunning catalog accompanies an exhibit presented at the McMichael Gallery in Ontario from June to September 2009 and from October through April 2010 at the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, Switzerland, to coincide with the 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver. Every full-page color photograph offers a fine example of recent creations by 40 Northwest Coast Native artists. The text, elegantly written by Ian M. Thom, Senior Curator at the Vancouver Art Gallery, includes a brief preface that explains the decision making process for selecting artists to be featured in the catalog and an introduction reviewing the history of exhibits of contemporary art of this region. The rest consists of 40 two-page essays based on interviews with the individual artists along with two or three examples of their works. These essays, brief though they may be, offer interesting insights into the biographies of the individuals and inspirations behind their works.

Today hundreds of Northwest Coast First Nations people make art, so it was no easy task for Thom to decide whom to select. In the preface he lists his criteria: each artist must self-identity as a First Nations person, have excellent technical skills, a track record of exhibits, a unique personal style, and a familiarity with traditional forms that he or she uses in new and creative ways. Thom acknowledges that one could argue with his selection, but correctly points out that he had to make the final judgment. Although many others could have been included, no one here should have been excluded.

Some people Thom selected are very well known masters with years of experience behind them. Robert Davidson is well represented with two outstanding examples of his minimalist use of formline. Susan Point's broad range of creativity is manifested by a woodcarving that refers to cedar bark weaving and an energetic abstract print. Two paintings by Lawrence Paul Yuxwelupton illustrate his distinctive, highly political images based on Northwest Coast designs. Some of the artists have long and distinguished careers, such as 73-year-old Henry Speck and 71-year-old Glenn Tallio. Others are relative newcomers to the art world, such as 30-year-old Alano Edzerza and 32-year-old John Marston.

Although Thom presents these artists in alphabetical order and makes no efforts to compare them, the 40 individuals represented fall into three broad categories based on their connectedness to the conventions of Northwest Coast art. Artists of the first category produce types of articles that were made in earlier generations: rattles, anthropomorphic and animal masks, bowls, hats, headdresses, boxes, argillite carvings, basketry hats, ravens tail and chilkat robes, silver and gold bracelets, and button blankets.

The second category artists, like Robert Davidson and Susan Point, use Northwest Coast traditional forms on non-traditional articles. A bronze frog crouching between four legs supports

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a glass table by Dempsey Bob. Preston Singletary and Alano Edzerza create formline images in glass. One cannot help but smile at Richard Hunt's droll Kwakwaka'wakw flower. Marianne Nicholson's bentwood glass box containing light sources is positioned within an installation in such a way that shadows of its imagery are cast on the wall. Tim Paul creates complex, original sculptures that use images and forms of his Nuuchahnulth heritage. The cover image, a work by Don Yeomans entitled "Creator" juxtaposes a raven with a cross designed with Celtic interlace.

Artists of the third category push the limits of tradition the farthest and have the most tentative connections to their stylistic heritage. Sonny Assu links Kwakwaka'wakw traditions with the modern technology of iPods. Shawn Hunt's political statements make good use of Northwest Coast imagery. Peter Morin's lithographs are highly abstracted depictions of rocks that allude to the landscape and the histories it contains. Michael Nicholl Yahgulanaas creates watercolors and acrylics in what he calls "Haida manga," a good term for these cartoon-like surreal images.

Thom's assemblage of artists is certainly varied. Although I do not wish to take issue with his selection of individual artists, which he admits could be quibbled with, I do wish to ask two questions. Why, out of 40 artists, are only three women? Today many, many women work in each of the categories I have delineated here, in the traditionally female arts of basketry and weaving as well as in carving and jewelry making. It may have been understandable that in the 1970s, Ellen Neel was excluded from exhibits such as *The Legacy: Continuing Traditions of Canadian Northwest Coast Indian Art* (Macnair, Hoover, and Neary 1980), but excluding similarly talented women today is inexcusable.

My other question concerns the absence of Alaskan Northwest Coast artists other than Tlingit Preston Singletary, who lives in Washington state. Nathan Jackson has as long and distinguished career as any other artist in this book. Terri Rofkar and Clarissa Hudson are celebrated weavers. And, several young southeast Alaskans are doing very interesting work; Stephen Jackson, Donald Varnell, Nicholas Gallanin, and Da-ka-heen Mehner would all fit nicely into the third category. Why are artists such as these, with reputations as fine as the others in the book, ignored?

Was this designed to be an exhibit of *Canadian* Northwest Coast art (with one exception)? If so, *Challenging Traditions* does a great disservice to the study of contemporary Northwest Coast art by disregarding the fine artists on the northern side of the border. What would have been the response if the recent exhibit and catalog, *S'adadeb The Gifts: Pacific Coast Salish Art and Artists* (Brotherton, ed. 2008) had been limited exclusively to Salish artists of the United States and excluded those of Canada? That would certainly have been completely unacceptable. As we all know, political boundaries do not apply to First Nations people. They should not have been applied to what is an otherwise outstanding publication.

References Cited

Brotherton, Barbara, ed.

2008 S'adadeb *The Gifts: Pacific Coast Salish Art and Artists*. Seattle: Seattle Art Museum and University of Washington Press.

Macnair, Peter L., Alan L. Hoover, and Kevin Neary

1980 *The Legacy: Continuing Traditions of Canadian Northwest Coast Indian Art*. Victoria, BC: British Columbia Provincial Museum.

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