Beau Dick is a contemporary artist, activist and hereditary Chief from the Namgis First Nation. His artistic practice is rooted in Kwakwaka’wakw aesthetics, customs and identity and finds expression through community and contemporary art. As a young man, Dick apprenticed with carver Tony Hunt and developed his practice further with Doug Cranmer in Vancouver. Beau Dick’s works are in major institutional collections, such as the Museum of Anthropology, Musée de la civilisation, Vancouver Art Gallery and numerous private collections.

Dick is an award winning artist with an extensive national and international exhibition history, and was included in the Sakahán exhibition here at the NGC in 2013. His works are rooted in Kwakwaka’wakw aesthetics and practices that provide the foundation upon which Dick explores medium and form. Dick’s practice fuses customary and commercial expectations and both works for consideration here, Bookwus and Supernatural Kolus, reflect this interesting intentionality clearly. Although made for the commercial art market, the works also occupy the cosmological function in community, one way this is indicated is the roughness of their surfaces which is in contrast to the polish many masks have when made for the commercial market. This is because these masks and all of Dick’s masks are created for both ceremonial uses in the communities (to be danced) as well as for collecting. In fact, according to Dick, if the masks are not danced they are not fully activated. For Dick, the way light shifts over the surface of the carvings are an integral element of his contemporary aesthetic. The activation of the masks in dance makes for interesting conceptual relationships within a gallery installation context and extends conceptual framework of as both sculptures and the products of performances. In this way, these masks remind me of Yinka Shonibare’s installation, Mr and Mrs. Andrews without Their Heads 39849.1-5, which also has an eerie performativity about it in its stasis. Furthermore the performativity embedded in these masks evoke the life of the object in and the multiple economic, political and social contexts possible. The concept of a living object that traverses cosmology and economy is a form of indigenous critical engagement that spans customary and contemporary practices, as well as bridging Northwest Coast Potlatch and Canadian art economies.

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