Artist: Joseph Tisiga (Kaska Dene, b. 1984 Edmonton, Alberta Lives and works in / vit et travaille en Toronto)

“It seems to me that we are still making the transition from a tradition of art making seen as “craft/curios/artifact” into a “modern” form of creation that everyone can feel comfortable just calling “art”“. Joseph Tisiga

A Whitehorse-based, multidisciplinary artist, Joseph Tisiga explores and occupies the territories that exist amongst ideological, economic and corporate expression. Tisiga was a finalist in the 2009 RBC Canadian Painting Competition and longlisted for the 2011 Sobey Art Award and winner of the Canadian Aboriginal Arts Challenge that Historica-Dominion 2011. The watercolour works considered here for acquisition are loaded with iconography that is at once familiar and strange. Tisiga uses this conflation of visual language, derived from stage set design, philosophy, Hollywood film and self-reflexivity, rooted in Indigenous identities (including his own), and art making. Tisiga locates these considerations within a construct he developed called the Indian Brand Corporation (IBC).

IBC is the conflation of lived, cosmological and allegorical narrative landscape populated by objects and figures derived from popular culture, philosophy, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous traditions and theatre. IBC was conceived in part as a response to the Private Property Bill framed in the Economic Action Plan 2012 (reminiscent of the Enfranchisement program established with the Indian Act, 1867), which seeks to legitimate indigenous identity through land ownership on First Nations Reserves - an ironic proposition as Reserve lands are held in trust by the Crown, not owned by the Canadian government. This process implemented by the current Conservative government proposed to ‘sell’ lots on reserves to First Nations people to promote sustainable land management – an important side effect of this process was the dissolution of reserve land. This dissolution not only threatens indigenous sovereignty but would also open up the land for resource development without the requirement of Aboriginal consultation. The land would then be unprotected and First Nations would lose their territorial rights. It would also contribute to the absolution of the state’s fiscal and cultural obligations specified in the many treaties. Out of this vast and complex assimilationist strategy, Tisiga created IBC to respond to the ways in which the state has sought to legitimize indigenous identities through land ownership – emphasizing, ironically, that owning land under the current corporate structure would legalize First Nations claim to territory thereby rendering First Nations truly indigenous as land owners.¹

“It is impossible for me to ignore the necessity of First Nations and Occidental influences coexisting in whatever I make and although I experience moments of peace and resentment with the marriage

of these realities, it is a circumstance that I have grown to understand more and more. It’s like trying to find beauty within brutality, a basic human conundrum that everyone will approach differently.”

Tisiga’s most recent exhibition at Diaz Gallery in Toronto presented three bodies of work, the watercolours, collages and sculpture. The collages are a direct reference to the process of categorization in Euro-western knowledge systems as well as an intellectual playground, were associations are implied but connected by the viewer. The sculptural work in this installation was his large format cigarettes As part of the space of exploration, the Indian Brand Corporation, is an opportunity to Tisiga and us to consider stereotypical and customary practices anew, through Tisiga’s earnest, whimsical and necessarily ironic lens. Certainly, taken together they have a storyboard quality. However, the handling of watercolour to create atmospheric effect are highly skilled. He has been developing this particular body of work since 2009 and the medium - watercolour on paper and format – serial narrative – speak to Tisiga’s long considerations of language, literature and theatre – these works engage with visual language, specifically symbolism. Within the Indian Brand Corporation, Tisiga fuses the fantastical and pragmatic. The format and medium allowed him to work in the manner of set design as well as develop, through a story board format the complex symbolic world of the IBC. His use of watercolour is also, to a certain, extend a nod to the history of illustration and the hierarchy of medium engrained in European art history. But more specifically, is evocative of the early military watercolour landscapes that were the first mappings of Canada as we know it. These early representations were equally fantastical to Europeans in the 17th and 18th centuries and contributed significantly to the romantiziation of wild North America and ‘Indians’. More evident, however, is Tisiga’s relationship to surrealist landscape.

Unlike the recently acquired Mario Doucette drawings, Tisiga moves away from the production of a historical narrative, and instead produces a montage of indigenous experience, stereotype and utopic and dystopic environs where history is played out between reality and fantasy. Tisiga, The youngest artist featured in Mass MoCA’s Oh Canada 2013, stated “I think there are a lot of people who go to the extreme of wanting to be very Indian, and I think that’s kind of naive… the reality is in these complex hybrid forms… You’re still going to be influenced by these narratives that are coming at you from all over the place.”

Please cite in the following manner:

Rachelle Dickenson, Acquisition Proposal for Joseph Tisiga’s An improbable explanation to an unlikely story; Imbued with the Spirit; The Precairousness of Its Dogmatic Assumptions; The Undiscovered Self; and Exercise Technique; accession #46542; #46538; #46540; #46539; and #46541, Curatorial File, National Gallery of Canada.

---
