YUXWELUPTUN, Lawrence Paul  (b. 1957, Kamloops, B.C. / né en 1957, Kamloops, C.B.)

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, of Coast Salish and Okanagan ancestry, received his BFA from Emily Carr College of Art and Design in 1983 (with honours). He has exhibited his work widely since then in many notable solo and group exhibitions including Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: Neo Native Drawings and Other Works, Contemporary Art Gallery, 2010; Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Western Front, Vancouver, 2009; Colour Zone, Plug In ICA, Winnipeg, 2001 (touring); An Indian Act: Shooting the Indian Act, Locus+, Newcastle, UK, 1997; Inherent Rights, Vision Rights: Virtual Reality Paintings and Drawings, Canadian Embassy, Paris, 1993; Shore, Forest and Beyond: Art From the Audain Collection, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2011; 75 Years of Collecting, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2006; True North: The Landscape Tradition in Contemporary Canadian Art, Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, Taipei, Taiwan; New Territories: 350/500 Years After, Montreal, QC (touring); In the Shadow of the Sun, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, QC, 1988; and The Warehouse Show, Vancouver, BC, 1983.

In 1992, Yuxweluptun was the only artist to be included in both Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives and Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada, exhibitions now recognized as pivotal moment in the national recognition of Aboriginal art and which aided in introducing a new generation of Aboriginal artists to the fore. Scorched Earth, Clear Cut Logging on Native Sovereign Lands, Shaman Coming to Fix, 1991, was among the first works acquired for the NGC’s collection from the latter exhibition. In 1993, the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery opened their new space with an inaugural exhibition of Yuxweluptun’s work. This exhibition, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: Born to Live and Die on Your Colonialist Reservations, remains the artist’s first and only career survey to date and served to underscore the importance of his work within the Canadian landscape painting tradition for its role in actively challenging many of the genre’s conventions.

Yuxweluptun was raised in Richmond, BC. His upbringing provided an acute awareness of the issues and challenges facing Aboriginal peoples. Growing up in a politically active family, the artist’s father Ben Paul, an astute politician, was active in the North American Indian Brotherhood and former head of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs. Yuxweluptun’s mother Connie Paul, was active in both organizations as well as the Indian Home-makers Association in BC.¹ His parents attended many of these meetings with Yuxweluptun in tow. Initially encouraged to pursue a career in politics; instead is it Yuxweluptun’s paintings, drawings, and assemblages that give voice to concerns regarding land claims, damaging assimilationist policies, and environmental degradation. From his perspective, “An artist can't do anything if he doesn't watch, observe, and participate in what's going

on.” “My work is to record.”2 Yuxweluptun also maintained a close relationship with Coast Salish cultural traditions. At fourteen he was given the familial right to dance with the Sḵwá̱y̓x̱w̓ mask and at seventeen was initiated as a Black Face dancer.3 Yuxweluptun is among the most overtly critical artists practicing in Canada today; he doesn’t shy away from depicting the devastating realities that face many Native people and does so through a unique hybridization of Northwest Coast aesthetics—ovoids and stylized formlines—with the dream-like aesthetics of Surrealism. Yuxweluptun’s wry appropriation of Surrealism is a reminder of the formative influence of Aboriginal artefacts, including Northwest coast masks, on this movement.4 He developed this signature style while a student at Emily Carr College of Art and Design (now University). This “deliberate act of reciprocal appropriation”5 broke with many conventions of Aboriginal art and was initially contentious among both Native and non-Native art communities.6 Although the ovoid is used in Coast Salish art, formlines which are identifiably Haida and Kwakwágwakw also figure prominently in the artist’s paintings and drawings. This perceived lack of authenticity with regards to his artistic and cultural heritage is of little concern to Yuxweluptun. In a recent telephone conversation he stated that painting in a more generic Northwest Coast style enables him to more accurately represent what he terms “the imaginary Indian” or “the symbolic Native.” The figures in his paintings then are not necessarily representations of real people—or specific Northwest coast beings or ceremonies—but instead comment on the way in which Native identity has been constructed from outside perspectives.7

Perhaps the most important achievement of Yuxweluptun’s paintings within the context of Canadian landscape painting is his introduction of the politicized landscape. The harsh “toxicological” realities shown in Yuxweluptun’s paintings—forests ravaged by clear cuts, water filled with toxic pollution, the figures of bureaucracy (Native and non-Native alike), the abject poverty and abuse on Vancouver’s downtown east side—are allegorical and rendered like stunning nightmares with smouldering technicolour palettes that are hard to overlook. As curator Scott Watson observes, his works invert the subservient role of Native arts and crafts within the development of Canadian Modernism.8

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4 See, for example, the Vancouver Art Gallery’s recent exhibition The Colour of My Dreams: The Surrealist Revolution in Art (May 28 to October 2, 2011) which paired Northwest coast works with the Surrealist works they inspired. Many artists involved with Surrealism were avid collectors of so-called “primitive art,” believing that this work demonstrated a direct link to the unconscious realm. http://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/the_exhibitions/exhibit_surrealist_revolution_in_art.html
5 Townsend-Gault, “The Salvation Art of Yuxweluptun,” 15
6 Ibid., 12-13.
8 Here Watson cites the National Gallery of Canada’s 1927 exhibition Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern in stating that, “The exhibition argued that Canadian Modernism must appropriate the legacy of native art in order to have an authentic relation to the land.” Scott Watson, “The Modernist Past of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun’s Modernist Allegories,” in Born to Live and Die on Your Colonialist Reservations (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 1995), 62
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