
THE ABSTRACT EDGE

ROBERT DAVIDSON AND CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL ARTS PRACTICE

Friday, May 26, 2006 | 12:30 – 4:30 pm | In English & French



Concordia

beaux-arts **concordia** fine arts



MUSÉE McCORD MUSEUM

Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowsky Institute for Studies in Canadian Art

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Friday, May 26, 2006 | 12:30 – 4:30 pm | In English & French

WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS

12:30 – 1:00 PM

Sedalia Kawennota's Sazio, Mohawk
Victoria Dickenson, Executive Director, McCord Museum
François-Marc Gagnon, Director and Chair, Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowsky Institute for Studies in Canadian Art

Introduction of Robert Davidson
Moira McCaffrey, Director, Research & Exhibitions, McCord Museum

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

THE ABSTRACT EDGE

Robert Davidson, *quud san glans*, Eagle of the Dawn

1:00 – 1:30 PM

Q & A

Moderator: Moira McCaffrey

1:30 – 1:45 PM

FILM SCREENING & COFFEE BREAK

Screening of *Art et légende* (NFB) | French version

1:45 – 2:00 PM

Screening of *Haida Carver* (NFB) | English version

2:00 – 2:15 PM

PRESENTATIONS

Introduction of Sherry Farrell Racette, moderator
Loren Lerner, Professor of Art History, Concordia University

2:15 – 4:30 PM

INTRODUCTION Sherry Farrell Racette, Concordia University

A REEL HAIDA CARVER | THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA'S CONSTRUCTION OF ROBERT DAVIDSON

Carmen Robertson, First Nations University of Canada

2:20 – 2:40 PM

"A THOUSAND GROTESQUE FIGURES": THE TRADITION OF ABSTRACTION IN FIRST NATIONS ART

Sherry Farrell Racette, Concordia University

2:40 – 3:00 PM

LA RENCONTRE FABULEUSE DE L'ESPRIT DES ANIMAUX DU TOTEM ET DE LA GRANDE TORTUE

Guy Sioui Durand

3:00 – 3:20 PM

UN ART DE RÉSISTANCE ET DE COEXISTENCE | RÉFLEXIONS SUR LE MOUVEMENT ACRYLIQUE CHEZ LES ABORIGÈNES AUSTRALIENS

Sylvie Poirier, Laval University

3:20 – 3:40 PM

FREEDOM TO DREAM

Mattiusi Iyaituk

3:40 – 4:00 PM

Q&A AND CLOSING REMARKS

Sherry Farrell Racette

4:00 – 4:15 PM

CLOSING

Sedalia Kawennota's Sazio, Mohawk

4:15 – 4:25 PM

Following the symposium, participants are invited to attend the vernissage to celebrate the opening of **Robert Davidson: The Abstract Edge & Haida Art: Mapping an Ancient Language**

The Abstract Edge

I'm at a crossroads right now where I've recycled the ideas of my teachers, of the old pieces, of the old examples I've been studying. My challenge is to go beyond those recycled ideas and create a new vocabulary for myself. The vocabulary I've been working with has come from the old pieces by Charles Edenshaw and other masters; it has come from my dad's teachings, from my grandfather's teachings, from Bill Reid's teachings. I'm continually challenging myself to expand from that knowledge. At first I thought I was pushing the art form. But I feel that's presumptuous – it's not up to me to say I'm doing that. I have years and years of experience in the art form, and now I'm experimenting to see how far I can push my own understanding.

I feel that every artist reaches a point in their creative lifetime where they want to have their own story, their own signature. It took many years before I was able to actually feel that I was creating my own style. I still remember a spoon I engraved in 1974, where I felt for the first time I was creating something from my own experience. Once I learned the vocabulary of the art, it became my privilege and responsibility to create within those boundaries and to challenge them within the language. I would rather stay within those confines than step out of them.

Expanding my understanding of the art form is not unlike hosting a feast. When I hosted my first feast, in 1980, I really bent a lot of people out of shape because of the way I did it without consultation. It was a profound lesson. The potlatch I hosted most recently came from the knowledge and experience of all of the potlatches and feasts I've hosted: it came from coaching from my naani [grandmother], coaching from my uncles and some of my elders, and consulting with my clan. But many of the teachers who guided me in the past are no longer here. The potlatch is a public forum, and so it's a way of establishing – and defining – the process. The potlatch was the event, and the people who attended were part of the experience. The next potlatch will grow from there.

I know that my experiments with the art form have a lot to do with my having a foot in each doorway: it means changing from hosting a potlatch to working in the studio – it means changing paths from challenging myself in the potlatch to continuing this dialogue with a new vocabulary of Haida art and with new supernatural beings. One feeds the other. The art builds on the experience of hosting a feast, it builds on the experience of going to feasts. When I start to draw an image, there's an order to it that is already established. It's very much like using the letters of the alphabet to make words: you don't just draw the letters together and think you're saying something. The art is the same way; to carve a totem pole is the same way. The art comes from experience – it's not a whim.

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Robert Davidson, whose Haida name means "Eagle of the Dawn" is a painter, printmaker, wood carver, jeweller and sculptor. Born in Hydaburg, Alaska, in 1946, he grew up in Old Massett on Haida Gwaii. He began carving as a teenager under the tutelage of his father, Claude Davidson, and his grandfather, Robert Davidson, Sr. It was through this apprenticeship that Davidson began to learn about the forms and three-dimensional aspects of carving, as well as the place of art within cultural practice and ceremony.

A recipient of several honorary degrees as well as the Order of Canada, the Order of British Columbia and the National Aboriginal Achievement Award for Arts and Culture, Davidson is an innovator among contemporary Northwest Coast artists and an influential cultural leader, whose work in a range of media has been widely exhibited and published. Committed to ceremony and song as integral components of his artistic practice, he also regularly teaches dance and visual art to urban Haidas in Vancouver.

La rencontre fabuleuse de l'esprit des animaux du Totem et de la Grande Tortue

Inspired by Robert Davidson's monumental sculpture *Hugging the World*, in which the Eagle and the Raven are fused to welcome passengers arriving at the Vancouver International Airport, I will give a lecture-performance which pursues this idea of the omnipresence of animal spirits in the imaginary worlds of those I call the new Hunters/Shamans/Warriors of Aboriginal art working in Gépèg (Quebec). This survey will, of necessity, be brief but it will, I hope, make possible dialogues between the Raven, the Coyote and the Badger proper to the orality of Aboriginal culture, in addition to dialogues with those present.

Guy Sioui Durand is from Wendake and is a member of the Huron-Wendat First Nation. His practical and critical work is in the field of sociology (in which he holds a Ph.D.), art curating and contemporary and Aboriginal art criticism. His publications include *L'art comme alternative. Réseaux et pratiques d'art parallèle au Québec* (1997) and *Riopelle. L'art d'un trappeur supérieur. Indianité* (2003). He is the co-founder of the journal *Inter* and of the artist-run centre *Lieu, centre en art actuel*. He is a contributor to numerous periodicals, catalogues and events, contributions which often take the form of lecture-performances.

In 2005, he participated in Refresh! The First International Conference on the Histories of Media Art, Science and Technology at the Banff Centre and in the conference on Aboriginal cultural diversity in French-speaking Canada at Emily Carr College in Vancouver. In 2006, Sioui Durand participated in the colloquium *The Way Ahead: Surveying the Curatorial Landscape*, organised by the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective/Collectif des Conservateurs Autochtones (ACC/CCA), and was subsequently invited to a theoretical forum on urban cultural dynamics at the Havana Biennial. He is a consultant on native issues for the celebrations around the 400th anniversary of the founding of Quebec City in 2008. His web site may be consulted at www.siouidurand.org

FREEDOM TO DREAM MATTIUSI IYAITUK

Freedom to Dream

When you look at my sculpture, you don't understand all of it. For this reason, you have the freedom to dream. Everyone has their own opinions about art so I just put titles for each piece and leave the rest for dreams. I started to do abstract forms in 1979. One day, I was doing a sculpture of a man but I did not like it. So, I just made forms on one side. Since that time, I have been doing sculptures using abstract forms. I also inlay different materials such as caribou antler or different coloured stone for faces or other details like tools. The inlaying of bone faces is an old form of art used by earlier Inuit sculptors.

My work is in both worlds because the abstract forms I use are considered by many to be a modern way of doing art but I combine the abstract forms with the old Inuit technique of inlaying. Before 1979, I was doing my sculptures like the way I saw it done in Ivujivik, Quebec. I used to put detail on my work like everyone else until I fell in love with abstract form. It makes me feel good to work in abstract form; therefore I know it is the right form of art for me.

Mattiusi Iyaituk was born near Cape Smith Island in 1950 and now lives in Ivujivik. Following in the footsteps of his father, the sculptor Markusi and his brother Nutaraluk, he began to sculpt at the age of fourteen. First influenced by the imaginative realism of his brother and other sculptors of his generation, he gradually developed a more abstract style that contains elements derived from a strong identification with his own culture and environment. The insertion of diverse materials such as caribou antler or coloured stones into his sculptures recalls traditional art forms by the first Inuit sculptors. His work combines two worlds of abstraction: the influences of modern art practices and traditional Inuit artistic techniques.

He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Inuit Art Foundation, a lecturer on Inuit art and a recipient of a bursary from the Canada Council. Since 1978, Mattiusi has participated on numerous exhibitions in Canada, the United States, France, Belgium, England, Germany, Japan and Korea. His work is on display at the Ackland Art Museum in North Carolina, the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, the Millard Collection at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, in Winnipeg, the National Gallery in Ottawa, the Museum of Civilization in Québec City and the Sarick Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.

Un art de résistance et de coexistence. Réflexions sur le mouvement acrylique chez les Aborigènes australiens

In the 1970s, a new form of art was born in the Aboriginal communities of the central Australian desert and quickly acquired national and international recognition. For the Aboriginals, what we know today as the *Acrylic Movement* is a space of identity, autonomy, affirmation and resistance. Each painting is simultaneously an aesthetic and a political act. Using the example of the community of Wirrimanu, in the Western Desert, where I have been carrying out research since 1980, I will discuss this art form as an art of existing, in which each painting speaks of the ontological link between the individual, the land and the world of the ancestors; as an art of co-existence, in which Aboriginals engage in a dialogue with the world; and, finally, as an art of resistance, as a site for the transmission and valorisation of local knowledge and cosmologies.

Sylvie Poirier is a professor in the Anthropology department of Laval University. Her research among the Aboriginals of Australia's Western Desert explores various topics: local theories of the universe and the individual; the cultural systems around dreaming; transformations in people's relationship to the land; and local strategies of resistance and for asserting the community's identity and culture. Her recent publications include:

Sylvie Poirier, *A World of Relationships: Itineraries, Dreams and Events in the Australian Western Desert* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

John Clammer, Sylvie Poirier and Eric Schwimmer, eds., *Figured Worlds: Ontological Obstacles in Intercultural Relations* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

Sylvie Poirier, ed., La (dé)politisation de la culture? *Anthropologie et sociétés* 28 no. 1 (2004).

"A THOUSAND GROTESQUE FIGURES" SHERRY FARRELL RACETTE

"A Thousand Grotesque Figures": the Tradition of Abstraction in First Nations Art

In 1636, the Jesuit, Father Paul Le Jeune, described a hide painted with "a thousand grotesque figures, canoes, paddles, animals, and such things." Le Jeune's negative assessment of Innu painting is strikingly similar to many contemporary viewers' initial response to abstraction. The deep roots of indigenous abstraction are not commonly known. However, the process of reducing a form to its essential elements, or selecting one distinguishing feature to represent an animal or an idea, is an important aspect of the earliest surviving examples of First Nations painting and porcupine quillwork. While some abstract imagery was deeply symbolic, and could be interpreted by an informed audience, abstract elements were also joyfully decorative. Some images were visual references to stories and social contracts. First Nations abstraction was grounded in an intimate familiarity with subtle visual markers and shapes relating to the hunt and the earth. It was also an important aspect of the meditative and visioning process of art making.

Sherry Farrell Racette is an interdisciplinary scholar with an active arts practice. She is currently a professor at First Nations University of Canada, but will soon take up an appointment in the Art History Department at Concordia University. Her art works are in a number of public collections including the Saskatchewan Arts Board and the Canada Council's Art Bank. Her broad research focus is Métis and First Nations women's history, particularly reconstructing indigenous art histories that recontextualize museum collections and reclaim women's voices and lives. Most recently she co-curated *Clearing a Path: an Exhibition of Traditional Indigenous Arts* with Carmen Robertson, showcasing contemporary artists working in traditional media for the Saskatchewan Centennial. Sherry was born in Manitoba and is a member of Timiskaming First Nation in Quebec.

A Reel Haida Carver: The National Film Board of Canada's construction of Robert Davidson

The National Film Board of Canada (NFB) promotes itself as an educative force in Canada. The NFB's mandate to bring Canada to Canadians motivated a 'teaching' agenda inherent in its films. As part of a larger program of research that investigates how the NFB constructed representations of Aboriginal art and artists in documentary films created between 1955 and 1999, this presentation engages a film produced in 1964 – *Haida Carver*. Richard Gilbert directed and produced a 12:13 minute film that introduced the transmission of traditional technology involved in carving argillite from a grandfather to a grandson. The young carver showcased in this documentary is Robert Davidson. One of more than sixteen films meant to 'instruct' ordinary Canadians about Aboriginal peoples and their culture, the representation of Haida art through the institutionally authoritative voice of the NFB positions the art within a cultural frame that packages this artistic production while romanticizing art practice by Haida peoples.

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Dr. Carmen Robertson teaches contemporary Aboriginal art history at First Nations University of Canada in Regina, SK, a position she has held for five years. For the past two years, she has also been the Department chairperson of Indian Fine Arts, a post-secondary department of studio and art history programs that has evolved over the past thirty years with programs on three campuses.

Robertson has recently completed a book-length project on how the National Film Board of Canada has constructed contemporary Indigenous art through its documentaries. Her SSHRC-supported research investigates Indigenous representation in the mainstream press. Robertson's recent research has revolved around notions of Indigenous aesthetics and the work of Norval Morrisseau.