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A Review of the **Edward Poitras** *Installation / Exhibition* at Articule

Curtis J. Collins

Edward Poitras, *Rock Hearts*, 1988. Detail White Man. Wood, leather, plexiglass, rock, string, graphite. Photo: Maria Parrella-Ilaria.

Edward Poitras' *Installation* exhibition at Articule in Montreal from February 16 to March 17, 1991 featured an eclectic collection of new and old works by the Saskatchewan artist. Each of the nine installation pieces challenge the dominant (White) society's perception of politics, history, and culture. The Metis/Indian artist charges his work with an emotional power that forces viewers beyond an innocent appreciation of their visual charm. Poitras' art endeavours to re-present North America's aboriginal people, through a unique combination of traditional Native and modern Western aesthetics.

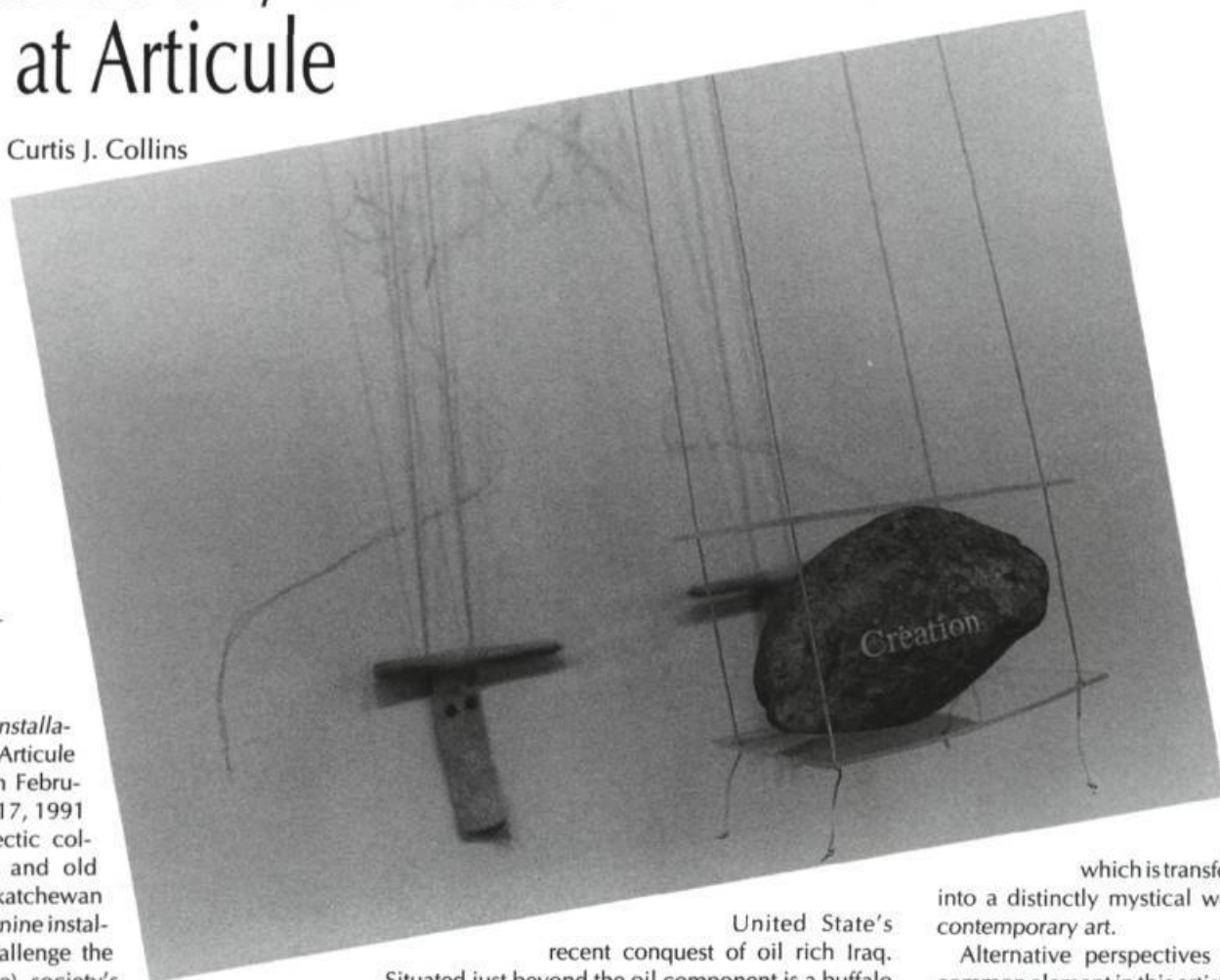
The show's most timely piece *Cheese/Oil* links the Oka crisis in Quebec to the Persian Gulf war by means of subtle references to acts of aggression. A cavalry sword perforates the centre of an Oka cheese block situated atop a lead fringed wooden stool, symbolizing the persecution of the Mohawk people by the governments of Quebec and Canada. On the floor in front of it is a Persian Gulf-shaped lead receptacle filled with motor oil, referring to the

United State's recent conquest of oil rich Iraq. Situated just beyond the oil component is a buffalo skull with leather wrapped horns, a talisman for the victims of death and destruction. The artist's evocative mixture of manufactured and organic objects visually seduces the viewer, however one does not escape without recognizing the violence of these metaphors.

Poitras condemns the dominant society's obsession with power and wealth, using the confrontations in Oka and Iraq as prime examples of injustices. He assembles conceptual documents of each incident, and presents the entire installation in a ceremonial-like form. Each component is empowered with Poitras' beliefs the moment he stabs the cheese, pours the oil, and places the skull. The parallel drawn between the Mohawks and Iraqis reflect his personal interpretation of their situations,

which is transformed into a distinctly mystical work of contemporary art.

Alternative perspectives are a common element in this artist's installations, and *Pierced Ears* advances an engaging view of a famous American military figure. General George Custor, the 19th century Indian-killer, was slain at the hands of his Native enemies, and Poitras' assemblage is a direct reference to a curious incident surrounding his death. A black and white photograph of Custor is pierced by two nails through the ears of the image; an emulation of the spikes which Native women stuck in the dead General's ears so that he could hear better during his next life. On the floor below the



punctured photograph is a breaker containing red liquid, highlighting the gruesome reality of this obscure event.

The artist, however, extends the essence of *Pierced Ears* beyond the confines of linear document by adding a shaman-like component. Hanging in front of the image is an amulet composed of a stone, buffalo hair, beads, and bells. This traditional Native element adds a sense of spirituality to a piece that would otherwise be a straight modern assemblage. Perhaps Poitras is attempting to renew the aspirations of those 19th century Native women who wanted Custor to be more attentive in his next life. Regardless, the artist successfully creates a work of art which transcends Western conceptual aesthetics, and rewrites American history from a distinctly Native perspective.

Poitras activates history in order to provide the dominant society with a revitalized expression of the North American aboriginal culture. *Rock Hearts*, first exhibited in 1988, celebrates the survival of the Sun Dance ceremony, and declares the value of spirituality in our post-modern society. The installation consists of four figures outlined on the wall, each named: Strong Heart, Sun Dancer, Contrary, and White Man. Suspended by string and plexiglass in front of each figure's chest are rocks, each with titles stencilled on them that correspond to the names: Truth (Strong Heart), Reality (Sun Dancer), Duality (Contrary), and Creation (White Man). Nailed to the wall are two leathered thongs with wooden pegs located on the chest of each figure, which act as anchors for their respective suspended rocks.

The artist's recreation of the ancient Plains Indian ceremony - that was banned for 66 years after the passing of the Indian Act in 1885 by the Canadian government - is a tribute to the endurance of the Native North American culture. Sun Dancers would reach altered states of consciousness induced by the ritual piercing of the chest during this gruelling test of manhood. *Rock Hearts* is a particularly fascinating interpretation of this ancient tradition, for it includes three Indian dancers and one White dancer. Recently, non-Native men have participated in the revitalized Sun Dance and Poitras seems to appre-

ciate this form of reverse assimilation. The installation exists as an abstract illustration of the 20th century culture in transition, and promotes the escape of all humanity from bounds of earthly life via secret Native rites.

Poitras' optimistic outlook for the future of his people is invariably tempered by the injustices committed upon his ancestors. *The Only Good Indian* recounts the willful decimation of the buffalo population by White hunters in the 1870's, a tactic which the American and the Canadian governments employed as a means of conquering the aboriginal population. By the end of the century the way of life of the nomadic Plains Indian hunting tribes had been destroyed, and they were forced to accept settlement on reserves. A framed black and white photograph depicts a wall of buffalo bones fertilizing site outside Saskatoon in the 1890's, and appearing below the image in large white letters is the word *Erase*. Snake-like pieces of wood affixed to the gallery wall lead down from the framed piece, and surround a stack of photocopies located on the floor. The same image of the buffalo bones is reproduced on each photocopy.

The Only Good Indian denounces 19th century white society's policy of ecological terrorism against the Indian people, using one word and one image. *Erase*, a term invented by the artist, possesses a dual meaning: the obliteration of the buffalo population, and the attempted annihilation of the Indian race. Poitras' word is validated by the historic photograph, and the photocopies reinforce the magnitude of the destruction which occurred. The serpentine sculptural elements appear to slither down the wall, and swirl around the stack of copies as though they were upon this historic scene of death. A sense of strife emanates from this installation, which is fuelled by Poitras' anger towards 19th century White authorities. The artist's combination of text, image, and sculpture is a creative method indicative of post-modern art, however he is able to charge this work with an intensity that is truly unique.

The tone of Poitras' *Installation* exhibition at Articule shifted effortlessly from the high intensity works to those pieces which maintained a quiet subtlety. *Metis/ politician Indian/ cowboy* is a serene work that addresses the evolutionary nature of the Metis and Indian cultures. A 12,5 x 17,5 cm photograph of Jim Sinclair, the Saskatchewan Native leader, is set in an oversized gold matte and frame. Beside the elaborately framed image is a similarly sized photograph of Poitras' grandfather dressed in a cowboy outfit, complete with six shooter and rifle. The juxtaposition of these images and their respective titles reveal the artist's sensitivity to the people they depict.

In the early 20th century, North America's Indian people were forced to assimilate into the white (cowboy) culture, and people such as the artist's grandfather conformed in order to survive, while in contemporary times Metis and Indian people have been obliged to participate in dominant society's political structure as a means of preserving their fragile cultures. The cowboy and politician, aliens to native society, have been accommodated by the aboriginal people. Poitras' use of symbolic person-

alities from different time periods attests to the enduring nature of his Indian and Metis ancestors, which he communicates through an elementary form of expression.

The simple strength of Poitras' art is most evident in *Broken Word*, an installation work that was first displayed in his 1988 solo exhibition *Indian Territory* at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon. It is composed of the two phrases *Manifest Destiny* and *Indian Territory*, which are rendered respectively in 10 cm high copper and brass alloy letters affixed opposite each other on the gallery wall. *Manifest Destiny* was the term used by 19th century Americans to rationalize their expansion to the West. *Indian Territory*, also an American expression, refers to the tracts of land assigned to the aboriginal people in early 19th century by the government of the United States. However, by the end of the century most Indian Territories had been inundated by White settlements, and their land had been stolen.

The letters of *Manifest Destiny* have corroded through the process of oxidation, symbolizing the superficial nature of 19th century American ideals, while the letters of *Indian Territory* have retained their original brilliance, a metaphor of the Native people's eternal connection to their land. *Broken Word* chronicles the confrontation of two races, and castigates the White government for its treacherous actions. This simple conceptual piece is a statement of its creator's ire towards the desecration of his ancestor's trust, and the faith he holds for the future of Native culture.

Poitras frequently pays homage to the pain of his people, and *Memorial* commemorates the 100th anniversary of the massacre at Wounded Knee. In 1890 the American government felt threatened by the Plains Indian Ghost Dance movement, and commanded the 7th cavalry to exterminate the members of this peaceful religious group. The artist's installation reads as follows in 45 cm high white letters on Articule's white wall:

Wounded	Joyeux
Knee	Noël
1890	1990

Located on the floor in the centre of the piece is a vase filled with flowers, and directly above the wall is a 10 x 12,5 cm framed illustration of Sitting Bull dead in the snow. *Memorial* quietly equates the coincidence of Wounded Knee's 100th anniversary with last year's Oka crisis. It establishes a relationship between the historic and contemporary suffering of North America's Native people, and shows disdain towards the American, Canadian, and Quebec governments. Joyeux Noël 1990 is directly aimed toward the Montreal audience, and serves to remind local viewers of a deplorable event in their contemporary existence. Poitras' installation also functions as a monument to Sitting Bull - a victim of Wounded Knee - as well as honouring the Mohawk nation's struggle for survival. The artist presents a sophisticated vocabulary of symbols constructed from text, image and object, which possess multi-



referential meanings.

Poitras' art is not easily interpreted, and only through careful observation and experience can one begin to appreciate the whole substance of his conceptual/spiritual idiom. However, the artist's provocative use of materials allows his work to operate on a purely visual level. *Treaty #4* is a piece that refers to a specific event in

Native/White relations, and yet it also captures the importance of text as a post-modern method of artistic expression. The words *Mask His X Interpret* are rendered in a 10 cm high cut brass alloy letters, and are affixed to the gallery wall. Between the *X* and *Interpret* are three 21,2 x 27,5 cm photocopies of a legal document, with sections obliterated by white paint. The importance of language is the immediate message conveyed by this piece's combination of textual materials.

Within the substance of this text lies the meaning

of *Treaty #4*. Poitras questions the validity of the legal document that is signed by two disparate peoples, when the agreement is written in only one culture's language. The 1874 Canadian treaty established reserves in Saskatchewan and Southern Manitoba, however the artist has painted out areas of the document including the names of its Indian signatories. He objects to the idea that the treaty was written in good faith, and symbolically alters the document as means of rejecting its legal implications. The artist places himself in the role of an active witness to an historic event that has determined the destiny of his culture, and attempts to re-possess Native North American ancestral rights.

Poitras continually plays the part of observer, which allows him to scrutinize political, historical, and cultural circumstances. A new work created specifically for the Montreal exhibition entitled *Self Portrait* focuses upon the artist's view of himself, and the world around him. Seated on the edge of a white sand circle is a black and white striped doll wearing a feathered headdress. Hanging from the ceiling 90 cm above the sand circle on the floor is a bow with arrows attached to one hand and a wooden cup to the other. This metaphorical scale continually rotates powered by both the wind from a nearby window, and the motion of people passing through the space. On irregular intervals the scale tips in favour of either the arrows or the wooden cup filled with cedar bows.

The painted doll is Poitras, an artist of mixed Indian and Metis blood who examines the events of past, present, and future worlds, symbolized by the white in which he sits. Suspended above the artist is a metaphorical reference to Native North Americans affairs, the focus of his creative/spiritual energy. The aboriginal justice scale wavers between the violence of arrows and the peace contained within the cup of nature. *Self Portrait* personifies both the pessimism and optimism of the artist's outlook on life, which is communicated through an assemblage of conceptually-based articles that exemplify both Native and Western aesthetics.

The value of Poitras' art is its ability to enlighten the public concerning the injustices committed against the aboriginal people of North America. He makes no attempt to conceal his anger towards the dominant society, however he does offer glimmers of hope that a new understanding can be established between the Native and White cultures. The artist's provocative combinations of traditional Native materials and Western manufactured objects are infused with a spiritual/ conceptual force which articulates a personal vision of politics, culture, and history. Edward Poitras *Installation* at Articule was a definitive statement by an artist who is striving to redefine the perceptions and aesthetics of post-modern society: «It has to do with distinct societies, and the people respecting each others' cultures. Members of the dominant culture can't always rely on what they have been taught before, that system does not always work.»¹ ♦



(previous page) Edward Poitras, *Pierced Ears*, 1991. Black & White photograph, nails, gold paint, rock, bells, beads string. Photo: Maria Parrella-Ilaria.

Edward Poitras, *Self Portrait*, 1991. Sand, doll, feathers, arrows, bow, wooden cup, cedar bows, string. Photo: Maria Parrella-Ilaria.

1 Interview with Edward Poitras and the author, September 28, 1990.