

Sonny Assu. *Longing and Becoming*

Sonny ASSU, *Longing*, Vancouver, Museum of Anthropology,
September 14 - November 5, 2011

Dion Kliner

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Rather choose rough work than smooth work, so only that the practical purpose be answered, and never imagine there is reason to be proud of anything that may be accomplished by patience and sand-paper.

— John RUSKIN, *The Stones of Venice*, II, 1853

When Sonny Assu collected the off-cuts of raw cedar left over as piles of debris from the production of luxury log homes at Quinsam (part of the We Wai Kai Nation's reserve lands on Northeastern Vancouver Island), he already saw masks. Even so, he initially considered altering the rough-sawn forms to make them look more traditionally mask-like, by either adding other materials like copper, cedar bark and colour or sanding them down. He resisted that impulse for four years as he daily looked at them stacked in his crowded Vancouver studio. It took him that long to recognize that the

"masks" were already finished when he found them. In this case patience paid off, whereas sand-paper would have been a mistake.

Assu is an Aboriginal artist, a member of the We Wai Kai Nation. The fact of his ethnicity is important because it is from this perspective that he is performing a reversal of early Twentieth century art history. More than one hundred years after Western artists found the formal inspiration to move art forwards by looking "back" at Aboriginal culture, Assu is looking at Western art to modernize Aboriginal traditions of the Northwest Coast, and regain control of his culture.

The voices of these distinct, yet episodically overlapping cultures merge in the eighteen "masks" Assu has installed at the West Vancouver Museum. There is an interesting reflection between the work inside and the building that surrounds it, another kind of inversion. Both are made from what are essentially the

waste products of a utilitarian purpose turned to an aesthetic end. The museum (the old Gertrude Lawson House) was built in 1940 from stones originally used as ship's ballast, and the "masks" are the byproduct of log home building; piles of debris created from making a house. All those stones sat in an enormous heap, just like those cedar off-cuts, until being stumbled upon and their potential becoming realized.

To emphasize the relationship to traditional Aboriginal masks, Assu's pieces are mounted on brass armatures identical to those used by Vancouver's Museum of Anthropology. Concave in back, a flat sided, truncated wedge in front, Assu's "masks" share a generalized form, like faces smoothed and distorted by a stocking (the narrow frontal plane as forehead, bridge of the nose, and chin; center rings and knots make eyes; cracks as mouths), but are distinct enough to be seen as specific characters. They have been installed to create an imaginary narrative. Entering the museum, one stands between

groups of "Anglos" and "Warriors." On a wall above, a single, large "Spirit" hangs, while in a back room three "Bureaucrats" huddle together.

Augmenting the exhibition is a trio of photographs produced in collaboration with Eric Deis and collectively titled *Artifacts of Authenticity*. Meant as a critique of the voices of authority that confer authenticity on Aboriginal artifacts, they show an Assu "mask" installed in a museum display case, in a commercial gallery and in a tourist gift shop. Before Assu decided on "Longing" as the title for this collection of sculpture and photographs he was calling it "Faceless," an unambiguous indictment of the invisibility that Aboriginal communities experience. Assu renamed the exhibition when he was struck by the narrative created in the photograph *Museum of Anthropology*. Surrounded by traditional Kwakwaka'wakw masks and artifacts, Assu's "mask" appeared to be looking at the others, longing to become one of them. This simple act pushed the

Sonny ASSU, Installation shots from *Longing* at the West Vancouver Museum. Photo: urbanpictures.com



tenor and comprehension of the exhibition in another direction, from being accusatory and outwards, to becoming melancholy and inwards, and made room for a reading that broadens Assu's intentions.

The conversations Assu most wants his "masks" to stimulate

authenticity (for Assu, perhaps before the contact with Europeans that destroyed his ancestral culture; for others, to a time without irony). It may also be an expression of that overwhelming artistic longing to transform one's experience of the world into art.

Assu did not set out to make found art, so of particular interest is his denial of artistic longing to recognize that the "masks" already answered their purpose when he found them; that there was no need of additional finish; that sometimes, no matter how great our longing, we

have to remain humble in the face of our world and admit that it cannot be made better by our transformations; to have the ability to say, "enough." But, of course, in choosing them, Assu had transformed them already: they will never again be mere off-cuts of cedar.

In their restraint and earnestness, Assu's work reclaims some of that authenticity compromised by the ruination of earlier Aboriginal culture. "Longing" is simultaneously: A confounding of the primary stereotype of Northwest Coast Aboriginal art; a return to the culturally significant moment when Aboriginal masks entered Western art; and an act of cultural repatriation. By adding a contemporary aesthetic parallel to its traditional expression, Assu is on the frontier of cultural transformation. This puts him on a path that never existed in the past.¹ ←

Sonny ASSU, *Longing*

Vancouver Museum of Anthropology
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Dion KLINER is a sculptor and writer living in Vancouver. He is a frequent contributor to magazines and catalogues. A recent essay is included in *Tumulus*, a book of photographs by James Nizam and Roger Eberhard, documenting the dissolution of a holiday village formerly located on reserve lands of the Katzie First Nation in Pitt Lake, British Columbia.

NOTE

1. See: www.sonnyassu.com



Sonny ASSU, *Museum of Anthropology*, 2011. Archival Pigment Print. 71,1 x 106,6 cm. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

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Sonny ASSU, Installation shots from *Longing* at the West Vancouver Museum. Photo: urbanpictures.com

concern issues of Aboriginal status and history in Canada, and the wastes of consumer culture. As successful as Assu is, it is equally compelling to see the "masks" as an echo of the history of sculpture, and as stand-ins for "the artist." I say "echo" because the history that resonates in the "masks" is more felt in the whole body, like a vibration in the ear, than seen and understood by the eye. When I look at the "masks" I feel the unfinished sculptures of Michelangelo and Rodin, the found and readymade objects of Duchamp, and the traditional Northwest Coast masks of anonymous carvers deep in history, and those more contemporary like Robert Davidson.

As much as a chunk of cedar might embody a yearning to belong to the valued objects that surround it, or to the era, or cultural place, from which its neighbours in the display case come, it also stands as a personification of artistic longing; not necessarily Assu's, but any artist's. That longing may be for a time, forwards or back, of perceived

