

Brian Jungen

Baseball gloves transformed into a cigar store American Indian. Nike Air Jordans converted into Northwest Coast masks. Sports jerseys woven into traditional warp and weft native blankets. Golf bags turned into totem poles. Green plastic rubbish bins formed into a giant tortoise shell. White plastic chairs metamorphosed into life-sized whale skeletons. Softballs and baseballs molded into human skulls.

Since Brian Jungen's first major exhibit more than 15 years ago – Prototypes for New Understanding, in which he shaped Nike Air Jordans into ritualistic Northwest Coast masks - this Doig River Band member of the Dane-zaa First Nation, in British Columbia, has become an international art star. His shape-shifting sculptures, such as the ones noted above, have catapulted Jungen into the rarified roster of indigenous artists whose work is visually translatable into almost any language in virtually every country. Global consumerism, whether in the form of sports paraphernalia or mass-produced objects of desire, is the real international language of the 21st century, and Jungen capitalizes on that in an uncanny way.

Jungen's sleight-of-hand play of materials, combined with his dry wit, is irresistible. Less obvious and more profound, and the underlying power of his art, are the connections he makes on both a personal and cultural level with the work he creates.

As with many contemporary artists, Jungen's art deals with issues of identity. References to his mother's Dane-zaa history abound as he refashions consumer-related objects, typically sports-related, into works that reference the sorts of hand-crafted, iconic, often ritualistic objects emblematic of native culture. Jungen's paradoxical, sacred/profane transformations allude to the kind of schizoid, existential balancing act that many minority peoples juggle as they strive to function in two very different cultures.

Western values ascribe to a split between that which is held to be spiritual and that which is considered vernacular. Most Eastern cultures and many indigenous peoples view life more wholistically; their material culture often reflects both personal and community values simultaneously. Notions of the Trickster are also implicit in Jungen's tweaking of native myths. Throughout centuries, various native peoples in the Americas have included parodies as part of their ritualistic customs. As Paul Radin writes in *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*: "It is safe to assume that there always existed professional humorists and satirists in the tribe, and an audience that was delighted to listen to them."

If Jungen's art is rooted in both prehistoric and contemporary times, there's also a case for linking him to Surrealism's main concerns. "Between dream, madness, and meditation . . . between art and the sacred lies the surrealist modus operandi," Celia Rabinovitch writes in *Surrealism and the Sacred*.

For the Surrealists – think Meret Oppenheim's fur-covered teacup, Salvador Dali's *Lobster Telephone*, and many other strikingly twisted artworks from 1936 – ordinary objects had the power to be transformed into metaphors that could possess the power of archaic magic. As Andre Breton noted in his seminal 1937 essay *The Crisis of the Object*, there is a fresh possibility of meaning for every bit of refuse in the world. The Surrealists saw themselves as cultural anthropologists, combining disparate elements that joined together would make the ordinary extraordinary. Jungen surely fits in this category.

Since 2011 Jungen has lived on a ranch in a remote location outside Vancouver. He is an avid horseman, and *Variant #4*, which is reminiscent of a mask, harkens back to his earlier prototypes. *America's Most Wanted* and *New Mexico* also incorporate distended forms of Nike Air Jordans, although these pieces are more abstract and more open to subjective speculation than Jungen's older artworks. But his core platform remains the same. He takes things as they are, and through discipline and second sight, transforms them into artworks that prompt us to an aesthetic and spiritual awakening. - Elisabeth Kirsch, independent art curator/writer, Kansas City