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Making totems of the objects that surround us

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Abstract (Abstract): So, in the current show, [Brian Jungen]'s totems are formalist objects; they take the shape and the busy designs of golf bags and render them into the totem's form. Zipper outlines become mouths or accent lines. The bags' openings, into which clubs would be inserted, become more faces, with comically sexual openings or tongues. Panels protrude to simulate a thunderbird's beak, an allusion even my six-year-old spotted during a preview last week.

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Full text: Forging golf bags into totem poles and land claims into putting greens, Vancouver artist Brian Jungen's new show at Catriona Jeffries Gallery is a blockbuster, a monumental return to the brio of his sneakers-as-masks and deck chairs-as-whale skeletons that launched his career.

Populating the gallery with five fifteen-foot high totems made of stacked, sliced, and stuffed golf bags, Jungen has demonstrated, again, why he is one of Canada's - and one of the 21st century's - most important young artists.

Jungen's exhibition, his first in Vancouver since a massive show at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2006, fills the Catriona Jeffries Gallery's cavernous spaces. When you walk in, you encounter the untitled totems - far from the carefully preserved or replicated wooden artifacts you might see at the Museum of Anthropology across town. Here, the bright and durable fabric of golf bags, and their very functionality (zippers, pouches, straps), become aesthetic decoration.

This transformation of a consumer object into a work of art comes naturally out of Jungen's practice. Jungen, now 37, is part of a generation of Vancouver artists - including Geoffrey Farmer, Jason McLean, and Tim Lee - who have captured the attention of critics, museums, and collectors internationally, making art that is pop and also conceptual, McLuhan-cool and Hollywood (North) hot.

He burst onto the scene in the late 1990s with a series of confident works that melded native and non-native art forms, commodity cultures and the avant-garde. His *Prototype for New Understanding* (1998-2005), a series of tribal masks fabricated from Nike running shoes, was both populist and abstract, a formidable bridging of youth culture and ritual. And his skeletons of whales, including *Cetology* (2002) - made from cut-up white lawn chairs - transformed everyday artefacts into majestic, airy sculptures that hung above the viewer with humour and dignity.

Other works by Jungen, many of which were on display in a mid-career retrospective that toured from New York to Vancouver to Rotterdam over the past two years, engaged with architecture and soccer balls, basketball courts and home theatre systems. And throughout the decade-plus of his fertile career, Jungen's raw material has been the objects that surround us, be they boxes that running shoes are shipped in or the pallets that those boxes sit on.

Let's make something of our world, his art suggests, rather than allowing it to make us.

So, in the current show, Jungen's totems are formalist objects; they take the shape and the busy designs of golf bags and render them into the totem's form. Zipper outlines become mouths or accent lines. The bags' openings, into which clubs would be inserted, become more faces, with comically sexual openings or tongues. Panels protrude to simulate a thunderbird's beak, an allusion even my six-year-old spotted during a preview last week.

And these totems are also, of course, socio-political statements, commenting on the different uses land is put to, and, especially, the role of a planned golf course expansion in the Oka crisis of 1990. But these days the message is necessarily more complicated; in Vancouver, for example, the Musqueam people run a golf course on their reserve south of the University of British Columbia campus.

And this is where the second part of Jungen's show comes into play. If the totems are the populist work, the art that everyone will get (which is the nature of Jungen's genius: to make art you do not need a degree in art history to understand), a small room off the main gallery at Catriona Jeffries contains work more attuned to the art-world insider.

In this room, lying on the floor and arranged roughly in the shape of British Columbia, are large pieces of what could be a jigsaw puzzle: plywood covered in red wool. The pieces are in the shapes of the various native reserves in the Vancouver area; overlapping as they do, they suggest tectonic plates, or perhaps the competing native (and non-native) claims to land. More abstraction, more politics, but also more sensuous, colourful, tactile art.

At its opening a week ago, Jungen's show was packed with art students, collectors, artists, and the curious.

Asked what she thought, First

Nations art historian Marcia Crosby noted how "Jungen's idea of his materials shifted from shoes and masks to bags and totem poles, from the pedestrian to the monumental, in a way that is parallel to how Northwest Coast Art has been historicized."

Precisely: for totem parks are often as much tourist kitsch as are golf courses. Again, Jungen is uninterested in privileging some native authenticity. And, indeed, the golf bag totems also resemble office towers, or phallic shapes - or, really, they could be pure abstractions with no figurative meaning. Jungen's art need not be corralled into purely aboriginal signification.

With this latest exhibition, then, Jungen's art continues to impress, for how it manages to be as timely as today's headlines, but also as traditional as a potlatch. And it is to Jungen's credit not only that he can bridge such a divide, but also that he makes that connection - between the traditional and the contemporary - seem so necessary.

Brian Jungen at Catriona Jeffries Gallery, 274 East 1st Avenue, Vancouver, continues until May 26.

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