Brian Jungen

Brian Jungen is part of a younger generation of artists who have emerged over the last few years amid an active scene in Vancouver, Canada. He was born in Fort St John, British Columbia to a First Nations mother and a Swiss-Canadian father. This dual heritage, and the tensions and links between aboriginal traditions, pop culture and consumerism, often provide the themes and subject matter for his art.

He talks about the mix of research and improvisation that goes into his work with curator Jessica Morgan.

Jessica Morgan: Your work often involves anthropological research or an investigation into how institutions display and interpret culture. How did this begin?

Brian Jungen: At art school, when I was taking my required non-western art classes, a lot of it was native Canadian art history. I didn't know much about it, yet the teacher was constantly looking to me for validation. I would read about my own ancestral past and that got me interested in anthropology – I would actually see my uncles in some textbook, which was quite bizarre. I was being recruited to be part of this serious political correctness, which didn't interest me. I was interested in exploring my identity, but not in this post-colonial way. At the same time, I was going to museums of natural history and so I became very interested in the display of these objects.

JM: You started off making drawings rather than sculpture. What was your attraction to that?

BJ: I was poor *(laughs)*. It was immediate, that was what I liked about it. I was drawing fast stream-of-consciousness identity work, using a lot of imagery like negative stereotypes of Indian folks. And then I thought 'Why don't I just get other people to draw this for me?' I would have people (usually students) ask people in malls to draw their ideas of what Indian culture was. Some people spent twenty minutes drawing an elaborate head dress and other people drew a beer bottle. Then I would enlarge them into colour fields on the gallery walls, like big hard-edge paintings. Big cartoonish images that I would categorise, like a reverse ethnographic study. They were only painted on the gallery walls though, so they disappeared after the show.

I also made manila paper drawings. I would make about 50 a day and then staple-gun these stereotypical images around the streets in my area, which was very run-down, characterised by people – often Indian people - suffering from substance abuse and alcoholism and so on.

JM: Your work is also characterised by a particular use of consumer materials. The first objects that you made were the masks made from Nike trainers? [*Prototypes for a New Understanding*, 1998 – 2005]

BJ: Yes, I saw the trainers in Niketown in New York, which was the first time I had been there. I had just visited the Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan

Museum. I always get kind of depressed in those places, especially the Museum of Natural History, because of the problems of presenting aboriginal cultures there. I then went to Niketown, where they also present their products in big, hermetically sealed vitrines. It was a museum-like environment. I had been reading a lot of anthropology texts, such as Lévi-Strauss's *The Way of the Masks*, and I had a weird epiphany that day. I went back to Canada, where I was doing a residency, which provided both money and time to devote to art making. So I bought these Air Jordans and I started taking them apart and reassembling them. But it was unplanned – the works evolved as I made them.

JM: Your method of working often seems to involve a balance between studio practice combined with a response to the site of the exhibition (museum, gallery or so on). How do you balance the two?

BJ: When I have been asked to make shows in unusual environments I always take the site into account. A lot of the work that was made on-site was a result of gallery residencies, so that's when I started using the gallery as a studio, which is what led to the giant whale skeletons [*Cetology*, 2002]. I had a month to make something in an artist-run centre in Vancouver, and the process was fast, intuitive and quite scary because I had so little time. I then wanted to make another skeleton in Seattle and a third in Vienna, but I realised I could make the whale skeletons anywhere because those chairs are available everywhere. So that experience in the artist-run centre really got me thinking about how to work in the studio and adapt each piece to a specific environment.

JM: Your recent work, *The Evening Redness in the West # 1*, consists of two riding saddles that were made from disassembled, vibrating leather chairs designed to accompany entertainment systems. The saddles are connected to speakers covered with skulls made from softballs. Could you describe this work and what interested you in particular about the products you used?

BJ: My band (which is what Canada calls tribes) is very remote and when I lived on the reserve there was very little communication with the outside world. Maybe two TV stations and a bit of radio, so our exposure was very limited. Now the band is very wealthy and a lot of band members have money. It's interesting how it changes everything. Now my family have widescreen TV and surround sound and a huge sectional sofa and it's all crammed into this suburban tract house like you see on every reserve.

Supposedly affordable leather furniture was something that members of my family would buy as soon as they got some money. It was like a symbol of luxury. First I made a gigantic tepee out of them for Vancouver Art Gallery, using the wood for the poles. Then I became interested in the chairs that moved with these weird motors in them. To me it was this extreme version of an object of leisure, passive participation in something, whether it's a video game or a big Spielberg film where you can "feel" the film. So I wanted to see if I could make these saddles out of the chairs and play around with the idea of the western. The skulls were partly to do with my interest with Cormac McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West*. I had read this book several times and I wanted to make some kind of homage to it using these home theatre systems. This incredibly violent novel tells the story of the

Mexican-American wars, with bounty hunters on a mission to slaughter the Indians. It's told from the perspective of this fifteen-year-old boy who is one of the bounty hunters. And the description, the language is all in the vernacular. So it's quite hard to understand, it's such heavy slang. There are some incredible scenes in it. In the book there is actually one scene that has always stuck in my head where one of the Apaches is described wearing a wedding dress that he took from someone they had killed. For the Apache, the wedding dress had no use-value. This sense of misplaced use-value relates to how I looked at a lot of Indian material in museums, and how I looked at the chairs and softballs. Often in museums you can see western items within Indian objects, which create a third, hybrid object, spoons, for example. But this assimilation of western and Indian material stopped when mass production was introduced.

JM: We started to discuss this project for Tate some time ago and since then you have had a number of ideas that you decided not to take forward. One idea we discussed involved the Treaty signed between your tribe in Canada, the Doig River band of the Dunne-za Nation in Northern British Columbia, and the British Crown in the nineteenth century. This is now something that you are planning to develop for another exhibition, but perhaps you can describe it a little here?

BJ: My new work is very much about my personal history and origins. When I go to my hometown every summer, there is always a Powwow in July. Gradually this became a rodeo, but now they also connect this event to a lot of the historical residue of the treaty – including a five-dollar handshake. Part of the Treaty agreement stated that a Royal Canadian Mounted Police constable would give each Indian from my tribe five dollars on the day of the anniversary of the treaty, which is July 17. So the local RCMP detachment heads up there on the anniversary, and one guy is dressed in traditional scarlet uniform, and the whole historical thing is re-enacted. Of course the whole idea is insulting because the amount was never increased with inflation. So my cousins call it the 'pack of cigarettes handshake'. I don't know exactly what kind of project will result from this research or my interest in the treaty, but I think it will include many different objects and media – photography, documents, sculpture, and possibly a land-claim lawsuit with the Canadian government. I mean this land treaty covers an area that is bigger than Texas and it covers such an array of different climates and geography from the northern Rocky Mountains to these sand dunes in Saskatchewan. And most significantly the second largest oil deposit in the world.

JM: Another project that we discussed involved the idea of working with the Battersea Dogs Home, possibly building a dog run or shelter for the dogs at Tate.

BJ: Going back a few years I got interested in this idea of the domesticated animal and the homeless animal. I am also very interested generally in architecture for animals, like Lubetkin's Penguin House at London Zoo. Perhaps this is also connected to my family's relationship to animals and growing up around them on a farm. I thought it would be interesting here to design a space that was specifically made for dogs. The humans could only have access if you had a dog.

JM: Another idea you mentioned was to make a replica of the Greenpeace boat The Rainbow Warrior and dock this outside of Tate on the Thames.

BJ: Greenpeace really took off here after its origins in Vancouver. Which was just too far away. And eventually it became this multinational direct action group that was very controversial. They always claimed that the design of the Rainbow Warrior was based on a Native American myth but I have never been able to verify this. I've asked many museums and so on, and I think it was just completely fabricated.

JM: As yet you are not certain about the route your project will take for the exhibition in May but perhaps you can describe your initial thoughts about how you intend to approach the exhibition?

BJ: I have several things on the backburner. Revisiting sports material. With sports culture there seems to be a parallel with performance, regalia, costumes, event and ceremony. A lot of sports equipment is armour, especially American football gear. I have this idea for taking sports clothing in that direction, almost like a samurai costume. But now I need to work with professional seamstresses for this. There is also this idea where I make soccer balls out of beaver felt, which is used by hat-makers. I was very shocked that you could still get this material, but in a way it's how Canada was built. The fur trade and this madness for beaver felt and top hats.

What I usually do is I get so into an idea that it happens quite quickly once I am engaged. A lot of my work has a grand scale but I think for this I want to do something in reverse. More delicate, a little more obsessive, something with details on a smaller scale.

Brian Jungen is fifth in a series of exhibitions conceived by Jessica Morgan, Curator, Contemporary Art, Tate Modern, and is curated by Jessica Morgan, assisted by Amy Dickson, Assistant Curator, Tate Modern.