



Kent Monkman, *Boudoir de Berdashe*, 2007, mixed media installation, dimensions variable; installation view, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; photo © NGC



Venkat Raman Singh Shyam, *Smoking Taj*, 2009, pen and acrylic on canvas, 99 x 69cm; image courtesy Must Art Gallery, New Delhi

## Afterword: Looking back to *Sakahàn*

GREG HILL

*The following essay comes from the catalogue for Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art, the first in a five-series 'quinquennial' exhibition focusing on Indigenous contemporary art from around the world, currently showing at the National Gallery of Canada.*

It is now 2038 and twenty-five years have passed since *Sakahàn* the exhibition took place at the National Gallery of Canada. It is again time to take stock, evaluate and question the position of Indigenous art today, how it arrived in this place, and where it is headed. It is an honour for me to look back and think about what my curatorial colleagues Candice Hopkins and Christine Lalonde and I were trying to achieve. We were convinced that a survey of the work of contemporary Indigenous artists from around the globe would do at least three things: one, create an exhibition that would demonstrate great aesthetic diversity; two, build on existing and foster new networks between artists, curators, writers, academics and the institutional infrastructure of the Gallery; three, demonstrate that Indigenous art makes a vital and important contribution to contemporary art discourses in ways that are unique to Indigenous artists.

When *Sakahàn* took place in 2013, it had been twenty-one years since the Gallery's first foray into a major exhibition of contemporary Indigenous art with the North American survey show *Land, Spirit, Power*. That exhibition, and the attention and focus it brought to bear and attempted to address, was a catalyst for change at the Gallery with respect to the positioning and status of contemporary art by Aboriginal artists. It led to the building of a collection, the regular display of works in the galleries, the establishment of a curatorial position to care for and expand this collection, and the broadening of the mandate beyond Aboriginal art of North America to encompass contemporary Indigenous art as a global phenomenon/reality. This culminated in *Sakahàn*, the largest-ever global survey of contemporary Indigenous art.

The scope, ambition, successes and shortcomings of that first exhibition have been revisited and successively improved upon in the five quinquennials that have followed. The field of Indigenous art has expanded and transformed over the period just as the artists themselves have matured. The art produced during this time has demonstrated incredible diversity, a testament to the creativity of Indigenous artists that honours, challenges, invigorates and proposes emergent understandings of what it means to create art from this position — as an Indigenous artist.<sup>1</sup>

*Sakahàn* was the start — igniting a fire — for this series of exhibitions that have celebrated and interrogated concepts of indigeneity and the art produced from this geopolitical position — a position decidedly centred within an Indigenous conceptual framework. From this site, the view outward informed our selection of artists as we sought work that engaged with varied models of cultural and aesthetic expression and ontological and epistemological approaches to indigeneity. Looking closely at that first iteration of what is now an ongoing series of six major exhibitions of contemporary Indigenous art spanning twenty-five years, we have much to celebrate. We can now look back with some measured satisfaction on the progress that has been made. Now in its sixth iteration, the exhibition has grown in stature and has arguably become one of the leading 'biennial-type' exhibitions in the world. A global community of Indigenous artists has developed and matured, spawning numerous international artist collectives, curatorial collaborations, exhibitions in major museums, as well as critical attention directed toward the Indigenous art activities of small institutions far off the well-trodden path of conventional art circuits. Indigenous artists have asserted their aesthetic sovereignty and developed new forms of expression that maintain links to concepts and values of their heritage while also looking ahead to the





Danie Mellor, *Maba-l Bala Rugu (of Power in Darkness)* [detail], 2013, pastel, pencil and crayon with wash, glitter and Swarovski crystal on paper; triptych: 300 × 374 × 12 cm; image courtesy and © the artist, courtesy Michael Reid at Elizabeth Bay/Caruana and Reid Fine Art, Sydney; photo: Stuart Hay and Dave Patterson, ANU Photography

creative and aesthetic needs of future generations. Before this becomes an exercise in self-aggrandisement, I want to acknowledge the work of the various curatorial teams and the ever-expanding network of curatorial advisors that have enabled this entire project. Their knowledge, commitment and efforts have taken what was started with *Sakabàn* and built it into a self-sustaining blaze.

As we gaze back to 2013, we have the privilege of looking through the veil of these past successes. The positive outcomes, however, may partially obscure the historical moment.

It is important to recall the political backdrop of 2013 to more fully appreciate how far we have come. During the final stages of organising the exhibition, the political situation in Canada took a dramatic turn. The Conservative government of the day pushed several bills through parliament and into law that directly affected Aboriginal peoples and their lands, with inadequate consultation and in violation of the constitutional responsibility to properly do so. As a result, Aboriginal leadership rejected the new laws. Chief Theresa Spence of the Attawapiskat First Nation started a hunger strike to call attention to the ongoing issues affecting her community. Idle No More, a broad grassroots political movement, was started by four Aboriginal women from Saskatchewan (Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam, Sheelah

McLean and Nina Wilson) and spread across the country and around the world. These events, and many others, were a stark reminder of the connection between Indigenous politics and Indigenous art. During both times of peace and unrest, Indigenous art can be a celebration of culture and identity as well as a tool for education and renewal. It is always political.

The conflict in Canada was a reminder of the spectrum of social and political conditions affecting all of the artists in the exhibition. That Indigenous artists living in Canada, Norway, Mexico, Japan, India, Guatemala and Australia had different lived experiences in relation to the colonial histories of their respective geographies was no surprise. Of course, no two artists would have the same experience of colonialism, in the same way that the political and social environment varied greatly across regions, countries and communities. In addition, each artist approached the concept of indigeneity in a different way. However, the relationship between colonial experience and formations of indigeneity is direct. It is a strategic relationship rather than a causal one. Strategically, indigeneity is flexible enough to serve as required. As a concept, or construct, its defining characteristic is its mutability. Indigeneity as a concept – a container – has to be plastic enough to expand in



any direction while also maintaining its integrity. Indigenous artists understand this.

This important prerequisite was not universally understood. One of the reactionary responses to *Sakabàn* was the critique that this group exhibition of Indigenous artists was an outmoded exercise of cultural essentialism and exclusion based on race. With the benefit of hindsight it appears to be a non-issue now, but some commentators still maintain that an exhibition that included artists from dozens of different cultural affiliations was somehow exclusionary and narrowly defined along racial terms. There was, in fact, an essentialism at play. In her [Sakabàn] catalogue essay, the eminent scholar Jolene Rickard cited Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's idea of 'strategic essentialism', referring to 'the ways in which subordinate or marginalised social groups may temporarily put aside local difference in order to forge a sense of collective identity through which they band together in political movements'.<sup>2</sup> It was maintained that the artists included in *Sakabàn* adhered to this sense of collective identity. Indeed, it has continued to be an important element of each exhibition over the span of the twenty-five years. Importantly, the networks fostered between artists, curators, advisors, critics and academics have only strengthened this sense of collective identity.

Ironically, it was regular practice for the majority of exhibitions organised in Canada at the time to be comprised of artists representing a very narrow ethnic profile. This was so much the norm then that it was invisible. Critics of the day were conditioned to spot difference. The spotting was like a dark stain on a white shirt that would keep drawing the eye to it. The impulse was to remove the stain. What was missed in the critique but later came to be recognised and appreciated was the depth and beauty of the art that was presented. To those open to deeper understanding, art that at first appeared shockingly different soon provided a means of entry. To the uninitiated, the works revealed alien aesthetics, foreign politics and kinds of knowing that came from an unknown centre, in ways that were unexpected, challenging and potentially rewarding. In all cases, the full benefit of the experience of the work required the viewer to engage with it.

One particular example of a work in *Sakabàn* that, for me, came to the fore was Teresa Margolles's *Tela bordada* (Embroidered Fabric) (2012). Pinned to a wall in the gallery was an embroidered white cloth. The cloth appeared soiled, detracting from the delicate threadwork. It was not until the viewer read the label for the work that they learned the cloth was from a city morgue and that the stains on it were from the body of a murdered Guatemalan woman. The artist provided the cloth to a group of Mayan women<sup>3</sup> who embroidered it. Margolles's work calls attention to the victims of systemic violence in Guatemala, stemming from poverty, drug-related crime, political crisis, military assaults on communities and domestic violence.

The stains on the cloth are the visceral reminders of a life lost through violence. Margolles confronts us with this evidence, but not before she strips away a desensitised gaze. The subtle presentation of her work draws one in, and then the full impact of the violent act is



Jimmie Durham, *Encore tranquillité*, 2008, fibreglass stone and airplane, 150 × 860 × 806cm; installation view, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; photo: Roman März

transferred to the viewer as they learn they are witnessing the vestiges of death. It leaves an indelible impression. It is not about shock. Margolles creates a tension between beauty and death that enhances both. The women's handwork, the labour and the sense of community that comes through in the creation of the embroidery take the work far beyond decoration to enter the realm of ritual and transformation. A video of some of the women working together on the cloth and explaining their intent is an important part of the installation. Their accounts of their intentions to honour the life of the deceased are telling: 'Her blood is going to help us ... Over her blood we are building a new future.'<sup>4</sup> The coming together of the women to produce the embroidery was part of an honouring and healing process – a creative rebuilding action. Overlaid with brightly coloured thread, the horror of the stains has not been erased, but beautified.

Margolles's use of Mayan embroidery emphasises two points. First, the overlay is a poignant reminder that this violence was enacted upon an Indigenous woman. She represents one of many who have suffered similar fates in the cycles of violence in Guatemala. Second, the embroidery is disarming; as much as it is a celebration of culture and identity from within, from the outside the bright colours and designs are associated with tourism and the promotion of Indigenous culture as commodity. As an artwork, the viewer is drawn in by the embroidery and then repulsed upon discovery of the source of the staining on the cloth. The viewer is forced to reconcile the distance between death and beauty and come to the understanding that as death is part of life, ugliness is the foil for beauty, and all are part of our collective experience, as much as we are being urged to consider Indigenous existence in Guatemala.

The embroidery represents the ongoing presence of these Mayan women while at the same time the stains are evidence of their disappearance. While there is a specificity



Michael Parekowhai, *My Sister, My Self*, 2007, fibreglass, wood and enamel paint, 265 × 150 × 102cm; installation view, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; image courtesy and © the artist, courtesy Roslyn Oxley9, Sydney; photo: © NGC



Marie Watt, *Blanket Stories: Seven Generations, Adawe, and Hearth*, 2013, folded and stacked blankets, paper tags, dimensions variable, site-specific installation, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; photo : © NGC

to Margolles's work, the conflict between nation-states created out of colonialism and the dispossession and aggressive exploitation of Indigenous populations and their lands was not exclusive to Guatemala.<sup>5</sup> While an essentialist view of these histories of conflict in Latin America and around the globe may have risked homogenisation, the great diversity of histories and lived experience presented in the artworks for *Sakabàn* provided a detailed counterpoint to this risk. On this point, the Mayan women themselves were very conscious of the idea that the art they were making was speaking not only to their situation but to the situations of all women oppressed by violence. They thought of the artwork as their voice speaking out in the art galleries of the world. As Catalina Lozano noted in her *Sakabàn* catalogue essay: 'This struggle goes beyond the mere achievement of isolated rights and is an integral reconfiguration of the social relations we all are subject to.'<sup>6</sup>

## FINALE

In the year 2038, inequality and abuse of power persist. The effects of colonialism persist. Ongoing oppression and subjugation of Indigenous peoples continues as a result of the conflict between capitalist exploitation and desire for the natural resources that are

enclosed in the territories of Indigenous peoples. In many areas of the world, disputes are pacified through negotiated means, although it is an uneasy peace as these agreements are not honoured and the uneven power relations are abused. Indigenous art is underground.

## OVERTURE

On behalf of all Indigenous peoples, great gains have been made on the political front in international forums. The 'right to exist' has been enshrined, endorsed and upheld by all the signatories to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Developing from the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the newly formed United Indigenous Peoples organisation runs parallel to the United Nations and has equal say on all matters pertaining to Indigenous peoples, their lands, territories and rights to exist as Indigenous peoples.

A multivalent art history has developed and is part of the educational system. The Indigenous academy feeds the necessary critical art historical perspective and transmits this knowledge and perception through teaching and writing. Senior artists have fostered the development of younger artists. A new generation of artists has come to



IMAGE: KINOSHITA SEIJI, 'WINDS-WORK-93', WOODBLOCK LITHOGRAPH, 251 (CENTRA)

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Shuvina Ashoona, *Untitled (Big Pink Flowers)*, 2009–10, coloured pencil and black fibre-tipped pen with graphite on woven paper, 124.5 × 182.5cm; image © Dorset Fine Arts; photo © NGC

prominence. Like their mentors, they are adept at navigating the irony, incongruity, complexity and fertility contained in the concept of indigeneity. They give it form. They embody it. Thrivance.

## CADENZA

Readers become the writers of their own future(s).

1. The inspiration for this afterword came during a keynote address given by Jolene Rickard at the Art Gallery of Alberta in June 2012, 'Making Aesthetics Indigenous?' The strategy is to prefigure the space and place we are now in, not as a point of advancement but rather as a kind of status-quo from which we can imagine a future with certain assumptions in place, such as sovereignty over one's self and position within the cultural construct we have come to call indigeneity, this in a world that is decidedly imagined to be beyond colonialism. This strategy has been reinforced in my readings and conversations with fellow artists and curators and is further inspired by Gerald Vizenor's concept of 'survivance', which I now see as the precondition to 'thrivance'.
2. 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (ed.), *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, Methuen, New York, 1987, p. 205.
3. Lucy Andrea López, Silvia Menchú, Bonifacia Cocom Tambriz, María Josefina Tuy Churunel, Marcelina Cumes, Rosamelia

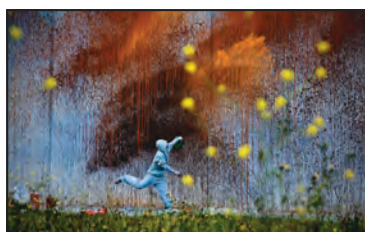
Cocolajay, Yury Cocolajay, Alba Cocolajay and Cristina López.

4. Teresa Margolles, *Mujeres bordando junto al Lago Atitlan* [Women Embroidering next to Atitlan Lake], 2012, HD video.

5. See Catalina Lozano's essay 'No Man's Land?: Coloniality of Power and Indigenous Struggle in Latin America' in this [*Sakabàn*] volume. 'For instance, the Nukaks, a people who has been in contact with migrant colonists and whose milieu has been exploited for coca growing only since 1988, have lost half of their population in twenty-four years. Such facts are systematically silenced and covered with the hypocrisy of cultural heritage protection, which is done according to the criteria of Western anthropologists or government agents.'

6. Lozano, 2012.

This article is a reprint of the author's essay in the exhibition catalogue for *Sakabàn: International Indigenous Art*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 2013, pp. 135-140. The 286-page catalogue also contains essays by: Christine Lalonde, Candice Hopkins, Linda Grussani, Gerald Vizenor, Jolene Rickard, Irene Snarby, Annapurna Garimella, Ngahiraka Mason, Yuh-Yao Wan, Catalina Lozano, Abraham Cruzvillegas and Jimena Mendoza, and Jimmy Manning. The *Sakabàn: International Indigenous Art* exhibition is showing at the National Gallery of Canada 17 May to 2 September 2013: gallery.ca



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Image: Ash Keating, *West Park Proposition* (2012), production still, photo Greta Costello, © Ash Keating. Courtesy of the artist and Fehily Contemporary.

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