

National Post

The breaking point: Artist Brian Jungen rips consumer items apart and rebuilds them into cultural artifacts. More is broken than plastic lawn chairs

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Illustrations: Black & White Photo: A whale skeleton made of plastic lawn chairs. 'I was interested in these chairs,' says artist Brian Jungen. 'They're ubiquitous. I saw them in Sweden, Australia. They're universal. Individually, they're quite ugly, but stacked, they're beautiful.'

Black & White Photo: Nike Air Jordans transformed into an Indian ceremonial mask. 'Nikes are almost religious objects,' says curator Reid Shier. '[Look at] how they've been marketed to transform young, poor, black urban kids into superheroes. They're ceremonial gear used to boost social status. But when people look at the ceremonial outfits of certain tribes, they look at it as primitive when it's something we all do, especially large corporations.'

First he played with running shoes. Now he's after the plastic lawn chair. Vancouver artist Brian Jungen, who captured attention two years ago for his sculptures of Nike Air Jordans transformed into Northwest Coast Indian ceremonial masks, is hoping his new show, *Shapeshifter*, at Vancouver's Or Gallery, will move him beyond the masks.

"They were so successful," he says, sitting on a plastic lawn chair in the spartan gallery. "It was hard to follow it up with something equal or better."

Hanging from the ceiling in front of him is a huge whale skeleton fashioned from cut up pieces of plastic lawn chair. In this stark white room, the "artifact" looks magical, unbelievable, like an exhibit in some parallel-universe museum. And, just like the Nike sculptures, it has much to say about the convergence of consumer and native culture. Like the Nikes, the chairs are a mass-produced commodity that Jungen tears apart, then re-imagines and gives back to the world. "The destruction, transformation and inversion of

mass-produced commodities is what people really respond to in Brian's work," says Reid Shier, director and curator of the Or Gallery. "And there's a real tradition of that in B.C. among West Coast native art."

In potlatch ceremonies, says Reid, native leaders would take items they received through trade with the white man, destroy them, break them apart or give them away. There is an uncanny resemblance, he says, between the way native people would spread out their pots and pans and other material goods at potlatch time and the way big-box retailers display their products.

Jungen acknowledges the links in his work to potlatch ceremonies, but says both exhibits are a way for him to come to terms with his identity. Like his art, Jungen is a native-western hybrid, producing brilliant, insightful native art while living, completely assimilated, in Canadian culture.

The 30-year-old artist, who has a Swiss father and a mother from the Doig River band in Northern B.C., says his work is

more informed by what he learned of his culture from school books and institutions than it is by real live aboriginal culture. Growing up near a reserve with relatives who went through the residential school system, Jungen was always well-aware of the stereotypes of aboriginal culture, and later of his inability to escape that label as an artist. So he plays with those associations. The perception of Indians as close to nature, for example, is a myth he tries to break with his Shapeshifter show. Likewise, the perception of Indian culture as dead or compromised and on display in museums.

"I don't call myself a native artist," he says. "I'm a contemporary artist. I make art about the idea of native art. I work with the public's idea of what constitutes aboriginalness. It's a bottomless pit." -

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