

NEW MEDIA REVIEW

Is the World Wonderful?

On Judy Chartrand's What a Wonderful World

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Judy Chartrand: What a Wonderful World on view at the Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Coast Art, Vancouver, BC, 19 October 2016 - 26 March 2017.

ADMITTEDLY, I WAS CONFUSED about where the permanent collection of the Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Coast Art ends and where the temporary exhibition *Judy Chartrand: What a Wonderful World* begins. Walking down the left side of the supporting columns of the first floor gallery, I initially missed the title panel of the exhibition sitting in a carved arch down the centre of the gallery. But, eventually, I came upon the black text of the exhibition's title placed on a close-up of what looks like an ancient clay tablet with the raised, seemingly anachronistic, words "We Mourn." The initial impression of entering an exhibition on ancient ceramics is automatically countered, on the other side of the panel, by a display of colourful glazed ceramic bowls, Campbell's soup cans, boxes of instant food, and other consumer products arranged in various vitrines and along the walls on wooden shelves.

Here, in a small section towards the back of the gallery, some of contemporary visual artist Judy Chartrand's ceramic works created from 1990 to 2016 were on view from 19 October 2016 to 26 March 2017. Chartrand's ceramics reflect aspects of her personal history as a Cree woman growing up in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, while highlighting pertinent issues of racism, xenophobia, and relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. The sense of death and loss prefaced by the phrase "We Mourn" is reflected in almost all of the works on display. However, *What a Wonderful World* is not entirely an exhibition of mourning; instead, it facilitates a dialogue between the viewer, Chartrand, and her ceramics that invites reflection while

recognizing the strength and resilience beneath the pain, anger, and sardonic humour in her work. It is a thought-provoking display that feels just as inviting and motivating as it is disconcerting.

The gallery space for *What a Wonderful World* is small and intimate (about forty-six square metres), an intimacy enhanced by the presence of the artist's voice throughout the exhibition. From the introductory text panel, on which Chartrand recounts her family history and how she began her career, to the labels accompanying each piece, Chartrand guides viewers through her work, each time relating profound concepts to her own life and experiences. On the label for *Urban Indian Fare* (2004) – a series of ceramic macaroni boxes on wood shelves – Chartrand writes about poverty and tells the viewer: “When you are poor, macaroni is the food you survive on ... Even when I was a student ... I often survived on big pots of macaroni” (Figure 1). This simple statement invites viewers



Figure 1. Judy Chartrand, *Urban Indian Fare* (2004).

to travel down their own chains of memory, to reflect on their own experiences. No matter what these experiences are, many of us are united by our consumption of the serialized products she represents.

The relatability and intimacy of the space are tempered by the specificity of the colonial relations invoked by each piece. Repetition is present throughout her works, such as *Urban Indian Fare*, where the instructions on the side of each box read: “Enjoy! Over and Over and Over Again!” *Indian Residential School Brand Porridge* (2004) consists of four boxes with the image of a residential school girl reluctantly eating a bowl of lumpy porridge. First Nations were repeatedly force-fed Western culture and forced to fit ready-made boxes (Figure 2). In *The*



Figure 2. Judy Chartrand, *Indian Residential School Brand Porridge* (2004).

Cupboard of Contention (2001), the Campbell's soup cans labelled "oppression," "loss of language," and "poverty" convey exactly what First Nations were fed and how this legacy still sits within Canada's pantry. Spread across the small, white door of the cupboard are the words: "Oh Canada Your Home Is Native Land" (Figure 3). Works containing repeated boxes and cans are placed on either side of the central axis of the exhibition space so that viewers experience them again and again. As a White-Hispanic American temporarily settled in Vancouver, the lighting led me to feel a pang of responsibility as my shadow was cast over *In memory of those no longer with us* (2016), a ceramic dish covered with the names of women who died violent deaths in Vancouver. Whether or not this was intentional, it led me to ask: As participants in this space and in the act of visual consumption, what are our responsibilities?

The exhibition not only deals with anger and sadness but also strength. Shelves with ceramic cans and boxes hang on the walls at eye level, and the close-knit quarters of the exhibition space bring the viewer closer to them. This prompts a careful examination of the pieces, which, despite



Figure 3. Judy Chartrand, *The Cupboard of Contention* (2001).

their seeming similarities, are handmade and unique. There is a sense of resistance in this singularity. Chartrand modifies each consumer product upon which she draws to fit particular experiences in a way that powerfully infiltrates homogenizing, Western regimes of display. These regimes removed colonized peoples and their material culture from their original contexts and rendered them fit for Western visual and, in some cases, monetary consumption through stereotyping and through displays that emphasize a universal aesthetic. The placement of Chartrand's works inside glass vitrines – the classic Western display method that glosses over specificity and treats objects and art as marketable commodities – or repeated on shelves like items in a grocery store, works against these regimes of display. The particularity of her work



Figure 4. Judy Chartrand, *What a Wonderful World* (2016).

carves out a space within universalizing vitrines for the recognition of her specific experience. Particularity is also a gesture against mechanical reproducibility; it prevents the easy distillation of First Nations and other marginalized groups into disposable, ready-to-consume, one-size-fits-all boxes.

There is a beautiful sense of hope in the resistance within Chartrand's work: this is what the exhibition brings out and this is its strength. It is the beauty found in her piece *What a Wonderful World* (2016) – a white bowl covered in flowers and the words “Go Back to Your Own Country!” – from which the exhibition derives its title (Figure 4). This work provokes viewers to respond to its racist demand. Chartrand herself responds in the label attached to this piece: “I refuse to be complacent about racism, poverty, and injustice.” We see from *What a Wonderful World* that this is true, that her work is not, as the title panel may suggest, some monument to loss. The contrast between the title panel and the overall exhibition is a contrast that is emphasized by the juxtaposition of Chartrand's work with the drawings and sculptures of Haida artist Bill Reid. The blurry transition from one to the other may force viewers to question their perceptions of First Nations art and readjust their way of seeing. Ultimately, by drawing the viewer in and encouraging a dialogue with Chartrand and her work, the exhibition asks if we will be complacent in the face of injustice. It asks: Is the world wonderful? And how can we make it more so?