

A WEAVING OF BOOKS; WHAT BASKET HAVE WE MADE?

A Review Essay

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Beau Dick: Devoured by Consumerism

LaTiesha Fazakas with John Cussans and Candice Hopkins

Vancouver: Figure 1 Publishing, 2019. 80 pp. \$29.70 paper.

People among the People: The Public Art of Susan Point

Robert Watt

Vancouver: Figure 1 Publishing, 2019. 208 pp. \$50 paper.

Incorporating Culture: How Indigenous People Have Been Reshaping the Northwest Coast Art Industry

Solen Roth

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018. 228 pp. \$32.95 paper.

I WAS INVITED BY *BC Studies* to write a review that combined my impressions, thoughts, and feelings about three books: *Beau Dick: Devoured by Consumerism*, by LaTiesha Fazakas with John Cussans and Candice Hopkins (2019); *People among the People: The Public Art of Susan Point* by Robert Watt (2019); and *Incorporating Culture: How Indigenous People Have Been Reshaping the Northwest Coast Art Industry* by Solen Roth (2018).

Each book looks at the topic of Northwest Coast Indian art from a distinct perspective and in doing so broadens readers' understanding of traditional art in contemporary Indigenous culture. Each book is written by a non-Native author, which can be seen as a statement in itself and the subject of a wholly different book.

I am a Coast Salish artist and storyteller from the Lower Elwha S'Klallam Tribe of western Washington. Besides my own work as an artist, I also teach Coast Salish art and design courses and have helped

organize Coast Salish art events. Unlike many of the artists profiled in these three books, I was not raised on a reservation or reserve or in a village. I was raised and educated in the city of Seattle. I came to Coast Salish art at the cusp of its re-emergence in the 1970s – not as someone who saw it all around me on a daily basis but as someone who found it in books and museum catalogues.

As I write this, I remember that many Coast Salish artists of that time were not doing traditional Coast Salish art – they were doing the more uniform, familiar, and popular northern “formline” art associated with the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples of the Northwest Coast. While again a topic for a different book, it is a subject that works on me, even today, and I will bring that perspective to my review of these books as well.

I will attempt to weave these three books into one statement while also honouring each book and giving to each its rightful individual focus. A little juggling will be involved, but I hope not too much. And I will also state that, while it was clear that *BC Studies* is looking for a review that would blend each of the three books’ respective perspectives and stories, I thought of the old parable of several blind men touching and feeling different parts of an elephant – they each describe a different creature because they each have only their own limited senses to describe parts of the animal rather than the whole. Keep this in mind, because Native American/Northwest Coast art is an immense cultural practice and presentation that spans regions, tribes, histories, languages, and experiences. So, like those blind men, I admit my perspective is limited – but this is all I can do.

The first book I read was *Beau Dick: Devoured by Consumerism*, by LaTiesha Fazakas. This book was developed in conjunction with a show at the Fazakas Gallery in Vancouver in 2017. Beau Dick, who passed away that same year, was a traditional Kwakwaka’wakw carver of international renown. His deep knowledge and familiarity with his own tribal culture is unquestioned as he was one of the chiefs of his village, always of service to his people and ancestors.

The book looks at how Dick critiqued modern Western consumer culture and its destructive impact on Indigenous cultures and the world itself. He did so by using the understandings of wealth in his Kwakwaka’wakw culture, which, in relation to power, is demonstrated in ceremonies in which wealth is not displayed as an individual accumulation of goods and money but, rather, as a source of status and identity – which only works if it is shared among the people.

The cover illustration of *Beau Dick* says much about the book's philosophical content as it shows several of Dick's carved and painted cedar masks being consumed by the flames of a longhouse fire. These symbols of wealth are ritually destroyed in a performance known as the Atlakima Mask Ceremony to show that their power is limited by time and that they should not be seen as symbols of personal accumulated wealth. And while his carvings are highly sought after by collectors, Dick's concern about the dangers of consumerism, reinforced by the beliefs of his ancestors, means that the burning of these art pieces elevates their worth to a cultural and spiritual level that is healing rather than destructive.

The logo for the show for which this book was created is a relatively simple drum design, and this also speaks to Dick's concerns about the crippling power of consumerism. A monstrously large mouth with jagged fangs eats two figures: one figure appears to be Native and is depicted in a traditionally influenced design style; the other figure has one of its eyes blinded by an X and the other blinded by a dollar sign. An interesting small detail is that the Native figure has one foot stepping outside the monster's mouth, while the other seems to be deep within its maw, too late to be saved. A quote by another tribal carver in conjunction with this design states bluntly: "Everything gets devoured, devoured, devoured" (9).

Dick and his fellow Kwakwaka'wakw artists spoke about consumerism at length. According to Dick, they were involved in "a war on another level; non-violent, but spiritual warfare" (10). As an Indigenous artist he believed his art could help the world by revealing the true face of consumerism, which he saw as a form of destruction that reached far beyond individual greed and competition. The world itself would be consumed. He believed that consumerism had to be seen clearly for what it is and what it is doing to us and the earth itself. Another Indigenous voice, that of Evo Morales, the former president of Bolivia, was heard at an international environmental conference of Indigenous people in 2010: "Either capitalism dies, or Mother Earth dies." Dick and Morales could not be clearer: they speak with a deep Indigenous respect for the earth.

The second book, *People among the People: The Public Art of Susan Point*, is a thorough examination of the major sculptural works of the renowned Musqueam carver and artist Susan Point. She is seen as one of the artists who brought Coast Salish art out of the shadows of settler history and placed it on a modern stage. While she is grounded in the traditional Coast Salish art style, she also moved into more modern Western presentations and media, all the while strongly displaying the

uniqueness of Coast Salish art. When as a young artist Susan Point researched older art pieces, she found the design elements – “crescents, wedges, v-cuts” (7) – that were constant and that would inform all of her work. She also points out that, because of the dearth of modern Coast Salish artwork, she developed her own style.

The author, Robert D. Watt, is a major figure in the history of Canadian art. He obviously sees Point’s work as a major contribution to the legacy of Canadian art. This book displays her more monumental work carved in cedar and sometimes forged with glass and metal. There are other books that focus on her other works, including prints, paintings, and smaller carvings, but the author felt there hadn’t been a retrospective of Point’s larger works. *People among the People* corrects that oversight. It presents much of Point’s public art legacy, showing house posts, story poles, murals, and welcome figures. Each has not only her distinctive blend of traditional forms and stories but also her unique vision as a designer and carver. Her work powerfully and beautifully shares the culture of Point’s people and the many tribes identified as Coast Salish through traditional stories and practices and through her personal artistic vision.

The third book, *Incorporating Culture: How Indigenous People Are Reshaping the Northwest Coast Art Industry* by Solen Roth, looks at a major aspect of modern Northwest Coast Indian art: the art that adorns T-shirts, coffee mugs, cards, calendars, oven mitts, and so on – the artware industry. It can be argued that this form of Native art is more accessible to the average tourist and consumer and is, therefore, a more powerful form of cultural sharing; however, it is also, possibly, a form of cultural appropriation and misinterpretation. Because of its accessibility in these “gift shop” environments, this type of Native art helps shape a cultural view of Indigenous culture that can be enlightening as well as superficial. Roth recounts the history of this relationship, going back more than one hundred years to when non-Native Canadians began to see Northwest Coast Native art as visually iconic of the region and therefore a lucrative source of sales.

Roth points out, through a variety of themes, how Native artists interact with non-Native producers and marketers of Native art, and how each group has a different perspective on the meaning of their partnerships. The non-Native producers and marketplace sellers have some very basic needs and requirements: sales and profits. However, to the Native artists this type of relationship is something that allows them to make money (and, for some, a living), to share their culture in

a highly visible way, and to create goods that can be used for Indigenous applications (for example, gifts for potlatches or memorials).

Two small critiques of Roth's approach to the sharing of Indigenous art are warranted. First, as a storyteller, I feel that so many of her descriptions call out for a story that allows us to see personal connections stemming from her observations. Roth explains in the book's introduction that she chose not to mention names of artists and manufacturers and sellers as doing so could affect their reputations and careers. But I still wanted more story detail to help me shape my understandings of the relationships to which she refers. Also, Roth does not address an important element of the relationships in question: What of the consumer, the people who buy these mass-produced products marked as Indigenous art? What do they believe they are receiving and what do they learn about Indigenous culture through the designs on their souvenirs and collectibles?

Overall, *Incorporating Culture* looks closely at an underappreciated, but important, aspect of modern Native life – the way our cultural arts are portrayed in the marketplace. And it asks what role Native artists have in controlling and shaping that image.

In the end, we have three perspectives on Northwest Coast Native art. First is the powerful cultural/political art of Beau Dick, who saw the destructive nature of consumerism (and greed and capitalism) and addressed it as directly as he could, drawing from his Kwakwaka'wakw culture in mounting his critique. The second perspective shows how Susan Point creates Coast Salish art and imagery that shares the unique artistic vision of her Musqueam people and utilizes that artistic creativity to the benefit of her people and Coast Salish culture in general. Finally, the third perspective addresses the appeal and popularity of Northwest Coast art in the artware market, which has Indigenous artists working with non-Native manufacturers and marketers and sellers to continue defining the place of Native art in the marketplace outside of galleries and museums.

In total, these books allow the reader to see that Indigenous and First Nations arts are not a relic of the past but, rather, are something created in modern times by artists whose visions are drawn from their ancestral myths, songs, and relationships. An Indigenous artist's critique of capitalism and consumerism; an Indigenous artist who shares her culture through her public art and outside of the art's cultural setting; and Indigenous artists who decide to allow their tribal crests to adorn oven mitts. All these are examples of challenges to the traditional uses of this First Nations art – acts that can change the art and the culture in ways

that can be as dramatic as wanting to preserve the meanings of the art for generations to come or as seemingly simple as making a business decision that can be reduced to dollars and cents. And as they are contemporary artists, all of whom are involved in the world of Northwest Coast art, they must strike a balance: never lose connection with ancestors and the earth but continue to make vibrant visual statements in the modern art world.