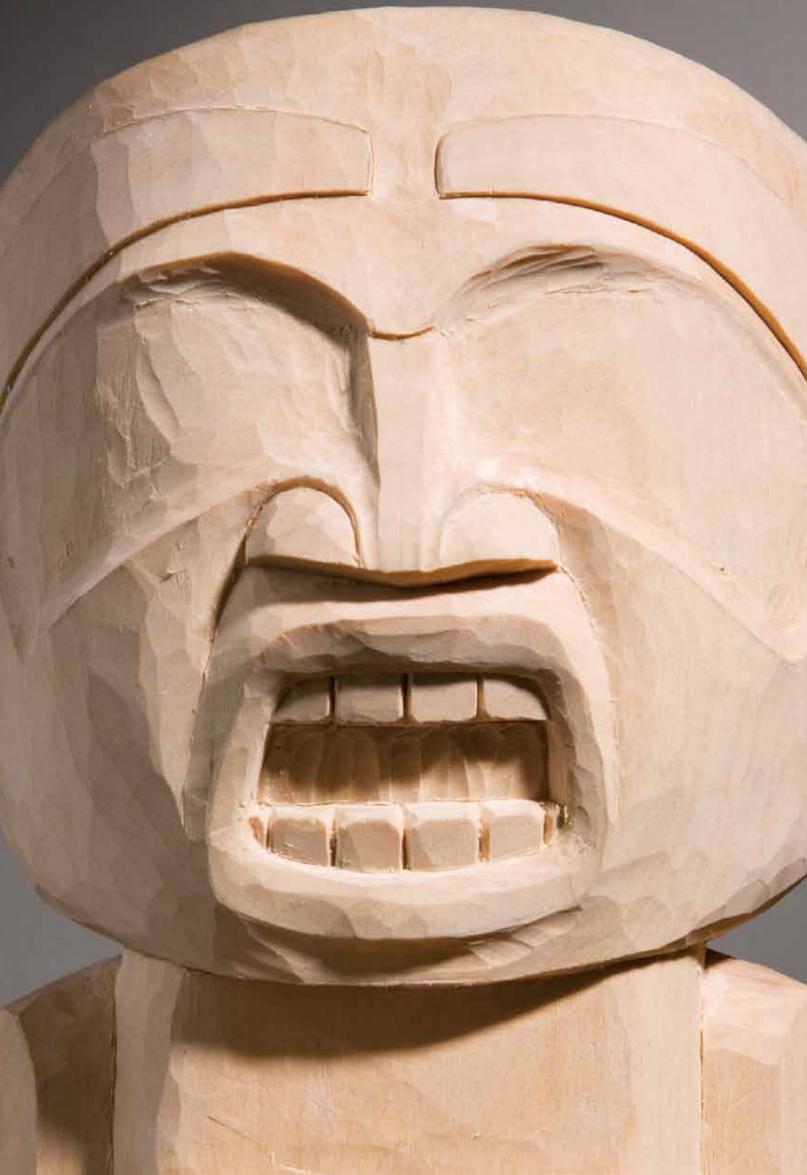


# past now

LUKE PARNELL



MACLARENARTCENTRE

Aboriginal contemporary art is no single or simple thing—it might be a basket or an installation, it could be a logo or a cartoon. The very idea of an aboriginal art is contested. It is fused by some histories and divided by others.<sup>1</sup>

—Charlotte Townsend-Gault

Telling history in the present is complicated; it both reveals and conceals truths. It has the capacity to uphold and perpetuate misconceptions unless conscientiously stated to the contrary. Artist Luke Parnell (Nisga'a/Haida) is part and parcel of this contemporary quandary. His work follows a long lineage of indigenous carving practices on the Pacific coast of Canada. Under the tutelage of master carver Henry Green from 2002–2005, Parnell honed a personal understanding of Northwest Coast form. Previously, Parnell studied at the Ontario College of Art & Design where he earned his Diploma in Sculpture in 1999 (and later his Bachelor of Fine Art in 2007). Trained both within the master-apprentice model and the contemporary academy, Parnell avoids any tendencies to arrive at fixed meanings by way of codified or conventional practice. The work remains faithful to Parnell's understanding of historical form and design as it takes shape in context of the present day.

Through formal cues, Parnell's carvings recall a passage through an as-yet-unresolved legacy of colonialism. *A Brief History of Northwest Coast Design*, 2007, narrates in pictorial and symbolic episodes Parnell's perspective on this history.<sup>2</sup> He begins his story when the old masters were interrupted at the time of first contact. Artworks were collected, catalogued as artefacts and removed from their original locations; anything left behind often fell into states of neglect and disrepair. The three central planks, literally and metaphorically white-washed, correspond to the years of condemnation and prohibition of various cultural practices, artistic contributions among them. The production of Northwest Coast art persisted, both openly and in secret, and would become an archetype of anthropological scholarship. Designs lost to time were recovered through

infrared imaging technologies—noted by Parnell in purplish paint on the ninth panel—and subsequently used to rekindle knowledge of old master designs by contemporary Aboriginal artists. Parnell establishes this moment in the eleventh and final panel where renewed production assumes precedent from past practices. Parnell locates himself in a gesture of self-reflexivity based in historical awareness. He acknowledges the losses accrued along this colonial history and recognizes his position on a contemporary horizon.

Parnell's art practice draws from a host of sources from anime to historical and scientific documentaries that influence his concept development and aesthetic planning. He envisioned the schematics for *Evolution*, 2009, after watching a PBS documentary titled *Evolution: "Great Transformations"* that explained the evolution of whales from a wolf-life land-mammal called *sinonyx*. Carved according to traditional Northwest Coast practices, *Evolution* utilizes totem pole design to narrate a theory of evolution through "story pole" construction, the results of which lie outside of common associations with the totem pole tradition and consequently of its symbolism. Likewise, *Obsession and Desire*, 2008, a painted cedar disc, tells Parnell's personal story of companionship and loss. Its carved surface becomes a vehicle for expressing ideas that both coax and resist stark definitions such as "contemporary" or "traditional".

Perhaps *Transformation Mask*, 2010, comes closest to coinciding with recognizable notions of tradition through its resemblance to and potential use as a transformation mask, still used in ceremony today. When closed, an eagle head juts out from a carved horizontal plank. By a system of cords and pulleys, the eagle opens to reveal a beaver head inside. Both animals combine to tell a story of Parnell's personal crests.



*A Brief History of Northwest Coast Design* 2007

Through *Phantom Limbs*, 2010, Parnell creates a personal narrative that engages the contemporary issue of repatriation. It recalls this not-so-distant historical practice where human remains and culturally significant objects were disinterred from their burial places and taken to universities and museums for analysis, collection and display. In choosing to carve forty-eight figures for this installation, Parnell refers to the recent repatriation of forty-eight human remains from the American Museum of Natural History to Haida Gwaii in 2002,<sup>3</sup> one of a multitude of Aboriginal repatriation projects presently underway. In Parnell's installation he positions each figure carving in an identical recumbent crouch encased in an acrylic box. Collectively, these symbolic human remains stare up from the ground on which they are placed, awaiting reburial. Each face expresses individuality through its unique features. Through this artistic re-memorial rite, Parnell narrates one instance of repatriation and alludes to the colossal nature of other repatriation initiatives yet to be honoured. He communicates and questions the complex nature of healing, and ultimately of resolution.

That the formal qualities of Parnell's carvings recall a historical practice does not negate their present day

context and meaning. The popular aestheticization of Northwest Coast design practices is visible in their currency and ubiquity in commodity culture and adoption into a national visual vernacular to describe the ideals of Canadian identity.<sup>4</sup> As a contemporary artist, Parnell carves a complex topological space out of time that aligns histories and seemingly asynchronous sources together for reconsideration in the present. His work eludes singular meaning, although not from an attitude of ambivalence. Using Northwest Coast forms as vehicles for conveying contemporary and historically based narratives, Parnell remains keenly aware of how form results in meaning, and his role in the transformation and telling of his truth.

—Suzanne Morrisette

<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "Let X = Audience", *Reservation X*, eds. Laurel Boone and Marcia Rodriguez (Ottawa: Goose Lane Editions, 1993) p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> In conversation with the artist, September 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Wilson, "Planning a Homecoming For Indians' Remains", *New York Times*, N.Y./Region. Published 16 September 2002; accessed 4 October 2010 <<http://www.nytimes.com>>.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Hawker, *Tales of Ghosts* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003) p. 46.



*Transformation Mask* 2010



*Obsession and Desire* 2007

Cover: *Phantom Limbs* (detail) 2010

Luke Parnell received his BFA from the Ontario College of Art & Design in 2007. He is the recipient of numerous awards including grants from the Toronto Arts Council and Ontario Arts Council. Parnell's work has been exhibited in group and solo shows in Toronto at ANDPVA, A Space and XPACE Cultural Centre. He has served the arts community in various capacities as a board member and jurist. Parnell was born in 1971 in Prince Rupert, British Columbia. He currently resides in Vancouver where he is pursuing a Master of Applied Arts degree at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design.



*Evolution* 2009

## Works in the Exhibition

*A Brief History of Northwest Coast Design*, 2007, acrylic on Western Redcedar and plywood, 11 units, overall dimensions 244 x 270.5 x 2 cm.

*Obsession and Desire*, 2007, acrylic on Western Redcedar, 88 dia. x 4 cm.

*Evolution*, 2009, acrylic on Western Redcedar, 275 x 75 x 57 cm.

*Transformation Mask*, 2010, acrylic on Western Redcedar with hardware and string, 25 x 95 x 43 cm.

*Phantom Limbs*, 2010, basswood and Plexiglas, 48 units, installation dimensions variable, each unit 9.5 x 24.7 x 13.7 cm.

Photography: André Beneteau, Acme Photographic.  
All works copyright Luke Parnell, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

## Gallery Acknowledgements

The MacLarenArtCentre is committed to fostering an understanding and appreciation of the visual arts through providing a year-round programme of exhibitions, site-works, events and educational initiatives and a permanent collection of 26,000 works of art.

The MacLarenArtCentre gratefully acknowledges the ongoing support of its members, benefactors, partners, donors and sponsors, the City of Barrie, the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts.

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**Harbour View Inn**

Publication to accompany the exhibition *past now*, November 25, 2010 to February 21, 2011, guest curated by Suzanne Morrisette and Lisa Myers for the MacLarenArtCentre.

Design: Zoup Creative Inc.  
Printing: Kempenfelt Graphics Group Inc.

ISBN 978-0-9813871-4-7

# past now

MERYL McMASTER



MACLARENARTCENTRE

Meryl McMaster places her art practice in the context of the continuing inquiries over historical representations of First Nations people. She engages these representations by inserting quasi-historical bodies into her highly charged contemporary portraiture to connect the exploration of personal identity with broader discourses around the reciprocations between Aboriginal history and modern social conditions. In the two bodies of photo-based work—the “Ancestral” series, 2008–2010, and “In-Between Worlds,” 2010—McMaster unravels notions of identity as “a ‘production’ that is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.”<sup>1</sup>

McMaster’s meticulous approach to photography involves thoughtful selection, choreography and staging of source images, objects and materials. Many of her source images were taken by American painters and photographers of the 19th and early 20th centuries, such as George Catlin, Will Soule and Edward S. Curtis. In the 1830s, Catlin travelled west to make a visual record of the “vanishing race” of the Native American. Thereafter he returned to the eastern United States to establish his “Indian Gallery,” intended as a permanent exhibition of his paintings and collection of Aboriginal artefacts. Catlin’s work exemplifies the salvage paradigm, attempts by a dominant culture to rescue a subjugated culture but which inevitably end up distorting, mystifying or destroying it. In the “Ancestral” series McMaster creates compound portraits comprised of these romantic historical images of indigenous people projected onto present-day faces. Catlin’s controversial warrior and chief paintings imbue the convincingly rich colours of painted faces and bold linear adornments onto the whitened face, shoulders and chest of the artist’s father. Living eyes pierce through the projections, adding vividly appropriate assertion to the gazes of old leaders.

In another group of works in the “Ancestral” series McMaster whitened her own face and projected onto it historical photographs taken by Soule and Curtis. Each self-portrait

incorporates the face of another woman, young or old. Weathered, elderly wrinkles fuse with McMaster’s skin. Past expressions brush over and reconfigure McMaster’s appearance. These eerie, merged images reanimate the historical portraits and create ghostly presences that peer back.

The origins of these historical photographs reveal the layers of signification in McMaster’s work. Soule, an amateur photographer, travelled into the American West to take landscape views. At Fort Sill, Oklahoma, from 1869 to 1874, his repertoire expanded to include portraiture of Native Americans. Soule employed the compositional conventions for portraiture of his time. His photographs, considered more candid than those taken in the early 20th century by Edward Curtis, portray most subjects wearing regular everyday clothing. By contrast, the portraiture of Curtis involved removing visual evidence of the modern world. It is often criticized for its artificial, exotic representations of indigenous people. Despite Curtis’ intentions to portray the authentic Native American, he depicts an imaginary production of identity that retells the past in his own image. The scholar Margot Francis argues that the Aboriginal people who sat for such portraits were not merely at the whim of a European gaze; they “brought their own forms of agency to the experience of being photographed—often with a demanding will to be recognized.”<sup>2</sup> McMaster’s “Ancestral” photographs acknowledge such agency by emphasizing present incarnations for these historical images.

McMaster’s most recent additions to the “Ancestral” series depart from historical sources and gather high-resolution jpegs of animals from the Internet. While many of the animals she selects suggest the social organization of clan systems and animal deities as ancestors, the horse evokes the history of European soldiers and migrants who introduced it to the Americas. Indigenous peoples adopted the horse to an important place in their culture; its image emerged in Aboriginal art during the 19th century, for example in the ledger drawings of the Plains

Nations. McMaster composes the contours of the projected animal faces to the various angles of her father’s whitened face, a new refinement of her technique. This negotiation between artist and subject, daughter and father, throughout the “Ancestral” series articulates the firsthand nature of McMaster’s exploration of identity and lineage.

The careful choreography and staging apparent in the “Ancestral” series continues with “In-Between Worlds,” revealing the performative underpinnings in McMaster’s art practice. In this latter self-portrait series, McMaster relies on symbolic props to convey her solo wilderness experiences, delving into dreams and transportation to remote places away from populated centres. Against urban natural thresholds, she melds mythology derived from her Cree and Scottish heritage to construct particular relationships with found materials and objects that function as extensions of her body. She wraps, binds, masks and enshrouds herself to interrupt an idyllic image of a female figure communing with nature. The titles of these add resonance to the evocative symbolism. In *Caduceus*, McMaster wears a white dress and holds an open umbrella frame over her head, capped with a twiggy canopy and fringed with shredded tartan fabric. This beaver-lodge parasol evokes McMaster’s embodiment of two histories and cultures. *Caduceus*, an ancient Greek myth symbol with two snakes entwined around a staff, indicates dualism. McMaster’s “staff” both foregrounds and obscures our view of her; she also refers to a partial eclipse of her persona by the title of her related sculpture, *Penumbra*.

In *Consanguinity*, the artist stands on a shoreline. A sheet of light plastic shrouds her body, billowing behind her like a bridal veil or coils of rising smoke. Shaft-like sticks protrude from her back as she holds a bow and arrow in her hand. *Consanguinity*, which literally means “shared blood,” speaks to the kinship of her British-European and Cree ancestors.

McMaster’s sojourns in the wilderness correspond to age-old rites



Viage 2010

of passage, such as vision quests or berry fasts, wherein an individual seeks purpose or meaning. In *Viage*, she stands on a beach wrapped in a grey sheet, her arms and body dramatically hidden under the folds of drapery. *Viage*, an archaic word for journey, implies a search of vision or truth. As McMaster stares at the distance, clumsy raft-like slippers underfoot, it seems her voyage will take place on another realm.

While the “Ancestral” series negotiates the overlay of cultural representations on individual subjectivity, “In-Between Worlds” encompasses the straddling of two cultural worldviews and moving between the physical and the spirit world. These self-portraits suggest the negotiation of the many facets and fluctuations of McMaster’s investigation into heritage and identity including those projected by society and those embraced by the artist. In both series, McMaster combines images and materials that interlace historical perceptions with contemporary reflections on personal, familial and cultural identity, emblemizing the ways that “past” and “now” inherently inform each other.

—Lisa Myers

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” ed. Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman, *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) p. 392.

<sup>2</sup> Margot Francis, “Reading the Autoethnographic perspectives of Indians Shooting Indians”, *TOPIA*, Number 7, Spring 2002, p. 6.



Ancestral 8 (detail) 2008

## Works in the Exhibition

*Ancestral 1–12*, 2008; & *13–16*, 2009, sixteen digital chromogenic prints, each in an edition of five, 101.7 x 76.2 cm. From the series “Ancestral.”

*Owl; Horse; Eagle; Buffalo; & Fawn*, 2010, five digital chromogenic prints, each in an edition of five, 101.7 x 76.2 cm. From the series “Ancestral.”

*Caduceus; Tilsam; Consanguinity; Sentience; Viage*, 2010, five digital chromogenic prints, each in an edition of five, 61.1 x 61.1 cm. From the series “In-Between Worlds.”

*Penumbra*, 2010, mixed media (gramophone horn, parasol frame, fabric, string and wood twigs), 91.4 x 91.4 x 91.4 cm.

All images copyright Meryl McMaster, 2010. Courtesy of Leo Kamen Gallery, Toronto.

Cover: *Ancestral 14* (detail) 2009

**Meryl McMaster** received her BFA from the Ontario College of Art & Design in 2010. Her work has been included in group exhibitions in Ontario at Onsite[at] OCAD, Gallery 44, York Quay Centre and the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, among others. McMaster is the recipient of a number of honours including the Vaughan Imagination Zone Award and the Gold Medal in Photography at OCAD University. McMaster was born in 1988 in Ottawa. She lives and works in Toronto, where she is represented by Leo Kamen Gallery.

## Curatorial Statement

*past now* shows how emerging artists Meryl McMaster and Luke Parnell have engaged their works in critical conversations with the past. From distinct cultural perspectives, these two artists question the life of historical images today. Simultaneous gestures to homage and inquiry, McMaster and Parnell resurrect an array of iconic artistic histories and traditions.

The mantle of colonialism in North America propelled photographers and artists of the nineteenth and early twentieth century into attempts to pictorially preserve or document indigenous cultures. Stubborn, ruinous stereotypes that arose from such representations, often constructions of their creators’ prejudices, lived on in tourist trinkets, Hollywood movies, video games and other forms of popular culture. Issues surrounding the perpetuation of such stereotyped representations inevitably raise questions with respect to Aboriginal and Native American agency, as these concepts have been redefined by art historian and curator Richard William Hill. McMaster constructs images using jpegs and scanned reproductions of historical photographs and paintings to summon the sustained presence of ancestors and to redirect the function of such images. Her photographic vignettes employ props, found objects and talismans to illuminate a self-reflective passage.

In their institutionalized historical context, Northwest Coast objects became among the most glorified artefacts of cultural otherness. Doris Shadbolt’s differentiation between the display of ethnographic and art objects in the landmark 1967 exhibition *Arts of the Raven* signaled a departure in the interpretation and reception of Northwest Coast art. As British Columbia art historian Charlotte Townsend-Gault has noted, such distinctions continue to have significant material consequence for present-day Northwest Coast artists who create their works in places of personal, familial, and cultural resonance. Responding to the airless conventions of public display and Aboriginal reclamation of the objectives of scholarship, Parnell carves and paints anew, integrating his formative influences. Parnell articulates a position informed both by an academic visual art education and a traditional apprenticeship alongside Tsimshian master-carver Henry Green. Parnell works with and against the inherent grain of Northwest Coast design. His art formally integrates Haida and Nisga’a carving styles and incorporates knowledge drawn from his familial heritage and the recovery of old master works.

Appropriating photographs and paintings onto self-portraiture, McMaster challenges temporal boundaries. In her art, definitive chapters of history blur and dissolve into ambiguous, residual traces. Eliciting entirely different historical legacies, Parnell also willfully entangles his roots. His contemporary manifestations of Northwest Coast form both honour its lineage and prod it forward. Through subtle variation of image and iconography, both artists exemplify *past now* as a creative credo.

—Suzanne Morrisette and Lisa Myers

Suzanne Morrisette is a writer, curator and artist currently based out of Toronto, Ontario. For many years, Lisa Myers has been making food, music and art. She now also curates and writes. Lisa lives in Port Severn and Toronto, Ontario.