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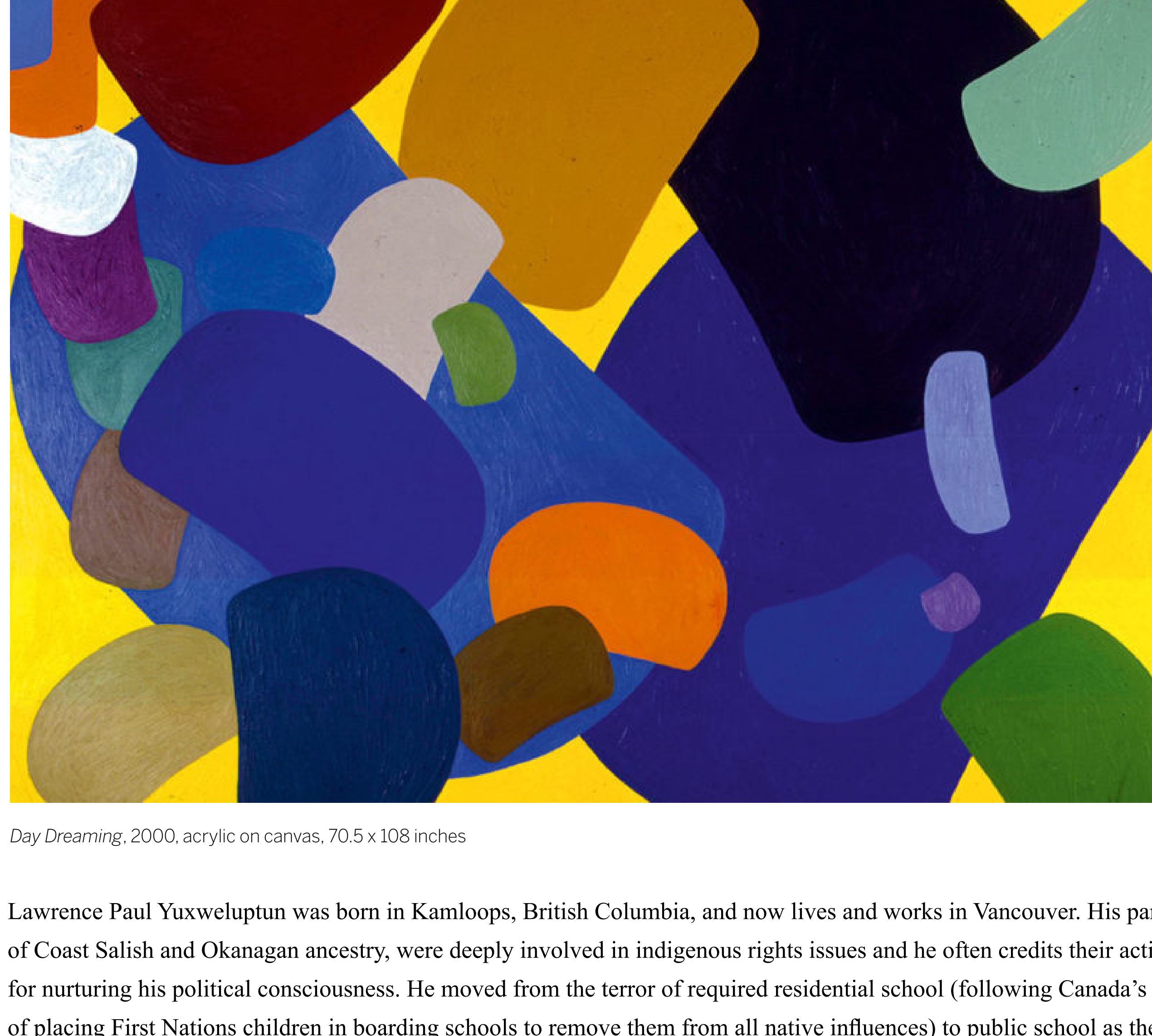
Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun

by Ammiel Alcalay July 15, 2016



Day Dreaming, 2000, acrylic on canvas, 70.5 x 108 inches

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun was born in Kamloops, British Columbia, and now lives and works in Vancouver. His parents, of Coast Salish and Okanagan ancestry, were deeply involved in indigenous rights issues and he often credits their activism for nurturing his political consciousness. He moved from the terror of required residential school (following Canada's policy of placing First Nations children in boarding schools to remove them from all native influences) to public school as the law allowed it.

Yuxweluptun showed artistic talent from a young age and, in 1978, he entered Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver. Though thoroughly conversant in his culture's traditional art, he was one of few indigenous artists to choose European modalities of training rather than continuing in the expected mode. This was as much a political as an aesthetic decision, and has allowed Yuxweluptun to intervene directly in the image-making process that affects how we conceptualize land, race, politics, and our place in the cosmos. Having uniquely transformed the language of traditional shapes while also drawing on colonial Canadian landscape painting as an archive to reinhabit, Yuxweluptun's work is phantasmagoric, ferocious, loving, and deeply disturbing.

Reminiscent of the great Cuban artist Wifredo Lam, Yuxweluptun reclaims the traditional surrealism of indigenous art from the Surrealists. His work is not nearly well-known enough outside of British Columbia and Canada, but *Unceded Territories*, an exhibit at the University of British Columbia's renowned Museum of Anthropology, promises to showcase Yuxweluptun's extraordinary oeuvre to new audiences (May through October 2016). After being introduced at Gene's Café in East Vancouver, where Yuxweluptun and his dog, Rez, are well-known fixtures, the artist and I continued our conversation in his studio.

Ammiel Alcalay: I'm honored, really, to have the opportunity to get to know your work better, think about it, and share it in the US, where much less of the history of the world you inhabit is known. You've been painting for close to forty years. What do you think has changed along the journey?
Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: Some things change and some things don't. When I was young, I went to New York City to try to get a gallery there, but America is a difficult place—I mean, they're still trying to figure out if they want to take down the Confederate flag. I went in thinking the world of art was for everyone, but it never really was. I understood that race was an issue. When I went back to the US years later, in my forties, it was the same thing: "We don't show your kind." Have I gone back? No. Have I given up on the world of art? No.

AA: In 1992, you were a key figure in the *Land, Spirit, Power* exhibit at the National Gallery in Ottawa. It included artists like Jimmie Durham and Edgar Heap of Birds. I'm wondering whether those connections to other artists continued?
LPY: We weren't making romantic art or tourist art. There were more interesting things to deal with, and that was part of who we were, of the time we were in, and the movement we created. That is, being artists who tried to be freer as human beings rather than contained in this romantic, Hollywood-driven market and traditional style, like those in Santa Fe or Guatemala. Traditionalism is not really dead, it's just that we decided that we're human beings. It has been difficult to get the rest of the world to understand that.

For most of my life, indigenous peoples were not a part of this country. We were kept, technically, wards of the Crown, which is to say we were prisoners of war—interned, since the confederation of Canada, in reservations. The war on Indians in the Americas was actually the first world war: the Spanish, the French, the English, the Russians, they all came here, and millions and millions of native people died as a result. What is a reservation? It's a colonial internment camp, a concentration camp.

These are not pretty pictures to paint. People want this romantic, noble savage. If you want a romantic Indian, you can find one. There are lots of them. But, natives are suffering from post-traumatic colonization stress. Waking up to this every day is not a pretty picture. I went to residential school. I was there. I went to a funeral. I know what I'm talking about. I knew that there were graveyards. All Indians had to go to residential school and wake up to fear and the fact that they could be next. That's fucking stressful! When Canada changed the law for me to go to public school, I asked my dad, "How come there's no graveyard at this public school?" It was bizarre to walk around a playground and go, "Where are all the dead kids?" So in terms of living through that experience and going through it, how do you deal with that? The Catholic Church is such an army of vicious creepy people, and they'll never pay a single dime for any of their sins if they don't have to. They molested, raped, and murdered kids. They tortured them, beat them, starved them, did experiments on them. We have to deal with our own history. We have to analyze and look at ourselves and see what has happened to us. When people are in the midst of all this, it's hard for them to look at that and at themselves. But that's my work, to give that history to the world.

AA: Coming from the United States, there are some real differences here in Vancouver. I was on Commercial Drive the other day, and a young native guy was walking down the street and looks were exchanged with two workers on a scaffold. The young guy was yelling, "Fuck you, I was just asking you a question, and besides, you're on my fucking land." That would be unimaginable almost anywhere in the United States. The fact that this whole province is under claim is extraordinary.
LPY: It is under claim, but many natives don't want to settle land claims. The Canadian government thinks that we're going to say: "Yes, we will extinguish our rights forever, and we're going to get this little bag of peanuts for the land and be happy." A lot of people are not happy with Canada. If I had a choice, I would be like the French and leave the confederation. This is the conflict we have with colonialism in terms of comprehensive land claims. Why should I surrender? Why should any native surrender? Why are we having this conversation? Because this is the politics of the day: our government chiefs, who get government salaries, are paid to surrender traditional lands forever. I'm saying, "Fuck you, government chief. You're a sellout. I don't want you to sell my land or my ancestors' land, or land that belongs to my children's children, future generations. I can agree with sharing it. If you want to cut down a tree, pay for it. If you want to take some gold, pay for it. If you want to take some fish, pay for it. Don't just steal." We're in a usufructuary position under Canadian law. Every day every native person is being frucked around by the usufrucker. I have been under the usufruct since I was born. I'm tired of it.

This is my land! They use it, they take the trees, they take the fish, they take the mines, they don't pay for anything, and then they say, "Well, it's yours, it belongs to you, but it's in trust to your Queen, for your own protection, while you sit on reservations."

AA: Yet, over the years, younger people have been responding to and picking up on what you're up to. What do you see happening?
LPY: I've been a mercenary of art for close to forty years and I think the younger kids are starting to catch up to me. For the longest time, for maybe thirty years, they didn't know me. If you're not making "native art"—masks, regalia, traditional designs for the community in the reserve—your own people will not know who you are, because who the fuck are you?

AA: What about younger native people living in Vancouver or other urban places?
LPY: For the longest time they didn't really know who I was because I was making art on behalf of them but not for them. I was speaking in general terms about the conditions and plights of aboriginal people. They were not the audience that I was trying to educate because they were the ones who were suffering. I'm not here to make art for Indians, art with the word *Indian* or *native* in front of it. I just make art. A traditional artist said that I hid behind color, and my rebuttal to him was that he hides behind tradition. The only traditionalist I've known who has ever said anything political is Beau Dick. The rest of the traditional carvers are market-driven. They can't say anything political. How do you carve a priest raping a native boy and make that traditional?

AA: I have a friend from Lebanon, filmmaker and writer Jalal Toufic, who has this concept about when a people undergoes what he calls a "surpassing disaster," then their "materials are withdrawn," and you have to find other ways to get to them.
LPY: I was born in a time when all of this shit had already gone down, like the smallpox epidemics that native people suffered dearly from. They rebounded back from that, they're very resilient. A lot of native people are more charming and not as angry

with the prairie Indians. We know the fucking routine. We know how much you guys hate Indians. So how does one paint hate? I want to show you what you are—to think about it, to talk about it. Or am I supposed to be one of those shut-the-fuck-up Indians and say nothing?

My position is: Why piss off one person at a time when I can piss off all of Canada, all of the colonialists, at the same time? Around the world, all the white supremacists everywhere. It's my job to say, "Hey, lighten up. We are human beings, and you have to get over these things." Race is a strange thing that's going to take this planet a long time to get over. Can we do it? I don't know. It just so happens that I'm interested in looking at this ugly, creeping thing. Somebody has to do it. It's a dirty job and nobody wanted to do it. So I stuck my hand out and said, "Oh! I'll take this job and see how far I can go."

AA: Do you think you've put a dent in something after all these years?
LPY: I made paintings about spirituality, and the natives looked at me and said, "Why are you making this religious kind of work?" I don't like priests in black clothes claiming that they are good people. I am praying to the killer whale. When the killer whale has a vision, he comes and talks to me. When the bear has a vision, he visits me and talks to me. These are things that I have to show people.

When I was a kid, I used to hear songbirds. And the forest was filled with songbirds and humming with bees. Now there are barely any humming bees and the forest is quiet. If you leave this planet, at least make a recording of the birds so that in the future they'll know what a bird was, what it used to sound like. Don't blame the Indians because we didn't kill all the songbirds. We believe that songbirds have sovereignty. Songbirds have rights. They have a right to be on this planet. Do we have to kill them? Do we have to kill all of them? Is it really necessary?

I make these paintings because these are religious beliefs: talking about the spirit world and the animals, praying for the thunderbirds and the bears and the salmon and all sorts of things. I like our traditional philosophy, it is not something that all artists can deal with. I am dealing with land claims, with landscapes, with history—the history of the world, the history of time. I am dealing with everything from the past to the present, weaving my way through the history book and saying, "You guys really fucking left out a lot." And that's why I made *Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in the Sky*. I am a history painter. I go back and sometimes come forward. The European language of painting is a language I was taught. I looked at Rembrandt, Miró, Michelangelo, Degas, Cézanne, Rodin, Brueghel, Bosch. . . . I have been all around the world and seen many paintings, museums, and artworks. I have seen the artists that represent the world.

It's part of my job description as an artist to enlighten the world, to entertain the world, to record the history of the world. My job is also to piss everybody off, to critique the world, to mirror history back to the world.

AA: Maybe you could talk a little bit about how you brought Surrealism back to its roots in native art?
LPY: Creating landscapes, inventing a style, writing the manifesto of Ovoidism. The Surrealists went all over the world and looked at indigenous peoples, and then they created their Surrealist manifesto. But if it wasn't for the indigenous peoples of the world, they could not have written the Surrealist manifesto. I don't have to go all over the world to create visionary "visionism" as a concept. Somebody asked me why I haven't traveled for fifteen years. Because my battle is here in this country. So that is a good reason to paint.

AA: Can you talk more about how you've thought about politics in your art?
LPY: I was trained as a politician, and I became an artist. My dad was trained as a shaman, but he became a politician. I traveled around with my dad everywhere, and he trained me all his life. We talked about everything. And it just so happened that I became an artist. I love my land. I like to go out and catch fish, go out and hunt, go down to the longhouse and sit around the fire with a bunch of savages. Because I am that wild Indian. Why not put paint on and have spirit dances? You can't take that away. I like having my drum. I like painting my drum and singing Indian songs around the fire. I am here in my natural habitat. This space, my studio which we're sitting in, is on traditional Indian land. My energy, everything about me, is from here. I take traditional beliefs from natives and from our shamans and our elders. I'm becoming an elder now. We modernists, we aren't here to disrespect the traditionalists. We are saying, "That traditional stuff is always going to be there." I'm not against it, but I do have to talk to the rest of the world. I have to make the metamorphosis of language into culture, into form and space and design, and into a language that can be understood. Simultaneously, I have to metamorphose this art language of native traditionalism into a modern form that natives can see and understand themselves. So the work is moving in two directions at the same time.

AA: How does this affect how someone working in traditional forms might react to your work?
LPY: I had a carver come look at that work the other day, and he was just cheerful. Laughing, he said, "It's so beautiful." So it gave him joy and uplifted his heart. It overwhelmed him, but he understood it. When the natives see the work, they understand it—it is natural for them to read these forms, where for a European it isn't. Europeans have to understand the language of what I'm doing, and only then can they understand what it creates in a painting. You know, when I make a forest, the natives look at it and go, "Whoa, man. This feels like the love of every tree that I have." I feel like I've been here 10,000 years, 20,000 years. And I have. I capture all of that.

I know that I hurt the feelings of the traditionalists, but for the good of aboriginal people I had to break some rules somewhere. And it just so happens that I broke every rule by not doing anything traditional: I'm a nontraditionalist being a traditionalist creating nontraditional art, which means that I'm just making art. Technically, I'm just like any other painter in history.