ART AND HISTORY: CREATING A VISION OF THE PAST

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ABSTRACT

Many Canadian artists are interested in looking back in history as a way to understand current individual and group identity, and the complex relationships between cultures. Today, artists are using anecdotal evidence and events from Canadian social and political history to create new ways of understanding the events and personalities that shape identity in Canadian communities.

RÉSUMÉ

Plusieurs artistes canadiens s'intéressent à l'histoire et au passé en tant que moyens pour comprendre les identités individuelles et de groupe, et la relation complexe entre les cultures. Certains artistes d'aujourd'hui utilisent des faits anecdotiques et des événements de l'histoire sociale et politique du Canada afin de créer de nouvelles façons de comprendre ces événements et personnages qui forment l'identité des communautés canadiennes.

Art and history have been closely connected since the beginning of human existence. Artists have always been involved in documenting events through images and sculpture, recordings of visual stories about individuals, communities and cultures, and the expression of ideas and messages related to many aspects of human existence. Art from all cultures describes certain kinds of experience, and tells stories and history based on cultural values and beliefs. In many ways, the study of art is the study of our human past.

Artists are interested in exploring and representing social issues in visual form. In cultures where freedom of expression is supported, artists have been able to produce work that is personally meaningful, and communicates shared experience. Artists are in the unique position to have the processes necessary for translating ideas, messages and experiences into visual form. Their work is something that can be seen, touched, and experienced by others.

CHANGING VALUES AND BELIEFS

Changes in values and beliefs in western culture have led to exploration and experimentation in the arts. New value has been placed in the ability to think about, discuss and pursue new ways of understanding individuals and society. Changes in social policy and political legislation to support equity and social justice have created a very different focus for emerging artists. The shift to contemporary values and beliefs have encouraged and supported artists to think about their own experience, identity, associations and interests.

Changing social and cultural values and beliefs have had a dramatic effect on artists, and what they choose to pursue in creative work. New cultural ideas have opened previously closed doors in terms of subject matter, intent, and the kind of meaning that can be explored. Traditionally held beliefs about what was appropriate subject matter have now been lifted. Today, there are few guidelines, limits or conventions for choosing subject matter.

Multiculturalism as public policy, changes in national values and social attitudes, and a respect for equity and social justice encourage artists to revisit the cause and effect of political, social, religious, cultural and historical events and policies.

CHANGING EXPECTATIONS FOR THE ARTIST AND THE VIEWER

Changes in culture have effected what is expected of the artist, and the viewer. There are new demands placed on art work, in terms of its meaning and how that meaning will be interpreted. The artist is now seen as an individual who has something important to say about culture and understanding personal and cultural experience. The art-maker is perceived as an important conduit for thinking about, and translating experience, ideas or messages into visual form.

TABLE 1: The effect of contemporary western values on art and artists.

NEW CULTURAL IDEA	THE EFFECT ON ART AND ARTISTS
Social/Cultural: Every individual has rights and should be free to express them. Equity and social justice need to be developed through policy and practise. Self-esteem is very important. There needs to be support for the victims of abuse or trauma.	Art work has meaning if it is based on understanding identity, and real-life experience. Art work can be about telling the story of prejudice, trauma, abuse and stereotyping. The subject matter for art work can reveal what was previously hidden, considered taboo, or suppressed.
Intellectual: There are no right and wrong ideas. Critical thinking and asking questions is valued and important to develop deep understanding. Any subject matter is interesting.	Exploration of any subject matter is valued, including looking at traditional subject matter in new ways. Borrowing ideas from other cultures can lead to new ways of understanding ideas. There is value in exploring all subject matter, including what has not yet been revealed. Few sanctions or limits are imposed on what can be expressed, and how it is expressed.
Psychological: Self-expression and personal expression is very important. Sensitivity, awareness and compassion are very important skills to develop for the individual, and the group.	Exploration of identity, stereotypes, personal life experience, trauma, isolation, depression and mental illness is of therapeutic and social/cultural value.
Aesthetic: There are no standards for "good" or "bad" art. Being creative is very important for everyone.	Everyone is encouraged to make art; art-making is not just for classically trained artists. Combining new materials with traditional materials will result in new ways of communicating information. The process is often more important than the final product.

Another dramatic change in western culture has to do with the viewers, and what is expected of them when they look at art. The viewer today is expected to be an active participant instead of a passive recipient in the viewing process. The viewer of the past was expected to look at the art work in front of them, and accept the information and messages conveyed by the artist. Today, critical thinking, asking questions, and reflection are part of the viewing process. Viewers of every age are encouraged to make connections between visual information and lived experience.

ARTISTS IN CANADA

Artists in Canada are encouraged to tell the story of their own history, especially when it includes experiences of cultural transition, dislocation or change as the result of political, social or psychological influence. The initial expression of Canadian art may have been as a statement about the landscape, represented as The Group of Seven and their contemporaries.[1] Today, the statement has evolved into a question about what it means to be Canadian and live in a complex and changing social landscape. For many artists, the question has become, "What are the events and experiences that define different types of identities in Canada?"

HISTORY AS SUBJECT MATTER

Canada is a rich landscape for the exploration of ethnicity and experience. In 1901, the national census showed 25 ethnic groups: in 2006, the national census recorded more than 200 ethnic origins. More than 40% of the respondents said that they had multiple ethnic origins. In the recent past, a number of large cultural groups have begun to collect and describe their experiences as new Canadians with references to specific historical events.

For many of these artists, their goal is to bring attention to what has already happened. In most cases, the event took place many years ago, and the artist is re-telling the story. The historical event has had an impact on the artist's life, and some important part of the experience has not been acknowledged or understood. By making the experience visual, the artist brings new information to the viewer for consideration.

NEW VISIONS FOR OLD STORIES

The history of Canada has a great deal to do with the experience of different cultural groups, and how they developed a sense of belonging in a unique and complex social and geographical landscape. In 1956, 38,000 Hungarian refugees came to Canada to begin a new life. In 2006, the Hungarian-Canadian community celebrated its 50 year anniversary in Canada. To commemorate the event, a number of large retrospective exhibits were sponsored by national cultural organizations. Exhibits entitled, "New Lives" and "Crossroads to Culture" featured photographs and artefacts collected from families who experienced the transition and hardships of the immigrant experience.[2] This period of acknowledgement and reflection encouraged artists and film makers to take another look at this period in Canadian history. Multiple new art works have been inspired by the Hungarian refugee anniversary, and new information about the lives of the individuals involved.[3]

"The Ties That Bind" is the name of a large new (Fall 2010) exhibit launched to commemorate and revisit the Chinese Canadian experience of building the Canadian Pacific Railway 125 years ago. Descendents of Chinese

railway workers are now sharing family stories, photographs and artefacts about the lived experience of building the railway, and settling in Canada.

The curator of the exhibit explains, "The Ties That Bind project corrects the historical inaccuracy and omission of Chinese Canadian's role in building this country."[4] Revisiting and rethinking a shared past allows the artist to explore new perspectives and information about historical events. Exhibits like these are not merely showcases for memory and nostalgia. Archival footage, stories about lived history and artefacts carefully preserved, provide artists with the information and messages to create symbolic testimony. The result is art work that provides visual evidence of evolving identities and relationships with a Canadian experience and culture.

WHY LOOK BACK NOW?

Inspiration for reflection suggests that enough time has passed for descendents to look back and reflect on what happened. The most popular subject matter for revisiting history centres around an exploration of identity, belonging, and the effect of specific political and social policies and events on individuals and groups. More than one or two generations may need to pass for the repercussions or effects of an event to be understood. Stories told orally in closed family and community groups, may appear years later as visual narrative.

Disclosing experience takes place over a period of time. The reshaping of identity and nature of the experience of First Nations peoples, Inuit, Métis, immigrants, feminists, gay and lesbian groups and members of other cultural communities make take many decades to acknowledge and understand. Traumatic and complex changes to individuals and groups (as the result of an event or experience) also require time, thought and reflection before they emerge as subject matter for art work.

Changes in national values and social attitudes, the valuing of personal history, and a desire to explore what has previously been hidden has opened the door for artists to revisit the cause and effect of political and historical events and policies. Contemporary artists are motivated to create visual narratives using personal experience, symbols and imagery. Their work is a way of trying to understand what happened, and how it has affected our collective understanding of history and culture.

REVISITING AND RETELLING

How are artists using art to revisit history? There have been major changes in art media, materials, equipment and processes available to artists in the last 20 years. Changes in technology coupled with cultural changes have created new possibilities for composing art work.

Artists interested in revisiting history use media that allows them to represent ideas in new ways. Revisiting history requires a visual association with the past while representing information from the present. An artist has access to the processes and techniques to create images, sculptures, performances and installation art works describing multiple perspectives. Today there are a number of visual techniques that can effectively show layers of meaning.

The most popular techniques for artists working with images are the following: juxtaposition, words and pictures, text montage and collage. These techniques allow the artist to place multiple and contrasting images on a single surface. Images can be made using lens-based media such a cameras, film and video, scanners, and digital manipulation. Computer-based media allow artists to use software, scanners, holographs and other equipment to organize or project visual information on to any surface. Images of the lived experience of struggle, conflict, despair and isolation are placed beside reports circulated by the dominant culture.

NEW MEDIA FOR REVISITING HISTORY

Some well- known Canadian artists use juxtaposition for images, sculpture and media as a way to show contrast between the values and beliefs of cultures living side-by-side in Canadian communities. Brian Jungen uses symbols and objects from traditional aboriginal culture, but makes them out of western industrial materials or consumer products. His *Prototype for New Understanding #3* (1999) uses Nike Air Jordan running shoes made into contemporary tribal masks. In the series entitled, *Group of Sixty-Seven* (1996) Jin-Me Yoon takes photographs of members of the Korean-Canadian community placed in front of landscape painters by Lawren Harris and Emily Carr. Her work resonates with references to the difficulties of cultural assimilation for all immigrants and new Canadians.

Multiple images allow the artist to express ideas from two (or more) different sets of cultural values and beliefs. Using text in the form of words and pictures, or text montage, gives the artist the ability to reinforce the meaning of the work. Juxtaposition means that the artist can place two images side-by-side to emphasize the differences or similarities in the experience being revisited. Canadian indigenous artist Carl Beam used a combination of words and images to bring together subjects and events from different time periods. His art work communicates a powerful message about the experience of indigenous people. Through words and pictures, photo montage and collage the artist asks the viewer to think about how history has been told.

Multi-media and multi-disciplinary art work also makes it possible to describe multiple perspectives. An artist using these techniques can tell the story in a way that uses any combination of material and media. Multi-disciplinary art work can include recorded sound, music, drama or dance sequence, moving graphics, viewer clips and viewer participation. This kind of art can take place in a public place, beside an important historical monument, or even in a home. Multi-media art work provides the viewer with a very different experience of art work and meaning.

Installation artist Judy Radal reconstructed a high tech courtroom in the Morris and Helen Belkin gallery in Vancouver to re-enact the court proceedings for the Air India Trial.[5] A taped video entitled, "World Rehearsal Court" of the trial proceedings were broadcast in a darkened room from 7 monitors. The re-enactment of the trial was filmed in a Vancouver school gym using a compilation of transcripts taken from the actual trial. The dark room and multiple monitors provided a viewing experience that brought history into the present, and forced the viewer to listen to and react to the testimony of the accused and victims. The installation was created more than 20 years after the crash.

Some artists from different cultures work together to revisit moments in Canadian history. A recent exhibit (Noise Ghost 2009) paired artists Shary Boyle with Shuvinai Ashoona in an exploration of themes related to the ways Inuit and White western culture have interacted in the past. In the art work entitled *Skirmish at Bloody Point*, Boyle retells the story of the first contact between Inuit and British soldiers on the coast of Baffin Island in the middle of the 1600s. When Boyle revisits the story, she documents the event as the moment of contact between the soldiers brandishing guns and the Inuit hunters in mid-air jumping into the water below. Every few minutes a gallery projector comes on, the gallery lights go out, and the event is retold as a moonlit scene.

Ashoona tells the factual story of an icebreaker that sunk near Cape Dorset in 1947. In the artist's retelling, she is able to stay alive through a series of experiences taken from Inuit lore and legend. The revisiting of history with an alternate ending is created through use of traditional story-telling and imagery. The retelling of an event in history merged with traditional Inuit storytelling creates a new way of connecting history with culture.

CONCLUSION

Art and history today is not about defining a style or a single point in time. The history of Canada is still being written. Canadian artists might say that their experience of Canadian history has to do with the landscape, the people, the events and influences that shape culture and identity. It is also about exploring and describing lived experience as a combination of conflicting elements and forces.

Key cultural ideas are shaping the way Canadian artists revisit events and experiences that took place in the past. A new lens has been created as the direct result of taking new cultural ideas and applying them to subject matter inspired by personal or shared experience.

Many artists are focussing on defining a new cultural and social identity within the context of historical information and past events. They are making art to revisit events, values and beliefs from the past, and create a new way of seeing and discussing what took place. Canadian artists who revisit the history of the nation, are involved in a process of seeking to understand what happened, why it happened, and the nature of the experience for those involved. Their intention is to identify the experience, reveal what has been hidden or forgotten, and to bear witness for the individuals and cultures affected by the experience.

NOTES

[1] In visual arts, a great deal of attention has been paid to the idea that Canada's identity is closely tied to the landscape. Painting, drawing, photographing and filming the landscape has long been of interest to Canadian artists

[2] The Hungarian Presence in Canada website: http://www.hungarianpresence.ca/Anniversary/anniversary.cfm

[3] Film-maker Lester Alfonso recently released a National Film Board documentary "12" (2008) recording the experience of 12 immigrants who came to Canada at the age of 12. Two of the stories are told by Hungarian-Canadian immigrants revisiting their experience of coming to Canada. This documentary is being used by educators to better understand the experience of new immigrants into Canadian culture.

[4] Brad Lee is the curator of the "Ties That Bind Exhibit"exhibit. The exhibit was launched on August 28th, 2010. More information can be found through their website: http://www.mhso.ca/tiesthatbind

[5] Air India Flight 182 was a flight from Montreal to Bombay. On June 23, 1985, a bomb exploded on board and 329 people died. The incident was the largest mass murder in modern Canadian history.