



Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas Meddling in the Museum

UBC Museum of Anthropology
July 10 – December 31, 2007

Installations and their locations

Entrance to MOA (outdoors)

Coppers from the Hood—Two Sisters

Dodge Dynasty and Chevrolet Geo Metro car hoods, copper leaf, paint
204 cm x 130 cm

Coppers from the Hood—Stolen But Recovered

Plymouth and Pontiac car hoods, copper leaf, paint
185 cm x 140 cm

Great Hall (at crossroads)

Bone Box

Wooden storage trays, metal shelving, acrylic paint
12 trays, each 61 cm square

Bill Reid Rotunda

Pedal to the Meddle

Pontiac Firefly, autobody paint, argillite dust, copper leaf
(Exhibited with 7.5 meter cedar canoe by Bill Reid, assisted by
Guujaaw, Simon Dick, and others, 1985. MOA Nb1.737)

Artist profile

Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas was born into the Yahgu Laanas Raven clan in 1954, and raised in Delkatla, Haida Gwaii. His decades of experience in negotiating the spaces between Indigenous and colonial institutions informs works he has shown in Japan, Korea, England, and, most recently, as part of the Vancouver Art Gallery's exhibition, *Raven Travelling*. Among his published works are several Haida manga books, including *A Tale of Two Shamans* (2001), *The Last Voyage of the Black Ship* (2001), and *A Lousy Tale* (2004). To date, his illustrated book, *Hachidori* (2005), now in its third printing, has sold 100,000 copies in Japan. See mny.ca.

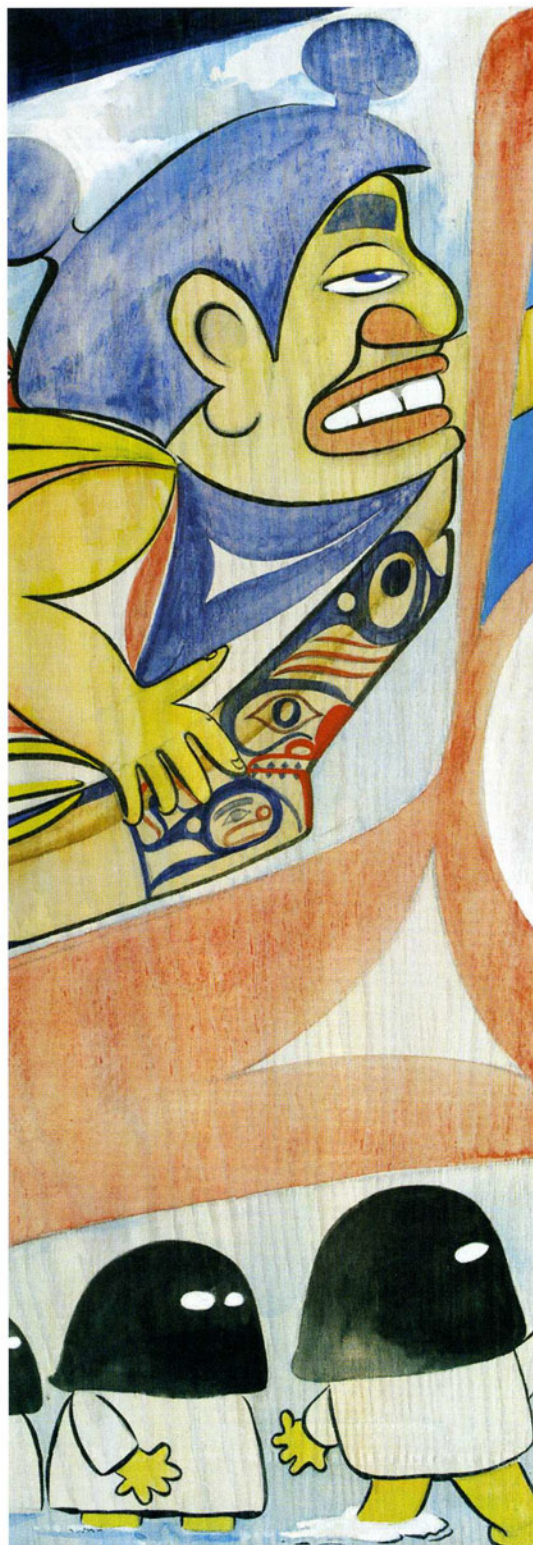
Installation Curator: Karen Duffek

Installation Designer: Skooker Broome

UBC Museum of Anthropology
6393 N.W. Marine Drive
Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z2
604.822.5087 www.moa.ubc.ca

Cover page: Bone Box (detail)

This page: Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, Self Portrait



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"I'm all about changing meaning," Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas comments, as he leans over two welded-together car hoods, using his fingers to press layers of fine copper leaf to the surface. "This is about me as an artist who happens to be Haida—and a little bit of Scot, and some Norse, I hear. I'm not claiming purity."

What Nicoll is claiming is space within the structure, and the idea, of the museum: the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) in particular and, more generally, the cultural authority such institutions represent. The freedom he gives himself to "change meaning" applies not only to the themes and conventions of Haida art, but also to the way that Aboriginal cultures are framed by institutions and are popularly understood. "Meddling" is one of his strategies of intervention. Re-inscribing Haida art with humour, moral ambiguity, and human complexity is another. As MOA embarks on a major renewal and reconstruction project, it seems like the right time to invite this artist/trickster into the Museum to mix things up, to twist and challenge, to raise questions and start new conversations, and to literally turn an established structure upside down.

Nicoll has created three site-specific installations for *Meddling in the Museum*, challenging himself to extend his art practice beyond the "Haida manga" style of graphic narratives for which he has become widely known. In the manga (comic-book) works he has published, readers are likely to encounter the wily culture-hero, Raven, strutting his way through the foundational Haida narrative, "Raven Who Kept Walking," while heading straight into new and ribald episodes of Nicoll's invention, "Rocking Raven." Combining the continually expanding and compressing elements of Haida painting with the graphic aspects of Japanese manga, Nicoll aims at a broad readership, using a contemporary and accessible medium. In the new installations, "found" objects become the primary medium for Nicoll's transformations. Yet from their carefully chosen locations within the Museum, these continue the work of the manga Raven, poking and prodding at the notion that Haida art and culture may be fixed in a misty timelessness, and subverting any expectation that it is only the "Indians" who are being studied here.

Coppers from the Hood is the first installation that visitors will encounter as they approach MOA's entrance. Two enormous metal shields hang inside the architectural pillars, each resembling the "coppers" traditionally made by the Haida and other Northwest Coast peoples as symbols of wealth and social standing. "This is not a copper shield," Nicoll points out; "But what's similar is that there is emotion tied to it." Their placement echoes the federal and provincial government declarations permanently inscribed on neighboring pillars, and which commemorate the opening of the Museum of Anthropology in 1976. "I was struck by the governments' claims," says Nicoll; "It didn't appear that anybody was reading them as proprietary claims to this place."

Reflecting on "the real claim to this territory," and the fact that the Museum and University are located on traditional Musqueam lands, the artist created placeholders in the form of *Coppers from the Hood*. He welded together a pair of red and a pair of white car hoods, obtained at an auto wrecker, and applied copper leaf to the front of each. *Stolen but Recovered* takes its title from a note originally scrawled by police on the front of one hood. *Two Sisters* refers to the Indigenous name for the local Lions Mountains, and to an ancient story linking the Squamish and Haida peoples through marriage and a subsequent peace accord. "The story anchors me to this new landscape," Nicoll reflects; "Not in as robust a sense of connection and duty as in Haida Gwaii, but being here is not casual. It's an awareness of obligation to the place and the people."

As visitors walk through the Museum and head toward the Great Hall, they encounter the second of Nicoll's installations, *Bone Box*. The work comprises twelve painted panels that together form a screen resembling the front of the carved chests displayed on surrounding platforms—the elaborate containers used by coastal chiefs to store their treasures. But Nicoll's box is only a façade, and the painted panels are actually empty storage trays, reclaimed by Nicoll from an archaeology-collection storage system discarded by MOA as part of its renewal ("If you guys run out of storage space you can always use these again," he offers). Working together with MOA designer Skooker Broome, Nicoll has mounted the painted trays on a framework also made of the discarded shelving system. Passive viewer becomes active participant as visitors manipulate the screen like louvers on a window. Flip the panels open to see between them into the Great Hall—and to read the labels on their edges: A STACK OF PLYWOOD TRAYS BUILT TO CONTAIN FRAGMENTS OF OUR CULTURE. Flip them closed to see the Haida manga on their surface. "This is a very public venue," Nicoll says. "When you flip the work you affect how other people see it. It's like taking ownership of the issue of representing other people. You must be engaged; you are engaged. It's not 'them,' it's 'us.'"

In *Bone Box*, a flowing compositional line links a range of narrative references and images characteristic of Nicoll's Haida manga publications, but in a less sequential way. The artist depicts human and animal characters pulling one another from the past into the present, personified landscapes—like the cliff on which MOA is built—and high-rise buildings, warriors and smoke stacks, souls and skulls... And at the centre, inside the mouth of a larger being above (whose penis contains "Richard Cranium," the salary man, in the logged red landscape below), are two profiled creatures joined in frontal view, flossing their teeth. It's a nod to being centred, paying attention. "Challenging complacency is the story of *Bone Box*," the artist observes. "Let's get involved, let's look at things and solve and absolve and move on."

Nicoll has positioned his third installation, *Pedal to the Meddle*, adjacent to the Bill Reid Rotunda, a MOA gallery showcasing the work of the late Haida artist, Bill Reid. A gutted Pontiac Firefly, painted with a mixture of black auto-body enamel and argillite dust, its mirrors reflective with copper leaf, appears to be careening out of the Rotunda, escaping the Museum with a 7.5-metre cedar canoe tied to its roof. The canoe was made in 1985 by Reid, with the assistance of Guujaaw, Simon Dick, and other carvers. This canoe is a major work of Reid's—ceremonially launched in Vancouver's False Creek, used for a time in Haida Gwaii, and ultimately placed at MOA. Now, Nicoll has turned it upside down and brought the "artifact" into another kind of motion—or an appearance of motion. The car has no engine and is standing still; a canoe upside down is in a state of rest.

In a salute to Reid's wry humor and outspoken critique of the "revival" he helped create, and with *The Raven and the First Men* looking on, Nicoll takes the notion of sacred icon for a ride. "The Haidabuck [Canada's twenty dollar bill, featuring Reid's work] wasn't issued by the Haida Nation," he suggests, "yet it clearly signals that someone sees Indigenous culture as Canadian currency." And as he contemplates the cedar hull on its shiny new carriage, he adds, "There are a few different things going on here and some are not like the others. If I place the icon upside down, am I a Haida jester denying its capacity to be converted? If so, do we wonder where the authority lies?"

At the Museum of Anthropology, we may ask ourselves the same question. We have been invited to have a conversation. Will we be led to see ourselves differently as a result?