

A Study of Indian-ness

May 6 – Jun 5, 2004

Jeff Thomas

Exhibition:

Frustrated in his search for archival testimonies of aboriginal experience, Thomas turned to historic studies produced by white photographer Curtis and ethnographer Knowles as sources for discoursing with history. *A Study of Indian-ness* is based upon fictive conversations between the artist and these historic persons.

Jeff Thomas: Working Histories

Essay: Richard William Hill

In a recent review in the *Globe and Mail*, arts writer Gary Michael Dault summarily dismissed an exhibition by Haisla artist Arthur Renwick. His central complaint was that the subject matter, a nineteenth-century treaty between several Aboriginal nations of the plains region and the U.S. government, was of no current interest to "us." I am always wary when I see an "us" used like this in the mainstream press, suspecting that, in the writer's eyes, I am more likely to fall into the "them" category.

The antidote to Dault's presumption that Aboriginal history lacks contemporary relevance might be to spend a few hours in conversation with Jeffrey Thomas. Thomas has found more productive ways into history than anyone I have ever encountered. He digs into historical representations of Aboriginal people until "us" and "them" is no longer the only way to see the issue. The results of this process end up in the gallery, where Thomas thoughtfully and meticulously shows us why history matters and how it can be put to creative use. In fact, it was Thomas's work that taught me how to engage with mainstream representations of Aboriginal people at a time when I simply wanted to look the other way.

Thinking back, I can't remember the first time I saw a representation of an Aboriginal person. It was almost certainly on our little black-and-white television, that amazing conduit that poured images into my brain every day throughout childhood. It might have been on one of the TV westerns that were still kicking around in the late sixties, or an old John Wayne movie. No particular image comes to mind, just a general impression of cowboys and Indians. I also recall a book of boys' adventure stories that I had with a cowboy and Indian fighting on the cover. Somebody gave me

this book before I could read more than just a few words and I remember how much it bothered me, staring at that provocative cover and not being able to access the stories. Yet, I suspect that they became infinitely more fascinating in potential than they would have been in actuality.

Sometime, fairly early on, I remember my mother's critical voice speaking over those cowboy and Indian movies. She wanted to remind me that these images were nonsense and had nothing to do with us. That much was obvious, even to me. But it was hard not to be seduced by the pleasures of those stories, the exotic landscapes, colourful costumes and thrilling goings on. "Do you notice that the Indians are always the bad guys?" my mother would ask. Well, maybe. And maybe now that she mentioned it I couldn't stop noticing. "Do you notice how they try to make the Indians look scary?" Yeah, I'd noticed that too. "And do you notice that these actors don't look much like Indians? Or talk like Indians? Or that this is not just an isolated phenomenon but something that happens over and over again systematically, to make us look bad, to justify taking the land and the resources?" Yes, yes, and yes. Now I noticed.

So my mother ruined westerns for me, thank goodness. And that childish pleasure was easily supplanted by anger. The more I saw of the world, the clearer it became that the whole thing was a set up. Fuck John Wayne. Fuck the Lone Ranger and his condescending attitude to Tonto. Fuck...well, you get the picture. I suspect that if all of the Aboriginal peoples of North America have nothing else in common, they share this anger about how we've been represented. But I also have another emotional response that I'm not sure is as universal. When I watch these westerns now I get embarrassed. Not on behalf of Aboriginal people, but for the people who made them. Once you realize that they are pure fiction you see just how naked these fantasies are. What could leave one more exposed than the parade of unexamined urges and assumptions that make up what Robert Berkhofer called the White Man's Indian? All those captivity narratives that fear and loathe sexuality and at the same time seem delighted to have found this excuse to talk about forbidden sex over and over again. You are looking right into the fears, power fantasies and repressed desires of white America. Blame it on my ancestors being colonized by the uptight British if you want, but I find that sort of thing a bit embarrassing to look at, once you understand what you're seeing.

Of course Hollywood isn't the only place that the notion of the Indian was produced. There were the travel writers, the military accounts, the photographers, the historians, the archaeologists and the anthropologists. So to hell with them too, right? All they are doing is adding new layers of

fiction, so why bother paying attention? That was my attitude until I encountered Jeff Thomas's work about ten years ago. Somehow Thomas had found a way into all this stuff. More than that he had taken these representations and had somehow made them creatively productive. Where other Aboriginal artists were drawing on this material in order to turn it on its head or expose it as caricature in relation to 'reality' (or at least their notion of reality), Thomas just kept digging deeper and deeper. The works in this exhibition are artifacts of that journey.

What makes Thomas's work so disarming is that one senses almost immediately that he is motivated by genuine curiosity. The sincerity of that curiosity opens his work up as a process and allows it to pursue unexpected directions. Too much contemporary art is loaded with pretend moments of discovery in which the artist reveals a social or political phenomenon that it is all too clear they set out to find. We are trained to expect artists to produce novelty, but how familiar and desperate that novelty can sometimes feel. Thomas never seems desperate for our attention or for something to say. When he tunnels into archives and museum collections he isn't harvesting historical representations of "Indians" in the service of an art practice, but putting his art practice into the service of his own curiosity and his own desire to share his process of discovery.

Pedagogy as Art and Story

Thomas talks frequently of wanting his work to be a bridge spanning the gap between the images of Aboriginal peoples in museum and archive collections and the Aboriginal community. His ambition, based on his own experience, is to model how the "historical image is [a] catalyst for telling new stories, stories that really deal with the contemporary world that we are a part of." He connects the notion of history as story to the way he learned as a child in his community. His childhood was lived between urban Buffalo and the Six Nations Reserve. On Six Nations, he was taught, often by powerful women in the community, to take pride in Haudenosaune (Iroquois) culture. He remembers the stories that framed his first views of the past, "[I]t is interesting to think about those stories that we heard as children. When I was staying on the reserve there was no television, electricity, running water or central heating. In the evenings or during the day, we would sit around the kitchen table and listen to the elders talk about the old days and in my mind, they created vivid images."

On the streets of Buffalo, however, he could find no signs of this history. He recalls asking one of his elementary school teachers, Miss Eckles,

"Why don't we learn about Iroquoian history?" His teacher replied, "Jeff, I don't know. You are going to have to find that out for yourself." He remembers feeling crushed at the realization that nobody was going to be able to answer his questions about his own history. Later, as an adult pursuing his interest in history he says that he at last understood what she meant: "Miss Eckles was African-American and her situation was very similar to mine. [She was telling me that] if they are not teaching your history, then you have to go out and find it for yourself. Certainly the work with historical images is about that."

Thomas's work is not nostalgic. Like Aboriginal stories that change gradually from teller to teller and generation to generation, Thomas is conscious that the narratives he weaves around historical images be situated in the concerns of the present. He notes that historical portraits of Aboriginal people often excluded their immediate environment, leaving their subjects in stasis, floating in a placeless place. It is precisely the sense of immersion in an immediate, living world that he tries to capture in his own portraits. For him, contrary to the romantic notion, that world is an urban one. At the most basic level this is simply looking at models for survival. He reflects on the challenges his parents and grandparents faced trying to find a place for themselves in the city. For those generations, he reminds us, "there was no manual or pamphlet that said, 'Okay, this is how you survive as a First Nations person in the city.'"

For Thomas himself, the struggle, which he has turned into a life's work, is to engage the place of Aboriginal history and identity in the city. He says:

My photography is based on street life. [I am] an Iroquoian person, raised in the city and going around always looking [for] or hoping to find evidence of my own history. I wander the streets with this idea in mind and what I do actually find, whether it is a monument, a frieze, or a little plaque that says something about First Nation's history [is the] evidence that we actually were here.

We can imagine this as an almost archaeological form of engagement with the city. Through a kind of immersion, Thomas has developed an insider's understanding of the systems by which Aboriginal peoples have been represented. This understanding is critically engaged because it remains linked to a knowledge of both where he has come from and the many boundaries he has crossed getting to where he is. He doesn't reject outright the representations of Aboriginal peoples that he encounters. Because he is so deeply immersed in these forms of representation, he is able to turn Aboriginal ideas loose within the very heart of them. The

process is so thoughtful and reasonable, so clearly guided by good intentions that you can't really describe it as entirely destructive. Nothing is the same when it's over, but we nevertheless feel a net gain has been made.

The Monument

Monuments are one way in which the state appropriates history to serve its own agenda. Monuments function in a peculiar way in public spaces, their presence being both highly visible and so entrenched, so much a part of the urban landscape, that they often recede from visibility right under our noses. From this oddly covert position, monuments instruct us on the ideology of the state. Thomas is interested in the absence of Aboriginal people from so many of these monuments, but he has also worked on ones that make statements about Aboriginal people and our place in history. He meets the narrow didacticism of the monument with a pedagogy of his own, turning the monument into a vehicle for a process of critically engaged thinking about power and representation.

Thomas has a long history of engagement with the Champlain Monument at Nepean Point in Ottawa. The monument once featured Champlain perched on the top and a kneeling "Indian scout" positioned well below him and clearly in his service. Thomas took on the challenge of decentering Champlain by persistently photographing the Indian scout. Often his son Bear appears in the photographs as a jarringly urban and contemporary challenge to the image of the breechclothed scout. In 1996 the monument was the focus of a protest by the Assembly of First Nations, in which they covered the Indian scout with a blanket as a symbolic rejection of his subservience and inaccurate, stereotypical costume. Their ultimate goal was to see him removed altogether. While Thomas understood and sympathized with their critique, he was also aware that, although the protest created a productive controversy in which the monument came alive as a site of historical discourse, if it was taken away future opportunities to expose that history would be lost. That seemed to be allowing the rest of Canada to forget this sign of how Aboriginals have been viewed a little too easily. Thomas suggested instead that a plaque be placed at the monument detailing Aboriginal concerns about it.

Eventually the Indian scout was moved across the street to Major's Hill Park where he crouches on his own, presumably scouting for his own sake. Thomas has not let him get away. He continues to photograph the scout in his new location and keeps up to date with the goings on related to him.

The Miniature

If the monument is the grand state-sponsored statement, the museum diorama represents a very different mode of didactic representation. I confess to being both fascinated and repelled by the diorama. As a child I found them absolutely immersive. I could enter these worlds with no effort. I could also imagine the satisfaction of creating them, the oddly godlike pleasure of creating one's own world exactly as one wants it, shrunk down to a manageable size. These are the aspects that make me uncomfortable now. And I can see how this desire for mastery relates to the colonial history of the museum. Here is the desire to conquer the world not just in fact, but in idea; here is the attempt to hoard and catalogue the cultures of the world, mastering them through exhaustive representation.

I remember a childhood encounter with a series of three dioramas. I can't place where they were, but I remember the message clearly. As I recall, the tour guide presented our class with dioramas of three different landscapes, or rather three different moments in the history of one landscape. In the first one there was a tipi pitched beside a river in a pristine landscape. In the second there was a nineteenth-century European settlement in the same landscape, now, however, there were some signs of pollution, logging, and so forth. In the third diorama we were up to date. The river was surrounded by industry, pollution, and the detritus of modern life (circa late 1970s). Our guide asked us which diorama we would prefer to live in. As soon as I saw the tipi my back had gone up, as it did when anything to do with Indians arose at school. I waited to be offended. I was going to point to the tipi, no matter what. And, to my relief, everyone else pointed to the tipi too. So far, so good. But we weren't done yet. The tour guide then went on to describe all of the diseases that might plague us if we lived in the world of the first diorama. The hardships. The short life expectancy. Lack of education and opportunity. Wouldn't it be better to live in the world of our own time, but without the litter and pollution? Aha! Suddenly the exercise was clear. It was about how we shouldn't litter and should fight pollution. She paused after her speech and asked us again to point to which world we would prefer to live in now that she had enlightened us. Everyone understood what was expected. We were supposed to enact the process of having our minds changed through her lesson. Everyone else pointed to the contemporary diorama. I stuck with the tipi. So the interrogation began. Why, after her careful explanation would I want to live back then? I knew better than to argue with grownup white folks who were determined to teach you something. I wasn't going to say "because this one has Indians in it and the others don't." But I wasn't

going to back down either. I used the classic kid strategy, "I dunno. I just would." No use arguing with a kid that stupid. So she moved along. Still, how I wish someone like Thomas could have appeared out of the woodwork just then to help me read the ridiculous dioramas against the grain.

Jeff had his own childhood experience with a diorama in the fourth or fifth grade. He recalls:

We went to the museum or [perhaps it was] the Buffalo Historical Society and they had a re-creation of an Iroquois village in a Plexiglas case. It was dissected so it was cut in half and you could look inside and see the families in there. And in another part of the tour, we came to another area and it said, "no admittance except for museum personnel." And I thought, "What would it be like to go through that door and find out what is on the other side?"

I'm not surprised that those two experiences are linked in Jeff's mind and not just because they occurred on the same day. The curiosity raised by the diorama is not an end point but a provocation to learn more, to get behind the scenes to see how it all works and figure out what they haven't been showing you.

Thomas's diorama, entitled *The Iron Horse*, 2004, engages the spectacle of the wild west show. He has created an amusing play in which the spectacle of the show is deflated to the scale of the miniaturized model railroad around which the project is based. The wild west show was a spectacle of the triumph of civilization and modernity over the primitive. The trains, which transported the shows, were linked to modernity in the public imagination and were seen as a significant force in civilizing the mythic West. Thomas pries into this tension, literally opening up spaces for contemporary life within his diorama and rupturing the dichotomy between the modern and the primitive.

Thomas's trick is to turn an absence into a presence, to find himself and his history in the world. He is able to do this because he has found the places where he can engage with history on his own terms. They seem to be the most unlikely places, the most impenetrable. But he finds his way in because he understands image and story and he uses them as Aboriginal forms of knowledge, or more precisely, as processes of knowledge making. This is based on an understanding of how history actually functions, that it is not just the ideal of objective facts strung out in a convenient chronology, but rather, it is a web of stories and images that are spun everywhere from the family to the state. And this is how we

experience history, from the most obscure personal history to the grandest narrative of global conflict, from rumour to statistic. Starting from our own position in the world as we find it, history comes to us in fragments. And sometimes we get it out of sequence. Sometimes we get it plain wrong. Thomas's working process is alive to the fact that this messy business is ultimately a series of creative acts. Thomas models an Indigenous form of agency that not only insists on self representation, but insists on self representation from within the very discourses that have overwritten our identities.