

First Nations Now II

1 1 / 1 1 / 2 0 1 7

First Nations Now | 3
Robert Davidson | 5
The Primacy of Story | 8
Steve Smith, Sonny Assu &
Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun | 12-13
Meryl McMaster | 15
The Totem Pole & The Formline | 19-20
Acknowledgements | 25

Indigenous Canadian artists, from the Northwest Pacific Coast to the Cree heartland, explore hybridity and autobiography. Traditional art practices and iconography meet remix culture, minimalism, performance art and corporeal narrative, reconstructing personal and shared identities betwixt realities and contemporising traditional stories. Recent serigraphs and historic lithographs by Robert Davidson, Haida; sculptural photography by Meryl McMaster, Plains Cree; digital interventions by Kwakwaka'wakw Sonny Assu; panel and hide paintings by Kwakwaka'wakw Steve Smith; and a 2017 form-line tree drawing by Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Coast Salish, as well as the place-based collaborative furniture of Pacific Coast artist and designer, Sabina Hill.

First Nations Now II : *Contemporary Innovations* |



Robert Davidson, *Canoe Breaker*, 2015, Serigraph, 40" x 27", Ed. 65/76, £1600

Robert Davidson, of Haida and Tlingit descent, is one of Canada's most respected contemporary artists and central to the renaissance of Northwest Pacific indigenous art. He has championed the rich art tradition of his native Haida Gwaii, consistently searching 'for the "soul" he saw in the art of his Haida elders'. As he works in both classical form and contemporary minimalism, Davidson negotiates the edge between the ancestral and the individual, infusing traditional forms with an evolutionary spirit. Davidson's awards include National Aboriginal Achievement Award for Art and Culture, Order of British Columbia, Order of Canada, Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal, British Columbia Aboriginal Art Lifetime Achievement Award and Governor Generals Award.

Robert Davidson |



Robert Davidson,
Put Your Complaints 'Ere, 2001,
Serigraph, 36" x 25", Ed. 35/67, £1200

Put Your Complaints 'Ere

"One day I had to drive into Vancouver on one of my delivery trips. As I was making my rounds to the galleries, feeling high about completing my work, I spoke to many people. Listening, I realized everyone was complaining about something or other. I started feeling weighted down by what I was hearing. On my way home, I thought it would be neat to have a place where people can complain without burdening other people. Thus this painting."

-Robert Davidson



Robert Davidson, *Mouse Woman*, 2016, Serigraph, 25" x 19", Ed. 43/71, £1200

The Primacy of Story

In *The Border Trilogy*, novelist Cormac McCarthy writes, ‘things separate from their stories have no meaning’. While the contention may be modified, it cannot ever be fully dismissed: it is a reality that dogs museums and which underlines the primacy of narrative in First Nations art, however abstracted. From autobiography, to current conditions and colonial history, to ancient creation stories, embedded narrative remains central to indigenous contemporary art. Robert Davidson’s serigraph, *Child of Mouse Woman*, explores the elusive figure of Mouse Woman (*Qaganjaat*), a wily and sage guardian, a maternal figure known for her helpful ability to guide young characters across the earth and return order after human encounters with the spirit realm. There are many renditions of Mouse Woman stories. Here is but one:

The ocean god, Nangldastlas, who lived in the deep waters of the Hecate Strait, possessed a magnificent hat which enabled the wearer, with a twitch of the eye, to disrupt the tides and summon great storms. One day, Nangldastlas’s troublesome son took his father’s hat and journeyed to Haida Gwaii to ask the Chief for permission to marry his daughter.

When the Chief refused him, the young god kidnapped the girl, leaving behind the hat as a bridal gift and bond. The girl’s brothers, seeking assistance from the spirit world, enlisted Mouse Woman to guide them: they voyaged through the unknown depths to retrieve their sister and return the hat, releasing her from the marriage.

Back on Haida Gwaii, however, she discovered she was pregnant. The girl gave birth to Nangldastlas, incarnated in the guise of his own grandson. Following Nangldastlas’s careful instructions, the girl placed the baby in a cradle painted with clouds, paddled into Hecate Strait and dropped the cradle in the water. As the cradle sank, it rotated. Through the body of the Chief’s daughter, the Haida people had offered Nangldastlas the gift of rebirth, and in return, with each rotation of his cradle, as he returned to his natural home, the baby Nangldastlas calmed the seas and replenished the ocean with an abundance of fish.

Robert Davidson’s work expands and reclaims his understanding of Haida cultural practice. The sinuous abstraction of *Child of Mouse Woman* offers a contemporary response to a narrative steeped in generations of oral tradition and reinterpretation.



Left: Steve Smith, *Rainbow Trout*, acrylic on wood, 24"x 36", £1500.

Right: Robert Davidson, *Put Your Complaints 'Ere*, 2001, Serigraph, 36" x 25", Ed 35/67, £1200



Algerian jug, thought to be 19th century, NFS



Sabina Hill, *Prow Coffee Table Redux*, with Andy Everson, H. 16" x L. 63" x W. 32", Ed. 8/10, approx. £8000



Meryl McMaster, *Avian Wanderer I, II & III*, 2015,
archival pigment print on watercolour paper,
20" x 30", £2,200 each, £5,400 as a set

Robert Davidson has opened the door for younger artists to integrate their history and longstanding customs into contemporary art movements. Like Davidson, Kwakwaka'wakw artists, Sonny Assu and Steve Smith, and celebrated Coast Salish artist, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, are inheritors of the 'formline' art tradition, defined by a complex stylistic vocabulary of shapes, geometrics and topographies, historically employed in totem poles, house fronts and transformational masks. All three artists reshape the formline in the face of the personal and political. While Smith individualizes his tribal identity, Assu elides Kwakwaka'wakw practices and Pop Art, challenging corporate and nation-state colonialism, and Yuxweluptun reinterprets the morphology and cosmology of his Coast Salish heritage, fantastically extending Western landscape conventions.

In the tradition of mentorship, **Steve Smith** was originally taught by his father. Painting his father's carvings, his work was meant to pass as his father's. When he surpassed his mentor, and his 'self' entered into his work, he became a contemporary artist. Today, these origins remain the foundation beneath bold experiments in form and colour. Smith interprets formlines through the changes and challenges of personal history. >>

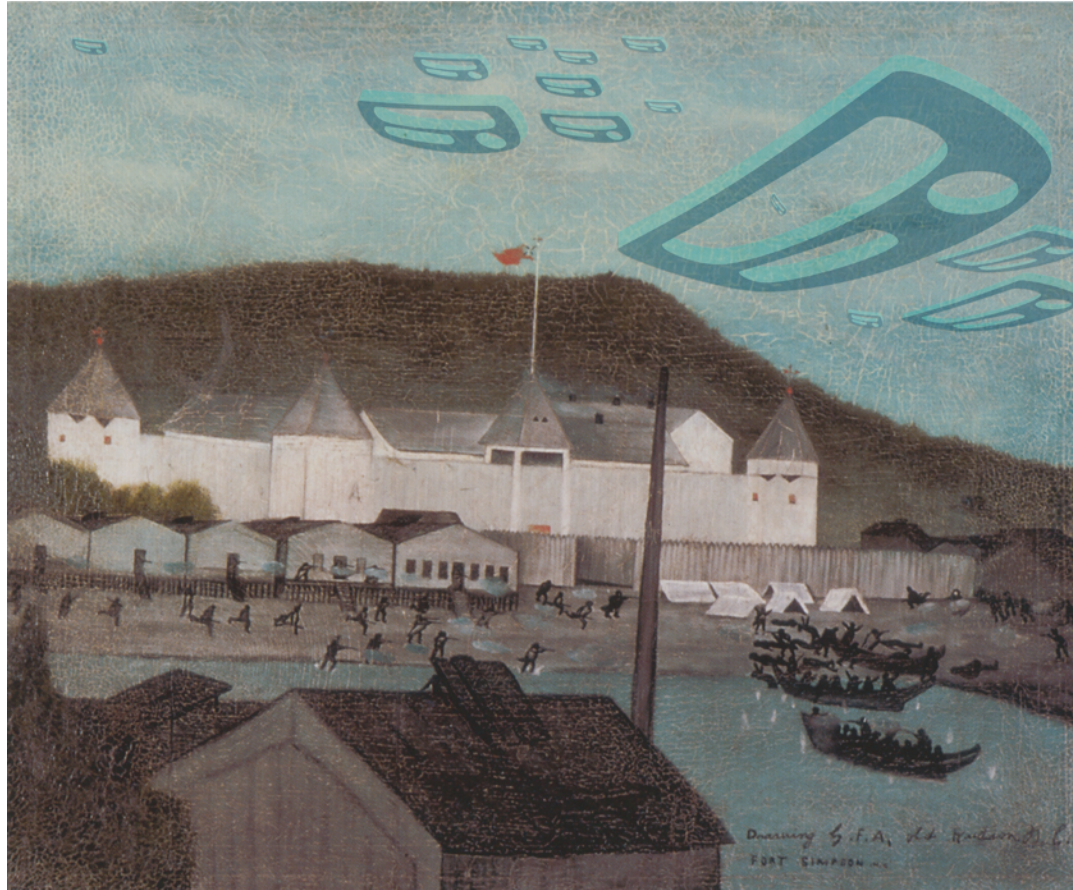
Steve Smith |
Sonny Assu &
Lawrence Paul
Yuxweluptun |

<< He credits a recent heart attack and the visions experienced during a triple bypass surgery for altering his palette from the red, green and blacks of Northwest Pacific indigenous art to a polyphony of colour.

Sonny Assu, graduate of Emily Carr College of Art and Design, uses painting, sculpture, large scale installations, digital constructions and photography to challenge monolithic commercial culture. ‘Consumerism, branding, and technology are new modes of totemic representation,’ writes Assu. Exploring the effects of colonisation on the Indigenous people of North America – loss of land, language and cultural resources – Assu deconstructs perceived identities and overturns the myth of the virgin continent and its vanished peoples. His digital series, *Interventions on the Imaginary*, imposes the traditional formline on pre-existing narratives, challenging colonial depictions of the receding Indian and the empty continent. Like alien spaceships, neon formlines hover above early colonial landscapes, interrupting the imperialistic tale of the ‘other’ and inverting the gaze.



Steve Smith, *Painted Elk Hide Drum for Vancouver Airport*, 2011, acrylic on elk hide, 41” x 41”, £5250 each



Sonny Assu,
You mess with me, you mess with my cousins,
2014, digital intervention on Frederick Alexcee painting,
22.5" x 27.25", £1600, £1750 (framed)

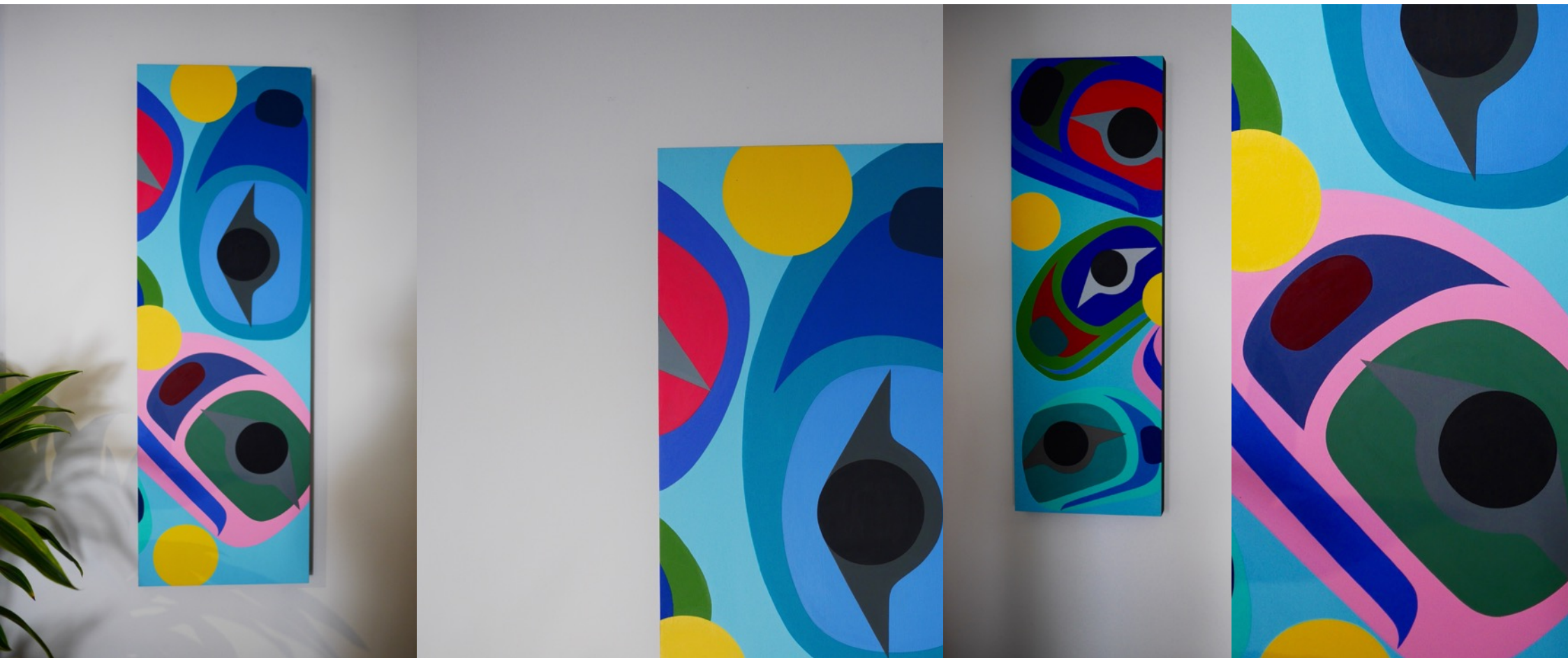
While Assu, Smith, Yuxweluptun and Davidson contemporize traditional art practices from the Northwest Pacific Coast, **Meryl McMaster** employs dominant-culture photographic practices to explore history and identity. McMaster is half Plains Cree and half of Scottish descent, with a BFA in photography from Ontario College of Art and Design. Confronting the fiction of fixed identity altogether, McMaster pits hybrid inheritances and constructed selfhoods — native, European, female — against the immediacy of the lived body in the natural world. A sculptural-photographer-performance artist, she inserts and distorts her own body inside a landscape at once familiar and ‘betwixt’. She expresses her heritage as a synergistic strength of unities, rather than a struggle between opposites.

From abstraction to performance realism, at once political and personal, all four artists extend the traditional and hereditary into the contemporary impulse, redefining history and pre-history, the colonial and post-colonial, and the multiple and liminal self.

Meryl McMaster |



Meryl McMaster,
Brumal Tattoo, 2013,
C-Print, 36" x 50",
£3,450



Steve Smith, *Rainbow Trout*, 2016, acrylic on basswood and Russian birch, 24" x 36", £3500



Sonny Assu, *#fangasm*, *Pabs was TOTALLY inspired by meeeeeeee111!*, 2014,
digital intervention on Pablo Picasso painting, 22.5" x 22.5", £1450

The totem pole is a towering art form, belonging to the indigenous peoples of the Northwest Pacific Coast, in what is now Canada and The United States.

Comprised of family crests – from the bear to the mosquito – the pole gives voice to kinships, human and animal, and speaks to both identity and interdependency. Carved from a giant redwood, home to a vast forest ecosystem, in the pole's stillness we are reminded of motion. Be it a memorial pole, a house post, a portal pole, a welcoming pole or a mortuary pole – some of which are purposely left to weather and rot, becoming a seedbed for salmonberry bushes and the saplings of further redwoods – the totem pole marks a transition: an exit or entry, both cosmic and mundane.

In its carving, forest and ocean fauna meet: wolf, shark, killer whale, raven and frog are found resting on each others shoulders. As in the dense forests, perspective is not the primary visual element, and one creature interlinks visually, ecologically and even spiritually with another. Comprised of 'formlines' – a compressed and refined vocabulary of calligraphic shapes – they are equally discreet and conjoined. Typically painted in red (from ochre and hematite) or black (from charcoal, graphite or lignite coal), formlines are sharp and solid, yet always in motion: they swell and diminish.

The formline ovoid – a rectangular oval inspired by the elliptical pattern on the skin of a young skate (fish) – is used to create eyes, heads and joints. The formline U opens into negative space, or seams it in. Between these two elements a dynamic world takes shape. Whether on a totem pole, a drum or a panel painting (Steve Smith), and whether clarified down to minimalism (Robert Davidson), sci-fi inspired pop art (Sonny Assu) or the atoms of western realism (Yuxweluptun), formline representation is mobilized through symbolic ambiguity. Creatures merge and distort to create symbiotic identities, so that no single interpretation of space and object is held as absolute.

The Totem Pole & The Formline |



Robert Davidson, *Humming Bird*, 1978,
Serigraph, 26.5" x 29.5", £1950

Like most indigenous Canadian art practices, totem pole art was illegal between 1876 and 1951. The art's survival, and renaissance in the 1960s is a testimony to indigenous resilience in the face of colonization and systematic cultural genocide.

In *First Nations Now II: Contemporary Innovations*, we attempt to honour the totem pole, as a sign of resilience and ongoing transition, by curating its echo. A vertical hanging of Robert Davidson's traditional lithographs, depicting interspecies polymorphs, gestures to the totem pole tradition and towards Davidson's own accomplishment as one of a few Northwest Pacific Coast artists responsible for returning mastery to the art form.

Also hanging in vertical unison are Sonny Assu's digital formline interventions on colonial landscapes. The central building block of this gestural totem pole is Assu's *Skeena, Beam Me Up*, in which a neon spaceship ovoid hovers above Edwin Holdgate's 1927 rendering of totem poles in disrepair.

Colonial depictions of First Nations cultures were once considered a record of a vanishing people, whose identities were conceived of as static, and whose journeys through history depicted as linear and racing toward their end. It was an aggressive and reductive fallacy.

Totem poles have always told a different story. In its verticality, the totem pole is, of course, structurally hierarchical, but its formline figures must be understood to be spatiotemporally synchronistic. One creature touches another. One creature becomes another. One creature appears in the moment only by touching another. As such, it is particularly salient that Emily Carr, also featured in Assu's *Interventions on the Imaginary*, painted landscapes dotted with totem poles carved by Assu's ancestors.



R.D, *Sea Bear Box Front*,
1969, Serigraph, 20.5" x
26.5", £1950

R.D, *Sea Bear Box Back*,
1969, Serigraph, 20.5" x
26.5", £1950



Robert Davidson, *Canoe Breaker*, 2015,
Serigraph, 40" x 27", Ed. 65/76, £1600

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Tree*, 2017,
ink on matt board, 15" x 36", £4500



Steve Smith, *Unity*, 2016,
acrylic on basswood and
Russian birch,
24" x 36",
£3500



Steve Smith, *Abundance*, 2016,
acrylic on basswood and
Russian birch,
24" x 36",
£3500



Sonny Assu, *Re-invaders*, 2014,
digital intervention on an Emily,
Carr painting, 22.5" x 35.5", £2050



Sonny Assu, *Skeena, Beam Me Up!*, 2015,
digital intervention on an Edwin Holdgate
painting, 22.5" x 22.5", £1450



Steve Smith, *Harmony*, 2016, acrylic on Russian birch, 33"W. x 10"D. £4750

The Baldwin Gallery

35 Eltham Road,
SE12 8EX,
London, England

Tel: +44 (0) 203 620 6744
Email: info@thebaldwingallery.com

Facebook: [thebaldwingallery](https://www.facebook.com/thebaldwingallery)
Instagram: [@thebaldwingallery](https://www.instagram.com/thebaldwingallery)
Twitter: [@GalleryBaldwin](https://twitter.com/GalleryBaldwin)

Curation:

Dennison Smith
Oceana Masterman-Smith

Production:

Jean Morris

Gallery Management:

Ruhksana Jahangir

Catalogue:

Designed by Oceana Masterman-Smith

Written by Dennison Smith

'The Primacy of Story' written by Verity Seward

First Nations II: *Contemporary Innovations*

1 1 / 1 1 / 2 0 1 7