

***Sonny Assu:
A Radical Mixing***

Canada House
June - October 2019

Sonny Assu



Curatorial Statement

The Baldwin Gallery

From sci-fi to superheroes, interdisciplinary artist Sonny Assu investigates what it means to be an Indigenous Canadian today. Raised in North Delta BC, a suburb of Vancouver, it wasn't until Assu was eight years old that he learnt of his Ligwilda'xw/Kwakwaka'wakw roots. His work is informed by a deep understanding of his heritage, radically remixing Kwakwaka'wakw iconography with western and pop aesthetics. Assu uses humour and irony to unsettle misconceptions of Indigenous peoples and expose the enduring legacies of colonization against the First People of what is now known as North America.

Assu works within an understanding of millennia-old Kwakwaka'wakw art practices, a well-known component which is commonly referred to as the formline tradition. This complex stylistic vocabulary is comprised of ovoids, s-shapes and u-shapes, historically employed on utilitarian and ceremonial objects such as totem poles, house fronts and transformational masks. The series *Interventions on the Imaginary* playfully challenges the way Indigenous presence has been romanticised and/or erased, primarily by early 20th-century landscape painters. Assu tags famous paintings of the supposed Canadian 'wilderness'

with vibrant formline elements. Reminiscent of an invading fleet of spaceships, these digital interventions propose an Indigenous futurism that speaks between generations, rewriting the narrative trope of the 'vanishing race' which has served to justify colonial mandates of expansion, assimilation and genocide.

Contested territories take center stage in *The Paradise Syndrome*, in which Assu overlays copper shields onto a collection of colonial marine charts that belonged to his grandfather. Flowing lines obfuscate and destabilise the invisible borders devised to confiscate, define and separate lands. The title references a 1968 Star Trek episode in which the crew stumble upon a planet populated by displaced Native Americans. In *The Treasury Edition*, Assu repurposes his childhood memorabilia, suffusing Marvel superheroes with the storytelling drive of the formline tradition. Likewise in *The Speculator Boom*, holding to account the publishers who emptied his piggy-bank, Assu dismantles and redistributes the inherent and conceptual wealth of his childhood comic book collection.

In *Ellipsis*, 136 copper replicas of vinyl records climb the gallery wall and lay silently stacked on the floor, referencing

a decision made by Assu's great-great-grandfather, Chief Billy Assu, to allow the recording of Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonial music in an era when it was illegal to perform these songs publicly. On the Northwest Coast, copper continues to be revered for its materiality and cultural significance; the installation could be wryly understood as indigenous certification, like platinum or gold albums in the dominant record industry. The copper LPs not only commemorate Assu's ancestor but mark the number of years, as of 2012, that First Nations peoples have lived under the 'Indian Act'. This controversial statute, first passed in 1876, imposed restrictive definitions on 'Indian' status and enforced an aggressive project of cultural assimilation and land redistribution. Whilst numerous amendments have since been made, the Act is still an active bill of law in Canada today.

Assu's dual heritage allows for a liminal and creative perspective on seemingly disparate realities, as he ironizes the stereotypes and propaganda-histories that forbid a nuanced understanding of identity.

Grappling with autobiography, family history, Indigenous visual culture and the crosscurrents that shape his worldview, he proposes a radical mixing that is at once politically charged and astutely personal.



Interventions on the Imaginary: The Value of Comic Sans, 2016, digital intervention on an Emily Carr painting (Memalilaqua, Knights Inlet, 1912), archival pigment print, 81 cm x 56 cm.
Courtesy of The Baldwin Gallery, London.



Ellipsis, 2012,
installation of 136 copper records,
dimensions variable.
Courtesy of Equinox Gallery, Vancouver.
Photocredit: Rachel Topham, Vancouver Art Gallery.





The Treasury Edition: Spidey Spectacular #1, 2018,
 acrylic, Marvel comic page on rag paper, 52 cm x 76 cm.
 Courtesy of Art Mûr, Montréal. Photocredit: Mike Patten.



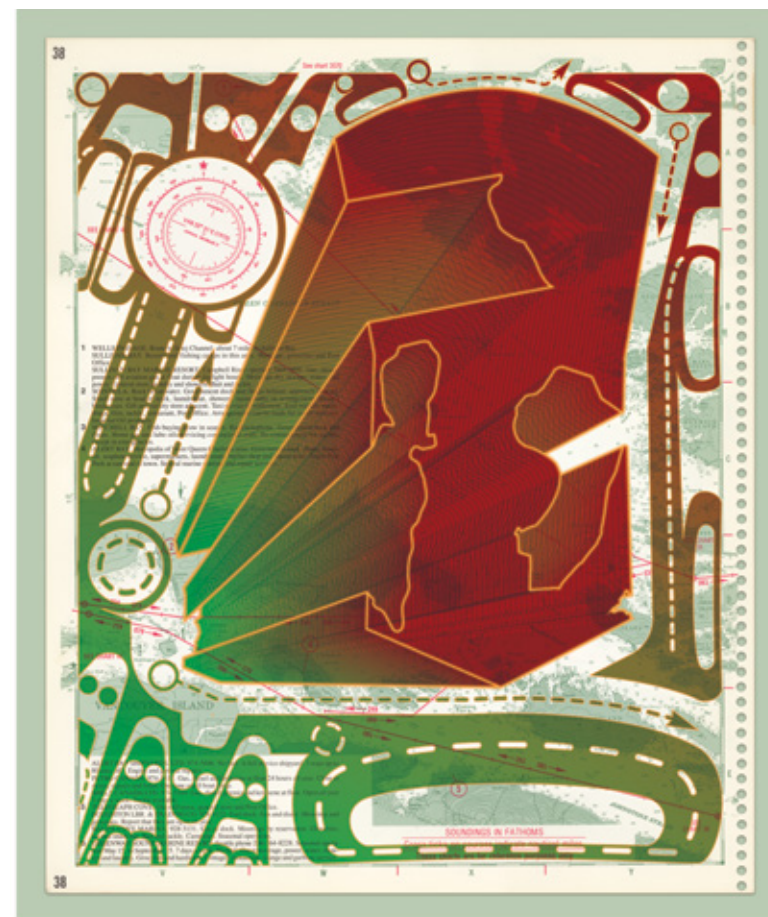
The Treasury Edition: Spidey Spectacular #2, 2018,
 acrylic, Marvel comic page on rag paper, 52 cm x 76 cm.
 Courtesy of Art Mûr, Montréal. Photocredit: Mike Patten.



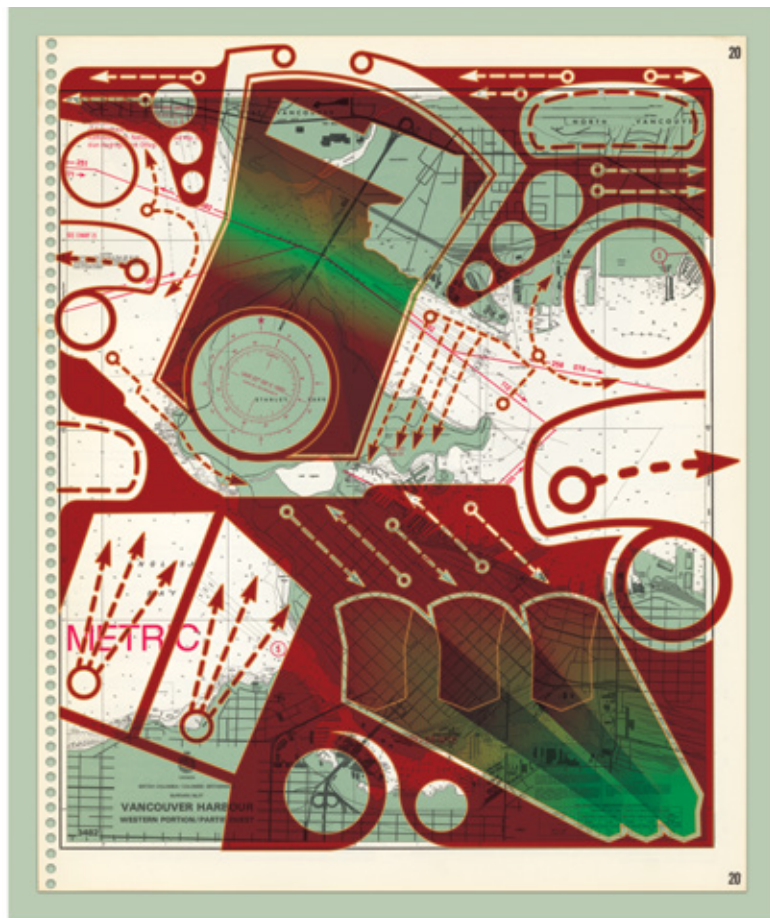
The Treasury Edition: Spidey Spectacular #3, 2018,
 acrylic, Marvel comic page on rag paper, 52 cm x 76 cm.
 Courtesy of Art Mûr, Montréal. Photocredit: Mike Patten.



The Paradise Syndrome: Voyage 39, 2016,
archival pigment print, 79 cm x 66 cm.
Courtesy of The Baldwin Gallery, London.



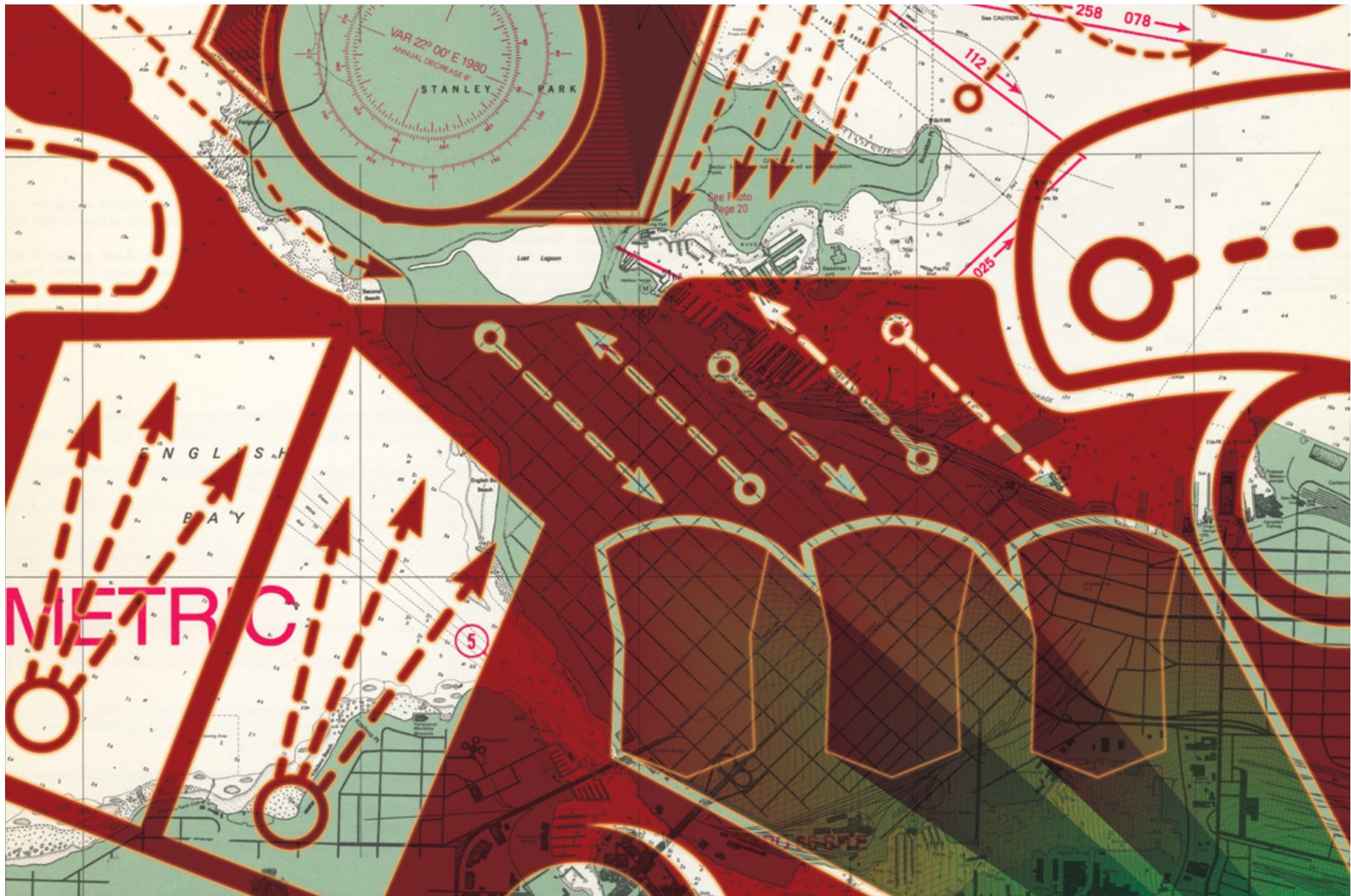
The Paradise Syndrome: Voyage 38, 2016,
archival pigment print, 79 cm x 66 cm.
Courtesy of The Baldwin Gallery, London.



The Paradise Syndrome: Voyage 20, 2016,
archival pigment print, 79 cm x 66 cm.
Courtesy of The Baldwin Gallery, London.



The Paradise Syndrome: Voyage 30, 2016,
archival pigment print, 79 cm x 66 cm.
Courtesy of The Baldwin Gallery, London.



Sonny Assu:
Legacies of Resistance
By Lindsay Nixon

Sonny Assu's artwork is aesthetically driven by a colonial-resistant visual language, derived from Kwakwaka'wakw knowledge, that speaks to the collapsing of time — past, present, and future — apparent in Indigenous epistemological productions such as art. He challenges the colonial propaganda histories, misconceptions and stereotypes, which have consigned Indigenous cultures to a static realm of pastness or atemporality. The first time I saw Assu's artwork, I knew he was making work for Indigenous people like me: those deeply connected to their Indigenous teachings, but city dwellers, firmly rooted in pop culture and adapting their cultural knowledge in futuristic ways. I was particularly moved by Assu's engagement with the narratives of Indigenous intervention, interruption and activism, drawn from our ancestors, embodied by Indigenous peoples in the beautiful present of our lives — as Anishinaabe scholar and writer Leanne Simpson might say, a future 'now', by Indigenous peoples' standards, having survived the settler-colonial apocalypse.



Spaced Invaders, 2014,
digital intervention on an Emily Carr painting,
(Heina, 1928), 57 cm x 80 cm.
Courtesy of The Baldwin Gallery, London.





We Come To Witness, 2014,
Digital intervention on an Emily Carr painting
(Silhouette No. 2, 1930) 57 cm x 86 cm.
Courtesy of The Baldwin Gallery, London.

Throughout his career, Assu has returned to formlines, a central feature of Indigenous art from the Northwest Coast of Canada, the traditional territories of his Kwakwaka'wakw community. Assu adamantly asserts that formlines constitute a readable, visual language:

I can read a totem pole or ceremonial object; thus, Northwest Coast art/formline and design is a form of written communication. I speculate that if we had not been colonized, the formline elements—ovoids, s-shapes and u-shapes—would have developed into a form of written communication akin to Asian character writing or Egyptian hieroglyphics.

(Sonny Assu: A Selective History, 2018)

Assu evolves the language of formlines to fit his contemporary reality and perspective. He adds his own inventive and bold perspective to the traditional ovoid, S and U forms, which take on bright, modern hues of pinks, purples and blues, and are digitally enhanced to resemble

alien lifeforms, commanding the spaces and objects over which they hover. In *The Speculator Boom* series, Assu embeds his favorite comics inside of sacred formlines. In doing so, Assu addresses the confluence of disparate objects that have influenced him as a Kwakwaka'wakw person, particularly during his nerd-boy youth.

Comic books are a visual language containing their own brand of teachings and ethics. Not only have comic books had a profound influence on Assu's art practice and personal ideologies, but they speak to the diversity of influences that urban Indigenous peoples experience when carving out their identities. Deliberately blurring the lines between traditional and modern, Assu posits that Indigenous peoples have deep attachments to present-day material culture, not necessarily viewed as 'traditional'. Indigenous people make kin with and through 'things' and inform identity formation around 'things'. So why not evolve Indigenous understandings of relationships to 'things'? In Assu's world-making, traditional carving

and painting evolve into relationship formation with and through comic books. Assu depicts complex Indigenous life at the intersection of pop culture, youth culture and boyhood joy. He is concerned with contemporary objects that are sacred to Indigenous boys, and the spaces where we, urban Indigenous peoples, find representation as alienated, nihilist youths.

At his core, Assu is a disrupter who has left his defiant mark on some of Canada's most beloved artworks. In *Sonny Assu: A Selective History* (2018), a summation of his career thus far, Candice Hopkins remarks on the influence of 1980's remix culture, used by Assu to erode pop culture dominated by settler perspectives. Hopkins argues that it is Assu's troublemaker nature, especially his love for repurposing camp as political means, that makes 'cultural cannibal' Emily Carr a natural target. In the digital series *Interventions on the Imaginary*, Assu confronts Carr. Carr was loosely affiliated with the early twentieth-century Group of Seven, landscape painters whose painted fictions

are renown for the subtraction of Indigenous peoples from Canada's wilderness. The absence of Indigenous life in Carr's paintings is a project of colonial aesthetics that denies Indigenous dominion over territories now known as Canada. Assu substitutes Carr's erasure of Indigenous life with the presence of formlines.

Marianne Nicolson, also in *A Selective History*, describes Assu's formline interventions as 'visual gestures akin to tagging'. In *Re-invaders* (2014), neon formlines descend upon Indigenous territories degraded by a church, whose infrastructure belies violent colonial forces, like the dark history of residential schooling. In *Space Invaders* (2014), ovoids visit with their totem pole antecedents, ancestors and kin. In *The Paradise Syndrome* series, crimson and green formlines intervene with the agendas of surveying maps, employed to divide up traditional Indigenous territories for colonial conquest and meaning.

Pop culture reference also appears in *Silenced: The Burning* (2011), which references Assu's great-great-



Re-invaders, 2014,
digital intervention on an Emily Carr painting
(*Indian Church*, 1929), 57 cm x 90 cm.
Courtesy of The Baldwin Gallery, London.

grandfather Chief Billy Assu. Assu tells this story: Chief Billy Assu was preparing for a potlatch – a ceremony that included gathering, feasting and gift-giving, which is still practiced today but was outlawed from 1885 to 1951 by the Government of Canada in an act of spiritual violence that infringed on the rights of Northwest Coast Indigenous people. In an attempt to curtail the ceremony, the local Indian agent demanded the surrender to the government of Chief Assu's ceremonial regalia. But after consulting with his community, Chief Billy Assu dragged his objects to the beach to burn them. He chose to destroy them. He would not allow them to be sold off and imprisoned in private and museum collections.

Chief Billy Assu's spirit of refusal lies at the centre of Assu's art and transcends space and time to inform his great-great grandson's practice. There is sorrow in Chief Billy Assu's story, but never without laughter and resistance. *Ellipsis*, which also references Assu's great-great grandfather, is comprised of 136 copper LPs, one for each

year of the Indian Act. An act of parliament first passed in 1876, the Indian Act manages and restricts registered 'Indians' and their bands, as well as the Canadian system of reservations, land allocated to Indigenous nations by the British Crown seeking to control traditional territories through a series of numbered treaties. Indigenous peoples hold that the Indian Act has resulted in violence enacted in their communities. A prime example is the Indian Residential Schooling System, where countless children were sexually and physically abused, robbed of their language and culture, and even made the subject of cruel nutritional experiments. Candice Hopkins describes *Ellipsis* as 'a conceptual record' of colonial violences in alternative, Indigenous spatialities, materialities and futures. Assu's installation can also be understood as a remix or punk-rock mixtape – a rejection through song of the colonial imposition on Indigenous peoples, an articulation of Indigenous futures grounded in music and the material cultures of Indigenous peoples.

Assu's work is both Indigenous past and present, a cyclical connection with the ancestors and future generations, through Indigenous teachings contained in material culture such as formlines. But Indigenous material cultures have evolved, as have the ways of knowing and being known through the objects we create. So Assu seeks to represent a unified vision of Indigenous life: one radically rooted in the words of our ancestors, as well as in his contemporary wily-nerdy-trickster-humorous-and-fun-loving ways. Though play is certainly present, Assu doesn't want viewers to mistake the legacy of resistance in his work as *solely* play. Through mastery of his craft and material, Assu refuses the imposition of the Canadian nation-state on his family and home. Playful and politically serious, Assu wants you to know that he is, and always will be, a nerd-boy trouble starter for his people.



The Speculator Boom: Careful, Shugah, You're Almost Smiling, 2018,
chalk paint and collage on panel, 173 cm x 112 cm.
Courtesy of Equinox Gallery, Vancouver.



The Speculator Boom: Nuff Said!, 2018,
chalk paint, acrylic paint and collage on panel,
173 cm x 112 cm. Courtesy of Equinox Gallery, Vancouver.



The Speculator Boom: It Only Heeds the Call of the Drums, 2018,
chalk paint and collage on panel, 173 cm x 112 cm.
Courtesy of Equinox Gallery, Vancouver.



Boastance, 2015,
acrylic on panel, 91 cm x 244 cm.
Private Collection, England. Photocredit: Dayna Danger.



Artist Biography

Sonny Assu is Ligwilda'xw (We Wai Kai) of the Kwakwaka'wakw nations. He graduated from Emily Carr University (2002) and was the recipient of their distinguished alumni award in 2006. He received the British Columbia Creative Achievement Award in First Nations art in 2011 and was long-listed for the Sobey Art Award in 2012, 2013 and 2015. He received his MFA from Concordia (Montreal) in 2017 and was one of the Laureates for the 2017 REVEAL - Indigenous Art Awards.

Sonny Assu: A Radical Mixing is his first UK solo exhibition. Simultaneous to the exhibition, Assu will undertake a residency at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich, UK, resulting in a Sainsbury Centre exhibition, July 2019.

His work is held by the National Gallery of Canada, Vancouver Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Canada Council Art Bank, City of Richmond (British Columbia, Canada), Seattle Office of Arts and Cultural Affairs, Museum of Anthropology University of British

Columbia, Seattle Art Museum, Burke Museum (Seattle), City of Vancouver (British Columbia), Hydro Quebec and Lotto Quebec. Works are held in private collections in Canada and the United States.

After years in the Vancouver and Montreal art scene, Assu has recently moved back to Vancouver Island, along with his wife and children. He lives and works in the unceded Ligwilda'xw territory of Campbell River, British Columbia.

This book has been published on the occasion of the exhibition

Sonny Assu: A Radical Mixing

Curated by The Baldwin Gallery, London, UK

On view at the Canada Gallery, at the High Commission of Canada in London, from June 21st – October 2019 and is included in Border Crossings ORIGINS Festival of First Nations 2019 Programming.

The exhibition was put together in partnership with the High Commission of Canada in the United Kingdom, The Baldwin Gallery, Equinox Gallery, Art Mûr, and a private collector in the UK.

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