

The image features a collection of approximately 20-30 grey, circular objects, possibly ceramic or stone, arranged in several stacks and scattered on a brown floor. Each object is decorated with abstract, hand-painted patterns in white and red. The patterns include curved lines, dots, and irregular shapes. The objects are set against a plain, light-colored wall. The text 'SONNY ASSU POSSESSION' is overlaid in the center in a white, sans-serif font.

SONNY ASSU
POSSESSION

FACE VALUE

JON DAVIES

In February 2013, on the grounds of the British Columbia legislature in Victoria, Kwakwaka'wakw hereditary chief Beau Dick performed the Copper Cutting Ceremony, a traditional shaming ceremony that had not been enacted since the 1950s. After walking over 500 kilometres from Quatsino with a group of supporters, Chief Dick broke a copper plaque, historically used to symbolize the wealth and power of Kwakwaka'wakw chiefs—thereby shaming Prime Minister Stephen Harper for his government's treatment of Indigenous people.¹ The ceremony took place at a time of heightened attention to Indigenous sovereignty in Canada, thanks to the direct-action Idle No More movement. This international movement seeking to reassert Indigenous sovereignty exploded on the political stage in late 2012 in response to Bill C-45, the Canadian government's omnibus bill that included provisions threatening environmental protections and treaty rights.

Chief Dick is a renowned carver whose work was included in *Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art*, a major exhibition of contemporary art at the National Gallery of Canada in 2013. Dick's work was placed near the work of another Kwakwaka'wakw artist, Sonny Assu, Ligwilda'xw of the We Wai Kai First Nation (Cape Mudge). Born in 1975 and trained at Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver, Assu now lives and works in Montreal. His work in *Sakahàn* also makes use of copper: *1884–1951* (2009) consists of sixty-seven discarded Starbucks coffee cups (with lids) made from spun copper, spread out over a Hudson's Bay Company blanket. The installation uses the sculptural vocabulary of a disposability-driven consumer culture to build a monument to historical injustices and, specifically, to a not-so-distant period of intense struggle between conflicting economic and value systems. Each of the sixty-seven cups in



1884–1951 represents one of the years that the potlatch ceremony was banned in Canada. The work functions like a shimmering timepiece.

The potlatch lies at the core of Kwakwaka'wakw cultural practice. The host (either a chief or a family) would gather the community to mark an occasion. Singing, dancing and traditional ceremonies take place during the potlatch, but the primary purpose is to redistribute the wealth of the host among those in attendance. Status and power are measured by how much the host is willing to give away or even to destroy. The potlatch was banned in 1884 to curb what government officials and missionaries saw as a suspiciously wasteful custom and one of the greatest threats to assimilating “Indians” into Christian civilization. The potlatch ban was one of the government’s most egregious legislative efforts to not just control but also eliminate the customs, languages and beliefs of Indigenous peoples

Sonny Assu, *1884–1951*, 2009, sixty-seven spun copper cups and lids with Hudson's Bay blanket. Collection of Michael Audain and Yoshiko Karasawa. Image courtesy of the artist and Equinox Gallery, Vancouver. Photo: Chris Meier.

in Canada. Enhancing the worth of the disposable cups by producing them in copper—which is of great value to the Kwakwaka'wakw—the artist gathers these ubiquitous waste products that litter the landscape into a display of wealth akin to those that were banned under the potlatch law.

The haphazard arrangement of the sixty-seven cups also evokes a garbage dump, symbolizing Canada's history of relegating Indigenous people to the dustbin of history. The empty coffee cups could also embody the remains of a decades-long period of waiting, the blanket spread out during a period of occupation or protest against the law—resistance that Assu's own great-great-grandfather participated in. And the cups are displayed on a Hudson's Bay Company blanket, which in Indigenous cultural production has become a potent encapsulation of colonialism's wolf-in-sheep's-clothing strategies, where harm is hidden behind a paternalistic, caretaking facade: the HBC blanket is notorious for contributing to the spread of smallpox to Indigenous populations in the late eighteenth century.

The past is inseparable from the present. Artists like Assu draw on the aesthetics of both past and present in a hybrid, mutable form that is well suited for trying to make sense of where we are going.² *1884–1951* captures many of the most compelling aspects of Assu's art practice as it brings together the language of popular and consumer culture with specifically Indigenous forms and content drawn from his ancestry. The resulting objects reflect on how identity is articulated, performed and politicized, as they measure the gap between the conflicting value systems held by Indigenous and colonial worldviews. Assu's work subtly and potently raises urgent questions of power, control and self-determination—over resources, culture and history. His work is driven by the question of how value is determined by societies, the power structures that dictate what is of worth, to whom and when. Assu states:

Historically, dominant cultures and ruling authorities have taken it upon themselves to preserve artifacts from perceived lesser societies, displaying

*the objects in galleries as a sign of their own wealth and authority. Today, we show our prosperity by accumulating posh, inanimate objects. And perhaps subconsciously we display the waste from this consumption (water bottles, disposable coffee cups, product packaging) as further markers of wealth.*³

The two competing economies that we see in tension in many of Assu's works are those of the potlatch society and Western society. As the artist notes:

How [do] two dramatically different societies disseminate wealth? On one hand, you have the Potlatch Society, where they, traditionally, would save their wealth, hoard their wealth, only to give it all away [...] Your wealth as a person in a Potlatch Society was based upon how much you gave away [...]

*In contemporary Western Society, our notion of wealth is the complete opposite. We collect our wealth, we save our wealth, we keep our wealth, and we display that wealth in the things we buy.*⁴

The exhibition *Sonny Assu: Possession* brings together a number of Assu's works in sculpture and installation, painting and photography, from the past decade. The title *Possession* foregrounds how power and control are exerted over objects, which cannot exist outside of value and ethical systems or social and political networks. For something to be a possession, someone must own it. Assu's work is animated by the question of who owns history, resources, practices, and objects. The concept of *self-possession* is also present throughout his oeuvre, as it explores how we make sense of ourselves in relation to histories, economies and communities that are increasingly navigated through new technologies.

Assu draws on the multi-generational duration of the Canadian potlatch ban in other sculptural installations as well. *Silenced: The Burning* (2011) and *Silenced: The Hidden* (2011) count off the shameful sixty-seven years through accumulations of elk-hide drums, painted in muted tones. Intended to generate rhythm and noise, and unify the members of a community, these drums now lie silent on the floor. In his text for Assu's recent exhibition at Art Mûr in Montreal, Michael Rattray notes that "the drum, a powerful



instrument of social organization, keeps time and may control a greater social structure.”⁵ Looking at them in their quieted state, we imagine the volume of sound that so many drums could produce. These large, haunted piles—or perhaps funeral pyres?—take up space like a great elephant in the room: the (ongoing) colonization of Indigenous peoples by European settlers to North America, a vast iniquity erased by historical amnesia.

Many of Assu’s installations incorporate painted elk-hide drums—alone, in small groups or in larger gatherings—similar to those in the *Silenced* series, as well as other circular objects like vinyl LP-like discs (Assu is a music buff). Hundreds of these circles proliferate in Assu’s work, like building blocks or pixels. Not quite flat and occupying the wall or floor, they have an identity somewhere between painting and sculpture. The accumulation of sixty-seven drums in *Silenced*, or 136 copper LPs in

Sonny Assu, *Silenced: The Burning*, 2011, acrylic on sixty-seven elk-hide drums. Courtesy of the artist and Equinox Gallery, Vancouver. Photo: Scott Massey, Site Photography.

his widely exhibited 2012 work *Ellipsis*, draws a parallel between the time-intensive process of crafting an art object and the experience of enduring historical injustices. The production of each drum or disc takes up its own unit of time, which comes to represent a year as the objects accumulate in the installation and occupy a gallery space.

Assu works with a wide array of materials that are meaningful to his various cultures—ancestral and consumer. His sculptural series *Longing* (2011) engages questions of value and labour in a different way than the accumulation-based installations. *Longing* is one of several of Assu's works that make use of found objects—in this case, off-cuts from cedar logging. On his reserve on northeastern Vancouver Island, Assu discovered that ancestral land was being leased to a business that cut down trees to build log houses for wealthy international buyers. He likens the off-cuts to “pre-fabricated Northwest Coast masks.” He writes: “Left to be reclaimed by the earth or chipped up into cat litter, they are considered worthless by the developer and the consumer [...] *Longing* is my commentary on what these waste products could have been.”⁶

Assu decided to recontextualize the off-cuts: he exhibits them in gallery spaces as art objects on plinths, their size and shape helping them to “pass” as masks.⁷ The industrial chainsaw creates idiosyncratic features and expressions that seem to give each mask a distinctive personality. In this project Assu plays with how context determines value. The pieces of discarded cedar, while beautiful in themselves, “long” to become something more valuable: art objects. They also long to become individuals possessed with unique attributes and qualities. There are thirty-one masks in the series, and Assu tends to organize them according to group identities: colonizers, warriors, bureaucrats. Assu notes:

*Each one has a face and story within—and therefore also an inherent wealth. The felling of the rainforest enables us to display wealth in the form of luxury vacation homes, but we often give little thought to the waste produced by such affluence.*⁸



Sonny Assu, *Longing #13*, 2011, found cedar and brass. Collection of David Allison and Chris Nicholson. Image courtesy of the artist and Equinox Gallery, Vancouver.



The *Longing* series also inspired Assu's striking photographic series *Artifacts of Authenticity*. Here, in each of the three images, Assu stages an off-cut mask in one of the value-bestowing contexts in which Indigenous artworks have been presented—typically with claims of authoritatively representing an often oversimplified “authentic” Indigenous identity. The three contexts include the Museum of Anthropology, UBC, where the mask performs the role of artifact;⁹ the Equinox Gallery in Vancouver, which represents the artist, and where the mask becomes commodified as contemporary art; and Roberts Gallery and Gifts, where it becomes a souvenir for tourists. Posed for these photos, the masks read very differently depending on what is around them. Assu creates yet another iteration of the *Longing* project by casting one of the masks in bronze, once more transforming what had been refuse into a luxury object.

Sonny Assu, *Roberts Gallery and Gifts* from the series *Artifacts of Authenticity*, 2011, archival pigment print. Courtesy of the artist.



The scenes of commercial display and consumer promise in the *Artifacts of Authenticity* photographs are mirrored in Assu's *Breakfast Series*, where clever takeoffs on popular breakfast cereals for kids—"Treaty Flakes" and "Lucky Beads"—are displayed on an IKEA shelf. Instead of trading on leprechaun and tiger characters, these "products" draw on Indigenous iconography and stereotypes, contaminating corporate branding with suppressed cultural references. Behind the colourful facades, the works also reference the wholesale transformation of agricultural practices from small-scale farming to corporate agribusiness, and our consequent experience of increasing alienation from the land. Nearby hangs another early work, *When Raven Became Spider (Embrace)* (2003), one of several of Assu's pieces incorporating blankets. Here the Northwest Coast figure of Raven—mischievous and curious, a trickster who delights in being the centre of attention—morphs into Marvel Comics superhero Spiderman. Through this transformation, Assu seeks to make Northwest Coast legends relevant for younger generations weaned on Saturday morning cartoons, action movies and hip-hop. The blanket reconnects an ancestral iconography with youth culture, invigorating them both.

Assu's appropriation of popular culture has also extended into the realm of abstract painting with his *Chilkat* series and his recent body of work titled *#selfie*. The *Chilkat* series consists of large-scale pentagonal abstract paintings that reference Chilkat weaving, a time-consuming technique that generates distinctive curved and circular forms and is historically associated with the Tsimshian, Tlingit and Haida people. Chilkat blankets are highly valued: their motifs identify clans, and chiefs wore them during the potlatch. Along with his signature take on the formlines characteristic of Northwest Coast art, and a twenty-first-century colour palette, Assu titles each of the *Chilkat* paintings with a hashtag, a way of announcing and sorting information topics on Twitter and other social media. Assu sees contemporary branding and self-performance through the consumption of goods and technologies as a kind of totemic representation, one that embodies new iconographies and communal rituals—"a symbolic consumer-based clan structure." He continues, "Instead of being from the Raven, Bear, Eagle (etc.) clan, we now belong to the Nike clan, the iPod clan, the Coke clan."¹⁰

These images, objects and platforms are in line with the historical ways that we have performed our identities through style. But increasingly, for better or for worse, such "tribal" affiliations are completely unmoored from biology and familial structures and become the terrain of desire and access, a stew of personal tastes and interests mitigated by the pressures of conformity to a mainstream (or subculture), with acceptance only a mouse-click and PayPal password away. In the clan of social media, identity and community are performed not through shared rituals and cultural practices IRL (in real life) but through avatars. A network of mediating screens stands between individuals on their computers and the carefully managed, thoroughly constructed online presences that now form our public identities as meme culture holds ever greater sway over our leisure time.

The *Chilkat* series draws connections between the visual motifs of Northwest Coast art and the abstracted writing style of graffiti, exploring



both as visual languages intimately tied to identity and its performance. Assu seeks to evolve an original pictorial form in these paintings, breaking from a history in which Indigenous languages are marginalized and destroyed. The *Chilkat* paintings' monumental scale stands in tension with their of-the-minute titles that reflect trends that history may decide were just blips on the media landscape: *#angrybirds* and *#tweetblast*, for example, might be *#trending* only temporarily in the grand scheme of things. Other titles suggest how social media might fulfill political hopes: *#digitalnative* invokes the term for the generation that has grown up with digital technologies and the internet as their “natural” context; Assu adds another layer, invoking the potential of the interface between “First Peoples” and the latest technologies. *#IdleNoMore*, meanwhile, references how the Indigenous movement makes great use of social media in their campaigns, revitalizing protest politics for new generations.

Assu's most recent series, *#selfie*, was inspired by the ubiquitous snapshot self-portraits that proliferate on cellphones, Instagram accounts and Facebook feeds across the globe. These private performances between individuals and their cameras take place for an imagined audience that will view the images through other screens, often at a remove in time and place. Assu returns to the painted elk-hide drums that he is known for,



Sonny Assu, *#selfie*, 2013, acrylic on elk hide. Courtesy of the artist and Art Mûr, Montreal.

(so in staying true to his “signature” aesthetic, they are already a kind of self-portraiture) while working with a colour palette that is noticeably more “flesh tone.” We cannot help but anthropomorphize the painted formlines we see—circles become eyes, an angular curve becomes a nose—and resolve them into faces. Whether these paintings show us our own reflection—they could be mirrors—or different faces of the artist, is an open question. Like much of Assu’s work, the *#selfie* series reflects both the artist’s identity and our own, as we collectively try to understand ourselves and one another, navigate a wounded history, and discern what is truly of value as we move into the future.

ESSAY NOTES

¹ Judith Lavoie, “First Nations Chief to Perform Rare Shaming Rite on Legislature Lawn,” *Times Colonist*, 9 February 2013, <http://www.timescolonist.com/news/local/first-nations-chief-to-perform-rare-shaming-rite-on-legislature-lawn-1.70849> (last accessed 17 November 2013).

² Jolene Rickard notes, “Change is the only constant in the lives of Indigenous peoples.” See “The Emergence of Global Indigenous Art,” *Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art*, ed. Greg Hill, Candice Hopkins and Christine Lalonde (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2013), 59.

³ Sonny Assu, “Artist Statements: *Longing*,” *Sonny Assu*, undated, <http://sonnyassu.com/pages/longing> (last accessed 17 November 2013).

⁴ “Sonny Assu—Laich-kwil-tach (Kwakwaka'wakw): Phone Interview by Crystal Baxley,” *Contemporary North American Indigenous Artists*, Spring 2011, <http://contemporarynativeartists.tumblr.com/post/6030123932/sonny-assu-laich-kwil-tach-kwakwakawakw> (last accessed 17 November 2013).

⁵ Michael Rattray, “#Neveridle” *Art Mûr*, exhibition 9 March–27 April 2013. <http://artmur.com/en/artists/sonny-assu/neveridle/> (last accessed 17 November 2013).

⁶ Assu, “Artist Statements: *Longing*.” ⁷ The concept of “passing” and the question of who is assumed to belong to a specific race, culture, gender, or sexuality on first glance are also at play in Assu’s work, as he is part Indigenous and part white. Every assertion of his Indigenous identity therefore becomes a conscientious act of political solidarity akin to a “coming out.”

⁸ Assu, “Artist Statements: *Longing*.” ⁹ Writer Marget Milne asks about the *Longing* series and its origin as found objects: “Is it the artist, the medium or the presentation that creates its power? [...] Is this Aboriginal art? Is this an artifact since it was found on traditional Aboriginal territory?”

in “Ebb and Flow: Sonny Assu and Rande Cook at the Nanaimo Art Gallery,” *Diane Farris Gallery*, 15 August 2012, <http://www.dianefarrisgallery.com/marget-milne-sonny-assu-rande-cook-at-the-nanaimo-art-gallery/> (last accessed 17 November 2013).

¹⁰ Amanda McCuaig, “Sonny’s Happy Future Demands You Perk Up Your Ears,” *Art Threat*, 5 March 2013, <http://artthreat.net/2013/03/sonny-assu/> (last accessed 17 November 2013).

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