

Raymond Boisjoly

Station to Station // Silent Trans-Forming

A conversation between Raymond Boisjoly, Derek Dunlop, and Daina Warren

This conversation elaborates upon some of the salient themes arising out of Raymond Boisjoly's recent exhibitions of new work at two artist-run centres in Winnipeg. PLAT-FORM centre for photographic + digital arts presented a new series of photo-based work titled *Station to Station*. Also, Urban Shaman Contemporary Aboriginal Art presented a new video installation in the Marvin Francis Media Gallery titled *Silent Trans-Forming*. While each exhibition is unique, they both share interconnecting formal and theoretical concerns that are characteristic of Boisjoly's practice.

Silent Trans-Forming is a video installation constructed of common materials. A black tarp is re-deployed as a screen to display an enigmatic text concerning the passage of time. This particular combination of elements is conceived as a deliberately ad hoc formation, informed by something other than a strict, defined utility. In using common materials with common functions for unforeseen ends, the work points toward the possibility of the future being something other than it would have been.

Continuing Boisjoly's investigation into the status of the photographic image, **Station to Station** includes eleven photographic works comprised of abstracted film stills created through the productive misuse of technology. Sourced from Kent Mackenzie's film *The Exiles* (1961), Boisjoly's images are made by scanning the film while it is being played on a digital video player: turning a moving image into a still one. The documentary style film follows a group of Aboriginal friends living in Los Angeles over the course of a twelve-hour period as they reflect upon feelings of home and community and contemplate their future.

This discussion was conducted over e-mail

upon Boisjoly's return to Vancouver from Winnipeg after the installation and the launch of both exhibitions.

Derek Dunlop: Your choice of materials can be described as having a mundane quality, or coming from the vernacular - for instance, your use of coloured copy paper, Christmas lights, or the imagery of black metal music. You have a very subtle way of imbuing these materials with traces of your own subjectivity. Can you explain your attraction to these materials and what you think happens to them when they begin to circulate in the institutions of art?

Raymond Boisjoly: I am interested in these materials because they communicate something meaningful that isn't restricted to the category of art. As far as what happens to them when they circulate in and as art, I am not sure, but I aim for the works to register a conscious and deliberate negotiation of their own production in relation to art, as something previously particular smuggled in, resulting in a partial estrangement of both art and the materials I have used.

Daina Warren: Can you speak about your use of materials in your installation *Silent Trans-Forming* at Urban Shaman, especially your use of the black tarp?

RB: My choice of a black tarp for this work is derived from an interest in vernacular materials, materials deriving from everyday life with their attendant uses. Tarps are utilitarian objects that don't have a specific use, only possible uses; my deployment of a black tarp is simply a demonstration of its capacity to be useful. From the tarp, I have cut out the text, "Always finding ourselves amidst changes already underway." Upon this object, a performance of the song "Write Me, Baby" (1965) by Pat & Lolly Vegas is projected without sound in order to emphasize the visual in this particular document.

DW: What drew you to Pat & Lolly Vegas? Can you speak about this reference?

RB: Pat & Lolly Vegas are really fascinating figures. I have done other research concerning Indigenous participation in modernity; the choice of this video is an extension of that ongoing concern. Within ten years of this performance, Pat & Lolly would progress from wearing sharply-tailored suits while playing a derivative pop song to playing disco music wearing pow wow regalia on national TV. This transition models other developments in Indigenous politics. It is interesting to see this manifest in the context of pop music.

DD: How did you come across Kent MacKenzie's film *The Exiles* (1961)?

RB: The first time I encountered *The Exiles* was when it was available streaming on Netflix, it was maybe 2010. Despite the interest in this film generated by Thom Andersen's documentary *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003), I happened upon MacKenzie's film without any prior knowledge of its existence. I had been engaged in researching histories that are reflected in the film's portrayal of Indigenous peoples, especially histories of cultural transformation, introduced technologies and processes, and the removal or migration of Indigenous peoples to urban centres, so this was a crucial film to see and respond to in some way.

DD: Can you explain a little bit more about the process by which you capture the images. Are they random? Or are you making conscious choices about when to freeze the images?

RB: The images are produced by playing a digitized file of MacKenzie's film on an iPad which is then placed on a flatbed scanner. The film, playing at 1/5 the normal speed, resists the scanner's attempts to fix its image. I scanned the entirety of the film over five hours; the process does not allow me the possibility of choosing what is captured. I would not call them "random" captures; they are rather images premised on varied contingencies.

DW: Could you also speak about the era to which both of these exhibitions refer, and why that particular time period is significant for you in terms of cultural art history and an Urban Aboriginal art history?

RB: I am very interested in the way popular culture can index larger societal changes. With both of these works, the material in question does not necessarily constitute a stable point of reference for histories of Urban Indigenous peoples, let alone their art. Given the complexity of the issue, that Urban Indigenous experience is not as easily legible for a public satisfied with conventional imaginings of Indigenous cultural practice, these documents allow for a different approach to the issue that diffuses the demand that the cultural manifestation of the struggle of Indigenous peoples be a primarily visual phenomenon. What happens when Indigeneity persists in obscure ways?

DD: The work in the exhibition *Station to Station* speaks back to the film in a very specific way. To some degree you are inserting your own subjectivity into the film, but in other ways, you let the mediation of technologies speak for you. When I think of artists who appropriate images from the media or popular culture, often it is for a desire to reclaim, or as a way of re-working representation. I feel like something different is happening in this work, partly because of your decision to use *The Exiles* as your source material. *The Exiles* is a complex and nuanced portrayal of Indigenous experience. It is not obviously stereotypical. What is it that you are trying to see differently by turning the moving images into still ones?

RB: Given the context in which I encountered the film, this technological mediation is central to this work. I struggle with articulating what the potential implications are for this sort of work. The film and its characters, visualized in this way, show something that must always evade capture, that remains a fugitive element denying fixity. Work concerning

stereotypes is often posed as a challenge to those stereotypes, positing a more authentic reality existing beyond the reductive tendencies of stereotyping. What I am trying to see through this is that there is always an element that will exceed our understanding because our tools for seeing are never precise enough.

DD: You've used the term "creative misrecognition" as a way to refer to your process—for example, the meeting of two incongruous technologies. It's a very evocative concept; can you elaborate a bit more on this concept in relation to both exhibitions?

RB: I have never considered this term as something in particular but always in relation to various facets of art, from the production of art to its reception. In the case of these scanner works, the creative or productive misrecognition can be seen in the redeployment of technologies for unintended ends. That is, because these technologies, the iPad and the scanner, can be used in this way, the work demonstrates an unforeseen possibility of their functioning, a productive misrecognition of their uses.

With *Silent Trans-Forming*, the misrecognition is more complete or all encompassing for me, as if it had no outside, as if all practice were impacted by misrecognition or understandings derived from this misrecognition. The text, "Always finding ourselves amidst changes already underway," registers a strange sentiment concerning historical change or transformation. The demands of the situation articulated in its text are multiple, and only by mistaking these things for something simpler or more manageable provides the capacity to act in the face of something difficult. Misrecognition provides a way in and a way through.

DD: There is often an elusive kind of transformation happening in your work. Either you are recording a transformation, or a transformation happens as a result of the mixed meeting of materials.

Images often emerge within the conditions of a restricted or highly controlled framework. In relation to this strategy, you've mentioned that, "The process by which something becomes visible can also destroy it." You seem to be testing the limitations of your materials, while at the same time questioning the limits, or the possibility of representation itself. Can you elaborate a bit more on these tensions and maybe discuss why they are important to you?

RB: I am interested in processes that index transformations because everything is undergoing numerous transformations. The *Rez Gas* works are images of independent, Indigenous-owned gas stations situated on reserves that have been faded into black construction paper. These works, using the sun as a tool in their production, are demonstrative of this idea that what produces an image can also destroy it. I am thinking of this destruction as the transformation of an object into something else not immediately convenient to our understanding or existence. The work persists in some strange way despite the fact that it is no longer what it was. Every material offers a limit, every material presents an obstacle to representation, every tool, while useful, is only relatively precise. This thinking guides the work in both exhibitions.

DD: There is often present in your work a fluctuation between the general and the specific. I am thinking about the way the motif of the gas station is operating in your different bodies of work. The appearance of the gas station in *Station to Station* takes on greater meaning because of its earlier appearance in *Rez Gas*. In each case the gas station stands in as a kind of common emblem, but it also can be understood as a unique, individual organization with very specific socio-historical connotations. There is a fluctuation between the general and the specific. Can you discuss a bit more the relationship between these two terms, and how you think about them in relationship to your practice?

RB: While I don't think of it in these terms, something of the general and the specific manifests in my concerns with language, naming, and discourse. This is often in the difference between naming and description in relation to experience and understanding. To give an example, I am interested in the way something like "colonialism" can never be regarded directly, but only glimpsed in the specific mechanisms that come to impact colonized populations. Colonialism is never present in full before us, and this is the challenge of moving between the general and the specific, to name an experience in relation to a general category without reducing its specificity. The gas stations become a way of registering something of the specific reality of Indigenous peoples within their traditional territories beyond the way these things are typically visualized.

DW: Does the idea of the "West Coast" and land/histories come into play with *The Exiles*? Does the idea of Vancouver history come into play with some of your other projects or influence your ideas?

RB: I have been thinking about the expansive cultural geography represented in *The Exiles*, the neon signs for Lucky Lager visible in the windows of Los Angeles Indian bars and the network this suggests in that Lucky Lager remains a very popular beer in parts of BC. I deal with specifically Northwest Coast ideas in other projects, though these are limited in number, and I am still trying to figure out how I can talk about these things in a respectful manner that does not appear simply to be me trading on my identity as Haida.

Though I think about Vancouver—I have worked in Vancouver for a little more than a decade—I have dealt with it in incidental or intuitive ways. With the elaborate approach to Vancouver history offered by other artists in the city, my negotiations of it are partial and fragmentary.

PLATFORM centre for photographic + digital arts

Station to Station

04 April - 17 May, 2014

Curator: Derek Dunlop

URBAN SHAMAN

CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL ART

Silent Trans-Forming

04 April - 07 June, 2014

Raymond Boisjoly is an artist of Haida and Québécois descent currently based in Vancouver. His practice operates as active speculation and engages issues of Indigeneity, language as cultural practice, and the experiential aspects of materiality. His process is situated in proximity to photography, and concerns the nature of technology as a means to index and understand cultural transformation. He has shown his work widely across Canada and is represented by Catriona Jeffries Gallery in Vancouver.

Derek Dunlop is an artist, writer, and curator based in Winnipeg. He completed his Master in Fine Arts in Visual Arts from the University of British Columbia in 2006. Dunlop has a studio based practice influenced by a variety of critical discourses including queer theory, and phenomenology. He is the Director of Operations at PLATFORM centre for photographic + digital arts.

Daina Warren is of the Montana Cree Nation in Hobbema, Alberta. She was awarded Canada Council's Assistance to Aboriginal Curators for Residencies in the Visual Arts program to work with Grunt Gallery in Vancouver which led to an associate curator and administrator position until 2009. Warren also completed the Canada Council's Aboriginal Curatorial Residency at the National Gallery in Ottawa. In 2012, Warren graduated with a Master of Arts in Art History in Critical and Curatorial Studies from the University of British Columbia. She is currently the Director of Urban Shaman Contemporary Aboriginal Art.



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