

Arthur Renwick

Arthur Renwick – Transcript

Thank you [laughter] I was just talking to Steven Loft who is working as a curator here. It [is] really exciting for me to be asked to give a talk on his work. There's a lot of things that are running through my mind right now. This is actually the first time I've seen the show. Having been making work for over twenty years now, and making work about First Nations issues, it's just really exciting to see the galleries displaying a lot of work that has been very meaningful to me for a number of years. A lot of my heroes are on these walls which is really quite an amazing honour to be a part of this show. So thank you Steve and thank you Andrea, really appreciate it. Andrea Kunard is a curator for the CMCP here. It's also exciting to see Robert Houle's show on the far end as well, cause he and I have a long history together of talking about First Nations arts and how we viewed it as moving along through history and what ideally it would be like, and the idea is on display right now. It's really quite phenomenal [laughs].

To start to talk about this work it actually has a bit of a long history in that. This was spurred off of another body of work that I did which were a series of

landscapes in South Dakota. I put together a show called *Delegates, Chiefs of the Earth and Sky* and it was a series of landscape photographs that were base[d] upon a certain history in North America. It was based upon the Fort Laramie Treaty in South Dakota. It was also spurred by a book called *The North American Indian*. The front cover of this book had a photograph of Red Cloud who is a Sioux chief, Dakota chief and his image is ubiquitous, you see it on t-shirts everywhere, you can see it on a poster, it's been on postage stamps and money in the U.S. I was flipping through this book and I was just looking at all these images of these beautiful plains Indian chiefs and warriors and I was struck because at one point I saw this one warrior who was looking fierce, holding a staff and looking directly into the camera. I turned the page and the same chief was sitting down, wearing a white robe and a white turban and he looked completely defeated. The sign underneath it, a little text underneath it said that it was Chief (inaudible comment) and [he] had just been captured for participating in a revolt and was about to be hung. There were these two contrasts and the images that I'm referring to, they were called the delegate

photographs, and they happened in the U.S. from the 1850's up until the 1890's. It was a series of photographs where the U.S. government, President Lincoln and presidents before and after him were gathering a lot of the chiefs that were sort of roaming Indian territory. There was a large section in the U.S. that was labeled Indian territory where no white people could enter because they were sort of feeding off the buffalo and it was just sort of territory that was -allowed them that space to roam free and exist without any contact. The U.S. government was making this concerted effort to move a lot of these people that were Indians ...Indian territory onto reservations. It was when reservations were first being made and they had a lot of meetings and what they would ultimately do is go out to these places, wagon train the chiefs to a train, bring them on a train back to Washington, DC. Let them stay at the White House and wine and dine them like they were royalty and impress upon them that western civilization is taking over the continent and that it would be really important for them to sign these treaties. It was a long period of this where they would be brought to the White House and they would be photographed in the White House by official government

photographers and they would be interviewed as well and talked to through a translator. Everything that was discussed had to be translated, and all of these conversations were basically put into the Library of Congress - it's in their archives, basically all the discussions about treaties are recorded there. I was looking at these photographs and I was trying to understand the delegate series of photographs and trying to understand that history. I found it really interesting how it was documented but at the same time those delegate photographs became the epitome of the Plains Indian, riding a horse with the war bonnet, it created...helped to create the stereotype of the Indian as we know it today. That history I found really quite fascinating. I started to read this book called *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee* and I was looking through it and I saw a lot of the same photographs, these portraits were in this book but in reading the chapters what they did was...the author did...I think it was D. Brown...D. Brown was the author. He actually went to the library of congress and actually pulled out all of the old transcripts of these conversations and basically used their voice to write the history of how the West was lost for the Indians. It was really quite a sad and tragic story so I read through that and

what fascinated me was that this text basically gave voice to all of those photographs that existed in that series. I found it really quite moving. I decided to continue the photo series; I moved from the landscapes and decided to actually get into portraiture.

I come from the west coast of British Columbia on the northwest coast, a small fishing village. I was born and raised there until I was nineteen and my older brother is actually a carver. He carves masks, west coast style masks. I was just really inspired to see him getting back into that tradition again, he was doing a really awesome job and I just found it really empowering to see him doing that. I thought well maybe I should create some photographic like masks and photograph a lot of my peers, in a certain format. So I considered that, and then I started talking to people about it and a lot of the people that you see on this wall are involved in the visual arts.

A lot of the people that are on this wall are involved in the arts in some way or another whether it be through acting, authors, curators, archeologists, comedians a lot of them are my friends and I would talk to them about this idea that I had about shooting this series, series of portraits on First Nations

people. Through conversations I started asking them is there a situation that you found yourself in where the fact that you're Indian has controlled you in some way with the job that you have, or has it controlled you in some way where you've actually decided not to take the job because it was a really bad stereotype? We would discuss these ideas and there was always some story that they would have. Each person would have his story about this epiphany that they've had while they trying to do a job that they'd been asked to do and they realized that they couldn't do it, they couldn't cross that line. We'd have a lot of these long discussions about the stereotype and what that meant and what eventually started happening is I would set the camera up and then I would interview them and talk to them about these experiences they had, basically you know within their profession. Then it reached a point where I would ask them to consider the lens, and imagine that on the other side of that lens was the whole history of these stereotypes that we were talking about. To look through this lens and imagine that history there and if they could, make a facial expression towards that history, what would it be, to challenge that. Which is how this series came about. One thing that I felt [was] really important was that all of the people sitting there had

to be looking directly into the lens, they had to be confronting the viewer. Another thing I was considering was that I really wanted it to be quite cropped and I was hoping that the faces would be as grotesque as possible - but I really had no control over that, it was really reliant upon their impulses and how they wanted to respond to that history of the stereotype. [I] used basic lighting, similar lighting that they would use if they were to photograph a west coast mask. They would light it from both sides; it's a very similar lighting situation with just a black background having the face floating in that space. The other thing that I felt was important that I wanted it to be as large as possible. The size of this gallery makes them seem quite small but in a more confined space when there's actually a room full of them...I found that it was really interesting. I have an art dealer in Toronto, his name is Leo Kamen and when we had the opening for the show it was...it was a body of work that I had never done before, I'd never done portraiture so I was really quite nervous and I was wondering how people were going to respond to it because a lot of these are common gestures a lot of kids will do, right? You know kids will always make faces at the camera...it's a

funny thing... it's something that's very familiar. My concern was that people wouldn't really take them seriously, which has happened here and there, but with a room full of them... I found that at the opening...The first opening I had, the landscapes it was a Saturday afternoon and the gallery was packed full of people but for this opening everybody moved into the back room and the space was empty and when I saw that, I realized that it was working, these pieces were making people feel very uncomfortable. They're meant to be intimidating, they're meant to be confrontational, the scale of them makes you feel this big and...and it creates a certain empowerment for First Nations people that is something that I really strive for in the type of work that I do. I want to see some type of empowerment. When native people see this work they laugh. They find it very funny, it's kind of humorous in some ways because not only do they know the people but I think they really understand the meaning behind the work. I think in some ways it's really pushing that boundary. The series that I did this work for is titled *Mask* to refer to the west coast mask but it's not just the west coast masks, it's about cultural identity, personal identity, it's about politics, spirituality, ritual, there's a lot of things that are implied by the title. Each

one is named by basically their first name so this would be Michael who is an archeologist, Tom Hill is a curator, Janii is an actress, Eden Robinson is an author and Monique (inaudible comment) is an actress. There were a lot of things that were behind this whole project that you don't really get from just sort of looking at the surface, but there is actually a lot behind it. I'll show you one story. This first photograph is *Michael*, Michael White, he's Ojibway from Manitoulin Island but he was actually my next door neighbour and we were sitting there talking about living in Toronto and what it meant to live in Toronto. He was a student at U of T doing his masters in anthropology and he had this summer job, a part-time job, where he was brought out to construction sites and if they were digging up a certain site to create a new development, if they came across any bones he was brought in to assess whether they were older than 500 years. He said this one day he was called in to do it and he was sitting at the bottom of this pit and he went down and he picked up this skull and he looked up and all he could see were all of these white guys wearing hard hats looking down at him and all he could see were dollar signs because what he realized is that if they were the remains of

somebody pre-contact they would have to stop development altogether. What they would do is, they would cover the hole again and then cordon it off, they wouldn't touch it, they wouldn't move the bones or anything, they would just leave that area and then build around it. Then in that subdivision...he said you'll see this quite often, where all of a sudden, there's all of this really dense housing and then there'd be just a plain grass plot with nothing on it, not even a park or a tree and he said usually that means it's a burial ground. So he's standing there with this skull and he realized that...he said it was like thousands of years old and then he sort of looked up and saw these guys and he put it down and he said I can't do this anymore, there's something wrong with this. He told me that story and I said well, okay...well...I could see he was getting quite emotional about it, and I said well is there a facial gesture that you have that you could share with us ...and look into that lens and really do something that you think epitomizes what you're feeling right now and that was what he did [laughs]. It was pretty intense. So yeah I think self portraiture and portraiture within First Nations communities I find [it] really an interesting and fascinating topic. I think as a culture, First Nations people have been really, really controlled by the land in a lot

of ways but not in our hands...outside of our hands through Hollywood movies or you name it. I was shocked when I was in South Dakota and just flipping on the television and they had this local television channel that had these weird announcements, it's like a community channel you know... knitting workshop at 5 o'clock down at the community centre type of thing. In between that they would show these mug shots, of mostly native youth, and it would say their name you know ... Lucy Deerchaser wanted for stealing a bag of chips, these really bizarre things but there were a number of them... where a lot of these native people their face would come up and they were like little wanted postings for these "on the run criminals" for really petty crimes. It was unbelievable and it was only native people. This was in Rapid City -I was shocked - which is right around the corner from Mount Rushmore, you know there's the black hills there, this huge history, like Pine Ridge, Wounded Knee was there...this huge massacre that happened, Custard[s] Last Stand happened around the corner, Deadwood, the mining community is right there. You know you can go to Wild Bill Hickocks, you know stoop and

still find his stool? You can walk up to Boot Hill and see Wild Bill Hickocks grave site with a bust of him beside...was it Calamity Jane? Next to him? Like this really, really bizarre history there and they have this huge plot of gravestones for Chinese workers. They were all the Chinese people that had died in the mines. There was just this weird history of things that have gone on that are really prevalent within American history that you don't see so much in Canadian history. There their racism is very fore-front, here it's very hidden it's very subtle, in a way, that racism acts in Canada. It prides itself in being a liberal country but in a lot of ways it's really not. I've toured rural places in Ontario and across Canada and because I don't look native I hear a lot of stuff and I can hear what people think forefront. Yeah, racism is alive and well in Canada whether we realize it, I'm not saying that you are here but it is out there. I'm sure you've seen it in your own experiences as well. It does exist in some ways and it's really shocking that it still does. I have memories of being a child, my grandfather [and I] we went on this trip to Three Hills, Alberta and we were in Calgary and even at that time Indians weren't allowed in bars. There's the history... you know women weren't

allowed to vote until, when was it, 1967 I think, 1960. There are a lot of things that are in recent memory that sort of still exist and it sort of trickles down.

I think exhibitions like this which is what I was talking about...somehow got off track but...that are really exciting, exciting to see so many First Nations artists dealing with their own vision of the world using the lens and putting it up on the wall for all of us to consider. A number of histories that exist within First Nation community, not just one idea, it's multiple. I equate the First Nations languages, similar to Europe, like if you look at the language base across the country, I mean you have the Cree which sort of has a huge plotted area which is similar to China which has a huge plotted area and then you go to, the west coast and you have at least 52 different languages all in one area which is similar to western Europe. There's a lot of different types of languages in one small concentrated area, a lot of different nations and people just throw us all in to one melting pot - if you're Indian you have that stereotype. Ultimately that stereotype doesn't exist it was constructed by white people. I guess the reason behind the work and for the show is basically to steal that gaze back and empower ourselves on our own terms in

our own territories.

Thank you