

Native Art Department International

Mercer Union, Toronto, Canada

'Bureau of Aesthetics' is the first solo exhibition in Canada for Maria Hupfield and Jason Lujan's collaboration as Native Art Department International (NADI), following its initial display at KADIST, San Francisco. In a meditation on kinship and collaboration, NADI seeks emancipation from institutionally oppressive representations of Indigenous cultural production.

Entering the gallery, I first encounter *Construction* (2019) – a big, minimalist, wooden frame panelled in mirrored, fluorescent-pink acrylic sheeting. The room around it has been purged of white almost entirely, the walls painted black save for one – curtly titled *Wall Painting* (2020) – that features a glitchy black-and-white pattern. NADI has turned the austere white cube into a club-like space with vibrating fluorescent hues and funhouse mirrors.

The literal or else obstinately opaque titles of the works regurgitate the conventional language of arts institutions. *Installation* (2020) is an enclosure formed by two L-shaped walls on which various works hang. Inside this space, *Untitled (Carl Beam)* (2017) mounts a red-and-white neon 'NO U-TURNS' sign atop artist Carl Beam's lithograph *Traffic* (1997), which itself juxtaposes the image of a crow above a traffic light. Opposite, *Drink Bar for Two* (2016) features a small shelf holding five sake bottles under a pink light. The outer walls house a bookshelf containing printouts of various

Native Art Department International, *Untitled (Carl Beam)*, 2017, neon, signed artist proof of Carl Beam's lithograph *Traffic* (1997), 51×76 cm



Native Art Department International, *Double Shift*, 2018, painted canvas, 2.9×1.3 cm

publications such as Joshua Piven's *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook* (1999), Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and Christine Wong Yap's *Inter/dependence: Artists' Personal Impacts Survey Review* (2015). On another wall, a projection plays of artist Dennis RedMoon Darkeem dancing in powwow dress in a black box theatre (*There Is No Then and Now; Only Is and Is Not*, 2018), the footage peppered with text about his experiences as a Black member of the multi-ethnic Yamassee Yat'siminoli tribe. The walls, which are unattached to the gallery's surrounding architecture, support these Indigenous artworks both literally and metaphorically on their own terms. Their symbolism and titles, meanwhile, evoke a shared sense of solidarity.

At the back of the gallery, a multi-coloured, fluorescent, double-hooded jumper, fashioned from canvas, hangs from the corners of a black freestanding wall. A monitor mounted behind it plays the video *Everything Sacred Is Far Away* (2019), a farcical play that mocks conventional art-historical connoisseurship as deeply informed by white supremacy. Cardboard props and staging comprise the makeshift scenery: reproductions of paintings by Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Andy Warhol, as well as I♥NY mugs and a Rubik's Cube. A series of actors playing 'experts' in white lab coats and hazmat suits fuss about, debating the ontology of art.

(‘Art is not science,’ asserts one.) In a bid for re-education, one man didactically holds up a postcard of a print by Hock E Aye Vi Edgar *Heap of Birds*, explaining that a larger cardboard version of the work is based on the postcard and not on a totem pole. At another point, a blond woman histrionically exclaims: ‘There’s an Eskimo who came in the front door!’ This Indigenous man – in business casual dress with an off-white fleece slung over his shoulders – has the circumference of his head measured, in reference to the racist phrenology methods used to classify non-white and Indigenous peoples in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Upon surveying the space, he declares: ‘This is a shithole.’

This compact exhibition is loaded with irreverent jabs at the self-interested seriousness of white and Western art history. Employing the dominant aesthetics of European modernism, the displayed works trouble racist ideas of what Indigenous art should look like. By further cloaking visual jokes in a canonical narrative, NADI interrogates how white viewers affix more value to Indigenous art practices that reproduce an identifiably ‘Indigenous’ aesthetic while leaving other stories untold. By turning this history on its head, NADI casts contemporary Indigenous art in a present and future of its own making.

—Charlene K. Lau