A CONTAINER FOR NEW LIFE AND DEATH

DAINA WARREN ON MARIANNE NICOLSON

BAWWINATSI: THE CONTAINER FOR SOULS
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PHOTO: SCOTT MASSEY

While light spreads throughout the gallery, this serene, sacred and purifying act uses light to transform the gallery into a place of meditation on traditional story, memory and loss within a layered context of consumer culture. Marianne Nicolson’s wina’tsi: the Container for Souls is an installation comprised of a modestly scaled glass box that takes its cue from traditional Pacific Northwest coast bentwood cedar boxes and expands, through projected light and shadow, to fill the entire gallery. With the tiny halogen light bursting from the box, monumental shadows are cast upon the gallery walls.

The box is installed on a white plinth in the centre of the exhibition space, surrounded by the institutional white cube. Each wall of the glass box is sandblasted with traditional design imagery: raven, owl and human figures that symbolize various concepts from Marianne Nicolson’s Dzawad’enewa’w culture (one of the many nations of the Kwakw’ak’wakw peoples).

The ravens on the sides of the box are referenced in the context of the trickster, the one who is both a great teacher and a fool. In the same genre as the Tlingit tale of how Raven stole the sun, a Kwakw’ak’wakw story tells of Raven who stole water from the old woman who was hoarding it by drowning her and drinking it. He then flew over the land urinating and making the water bodies. (Marianne Nicolson in an email to the author dated January 19, 2006).

On the longer sides of the container, coastal designs and photographic portraits are framed within a big house design. The form of the big house on the walls speaks of traditional dance and song, as well as having numerous other references. The artist converts the gallery into a place of Aboriginal spirituality by applying her traditional knowledge to contemporary materials, creating a piece that reflects ideas of death and the afterlife. The title itself comes from the root b’wakw that refers to the soul. Dzawad’enewa’w people used to believe that the souls of humans resided in the bodies of owls and in Kwakw’ak’wakw culture the soul is linked to shadow. The photographic images of the artist’s Auntie, who passed on several years ago, create a sense of death and loss. The form of the box itself refers to its traditional function. Bentwood boxes were not only used to store daily objects, but were also designed to contain sacred objects and the bones of the departed.

However, there is secondary aspect of the project that offers another layer to the reading of the work: its placement, not only within the gallery, but also within the larger locale of Gastown (Artspeak’s neighborhood). Gastown has undergone many evolutions since it was first settled by ‘Gassy Jack’ (John Deighton) in 1867. From its start as a settlement known for saloons and the wild landscape, it is has been subject to cycles of growth, neglect and redevelopment; the environment of Gastown has undergone deaths and rebirths.

Most of the current culture of Gastown is specifically designed as a daytime play land for tourists and a nighttime club scene for partygoers. Stops cater to tourists and consumers of ‘Indian kitch’, while Native art galleries retal the carvings of many Aboriginal artists as home décor rather than for use within Aboriginal culture. All in all, Marianne’s work not only references a personal account of death and loss, but placing it within a culture that promotes the idea of ‘pan-Indianism’ references the loss that Aboriginal culture, on the whole, is experiencing.

The outpouring of light from the bawwinatsi potentially reimbues a consumer locale with Aboriginal spirituality. The box holds the possibility for purification and healing for a landscape ravaged by the visitor, carrying the memories of Aboriginal life and community. The act of placing the box in a Gastown gallery is one of re-appropriating space from a First Nation’s perspective to demonstrate respect for the land and the peoples that were once, and are now, living within its cityscape.

Daina Warren is of the Montana Slavey Cree Nation, and is a contemporary artist and curator. She graduated from Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in 2003. From 2000 – 2002 she was in residence at the grunt gallery through Canada Council’s Assistance to Aboriginal Curators for Residencies in the Visual Arts. She is currently curator and administrator at the grunt gallery and has organized numerous projects. Upcoming projects include the visual art component for the World Urban Forum and an Aboriginal Elders exhibition. Her work has been shown in group and solo exhibitions at The Dr Gallery, Vancouver; Campbell River Public Gallery; and Alternator, Kelowna.