

## **Postscript 56**

**DENISE RYNER  
on “Barn Swallows”**

***Culture is elsewhere. So is life, moreover. The wind is turning...and then there is the climate, the habitat and the extraordinary internal commingling of our collectivity and the particular characteristics of our genesis and the singular life we lead...everything that creates fears and hopes, desires and passions, acts and dreams, sadnesses and joys within us that are unique in the world. In the imperial concert of a common culture, we have our own special tone to which we have not previously been able to give voice. We alone can express the qualities that make us unique. (Caribbean French Surrealist René Ménéil "Birth of Our Art," 1941)***

**How do cultural forms borne of adaptive flexibility contend with art history's tradition of rigid delimitation?**

**At first glance, "Barn Swallows" promises a series of works that can be tidily affixed to the category of formalist aesthetic autonomy. This promise is supported by the exhibition installation itself which seemingly defers to the conventional white cube presentation. Work composed of limited colour palettes and simple geometric form dominates. Two simple, white plinths display coloured cedar sculptures by Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun. Two other artists, Caroline Monnet and Devin Troy Strothers present a series of framed, black and white silkscreen prints and acrylic/paper collages respectively. The large canvases by Yuxweluptun punctuate the configuration with painted fields of black, white and reds. This however is an adaptive camouflage.**

**The exhibition title "Barn Swallows" refers to a species of bird that, due to its highly adaptive nature, has established itself in almost every terrain on the planet. Through its biological tendency towards border-crossing, flexibility and the appropriation of foreign habitats, the swallow embodies thriving and universality.**

**The artists in Barn Swallows each problematize the traditional assumptions around modern abstraction as a universal and aesthetically autonomous art form. This vision of modern art is mostly associated with Clement Greenberg who, in 1940, arguing for**

the supremacy of abstraction, discouraged art that referred to a context outside of itself or fought with its physicality in order to depict anything beyond its own medium.<sup>1</sup>

Vancouver artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's inclusion of Northwest Coast aboriginal ovoid forms on canvases that invoke non-objective modern abstraction are not a hybridization so much as a response to the history of appropriation of African, North American and Oceanic Aboriginal forms by the canonical figures of European and American modern art. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman, as well as the French Surrealists, enthusiastically looked towards Aboriginal visual forms during the development of their work. Yuxweluptun's acrylics combine solid impastoed ovoid forms of red, black and white with equally opaque fields drawn from the same palette. Ovoids also comprise Yuxweluptun's sculptures which extend into space as stacks, ever so slightly resembling perching birds, that are limited to a palette of black in one work and blues, primary yellow and its complimentary, purple as a base for the other. The ovoid forms that facilitate these colour studies emerge from the Haida and Kwakwaka'wakw symbolic order but Yuxweluptun is Coast Salish, which complicates his engagement with 'ovoidism' as an appropriation.<sup>2</sup> This illustrates how the elements in his work as well as modern art is always already the result of transculturation.

The oddly grinning, figures in New York artist Devin Troy Strothers work disrupt the otherwise formalist ground. His series of small, varnished wooden blocks support compositions of crudely applied acrylic and paper collages. These colour and texture studies must contend with the mischievous interventions by Strothers' stylized paper beings. His figures are black, nude and appear to be female with exaggerated breasts and buttocks, textured Afros and faces composed only of large lips and round eyes. These grotesque forms appear throughout Strothers' body of work and are as much a creation of Eurocentric modernity as any Afro-centric visuality that Strothers might invoke as an African-American artist. They are reminiscent of racist 'blackface' characters, a visualization of the invention of a civilized West and a savage Africa. A larger work on canvas by Strothers features an impastoed composition of primary red and yellow colour-play which is super-imposed by four figures that appear to pop out into the viewer's space. They have feline-like heads and unlike the other caricatures, are clothed. One figure tosses off its animal-mask to reveal the head of one of Strothers' blackfaces. The title of this work, *A Black Joan Jonas in, "Nigga I'm a coyote"* names the American performance and video art pioneer who often used masks in her work. In his wider practice, Strothers' repeatedly incorporates black bodies into well-known performances and images from contemporary art. In *A Black Joan Jonas*, Strothers' mention of a coyote

is a reference to the ‘trickster’ that has traditionally been applied to border-crossing figures in African or Aboriginal cultures. The coyote-trickster was referred to by Jonas in a 2004 work.

Pictorial quotations of well-known contemporary art work and the addition of vernacular slang denotes Strothers’ use of the African-American tradition of signifying, defined by American literary theorist and critic, Henry Louis Gates, as vernacular structures localized to African or black cultures based in the double play on ‘white’ forms, “Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language use.”<sup>3</sup>

The series of framed prints are the work of Caroline Monnet. This series departs from the other artists’ engagement with abstraction but confronts the Greenbergian ideal of non-objective expression limited to a painting’s surface by puncturing the picture-plane through a series of simplified pictorial portals.

Monnet is a Montreal-based Algonquin artist who mostly uses film and video to examine themes of “history and counter-memory.”<sup>4</sup> In her series, the artist depicts a series of emblematic outlines of pop-cultural associations with the Canadian wildlife and the First Nations. This is emphasized by each of the works’ titles: *Stag*, *Heron*, *Castor Canadensis*, *Plastic Indian*, *Bear*, and *Communicator*. The final work is dominated by the outline of a dog or perhaps coyote’s head. The reference to a “Plastic Indian” helps to establish these icons as interpretations and appropriations of

Aboriginal culture. Revealed through the emblems are a series of grainy black and white archival images, divided into thin elongated bands like an outdated video transition effect. The images include a man in snowshoes, industrialized deforestation, a long-haired man squinting into the sun, and, in *Communicator*, switchboard operators. These images complicate the historical emblems and narratives that frame mediated representations of the First Nations.

In his theory of the Utterance, Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us that the words in any language that we use to express ourselves are embedded in a history of the expressions of others. It is only the intention attached to our use of a word that makes it our own. Expression is always a response and words always belong to others, until we make them our own. Monnet, Strothers and Yuxweluptun each adapt the forms and perspectives of other traditions and artists thus emphasizing their positions as culturally intertwined and thriving producers.

#### Notes

1 Clement Greenberg "Towards a Newer Laocoön," (July-August 1940)

2 Yuxweluptun's term for his ovoid studies. Winter 2014.

3 Henry Louis Gates, "Introduction," North Carolina: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxiv.

4 "Filles Électriques: Caroline Monnet," [http://www.festivalphenomena.com/filles/en/select/bio/?id=monnet\\_ca](http://www.festivalphenomena.com/filles/en/select/bio/?id=monnet_ca)

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