



# SONNY

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# ASSU

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## HIDDEN HISTORIES

At the invitation of Kwak'waka Chief Billy Assu in 1947, Viennese-born ethnomusicologist Dr. Ida Halpern recorded the ceremonial songs of the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples from a territory that is now known as Vancouver Island, British Columbia.<sup>1</sup> Amongst the recordings are those of Chief Billy Assu, the hereditary leader of the First Peoples of Cape Mudge. The over 342 ceremonial songs recorded by Halpern were central to potlatch ceremonies.<sup>2</sup>

The period of the recordings is particularly significant: it was a time when the Canadian government's potlatch ban sought to drastically suppress and outright disavow the ceremonial traditions of Indigenous peoples from the Pacific Northwest Coast. An amendment to the Indian Act in 1884 criminalized



**FIG. 4**  
*What a Great Spot for a Walmart!* (2014)



**FIG. 2**  
*Silenced: The Burning* (2011)



**FIG. 3**  
*#photobomb* (2013)

**FIG. 1 COVER**  
*Billy and the Chiefs: The Complete Banned Collection* (detail, *The Feast Collection*, 2012)

the potlatch, a highly structured ceremonial gift-giving feast that had united villages for centuries.<sup>3</sup> Eventually repealed in 1951, the law had ensured that seized ceremonial potlatch items such as regalia and masks left communities and often made their way into museum collections across Canada, England and the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Halpern's recordings of leaders such as Chief Billy Assu, Mungo Martin, George Clutesi, Dan Cranmer, and Stanley Hunt documented the rich culture of the Pacific Northwest Coast.<sup>5</sup> The recordings ultimately provided inspiration for great-great-grandson and artist Sonny Assu generations later. In his drum installation, *Billy and the Chiefs: The Complete Banned Collection* (Fig.1) Assu pays homage to his great-great-grandfather as he humorously envisions the ethnographic recordings as performed by a fictional musical group "whose aspirations were to go copper rather than gold or platinum."<sup>6</sup>

In the exhibition *Continuum*, interdisciplinary artist Sonny Assu explores and sheds light on the hidden histories of Indigenous peoples from the Pacific Northwest Coast. From interventions on iconic paintings by Emily Carr and Paul Kane, to large-scale paintings in the shape of Chilkat blankets and the *Billy and the Chiefs* installation, Assu explores elements of West Coast formline aesthetics to refashion and reinvent the meaning and function of traditional art forms. In other words, by experimenting with conventions of Pacific Northwest Coast art, Assu "challenges the notion that a Native artist on the Northwest Coast must conform to particular aesthetic conventions."<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, the imagery of Indigenous peoples (or lack thereof) is subverted in Assu's work and the tensions between official and marginal histories come to the foreground. The revelation of these histories has a profound impact on the ways in which mainstream national narratives in Canada are more broadly constructed. Assu's work implicitly "acknowledges the status of national culture – and the people – as contentious, performative space."<sup>8</sup>

For example, in the work *Silenced: The Burning* (Fig.2) a series of 67 hand-painted elk hide drums are stacked and arranged on the floor as sculptures. The muted greys of the pieces are accentuated with connective red power lines that course through all the drums. As curator Jon

Davies points out, each drum not only marks each year of the potlatch ban but were also "intended to generate rhythm and noise, and unify the members of a community, these drums now lie silent on the floor."<sup>9</sup>

In addition to asserting and contextualizing suppressed histories, the use of internet-speak presents a much more contemporary dimension to his print and painting practice. Titling his work with hashtags and abbreviated phrases serves as an immediate reminder of the changing common parlance of the English language. The painting *#photobomb* (Fig.3) utilizes formline aesthetics but also suggests that the image may be ruined by the chance encounter of a person or thing in the background. However, in amongst the interconnected ovoid shapes and vivid schema, it is hard to decipher which elements are not meant to be part of the picture plane.

Similarly, the print series *Interventions on the Imaginary* brings together both the 'seen' and 'unseen' by juxtaposing images of iconographic paintings from Canadian art history with delineated ovoid forms. In *What a Great Spot for a Walmart!* (Fig.4), an image of an oil on canvas painting by Emily Carr titled *Graveyard Entrance, Campbell River* (1912) is centrally punctuated with electric red and brown ovoid shapes. The digital intervention becomes a stark reminder of not only the elimination of cultures and histories of Indigenous peoples from national narratives but also the ongoing paving over and dispossession of traditional lands. Moreover, the work cheekily nudges the viewer to reconsider the ways in which Aboriginal art histories continue to be excluded from Euro-Canadian art histories.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond transforming the forms and meaning of Indigenous art from the Northwest Coast, Sonny Assu shows us that our stories and histories here in Canada are never far from the present. More than challenging the narratives that define us as Canadians and by in large, even North Americans, the hidden histories illustrated in the exhibition *Continuum* point to the need to make visible the larger, painful legacy of assimilation of Indigenous peoples. With wry humour and the visual signs of the Pacific Northwest Coast, the work of Sonny Assu expands our engagement and understanding of the living histories of colonization in North America.

# ENDNOTES

- 1 Raymond Frogner, "The Ida Halpern Records and the Archival Depiction of Indigenous Culture and Identity," *Curious Quarterly Journal* 001 (2013), accessed August 14, 2015. <http://curious.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/the-ida-halpern-records-and-the-archival-depiction-of-indigenous-culture-and-identity/>
- 2 Elizabeth Burns Colman and Rosemary J Coombe with Fiona MacAraillt. "Broken Records: Subjecting 'Music' to Cultural Rights", *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*. Conrad Brunck and James O. Young, eds. (Blackwell, 2008), 186.
- 3 Aldona Jonaitis, *From the Land of Totem Poles: The Northwest Coast Indian Art Collection at the American Museum of Natural History*. (Douglas & McIntyre and American Museum of Natural History: Vancouver/Toronto and New York, 1988), 53.
- 4 "The Potlatch Collection History," U'mista Cultural Society, accessed August 19, 2015. <http://www.umista.org/exhibits/index.php>
- 5 Raymond Frogner.
- 6 Sonny Assu, Artist Statement, 2015.
- 7 Jaime-Brett Sine, "Reshaping Tradition: Linking Continuity, Change, and Formline Design in Contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations Art" (MA Thesis, Concordia University, 2012), 53.
- 8 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. (Routledge: New York, 1994), 157.
- 9 Jon Davies, "Face Value", essay produced in conjunction with the exhibition Sonny Assu: Possession curated by Jon Davies, Associate Curator, and presented at Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square (1 December 2013 to 16 February 2014), 5.
- 10 Gerald McMaster, "Our (Inter)Related History." *On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery*. Lynda Jessup and Shannon Bagg, eds. (Canadian Museum of Civilization: Hull, QC, 2002), 5.

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Image credits:

*Silenced: The Burning*  
Acrylic on Elk-hide drums  
16"-24" diameter  
Installation of 67  
2011

Image courtesy of the artist and the Equinox Gallery  
Photo credit: Scott Massey, Site Photography.  
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*#photobomb*  
Acrylic on panel  
40" x 84"  
2013  
Image courtesy of the artist and the Equinox Gallery  
Photo credit: Dayna Danger  
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*Billy and the Chiefs:*  
*The Complete Banned Collection*  
(detail, *The Feast Collection*, 1 of 7)  
Acrylic on Elk-hide drums  
10" and 12" diameter  
Installation of 67  
2012  
Image courtesy of the artist and the Equinox Gallery  
Photocredit: Rachel Topham, Vancouver Art Gallery  
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*What a Great Spot for a Walmart!*  
Digital intervention on an Emily Carr Painting  
22.5 x 33.25"  
2014  
Image courtesy of the Artist  
Image credit: Sonny Assu  
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