

KEITH BIRD: Mushum...! What IS That?

May 19 - June 25, 2010



Art Gallery of Regina

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ART
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Neil Balkwill Civic Arts Centre
2420 Elphinstone Street, PO Box 1790,
Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 3C8

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Director/Curator: Karen Schoonover
Essay: David Garneau
Design: Steve McDonnell: Dalek Design @ dalek.ca

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Cover: "The Spotted Thunderbird Healer", detail, oil on buffalo hide, horse hair

Cover: "The Clans", detail, oil on buffalo hide, horse hair

KEITH BIRD: Mushum...!

What IS That?

Keith Bird is a modest man with immodest ambitions. In his working life, he is a down-to-earth construction worker, but in the studio, and in this exhibition, he is a visionary using art to revive, refresh and share traditional Aboriginal stories, philosophies and spirituality. More than just a display of Aboriginal art, *Mushum... What Is That?* is a transformed environment designed to wrap the visitor in a cultural and spiritual experience that moves us into another physical and mental space. Two walls of the gallery are draped with a huge canvas decorated by motifs inspired by ancient Aboriginal petroglyphs that remakes the room into something like a teepee interior—the place where stories are told. There are several buffalo hides with symbolic figures painted in a modified Woodland Cree style combined with “Western” realism. There are other numinous objects, drums especially, that hover between art and ceremonial object. In this space we witness a process of reconciliation where various knowledge systems are symbolically combined to find the practical wisdom common to them all.

The title, *Mushum... What Is That?*, implies that this is a learning space designed to help neophytes make sense of some unfamiliar things. Ideally, traditionally, we would ask a Mushum (Cree for ‘grandfather’) to explain what an elk whistle is and how it differs from an Eagle whistle, how a personal drum is different from a Medicine drum, when to use tobacco and why. In the absence of Elders, we have Keith’s texts,* his artist talk and these specially made pedagogic objects designed to meet us halfway, to bring an unfamiliar world closer to the familiar. (Bird is not replacing Elders, but is making gateway objects that introduce the uninitiated to symbols and stories that may help them feel more comfortable about talking to an Elder.)

According to the psychologist Carl Jung, the artist’s primary goal is to revitalize archetypes. Artists employ or invent contemporary modes of representation—new styles and new media—to make ancient stories and truths relevant to present times. It is interesting to note that when talking or writing about his practice, Keith uses the first person pronoun (‘I’) far less than do other artists. While there are personal aspects embedded in this work, the installation is extra-personal. The work is less about self-expression than about bringing together several Aboriginal world-views and pictorial styles to create fresh portals to the universal. There are doorways and passages throughout the exhibition; Bird is himself a conduit who brings the teachings of the elders to those who are ready to see and listen.

As treaty people, we know that colonial and Canadian governments tried to extinguish First Nations language, culture and spirituality through various assimilation campaigns. There were repressive social policies such as The Indian Act, Indian Agents, pass-laws, potlatch bans, anti-gathering laws, etc. But the most effective and insidious method was the ‘re-education’ campaign where, individual by individual, the state and churches endeavoured to ‘convert’ children—take out the ‘Indian’. While many

aspects of culture and spirituality were secretly preserved, this knowledge was not immune to Settler influence. While there are many who are trying to recover the original traditions, most are cognizant of the mixing and realize that it is impossible to recover an original Aboriginality; and even if it were possible, uncolonized First Nations people would not have remained fixed in amber but would have adapted over time. This is not an archaeological project but a matter of survival and adaptation. The task for serious Aboriginal artists is to create Indigenous art that is informed by tradition yet meaningful for people living in the present.

Keith Bird could be called a Traditionalist, meaning that he is guided by an Elder and centers his life around Traditional teachings, but which ones? As a mix of Cree (Gordons) and Saulteaux (Cote), who follows a Nakota elder, Herb Walker (Carry the Kettle), he has, he explains, legitimate connections to several traditions. There is no monolithic Aboriginality—they are various and changing. However, Traditionalists are not cultural relativists; they believe that behind the variety are universals, and that European and First Nations beliefs and experience are not completely incompatible—there are common truths behind different appearances.

In addition to his grasp of various First Nations teachings, Keith Bird also has a university education that includes European and North American aesthetic traditions (BFA, University of Regina). His work is a hybrid of these many sources. Hanging at the entrance to the gallery is a muskrat and water painting in the familiar Woodlands Cree style. Bird is teasing with our conventional expectations of ‘Indian’ art. Once inside, the art works play on and exceed that familiar style. In the “Back Drop,” paintings of petroglyphs morph into a sly Indigenization of Michelangelo’s God giving Adam the ‘touch of life’ from the Sistine Chapel ceiling; a bear skull rendered in western-style realism on a buffalo hide is surrounded by Woodland Cree-style figures (“The Clans”); and cellu-clay cast real human faces hung next to Iroquois-inspired masks ring “Medicine Drum.” Bird pulls these many seemingly disparate materials and sources together through a personal style much as each of us is the sum of our many influences.

In A Fair Country, John Raulston Saul argues that Canada is not only, or primarily, the result of two founding nations (French and English). What makes us Canadians, and different from Americans, and especially Europeans, is that Canada has emerged as the intertwining of French, English and Aboriginal cultures. Pushing this argument further, the multiplicities of Canadas—very different in the Maritimes and on the Plains, in the many Norths and West Coasts—are due, in part, to the many First Nations. To make things more complex, First Nations people are, of course, individual, and are often the result of mixtures, too, among nations and with Settlers. Keith Bird demonstrates that this hybridization is not simply a collage but that the best of all the parts point to a common humanity.

David Garneau,
2010

*There is not enough room in this short essay to decode these rich works individually. In any case, Bird is the best person to do this.

Artist Statement

This showing is about Aboriginal spiritual teachings and the refreshing of old stories and spiritual practises that may have been forgotten or are no longer used in this generation. I believe that these teachings should not go way of the dodo but continue to have reverence and a use in contemporary societies. The handing down of spiritual and cultural information is a common practise within Aboriginal culture, and art is a great vehicle for any information. I believe that cultural teachings are pertinent to society as a whole, as it is a basis for personal identity. The sharing of cultural knowledge creates a better understanding between the diverse cultures. The Aboriginal spiritual information contained in this exhibition may be used in the teaching of Aboriginal youth by elders of the present and the future.

Keith Bird,
2010



“Elk Whistle,” detail, raw pigment on buffalo hide, horse hair