

13 Coyotes

Edward Poitras

The work of Edward Poitras has been included in many important group exhibitions and almost every major contemporary Native art exhibit of the last 20 years. In 1995, he represented Canada at the prestigious Venice Biennale. In 2002 he was the recipient of a Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts. The jury said:

[Poitras'] artistic voice is one of the most compelling and eloquent to have emerged from the rich creativity that is contemporary Canadian art...He reflects issues of identity, culture and race through a sensitive and subtle engagement with history and heritage. His sculpture, painting drawing, installation and performance cross borders, and do so with the mystery of the trickster coyote.

The themes of assimilation, genocide, displacement and survival permeate his work. Poitras explores tensions between past and present, nature and technology, western culture and First Nations cultures, combining natural materials with manufactured objects.

Edward Poitras grew up in Regina, Fort Qu'Appelle and the George Gordon First Nation. His mother and father met when they were both students at the Qu'Appelle industrial (residential) school at Lebret. His mother's family was Saulteaux and his father's was Metis (a mixture of French and Cree) from the Red River settlement in Manitoba. Poitras grew up with a mixed heritage that was sometimes a source of conflicting identities.

"Actually my father, even though he was Metis, was still a treaty Indian," he explains, and therefore Poitras identifies himself as "a Metis with a treaty card". "On the reserve we weren't quite dark enough. With the "Indian" culture on the Reserve, my father's Metis background and also white culture, it was like dealing with three different cultures".

From an interview with Robert Enright, Border Crossings 1995, p. 26

Pierre Poitras, Edward's great grandfather, served in Metis leader Louis Riel's provisional government and, after moving to the Qu'Appelle Valley after 1870, was a witness to the signing of Treaty 4, which covers southern Saskatchewan.

Throughout his career as an artist, Poitras' identity, family history, and his reflections on the history of Aboriginal people in North America have been important subjects and sources of inspiration for his work.

Frustrated in school, as many First Nations and Metis youth were - particularly at this time, Poitras left before completing grade twelve. However, by 1974 he had decided to return to school and noticed a poster announcing an experimental Indian art program at the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural College in Saskatoon. Having just read Dee Brown's book, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: an Indian History of the American West*, he was angry that this documented story of systematic

destruction was not being taught in the schools. “I wanted to find out about my heritage,” he says. He signed up for the first “Indart” program at the college in 1974. This program brought him into contact with charismatic and influential teacher Sarain Stump, and with other students, urban and from Reserves, with whom he shared common interests.

Sarain Stump

Stump was a painter, poet and singer of Shoshone, Cree and Flathead ancestry who believed that a major cause for the lack of self-confidence in the [First Nations] people was the little knowledge they had of their culture and spiritual wealth.

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/sarain-stump>

In his classes, Stump introduced a combination of Western art history and the history of Native art in the Americas. He and his students camped out, living in teepees and exploring natural materials – bone, wood and stone – believed by many native cultures to be imbued with living spirit. The students also experienced ritual spiritual practices and ceremonies.

But Poitras was not interested in producing work that reflected a purely Native aesthetic. His interests went further to encompass European art history and in particular he was intrigued and engaged by the work of Marcel Duchamp.

Marcel Duchamp

Duchamp was the French artist who experimented with “ready mades”, and is perhaps most commonly known for exhibiting a urinal in an art gallery. Poitras admired the way he used materials.



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Readymades_of_Marcel_Duchamp

Poitras began combining seemingly incongruous materials including fibreglass, circuit boards, transistors, and magnetic tape, with feathers, horsehair, rawhide, and cow skulls in unusual and provocative ways. But underlying the aesthetic qualities and intriguing use of materials there is always a message. Poitras draws attention to issues, politics and abuses of power. He challenges the narratives of Canadian history and provokes a re-reading of the major events of colonization, signing of treaties and civil unrest. His work reveals the systemic racism that undermines the health and well-being of Aboriginal Canadians.

http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/who_stole_the_teepee/school/poitras.htm

Poitras' first Coyote appeared in 1986.

The coyote is the trickster. He is the outsider who is at the same time crucial to the community. His tricks, practical jokes and disruptive behaviour confound our expectations. Narratives involving the coyote reveal the unexpected, allowing us to look at ourselves and our world differently.

Cindy Richmond, C Magazine, summer 1995, p. 18

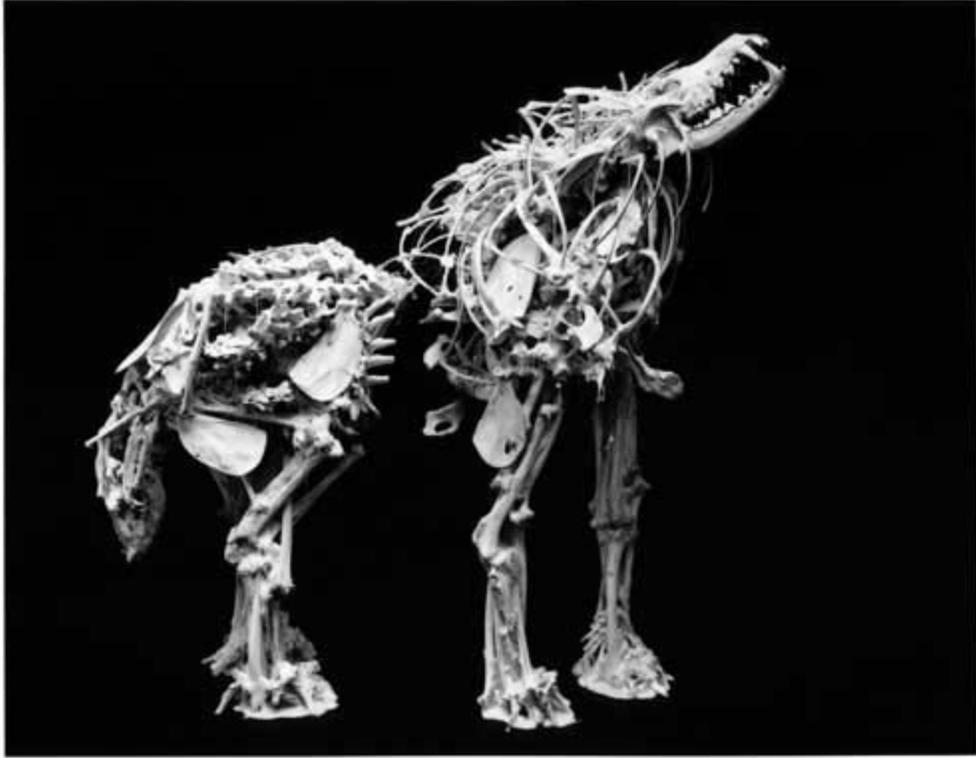
Poitras has been identified as a Trickster, or perhaps he has a tendency to play Trickster.

Who is Trickster?

Tricksters are archetypal, almost always male, characters who appear in the myths of many different cultures. As their name suggests, tricksters love to play tricks on other gods (and sometimes on humans and animals). But perhaps the best definition of a trickster is the one given by Lewis Hyde: "trickster is a boundary-crosser". By that, he means that the trickster crosses both physical and social boundaries-- the trickster is often a traveller, and he often breaks societal rules. Tricksters cross lines, breaking or blurring connections and distinctions between "right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead". The trickster often changes shape (turning into an animal, for example) to cross between worlds. In his role as boundary-crosser, the trickster sometimes becomes the messenger of the gods.

World Mythology Course, Grand Valley State University

In *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*, Allen J. Ryan suggests, "the influence and power of the Trickster – often embodied as Coyote – is deeply entwined with Native cultural sensibility and expressed through wry, ironic humour". "The humour – and the art – is characterized by frequent teasing, outrageous punning, surprising association, extreme subtlety, layered and serious references, and considerable compassion."



Edward Poitras, Coyote, 1995
Photo by Don Hall

Throughout his life and art, Poitras has contemplated structures of inclusion and exclusion within communities, whether geographically determined or across established boundaries. He believes that we are all conditioned by our reality to think in ways that divide us from one another. For Poitras, concepts of community and connectedness, including nationalism and religious beliefs, simultaneously operate as agents of division. His work questions these structures of community that provide the template of our existence, and asks how we move beyond the continuous construction of division(s).

Works included in the exhibition demonstrate the ongoing play and exploration prevalent throughout the artists' oeuvre. In his work, we are witnesses to traces of the artists' (re)considerations, the results of many years of contemplation of various issues and realities. A continual reworking of symbols and imagery, concepts and meanings, further inform major themes that have evolved and proliferated throughout his work.

Working in diverse media and with multiple narratives, the work of Edward Poitras provides many intellectual entry points. Viewers are challenged to draw their own connections in order to interpret what is before them, to ask questions about our complex reality, and to contemplate a vision of humanity without universalizing divisions.

Quotes and links:

Poitras work is characterized by an intuitive and evocative use of materials, a legacy from his former teacher Sarain Stump. His environments are infused with a visual drama that simultaneously engages the viewer on many levels. The viewer must find his own way through a labyrinth of images and create a personal meaning in order to find his way out.

Elizabeth McLuhan, Curator, *Horses Fly Too*, 1984

MacKenzie Art Gallery in cooperation with the Thunder Bay National Exhibition Centre

In 2002, Poitras was a recipient of the Governor General's Awards in visual Arts and Media. The following link is a short essay describing the artist and his work, entitled *Being in His Own Time*, written by Lee-Ann Martin.

http://www.canadacouncil.ca/prizes/ggavma/gx127240203513437500.htm?subsiteurl=%2Fcanadacouncil%2Farchives%2Fprizes%2Fggvma%2F2002%2Fep_picts-e.asp%23pict01

In 2002, Edward Poitras was a featured artist in the Mendel Art Gallery exhibition *Qu'Appelle: Tales of Two Valleys*. The following link connects to the Virtual Museum of Canada website for this exhibition, and specifically to an artist statement by Edward Poitras.

<http://www.mendel.ca/quappelle/edwardpoitras/index.html>

In 2010, Poitras participated in an exhibition entitled *Borderzones*, produced by the UBC Museum of Anthropology. The following link provides an interview with the artist in relationship to work in this exhibition.

http://moa.ubc.ca/borderzones/video_ep_interview.html

One of the works in the exhibition *13 Coyotes* is *Cell*, previously featured in *Borderzones*, 2010. The following link provides a visual image of the installation and some contextual information written by Hank Bull.

http://moa.ubc.ca/borderzones/features_ep.html

Activities

Animated Objects

Objective: To give human or animal characteristics to an inanimate object.

- Find an interesting discarded object (food packaging, plastic moulds used in packaging, obsolete electronics, etc.)
- Using paper, masking tape, plasticine, jar lids, eyeglass frames, wool, etc add features such as eyes, nose, mouth, hair, fur, claws, and tail.

Optional: Cover with papier maché and decorate with acrylic or tempera paint.

Transforming Derelict Objects

Objective: To create an aesthetic object from an abandoned derelict object.

- Find an interesting object from the garage, attic, flea market, auction or second-hand store.
- Transform the object by covering its entire surface with textural materials: pebbles, glass, yarn, paper, sand, photos, rope, coins, marbles, etc.
- Use white glue for smaller objects and tile cement for heavier objects.

Symbolic Mural

Objective: To use symbols and visual data to alter viewers' attitudes

- Choose a theme based on an issue relevant to the group.
- Research and gather sketches of graphic signs and symbols related to the theme. Research and collect documents, text, and images to present visual and written information about the chosen theme/issue.
- Create a mural calculated to focus attention or alter viewers' attitudes regarding the theme.

Suggested themes: pollution, energy conservation, justice, ecology, politics, nuclear accidents, social problems, racial discrimination, housing and rent controls, threatened animal species, crime, etc.

Reinterpreting Myths

Objective: To create contemporary, personal versions of myths.

- Select an interesting story or legend from mythology.
- Invent your own characters to serve as substitutes for the original characters. (Use animals, modern-day media heroes, cartoon characters, plants etc.)

The Irony of Humour

Objective: To better understand how humour and irony function in visual art.

- On one sheet of paper, draw something, anything, as funny as you can make it. It can be one drawing, a multi-panel comic, anything, but give it your best effort to make it as funny as possible.
- On another piece of paper, draw something as sad as you can make it. It should be really heartbreaking, not capable of producing a snicker or a smile.

Try to make sure the students cannot see what the others are drawing.

The rules:

- Everything must be identifiable from the real world.
- You must draw each drawing for at least fifteen minutes continuously.

Next, put everyone's work on the wall, and ask the students to identify which is the sad drawing and which is the funny drawing. The results can be unpredictable, but frequently the "sad" drawing is funnier than the "funny" drawing, and the funny drawings aren't funny at all.

http://www.teachingcomics.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=62:The%20Irony%20of%20Humor&catid=35:Exercises&Itemid=55

Identity Interviews

Objective: To sensitize students to issues of cultural identity and enhance their knowledge of the historical and political circumstances underlying differing attitudes.

Divide class into pairs.

Have the students take turns conducting interviews with each other working from the following list of questions or similar questions they develop through class discussion:

- a. What is your name? Do you know the meaning of your name?
- b. Where are your parents from?
- c. Where are you from?
- d. Do you know any languages besides English?
- e. Do you have relatives in other countries?
- f. How long has your family lived in Saskatchewan?
- g. Why did your family originally come to Saskatchewan?

Have the students write the answers to these questions for presentation to the rest of the class.

Discussion:

- a. What are the most important or surprising things you have learned about your partner? Your classmates?
- b. How does this knowledge help you to better understand your classmates?
- c. Are you curious to learn more about your origins? Why, or why not?
- d. Describe any unexpected similarities between classmates of different backgrounds.

Trickster Stories

Find, read and discuss Coyote/Trickster stories. Here is an example:

A little boy was out wandering around.

He heard the sound of a whippoorwill which was really beautiful.

(Sound of the whippoorwill) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTATW8H8zpQ&feature=related>

So, he was out wandering around looking for the whippoorwill, and he walked on a particular path.

He came upon a coyote who also had a very nice song.

(Sound of the coyote) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42Nc3oqGXBY&feature=related>

And the coyote said to the little boy, "Why are you following me?"

And the little boy said, "Well, I've been listening to the sound of the whippoorwill, and I want to find out where he's at?"

And coyote says, "Don't you like my songs? I sing too." And he reared his head back and howled out of tune.

The little boy covered his ears he said. "Well, that's nice, but (laughing) I would really like to go find and listen to the sound of the whippoorwill".

So the coyote, being as cunning and as crafty as he is, said, "Well, I know where he sings, so follow me."

So the little boy followed him, and the coyote went through some thick brush and the little boy fell down and got skinned up.

The coyote was running and saying, "Come on! Hurry up! Follow me!" Then he ran off through some thorns.

The boy fell down again.

It was getting light out when he finally reached the place where the whippoorwill had been singing all night, and the whippoorwill was gone. He could still hear the coyote howling off in the distance.

So, the little boy wandered home, all cut up, beat up, skinned up knee, and as he became an older, wiser man, he realized that there are many paths in this world. And there are many ways to get to what you truly love. But you should always stay true to your path no matter what. And always keep an eye out for coyote.

How do you interpret this story?

The Storyteller says:

“Don’t let someone pull you off the path that you know is the right one to be on in the first place. The boy knew how to get to go see the whippoorwill. And...watch out for those people who are like coyote, cause there’s many of them and they’ll try to always want to pull you somewhere else, let you wander around, get a skinned up knee and everything else. And then you miss what was at the end of your true path.”

Source:

<http://hercules.gcsu.edu/~mmagouli/trickster.htm>