

University of British Columbia

DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY, VISUAL ART AND THEORY

ARTH 561 *THE CONTINGENT AND THE ESSENTIAL: INDIGENOUS ART CLAIMS*

Course outline

This seminar will take as its area of enquiry the claims made for Indigenous art forms in North America over the past half century. It will have the nature of a survey of ideas since these claims have been variously grounded in historical restoration, in attempts to redress colonialism, in the struggle for specific rights and recognition within dominating systems of law and governance, and in assertions of cultural difference if not of ethnically based essentialism.

The notion that the debate starts with `primitivism` in modernism – Robert Goldwater, William Rubin – will be put into question; there will be readings from the foundational work of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha; recognition that definitions need to be re-assessed in the light of complex inter-cultural relations – Nicholas Thomas, James Clifford, Fred Myers; and that the relations at issue are primarily those of production and consumption dictated by capitalism – John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, Calvin Helin. The work of Bruno Latour, Edward Vivieros da Castro and Slavoj Zizek opens up some fundamental contradictions in approaches to Indigenous ways of knowing. We may also consider the recent turn to affect, and the contemporary critique of sensory hierarchies.

In asking how works of art come to stand in for larger debates the seminar will take into account recent ontologically-based writings by Jimmie Durham, Marcia Crosby, Taiaiake Alfred, Paul Chaat Smith, Marie Mithlo and Candace Hopkins amongst others. Our readings will be wide-ranging in order to establish the context for increasingly accessible Indigenous epistemologies, first-hand accounts, oral recitations and performance.

As a group we will take advantage of current exhibitions in Vancouver.

A good place to start would be *Signed Without Signature: Works by Charles and Isabella Edenshaw*, currently at UBC's Museum of Anthropology.

In summary, the seminar might ask whether, for all the evidence of inter-cultural entanglement, current estimations of the meaning and value of objects, images, performance may be most accurately located in processes of strategic disentanglement.

Charlotte Townsend-Gault
May 28, 2011