

A review on “Don’t Go Hungry” at grunt gallery

by Gizem Sozen

Artists: Bracken Hanuse Corlett and Csetkwe Fortier

Curator: Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun

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“The jars of stcuwin (salmon) represent the preservation and processing of cultural nutrition... It is through the use of image, colour, and technique that I express my sadness, frustration and hope in respect to the threat to our health. The contents of the jars symbolize the entrapment and dependence that the corporations and government are trying to enforce on the people, by making deals where the land is poisoned.” (Csetkwe Fortier¹)

Salmon provides the flesh needed to represent the tormented bodies figured by Csetkwe Fortier in her paintings. These tiny, naked bodies colored in salmon pink try to find their ways to escape from where they are entrapped. Imprisoned inside a glass jar, these bodies do whatever they can to tear down the invisible glass walls that confine them -- using all their power to resist the prison they have been thrown into as it can be witnessed in Fortier’s “Mad Stacks” (2013). The figure that has entrapped these bodies does not have a face but only has hands ready to capture. These hands belong to the “sovereign” that knows best how to “govern bodies” and how to “ban” life to ones that it cannot tame under its rules (Agamben, 1998; Foucault, 2003). Through poisoning the earth and the water, the sovereign ones (whether governments or corporations) ban life to Native people and to ones that reject their sovereignty upon them. While the jars of salmon could have symbolized the abundance of nurturing food and wealth in a previous age, now they are utilized by Csetkwe Fortier to tell a story of entrapment and dependence of Native people; they tell how Native people are confined behind invisible walls and forced into a disabled position, unable to pursue their sovereign relations to their lands and to the nature with which they have strong ties.

Bracken Hanuse Corlett’s and Csetkwe Fortier’s mutual work “Midnight Snack (Raiding the Pantry)” (2013) is inspired by a story of confinement and resistance told by Corlett’s mother. Removed from her nurturing and care-giving community, Corlett’s mother as one of the residential school students had experienced hunger in a residential school where kids were given inadequate and bad food, so they were forced to steal food from the pantry where the better food for the priests was kept. While kids were told by their parents in Native communities that Wild Woman of the woods would take them if they entered the forest on their own at night, in the residential schools the fear has shifted from the Wild Woman of the woods to the priest-teacher

¹ Retrieved from <http://grunt.ca/exhibitions/wuulhu-to-fuse-together/>

who could catch and punish the kids at night stealing food from the pantry. The hand with the sleeve cuff represented seems to be not belonging to the Wild Woman of the forest, but to the priest-teacher who is ready to severely punish and discipline these disobedient bodies.

Why does the sovereign operate as an “apparatus of capture” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)? Isn’t it trying to disfigure and disable the bodies it confines so there would be no resistance to the sovereign? It would have been expected by the colonial state that eventually these untamable bodies would turn into a docile mass under the confinement -- resembling the conserved salmon in glass jars displayed in the exhibition, as there is no salmon in these jars but only the salmon flesh. Thanks to confinement, there would be no resisting bodies in their firm and fierce standings but there would be a mass of docile bodies ready to be consumed by the colonial state and the capitalist economy it promotes. The bodies that survived this confinement would not be much of a threat to the system as they would have fallen weak, but we can see that they have underestimated the power of resistance as can be encountered in contemporary Native art. Bracken Hanuse Corlett and Csetkwe Fortier make the walls of entrapment—invisible to the Western eyes—visible through their art, telling a story both of the past and the present. They say no to entrapment and dependence imposed by the state and capitalism it promotes.

References:

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