



Dance As Though the Ancestors Are Watching

Assu, Sonny

Not on display

Title/Description: Dance As Though the Ancestors Are Watching

Artist/Maker: Assu, Sonny

Born: 2019

Object Type: Painting

Materials: Acrylic paint

Measurements: h. 2130 x w.1220 x d. 50mm

Accession Number: 50812

Cultural Group: Kwakwak'wakw, Ligwilda'xw

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Credit Line: Purchased with support from the Art Fund, 2020

Sonny Assu created this large painted panel in the iconic shape and form of a ceremonial Chilkat Robe, entitled *Dance as Though the Ancestors are Watching*. More specifically, the painting was created as a response to one of the masterworks of the Sainsbury Centre collection, a late 19th century Tlingit Chilkat Robe (667). This ceremonial garment originates from the Chilkat people of the Tlingit Nation from the Northwest Coast of Canada.

The pictorial weaving of the historic Chilkat robe is based on whale and other animal mythology and cosmology. Assu recontextualises these historical forms of iconography in his work and integrates contemporary cyphers for consumerism, branding, and technology. Assu uses recognisable iconography from traditions of the Northwest Coast.

Northwest Coast art incorporates the use of characteristic shapes such as ovoids, U forms and S forms, known as formline design. Assu has used formline shapes in aqua blue, while ancestral emblems are painted in red, as if ancestral eyes are watching over. The painting tells multiple stories and one of its key themes is how he and his contemporaries pursue Indigenous cultural practices such as making art or performing dance but with contemporary references that makes it relevant for today.

Sonny Assu investigates what it means to be an Indigenous Canadian today. Raised in North Delta BC, a suburb of Vancouver, it wasn't until Assu was eight years old that he learnt of his indigenous heritage. He is Ligwilda'x_w (We Wai Kai) of the Kwakwaka'wakw nations. His work is informed by a deep understanding of his heritage, radically remixing Kwakwaka'wakw iconography with western and pop aesthetics from his childhood interest in comic book art, from sci-fi to superheroes. Assu uses humour and irony to unsettle misconceptions of Indigenous peoples and expose enduring legacies of colonization. Grappling with autobiography, family history, Indigenous visual culture and the cross-currents that shape his worldview, Assu proposes a radical mixing that is politically charged and deeply personal - indeed, even presenting challenges to some of his Kwakwaka'wakw relatives working in traditional practice, such as carving totem poles along the shores of the Wei Wai Kum First Nation reservation where he lives and works.

The painting was completed as part of an artist residency that formed part of a wider research project, *Beyond the Spectacle*, at the University of East Anglia. During his residency, Assu curated a display, called the (un)Named Maker, which included a selection of works from the Sainsbury Centre with this painting alongside other examples of Assu's work. [1] The exhibition was a direct attempt to highlight the representation of unnamed artists and makers of works in museum collections - not least in museums that also contain European collections of works where biography forms an important component of study. Although in most instances the names of indigenous artist/makers are not recorded, Assu identified himself with 'un-named' makers and that historic works from the Northwest Coast were made by his ancestors.

Assu graduated from Emily Carr University (2002) and was the recipient of their distinguished alumni award in 2006. He received the BC Creative Achievement Award in First Nations art in 2011 and was longlisted for the Sobey Art Award in 2012, 2013 and 2015. His work is held by the National Gallery of Canada, Vancouver Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Canada Council Art Bank,

City of Richmond (BC, Canada), Seattle Office of Arts and Cultural Affairs, Museum of Anthropology UBC, Seattle Art Museum, Burke Museum, City of Vancouver (BC). Works are held in private collections in Canada, and the United States.

The acquisition of this painting by a contemporary a First Nation Canadian artist provides an important link with living Northwest coast artists and communities, as well as our historic works from the Northwest Coast in our collection. It is important that it is understood to be part of a living tradition which is perhaps less known in the UK.

Calvin Winner, December 2019

[1] <https://www.sainsburycentre.ac.uk/online-display/>

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Sonny Assu painted this panel during a residency in Norwich in 2019. It re-creates the iconic shape of a Chilkat robe while depicting formline figures dancing before the eyes of shadows: the past always watching the future, providing inspiration, comfort, balance and a hint of ambiguity. Assu's work aims to leave breadcrumbs of curiosity, leading those who follow towards awareness of Indigenous experiences, past and present.

Exhibitions

'Empowering Art: Indigenous Creativity and Activism from North America's Northwest Coast', Sainsbury Centre, Norwich, 12/3/23 - 30/7/23

Further Reading

Sonny Assu, Sonny Assu: A Selective History (Victoria B.C.: Heritage House, 2018)
