RIVERPEOPLENATIONSTATEPEOPLE

A Sounding Board for Voices for Kamloops

Matt Macintosh

In 2016, the Kamloops Museum & Archives (KMA) commissioned Mississauga–based artist, Morris Lum to produce a series of works responding to its collection as it relates to Chinese history in Kamloops. Lum's practice uses the language of documentary photography to investigate the evolving social and material conditions of the Chinese diaspora in North America. Hoping to open discussions about the role played by culture in collecting and sharing heritage, the KMA worked in partnership with the Kamloops Chinese Cultural Association (KCCA) and the Kamloops Chinese Freemasons (KCF) to provide Lum with full ac-

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cess to a range of regional approaches to preserving Chinese histories.

Lum's project, *Re:Recording Chinese Histories*, comprised two series of photographs. The first were frank overhead shots of index cards, copy prints and fonds inventories drawn from the KMA archives. Carefully arranged on archives' research tables, the groups of annotated reference materials highlighted the evolving language and practices the institution uses to catalogue records of lives once lived. Photos of pleasant, if not "westernized" family life, were represented amid an apparent collecting tendency toward anomalous phenomena such as funeral parades, opium consumption and incidences of violence and victimization.

Above: *Artist Morris Lum adjusting his large format camera while shooting at the Kamloops Chinese Cemetery.*
Photo credit: Matt Macintosh

The second series were photographs of the Kamloops Chinese Cemetery and Kamloops Freemason's Hall shot on large format film. These images present correlative approaches to preserving heritage through sites that make no claims of impartiality but are visibly inscribed by cultural identifiers and preserve heritage by providing spaces for contemplating and for sharing news, stories and historical research processed by Chinese community members. Marked by cultural identifiers, they embed the process of recording history in a specific cultural context with its own linguistic and practical activities.

Together, Lum's photographs demonstrate that techniques acquiring and describing cultural materials are developed inside specific cultural contexts and reflect specific cultural norms. Western museology uses signs, symbols and practices that are the product of an already historically structured way of doing, seeing and speaking about things. It gains its languages and

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customs from Western experience, and reflects that experience back to itself. So it follows that any attempt to apply terminology to phenomena outside of the cultural context from which the terminology originates will necessarily describe those phenomena as eternal, non–conforming or in terms of peculiarities.

Lum exposed that the inventory of records housed by the KMA raised the possibility that Chinese lives would be researched, interpreted and represented as foreign and incongruous with local laws and customs. *Re:Recording Chinese Histories* identified the social location of the KMA and underscored its role as the regional authority for maintaining not just stories of Chinese settlement, but of cultural memory more broadly. And it made way for stories to be told though practices

Above: *Morris Lum, Cemetery 3, 84.24 x 106.25in, Digital C-Print.*
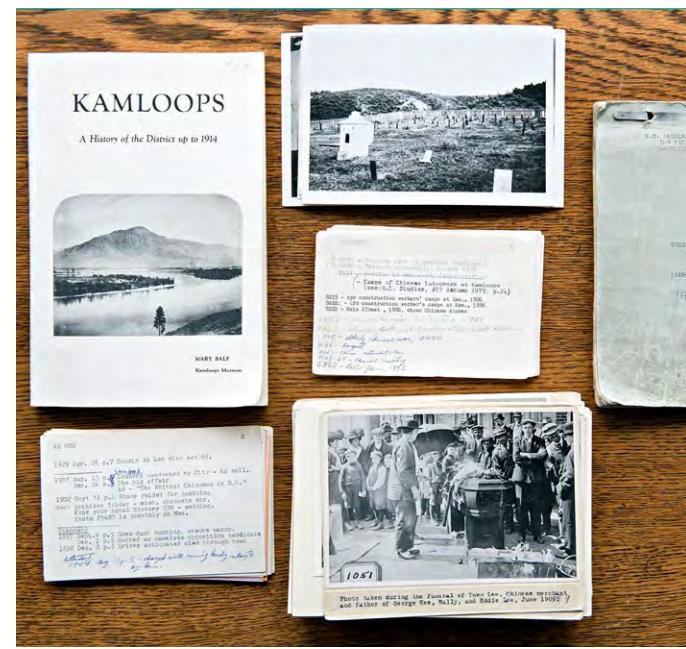
Above: *Morris Lum, Kamloops, 30.5 x 46in, Digital C-Print*

Above: *Main floor galleries, Kamloops Museum & Archives. Photo credit: Kelly Funk*

and conventions that were not part of the KMA's existing museological discourse. It motivated a deeper commitment to progressively identify and contextualize the language and practices it uses to collect, conserve, interpret and present regional history.

The work on display in *Re:Recording Chinese Histories* and in subsequent KMA projects has sought to address the conditions for producing and preserving cultural memory by consulting multiple stakeholders and using complementary approaches to realign historical data and introduce complexity as a vital element in re–telling histories.

Accompanying information is being introduced near exhibition elements that speaks to the way objects have

been conserved, stored and presented. By locating and looking critically at the museological conventions the KMA operates through, those conventions can be used more strategically and simultaneously reveal the value of including multiple possibilities for sharing heritage.

One such possibility was introduced to time out with the complicated affair of Canada 150, when the KMA introduced a suite of projects collectively referred to as *riverpeoplenationstatepeople.* The title refers to a timeline for Kamloops that begins with the land and proposes a future where lives are lived beyond the state apparatus.

The projects are a demonstration of the KMA's commitment to producing self–critical presentations of

regional history while making room for non–dominant cultural voices and knowledge–making practices to speak through a municipal museum. At the centre of those projects is a comprehensive overhaul of the KMA's permanent gallery.

Occupying its 5,000 square foot third floor, the permanent display of regional history is the KMA's largest feature. It is organized around a large, central rotunda with seven openings that lead to themes from the region including the fur trade and construction of the railway. The primary concern of the overhaul was to place First Culture at the centre of the rotunda, and hence the centre of the Museum's telling of regional history. It was also important that the display engaged in some way with the circumstance

of its presentation within a municipally–run Museum. Particularly when the outstanding Secwépemc Museum and Heritage Park (SMHP) stands five kilometres away.

With that in mind, the KMA invited artist and curator Tania Willard (Secwépemc Nation) to lead the creation of an exhibition that would respond to the display on Secwépemc culture it would replace. The process was executed and the exhibition presented through the voices of the SMHP and Stk'emlupsemc te Secwépemc Nation. The principal role of the KMA curatorial team was to facilitate the collaborators' research and presentation interests, though they made two requests: that the display did not look at Secwépemc culture as a whole, but focused on an area or areas of cultural production; and that its content and tactical approach would diffuse into other display themes and areas.

The collaborators' record of Secwépemc experience and cultural production was shaped as a response to the organization of the KMA's third floor. Items such as clothing and craft were placed near passages leading to themes that echoed or connected to those artifacts. For example, a carved petroglyph was placed near the entrance to the KMA's geological display, while a feature on the *Kamloops Wawa* (a newspaper primarily written in Chinook Jargon) stood adjacent to the doorway into the Victo-

rian era and its associated industrial processes. Newer items were displayed alongside old, acknowledging the names of their creators. A large map of Kamloops was overlaid with Secwépemc place names, and a display on a regional passion—fly fishing—was re–framed by a series of interventions that tied the activity to foundational stories about the Trout, and the spiritual and cultural significance of Pípsell, a sacred place now endangered for its mining potential.

The display, represented, in Willard's words, " a new vision for engagement with Secwépemc culture … [one] that deepens the timeline of Canada to acknowledge Indigenous histories. One that speaks to layered intercultural exchange …"

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New features continue to be introduced as *riverpeoplenationstate-people* unfolds, and throughout the Museum, in–context tools provide feedback on display elements. For

example, the didactic material produced from the curatorial staff exists in a sort of public dialogue with Museum Educator, who posts interventions that ask questions like why things have been presented a particular way, or wonder aloud about the absence of women in certain histories or pose challenges to the Eurocentrism on display in the Victorian period. Visitors can respond to these questions. They can fact check using resources available near displays and in a lounge area in the permanent display. There are tools to make corrections to materials and post them clearly The Museum uses this feedback as an assessment tool for implementing changes to exhibition content on the fly.

Contemporary visual art has been installed, both for its own sake, and as a mechanism by which challenges may be posed to visitors and to museum staff about the self–reflexive and multivocal approach to history on display. For Canada 150, two significant photo–based works were placed prominently to lead visitors out from the main lobby and into the central gallery. *Baby Boyz Gotta Indian Pony* by Dana Claxton and *I <3 Canada* by Francisco–Fernando Granados and Manolo Lugo could, on surface glance, dovetail neatly into expected models for any regional museum to commemorate Canada 150. Straightaway though, each one directs sharp criticality at familiar Canadian storylines, setting a lens for viewing all subsequent materials in the Museum.

The relationship of art and history is reflected as well in a continuing collaboration with the KCCA and KCF. In a major developing feature in the permanent exhibition, objects, research, and curatorial decisions have been shared in an exploration of the experiences and contributions of Chinese rail workers and the commemorative significance of the Kamloops Chinese Cemetery. Didactic materials have been co–produced and translated into Chinese and new artifacts have been donated, dispersing across the feature itself and throughout the permanent display area. This collaboration, too, re-configures the normalized presence of European material culture in support of canonical themes of the "West". It stakes out sites for the appearance of stories and material traces of the Chinese community as foundational to the development of Kamloops.

Plans are underway to seek out collaborative opportunities with other underrepresented groups to speak through the particular linguistic and practical activities that best represent their own interests. These initiatives, captured under the general title *riverpeoplenationstatepeople*, signal a widened frame of reference for understanding the current of our region's histories by exploring the tributaries that feed it. As a set of displays, revisions, questions and responses for attaching Kamloops' cultural history to an ongoing process of self-evaluation, they are a tires on the road attempt at making the KMA a comprehensively inclusive space. Unfolding incrementally, imperfectly and unendingly, *riverpeoplenationstatepeople* is a sustained effort to use the unique space and tools of the Museum as a sounding board for voices from Kamloops' oldest and newest cultural communities.

Matt Macintosh is a curator and artist interested in disagreement and understanding. His practice looks for ways that antagonistic forms of disciplinary or cultural knowledge can explore shared issues as complements. He is the Curator of the Kamloops Museum and Archives.
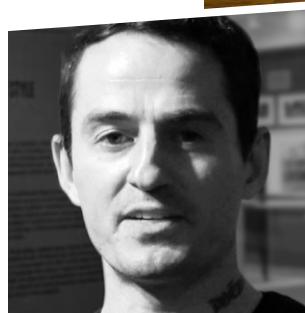
Photo: *Display on Secwépemc culture expands into features on Kamloops's Victorian and Fur Trade periods. Photo credit: Kelly Funk*