



Lunch With WL

Jane Lemke

Roundup Editor, Jane Lemke, recently sat down with Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, an award-winning visual contemporary artist, author and professional speaker. Yahgulanaas's blend of Haida iconography and contemporary Asian visual culture, create a broad practice and application for the vitality and originality of Canadian cultures.

For more with Yahgulanaas, see his [Ted Talks](#).

I'd like to hear your background and how you found yourself at this stage in your career?

I was raised in a Haida village on a north Pacific island. I later moved to a nearby fishing village due to my classification as a “non-status person” in Canadian legislation. I served a couple of decades playing generational roles within my Indigenous community as my family had before me. During this time, I set aside my art adventures in order to work for my community. Having spent decades wrestling with social, economic, cultural and political devils and enjoying some significant successes, I remained alert to the horrific circumstances that characterize Indigeneity within the Canadian ex-

Above: “Copper from the Hood” by Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas

perience. It became time for me to dance with art.

Where do you find your inspiration?

My sense of cosmology is not fully constrained by any sense of ethnic purity but straddles both Indigenous and settler identities. I play amongst the challenges and opportunities of the “hybridized”, “mixed blood”, “non status” and all these imagined spaces that arise out of the mythic identities of “race”. I aspire to be a complex contemporary and engaged artist that is not static, blandly predictable or scripted.

I am inspired by the vastness of this space in-between.

My decades of experiences in the spaces in-between political identities continue to inspire my practice. The lack of any treaties between Haida peoples and Canada has created an open space between the legally defined two sides: Indigenous peoples and a settler society.

This living generation can do what none other has done before: we can get it right. We can apply morally defensible concepts consistent with the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Canadian Constitution, and be creative, thoughtful, innovative and mutually rewarding. What an amazing opportunity.

Our species is born with a sense of fairness and compassion. We are able to see “others” as complex human beings and live as neighbours. Even when we allow ourselves to slip into the madness, we remain more than selfish fools. Every baby born is a human born with a loving inclination. We do not inherit the sins of our fathers. That is just our fathers avoiding their parental accountability.

We can measure our movement towards our better selves by observing how we treat those we call less fortunate. How we collectively integrate difference into our lives is a marker of our societal ability to be true to that better nature.

This is the first time Canada has ever had an Indigenous citizen serving as a Minister of Justice, a significant and potent symbol for what is possible. It has been a long night filled with creeps, and crawly things that avoided daylight. Canada now has a Prime Minister calling on the better nature of his citizens. And with a hopeful vision we can begin to repair relationships between Indigenous Peoples and Canada. The scope of what this relationship touches is immense. No part of our National identity is far removed from this primary relationship. Yet the immensity is inspiring.

What is Haida Manga?

Haida Manga is the artistic representation of my identity, a merging of things that we would say are different. Creativity is how we make such associations.

In order to challenge the notion that difference equals oppression, I needed to describe that those unusual combinations can be useful and even beautiful.

So I created Haida Manga, which loves the tertiary spaces. It is not a narrow view, it avoids the pretentious, refuses the authoritative pronouncement by welcoming observers to participate in creating new relationships. Like classic Haida design theory, it relishes the pun and is playful.

Haida Manga has roots connected to the historical relationship between Japan and Haida, at a time when racism was encouraged, named and so acceptable that it was invisible to many. For others, it was and still is brutally obvious. Recall Smiles Cafe, fortunately still in business, is the only restaurant in Prince Rupert that welcomed Indigenous patrons. My grandmother recalls that every other restaurant in that little town posted a sign on the window that said “No dogs, No Indians”. Another grandmother, Aunty Jane, went to the theatre in this little seaside town, paid her ticket and waited for the movie to begin. And after sending the “poor nervous usher” down the aisle numerous times to ask her to move from the “white section”, management finally had to accept that the Indian woman was not moving out of her seat. They started the movie. This dear woman from Massett was our own Rosa Parks and these dark days are within living memory.



On the other side of the ocean was a more welcoming place. Decades earlier, Haida relatives worked on pelagic seal hunting voyages across the North Pacific and to the island of Hokaido. They returned to Haida Gwaii with stories of walking freely on the street, buying goods in any store they wished, eating in any restaurant and all this as a full human being. I grew up hearing these stories thinking what a blessed relief this experience was for these men, a sanctuary across the Ocean.

I wanted to speak to that important moment and also avoid the colonization of my own artistic efforts as a variant of the western graphics, a Haida “comic book”.

While raising the question of differences, I needed to remember and share how relationships between ethnicities can be friendly and welcoming. This became Haida Manga.

What can museum and gallery professionals do to use this type of welcoming relationship-building when they construct an exhibit?

Can we create opportunities for passive visitors to become physically engaged and explore, discover and even articulate new possibilities? Yes we can and we must. Consider that although descriptive labels are helpful, they also substantiate the idea that there is an authority, a final arbitrator that has

Above: Yahgulanaas painting his famous Haida Manga art.
Photo Credit: Farah Nosh

Over: “Red”, an example of Haida Manga by Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas



carefully prescribed the world. There are ways to deflect the inclination to simply accept and encourage questions.

The key question is likely to what extent do such professionals wish to increase relevancy in relationships.

Questioning assumptions or perhaps even questioning authority opens up new ways of imagining liberated spaces. When horizons shift, so do our perspectives. Making a space for the observer increases awareness of how familiar meanings are buttressed and assumed. Considering the presence of the “other” and our manufactured geography can be a potent democratic and creative act. Realizing that people do want to be engaged in real and honest ways may encourage institutions to be more trusting and adventuresome. Safe approaches and predictable themes are then tediously rolled out with alarming regularity in both private and public institutions.

Changes such as we are now witnessing in the shifting legal landscapes race far ahead of the pedestrian institution and this must raise some consideration of the “f” word: Funding. Institutions and funders, be they donors or buyers, might take a moment and anticipate where societal developments are headed. As long as we remain safely distanced from current political, social and legal discussions that are questioning the foundational assumptions of our colonial mythology, it is difficult to imagine how we can be anything but nostalgic backgrounders, memories or extras without lines.

Institutions and exhibits that accurately and honestly examine issues such as land may find themselves in lead roles as relevant and engaged players in a fast moving contemporary and evolutionary discourse.

What advice would you give to those in the cultural profession who may be fearful of opening those discussions but do want to tackle these issues?

These are not “First Nations” issues. These are not complex issues. These are issues of clear, persistent legislative and institutional violations of Canadian Constitutional and International Law. The real complexity is the extent to which we are avoiding the facts. What additional evidence is required to indicate a systemic and persistent assault on every single expression of Indigeneity within the lands coveted and claimed as Canada?

Cultural professionals have status, recognized skill-sets, an authority, a voice that, even if unwelcomed or challenged, is valued and respected as being appropriate to cultural conversations.

Cultural professionals are neither marginalized nor uninformed. Cultural professionals have long had elevated positions to speak from.

Why should there be silence now? If reluctance arises out of awareness of the heavy prices paid by the assaulted and the cost of such injury on aggressors then when is the best moment to engage in the frank conversations that need to take place? Exactly when is the right moment if not now?

We are finally able to have that conversation; an opportunity that hasn’t existed for a long time. The cost of missing the moment will be significant. Engaging requires some honesty. Such engagement is not truly “reconciliation”. A friend reminded me years ago that “reconciliation” is a problem word because it implies we are returning to a time when we were together. It suggests that we once were whole but slipped away and now are ready to reconcile. Were Indigenous peoples and settler societies ever

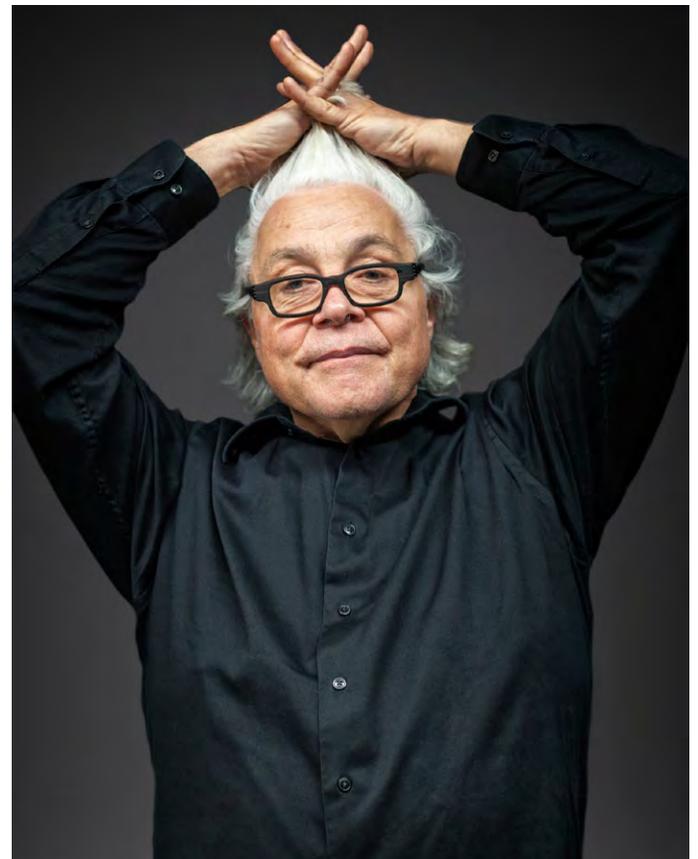


together in common understanding or agreement? Even assuming some examples of common cause, they must be rare, brief opportunities that were thrown away. What is said in the word reconciliation is a desire to come together. What is missed is the newness of the opportunity. The freshness of the moment is not fully appreciated and we lose some of the amazing significance of the moment.

Anyone living today and especially for cultural professionals, are in a time when we can actually do it right for the first time.

A formalized and freely negotiated relationship has never existed here before. We can participate in a profoundly important opportunity and make contributions to a morally sound, legally consistent relationship with real living human societies. We must recognize the past and how much of it lingers around our feet as dark, toxic slurry but we must also step up and create our own new relationship. Cultural professionals can choose to be leaders, or followers but anything less than an active partic-

ipant does no good service. This is not the time to retreat, counting angels on pins and be disengaged from what may be Canada's most critical cultural test.



Top Left and Right: *Raven Exercises* by Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas

Above: Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas.
Photo Credit: Farah Nosh