

Re-setting the Cedar Table

The works of art installed here were part of the *Cedar Table Series Anti-Colonial Art Contest*, which was organized in response to the installation of *British Columbia Pageant* — the nineteen-meter-long mural on the opposite side of this hall. The contest was organized by members of the First Nations Student Association, the Simon Fraser Student Society, and the First Nations Student Centre along with other members of the campus community. The events took place from 2004 – 2005.

Nate Woodbury's mask/sculpture *Teen BC* was the grand prize winner, and A.S. Matta's print *Civilization is a Crime Scene* was one of several other prize-winning entries in the art contest. Edgar Heap Of Birds was one of the featured speakers during the series.

British Columbia Pageant, painted in 1951 by Scottish-born Canadian artist Charles Comfort, was commissioned by the Toronto Dominion Bank and was painted *in situ* at the Granville and Pender branch in Vancouver. That branch closed in 2002. *British Columbia Pageant* was donated to Simon Fraser University in 2004.

What impression of SFU does the mural give?

Art historian Rosemary Donegan points out that “Comfort’s advertising career provided the philosophical underpinnings of his mural work... [his] murals are not concerned with the social or economic effects of industrialization, unemployment or the tedium of industrial labour.” By the time he began work on *British Columbia Pageant*, Comfort had produced several large murals and an exterior stone frieze at the Toronto Stock Exchange, which Donegan has called “A true monument to capital.”

For similar reasons, *British Columbia Pageant* serves as a monument to colonization. It seems to be both an instance of and a prescription for a violently selective memory: remembering how history was *represented* (by the victor-class), rather than how it happened. The mural tells a story about the history of this region — but the story is a fiction, propaganda really, avoiding the complexities of struggle and diversity.

Such a representation of history (rightly) elicits objections. But this mural is of particular concern when considered in the specific social, geographical, political and historical context of its placement: in a public university, on the unceded territory of the Coast Salish First Nations, in a neocolonial state, on a continent scarred by genocide.

It bears repeating that the case for naming the devastation of Canada’s First Nations as “genocide” is absolutely clear and persuasive; the record of the residential school system alone satisfies the criteria of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (under Article 2-e). Today, the current text of the Indian Act — with its “two-generation cut-off clause” (Article 6 section 1-f, and section 2; Article 7 section 1-b) — continues to “officially” reduce the indigenous population, even as Native communities experience a baby boom. If current rates hold steady, it is projected that within 50 years there may be no “Status Indians” left in Canada (at which point the federal government may claim Aboriginal rights are obsolete).

It also bears repeating that British Columbia is different from the rest of Canada. Except for the Douglas Treaties on Vancouver Island, the modern Nisga’a Agreement, and the area in northeastern BC covered by Treaty 8, the entire province remains unceded territory. The provincial government’s claim to this land is arbitrary: it has never been surrendered by the holders of Aboriginal Title. Both the Delgamuukw decision in 1997 and the Supreme Court’s ruling in favour of the Haida Nation in 2004 upheld the obligation of the province to acknowledge Aboriginal Title to BC.

Discussing the controversy over George Southwell’s murals in the provincial legislature in Victoria, philosopher James O. Young concludes that if “today a legislature were commissioning murals for its buildings... It would clearly be wrong to erect murals anything like Southwell’s *Justice*.” Young argues that a crucial question is that of

consent to view the offensive work: “It is one thing to provoke offense in someone who has freely entered a gallery, knowing that offensive photographs will be displayed. It is another to offend those who have given no consent”. Thus: “Members of British Columbia’s First Nations are reasonably offended by the presence of Southwell’s *Justice* in the Provincial Legislature. The mural is in a public space that aboriginal people cannot be expected to avoid”. Should those who are reasonably offended by Charles Comfort’s mural be expected to avoid one of the busiest hallways of SFU’s main campus?

The university administration did not initiate or participate in any public process of dialogue, consultation, or reflection prior to making the decisions to accept, restore, and install *British Columbia Pageant*. For many, this seemed to indicate serious insensitivity. Less than a year earlier, students had highlighted the political nature of public art by raising concerns about several paintings by John Innes, two of which were ultimately removed from this same location. Rick Ouellet, of the First Nations Student Association, called the installation of Comfort’s mural, after such a recent dialogue, “a real slap in the face.”

Why do Aboriginal adults, who make up at least five percent of the total population (and twenty percent of the prisoner population) only account for 1.7 % of the student population at SFU? The university’s Institutional Service Plans proclaim the administration’s intention to increase culturally relevant programming by consulting with First Nations communities, and to dramatically increase First Nations enrollment at SFU. However SFU’s statistics show that First Nations enrollment has not increased in recent years. If the SFU administration wishes to be taken seriously, perhaps it will do something about that rather conspicuous nineteen-metre long monument to the decimation of this region’s First Nations.

Many members of the campus community agreed that something had to be done to protest the mural’s monumentalization of an appallingly retrograde vision of history. The 2004-05 Cedar Table Series consisted of several panel discussions bringing together artists, activists and academics to consider the question “What is Colonialism?” These events were followed by the Anti-Colonial Art Contest exhibition. The contest was adjudicated by a panel of four women: Rita Wong (from the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design), Erma Robinson (from the First Nations Student Association), Nadine Chambers (from the SFU Women’s Centre), and Tania Willard (then editor of *Redwire* magazine). The criteria by which they evaluated the art included: multi-level storytelling, depth, crossing boundaries and authenticity. The art contest itself was an effort to bring forward representations of “what is missing” in *British Columbia Pageant*.

From the outset, the Cedar Table Series organizers emphasized concern with something much larger than the “political incorrectness” of the mural; we saw it as a point from which to challenge the insidious hegemony of neocolonial ideology, the erasure of history, and the ongoing refusal of Canadian institutions to acknowledge what SFU professor Roy Miki has called their “colonial debts.” We organized the art contest not out of nostalgia or vague despair, but because we believed it could help bring us closer to decolonization.

We think it is cause for alarm that a mural like *British Columbia Pageant* could be installed on the campus of a public university without even a perfunctory pretense of consultation with members of the campus community. The administration has claimed that the installation of the Comfort mural has *benefited* the university because it has promoted dialogue about “the issues” raised in “the controversy.” We believe this claim is both cynical and completely backwards. To date, the only public discussions about the mural have been those organized by students, professors and other members of the campus community. As Sasha Hobbs, director of the First Nations Student Centre at the time, said: “You don’t start a dialogue about violence by punching someone in the face.”

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The 2004-05 Cedar Table Series Anti-Colonial Art Contest was co-organized by:

Erma Robinson, Rick Ouellet, Sasha Hobbs, Nadine Chambers, ryan andrew murphy, Amanda van Baarsen, david fleming-saraceno

The contest judges were: Erma Robinson, Tania Willard, Nadine Chambers, Rita Wong

Cedar Table Series guest speakers, performers, designers and winning artists included: Barbara Charlie, Theresa Neel, Margaret “Grandma” Harris, annie ross, Peter Jacobs, William Ignace (a.k.a. Wolverine), Arnie Jack, Sandy Scofield, Lucie Idlout, HOCK E AYE VI Edgar Heap of Birds, Leonard George, Sherene Razack, Sunera Thobani, Merit Ichin, Pascuala Patishtán, Erika Fuchs, Nate Woodbury, Susan Cormier, A.S. Matta, Valentine Gomez, Marlee Ouellet, Scott Stonechild, Adriana Contreras, m.d. caroline lefebvre, Noemi Kozikowska, Lisa Sterling, Tania Willard, Gwaai Edenshaw, Mary Aski-Piyiswiskwew Longman, Roy Miki, Rita Wong, Jerry Zaslove

The sources for all quotes and statistics in this text can be found in *West Coast Line 55* (February 2008) “Art & Anti-Colonialism: The 2004/5 Cedar Table Series Anti-Colonial Art Contest” edited by ryan andrew murphy.