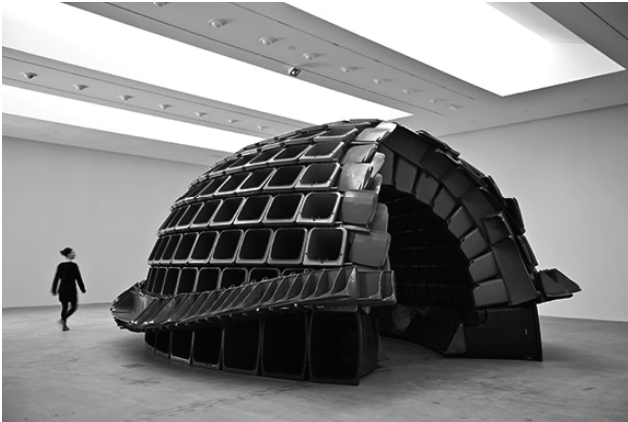


# Fossils from Our Future

The natural history of consumer culture is on display in Washington D.C. The fossilized plastic of Samsonite suitcases takes on the form of archaic animals vaguely resembling alligators, ostriches and armadillos. Plastic trash cans repose in an enormous tortoise-like shell. A unique assemblage of white plastic chairs forms the apparent skeleton of a gigantic whale. The artifacts and remnants from our world are exhibited as so many monolithic monsters from the past in an astounding show at the National Museum of the American Indian. As with the dinosaurs, the question of their extinction remains unresolved.



Brian Jungen is the artist responsible for this exhibit, appropriately entitled "Strange Comfort." By bending, folding, cutting and rearranging the raw materials of consumer culture, he masterfully transforms its objects into cultural artifacts. He thereby reverses the traditional lens of ethnology and anthropology, two disciplines developed through the course of European colonization as an attempt to explain "them" (history and sociology are, of course, the parallel disciplines used to understand "us"). Yet, this ethnology of ourselves not only disturbs the distinction between the disciplines for "us" and those for "them" (echoing Jean Rouch's masterful portrayal of an African undertaking an ethnological study of the French by asking them insipid questions concerning their daily routines and trying to measure their skull size). It also calls into question the very idea of cultural purity. The fossilized objects of consumer culture include sports bags become totem poles and sneakers magically transformed into masks resembling those of the aboriginal Northwest Coast. These appear to be the obverse of the statues that "also die" explored by Chris Marker and Alain Resnais in the 1950s. Rather than objects that have lost the soul of their cult value by being removed from their original context and exhibited for cultural voyeurs, they are "prototypes for a new understanding" that stage both the historicity of culture on the American continent and the thin veneer of the soul-less value system of its contemporary form.



What are we to make of the Native American imagery that punctuates his work? Jungen carefully avoids the pastoral or nostalgic appeal to the purity of the Native American, and seems to question the multicultural valorization of true Indian culture. At the same time, he is clearly not playfully recycling indigenous forms to celebrate the apotheosis of postmodernism and the idea that "everything can be played with." Jungen walks a very fine line between mythological purity and postmodern playfulness, rejecting both the idea of unsullied indigenous culture and the embrace of cultural relativity. He is clearly critical of the commodification of culture and the ways in which it serves both the tourist industry and the world of sports. There is a firm and refreshing critical edge to his work, as well as an astute precision and honest craft, that avoid the puerile playfulness often categorized as postmodernism. What, then, is this critical edge?



Jungen takes us to the heart of some of the most profound metaphysical questions of our times: who are our gods? Have the athletic stars of media spectacles become the shamans of contemporary culture? What will remain of "our" civilization? Will our remnants, when compared to those of the dinosaurs, amount to enormous deposits of synthetic materials left over from the ecological disaster they helped produce? In raising these questions, Jungen takes us into deep history: the history of eons and ages rather than the microscopic time of human existence. He turns "our" culture into an assemblage of comfortingly strange artifacts seen from afar, as if an anthropologist had unearthed them in the year 4026 and raised the questions: who are these people? What were their values? How did they treat their fellow human beings?



His critical edge consists in raising fundamental questions concerning the bare bones of "our" culture: how have we survived in the past (and at what expense)? How will we survive in the future? Will we survive in the future? What are the metaphysical underpinnings of the world we have created? And, perhaps most importantly: what will remain of us once we are gone?

- Theodore Tucker