

Lifeworks

Ron Noganosh: sculpting politics and passion

An atomic cloud, captured in an 8-by-6 foot black-and-white photograph, hails from the far end of the room. In front of the photo, brightly coloured cocktail parasols spell out “Hiroshima.” The contrast between the frail but merry parasols and the imposing radiation cloud is a typical example of how Ojibway sculptor Ron Noganosh mixes sombre and humorous emotions. This mixture continues in the rest of *Ron Noganosh: It Takes Time*, which recently concluded a national tour with a stop at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria (AGGV). In Noganosh’s work, where there is humour there is also irony, and where there is tragedy there is also wit.

Ron Noganosh comes from a background in graphic design and welding, his artistic mainstay until he entered the University of Ottawa fine arts program in 1980. There he discovered collage, political art and assemblage. Making art with found objects and other people’s “junk” changed his whole approach. On the one hand, his work is about recycling materials: discarded chainsaw blades, a tractor seat and abandoned hubcaps appear in the show. On the other hand, his use of found objects is also a comment on how First Nations people are too often handed cast-offs

(land included) from the non-Native communities around them.

By the mid-1980s, Noganosh had become known nationally and internationally for challenging traditional ideas of Native art. This is partly because, as he emphasized in an artist’s talk at the AGGV, “I’m an artist first, and a Native second. But an artist first.” He recalled a 1983 piece, *Shield for a Modern Warrior*. “When people asked me about being an Indian artist, they wanted beads and feathers. I said okay, and I did a piece, a warrior’s shield, out of flattened beer cans.” He points to the Hiroshima piece (*Forget Me Not*) and the sculptures about environmental destruction as examples of his engagement with issues that affect everyone on the planet. *Innu* criticizes the low-level military flying tests going on for decades over fragile Northern ecosystems, while *Massey Harris*, a suspended tractor seat with dozens of pink plastic pigs stampeding off its edge, mourns the destruction of buffalo and the monstrous, unsustainable growth of chemically destructive agribusiness.

Several of his works address specific First Nations losses. *If You Find Any Culture, Send It Home* is a satirical letter in which a father tells a son about selling an ancestral mask, then going to town to buy a VCR with the cash. In an installation entitled *The Only Good Indian*, an old photograph of a smug group of white men standing beside a wagon filled with dead Native people circles endlessly on a toy railroad track, this tangible hatred supported by the bureaucratic racism in the text of the Indian Act pasted below. Noganosh addresses health disparities between Natives and non-Natives in the very personal *Anon Among Us*. This sculpture is a mound of dirt with a simple wooden cross, above which a video lists the names and cause of death of 63 relatives who died before Noganosh’s 50th birthday. Alcohol is the major culprit in the death toll, and the sadness in the



Ron Noganosh, 1999. *Anon Among Us*. Multimedia installation.



Ron Noganosh, 1990. *Innu*. Mixed media.

piece is compounded by Noganosh’s reminder of the shameful disparity in life expectancy between First Nations and other Canadians.

First Nations experiences and broader human concerns weave together powerfully in *It Takes Time*. Topics shift from agribusiness to consumerism to alcohol abuse, but whatever subject Noganosh explores, satire and compassion operate on equal footing. There is an element of the trickster throughout Noganosh’s work, challenging viewers to think about the labels and categories they use to understand the world.

An exhibition catalogue copublished by the Ottawa Art Gallery, which organized the tour, and the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ont., is available from ABC Art Books Canada (www.abcartbookscanada.com).

Meg Walker

Writer and artist
Winnipeg, Man.