

# SUPERNATURAL - Neil Campbell & Beau Dick

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Neil Campbell and Beau Dick come from very different cultures. Campbell grew up a third generation Irish-Canadian on a Saskatchewan farm; Dick descended from a line of Kwakwaka'wakw artists. It has become routine to view art in social-historical rather than aesthetic terms, to understand that artworks are products of specific moments and cultures. This approach developed as a critique of universalizing concepts of art and emphasizes difference rather than similarity between the arts of different cultures. While contemporary science has taught us that the concept of race was an illusion and so removed a barrier between us, the social approaches to art sometimes seem to have an opposite, splintering effect. *Supernatural* aims to celebrate the art of Neil Campbell and Beau Dick and to entertain the similarities of intention, means, and effect in their work without losing sight of their significant differences.

## Neil Campbell

Our initial encounter with Neil Campbell's art is marked primarily by its effect on our senses. A longer look will reveal that his painted designs derive from a wide range of inspirations; from Indian Tantric painting, to the history of Western art, to commercial and popular art, and observations made during his daily experiences. Campbell's practise involves extensive research; his studio is full of boxes and files containing hundreds of variants of a single design. His designs are honed through infinitesimal increments of transformation or mutation.

Campbell's oeuvre displays a veritable atlas of styles and each work exhibits a unique character. While one work might induce a sense of awe through its use of a grand scale, another might evoke a sense of delicacy or fragility; one work will seem like Italian *arte povera* in its stark frugality, another seems closer to psychedelic poster art with its complicated layering of patterns. Yet, considered all together, they appear as a unified project under the artist's control.

Most of the works begin small; eventually they achieve a scale that is appropriate to address the vertical human form. The process appears rational but is guided largely by intuition and often involves leaps, false moves, returns and dead-ends. Despite their apparent flatness, Campbell's works are like animate, performing machines. It is impossible to stand before his paintings without feeling their calculated effect on our bodies and senses – far from 'abstract', the experience is both physical and spiritual, in a manner that most Abstract painting has only succeeded in symbolising.

While he has explored various shapes, the circular dot has been Campbell's most often used motif. The circular shape is probably the most ubiquitous in human history and usually signifies the universal. Campbell's designs have consisted of groups or large fields of dots, or have been derived from the 'negative' shape produced by placing a dot within a defined field. In the dot-field type works, some dots have been removed at regular intervals. Sometimes the designs are mutated, most recently by computer assisted stretching. Campbell has said that he is addressing the "electric body". If the dots can be read as an illustration of sub atomic particles, the works also aim to affect us at a neurological level. His works are not simply intended as optical events but are intended to engage the viewer's entire physiology.

Campbell's early works were painted on wooden panels, however, the shadows that the panels cast on the walls were seen as unintended and undesired distractions - they compromised the frontal character of the painted image. By painting directly on the wall, Campbell eliminated the shadows and succeeded in finding a medium that would most directly accomplish his goal. His recent aluminium cutout pieces solve the problem of making his art portable. Here the role of the shadow has been rethought and successfully incorporated as an integral aspect of the work. The cutouts

present a complication of the division between painting and sculpture. While the experience they offer is largely visual, they are also discrete objects. Here the design has not been articulated with paint, but by cutting, or carving, with a computer-guided router.

Campbell's project was initially inspired by his recognition of how various cultures privileged a specific center along the vertical axis of the human figure. For Egyptian art, this point was near the sternum, for Christian art it was at the heart, and in Asian art, it was the *Hara*, below the navel. The Yogic notion of the *chakras* maps a similar vertical arrangement of centers along the spine. In Campbell's art, this vertical geometry is often extrapolated into a field, as in *Saskatchewan* (2004). Here the experience is enveloping, the dots seem to project outward towards us as though they were gamma rays about to beam right through us.

When we first look at *Dog* (2004), we will either see an 'x' shaped figure or four white discs. Quickly thereafter, our first impression will be eclipsed by the alter image. Then, a flipping between the two images begins and continues endlessly. Children in particular seem titillated by the effect, often to the point of giddiness or hysteria. How does something so simple, flat, and inert, produce so much movement?

Campbell's wall painting *Boom Boom* (1993 – 2004) immediately changes as we walk toward it. Depending on its particular installation, one of the enormous black discs spreads out from an oval to a circle as we find our position in line with the white space between them. The point in the middle where the two circles are closest becomes the most intense point in an apparent funnel of energy caused by the black discs. The matte surface of this and other of his paintings seems to intensify the edge vibration and the palpability of the white, negative, or ghost images. Rationally, these ghost images are illusions, but as *experience*, they are as real as the materially manifested figures.

The austere means of Campbell's art might cause one to confuse it with a modernist pursuit of painting according to its internal logic. His intent however, is not to produce a pure painting as autonomous art. There is nothing 'painterly' in his deliberately flat and uninflected application of paint. There is nothing heroic about Campbell's technique; the craft involved is within reach of anyone, although the careful compositions and proportions are the result of obsessive attention. Unlike the majority of abstract painting, and even, curiously, the bulk of Op Art, Campbell has eschewed the confines of the *tableau* or frame. His works must be carefully fitted to the exhibition space; the wall becomes an integral aspect of the work, which becomes a mediator between the viewer and the space. In fact, a truly accurate measurement of each work would have to include the dimensions of the supporting wall. The title of the cutout work *Dog* is an allusion to this mediating function as it references *Cerberus*, the guard dog at the entrance to Hades.

Art and magic have in common the enterprise of making things appear, and so by logical extension - disappear. While every artwork can be said to be magic in this respect, Campbell's works bring the phenomenon of appearance to the forefront. Campbell avoids shapes that have a strong representational or symbolic function as much as is possible. This is a difficult enterprise considering that practically every simple shape has at some time been invested with such a function. Cut off from the possibility of employing the old magic, he must invent his own, new devices. Campbell considers himself a pantheist, this is a position usually defined as "atheistic monotheism", a belief that there is no personalised god, but that god is synonymous with all existence. The dichotomy of immanence versus transcendence is swept away. Pantheism offers a spiritual view to those who can no longer subscribe to any traditional beliefs. If, as Campbell believes, an artwork exhibits the artist's worldview, we would not be wrong to see his art as an attempt to make manifest the underlying unity of all things.

### **Beau Dick**

Beau Dick is an accomplished and talented Kwakwaka'wakw carver. He is actively engaged in all aspects of Kwakwaka'wakw culture and is highly regarded as a teacher and mentor. Although he is a prolific artist, Dick has concentrated on his culture as a whole, studying and revivifying the traditions of carving, dancing, and storytelling. While he recognizes the art market has played an important role in providing employment, and helped to keep the old forms from disappearing - he sees the masks as having their full purpose realized only within the integrated rituals of dances and potlatches.

Originally, masks were seen in flickering firelight, brought to life by the calculated but exuberant gestures of a skilled dancer. Whether naturalistic or extremely stylized, masks are intended to present animate beings. Both in functional and æsthetic terms, a mask's degree of success is tied to its degree of animation. It is common to hear Dick's masks praised for 'being alive'. On one level, all good artists are actors; when Dick tells a story it is clear he is a born actor. His dramatic or poetic sensibility equally inflects his carving and painting.

The northwest coast of pre-contact North America provided for the richest material culture north of Mexico. The abundance of fish and cedar trees meant that the indigenous peoples here had both the free time and the material to create an architecture and art of a high sophistication and variety. French Surrealists and anthropologists, American Abstract Expressionists, Situationists, and hippies have all been drawn to the Northwest Coast culture because its model of economy contradicted capitalism's claim to naturalness. The potlatch, wherein social position was secured through spectacular expenditure, was the opposite of an economics based on accumulation. Of course, in a world without banks, the potlatch made shrewd sense, and should not be seen as altruism - as gifts dispensed at potlatches were to be returned with interest. Nonetheless, although not a socialist-style redistribution of wealth, it serves the common good more to have twenty canoes in use than rotting in the rich man's yard, like the fleets of luxury cars that today's celebrities and millionaires accrue as proof of their worth. Carvings, totem poles, architecture, dances, and ceremonies were also used to secure and affirm position, bind relations, relate myths and entertain. Masks were, and continue to be, central to Northwest Coast culture; they are perhaps the most concentrated, intense, and significant registers of the culture.

Kwakwaka'wakw art is unequalled among the peoples of the Northwest Coast in its dramatic power. Most masks are meant to be danced, but the arrival of Europeans on the coast started a market for souvenirs that continues today and from which eventually developed a First Nations fine art market. While Dick carves masks for ceremonial use as well for sale in the market, the line between the two is blurry. A mask originally intended for sale might be borrowed back for a potlatch and a mask carved for a potlatch might later be replaced and sold off. While some see the display and sale of masks as art works as a perversion of their original function, this is probably a disappearing attitude. First Nations carvers today must negotiate two worlds and this need not be experienced as a conflict or compromise.

Dick's facility at naturalism is evident in both the Shaman Mask (2003) and the *Bak'was Mask* (1990) included in this exhibition. While the *Bak'was* or "wild man of the woods" is quite stylized, the natural colour of the wood and the furrows in the forehead and elsewhere produce a carnal effect. This *Bak'was* is adapted very closely from an old mask in the collection of the Museum Of Anthropology at U.B.C., yet the interpretation is relaxed. Dick's *Shaman Mask* was carved during a recent stay in Masset, at Haida Gwaii. The corporeal remains of a shaman had recently been repatriated to the islands and Beau carved the mask while reflecting on this event. The painted designs are of a Northern style of face painting, the shape of the face is perhaps close to Tsimshian, but is also recognizably 'Beau Dick'. It resembles many Tuxw'id masks he has made, and the 'eyes rolled-back, tongue out' expression is also similar, but here it represents a trance state. Again, the natural colour of wood stands in for flesh and the over-all effect is uncanny if not terrifying.

The *Mugamtl, Four-Face Mask* (2003) here is integral to the Hamatsa or Cannibal Society dance. This recent mask is among the most 'archaic' in style that Dick has produced. We are used to seeing more elaborate, baroque Mugamtl and other masks, intended to dazzle the viewer with their virtually psychedelic effect. In the marketing of Northwest Coast art to non-First Nations customers, such fine finish and intricate complication has been a noted hallmark of success. The almost comical simplicity of the archaic style *Mugamtl, Four-Face Mask* might easily be confused as a modern exercise in æsthetic license, and it partially is, but it is also more of an anti-mannerist attempt to get to the original spirit of the character.

In Kwakwaka'wakw mythology as in most cultures, ghosts are messengers, and crows are usually omens. In Dick's *Ghost Mask* (1996) the two are together. I asked Dick what the stylistic influence for this mask was and he proceeded to spend twenty minutes relating his own experiences with ghosts and ominous crows. I asked again about stylistic precedence to which he replied – "it's Beau style, so I guess you could say Kwakiutl!" His point was clear, that his art is not a series of historicist exercises but a matter of lived experience. No matter where the influence comes from, if it is his work it is Kwakwaka'wakw by virtue of being made by a Kwakwaka'wakw. The *Ghost Mask's* design reminds me of Japanese anime characters and commercial Halloween masks. I have yet to find anything traditional that resembles this mask. Artists from all cultures have always borrowed from other artists and cultures when they could. Dick studies the art of all cultures through books and visits to museums and galleries. An influence from a European painting, or a Japanese *Noh* mask, are equally likely to inflect one of his works. Dick has in fact carved *Noh* masks and other non-First Nations designs as experiments.

Dick often works in different Northwest Coast styles. His right to work in these other styles comes from his familial relations to that group. However, when Dick works in a Kwakwaka'wakw Northwest Coast style, such as Haida or Nuxalk, it is usual for him to declare it. It is a matter of context and politics; respect is due to the Nuxalk - in the spirit of solidarity. Such are the politics of cultural appropriation for a Kwakwaka'wakw artist today.

In the two recent versions of a *Pookmis Mask* (2002 & 2003), we see the stylistic diversity with which a mythological character can be portrayed. Pookmis is a serpent that was turned into a man that lives in the world under the sea. Dick has said that the world under the sea should not be thought of as *in* the sea, but another world *beneath* the sea that shares many characteristics with the earth world. Old depictions of Pookmis share the pale complexion of Dick's and suggest that there is little light in that world. Both of these masks are in Dick's archaic style. One is tempted to describe the carving and painting here as rough, but it is just as deliberate and precise as in any other of his masks. Perhaps instead it is a matter of a more gestural, expressionist, or soulful style. Dick began as an interpreter of old masks and mastered the finely finished and meticulously painted, glossy style that has come to be seen as a standard of Kwakwaka'wakw carving. While it brought deserved recognition to the art of the Kwakwaka'wakw, it also led to a situation where polish was often confused with artistic quality. Dick's newer style seems to want to challenge the prevailing standard by favouring *feeling* over surface.

### **Similarities and Differences, Reticence, Supernatural British Columbia, and the Aesthetic Apartheids**

Neil Campbell makes his work from the position that every work of art or artifact reveals a worldview. Beau Dick also holds this opinion and enjoys researching images and art from every culture, absorbing inspiration from wherever it comes. Both artists confess to reading little and looking a lot. Dick in particular avoids reading anthropological accounts of his own culture, preferring instead to hear stories from his elders, thus avoiding confusion about the origins of his knowledge. Perhaps this is his protest or resistance against the intrusion of a foreign language and writing on his own, traditionally oral culture. Campbell's art, in its address to sensation is an insistence on the existence of pre-linguistic experience. Both artists employ bold, graphic design and theatrical aesthetics in order to point us toward a world beyond the everyday, the rational, the positivistic.

Whereas for Dick, his Kwakwaka'wakw myths and spirituality are familial inheritances that are as real and naturally experienced a foundation for his identity as a family photo album, Campbell could not subscribe to any particular tradition. Instead, he had to address his needs from the position of the 'secular' — that modern, liberal, but ultimately Protestant inheritance. In fact, it could be argued that the apparent neutrality of the secular position is an illusion. It could be argued that to live under capitalism is to be Protestant - or at least suffer Protestantism. And this would include a modern Kwakwaka'wakw like Dick - who must today straddle two histories, two traditions. One could then argue that Campbell, like Dick, was equally destined to follow a prescribed path. But this is making light of the choices Campbell faced. Realistically, he never had the option of working from an 'Irish-Canadian artistic tradition', whatever that might be. An artist in his position might take his cues from Neolithic cave painting, French Rococo, Conceptualism, or even Kwakwaka'wakw art. Although Dick seems by comparison to have been born into his project one could argue that he also

faced the existential dilemma of whether to accept it and how *exactly* to accept it. He also faces the many choices of influence that Campbell does as he does not work in a hermetically sealed Kwakwaka'wakw world, but also functions as a modern artist in the contemporary art world.

The art culture of Canada, with its heavily bureaucratic, state-funded institutions can indeed turn artists into paper shufflers and even apparatchiks. Or they can become hustlers in the market with their limited editions and advertisements. Each system naturally sucks the artist into its agenda and sucks the independent thought out of the artist. In the near future, there is no perfect world for the artist and it is probably a balance of market and state that will create the healthiest, freest art scene. Marcel Duchamp once said that "in the future the artist will go underground." Reticence can become an effective strategy for coping, for preserving what is important.

I am usually drawn to organizing an exhibition because I imagine that it will not happen soon unless I do it myself. Part of the reason that these artists were not showing much was due not to a lack of production but rather a lack of self-promotion or subscription to prevailing artworld agendas. One gets the sense that their art would be here even if the engines of state and market suddenly disappeared. In the art world as elsewhere, the "squeaky wheel" maxim holds true. This does not make them any more virtuous than artists who are ambitious or simply struggling to stay alive. Yet it doesn't mean we can afford to ignore them or let them slip away either.

This exhibition came about because of a long-term interest in two artists whose work I greatly admired. I followed their progress for decades and when I began to work as an occasional curator it seemed inevitable that I would one day organize exhibitions of their work. I had originally imagined solo exhibitions for them both, but my thinking about their art and the state of affairs in the Canadian art world, lead me to consider bringing them together in a two-person exhibition. Unfortunately, this could not be just another two-person exhibition because of the issues it would raise. This was irksome because I am primarily interested in artists, art and aesthetics, rather than *issues*.

It has become common to see the work of First Nations artists using non-traditional approaches, such as easel painting or conceptual strategies, included in the contemporary art context. At the same time, traditional Northwest Coast has largely been ignored by the contemporary art world. The job of curating and collecting their work has mostly been left to the anthropologists, as though artists who were in touch with their tradition were part of something past rather than a continuance of a living culture. The commercial galleries dealing in contemporary art have also left traditional Northwest Coast art to the galleries specializing in First Nations art.

My experiences of both Campbell and Dick were as vital, committed contemporary artists; in thinking about their work, I noticed many similarities of intention, means, and effect. My first thought; "why not do an exhibition pairing these two?" was immediately followed by the type of foreboding that accompanies the transgression of a serious taboo. But what exactly was the nature of the taboo? It seemed that the separation of traditional Northwest Coast from contemporary art was just a habit, that it had no other basis than precedent. I wondered why I could not recall such an exhibition ever taking place. Perhaps it was a matter of curators feeling unqualified to discuss traditional Northwest Coast art? This was something serious that the anthropologists had always taken care of in an authoritative fashion. But which curator could, on the other hand, presume to know everything about western contemporary art? Perhaps with respect to older First Nations art, the need for Anthropological knowledge is a legitimate point, but today's traditional First Nations artists are willfully making art for the international art market, they *want* to be included. I concluded that curating was a learning experience, it should be a way of experimenting, asking questions, making propositions.

For a foreigner to fly to Vancouver and arrive at Vancouver International Airport for the first time must be an impressive experience. One is greeted by one of the most ambitious feats of set decoration ever created for an airport arrivals area. Massive totem poles and First Nations sculptures in wood and bronze, masks, weavings and two dimensional works, crafts in vitrines, dioramas of artworks and faux-natural elements including a functional 'waterfall' – are all orchestrated to announce the Tourism Ministry's theme of *Super Natural British Columbia*. The Canadian embassy in Washington features a monumental sculpture by Bill Reid, the late Haida artist. Canadian currency and postage stamps

feature native designs and the reopening of Canada House in London, England in 1998 featured a performance by a group of West Coast dancers that included Beau Dick. It is clear that traditional Northwest Coast culture has eclipsed the Group of Seven and Emily Carr as the official face of Canada, both to itself and rest of the world.

At the same time, contemporary non-First Nations artists have been effectively shut out of officially representing B.C. and Canada. Why couldn't a Neil Campbell painting represent this place to visitors arriving at the airport, or be reproduced on a stamp? Why couldn't Campbell have been considered for the reopening of Canada House, and have a chance to meet the Queen? It would certainly seem less hypocritical than using First Nations art to sell B.C. to tourists while simultaneously refusing to deal fairly with land claims settlements. Campbell and Dick have both concerned themselves with addressing the philosophical through the poetic. This task is one that is often discounted, and sometimes scorned within the everyday world. Both of these artists share in the sacrifices and rewards that come to those who search beyond the petty wisdom of a culture that worships accumulation. While the larger historical, cultural and political problems that this exhibition invokes are important, and need to be contemplated and discussed, *Supernatural* is intended *above all* as a celebration of the remarkable achievements of two British Columbia artists.