

EQUINOX GALLERY
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Sonny Assu: Day School

June 13 to July 11, 2015

Equinox Gallery is very pleased to present *Day School*, an exhibition of new works by Sonny Assu. This is the artist's fourth solo exhibition with the gallery, and marks his return to Vancouver after three years in Montreal where he is a Master's Candidate in the Fine Arts program at Concordia University.

Over the past decade, Sonny Assu has been recognized for his mash-ups of Indigenous iconography with popular culture in a critique of the often one-dimensional representation of First Nations cultures in mainstream society. While maintaining a profound connection to past traditions, Assu's practice emphasizes the complex conversation relating to the intersections and boundaries of traditional Indigenous art within the larger realm of contemporary art practices.

The title of this exhibition, *Day School*, refers to the deplorable legacy of the residential school system implemented by the Canadian Government that manifested itself in abuse, systemic discrimination, and a deliberate attempt to eradicate Indigenous culture and language. At the center of the exhibition are two school desks that are partially covered with copper leaf. *Leila's Desk* (2013), a vintage 1930s desk with a bar of Lifebuoy soap conspicuously left on the desktop; and *Inherent*, a desk from c. 1990 with the word "chug" written on the underside. These works each refer to pivotal moments in the artist's personal history when the xenophobia ingrained through government initiatives became personally resonant. By appropriating objects associated with a painful history, Assu not only pushes to the forefront what was once hidden, but also reconstructs a new history on his terms, with materials that are culturally-relevant to him. The desks also reinforce the ways in which, until recently, western discourse prioritized the act of writing (and consequently, the written word) over other forms of communication.

Assu further explores the divide between written and oral histories in the Longhouse and Chilkat panels. Imagining a world in which the colonial education system did not come to be imposed on Indigenous people, Assu counters the perception that Indigenous cultures lacked a form of written communication through the exploration of the pictorial as a written "language," much like hieroglyphics. Pop art references and graffiti-like (another pictorial tradition often disparaged by dominant culture) modes of representation are layered and meshed with abstracted ovoid and "u" forms, as well as references to copper, both in form and through the use of copper paint. The Kwakwaka'wakw people highly value copper in their economy and use it for ceremonial

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and social practices. To present a guest with a copper or a piece from a broken copper places on them a powerful obligation.

Copper is also a significant component in a series of single records entitled *Gone Copper!* With additional subtitles such as *1921*, *Busted*, and *Giving It All Away*, these playful pieces are based on a fictional musical group called *Billy and the Chiefs* whose aspirations were to go copper rather than gold or platinum. Assu was inspired to create these works after finding a discarded LP *Indian Music of the Pacific Northwest Coast*, produced by Dr. Ida Halpern between 1947 and 1953. This record included recordings of songs sung by many Elders, including Assu's great-great-grandfather, Chief Billy Assu.

Sonny Assu is Laich-kwil-tach (Kwakwaka'wakw' of the We Wai Kai First Nation (Cape Mudge). Since graduating from Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver, Canada, Sonny Assu's work has been exhibited across North America, including solo shows at the Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Oakville Art Galleries, Two Rivers Gallery, West Vancouver Museum, Belkin Satellite, and the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba. His work has also been featured in many important group exhibitions: *Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art* (National Gallery of Canada), *Beat Nation* (Vancouver Art Gallery, Power Plant), *Decolonize Me* (Ottawa Art Gallery), *Don't Stop Me Now* (National Gallery of Canada), *Changing Hands: Art Without Reservations 2* (Museum of Arts & Design, New York; Anchorage Museum of History & Art; Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis; Naples Museum of Art; Institute of American Indian Arts Museum, Santa Fe); *Throw Down* (AGGV), *How Soon is Now?* (Vancouver Art Gallery), and *Fifth World* (Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon). Sonny Assu's work *Ellipsis* is currently being featured in a major exhibition: *HIP-HOP: du Bronx aux rues arabes* at l'Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris.

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The opening of this exhibition comes on the heels of the release of the summary report drafted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. In the 1870s, the Federal Government of Canada began to play a role in the development and administration of schools, partly in order to meet its obligation to educate Indigenous children. For more than a century, residential schools separated over 150,000 Indigenous children from their families and communities, resulting in the fracture of families and communities and the abuse and death of thousands of Indigenous children. The two primary objectives of these residential schools system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption that Indigenous cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. This significant report concludes that residential schools were effectively government-led tools of cultural genocide, hidden behind so-called educational mandates. For more information, we encourage you to visit the website for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada at www.trc.ca.