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*Sonny Assu: Legacy Format*

By Kate Hennessy

Sonny Assu recalls the transformative experience of visiting the Ottawa institution now known as the Canadian Museum of History with a letter in hand, written by his grandmother Mitzi Assu. In it she requests that her grandson be granted access to the Chilkat robe, dance apron, and frontlet that were the belongings of his great-great-grandfather, Hereditary Chief Billy Assu, which she and her husband Herbie Assu had sold to the museum decades before with the intention of their long-term protection and preservation. In the sterile space of the museum's vast collections, curators placed the robe on Sonny's shoulders. He describes feeling an energy transmitted through his body, the weight and materiality of the woolen garment, a spark conducting a direct connection to his Kwakwaka'wakw ancestors, and the knowledge, ceremony, and resilience woven into the regalia.

Why Assu's grandparents believed that selling the regalia to the museum was necessary is not a story to tell here. Yet it remains in the museum's collections along with multitudes of other Kwakwaka'wakw belongings, and thousands more in collections around the world. Their existence in suspended animation outside of contemporary Kwakwaka'wakw community life is the direct result of colonial violence including the theft of land and resources, the Indian Act, and the Potlatch Ban (1884-1951), which resulted in the seizure of potlatch regalia, the criminalization of this central element of Kwakwaka'wakw life, and the fragmentation of precious cultural belongings into public and private collections around the world.

I like to imagine that the energy that Sonny Assu felt when he wore Chief Billy Assu's regalia entered his body and merged with his life experience and interests as a person growing up in the 1980s and 90s between North Delta and Campbell River, playing video games in East Van, or watching the ocean from the bow of his family fishing boat working up and down the coast. These intertwined experiences and identities have been consistently expressed in a complex, playful, and challenging body of work that remixes materials, performance objects, and technologies to signal the dynamic persistence of Indigenous worlds and ways of being.

*Legacy Format* represents a new direction in form and process that was ignited by the experience of wearing his great-great-grandfather's Chilkat robe and the desire in his family to explore possibilities for replication of regalia. Four vibrant graphic jacquard-woven robes merge traditional forms and materials with digital tools and pop culture as a startling disruption. In continuity with earlier works, the robes resonate, for example, with *Ellipsis* (2012) —136 copper LPs mounted on the wall in an inverted equalizer pattern, referencing 136 years of the Indian Act (at the time of the work in 2012) and technologies of memory and status. In *Silenced: The Burning* (2011), a stack of 67 drums painted with designs inspired by the conflicted iconography of Hudson's Bay blankets evokes the 67-year duration of the Potlatch Ban, and the story told about Chief

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Billy Assu who burned his potlatch regalia on the beach in defiance of the Indian Agent who would have confiscated it and incarcerated family members who danced it. Like the copper LPs which evoke sound but are silent<sup>1</sup>, and the stacks of drums which are not meant to be played, the robes have not been woven for ceremony and dancing. While they look as if they should be curved around a human body in motion, they have other work to do in continuing to represent Assu's unique experience and interpretation of his intercultural world.

*Embraced by the Ancestors*, the first in the series, is the truest reference to Chilkat form and colour. While the inception of this robe was tied to the intention to replicate Chief Billy Assu's robe in the Museum of History's collection, Assu ultimately took the work in a new direction. Playing with traditional protocols and belongings, status in social media is represented as ellipses while coppers push through the edge of the five-sided form. The robe signals histories of cultural documentation, their migration to new formats, and the tensions between preservation and the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations.

These themes are further explored in *Betamax*, which refers to a retro 1970s colour palette while paying homage to an obsolete video format that once was the gold standard but is now a fugitive technology. Working within the 5-sided Chilkat form, which can also be read as the inverted shape of the Big House, this digitally materialized blanket will likely outlast the files and media formats used to create it. *Peer-to-Peer* uses inverted equalizer patterns, iPods, and grids of connection to look back at the turn-of-the-millennium explosion of file-sharing networks such as Napster and the overall importance of music to Assu's generation. The work speaks, on the one hand, to dynamics of collaboration, networking, piracy, and ownership, now implicated in today's artificial intelligence boom; and on the other, to the historical coming-together of the Assu and Martin families to develop their own peer-to-peer networks to share songs and culture for the preservation of potlatch traditions.

A fourth robe, *Tempest*, uses a void and grid pattern inspired by the 1970s and 80s vector-based video game of the same name that Assu used to play. With a roller ball controller, players would shoot at pixelated aliens, a challenge that is recast in the robe's design as a colonial revenge fantasy. I also read into this weaving a reference to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the shipwrecked Prospero's magical control of an island, the enslavement of the island's original resident Caliban, and Caliban's (anti-colonial) resistance—a text that continues to be reimaged and re-created in every performance.

The robes were woven in collaboration with Montreal-based weaver Sophia Borowska on a digital jacquard loom, and it is important to Assu that she is credited in their creation. In their process, Assu composed the images as vector graphics which were then digitally transferred across time and space to Borowska, who then programmed the loom so that the image and pattern would be materialized as she manually brought the shuttle and weft through the warp. There is some continuity here with traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Candice Hopkins. 2018. From the Copper Record to Emily Carr: Interventions on the Imaginary. In, Sonny Assu: A Selective History. Heritage House Publishing.

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Kwakwaka'wakw weaving relationships, where men conventionally designed pattern boards for women to realize. There are also many departures: Assu's artwork evokes elements that signal Indigenous futurisms over tradition; the fringes and edges take on a life of their own in response to the design and fabrication process. The digital jacquard loom uses a weaving logic that is very different from the twining and knotting in Chilkat technique, meaning that while Assu's designs can be materialized very closely, these designs could not be woven by hand. Collaboration is inherent in this contemporary digital design and fabrication processes, back in time through traditional Kwakwaka'wakw art practices, and is just as important now over the internet and in cloud-based software and storage.

According to art historian and Bauhaus scholar T'ai Smith, weaving has always functioned as a mediation of other media, harnessing the terms of other media to define something new<sup>2</sup>. As a precursor to binary computation, harnessing the logics of 0s and 1s, jacquard weaving processes continue to be implicated in the transformational digital worlds we inhabit. Sonny Assu's robes ask viewers to contemplate and challenge their expectations of the Chilkat form. They are invitations to follow threads of learning and unlearning that are entangled in Indigenous and colonial histories and their futures.

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<sup>2</sup> T'ai Smith 2014. *Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design*. University of Minnesota Press.