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Transformations that speak to the present

Luke Parnell at Seymour Art Gallery

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As part of his exhibit at the Seymour Art Gallery Luke Parnell will give an artist's talk on Aug. 11 and a carving demonstration on Aug. 18.
Photo MIKE WAKEFIELD

Â! Luke Parnell: Transformation and Renewal at the Seymour Art Gallery on now until Sept. 7. Artist Talk: Sunday, Aug. 11 at 2 p.m. Reception: Sunday Aug. 11, 3-5 p.m. Carving demonstration: Sunday, Aug. 18, 2 p.m. Info: seymourartgallery.com.

ARTIST Luke Parnell laughs when he says one of the difficult things about raising questions in his work is that people always want to know his opinion on the matter.

In light of his Nisga'a and Haida heritage, Parnell commonly addresses issues facing First Nations people, both as a whole, as well as from an artist's perspective as he continues to explore and come to terms with his contribution to and role in the past, present and future of Northwest Coast art.

"A lot of my artwork mirrors my own struggles at the time," says Parnell, 42, a Vancouver resident.

North Shore residents have an opportunity to experience Parnell's unique approach at an exhibition, Transformation and Renewal, currently on display at Deep Cove's Seymour Art Gallery. The show marks Parnell's Seymour debut and features three of his works, exploring a variety of themes, including education, repatriation and cultural identity.

"The issues. ... that he deals with in his work should be a concern to all of us as we think about Western culture and Aboriginal culture," says guest curator Rachel Rosenfield Lafo, current director of the Richmond Art Gallery. "They're beautifully made pieces as well, so that's part of the appeal."

From Prince Rupert, Parnell has studied art at a number of institutions, having received a bachelor of fine arts from the Ontario College of Art & Design and last year, received a master of applied arts degree from Emily Carr University of Art and Design. He's currently a sessional instructor at Emily Carr.

Rosenfield Lafo came to be familiar with Parnell's work through his various exhibitions at Emily Carr.

"My interest is in contemporary art and I see what Luke is doing as part of the contemporary art spectrum, whatever his origin might be," she says. "The issues that he deals with in the pieces in the show, I mean you look at a totem pole and you say, 'Oh that's a traditional totem pole,' but he's dealing with his own feelings about educational systems and the Aboriginal system contrasted with the Western tradition, since he's experienced both. Is one better than the other? What's the relationship? I think the issues that his work addresses to me are very contemporary."

Parnell explains he's gone through a number of phases in terms of his artistic approach, which is continuing to evolve. Long interested in art, as a young child he learned some Northwest Coast art practices, though as a teenager, was drawn to comic book styles, before later moving into conceptual artwork.

Eventually, he started looking back on his roots. Aiding him in his journey was a three-year apprenticeship with master Tsimshian carver Henry Green in Prince Rupert.

"It was just natural to come back," says Parnell. "I guess eventually, after a while, you sort of look back on who you are and this is who I am."

Ten years later, Parnell is continuing to work in the Northwest Coast art genre.

"I feel like it's a continuation of what people have been doing for a long time, telling stories about themselves, about where they're from and that sort of thing," he says.

The Seymour show speaks to Parnell's interest in transformation, a common theme in his work.

"I feel like as I've been exploring Northwest Coast art and Northwest Coast art history I feel like things have transformed quite a bit in the sense that what the art was created for in the old days and what it's created for now," says Parnell.

In the case of totem poles for instance, how they're carved, who carves them and for what purpose, has changed dramatically from the old days to now.

The first piece Parnell is exhibiting at the Seymour gallery is a pole entitled Epistemological Conundrum, which will eventually be installed as a permanent fixture at the new Emily Carr campus.

"I wanted to put forth the idea that there's a complicated history with education and native people in this country and native students are trying to find a balance and trying to reconcile the horrible history with education with whether or not we're still a part of the continuation of that or if it's different. Or if we're using the education for our own benefit. The question basically asks:

education has been used as a tool of assimilation, is it still?" says Parnell.

The second piece Parnell is exhibiting, Phantom Limbs, features 48 carved basswood figures in Plexiglas boxes, a reference to the repatriation of Haida remains from the Museum of Natural History in New York City to their ancestral grounds on Haida Gwaii. The museum's were among the 460 remains that were recently returned to the area from museums and private collections around the world.

The piece's name comes from a comment Parnell heard made by someone who said that, for a long time, the Haida people didn't know the remains were missing as it just never occurred to anyone that people would do such a thing.

"Somebody had said. .. 'Even though we didn't know the remains were gone, we felt better once they were back,'" recalls Parnell. "And I sort of thought of the idea of a phantom limb, where if you lose your hand, your hand will still get itchy even though it's gone. That's where the idea of calling it Phantom Limbs came from, the idea that even though they were gone, we were aware of their presence."

The third piece, The Violence of Words, is Parnell's newest work and mimics the front of a Haida mortuary totem pole. It speaks to modern times in which Northwest Coast art is filtered through the English language, transforming its meaning and leading to the potential for harmful generalizations, he says.

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