MISCHIEF MAKING

MICHAEL NICOLL YAHGULANAAS,
ART AND THE SERIOUSNESS OF PLAY

NICOLA LEVELL

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FOREWORD

Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas is a celebrated contemporary Haida artist whose practice is grounded in the Pacific Northwest of Canada. In this thought-provoking book, Nicola Levell explores his varied body of work, which includes large-scale public projects, mixed media sculptures and canvases, acrylics, watercolours, ink drawings, ceramics, illustrated publications and especially what is recognized as ‘Haida manga’. Levell examines the characteristics and philosophical and ideological backgrounds of these works to convincingly argue that they represent a unique expression of contemporary Indigenous art; one that reveals a complex and sophisticated mediation of many global artistic and cultural movements.

The Haida Nation, to which Yahgulanaas belongs, is situated on Haida Gwaii (formerly the Queen Charlotte Islands) on the west coast of Canada. The Haida peoples developed a distinctive culture based on the use of rich marine and forest resources, and are especially renowned for their potlatch ceremonies and their sophisticated totem poles, large longhouses, wooden canoes, bentwood boxes, masks and other carved and painted artworks with unique depictions of human and non-human figures. Like other Northwest Coast peoples, the Haida suffered severe hardships due to settler colonial control as well as infectious diseases, such as smallpox and influenza brought by European and American traders during the prosperous maritime fur trade between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They were legally banned from holding potlatch ceremonies from 1885 until 1951, and their totem poles, masks and other items used in ritual ceremonies were confiscated by the Canadian government and handed over to museums and other institutions. Furthermore, the government enforced assimilation policies, including residential schooling and Christianization, for all Indigenous peoples in the country. Thus, their cultures and languages faced the threat of extinction during this period. However, the Northwest Coast peoples have creatively rebuilt their traditions through the cultural revitalization movement since the 1950s and the Indigenous rights movement since the 1970s.

As this book reveals, in the 1970s, Yahgulanaas emerged as an activist and artist during the Haida Nation’s battle for rights and sovereignty. His ideas about and commitment to the Haida and other worlds as an Indigenous person, environmentalist, politician and Indigenous rights activist have played an important role in shaping the issues and objectives of his art. For example, among other subjects, his oeuvre addresses the collective memory of historical colonization; conflict; war; social, economic and cultural discrepancies; industrial resource development and identity and climate change.
Through a rich body of colour illustrations, Levell incisively examines and interprets Yahgulanaas’ different artworks in relation to his life experiences, his engagement with environmental issues and his embrace of traditional and global art production techniques. Yahgulanaas is especially recognized for inventing the genre of Haida manga by mixing and integrating Northwest Coast iconography, Japanese manga, American comic book style, and calligraphic brush strokes. His contemporary Coppers fashioned from car hoods have also garnered a lot of public attention.

*Mischief Making* reveals how widely Yahgulanaas experienced, learnt and thought about a variety of topics, from art and music to politics and environmental problems, in creating his art. Through it, he questions viewers about the nature of desirable human lifeways and the shape that relationships with other people and non-humans should take, suggesting how we can make our life world better.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of Yahgulanaas’s art is its ‘hybridity’. Globalization has led to both standardization and diversification, in addition to hybridization of cultural practices worldwide. Yahgulanaas does not regard hybridization as an unfortunate process in which pure cultural traditions become adulterated, but rather as one in which good things emerge. For him, mixing or hybridity is a source of artistic imagination and creativity, and a method to generate a better future. Thus, as an Indigenous person, a Canadian and a creative individual, Yahgulanaas expresses his opinions on contemporary world problems by making hybrid art, using various techniques and media. I believe that by producing such works, he is attempting to create a more inclusive society in which humans and non-humans coexist harmoniously. His strange but impressive art expression, grounded in his opinions, appeals to our hearts and minds empathetically.

Yahgulanaas’ art practices imply that hybridity has the potential to give rise to a new art and a new way of life. His work demands that we reconsider the meanings, roles and effects of what we define as art in our globalizing world. This book is a significant and sophisticated contribution to our understanding of global art practices and interculturality and provides an insightful introduction to Yahgulanaas’s art world.

Nobuhiro Kishigami
Executive director, National Institutes for the Humanities, Japan,
and professor, National Museum of Ethnology, Japan
INTRODUCTION

We must uncover our rituals for what they are: completely arbitrary things, tied to our bourgeois way of life; it is good—and that is the real theatre—to transcend them in the manner of play, by means of games and irony; it is good to be dirty and bearded, to have long hair, to look like a girl when one is a boy (and vice versa); one must put ‘in play’, show up, transform and reverse the systems which quietly order us about.

Michel Foucault

The idea of putting unconventional character types, ideas and media “in play” as means to expose, stretch and subvert our cultural perceptions is intrinsic to the art of Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas. On the surface of his works, he signs himself ‘mny’ with a fish-like flourish. His name has become synonymous with Haida manga, an artform he innovated that reformulates and blends Indigenous Northwest Coast iconographies and formlines with the graphic dynamism of Japanese manga. Through this creative mix or creolization, Haida manga has emerged as a vibrant visual idiom for retelling Indigenous oral histories and other narratives and for offering different ways of seeing and knowing cultural complexes. Its expressive imagery often engages with contemporary social issues concerning the environment and interdependent ecologies, Indigenous thought-worlds and global anxieties, and the materialities of cultural heritage and memory. Yet Yahgulanaas’ distinctive Haida manga aesthetic is not restricted to publications and paper-based graphic artworks: it has modulated into a diverse but coherent body of media and forms, including large-scale public art projects forged from steel; repurposed automobile parts covered in metallic leaf; mixed media installations; acrylic and oil painted canvases and boards; watercolours, ink drawings, ceramics and animated forms.

Part of the unique character of this elastic genre is its unflinching commitment to, in Yahgulanaas’ words, “hybridity”. In his case, hybridity is envisaged as a positive force that opens a space—in Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial thinking this is a “third space”—for artistic and public engagement with the politics and poetics of being in the world. For Yahgulanaas, this means being recognized as an artist of Indigenous Haida and European ancestry, with multiple connections to and affinities with other cultures and places. Yahgulanaas is serious about the potential of hybridity, as an identification, aesthetic and strategy, to elicit reaction and challenge established hierarchies, attitudes and stereotypes. Art is mobilized as a form of social empowerment: it seeks participation, dialogue, reflection and action.
Even the naming of his practice—the purposeful melding of Haida and manga—can be understood as a political act of hybridization that indexes the creation of a third autonomous form, a new art for negotiating new perspectives, positions and identities. By strategically aligning with manga and more generally Asia-Pacific cultural practices, Yahgulanaas consciously set out to subvert dominant Western aesthetic forms and simultaneously signal his cultural and personal familiarity with cultures of the Pacific Rim and especially Japan, which has long featured in Haida oral histories and Yahgulanaas’ family memories. He explains, “I was drawn to comics as a way of talking about complex things such as relationships between Indigenous peoples and settler society. I found manga attractive because it is not part of the settler tradition of North America (like Archie or Marvel comics, for example) ... [plus it] has roots in the North Pacific, as does Haida art”. While his art always has had a political inflection, it is neither prescriptive nor bound to the local or Indigenous context. Rather it presents itself as an agitation for individual and social engagement:

Artwork is a personal adventure for the people who create it and for those who choose to participate in the experience. I create work that mostly avoids the idea of dominance and resists the idea that the artist is an ultimate authority ... I like to create work that confounds the observer and requires them to decide where the dominant horizon of the work is. [In the Rotational series] I put my name in one corner, a title in another, a date in a third corner, and I usually find something amusing to put in the fourth ... I encourage people to make observations and choices arising from their own experience without relying on the authority of the artist.

These strategies of captivating the viewers’ attention, luring them into the artwork, making them think about the characters and the lines, making them twist their heads, literally and metaphorically, to fathom out relations and meanings, are manifest in Master Chief, 2020. This complexly textured work is part of a series of collages that includes Gunit, 2020, Milkit, 2020, Hooked, 2020 and Sinking into the Ocean, 2020—a detail of which is reproduced on the front cover of this book.

In the case of Master Chief, the alluring central figure appears as a fluid, fragmentary and transformative being. Their beak-like side profile is formed by a series of dynamic “framelines”, to use Yahgulanaas’ term, that contain other features and forms; their cranium appears to be brimming with chatter and movement. The body—accented by the white shirt collar, placket, buttons and cuffs—is like a living tuxedo, comprised of small, blackish bird-like forms, nestled together, with bright pink dot eyes, while others are pictured as small beaked heads suspended on the palimpsestic background. Arguably, this imagery contains clues to Yahgulanaas’ Haida worldview wherein multispecies—human and non-human entities including animals and plants—and their identities and kin-relations are interconnected and dynamic. They coexist and interrelate in and among the natural, human and supernatural realms. As the viewers’ eyes are drawn closer to focus on the snippets of textual matter that are pasted and patchworked in different reading orientations and washed with ink, they may become aware that the backdrop to Master Chief is partially comprised of excerpts from the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007). This document, with its forty-six
articles, lies at the heart of new legislation—Bill C-15, Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act, which received Royal Assent on 21 June 2021 in Canada, and is positioned as the legal and ethical framework for forwarding reconciliation with Indigenous peoples as called for by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. In the lower right-hand corner, for example, a vertical slice of Article 31 is apparent. The full article reads:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.

2. In conjunction with indigenous peoples, States shall take effective measures to recognize and protect the exercise of these rights.

By purposefully selecting an incomplete piece or patch of this text, Yahgulanaas invites his viewers to critically engage and cognitively explore different meanings, connections and divergences. To a degree, Yahgulanaas’ visual-textual collages can be constructively compared to erasure poetry wherein found texts are creatively redacted and framed to become aesthetic forms that can offer a more directed social and political commentary on the original source. In the case of Indigenous erasure poetry such as Jordan Abel’s *The Place of Scraps* (2013), the Nisga’a poet appropriates and erases historical texts, including Canadian ethnographer Marius Barbeau’s *Totem Poles* (1950), to present a biting critique of colonialism on the Northwest Coast, with its aggressive drive to appropriate land and cultural heritage and erase Indigenous peoples from the future narrative. The politics of land and erasure are also cleverly layered on Yahgulanaas’ collages. In *Sinking into the Ocean*, we see collaged sections of the map of Greater Vancouver showing patches of Langley, the University Endowment Lands, Delta and Coquitlam—places and names imposed on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territories of the heč̓q̓an̓q̓meθ̓-speaking Musqueam, Stó:lō, Kwikwetlem and Tsawwassen peoples. In the top right-hand corner, we may perceive an ancestral figure whose symbolic white tracks erase or ironically white-out the colonial settler topographies of railroads, streets, avenues, parks, golf courses, ferry terminals and the like. Circled in the black, red-rimmed beak that reaches into the mapped pink terrain are the words “Indian Reserve”—the designation given to the small plots of land, over three hundred in total, which were carved out of British Columbia in the nineteenth century to contain the Indigenous population or “Indian Bands” who were violently dispossessed of their rights, heritage and land. Following the right-hand border down below the air bubbles that fizz up the plane and below the partial maps and index, you can spy a portion of a ledger listing “ice cream”. Here we have an absurdist collapsing together of diverse worlds from the topographies of unceded territories to the historical accounting of frozen treats. These are drawn together by a gaggle of enigmatic characters with eyes,
tongues, teeth and beaks and bodily appendages wriggling upward through a watery realm. As with his other recent collages and paintings, for *Sinking into the Ocean*, Yahgulanaas decorated the back (verso) of the work. In many cases, the backs of his paintings, including the stretcher bars, are collaged with maps that the artist has found, and for him they represent “constructed or imagined geographies”.

As with the *Rotational* series, the idea is that we can explore the work, looking at it from different angles, either portrait or landscape, not only from the front (recto) but also from behind, maybe with the help of a mirror, to conjure up different meanings or to trouble established ways of knowing. In *Sinking into the Ocean*, the back collage is not dominated by maps, but rather by the pages of a ledger dated 1928 with handwritten entries documenting diverse expenditures from freight, ferry fares and laundry to phone calls, national packers and the Pleasant Cafe. Overlaid on the upper right-hand quadrant is the key to the 1958 map-fragment of Courtenay, Vancouver Island, on the front. It includes reference to “Lands alienated […] Surveyed Timber Lease or License, Indian Reserve […] Government Reserve” and more. This key or legend is embellished with Yahgulanaas’ signature, the date and the title of the work. Like all of Yahgulanaas’ works, this two-sided collage is brimming with playful gestures, political accents and punning quips, revealing mischief to be a critical attribute of his art.

But what does mischief mean when applied to an artist’s practice? The conceptual artist Joel Rudinow argues that mischief is exemplified in Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades and in particular in his seminal piece, *Fountain*, 1917, a porcelain urinal signed “R. Mutt”. In ‘creating’ and submitting *Fountain* for an exhibition, Duchamp mischievously set out to expose the authority, discourse and dynamics of the art world and its consecrating institutions and agents, including artists. Duchamp wanted to poke, to provoke, to question the apparatus and its power to define art and determine the aesthetics of taste. In conversation in 1971, he said the ready-mades were not solely created to challenge the system but also for “distraction” and “amusement”.

Accordingly, mischief can be defined as a particular form of play that can be entertaining in effect while simultaneously serious.
in its intent to disrupt the status quo, to unsettle dominant power relations, to transform and even reverse our cultural categories, our naturalized behaviours and norms, as Foucault implored. Rather than perceiving mischief as a deviant and even harmful mode of behaviour, in Yahgulanaas’ art practice, it is embraced as a means of empowerment to trouble, tease and tickle, and open up a space for engagement where new possibilities and understandings can unfold.

A similar strategy is manifest in the paintings and collages of Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, an award-winning artist and curator and Salish member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Nation, Montana, whose I See Red: Target, 1992, was the first painting created by a Native American artist to be purchased by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. More shocking still, the year of acquisition was 2020. In the artist’s opinion, this national institution’s slowness to acknowledge and acquire works of contemporary Indigenous artists is that “because of popular myth-making, Native Americans are seen as vanished. It helps assuage the government’s guilt about an undocumented genocide, as well as stealing the whole country”.[11] In her 1992 Mischief, Indian Land series, she appropriates and collages commercial and media images and pithy texts, and paints and works the canvas to critique this violent mythologizing. The Cree artist Kent Monkman also literally and metaphorically harnesses mischief in constructing his revisionist history paintings. More specifically, he positions his alter ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle (a pun on mischief) in the pictorial frame of action to disrupt and subvert the colonial narratives of the encounters between European settlers and Indigenous peoples in Canada.[12]

Despite the seriousness of the issues indexed in Yahgulanaas’ oeuvre, from his early political cartooning of the 1970s to the present there are always elements of mischief and play, from the expressive and sometimes comic images, through punning titles and visual narratives, to interactive components, symbolic materials and more. Thus, Mischief Making sets out to explore the dynamic nature, the philosophical underpinnings and plasticity of Haida manga as a uniquely hybrid aesthetic, as it modulates into different media. The book is organized into five chapters. The first chapter offers a biographical portrait of Yahgulanaas and traces the maturation of his visual practice and the advent of Haida manga. Each subsequent chapter focuses on a theme. They cover the aesthetics of hybridization and the revolution in framelines; the significance of words and narrative practices; the materiality of memory and repurposed forms and the effects of rotating matters.

3 Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, personal communication, 13 October 2014.
6 For a critical and expansive theorization of kin relationality among human and non-human or more-than-human beings in Indigenous worldviews, see Todd, Zoe, “Refracting the State through Human-Fish Relations: Fishing, Indigenous Legal Orders and Colonialism in North/Western Canada”, Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education, and Society, vol 7, no 1, 2018, pp 60–75.
8 Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, personal communication, 28 June 2021.
Orcinus, Orca, SKAAnaa, 2019