

ADRIAN STIMSON: The Immortal Buffalo Boy

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ART GALLERY OF REGINA
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Art Gallery of Regina



Two images from Collin Zipp, *Shaman Exterminator: On the Trail of the Woodcraft Indian's with the Buffalo Boy Scouts of America*. Paved Arts, Saskatoon, 2012

Cover: Doug Willis 2009, *Buffalo Boy's You Can Roller Skate in a Buffalo Herd*.

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Once upon a time, Adrian Stimson was a politician, a band councillor for the Siksika (Blackfoot) Nation, in Southern Alberta, and had a national profile. But he left it all to become an artist. Adrian first went to the Alberta College of Art and Design (Calgary), where he graduated with distinction, and, later, for his Masters degree at the University of Saskatchewan, in Saskatoon, where he still lives. Sometime in 2005, while in the MFA program,¹ Adrian received a visit from, and is now periodically inspired or possessed by, and becomes, Buffalo Boy.

Buffalo Boy is a kind of trickster. Words in any language fail to capture this being. Though for the ease of our gender imposing culture “he” is called “Boy.” But really, they are neither man nor woman but eternal youth dancing gender. They are timeless and timely, a return of the repressed, eraser of boundaries. Their multiplicity is spread over a rainbow of performance personas. Even his alter ego has alter egos!: there is the Shaman Exterminator, a warrior whose mission is to expose the misappropriation of Indigenous culture by the non-Indigenous; the shopping loving Campy Cowboy;² or Miss Chief, a demure beauty pageant winner. In photographs he appears crucified; in the guise of a nylon wearing priest; cavorting in the desert (Burning Man) sweating under fifty pounds of buffalo robe; or lying face down with nothing on at all.

In his (un)usual Buffalo Boy attire, Adrian sports a burlesque collage of “Indian” and cowboy outfits with a feminine twist: a horned buffalo robe, or a robe and silver cowboy hat; cowboy boots; fur shorts with a long, broad tail in the front; fishnet stockings; imitation pearl necklace; braided wig; “war-paint” and lipstick. The mash-up reminds us that many First Nations folks dressed in and continue to wear western-style clothes, and that Hollywood routinely dressed non-Indigenous actors in Indian drag. At the same time, the get-ups echoes powwow regalia that increasingly incorporates shiny synthetic fabrics and other glitz. The costume also parodies perennial fashion trends that misappropriate the Indian look without regard for actual Indigenous people and cultures. Through his performance persona, Stimson informs non-Indigenous people, and reminds colonized Indigenous folks, that gender roles were less rigid and two-spirit people were honoured prior to contact. He combines the sacred and the profane, the serious and the silly, leaving most people uneasy about whether we should laugh, be upset, or join the dance. Buffalo Boy is a mirror (ball) reflecting our multiple natures.

Buffalo Boy is sometimes demure, peeking and teasing from behind a tree; occasionally found slinking through the crowd, fluttering thickened eyelashes, and stroking equestrian statues.³ Other times, they are as regal as an enthroned queen or pope conferring benedictions. Then again they can appear as a whip-cracking militant, seductive, an exciting date or shopping companion, a genial uncle, even as a ceremony leader.⁴

Beneath the glamour, play, and paint are scars. Buffalo Boy parodies Buffalo Bill⁵ who in his late 19th century Wild West shows condensed the destruction of Plains civilizations into theatre in which the boundaries between the real and the performed were often parchment thin. His ‘real-live’ cowboy and Indian battles often featured the actual combatants of those wars. Buffalo Boy also mourns the destruction of the bison, his people’s primary source of food, clothing, shelter, identity, and a significant aspect of Blackfoot spirituality.⁶ He marks the human-made disaster as a concerted effort to demoralize and impoverish Indigenous people, to decimate, contain and control them, releasing the land for colonial expansion, ownership, and exploitation. In *Buffalo Boy’s Confessional Indulgence* (included in this exhibition), Stimson interrogates the role of Christianity in aggressive assimilation. He went to Indian Residential School as a day student. His father went to Indian Residential School and ended up working for various similar schools with his wife across Canada. Despite all this, Indigenous people persist and thrive. Buffalo Boy embodies this spirit of Indigenous adaptation, survival, and future possibilities.

The Immortal Buffalo Boy, the exhibition at the Art Gallery of Regina, is an assemblage of props, outfits, and photo-documentation of nearly two decades of Buffalo Boy performances. In addition, there are related museum-like displays and video installations, such as *Buffalo Boy’s the Two Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Buffalo Boy’s First Peep Holes*. I read this exhibition as the work of Adrian Stimson, curator, who has surveyed the efforts of his alter-ego(s) and presents this collection as an attempt to elucidate and connect meanings that might not be evident to those who have only seen the occasional performance or photograph. In this rendering—an active life mostly stilled for contemplation—Buffalo Boys’ playful but melancholic wisdom emerges.

Until very recently, Indigenous art was, as the Indigenous Australian artist Richard Bell explains, “a white thing.”⁷ White people sold it, collected it, showed it, and were its experts. In the mid-80s everything changed. Much of the art became less customary or illustrative of traditional stories. It became more contemporary, and Indigenous curators emerged to help record, exhibit, and shape it. Because getting non-customary Indigenous art into the public art galleries was difficult, or what did get in was not always well-presented, understood, and contextualized, many early Indigenous curators and critical writers were also artists.⁸ Stimson is in this company but goes further, he becomes his own collector-curator-visual chronicler. And who could do it better? He’s the only one to have experienced every Buffalo Boy performance!

More than a retrospective of performance artifacts, *The Immortal Buffalo Boy* is a counter-archive in which Stimson recreates, intervenes, and upsets the colonial archive. The collection interrogates the nature of non-Indigenous museums and art gallery displays of Indigenous culture and presents a model for an Indigenous version. His collection is personal and subjective rather than attempting to be an objective and clinical display. He queers the archive by including high and low culture, historical artifacts and contemporary objects; things that might be real artifacts with artifakes, toys and camp crafts.

If this is not complicated enough, Stimson invites one of Buffalo Boy’s alter egos, the Shaman Exterminator, to co-curate. *Shaman Exterminator: On the Trail of the Woodcraft Indian’s with the Buffalo Boy Scouts of America* “explores the history and resulting popular culture of the Woodcraft Indian movement created by Ernest Thompson Seton,” a non Indigenous immigrant from the UK who “created The League of Woodcraft Indians, an American youth program...for non-Indian boys,” and, later, girls, which was the precursor of the Boy Scouts. Seton’s books include: *The Gospel of the Redman* and *Woodcraft and Indian Lore*, works that misappropriate, distort and often invent Indigenous knowledge, shifting them to echo Eurocentric Christian morality. “The Shaman Exterminator’s ... duty is to expose the world of ‘Indian’ appropriation, to re-appropriate that which was appropriated; to explore the complex web of non-native Indian identity, ideology and practice in Western Culture.”⁹

Running throughout this exhibition is an awareness of the complexity of appearances, identity formation, and authenticity. At no point does Stimson suggest that he is free from being as entangled as everyone else in the web of colonial images of Indigenous folks. In fact, he finds some pleasure in playing with these representations. But the play is ironic and full of comic reversals that drain them of their power to further distort. Importantly, he does not clear the field for an unadulterated authentic Indigenous. He does not replace one set of troubled narratives with an authoritative other. He tries everything on; placing and replacing accessories as needed. At times, this work has a melancholy air, a sense that there is no firm place of being; everything is a play of illusions. However, I find an exciting sense of agency here. The pairing of the trickster (Buffalo Boy) with the curator (Stimson) is a unique autobiographical performance, a joining of the spontaneous and the contemplative, heart and head. The exhibition is a complex representation of a contemporary Indigenous imagination and being.

David Garneau
2014

¹ *Buffalo Boy’s Heart on: Buffalo Boy’s 100 Years of Wearing His Heart on His Sleeve*, MFA exhibition, University of Saskatchewan, 2005.

² *Buffalo Boy’s Why Not?* Performance, Banff, AB, 2009.

³ *Buffalo Boy’s Coal Jubilee*. Performance, Victoria Park, Toronto, 2012.

⁴ *ibid*.

⁵ *Putting the WILD back into the West: Belle Sauvage and Buffalo Boy*. Performance with Lori Blondeau, Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, SK, 2004.

⁶ *Bison in the Bowl: This is Indian Land*, performance, Saskatoon 2005.

⁷ <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/great/art/bell.html> Accessed Sept. 15, 2014.

⁸ For example, Robert Houle; Gerald McMaster; Joane Cardinal Schubert; Bob Boyer; Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskewew; Lori Blondeau; Dana Claxton; and more recently, Greg Hill; Skawannati Fragnito; Steve Loft; Patricia Deadman; Cheryl L’Hirondelle; Elwood Jimmy; Nadia Myre; Ryan Rice; Bonnie Divine; Heather Igloliorte; and many others.

⁹ Artist statement by Adrian Stimson, October 23, 2012: <http://www.pavedarts.ca/2012/the-shaman-extremator/> Accessed Sept, 10, 2014.



Happy Grove. *Buffalo Boy in the Black Rock Desert*, 2005.



Henri Robedeau, Adrian Stimson and Lori Blondeau/Buffalo Boy and Belle Savage. *The Life and Times of Buffalo Boy*. The Works, Edmonton, 2011.