

lessLIE: Sale(ish) Art

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Losing Vitality (2009)
acrylic on canvas
triptych, each panel 24 inches square

lessLIE: *SALE(ISH) ART*

By Brian Grison

LESSLIE WAS BORN IN THE COAST SALISH COMMUNITY OF DUNCAN, BRITISH COLUMBIA IN 1973. HE HAS A BACHELORS DEGREE IN FIRST NATIONS STUDIES FROM VANCOUVER ISLAND UNIVERSITY AND A MASTERS DEGREE IN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA. BECAUSE HE WAS RAISED OUTSIDE HIS CULTURE IN SEATTLE, WASHINGTON UNTIL THE AGE OF NINETEEN, HIS ACADEMIC STUDIES BECAME A RESEARCH PROJECT INTO THE MEANING OF COAST SALISH CULTURE, ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH WESTERN CULTURE, AND HIS OWN ROLE IN THIS UNCOMFORTABLE INTERACTION.

lessLIE, whose colonized name is Leslie Robert Sam, is an artist with a political mission. As in many of the titles of his drums, paintings and prints, his decolonized name, lessLIE, is a rebellious critique of the hegemony of the English language, which for his community represents racism, imperialism and genocide, and he confronts these destructive forces through his art. The exhibition in Prince George, consisting of thirteen acrylic paintings on drums with animal hide, acrylic on canvas and limited-edition serigraphic prints on paper, continues his exploration of issues of hybridity and marginality through visual and textual puns that confront the problematic nature of traditional practice within contemporary culture.

Coast Salish art is largely based in a vocabulary of symbolic designs, stylized circles and crescents, u-shapes and s-shapes. Within this format, lessLIE makes art that is traditional, but also contemporary and personal. In *Sale(ish) Culture* he assembles repeating shapes in the same way words are connected to make communicable meaning.

As with his name, the works of art in this exhibition, such as the drum diptych, *YOUR* and *THEIR*, lessLIE uses textual punning in the title. This parallels the traditional technique in Coast Salish art known as visual punning in which the features of one form can suggest an alternative or conflicting meaning. Through reversing the colours, in these two drums made with black, burgundy acrylic and sparkles over white gesso on hide stretched over a circular wood frame, identical images represent conflicts of ownership of land, natural resources and culture. The repeat pattern of faces with their sleepy or baleful expression, refers to the wealth creating and sharing symbolism of the spindle whorl in Coast Salish culture. The traditional wooden spindle whorl is central to the private and community act of making wool for blankets and clothing as a form of cultural and commercial wealth. Within colonial society, which First Nations peoples experience as institutionalized thievery, matters of community and cultural ownership are still especially poignant. In this diptych, lessLIE confronts issues of the commercialization of art and cultural practice within First Nations communities as well as the appropriation of Coast Salish culture by the Canadian nation-state.

While acknowledging that vital modern cultures naturally evolve, the triptych, *Losing Vitality*, represents the potential 'dark age' that comes with the loss of cultural information

within indigenous traditions, largely resulting from contact with modernity. While each of these panels carries the same image, a possible synthesis of revolving salmon, bird and whale, the bright red and black of the first one is drained into ever-duller grays and black in the next two panels. Rather than being judgmental, lessLIE reads this triptych as a metaphor of Coast Salish cultural assimilation into popular culture.

Overlaying both the political content of these works and their indirect sense of being ethnographic artifacts, lessLIE's paintings radiate a minimalist sensuality of surface reminiscent of Frank Stella or Donald Judd. While his works are essentially one-shot and hand-drawn, they are obviously hand painted. He does not employ templates or masking tape or white acrylic to make his colours sharp, opaque, flat or the edges crisp and accurate. In order to achieve the required colour density with transparent colours, he often applies several layers, resulting in passages that are thicker or more translucent or glossier. These nuanced surfaces give the paintings a distinctly personal, hand-crafted and even a rather naive quality that encourages a meditative and philosophic reading of his art and teaching.

EXHIBITION

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