

Richard William Hill
&
David Garneau

Trigger Warning

We will be discussing, watching, and reading about difficult themes and issues surrounding settler/extractive colonialism, repatriation, and Residential Schools, which may be traumatic for some. If you need time and space, feel free to take it.

Let us all try to remember to be respectful and generous, and to treat each other with care.

Richard William Hill

Richard William Hill (?- present)

- Hill is Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Studies at Emily Carr University of Art and Design, and Curator of Canadian Art at Vancouver Art Gallery.
- His is a prominent critic, curator, and art historian of Cree heritage.
- He is known for his extensive work on contemporary North American (and especially Canadian) Indigenous art.



(photo by Scott Little; courtesy the Vancouver Art Gallery)

Reading Hill's "Is There an Indigenous Way to Write About Indigenous Art?"

“Now I believe that it is true, in a very narrow sense, that non-Indigenous ideas are dangerous. This is just because all ideas are potentially dangerous. The best way to manage that danger is to experience a diverse range of ideas and cultivate the ability to engage them deeply and critically. Bracketing off whole cultures worth of ideas has the paradoxical effect of making people more vulnerable to bad thinking rather than less, because the bad ideas just sneak in the back door anyway.” (Hill, para. 6).

Reading Hill's "Is There an Indigenous Way to Write About Indigenous Art?"

“Also, in purely practical terms, how would you bracket off Indigenous culture? Where would you draw the line? No more pop culture? How about all of the postcolonial critiques of colonial representation? Indigenous authors have been involved in that discussion, but so have many others. How could we untangle which bits are ‘ours,’ and what help would it be to do so?”

(Hill, para. 7).

Reading Hill's "Is There an Indigenous Way to Write About Indigenous Art?"

“Another challenge is that many of the Indigenous intellectual traditions that might be relevant were brutally interrupted by colonialism and then reconstructed, at times rather clumsily (and all too often with a pan-Indian New Age patina), in the 1970s revival of Indigenous cultures. This means that accessing traditional thought can, at times, be a hermeneutically challenging undertaking requiring the ability to critically parse both historical texts and contemporary oral narrative to arrive at a convincing interpretation.”

(Hill, para. 11).

Reading Hill's "Is There an Indigenous Way to Write About Indigenous Art?"

“In fact, there are so many cross-cultural influences and such diversity of approaches in an art world (and broader culture) that is now in many senses global, that it has become increasingly difficult to assign ownership of particular approaches exclusively to a particular cultural tradition. The question should not be, “Which tool is properly ours?” but rather, “Which tool works for the job at hand? ” (Hill, para. 14).

Reading Hill's "Is There an Indigenous Way to Write About Indigenous Art?"

“The immediate response to forced assimilation is almost certain to be a desire to preserve what is under threat. But if we do this unreflexively—making the tradition its own justification and our only duty to mimetically reproduce it—we risk perpetuating our own lack of agency by systematically deferring to an idealized past. This can inhibit us from deploying ideas from our intellectual heritage into new contexts where they might live with more vitality. ” (Hill, para. 16).

David Garneau

David Garneau (?- present)

- Garneau is an internationally recognized Métis artist, curator, and writer focusing on cultural issues surrounding Canadian Indigenous identities and disability studies.
- He is currently Professor of Visual Arts at the University of Regina.



David Garneau



Healing Alone, acrylic on panel, 36 x 46 cm., 2021

David Garneau



Complementary Methodologies, acrylic on panel, 50.5 x 40.5 cm., 2020.

David Garneau



Métis Academic Charm, acrylic on masonite, 50 x 40 cm., 2019.

Reading Garneau's "Writing About Indigenous Art with Critical Care"

“Indigenous evaluation of Native art happens, but rarely in print. It’s in the side-eye at an artist talk, joking-but-not-joking at an exhibition opening or a seemingly open but provocative question posted on social media, but which really targets you-know-who and you-know-what. More positively, it takes the form of the presentation of a sash, a star blanket, an eagle feather or other form of community recognition. All express judgment. They display approval or disapproval but do not qualify as art criticism. Art criticism is a sustained examination of a work’s meanings, merits, and deficits. It is a conclusion supported by reasoning.” (Garneau, para. 3)

Reading Garneau's "Writing About Indigenous Art with Critical Care"

“So far, the best Indigenous-authored texts about Indigenous art are not reviews but catalogue and academic-essays... They do not ask, for instance, if one work is better than other work, nor why considering a work as art is a more productive approach than considering it as a work of culture, an elaborate utility, or a trade good. Academic and curatorial writing assumes but does not prove quality; these sites are not about troubling their subjects. That is the role of the critic.”(Garneau, para. 4)

Reading Garneau's "Writing About Indigenous Art with Critical Care"

“A favoured tactic for settler art magazines, galleries, and museums responding to the reconciliation, decolonization, and Indigenization surge is to cede display territory – temporarily. [...] Making, holding, and sharing space reinforces settler ownership of these display territories; critical engagement jeopardizes authority, on both sides. A lack of critical care reifies settler–Indigenous binaries.” (Garneau, para. 5)

Reading Garneau's "Writing About Indigenous Art with Critical Care"

“The refusal to engage Indigenous art and persons critically positions us as permanently in a representational rather than a dialogic mode, as transmitters rather than generators of knowledge.” (Garneau, para. 6)

Reading Garneau's "Writing About Indigenous Art with Critical Care"

“Jokes and works of art often express an intuition, which is an understanding arrived at without conscious reasoning. Intuitions are affective solutions; they feel satisfying. [...] They feel right because they conform to and confirm settled opinion. Racism is an intuition of this sort.”(Garneau, para. 9)

Reading Garneau's "Writing About Indigenous Art with Critical Care"

“Such intuitions are troubled by deep social attention, including prolonged communion with people whose lives are not reducible to our apprehension. [...] [I]n the case of critical art writing, [this] is the analytic, empathetic, and imaginative consideration through the medium of words of one’s own subjective processes when engaging a work of art – this work, consciousness, is exhilarating and exhausting, a luxury and privilege. It requires time, space, quiet, and other mental, physical, emotional, and psychic resources that few Black, Indigenous, and folks of color have in abundance, and fewer still are willing to squander on such uncertain labor.” (Garneau, para. 9)

Reading Garneau's "Writing About Indigenous Art with Critical Care"

“There is another class of intuition. These are true leaps into or from the unknown. Lightning strikes. Sudden illumination is followed by thunderous conclusions and calamitous yet nurturing precipitation. [...] Intuitions *feel* right, but for the critically minded, testing is required to know if they *are* right – if their rightness extends beyond a single subject and passionate moment.”
(Garneau, para. 11)

Reading Garneau's "Writing About Indigenous Art with Critical Care"

“The flesh of art writing is *ekphrasis*, the detailed description of a work of art. Because it is a form of storytelling, because it is grounded in experience, because it is humble before its subject, because it implicates the viewing subject, because it is at once truthful and interested, because it is non-adversarial, because it attempts to understand and show understanding, description is an important element in the future of Indigenous critical art writing. Description is a high form of honoring. I am currently working on two public art projects that include consultation with elders. They will not tell me what to paint, even when I ask. Instead, they tell stories that allow me to see content. We co-produce images; their words produce pictures written in the visual vocabulary of my mind. Descriptive critical writing does the same. It is not quite a form of judgment, more a species of world-building.” (Garneau, para. 11)

Reading Garneau's "Writing About Indigenous Art with Critical Care"

“ ‘Yes,’ our Métis curator exclaims, ‘that Anishinabeg beaded vest may be “resistant” and “resurgent,” but that is true of every Indigenous beaded vest. Because all First Nations people struggle to emerge from genocide, anything they produce is evidence of “resistance” and “survival”.’ Noting this is not criticism but journalism. While this knowledge is crucial for the critic, their special role is to explain why a particular work of art is worthy of attention beyond how it exemplifies the category to which it belongs. If what you write about a work of art can be said of everything in that work’s class, and you can find nothing about its special nature to highlight, you are probably doing anthropology or sociology, not art criticism.” (Garneau, para. 14)

Reading Garneau's "Writing About Indigenous Art with Critical Care"

"In short, I differentiate between [customary culture](#), [Aboriginal art](#) and [Indigenous art](#). Each operates in its own art and evaluative worlds."

[Customary creative production](#) follows proscribed codes. While primarily made for internal display, traditional art is often shared beyond the originating community through gifting and trade. [...] Just as non-Native curators determine what enters their spaces as art, what counts as customary can only be regulated by traditional makers and knowledge keepers. While customary art welcomes appreciation from outsiders, what differentiates it from the Aboriginal and Indigenous is its immunity to their criticism. (Garneau, para. 15)

Reading Garneau's "Writing About Indigenous Art with Critical Care"

“**Aboriginal art**, a.k.a. Indian art, is an epiphenomenon of colonialism. [...] [If it has] have more meaning for non-Native consumers than for the artist's own community, it's Aboriginal art. [...]

‘**Indigenous**’ is the name for contemporary persons, spaces, and processes in those moments when they are informed by traditional and Aboriginal aspects but endeavor to operate apart from them. The Indigenous are bodies, places, works of art and ways of being that emerge from customary, Aboriginal and settler cultures but strive to be neither fully traditional nor colonized. Indigenous is a third space – sovereign sites within settler territories. Not places of assimilation, but contingent spaces where the Indigenous is performed, critiqued, produced, and reproduced as contemporary phenomena.” (Garneau, para. 15)

Reading Garneau's "Writing About Indigenous Art with Critical Care"



Kent Monkman, *The Scream*, acrylic on canvas, 213.4 x 335.3 cm, 2017.

Reading Garneau's "Writing About Indigenous Art with Critical Care"



Alex Janvier, *Indian Residential - The way of the Cross - English vs. French*, 2014, watercolour on paper, 76.3 x 57.8 cm.

Reading Garneau's "Writing About Indigenous Art with Critical Care"



Robert Houle,
Sandy Bay Residential School Series, 2009, oilstick on paper