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FLOATING TROUT SPACE - native art in cyberspace

23. Juli 1996 – [Rafael Lozano-Hemmer](#)**Artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun interviewed by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. Edited by Susie Ramsay.**

Yuxweluptun created the first Native artwork in cyberspace. "Inherent Rights, Vision Rights" is a virtual reality piece that invites the user to experience a Native Indian perspective which includes a sacred ceremony in a traditional West-Coast long house. In the interview he describes the background of his spiritual high-tech art work.

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun is a painter and photographer from the Salish tribe living on the Nak-azdli indian reservation in northern British Columbia, Canada. After getting a degree in painting in the early 80's from the Emily Carr College of Art and Design in Vancouver, his work has been "very concerned with the political structures of power, accountability to the environment, and ancestral lands." In 1992 he was invited to the Art and Virtual Environments project at the [Banff Centre](#) for the Arts in Alberta, where he created the first Native artwork in cyberspace: [Inherent Rights, Vision Rights](#), is a virtual reality piece that invites the user to experience a Native Indian perspective which includes a sacred ceremony in a traditional West-Coast long house. The piece uses real-time 3D graphics, a stereoscopic display, virtual sound, and some intuitive navigation controls. "Inherent Rights, Vision Rights" has been shown in France, Germany, Spain, Canada and other countries.

RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER: *Most of your work in painting and photography is explicitly political and polemic. Your virtual reality piece "Inherent Rights, Vision Rights" is more subtle. Did the new medium influence your expression?*

LAWRENCE PAUL YUXWELUPTUN: Virtual reality gave me a chance to do something that I consider to be very romantic, like a cultural exchange. It's true that a lot of my painting is more direct and in your face... but "Inherent Rights" is a political piece because it is designed to make people share a spiritual world where a salmon or a tree are some of the things that you pray to. I pray to a bear, for example, because I like his spirit, how he walks and



Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun

carries himself. I try to avoid the Catholic Church from entering my dream space or take away my spiritual phenomena.

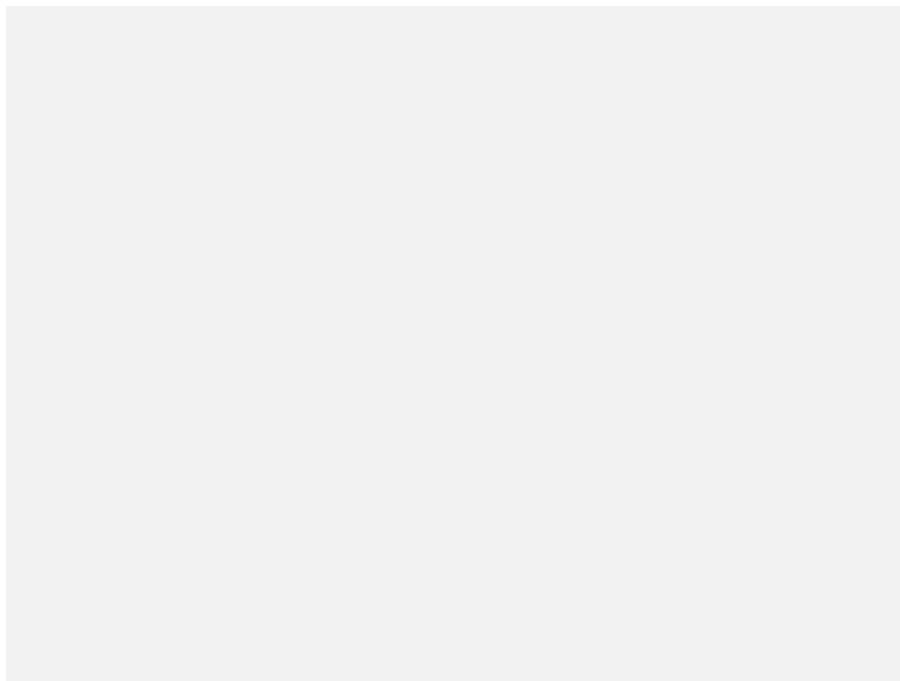
RLH: *What were some of the cultural challenges for you as a Native artist working with virtual reality systems?*

LPY: The thing about computers is that they're on a grid, they're designed in a Western concept. The curve is an equation which is very hard to create on a grid so I had to compensate my West-Coast ovoid designs. The interesting thing for me was how to combat a cultural bias in the system itself. I guess it's a question of user-friendliness. If the curve wasn't so hard to make, then a lot of other cultures would have accessibility to it more readily.

RLH: *So it's a conscious decision that you're making to use certain vocabularies from Western technology or aesthetics even.*

LPY: You have to start somewhere. For me it was taking Western culture's way of looking at things, canvas and art and now VR. Most of my work has been seen by non-Natives and it's directed at an outside audience; at the same time it is documenting Native rights and positions so it will benefit Native people in the long run. It communicates to the outside world. VR is also more

accessible to non-Natives, you can't bring it to small communities or to very remote regions of Canada. But I've invited people from my community to look at a videotape of the piece. It seemed to be quite different for them to look at Native Art on a television, on a monitor. It's impossible to explain to them how you create it without actually having a real VR piece in the community.



Scene from Inherent Rights, Vision Rights

RLH: *How do you see your work in relation to traditional Native Art? Are you creating contemporary Native myths?*

LPY: I have been told by ethnologists, 'well this isn't Indian Art'. As if they have the right to determine what Indian Art is! I can advance my culture freely in the directions that I choose. There's a lot of Native artists that are very romantic that are great --but I think there are already enough of them. It's important to record the things from right now. Today, there's so much more from the outside world that is affecting Native people and reservations. Also, there are no legends I can relate to --a killer whale jumping onto the beach and jumping at my face? If it did, it would probably be dying from some toxin. So how does that become a legend? How do you represent dioxin pollution on a totem pole?

RLH: *Even though it might have references that are culturally specific, "Inherent Rights, Vision Rights" creates a virtual space that I can visit here in Madrid. Do you think you can convey your own cultural background to a person who was previously foreign to it until they saw your piece?*

LPY: The success of it is that I took out language as a barrier. I took out Native and took out English and French. We sampled sounds of animal noises, this song of an eagle, fire, drums, tambourines. I wanted people to have an understanding that they were going into something really heavy. That's what I mean about bringing it back to the very basic, natural experiences in life. It gives you something that you wouldn't have an idea of if you weren't Native. I can give you an instantaneous feeling of what it's like to walk with spirits. Non-Natives cannot experience this otherwise because they're not brought into long houses.

RLH: *Can you describe some of the choices you made in order to convey the solemnity of a sacred Native ceremony? For instance the choice of colours, the pace of the piece, where you can go...?*

LPY: One of the things is that I made it so you couldn't walk through walls and I put in gravity so you stayed on the ground. The moon in the sky was to give a sense of scale. When I was first making it, I flew around and I was going, 'this is cool, but I don't normally fly in a long house'. The ground is all Indian, is all Native, and that's basically how we look at life: everything is Native, everything is sacred. So that's part of what I wanted to show. You may put these cities on it but it's still Indian land. You can call it whatever you want, you can call it Vancouver, it's still Salish land, it's still my Motherland. So you do get a total virtual Native perspective. You cannot think in a Western concept because you are visually experiencing a Native perspective and yet the whole phenomena of VR is in a Western context. Simultaneously the unilateral structures of different cultures meet and it gives you a sense of sharing.

RLH: *If it had been done with a Western perspective, you would probably be able to go to the moon, conquer the moon, put a flag on the moon...*

LPY: ...and call it a reservation (laughs).

RLH: *There is one element of technology represented in the VR piece.*

LPY: There's two. When you first start, you hear the sound of a car turning off, then the door opens and closes. You walk along and hear natural sounds, wind, insects, birds, wolves, and then you hear a loud airplane flying by. This happens all the time, you could be in the middle of nowhere, in the bush kayaking away singing Indian songs and suddenly you hear this wwwrrrrr.

RLH: *In the context of the serene and meditative walk towards the place of worship that has been established, the airplane roaring by is very unnerving and disruptive. Almost more so in this context than if it had been programmed into a war game for example.*

LPY: I think that it's important that I show the outside world that this is how it is on a reservation and that this is what segregation means. Are we going to have reservations for the next 500 years? Can I walk outside those boundaries and are they going to continue to point their guns, are they going to kill me? I tried to let other people think about these things at least.

The ecosystem aspects of my work have to do with questioning the directions of the political structures of power. This land is not an outhouse, it's not a toilet for people to urinate their civilization's toxins wherever they wish, as they see fit. Civilization always needs a direction, it can't just jump into something and say, 'let's go in this direction'. There is very little accountability for those things - in Canada for instance, they're always pointing their fingers somewhere else, but it's really the Brazil of the North. I think Greenpeace should stay home in Canada where they belong. So art can be political by recording history.

That's why I like to do work that shows things like clear cuts. Clear cuts are out of sight, out of mind, and cities are protected from what's really going on with the environment - they're like cocoons.

RLH: *To what extent is "Inherent Rights" a land claim? Do you see it like that too?*

LPY: I'm not concerned with Aboriginal land claims period, because if it's all destroyed, what's worth claiming? So I've given up on that colonial concept; instead I say, 'well fuck it, share it, but let's be responsible'. In time people will wake up and realize that they are their own 100 mile radius and that they have to live within it. And that's how I look at it: you're your own 100 mile radius so look after it.

RLH: *There is a fascination with representations of violence in technology. A lot of virtual reality work is based on predatorial vision; it's antagonistic, competitive, confrontational. You chose to have instead a place where you're invited to reflect.*

LPY: I wasn't really interested in concepts of death and killing. I was more interested in life.

RLH: *Do you think there is a relationship between violence in VR and what you have been talking about - a blatant disregard for the land?*

LPY: When you lose the fear of the bear, you lose a sense of perspective of where you fit into the world. I don't find anything to pray to when I'm sitting in a clear cut because I can't hear anything. I don't have the fear of the bear because he's not there --there's no spirit inside that forest anymore. In Canada you can walk into an area where a grizzly bear is and he'll whistle. He can smell you, you're a human being, you stink. He whistles to tell you that you're in his area and then he'll wander off somewhere else. So there's a lot of respect for those types of things in my culture, things where people would have a real fear. It's like when I was in Switzerland, they had pictures of these beautiful bears - but they're extinct! So that's an example of total supremacy, of superiority. I think that attitude of supremacy is reflected in the violence you see in technology.

RLH: *What are your plans for new VR pieces?*

LPY: I have some ideas. It's like being a director and you have all these players and components. It's a symphony of programs that you have to orchestrate. I'd like to challenge the bigger computers. In Banff I played with a 3-D program. I put about 50 or 60 West-Coast ovoids in it, then I made them float in different angles, shifting the perspective. It was very abstract. It was just ovoids and curves and West-Coast designs, trout heads and... it was like this floating trout space.

[Rafael Lozano-Hemmer](#) is a conceptual artist and chemist, founder of the Techs-Mex movement. [Susie Ramsay](#) is a temporary dance choreographer of cyborg dolls. They are founders of the Canadian performance group Transition State Theory, currently based in Madrid, Spain. See also their contribution in Telepolis [Spain Wide Web](#) ([Rafael Lozano-Hemmer](#))

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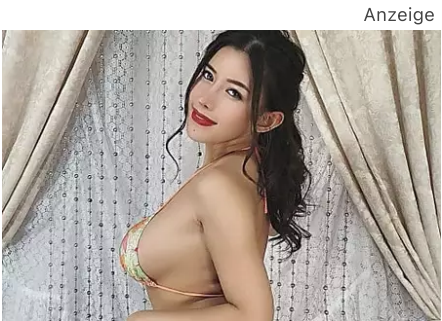
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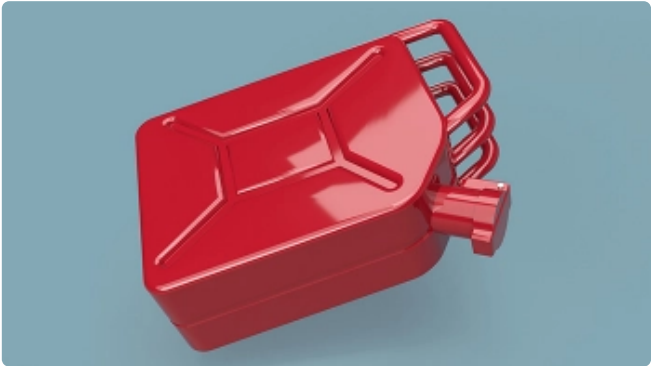


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