

# THE SUBJECT OF DISPLACEMENT:

A response to the judicial decision regarding what constitutes a work of art that is neither Canadian nor Indian enough to be part of the said collection

by Gerald McMaster

In the late nineteenth century the American entertainer William F. Cody, alias "Buffalo Bill," brought together several aboriginal people, whom he called "his Indians," as part of his Wild West Show. These aboriginal people willingly participated, no doubt realizing their particular historical circumstances. It was also a chance for them to travel with other people to unknown places, to play "Indian." They knew what their benefactor wanted and henceforth endured his fifteen years of fame. Though no account exists regarding their perspectives on this matter, it is sufficient to say that if they had occasion to, this may be what one would have said to a friendly journalist.

**Journalist:** We are here in the city of London, where the famed Wild West Show is being performed. With me now is one of the actors in the show, an Indian from across the United States Border in an area known as Rupert's Land. His name is May...tay., Maytay pooh? I'm sorry how do you pronounce it.

**The Indian:** Matapoo!

**Journalist:** Ma...ta...poo. Is that right? What does that mean?

**The Indian:** Close! It means "Side by Side"

**Journalist:** Interesting. Can I call you Mr. Side?

**Mr. Side:** Whatever!

**Journalist:** What's it like being part of this show?

**Mr. Side:** The food is different. When we thought they were serving us buffalo, we didn't realize they meant water buffalo. That kind of threw us a bit. The pay is okay, but the hours are long. We occasionally get out and see the sights. All the young women like to meet us after the show. They like to touch our hair. They're strange that way. Their men don't like it so much that they hang around us. Also, we are hurt a lot because of the tricks we're asked to do. For some of us, it's been a few years since we attacked stage coaches. We're a bit rusty. And, generally, the arenas are too small, which causes some problems when you're riding at full speed. But, if I had to do it over again, facing real bullets, well... Get the point?

**Journalist:** Yes, I do. Tell me Mr. Side, how did you come to know Buffalo Bill and agree to be part of his show?

**Mr. Side:** It was by accident. I was visiting a friend in North Dakota and this white man came to the camp and asked if anyone was interested in making some money. He said that we could just be ourselves. My friend and I looked at each other and chuckled. "What's the catch?" I asked. He said that a big white man named Cody wanted to put an end to chasing and shooting at us, Indians. Instead, he wanted to put us in an exhibition. "What's an exhibition?" asked my friend. The man replied: "Oh, it's like what we've been doing to each other all these years; you know, chasing and shooting each other. Only this time, it is strictly for fun. All you have to do is dress up in your old buckskins, ride horses and pretend to shoot the white man. You get paid for it. What do you think?"

Shoot a white man and be paid for it! Somehow the idea seemed too good to be true, yet at the same time it was odd. I thought to myself: "We are used to playing war-games amongst ourselves. No one gets hurt, perhaps only someone's feelings and pride, but at least we live to return the act and brag about it. We all did this to each other; that was however,





before the white man came and spoiled it all by using real bullets. Many of our people died after that. They kind of spoiled the fun."

**Journalist:** So you agreed to join?

**Mr. Side:** Yes, we both agreed as did some of the other boys. He said that we'd be joined by Indians from other tribes. He thought that maybe there would be about a hundred of us. We realize his exhibition would not be so successful without us in it. In fact, we are the reason so many curious people came to see the show. Buffalo Bill usually keeps to himself. We call him "Mostoos-senow" (translation: "the buffalo guy"). He doesn't much care to hang around with us. In front of famous white people he is very different, calling us "his Indians." There's no reason for us to complain since we are treated fairly well. However, we miss everybody back home. I'm sure they all think that what we are doing is unusual. They didn't bother to say anything, as long as we don't come home speaking or acting funny.

**Journalist:** You said that Buffalo Bill doesn't hang around with you guys a lot, why do you think that's so?

**Mr. Side:** First, he doesn't speak any of our languages. We all have to speak English. He really isn't interested in who we are. He's much older than all of us anyhow. We have our fun with him, though he doesn't know it. Every time he comes by us, he hears us chuckling. He's very serious and businesslike. It's important for him that we don't say anything bad about him because it will spoil the show. We respect him enough for that. He can be pushy. No doubt, it's because this is his show and we should be glad we're in it, instead of being back home and doing nothing. At least here he thinks we're doing something and keeping out of trouble.

**Journalist:** You're not the only people in the show. I hear there are performers from other places?

**Mr. Side:** That's right. There are white war-soldiers from all over; cowboys, people called Mexican, Syrian and Arabian who are very good horse riders. There are men called Cossacks, too. Oh yes, there are some white men that play very strange music. One guy plays with a drum and the others play with funny looking things that make sounds like a flute. They all play at once. No one sings. For us Indians, we would rather sing. That is our instrument. All the performers get along though. Sometimes we go out together, but usually we stick to our own people.

**Journalist:** I hear that Buffalo Bill has been collecting all sorts of things. What do you think he's going to do with all that stuff?

**Mr. Side:** Yes, I heard Mostoos-senow likes to collect things. Us Indians, we don't

Above: *Speaking to their Mother*, Rebecca Belmore, 1991-92, Standing Buffalo, Saskatchewan. Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite: Publicity poster for Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and Congress of Rough Riders of the World, from the time of a tour of Europe (c. 1903). Also a photo of a portion of the Buffalo Bill company taken in London, England.

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know what's the point. He must have a big house. We're told he likes paintings done by white men who come out to where we live. They make pictures about us and our territory. My people don't like being looked at. Sometimes, these pictures show battles between the white man and us. Usually, we're losing the battles, which isn't always true. We do pictures like that too, only we're winning, but he's not interested in them. What he likes is our worn-out clothes, which we sometimes give to him because we don't need them anymore. That makes him very happy. In fact, there are a lot of white men who come to our homes looking to buy old stuff. Our people think it's odd to save this stuff and not use it. What a concept! We don't think much about it. Most of our people are happy just to get some money for them.

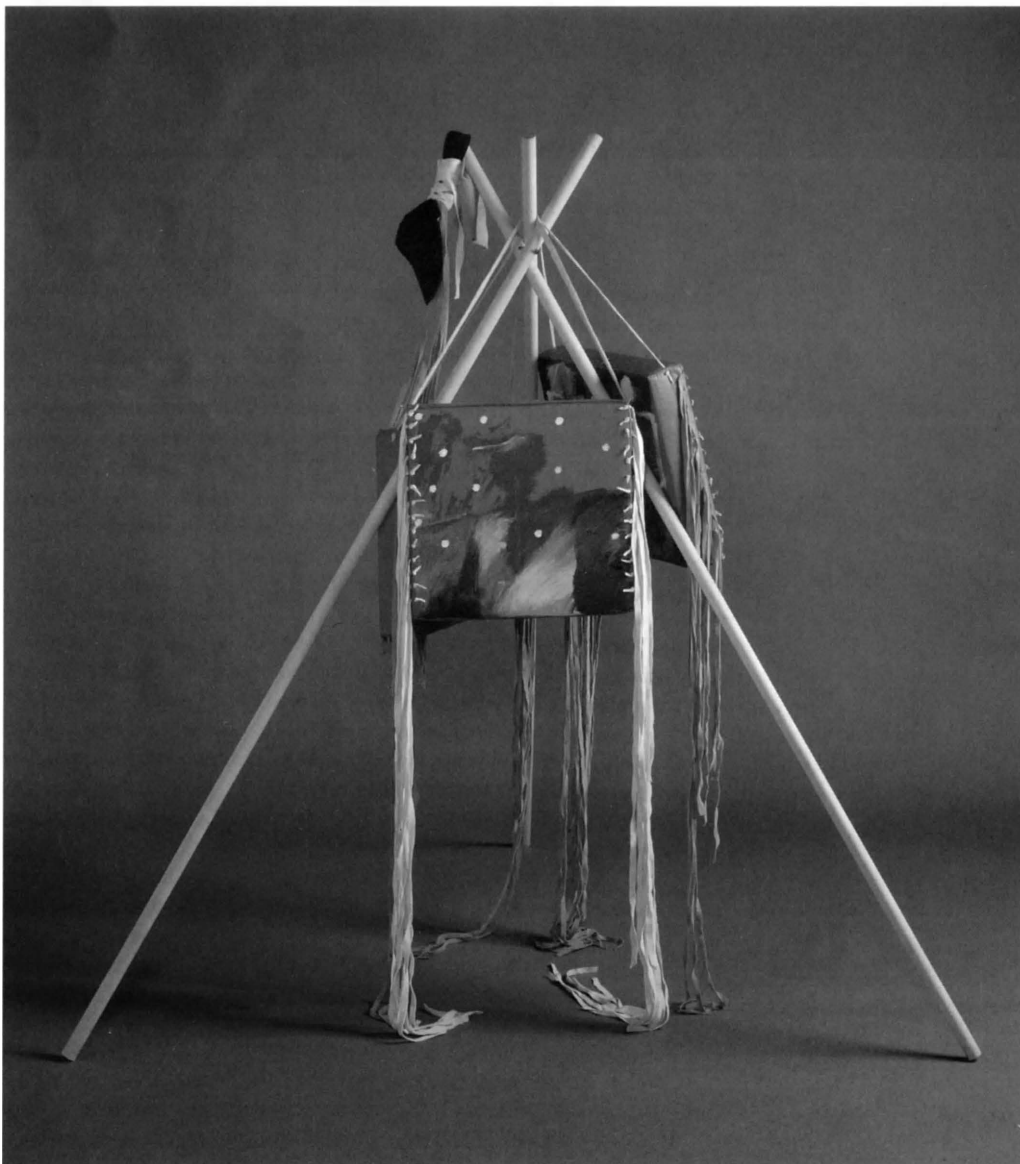
**Journalist:** I want to thank you Mr. Side for this opportunity to talk. I hope we will see each other again. One final question before you go. I want to ask: "Why are you named Matapoo?"



An Act to give effect to a request by the Senate and House of Commons of Canada...WHEREAS CANADA has requested and consented to the enactment of an Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom to give effect to the provision hereinafter set forth and the Senate and the House of Commons of Canada in Parliament assembled do hereby request Her Majesty requesting that Her Majesty be pleased to cause a Bill to be enacted for the Parliament of the United Kingdom to give effect to the Constitution Act, 1982 set out in Schedule 1 to this Act and shall come into force as provided in Part II of this Act. 2. No Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom passed after the Constitution Act, 1982 comes into force shall extend to Canada as part of its law... This Act may be cited as the Canada Act 1982... PART I. CANADIAN CHARTER OF RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS...25. The guarantee in this Charter of certain rights and freedoms shall not be construed so as to abrogate or derogate from any aboriginal, treaty or other rights or freedoms that pertain to the aboriginal peoples of Canada including (a) any rights or freedoms that have been recognized by the Royal Proclamation of October 7, 1763; and (b) any rights or freedoms that may be acquire

Above: *Premises for Self Rule: The Constitution Act*, Robert Houle, 1994, oil on canvas, photo emulsion on canvas, laser cut vinyl, 152.4 x 304.8 cm. Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank. Courtesy Garnet Press, Toronto.

Below: *Bases Stolen from the Cleveland Indians and a Captured Yankee*, Gerald McMaster, 1989, mixed media, 159.5 cm high. Courtesy McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg.



**Mr. Side:** You don't give up do you? But if it will help, this is why. First it's not my only name, but I won't explain that part. It's what you call a nickname given to me by others. One time Mostoos-senow got very upset because all the performers weren't listening to him. You see he likes to command attention. He kind of forgets that we all don't speak the same language as he does. So, this one time I went and stood beside him and started to interpret to all the Indians, using my hands, like this. You call it "sign language." We use it all the time because where I'm from we all speak different languages, and it's the only way we can understand each other. Anyhow, this got him upset, because he didn't know what I was doing. He thought I was making fun of him, when really I was trying to make sense of him for everyone else. The more upset he got, the more everyone laughed. He soon realized that we weren't making fun of him. I don't think he ever understood us. Anyhow, the others gave me that name because I stood beside him. I think he eventually respected us for that.

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