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Buffalo Boy: Then and Now

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Buffalo Boy:

➤ THEN AND NOW ➤

Ryan Rice and Carla Taunton

Prancing through the crowd at *Corralling Art: Curatorial Practice in the Prairies and Beyond* in Saskatoon (2007), brandishing his whip and shaking his tailfeather, Adrian Stimson's anti-colonial, gender-bending persona, Buffalo Boy, a parody of Buffalo Bill, resurrects the turn-of-the-century staged frontier spectacles well known from Wild West travelling shows. Part drag performer, part shapeshifter, Stimson's Buffalo Boy relies on his prairie-nurtured chameleon intuition — an amalgamation of Rez smarts and street smarts with traditional Indigenous knowledge and contemporary queer theory — to camp up colonialism, sexuality and authenticity. Stimson notes that "Buffalo Boy is a trickster character. He's campy, ridiculous and absurd, but he is also a storyteller who exposes cultural and societal truths." In representing himself through a multitude of guises, Stimson's Buffalo Boy toys with becoming an icon of destiny and destruction. These forces merge to reflect transition, survivance and growth within Blackfoot and contemporary North American Western/Prairie societies, challenging historical discourses of difference. In this way, Stimson's Buffalo Boy persona participates in what Gerald Vizenor calls Native survivance, an idea that links Indigenous survival, resistance and continuance to the presence of stories and the continued acts of re-telling. "More than survival, more than endurance or mere response," Vizenor argues, "stories of survivance are an active presence... [and] are the creases of sovereignty."¹

Stimson nurtured his Buffalo Boy character at Burning Man, a yearly arts festival in Nevada's Black Rock City dedicated to community, art, self-expression and self-reliance. It was through Burning Man that Stimson realized the necessity of being radically self-determined and self-reliant. A staple in Burning Man's community, he filmed the 2006 performance *Buffalo Boy's*





Adrian Stimson. *Shaman Exterminator Sunrise 2*, 2005. Photo: Happy Grove. Courtesy: the artist.



Adrian Stimson and Lori Blondeau.
Buffalo Boy and Belle Sauvage:
Putting the WILD Back into the WEST
 (Polaroid from performance tableaux), 2008. Photo: Henri Robideau.
 Courtesy: Adrian Stimson.

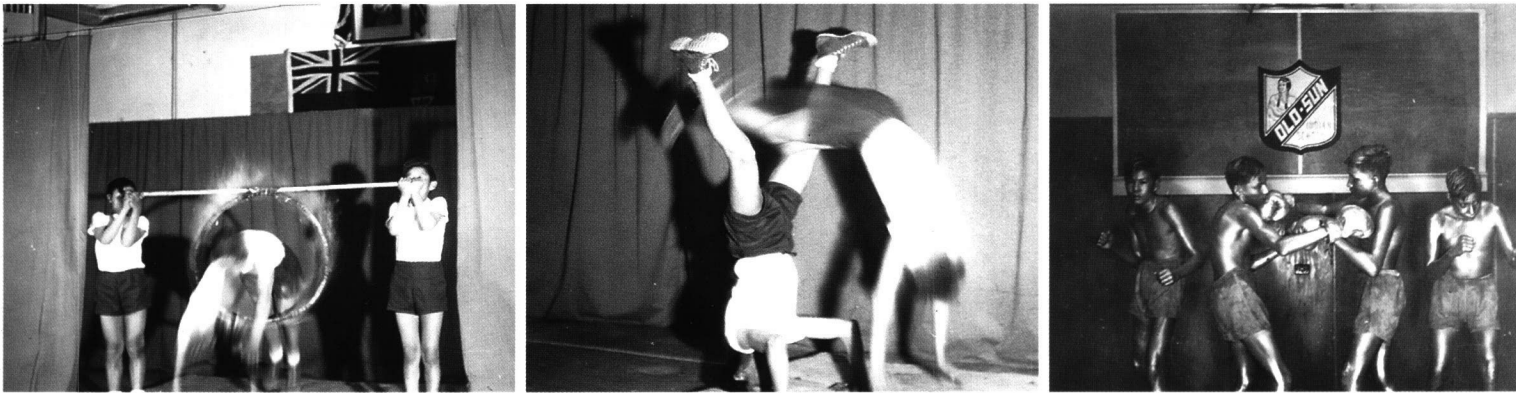
✦ ...HE SIMULTANEOUSLY
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Shaman Exterminator's what about the Red Man. The film captures Buffalo Boy's alter ego, the Shaman Exterminator, a fighter of new age misrepresentations of Aboriginal traditional knowledge moving freely in the desert. The filmed performance recalls the comedic western, silently filmed in black-and-white and capturing characteristic zaniness and humour. Buffalo Boy is portrayed running in every direction of a

grand space where buffalo once roamed free, exorcizing misguided truths by crawling ritualistically across the desert of Burning Man and touching upon notions of greed and guilt, obedience and mischief.

Remixing and re-signifying the Master Narrative of colonial history, Stimson's Buffalo Boy confronts contemporary structures of power through a neo-trickster approach, reawakening the indigenous figure of play associated with strategies of humour and subversion. Invited by the Glenbow Museum to mine their collection on the eve of the 20th anniversary of the controversial milestone exhibit *The Spirit Sings*, Stimson set Buffalo Boy free to roam its archives and excavate the amassed material culture. The outcome from *Tracing History: Presenting the Unpresentable* (16 February – 22 June, 2008), which also featured artists Terrance Houle, Faye HeavyShield and Tanya

Hartnett, was Stimson's installation *The Two-Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Buffalo Boy's First Peep Holes*. Focusing on the museological, anthropological and ethnographic approach employed by the Glenbow in creating the Spirit Sings exhibition, Stimson critiques the practice of displaying living cultures behind glass. Stimson's installation included a collection of objects, artifacts and cabinets of curiosities, which contained Buffalo Boy's collection called *Material Culture Manifest* that included the Shaman Exterminator's regalia, Buffalo Boy paraphernalia, and mix-and-match drag accessories such as g-strings, panty hose, pearl necklaces and pasties. The objects, displayed in the showcases originally used in the Spirit Sings exhibition, added a layer of the erotic to existing exoticized artefacts, shifting and challenging the perception of authenticity imposed by the collecting institution. Indian dolls, swizzle



Adrian Stimson. *Desperate Commons: Gym Acts*, 1952. Photo: William Star. Courtesy: Adrian Stimson and Lesley Stimson.

sticks and a dream catcher were arranged beside traditional objects such as a broken shell, rattle, drum and arrowhead.

For Buffalo Boy's manifestation as an imaginary figure, tchotchkes and Indian souvenir kitsch are rich and relevant; he uses them to comment on the constructed nature of stereotypes of Aboriginal peoples and cultures. Meanwhile, Christian trimmings and his government status card are used to critically examine the impacts and legacies of colonialism and comment on the historical and contemporary realities confronted by Indigenous peoples in Canada. In this way, Stimson's showcases cull and challenge deeply held socially accepted stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, knowledges and cultures. Here, he simultaneously exposes and voluntarily embraces stereotypical representations in order to reclaim and revision Indigenous identities.

By alluding to a standardized strategy of museum practice, Stimson imposes Buffalo Boy's liberal perspectives to normalize two-spiritedness for a conservative mainstream museum-going audience. Toying with the relevance and saga of *The Spirit Sings*, Stimson reframes, sexualizes and queers the premise, acutely aware that living Aboriginal cultures which were controversially missing from that exhibition continue to be omitted in contemporary displays of societal representation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture. By subtly inserting a two-spirit premise, Stimson reveals and exposes a legacy erased by contact with and conquest by Christianity. Buffalo Boy's "queerness"

is a manoeuvre to reclaim, reframe and liberate within the colonized spaces of reserves and broader society. As a contemporary performance artist, Stimson rekindles a distinct queer identity that is alive in our society, urban, rural and anywhere in between. Cunningly, he sets up his audience and invites them to be voyeurs of his "peep holes" — four holes painted the colours of the four directions situated about three feet from the floor. Each viewer becomes a voyeur and unintentionally bends over to view Buffalo Boy videos through the holes, situating them in a hilarious yet uncompromising position. An intervention of sorts, the multi-media installation *The Two-Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Buffalo Boy's First Peep Holes* uses play and humour to expose Buffalo Boy's queer identity and provoke questions relating to the complexities of sexuality, gender and society through performative strategies of resistance, camp and drag.

Theatrically recalling images of the Wild West, Buffalo Boy rode tall and proud in the city of Kingston's 2008 Gay Pride parade, inserting an Aboriginal presence into a largely mainstream white queer culture. Sitting atop a vintage coin-operated galloping horse, dressed in pearls, a corset, fishnet stockings, cowboy boots and lasso, Buffalo Boy rode atop Modern Fuel's float, a flatbed covered with decorations, balloons and flashing lights from the dollar store. Stimson's performance Buffalo Boy: Do Not Feel The Buffalo commemorated the struggles of LGBT communities and Indigenous peoples

for equal rights and for spaces to celebrate personal identities and communal pride.

Stimson, who is from the Blackfoot Siksika Nation, traditionally reveres the buffalo as an important source and ongoing inspiration for his performance alter ego. The printed banners that graced the Pride float depicted a herd of buffalo being corralled by "Indians" on horseback, as illustrated in the 1957 schoolbook *Buffalo Boy: Indians of the Plains* by Edna Walker Chandler. "Buffalo Boy's Do Not Feel The Buffalo" was printed on a banner hanging from the float, which became the context for both the float and Stimson's performance. Walker's book stirred Stimson enough to conceptualize his performance as a re-examination of literary misconstructions of First Nations people. The underlying premise also went hand in hand with his deep connection to the spirit of endurance and respect for the buffalo. In conversation with Lynne Bell, Stimson says, "I use the bison as a symbol that represents the destruction of the Aboriginal way of life, but it also represents survival and cultural regeneration. The bison is central to Blackfoot being. And the bison as both icon and food source. The whole history of its disappearance is very much a part of my contemporary life."² Toying with Edna Walker Chandler's account of Natives raising a hand in the air to arrive at a sensation of feeling the buffalo, Buffalo Boy struck a pose and put his hand up in the Kingston air to communicate a sense of the mainstream community's misunderstandings of queer, marginalized and Aboriginal popu-



Adrian Stimson. Buffalo Boy: *Do Not Feel the Buffalo*, 2008. Photo: Jeff Barbeau. Courtesy: Modern Fuel Gallery.
<opposite page> Adrian Stimson. *The Battle of Little Big Horn*, 2008. Photo: Rebecca Rowley. Courtesy: TRUCK Gallery.

lations. High up on his coin-operated horse, Buffalo Boy did not feel the buffalo, but he did feel the spirit of the rainbow generated by Kingston Pride.

Crossing the boundaries of colonialism, racism, hybridity, sexuality, nationality, politics and religion, Buffalo Boy's stature resembled that of local statues on the parade route, positioning him as an equal amid a legacy of colonial history while also challenging a mainstream conservative and mainly white gay community with questions of visibility, cultural differences and paradigms of absence and presence.

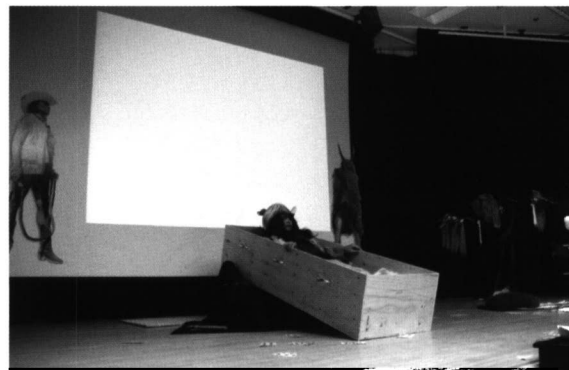
Stimson's *Do Not Feel The Buffalo* performance draws on the tradition of late 19th- and early 20th-century Wild West shows while challenging the effects of conquest on sexuality and stereotypes, as well as on traditional and contemporary Aboriginal cultures. His mimicry of Wild West staging focused all eyes on the exotic and the unknown: Buffalo Boy. But Stimson subverts these limiting stereotypes, fusing stereotypes of the Indian Brave and Princess with the iconography of the Cowboy, resisting imposed histories and embracing the agency and autonomy of Indigenous performers in Wild West shows throughout the colonial era. In many ways, the Canadian government was successful in its colonial strategies and efforts to isolate the nations of Indigenous peoples and to manoeuvre them into subordinate and marginalized positions. Residential schools and ceremonial bans exemplify Canada's tactical approach to eradicating Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of being. This legislative domination and control over all aspects of Indigenous life was a deliberate campaign to foster ethnocide of Indigenous cultures. Yet, in a seeming paradox, in this era of extreme oppression, Indigenous performers were very popular and Indigenous performance was among the events included in British Royal Tours. Indigenous peoples were permitted to perform for white audiences (permission for participation had to be officially granted by Indian Agents and the Department of Indian Affairs), but they were

not permitted under law to continue to pass on traditions to their children, to organize multi-community gatherings, or to perform ceremonies, dance, or song for their own cultural purposes.

Buffalo Boy overtly draws on this period of settler history for his performative presence, using his body, gestures and costumes to bring his audience back in time while making strong links to the contemporary legacies of colonization. Stimson's performances, taken in relation to Aboriginal peoples who worked the "Native stages" at World Fairs, Wild West and Indian Medicine Shows, highlight the use and tradition of performance and performative storytelling as a means for both encapsulating cultural status and creating forms of continuance and political activism. In many accounts of these performances, the power dynamics between Indigenous performers and their settler audiences are polarized and one-dimensional: the Native performer as voiceless victim, colonized and oppressed, and the white audience member as powerful colonizer and oppressor. In reality, most performance of Aboriginality for settler audiences involved complex negotiations between performers and audiences.

While these complexities seem obvious there is a common absence of this recognition within a significant amount of the scholarship exploring Indigenous performance. The inclusion of discussions of Aboriginal agency and recognition of Indigenous strategies in the analysis of performance, including those that took place in Wild West shows, reveals the ways in which these Aboriginal performers consciously conceded to the expectations and desires of their settler audiences. Settler-Canadian society's longing to experience so-called authentic, pre-contact Indians was manipulated by Aboriginal performers for both economic and political gain, undermining the assimilationist federal policies that attempted to control all aspects of Aboriginal life as documented in Canada's Indian Act. In other words, politically informed performance on the stages of circuses and fairgrounds became a site for indigenous

intervention into colonial power structures. Performers played into Eurocentric Romanticism of Aboriginal cultures, exemplified by the images of the Indian Princess and Brave, in order to make political statements, increase their mobility, create networks with other indigenous peoples and for economic gain. Stimson's Buffalo Boy participates in this continuum of using performance as a tool for political activism and Indigenous intervention. He continues with the long tactical tradition of deploying artistic and/or performative practices as resistance. These performers, as curator Greg Hill notes, "draw on that multi-layered and multi-contextual history; their art rebukes and engages





<left> Adrian Stimson. *The Battle of Little Big Horn — Topping Old Sun*, 2008. Photo: Jason Stimson. Courtesy: the artist.
<right> Adrian Stimson. *The Battle of Little Big Horn*, 2008. Courtesy: Cheryl L'Hirondelle.

➤ THE BODY, FOR BLONDEAU AND STIMSON, IS INTEGRAL TO THEIR ARTISTIC PRACTICE, ACTING AS A SITE FOR SOCIAL INTERVENTION AND CULTURAL RESISTANCE. ✦

it, turns it on its head, is intertwined with it and honours it.”³

Buffalo Boy made his public debut in 2004 during a Mendel Art Gallery artists by artists collaboration with Cree/Saulteaux performance artist Lori Blondeau. Entitled *Buffalo Boy and Belle Sauvage: Putting the WILD Back into the West*, the exhibit included photographs, artefacts and performances by the artists. Blondeau’s persona Belle Sauvage actively plays with the stereotypes of the

Indian princess and squaw while also drawing from Indigenous women who performed in Wild West shows and Vaudeville acts in the early 20th century. She spoofs the 1950s film *Calamity Jane*, in which Doris Day performed as a cross-dressing, gender-bending white cowgirl. The naming of Belle Sauvage reflects Blondeau’s multifaceted performance strategies, appropriating a colonial name in a humorous and parodic way. Belle Sauvage is usually dressed in an “Indian Princess” mock buckskin dress made of cloth, with a holster, two toy guns and a beehive hairdo. In her multiple stagings of this performance, she can be seen wearing a cowboy hat with a bob haircut, cowboy boots and spurs. Blondeau notes, “The persona of Belle Sauvage was created for a postcard I made in 1998 for the Dunlop Art Gallery. The Dunlop asked me to make a work responding to the show *Indian Princesses and Cowgirls: Stereotypes from the Frontier*. For me,

this exhibition demonstrated once again that as a Native woman I could play only two roles in frontier narratives: one as the Indian Princess and the other as the Squaw. I saw this as my opportunity to create an Indian cowgirl.”⁴

The co-produced performance provides a space for recalling and then unpacking the limited and stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples and cultures in the archives of Canadian history. The body, for Blondeau and Stimson, is integral to their artistic practice, acting as a site for social intervention and cultural resistance. By looking at the performative interactions between Buffalo Boy and Belle Sauvage as an artistic process of fusing memory, history and storytelling that fosters a space for listening and remembering, one can understand the body as a repository from which Indigenous knowledge is shared and as the site from which silenced histories are remembered.

The act of remembering, for both the artists and the audience, becomes a political action of Indigenous cultural survivance and continuance, and also, for those non-Indigenous audience members, a politicized act of solidarity. In other words, the performative storytelling in *Putting the WILD Back into The WEST* is a practice of testimony.

Blondeau and Stimson perform within a "Wild West" diorama, highlighting the constructed nature of national narratives that legitimized settler expansion on Western North American Indigenous lands. They invite audience members to join them on their Wild West stage for an interactive photo session, creating a scene where artists and viewers re-examine the silences of the era and create contemporary meanings of 19th century histories. This campy performance invites its audience-members-turned-performance-participants to dress up in costumes that evoke notions of the Wild West and its myths and histories. The photographic evidence, or remnants, raise many different questions and challenge classifications of race, sexuality, culture and identity. They also offer an opportunity to reflect back on the ways in which Indigenous peoples and their cultures have been represented by Euro-Canadian society and Eurocentric disciplines, such as anthropology and ethnography, and institutions, such as the museum and popular media. The inclusion of humorous and campy personas support the continued examination of how photographs have been used to document, record, produce and construct Aboriginal peoples through the Western lens. In effect, Buffalo Boy and Belle Sauvage are creating a new photographic record that exposes the absurdity and constructedness of stereotypes.

Although rumours surfaced between here and there that Buffalo Boy would meet his end at Burning Man, Stimson's alter ego did not show up. However, Buffalo Boy's two spirits were stripped down to bare Stimson's own soul in a performance called *Manifest Destiny*, in critical response to Burning Man's (2008) American Dream theme. Dressed in his Siksika Nation buckskin rega-

lia with his eagle feather headdress, Stimson entered his performance site with his eagle fan and a small bronze bison in hand. He comments, "I placed the bison in the middle of the space, then acknowledged the four directions and sat down and read some quotes written by Native Americans/First Nations people."⁵ The words Stimson shared with his audience were quotations that were directly related to the earth, and to the socio-political and cultural changes that Indigenous peoples of North America have endured and continue to endure due to the impacts of colonialism. Following this, he read a quotation from John O'Sullivan's "Manifest Destiny," which comments on colonial expansion and settlement of Western North America. Today this land is seen by many, from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, as stolen Native land. Stimson's performance ended powerfully and dramatically in silence; then, he notes, "I stripped naked and lay prostrate behind the bronze bison, with my face in the dust."⁶ An ongoing evolution in his performative practice, Stimson also workshopped the acts of unspoken atrocities in *Desperate Commons Gym Acts* (2008), which references a 1954 Calgary Herald newspaper article about an annual student pageant at the Old Sun residential school at the Siksika Nation, during the Banff Centre's Fiction residency. There he performed *The Kiss* (2008), directed by Terrance Houle. This performance closed the quiet yet crucial symposium *Legacies and Futures: Beyond the Spirit Sings with a bang*. All three of these performances are indicative of Stimson's willingness to expose and challenge the Canadian state's acts of reconciliation, apology and white guilt with his own persona of (em)power(ment).

Notes:

1. Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* (Lincoln, Nebraska: First Bison Book: 2000), p.15.
2. Lynne Bell, "Spotlight: Buffalo at Burning Man," *Canadian Art* (Summer 2007).
3. Greg A. Hill, "Caught. . . (Red-handed)," *Caught in the Act: The Viewer as Performer* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada: 2008) p.163.
4. Lori Blondeau, "Some Kinda Princess," *Mentoring Artists For Women's Art: Culture of Community*, ed. Vera Lemecha (Winnipeg: MAWA: 2004), p.28.
5. Adrian Stimson, e-mail correspondence, January 2009.
6. Adrian Stimson, e-mail correspondence, January 2009.
7. Adrian Stimson, e-mail correspondence, October 2008.

Resurfacing last October at the Mountain Standard Time Performative Arts Festival (M:ST) dressed in his signature eclectic glam bison fashion, Buffalo Boy appeared to make his last stand. Inspired partly by the film *Little Big Man*, mashed with Wild Wild West theatricals, Stimson venerated his alter ego in Buffalo Boy's *Battle Of Little Bighorn*. Rewind to the "Indian Wars" in the American West, Stimson resurrects Colonel Custer and the Shaman Exterminator to battle in the infamous Little Bighorn. Stimson explains Buffalo Boy's passing as an evolution of desires: "Well... in death comes celebrity and since I killed Buffalo Boy off... he/she would be a ghost?... this killing off also relates to my own transformation at this time in my life... change is everywhere and certainly within me." He notes in a recent conversation, "I don't think I will perform Buffalo Boy much more yet this is a time thing, meaning that if I do a BB performance it will have to be in the past... or dated as such, I love to play with notions of time... hence celebrity after death is much bigger than real life ... I think."⁷ □

RYAN RICE, a Mohawk of Kahnawake, Québec, is an artist and independent curator. In 2009, Rice will tour his exhibitions *ANTHEM: Perspectives on Home and Native Land, Oh So Iroquois, Scout's Honour*, and *LORE*, and will be opening three new exhibitions in Toronto and Montréal.

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