

Elinor Whidden – Head-Smashed-In-Engine-Block-Buffalo-Jump

Using the notion that history repeats itself, *Head-Smashed-In-Engine-Block-Buffalo-Jump* mines the history of white man's conquest of North America to come full circle to the present day. Scavenging the automotive scrap yards of today, Whidden utilizes discarded car parts to fabricate a mountain of Buffalo skulls, echoing photographs circa 1860-80 that depict the extermination of the buffalo with vast piles of bones waiting to be processed into fertilizer or bone china.

The skulls are skillfully fabricated and the effect of the dwarfing pile is humbling. One can see the automotive parts inscriptions on the formed "ossature" of these heads, potentially turning the audience's gaze into one of a witness. Faithful to her practice, Whidden retraces the path of history and empowers the re-evaluation of its direction.

The attitude that everything is for the taking stems directly from western colonialism and is at the root of the consumer culture that defines us today. The work asks the question, are we done conquering this land and its inhabitants? Perhaps the shift from pillaging to conserving our resources has never happened: from the buffalo to the automobile our greed is the one constant that ensures this cycle. The globalized industry of the automobile is one of excess and parallels the pioneer's plundering of America's natural resources and of its indigenous peoples.

Whidden's photography attentively constructs an atmosphere that presents us with the similitude of past and present times. Emulating a popular portrait of Buffalo Bill, Whidden's photograph *Anonymous Cowboy* (from the series *Images of the Old West: Roadkill Redux*) is a performative cross-dressing portrait depicting the romanticized cowboy: fearless, heroic and steadfast. This image evokes both nostalgia for the daring adventures of the Wild West and for the ridicule mindset behind the conquest of this frontier.

Head-Smashed-In-Engine-Block-Buffalo-Jump is a re-inquisition of our present ways against the narratives of our past.

- Julie René de Cotret, 2012

Julie René de Cotret (Mtl, 1976) visual artist and independent curator studied at NSCAD 2004. She has recently finished a two-year artist residency program which she founded at the School of Environmental Science, University of Guelph. Her studios are located in Guelph and Hillsburgh, On. René de Cotret is secretary and past-chair of the board of directors of Ed Video Media Artist Run Center.