

FrameWork 8/13

Althea Thauberger on Duane Linklater



A STORY

Upon stepping off Tecumseth Street and entering the gallery, a massive diagonal graphic stretching from ceiling to floor, like a cartoon lightning bolt, startles. It seems a bit funny. Overly dramatic or inappropriate. It is a bright, sunny, psycho yellow,¹ and sings, or zings, against the white. In the far corner, hang two prints with images you know. Out of habit, you glance left (where there is a framed print),² hesitate for a second, and walk towards it. The matte and frame are unfashionable. The image is perfectly familiar. Two stylized Canada geese: a parent, with a small gosling at its feet. Both look upward, the goose at the sky, the baby at the parent.³ Their wings move upward as elegant flowing lines. The print is marked 181/495 and signed by the artist Benjamin Chee Chee, or is the signature also printed? The print's title, "Learning," is not indicated.

I remember similar mattes and frames in my family home when I was a child. The image is beautiful and deeply touching, stranded and honoured by its place on the wall. I remember it as an emblem, an aesthetic, a feeling. Perversely, I remember it as palpably "Canadian" or, as palpable Canadiana, as a visual emblem.⁴

The painted yellow stripes that slice the gallery shift perspective when you move towards them. Directly facing the head-height zigzag which optically quivers, you are brought back to ideas in painting. You are reminded of chevrons⁵ in Aboriginal design and as military insignia. You are reminded of the Janus head: a simultaneous regard towards the past and future, and an opening in a time of war.⁶

Forward or backward, towards the photographs⁷ that hang next to each other and define a corner, you register first the image of the Mohawk Warrior. The image is absolutely familiar. It shows a camouflage-clad man with a bandanna tied over his nose and mouth standing on one of the *Sûreté du Québec* vehicles abandoned and turned into barricades after the July 11, 1990 standoff in which more than one hundred police officers fired tear gas and automatic weapons into a Mohawk blockade set up to defend Kanesatake territory from development, and during which a Québec officer was shot and killed. The man holds a rifle over his head in a gesture of struggle, resistance, victory, or defiance. You admire the photographer's⁸ choices for a moment. An upside down *fleur-de-lys* insignia painted on the police vehicle door, hovering over the ground, seems to suggest that a fucking of the land is either imminent, or has been averted. Next to the symbol, the vehicle manufacturer's name plate, RAM, echoes this sentiment.

I recall that summer, my 19th, when my identifications were radically changing. I am the daughter of grandchildren of German and Scandinavian immigrant farmers who settled in rural Saskatchewan. I was raised in various towns and suburbs in central and western Canada in a religious family. Before following the Oka Crisis on TV, and radio, I'd had little consciousness of Canada as an antagonistic colonial state.

You turn to the perpendicular Cobain. The image is unpleasantly familiar. You are aware that the photograph is from Nirvana's Unplugged in New York concert on November 18, 1993. Cobain starts to look strange, frozen in an earnest gesture of song speech; small, white, hunched and fuzzy in sweater. A vulnerable creature.

Both photographs were shot on film, then colour separated and printed using a commercial litho dot matrix process, then scanned, then web optimized with a jpeg algorithm, then photographed from a computer screen, including parts of the image window's grey background⁹ and surface

smears, and then printed in a digital photographic process. Both betray each constitutive layer as traces or even documents of moments between the then and the now, and as metaphors not for remove but connective tissue. Perhaps because of their familiarity, both images still strangely convey something of what might be described as their aura, the figures hovering and coherent from beyond the grave within the matrixes that have constituted their visibility.

You notice the emphatic formal triangularity of both compositions. This echoes the other “threes” in the gallery. You project a sense of vehemence toward the depicted phalluses (microphone, guitar, gun) and see the perpendicular figures as role models of masculinity in direct comparison and confrontation. Cobain is the expressive, sensitive and affected individualist slacker exuding anger with a kind of ‘whateverness’.¹⁰ The warrior is the resolute, seemingly anonymous, affected collectivist in an exaggerated gesture of struggle for recognition and autonomy. They make each other awkward.

On the stairs, I hear another voice, from memory, perhaps as an unconscious way of exorcising the whiny Cobain. It is a few words of a Don Freed song that I must have heard him perform live in a pub in Saskatoon more than twenty years ago:

“So you want to go golfing/
On Sacred Land...”

On Sacred Land...”

I couldn’t remember the rest.

Upstairs you are met with artefacts related to the corporate visibility of the Ontario Northland Rail Service, whose chevron logo has been re-purposed in the lower gallery.¹¹

Ontario Northland discontinued its southern line, “The Northlander,” (connecting Toronto with North Bay) in September 2012, due to its unprofitability.¹² Presumably, the railway, constructed in 1902 in large part to facilitate the extraction of resources and wealth from the Treaty Lands around Hudson Bay (going on to include, most likely, diamonds from the De Beers mine, ninety kilometers from Attawapiskat) was no longer “financially viable”. Freight shipping was facilitated by other means, and the railway had become primarily a passenger service.

The artefacts are displayed in two vitrines. In one is a handwritten note to Duane from Rebecca, the evidently enthusiastic and helpful marketing manager of Ontario Northland, and original Pantone-like blue and yellow paint swatches, arranged in a pattern. In the second are two colour photocopies of a statement provided to the Ontario Northland Rail Company in 1975 by an unknown design firm who developed the Railway’s corporate identity. The written rationale is oddly generous, describing, with care, a successful identity expressed in colour and line, and the relationship of this identity to the land.

The documents make me think of the years leading up to 1975 as a time of emphatic structural change in Canada when the visual, graphic, and pictorial identity of the nation and its national infrastructure was part of “post-colonial” rebranding.¹³ This first involved replacing the British National flag in 1965. This vision was not only symbolic. Four years later, against the backdrop of the American Indian Movement, the Trudeau administration unilaterally attempted to divest Aboriginal peoples of their legal status with the White Paper proposal. The rationale was that by eliminating the Indian Act, treaties, and allowing Reserve Lands to be sold, “equality” amongst citizens would result.

I mentally compare events associated with the late 1980's to mid-1990's—the other period evoked in the exhibition. I think of the struggles, betrayals, and resistance in Aboriginal and Canadian politics and identity that occurred in the twenty-some years in between. I recall that Elijah Harper died a few months ago, after Theresa Spence's hunger strike and the snowballing events of Idle No More, which began shortly after the death of the Northlander.

You glance again at the documents displayed in the two vitrines before you, including the logo reproductions.¹⁴ You reflect again on the ease with which the distinctive visual style of Benjamin Chee Chee's paintings became domesticated to a national aesthetic,¹⁵ and that his works are often theorized in close proximity to psychological and biographical readings. Chee Chee was, in a sense, killed by the state, then dissected by biographers, and in the encompassing project of Canadian national identity,¹⁶ his work also taken.

Walking out of the gallery and past *Je me souviens*, you pause again for the chevrons. You see *The Chevrons* as a ground. You see their form as a figure stretching up or down, an un-easy identity, or as a diagram of a life lived. You see “movement” as collective or simultaneous, as co-existing action.¹⁷ On the way out you stop by the Chee Chee reproduction. You notice its comparative fluidity and promise of flight, and you remember him in movement, on an Ontario Northlands train, focusing and unfocusing on the lands it passed through.

A CONVERSATION

¹ Northland Yellow: Yellow was chosen as the principal color because it allows for maximum contrast during any season in the north. (The north tends to be all white, all brown or all green. It doesn't, for example, have the multi-colored autumn of southern Ontario.) Yellow has the best visibility under most conditions and is now universally accepted as a safety color. The diversity of equipment called for highly visible color: ships in a mist; trucks at night, buses in a snowstorm, trains at a crossing, planes in a descent. The color chosen is close to the traditional school bus yellow and close to the standard Ontario Ministry of Transportation and Communications yellow. The yellow had to be dark enough to allow white to be reversed from it and able to stand on its own in printing work. Yellow is also a 'happy' color-vibrant, a color of life. (Excerpt from logo justification, *Ease of Identity*, 2013.)

² *Learning*, 2013, ink on paper, frame

³ The Life and Death of Benjamin Chee Chee

...The serene, spare elegance of Ojibway painter Benjamin Chee Chee was probably my first consciousness of art. I babysat the neighbour kids, amazingly named the Friends, and loved going to their house, which was free of the clutter that defined our home. The clarity and breathing room there was a safe haven from the manic pace I came from. Mom was a compulsive hoarder, but the closest thing we had to art were Old Testament felt storyboards and macaroni fridge magnets. While there were countless wonderful things about my own home, there was also much chaos. The Friend family had selective, neatly laid out objects. I felt safe and calm in that atmosphere. And it was the minimalist lines of Chee Chee's bird paintings that mesmerized me most. I stared at their artful flight for hours after the kids went to bed. Of course, I knew then very little of art or of Indians or even Benjamin Chee Chee's name, but those stunning paintings stayed in my mind's eye. I forever associated peaceful serenity with the Temagami artist's monochromatic and linear style.....

Yes.....Benjamin Chee Chee needs to be honoured. I was in a shop....full of indian paintings and prints. I was immediately drawn to the prints of Chee Chee and purchased three. They have been framed and hung. Everytime I look at them I am enlightened....such simple lines, yet spectacular in appearance.....very spiritual. Having become a widow in the last five months, most days are filled with loss of a really wonderful person, but when I look at these prints.....a smile comes to my face. Having read the bio on the reverse of the prints, I was shocked to read of this young man's life, but can understand it....because we all need love.

Comment by Thea | November 7, 2008

I have an original Ben Chee Chee acrylic. It depicts a walrus in front of the sun or moon. I'm not really sure though.

Marcel

Comment by Marcel | December 30, 2009

You can buy a mug with Benjamin Chee Chee's drawings on it, if you can't afford the whole canvas. Or cloth bag.

<http://www.whetung.com/chee.html>

Or buy a group of 6 prints for \$5400.

Go see.

And thank you for writing this bio on Ben

Comment by Cyn

I have just bought a 24×18 inch print of “Learning” at a garage sale. It is in what looks like original frame, on reverse is label with Title Learning CODE CP-032 59-H3, 2/87mm
Does anyone know if this is an original or what the code means, and possible value? I am in Sydney Australia. 11 Jan 2011

Comment by Cemal Yavas | January 11, 2011

(<http://www.touchedbyfire.ca/the-life-and-death-of-benjamin-chee-chee/>)

⁴ In a 1984 catalogue, curator Elizabeth McLuhan introduced Chee Chee as someone who, “above all, stripped Indian Art of its ‘legend painting’ trappings and returned to it the rigors of strong design and structural minimalism. ‘Less was more’ and his paintings evince a tireless interest in abstracting the essence of the image. (Elizabeth McLuhan. *Painting and the Prints in the Collection of the Thunder Bay National Exhibition Centre and Centre for Indian Art*, Quoted in Al Evans*, *Chee Chee: A Study of Aboriginal Suicide*. Montreal / Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2010.)

⁵ AT: Hello Rolande! I hope this finds you really well. I write with a question. I am wondering about the use of chevrons in your work—of course I’m thinking specifically about the wall work you installed at The Power Plant—and also the significance of chevrons for you personally and culturally. If you are inclined, could you share some information about these things? Best, and big thanks, a.

RS: Sure. Basically, I am interested in chevrons because their resemblance to First Nation beadwork designs, their connection to modern and contemporary art (for example Kenneth Noland has done a series of paintings depicting chevrons), but most importantly as a metaphor to address governments’ involvement in Indigenous affairs. As you may know chevrons are used to guide drivers on the road, well when placed in a gallery setting it does a couple of things. Firstly the tapes used are the colors of the four directions, so that’s a point of reference. Secondly, the visibility of the tape changes depending on where one enters the space. This emphasises how perception of boundaries shift according to one’s perspective- specifically how indigenous art has been kept out of main art institutions due to its non-art classifications and also the play on the word ‘caution’. The tape is known as caution tape here in Sydney and I associate this with how First Nation people were prevented from issuing ‘Caution on title’ so that buyers were aware that the land they were considering buying was under a land claim. An example of this is the Temagami case in 1994 and the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that a First Nation cannot register a caution on title to prevent the sale of land. This case affected the band I am affiliated with- Michipicoten First Nation.

Needless to say a few years back Michipicoten won the 2nd largest land claim in Canadian history!

AT: Thanks so much! May I ask something more? I’ve been thinking about chevron designs as a diagram of time—of a pointing or movement towards the future and past as interlocking and part of the same schema—or as a map of historical movement. (Very different than notion of the forward movement of time/history). Have you thought of chevrons in this way? Esp. in relation to your own work?

RS: Yes, and this is reflected in my how chevrons bring me back to my culture eg. beadwork and also that indigenous people do not see ‘time and space’ as linear or static. In fact is it the opposite indigenous see it as non-linear. The construct of time is a modernist notion and continues to be problematic in western art discourse when writing about indigenous art and the categorisation of it.

Traditional verses the contemporary. The chevron is as much as a link to the past as it is to the present and hopefully the future. Hope this answers your ?s. (Facebook exchange between Althea Thauberger and Rolande Souliere, August 2013.)

⁶ Now that war is being forced upon us, we will turn our hearts and minds to war and it too we will wage with all our might... Our Spirits are strong. We are together at last with ourselves and the world of our ancestors; we are proud before our children and our generations unborn... We are free. No yoke of white government oppression can contain us. We are free." (Mohawk Nation Office, August 27, 1990. Quoted in: Gord Hill.. *500 Years of Indigenous Resistance*. Oakland: PM Press. 2009, 66.)

⁷ *Je me souviens*, 2013, two chromira prints mounted on aluminum

⁸ MONTREAL – In one of his most iconic photos, Canadian Press photojournalist Tom Hanson captured a defiant Mohawk warrior – arm raised, rifle in hand, standing atop an overturned police van – during a tense standoff with police in Oka, Que., in 1990.

Remarkably, the lives of Hanson and his masked Mohawk subject, Richard Livingston Nicholas, converged again this week when they both died suddenly, in separate incidents, on the same day. They were both 41 years old.

"At that pinnacle moment in 1990 they crossed paths, and then they crossed paths again," Sonya Gagnier, Nicholas's cousin and a Kanasatake band chief, said yesterday.

"It's another pinnacle point – they crossed paths in death."

Hanson, an award-winning photojournalist who was known as a passionate defender of journalistic rights, died on Tuesday night after collapsing while playing hockey.

Nicholas, a proud, lifelong champion of his nation's land-claim rights, died the same day in a three-vehicle accident near the village of Oka, west of Montreal. Police said he lost control of his tow truck moments before the collision. (Andy Blachford. *Photographer, his subject cross paths again in death*. 14 March 2009, The Toronto Star.)

⁹ The ability of the photograph to give a factual document or trace the real as an image meant that the reality principle automatically became part of the objective language and the subject of my work. Through the use of the photograph I saw the opportunity to create a link between the intellectual, literary and idealistic biases of the purest forms of conceptual art and the concrete, factual pragmatic recognition of the objectness of minimal sculpture. While the photograph provided an abstract linguistic sign for subject matter, an indicator as it were, it also, in its direct connectedness to the reality of that subject, functioned as a concrete element in the objective material sense, as an industrial component in the construction of a statement. In my more recent works, the photograph is a kind of slab of reality riveted to the symbolic space of ideality, the blank field of the monochrome canvas upon which it is laminated. The images of construction sites in my work thus play on an ironic metaphor for the idea of constructivism in my aesthetics.

These subjects are outer-directed, and thus engaged with the world, and even the distancing and passivity of my work is reflective of a social and historical condition that is symptomatic of more than my condition alone. I believe that it is not merely my own expressive problem, but is in fact my reflection, through what is possible in the language and medium of art, on the condition of meaning. That is, through the economy of art, through its technical language and expressive themes, a reflection is offered on the general economy and its limits, and that this political dimension of the photographic is also a reflection on the limits of aesthetic judgment and what is possible as a work of art. In this sense, I think of my work as unreservedly modernist. In effect this work is constructed out of a recognition of the condition of crisis—a crisis of meaning, a crisis that also emerges from the inertia of skepticism in face of the rhetorical power of photography; of the insufficiency of this inertia as well as the compromised nature of its rhetoric.

In part, at least, it was this crisis that led me to a reconsideration of the monochrome and its place in the history of the crisis in painting. Throughout my work in the 1970's, the monochrome remained as a latent theme developed only within the photographic subject, often as a Mallarméan metaphor of silence. During this period the support surface of the white wall of the gallery or the white page of the book had displaced the support of primed canvas of the painting. But since about 1980, when I enfolded my photographic practice back onto the ground of painting, the monochrome has returned as a dialectical field of opposition in relation to the photographic image and subject. This has to do with the relation that the monochrome has with the crisis of Modernism and its position as the critical fulcrum in the dialectic of painting and photography. By intersecting the field of ideality of monochrome painting with the photographic 'speech of the world', the historical function and the fetish value of this ideality is alternately refused and reified. Painting becomes secularized. (Ian Wallace, "Photography and the Monochrome: An Apologia, an Exegesis, an Interrogation." *Ian Wallace At the Intersection of Painting and Photography*. London/Vancouver: Black Dog Publishing. Vancouver Art Gallery, 2012, 67-68. First published in *Càmeres indiscretas*, ed. José Lebrero Stals, exh. Cat. Barcelona: Centre d'art Santa Monica and Generalitat de Catalunya, 1992, 55, 119.)

¹⁰ Dear Empty TV
the entity of all Corporate Gods
We will survive without you easily -- the oldschool is going DOWN FAST
My lifes Dedication is Now to Do Nothing But SLAG something
Kurd Kobain xxx
Professional Rock musician

¹¹ The problem was not only one of clarifying the identity of Ontario Northland and relating it to the North and to the Government of the province, but also to bring visual order to a system which had evolved in a diversity of services and which obviously needed a comprehensive and unified corporate identity.
(*Ease of Identity*)

¹² TORONTO-Ontario has chosen to take a new approach to regional transportation in northeastern Ontario by winding down the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission (ONTC). This decision will allow the government to protect investments in northerners' health and education systems while balancing the budget by 2017-18.

3 Responses to “Cancellation of Northlander Train Service announced”

Chris Mong says:

March 23, 2012 at 11:21 am

Amazingly this all could have been avoided. The government making this discussion did not fight to maintain provincial work to a provincial government agency. Then details then comes out that the Quebec firm awarded the contract was sold for pennies on the difference the contract was awarded for. Also...

There was no fight for mandating the transportation of the big boom up north. The ring of fire is in Ontario, the Ontario government owns transportation resources to move the product. I suppose the bigger picture isn't for the Ontario people...It all just doesn't make sense!

Mark Dowling says:

March 25, 2012 at 1:03 pm

Why can't VIA Rail be requested to run the Northlander train at a cost recovery rate to the Province between North Bay and Toronto? If having access to the booking system, points scheme and general economies of scale meant VIA needed less subsidy than forecast then this could be reviewed at intervals. It seems crazy that the Province's first public announcement is closure and meanwhile there is the national operator for whom adding the service could be done without hiring on ONTC's CEO, VP of this, that and the other and Director of so forth.

Ida Hilson says:

April 1, 2012 at 8:45 pm

My name is Ida Hilson I do feel that we need the ontario Northerland train for people to travel to Toronto and me myself I like taking the train and I always did take the train in summertime because I likw train I do feel we need the train and I don;t want the train Cancelled and I hope all you fright for the train to stay on North Bay Nipissing March 23, 2012

(<http://www.northbaynipissing.com/2012/03/cancellation-of-northlander-train-service-announced/>)

¹³ AT: Annabel, your comments about Duane's exhibition have influenced my thinking a lot, especially about the graphic identity of Canada in relation to his use of the Ontario Northlands logo. Can I ask you to repeat some of that, so I can write it down to quote in the text I am working on?

AV: Yes, I had a conversation with Duane at the opening about his research on the Northland logo. I have not been able to find any information on the original graphic designer. The graphics at that time were so influenced by the national competition and the redesign of the Canadian Flag that was inaugurated in 1965, under Pearson. I think it was. The design that incorporated the British Flag was rejected. Shortly afterwards, and through all the iconography of Expo 67, the new graphic identity for Canada in the 70's emerged, and this plays into the way the colonial outpost rebranded itself as an independent, contemporary and "just" nation.

AT: I was also thinking about the Ontario Northlands logo and its use of chevrons which have an association with certain aboriginal designs. In this moment of Canadian re-branding, also Native imagery was appropriated. Did you notice however that the Northlands logo is similar to the British Rail Service?

AV: Yes, and chevrons are also a military design, they are used to indicate rank on uniforms. But many other logos that came out of that time. I'm thinking of Burton Kramer's work. He did the new CBC logo in the 70s— also look at the Air Canada and CN logos. You can see the graphic moment

and identity rolling across Canada, and it has so much to do with the notion of how we want to see ourselves as a post-colonial state. (ranscription of phone conversation between Althea Thauberger and Annabel Vaughan, August 2013.)

¹⁴ *Ease of Identity*, 2013, ink on paper, paint on paper, printed paper

¹⁵It is a telling phrase, suggesting that art took ahold of Chee Chee and offered him a way of leading to wholeness and away from lostness and confusion. Art held out to him the promise of an identity. He told an interviewer: "I wanted to be my own man. I wanted to develop a style that was so much my own that anyone looking at a painting by me would say at once, even if the work was unsigned, "Now that was done by Benjamin Chee Chee." (Ottawa Journal, 31 August 1974. Quoted in Evans, 35.)

¹⁶ We cannot share the world as it already is, with the exception of the natural world. The world that we can share is always and still to be elaborated by us and between us starting from the perception and affirmation of what and who we are as humans here and now. (Luce Irigaray. *Sharing the World*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008, 136.)

