



Portrait photograph of Edward Poitras by Keith Moulding

In his new  
installation  
for the  
Venice Biennale,  
Metis artist **Edward Poitras**  
turns the tables  
on history

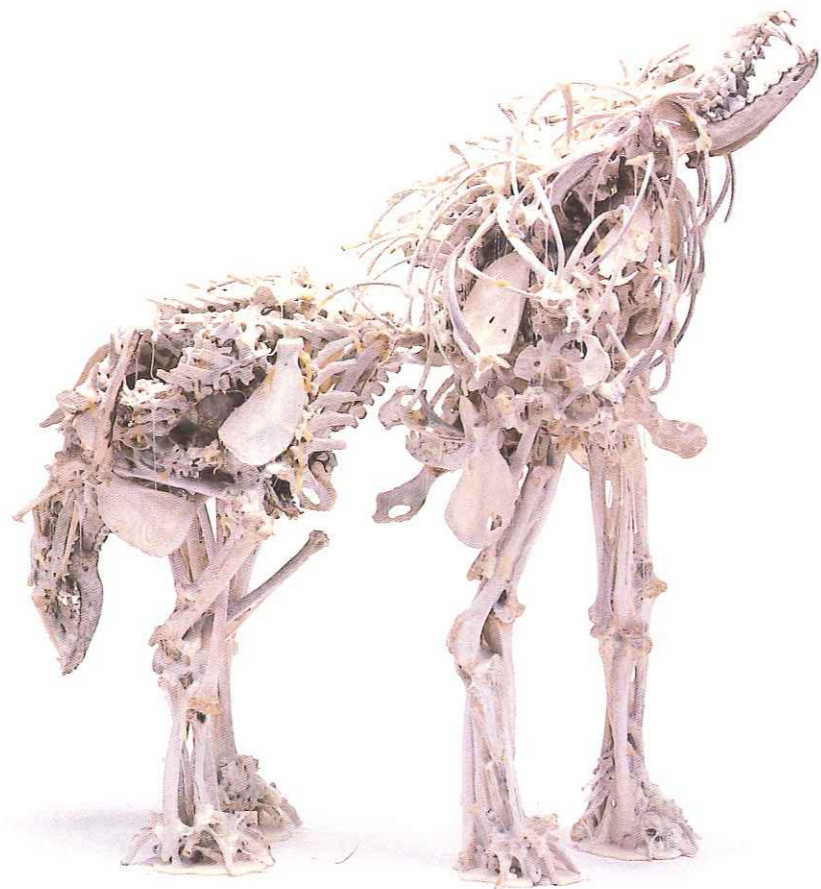
by Nancy Tousley

## the **trickster**

A bony coyote sits on a pile of white granite books and looks out through the window at a pile of bones. Is he howling or laughing? From his vantage point in the “Old World” — the Canadian pavilion tucked in among the trees of the Giardini Pubblici in Venice — he ponders the “New World” back home, and he’s doing his thinking in metaphors.

Pile of Bones was the name for Regina, Saskatchewan, before officials renamed the site of the provincial capital for Victoria Regina. This, the Queen City of the Plains, is where Edward Poitras, the artist who has put a coyote at the centre of his Venice Biennale installation, lives and works. The original name derives from the Cree word “oscana” for bone, and refers to the history of Poitras’ Indian and Metis ancestors. Bones left after the buffalo hunts littered the prairie; settlers, erasing history, shipped them east to be made into fertilizer. It could be said that Poitras inhabits a complex reality somewhere between Regina and Pile of Bones, a place where he is as agile and elusive as a coyote, the wild dog with the Aztec name.

Coyote, the Trickster figure of many First Nations cultures, is this postmodern, postcolonial artist’s alter ego. Poitras made the life-sized sculpture in 1986 from the bones of seven coyotes, and has used it to signify his presence in several installation works. “It has become a mask I use for placing myself in another environment. It allows me to contradict myself,” he says.



Coyote 1986  
Coyote bones  
28 x 18 x 31 in.  
Photo: Don Hall

Poitras is the first artist of native ancestry to represent Canada at Venice, and the seventh Canadian artist to have a solo show among the twenty exhibitions held in the pavilion since 1952. Given the XLVI Biennale's theme, "Identity and Alterity" (the latter meaning "otherness" or "difference"), Poitras is seen as the perfect choice in some camps and in others as an obvious and predictable one. As a Metis, whose roots are both aboriginal and European (the term is derived from the French word for "mixed"), he belongs to a distinctive third culture. His work blends the strategies, iconographies and formal vocabularies of European art with those of native art, spirituality and culture. Looking back at other selections for Venice — Jean-Paul Riopelle in 1962, Michael Snow in 1970, Paterson Ewen in 1982, Robin Collyer in 1993 — all seem tied to their decades. The Venice Biennale, celebrating its hundredth anniversary this year, is the epitome of a colonialist institution. But every dog has his day, so to speak.

The forty-one-year-old artist's participation at Venice — where, in 1890, "Buffalo Bill" Cody brought the Wild West Show and the great chiefs Sitting Bull and Black Elk (whom he called "my Indians") — was proposed by Gerald

McMaster, curator of contemporary Indian art at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec. McMaster, an artist in his own right, is Plains Cree and, like Poitras, is from Saskatchewan. McMaster and Poitras, who have known each other for twenty years, were already in the early planning stages of a retrospective, still on the books at the CMC, when the opportunity for Venice arose. An artist in mid-career, Poitras has been tapped for nearly every important exhibition of contemporary native art in Canada held since 1980, the most recent being the CMC's *Indigena* three years ago. He was the only artist of native ancestry to be included in the National Gallery's *Canadian Biennial of Contemporary Art* in 1989. He has shown in group exhibitions in the United States, Cuba, Finland, Germany and Denmark.

Venice, however, has given him his first site-specific installation in Europe, and Poitras had particular reasons for wanting to participate. "Being of mixed ancestry with this French name, I have always wondered about my connection with Europe," Poitras says. The Venice project is a kind of quest, and a memorial both to his first teacher, a mysterious and charismatic native American artist named

Sarain Stump, and to the native Canadian soldiers who served in both world wars. In the tradition of the plains, Poitras honours the warriors. As he has written, native men chose to fight for their country, yet "did not receive the benefits that other veterans received: lands, grants, etc." They did, Poitras believes, bring their experiences of Europe back to their reserves. The question of his teacher's lineage (Poitras believes Stump's father was a native soldier and his mother a woman from the Veneto, and that Stump came to North America looking for the other half of his culture) weaves into Poitras' own lineage as an artist, with Europe entering directly into the mix. "In the Venice piece, Coyote is allowing me to explore identity, to look at the Indian presence in Europe and the possibility of their experiences affecting aboriginal culture in North America. I'm sure they did."

The Venice site itself is full of meanings. The Canadian pavilion is a funky modernist teepee that fans out around the glassed-in courtyard at its centre. An asymmetrical octagon with beams protruding at the top to suggest teepee poles, it represents a vision of Canada that trades on its references to indigenous people. As an architectural appropriation of native culture ripe for reinterpretation, the Canadian pavilion is the first installation setting that has played so completely into Poitras' hands and what McMaster calls his "aesthetic of tricks." Most artists who show there complain about the awkwardness of the space. But with its two living trees — one inside, one in the courtyard — the setting is perfect for Poitras. A living tree or "flowering stick" at the centre of a circle is a powerful Plains Indian symbol of the universe, of a nation of people, and of the renewing ritual of the sun dance. The Oglala Sioux visionary, Black Elk, received his holy powers in the form of a flowering stick. Poitras has wrapped the courtyard tree in red fabric, the colour of blood and life. The inside tree is wrapped in black, the colour of earth and healing, stitched with the names of native soldiers in the Canadian Book of Remembrance. In the sacred rituals of the sun dance and the rain dance, cloth is associated with the offering up of prayers.

Transformation is another of the Venice project's themes. Magical, social and technological transfigurations are summoned up by the first objects a viewer sees upon entering the pavilion: enlarged bronze versions of small natural and archaeological objects. *Traces: A Car* is a coyote jaw; *Traces: A Camera* is a bear claw; *Traces: A Tool* is a flint scraper; *Traces: A Container* is a pottery shard. In these sculptures, Poitras evokes a past that is forever alive in the present. As well, Poitras has created a veritable doge's palace for Coyote, covered with gold leaf and graffiti, which signifies both the greed that propelled European exploration, exploitation and destruction, and the desire for the New World "other." According to McMaster, this is where Coyote plays his biggest trick, one that turns on the similar sound of two Aztec words: "coyotl" for coyote and "teocuitlatl" for gold. The latter translates literally as "excrement of the gods." Covering the front of Coyote's house, the gold — which



Top  
*Traces: A Car* 1995  
Bronze  
48.5 x 22.5 x 6.5 in.

Bottom  
*Traces: A Camera* 1995  
Bronze  
48 x 25 x 24 in.  
Photos: Keith Moulding

“Edward has always been a storyteller in the tradition of his family and his community, and he’s always linked the stories to history. He’s very comfortable with that because it’s really part of the present for him.”

Europeans deemed a gift from the gods — takes on a wholly transformed, scatological meaning. Finally, the installation includes two photographic images of Saskatchewan, presented as large, backlit transparencies. The first commemorates Sarain Stump, who died of accidental drowning in 1974, at the age of twenty-nine. Called *Rock Heart* (1995), it shows a large stone on the open prairie, a reference to the simple stone marker on Stump’s grave in the Sweet Grass Reserve cemetery. The other image shows the park at the Regina IPSCO plant, where buffalo still graze. Both landscapes define Poitras’ place. “I felt it was important to show where I come from,” he says.

“My flesh is my border and only true possession,” Poitras wrote in the catalogue of *Indian Territory*, the 1988 installation at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon which he considers his first major show. His long artist’s statement has the ring of a personal manifesto. “My interior is Indian Territory and my Manifest Destiny is the recovery of history for your assimilation.” Edward Poitras was born in Regina in 1953, but he grew up in the Touchwood Hills, in the broad, tranquil Qu’Appelle Valley on the Gordon Indian Reserve, eighty miles northeast of the city, and in the small town of Fort Qu’Appelle. His mother’s people were Saulteaux Indians who moved north of the 49th parallel long before the treaties were signed. His father’s family was Metis (a mixture of French and Cree) from the Red River settlement in Manitoba. Pierre Poitras, Edward’s great-great-grandfather, served in Metis leader Louis Riel’s provisional government and, after moving to the Qu’Appelle Valley after 1870, was a witness to the signing of Treaty 4, which covers southern Saskatchewan. By that time the buffalo were already decimated, and aboriginal people were in the process of becoming dependents of the government. By 1885 and the Riel rebellion, the Qu’Appelle industrial school at Lebret, where his own parents were to meet as students decades later, was already in existence.

Throughout his work, Poitras’ family and regional history are interwoven with references to the story of aboriginal people in the Americas. The Lebret school stands in the distance in a historical photograph which fills the background of *1885*, a work Poitras conceived in 1993 for the Mendel Art Gallery’s *The Post-Colonial Landscape: A Billboard Exhibition*. An earlier mixed-media work, *As Snow*

*Before the Summer Sun* (1980), took the form of a painted and wired cow skull to which Poitras attached an old photograph of residential schoolboys. The piece arose from “wondering what my parents went through in residential school and what I lost in terms of language.” Being robbed of the ability to think and speak in your native tongue is like being lobotomized, Poitras observes. In *Internal Recall*, a part of *Indian Territory*, he placed life-sized figures of seven naked, kneeling native men with their hands bound behind them under the words “Witness/Interpreter/His/X/Mark,” a reference to his great-great-grandfather and to his own resumption of the role of witness and interpreter.

“What’s always interested me about Edward’s work is this connection between history and place,” says Matthew Teitelbaum, chief curator of the Art Gallery of Ontario, who invited Poitras to mount *Indian Territory* at the Mendel when he was a curator at that gallery. “There is a very clear sense that identity is formed in relation to a set of local circumstances. He’s an artist who is very much of Saskatchewan because the best work done in Saskatchewan in the past twenty years has been about that. Edward, in my view, has always been a storyteller in the tradition of his family and his community, and he’s always linked the stories to history. He’s very comfortable with that because it’s really part of the present for him.”

Poitras counts his parents’ creativity as his earliest influence. He has vivid recollections of crawling under the table and drawing on the underside while his parents were painting or drawing. But his father, who also made toys, died when he was seven and his mother stopped painting. The example of language may have also played a part. Poitras’ stepfather speaks Michif, the language of his paternal grandparents. In Michif, the verbs are mostly Cree and the nouns almost all French, making it an apt metaphor for the way Poitras works: native spirit animating a European sense of materials. The spiritual knowledge that permeates his work also comes from more than one source. Like his parents, he was raised a Roman Catholic, and he says with irony that he still reads the Bible as a means of understanding how Christians think. At age fifteen he was introduced to Otto Rogers and some other Saskatchewan artists who were Bahais. The attraction of Bahaim, he once told Garry Mainprize, was “its tolerance of other religions and cultures, as well as its emphasis on the mythological beginnings of early civilizations.” It was not until later, when he was about



*Offensive/Defensive* (detail) 1988  
Sod, natural prairie grass, cultivated lawn, buried cast lead  
55 x 36 in.  
Photo: Mendel Art Gallery  
Collection: Saskatchewan Arts Board  
Courtesy: Dunlop Art Gallery

twenty, that he discovered the documented teachings and visions of Black Elk.

Poitras attended high school in both Fort Qu’Appelle and Regina, but dropped out before he finished. On the reserve, Poitras was marginalized as a Metis; in the city, as an Indian. (Some years later Poitras would make a work symbolic of the difficulties of assimilation. Entitled *Offensive/Defensive* (1988), it included an outdoor component in which a piece of prairie sod from the Gordon Indian Reserve was exchanged with a strip of the Mendel Art Gallery’s cultivated lawn. Poitras photographed the results of the transplants; the hardy prairie grass survived, mixing in but remaining visible.) Poitras got a job in Calgary tarring roofs, and laid pipe for IPSCO in Regina, spending the winter of his nineteenth year at hard labour. After deciding to go back to school, he noticed a poster announcing an experimental Indian art program at the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural College in Saskatoon. Poitras had just read Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*. He was angry that this documented story of systematic destruction was not

being taught in the schools. “I wanted to find out about my heritage,” he says. He signed up for Sarain Stump’s first “Indart” program at the college in 1974.

Stump was a painter, poet and singer of Shoshone, Cree and Flathead ancestry who wrote: “One of the major causes for the lack of self-confidence in the Indian people today is the little knowledge they have of their culture and spiritual wealth.” Teaching native art to young native people could help to heal the damage caused by the disruption of ancient ways of life and by the misinterpretation of native values. Stump’s curriculum combined Western art history with the history of native art in the Americas. For three months of the program, teacher and students camped on the Moose Woods Reserve, living in teepees and gathering the natural materials — bone, wood and stone — believed by many native cultures to be imbued with living spirit. Guest craftsmen taught the students how to use them. Ritual spiritual practices and ceremonies were brought into the program through dancing and sweat lodges. Poitras recalls “experimenting with various exercises to have significant dreams that we would try to express in some way.” The students



*The Big Picture* 1991  
Backlit Cibachrome  
72 x 144 in.  
Photo: Don Hall

were deeply affected, McMaster says. "We go to Italy to study the Renaissance. Aboriginal art is being out there in the elements where that art comes from."

Poitras' education is unusual in that it encompasses the two significant early experiments in teaching native art in Canada. The following year, he went to La Macaza, Quebec, to study with Mexican Metis artist Domingo Cisneros at Manitou College, where the Native Arts and Communications program (which existed for only two years) also involved working with natural materials and learning techniques — even how to make snowshoes — from elderly craftsmen. "A lot of this information was being lost," Poitras says. He spent six of the following eight years teaching at the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural College, the Saskatchewan Native Studies Department at the University of Manitoba and the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College at the University of Regina. He made parfleches and masks, but he increasingly questioned the validity of producing traditional cultural objects whose functions were lost when they became collector's items. In 1978-79, he went back to the Cultural College to take a course in audio-visual production. On the reserve, he started filming meetings and powwows and began making short documentaries. It was at about this time, while he was screening videotapes of the second Native Artists Conference in Regina (a gathering that included Bill Reid, Jackson Beardy, Daphne Odjig, Alex Janvier and Robert Houle), that he came to a realization. "I knew I didn't want to do what they did," he says.

This is where Marcel Duchamp, whom Poitras encountered in an art book in 1974, probably comes into the picture. Could it be that R. Mutt, as Duchamp signed the urinal in his most famous appropriation, is a French version of Coyote? Poitras identified immediately with the iconoclastic artist who could jokingly draw a moustache on a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*. ("I liked the way Duchamp used materials," Poitras now says drily.) He began to work with fibreglass, circuit boards, transistors and magnetic tape, mixing these definitively non-organic twentieth-century materials with feathers, horsehair, rawhide and cow skulls. Uniting bone with discarded circuit boards and other dead technology was like "restoring life," he says. "I felt I was expressing my own identity. I was being honest with myself and being in my own time, not in history."

The early 1980s held other changes for Poitras. He married dancer, performance artist and sometime collaborator Robin Wiens, daughter of the Regina modernist architect Clifford Wiens. In 1982 he was one of fifteen Canadian and American native artists introduced to the public by the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery in the exhibition *New Work by a New Generation*. (The title expressly avoided labelling the artists.) In the catalogue, guest curator Robert Houle excerpted a letter he had received from Poitras: "I would like to suggest that a group of us malcontents get together and perform the sacred ritual of the Dadaists for the origin of a new name.... This will give us the freedom

that we need, because nobody will know what to expect."

When his first large installation work, *Big Iron Sky*, appeared in 1984, it was indeed unexpected and bold. The four horse skulls, mounted on T-shaped structures tilted forward as if poised for supersonic flight, were suspended above a sand painting in which the outline of a spaceship appeared. These are the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse from the Book of Revelation; they are also the mystical beings that came to Black Elk from the four cardinal directions and carried him to the centre of the earth. The horse, introduced by the Europeans, became a symbol of the Plains Indians and their "buffalo culture." But in his vision, Black Elk sees that the strength of his people, the buffalo, will be destroyed. The "iron horse" would come to rule the plains. Poitras' conflation of the two visions suggests the apocalyptic arrival of Christian settlers. At the same time, however, *Big Iron Sky* revitalizes the spirit and power of the horse as a symbol in contemporary times.

Poitras' work is full of double and triple meanings, paradoxes and appropriations. The kneeling figures in *Internal Recall* were inspired by a Sarain Stump drawing, but evoke as well the nineteenth-century European artists Paul Kane, Karl Bodmer and George Catlin, all known for making early images of Indians. "Poitras understands how appropriation works, but he never fully divulges his strategy; we are not allowed to know whether he is borrowing or stealing," McMaster writes in the Venice catalogue. "He sometimes views stealing as an art." Thus, while Poitras disclaims having borrowed willfully from the work of German artist Lothar Baumgarten, the echo is unmistakable. In his controversial site-specific installation of 1984-85 entitled *Monument to the Native People of Ontario*, Baumgarten inscribed the names of Ontario tribes in Roman letters around the top of the Art Gallery of Ontario's Renaissance-style Walker Court. In his *Relocating Tribes* (1991), a conceptual artwork made for a book, Poitras lists the names of North American tribes alphabetically from A to Z in the same Roman lettering, printed in varnish on white paper. Dropped into the roster in black, the words "English," "French" and "Spanish" leap out, exposing the problematics of Baumgarten's lament.

By the same token, it is impossible to look at Poitras' backlit Cibachrome transparencies and not think of the well-known Vancouver artist Jeff Wall. Wall, in fact, has made several images of native people; both *Bad Goods* (1984) and *The Storyteller* (1986) show their contemporary native subjects as hard-up urban outsiders. Yet where Wall's photographs of native subjects present a charged psychological theatre tinged with fear and fascination, Poitras' images are more like candid snapshots. *The Big Picture* shows two native friends and the Chinese owner of the Utopia Café standing in front of the café, one of Poitras' favourite haunts in a Regina neighbourhood with a dense native population. It describes a slice of his life.

*The Big Picture* was made specifically for *Indigena*, an exhibition which marked the five hundredth anniversary of

White Buffalo Cloud 1990  
Brazilian soapstone, pipestone map, pipestone book, granite bowl and  
engraved brass plaque  
Photo: Patricia Holdsworth  
Courtesy: Dunlop Art Gallery



At a time when “native spirituality” is used to peddle corn oil and New Age shamanism, Poitras chooses not to exploit serious matters. Instead, he aims to fulfill his responsibility to his community as a witness and interpreter, but never without a sense of subversive mischief.

Columbus’ landfall in the Americas. In it, Poitras addresses a controversy that arose during the planning of the exhibition: should artists of mixed blood be allowed into the show? As far as Poitras is concerned, the work — conceived by him and photographed by non-native Regina photographer Don Hall — is about authenticity. Does it lie in “pure” blood? “When does native art stop being native art?” Poitras asks. “Does it exist?” In the exhibition catalogue, he wrote: “I stand on the curb of a street running east and west, in a city named Regina, named after the Queen after the treaties were signed. On the edge of a situation best described as the colouring of North America.”

In *Death of Jimmie Wolf* (which refers to history painting as Wall’s work often does), Poitras mimics Benjamin West and his icon of Canadian colonialism, *The Death of Wolfe* (1770). Wolfe, of course, was the “dauntless hero” who planted the English flag in Canadian soil and died on the Plains of Abraham. Jimmie Wolf is a young Plains Indian who lies in a colourful, graffiti-sprayed set, an arrow-strewn alley that suggests that the inner-city slum is a battlefield. Poitras himself is one of the companions at Wolf’s side. But the play-acting is apparent. “Here is what we must by now call excellent vintage Poitras: thousands of young Indians do die sordid deaths in those back alleys,” writes the native art critic and artist Jimmie Durham. “Poitras has been taken over by Coyote, so that with the same astounding bravery that Geronimo had, he says, oh sure [we’re dead], but not as dead as you guys.”

Walking through one of Poitras’ major installations, which are large, complex groupings of smaller discrete works, the viewer is constantly crisscrossing borders, as Poitras does in his art practice and his life. In his 1991 installation, *Marginal Recession*, shown at the Dunlop Art Gallery in Regina, the words “peace”, “bread” and “land” (echoing the slogans of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution) appear on the gallery wall above a memorial to the December 1890 massacre of the Sioux at Wounded Knee. Elsewhere in the piece, the figure of Coyote stands underneath a mock-classical pediment supported by plexiglass columns. Poitras fashioned the sculptural frieze of allegorical figures after

the one on the Saskatchewan legislative building in Regina. The woman in the centre is Queen, Canada, Regina, and the heroic male at her right seems to represent agriculture and animal husbandry. Watching from the left is what Durham in the catalogue calls “a Noble Savage Indian dude.” Only he has kept his head; the rest are decapitated.

Poitras’ installations are like stratified sites, and the cultural knowledge a viewer brings to them is always an issue. Native and non-native viewers are likely to read them in different ways that will turn on a number of understandings — of contemporary art, yes, but also of the European notion of the Indian, native spiritual beliefs, the history of native people and the realities of their contemporary life. *White Buffalo Cloud*, another element of *Marginal Recession*, is a case in point, difficult to understand for the uninitiated. The work is a kind of sculptural poem that renders Black Elk’s story of how the sacred pipe was given to his people by White Buffalo Calf Woman, who comes out of a cloud. One part of the work is a pipestone carving of a book, with “The Pipe” inscribed on the spine. Durham explains the significance of representing the peace pipe as a Western book. “When Indian elders say the pipe is our Bible,” he writes, they mean that “there is at least the same rich complexity centred around our practice and knowledge of the pipe as there is surrounding the Bible in Christianity.” In the five parts of this quietly beautiful work, Poitras refers not only to the pipe’s mythological origin, but also to the location of the one pipestone quarry in the world, at the centre of North America. One senses Poitras’ discretion and his integrity in dealing with the sacred. At a time when “native spirituality” is used to peddle corn oil and New Age shamanism, Poitras chooses not to exploit serious matters. Instead, he aims to fulfill his responsibility to his community as a witness and interpreter. But never without a sense of subversive mischief.

“Our Grandfather coyote has come to be a symbol of survival-with-hubris for most Indian people,” Durham observes. “Coyote always says, ‘Whatever you do, I am going to do something else.’” He might also say, “What goes around, comes around.” Poitras, with his Metis dream of a mixed nation, offers the possibility of reciprocity by acknowledging the ties that bind. ■