

Old Sun...

Written By Lynne Bell

The works that appear in *Old Sun* focus on a particular chapter in Canada's history of colonialism: the long and unfinished story of the residential school system. This colonial education system—founded and operated through a state-church partnership for over a century until the last school closed in 1996—attempted to “kill the Indian in the child” (Fontaine) by erasing the culture of generations of Aboriginal people: an assimilative practice that is identified in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* as cultural genocide.

The title, *Old Sun*, links this installation-event with Old Sun School, an Anglican residential school founded in 1890 on Stimson's reserve: the Siksika Nation. Many of Stimson's family members attended Old Sun School where so many children died of tuberculosis, mumps, cholera, small pox, influenza, measles, and malnutrition: all in the name of civilization. In successive government reports Old Sun School became infamous for its high mortality rates: its buildings were condemned as unsanitary and its overcrowded dormitories were described as providing an ideal incubator for the spread of disease. As Stimson notes, Old Sun School—just an hour's drive from the Truck gallery—was named after Old Sun or *Natusapi*, a chief of the Blackfoot and Stimson's distant relative. “I find it ironic” Stimson says, “that Old Sun School is named after this respected leader who did not want to sign Treaty 7, preferring war to what, at the time, was seen as the end of our way of life. Old Sun School did ensure the end of a way of life for many of his descendants, including my family.”

Moving back-and-forth between the installations brings together an accumulation of images: a steel-ribbed sweat lodge lined with scraps of buffalo hide; a classroom light casting shadows that mimic the ‘double-cross’ of the Union Jack; a sleeping figure lying on an infirmary bed wrapped in buffalo fur; the phantom shadow of a flayed buffalo hide; a tall sketchy structure resembling an Indigenous burial platform and a wooden coffin; a small fur-sarcophagus suspended in front of a projection of historical and contemporary images of Old Sun School; and an old Anglican church banner reading: “All one in Christ Jesus.”

Stimson's installations start from and continually return to the found object: material fragments from Old Sun School including windows, light fixtures, an infirmary bed and black-and-white photographs from an instructor's personal photo-album. “These fragments,” Stimson notes, “bear witness to the trauma of these schools. They also invoke my relationship to this history. I went to residential school until grade four as a day student. I have a lot of vivid memories that I draw on when I work with these fragments.” Talking about, *Old Sun* (2005), Stimson says: “The Old Sun light fixture that hangs above the sweat lodge shines downward interrogating the piece. I believe that objects hold energy. This light that once shone above the heads of many children in the school is a witness to cultural genocide. The shadow it creates on the fragments of bison fur is the Union Jack. Shadows of history haunt us but illumination of our history can

enlighten us.” In bringing differing visual elements and signifying systems into juxtaposition, Stimson creates an image-montage that allusively yet insistently draws connections between things that are normally kept apart in the Canadian national imaginary.

Old Sun engages in the exhausting work of mourning yet it is also a story of survival and strength. In his practice as an artist, Stimson repeatedly turns to the figure of the buffalo as a metaphor for spirituality, creativity, and rebirth. In this exhibit, the figure of the buffalo is at once witness, mourner and survivor. As he tells it, “I use the bison as a symbol representing the destruction of the Aboriginal way of life. It also represents survival and cultural regeneration. The bison is central to Blackfoot being.”

In this hauntingly beautiful installation Stimson has created an archive of visual testimony that bears witness to Canada’s colonial past and the “national crime” (Milloy) of the residential school. It is an exhibit that reveals the affective and interrogative force of the visual arts and their ability to make a significant contribution to the urgent task of building an inclusive national imaginary as a process of historical accountability.

Lynne Bell is a Professor in the Department of Art and Art History and Co-Director of the Humanities Research Unit at the University of Saskatchewan. Her essay on Adrian Stimson's work, "Buffalo Boy: Camp, Mourning, and the Forgiving of History" appeared in Canadian Art (Summer 2007).