

# SURREY ART GALLERY PRESENTS

Sonny Assu  
1UP

## Reading the Tide: Water and Land as Storytellers of Place

ELLYN WALKER

### Exhibition Statement

SONNY ASSU AND ALISON RAJAH

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SONNY ASSU  
ELLYN WALKER



## *Reading the Tide: Water and Land as Storytellers of Place*

Ellyn Walker

The city now known as Surrey, BC, is a place of many histories, ones that are multiple, overlapping, and at the same time, contested. Incorporated in 1879, and named after the County of Surrey in the south east of England, Surrey represents a site of coloniality through its settler renaming of Kwantlen territory, which is land that many Nations make claim to, as its surrounding waters have served as critical trade routes for Indigenous peoples for thousands of years. Because of this complex history, Surrey's landscape holds stories that simultaneously cross cultures and span time, and that tell of important

Sonny Assu  
*1UP*, 2016

digital projection with video  
elements, UrbanScreen installation

Photograph by Edward Westerhuis

changes to a place that had been inhabited for over 13,000 years prior to colonial contact. Sonny Assu (Ligwilda'xw of the Kwakwaka'wakw nations), who is also a resident of South Surrey, reminds us of this in his latest work *1UP* for UrbanScreen, presenting a site-specific digital artwork that complicates the way place is read and by whom.

Featuring expansive and overlapping formline elements – which are continuous ovoid, S, and U shaped graphics specific to the Kwakwaka'wakw and other Pacific Northwest Indigenous nations – Assu constructs a digital landscape in his new work that extends outwards by way of animation. Containing bold colours, neon gaming pixels, and moving image of shimmering waters as their centres, each element is comprised of a different creative vocabulary:

Indigenous, gaming, or documentary. More specifically, the subtle water animations featured within select areas of formline work to remind us of two things: the fact that land is a living relation, and, as such, is also *one of our relations*. In this way, the imagery of rushing waters, similar to the Pacific Ocean that indirectly surrounds the City of Surrey, reflects its transformation as a living relationship – a place that was at one time solid, when around the time of the last ice age Indigenous peoples first arrived in the area.<sup>1</sup>

What more immediately surrounds Surrey is Boundary Bay – an imagined political border between Canada and the US that imposes colonial practices of mapping, though, does so through a seemingly unfixed medium: *water*. Because water



Sonny Assu, *1UP*, 2016, digital projection with video elements, UrbanScreen installation, Photograph by Edward Westerhuis.

moves, expands, spills, ebbs, and flows, it can at times refuse certain kinds of containment. Yet, it also performs a strategic spatial divide between the two neighbouring nations, whereby the 'border' represents the violence that is invisible though always implicit in the act of dividing territory. Thus, Assu's installation highlights the complex role water plays in our lives, emphasizing the fact that while we all live on land, it was in fact water that brought us here, as for millennia Indigenous peoples have travelled the waterways in search of food and settlement. More recently, such as in the present day and over the past four hundred years, other bodies have arrived on this land, which can be attributed to such transnational practices as slavery, immigration, and now refugeeism. Accordingly, it is important to understand the mobilization of bodies through water as something that is hardly benign; rather, as something that implicates us all as *travellers* and also as *arrivants*.

Upon one's arrival on land begins a new relationship of guesthood, one that allows for opportunities for settlers to "learn more about their hosts and [an occasion for] hosts to know more about their guests."<sup>2</sup> This relational impulse that Metis artist/curator/scholar David Garneau writes about is key to a conciliatory future for Indigenous/settler relations in Canada, where, as a nation built on unceded land, we are all implicated in the colonization and decolonization of territory. *1UP* points to the importance of such interrelationships and draws on different cultural references in order to do so. For instance, Assu's use of formline within *1UP* (as well as within many other of his works) makes reference to graffiti practices and the ways in which graffiti writers tag and thus (re)claim public space. The graphic layering of formline elements within *1UP* creates a hypervisible amalgamation of Indigenous

iconography that, like a graffiti tag, works to mark and reclaim the land on which the screen is situated as Indigenous. In doing so, Assu's gesture attempts to reorient Canada's longstanding settler colonial narrative that continues to unfold across the country, albeit, in different ways, and inscribes its location on the grounds of the UrbanScreen as Indigenous territory.

British Columbia, of which Surrey is a part, has recently adopted a provincial rhetoric of re-Indigenization alongside the national project of Truth and Reconciliation, where many British Columbian cities now officially acknowledge their location on unceded Indigenous land. While this act of recognition is an important gesture of reconsidering place, it can also run the risk of "performing" a kind of recognition that is inherently colonial, as it is defined by both the goals and gaze of the state. Indigenous scholars like Glen Coulthard,<sup>3</sup> Audra Simpson,<sup>4</sup> and Dylan Robinson<sup>5</sup> disavow these official practices in their work, explaining that state-based practices of recognition function as non-performative utterances, in essence, saying things they do not actually do. Instead, to recognize Indigenous sovereignty is to profoundly change one's relationships with others, the land, and with place, and as such, *1UP* proposes a reconstructed view of an immensely storied site. It gestures towards place-making as an ongoing process of reorientation akin to how the featured footage of water shows the tides in continuous motion.

Indeed, *1UP* tells a multifaceted story of place, one that gestures towards Surrey's complex terrain as a site that necessitates both *re-reading* and *retelling*. If we think about land as an archival site, or as a place that holds manifold histories at once, what can be gleaned from its close reading? How do we

look for, listen to, and engage with the land's many histories, and how do these encounters complicate and potentially unsettle our understandings of place? By confronting the archive – what is in this case, land – new systems of knowledge and diverse ways of knowing are revealed. This impetus of 'revisiting' allows artists to "make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present"<sup>6</sup> in ways that enable one "to probe a misplaced past, to collate its different signs, [and] to ascertain what might remain for the present"<sup>7</sup> and, more importantly, for the future. For Indigenous artists, in particular, this method allows for the unique opportunity to unhinge dominant colonial ideologies and to assert culturally-specific worldviews and ways of knowing, which, in the context of Assu's work, holds great decolonizing potential. *1UP* performs this archival re-orientation, layering distinct cultural iconographies such as formline, graffiti, and gaming through the use of artistic strategies like intervention, juxtaposition, and animation. Combined, these composite methods work to complicate the legibility of Assu's images in ways that compel viewers to *negotiate* what they see rather than simply *consume* it – what can be understood as another subversive and decolonizing gesture.

Like the ongoing process of decolonization, Assu's projection requires work. There is a labour involved in making meaning from the disparate concepts he draws from and the ways in which they intersect, in particular, for different viewers. Reminding us that the land on which Surrey stands is hardly banal, *1UP* performs an archival re-orientation, and invites viewers to both remember and (re)imagine Surrey's past alongside its future.

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#### Notes

1. Assu in conversation with Brandon Gabriel.
2. David Garneau, "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation," *West Coast Line*, #74, vol. 46, no 2, Summer 2012: 35.
3. Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.
4. Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.
5. Dylan Robinson, "Enchantment's Irreconcilable Connection: Listening to Anger, Being Idle No More," *Performance Studies in Canada*, edited by Laura Levin and Marlis Schweitzer. Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 2016.
6. Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October*, No. 110, fall 2004, 4.
7. *ibid* 21.

## ***Exhibition Statement***

### **Sonny Assu and Alison Rajah**

*1UP* is a nostalgic nod to my childhood. I'd spend hours locked away in my room or a cousin's basement, playing Sonic The Hedgehog, WonderBoy, or Altered Beast. I'd hoard quarters, normally spent in the arcade, and raid my grandfather's change dish just to get the latest 8-bit or 16-bit games, wrapped in the iconic Sega grid packaging. As an ephemeral mural, *1UP* draws on the theories and explorations within my larger body of work. Addressing my thoughts on decolonization, the large foreground shape invokes notions of graffiti, "tagging" the colonial landscape to become a metaphor that speaks to the resurgence for Indigenous rights and titles.

Sonny Assu

Sonny Assu's *1UP* is a new site-specific installation for the Surrey Art Gallery's offsite programming venue UrbanScreen. Located on the west wall of Chuck Bailey Recreation Centre, UrbanScreen is situated on traditional Kwantlen territory. As a Ligwilda'xw/Kwakwaka'wakw person recently relocated to South Surrey, Assu "tags" the colonial landscape to bring attention to the histories of the Indigenous people in Canada.

As a colloquial term in gaming culture, "1UP" grants an extra life to a player through an achievement or item. Drawing on this term, Assu's artwork *1UP* becomes a metaphor for how the First People have risen up for rights within a system that was designed to oppress and assimilate them. *1UP* merges 80s and 90s retro gaming iconography from his childhood with Northwest Coast formline elements

Assu's *1UP* relates to his larger body of work, specifically his Longhouse, Chilkat, and Interventions on the Imaginary series, which investigates his theories of abstracting abstraction, the recreation of language, and his work addressing decolonization. Recognizing art from the Northwest Coast is a form of abstraction that inspired artists from the Surreal and Cubist movements, Assu witnesses this gaze and influence by making working in response. With *1UP*, Assu seeks to comment on the land, honouring and making visible the parallel narratives of Indigenous people, and the histories of this place, now known as City Centre in Surrey.

Sonny Assu thanks Mark Mushet for adding the video elements into *1UP*.



### *About the Artist*

Through museum interventions, large-scale installations, sculpture, photography, printmaking, and painting, Sonny Assu merges the aesthetics of Indigenous iconography with a pop art sensibility in an effort to address contemporary, political, and ideological issues. His work often focuses on Indigenous issues and rights, consumerism, branding, new technologies, and the ways in which the past has come to inform contemporary ideas and identities. Assu infuses his work with wry humour to open the dialogue towards the use of consumerism, branding, and technology as totemic representation. Within this, his work deals with the loss of language, loss of cultural resources, and the effects of colonization upon the Indigenous people of North America.

Assu's work has been accepted into the National Gallery of Canada, Seattle Art Museum, Vancouver Art Gallery, Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Burke Museum at the University of Washington, Hydro-Québec, Loto-Québec, and in various other public and private collections across Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

Assu, Ligwilda'xw (We Wai Kai) of the Kwakwaka'wakw nations, graduated from Emily Carr University (2002) and received their distinguished alumni award in 2006. He also received the BC Creative Achievement Award in First Nations Art in 2011 and was longlisted for the Sobey Art Award in 2012, 2013, and 2015. Assu is an MFA candidate at Concordia University, and he currently works and lives in South Surrey.

### *About the Writer*

Ellyn Walker is a writer and curator based in Toronto (Tkaronto) on Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee and Wendat land. Her work is informed by critical art history, Indigenous-Settler studies and anti-racist methodologies, and focuses on the politics of cross-cultural work within representative and collaborative arts practices. Ellyn's curatorial projects have been presented by the Art Gallery of Mississauga, Prefix Institute for Contemporary Art and the Art Gallery of Ontario. Her writing has been published in the Journal of Curatorial Studies, Prefix Photo, PUBLIC Journal, Fuse Magazine, Inuit Art Quarterly, BlackFlash, C Magazine, and by multiple artist-run centres and public galleries across Canada. Ellyn is currently a PhD candidate in the Cultural Studies program at Queen's University in Kingston where her research explores curating as a relational and decolonizing practice.



## About UrbanScreen

Imagined by artists and built by the City, Surrey's UrbanScreen is Canada's largest non-commercial outdoor urban screen dedicated to presenting digital and interactive art. UrbanScreen is an offsite venue of the Surrey Art Gallery and is located on the west wall of Chuck Bailey Recreation Centre in City Centre. The venue can be viewed from SkyTrain, between Gateway and Surrey Central stations. Exhibitions begin 30 minutes after sunset, and end at midnight.

UrbanScreen was made possible by the City of Surrey Public Art Program, with support from the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Surrey Art Gallery Association, and the BC Arts Council Unique Opportunities Program, and is a legacy of the Vancouver 2010 Cultural Olympiad project CODE. Surrey Art Gallery gratefully acknowledges funding support from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Province of BC through the BC Arts Council for its ongoing programming including this exhibition event. UrbanScreen's 2015 equipment renewal was made possible by the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage / Government of Canada and the City of Surrey.

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