

SONNY ASSU Tag



PUBLIC
ART
vancouver



About the Work

Sonny Assu's public artwork *Tag* (2013) is inspired by two very different aesthetic traditions: graffiti found in the streets of Vancouver, and Northwest Coast form line drawn from the artist's indigenous background. Inscribed across five panels and inset at the foot of The Mark, a new development in Vancouver's Yaletown neighbourhood, Assu's colourful lines stand out in contrast to the grey concrete and asphalt of the surrounding cityscape.

Each of the panels constitutes a section of a larger, horizontal painting that, if placed together, aligns symmetrically, with its distinct contours flowing seamlessly from one section to the next. From the foreground of each composition, a white ovoid form pops out against a layered background of rounded shapes in alternating hues of blue and copper. Three white dots off to the side punctuate each panel, animating it like motion lines in comics.

On the Pacific Northwest Coast, the tradition of indigenous form line is an abstract, stylized art form characterized by the use of shapes referred to as *ovoids*, *U forms* and *S forms*. Each group uses different variations and combinations of these forms, from which distinct figures and animals are created, which tell the constellation of stories and myths, past and present, that have become iconic of the region. Embracing

and at the same time departing from this tradition, Assu's approach is unique. He has developed a highly singular style of painting that merges traditional form line with the stylized lines of street art, comics and graffiti, one he describes as "a modern twist to tradition, laced with a whimsical exploration that is rooted firmly in my Ligwilda'xw/Kwakwaka'wakw ancestry." Often painted on unconventional surfaces, such as panels shaped like Chilkat blankets or elk hides stretched like drums, Assu's work has become known for a playful mash-up of indigenous iconography with popular culture, in a critique of the often one-dimensional representation of First Nations cultures in mainstream society.

In street culture, a "tag" is a type of graffiti signature — a stylized name or symbol. It is also a verb: to "tag" something is to mark it, to claim space by placing one's initials on it. Graffiti, especially for urban youth culture, has long been a way of symbolically claiming city space. Likewise, from an indigenous perspective, marking territory is hardly something new. Rock paintings and engravings, pictographs and petroglyphs have been used to mark land inhabited by Indigenous peoples for generations, etching cultural narratives into the landscape and connecting people to the land that they inhabit. By combining form line and graffiti, Assu's artwork brings these ideas together and asserts an indigenous presence in the urban landscape.

Situated across from a bridge off-ramp that has been home to graffiti artists and taggers for decades, Assu's artwork is an important reminder that urban spaces are also indigenous spaces. By conflating assumptions of what is considered traditional or contemporary, mainstream or marginal, urban or rural, Assu collapses these divisions altogether. His work shows that these categories are no longer relevant; especially to a younger generation who are making the point that indigenous cultures are not outside or elsewhere. They are present, urban and thriving.

— Kathleen Ritter

Kathleen Ritter is an artist and writer currently based in Vancouver and Paris.

Images Installation views of *Tag*, 2013. Photos: Scott Massey

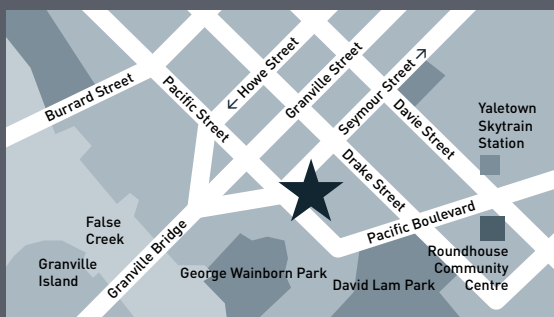


About the Artist

Sonny Assu is a multidisciplinary artist and Ligwilda'xw of the We Wai Kai First Nation (Cape Mudge). Using a range of materials, Assu merges Pacific Northwest Coast indigenous iconography with the aesthetics of popular culture. In early work, he created parodies of common consumer products, branding Salmon Loops as a breakfast cereal and appropriating the Coca-Cola slogan to welcome people to Coast Salish territory. He graduated from the Emily Carr University of Art + Design in 2002. He received the BC Creative Achievement Award for First Nations' art in 2011 and was long-listed for the 10th annual Sobey Art Award in 2012. His work has been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions across Canada and the United States, including *Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture* and *How Soon Is Now: Contemporary Art from Here*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver; and *Challenging Traditions: Contemporary First Nations Art of the Northwest Coast*, McMichael Gallery, Kleinburg, ON. He currently lives and works in Montréal.

Above Sonny Assu, *Hamatsa Hair*, 2011, sketchbook self-portrait

The City of Vancouver Public Art Program commissions contemporary art for public spaces. The program supports excellence in art making by emerging and established artists, in new and traditional media and from stand-alone commissions to artist collaborations. Projects at civic buildings, greenways, parks and other public spaces are funded through annual civic capital budgets. Private sector projects are funded by developments in the rezoning process. Learn more about this and other public artworks in the Public Art Registry at www.vancouver.ca/publicart; subscribe to the Public Art Listserv to be notified of upcoming artist opportunities.



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Cover image *Tag*, 2013, 1372 Seymour Street, Vancouver, British Columbia.
Photo: Scott Massey



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