

This one [Figure 121] is called *No E & H Please, We're Treaty* – No Education and Health tax.⁵⁰ And that one I found very interesting because it was borrowed. Brian Mulroney borrowed that one when he had his international finance conference. And I don't think he even knew what was going on, but there it was hanging right behind the ... head table. Whenever they had the sessions they decorated the wall, and they were talking about international finance and so on [and] there's my statement about Treaty Indians behind there with the finance thing. So Mulroney and his cronies became part of a performance piece there for me.

Ryan, Alan
Trickster Shift

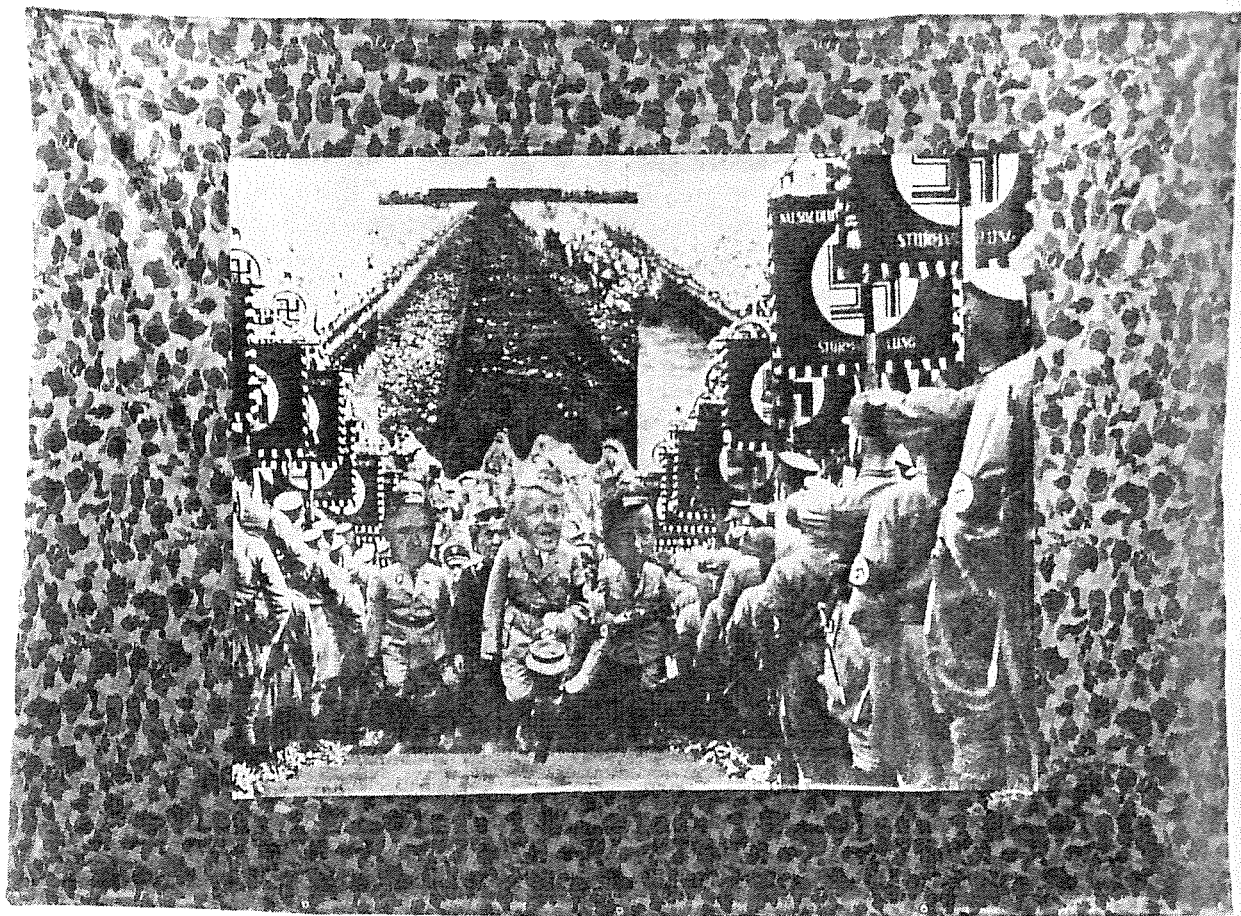
Noganosh portrayed Mulroney once again in a devastating denunciation of the federal government's handling of the 1990 confrontation at Oka, Quebec.⁵¹ Many Native people were enraged and sickened by the government's hardline stance on negotiations and by the decision to send in Canadian army troops and tanks to replace the provincial Sûreté du Québec (SQ). Noganosh gives voice to that rage in his mixed-media collage, *The Final Solution* (Figure 122), which draws an alarming analogy between the Canadian government's treatment of Indians and the Nazi treatment of Jews:

I had an old photograph of the Reichstag in the Second World War with masses of swastikas. Hitler, Goering, and somebody else are coming up the steps towards the camera, so I cut Hitler's head out, put Mulroney in there, [Quebec premier Robert] Bourassa's on one side, and [Indian Affairs minister Tom] Siddon is on the other side. And the Queen's looking over Mulroney's shoulder. Now there's railroad tracks that go off in the back and those railroad tracks are leading into Auschwitz⁵² ... It's a collage, a composite. I've blown it up to four feet by six feet and it's mounted against camouflage cloth. I mean, that's my reaction to Oka ... There are some pieces that I do like that. There's humour in there but it's pretty black humour. These are the people who, right at the moment, are controlling what is happening to Indians. And they're acting just like

50 The title of this piece is a play on the name of the popular British television series, *No Sex Please, We're British*.

51 See p. 69 n. 49. For an insider's account of events that unfolded at Oka and Kahnawake during the seventy-eight-day standoff in 1990, see *People of the Pines: The Warriors and the Legacy of Oka* by Geoffrey York and Loreen Pindera (1991), and *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (Obomsawin 1993), the award-winning two-hour documentary produced for The National Film Board of Canada by Abnaki writer-director Alanis Obomsawin.

52 The 'final solution' (*die Endlösung*) is the term applied to the attempted extermination of European Jewry, which climaxed the twelve-year period of Nazi persecution known as the Holocaust (1933-45). More than four million perished in the gas chambers, disguised as showers, constructed alongside crematoria in death camps such as Auschwitz. The total number of Jews who died at the hands of the Nazis during the Second World War is estimated to be as high as six million.



122

Ron Noganosh

The Final Solution, 1991

photo collage on camouflage fabric,

229 x 171 cm

Nazis. And there's the Queen pussyfooting around looking over his shoulder saying, 'Gee, Canada's doing alright; look at how they're treating ... my Red children.' The Great White Mother!⁵³

In a four-part pastel drawing with the pointedly direct title, *FUSQ: Tanks for the Memories* (Figure 123), Bob Boyer registers his own disgust with the government's actions at Oka. In what must be regarded as one of the subtlest of subversions, the artist has scattered through the panels small and almost imperceptible letters from the tersely obscene title, 'FUSQ,' an expression that surely testifies to the tenacity and infinite mutability of Native oral tradition! The text is all the more potent when, and if, detected. Like Edward Poitras, Boyer is past master of the subtle ambush.

- 53 One is reminded here of a comment by Louis Owens on humour in the novels of Blackfoot author James Welch: 'As Jesus Maria says in John Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat*, it is a funny story, "but when you open your mouth to laugh, something like a hand squeezes your heart"' (1983, 142).

The grim humour that bristles in Noganosh's *The Final Solution* mirrors perfectly the humour directed at the Nazis by the peoples they oppressed. In his classic study of Czech resistance humour, Anton Obrdlik (1942, 712-5) writes:

People who live in absolute uncertainty as to their lives and property find a refuge in inventing, repeating, and spreading through the channels of whispering counterpropaganda, anecdotes and jokes about their oppressors. This is gallows humor at its best because it originates and functions among people who literally face death at any moment ... These people have to persuade themselves as well as others that their present suffering is only temporary, that it will soon be all over, that once again they will live as they used to live before they were crushed. In a word, they have to strengthen their hope because otherwise they could not bear the strains to which their nerves are exposed. Gallows humor, full of invectives and irony, is their psychological escape ... Its social influence is enormous ... [It] is an unmistakable index of good morale and of the spirit of resistance of the oppressed peoples ... I am inclined to believe that what is true about individuals is true also about whole nations [and here one could add First Nations] – namely, that *the purest type of ironical humor is born out of sad experiences accompanied by grief and sorrow*. It is spontaneous and deeply felt – the very necessity of life which it helps to preserve (emphasis added).

Likewise, John Morreall, in his book *Taking Laughter Seriously*, observes, 'The person with a sense of humor can never be fully dominated, even by a government which imprisons him, for his ability to laugh at what is incongruous in the political situation will put him above it to some extent, and will preserve a measure of his freedom – if not of movement, at least of thought ... It is because of the freedom of thought in humor, and indeed in aesthetic experience generally, that humorists and artists have traditionally been *personae non gratae* under rigidly controlled political regimes' (1983, 101-2).

For a further look at resistance humour in Europe, see Brandes (1977) and Townsend (1992).

Not surprisingly, the Oka crisis provoked a great deal of emotional and embittered response from Native artists across Canada and beyond, who wished to demonstrate their support for, and solidarity with, the Mohawk peoples.⁵⁴ The proposed expansion of a nine-hole golf course onto sacred Mohawk land was treated with especially acrid wit. Three of the most striking examples are: *Life on the 18th Hole* (Figure 124), Kwagiutl artist David Neel's silk-screened portrait of Ronald Cross, the Mohawk warrior known as 'Lasagna,' with its grimly decorative border of 'ten little soldiers' reversing the imagery of 'one little, two little, three little Indians' in the children's nursery rhyme;⁵⁵ *Par for the Course* (Figures 125 and 126), Onondaga sculptor Peter B. Jones's ceramic interpretation of a masked warrior/guerilla golfer, with his skull-capped clubs slung across his back in a wampum-belted bag; and *Oka Golf Classic (He fell out of a tree and shot himself)* (Figure 127),⁵⁶ Ya'Ya Ts'itxstap Chuck Heit's red cedar housepost figure, which challenges Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's contention that Northwest Coast carvers cannot address contemporary issues in their work.⁵⁷

54 In May-June 1991 Ottawa's Saw Gallery exhibited *Solidarity: Art after Oka*, a small collection of works by Aboriginal artists created during the stand-off or immediately after it (Martin 1991). In August-September 1991 Toronto's Workscene Gallery and A Space mounted a much larger show, *Okanata: An Interdisciplinary Exhibition Examining the Events and Emotions of the Mohawk Summer of 1990*, which featured the work of forty-six artists, both Native and non-Native. In February 1992 it travelled to the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ontario.

55 Using a particularly entertaining allusion in a review of the exhibition, Elizabeth Leiss-McKellar writes, 'These soldiers stand with nightsticks like tap dancers in a chorus line.'

56 In a 1998 telephone conversation from his home in Hazelton, BC, the artist (who prefers to be known as Ya'Ya) discussed the subtitle of this piece and the sculpture's various historical references. Within the Native community, he said, it is widely believed that the unsolved shooting death of Corporal Marcel Lemay of the Sûreté du Québec – the only acknowledged casualty of the Oka standoff – was accidental and self-inflicted. In this version of events the young soldier was an inept sniper who tumbled to the ground from a lofty perch, fatally shooting himself in the process. This, and the larger issues it symbolizes, are commemorated in Ya'Ya's compelling sculptural interface that depicts Lemay, on the left, in military blue with golf ball eyeball, shell casing in hand, and blood oozing from a fatal shoulder wound, confronting a red-faced Mohawk warrior, on the right. The two half figures are held in tension and locked in conflict over an open space, defined physically and understood metaphorically. A large hole through the centre of the pole separates the figures. Dominating this space and ironically testifying to the gravity of the situation are several white golf balls suspended in midair on thin metal rods. Above the forehead of the doubled face a narrow headband references the historical Iroquois two-row wampum belt, symbolizing the parallel and supposedly non-intrusive paths travelled by Natives and non-Natives. At the base of the pole a stylized eagle honours the Cree politician Elijah Harper, whose surprising defeat of proposed government legislation a few months earlier had made him an instant national celebrity and earned him the admiration of Native people across the country.

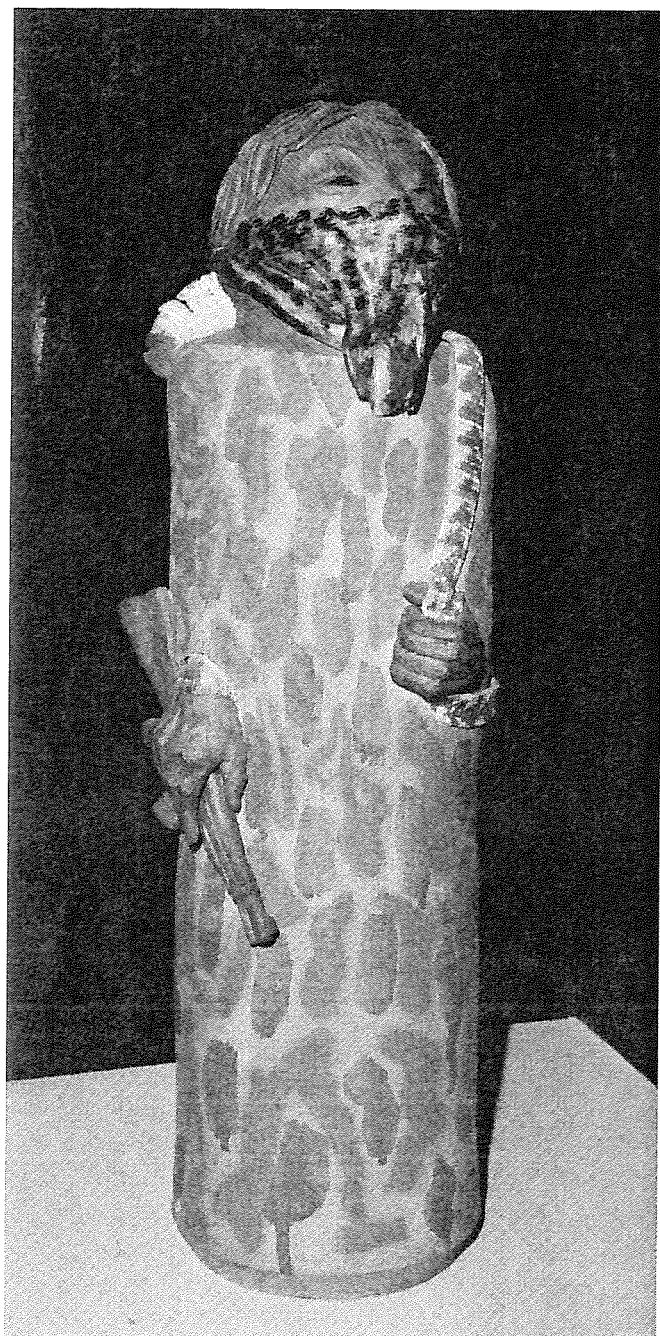
See *Elijah Harper and the Deadheads* (Figure 136), a second carving by this artist that pays tribute to Harper's victory and, like this one, recalls Hoesem-hliyaw'n's *Hole-through-the-Sky* totem pole (Figure 53, p. 111). See also McMaster's *Oka-boy/Oh! Kowboy* (Figure 128, p. 237), in which the figure of a blood-stained cowboy soldier makes oblique reference to Lemay.

Oka Golf Classic, the intentionally ironic title of Ya'Ya's piece, acquires further, albeit unintentionally ironic overtones in light of the program set out in a flyer for a 1989 'Pow-wow in Paradise' in St Thomas, US Virgin Islands. A scheduled feature of the week-long event was a 'Mohawk Masters' golf tournament!

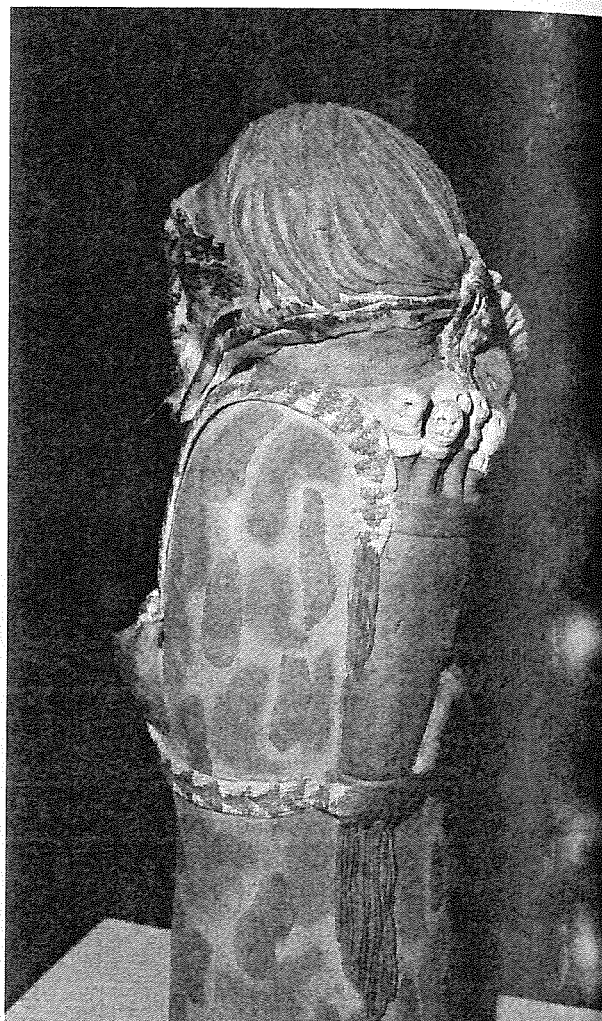
- 57 In the spring of 1993 the Vancouver Museum mounted *Spirit of the Earth*, a year-long exhibition of masks by David Neel, which dealt with a variety of current sociopolitical concerns. The show featured pieces with names such as *Ozone Mask*, *Clearcut Mask*, *Chernobyl Mask*, and *Overpopulation Mask*. Photographs of several have been published. Among them are: *Oil Spill Mask*, in Townsend-Gault (1991); *Inuit Relocation Mask*, in Tétreault (1992); *Mask of the Injustice System*, in McMaster and Martin (1992); and, along with four others, a stunningly dramatic *Mohawk Warrior Mask*, in Raziell (1993).



124
David Neel
Life on the 18th Hole, 1990
serigraph, 91 x 76 cm

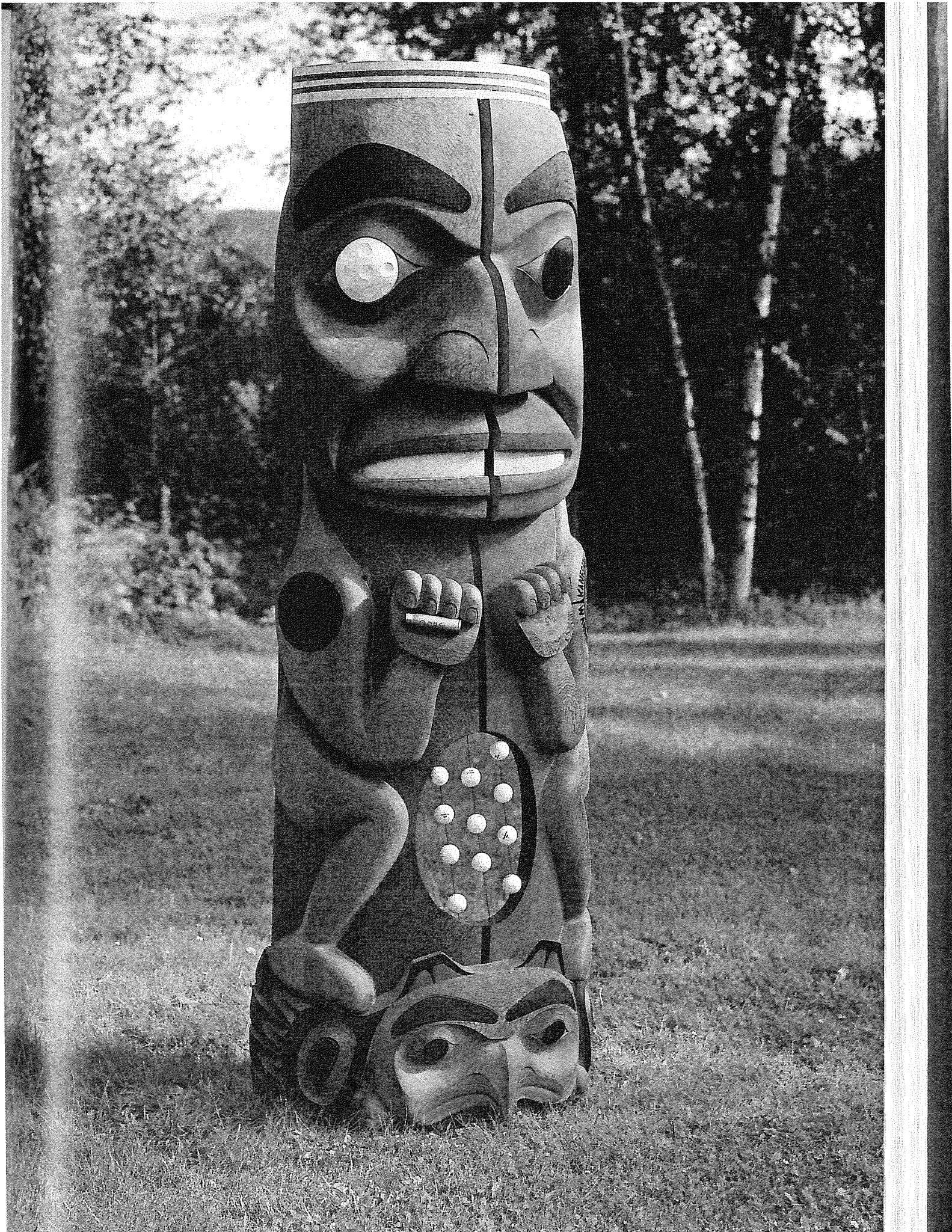


125
Peter B. Jones
Par for the Course, 1991
 stoneware, 49 x 15 x 14 cm



126
Peter B. Jones
Par for the Course, back

127 (facing page)
Ya'Ya Ts'itxstap Chuck Heit
The Oka Golf Classic (He fell out of a tree and shot himself), 1991
 mixed media, painted red cedar house-post, 244 x 122 cm



Gerald McMaster's painting *Oka-boy/Oh! Kowboy* (Figure 128), included in *The cowboy/Indian show*, is not so much a response to the Oka stand-off – although it obviously is – as a disturbing illustration of history seeming to repeat itself. It is one of the most layered and textually complex paintings the artist has created, as he explains:

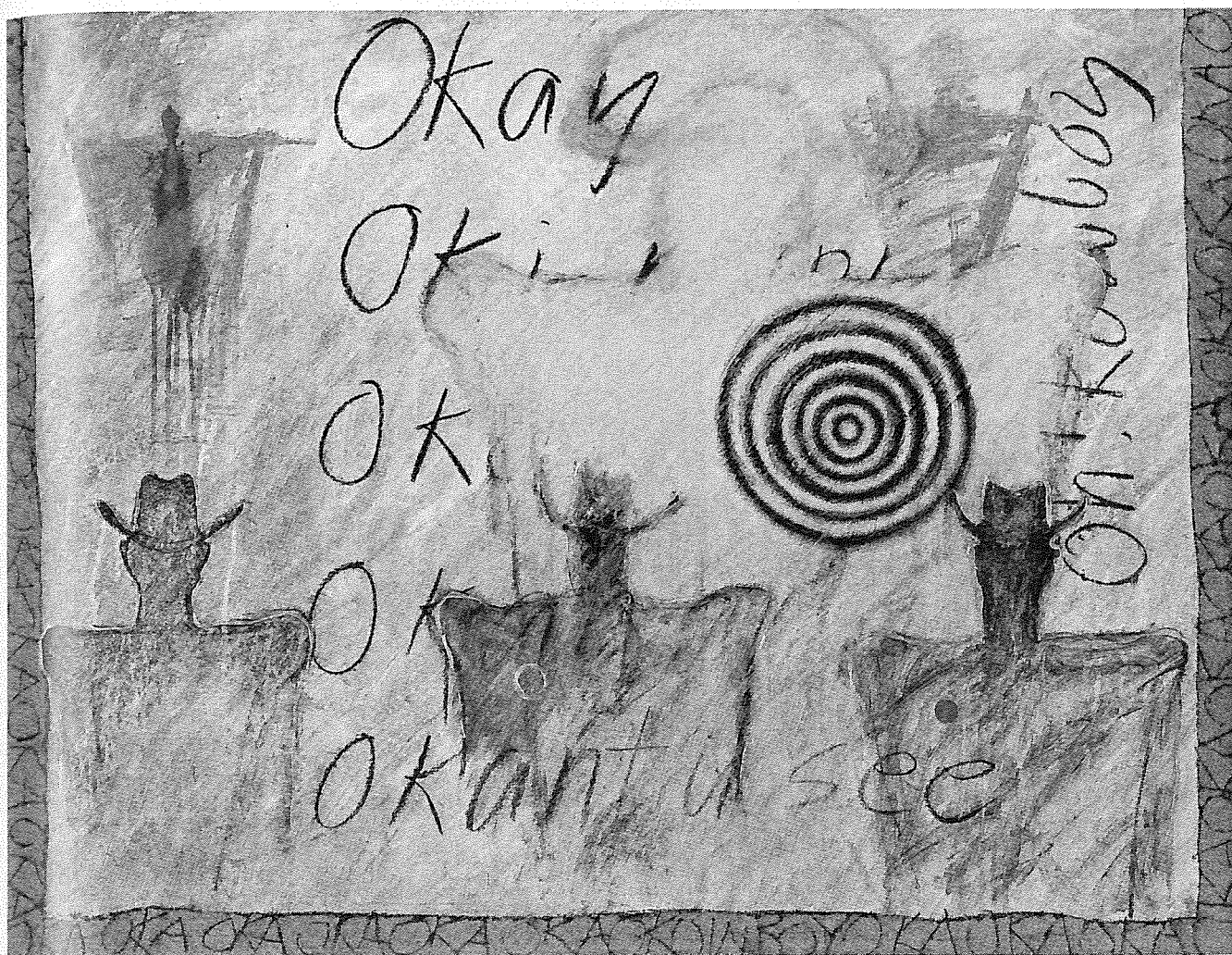
I did this one just as I was reading all the news that was coming out of Oka. Here, the cowboys are the soldiers or the Sûreté du Québec ... The large figure represents the Mohawk Warriors ... just one figure ... [symbolizing] the outnumbering of these Warriors at the time ... nine to one. These people were *targets* ... The media seemed to create the divisiveness between 'soldiers' and 'Indians.' I began to think, okay, it could be like the cavalry again. They're coming in with bugles to the rescue ... saving the community ... saving everybody. But 'What community?' is really the question. In the end, you don't know who the army was saving. It was probably everybody, yet you don't read it that way.

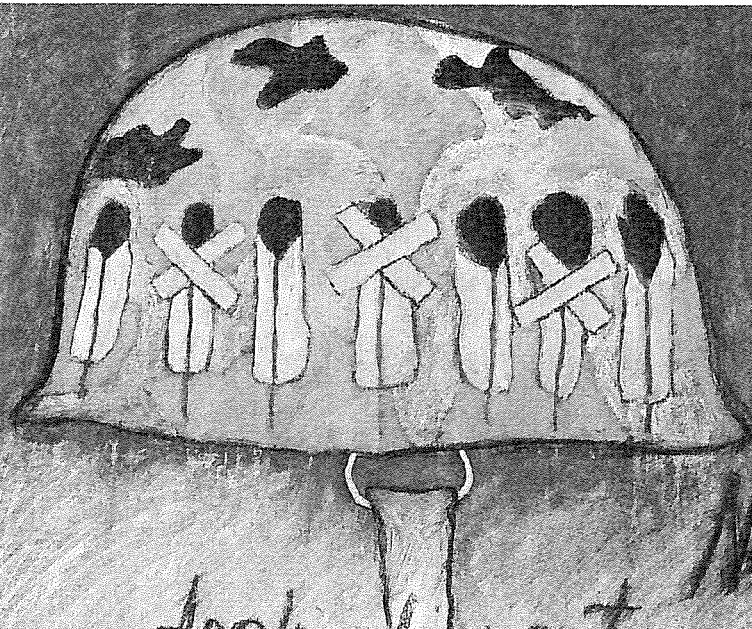
In the painting, the text was the first thing. Then I built around it. I listed a number of ways that 'OK' could be presented. Those two letters can be used in different ways. 'Oka' and 'Oka-boy' were references to the Warriors. 'Oh! Kowboy' referred to the soldiers, the contrast that I was looking for. I was playing on different levels. Is everything 'okay' now? Will everything be 'okay' after this? Can the communities ever be the same again? Has this event created a relationship that can never be mended? 'Oki-napi' is a Blackfoot greeting to a friend. It means 'Okay, things are cool.' 'O Kanada' and 'O kant u see' refer to the two national anthems – Canadian and American. If you go back to Akwesasne, the reservation that straddles the border, a lot of the problems emanated from that region. And 'Oh! Kowboy' ... I was listening to a song called 'Mon Cowboy,' ... by [Quebec singer] Mitsou. It's in French. 'Oh! Kowboy' is a friendly reference to a cowboy ... 'Oh! what a big guy' ... or 'Ohhh! ... you're my cowboy!'

What McMaster does not mention specifically is the perversely playful border design which freely and numbingly repeats 'OKAOKAOKAOKA' like a broken record or an endless protest chant. The painting's cheerful colouring merely heightens the horror.

In *No Life Like It* (Figure 129), a second painting in *The cowboy/Indian Show* inspired by the Oka crisis, McMaster reflects on the romance and racism of 'Indian fighters,' both in and out of uniform:

In this piece I was asking these questions: Why are people joining the army? Is it this 'cowboy and Indian' thing again, where 'we've got to do something about this "Indian problem"?' I quoted the army's announcement ... in *Maclean's* magazine: 'Applications to join the Canadian armed forces were 32% higher in Aug. than the same month a year ago. Spokesmen attributed the increase to the army's involvement in the Quebec Mohawk crisis ...' Then I drew this big camouflaged helmet and on the helmet I drew feathers. The feathers were crossed out like notches. The crosses could indicate two things: they mean 'notch marks,' like 'scalp marks' in the old days – 'the only good Indian is a dead Indian' kind of thing ... which has larger ramifications – or they could be Band-Aids ... in other words, helping somehow. In the complexity of the situation this summer the army actually was a saviour to some Indian people. Some Indian people were actually glad they came in.





No Life Like It

Applications to join the Canadian armed forces were 32% higher in Aug. than the same month a year ago. Spokesmen attributed the increase to the army involvement in the Quebec Mohawk crisis...

Macleans Oct 8, 90

rocks from Berlin wall and Lasalle

129
 Gerald McMaster
No Life Like It, 1990
 Lipstick and oil pastel on matt board,
 114 x 96 cm

What gives *No Life Like It* its incisive edge is McMaster's unexpected global reading of a distressing incident of racially motivated violence in the Montreal suburb of LaSalle. A brief explanation: in a gesture of solidarity with their comrades at Oka, Mohawks at the Kahnawake Reserve near Montreal mounted a sympathy blockade of the Mercier Bridge, a vital link between the communities on the south shore of the St Lawrence River and the city of Montreal. In late August a rioting mob of non-Natives stoned a convoy of sixty cars carrying more than a hundred Mohawk women, children, and elders across the bridge to safety in advance of an anticipated military attack on the reserve. One elderly man was struck by a rock thrown through an open car window and later died. McMaster continues: 'At the bottom of the painting I have four rocks, and the comment there ... is a double-edged sword. At the Berlin Wall the rocks represented a kind of freedom, whereas at LaSalle – shit! – they were being stoned to death! Is that irony? I don't know. Yeah! [And] 'No Life Like It' is, of course, from the army's advertisement on television. What's the adventure?'⁵⁸

Over the course of the long summer and into the fall, Mohawk artist Bill Powless monitored Native reaction to the stand-off in a series of cartoons appearing in the *Tekawennake* newspaper (Figures 130 to 132).⁵⁹ None is perhaps more potent or critical than Figure 132, which targets the angry residents of Châteauguay, Quebec, who came out night after night with beer and binoculars to taunt those entrenched behind the barricades at Kahnawake.⁶⁰

In the wake of discussions that saw the conflict come to a negotiated, if somewhat chaotic, conclusion on 26 September 1991, Native peoples across Canada began to reflect on the ramifications of the event for the future of Native/non-Native relations. Though opinion was sharply divided on the seemingly 'un-Canadian' and 'un-Indian' use of violence to call attention to outstanding grievances, there is no denying that the incident unified Aboriginal peoples. They denounced what they perceived to be yet another indignity perpetrated by a militarily superior but morally impoverished government of colonial interlopers. McMaster says that in

58 At the 16 August 1991 opening of the *Okanata* exhibition at the A Space Gallery in Toronto (p. 232 n. 54), Rebecca Belmore staged a performance titled *August 29, 1990*, which dealt with the rock-throwing incident at LaSalle. In a brief description of the piece she says, 'There's a white sheet drenched in blood and it's violent and there's a twist of humour: it begins and ends with the words, "There's nothing like getting up in the morning and reading the newspaper!"'

59 Figure 131 illustrates another event as well. In response to Iraq's invasion of oil-rich Kuwait in 1990, a multinational military force spearheaded by the United States launched the largest air and land attack since the Second World War to drive Iraq out of Kuwait. The Conservative government of Brian Mulroney sent Canadian forces to take part.

60 Like McMaster's *No Life Like It* (Figure 129), this cartoon was actually produced after the confrontation had come to an end. The issues that prompted the crisis have yet to be satisfactorily resolved.

retrospect the conflict at Oka 'was not just over a nine-hole golf course. I think that was the success of it. I think that's what Native people across Canada are in some way or another joyous about. They were glad it happened. Native peoples in the Americas and a lot of indigenous peoples around the world thought "Alright, underdog!" So ... there were some positive sides to that.'

In the weeks and months that followed the stand-off, it was nigh on impossible to separate the legacy of Oka from the larger legacy of European exploration and conquest that was fast becoming a major focus of media attention with the impending international celebrations of the Columbus Quincentenary in 1992. As might be expected, many Aboriginal people viewed the upcoming anniversary as a time perhaps more appropriate to 'decelebration' than to celebration.⁶¹ What, in fact, was there to celebrate – save for survival? As Saul Terry, president of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, succinctly put it, 'We're tired of surviving. We want to live.'⁶² For those in the arts, the challenge of 1992 was to convey such sentiments to the general public with conviction yet without causing alienation. Predictably humour and irony figure prominently in some of the more imaginative solutions.

Take, for example, Seneca artist/curator Tom Hill's illustrated lecture on Christopher Columbus at the South Street Seaport Museum in New York City in June 1991:

I did [it] with a real tongue in cheek because I knew Columbus [laughs], to the Americans, is like a cultural hero. So I thought, 'How am I going to touch on this thing? It's like making fun of God, to Americans, and here am I doing it right in the middle of Wall Street. Like, how do I get them even to think about my ideas or my notions?' Of course, I did it with a slide presentation and tried to tie it all together, but it worked because I did take a sense of humour to it – but based on some very serious notions. Like, the moment we'd get laughing I'd drop a line [like], 'It hasn't changed that much, you know, I'm just reading about Brazil – Indians being shot in their fields,' [or] 'New York Times has just reported ...' or 'Time magazine has just done this ...' and constantly bounc[ing] them back through it. There was one lady [who] came up to me after I made that talk, she said, 'I felt like a ping pong ball, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.' But she said, 'I'm glad I fell on your side, as the ping pong ball,' which was a relief because that's where I really wanted them to go. Which is neat. She said, 'You convinced me that we've got to rethink some of these things.'⁶³

[The lecture] was to comment on an exhibition called *First Encounters*, and I was presenting the Native voice here, but also my main objective was to [say], 'Let's use this time

61 In 1989, long before the public hoopla began in earnest, Ottawa's Saw Gallery mounted the exhibition *Decelebration*, featuring the work of Native artists Shirley Bear, Lance Belanger, Domingo Cisneros, Peter J. Clair, and Ron Noganosh. See Maracle and Fry (1989).

62 Terry's words were added as a line of text to David Neel's serigraph *Life on the 18th Hole* (Figure 124, p. 233) when it was used for a fundraising poster whose sale would 'contribute towards the just recognition of our Aboriginal Title and Rights and a just settlement of the land question in Canada.'

63 Cf. Joane Cardinal-Schubert's similar seriocomic approach to public speaking, p. 144.

130
Bill Pow
'We'll ju
game ...
pen and

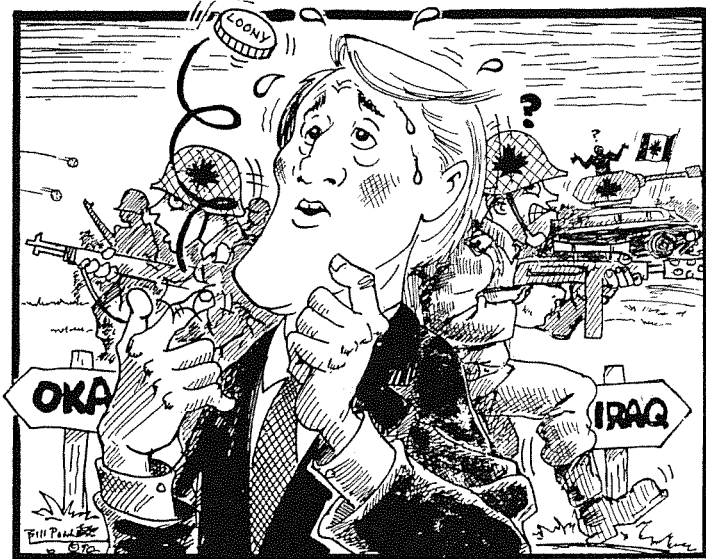
131
Bill Pow
1990
Loony, p
on pap

132
Bill Pow
'What a
party o
pen and



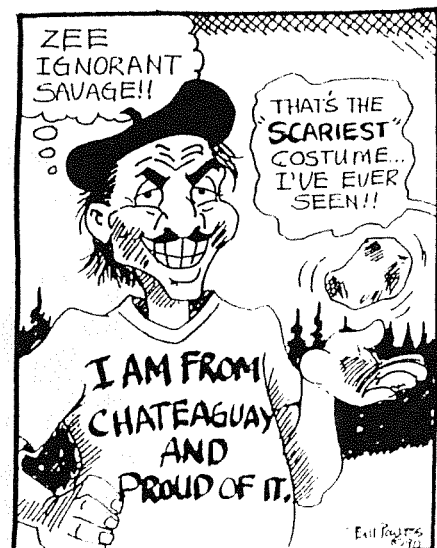


130
Bill Powless
'We'll just have to finish our game ...' 1990
 pen and ink cartoon on paper



131
Bill Powless
 1990
Loony, pen and ink cartoon on paper

132
Bill Powless
'What are you going to the party as?' 1990
 pen and ink cartoon on paper



to rethink this, these ideas. Are we prepared to change? And if we don't change what does it mean? And if we do change what does it mean?' So that was basically the objective of that gallery talk.

The text of Hill's lecture appeared in revised form in the September 1991 issue of the Woodland Cultural Centre's quarterly magazine, *Wadrihwa*, accompanied by a wry pen and ink parody by Bill Powless of Sebastiano del Piombo's famous painting of Columbus (Figure 133).⁶⁴

An adaptation of the same portrait appears in Carl Beam's *Columbus and Bees* (Figure 134), from his *Columbus Suite* of etchings, which in turn forms part of his much larger body of work, *The Columbus Project*, begun in 1989 and completed in 1992.⁶⁵ In *Columbus and Bees* what may at first seem to be merely a curious

64 Writer David Gates suggests that the lettering on the original painting identifying the individual as Christopher Columbus 'was probably added, years after the fact, to a portrait of some long-forgotten Italian nobleman' (1991, 29). Be that as it may, the image has been invested with considerable historical authority over time.

65 See Beam and Young (1989) and Rhodes (1992). It will be recognized that over the course of this book several other etchings in Beam's twelve-piece *Columbus Suite* have been discussed: *Self Portrait as John Wayne, Probably* (Figure 16, p. 42); *The Proper Way to Ride a Horse* (Figure 78, p. 150); *Calvary to Cavalry* (Figure 99, p. 192); and *Semiotic Converts* (Figure 105, p. 202). Reflecting on the series as a whole, Beam wryly says, 'I tried to start a rumour that there was something meaningful going to come out of this.' In a somewhat more expansive appraisal, he adds: 'The idea was to address some of the larger issues over the past 500 years. Technology is pretty well covered [here], but I'm not qualifying it as good or bad. There are some real faces, the major European players, the underlying issues. It's a little compact group of works, a little snapshot for somebody who dropped in from another planet. That was a good series because it did all that stuff with great skill, finesse, masterfulness of the medium, and it was fairly generic. I've never seen work like this any place.'



133
Bill Powless
Welcome 1991
pen and ink cartoon on paper