

# West Coast Modernism and the Pop Sauvage of Eric Metcalfe

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*Pop Anthropology* is an exhibition of Canadian multimedia artist Eric Metcalfe's oeuvre in celebration of the artist's honorary doctorate from the University of Victoria. This doctoral degree was awarded to Metcalfe in June 2021 amidst the uncertainty of the evolving COVID-19 crisis: as the novel coronavirus continues to affect gallery programming and experiences, the spirit of Metcalfe's work retains its own novelty in this serious world. This exhibition centres Metcalfe's playful and charged work in the re-imagination and revision of images of pop culture tropes and stereotypes as plentiful scraps from which to pull and construct meaning. A UVic alumnus, Metcalfe stands out as exemplary in his resonance and engagement with waves of social and intellectual change that have impacted the cultural milieu. His career has been a complex, decades-long study in human experience spanning different media and genres alive with the theoretical possibilities of visual art, performance and play as well as graphic expression. His oeuvre is also indelibly marked by iconography that the artist cannot shed: most notably, the ubiquitous leopard spot with its abstractions and reformations over the past half-century.

*Pop Anthropology* looks at Metcalfe's oeuvre as emergent from his early life in Victoria, and through stages of development in the international art world. A Victoria-born pupil influenced by established Canadian artists and European artist emigrés, Metcalfe then went on to study as a fine arts student under the tutelage of international artists Dana Atchley and Peter Daglish at the University of Victoria's Visual Arts program, where he graduated with distinction in 1971. As a founding member of the Western Front Society in 1973, he played an integral role in the development of artist-run centre culture in Canada. Crossing national borders, Metcalfe also participated in queer international mail art networks and Fluxus-based intermedia and art activities that defied institutional boundaries and instead integrated art into ephemeral life and experience.



**Decca Dance event poster**  
 Eric Metcalfe (Canadian, b. 1940)  
 1974  
 Commercial Lithograph  
 UVic Legacy Art Galleries  
 Gift of C.A. Bates and Pat Martin Bates

Far from producing a viable catalogue raisonn  e, this exhibition traces a selection of non-canonical work alongside more central pieces from Metcalfe's longstanding practice. While some of the work on display in *Pop Anthropology* is well-known, other pieces have evaded public viewing: this exhibition is poised to debut previously unknown archival works from the extensive holdings of the University's art collection. Imagined as an archival snapshot and a brief collapse of the temporal barriers between the Legacy Maltwood Gallery walls and the outside world, this exhibition plays with what it means to consult the historical record, while exposing the constructed, rather than naturally occurring nature of the archive.

The archive is, after all, a parafiction invented by those who select the documents intended for the assembly of an imagined future. Archives are no strange environment to Metcalfe: the taxonomies and classifications inherent in the system-building praxis of the Western Front Society artists are integral aspects of the archive as a site of power. Michel Foucault

**Proposal to Mint Brutopian Currency**  
Eric Metcalfe (Canadian, b. 1940)  
1997  
Gouache on paper  
UVic Legacy Art Galleries  
Gift of Karen Henry



and Michel De Certeau, among others, have identified the conceptual archive as that “erudite” place from which linguistic structure, statements and events emerge, and through which is constituted what can and cannot be said<sup>1</sup>. It holds the capacity and the potential to expand and complicate our understanding of cultural figures, and Metcalfe is not exempt. The archival space of this exhibition is made to reflect the artist’s affinity for built environments (see *Laura*, 2008; *the Attic Project*, 2001) and as well the continuous development of the University’s holdings and cultural mission as an archival institution. It challenges the concept of the archive itself—the exhibition and its archival space is a construction that will not last through time. This false front of monumental history interrogates the construction of knowledge and culture itself: it is a flippant homage to that which endures, but which is, in reality, fabricated to come apart at the seams. It is an homage to Metcalfe’s spirit—it resounds with irony, pastiche and sarcasm.

Balking at nothing, the works collected here ridicule their own origin in the mainstream—satirizing celebrity worship and elevating and debasing symbols circulating through entertainment and advertising industries. Metcalfe’s oeuvre slashes at the mainstream culture of North American society but this avant-garde critique of popular culture is made

<sup>1</sup> See Foucault, De Certeau.

more complex by the complicated dialogue it invokes: although salient, his critique is built on modernism engaged in a formal erasure of Indigenous, African and African American arts and artists while using imagery from these non-European cultures for the benefit of innovating in white art worlds. What does it mean to take up the archive, on this land, in this institution, and to what ends does the archive of Metcalfe appear here and now? Looking at the archives as a space of careful guardianship and potential world-building, the Legacy Maltwood Gallery offers its walls as a space for a world-construction project that embraces and derides a complicated history of modernism that simultaneously fetishized aspects of Indigenous and African cultures while ignoring the realities of Indigenous life under colonialism and the place of black culture in modernist discourses taken up by white artists in the twentieth century.

Claude Lévi-Strauss' *La pensée sauvage* (1962) is often invoked as the anthropological foundation of the philosophical world of Metcalfe and his contemporaries at the Western Front in Vancouver. Lévi-Strauss invites readers to unravel the separation between the 'civilized' and the *sauvage* (savage, wild, or "primitive"). He offers to his readers the idea that magical and scientific thinking are actually "parallel modes of acquiring knowledge," instead of proposing that scientific thinking (a bastion of the West, and of whiteness) is inherently more valuable in the construction of social worlds.<sup>2</sup>

*La pensée sauvage* and its attendant debt to Franz Boas, the paternal figure of cultural relativism in anthropological studies, brings forth the complicated connection to the land on which Metcalfe took up the position of Lévi-Strauss' *bricoleur*— an artist who occupies the middle ground between scientific and magical thought. The *bricoleur*— a cultural interpreter and meaning maker— picks up remnants and salvages oddments leftover from cultural signs and symbols. Metcalfe's connection to Lévi-Strauss, and the relationship of Lévi Strauss to Boas develops a lineage in thought, but also highlights connection to salvage, to the French *sauvetage*. The archival action in anthropological thought is here defined: to save, to rescue, to protect from assumed destruction in an assumed "declining" cultural world. Given that the practice of anthropological 'salvage' as it occurred in British Columbia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was a thriving and active practice that enabled anthropologists to decontextualize, remove and further decimate communities of

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<sup>2</sup> *La pensée sauvage*, 9.



Indigenous people, how can we locate the work of Metcalfe in the ongoing recuperative, anti-racist and postmodern practices of contemporary art history? In examining the oeuvre of the artist, we must consider how his position living and working on unceded territories in the 20th century influenced his work, both directly and indirectly through the general milieu of the social worlds he encountered, participated in, satirized and bricolaged himself. The uneasy ties between the *sauvage* and the archive of Metcalfe's work invite some speculation— what does it mean to invoke the *sauvage* now, in the contemporary moment when Canadian art history is offering more expansive understandings of the world rather than early 20th century landscapes that recall claims of terra nullius narratives or the “ruins” of Indigenous communities? To add to this, the forms and techniques of exoticized African or Indigenous cultures were taken up so readily by modernists like Picasso, Barnett Newman and others as ways of drawing parallels and invoking “universal” ideologies in art and in civilizations that it is impossible to separate and unkink the web of influence, design and creativity that is still at play in the bricolage of Metcalfe's work.

In service of unmooring the archive as a place of truth and connection of the ‘civilized’ to Euro-American culture, this exhibition calls attention to Metcalfe's practice of cultural salvage and redeployment of the brute aspects of mid-twentieth century cultural tropes. Savagery and violence in Euro-American culture are tied in his work to commodification, individualism and the effects of unbridled 20th century capitalism painted in bright Pop palettes and graphic design. *Steel and Flesh* (Metcalfe and Atchley, 1980) is a video based on comics Metcalfe drew in his adolescence where sexuality and homoeroticism are intricately linked to the widespread fears of a Communist horde of homosexuals as well as a luxurious and slick dichotomy of the soft flesh and hard steel of the revolver, which becomes the fetish object of Metcalfe's mid-century villainous alter-persona. Envisioning a liminal meeting between the imagined and the made (or even, in a Lévi-Straussian mode, the raw and the cooked), the storyboard on display as part of *Pop Anthropology* is an intersection of the work itself, an artifact and expression of modalities in which Metcalfe has worked.

Metcalfe's inversion of the *sauvage* upends the anthropological traditions enacted on unceded territories of so-called British Columbia. His work turns the idea of so-called salvage anthropology on its ear— Metcalfe practices a cultural salvage that instead tries to



*Laura*, 20th Century Fox, 1944 movie poster imaged by HeritageAuctions.com

highlight the “primitive” aspects of twentieth century Euro-American culture for what it was, a slickened and packaged surface veneer. Metcalfe’s oeuvre infuses well-worn cultural material with new meaning by transposing widely circulating images and using their cultural currency to undermine, subvert and redeploy satirical energy against the juggernaut of postwar American mass consumption. If, as Walter Benjamin has shown, any archive is a collection of impressions and brief moments, this archive collects pieces of Metcalfe’s oeuvre that salvages imagery from the mid-century: the cutting noir shadows that echo *Mildred Pearce* (1945), *Laura* (1944) and the B-movie camp of *Kiss Me Deadly* (1953) are funneled directly into a parody of pulpy Americana.

Lévi-Strauss asserts that the poetic nature of bricolage is constrained and limited by “the

constitutive units of myth.” In Metcalfe’s oeuvre, this mythic thought is derived from the 20th century American postwar boom that encouraged white flight from city centres, a return to gender norms after a brief period in which women were central to the industrial work force, and America’s rise to the centre of the international art world.<sup>3</sup> As *bricoleurs* emerging in a changing cultural milieu, Metcalfe and contemporaries of the Victoria and Vancouver art scenes delved deeply into the world of signs and images as they related to structures of myth, society and conceptual imaginings of a new world. In fact, at the same moment that Metcalfe was involved with the founding of the Western Front Society on East 8th Avenue in Vancouver, Lévi-Strauss himself was on a sojourn along the British Columbia coast where he stated in a documentary made by the National Film Board, that the ecology of the coastline was so deeply ingrained into Indigenous “mythology” that lived experience in the area was necessary to an understanding of its complex and primary structures, let alone regional differences.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *La pensée sauvage*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Behind the Masks*, NFB 1973. Lévi-Strauss himself lacked understanding of this ecology. His

In looking back at the oeuvres of artists who began their careers during a moment of sea change and deconstruction of an old world, it is integral to understand the expansive nature and limited realization of their intentions, conceptual advancement and impact in an art world still dominated by tropes and stereotypes of indigenous and “exotic” cultures seen as existing outside an art world steeped in colonial practices and whiteness. The subversion of old cultural norms and explorations into “new” territories was still, at this point, reserved for white avant-garde artists toying with ersatz “shamanic” spirituality and practices.<sup>5</sup>

But Metcalfe pulls from a repertoire of imagery outside the so-called spiritual— instead he works to highlight the absence of spirituality in the cultural world he depicted, reflecting instead the frenzied reification of commodity fetishism his anti-heros represent. The horrors of the aristocracy abound, scratching the patina off the respectable, and mutating the mundane through his uptake of pop culture and colours.

There is a deep undercurrent of speculation and skepticism with which Metcalfe seeks to displace mid-century cultural norms through the idealization and reification of characters like Dr. Brute, the hardcore villain behind the cool shades and three-piece suit. But this is Metcalfe’s *sauvage*— the language of signs and symbols that display the mythical status of gender, pulp, modernism and postwar machismo that pervade popular culture. And, it is with this uptake of the *sauvage* that Metcalfe speaks both with words and ‘the medium of things.’<sup>6</sup> Lévi-Strauss, lecturing students at the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology, pointed out that “a given myth, [never has] meaning in itself and by itself, but

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lifelong interest in Northwest coast art and culture, tied to his structuralist and anthropological background, with its Eurocentrism and deep grounding in primitivist modernism of the twentieth-century, failed to account for the complexities and specificity of living Indigenous cultures. This NFB film is invaluable in the ways it documents Lévi-Strauss’ reverence for the culture of Northwest coast Indigenous cultures he used as part of his theorizations and the fetishization and longing to use Indigenous cultures as the rule to prove his structuralist theories. In the end this method resulted in a shallow and incomplete understanding of living culture and social structures of Nuuchalnuth and Kwakwaka’wakw cultures.

5 Euro-American artists working in tangentially connected, but completely separate milieux, such as Joseph Beuys, also affiliated with Fluxus, assumed the mantle of ‘shaman,’ in their work, trying to assume spiritual traditions unavailable to them, often met with art world success. At the same time as Metcalfe, a young Norval Morrisseau was developing his innovative Woodland style and as well drawing on the potential of shamanic power to cultivate a persona that would define his career- Morrisseau, however, used his Ojibwa spirituality and teachings, including inspiration from ancestral petroglyphs, traditional materials, and oral histories. While Beuys and other white artists invested in claiming an avant-garde shamanism (Jackson Pollock included) and connection to a magical and mythical status of art producer, Morrisseau held tea parties and invoked the British ritual as a hybrid spiritual emcee and bricoleur to his invited guests.

6 *La pensée sauvage*, 14.

it is only in opposition to another myth that we can unravel the meaning.”<sup>7</sup> Can we take this axiom of Levi-Strauss’ consideration and apply it to Metcalfe’s works?

To take the binary opposition that Lévi-Strauss’ anthropology employs and use it to extricate meaning from Metcalfe’s work throughout his oeuvre reveals a deep ambivalence for the mid-century and modern image of the civilized and urbane, tuxedo-wearing hero or madman. It reveals a reverse flow of cultural salvage, highlighting the *sauvage* and as well in this archive, *sauvetage* of Metcalfe’s oeuvre, in which the artist pulls from a stream of cultural and art historical imagery that simultaneously invokes and neuters dominant culture.

In his drawing, *Reincarnation of the “New” Brutopian Man* (c. 1969) Metcalfe experiments, much like his peers in the N.E. Thing Co., with the idea of the emerging corporate entity and its efficacy in pastiche and play. *The “New” Brutopian Man* with close cropped hair and

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7 NFB.



**Dr. Brute's Kiss**

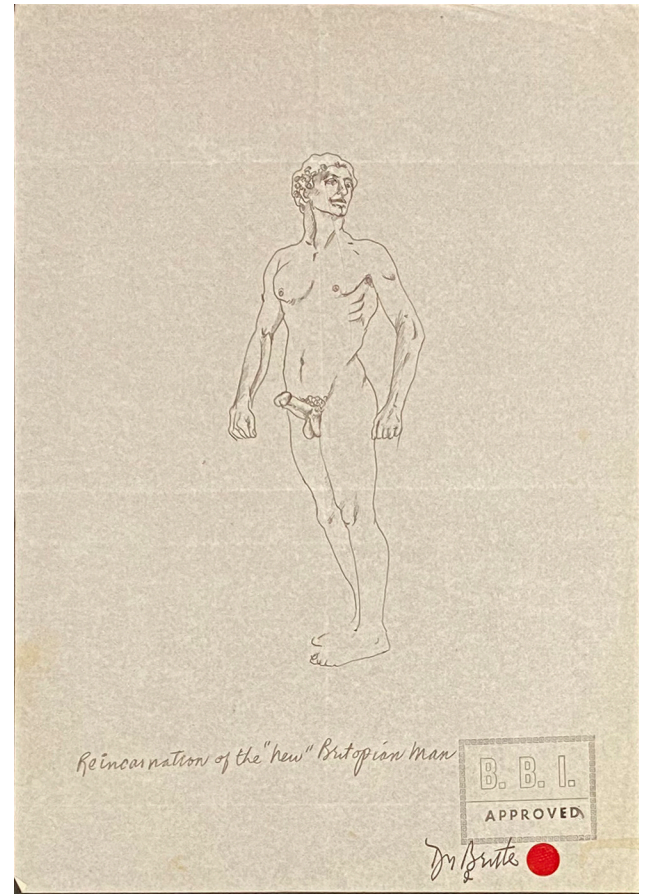
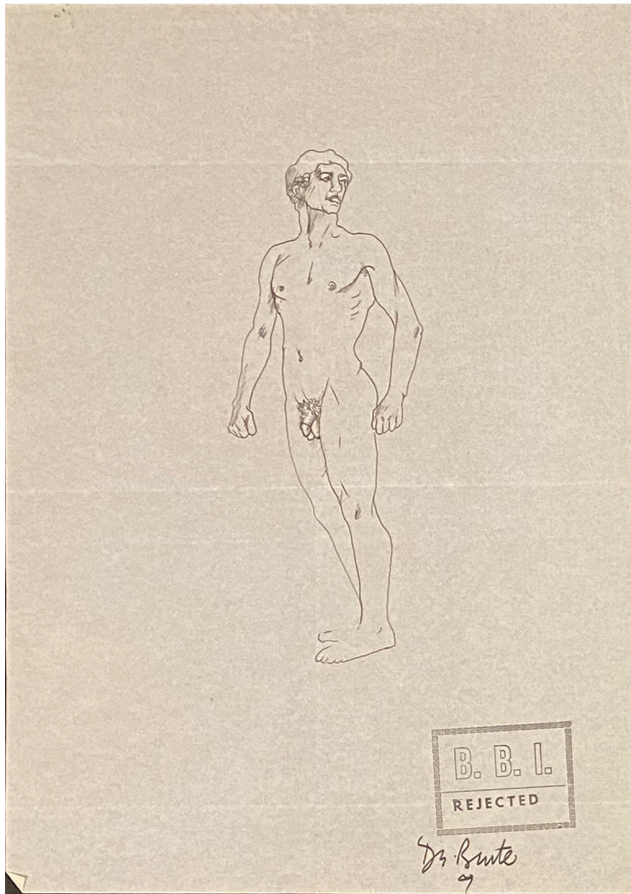
Eric Metcalfe (Canadian, b. 1940)  
1969

Serigraph on paper

UVic Legacy Art Galleries

Gift of Edward B. Harvey and Lorna R. Marsden





### **Reincarnation of the "New" Brutopian Man**

Eric Metcalfe (Canadian, b. 1940)

1969

Pen and ink on paper

UVic Legacy Art Galleries

Gift of Edward B. Harvey and Lorna R. Marsden

a pose that coyly riffs on Michelangelo's David (1504) with a slight contrapposto stance and a gaze off into the distance (contemplating a foe?) marks a turn for Metcalfe toward the past, but also toward a new vision of what is presumed to have always been there. Much like Da Vinci's *Vetruvian Man*, the "New" Brutopian Man is balanced by the standards of the time. In this work, the Brutopian man with an erection and a wide smile bears the stamp of "B.B.I. APPROVED" in black ink at the bottom of the page, and the almost identical Brutopian man who is flaccid bears the "B.B.I. REJECTED" mark. Stamps of approval and rejection both denote the selective processes of the archive and as well refer back to the art historical references that gird the Brutopian man within a canon of Western art history firmly entrenched in a white, classical milieu.

Other drawings from Metcalfe's notebooks (1965-1970) are field notes for Brutopia, that is, early characterizations of types and taxonomies. Androgyne figures and composite human/machine maidens sit verso on the page with half-finished portraits and caricatures of Brutopian characters. The wealth of material in these notebooks grounds the viewer in Metcalfe's early years as an artist at the University of Victoria, and these sketches betray an interest in the sexual and the transgressive, but also in the revivification of portraiture styles used in 20th century Modernisms— the pin-up, the bather. Metcalfe's references in these early studies indicate art school education but also a keen interest in the popular cultural tropes that informed his personal modernist sensibility.

What does this say, then, about the young Metcalfe who visited Mungo Martin in his studio and was inspired by the master carver and his landmark work for the Royal BC Museum? We can see in Metcalfe's early work, *Jazz Totem* (1959) the influence of jazz music and Indigenous carving- neither tradition explicitly or implicitly "belonging" to him. But this is the work of the *bricoleur*, to break open mythologies and create new truths and magic



**Notebook page (photocopied)**

Eric Metcalfe (Canadian, b. 1940)

c. late 1950s

Copies of original pencil and pen and ink on paper  
UVic Archives



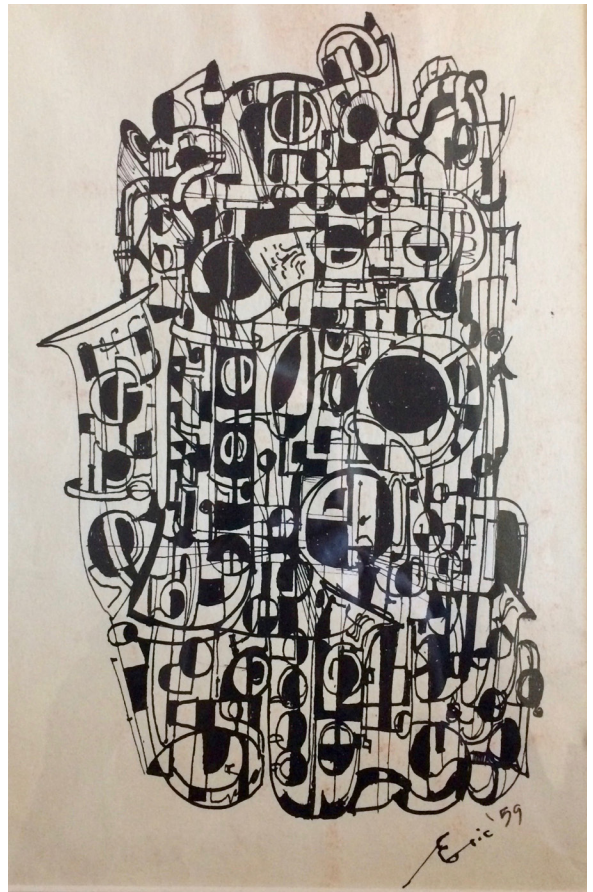
**Jazz Totem**

Eric Metcalfe (Canadian, b. 1940)

1959

Pen and ink on paper

Private lender



within their forms. Not having to bear the expectations and limitations of artists from whose cultural traditions he took inspiration, and to whom he paid homage in his work, Metcalfe cited master carvers like Mungo Martin, and jazz master Roland Kirk in his prints, notebooks and plans.

Early works in this exhibit present a connection to other cultural practices in convergence with a midcentury hard bop jazz world, an avant-garde imaginary implausible in the steadfastly British and white enclave of Oak Bay. A whole world away from the epicentre of midcentury jazz life in large metropolises, Metcalfe's adolescent love of jazz music greatly influenced his art, and became a central aspect of the world he created through the magic of attaching himself to the material world in search of messages, signs and meaning.<sup>8</sup> The use of jazz-based imagery in Metcalfe's work recalls, in spirit, some of the aesthetics found in popular style from the 'roaring twenties,' although the artist largely evades the art deco stylization associated with the 'jazz age' and, instead, portrays figures in the midst of

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<sup>8</sup> *La pensée sauvage*, 12.

creation, playing instruments and assembled together in compositions.<sup>9</sup>

It is impossible to separate the cultural cachet of jazz style, improvisation, character and emotive capabilities in Metcalfe's oeuvre without speaking about the ways in which he benefitted from white privilege and the ability to move in and out of cultural niches and imagery unencumbered by racial barriers. It would be, however, unproductive to dismiss the boundary-pushing aspects of the world: Metcalfe's work is valuable, if reflective of social understandings and evolving attitudes around race, access and the viability of cultural convergence and assimilation in art. In Graham Lock and David Murray's *The Hearing Eye: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Visual Art* (2009), the authors contend that while African American musical influence on art in the twentieth century has shaped and molded cultural taste and practices, surprisingly little attention has been given to jazz as a major cultural influence in the art world, in criticism or art historical

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<sup>9</sup> As Lemke notes, the fact that, "America was coming of age during a time commonly referred to as the 'jazz age' suggests how crucial black cultural expression has been in the shaping of the larger project American artistic and cultural identity." <sup>8</sup>



**Untitled (Four Figures - Sax, Piano, Bass, Vocals)**

Eric Metcalfe (Canadian, b. 1940)

1967

Gouache on paper

UVic Legacy Art Galleries

Gift of Karen Henry



writing.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Sieglinde Lemke notes that, although black music was the basis for modernist development in the music and art world, the “inextricably black face of jazz was subordinated and often ignored.”<sup>11</sup>

In Metcalfe’s performances and in his graphic work, the jazz milieu is mobilized as part of the artist’s world— the modes of creative and aesthetic production inherent in jazz music are lionized. Figures moving and swaying, layered on top of one another, set in silhouettes light narrative paths through a world pieced together and filtered through 20th century glitz. The evocation of black musicians as cultural icons in Metcalfe’s work both engages with jazz as a prominent cultural force, and also a driving inspiration in Metcalfe’s personal world. Jazz music, unlike the forms of African art appropriated and exploited by Picasso and other Modernists in their work, was, “...inextricable from the physical bodies of the African slaves. The black body was the vessel for the polyphony and polyrhythms of African music and dance. Music and singing became a tactic for survival, a vent for frustration, and a reclamation of the body.”<sup>12</sup> This powerful and emblematic expression of African American being in modernist culture, music and style, while often undermined throughout the 20th century high modernism, is given a prominent place in Metcalfe’s work, and speaks to his entanglement with the complicated and contemporary modernist world. However, this inextricable connection to the black body is mediated by the comingling of Metcalfe’s personae and graphic inspiration.

Not only did Metcalfe use imagery to express the central placement of jazz culture in modernist culture, he also incorporated artistic techniques and methods used by Indigenous artists. Metcalfe used cedar carving in the creation of the leopard-spotted saxophones that would become a symbol of extreme importance for his art practice in the 1970s. This connection to Indigenous sculptural practices can be recognized as an influence on his work through an early connection with Chief Mungo Martin at Thunderbird House at the Royal B.C. Museum in Victoria.<sup>13</sup> It cannot be overlooked that

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10 Graham and Murray, Introduction. *The Hearing Eye: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Visual Art*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 5.

11 Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 6.

12 Lemke, 60.

13 Chief Mungo Martin would carve in Thunderbird Park and invite passersby to come and visit and engage with his works. As a child, Metcalfe remembers being intrigued by the works of Martin even though racism and social propriety dictated that he “stay away,” from the carvers at Thunderbird Park.

exhibitions like *Arts of the Raven*, as well as the revolutionary Indians of Canada pavilion at Expo 1967, fundamentally changed the ways in which Indigenous arts were seen: as avant-garde artistic practice, not ethnographical artifacts.

In looking back, it seems necessary to caution against looking at Metcalfe's oeuvre as influenced primarily by a modernist legacy of cultural scavengers, profiting from assimilation and appropriations of African and Indigenous forms and modes of expression while simultaneously deriding the cultures that produced them as primitive in comparison to Euro-American arts. Invoking the cultural savagery of modernist culture, Metcalfe both extends the possibility of critique to the social worlds that he inhabited and also reveals his particular place in them as an artist with access to the practices of cultural appropriation. The connections to any artistic practice on land staked by colonial powers needs to be addressed as such. The archival structure of this exhibition challenges viewers to concede to the constructed nature of the archive. In order to read art oeuvres from the twentieth century in the context of a changing art world, it is necessary to return to the structures



**Leopard Spot Saxophone**

Eric Metcalfe (Canadian, b. 1940)

1971 - 1974

Laminated enamel paint on cedarwood

UVic Legacy Art Galleries

Gift of Edward B. Harvey and Lorna R. Marsden

and histories that have influenced the construction of the world we live in, in language but also in the foundations of art historical inquiry. If a structuralist bricolage is a method of construction of signs, images and concepts as they have meaning and are re-deployed in a mythical and scientific world, it would be wasteful to ignore the residue, remains and traces of the *sauvage* in the word's deployment, meaning and weaponization in the world—historically and in the present moment. This exhibition presents us with the opportunity to celebrate over a half-century of Metcalfe's active arts engagement in the Canadian and international art world and it brings the complexities of the art historical field into focus, questioning any easy assimilation of modernist influence on postmodernist art practice. These two complex realities sit alongside each other in an uneasy relationship, and the dynamic and generative charge is capable of taking these tensions and so-called cultural remnants in the archive into account as we construct histories that represent and defy past understandings of civilization, cultural salvage and the *sauvage*.

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