

David Neel

PHOTOGRAPHS AND PRINTS

David Neel: The 1990s and Beyond

BY CAROLYN BUTLER-PALMER

Artist's Statements (1991)

BY DAVID NEEL



David Neel: The 1990s and Beyond

Carolyn Butler-Palmer

David Neel
*Chief Charlie James
Swanson and David Neel,*
1990

silver gelatin photographic
print on paper
(40.6 x 27.6cm)
SAG 1994.01.03

Photographer, painter, and carver David A. Neel (b. 1960) descends from a long line of eminent Kwakiutl artists. His father, also David Neel (1937-1961), is known for his streamlined modernist art during the 1940s and 50s. His grandmother, Ellen Neel (1916-1966) is often credited with being the first Northwest Coast woman totem pole carver and was celebrated

for her adaptations of her own Kwakiutl designs into everyday household objects and fashions. She learned the art of carving from her grandfather Charlie James (abt. 1866-1937) and for a time ran the Totem Arts shop in Vancouver's Stanley Park. This multi-generational inheritance might have been lost, as Dave senior died in an automobile accident in 1961 when his son, David, was still in infancy, and his mother soon moved to Calgary, a great distance from the Neel family homes in Vancouver and Alert Bay. Nevertheless, young David grew up with reminders of his ancestral heritage in paintings by his father and carvings by his grandmother that came with them to Alberta.

Separated from Vancouver's burgeoning aboriginal-cultural carving scene, Neel first found his way into the art world through the medium of photography rather than carving or painting, which he discovered later in life. He studied photojournalism at Mount Royal College and then at the University of Kansas.

By the late 1980s he was living in Dallas, Texas where he saw the travelling Museum of Modern Art exhibition "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art." Neel was inspired by the prominence of Charlie James' work within this exhibition as it was juxtaposed to that of Pablo Picasso. The following year, Neel returned to British Columbia, where he would begin his carving apprenticeship with Beau Dick and Wayne Alfred.

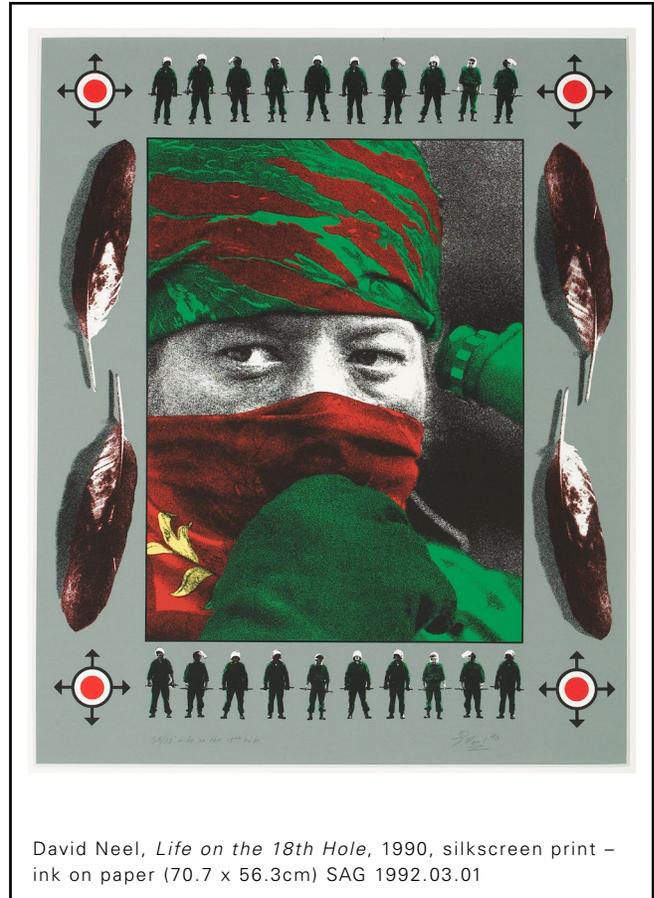
Neel's return to Vancouver altered his practice of photography as well. *Our Chiefs and Elders: Words and Photographs of Native Leaders*, published in 1990, is one of Neel's most celebrated photo-essays. It was designed to unpack the visual paradigm laid out by white photographer Edward R. Curtis, who in the early early-twentieth century created a series of lushly illustrated photographic volumes entitled *The North American Indians*. Despite Curtis' use of the very modern medium of photography, his photographs serve to set his Indigenous subjects before the



David Neel, *Catherine Adams I & II*, 1990, silver gelatin photographic print on paper (40.6 x 36.1cm, 36.5 x 34.3cm), SAG 1994.01.01, SAG 1994.01.02

arrival of the modern world. The photographs of *Our Chiefs and Elders* endeavour to challenge the timeless quality of Curtis' paradigm. *Chief Charlie James Swanson and David Neel* is one of the most poignant examples of this strategy: it captures the complexities of contemporary Indigenous lifeways, which weave current technology and fashion with conventional ceremonial practices. The tee-shirt clad Neel appears with camera in hand sitting next to Chief Charlie James Swanson, who is vested in ceremonial regalia. Swanson holds a Chief's talking stick, which is a mechanism of the Chief's authority that may be taken to parallel Neel's camera. Neel's *Portraits of Catherine Adams, I and II* are more typical of the work within *Our Chiefs and Elders*, with Adams wearing everyday attire in the first and clad in regalia in the second. The complete series has been exhibited in more than a dozen museums and art galleries, including the National Portrait Gallery of Canada, and the National Museum of the American Indian, and published as a book by the same name (University of Washington and University of British Columbia Presses, 1991).

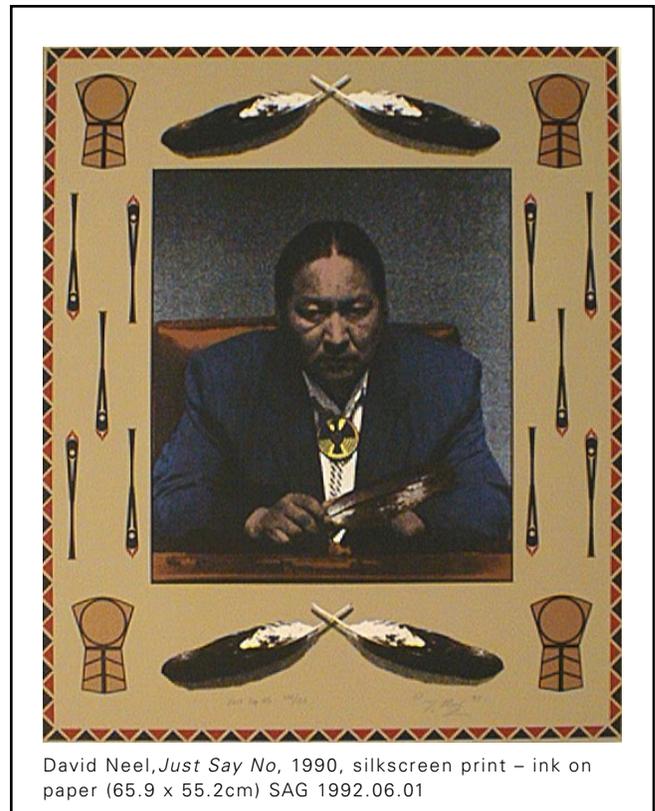
During the early 1990s, David Neel also used the medium of photomontage to engage with Indigenous political actions across Canada in four notable silkscreen prints. *Life on the 18th Hole* is the first and most celebrated of the series. Neel has explained that his montage was inspired by *Guernica*, Picasso's reaction to newspaper reports of the 1937 aerial bombing of Guernica by Nationalist forces during the Spanish Civil War. *Life on the 18th Hole* similarly registers the Vancouver-based artist's reaction to news accounts of militarized action against the Mohawk community of Kanesatake in the summer of 1991. The central image of *Life on the 18th Hole* reproduces a news photograph of a masked Mohawk warrior taken by journalist André Picard



and published in *The Globe and Mail*. A member of a traditional Mohawk warrior society, the warrior in Neel's print was one among many defending a sacred burial ground from police forces called to support a developer's efforts to expand a golf course from its original nine to eighteen holes. Reproduced both above and below the central image in Neel's montage are figures from another recycled news photograph, each row portraying ten little policemen, armed but diminished in might by the relative scale of their Mohawk counterpart. Neel introduces his own photographs of eagle feathers alongside the warrior—symbols of truth. In each corner Neel exhibits the emblem of the Four Sacred Directions to honour the rights of all people respective of race.

Just Say No (1991) is the second of the series that would grow to include *The Trial of Tears* (1991) and *Out of Sight/Out of Mind* (1994). *Just Say No* depicts Elijah Harper, member of both the Red Sucker Laker First Nation and the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba. By his vote in the Assembly, Harper had single-handedly scuttled the Meech Lake Accord, an amendment to the Canadian Constitution that would have recognized Quebec as a distinct society, implying that the Indigenous nations had no such status. The work's title wryly draws upon American First Lady, Nancy Reagan's slogan from the U.S. "war on drugs," but within this context the expression is transformed to a statement of serene and confident resistance against 500 years of colonial oppression. Harper has accomplished the seemingly impossible task of just saying no to colonialism. By contrast, the subject matter of Neel's *Life on the 18th Hole* flips the expected image of the serene suburban lifestyle suggested by "life on the 18th hole" to a battleground.

Neel followed the print series with further exploration of current events and political subjects in a series of portrait masks including *Mask of Chernobyl*, *Mask of the Injustice System*, *Mask of the Mohawk Warrior*, *Mask of Racism* (Rodney King from the 1992 Los Angeles Riots), and *Mask of Globalization*. For the last decade his focus has been on exploring Northwest coast Indian flat design as expressed through hand engraved jewelry, and paintings on canvas that reference post-Modernist ideas. David Neel has handed on the family's artistic legacy to his daughter Ellena and son Edwin who now reside in Vancouver, at least the sixth generation of artists in the Neel family.



David Neel, *Just Say No*, 1990, silkscreen print – ink on paper (65.9 x 55.2cm) SAG 1992.06.01

Artist's Statements

David Neel

Just Say No (1991)

No. One simple word, by one Native man on June 22, 1990, put an end to a constitutional accord known as Meech lake. This event, perhaps more than any in recent history, has forced the Canadian government to take Native Canadians seriously and reevaluate their relationship.

Eagle feather in hand, Elijah Harper stood his ground, and for the first time in Canadian history an aboriginal member of the legislature spoke for the rights of Native and non-native Canadians. He alone spoke against a secret deal made on June 9th, 1990 by 11 first ministers, which would affect untold generations of Canadians, and once again brushed aside First Nations.

The strength of his action has made him a household name, and a symbol for Canadians across the country. *Just Say No* strives to honour this man and mark a significant event in Canada's history.

The central image is Elijah Harper, eagle feather in hand, sitting in the legislative assembly. An eagle feather, as well as a source of strength and connection to the natural world, helps one speak the truth when held. The image began its life as a newspaper photograph by Winnipeg Free Press photographer Wayne Glowacki.

A copper is a traditional symbol of wealth, the four coppers represent the wealth of the country. Wealth may be resources, monetary or cultural. There is one paddle for each province. In paddling a canoe the pullers all need to work together; as it is with a country.

There are two sets of eagle feathers, crossed to represent the two nations: Native and non-native.

Jointly it is a language of images which speak to a turning point in Canadian history. As Canada seeks a path for the future in a constitutional accord, First Nations seek a more active and just role in Canada.

On June 21st, 1990, Harper told the legislative assembly: "It is about time that we aboriginal people stood up for our rightful place in Canadian society. We have been excluded in this country for many years, never have participated in the democratic process. The policies of the government have been of racism, policies of assimilation, policies of integration, policies of genocide. That has been the history of Canada."

The history of Canada does not often include the contribution of Native people. Harper explains, "The aboriginal people have made the greatest contribution to this country. We have given up our land and our resources so that other people could enjoy the benefits in a great and rich country called Canada."

This print may help us remember June 22nd, 1990, when a lone Native MLA from Manitoba stood strong for generations of Canadians, and changed the course of history.

Life on the 18th Hole (1991)

This print is intended to serve as a reminder of an event in Canadian history. It points to a time when Canada was put on the international stage in the stand-off in Oka, Quebec. This image is not intended to serve as inspiration for armed resistance. It is meant rather to help the viewer to recall and reflect on the events of the summer of 1990. It was inspired by Picasso's *Guernica*, painted in reaction

to the bombing of Guernica, Spain during the Spanish Civil War. I wanted to do a print using my influence as a native artist. The result draws upon my heritage as a hereditary Kwagiuti artist and my training as a professional photographer. A silk screen photomontage using graphics, news photography, and created photography combine in a print which is contemporary in execution and traditional in foundation. The central image comes from a Canadian Press photograph that ran on the cover of the *Globe and Mail* newspaper. The choice and use of colour, bilateral symmetry in composition, eagle feather and circle of life motifs are stylistic of traditional graphics.

The Mohawk warrior symbolizes an individual pushed to his limit and having the will to stand his ground. How many of us can say we would have the strength to stand for what we believe, at all costs? The struggle of the Mohawk people is symbolic of the struggle of all First Nations people. The "10 little policemen" is a play on the nursery rhyme "1 little, 2 little, 3 little Indians," allowing the viewer to see the ethnocentric and racist roots of this children's nursery rhyme. They symbolize the Canadian government's inaction in dealing with the issues leading up to the Oka crisis, and the following militarization. The Circle is the circle of life, the arrows the four directions, four being the

number of balance and completeness. The red dots represent the blood of man, one for each race: the red, the yellow, the black, and the white man. Jointly these remind us of the common bond of all men. The barriers between men and between races are erected, not inherent. Clearly it is up to individuals, not governments, to dismantle these barricades and work together to the benefit of all.

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