

Images of Native Women

The Academy can now embrace indigenous content

When Dana Claxton, SFU's Ruth Wynn Woodward Chair in Women's Studies, pictures a First Nations woman she thinks of Buffalo Woman or Wendy Grant-John. Grant-John was a longtime chief of the prosperous Musqueam band and White Buffalo Woman was a prophet who gave the Seven Sacred Rites to the Lakota people, the spiritual underpinnings of their nation. Claxton herself is of Lakota Sioux descent. She is an interdisciplinary artist whose work includes film and video, installation, performance and photography. She's organizing a Performance and Dialogue Event called "Unpacking the Indigenous Female Body", which will take place at The Western Front and SFU Vancouver on April 23 & 24.

"I'm into the body at the moment, in terms of my research and artistic production," says Claxton. "It interests me as a site for narrative memory, how a society shows the body." Her most recent show was called "The Barbarian", a photographic series depicting a life-size naked man holding a giant narwhal tusk. Esther Harrison, Women's Studies Assistant to the Ruth Wynn Woodward Chair says of the show, "It was amazing. I went up to the picture and stretched the palm of my hand out toward the tusk. When it was about three inches away I felt something—a pressure energy. I tried it on the man but it wasn't there. The energy was only coming from the tusk," says Harrison.

Claxton has recently been inspired by the 1970s movie trilogy *A Man Called Horse*, specifically the film's representation of Lakota women, spirituality and culture. "The post colonial representation of First Nations women in film is uncharted research territory," says Claxton. Very little has been done on Lakota Women in film, in particular.

The poster for the April event is a photograph called *The lonely surfer squaw*, a picture of the Saskatchewan native artist Lori Blondeau standing in the snow by the North Saskatchewan river, in a bikini and snow boots and holding a huge surfboard. "It's a great image of an Indian woman," says Claxton who is perfectly comfortable saying 'Indian'. "If you think of the body as a memorial, as a site of memory, our bodies as indigenous women have been greatly harmed, but also celebrated," she says. "I want to celebrate the Indian body." The event at the Western Front will feature two performance art works that respond to *A Man Called Horse*, one by Blondeau and the other by Skeena Reece. On Saturday a symposium on "Images of Indigenous Women" will be held at Harbour Centre featuring a keynote by Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie.

Claxton is delighted that SFU has a new office of First Nations and she hopes that some day indigenous content will be inserted into all disciplines at SFU. "Even science could be made more interesting," she claims. According to Claxton, the Academy has contributed to the structural dehumanization of native people, but now our public institutions have the great potential to realize



the contribution that indigenous knowledge can make to humanity.

She points out that when Europeans arrived in North America they encountered many sophisticated societies, civilizations that had lasted thousands of years. "These have not been respected, recognized or accepted," says Claxton. "What's more civilized: polluting a river in a few decades, or living in harmony with it for 10,000 years?" she asks. She believes that the university is a great place for post-colonial studies that examine what indigenous knowledge can add to all the disciplines. "The goal is to bring forth more wisdom and goodness, to enhance the great work that is already going on in the university," she says. More: www.sfu.ca/gsws/RuthWynnWoodwardProfessorship ■

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