

SUPER PHAT NISH

Barry Ace

FEBRUARY 24 - APRIL 2, 2005



Phat Albert vs. Super Phat, 2004
Acrylic on Canvas
36W x 36 H

ART GALLERY OF SOUTHWESTERN MANITOBA

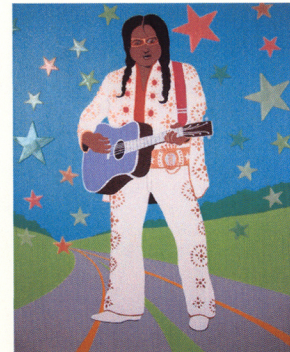
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Biography

BARRY ACE (ANISHINAABE, B.1958)

Barry Ace is a member of the MiChigeeng First Nation on Manitoulin Island. He has an MA from Carleton University (1996) and a BA from Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario (1991). While Ace was Chief of the Indian and Inuit Art Centres at the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development from 1994-2001, he curated numerous exhibitions of Aboriginal and Inuit art that have toured nationally and internationally. His work has been included in numerous shows in Canada since 1996; his 1998 solo exhibition *Modern Indians Standing Around at the Post* was presented at Gallery 101 in Ottawa and his most recent multi-media work was included in *Emergence from the Shadows: First Peoples Photographic Perspectives* at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Ace's work is in public collections including the Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton, Woodland Cultural Centre and the Royal Ontario Museum. He is the recipient of grants from agencies including the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.



King Phat, 2004 (Elvis Look-a-Like)
Mixed Media 24 W x 36 H



Land O Phat, 2005 (Butter boxes)
Digital output 5 W x 4 D x 4 H (X 10)



Love Cake, 2003 (dj)
Acrylic on Canvas
60 W x 48 H

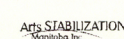
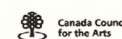


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Super Phat Nish - Barry Ace Essay by Cathy Mattes

*The human mind, one of a kind,
we use it as though we're blind
Driving in the city, an overpopulated city,
The council and committee stare at me in pity
Sure they're wives are witty, their cars are pretty,
I'm still a native. shitty. -Roger Crait¹*

Since the early 1960s when there was a mass migration of Aboriginal people leaving their reserves for urban life, cities have become both obstacle and refuge. Living in urban centers where one is not always welcome creates challenges for those who come for new opportunities. At the same time, city living can open up one's world to that which is not available in smaller communities and be a preferable location to live. These experiences coupled with exposure to other cultures and experiences strongly impacts Aboriginal youth.

In the exhibition *Super Phat Nish*, Barry Ace recognizes urban Aboriginal experience in painted canvas and mixed media, and primarily through a character named "Super Phat Nish". Super Phat Nish is Barry Ace's version of an icon of urban Aboriginal pop culture. He is an ever transforming and sly urban guru who reveals how one can maintain their distinct cultural sensibility amidst urban settings. For his name Ace unites "Nish", which is Anishinaabe street slang to acknowledge another Anishinaabe, with "Super Phat", which loosely translated means cool. Reminiscent in appearance of Bill Cosby's Fat Albert², Super Phat Nish urges youth to locate personal and significant cultural markers. In addition, he affirms the ability of Aboriginal people to adapt to adverse situations while maintaining cultural tenacity.

Ace recognizes and celebrates how Aboriginal youth borrow and alter pop culture objects and morph them into their own cultural aesthetic. He does so by infusing Super Phat Nish's image on objects including ball caps, turntables, skateboards, and CD covers. He also provides painted



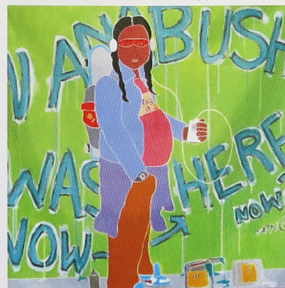
Phat Skateboards (L- Super Phat Nish, 2004, R- Slicker this Year, 2005)
Mixed media
30 W x 7 H

portrayals of Super Phat Nish in the same vein as pop culture figures like Sponge Bob Square Pants³, thereby urging youth to take control of commercialism.

Ace combines contemporary dress and interests with cultural symbol and artforms, while reclaiming stereotypical iconography of the past. In works like *Phat Deck*, *Phat Pack*, and *Phat Remixes* Ace incorporates Ojibway floral beadwork design onto cradleboard, vinyl records, and skateboards. This is done to remind youth that urban cultural aesthetics is "informed by our past, and reflects our innate ability to translate our cultural aesthetic into new media of the present."² His work suggests that within urban landscapes, it is important to locate and appreciate significant cultural markers. Doing so contributes to the cultural milieu of urban settings, while asserting our cultural presence.

In *Nowhere, Now Here*, a young Aboriginal woman stands in contemporary clothes, wearing a backpack, and holding an iPod. Peering at the viewer she stands in front of a brick wall that is tagged with the words, "Nanabush is here". Nanabush is an Ojibwe spirit in mythology, who was sent to earth to teach the Ojibway. Through the young woman's tenacity Nanabush claims the urban site, while the youth affirms her culture amidst the urban jungle.

In *Land O Phat*, Ace acknowledges the longstanding traditions of stereotyping Aboriginal cultures. On replicas of Land-O-Lakes⁴ butter boxes, the figure of "Super Phat Nish" is located where a romantic image of an "Indian Princess" holding butter originally lay. History has proven that stereotypical images such as this have not served us well. They distort people's perceptions, and cause many to internalize stereotypical thought. By altering the Land- O- Lakes butter lady into his urban guru, Ace reclaims stereotypical iconography of the past.



Nowhere, Now Here, 2005
(Nanabush was here)
Acrylic on Canvas
66 W x 64 H



Imagemakers, 2005
Acrylic on Canvas
133 W x 65 H

referencing Bill Cosby's Fat Albert. "Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids"⁵ was a cartoon made in the 1970s loosely based on Cosby's experiences of growing up in the inner city of Philadelphia. It featured characters that dealt with issues or problems commonly faced by young people from puppy love to child abuse. Although recognized for its educational content, these characters' appearance and dialects appeared to be created with stereotypical notions of the inner city. It was a case of Hollywood going to inner cities, creating a cartoon based on peoples' life experiences with their own perceptions, and then selling it back to the streets. "Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids"⁶ then somehow became relatable and relevant. This is a prime example of how stereotypical imagery can become internalized by various communities. Both African American and Aboriginal communities have ample experience of being exposed to stereotypical images, internalizing them, and then making them somehow relevant.

Super Phat vs. Phat Albert also recognizes the cultural cross-fertilization that takes place between Aboriginal and African American youth. In the 1960s, Red Power and Black Power movements supported one another as they fought against injustices. Both African American and Aboriginal communities continue to endure overt and systemic racism in city centers. In the 1970s the art of rap, hip-hop, and break dancing emerged in African American communities as a means to protest marginalization. Within inner cities today, this cross-fertilization continues, as rap and hip-hop are now "Indianized", telling Aboriginal tales of struggle and glory. Using these similar means, youth have their voices heard while contributing to the artistic hodge-podge that reflects the experiences of marginalized youth.

The large-scale acrylic painting *Image-Makers* affirms the need to take control of imagery. Modeled after a portrait of pop artist Andy Warhol and his Factory of artists by famed photographer Richard Avedon, Ace presents Aboriginal people realistically in various poses and sporting different looks. Most figures are wearing street clothes, yet a fair-skinned



Seven Stages of Phatness, 2005
Acrylic on Wood
8 H x 4 D (6 descending sizes)

In *Super Phat vs. Phat Albert*, Ace recognizes similar experiences shared between urban Aboriginal and African American youth by

Aboriginal woman wears regalia. She reminds viewers that Aboriginal people come in different shapes and shades with variable experiences and interests.

On the far left, separate from this image and standing alone, is Disney's⁷ version of Pocahontas. She is barefoot, suggestively sporting a loincloth. Disney's Pocahontas is so much a part of our lives, yet also very separate from our daily existence. By separating Pocahontas from the other figures, Ace is suggesting that if we do not take control of how we are presented, then all we are left with is representations like Disney's⁷ Pocahontas. The painting is done as a mirror image of a shot from the photograph. The viewer is metaphorically looking through a lens, which suggests that we are in control of how we are presented. We do not have to accept Disney's⁷ version of Pocahontas, because we are Avedon, and we are the Factory.

The role stereotypes have played in the psyches of Aboriginal people across the land is widely recognized. However more needs to be done to really figure out what to do about them. By Ace recognizing the tenacity and creativity of Aboriginal youth some options are provided. Through dress, rap and dance, youth express their cultures and their struggles. Urban Aboriginal youth have found some solutions, and like those that have gone before them, they've created the tools to adapt. *Super Phat Nish* not only recognizes the impact stereotypes have, but the exhibition also reminds viewers of the cultural endurance of Aboriginal people.

Ace's vibrant paintings, irony and wit makes one feel empowered - or should I say, Super Phat!

¹ Excerpt from a rap written by contemporary artist

Roger Crait in his youth.

² Barry Ace, Artist Statement, 2004.

TRADEMARKS:

³ Sponge Bob Squarepants is a trademark of Viacom International Inc.

⁴ DISNEY is a trademark of the Walt Disney Company

⁵ Fat Albert and The Cosby Kids is a trademark of William H. Cosby Jr.