An interview with Gregory Burke

by Mandy Alves

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Remai Modern exterior view by KPMB Architects. Courtesy of Remai Modern.



Mendel Art Gallery (1964-2015), the predecessor to Remai Modern. Courtesy of Remai Modern.



Ian Wallace, *At the Crosswalk IX*, 2011, photolaminate and acrylic on canvas, 243.8 x 487.7 cm. *The Mendel Art Gallery Collection* at Remai Modern. Gift of the artist, 2016. Photo courtesy of Vancouver Art Gallery.



Remai Modern entrance view by KPMB Architects. Courtesy of Remai Modern.



Govett-Brewster Director Greg Burke. Courtesy of Govett-Brewster Gallery, New Zealand.



Anton Vidokle, *The Communist Revolution was Caused by the Sun* (video still), 2015, HD video with sound, 34:00 minutes. Purchased 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Remai Modern.

Gregory Burke is a museum director, writer and curator. He is the former director of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth, New Zealand (1998 to 2005) and of the Power Plant in Toronto, Ontario (2005 to 2012). In 2013, he was named executive director and CEO of the Remai Modern Art Gallery of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Canada. Remai Modern, set to open in the fall of 2017, will host a major touring retrospective of Jimmie Durham's work in early 2018.

HUM has just turned 6 months old! To celebrate we are pleased to publish the first piece focusing on a New Zealand arts professional working in North America. With an initial focus on Europe, HUM is aimed to continue its expansion to eventually cover New Zealand contemporary art projects globally.



MANDY ALVES New Plymouth, Toronto. I hate to ask the obvious first question but what made you decide to move to Saskatoon?

GREGORY BURKE When I first saw this job come up at the Remai Modern 4 years ago, I thought it was such a rare confluence

of events to get a great architect (Bruce Kuwabara), and a donor like Mrs. Remai, who not only donated towards the new building but had the foresight to fund an international gallery program. It was more than a job, it was the opportunity to help build a vision for this space. In many ways it felt like the place chose me.

MA Can you speak to the challenges and opportunities of moving to a new gallery, one where you are able to participate in building something from the ground up, in contrast with the Govett-Brewster and The Power Plant, which were both already well established when you moved into your positions there.

GB The idea of it is still very daunting. I remember flying into Saskatoon in mid December 2012 with this strong feeling of apprehension. I left New Plymouth in 2005 to be in a city of 6 million people (Toronto) and then there I was, looking at being a pilgrim again. I am not saying that Saskatoon is a small city because I see now that it has much to offer, but at the time…

It was also the idea of the change in climate. Moving from New Zealand, where the high in winter averaged 16 degrees Celsius, to somewhere where temperatures can get as low as -30 is pretty daunting. As I flew in, I thought we must be flying into the arctic as it was completely white. When I came back again in May the next year, it was still all white. To be honest, I was thinking 'why am I doing this?'

This was one of those situations when stars strangely align, allowing for a new gallery such as Remai Modern, and not simply a replacement of the Mendel Gallery (which can loosely be seen as its predecessor). Unlike many institutions in New Zealand, Canada and internationally where galleries are owned and run directly by the municipality – like the Auckland Art Gallery and City Gallery Wellington, – the municipal government appointed a board to operate Remai Modern, so they are really at arms length in terms of gallery operations. As we don't report to the city directly, we determine the direction the museum will take.



Remai Modern main floor atrium by KPMB Architects. Courtesy of Remai Modern.



Remai Modern entrance view by KPMB Architects. Courtesy of Remai Modern.



Mendel Art Gallery (1964-2015), the predecessor to Remai Modern. Courtesy of Remai Modern.

GB (CONT) The process through which the Remai Modern was established started around 2008-2009 when the government of Canada set up an infrastructure fund called 'Building Canada,' which aimed to stimulate the economy after the global financial crisis. It was a one-off fund and the City of Saskatoon applied for a development project called River Landing. It was quite a surprising vision, even for a big city, to have this very long-term plan of redeveloping this beautiful river frontage site. They decided that they needed a cultural anchor to build around. They approached the Government of Canada about supporting this venture for a new modern gallery and the Government agreed. It was originally called the Art Gallery of Saskatchewan. This caused quite a lot of tension in the art community because what was being proposed was a new gallery that would not retain the name of Fred Mendel, who was the founding donor of the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon. This all happened well before I arrived.

When I arrived, the Mendel Art Gallery was still operating and part of my job was to shut it down and then establish Remai Modern. While obviously a huge challenge, what also interested me was that there was a very limited vision and philosophy established for this new entity called 'Art Gallery of Saskatchewan'. The idea of being able to build a founding vision for a new institution is really what I find the most exciting. And that is what I have focused on.

Along the way we changed our name to Remai Modern. We said "this is who we are going to be", we put some very clear stakes in the ground and we are still building on that vision and philosophy and the commitments we made to be the type of museum that we want to be. We want this gallery to be dynamic, really current and

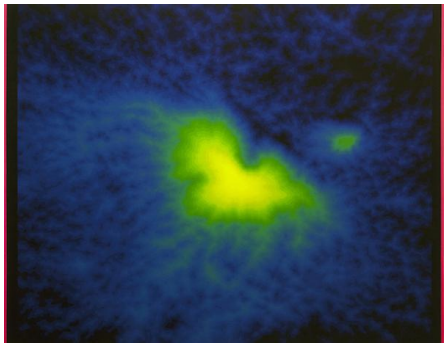
to be of its time. Having said that, I also think it is very important to acknowledge the Mendel family's contributions and we are doing a number of things to ensure this. The works from the original collection will always be known as the Mendel Art Collection at Remai Modern, and we are naming a gallery in the collections suite the Mendel Gallery. We will also have a major international lecture every year called the Mendel Lecture Series. The idea of ensuring there is recognition for the Mendel Gallery and ensuring that the Mendel family will have a place within the larger Remai Modern is of vital importance. But done with care and thought - we are not trying to suggest this is the Mendel Art Gallery because it is not, it is Remai Modern.



Anton Vidokle, *The Communist Revolution was Caused by the Sun* (video still), 2015, HD video with sound, 34:00 minutes. Purchased 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Remai Modern.



Ian Wallace, *At the Crosswalk IX*, 2011, photolaminate and acrylic on canvas, 243.8 x 487.7 cm. *The Mendel Art Gallery Collection* at Remai Modern. Gift of the artist, 2016. Photo courtesy of Vancouver Art Gallery.



Jack Goldstein, *Untitled*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 214 x 273.9 cm. *The Mendel Art Gallery Collection* at Remai Modern. Gift of Sandra L. Simpson, 1990.

MA Tell me a bit about the Gallery itself.

GB I think it will be the most beautiful art gallery in Canada without a doubt. The location is fantastic. The building is stunning, very transparent and engaging. The idea of the cantilevers moving out in all directions is intended to represent the idea of reaching out and embracing the community that surrounds us and beyond.

What I am and have been interested in from the outset, is that I bring a curatorial and strategic focus to what this institution can and will be, and the potential it might have. Without wanting to in any way indicate a lack of attention to the local community - because that is simply not the case - there is a very conscious

decision not to position it as just another provincial art gallery, there is an ambition here to be Canada's museum of modern art - whatever that might mean at this point in history. And to really box above the weight of a provincial art gallery in a place like Saskatchewan. I know that this is possible because the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery was getting a lot of attention internationally, more so than its big city cousins.

MA This must have been, and continues to be an interesting and difficult line to walk; how to ensure that the local communities still feel like this is their gallery while also making certain that it is the visionary gallery that you foresee. How do you hope to maintain a level of intimacy, of supporting the local community and local artists while also creating this gallery that lives up to your vision?

GB I fall back on my experience directing the Govett-Brewster. The programming there was layered to ensure there was a high calibre of local and national programming, as well as international programming. Our group shows focused around an issue or a set of issues that were very much of the moment - on contemporary discourses. The idea would be to put many local and national artists on the same level as some quite significant international counterparts so that there is a conversation created.

To come back to the local/global, one of the main driving factors in terms of determining who we are is the will to be a museum that asks questions to create dialogue more so than give answers. One of the key questions we ask in driving this museum is what is urgent and why? And so it really comes down to the question 'what can a modern art museum do in this place at this point in time and what are the things that are impacting culture both locally and globally right now?' Some of the things that seem quite obvious to me are that we seem to be on a doomsday path in terms of climate change - so what does that mean for a province so heavily associated with resource extraction? And also ensuing that we address questions tied in to the First Nations communities here and colonialism on a global scale. So how do you address these

questions and what questions need to be addressed? Climate change is one of them.

I think the idea of capitalism is flawed. Regardless if you are left, right or in-between - logically capitalism is based on an endgame that cannot continue. It is based on the idea of continuous growth and at some point you will have to stop growing, and you will have to work with the idea of sustainability. Then there is the issue of the extremely accelerated rate of technological change impacting on our lives. For instance, the recent wiki leaks suggesting that anyone's phone can be hacked by whomever. This massive loss of this idea of the private realm, and the impact of technological change accelerating so rapidly that we don't know what the present means anymore, let alone how to begin to understand the future. And last but certainly not least is the continuing effects of colonisation, which do not diminish over time, they are still presenting some of the biggest issues of our time all around the world.

So how do you begin to address those questions and what role does art play? Can you do it just from a local point of view or can you only do it from a global point of view – like a world government point of view? I do not have the answer but I think it takes a mix of both local and global. You need to involve people in these discussions, ask those questions and engage. I envision the gallery creating a space where this happens.



Govett-Brewster Director Greg Burke. Courtesy of Govett-Brewster Gallery, New Zealand.



New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark, Govett-Brewster Director Greg Burke and Mayor Claire Stewart, 20 September 1999. Courtesy of Govett-Brewster Gallery, New Zealand.

MA The idea of indigenising Canada, of decolonising spaces, methodologies and consciousness, are at the forefront of many conversations right now in Canada. How important do you believe that is in terms of where our country needs to be heading? What role do you see art, and Remai Modern playing in these dialogues?

GB Art has a vital role to play in that. Museums have often been the points of focus in struggles. This may sound very lofty, but in terms of museum culture – it began with the opening up of the museum to the people until it became the people's collection. The idea of the first public museum as a museum of the people, and that kind of democratic principle, informed the development of museums for a century of more. One could never really escape though, that the early idea behind museums was hardly democratic, it was about collecting and someone owning this material and knowledge, choosing what to present and what to leave out. So it is a bit problematic to start with. But then starting in the 1980s, with people like Richard Florida and others, you get this move towards the museum competing in the entertainment industry and becoming part of the attention economy. So increasingly, in order to get funding, you have to show that you are providing 'leisure options'.

The question for me was always 'what is the alternative?' How can we make the museum actually take a role in the community and the society – one that nurtures democracy, because democracy is being stripped away as we speak. We may think that by voting every 4 years we are in control but actually we know that many big decisions are being made by corporations. What we want to create at Remai Modern is a place where people can discuss and engage. There will always be people that come in to see objects, but we want to suggest that art is not just objects removed from discourse, that art is a temporal process that involves all sorts of interactions between the artist and the public and that people bring knowledge to art as much as art is a medium for disseminating knowledge. Without saying that all art needs to engage with these questions, I think generally speaking art does prompt questions about our existence. We want to show that you can work with art in such a

way that involves people and provides multiple ways of engaging with these big weighty questions.



MA I am interested in the fact that the Jimmie Durham show, which is one of the first big shows you have announced, is happening shortly after Canada's '150th birthday'

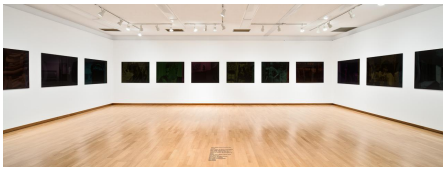
celebration. What was the intention behind this, or was it another alignment of stars? Jimmie Durham talks a lot about repatriation and authenticity and growing up as a First Nations youth; his work engages with the many questions being raised in Canada at the moment, especially with Canada 'turning 150 years old'.

GB Some of this is fortuitous and some of it is planned. One of the commitments we have made is to be a centre for contemporary Indigenous programming. I think in Canada the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report is only really beginning to identify the problem and not necessarily addressing it. Coming from Aotearoa New Zealand, and without putting a halo around it, it does feel like discourse around a bicultural environment has had a longer history there. So the question becomes, how does a museum position itself as a space that prioritises Indigenous programming while still being true to the visions of a contemporary and modern art museum. Back to the Jimmie Durham show, he has stated that he is happy to be called Cherokee but not to be identified as a Cherokee artist, because he is an artist just like anyone else. He is fighting the traps of being pigeon-holed into a category. He does not want to be limited by definitions of who he should be as an artist. So this question of how do we remain strong in terms of a commitment to Indigenous practices within the contemporary art museum context is something I think a lot about and how to do that well.

The first artwork I purchased for Remai Modern was by Raymond Boisjoly, a Vancouver-based Haida and Quebecois artist. It was important for me to put that stake in the ground – the first thing I am going to do is purchase a work by an Indigenous Canadian artist. I think we are very fortunate that some of the strongest, most interesting, forward-thinking and insightful works being made in Canada currently are being made by contemporary Indigenous artists.

Then the idea of Jimmie Durham came along, an artist that I have followed for many many years, and it is important that the first major international solo show at the gallery will be by an artist who is Indigenous to North America, but without branding it as Cherokee art because his art has as much claim on universality as

anyone else's. It was a really opportune and significant step for us to take. He hasn't had a retrospective to date. To be the only Canadian venue presenting this show is a pretty strong statement on behalf of Remai Modern I think.



Raymond Boisjoly, (And) *Other Echoes*, 2013, 12 screen-resolution LightJet prints on gray-tinted acrylic, 91.5 × 122 cm (36 × 48 1/16 in.) each. The Mendel Art Gallery Collection at Remai Modern. Purchased with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program 2014.



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MA Coming from New Zealand, which I feel is far ahead of Canada in terms of celebrating and acknowledging Indigenous populations, it is significant that your website not only mentions territory rights but also uses the language in Cree syllabics. Language is such a vital part of culture in terms of situating histories and it plays a vital role in those grand narratives. This was an important and obviously quite intentional decision on your part, including words in syllabics on the website and physically on the gallery walls. Could you talk to this decision?

GB It is an important part of our visual identity. It partly comes from the very first Newspaper in Saskatoon called the Saskatoon Centennial which was hand drawn by one individual and the singular copy was passed from person to person to person. In some ways it was the beginning of typography in the region.

There is this very English museum model based on the idea that everyone wants to be the National Gallery of England, and then you have a sort of pyramid of who is at the top and who is at the bottom. You have this broad-spectrum mandate to represent one universal canon of art history from the National Gallery with its encyclopaedic collection to a small gallery in a small location with

maybe a book on Picasso rather than major works in their collection. The Art Gallery of Vancouver, The Art Gallery of Ontario, the Winnipeg Art Gallery - the brand seems to be repeating a concept which was really about colonisation. The name Art Gallery of Saskatchewan does not in any way identify who we are or what our vision is. And while Remai Modern with Saskatchewan in syllabics might sound the same, it actually reads very differently, because this idea of borders and territories is quite problematic here and we hope to begin conversations about relating to a time when there were no borders and how that played out. We wanted to very consciously break from that mould and that is why we named it Remai Modern. We really struggled with the inclusion of syllabics because we did not want to use it in a fake way to exoticise the gallery, we wanted to acknowledge the location and use it as a locator. The syllabics on the home page translates to Saskatchewan. And, as we are on Treaty 6 land, Cree syllabics were chosen to acknowledge this. Through conversations we got more and more comfortable using the syllabics in more places. I do not think we are overplaying it, I do not think we are using it as an exoticisation, I think it is subtle but it is an affirmation, and ultimately it talks about place. We are not Remai Modern of the world, we are Remai Modern of Saskatchewan, of Treaty 6 Territory.

Many galleries in New Zealand have a Maori subtitle or alternative title. I remember that when it first started happening, many Pakeha (settler) did not understand what it had to do with art, why it was important. For many people it was quite foreign to see these Maori words but after a while it becomes almost familiar. For us, it's about building this familiarity. We know that there are not many people in Saskatchewan that will be able to understand Cree syllabics but they will understand that by us using it there is a desire to engage and to acknowledge.



Remai Modern exterior view by KPMB Architects. Courtesy of Remai Modern.



Remai Modern, 2016. Photo: Kelly Pankratz

MA In many ways, both in New Zealand and Canada, we don't seem to champion our artists and our intellectuals in the way that other countries do. Have you found this in terms of your own work?

GB I totally agree with that. One of the things that makes it hard being a New Zealander abroad is that when you leave it is like you leave the tribe. People seem disconnected from the fact that you are having an impact in the world. Whereas one of the things that defines Europeans is they always claim and support their artists and intellectuals wherever they are working. There is a cultural confidence in that. Canada is similar to New Zealand in some ways. We have the case of successful Canadian artists such as Jeff Wall and Stan Douglas, who made international exposure of their work a priority. They became successful by almost turning their backs on Canada, despite being committed to and basing their studios in Vancouver. They are championed now as great Canadian artists but this was not always the case. Similarly there are many Canadian artists working internationally now who don't get much attention. There is a kind of bubble mentality, although I think that what we will be doing at Remai Modern will help that to a certain extent.

We speak a bit more about art and weather and my excitement surrounding the opening of the gallery and then he is off on his way to pick up Haegue Yang, a Korean artist based in Berlin, at the airport.



Mandy Alves is a Canadian arts educator, a writer and a photographer. She previously lived in New Zealand from 2004-2012 where she taught in the art department of several high schools. She holds a BFA and a Masters in Art History from the University of Auckland. Mandy is now a high school teacher in the northern reserve town of Attawapiskat where she has been based for 4 years. Consequently, Mandy's research, art and education practices engage with, among other things, indigenous ways of knowing, issues surrounding place and the role that art plays in society.

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