

**Cobalt Ishi**  
**Six Paintings by Erik Bakke**  
**Completed 2010**

**Introduction**

The 2010 series “Cobalt Ishi” is six paintings by Erik Bakke.

Each work is 40 x 30 x 2.5 inches and graphite and oil paint on canvas.

The linseed oil paints used in the paintings are the six cobalt colors listed below. ASTM identification numbers are included.

Cobalt Blue (Cobalt Aluminate-PB28)

Cobalt Turquoise Bluish (Oxides of Cobalt, Chromium, & Aluminum-PB36)

Cobalt Green Pale (Cobalt Zincate-PG19)

Cobalt Teal (Cobalt Titanate Green Spinel-PG50)

Cobalt Violet Light (Cobalt Ammonium Phosphate-PV49)

Cobalt Yellow (Cobalt Potassium Nitrate-PY40)

The titles of each of the six works begins with the name of one of the six cobalt colors and continues with a list of items (one per each month) associated with the year the painting references--the six years referenced are from 1911 to 1916. The full titles are listed in the “Works” section below.

**The Works**

1.

In the painting with the title starting “Cobalt Blue Ishi 1911” we see Ishi in silhouette as he was photographed in the Oroville, California jail soon after his initial capture. This silhouette image is the same one used repeatedly as the starting point for the monotypes of the “100 Years of Freedom” series. This painting also features each of the six cobalt colors in unmixed form.

Full Title:

Cobalt Blue Ishi 1911: January 12, 1911, Senator J. B. Holohan introduces Bill No. 291, “An act to select and adopt the Bear Flag as the state flag of California;” February 1911, The Magonista Revolt in Baja California; March 29, 1911, M1911; April 28, 1911, Albatross returns to San Francisco from the Gulf of California; May 1911, Letter from John Muir to Katharine Hooker; June 2, 1911, Republic of Baja California; July 1, 1911, Calaveras Earthquake; August 28, 1911, Ishi captured; September 1911, Annie Besant; October 1911, California suffrage card; November 1911; USS F1 (CARP); December 1, 1911, Clarence Darrow

2.

In the painting with the title starting “Cobalt Turquoise Bluish Ishi 1912” Ishi is seen sitting in an open top automobile. He wears a suit and tie.

Full Title:

Cobalt Turquoise Bluish Ishi 1912: January 1912, Hetch Hetchy; February 1912, Second National Orange Show; March 1912, Arrowhead Hot Springs; April 1912, Marin Municipal Water District; May 1912, Yolo Water and Power Company; June 1912, Ishi in automobile; July 1912, Bathing pavilion Venice of America, California; August 1912, USS California; September 1912, The Journal of the Polynesian Society; October 1912, “Tarzan of the Apes” in “The All-Story;” November 1912, Ad Wolgast v. Willie Ritchie; December 1912, Bertha Lum “Kites”

3.

In the painting with the title starting “Cobalt Green Pale Ishi 1913” Ishi is pictured with Alfred Kroeber (the anthropologist) and Sam Batwi (Ishi’s translator for his first weeks in San Francisco). In this image the heads of Ishi and Batwi overlap with the letters indicating the months and are distorted and Ishi’s body takes on the the attributes of the newspaper descriptions of his day which described him as a “wild” man. The caption for the image as it appears in the book “Ishi’s Brain” is superimposed over the figures (in reverse) with the “courtesy of the Phoebe Apperson Hearst Museum of Anthropology and Regents of the University of California” written in a pronounced fashion. Issues not only of citizenship and ownership of land but of ownership of history and artifact come to the fore.

Full Title:

Cobalt Green Pale Ishi 1913: January 1913, First gondola of salt arriving at the Swansea Terminal in Owens Valley; February 1913, The Journal of the Polynesian Society; March 1913, SPCA Fountain in Oakland, CA; April 1913, Cleve Creighton-Chaney; May 24, 1913, 400 Fall as Long Beach Pier Crashes, 33 Die; June 1913, Chevrolet Baby Grand; July 10, 1913, Greenland Ranch (Furnace Creek), CA -- 134 degrees fahrenheit; August 28, 1913, Freshman-sophomore pushball contest; September 1913, Lemuel David Parsons; October 1913; Josh Knowles; November 5, 1913, “There it is. Take it,” William Mulholland; December 1913, Big Creek Dam 4 during construction

4.

In the painting with the title starting “Cobalt Teal Ishi 1914” Ishi is seen, dressed in western clothes, standing on the grounds of, most likely, a San Francisco museum in front of a “Yana House” of his making. Various signs indicate the locations of the bed and fireplace. One sign indicates the height of the arched door as 33 inches--a dimension equal to the height of the teal painted area of the painting.

## Full Title

Cobalt Teal Ishi 1914: January 1914, Pancho Villa; February 1914, San Francisco street car; March 1914, California porcelain license plate; April 1914, Map of Yosemite; May 1914, George A. Ralphs; June 22, 1914, George A. Ralphs dies near Arrowhead; July 1914, Kaiser Wilhelm II; August 1914, Hotel Al Tahoe; September 1914, "Pleasure Land for the Tourist," poster from tourist association of Central California, 525 Market Street, San Francisco, A Public Organization; October 1914, Kazimir Malevich; November 8, 1914, Serigraph record--correction--isoseismal of earthquake in the Santa Cruz mountains by Carl H. Beal; December 1914, Odilon Redon "Le Cyclope"

5.

In the painting with the title starting "Cobalt Violet Light Ishi 1915" Ishi is seen, in a suit and holding arrows and a bow, meeting with Blackfeet Indians at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition 1915. In this painting the circle motif is less prominent than in the other five works and a certain visual confusion is created between line, imagery, text and ground.

## Full Title:

Cobalt Violet Light Ishi 1915: January, 1915, Charlie Chaplin making The Tramp with the Essanay Film company in Niles, California; February 1915, Panama-Pacific International Exposition, 1915; March 14, 1915, Lincoln J. Beachy dies in San Francisco Bay; April 24, 1915, Tsitsernakaberd; May 22, 1915, Lassen Peak eruption; June 18, 1915, movie poster, "Moore Theatre, Seattle, second and last week starting Sunday, June 18, Elliot and Sherman Film Corp. present D. W. Griffith's 8th wonder of the world, twice daily, twice daily, The Birth of A Nation, 18,000 people, 3,000 horses, cost \$500,000, 'worth \$5.00 a seat,' New York Journal"; July, 1915, Selig Zoo; August, 1915, Bernard Maybeck's Palace of Fine Arts and Lagoon; September, 1915, Panama California Exposition San Diego; October, 1915, Sara Bard Field; November, 1915, banner for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition San Francisco 1915; December, 1915, The Sphynx at Gallipoli; Photo Source--Orin Starn's Ishi's Brain with caption reading "Ishi with Blackfeet Indians at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, 1915. (Courtesy of the Phoebe Apperson Hearst Museum of Anthropology and Regents of the University of California)"

6.

In the painting with the title starting "Cobalt Yellow Ishi 1916" Ishi's death mask is seen as the central image. The text in this work looks as if it might be radiating out from the mask--like the radiant halo of an icon painting.

## Full Title

Cobalt Yellow Ishi 1916: January 1916, Toilet water box label (California Toilet Water Carnation Manufactured by California Perfumes New York); February 21, 1916, Battle of Verdun; March 25, 1916, Ishi's death mask; April 1916, The National Geographic

Magazine cover detail (Panorama of the King of Trees Size 10 1/4 x 25 1/2 Inches); May 1916, Ishi's death mask hidden behind Empire of China flag; June 6, 1916, Chicago suffrage parade; July 1916, Private Wilferd Earl Leggett with the Camp Flag of the 2d California Infantry. Mexican Border Campaign, 1916; August 29, 1916, U.S.S. Memphis destroyed by hurricane, Santo Domingo City, Lt. Jones receives Medal of Honor; September 18, 1916, Court date regarding land dispute in Nagcarlan, Laguna, Philippines; October 1916, California sardine landings by season, 1916-17 through 1954-55; November 1916, Fasces from 1916 dime; December 14, 1916, Stranding of submarine H-3

## Context

The "Cobalt Ishi" series of paintings grows out of series of paintings and prints each entitled "100 Years of Freedom." Each of the "100 Years of Freedom" works is associated with a year--the first being 1911 (when Ishi left the territory of his people's homeland and entered a modern California where he did not have legal right to U. S. citizenship). As the title "100 Years of Freedom" suggests for each of the 100 years from August 1911 to August 2011 there is an associated art work.

"Cobalt Ishi" is a more narrowly defined series. It comprises just six paintings covering a span of six years, 1911-1916. For those six years Ishi primarily lived in San Francisco under the stewardship of the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber. Ishi died in 1916.

The "Cobalt Ishi" series comes directly out of the work done on the "100 Years of Freedom" monotypes completed at Smith Andersen Editions in 2009, both in subject matter and specific utilized techniques.

The dominate motif of each of the "Cobalt Ishi" paintings is a ring filling the top three quarters of each of the vertically oriented paintings. The lower quarter of each painting is left, mostly, unpainted. The ring is divided into twelve sections with each section labeled with the abbreviation for one of the twelve months. The months in the ring appear backwards and out of order. Within the circumference of the dominate ring can be seen four quarter rings. These quarter rings are directly related to the quarter rings appearing, predominately, in each of the four corners of each of the two panels of each of the "100 Years of Freedom" monotype diptychs. In the monotypes each of the quarter rings is divided into three parts with each part referencing a specific month. As in the monotype the quarter rings are part of a circular calendar broken into four parts and appearing in four separate places. In the end the four parts of the whole ring in the "Cobalt Ishi" paintings are only mirrored reflections of the four quarter rings located in the interior of the ring. Thus, the apparent whole calendar is cobbled together from reflections of pieces. The large numbers on the outside of the ring indicate the foci of the quarter circles--located at the corners of the imaginary square in which the ring is inscribed--and together the four numbers indicate the year the painting references. Radius lines from these foci located outside the ring and radius lines from the center of the ring are pre-drawn in graphite (along with much of the works imagery) and these

graphite lines and their mathematically determined, intersecting relationships become part of the final work as pigment is applied in a way to emphasize this original graphite layout.

Each of the months in the “100 Years of Freedom” series is labeled with a letter and each letter is associated both with a month and part of the text of the title (which is printed in its entirety within the work itself)--this bit of text lists some event that took place in the year the print or painting references. These events have been selected in an intuitive process through lengthy Internet searches using terms like “water” and “California” or just the date in question. In the “Cobalt Ishi” paintings there is also text listing events, of the painting’s particular year, month by month. But here in the “Cobalt Ishi” paintings the title text is written as if mirrored. Also within the ring of each “Cobalt Ishi” painting is an image of Ishi taken from a photograph of Ishi either alone or with people he encountered during the years 1911 to 1916. So, the figure of Ishi within the ring is confronted with the text, listing particular events of a particular year, legible from his perspective. Ishi can be thought of as reading the text we the viewers see as backwards.

Rather than depicting straightforward events or events in in a straightforward fashion these paintings mirror events and images from the past into the present. Finally, the disjointed reflections and the freshly created unities, and their import, are offered to the contemporary viewer for consideration and reconsideration.

The whole of the painting’s imagery being created from overlapping, interconnected fragments and the mirrored texts and forms allows for numerous ways for the viewer to approach the painting’s content and formal aspects. The paintings are at once visual and textual chronicles of various points in, mostly, California history and exercises in the communicative power of reductive and highly organized color and form.

Though rife with information the paintings resist directing the viewer towards specific, overt associations. The painting referencing 1911 points to the origins of California’s Bear Flag as well as to the theosophist Annie Besant, the lawyer Clarence Darrow, John Muir’s letters, and, among other items, the Calaveras Earthquake of that year.

Not only does each works’ title start with a reference to one of the series’ palette’s six cobalt colors but that color is also the first color laid down in the painting--as two horizontal bands functioning at once as foundation color and as a patterning element complementing and opposing to the overall design.