

**The Anti-Trickster At Play: Representing First Nations Artists And Art In  
The Art Galleries And Museums Of Northern British Columbia**

**Annette Catherine Schroeter**

B.Des., Open University of British Columbia  
and Emily Carr College of Art and Design, 1992  
Graphic Design Major

B.A., University of Northern British Columbia, 1997  
Anthropology and History Majors

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*Dedicated to my mother Harriet Tamar Schroeter  
who's love, faith and patience gently push me forward.*

## **Thesis Abstract**

First Nations artists in Canada are currently engaged in a struggle to challenge a colonialist system which has largely ignored, rejected and minimized their contributions to the mainstream Canadian art discourse and society. The attempt to engage in this discourse is not the only issue here, but also a peoples' attempt to communicate inconsistencies and weaknesses in contemporary Canadian society that continue to erode the movement toward a just and equal reality (Battiste 2000b: xxii). A central area of turmoil is the public art galleries and museums as they have recently begun to deconstruct and redefine themselves since many of them have been challenged to address a colonialist system of oppression and destruction which they have contributed to and maintained. These are significant and pervasive sites in Canadian society with social, political and economic responsibilities to the communities in which they are situated. As a result, some of these art galleries and museums, through their work of programming and collecting, have actively engaged with the First Nation's struggle to revitalize and strengthen their cultural autonomy.

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## Chapter One

it's ironic that i feel out of place  
and this discomfort is based on race -  
*my home, my "native land"*  
is filled with cities, buildings, pavement –  
chevrolets, and  
political engagements

pulp mills in sound locations,  
deflowered forests –  
*and then,*  
there's the *strategically* located reservations –  
this is where *i belong*, if i  
adhered to *proper* placement

because my mere existence  
results from a glitch in the plan  
to *dissipate*, and *assimilate* –  
but brown skin...simply won't erase

and years slipped by,  
and residential schools and  
government legislation  
could not "correct" the problem of  
the indian population.

so decades later,  
here is my struggle:  
day by day  
i carry on,  
mourning the half of my culture that's gone<sup>1</sup>  
(Runningwater) Dawn Dunstan (2006)

### 1 Introduction

As I turn my heart and my mind into the past I can see that the relationships  
between First Nations and non-First Nations in Canada have been troubled and I'm  
concerned about our futures. The continued pain and suffering experienced by thousands

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<sup>1</sup> A section from the poem, *brown skin: "just another indian."*

of people caused by a racist society is not necessary. For centuries the ideologies and cultures of those peoples who originally thrived on this continent have been ignored, distorted and/or dismantled. In reaction to this process of colonization many First Nations have struggled hard to be heard and the many peoples who complete the whole that is Canadian society have been continuously challenged to reflect upon the nature of the social and cultural reality they have established. The injustices and inequalities of the past, such as the residential school experience and the banning of cultural ceremonies, have built upon each other and in some places they have erupted into physical expressions of outrage and frustration. In eastern Canada the 1990 Oka Crisis was a clash between First Nations and the state of Canada which revealed the depth of racism and intolerance amongst the Canadian population for Aboriginal people.

Many First Nations artists including Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Carl Beam, Jane Ash Poitras, Rebecca Belmore, Art Wilson and Ya'Ya Chuck Heit, just to name a few, have joined the voices of dissent and contribute to the work of dismantling a tradition of oppression and economic and cultural impoverishment gradually imposed over hundreds of years under an imperialist regime. Canadian social and cultural systems instilled and maintained by the colonialist rhetoric are challenged through the cultural expression of these artists. Their artwork communicates ideas, symbols and emotions which reclaim, revitalize and strengthen First Nations cultures. These artists have struggled, with slow progress, to gain a political and social forum from which to express

their voice. The need for the development and implementation of strategies to address the imbalance of power in Canadian society continues.

Publicly funded art galleries and museums are places that represent a wide range of ideas, knowledge, and beliefs from many sources and are potential places of resistance and reconciliation. They are additionally important sites as they serve their local and regional communities by contributing to the dissemination of knowledge and the symbolic representations of human culture (Fung 2002: 39). They also may serve First Nations communities in this time of need by assisting them to recover and return to things and ways that are truly their own. “Museums have a crucial role not only in preserving, continuing and managing cultural heritage but also in modeling community relations strategies” (Galla 1996: 94). However, First Nations communities and their artists have had a long tumultuous history with representatives of museums. As the Western concepts in museology and anthropology developed and expanded during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries museums began to collect cultural objects until there was an almost frantic effort to “salvage” First Nations cultures which were predicted, as constructed by the Western intellectual paradigm at the time, to become extinct.

Museums flourished and objects were readily had due in part to disease and violence, the influx of mass-manufactured goods, the influence of Christian conversion, and federal legislation outlawing Native ceremonies, such as the potlatch of the Pacific Northwest Coast. (Mithlo 2004: 749)

The collection of the material culture was so intense and pervasive that it contributed to the cultural impoverishment and destruction experienced by many First Nations groups (Jonaitis 2002: 27).

Today, the works of art produced by First Nations artists are tentatively sought after by public art galleries and museums and are collected, exhibited and/or interpreted to a limited extent by their curators. However, Canadian cultural centers have largely supported and reinforced the dominant Euro-Canadian culture through their work and include First Nations cultures with an often minimal and distorted perspective. As stated within the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* “Aboriginal people generally do not see themselves, their cultures, or their values reflected in Canada’s public institutions” (INAC 1996: 10) and in particular “it has been most difficult for these works to find a presence in public art galleries” (McLoughlin 1999: 172). As a result, both First Nations and non-First Nations have often criticized the policies and practices of art galleries and museums and since the early 1990s there have been some changes.<sup>2</sup> The politics of inclusion and exclusion of First Nations art in these places are continuously in the process of being evaluated and critiqued by a growing number of concerned individuals including Lee-Ann Martin (2004, 2002, 1996, 1995 & 1991)

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<sup>2</sup> During the late 1980’s the Canadian government began to approach various community members seeking ideas for the 1992 celebrations of two significant anniversaries, 500 years of European presence in the “new” world and 125 years of Canadian confederation. Intense vocal criticism of the original intent of these celebrations, including a speech by Georges Erasmus at the “Toward 1992” conference in Ottawa, caused many people to begin to consider alternate realities and understandings of the history of Canada (McMaster and Martin 1992: 11). Two significant exhibitions, *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives* organized by the Museum of Civilization and *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada* organized by the National Gallery of Canada, were opened in 1992 and reflected the voice of Aboriginal artists.

Alfred Young Man (1995, 1992), Ruth Phillips (2002 and 1999), Jim Logan (2004) and Joane Cardinal-Schubert (2004). The research I have conducted for this thesis examines whether these changes are reflected in the art galleries and museums of northern British Columbia and it attempts to determine the nature of the cross-cultural relationships between First Nations artists and the people who work with or in curatorial departments in the art galleries and museums of northern BC.

## 2 Placing myself in this study

i know in this society  
i can expect more barriers and challenges than some  
i'll spell it out, won't exaggerate  
because i have felt the disgust, and the hate  
or the patronization that humiliates<sup>3</sup>  
(Runningwater) Dawn Dunstan (2006)

As an Anishnawbe/Euro-Canadian woman I have worked and played most of my life within the central interior region of British Columbia where I was born and raised. It was here that I had largely explored and developed my own artistic abilities. Eventually my academic and professional interest and work originated from that creative foundation. I studied graphic design at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design in Vancouver, BC and completed my Bachelor of Design degree by 1992. Soon after returning to Prince George I decided to pursue my recently developed interests in history and anthropology and I entered the Bachelor of Arts program at the newly founded University of Northern British Columbia.

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<sup>3</sup> A section from the poem, *brown skin: "just another indian."*

During my time at UNBC I also pursued a career in the curatorial department of the Prince George Art Gallery. I initially worked as a researcher/special events coordinator and six months later became the gallery's exhibition technician. Six years later as the gallery relocated and redefined itself my position at the newly named Two Rivers Gallery changed to assistant curator/graphic designer with a few intervals over the years as acting curator whenever that position unexpectedly opened up. I found myself unprepared and intimidated to be taking on what I believed to be the important and rather sacred role of curator as I felt I was not adequately experienced. I had noted that many curators who worked at art galleries and museums in North America have earned Masters or Doctorate degrees within appropriate fields. The importance of this education was evident, I thought, as the people living in the communities in which the art galleries and museums are located look to the curators to interpret and explain that vast and mysterious area of our culture that is called "visual art." At the time I was not sure I could adequately accomplish this. Nonetheless, I took on the task with determination and quaking courage because I love and believe in the value visual art. I knew my commitment would help me brazen my way through the experience, which it did. During my time at the public art gallery in Prince George I was fortunate to be a part of a few important exhibitions which included First Nations artists. I assisted George Harris with the organization of the exhibition *What is Dakelh Art?* (1996) and as acting curator I initiated the exhibition *Under Raven's Wing* (2001) which was curated by Heather Harris.

In addition to my education and work activities, I was invited to sit as a member of the Arts Council of UNBC and I eventually became the Chair of that committee. One of the duties of the Arts Council was to make recommendations to the President of the University regarding art acquisitions for their collection. Having worked at the Prince George Art/Two Rivers Gallery I began to notice an interesting trend regarding the rapid development of the art collection at UNBC. A number of collectors and artists were offering works of art created by First Nations artists to the University despite its inadequate display and interpretive abilities, whereas works of art offered to the Two Rivers Gallery for their permanent collection were generally works created by non-Native artists. I knew of no significant collection of artworks by First Nations being held at Prince George's regional museum, The Exploration Place. I began to wonder about the ideas and beliefs built into our cultural and social systems which were unofficially directing the placement of these works of art in our community. The Two Rivers Gallery, the University of Northern British Columbia and The Exploration Place are built in the traditional territory of the Lheidli T'enneh and it would be appropriate for these institutions to reflect and promote the artistic culture of these people as well as the First Nations and Inuit of Canada.

While I pondered these questions I often worked on the University's art collection and I began to develop an aesthetic appreciation and the beginning of an intellectual understanding of First Nations' and Inuit art. Up to this time my experience and education had placed me primarily within the Western art tradition. My own

Anishnawbe traditions seem very distant to me as the majority of my family resides in Ontario and my mother, a former residential school student, was not interested or unable to pass on her language and cultural traditions to her children. I can relate with Greg Sarris and his comments about his cultural, personal and professional backgrounds as he discusses them in his books, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* (1993) and *Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream* (1994). He states, "I occupy a somewhat unusual and awkward position as a mixed-blood Indian and university scholar. As a scholar I work from the borders of different cultures and traditions, talking about the ways these cultures and traditions intersect in time and place" (1993: 7) and, "So many of us are a mixed-up lot, a chorus of intermingling voices and histories" (1993: 12). I often feel that I exist outside, on the borders of the cultures and people I am connected to through blood. According to Kimberly Blaesar, Aboriginal writer Gerald Vizenor portrays the trickster character as "nearly synonymous with and metaphor for the tribal mixedblood" (1996: 155).<sup>4</sup> My existence is symbolic of a marginal figure "whose very identity reflects all duality and contradiction" thus resisting stereotypic definitions (Blaesar 1996: 155). I belong and yet I don't and my voice is amongst the chorus wanting to be listened to.

I left the Two Rivers Gallery in the spring of 2001 and joined UNBC's Ethnographic Field School in Siberia, Russia over their spring/summer semesters.

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<sup>4</sup> The ambiguous Trickster character often appears in First Nations oral stories and literature. Gerald Vizenor creates Trickster narratives where "the listeners and readers imagine their liberation; the trickster is a sign and the world is 'deconstructed' in a discourse" (Vizenor 1989: 194). Within these often funny stories the Trickster character "is being, nothingness and liberation; a loose seam in consciousness; that wild space over and between sounds, words, sentences and narratives; and, at last, the trickster is comic shit" (Vizenor 1989: 196).



During that time I observed and interacted with the aboriginal peoples of the Republic of Sakha including the Yakut and Eveni who took every opportunity to express their immense pride in their cultural traditions. The cultures of these peoples were visible multiple ways including performance, song, dance and visual art in many different venues including performance centers, museums, art galleries and outdoor festivals. As I compared the prevalence of cultural expressions between the Republic of Sakha and northern British Columbia I was struck by the larger amount of infrastructure and resources in the city of Yakutsk supporting Aboriginal culture, particularly in the area of performance. There is no performing centre, museum or art gallery dedicated to Dakelh culture in Prince George. My experience in Russia had allowed me to begin to understand the importance and potential of strong First Nations' cultural expression and how severely lacking this is in my community and region. The next step in this process is the development of my thesis' research objectives.

### **3 Research objectives**

I have noted that contemporary art discourse in North America exists primarily within the Western academic tradition with critical interpretations largely informed and guided by European cultural understandings of aesthetics of content and form. This foundation of biased knowledge guides social, political and economic policy within and across government and private sectors and so the First Nations people of Canada generally do not find themselves, their cultures, or the principles which guide their lives resonating or mirrored in the public institutions of our society (INAC 1996: 10). Living under the weight

of the unfairness and injustice of this situation matters to me and I know to those around me. One of the aims of this research is to contribute to the ongoing struggle for de-colonization. A strategy to accomplish this is by helping to bring to people's consciousness and realization the suffering and oppression experienced by First Nations because of their race (Adams 2000: 52) and to work on bringing about a cultural environment rich with their arts. Professor Carolyn Berezna Kenny believes "that our song, dance, art, carving, basketmaking, and other forms can provide the foundation for our autonomy, solidarity, self-determination and the means for keeping our spirit alive" (1998: 77-78). I also firmly believe this to be true. This work critically evaluates Eurocentric ideologies and perspectives which continue to be pervasive in art galleries and museums of northern BC and continues to propagate the colonization of First Nations.

The forms of knowledge, traditions and emotions expressed and held by First Nations are communicated in many different ways such as oral histories, literary works and the visual arts (Harris 2002, Hill, G. 2006, McMaster 1998, McMaster and Martin 1992, Ryan 1999). This research argues for the importance of the visual arts and advocates the need for more sites where First Nations can communicate and express themselves. The visual arts embody characteristics of language as artists communicate their beliefs, ideas, stories, experiences, emotions, hopes, dreams and history (Cohen & Gainer 1976: 10). There exists much pain, frustration and anger amongst First Nations and all avenues of healing need to be explored.

An additional intent of this research is to present the experiences of First Nations artists and personnel of art galleries and museums so as to create opportunities for learning and understanding. Each individual who was interviewed has a unique and valuable

perspective and knowledge with their own insights into the nature of the relationship between First Nations artists and art galleries and museums. By sharing their wealth of information the participants of this research will help to create a positive and empowering experience for themselves and each other. This work gives them a voice and situates them so others can look upon them as advisors and role models.

Based upon my own work experience, observations and readings I have found that the working networks between First Nations artists and northern BC cultural institutions are often weak and in some cases non-existent. However, most people working in these places are aware of the history of exploitation and appropriation that have been carried out and sanctioned by museums, particularly those in southern urban centers. The relationships between First Nations and museums have been severely damaged and it will require significant work and resources to begin to make repairs and redress the wrongs committed in the past. Avoiding or ignoring this daunting legacy maintains and extends the history of oppression and neglect. I conducted this research to advocate for stronger and continuous relationships between First Nations artists and personnel from art galleries and museums.

First Nations artists, such as Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Ya'Ya (Chuck) Heit, Robert Davidson, Brian Jungen, Art Wilson, Rebecca Belmore, Jane Ash Poitras, Norval Morrisseau, Rick Rivet, Tom Hill and many more, have become increasingly active in their efforts to revitalize and strengthen Aboriginal ways of knowing as they interpret the Western modernist, postmodern and postcolonial reality. Through their artworks, writings and voice they engage with these theoretical frameworks creating works of art that reflect and/or challenge Western social values and beliefs. The continued inadequate, distorted and inaccurate interpretations and knowledge revealed by the mainstream art discourse on

contemporary First Nations art reveals an urgent need for Western intellectuals and society to dismantle their proprietary attitude towards aesthetics and knowledge and recognize the cultural diversity, intellectual vitality and visual integrity of works created by First Nations artists (Price 123, 126). Integrating new paradigms of First Nations knowledge of their own aesthetics and culture into the Western art discourse will provide a broader and more diverse panorama of the Canadian cultural landscape that will begin to reflect First Nations reality. I am hopeful that this work will create ties and raise awareness of the inequality and injustice that continues within the public institutions of Canadian society.

In pursuit of these important research objectives I conducted a series of interviews with First Nations artists and personnel associated with the curatorial staff of art galleries and museums in northern BC. As I previously noted, I had worked at the Prince George Art/Two Rivers Gallery for many years and I had professionally and personally established relationships with numerous artists and museum staff. As well, I consulted with advisors and peers at UNBC and museum curators as I made the final choices of potential research participants. I invited five individuals of First Nations descent who have established reputations as artists with art gallery/museum curators and the general public and who reside in northern BC to participate. These artists generally have an understanding of the operations of art galleries and museums in their region as they have interacted with them through exhibitions, programming, sales, fundraising, committees and/or collections.

For the purpose of this thesis it was not important to me whether the artists I worked with were commercially successful or widely well known within the Canadian contemporary art world. In fact, I preferred to work with artists whose work fell outside of the Western understandings of “art” as they might discuss issues particularly relevant to

them. I knew female artists, whose traditional mediums fall within the category of “craft,” might express issues around the exclusion of their work from the mainstream art discourse. As well, I questioned the narrow focus that curators, collectors and academics have placed on a handful of First Nations artists across the country. I do not believe the variety and richness of First Nations cultures is well represented when the same artists and artwork is viewed and discussed over and over again. This focus on the exceptional or “great” artist is a Western practice that I believe can impoverish the cultural experience for everybody.

I interviewed five First Nations artists who currently live in four different communities across northern British Columbia. Most of these artists have lived much of their lives in the region with strong social and economic ties to their current communities. In Prince George I met with Angelique Levac (Cree) and Peter George (Wetsuwet'en); in Kispiox I interviewed Ya'Ya Chuck Heit (Gitxsan); in Terrace Rena Bolton (Sto:lo) met with me. The final interview I conducted was with Garry Oker, (Dane-zaa) in Fort St. John.

Six individuals from five cultural institutions located in communities across northern BC were invited and agreed to participate in this research. In Prince George, George Harris, Curator of the Two Rivers Gallery; Tracy Calogheros, Executive Director and Bob Campbell, Manager of Collections of The Exploration Place all met with me. In Prince Rupert Susan Marsden, Curator of the Museum of Northern British Columbia was interviewed.<sup>5</sup> In Dawson Creek I spoke with Ellen Corea, Director/Curator of the Dawson Creek Art Gallery and in Hazelton, Laurel Mould (Gitxsan), Executive Director/Curator of the 'Ksan Historical Village and Museum also met with me. Almost all of these

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<sup>5</sup> Susan was adopted into the House of Gwin'uu and was an active member of Gitxsan community. She worked strenuously on behalf of the Gitxsan Wet'suwet'en Tribal Council for the court case *Delgamuukw v. A.G.* As well, she has worked for the Tsimshian Tribal Council (Project for the Protection and Repatriation of First Nations Cultural Heritage in Canada 2007, internet source).

organizations are supported by public funding through municipal, regional and/or provincial sources with the exception of 'Ksan which was initially supported by federal funding but its public operational funding was cut in 1997. This world heritage site draws interest from local, national and international tourists but now depends almost entirely on the income generated from its gift shop and facility rentals to keep its doors open.

#### **4 Relevance of research**

This research contributes to an emerging and growing body of critical work on the subject of First Nations art. Mainstream North American society is responding to the exciting and flourishing areas of cultural expression in First Nations societies, which has been described as a renaissance (McFadden and Taubman 2005: 15), by actively engaging with it. In the past, First Nations art had been either ignored and/or curated outside of the Aboriginal understanding of aesthetics and creative expression. It is critically important that this subject of study be expanded and continuously revised as it provides an intellectual basis from which curators, academics, collectors and the general public can interpret and critically assess this artwork and the body of knowledge accumulated on it so far.

Lee Ann Martin's report, *The Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion: Contemporary Native Art and Public Art Museums in Canada* (1991) was conducted fifteen years ago and explored First Nations art in art museums in many major urban centers across Canada. Before this work there existed no current or historic examination of this issue in northern British Columbia which is the home of numerous rich cultural areas with many First Nations artists who may or may not interact with the museums and art galleries in their region or in the larger urban centers to the south. In addition to examining issues around the

exclusion of First Nations artists and art in art galleries and museums in the north, this study will bring to light continuing colonialist ideas and systems which may work against current attempts to initiate and strengthen relationships between First Nation peoples and mainstream Canadian society.

The vast and rich material that is commonly referred to as Native or Aboriginal art is an incredible source of pride and power to First Nations people for multiple reasons. It is the physical embodiment of the living and adapting cultures which have survived colonialist attempts to eradicate them. As well, there can be a spiritual aspect to works of art by First Nations artists that communicate ideas, beliefs and symbolism providing the people with inner strength and vitality. Many First Nations visual artists, such as Rebecca Belmore, Shelley Niro, Carl Beam, Art Wilson, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Jane Ash Poitras, Joane Cardinal-Schubert, Bob Boyer, Rick Rivet, Gerald McMaster, Jeanette Armstrong, etc., are cultural and social activists who are critical of the colonialist Canadian history and of the status quo. They communicate their ideas and ways of being through their artwork, their voice and their writing.

This European ethos – your utilitarian, imperious, imperialistic power and your capitalistic value of authoritarianism – have created a toxicological disaster and destroyed First Nations’ ancestral sacred lands in fewer than five hundred years. (Yuxweluptun 1992: 158)

Whole generations turned to drugs and alcohol to anaesthetize their inner rage, sometimes two and three generations old. But there were survivors as there have always been. These people hung on to the fragments of culture they had managed to preserve; they began to work together to piece their cultures together and to celebrate their wholeness. (Cardinal-Schubert 1992: 132)

The Red Man and the White Man – the two represent a power struggle. The equation that is presented by the notion of ‘cowboy and Indian’ you can see faintly at the top – ‘cowboy’ does not equal ‘Indian.’ I painted over it. It’s barely discernible. Whether it’s in the language, whether it’s in the notion of how we see land, the Native person has never really had the choice of calling the shots. It’s been

the government. (McMaster 1999: 263)

This research will create an opportunity for the increased understanding and recognition of the ideas and systems which prevent or lessen opportunities for First Nations artists and art, and thus the important knowledge, ideas and beliefs of the Aboriginal people, to be included within the Canadian social and cultural mainstream. It is undertaken with the hope of using that revelation to change the representation of First Nations art in northern BC.

## **5 Research design, methodology and theoretical framework**

Finally, Sonkwaiatison, we ask that you give us all the courage, the strength and the wisdom to use the power of the good mind in all we do. Help us speak clearly and honestly so that we may understand one another, how we feel and why. Help us to listen carefully to what others say and not to react in anger when negative things are said. Help us to understand that even painful words contain teachings and that we must sometimes look hard and listen carefully to find them. And so it is, Sonkwaiatison, that we have reflected on our place within the Circle of Life and on our responsibilities to all of Creation. Life continues, and we are grateful for what we have. So be it in our minds.<sup>6</sup> (INAC 1996: 8-9)

It is important to me in this work to be an effective researcher and to represent the voices of First Nations artists as well as the curators of art galleries and museums in northern BC in an effort to understand and explore the relationship between them. It is my hope that this thesis shows that we can and should talk to one another and that each group can inform and be informed by one another. I arranged to meet all of the participants face to face, on their own terms, and I placed myself in the privileged position of learning as they assumed the role of teachers. I sat with each of them as we had coffee or tea and I listened to their stories as they revealed who they are, what they do and what they want.

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<sup>6</sup> This is the final paragraph of *A Thanksgiving Address* written by Kanatiio (Allen Gabriel), Kanesatakeronnon (Kanesatake Mohawk, Bear Clan) which opened the Report of the Royal Commission On Aboriginal Peoples (1996) and was spoken many times at the Commission and from time immemorial among the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois people).



Throughout this work I attempted to “use the power of the good mind” to recount what I have heard, researched and understand.

I realized this research was going to be challenging as I intended to ask people to discuss areas of their lives which are intertwined with a history of colonialism. I also knew people would be guarded on this topic as it is fraught with highly charged emotion as well as political, social and economic consequences, but it is important for us to talk to each other about our confusion and our pain. Sarris points out that silence can be a weapon where a person can cut oneself off or be cut off (1993: 81). I want to believe that the relationships between First Nations and non-First Nations are important to everyone and that they care about recognizing and respecting the common humanity of all people. Strong, respectful and continuous relationships will require that we “look hard and listen carefully” to what each of us have to say.

The research I have undertaken for this thesis is built upon a phenomenological and indigenous foundation of inquiry. Working within these frameworks I began by attempting to set aside the preconceptions I have accumulated about cross-cultural relationships between First Nations and non-First Nations and art gallery and museum practice so that I might best comprehend the experiences of the artists and curators as they have voiced them. Sarris notes, “...in understanding another person and culture you must simultaneously understand yourself. The process is ongoing, an endeavor aimed not at a final transparent understanding of the Other or of the self, but at continued communication, at an ever-widening understanding of both” (1993: 6). As I have worked through this thesis I periodically reviewed the notes where I have explored my thoughts since I began this journey.

The teachings of indigenous theory are not comprehensive nor are they complete because of the colonialist strategies of oppression and subjugation. Until recently indigenous wisdom existed primarily in oral form and was not widely or easily accessible. Literary forms are currently becoming more and more available as First Nations scholars and writers express their ideas and traditional wisdom and knowledge including *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999) by Linda Tuhiwai Smith. This is a popular book used by many academic scholars and I have also found it a useful guide through my research as I searched for an appropriate and sensitive research methodology. In addition, I have accessed other sources of Indigenous methodology from a variety of places including the *Thanksgiving Address*, quoted above, which opened the *Report of the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples* (1996) and Greg Sarris' book, *Keeping Slug Woman Alive* (1993). Caring and respect are central to practicing research in the field of First Nations Studies as we wield power through this action. We also have to be aware that researchers in the past have abused that power and they have contributed to the erosion and stripping of First Nations people's humanity

For the interviews I created a set of open-ended questions which were used as a guideline to provoke the research participant's thoughts on the phenomenon of the relationship between First Nations artists and art galleries and museums.<sup>7</sup> To begin the interviews I asked each person to tell me about themselves and their work to establish some level of comfort for the interview session and then I began to introduce the questions. I would regularly make a positive or encouraging comment or I provided information when requested during the formal portion of the interview. I generally resisted being drawn into a conversation or debate as I did not want to influence the outcome of what the participant

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix 1 for the Research Questions.

expressed. Listening carefully to what is being said is an important component to the First Nations oral tradition and I practiced this by allowing participants the time they needed to express their thoughts and I occasionally asked additional questions to clarify what was being said. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and returned to the research participants for additional feedback.

As my topic is on First Nations art I originally thought I should focus my research on art galleries only. However, the political, economic and social realities in northern communities do not allow for the clear delineation between art gallery and museum mandates to occur as is found in larger urban centers. The history of each community is unique and so is the development of their cultural institutions. For example, in Prince Rupert, the Museum of Northern British Columbia encompasses a multitude of museological jurisdictions including contemporary First Nations art, pre-contact history, post-contact history and natural history. For this reason I have included both art galleries and museums in the research I conducted.

To supplement and deepen my understanding of activities at the art galleries and museums I compiled additional information from a variety of sources. From each art gallery and museum I requested additional promotional materials for curatorial programming for the past five years. Art galleries and museums generate supplemental income through a membership program which they sell to the general public. They draw on this pool of members for their board of directors who make key decisions in the general operations of the facility. To keep their membership and the general public informed of their activities, art galleries and museums create promotional materials generally in the form of newsletters, information sheets, and/or annual general reports. Where this material was

not made available, I reviewed the local newspaper for any advertising or promotion of their curatorial programming. In addition, I surveyed all the information made available on the art gallery and museum internet sites. I also toured each facility, observing and compiling notes on the exhibitions; the permanent art installations in, on or around the buildings; the architecture and the gift shops.

Secondary research was comprised of academic literature on representation of contemporary First Nations art (Jessup and Bagg eds. 2002, Rushing ed. 1999, McLoughlin 1999, Phillips and Steiner eds. 1999), art history (Hawker 2003, Price 1989), curatorship (Turner and Davis eds. 1995, Martin 2004a, Thomas 2002) and museology (Sandell ed. 2002, Clavir 2002, Anderson ed. 2004, Weil 1990). Information was also compiled from the popular media (newspapers, magazines) and the internet. In addition, I made a special request from the Canada Council for the Arts for a copy of their report, *The Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion: Contemporary Native Art an Public Museums in Canada* (1991), by Lee Ann Martin which was not yet published. Martin has since written articles, *First Nations Activism Through the Arts* (1995) and *An/Other One: Aboriginal Art, Curators, and Art Museums* (2002) on the subject which are included in published compilations on curatorial issues. As I previously indicated, First Nations art is an area of discourse that is currently experiencing increasing interest and popularity. However, continuous critical, cross-cultural studies, especially researched and written by First Nations academics, on aesthetics and museum practice and policy, are scarce.

Postcolonial (Adams 1995, Battiste 2000a, Hall and Tucker 2004, Laliberte, et al, 2000, Michaels 1994), postmodern (Cresswell 1998, Jessup ed. 2001, Walsh 1992) and feminist (Anderson 2000, Cresswell 1998, Green, ed. 2006) theories are primary ideological

frameworks which I drew upon during the course of this thesis research. These doctrines provide conceptual tools with which to critically evaluate and understand the cross-cultural relationship between First Nations artists and art galleries and museums in northern BC. They offer paths with which to find alternate ways of thinking about and transforming the status quo.

It has been argued that colonization “is very much alive and well” despite the demise of previous imperialist control of the colonies around the world before the end of World War II (Adams 2000: 155). Aboriginal academic Howard Adams notes that since 1945 “No transformation was made in the structures and policies of traditional imperialism. The indigenous people continued to be equally repressed, exploited and impoverished by the same old imperial institutions” (2000: 155). Even though there is an awareness of this current state of affairs it does not mean that there have been or will be any changes to the imperialist system (Smith 2000: 215). What does this mean to the state of contemporary First Nations art? The position of First Nations art within the contemporary art discourse over the past century or more has been contentious and precarious and the position of its borders has wavered. More recently these borders seem to have begun to crumble as we have begun to see more First Nations curators working in art galleries and museums and First Nations art installed in these places, as well as in other prominent public spaces such as the Vancouver Airport. However, the progress of inclusion has been intermittent and slow. As well, many First Nations groups are exploring the idea and/or building their own cultural centers with cultural displays in gallery facilities. It remains to be seen whether cultural institutions controlled by non-First Nations are fully committed to decolonization and the equal representation of culture.

Postmodern thought critically intersects with modernism, the intellectual paradigm that dominated most of the twentieth century in the Western world. Modernism has its roots in The Enlightenment from the seventeenth century and advanced the use of *reason* for scientists and philosophers to reveal the objective truth about the universe. Further, it involves a belief that human beings have the power to shape their physical reality in a way that is progressive and optimistic (Kvale 1996: 41). Postmodern writer Eric Michaels notes the unstable Western authority over aesthetics as a statement of order out of chaos. He argues that Aboriginal art is “art to be judged first and foremost in terms of the social practices that produce and circulate them – practices that promote issues of authority, not authenticity” (1994: 161).

The postmodern paradigm provides a critical discourse of modernist theory and the colonialist structure which thrives within it. It is important to realize that while changes have been proposed and in some cases implemented in various Canadian social systems, such as in education, law and economics, it can be argued that these changes do not represent a serious and profound commitment towards decolonization. Postmodern thought can assist with the deconstruction of ingrained and hidden ideologies and practices. However, postmodernism is significantly a Western epistemological construct and thus still confined within Western understanding and knowledge of the world rather than in social practice. It is important to be vigilant and open to new ideas that can allow different perspectives to contribute to a future postcolonial world which indigenous theory begins to make possible.

Of the five artists I interviewed, two were women and I was interested in what issues they would raise about their artwork and their inclusion in the larger contemporary art

discourse in Canada. Feminist inquiry can explore the roles and position of female artists as they are represented in the past and present art discourse. However, it is important to note that Aboriginal Feminism is a new discourse and is not widespread among individual women (Green 2000: 332). Certain forms of expression, such as beading and weaving, may be implemented almost exclusively by women. Unfortunately these art forms have been trivialized as craft and excluded under the modern Western art paradigm surrounding ideas of high art while, historically, the forms of painting and sculpture, which are seemingly dominated by male artists, have been exalted (Siernacheski 2005: 9). An exploration of these gender differences as they are represented in the northern British Columbia art galleries and museums was also conducted through the interview process.

## **6 Art?**

I believe I possess creative and skillful talents that allow me to pursue the activity of artmaking. I have an ability to make beautiful, unique things whether it's a drawing, a brochure or a knitted sweater. What makes it art though? I don't exactly know! There are numerous considerations I dwell on when I create art including the materials I use, the technical skill with which I construct the work, the meaning of the work (both to myself and others), and the beauty I'm able to infuse into it. Other artists have different and/or additional factors they consider and prioritize.

Gitxsan artist and curator Doreen Jensen argues that art has the potential to build connections between people and the natural world. It can mediate between our concrete existence and the spiritual world. As well, it can spark our creative individuality causing us to have a deeper awareness and interest in the world around us (1992: 18). Tom Henigan

points out that “the arts express something in us that is uniquely human, global and meaningful” (1997, internet source).

Although art is a topic of academic study it is not an easy term to define by those working within the discipline. It has often been pointed out that there are many First Nations cultures which do not have a word for it in their language (Friesen & Friesen 2006: 1). Artist and curator Doreen Jenson states, “In my language there is no word for ‘Art’. This is not because we are devoid of Art, but because Art it is so powerfully integrated with all aspects of life, we are replete with it” (1992: 17). Some academics do not accept that there is meaning or understanding of objects as “art” if there is no word for it in the language (Jones 1993: 207). Within the Western intellectual paradigm “the category of ‘Art’ privileged those objects that were farthest removed from the tool-like or the utilitarian, following the Kantian premise that functionality constrains the artist’s freedom to reach the highest and purest forms of intellectual and aesthetic expression” (Phillips 2002: 46). Evelyn Hatcher explains, “Confusion here lies in the fact that art is not a phenomenon but a concept. Being a concept it has no objective referent, and so one cannot say what it is or is not, but only what the user means by the term” (1985: 8). Therefore, art historian Ernst Gombrich notes, “There really is no such thing as art. There are only artists” (1951: 5). Academics continue to grapple with the definition of art and a universal system of aesthetics but “the only premise upon which art historians and cultural specialists agree is that no one aesthetic canon can be the standard for all other works of art” (Danford 1989: 6).

In addition, the uncomfortable position of art in Western thought is made more complex by the language of taxonomic systems which is applied to it. Meaning and value are assigned to certain objects while kept from others (Myers 1995: 15) and these can be



rigidly maintained especially within the Art History discipline (Jessup 2001: 4). Members from different cultures will often not agree on a singular aesthetic referent of the same object. For example, an aspect of the aesthetic experience that, in the past, has often been ignored, misunderstood and/or avoided by Western academics is the spirituality instilled in First Nations art (Friesen & Friesen 2006: 4). However, there is a growing consciousness within academic circles of the complexities of the “issues of power and difference, to the relation of representation to social contexts, and to the formative role of institutions in the field of cultural production” (Jessup 2001: 5).

Sally Price examines the problem of Western perceptions and ideas of non-Western art. She is critical of modernist thought as it has shaped a Western aesthetic sensibility that creates situations of exclusion, appropriation and misrepresentation of non-Western art. Recently, a revisionist art history has begun to break with the traditional study of art as isolated from its social and cultural context (1989: 125). The term has broadened significantly to be more cross-culturally inclusive. The previously primary focus on painting and sculpture now includes textiles, body painting, happenings and much more (Hatcher 1985: 8). Price has noted that First Nations art is finding some acceptance in the contemporary art discourse but she is critical of the continuing exclusion of the aesthetic sensibilities that created them (1989: 126). There still exists the need for Westerners, "to follow through on our newly invigorated appreciation of "exotic" art by acknowledging the cultural diversity, intellectual vitality, and aesthetic integrity of its creators" (Price 1989: 126).

Barbara Milmine asserts that “Art allows the artist to give voice to their own stories, together with their unique interpretations and meanings” (2006: 113). Some artists allow

their creativity and intellect to flow freely and their work will often exert pressure on the boundaries of tradition and the status quo. I believe art can influence positive social and cultural change and it is important for this work to be given a stage from which it can communicate.

## **7 Museums?**

It is important for this thesis work to develop an understanding of the function of museums and the historical and contemporary issues which museum professionals wrestle with intellectually. Museums in Western society are structures which contain, preserve and transmit cultural heritage (Weil 1990: 23). Museums garner respect and pride from community members and from those individuals who work within them (Weil 1990: xviii). Margaret Dubin notes that “The authority of the museum is so great that few have dared to quarrel with it, at least until recent years...” (Dubin 2001: 83). However, critics now argue that museums are not relevant or meaningful to large sections of their communities and they continue to struggle with the problem of defining their role. “[...]our museums and art galleries seem not to know who or what they are” (Cameron 2004: 61). According to Stephen Weil, museums struggle as some have sacrificed their connections and relationships to the people in their communities because they are intent on an inward focus. He argues that museums need to have “a sense of community service” if they are to continue to exist (Weil 1990: 23).

Across Canada, as well as northern British Columbia, there are different types of museums with different mandates. The large galleries, which Lee-Ann Martin’s report (1991) examined, are situated in metropolitan centers, such as Vancouver, Victoria,

Ottawa and Toronto, and often have access to a broader economic resource pool including federal funding through the Canada Council for the Arts and private and corporate donors. As well, galleries and museums in these cities may be specialized with specific collecting and programming mandates such as the Canadian Craft Museum in Vancouver or the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa, whereas small art galleries and museums, such as the ones in northern British Columbia, generally have broader collecting and programming mandates which usually cover the region in which they are located.

Art galleries and museums are important social and cultural structures as they play an influential role in the development of contemporary art.

Serious collecting and writing establish critical frameworks and encourage dynamic discourses within which artists and the larger art community can develop. In addition, art museums provide for the visual exploration and reinforcement of individual and collective identities within regional, national and international contexts. (Martin 1996, 19)

Museum employees, as well as community individuals and/or groups, need to be aware of the power of voice and the ease with which museums can be used as ideological tools. While those individuals involved in museum practice have attempted to claim an unbiased, objective stance in their work, this state of being is no longer considered a possibility within current Western thought. From a postcolonial perspective much of museum practice is problematic including the classification and analysis of objects which can be perceived as acts of domination. As Weil has noted, represented within the works of art is the wealth, knowledge, power and aesthetic taste of what can possibly be assumed to be mainstream society by an inattentive observer (1990: 51). Duncan Cameron noted the creation of “great art museums that reflected the heritage of bourgeois

and aristocratic culture to the exclusion of popular or folk culture” (2004: 66). Museums have the ability to influence thought and beliefs and they, therefore, must continually reflect, experiment and dialogue to prevent the misuse and corruption of this power.

Museums have the potential to be sites of ‘fierce struggle and impassioned debate’ often centered around questions of who constitutes the community and who exercises the power to define its identity. For postcolonial museums, this process involves the unmasking and inversion of power relations. (Smith 2005, 435)

During the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century artwork by First Nations artists became increasingly visible and recognized in Western forums for its intellectual and aesthetic value through exhibitions in powerful venues such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Berlo 1992: 13). Since 1950, British Columbia First Nations artists have found creative and financial support through the patronage of the museums of British Columbia, particularly from the Royal British Columbia Museum, the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology and the Vancouver Museum (Ames 1992: 63).

In Canada the relationship between museums and First Nations came under intense public scrutiny during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Glenbow Museum organized the exhibit *The Spirit Sings* in conjunction with the 1988 Calgary Olympics which was intensely criticized and boycotted by the Lubicon Lake Cree of northern Alberta. Moira McLoughlin noted that the cultural material in that display communicated, “painful silences; powerful absences. They were not asked to speak of the disruption and extinction, the change or the loss that was evident on their return” (1993: 1). Anthropologist Nancy Marie Mithlo states:

...because museums as we know them are essentially white European inventions designed to serve the interests of mainstream or non-Aboriginal segments of

society ...the value of that environment is not self-evident to most First Peoples, nor is the museum's internal organizational culture entirely compatible with Aboriginal sentiments. (Mithlo 2004: 758)

These issues, as well as the return of previously stolen or seized cultural objects to their original communities, have initiated museum projects within First Nations' communities such as the Kwagiulth Museum and Cultural Centre on Quadra Island and the 'Ksan Historical Village and Museum in Hazelton'<sup>8</sup>. The traditional role of museums as shrines of the past and depots for cultural objects for the enjoyment of the Western gaze is currently changing as First Nations develop their own museum ideologies and education programs. At the newly opened National Museum of the American Indian<sup>9</sup> in Washington, DC "installations were underpinned by five principles: community: our tribes are sovereign nations; locality: this is Indian land; vitality: we are here now; viewpoint: we know the world differently; voice: these are our stories" (Smith 2005, 426). James Clifford notes the difference between mainstream museums which "articulate cosmopolitan culture, science, art, and humanism – often with a national slant" and tribal museums which "express local culture, oppositional politics, kinship, ethnicity and tradition" (1991: 225).

## **8 Literature review**

In preparation for the interviewing process I read a number of relevant works. Lee-Ann Martin's report, *The Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion: Contemporary Native Art and Public Art Museums in Canada*, (1991) which was submitted to the Canada Council of the Arts. The study addressed the timely and relevant question, "What is the status and nature

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<sup>8</sup> These museums are often called Native-owned museums or tribal museums (McLoughlin 1999: 240).

<sup>9</sup> The National Museum of the American Indian was originally established in 1989 with the new facility opening in the National Mall in September, 2004. This museum is responsible for the management and interpretation of the world's largest collection of First Nations material culture (Smith 2005: 426).

of contemporary fine arts in public art institutions in Canada?" (1). This exploration deepened a greater understanding of the issues of inclusion and exclusion of contemporary First Nations arts. In British Columbia, museums participating in this study included the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria and the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology. No art galleries or museums in northern British Columbia participated in this study. The criteria for deciding participation in this study considered only those cultural institutions receiving funding from the Canada Council of the Arts under the *Programming Assistance to Public Art Museums and Galleries*. Public funding to museums also comes from various other sources and in various combinations including provincial, regional district and municipal sources. Martin's study's parameters restricted her to an exploration of larger galleries in other Canadian metropolises.

Martin observed that only a few cultural institutions showed minimal interest in collecting, exhibiting and documenting First Nations art (1991: 30-31). She notes that one of the reasons for this response by a few mainstream cultural institutions is their reluctance to accept the strong political content and racism addressed in many artworks by Aboriginal artists. Martin advocates a critical process of determining motives and attitudes which expose strategies of marginalization (1991: 31). In addition, she encourages institutions to develop closer relationships with local and regional First Nations communities, accountability and affirmative action (1991: 32). Martin identifies a process of "soft" inclusion which refers to a strategy of accepting works in group exhibitions where the First Nations artist is one of many artists exhibiting in one show or small solo exhibitions both of which are usually produced without an accompanying publication. She noted that as of 1990 there had not been a major solo exhibition by a solo Aboriginal artist in a major

cultural institution in Canada (1991: 25). Martin's 1991 study provides valid, if now dated, information about the serious problems that have affected First Nation artists and peoples within an important aspect of Canadian society. In 2003, in a brief email exchange with me, Martin stated that the 1991 "report is very dated today, and that there has been much activity since that time, supported primarily through the Canada Council."

Compared to the prolific writing on museums and art galleries from Western perspectives there exist few publications which provide First Nation's ideas and perspectives. Lee-Ann Martin is one of a very few First Nations curators in Canada who contributes regularly in various publications to the art discourse. In her article, *First Nations Activism through the Arts* (1995), Martin explores the history of the grassroots work done to change the Canadian arts political and cultural realms. During the last half of the twentieth century Native artists created organizations to address funding, networking and exclusionary issues. One major concern repeatedly addressed in meetings across the country was the "lack of recognition of Indian art in cultural institutions" (Martin 1995: 81). Since 1983, Canadian Aboriginal artists have persistently worked to change policies and mainstream ideas which have incorporated systemic racism and cultural arrogance in an effort to gain recognition and representation for aboriginal artists within Canadian galleries, museums and funding agencies (Martin 1995: 81-82). The efforts to make these changes have been done with the belief that contemporary First Nations art is an integral aspect in the revival and development of Aboriginal cultures and can contribute to the self-identification and self-actualization as Aboriginal people place themselves within the world's social, political and economic realms (Martin 1995: 84).

An additional study exploring the problem of exclusion is Maurice Berger's article

*Are Art Museums Racist?* (1990) in which he studied the prevalence of African-American artists in art museums in the United States. He noted that it is white people who hold the power in the art world. Berger further points out that a study done in New York in the 1980s revealed that First Nations and other non-white artists were systematically excluded with a few exceptions (70).

It is startling to me, however, that in a nation that has seen at least some effort made by white people to share mainstream cultural venues (and the concomitant social and economic rewards) with African-Americans and other people of colour - most notably in the areas of popular music, dance, literature and theatre - the visual arts remain, for the most part, stubbornly resistant. (Berger 1990: 70)

The art gallery in Western society is often perceived as an elitist structure patronized by the affluent sector of society. Berger criticizes art museums for maintaining and protecting the agendas of this small group of people. By practicing strategies of exclusion and "lip service" to the idea of cultural inclusion curators have kept the art world closed. Museum curators, administrators and patrons generally ignore artwork that is different from the mainstream concept of art or that challenges Western values and ideas.

Intense discussion fueled by controversy has occurred over the past twenty years in Canada and the United States and fears have been expressed by many people about art galleries and museums continuing to conduct their usual business without knowledge about and concern for the consequences of their work on individuals, on groups of people and on social structures. No longer can museums be simply defined as repositories for cultural and/or historical objects as the critical deconstruction of established paradigms raises questions about the process and purpose of assigning value to these objects (Handler and Gable 1997: 8). In addition, the inclusion and/or exclusion of individuals or groups of people have further consequences that stretch well beyond local social structures.



One of the few publications that currently exists which studies First Nations artists and art as it is represented in public institutions is *On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery* (2002), edited by Lynda Jessup with Shannon Bagg. It explores the controversial precedence that has been set by curators in the presentation and acquisition of artworks by Aboriginal artists. The contributors of this book critically deconstruct Western knowledge and thinking, working to redefine mainstream ideologies of art including ideas surrounding such terms as, "primitive" art, "traditional" art, artifact and craft. This publication comprehensively covers contemporary issues from different perspectives and provides a historical overview that defines museum and academic approaches to the study of Aboriginal artwork.

Vastly different perspectives exist between First Nations and mainstream Western society regarding the purpose and value of museums. A significant function of the museum is to collect and care for material culture while museum staff work diligently to ensure the physical integrity and preservation of the collection for future generations. This is an area of contention as museum professionals believe that an understanding of history and culture can be "read" through the preservation of physical evidence. In contrast, many First Nations perceive preservation as a complex web incorporating vital aspects of culture such as traditions, oral history, community and identity. "Preservation is about people, and objects have their role in cultural preservation" (Clavir 2002: xvii).

In the recent past, very few First Nations people have worked in positions of power in the Canadian public art gallery system. It wasn't until 1998 that Lee-Ann Martin, an aboriginal curator, was appointed the first head curator of a public art gallery in Canada. As a result, Western aesthetics dominates the public realm of curatorship and academics. In

Western cultures the philosophical study of aesthetics, "tend to be more abstract in nature" (Leuthold 1998: ix). Very little research and writing has been done in the area of First Nations aesthetics and its central role in Indigenous cultures (Leuthold 1998: 1). The placement of more First Nations people in curatorial roles in art galleries and museums would address the problem of Western focused research and discourse.

Two very important exhibitions which took place in the most prominent museums in Canada early in the last decade were *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada* (Nemiroff, Houle and Townsend-Gault 1992) and *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives* (McMaster and Martin 1992) at the Museum of Civilization. These exhibitions occurred at almost the same time and very near each other and assumed the responsibility and challenge of representing First Nations artists within a contemporary Canadian art context. The accompanying exhibition catalogues contribute to a revisionist history which challenges the dominating Western art history discourse. *Land, Spirit, Power* was organized by three curators, Diana Nemiroff, Robert Houle and Charlotte Townsend-Gault and of the three only one, Robert Houle (Saulteaux), is First Nations. In contrast *Indigena* was curated by Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin, both of whom are of Aboriginal descent. Some striking differences exist when comparing the exhibition catalogues which accompanied their respective exhibitions. While the artist's voices are represented in *Land, Spirit, Power* they are obviously secondary to the essays by the three curators. These essays are prominently placed in the first half of the book and are substantial as they make up almost half of the publication. In contrast, the *Indigena* publication contains the voices of multiple people beginning with the former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, Georges Erasmus. It is made clear in this publication that

the exhibition and accompanying publication is inspired by his words which were actually from a speech he gave at a conference in Ottawa called "Towards 1992." That year was to be particularly significant to many North Americans to commemorate the achievements accomplished over the past 500 years, however, Erasmus' words allowed those who attended that gathering to begin to envision and understand an alternate history. *Indigena* follows through with those words and begins to present a revisionist history, one in which First Nations' experiences, understandings and ideas are represented.

First Nations female artists may have even fewer opportunities, compared to their male counterparts, to participate and contribute towards the Western artistic aesthetic. *Great Works: An Overview of Contemporary British Columbia Artists* (Gold 1996) features forty-five artists and four of these are First Nations men: Dempsey Bob (Tahltan/Tlingit), Robert Davidson (Haida), John Livingston (adopted Kwagu't, Kwakwaka'wakw) and Bill Reid (Haida). Only one artist in that publication is a First Nations woman, Susan Point (Coast Salish), with a wood carving as an example of her work. Woodcarving is frequently perceived by many people as a male activity. In contrast, the publication *Topographies: Aspects of Recent B.C. Art* (Arnold, Gagnon and Jensen 1996), an exhibition catalogue published by the Vancouver Art Gallery, lists forty-one artists including eight First Nations women. Interestingly, of the three curators of that exhibition, Doreen Jensen is a First Nations woman and artist. It appears that her interest, experience and knowledge were fully utilized in the gathering of information and participants for that exhibition and publication. However, Anne Newlands' compilation of *Canadian Art: From its Beginnings to 2000* (2000) recognizes "that definitions of art have changed and evolved over the years. Art has meant different things to different people and always will" (2000: 13). Of the 300 artists

included in that historical overview of Canadian art many are First Nations and Inuit artists including a number of women such as Joane Cardinal-Schubert, Rebecca Belmore, Pitseolak Ashoona, Kenojuak Ashevak, Faye Heavyshield, Helen Kalvak, Janet Kigusiuq, Daphne Odjig, Jessie Oonark, Jane Ash Poitras, Napachie Pootoogook, Shanawdithit, Marion Tuu'luuq, etc. As well, that book contains images of beaded, woven, carved and sewn works of art originating from numerous First Nations artists, generally unknown, from a variety of cultures including the Cree, Gwich'in, Haida, Mi'kmaq, Naskapi (Innu), Nuuchah-Nulth, Plains, Tsimshian, etc. That publication demonstrates a more culturally inclusive understanding of history and aesthetics which is generally not reflected in other Canadian art history books.

The Thunder Bay Art Gallery publishes at intervals a compilation of their permanent collection titled, *Thunder Bay Art Gallery: Permanent Collection* (1996). This art gallery focuses on the work of contemporary First Nations artists and its collection contains works by both men and women in a range of mediums. William Hill identifies, within the modern art paradigm, the classification of art works as craft, which carries the Western stigma of being 'women's work' (1996: 11). Current social issues in Canada include women's struggle for equality and many women are further discriminated against because of race. Film director Loretta Todd has worked with First Nations artists and notes women have had to cope with varying degrees of discrimination in a society that has neglected their cultural heritage. Further work must be done by First Nations peoples to continue the critique of contemporary art and dispel Western modernist notions which continue to exclude First Nations ideas and peoples.

## **9 Organization of thesis**

Having presented the literature on First Nations art and art museums, chapter two of this thesis moves on to include the words and opinions of First Nations artists as well as employees, mostly curatorial staff, of the art galleries and museums who agreed to be interviewed for this research. The following chapter was constructed after extensive review and reduction of the interview data. I focus on the main themes as they were revealed from the interview material. Some ideas and thoughts are repeated from one person to another so as to not give any one individual any greater intellectual weight over another. In chapter three, the final chapter of this thesis, I present a general discussion about First Nations Art, First Nations artists and the relationship between them and art galleries and museums as it is revealed within the northern British Columbia context.

## **Chapter Two: First Nations Artists and Art Galleries and Museums of Northern British Columbia**

### **1 First Nations artists of northern British Columbia**

Northern British Columbia is home to a number of Aboriginal artists from many different cultures and I was honoured to have the opportunity to meet and talk to the five creative individuals who agreed to participate in this project. The common thread that connects them all is their commitment to their art and culture and their willingness to share these passions with others. This is profoundly expressed in the time and effort they have made to educate others about their cultural knowledge, their technical skills and their creativity. Each artist enthusiastically took the time to teach me about their work and the relationships they've developed over their professional and personal lives. The artists I interviewed for this thesis were Peter George and Angelique Levac in Prince George; Ya'Ya Chuck Heit in Kispiox; Rena Bolton in Terrace and Garry Oker in Fort St. John.

#### **1.1 Peter George**

The first artist I interviewed for this project was in my hometown Prince George. I met with Peter George (Wet'suwet'en), a long time resident of the city, whom I had known professionally for many years (since I first began working at the Prince George Art/Two Rivers Gallery in 1993). Peter occasionally participated in public exhibitions at the art gallery and had generously volunteered to sit on committees where the gallery required First Nations expertise and knowledge. For example, he participated in and advised

Figure 1



Peter George *Spirit of the Ancestors'* (Kermode Spirit Bears in the City)

on projects such as the *What is Dakelh Art?* (1996) exhibition and the *Millennium Unity Pole* project (2000) which involved the development of a monumental work of art by First Nations artists. He was one of the artists working on the *Millennium Unity Pole* as a carver under the direction of Master Carver Ron Sebastien (Gitxsan).

Peter is originally from the Moricetown/Hazelton area but he has lived and worked in Prince George with his family for many years. He attended residential school for most of his education and he completed his grade 12 at the Prince George Secondary

School. Peter has worked in a variety of fields including construction, the correctional service as a jail guard and then in education. Until recently he worked for School District #57 in the Native Art and Culture program which he developed and implemented.

Before I got there, there was no program at all, so I had to work on creating one and implementing it and then aiding in its growth. Started off with intermediate kids and elementary schools and then I widened it out to primary students and then I went to high schools... (George, personal interview, Feb. 2007: 2)

He currently works for the College of New Caledonia teaching the First Nations Art, Design and Technology course. In addition, he has worked on many public art projects such as the *Kermode Spirit Bears in the City* and the *Millennium Unity Pole* project at the Two Rivers Gallery. Peter describes his artistic style as northwest coast Native art and he expresses his ideas, traditions and creativity in the carvings, drawings, prints and drums he produces.

As Peter spoke during our interview he often expressed his frustration, disappointment and anger at the levels of unfairness, misunderstandings and intolerance he has experienced throughout many Western public and private organizations, including art galleries and museums. Unfortunately his experiences as an artist have not been entirely positive but he persists in this profession as he regularly finds ways to get his work into the public realm.

Peter initiated contact with the Prince George Art/Two Rivers Gallery when he first started to attempt to generate revenue from his creative work.

I approached them when I started doing artwork and the carving and I went there to see if they wanted to sell any of my artwork. I was actually shocked at how much they get paid. Like the wholesaling, checking around with a lot of the art galleries and museums. It's like a 60-40 split for some of them. They get 60, we get 40 and then there's no control over how much they get to ask for the price of it. So, a few of the places I've gone to who have sold my artwork they've actually



doubled the resale price on it since I had sold it wholesale. (George, personal interview, Feb. 2007: 5)

Another system of selling products that gift shops may practice is consignment where there is an understanding between the artist and the retail business that payment will be made once the artwork is sold.<sup>10</sup> However, this can be a financial strain on the artist who has to wait until the artwork sells and then wait for the administering of the payment.

Consignment doesn't do a lot of good either cause basically what you're doing is making somebody else a whole lot of money and they don't put anything into it. Meanwhile you've put the designing of the picture, time to carve or paint or create this piece of work and then... they're making 50 to 100 percent or sometimes 200 percent on your, all your work and they don't have to pay you a cent for it, and you've got to wait. And when they do sell it you've got to wait a month or two before a check gets here for you. Same way at the art galleries too. You've got to wait for the next board meeting. Na yeah, gets to be frustrating at times[...]  
(George, personal interview, Feb. 2007: 6)

Western ideas and perceptions have serious ramifications affecting the prevalence of First Nations art and artists in Prince George. Community organizations, including art galleries and museums, will often turn to local artists for donations of artwork for their fundraising events. This expectation of artists to give to their community can go beyond their artwork. In our society there seems to be a perception of a communal ownership of creative talent and that it should be given over freely or with little cost.

I do a lot of donating. I had to narrow it down to just kids, students and elders. Otherwise I was always, always getting phone calls. Can you donate a print for this raffle or that raffle or fundraising for this or that. Give and give and give.  
(George, personal interview, Feb. 2007: 9)

...when I go to teach too. They want me to do it all for nothing. They all want me to teach drum making for nothing. That happens a lot in the school district here too. They'll pay somebody to come in from Alberta to do a talk on drumming and

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<sup>10</sup> Consignment is advantageous to the retail shops as they don't have to pay the artist up front for their work. Some gift shops operate under limited budgets so this system allows them to bring in more artwork to sell without seriously depleting their resources. Also, if the item doesn't sell it can be returned to the artist without a loss to the business.

singing and they'll pay him \$500 to \$700 or \$1200 a day to come in and do that but when I go in, and I'm local, and I already work for the district they expect me to do it for nothing. (George, personal interview, Feb. 2007: 9)

Few artists can make a living from this profession alone and they often have to have other work on the side. Materials and their time creating works of art are financially very costly to them.

As an artist Peter battles the narrow and stereotypical understandings applied to what he does and he finds it difficult to be accepted as a serious professional. Westerners today have little knowledge or understanding of their colonialist history and the resulting contemporary state of First Nations communities, families and individuals.

They got to change, they got to change the history books too... all of the old archival stuff, it also has that colonial attitude. Superior person writing about lower level cultures I guess. They say we were discovered but I didn't know we were lost. We weren't lost! (George, personal interview, Feb. 2007: 13)

Peter has observed that his work is not accepted within the mainstream contemporary art discourse and instead exists outside of Western understandings of what art is. He explains this as happening, "because it's not as good as the rest of the art. It's been around for thousands of years but it's still not a recognized fine art or anything like that..." (George, personal interview, Feb. 2007: 12). As well, Peter has encountered disturbing attitudes vocalized amongst local merchants dealing with First Nations artists.

A lot of the native artists in the area get labeled because one or two people sell their artwork in the bars. Naturally all natives are selling all their artwork in bars. I still get that attitude. I walked into a few art stores in town here to exhibit or sell artwork and I never met these people before but as soon I walked in the door they said, "Oh no, you people sell all your artwork in the bars. I'm not buying anything from you." They didn't even know who I was. What my name was... (George, personal interview, Feb. 2007: 11)

Working on the *Millennium Unity Pole* project Peter observed that the media plays a large role in building and maintaining stereotypical ideas and attitudes amongst local community members.

When we were doing the totem pole people were coming by and yelling at us about, "We didn't have power saws, we didn't have power tools, axes." Media said, "Oh yeah, hundreds of thousands of dollars are being spent on this project alone. Kids need text books or health issues" or stuff like that. Media coverage put a negative spin on everything. I could have made more money cooking burgers at McDonalds than I did on that totem pole. (George, personal interview, Feb. 2007: 17)

As an educator Peter has observed deficiencies in the Western pedagogy, particularly in First Nations studies, and he finds the situation really discouraging.

They have no idea of the growth potential of the whole thing. They always talk big about aboriginal culture and language and they really like the money and they like to spend it, but as far as implementing any cultural programming... they need to focus more on language and culture. Long time coming. (George, personal interview, Feb. 2007: 15)

He has worked within all levels of education and he doesn't see a commitment by those people who are in power to address the misconceptions and stereotyping currently built into the education programs, as well as a commitment to assisting First Nations rebuild and strengthen their cultures as a result of past government policies committed to their destruction. Peter would also like to see Westerners relent on their Eurocentric attitudes and recognize that people who are educated outside of the Western system are holders of legitimate and authentic knowledge. Elders are a critical link to First Nations' languages and cultures but many of them are unable to access the education system as teachers because they do not hold the credentials normally assigned to so-called qualified teachers. In the past Peter has had to struggle to have knowledge and skills acknowledged so that he could continue teaching.

**Figure 2**



Angelique Merasty Levac

## **1.2 Angelique Merasty Levac**

Angelique Merasty Levac (Cree) is originally from Pukatawagan, Manitoba and in 1983 she moved to Prince George. She opened her own business in downtown Prince George in 1994 where she sells her own and other artists' artwork. The life journey she has traveled illustrates a strong, determined and resourceful woman who is dedicated to the art forms and culture of her people. Angelique is well known for her birch bark biting which she learned twenty-six years ago from Cree elder Angelique Merasty who wanted

to pass her art form on to a willing student.<sup>11</sup> Angelique knew of the art form from her childhood when the women in her family did it as an amusement to pass the time during berry picking. She immediately knew she wanted to learn and feeling a sense of urgency she made the trip to visit the elder.<sup>12</sup> After that Angelique frequently made the journey to visit her teacher and over the years she developed and refined her knowledge and skill of birch bark biting.

I knew Angelique mostly by reputation through the local media and her business, Angelique's Native Art Gallery. I also remember, on at least one or two occasions, when she submitted her artwork into the group exhibition, *Arts Fest* at the Prince George Art/Two Rivers Gallery during the mid-1990s when I was working there. As an artist and a business owner Angelique generally has little involvement with the public art gallery and museum in Prince George. For the past decade she has been very focused on running her business.

Drawing from her own experience Angelique relates how little she knew, as a young adult, of Western economic and cultural systems. Her lack of knowledge of these worlds was compounded by the very little formal education she received as a child. Although she wanted to go to school she didn't have Indian status and she was denied

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<sup>11</sup> One day Angelique went to her local post office in Uranium City, Saskatchewan and picked up a magazine featuring northern articles. She opened it up to an article about a Cree elder whose name was also Angelique Merasty. They weren't related to each other but Angelique couldn't help thinking, "Wow, that could be me, that could be me." (Levac, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 2)

<sup>12</sup> Angelique Levac didn't listen to the discouraging words expressed by her husband who told her she wouldn't be able to learn this and that she would be wasting her time. In the middle of winter she left him and her small children and traveled by plane, bus, taxi and by foot until she reached the frozen shore of Beaver Lake. Unfortunately the elder Angelique lived on an island and Angelique couldn't reach her. She returned to her home and put her wish to learn birch bark biting on hold for awhile, but she went back and with more determination that second time she succeeded in reaching her. (Levac, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 3)

access.<sup>13</sup> She watched enviously as family members and friends went away to school. Angelique states, “I was native and my people didn’t want me on a reserve because I was not status. White people didn’t want me because I wasn’t white” (Levac, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 12). She didn’t learn to speak English until she was fifteen years old and to this day struggles to read and write the language. Her artwork is very important to her as it has brought her into the world of entrepreneurialism and she works hard to create a successful business.

I start framing my own work and selling it for \$25. I started setting up in the malls. I asked if I could set up there and I demonstrated. And this is how I made a name for myself. I did a lot of footwork, a lot of talking. I went around...now at this time I didn’t know much about wholesale and retail. I didn’t know nothing. I learned a lot since owning my own business. And I learned all about art and I’ll tell you why. My birch bark biting. (Levac, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 6)

The average Canadian has no idea of the social and cultural damage to the First Nations people by the colonialist agenda of the past which manifests itself within our physical, mental and emotional well-being. Little understanding and compassion is expressed by Westerners, but instead, there is an expectation to “suck-it-up” and fit into Canadian mainstream society. Angelique notes that a lot of First Nations, including herself, suffer from a lack of self-esteem and confidence in what they do.

At first I was a little bit ashamed of it, you know. I was kind of thinking “What are people going to think that I’m doing this with my teeth.” So I had to kind of go beyond that and kind of say “No, I’m proud of what I can do. It’s different. I really don’t care what anybody thinks and says.” I had remarks like, “Oh, you chew it?” I said, “No, you don’t chew it.” I said “You bite a design into it. There’s a difference between chewing and biting.” (Levac, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 21)

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<sup>13</sup> The Indian Act, passed in 1869 by the Canadian federal government, defined who was an Indian. Under this set of codes First Nations women who married a non-status man lost their Indian status and their children were also denied status. The amendment Bill C-31 reversed this discriminatory law in 1985 and many of us finally received our status, including Angelique Levac (Green 2000: 335).

Once Angelique had become an acknowledged and respected birch bark biting artist she was able to apply additional direction to her career and she entered the Prince George Native Friendship Centre's art school. The program in which Angelique participated took place during the early 1990s at the Prince George Native Friendship Centre. Here she learned the different mediums and styles of traditional and contemporary art. A Carver Training Program was offered in 1996 -1997 and was taught by Phillippe Lafreniere. A fine arts program has not been offered by the Prince George Friendship Center again and in fact, they closed down their Native Art Gallery and Gift Shop this year. Angelique feels respect and appreciation for the Native Friendship Centre and the work they've done for artists like her. She states, "I work with them very closely. Even though we're not connected, but they taught me a lot. They were there for me; they were always there with open arms for me" (Levac, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 8).

Mentoring and education are important components determining success for many artists in northern British Columbia. Angelique was able to acquire access to these from a key institution and her family and friends in Prince George which motivated her to pursue her artistic work. She notes, "A lot of artists are frustrated. They do a lot of footwork. There is some artists that really go out there and show their work. But where do you go? They sell their work and they go to individual business people. Not...even if they go to the gallery and show their work, they don't go very far" (Levac, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 21).

Angelique expresses confusion and uncertainty about the addiction problems that afflict many First Nations artists. She knows of artists who attempt to sell their work in bars and on the streets of Prince George. She recalls one incident where an artist came

into her shop and claimed a piece of artwork as his while Angelique had been informed that it had been purchased and framed by someone else who wanted to resell the piece through her gallery.

See a lot of people with addictions they kind of wreck it for themselves and a lot of these galleries are run by white people. They're not run by native people so they kind of...well, you know, "We don't want to deal with you, we don't know you, we don't know if we can trust you. You're a pest and you come here," and you know, they don't really understand. (Levac, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 21)

Angelique is critical of artists who attempt to sell their artwork in this way as it cheapens the work. They will impulsively peddle a print or drawing for \$25 – 30 and then expect a private or public art gallery to purchase it for hundreds of dollars. She states, "That's not good. That's not an honest way of doing... a lot of them are not honest." Angelique believes that you have to be honest and hard-working to get ahead in this tough business.

In her campaign to further her career and market her work Angelique approached many private and public art galleries and museums and she is critical of their limited understanding and exposure of First Nations art and culture.

The board members that are looking after this, they're not understanding much about native art. And why should they? The majority of them, they are not native so what do they care? They need more native people on the boards of directors or whatever for the dealings with these. I think that's the problem. And the people that are in charge of these things they are really not educated in that area or they don't...or they couldn't care less. (Levac, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 22)

She observed that even curators don't have much knowledge about her artwork but some of them were excited by it as it was new and different to them. The art gallery and the museum in Prince George seem to be only interested in exhibiting people who are exceptional, well-known artists. "They are getting these people from out-of-town, but they are not acknowledging people from our city" (Levac, personal interview, Feb. 2006:



19). She laments that she doesn't get asked to participate in the programming of the Two Rivers Gallery and she states, "I would have been so proud to display my work there" (Levac, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 15). Visiting Exploration Place Angelique found a limited display on the Dakelh culture and the local Lheidli T'enneh band. "There is not much in there that's Native. I was in there and looked around to see if I could see something there. Maybe a few little things, one or two things in there, and little blurbs on stuff. And the reason why they did that was because they got a cemetery in there" (Levac, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 17).<sup>14</sup> Many tourists that stop in Prince George have visited Angelique's Native Art Gallery which is strategically situated across from the Ramada Hotel in downtown Prince George. She recalls that she will hear complaints from some of them that they can't find any significant displays of local First Nations art and culture. She recalled, "...and they went to the train station, the museum and you know what they said? They said 'There is really not much there to see'" (Levac, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 30).

Angelique concedes that she also lacks knowledge about the operations and activities of the public art galleries and museums and how to access that knowledge. She admitted she didn't know about the art gallery and museum's membership system, which could be a source of information, or about the permanent collections. Other than the crest pole at the Two Rivers Gallery, which was highly publicized during its creation and installation, and the little she saw at The Exploration Place she is not aware of any other First Nations artwork in their collections. Angelique expresses a questioning curiosity about the curatorial area which, for her, is mystifying and she wonders, "I don't know what the curators... they do" (Levac, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 24). She also asks,

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<sup>14</sup> Both The Exploration Place and the Lheidli T'enneh Cemetery are located in Fort George Park.

“Well, for me. I’d like to know where... how do I find a curator, as an artist?” (Levac, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 25).

**Figure 3**



Ya’Ya Chuck Heit

*Catch of the Day*

### **1.3 YA’YA Chuck Heit**

I traveled to the coastal mountain area, west of Prince George, to Kispiox where I met with Ya’Ya Chuck Heit (Gitxsan). He is a prolific carver and jewelry-maker who has apprenticed and worked on numerous monumental projects with many well known northwest coast carvers including his chief and uncle Walter Harris (Geel), his cousin Earl Muldon and with Ken Mowatt and Robert Davidson. Ya’Ya’s formal fine art education includes attendance at ‘Ksan’s Kitanmax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art where, upon completion of all the courses, he was hired by the school as an instructor.

He has been part of many group exhibitions and publications including, *Changing Hands: Art Without Reservations 2* (2005) by David Revere McFadden and Ellen Napiura Taubman, *Trickster Shift: Humour & Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (1999) by Allan J. Ryan, *Topographies: Aspects of Recent BC Art* (1996) curated by Grant Arnold, Monika Kin Gagnon and Doreen Jensen and *Premonitions: Artists Exploring Possibilities* (1998) curated through Spirit Wrester Gallery.

I met Ya'Ya about six years ago at a drawing workshop he was teaching at the Two Rivers Gallery. At that time he had many spectacular works of art included in the group exhibition curated by Heather Harris, *Under Raven's Wing* (2001) which was on display at the gallery. This exhibition represented a number of artists from a variety of northern BC First Nations who express a sincere interest in creating works of art that are beautiful and meaningful (Harris 2001: ii).

As a young carving apprentice, Ya'Ya experienced the exciting revival of Gitksan art much of which occurred under the administrative support of 'Ksan's 'Kitanmax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art and the 'Ksan Association. During the 1970's artists from Hazelton and the surrounding communities were inundated with the commercial demand for their work. "Ksan started out to promote the art and to give it life again and it became fantastic. It did it in a far, far bigger, better way than anybody ever hoped for. You know it was really fantastic. It touched everybody's life around here" (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 6).

However, at that time Ya'Ya was one of the youngest artists in the community and he found it difficult to work under the authority of his peers. Under the rules established by the professional carvers of the Kitanmax School, Ya'Ya qualified as a

senior carver upon graduating. He excelled at his chosen profession and he was hired to teach at the school. He also found his work winning commissions offered through 'Ksan.

I won the first commission I tried for. A 5'x10' panel. Which didn't make some people happy because I was eighteen, I think. So they told me that I had to, that I HAD TO hire a senior carver to work with. So I explained to them their rules that I was already a senior carver and I didn't care what they said cause I only thought about asking my uncle to help me. I just didn't like the way they were trying to put me down for winning and being young. (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 5)

So I was right in there thinking I was a senior carver and at night time I came up with 5 designs. They were all ready to go, eh, to printing. My print designs they went through the quality control committee and so I thought I was in, and then one day they, a group of these people, came to me and said, "Oh, we like your designs really good, but we just don't have time to print them and besides you're too young. You should be happy with \$150.00 a week." That's what they told me. So I talked to the printing company and they had a different story. They wanted more prints. They didn't have enough prints and they had lots of time. So these guys were squeezing me out. I just packed my stuff and I left. I knew I couldn't stand a chance there if I was 18 or 28. I would always be younger than those guys. Their jealousy was the end of 'Ksan. (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 5-6)

Ya'Ya found his age and skill to be a barrier to gaining opportunities and full acceptance amongst his peers and organizations in his community.

Ya'Ya's emotional and physical connection to his community is strong and profound and he looks for chances to deepen that connection by displaying his artwork on local public sites. "Then I finally got to do a big carving that would stay in my own village. A large wall panel for our new school. Now that's my favourite carvin!!?!!" (Heit 2000, internet source). However, he has found that there are limited opportunities to show his work in his community. He observes that little of the artwork produced by Gitxsan artists stays in the communities. "Yeah, it goes to Vancouver and mostly the U.S. I would think. Hardly anything ever stays here. In my whole life I've just made two button blankets, I think, for the local chiefs" (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 25).

When Ya'Ya approached the Kispiox Cultural/Information Center about displaying his carvings he was turned down. "Even our little Cultural Center down here, they would never want any of these big carvings here. Their excuse is they have no insurance, and that cultural shop is just down the road here, a few hundred meters. I couldn't talk them into displaying any of my best carvings" (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 27). So Ya'Ya has had to venture into the world to discover other places to situate his artwork.

Recently Ya'Ya attempted to involve himself in the 'Ksan Historical Village and Museum by becoming a member of the Board of Directors. He was appointed Vice-President but soon he became frustrated with what appeared to be a general disinterest in programming opportunities and their policies.

When I was in there I wanted to get a show going. A retrospective which would have been a really fantastic show because that would have included every artist who ever had anything to do with 'Ksan like Robert Davidson and all the other big shots around here. I think Tony Hunt has totem pole work there and so it would have been a really nice show but they didn't even want to talk about it. So you give them a million dollar idea and they say "No thanks." It's a waste of my time and energy to even bother with them. You know, I just try and think of how good it was and it still could be but there's not enough willpower and I'm not going to do it myself. (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 22-23)

Ya'Ya is concerned that the 'Ksan organizations are no longer committed to the artists or to the Gitxsan communities. They have left behind the creative and artistic life and instead have succumbed to a colonialist agenda of feeding the tourist consumer market. This is an extremely limited market that is generally not interested in the works of art created by Gitxsan artists.

Their mandate is to give all kinds opportunities to artists and they never give anything. Well, they never give any to me or any of the carvers that I know. So maybe they're giving them to somebody but not, not to people that I know. (Heit personal interview, Sept. 2006: 21)

As an Indigenous knowledge holder Ya'Ya has found multiple ways to transmit his traditional cultural teachings but he has found himself excluded from the museum space. "See, curating is another job that I'm not qualified for" (Heit personal interview, Sept. 2006: 23). He identified Western requirements and assumptions as working against his desire to educate. "If I went to apply for a job at, at any gallery that is what they would say. Where is your grade 12? Where's your curator certificate?" (Heit personal interview, Sept. 2006: 21).

Ya'Ya commented on the extensive collection from the 'Ksan Performing Arts Group which is housed at the 'Ksan Historical Village and Museum but the works of art are unchanging with few contemporary pieces cycling through the displays.

Well they don't, they don't invest in themselves that's why. They used to when, I think [Margaret] "Polly" Sargent was the main driving force to keep them buying stuff off the carvers. They used to think it was a good idea to support the carvers and now they think it's a bad idea. Of course if you don't support the carvers you don't get new carvings. (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 24)

Ya'Ya reflects on 'Ksan's past role in the community to revitalize culture and he states, "Ksan started out to promote the art and to give it life again and it became fantastic. It did it in a far, far bigger, better way than anybody ever hoped for. You know it was really fantastic. It touched everybody's life around here" (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 25). However, Ya'Ya is critical of the museum's function within Hazelton and the surrounding First Nations communities. "And now it's the exact opposite. Nobody wants hardly anything to do with tradition around here" (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 25).

Ya'Ya has many works of art in many collections including museums and art galleries across Canada. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, the Museum of

Anthropology at UBC, the Vancouver Museum and the Royal Ontario Museum are a few places that hold his carvings. When I asked Ya'Ya if any of the museums or art galleries in northern British Columbia collected his work he replied negatively. He pointed out that the major barrier preventing the acquisition of works by local and regional artists such as him was money. Ya'Ya stated that he is not interested in donating works to these collections because he is trying to make a living. Ya'Ya pointed out the extensive footwork and research required to understand and enter the system of art gallery and museum collecting. He explained that he can't approach a cultural institution directly; instead artists are required to submit proposals to affiliated organizations such as the "Friends of Museum of Anthropology" to be considered for their purchasing program. Ya'Ya states, "once you learn that trick then you can just apply it to most places, eh. That's what I learned." (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 32). He further comments "I had to go and learn that all myself. So I was fumbling around in the dark" (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 32).

Ya'Ya confided his frustration with the business aspect of creating works of art and the significant barrier it is for other artists. "That really stops a lot of artists and especially when you're starting out if you have to quit carving and go and learn how to sell" (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 33). He notes that his work is a balance between two jobs which is a compromise he does not like. "I like carving and I don't want to sit in front of a computer all day or travel around trying to sell my stuff" (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 33). Ya'Ya remembers that 'Ksan was able to manage some of the business aspects for many of the Gitksan artists. "Ksan was a brilliant idea because it had everything and now it fell apart a bit there" (Heit, personal interview, Sept.

2006: 34). Ya'Ya confided how difficult it is to make a living from being an artist and he stated "I'm just starting to get out of the poor starving artist into where I can afford to support my family a little better than barely making the bills, eh. It's nice to have a bit of money left over after the bills" (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 36).

Ya'Ya further expressed frustration with art galleries, particularly commercial galleries, and their focus on the bottom line and on selling the artwork while sacrificing the intellectual integrity and meaning of the work. He has encountered incidents of censorship as curators and managers attempt to suppress his stated intentions in creating the work.

Maybe half the galleries want to censor it, you know. Like this piece here is all about AIDS and not too many people want to tell that. And, a talking stick I sold a few years ago is all about our modern day treaty making politics but in the gallery they just wanted to put down, "Oh, Human, human bird." So I gave them a good explanation of what it was all about but they didn't want to put that in the marketing, eh. (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 41)

I made a real nice mask here to go. That was also about that Oka roadblock and the gallery in Vancouver bought that then they just sold it as "Angry Young Man." That was their label they put on it. (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 43).

When he was a young artist attempting to begin his career he eventually came to the hard realization of the unpopularity of attempting to make political statements through his artwork. "The first thing that I started out carving that I became aware of for politics was that Oka crisis and Meech Lake and I couldn't sell any of that stuff at any gallery in Vancouver. None of them, they wouldn't touch it" (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 42).

Having recently returned from the show, *Changing Hands: Art Without Reservations 2* (McFadden and Taubman 2006) in New York, Ya'Ya commented on the



artwork being produced by young First Nations artists. He notes, “They were just still in art school some of them, eh. You know, just thinking, ‘I wonder what happens if I put a tire over there in with that ovoid’ an old used tire and stuff like that. So some of that stuff don’t make no sense to me” (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 39).<sup>15</sup> We had a brief discussion about contemporary art and how his work fits into this area. While Ya’Ya was traditionally trained in carving and the artforms of his culture he also actively researches what other artists are accomplishing on the internet and what they’re displaying in other art galleries and museums. His carvings are frequently mixed-media works incorporating metal and other materials. He experiments and often likes to infuse irony, humour and political statements into his work. Ya’Ya states “I am a pretty contemporary artist. I forget about it myself most of the time. I just do what makes me happy” (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 41).

#### 1.4 Rena Bolton

##### *The Cedar Tree*

Patiently, regally, she stands, always aware,  
While gentle breezes caress her hair  
The essence of her fragrances fills the air  
Oh lovely, Oh beautiful, how came you there!

As I kneel before you, loyal friend,  
A beggar no less for you to tend,  
With pick and shovel and hiking boots,  
I’ve come to seek your tender roots,

I’ll scrape and split long flowing strands  
And weave a basket with loving hands  
With red and black and white designs

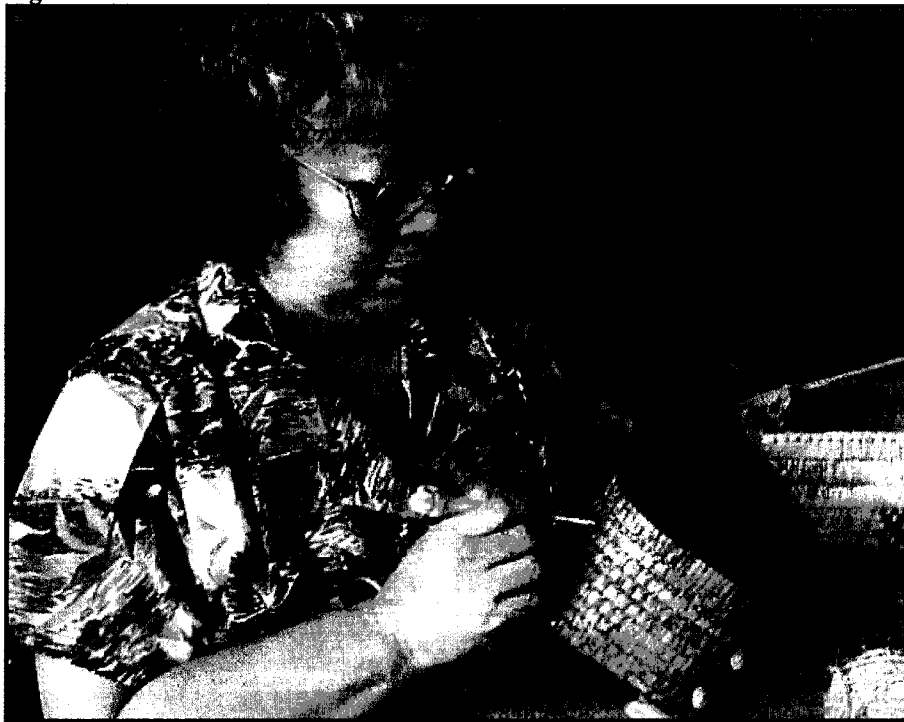
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<sup>15</sup> The ovoid is a common shape used by northwest coast Aboriginal artists. Ya’Ya (Chuck) Heit described it in a workshop at the Two Rivers Gallery as the shape of a loaf of bread. The form is similar to the oval shape but slightly distorted as it is broader on one of its wider lengths.

A million stitches to make it fine

To show the world that you and I  
E'en tho someday we both shall die  
We'll leave behind a lode of treasure  
That time and man shall never measure.  
(Rena Bolton 1996: 5)

Figure 4



Rena Bolton

Further west of Hazelton, in Terrace, I met the renowned weaver Rena Bolton (Sto:lo). Through her work, which includes harvesting and preparing materials for her weavings, Rena stresses her connection and reverence for the natural world and the traditions of her people. She has concentrated much of her career on relearning and revitalizing the art of weaving and education of First Nations culture. Before I made the westward journey to Terrace I had been familiar with Rena Bolton's work through the film *Hands of History* (1994) in which she was featured with three other First Nations

women artists. She had participated in high profile exhibitions including *Topographies: Aspects of Recent B.C. Art* (1996), and an exhibition at Robson Square in Vancouver.

When Susan Marsden, curator of the Museum of Northern British Columbia (MNBC) in Prince Rupert suggested I interview her for this project, I leapt at the opportunity to meet and talk with this knowledgeable elder.

Rena Bolton was very well respected and active within the British Columbia Indian Arts Society until it was dismantled. When I met with Rena she stressed the important work of this organization to train artists the traditional and technical skills they would need for their work. Some well known artists participated in this organization including Frieda Diesing, Dempsey Bob and Stan Bevan. She saw the disbanding of organizations such as the B.C. Indian Arts Society in 1983, as a major setback to First Nations' political, economic and cultural lifeways.

Rena has spent many years of her life learning, perfecting and teaching her weaving skills. As a very young girl she began to learn the Salish tradition of this fine craft from her grandmother and she later spent five years at a residential school. When she moved from southern B.C. to Terrace, her husband's home community, she took up the task of teaching herself the traditional Tsimshian weaving. By the 1970s the art of Chilkat weaving had been almost lost and she traveled to the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria to study the ancient weavings kept there.

Traveling throughout British Columbia, Rena attempted to talk to First Nations people to practice and teach their traditional arts.

When I came up here I was president of BC Indian Arts and Crafts at the time and I was traveling throughout British Columbia, sponsored by the First Citizens fund in Victoria, and trying to revive all the ancient crafts of our people after the ban

had been lifted in 1952.<sup>16</sup> So I was the one who was going out and giving the word to pick up. Ask the elders to teach the young people. They're the ones who were left and so it was my job. I was trained to do this. To make sure that young people learned to do the crafts of their elders and not to let it die. (Bolton personal interview, Feb. 2006: 3)

This was an extremely serious endeavor for Rena who at times became frustrated and discouraged with the general reluctance shown by First Nation's elders to learn, practice and teach their skills to the younger people. She observed that some of the old grandmothers appeared to be afraid to speak of the old crafts. Now living in northern British Columbia she finds that she no longer wishes to be involved in any activist work in her community. She states, "They're all Christian people and they're trying to stick to the Christian way of living and I'm kind of like a rebel bringing back the past that they're trying to forget" (Bolton, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 20). Rena says First Nations avoid the ways of the "heathens" because of the influence of the missionaries. "Even the medicines were considered witchcraft and so, it was very difficult" (Bolton, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 4).

Rena explained that she and her husband have a connection to the MNBC as they have had a membership there for many years. Once in a while the gift shop at the museum will call her and ask her for her baskets to sell. Also, she has known Susan Marsden, Curator of the museum, for many years as they used to work together. Rena had a solo exhibition at the MNBC about four years ago and recently her work was included in the Frieda Diesing exhibition at the same museum. A large part of her work goes south to the museums and art galleries in Vancouver and Rena notes, "I kind of spread myself around. I work with the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver so some,

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<sup>16</sup> The 1884 Indian Act Amendment: The Potlatch Law prohibited the potlatch and sundance and although this law was not legally revoked it was dropped from the rewritten Act in 1951 (Clavir 2002: 104)

quite a bit of my work goes down there for display. They buy pieces for display, big pieces for their own collection and then they sell a lot of my stuff” (Bolton, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 6).

I asked her since she lived in Terrace whether she had ever had any work on display at the Terrace Art Gallery and she admitted that she had not. She explained, “Terrace is kind of a transient town. They don't seem to understand the Indian art. They don't want to spend a lot of money on art. Not our kind of art” (Bolton, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 5). Trying to educate people in her community was difficult because the people would come and go as the work ebbed and flowed. This is rather typical for northern towns. In the past, she found that there existed a weak relationship between First Nations and non-First Nations who have made the Terrace area their home.

...and then there's the ones who live here permanently. They're old loggers and old miners and they're different. I don't think art is their thing. To them an Indian is a person who puts feathers all over their head and paints their face and goes around scalping people. That's the only thing they understand about Native people... and they don't really want to understand. (Bolton, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 5)

Rena observes that cultural differences exist between First Nations and non-First Nations in the way both conduct business. In the past, she was always approached by curators and dealers from art galleries and museums asking for her work and Rena would never think of contacting them to promote or market her artwork.

Because the old teaching was that you don't commercialize or show off with your work. You, as a high class lady, it is beneath you to beg for anything. Like our culture is totally different from the White culture. The White culture, if you go out and push your way and scam your way into doing things it doesn't matter how you look while you're doing that. It's the end result of making a pile of money. You're a good business person. Then everybody thinks you're great but Native people, they're very timid to do that kind of thing. Maybe the younger generation might not but the older ones like myself, we lose face terribly if we went around begging a museum to show our work and it's just not done. You don't lower

yourself to that sort of thing. It's very degrading... (Bolton, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 11)

She notes that this is a cultural trait of her generation which has been relentlessly exploited in the past by non-First Nations.

...it's a pride thing I guess and this is where the European people cashed in on us because they know of this silly pride thing we have of losing face and being. They know how we are and so they railroad over us and take everything they want and they say, "Oh well, they don't care. They don't fight for what they have. So, this is a business world. If we want something we go and get it." Well they're used to doing that. That's their way but our way isn't like that. We used to be a very nice people. Very gracious, you know. Never pushy or competitive but our younger people I noticed some of them that have gone through the public school system and they learn quite quickly to be pushy and rude and outspoken. (Bolton, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 12)

Rena agrees that the economic situation in the north is very frustrating for First Nations artists as there are little opportunities to sell art. She states, "We just deal with private buyers and like sell to museums if they have any extra money for that year then they'll buy. It keeps their little stores going[...]" (Bolton, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 16). Rena cannot count on her artwork to support her as she might make a significant sale every six months or once a year. Rena laments that even attempting to sell their work to tourists in Prince Rupert does not see a return. She states, "They just buy piddly... trinkets. Like, we've had two shows up there when the ships have been coming in. We haven't sold a thing to anybody. Not anything" (Bolton, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 18).

Rena also admits that she is not completely aware of the operating procedures of museums and the function of the board of directors. However, she recalls one experience that gave her some insight into the influence of the board of directors on decision making.

I know when I was selling two pieces of fine work to the museum in Vancouver the buyers wanted them desperately but the board members were kind of hesitant

and the board members are people who are... I don't know whether, if they're politically inclined to worry about everything that happens in the museum or whether they'd know anything about art or whatever... why they were chosen to be on the board of directors, I don't know, but they seem to have the last say about purchases made for the museum itself. Like, what they're going to keep in their collection so that, we had to sit at the museum for quite a little while, while this dispute went on between the buyers and the board members and finally the buyer... One older woman said, "Just buy them!" She was upset, angry and she said, "Just buy them! Pay Mrs. Bolton for them and we'll deal with them later. She can't sit here all day, you know." So I don't really know how the museums, how they function but it seems like there is a lot of politicalness going on. I don't know if they're set up for artists or what they're set up for. Maybe they're just set up for the old stuff that's in the museum. I don't know. Maybe the artists and the crafts are just a sideline. (Bolton, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 21-22)

### 1.5 Garry Oker

I rarely travel to the north and I was pleased to be able to make these journeys to Dawson Creek and then Fort St. John for my research. I drove up to the Peace Country (northeastern BC) to meet Garry Oker (Dane-zaa) for the first time in the fall of 2006. He was the last artist I selected for my research as I had few contacts north of Prince George and I was unfamiliar with the "art scene" there. Garry's professional reputation extends to the University of Northern British Columbia and it was suggested by my fellow students that I contact him. Garry currently lives in Fort St. John where he works independently as a Senior Consultant on a variety of projects such as strategic planning, administration, development of cultural programs and bridging between corporate/government/and Aboriginal groups. One of his major accomplishments is the development and design of the clothing company *Symbols & Accessories*. Earlier in his life Garry, while living in eastern Canada, began to study visual and performing arts and fashion design at the St. Lawrence College in Kingston, Ontario. Upon completion of his studies he began to work in the fashion industry. However, the strong ties he has to his

First Nations culture brought him back to British Columbia. He furthered his education by obtaining a Master of Arts Degree in Leadership and Training from the Royal Roads University in Victoria, BC. Garry lived in Dawson Creek for eight years where he developed and implemented a First Nations Design and Cultural Studies Program for the School District #59. After his time as a teacher Garry served as Programs Director and then Chief of the Doig River First Nation Band. Garry, like many artists, is multi-talented and expresses his creativity in a variety of ways. As well as being a fashion design artist he is a musician, film producer, political leader and translator just to name a few roles he currently plays.

**Figure 5**



Garry Oker

Again and again throughout our interview together, Garry stressed his perception of art as a more holistic and integrated system than what most people, particularly



Westerners, understand. Whether he's hunting moose or translating stories, for him, Garry knows he's expressing the creative and conceptual aspects of his life and manifesting it in a physical form. He states, "I try to use all kinds of real life media in my life. Whatever is in my life I use it to create art. So the whole concept of how you go about [life] is art. How you live is art. How you go about is symbolic" (Oker, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 5).

Garry expressed a need for exploration and innovation in the physical expression of culture. He is particularly interested in virtual reality as a possible medium which may express the multiple facets of creative expression as it exists in his culture in a more holistic way. He doesn't see the traditional mediums commonly utilized by Western artists as particularly relevant to many First Nations artists.

I think that if we can be able to harness that virtual reality technology and put our stories into it we would be really developing amazing stuff that people can see because its kind of spiritual stuff we're talking about, right. And how do you express spirituality in a painting? I mean you can do that but if you kind of saw it but didn't see it. I think that kind of thing would really be the futuristic concept about presenting our worldview and using that kind of technology. Cause painting is very limited to colours and canvas but we need to find other means to do that. So it's a multi-media kind of concept, right. (Oker, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 13)

Garry feels that art galleries and museums can assist First Nations artists in this area by interacting and communicating with them about contemporary art that is particularly relevant to their needs.

One of the things that museums and art galleries can assist the artist [with] is identifying mediums and ideas or trends. Things happening. That would be good because a lot of times we just do our own thing and then we don't know what's really going on and if the artist is informed about what is selling, what kind of stuff is being done and what is a good seller of products and stuff like that. I think then artists can be able to focus their energy towards that trend. (Oker, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 8)

Garry expressed concern that artists in the north generally do not have the education or knowledge of what is required of them for the display of their artwork. When representing an artist's work art galleries and museums often have expectations around the presentation of the artwork for display.

I think the biggest challenge is communicating to the artists themselves and then helping them organize what is required to do a show. I think that's the biggest challenge artists face is that they can do art but then how do you have the resources to be able to put in a framework that can be put into art galleries. Cause they have to be framed well and you know all that costs money, right. And I think there's expectation of a standard of how art has got to be placed. So I think that's a challenge about communicating that out to artists and working with artists to be able to build that process. (Oker, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 7)

Garry suggested that art galleries and museums work with artists in the preparation of their work for display by making their facility available and communicating a step by step process.

However, Garry does not believe that art galleries and museums can fully accomplish the goal of fulfilling First Nations expressive needs and thinks First Nations need to explore alternate spaces in which to express, explore and affirm their cultures. These spaces may manifest themselves as cultural centers, museums, art galleries or even virtual websites or some other appropriate form. Garry believes that First Nations culture is in a transformative state in which traditional and contemporary systems of wisdom and knowledge and technology are integrated into a new form. He sees this change as positive, exciting and fun and will work to bring families, communities and areas all over the world together.

Today we need a space where people will discover their natural gifts, a place to discover purpose that is suitable to their environmental systems and a space to reshape our cultural knowledge and discover new approaches to life. We also need a space to discuss different spiritual realities and integrate the systems to allow the mind and body and spirit to evolve new energy forces. What would

happen if we blend new concepts with the old, ancient practice of raising our consciousness? (Oker, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 20)

He further states, “The environment is important, the space to create, for First Nations exposure is limited up in Fort St. John” (Oker, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 16). Garry has worked on projects such as the documentary, *They Dream About Everything* (in production) and a virtual museum website for Doig River First Nations ([www.virtualmuseum.ca/~beaver/english/project/index.php](http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/~beaver/english/project/index.php)), which have brought together members of his community but he feels there needs to be more opportunities for cultural expression.

I see the old people struggling because they don't know how to use what they got as natural talent because there's a disconnect with the young people. So we need a way to help them have a space to be able to express what they think, and I've been working with the elders for a long time doing that. So, if there was an art gallery which would do something like that maybe we can be able to create a space for indigenous people to use their talents. (Oker, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 21)

Garry further expresses concern that there is, in some ways, a lack of appreciation of art in the north because of this physical deficiency and the pressures put on First Nations communities to go along with the current colonialist agenda in his area to exploit resources.

...because everybody's into working in the industry to make big money, you know. I mean I'm sure they appreciate art but First Nations people, I think, just don't have the opportunity in a way that they can harness their talent and build upon it, right. Everybody's just busy doing everything else, like, I think it's the whole colonialism thing that goes on. So that's a factor too. (Oker, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 16)

He sees this agenda further reflected in the education system and the lack of commitment by those people who build the curriculum for students to teach First Nations history and culture. He states, “They do try to do First Nations art but again it's limited to maybe just

a class there and here. It's not consistent enough. I think there needs to be more consistent... see, we need a place to show that kind of stuff, right. If we don't show it then how do we teach people about it, you know" (Oker, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 16). He advocates for First Nations to look for opportunities to take control of how and where their history and culture is communicated to themselves and to Westerners because there are other priorities being fulfilled in the north.

Garry is positive about art galleries and museums in the north and their willingness and desire to reach out to First Nations and he, himself, has frequently been approached to participate in various programming and fundraising events. He recalls when he lived in Dawson Creek that the art gallery attempted to engage with him but unfortunately his time was committed to other creative priorities. Since Garry moved to Fort St. John, Shar Coulter, the curator of the Peace Gallery North Art Gallery in Fort St. John, has cultivated a good working relationship with him and she frequently encourages him to attend and participate with events at the gallery. He acknowledges, "They want me to be involved all the time but I mean, and we also donate a lot of art to them for their fundraising. I think the artwork that we donate, we raise a lot money for them" (Oker, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 5). Garry admits because of his limited involvement and access to the art galleries and museums he does not have a full understanding of their programming and how they conduct business. He was not familiar with the concept of the museum "permanent collection" and so he was not familiar with the artists represented in those collections in his region.

Garry has observed that there are few opportunities in his region for artists to promote and sell their artwork. Selling their work is an important goal for First Nations

artists and quite often is a measure of success. Without the flow of funding through sales of their work the continued creation of the art is threatened.

The ones that do the artwork always want to, kind of sell, like, I know the artists are the ladies in the communities they always make moccasins and, you know, traditional products. So those are all art. Most of the ladies do those kind of works and then they sell their stuff, right. But recently there's no place, I was talking to one of the elders that used to sell quite a bit of her work and she just said there's no place, nobody buys them anymore. So that's kind of interesting. I mean you need a product. You need a place where people can buy stuff like that. (Oker, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 12)

He wonders whether art galleries and museums can work more closely with First Nations artists and take a more active role in this area.

## **2 Art Galleries and Museums in Northern British Columbia**

Numerous public art galleries and museums, ranging in size and scope, exist in many of the communities throughout the northern area of British Columbia. The cultural institutions that participated in this research are well established as they have been operating for many decades now in one form or another. They range in size and scope with some employing only one or two full-time permanent personnel and perhaps a few part-time staff while others are able to maintain large operating budgets with several full-time permanent employees. What can be of huge assistance to the operations of galleries and museums is the assistance of volunteers from the community. Each of these cultural institutions is a not-for-profit society which is run by a Board of Directors. Those Trustees are community members who are ultimately responsible for the fulfillment of the art gallery or museum's mandate and, ultimately, the success of the facility.<sup>17</sup> The art galleries and museums I examined in northern British Columbia were the Two Rivers Gallery and the Exploration Place in Prince George; 'Ksan Historical Village and Museum in Hazelton; the Museum of Northern British Columbia in Prince Rupert; and the Dawson Creek Art Gallery in Dawson Creek.

### **2.1 Two Rivers Gallery: George Harris**

The opening of the beautiful, new structure during the summer of 2000 was highly anticipated by many members of the community as the original Prince George Art Gallery was located in an old, small forestry warehouse building. What is now known as

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<sup>17</sup> See Appendix 2 for art gallery and/or museum mandates, mission statements and collection policies. I attempted to retrieve this information directly from the art gallery or museum but in some cases this information was not made available to me.

the Two Rivers Gallery resides in a “Class A” facility incorporating unique architectural elements inspired by local environmental and historical features. A dry creek bed marked by water rounded rocks runs across the front of the building and the prominent wooden

**Figure 6**



Two Rivers Gallery, Prince George, British Columbia

arches roughly echo the form of the carved out banks, a striking environmental feature along the nearby Nechako and Fraser Rivers near their confluence in Prince George.

A distinctive artistic feature displayed prominently at the front of the Two Rivers Gallery is the *Millennium Unity Pole* carved by Ron Sebastien (Gitxsan) and Peter George (Wet'suwet'en). This crest pole project was initiated by the Two Rivers Gallery and funded by the Millennium Foundation and the City of Prince George. In addition, on display inside the art gallery on the upper floor, are two small crest poles carved about

twenty five years ago by Ron's brother, Robert Sebastien.<sup>18</sup> Those three large works of art are part of the gallery's permanent collection which is composed "primarily of contemporary artwork, stemming from exhibitions, private collections and other sources, which speaks to the history and cultural identity of the Central Interior and to the experience of life in Northwestern Canada" (Two Rivers Gallery 2006: 4).

Approximately ten percent of the works of art in that collection are created by First Nations and Inuit artists.

The Two Rivers Gallery has two exhibition galleries with approximately twelve shows per year that are booked two to three years in advance; a less formal exhibit space called the Galleria with a much shorter advanced booking period; and a sculpture court on the upper level of the building. Other public spaces on the site also include: The Shop at the Gallery, two studios, art rental storage, a children's activity area and a spacious multi-purpose area.

George Harris, Curator of the Two Rivers Gallery met with me to discuss operations of the gallery as it pertains to First Nations artists. George completed an Honours B.A. in Art History at the University of Victoria and a M.A. in Advanced Studies in Non-Western Art at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. George had been my employer for a number of years when he was the Director/Curator of the Prince George Art Gallery during the mid-1990s before he took a position as the Curator of the Art Gallery at the Yukon Arts Centre in Whitehorse. He returned to Prince George and the Two Rivers Gallery in 2002 and he has since contracted me for assistance on projects including a written contribution to the exhibition catalogue *A Bad Colonial Day: Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun* (Harris 2005).

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<sup>18</sup> The crest pole with the carved raven and owl is 8' high and carved wolf pole is over 9' high.



Since 2004 George has been working on organizing some programming featuring First Nations artists including the exhibition *This Land is Mime Land* by Shelley Niro (Mohawk), curated and circulated by the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography in Ottawa; an art film screening in February of 2005 of *It Starts With a Whisper* (1993) and *Honey Moccasin* (1998), both by Shelley Niro; Artists' Talk Series in the spring of 2005 which included: Joane Cardinal Schubert (Blackfoot), Art Wilson (Gitksan), and Robert Davidson (Haida). Also during 2005, George curated the exhibition *A Bad Colonial Day: Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun* (Coast Salish) and in 2006 arranged to receive the exhibition *Rick Rivet: A Survey 2000-2005*, produced and circulated by the Mendel Art Gallery.<sup>19</sup> Rivet is a Métis artist currently living in Terrace, BC. In the Galleria in 2004 Judith Morgan (Gitksan) exhibited a series of paintings which coincided with her MA defense at the University of Northern British Columbia. The only adult and children programming which was offered by the gallery during this time was a weekend "Family Sunday" event "Bright Colours" which incorporated play with the u-shapes and ovoids prominently used by many north coast artists in their creations.

While I worked with the Prince George/Two Rivers Art Gallery, from 1993 to 2001, the curatorial department occasionally reached out into the community and incorporated programming emphasizing cultural diversity in our community and region. For those projects George worked with various organizations in Prince George including the Multicultural Heritage Society, the Prince George Native Friendship Centre, the

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<sup>19</sup> Both Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun and Rick Rivet attended the opening receptions of their respective exhibitions and also gave short, informal talks about their work for those attending.

Carrier Sekani Tribal Council and the Lheidli T'enneh Band. However, he expressed the limited capacity for programming at the Two Rivers Gallery.

As a public art gallery it's important to work to be somewhat inclusive of all the communities in our area. Obviously in a limited time frame, let's say like a year, it's impossible to do that but, let's say over a ten year time frame (using some arbitrary time frame) it would be nice to think that you gave opportunities for a wide range of cultural backgrounds to be represented somehow in the gallery. (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 5)

George stresses the challenge of reaching out to a culturally diverse community that includes many ethnicities and that it is sometimes difficult to know where and how to begin to make those connections. George finds, as the head of the gallery's curatorial department, he has a very demanding work schedule that interferes with the effort to establish and maintain cultural connections.

...it's hard to feel as if you necessarily have the time to go out there and make the initial introductions and perhaps sit down and have coffee with people or chat with people before you ever talk about art. No, I think this is something you should be doing. It's not necessarily something that's always easy to either find the time to do or to do in a focused kind of way. (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 5)

We talked about the need to make relationships within those communities. To find the time to sustain them, and ultimately that relates to issues of time and workload, limited staff... which I say is a weak excuse in some respects, but it really becomes a reality in your day-to-day operations. (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 7)

He proposed the idea of the gallery possibly hiring a Cultural Liaison Officer, or a similar position, who could go out into the communities to forge and strengthen cross-cultural relationships with the Two Rivers Gallery. He also notes that, in some respects, it is the role of the gallery's Board of Directors to fulfill this task, but this has not happened and he notes, "It's very difficult sometimes though to find people who might either be interested and representative of those communities or have the time" (Harris, personal

interview, 2006: 7). Once having completed a stretch of programming with a group of people George lamented that it has proved to be challenging to continue bringing them back into the art gallery.

Having worked with a small group of people to try and address issues of cultural diversity, having identified your project and completed that project, I think it's really discouraging to know that that group of people is not now going to automatically come with you. They're not going to start coming to the gallery regularly because you've made that initial connection. It's almost always the case. Whether you're talking about a cultural group, or some other kind of special interest group, when you work with them, in order to keep them coming you have to maintain that relationship, and that relationship development can really be tremendously time consuming, and... It's very important that... It's just sometimes hard to convince oneself to find the time to do it. Perhaps we should be doing it more. (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 6)

George's time schedule in his position as curator is limited and he has to establish priorities and limits and so he admits the cross-cultural relationships are not as well established as they should be.

George contemplates his past work organizing and researching exhibitions and he has come to realize that, "there are different cultural understandings of what constitutes art, or contemporary art" (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 7).

I remember one guy saying something like, "I decided trying to break down, you know, the walls of this Northwest Coast art thing and sort of doing something really different," and I tell him, "Well, what is that?" and he said, "Look the other day I started actually making well, drawings of ducks, you know, just plain ducks, you know." So his idea that, that ducks that weren't in some Northwest Coast style was contemporary or avant-garde was very different from what my own understanding of what contemporary or avant-garde meant. (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 28)

The existence of different expectations and/or values between him and First Nations artists creates a boundary between them that requires negotiation and clarification. This is an issue that requires effort and time by both curators and artists to understand so that the relationships between them can be forged on equal footings.

George expressed concern about First Nations artists' understanding of art gallery procedures and policies. The Two Rivers Gallery annually promotes a *call for exhibition proposals* where local, regional and national artists compete for the opportunity to show their work in one of the main galleries. As the Curator, George selects the successful submissions and he knows how emotional a rejection from the art gallery can be.

It seemed to me rather important thing that... I know that there are parts with artist's submitting to exhibitions and could be turned down for a number of reasons, and we do so for a wide variety of reasons, and my one hope is that when artists are turned down regardless of their cultural background, like First Nations artists or artists of European background they don't take it personally. Don't feel discouraged. (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 20)

George conveys his intent to work professionally with all artists, including First Nations artists and his goal to promote "good contemporary art with trying to exhibit and interpret work" (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 17). He further expresses concern that First Nations artists would understand a rejection from this process as discrimination against them. George states, "I'm very interested in always trying to facilitate the artist's voice being heard regardless of whether or not they are First Nations artists" (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 17).

A primary goal of First Nations artists is the marketing and selling of their artwork and, according to George, they will often mistakenly approach public art galleries and museums to assist them in this way. However, as not-for-profit societies<sup>20</sup> these cultural institutions tend not to be engaged in commercial enterprises.

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<sup>20</sup> A not-for-profit society exists for the purpose of public or mutual benefit other than the pursuit or accumulation of profits. A requirement of many government funding agencies and grants is the maintenance of this status.

I think sometimes when you do get calls from First Nations artists, especially local First Nations artists, there is an expectation that we're a commercial gallery, and they are especially interested in having some kind of commercial exhibition, and we are absolutely not interested in being a commercial gallery and having a commercial exhibition. (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 11)

George points out that the commercial opportunities available through the public art gallery and museum systems, such as the Two Rivers Gallery, are the small gift shops and art rental programs. He also concedes that gallery staff will facilitate connections between artists and individuals who may have expressed an interest in purchasing their artwork.

George has observed that there are different streams for which First Nations artists create their artwork. As he previously noted, there are First Nations artists who have worked to take advantage of the commercial popularity of their art and produce their work with the intent of generating an income. However, there are artists who are focused on other priorities in their work. George points out that, “there are artists whose work is typically fairly commercial and then artists who deal much more with issues in their work, and for me, over the last few years, my primary interest is with more issues-based work than it has been with commercial work” (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 26). He believes that the commercial aspect to their purpose causes some First Nations artists to produce artwork with the intent to satisfy the tastes and expectations of their potential buyers with the hope that it will be extremely profitable.

...for particular artists it's expected of them that the artwork that they should be producing is that kind of artwork that's seen more as traditional art and that sometimes, particularly by dealers of art, by people who run art galleries, sometimes there are pressures put upon those artists to produce art that looks a particular way so that it will be desirable to a particular market and I know that there are artists who are trying to work specifically outside of that context and to resist those kinds of pressures. (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 27)

George laments that the “commercial aspect has taken off with an awful lot of art work” (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 23). This practice has caused some problems in his curatorial work as he attempts to create opportunities for the display of First Nations artwork in the art gallery.

I've asked a lot of artists that I met there [New Aiyansh] about this idea I had for an exhibition of contemporary Nisga'a art work and apparently none of them that I spoke to had much of a collection of artwork ready to go – in their studio. Further, in fact, what they were producing would often sell either to private individuals, or get shipped to a collector or, you know, to a gallery. (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 21)

The Two Rivers Gallery has a collection of art that is rapidly growing but George acknowledges that this growth is limited by the art gallery's ability to finance the purchase of artwork. The art gallery has no acquisitions budget and so they rarely purchase artwork for their permanent collection. Instead, the development and expansion of this body of artwork is, “contingent upon the generosity of those people who have various connections with the Gallery” (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 12). “Ultimately, we should be in a position to purchase artwork; to expand our collection rather than depend upon the generosity of artists. You know, I must say I tend to agree. I think we should be purchasing artwork” (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 13).

Art galleries and museums are facilities with specific purposes that are particularly appealing to many people, especially travelers who would like to learn more about the place and people they are visiting. However, there are people who do not visit art galleries and museums and who may actually avoid them. George acknowledges that there exist some negative sentiments about art galleries.

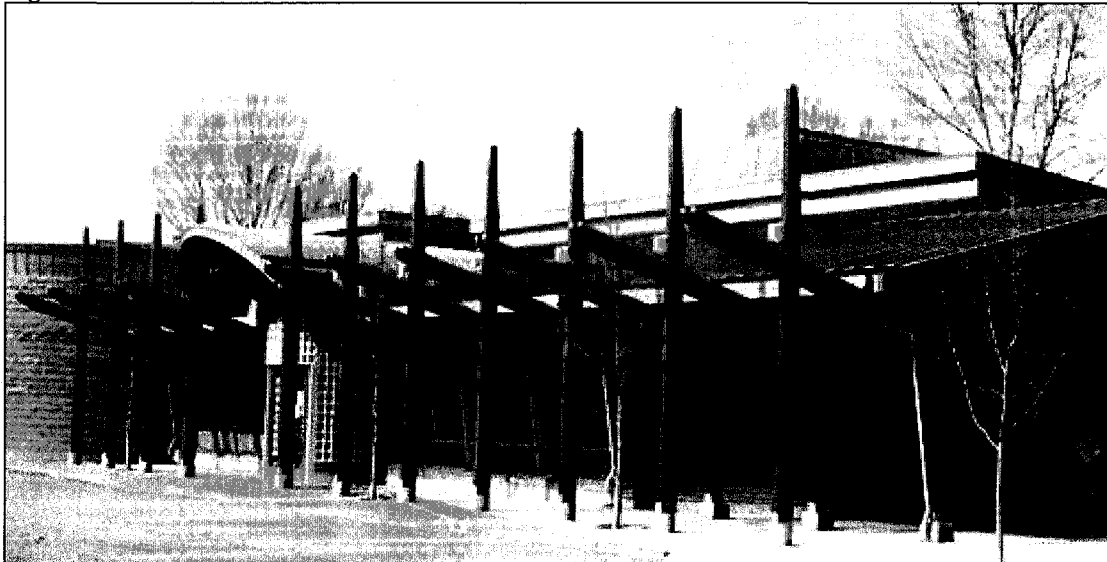
...art galleries are always seen as kind of intimidating places, especially places that deal with contemporary art. You look at the art gallery here in town; it's this really quite remarkable building. You look at that building and it's not just a

square brick building it's a building that looks, well, the way it is, a building that has been designed by a particular architect with a particular architectural scheme in mind. It's a highly designed space and sometimes that sends a message to people. This is a special place and sometimes perhaps, I think, people don't always feel comfortable about entering into those places for the first time because they don't know how they're going to be received and especially with notions about contemporary art and people who work in contemporary art galleries being snobby and elitist. I think to some extent we're starting a little behind the eight ball because there is that kind of perception out there. (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 14)

He hopes people would ignore the myths and perceptions about contemporary art and art galleries and he encourages people to understand these places as places of opportunity and learning.

I think when you come into a gallery and have an opportunity to chat with people who work there, I would like to think anyway that one would come fairly quickly to the conclusion that we are not culture snobs, that we're rather nice people. (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 15)

**Figure 7**



The Exploration Place, Prince George, British Columbia

## **2.2 The Exploration Place: Tracy Calegheros and Robert Campbell**

In Prince George, located along the western bank of the Fraser River, is Fort George Park, a historically significant site to both First Nations and non-First Nations.

Simon Fraser established Fort George there in 1807 providing a foothold for Western commerce and culture at the site where the Lheidli T'enneh (The People from the Confluence of the Two Rivers) lived. The main Lheidli T'enneh community is now located outside of Prince George in Shelley. Fort George Park today continues to be a sacred site for the Lheidli T'enneh as it contains one of the band's cemeteries. Today, visitors to the park can also find the Exploration Place Museum & Science Centre, a bandshell, and children's play areas including a miniature 1912 steam train which will take them on a short circuit through part of the grounds.

The Exploration Place features a number of interpretive exhibits that focus on human history and science topics including paleontology, biology, local First Nations culture and local history. There are about eight galleries one of which is dedicated to the First Nations culture, the Dakelhne, of the region.<sup>21</sup> Also located in this facility are a children's museum and a Simex Virtual Voyages ride. Recently, the museum has undergone a dramatic transformation both in its physical structure and its name as it was formerly known as the Fraser Fort George Regional Museum. The museum renovations significantly expanded the amount of display and programming space but, other than what is on exhibit in the one gallery, there are no other displays of decorative or architectural features contributed by the First Nations artists of the region.

The area of interest explored by The Exploration Place, as expressed through its programming and collection, is primarily focused on the political boundaries of the Regional District of Fraser-Fort George. Artifacts, specimens and archival material form

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<sup>21</sup> The traditional territories of the Dakelhne (more commonly known as the Carrier people) cover the central interior plateau of British Columbia in the Upper Fraser River and Babine watersheds. (The Exploration Place, internet source)



the foundation of this history which are preserved and interpreted.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the museum works to present and promote the knowledge and appreciation of Western science and technology by exhibiting and interpreting acquired artifacts, such as a pool table, tools, and clothing, and specimens, such as rocks, plants and animals.

As there was not a permanent curator on staff at this institution, I interviewed two employees, Tracy Calogheros, the Executive Director and Robert Campbell, Manager of Curatorial Services. Tracy is responsible for a fluctuating staff of between fifteen and thirty people, establishing and managing budgets and liaisons for the Museum's Board of Directors. She describes her management style as: "Primus inter pares, is the term for it. It's a first among equals, so I have a manager of curatorial; I have a manager of human resources; I have a manager of marketing and fund development and myself" (Calegheros, personal interview, Jan. 2006: 23). All of the managers work closely and together they discuss and come to a consensus on major decisions and issues. Tracy notes, "but, ultimately, curatorial responsibility lays with my manager of curatorial services and with his staff in his department" (Calogheros, personal interview 23). Bob Campbell is responsible for the interpretive displays and the collection. He notes that there is no museum curator and he describes his position as, "publicly, I often act as the Curator of the museum. However, knowing very much the limits of my own knowledge on things, when we need curatorial expertise in a certain area, then we hire that expertise on a contract basis" (Campbell, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 1).

Tracy's many years working for the museum have made her aware of the challenges they face to bring people into the facility and she states that they have taken

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<sup>22</sup> Artifacts are generally considered to be objects (tools, clothing, toys, art, etc.) created by humans, specimens are natural materials (rocks, insects, plants, animals, etc.) and archival material are the records (diaries, letters, photographs, etc.) created by people.

action to create a more user-friendly structure. One strategy they have initiated is a change that removes the “museum” reference from their name. She comments, “because we thought the term “museum” can be very intimidating to someone that’s never been in a museum” (Calegheros, personal interview, Jan. 2006: 4). Tracy notes that amongst Canadian museum professionals there is concern that there exists a significant lack of understanding amongst the general public as to what the museum experience is all about.

Many people who do visit The Exploration Place have expectations of what they would like to find within their walls. People traveling from other countries have expressed their disappointment to the museum staff that there is so little local/regional First Nations material culture on display.

We get complaints from tourists say like Americans coming up from the States to go to Alaska and are passing through, or there are some Germans in town, that we do not have more First Nations material out. We explain to them that actually not a lot has survived and they are looking at a portion of what has been preserved, at least locally preserved. (Campbell, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 11)

However, Bob has observed that there are people who come to the museum who are surprised at what they find on display.

School groups that come to the museum, you’ll see, especially if it’s city kids, or from some of the small communities, you’ll actually hear the First Nations kids be surprised that their culture is important enough to be in a museum. I find that kind of appalling and embarrassing that the situation exists, that these kids would be surprised, and I also find it an odd paradox that there’s this huge appreciation of their material culture but the everyday prejudice that people run into is still around. But for the school kids, I find that quite strange that they would not expect to see their culture represented in a museum, and I’ve heard that comment actually fairly often. (Campbell, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 11)

Tracy acknowledges that it has been challenging to build a Dakelhne collection of material culture because, “There isn’t a lot of it” (Calegheros, personal interview, Jan. 2006: 5). Bob states, “We have First Nations artifacts. Most of the collection that

belongs to the museum is Carrier baskets, but we do have some other material and shaman regalia, stuff like that” (Campbell, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 3). Both Tracy and Bob point out that as employees of the museum they classify First Nations material culture as “artifacts” but as they both have some education in fine arts they personally feel that some of the pieces can be interpreted within the Western concept of “art.”

I look at these baskets that we have in our collection and they’re beautiful works of art. To my Curator, they’re an artifact. So, you know, I think if they were held in the collection at the art gallery they’d be pieces of art. Because they’re held in a collection at a museum they’re a material culture artifact. I think it’s semantics. So, I think, if you are talking about the pieces in our collection that are material culture, yeah, we definitely do have First Nations pieces of art in our collection. (Calegheros, personal interview, Jan. 2006: 11)

I mean, what is art? Is it....I guess I think something is art when it makes some sort of connect across cultures, across different ideas of systems or values and people are still moved by it in some way. Then maybe that’s a very simple definition of, “what is art”? And, definitely some of this material is that good. (Campbell, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 4)

Both Tracy and Bob pointed out that the museum is not focused on interpreting and/or acquiring art, especially contemporary art. Bob states, “We have a different mandate and so we’re tending to deal with that historic connection all the time” (Campbell, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 8). The staff at The Exploration Place instead defers this area of study and collection to the Two Rivers Gallery to fulfill for the community.

To my knowledge, we’ve never turned away anyone simply because it was an art piece. What we would do with that donor is say this rightly should be in the permanent art collection at Two Rivers Gallery, which is also a Class A facility, which is a community facility. It’s just that their collection focuses on the fine arts as opposed to our collection, which is looking to tell a heritage/history-type story. (Calegheros, personal interview, Jan. 2006: 11)

Bob recalls that in the past the relationship between Exploration Place and the Lheidli T’enneh has not been strong. During project meetings, communication efforts between band members and museum staff would generally not go very smoothly as there

was not an understanding of each other's agendas. However, Bob is optimistic about developing a stronger and more meaningful relationship with the Lheidli T'enneh as they have established connections with the elders just in the past year with the number of joint projects they are doing together.

It's a different relationship that we have now and hopefully we'll be able to do much more with them. Sometimes you just have to be patient for trust to build. The Lheidli T'enneh have, for as long as I've known them, going back for a long time, so for at least 10 or 12 years, they have had a representative on our museum board of directors. I think they've been more active or less active as things change in that position on the board. But we are definitely, at this time, building a whole new relationship of trust and understanding. So I think there will be lots more opportunity because of that. (Campbell, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 13)

Tracy stresses how important it is to the museum to maintain a link with the Lheidli T'enneh and build trust between them by including them in the major decisions regarding the operations of the museum. Tracy points out, "I mean, quite frankly, we're on their home territory. Our building sits right next to their graveyard so we feel they have a right to be on that board" (Calegheros, personal interview, Jan. 2006: 6). She further states, "but, you know, it's taken hundreds of years to get us into this sort of gulf between the two and it'll take us a while to close it" (Calegheros, personal interview, Jan. 2006: 10).

While acknowledging the troubled relationship between First Nations and non-First Nations Tracy further recognizes the general exclusion of First Nations involvement in museums and art galleries.

I think that the museum and the arts community actually are aware of those challenges and they're aware of how much it hurts us as an industry to not have the involvement of the First Nations. That it's so integral to our culture as a country that we need the involvement of the First Nations. And so, there's been real concerted effort to change some of those perceptions and barriers and that's where the work that my own institution's done for better than the last decade to try and create that trust. Putting a seat on the board that's not an elected seat, it's an appointed seat by the band. I think that that will go a long way. (Calegheros, personal interview, Jan. 2006: 10)

However, Tracy feels they have worked hard to turn things around between the local and regional First Nations groups and the museum.

We've been the middleman and all of the various interested parties have been able to work together on it. I think we have a really important function to play but really, in my view, it's about breaking down some of those barriers that went up 100 years ago when white collectors came through and lifted material culture out and left with it. For museums, in particular, it's going to take a long time but I see huge headway here. (Calegheros, personal interview, Jan. 2006: 20)

Bob has found the challenge to obtain First Nations involvement with museum projects is to get their interest. He states, "There's lots of programs once you've got them interested. But it's getting that interest in the first place" (Campbell, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 14). Tracy also notes that the elders are currently not interested in getting involved with museum programming. The Lleidli T'enneh have been engaged with the federal and provincial governments in the negotiation (and continue to work on ratification) of a treaty. Many band members are focused on those political and economic priorities. However, opportunities have emerged which have allowed museum staff to cultivate their relationship with the Lleidli T'enneh. Bob observed, "Some of the discussions with the Lleidli T'enneh that we're dealing with right now are about the First Nations graveyard in the park, and to a lesser extent with the church, it's in fact the interest of the elders for the Catholic Church" (Campbell, personal interview 14). The museum has taken on the task of attempting to locate graves and grave sites as well as rescuing the stained glass windows from the church structure located on the Shelley Reserve as it is currently a particular interest and concern for some of the community members. In addition, the museum is assisting a Lleidli T'enneh family with the

preservation of a carved coffin by keeping it in their environmentally controlled storage area until it is needed.

Comparing programming for the fine arts between communities, Tracy finds that they are limited in the north. She acknowledges that the Two Rivers Gallery works to help fill this void but increased exposure to fine arts programming would go a long way to educate northern residents. In addition, she notes that once a cross-cultural event is organized it can be particularly challenging to reach people.

I think when you add into that a cultural bent you run into other brick walls, whether it's First Nations or East Indian or Chinese. I think very often you run into prejudices and you can do that anywhere in any centre, but in an urban centre it's much more ethnically diverse than it is in rural Canada traditionally. So, again, I think you run into just a lack of awareness and a lack of understanding. (Calegheros, personal interview, Jan. 2006: 2)

As a director of The Exploration Place, Tracy is aware of the line she and the programmers have to walk between keeping the museum open and the educational opportunities that they can make available.

The programmers and the directors of the various institutions have a bottom line to meet. They have to get x number of dollars through their store and their gate in order to be able to pay for their heat and hydro. So, when they bring in a challenging exhibit or something that they see as challenging to their local market they know that they're not going to make the kind of revenue that they perhaps need to make in order to make ends meet. (Calegheros, personal interview, Jan. 2006: 2)

As I noted previously, there is a section or gallery of the museum dedicated to the Dakelhne culture. Objects they have on display include clan ceremonial regalia, Shaman regalia, bags and moccasins. In addition there are baskets with some made from a single piece of birch bark with split spruce root stitching. Bob indicates the importance of this display to the museum because of its educational value and the connections it creates among all people.

[It shows that it's] their culture at the museum and that it's prominent. It's not in the back, it's at the top of the stairs as you go to the second half of the museum and it's ...it's one of the more special parts of our museum. So I think that's how we can help overcome barriers. (Campbell, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 20-21)

During part of 2005 the museum had on display a collection from the Athapaskan language and cultural group. The exhibition titled *Common Language* explores the similarities and differences in styles and techniques utilized in the production of cultural objects. The collection, owned by Parks Canada, is currently on loan to the Nak'azdli First Nation and to Exploration Place where it is currently stored but no longer on display.

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Bob confirms that The Exploration Place does not have an acquisitions budget that would allow them to purchase materials for their collection but he states, "We will find money if we think that it's important to do so" (Campbell, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 16). They generally keep their collecting confined to the guidelines of their mandate but they feel there may be times when they need to be flexible if the situation demands it.

Now, if something comes to us and it's obviously important and it's from another region and, I mean, we'll collect it if we can't steer it somewhere or they feel they can't care for it, we'll hang on to it and protect it with the idea that it, eventually, it'll find its proper home. I mean that's the most important thing to do. (Campbell, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 17)

Tracy questions the museum's need for an acquisitions budget because of the type of material they are generally collecting.

I'm not sure that we're the kind of museum that needs an acquisitions budget for purchasing objects. It's tough. How do you put a value on the first school table that came into Prince George? We had that donated to us a couple of years back. Well, it's an object, a school table is worth a couple grand, but really, as the first one that ever came into Prince George that was the center of the social life of the community, it came up on the BX Steamer, it's probably worth a whole lot more

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<sup>23</sup> The Nak'azdli First Nation is located in the Fort St. James, BC area.

than that. How do you price that to acquire it? It's different in an art museum where the artist needs to make a living and the art is important and should be preserved. There the purpose of an acquisitions budget makes a lot more sense to me. (Calegheros, personal interview, Jan. 2006: 18)

Tracy also points out that the museum does not need to own the objects that are housed within its walls. As previously noted, the Athapaskan collection is currently stored at the museum.

I like the museums now where they work with the First Nations. The objects are stored in the Class A space, they're fully documented but they're taken out for ceremonies and they're used for a variety of things. And that object's at risk while it's in use but that risk is mitigated by the fact that it's been fully documented and when it's not in use, it's living in Class A storage. And I think that's a pretty good marriage of the two. (Calegheros, personal interview, Jan. 2006: 14)

### **2.3 'Ksan Historical Village and Museum: Laurel Mould**

Alongside the confluence of the Bulkley and Skeena rivers, nestled in the coastal mountains of northern British Columbia, is the village of Hazelton, or Old Hazelton. This area has been, and continues to be, an important fishing site and transportation hub. It is the home of the Native-owned 'Ksan Historical Village and Museum.<sup>24</sup> This museum has an international reputation for its extensive collection of Gitksan art and material culture and it is located where the original Gitanmaax village was established. 'Ksan includes a reconstructed community that existed during the 1800s including seven cedar plank communal houses and a number of crest poles.

'Ksan Historical Village and Museum is a World Heritage Site that includes more than one cultural endeavor, each with its own Board of Directors, and who work toward

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<sup>24</sup> The word ksan (or xsan as Gitksan linguists suggest it should be spelled) means "river of the mist." The Gitksan people call themselves the "people of the river of the mist" or "the people of the Skeena River. (Barnsley, internet source)



Figure 8



Entrance to 'Ksan Historical Village and Museum, Hazelton, British Columbia

Figure 9



Main building at 'Ksan

maintaining and revitalizing Gitxsan culture. Laurel describes the 'Ksan Association as the umbrella organization for all of them. The Gitanmaax School of Northwest Coast Art – the Gitxsan Carving House – with instructor and Master Carver Vernon Stephens, has an international reputation as a fine arts school which, at one time, had hundreds of new applicants vying for entry into its program each year. The careers of many Northwest Coast master carvers were launched from the Gitanmaax school.<sup>25</sup> 'Ksan Performing Arts Group, created in the late 1960s and early 1970s, is an important component of the museum as they perform within the village during the summer months. The gift shop is also on this site and the museum depends heavily on it to provide operational funding since federal and provincial sources of funding were cut in 1998. The gift shop now occupies the space which originally had been designated as an art gallery and had prominently displayed art exhibitions.

As I traveled to Hazelton I was struck by the beauty of the land. I drove west from Prince George, through the forested interior plateau with its rolling hills and then suddenly the landscape changed as I traveled into the coastal mountain range. When I reached Hazelton I turned off the highway and drove for about twenty minutes on a narrow road as I slowly descended down into the valley where the museum is located. The last time I had been to 'Ksan, around 1998, I had traveled to Hazelton to consult with Earl Muldon about the carving of *The Millennium Crest Pole* for the Two Rivers Gallery. The area is spectacular with many large cottonwood and cedar trees gracing the banks of the rivers. As I made my way up the walkway to the main building I was once again

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<sup>25</sup> First Nations carvers who have been instructors and/or students at this school includes: Ron Austin, Robert Davidson, Frieda Diesing, Murphy Green, Walter Harris, Ya'Ya (Chuck) Heit, Doreen Jensen, Ken Mowatt, Earl Muldon, Chester Patrick, Ron Sebastien, Vernon Stephens, Roy Henry Vickers, and many more.

struck by the monumental scale of the painted crests on the buildings and the line of crest poles gracing the exterior of each longhouse. Both the natural and the man-made environment impressed me with its sheer scale and beauty. The museum's Executive Director/Curator, Laurel Mould expressed her pleasure to be living and working in such a lovely environment.<sup>26</sup> Laurel graduated from Grade 12 and participated in the Banff School Senior Executive Development Program. She has worked for the 'Ksan Museum since 1995 and is knowledgeable in the cultural practices of the Gitksan people as she has lived her life in the Upper Skeena region.

Sixty years ago, the Gitksan people expressed their extreme pride and the commitment they have for their culture by taking steps to preserve and revitalize their artistic heritage. The activity towards these goals intensified after the potlatch ban was lifted in 1951. Smaller museum-type facilities were constructed where the Gitksan could store the priceless and irreplaceable cultural items until eventually the full-scale traditional village was opened in 1970 (Barnsley 2006, internet source). The creation of this site has involved considerable critical evaluation of what the Gitksan wished to exhibit and how they wished to communicate their art and material culture. There is a general understanding by many people of museums as places which display the remnants or "artifacts" of cultures from a past that no longer exists. Laurel has defined the 'Ksan historical site as a unique and "living" museum (Barnsley 2006, internet source).

The original construction of the museum and village became a center that brought together many artists and community members from the surrounding villages. It was a place where they could tell their own unique and authentic stories and display the

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<sup>26</sup> Laurel is usually the only employee of 'Ksan Historical Village and Museum during the winter months. She hires an additional ten to twelve employees during the summer months when visitors to the museum increase significantly (Mould, personal interview 4).

complexity and richness of their culture. An immense amount of work went into the project with funding originating from multiple sources including the federal government which allowed for the training of many artists at that point in time.

When 'Ksan first started they had a lot of work to do so a lot of the display material used in our interpretive houses was created by artists right here on the site. Were they artists at the time? They were artists in training I guess you could say. 1968 - 69... when they first really started working to get the facility open by 1970 and a lot of local people were working here at 'Ksan on what was then called a Local Initiative Program with federal money flowing through to help the facility get going. So people were brought in and they made baskets, they made totems, they made house posts. They trained artists and this went on for a number of years and of course the art school at that time was being formed as well. It was all part and parcel of getting people trained in skills that they would need to make basketry or totems. (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 6)

'Ksan became immensely successful and popular within the tourist industry as people from all over the world converged on the area during the summer months.

In the summer it's full of people from all over the world who are truly enjoying the experience here and it's unique, it's authentic... everything about it is portraying the real people that live here, the Gitksan. We are able to tell our story on the land and the richness here. The other added attraction is people can leave the museum and actually go out into the villages and some of the villages now have their own little cultural spaces; Kispiox, Gitanyow, Gitwangkak, Hagwilget, Glen Vowell, Gitanmaax. (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 5)

After the initial construction of 'Ksan there was a decline in its programming and a consequent decline in their ability to work with the Gitksan artists as funding opportunities were limited and finally severed.

The one thing we haven't been able to get back on track at 'Ksan is offering more courses to local people. When I say that I mean courses in Chilkat weaving, courses in raven tail weaving, courses in basketry and in all the techniques of basketry and I know for a fact there's people that can still teach it but that isn't happening at the rate it should be. (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 4)

She further states, "We certainly haven't failed but there's lots of room to grow and get back on track to what 'Ksan had originally started out doing" (Mould, personal interview,

Feb. 2006: 4). However, Laurel doesn't see 'Ksan returning entirely to its original programming and operations as there are now many commercial galleries which can market and sell Gitxsan works of art.

Over time there's more art galleries. There's more artists in the area, but even in the south artists now have the ability to work with their gallery of choice. They're not all needing a 'Ksan anymore. There are many galleries that can sell their works. (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 7)

Laurel expressed her concern about the multiple demands on her as the Executive Director/Curator of the museum and the need for her to find more time to work on museum programming. She points out, "I wear about five hats here at 'Ksan, you know. There's only eight hours in the day and it's a shame that we can't have a bigger staff that could be doing more investigating in preparing courses" (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 4). Having only one person on staff for over half of the year places serious restraints on public access to First Nations art on the museum site. Laurel curates one temporary exhibition a year for a gallery located on the upper floor of the main building and they are careful about the type of artwork they place in this space. For the past two years the exhibition in this space has been *Button, Button* which examines the button blanket artform.

There aren't individual works of art. We use a lot of archival photos. We've used some silkscreen prints to tell the stories upstairs and the main reason is because it's not a secure area, and by that it would mean I'd have to hire a couple of employees to make sure that area is secure, that somebody is watching that nobody leaves with a high end piece of art. So anything we do upstairs is unmanned. There is no employee up there watching the exhibit. We have some security in place that senses when people are going up the stairwell but there is no monitor in place should somebody steal something, and that costs money. (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 7-8)

Laurel points out that she does contract local artists to build display material when required for the site.

The need for core operating funding is a critical issue for 'Ksan as the lack of it severely limits their ability to continue as a vital cultural center for the Gitksan people, but Laurel notes, "I think there is money out there but finding that money and keeping programming, educational programming takes more than one person. I'm hoping that in the near future we get back to having more employees" (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 4). Laurel understands that at the present time all art galleries and museums in the country are experiencing increasing financial constraints as cultural funding pools become smaller. Those cultural institutions are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain the human resources they have or need. She states, "Everybody, in my opinion, today is all running to the same pot of money. So you have a lot of competition and it's fierce and if you're not keeping up with your grants and your skills in grant writing you may not be successful" (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 6).

Upon opening its doors 'Ksan quickly became an art center where art collectors and Curators from around the world could collaborate with artists to organize projects such as exhibitions, publications or commission northwest coast artworks for public or private collections. The popularity and production of artwork from this place grew and 'Ksan acted as a broker between the artists and those people who wanted the art. Laurel comments, "I think 'Ksan was one of the first successful merchandising outlets to merchandise art except in the south. 'Ksan became kind of a wholesale outlet to some very major commissioned works of art and so they kind of rode the gravy train for awhile in that area of wholesale" (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 7). However, the role that 'Ksan played between the artists and the outside world changed and Laurel notes that there is no longer "a big flow going out of Gitksan art as there once was" (Mould,

personal interview, Feb. 2006: 7). Many Gitxsan artists now work directly with galleries/museums, retail outlets and collectors and Laurel often does not see the artwork that is being produced in her community.

That's not to say that local artisans, who I would call the master's in their work, they have gallery of choice now too. So they're doing major commissioned works of art that I don't even get to see as the buyer here at 'Ksan. They're so pricey that the artisans know we don't have the means to buy that type of art. Who am I selling it to? Do I have a potential customer that I know would pick that piece up instantly? (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 7)

As Laurel noted the production and availability of works of art are not what they used to be and she laments that many of the young people are not interested in the traditional arts.

You know I would like to see people tanning hides. Those who are still interested. To get younger people interested in making moccasins or anything of leather and all of our artisans who do that work tend to be women who were in their late 70's or early 80's and there are very few young men and women picking up the skills... because it's hard work. (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 10)

First Nations people have many interests and actively participate in the Canadian economy at many different levels. Laurel states that the Gitxsan are contemporary native people and they are employed in many different industries that consume much of their time and, because of this, many Gitxsan are not able to commit to aspects of their traditional culture that require intensive time and effort.

You know if you have to shoot the moose, tan the hides. Well one woman that came in here shoots her own moose, tans her own hides and makes mukluks. Well, that's a lot of work, and then she puts a \$300 price tag on her mukluks and people say they're too expensive and I just think they just simply don't understand the work involved, the skill involved. So we're still working in the area of retail where people want something for nothing. (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 10)

Laurel has developed a deep understanding of the retail world as she manages the gift shop at 'Ksan and she expressed some frustration with the tourists' expectations of cheap works of art.

So I can sit on both sides of the fence, you know, and say I'm surrounded by artisans here at 'Ksan and I work in retail. I have to have a good rapport with these artists and an appreciation for the amount of time they spend on a piece that they bring in to sell me and I consider myself pretty fair. I know what my customer will buy and I pretty much have figured out the prices and that's a really hard job because I have great empathy for the artisans but I also have to put my business hat on and look at how much the plaque would sell for and the quality of the plaque and the authenticity of the art form of the plaque. So, yeah, that's probably the hardest job here at 'Ksan. (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 14)

In order to fulfill the customer's demands for reasonably priced items many gift shops, including 'Ksan, take advantage of the availability of the massive and lower priced quantities of objects replicating northcoast art or featuring northcoast cultural designs and symbols. Laurel notes that the quality of these items are poor compared to the works created by First Nations artists. While many visitors to 'Ksan are turning to the factory made items Laurel has observed that some visitors would rather buy from local artists. She states, "I think people wanting to buy First Nations art are really pleased when it can be bought in a local level, you know; that the artisan lives here. It happens to be a Gitksan person. That is an easier sell" (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 15). Many of the tourists are conscious and engaged in the place and culture that they are visiting and they often wish to purchase artwork that projects that experience. However, Laurel reflects on the reality of the fiscal restraints for many people who are traveling through the area as well as her ability to purchase insurance for the valuable works of art.

I think that as an artisan here at 'Ksan, creating a wonderful piece that is authentic, that's made by an artist that is living in the community. [The tourists] want a piece that has had care and attention with perhaps a little story line. The artists



have to come up with that if they're wanting to sell; and creating very nice affordable pieces as well that everybody can buy. It's wonderful to have \$75 000 objects that are for sale but there's huge limitations here at 'Ksan. Nice to look at but if that's all in our gift shop, you know. I do question the price quotes, you know. If you lost that piece or if it was destroyed while on display... what about insurance value? So that is something I would like to understand a little bit better. Would they get that money back? (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 15)

Laurel has found that many customers are very knowledgeable and discerning about the artwork made in the area. She also notes how they apply their own understandings and experiences to the works of art.

Now I've just been informed about the cedar, you know, working with cedar and customers wanting to know about sustainable cedar. Where are we getting the cedar from and... There's a whole lot of issues going on out there now that we may not have been discussing thirty years ago. Customers are getting smarter. So they have their own issues. (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 15)

First Nations artists create works of art for a multitude of reasons and Laurel recognizes the conflict that many of these artists must be experiencing as they attempt to rationalize their intentions. She feels that artists generally want their works to be understood and, “that their art not just end up in... like curios” (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 14). Many Gitxsan artists are actively engaged with commercial galleries, many located in Vancouver, and Laurel ponders the difficulty First Nations artists have trying to bring their art into the mainstream market.

I think that they're still having a difficult time working with galleries and having their work recognized, but having said that, there's good and bad art out there and the prices are all over the board and if you go into Vancouver and look at galleries, there are so many now, the prices are all over the board. Some galleries are better than other galleries. Some galleries only carry high end and their prices are astronomical or you go to another gallery that's selling a very decent little plaques for next to nothing. (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 14)

Contemplating the role of 'Ksan within the Gitxsan artistic community Laurel explains to me that the site continues to provide a retail facility where artists can sell their

works of art, but this is limited as she generally only purchases artwork in the spring to prepare for the summer tourist season. Further, she states of 'Ksan, "As well as providing a building for them to learn ['Ksan is]; providing an art gallery; providing a museum for them to come in and study" (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 16). She points out the uniqueness and perfection of the site as a learning center and she confides, "There's just something about the feeling one gets here when you walk down the path. I think if I was an artist it could be easy I guess for me to come to work everyday" (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 16).

'Ksan houses well over a thousand pieces in its permanent collection which includes display material in the longhouses and the cultural regalia of the Gitxsan performing arts

But in the conventional museum, like old cultural pieces that were used by the Gitxsan a hundred years ago, are stored in the museum space, exhibit space as well as the collection area. We don't use old, old pieces for display material in the longhouses. So we use recreated cultural pieces, living pieces that were used to tell a story. There's the odd thing in the longhouses that I would consider museum pieces but not many. (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 11)

Laurel notes that for the past eleven years, since she's been working there, the museum has not acquired Gitxsan or any other northwest coast art. She states, "I'd love to do more. But right now I'm not" (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 8). She further explains, "We accept things on loan but we have not purchased anything directly for the conventional museum space. There is no area in our conventional museum space for a contemporary exhibit" (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 8).

I would love to have a new rapport with artisans and request that they put something in the museum space... now one artist did. It was a beautiful bent box with an argillite lid. It's on loan and that would be considered a contemporary piece and now that piece actually is in an exhibition in Georgia right now. (Mould, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 9)

**Figure10**



Museum of Northern British Columbia, Prince Rupert, British Columbia

**Figure 11**



Main entrance, MNBC

## **2.4 Museum of Northern British Columbia: Susan Marsden**

The Museum of Northern British Columbia (MNBC) is located on the beautiful northern coast in Prince Rupert overlooking the harbour area. Prince Rupert is a small

coastal town and a main transportation hub with ferries and cruise ships traveling to northern ports along the British Columbia coast to Alaska, to Haida Gwaii and to the south. Tourism is a significant industry in the area as indicated by the opening of the new cruise ship dock in 2004. Industry is also taking off in the area with the construction of a container port and the transfer of ownership of the pulp mill. The museum offers diverse experiences and learning opportunities in different venues. The main facility resides within a unique and distinctive structure that is a replica of a First Nations northwest coast longhouse and is situated on the traditional lands of the Tsimshian nation. The original small and structurally poor facility closed and the museum moved into the Chatham Village Longhouse in 1996.

I met with the Curator of MNBC, Susan Marsden, who oversees a number of cultural components and facilities affiliated with the museum. She possesses a rich and deep knowledge of the cultures of British Columbia coast as she has lived and researched in this area for many years. Upon completion of her education, Honours B.A. in Philosophy from the University of Toronto and certification from the Professional Development Program at Simon Fraser University, Susan moved to Gitanyow, BC where she worked as a teacher and eventually married. Susan was adopted into the House of Gwin'uu and she has been culturally and politically active in the Gitxsan community for many years as she has worked on the development of culture and language curriculum for the Gitxsan and Tsimshian and coordinated research for the *Delgamuukw v. A.G.* Susan has also authored and co-authored several books and articles.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Susan's published works include: *The Tsimshian, the Hudson's Bay Company, and the Geopolitics of the Northwest Coast Fur Trade, 1787-1840* (with Robert Galois) (1995), *Defending the Mouth of the Skeena, Perspectives on Tsimshian Tlingit Relations* (2000) and *Adawx, Spanaxnox and the Geopolitics of the Tsimshian* (2002). She is co-author of the book *Tribal Boundaries in the Nass Watershed* (1998).

The main museum building is comprised of the galleries (The Great Hall, Treasures Gallery, Monumental Gallery and the Hall of Nations), the Ruth Harvey Art Gallery, a gift shop, studio and administration offices. The Monumental Gallery and the Ruth Harvey Art Gallery are spaces where exhibitions of contemporary art are displayed. Other areas included in the museum's jurisdiction are the First Nations Carving Shed, The Kwinitsa Railway Station Museum and the new dance performance Longhouse.

The MNBC has an extensive and varied collection, including at least two hundred contemporary works of art created by First Nations artists. Susan states, "...we don't associate all our contemporary art with the art gallery and we don't actually collect for the art gallery. We collect contemporary pieces. We've always collected contemporary works, either from artists selling their works or from artists who have exhibited in the art gallery" (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 3). The mandate of the museum is to collect artifacts and archival material relating to the ethnography, history and natural history of the northwest coast from the last ice age to the present day. The geographical area they are responsible for includes Portland Canal to the north and Douglas Channel to the south and includes the lower Skeena River Valley.

Financing of the various programs is a delicate balance and includes a number of different sources. The museum depends entirely on its bingo license to provide funding for the development and maintenance of its permanent collection. Susan is skeptical of the museum's ability to access other sources of funding for this area of activity.

But because it's the only money, there is no other money... you know, they say, "Oh, why don't you apply to Canada Council." Well that's a joke. If you're not from the east, forget it and it's... You know, if you're First Nations, one hundred

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percent First Nations, possibly, but not if you're a cross-cultural institution. So if we didn't have bingo, acquiring would end. (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 17)

The MNBC is a facility where the employees work with a number and variety of challenging goals. Susan comments, “Northern institutions outside of urban centers tend to be more multi-faceted than urban ones. So yes, we have an art gallery and we also operate with the rail station museum and the carving shed and the dance performance longhouse so we do a number of different things” (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 1). Susan points out the common expectations of successful museums: “you have to be able to educate them, entertain them, feed them and give them an opportunity to shop” (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 18). She feels that the more activities and opportunities that you have on one site the more everybody benefits.

Within the museum are five galleries and each one has different aspects of culture that are explored. Susan describes the Main Gallery as a bit of a hybrid as the theme and content were transferred from the old museum. She explains, “...basically it's a set of cultures, peoples and activities within cultures. It has a bit of a chronological theme to it but we try to get away from the pre-contact, first contact theme of the old museum but it's looking at objects in terms of their cultural use, their places within cultures...” (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 1-2). As I moved out of the Main Gallery and into the Treasures Gallery I experienced a change in the feel of the environment as the architecture and the exhibition style shifted significantly. Susan states, “So the actual exhibit style changes, the mood changes and the context for the objects changes as well” (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 2). This exhibition space displays and explains works of art by First Nations. I then moved into the Monumental Gallery where I again

experienced a transition as the architecture is different again. It is a wide, open space with large crest poles permanently installed in the middle of the west wall. For a museum, it has the unusual feature of natural lighting provided by sets of large windows overlooking the ocean harbour.

The Monumental Gallery is a gallery where we change the exhibits about every six months to two years and we mostly focus on contemporary Northwest Coast First Nations art; but also, we've done a memorial exhibit for Charlie Curry who is one of the longest non-native residents of Prince Rupert who was involved in the fishing industry and is quite a person of note in Prince Rupert; and we had that special show commemorating Freda Diesing.<sup>28</sup> Sometimes we just put in a mixture of contemporary and old pieces with a sub-story line. This year, in half of the gallery, we're going to be featuring Willie White's weaving.<sup>29</sup> We're just taking down the Freda Diesing [exhibition]. (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 2)

Leaving the Monumental Gallery I traveled down the Hall of Nations which features cultural objects displayed within the context of the nation they originate from. Susan notes, "there's a Haida case and two Tsimshian cases and a Kwakwak'wakw case and there was a real lot of people from China here in the very early days so there's a case of Chinese artifacts. If we had more cases we might have lots more different nations" (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 2). As I left the Hall of Nations I finally entered the Ruth Harvey Art Gallery which has a change of exhibitions every one to three months.

Depending on our time and staffing and also depending on artists being interested in exhibiting; and we exhibit mostly non-native artists because... just because of, mostly First Nations artists like to sort of have shorter term exhibits or have us buy the pieces first rather than having to set aside twenty works and... We did

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<sup>28</sup> Freda Diesing (Haida) was one of the first students of the Gitanmaax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art at 'Ksan. She was a teacher and a carver with many works of art including crest poles raised in Kitsumkalum, Terrace and Prince Rupert. She worked continuously to revive and preserve the culture of her people (National Gathering on Aboriginal Artistic Expression, 2007, internet source and Siernacheski 2005: 40-46).

<sup>29</sup> Willie White (Tsimshian) is a traditional Chilkat weaver who works to revive and preserve this important but rarely practiced cultural activity (First Nations Drum, 2001, internet source).

have one exhibit though. It was a joint exhibit with Dempsey Bob<sup>30</sup> and Nicole Rudderham which was really neat. Dempsey put his sculpture in and Nicole did landscapes... (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 2)

Reflecting on the function of museums in British Columbia at this time, Susan pointed out the state of crisis they are experiencing. She believes that public art galleries are taking over specific areas, such as First Nations cultures, of exploration and display that had previously belonged to museums.

Well, museums are so busy being concerned about what their mandate is, who their audience is, and what their relationship to the community is, and what should they be doing with this and at the same time trying desperately to keep the doors open because the money gets smaller and smaller every year that they're not able to do some of the things that I personally think they should be doing, which we try to do here; which is to focus on collections, objects, art and to make them accessible to the public as much as possible; and as effectively and beautifully as possible. (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 4)

To illustrate her point Susan refers to two recent prominent exhibitions: *Raven Travelling: Two Centuries of Haida Art* (2006) and *75 Years of Collecting: First Nations Myths and Realities* (2006), on northwest coast themes curated by the Vancouver Art Gallery. She states, "not that I think the art gallery shouldn't do it but I just think that... I wonder why a museum wouldn't be doing it" (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 4). She notes that museums are always collecting material culture but she doesn't think the objects have to be a certain age to be deemed worthy. "There's a lot of discussion about, you know, tremendous turnover all the time of technology which we'd be collecting. How do we know what's going to be significant as an object that people are going to want to see fifty years from now?" (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 4).

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<sup>30</sup> Dempsey Bob (Tahltan-Tlingit) currently lives in Terrace, BC. He studied carving with Freda Diesing in 1969 and at the Gitanmaax School of Northwest Coast Indian Art at 'Ksan in 1972 and 1974 (Nemiroff, Houle and Townsend-Gault 1992: 127). He currently teaches at the Freida Deising School of Northwest Coast Art in Terrace which is affiliated with the Northwest Community College.



Susan describes Prince Rupert and the surrounding community as extremely culturally diverse; and she refers to it as almost a microcosm of the Canadian cultural mosaic. She points out that the many groups of people living in this region are very distinct from each other and she finds it challenging to create programming that will provoke people's interest and to adapt as those interests change.

...so what we try to do is, since it's very hard to find one or two things that everybody is interested in, we try to make sure that we cover the interest of each of those sectors of the community over a period of time and when there's crossover between the sectors that's great but it's not something that you can force people into doing. (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 5)

Susan draws on an example of a successful program that drew the interest of a northern First Nations group. The Ruth Harvey Art Gallery exhibited the works of Edward Epp, a non-Native painter who spent a significant amount of time in the Nass Valley. An opening reception was held for the display of Epp's artworks in Port Edward which was hosted by the Nisga'a community.

...we had a huge turnout of Nisga'a people who would not normally come to an art gallery opening of a non-Native painter, but they engaged in it as something that was more, you know, part of their world, I guess, and the same painter has had three or four shows over the last ten years. Different people come to different shows. Often friends and family come for the artist. (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 5)

Susan describes the challenge of representing different understandings and perspectives in the exhibitions she curates. She illustrates the difficulty by drawing on the context of the construction of the railway, noting,

...the destruction of all fishing sites along the river for the building of the railway. So you have this one group of information. Great human endeavor, help create Canada. You know all of these incredibly powerful emotional things that the railway represents and on the other hand you have thousands, and thousands of years of the same lineage fishing every year at that spot. It's like a totally integral part of their life. It's not just, "Oh I'll just go down the river a ways," because the

spots were, if you didn't have a spot like that you couldn't get fish because the technology was tied to that spot. (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 20)

Susan finds it to be an insurmountable task to relate the physical and emotional impact of losing an integral component to a family's way of life. She reflects on the relationship between First Nations and non-First Nations and their ability to work together and Susan feels that there are some strong tendencies against everyone getting along. She states, "I just see that the forces that could make... you know, there are forces that are separating people. They're mostly political forces and often just the fact that a lot of non-native people just aren't respectful enough" (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 22).

The museum has developed an extensive and varied programming schedule that meets the demands of different groups of people including school children and visitors.

We have an archaeology tour of the museum. We've got storytelling in the longhouse, we have the standard museum tour and then we do special tours for groups from the cruise ships, bus tours; and then we also do, on demand, tours for high schools; and also, not just for high schools, but for alternative schools and also for preschools but those are on demand. (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 6)

Susan and her staff work closely with First Nations artists who take advantage of the facilities, such as the carving shed which the museum has made available for them. In addition, artists who are starting out their careers may form mentoring relationships with the more experienced and skilled artists and they are able to further develop their creative and technical skills.

In the summer time, the deal is they get the carving shed year-round for free and in return, when they're around, they talk to the tourists. That hasn't worked out very well. The artists get very turned off that process very quickly so we had to hire a summer student to sort of interface with tourists and explain their work to them; but in terms of it being a public domain, it hasn't really been that effective because basically who wants to be watched while their working. (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 7)

But we don't market it, but everybody else does and so when the cruise ships are here the artists are just overwhelmed. It's just ridiculous. Hundreds of people and it's a small area, so we've actually made the decision for the artists not to open the doors unless they actually feel like it because it's too much to ask. Some of them are okay with it. They don't mind. They just take the day off work to talk to the tourists, but quite frequently we just don't have the people that can get in and so we just don't open it; and there are people who complain which is crazy because we don't market it. It's not an experience that we guarantee to anybody, you know. If you get here on a good day and somebody wants to talk to you, you have the experience. (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 9)

However, with the number of artists coming and going through the Carving Shed, Susan has found that there is a high turnover of artists in the north. She states, "...then they find that the market, it's just not adequate here to make a living and they go to Vancouver" (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 7). Susan points out that the museum does purchase some works of art from First Nations artists for sale in their gift shop; and also, they will help people to sell their work directly to the customer. However, one of her driving goals has been to keep the First Nations cultures in the area that they originate. She states, "Why should all the power for everything be in Vancouver? Why can't it be here where it's rooted? So, I think it's a pulling away from each other and other negative forces will just result in all of it somewhere else. That's the biggest challenge" (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 22).

Working in her curatorial position at the museum, Susan feels the strain of the demands on her and her staff and she speculates what could happen in the future. This problem originates with the diminishing funding system currently in place which is threatening her ability to adequately staff the museum. Susan states it's "almost to the point where I have to think, okay, that's it, because at the same time we're getting cut. Every year the funding goes down" (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 8). She's

passionate about the work she and her staff do at the museum but Susan knows if people don't support it financially the structure and programming they have built will all end.

...we just can't sustain it and it's a living organism where, you know, we have programming: Sam Bryant is the artistic director for the longhouse, we have a dance group that comes back every summer. There's a whole dynamic of people and training and development and marketing and getting known and at a certain point it all collapses. It isn't like it just kind of ebbs away. It just all collapses because you can't say, "Okay, I'm going to have two less dancers. We're going to put everybody on part-time" or, you know, "they're only going to work..." I mean, you have an institution that's working and doing a really, I think, a really good job of interacting with the public and being faithful to the cultures that they're representing and then everybody just takes it for granted and doesn't fund it. (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 8)

Cultural institutions are constantly engaged in the process of funding applications from government sources for their general operations and it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain it. Employees and volunteers are having to direct more and more of their time to market, network and pursue private sponsorship from their communities. Susan notes that quite often community members have expectations of art galleries and museums to produce a certain level and amount of programming and work which is becoming increasingly difficult with the declining public funding.

Considering the intent of this research, Susan expressed concern about the mistaken perception of art as being representative of contemporary First Nations culture.

I think that there's a danger of having artists be spokespersons for their culture and when you're in a region like this you have the luxury of ensuring the artists are embedded in the culture as opposed to an urban environment where they are separate from their culture and spokespersons for it in a way that perhaps people from that culture wouldn't be that happy with. (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 6-7)

She further states, "You know that if you're really, really faithful to the culture the art wouldn't be out there" (Marsden, personal interview 10). Her understanding of the creative cultural expressions of First Nations people is that it is something generally

expressed only for the members of the culture that they belong to. Susan notes it's "[...] not a public affair at all. It's a private affair [...]" (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 10). While Susan admires the works of contemporary First Nations artist Brian Jungen, at the same time she's conflicted by his impertinence.<sup>31</sup> She confides, "When I first saw it, we first got the ad for the exhibit that's going to be at the Vancouver Art Gallery and I said, 'My God that can't be. How can he get away with it?' I had to, I just ran down in my head the list of rules that he had broken. First of all, it's not even his culture" (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 10). While Susan acknowledges the exciting work being done in the contemporary realm of visual art, particularly by First Nations artists, she feels that the integrity of many First Nations cultures are being threatened.

I think there aren't enough people working to help keep vital those aspects of the culture that still are very much alive and that are just not getting attention paid to them and in every aspect you find it; in treaty process; you find it in cross-cultural ceremonies; you find it in the art world. You find it everywhere... (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 11)

Susan confirms that if an artist who was engaged in a modernist dialogue through his work, such as Brian, wanted to have an exhibition in the museum or art gallery they would display his work. She states, "It's not like we're exclusionary or anything, but we're inclusive" (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 11). However, Susan stresses the museum's efforts to foster First Nations artist's efforts to practice their art within the context of their traditions.

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<sup>31</sup> Brian Jungen (Dane-zaa/Swedish) is a young First Nations artist who is originally from near Fort St. John and is currently living in Vancouver (Higgs 2003: 30). Jungen graduated from Emily Carr College of Art & Design in 1992 and he recently had a solo exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery during the spring of 2006. His sculptures and installations consist of dismantled mass marketed objects into newly constructed structures, such as Nike shoes into Northcoast style ceremonial masks. Through this work he investigates the use of objects in ways they weren't originally intended and the transformation of meaning (Higgs 2003: 29).

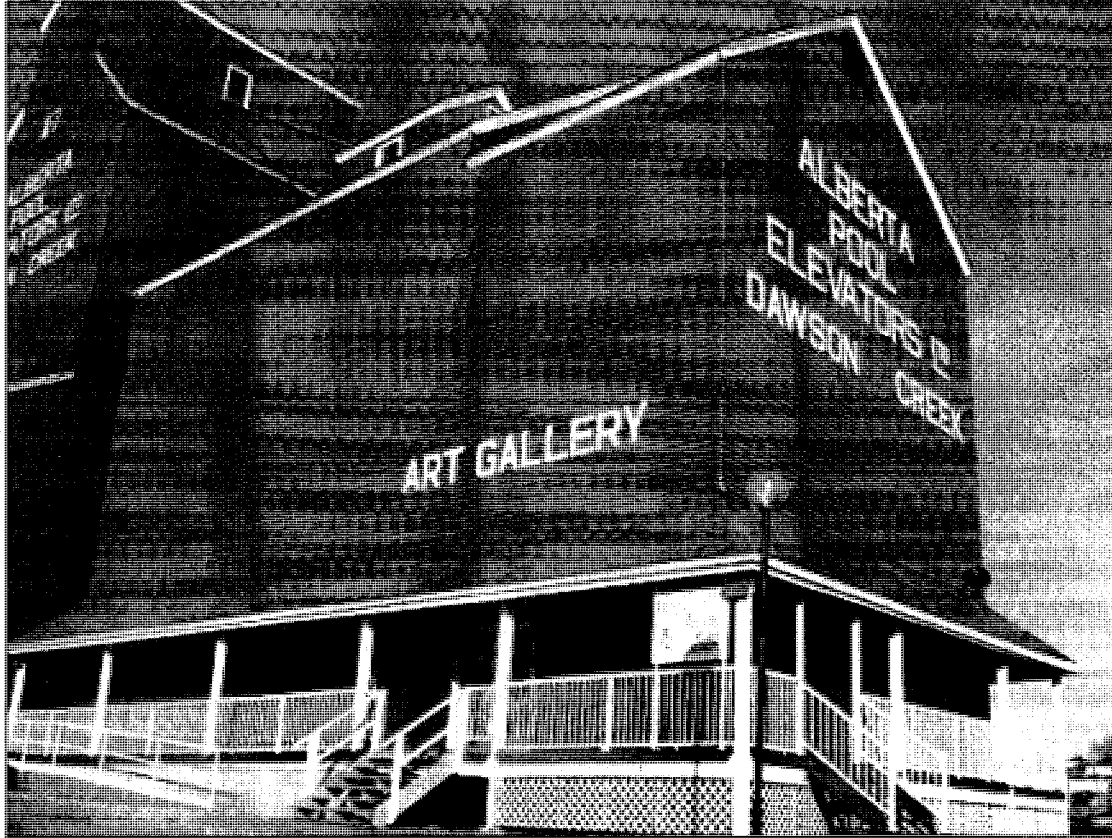
But we also do that ourselves apart from artists so for example we waited several months to open the longhouse until we could have the proper opening and it was amazing how the chiefs came and then... I didn't expect them to come. Well, I hoped they could come, but they came in their regalia. Some chiefs they don't go out in the public domain, you know. But they saw this as respectful and cohesive with who they are enough that they were comfortable doing it. (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 12)

She describes some of the First Nations artists in the area as absolutely brilliant but she also acknowledges that some of the artists are not as exceptional. She recognized that there are artists who are exploring their own cultural traditions but they are also striving to work outside of those boundaries.

I think it's really exciting that some of the artists are looking at different ways of doing, of expressing who they are, yeah. I can't see any end to it. Well, maybe there's an end to it if... I think if you get so disconnected from your roots that they aren't there anymore then there's some kind of logical question there. In what sense are you doing First Nations art? (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 21)

Working at the museum, Susan struggles towards maintaining the delicate balance away from tokenism. She does this by regularly evaluating the purpose of their programming. "You know, at the same time this isn't a First Nations museum as you said at the beginning... it's culturally diverse, it's a culturally diverse community and it's a culturally diverse museum and it will be more culturally diverse expanding it" (Marsden, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 12).

Figure 12



Dawson Creek Art Gallery, Dawson Creek, British Columbia

## 2.5 Dawson Creek Art Gallery: Ellen Corea

Approaching Dawson Creek as I left the foothills of the Rocky Mountains I began to enter the distinct landscape that is the Canadian prairies. Behind me were the forests as I traveled into the flat grassy plains before me. Driving into the small city I was quickly able to identify the historic grain elevator, which currently houses the city's art gallery, as it rose prominently out of the urban landscape. Off to the side, on a raised platform, is a metal sculpture of a human figure who is working to survey the landscape. The tall wooden building and sculpture are symbols of European settlement and the early agricultural industry that opened up in the area during the 1920-30s and which continues strongly to the present day.

The Dawson Creek Art Gallery features changing shows with fourteen exhibitions scheduled annually. I met with Ellen Corea who has worked as the Curator/Director of the art gallery for ten years now. She laments the difficulties of working a combined position as she is required to cover a wide variety of tasks in a limited amount of time, “as opposed to someone who is doing grants and, like I do everything. So that limits how exactly you can program. You just only have so much time” (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 16). Ellen graduated from the Alberta College of Art (Alberta College of Art and Design) and also attended the Vancouver School of Art (Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design), the Ontario College of Art and the University of Calgary. She has worked on personal professional development in the areas of administration and board development. Ellen also continues to study the visual arts.

The Dawson Creek Art Gallery has developed and houses a permanent collection of approximately 130 pieces. Ellen explains that the art gallery collects works of art from significant artists from their region and even from British Columbia. She explains that the region the gallery has jurisdiction over is roughly defined by the geographical location of the gallery members. Ellen states, “We are a membership run gallery, we are an artist run gallery. So we have members up into Ft Nelson. I think I have one in Prince George but not very many. Into north-western Alberta, as far away as Grande Prairie and then this area, north and southeast” (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 8). The collection also contains works from significant exhibitions which have been displayed at the gallery.

You wouldn't recognize them as culturally diverse. I do have a few that are from artists that have very First Nations imagery in them. But other than that I couldn't go through it and say, oh well, you know... it's because we probably do have



quite a few but they are not deliberately [created] with that kind of imagery. (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 8)

Ellen believes that approximately ten percent of the collection contains works of art by First Nations artists but she is uncertain because the artists may not identify themselves as First Nations.

...it is so hard to say. Cause I did find out that there is a fellow that is a sculptor here and he is just an incredible sculptor and, you know I knew him for probably two years before I heard that he was actually First Nations and actually had a fairly traditional First Nations history, right; and so, you know I may never have found that out, it was just part of our conversation. (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 9)

Within the collection she further notes that only ten percent of those works created by First Nations artists show that they are obviously engaged with and visually express their traditional culture.

Having worked extensively within the cultural sector of Dawson Creek Ellen has found that she has not had much opportunity to work with First Nations artists.

We don't have a lot of First Nations artists, per se. I find that the First Nations community here is a little bit fragmented. We have reserves closer to Chetwynd and definitely north of the river, north at Fort. St. John, there's a number of reserves there. In our own community we have very few status First Nations. We do have Métis, but they're very assimilated into the community. So you may be working with a First Nations artist and not know that. (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 3)

As a result, cultural programming in the community generally does not stress cultural differences especially between First Nations and non-First Nations. However, Ellen notes that there are some fairly strong ethnic groups, "One is Sudeten Germans that came over during The War. There is a very large population of Sudeten Germans here. So, you know, when you look at diversity, you don't always look just at the First Nations as well" (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 3).

Ellen has found that when she is working with people it can be difficult to identify who is First Nations or not First Nations unless they share that information with her. She states, “it's just not as big an issue up here I find” (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 3). In addition, Ellen finds that many First Nations artists living and working in her area generally are not interested in expressing their traditional culture in their artwork.

We do have some artists that we've worked with and had on display, and they do have a First Nations focus. But, I would say that a number of artists that I worked with here, and I am just looking at our local artists, they're not focused that way. They are just artists and so they are not really working with that imagery necessarily. They may have a little bit of an influence, but not that much. (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 3)

Ellen points out that in the Dawson Creek area First Nations artists tend to be more recognized in the performance arts rather than the visual arts. In other cultural organizations Ellen identified playwright Theresa Gladhew, who has volunteered to sit on both the Community and Regional Arts Councils as their First Nations advisor. She is hoping this will provoke increased consultation and collaboration between the various arts groups in Dawson Creek.

So that she can be a contact or a conduit between our group and any First Nations group, you know, that we are trying to encourage work from them or encourage events and that type of thing, and I think that will help us a lot, because we have never had a very conscious [connection], we haven't done it consciously. (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 7)

Ellen notes that the gallery's Northern Treasure Gift Shop sells a wide selection of works created by local and regional artists, including some works by First Nations artists. She states, “There are traditional craftsmen in the area that we work with. We carry some craftsmen and craftwork and artisans work in our gift shop, that type of thing” (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 4). I asked Ellen if they had many visitors traveling through the area and she acknowledged that there were quite a few but she has

observed the tourists tend to look for First Nations artwork work that is, “more for the craft end, you know. They're looking for dream catchers and sculptures... they're really not looking for the larger pieces” (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 3). She indicated that they were not looking for intricate or detailed works of art to purchase.

Well we actually have some dreamcatchers. That type of thing, but more on the crossed end of things and we have needle baskets from the central interior and we have some birch bark baskets as well and we have had the moose tufting and I have had some birch biting. That type of thing. So those are very focused on traditional crafts and traditional, working with the traditional artisans. But as far as exhibition work I would say a lot of the First Nations people, mainly Métis here, would be just doing whatever they would normally do, like you wouldn't pick out their work out of an exhibition. (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 4)

Ellen explains that the Dawson Creek Art Gallery will sell artwork for artists out of the gallery, “which is fairly unusual for a public gallery. But we don't have a private gallery here in town. So in a couple of shows a year we do sell, sell work out of our gallery” (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 10).

Ellen expressed her frustration with government funding agencies which generally stress cultural diversity, particularly around First Nations issues, in their funding application process.

So the focus that is coming from a lot of government agencies and that type of thing, is that diversity and primary focus on First Nations. But up here we are doing it all the time, but we are not really looking at it that way. It is just part of our regular programming. (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 3)

She points out the work she does with community schools and the visual arts programs for the Métis and First Nations students that have been developed. Grant applications were submitted for funding consideration but the writing process was challenging as they worked out the granting agency's expectations.

So it is kind of just part of everything we do on a daily basis, we don't separate it out. Which is hard when you go for funding because they want it separated, they want it, and it's almost like, you know... We all find it a little bit frustrating that way because if you're looking at making say First Nations art or that kind of expression it's just part of everything that you deal with. Well we are doing that, but we're not saying it. (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 7)

Ellen notes that the exhibitions they display which feature different First Nations' works of art tend to be curated by other cultural institutions from Vancouver or from Alberta. She notes that, "the Alberta foundation has an incredible collection and they actually create tours from their collection that are available for everyone. So, I access them quite a bit" (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 15). The art gallery usually does not showcase local First Nations artists in their exhibition programming other than the occasional piece of artwork which is included in group exhibitions. Other programming opportunities that may interest First Nations artists are workshops, symposiums or personal consultation regarding professional development but they have not been designed to target just First Nations artists. Ellen states, "I actually work with a lot of the artists here to develop portfolios and help them, you know, with professionalism and how they might document their work, and how they present their work and that type of thing" (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 10). Ellen is open to working with First Nations artists if they approach her for assistance but she is concerned that there aren't the opportunities in the north that these artists need to connect and interact with.

If someone came to me and said, "I am a First Nations artist, this is my imagery. I want help," I would probably work with them going to galleries if they want to sell their work, going to galleries where First Nation work is important, and sort of showcased. But other than that I haven't had anyone...you would get the same kind of assistance to anyone I think. See we have so little facilities here to help with...sort of psychological, the historical, the emotional background of First Nations artists. (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 11)

Ellen believes that more artistic opportunities exist for First Nations artists in Prince George and especially those on the northwest coast. She states, “I think that there are a lot of people working in that field. There isn't a lot of people up here working in that field. So that is why I think it is more of an assimilated imagery” (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 11). Ellen recalls the implementation of the *Millennium Unity Pole* project at the Two Rivers Gallery and she speculates that it would have been an inspiring project for First Nations artists in the area.

They would be able to go over it and, and get some mentorship from that person. Even to talk to that person, right. But that type of thing isn't really, particularly happening in this area. So, you know, I don't know where I would send somebody or how I would help them if you're looking at just the First Nations imagery or First Nations art. (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 12)

Ellen expressed her concerns about First Nations contemporary art and the social and economic expectations that she feels are being imposed upon the artists.

I think that as a society we are actually doing young First Nations artists a disservice by insisting that they use traditional imagery, rather than actually just be an artist and make statements through their art. I think that we made their art a commodity and it's actually hampered their expression. (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 14)

She speculates that the pressure on these young artists, many who are living in Vancouver and Victoria, to work in a particular style and medium has strongly influenced them to produce work which contains no meaning for them. Ellen concludes that, “It would be like me continuing to paint eighteenth century landscapes for the rest of my life, of England. I don't live in England. I am not in the eighteenth century. It's sort of like we are doing that to First Nations artists” (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 14). She acknowledges that there are some First Nations artists who are engaged in an exciting and

meaningful dialogue through their work. Ellen looks upon Brian Jungen's artwork as an example, "He did the Nike runners that are turned into masks. I think that is an incredible exhibit. I think that is exactly, it is like a breath of fresh air and I have seen a number of other artists that have done really challenging and wonderful statements" (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 14).

Ellen makes a connection between the expectations from funding agencies and what society desires from First Nations artists.

I think until we stop creating almost a reverse prejudice in our politics as well, how they fund, even galleries. You know they are saying that you have to have a First Nations component in your programming. To me that is reverse prejudice because we are not allowing First Nations artist to actually just do what they want. They should be able to do whatever they want, as well, right. It shouldn't be focused that way. (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 14)

Ellen has observed the programming that is happening in the southern galleries and she commented positively on the programming work George Harris has been initiating at the Two River Gallery. Ellen laments that she is unable to implement similar programming in the Dawson Creek Art Gallery.

I have noticed that George is having a number of wonderful speaking engagements with First Nations. I think that is incredible. That's fabulous that he can do that. We are such, so much smaller a facility than [other] institutions. Our budget is so much smaller and our recognition is so much smaller, that it is hard for us to access that. (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 15)

She reflects on a potential collaboration between the University of Northern British Columbia and the First Nations Studies department and the Dawson Creek Art Gallery, "Because I find that a lot of the First Nations students from the high schools are so talented. Visual arts, music, performing arts, that is really where they shine, you know" (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 17).

## **Chapter Three: Discussion of the Challenges to Representation**

I remember years ago as an art student at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design (ECCAD) my awareness of the artwork created by First Nations artists was of something that existed outside of mainstream Canadian contemporary art.<sup>32</sup> My thinking was shaped by the fact that very little First Nations art was included within the public realm, either visually or intellectually. I could see that the small amount of this art that was on public display, such as at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia and the Vancouver Aquarium, was placed for specific purposes which included showcasing local First Nations cultures for the interest and amusement of visitors and tourists. Also at that time, comparing Vancouver to my hometown, Prince George in northern BC, First Nations art in Prince George was sparse and limited to gift shops. Overall, those works were generally not exhibited in a context that engaged the Western art discourse. I learned very little about First Nations art in all of the levels of my education, other than the carvings by artist Bill Reid (Haida), and I don't remember any courses on the subject being taught at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design at the time. Yet I could see its subtle influence in some of the course programming there, including the wood carving class I managed to squeeze into my busy schedule.<sup>33</sup>

Since completing my time at ECCAD I have continued my studies of art through my professional, volunteer and academic work and my understanding and awareness of First Nations art has increased significantly. As I previously indicated, I have become

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<sup>32</sup> I graduated from Emily Carr College of Art and Design (renamed the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design) in 1990.

<sup>33</sup> The type and design of the carving tools we manufactured were greatly influenced by Haida styles of tool-making including the adze, crooked knives, and the fixed blade knife.

aware of some of the patterns of representation of First Nations art in northern cultural and academic institutions. I desire to create an understanding, for both myself and others, of the forces which shape what I perceive to be a continuing weak representation despite some recent changes in other areas of Canadian society such as resource management

The contemporary art discourse in North America, as expressed through exhibition and academic publications, appears to be transforming in a positive direction. Artists, curators, academics and collectors have become increasingly engaged with First Nations, Inuit and Métis artists' visual culture. There is an escalating awareness and effort towards representing a more complete historical and contemporary culture of Canada that includes First Nations' societies. For example, the National Gallery of Canada held the first solo exhibition for a First Nations artist, Norval Morrisseau (Ojibway), in the spring of 2006 (Hill G. 2006: 11).<sup>34</sup> In addition, for the first time in its 125-year history, the National Gallery of Canada included a new display of First Nations objects in its Historical Canadian Galleries (Whitelaw 2006: 197). Last fall, for the first time in eighteen years, Toronto's Power Plant (a significant Canadian venue for contemporary art) organized a major display of work by an Inuit artist, Annie Pootoogook.<sup>35</sup> Pootoogook was also the 2006 winner of the \$50,000 Sobey Art Award (Lewin 2006: 104).<sup>36</sup> Brian Jungen (Dane-zaa) was the first artist awarded this prize in

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<sup>34</sup> Morrisseau was the first Aboriginal artist in Canada to prominently bring his culture's rich imagery, stories and ideas into the mainstream Canadian art discourse (Marshall 2006). However, some people in the media were critical of the National Gallery of Canada for taking so long to feature an Aboriginal artist. Peter Goddard of the Toronto Star points out, "The National Gallery is shamefully misguided in taking any measure of pride in the fact that this is the first solo show from an Indian artist in its 126-year history" (Goddard 2006).

<sup>35</sup> Granddaughter of renowned graphic artist Pitseolak Ashoona, Pootoogook has broken away from what Westerners commonly perceive as Inuit art. She works at, "creating art that reflects the modern realities of an Arctic woman living in the global village, with hardly a bear in sight" (Lewin 2006, 108).

<sup>36</sup> The Sobey Art Foundation's Sobey Art Award is a prize dedicated for a young Canadian artist. Originally given away biennially, it is now awarded every year. Artists 39 years old or younger and who



2002 (Whitelaw 2006: 205). Officially representing Canada at the Venice Biennales of Visual Art were Edward Poitras (Cree) in 1995 and Rebecca Belmore (Anishinabekwe) in 2005 (the-artists.org 2007, internet source). Last year, in 2006, the Vancouver Art Gallery displayed three major exhibitions featuring First Nations artists: *Brian Jungen, 75 Years of Collecting: First Nations Myths and Realities* and *Raven Travelling: Two Centuries of Haida Art* (Vancouver Art Gallery 2006, internet source). Having frequently made my way through the Vancouver Airport I, and many other travelers, have noticed the extensive and growing collection of First Nations and Inuit artwork installed throughout the structure.<sup>37</sup> As a portal into and out of Canada, British Columbia and/or Vancouver, it is a site that prominently and importantly communicates the national and regional pride of the Canadian and First Nations cultures and their artists. As well, a growing group of Aboriginal scholars and curators such as, Richard William Hill (Cree), Cathy Mattes (Métis), Guy Sioui Durand (Huron-Wendat), Kathleen Ash-Milby (Navajo), Lee-Ann Martin (Mohawk), etc. are making their way into the contemporary art discourse (Aboriginal Curatorial Collective 2006, internet source). They are demanding intellectual transformations and recent discussions have centered on the need to take control of First Nations discourses on aesthetics, history and contemporary issues and disseminate this knowledge in local, national and international spaces. The newly proposed National Aboriginal Art Gallery, possibly to be built in Vancouver over the

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have displayed their artwork in a public or commercial art gallery in Canada in the past 18 months are eligible for consideration (The Sobey Art Foundation, internet source).

<sup>37</sup> Artworks by First Nations artists at the Vancouver Airport include: *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii*, *The Jade Canoe* by Bill Reid, *The Spindle Whorl* and *Coast Salish Welcome Figures* by Susan A. Point, *Musqueam Weavings* by Debra Sparrow, Robyn Sparrow, Krista Point, Gina Grant and Helen Calbreath, *Totem Poles* by Earl Muldoe and Walter Harris (on loan from the Vancouver Museum), and many more (Vancouver Airport Authority 2007, internet source).

next few years, would be a physical manifestation of this intent as it would feature and empower First Nations' voices and culture (Bill Reid Foundation 2005: 17).

The inclusion of First Nations as curators, researchers, writers, preparators, exhibition designer, etc. in art galleries and museums has been long in coming especially since many museums have housed their cultures since the nineteenth century. Many First Nations have expectations for future employment opportunities offered by cultural institutions, organizations and funding agencies. Yet Jim Logan, artist and cultural worker, has observed that extensive thought and work is still required to establish equality in the arts. He further states, "by equality I mean fair representation: on staff, on committees, on boards, and in exhibitions and acquisitions" (Logan 2004: 73). Intensive education and critical discourse needs to be nurtured and supported, both financially and intellectually, to continue the reshaping of the Canadian cultural mainstream, which has so far only just been initiated. However, there is a general feeling of empowerment and optimism amongst many First Nations artists. At the *2002 National Gathering on Aboriginal Artistic Expression*, Alex Janvier expressed his expectation for the immediate future: "...perhaps the time has come to build a Canada that belongs to its Aboriginal people" (2002, internet source).

As a First Nations woman whose social and cultural experience and understanding have largely been Western influenced, I have come to question the hierarchical social system in which I have been immersed. The European structures of reality are so pervasive throughout mainstream Canadian society and ingrained within each individual's psyche that I understand how difficult it can be to attempt to push it aside and accept other perspectives and realities, such as First Nations knowledge and

wisdoms... and the reluctance some people may have to question the foundation that their lives are built upon. I have worked and studied within the cultural realm of my community for many years and I recognize that the relationships between First Nations artists and art galleries and museums are complicated, largely because of colliding worldviews, lack of knowledge and indifference (Little Bear 2000: 77). Many factors exert influence on the dynamics of these institutional networks including political, economic, social and cultural issues and they are constantly shifting through time and space and are yet still Western dominated. Working within the scope of this study I will now discuss a few of these issues and ideas which have emerged during the course of the research for this thesis.

## **1 First Nations art**

From my observations through my previous work, recreational and research experience, I have found that First Nations art created in northern British Columbia is rarely collected by the local public art galleries and museums. This inadequacy creates a skewed representation of cultures and artists in exhibitions and programming. I found that the only institution which had an acquisitions budget was the Museum of Northern British Columbia and the Curator, Susan Marsden pointed out the museum's support and inclusion of First Nations artists by the purchase of their art. However, Ya'Ya (Chuck) Heit, Rena Bolton, Peter George, Angelique Levac and Garry Oker, all of the artists I interviewed, indicated that none of their work has been acquired for collections for any northern art gallery or museum in British Columbia. It is apparent that a very small fraction of First Nations art is included, thus celebrated and disseminated within these cultural institutions.

The University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George has inadvertently become an option for the placement of First Nations art where it can be accessed by community members. A few private collectors and First Nations artists have committed their works of art to UNBC, such as the Bill Reid (Haida) silk-screened banners donated by Martine Reid, a serigraph print by Michael Blackstock (Gitxsan) donated by Jean Weller, a serigraph print by Joe Mandur (Tsimshian) donated by the artist and many more works of art. These donations have been made even though there are no formal facilities for display or storage. As a student and a former Chair of the Arts Council of UNBC, I have participated in the acquisition process for the university, as I noted in chapter one. It is apparent to me that there exist few options for contemporary First Nations and Inuit art to be included within the public realm of this and many northern communities. The University has been chosen by some individuals seeking a public space for this genre of art as one of those few places, perhaps the only place, where First Nations and Inuit art may be exhibited and studied.

There exist a number of different understandings of First Nations art as many different people engage with it for many different reasons. Artists, community members, curators, academics, cultural workers, collectors, tourists ... all have different experiences and expectations of this genre of contemporary art. Charlotte Townsend-Gault describes First Nations art as, “no single or simple thing – it might be a basket or an installation, it could be a logo or a dance or a cartoon. The very idea of an aboriginal art is contested. It is fused by some histories and divided by others” (1998: 41).

I have found First Nations art to be an interesting and exciting area to work within and study as it is full of intellectual and aesthetic vitality and potential. However, it

requires nurturing and cultivation as I perceive there to be many barriers working to suppress and exclude it from mainstream Canadian society. In the early 1990s Curator Lee-Ann Martin found that, “When included within the institutional framework, contemporary Native arts are generally not accorded a value equal to other collections, which often leads to a token commitment and artistic marginalization” (1991: 19). Art Historian W. Jackson Rushing notes that First Nations art is generally not included in “the curricula of major research universities and art schools in Canada and the United States” (1999: xix). Academics are often not completely familiar with the discourse and issues of modern and contemporary art (Rushing 1999: xix). I have found the problem of valuing First Nations art continues today with varying degrees within many of the cultural institutions I have examined for this thesis. The ideas and issues involved in this “contested” subject exert influence on the relationships and the inclusion of First Nations artists and art in art galleries and museums in northern BC.

### 1.1 “Anti-trickster”

Without facing our true history as perpetrators of violence, there can be no genuine “transformative” new relationship with Indigenous peoples. The current discourse of reconciliation is destined to fail on this account because in our misguided quest as benevolent peacemakers, intent on fixing the “Indian problem” with little disruption to our own lives, we ignore a simple yet profound truth: *we must transform ourselves, our myths, our attitudes, our actions* (Regan 2006: 266).

Within First Nations intellectual understanding of Eurocentrism, James (Sakej) Youngblood Henderson describes the concept of the Anti-trickster as the twin of the Trickster. First Nations’ traditions are passed on through the telling of an enigmatic creature who teaches lessons of new understandings and realizations through his outrageous and wild behavior. (2000a: 58 & 73). Gerald Vizenor describes the Trickster

as a mediator of “wild bodies and adamant minds; a chance in third person narratives to turn aside the cold litanies and catechistic monodramas over the measured roads to civilization” (Vizenor 1988: x). The Anti-trickster is unlike the typical Trickster as he continuously misapplies offered advice to wrong situations and is always experiencing defeat and grief. The Anti-trickster is so spectacularly stupid that observers or listeners can feel superior to him. However, both the Trickster and the Anti-trickster “have didactic value, since they indirectly inculcate behavior by showing the dire consequences of deviation from societal norms” (Henderson 1997: xviii). Among some First Nations, the Anti-trickster is a symbol of the dynamic foundation of European paradigms which “justify the oppression and domination of contemporary Indigenous peoples and their spiritual guardians” (Henderson 2000a: 58). I have to stress how extensively this way of understanding saturates our lives because I know the “Anti-trickster” as it surrounds me and I struggle with it myself. In Western society the history of Eurocentrism is long and intense and it “is an integral part of all scholarship, opinion, and law” (Henderson 2000a: 58). An immense amount of intellectual and financial resources have been invested over hundreds of years in support of the ideology and the values upon which Eurocentrism is built. However, it is noted by academics that, within the fields of social thought, there is currently a strong critique of the paradigm (Henderson 2000a: 59).

Marilyn Martin explains that Eurocentrism is not easy to define because of how it insidiously pervades daily thoughts and actions and manifests itself throughout every level of our social and cultural realities (1994: 1). Henderson describes Eurocentrism as “a dominant intellectual and educational movement that postulates the superiority of Europeans over non-Europeans” (2000a: 58). It is particularly difficult to change or even

expand ideas as many people are resistant to living outside of their comfortable patterns. Martin notes “To call into question the dominant ideology, particularly its economic dimension, is taboo” (1994: 10). Westerners have created a story about First Nations and many of them refuse to listen to alternate narratives because they don’t have to. One manifested thread typically woven into the history of Canada is that of “Indigenous peoples as victims, not partners in our shared story” (Regan 2006: 266-67).

## **1.2 The “Anti-trickster” at play**

In the past, the voices and actions of curators and other staff of cultural institutions have revealed the “anti-trickster.” In New York, the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition, *Primitivism in the Twentieth Century* (1984) demonstrated how First Nations art had “value only insofar as it informs or can be assessed according to Western Aesthetic criteria” (Whitelaw 2006: 203). The organization of such exhibitions across North America have demonstrated how the dissemination of the concepts of taste, quality and sensibility have been, and continue to be, firmly embedded within the realm of anthropology and art history (Phillips 2002: 8) which have filtered into the practice of art galleries and museums. It is important for curators to always reflect on how their life experience and education is expressed through their decisions in their work and thus influence the collective aesthetic understandings and artistic knowledge within their communities. Museum employees have argued that the practices and policies of their institutions are objective but it has become clear that this is not so. Robert Janes notes “There is no doubt that the personal and academic experiences of individual staff exert a profound influence on the direction of mainstream museums” (1994: 5). George Harris mentions that his work at the gallery is focused on promoting “good” contemporary art;

Ellen Corea explains that their collection is built on works from “significant” exhibitions; and Susan Marsden notes that there are some “brilliant” artists and some are not “brilliant.” The values and understandings which shape these curators’ concepts of “good”, “significant” and “brilliant” are drawn from their own Western cultural knowledge and experience and it is primarily under their authority that collecting and programming is shaped and implemented. One aspect of this Western understanding is the idea of art as a “universal language” communicating the emotions and daily realities of all humanity. As well, artistic creativity is perceived as a source deep within the artist’s psyche which is tapped into when needed. Therefore, a viewer, as another human being who shares the same psychological make-up, may comprehend and appreciate the work of art (Price 1989: 32). Exhibitions such as *Primitivism in the Twentieth Century* “maintained the thesis that there are universal criteria of formal excellence” (Jones 1993: 206) and allowed Westerners to maintain their position of authority with little need for First Nations’ histories and concepts of aesthetics to be included or acknowledged.

It is important for museum staff to recognize that it is their own values and knowledge that they access as they develop concepts of rarity, genius and connoisseurship in their work at northern art galleries and museums. This process is problematic for the understanding of First Nations art because curators influence and direct much of the art into an alternate system of existence and circulation for which it was not necessarily intended. Since the establishment of the settler societies in the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries as well as their nation building priorities, non-First Nations have worked to overlay their own systems “of spirituality, expressive culture and



value with idealist notions of art and scientific paradigms of objecthood” (Phillips 2002: 45).

When a work falls into the Western European category of “art,” restrictions over access to images, the meanings of those images, and the right to reproduce them – which are held through language group, clan and totemic relationships – may be foregone or challenged. (Brady 2002: 27)

All over the world, including North America, artwork by First Nations artists are removed, physically and intellectually, from the context for which they were created and reframed within the colonialist paradigm. We are able to observe the process of Western assimilation of the unfamiliar or alien (The Washing of Tears 1994). Solutions and compromises may be negotiated between First Nations and non-First Nations. Ya’Ya (Chuck) Heit spoke of the development of the generic crests at ‘Ksan which allowed for “a way to work tradition with the modern day market place” (Heit, personal interview, Sept. 2006: 35). By creating these crests the Gitxan gave their own and other North Coast artists the freedom to produce artwork which did not violate the traditional laws of family ownership of crests. With the development of this initiative ‘Ksan showed how museums and art galleries may act as mediating sites where issues and problems between different groups may be worked out for the benefit of all parties.

Understandings of concepts and values of museum workers, trustees, the general public and First Nations artists can be very different from each other. This may threaten the relationship between them and disrupt the inclusion of their work in contemporary art exhibitions. George Harris recalled a time earlier in his career when he curated the exhibition *Here Today*. He interviewed a First Nations artist who expressed an interpretation of contemporary art which was quite different from his own. In this case, George Harris’ search for “cutting-edge” or avant-garde contemporary art was

complicated by the artist's perception that this meant a departure from traditional art style and techniques and an adoption of Western approaches to art-making. As noted earlier, First Nations artists are cognizant of the pressures of the market-place but they also experience pressure from curators who have specific expectations of the artists. In 1999, Lee-Ann Martin and Morgan Wood curated the exhibition *Exposed: Aesthetics of Aboriginal Erotic Art* at the Mackenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan where they struggled to reconcile concepts of art and morality with the site in which it was exhibited. Artists and curators found themselves disrupting Western assumptions about morals and values as they explored eroticism amongst First Nations cultures.

In doing research for this exhibition [Exposed: The Aesthetic of Aboriginal Erotic Art] a distinct difference emerged among communities: Aboriginal and Caucasian; Christian and Traditional (I believe it allowed me a glimpse of what contact must have been like). The concern was involving morality, that the images used would not reflect "proper" values for a public gallery, meaning Christian values. (Martin and Wood 1999: 11)

Also, Ellen Corea who lives in the same region of northern BC that First Nations artist Brian Jungen grew up in, does not question the northwest coast imagery that Jungen appropriates as does Susan Marsden who lives and works on the north coast of BC. Most curators rigidly situate art "within a Western framework that values individuality, universalism, novelty and disinterest" (McLoughlin 1999: 269).

While many museums across the country have begun a revisionary effort to assist with the progress of First Nations art and culture they continue to be criticized for continuing to work within and applying the nineteenth-century ideologies from which they were first established (Jessup 2002: xvii). Lynda Jessup argues that "efforts should also be directed towards the decolonization of the museum system as a whole, including art galleries" (Jessup 2002: xvii). However, while the Western ideological structure

remains firmly in place within art galleries and museums some critics are not hopeful of change within these institutions as they “must cater to the tastes of wealthy patrons” (Jones 1993: 207). A willingness to engage into a process of serious reflection and exploration is required to examine how the system of Western aesthetics and values determines what and who are permitted within northern cultural institutions.

Art galleries and museums further confine First Nations material culture within a Western tradition of seeing, and largely ignoring the other sensory possibilities of sound, smell, touch and taste (Phillips 2002: 62). Visitors to art galleries and museums often find art placed behind a barrier of glass so they would be unable to smell the fragrant scent of smoked animal hide on which a beautiful and ornate beading is worked. “...The inclusion of songs, stories, and smells not only situates objects in the context of their possible uses, but also affords an opportunity for historical objects to be linked to living communities, rather than be viewed as artifacts of a distant past” (Whitelaw, 2006 210). Those few individuals employed within art galleries and museums have the power to influence how the greater community, region or nation think about and perceive cultural material and history and they diligently guard access to this power as they continue to control the ideas and thought of Western society.

Employing First Nations curators for full-time permanent positions (not the typically part-time, temporary commitments currently practiced by most cultural institutions) would begin to expose non-First Nations to alternate paradigms of aesthetics and histories. There are many First Nations curators clamoring to work in art galleries and museums across Canada. *The Program of Assistance to Aboriginal Curators for Residencies in Visual Arts* was developed in 1997 by the Canada Council for the Arts to

attempt to address the issue of equitable representation in this area of employment (Martin 2002: 19). However, by 2003 the continued failure to include curators of Aboriginal ancestry within Canadian cultural infrastructures remains an issue (Martin 2004: 17).

Until museums do more than consult (often after the curatorial vision is firmly in place), until they bring a wider range of historical experience and political agendas into the actual planning of exhibits and the control of museums collections, they will be perceived as merely paternalistic by people whose contact history with museums has been one of exclusion and condescension (Clifford 1997: 448).

Aboriginal curators contribute to the recovery and revitalization of their own community's artforms and material culture which would potentially create a positive and empowering environment for all community members. Lee-Ann Martin remarks, "The exclusion of art curators of Aboriginal ancestry from the national and international arts infrastructure remains an unresolved issue" (2004: 17). She further notes that many First Nations cultural professionals express a sense of futility and frustration as they attempt to work towards new ideologies of inclusion "when Eurocentric scholars and curators continue to be recognized as the authoritative voices" (Martin 2004: 104). The artists I interviewed for this thesis revealed the presence of the "anti-trickster" within their professional interactions. Ya'Ya, having many years of experience and skill as an artist and involvement with many art galleries in Canada and the United States, knows he would not find employment as a curator in an art gallery or museum. This understanding exists because of the common perception of many people of the hierarchy of worth determined by one's accomplished levels of formal education.

Contemporary artists ...are concerned that museums and galleries overcome certain limitation in their boundaries for defining art. Any attempt to achieve an accurate definition of and context for their art will necessarily include continued

dialogue with artists. Curators and academics must listen to artists in order to “break down the wall of ignorance” which contradicts many Native perspectives. (Martin 1991, 20)

Peter George also noted the authoritative and guarded stance of northern education systems which have demonstrated their reluctance to accept elders as teachers. Within First Nations cultures, elders are central figures who transfer knowledge, ideas and beliefs ensuring our development as human beings and they have been vital leaders as we attempt to transform the colonialist landscape (Battiste 2000c: 202). Paulette Regan expresses optimism about the possibilities of a transformative relationship between First Nations and non-First Nations in her thesis, *Unsettling the Settler Within* (2006) as she states, “we can create transformative learning and teaching possibilities in a variety of formal and informal settings: classrooms, negotiating tables, policy forums, community halls and public history spaces” (271) but there must be commitment and willingness to explore and experiment with the possibilities that are available to us. The involvement of First Nations would greatly enhance our understanding of the human interactions between each other and the world we live in within and beyond the realm of the fine arts. “We are witnessing throughout the world the weakness in knowledge based on science and technology. It is costing us our air, our water, our earth; our very lives are at stake” (Battiste 2000c: 201). I, and others, can see the cost of allowing Westerners to maintain rigid intellectual boundaries as individuals and as a collective group. Our fates are entwined with one another and the concern I feel for the continued existence of humanity steadfastly looms before me. Aboriginal writer Louis Owens argues that Native American intellectuals must be forceful in their voice.

By demanding that the West begin to listen to voices other than its own, Native American intellectuals take a significant step toward those acts of cross-cultural

communication necessary for the global community to survive. (Owens qtd. in Pulitano, 2003: 139)

Angelique Levac spoke about the shame of her newly acquired artistic skills and her worry about what people would think of the practice of using one's teeth to create art. Biting tree bark is not a typical practice when viewed from a Western perspective and some "civilized" observers may find it distasteful. Angelique defended her artistic technique and was quick to point out the distinction between chewing and biting the bark. The practice of birch bark biting is a controlled and methodological skill drawing together cognitive thought and physical action. Angelique's comment reveals her self-consciousness and lack of confidence which have been deliberately cultivated by notions of the primitive and an idea that those who create such art are "not yet trained to repress their natural urges in conformance with the rules of civilized behavior" (Price 1989: 2). Art forms and ideas have been and continue to be lost because of these powerful and misguided beliefs that continue to influence many First Nations and non-First Nations. Angelique has remarked on the difficulty she has had finding someone willing to learn the birch bark biting knowledge and skills as her family and friends are not interested in learning the techniques.

Western ideas of cultural superiority can alienate and endanger relationships between First Nations and non-First Nations people. It is critical that curators understand their positions of power in art galleries and museums and the influence they exert on the understanding of historical and contemporary realities in their communities. They risk alienating the people they serve by refusing to consider or advocate different cultural understandings of communication. George Harris expressed his concern about First Nations artists not taking rejection personally and interpreting it as discrimination against

them. However, with European understandings of aesthetics so deeply ingrained within the contemporary art discourse, how can they not take rejection as discrimination? Even the “Call for Proposals” process is discriminatory within the cultural understanding as explained by Rena Bolton. First Nations artists, particularly elders, generally would not engage with a gallery or museum in this way as they would “lose face” amongst their family and community members if they were to be rejected. Their social understandings prevent them from approaching art galleries and museums to promote their art work.

I recently sat on a selection committee for the exhibition, *Wood*, curated by George Harris at the Two Rivers Gallery and I asked Angelique Levac why she did not submit her work for this show. Angelique conveyed her willingness to participate in art gallery programming if she were to be asked and she feels partly responsible for the breakdown of communication between herself and the Two Rivers Gallery. However, I think her willingness to blame herself is largely unfounded because of the lack of educational opportunities available to her as a child. Angelique pointed out that she didn’t learn to read English until she was fifteen years old and she has continued to find reading a challenge. When I asked Angelique if she was a member of the Two Rivers Gallery she admitted her lack of knowledge of this option and the possibility of participating. Art galleries and museums need to be committed to their communities and to the artists working in the region. One path to establishing and maintaining relationships is by keeping them informed of their programming and events. They cannot assume that the artists are members or that they regularly read the local newspapers or that they are signing up to become members. There are many reasons why this may not be occurring.

Having dealt with many art galleries and museums, both in the public and private realm, many First Nations artists have come to the realization of how little knowledge and understanding there is for First Nations art amongst the employees and volunteers of cultural institutions. Rena Bolton points out that these shortcomings extend into her community which she feels has economic ramifications for First Nations artists. However, the lack of cultural knowledge amongst art gallery and museum employees, volunteers and the general public reaches even further into the contemporary and historical aspects of the social, political and economic issues of First Nations cultures. During the summer of 2004 I was briefly employed at the Two Rivers Gallery to supervise an exhibition of artwork by contemporary artist Lawrence Paul Yuxwelupton and I had the opportunity to observe tours of school children as they passed through the gallery. I felt that many docents inadequately addressed questions and it became obvious that they did not have a minimum understanding of First Nations cultures and the current political and economic issues that were being expressed in the works of art.<sup>38</sup> One of the main reasons why First Nations artists and community members wish to collaborate with art galleries and museums is because of the educational opportunity to teach Westerners about their cultures and the colonial issues which continue to work to oppress their nations. This can be accomplished most effectively if cultural institutions relinquish their authority and allow First Nations to research and teach each other and non-First Nations about their cultures, ideas and needs. Peter George pointed out that First Nations have been practicing their culture for thousands of years and, at this point in time, they don't need a non-First Nations person to research and legitimize their cultures.

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<sup>38</sup> Docents guide visitors through museums and provide descriptions, explanations and interpretations of their contents.



Lee-Ann Martin comments that the continuing exclusion of the arts of First Nation peoples “implies that the artistic and cultural contributions to Canadian history by Canada’s First Nations are non-existent” (1991: 19). She further notes that such colonialist practices of exclusion, tokenism and marginalization do not allow for the complete expression of the vitality and endurance of First Nations art (1991: 19). Susan Marsden acknowledges the presentation of a one-sided history dominated by Western society that is represented in history books and cultural institutions. She commented on her intent to curate an exhibition about the destruction of First Nations fishing sites along the river near Prince Rupert. To date, it is the Western story of progress that has been represented and that dominates the local history in Prince Rupert. Peter George also noted this limited perspective and he was critical of this colonialist strategy to diminish and ignore First Nations’ presence and voice by not sufficiently representing them in the history of Canada. Educator Marie Battiste points out, “In the Canadian educational system today, Aboriginal people continue to be invisible” (2000c: 198) and she is critical of the blatant racism which is commonly depicted in texts (2000c: 200). One of the cornerstones of the continued maintenance of colonialist thought and oppression is the control of education. Dismantling the authority of this system should be a priority if Westerners are serious about transforming their relationships with First Nations peoples. Henderson points out, “Such authority has never been earned or properly possessed” (2000b: 164). Joane Cardinal Schubert strongly encourages First Nations to be vocal and to advocate for new practice which equitably distributes the authority of knowledge within all education institutions. “We have an arts history, within a greater history, that has not been recorded by ourselves, not been embraced, not been written about by us”

(Cardinal-Schubert 2003: 47). It is clear that education and training is required for both First Nations and non-Aboriginal museum personnel for successful and effective collaboration and project development between communities.

A relevant critique I have of at least one cultural institution in northern BC is the continued distortion of history in the representation of First Nations material culture as originating from a “timeless tribal style” (Jones 1993: 208). These types of displays attempt to capture a moment from a distant past and this representation is permitted to shape perceptions and ideas of a nation which, in reality, has been constantly changing through time. Those employed within cultural institutions have, and in some cases, continue to work with “the intention to portray Aboriginal groups in as ‘pure’ and ‘traditional’ a state as possible” (McCaffrey 2002: 77). Unfortunately, this common museum practice and policy have created negative perceptions amongst both First Nations and non-First Nations. Museums have become understood as places for White people with the specific purpose of containing dead objects (Mithlo 2004: 754). This practice has been a contentious issue and has, in the past, provoked anger and hostility between First Nations and museums. In Calgary, during the 1988 Olympics, the Lubicon Cree organized a boycott of the exhibition *The Spirit Sings* to protest the stalemate in their land claims and racist issues within museological practice (Churchill 1999: 203).

The exhibition’s focus on the early contact period was read as a privileging of the past over the present and provoked demands for museums to address contemporary Aboriginal issues and cultural expressions – and, by clear implication, to validate the authenticity of contemporary arts. (Phillips 2002: 47)

It was argued that this exhibition, organized by the Glenbow Museum, showed First Nations culture as having expired; the Canadian assimilationist agenda had been completed and the cultures were dead. It is imperative that cultural institutions no longer

communicate this message and that they work with local and/or regional First Nations individuals and communities to learn and understand their cultures and their needs.

[...] museums are also actively engaging in collaborative projects with members of indigenous and other communities. They are learning that they must modify the Western ideals of open access to objects and information on which public museums were founded, in order to respect other systems of knowledge management. In their exhibits and public programs they are finding ways to accommodate multiple narratives of history and culture based on different kinds of truth claims. (Phillips and Steiner 2005: 18)

Tracy Calgheros and Bob Campbell both communicated to me the problem of collecting First Nations cultural material as they have identified the problem of availability of material caused by a variety of reasons. This contradicts Angelique Levac's comment that there is a lot of cultural material and history out there and work needs to be done to record and study it. Unfortunately, the employees of Exploration Place have demonstrated an inflexible focus in their work as they continue to exhibit and interpret historical material. As I toured the small exhibit of First Nations cultural objects and the interpretive display at the Exploration Place I observed the display of historic objects. I did not perceive any indication that there still existed a living and thriving contemporary First Nations culture in this area. In contrast, the Museum of Northern British Columbia builds exhibits incorporating both historic and contemporary cultural items which convey the idea that First Nations are here now and that they are flourishing. 'Ksan also does this but incorporates contemporary Gitksan art into their exhibits to a much lesser extent since their public funding has been completely severed. Critics, such as collector and essayist Malcolm White, stress the need for museums to stop concentrating on the past and instead, "marvel at the way things are changing" (qtd. in Dubin 2001: 53).

The "Anti-trickster" is also revealed in the disinterest and neglect of contemporary

First Nations art as curators, mostly non-First Nations, are employed to fulfill an art gallery or museum's mandate which is often a very broad undertaking. Many of the people I interviewed explained that their busy work schedule and limited available time was a major factor contributing to their inability to establish and maintain relationships with First Nations communities and artists. All of the art gallery and museum staff I interviewed had some knowledge of the Canadian art and museum discourse as it pertains to First Nations art but most of them were generally focused on the so-called commercial success of this art. By contrast, most of the artists I interviewed expressed how difficult it was to make a living from selling their artwork. Ya'Ya (Chuck) Heit noted that this was the first year that he had money left over after the bills were paid. Rena Bolton confided that she was glad both she and her husband were on pensions to supplement their inconsistent income and Angelique Levac noted that artists are frustrated with the business aspect of their work. My impression, after interviewing the curators and directors participating in this study, is that none expressed a thorough understanding of current issues and the challenges to Western paradigms of aesthetics and histories that I've discussed in this thesis. Western academic Melville Herskovits believed, "In art, familiarity breeds appreciation, which is to say that it takes time and experience to perceive, internalize and respond to the aesthetic values in the art of peoples whose culture differs from one's own" (qtd. in Danford 1989: 9). Without an appreciation and understanding of First Nations art there is usually little interest amongst Westerners to invest or contribute time and money into the artwork. Frank Siegrist, Director of Economic Employment Initiatives at the Prince George Native Friendship Centre, explained that the closing of the Prince George Native Friendship Centre Art Gallery and Gift Shop was necessary because of a lack of support from the community. For

many years the Centre attempted to make this business a success but the Art Gallery and Gift Shop was a significant financial drain which was compromising the Centre's other program initiatives (Siegrist, personal communication, 11 September 2007). The cultural institutions in northern BC must create opportunities for their employees to cultivate the time needed to develop an understanding and appreciation of the art created by First Nations artists so that they may become allies working towards the inclusion of First Nations culture within mainstream society.

Another issue influencing perceptions and the inclusion of First Nations art is the reluctance of many non-First Nations to engage with the political, cultural and social content that appears in many contemporary First Nations works of art. American artist Bob Haozous states, "there's no market for Indian people looking at themselves honestly" (qtd. in Cembalest 1992: 90). Ya'Ya Heit discovered this truth many years ago and was angry and outraged when a private gallery in Vancouver altered the title of one of his works to avoid exposing potential buyers to the context within which it was created. Rena Bolton points out that Westerners don't want to understand First Nations art and Angelique Levac concurs. Susan Marsden expressed her intent to tell "the other half of the story" of the construction of the railway as there has been a neglect to tell the powerful and emotional story of loss and destruction for Tsimshian communities. The primary focus of cultural institutions has been to promote and celebrate the development and progress of Western civilization. In Prince George the victorious establishment of the Euro-Canadian society is profoundly communicated at the Prince George Railway Museum, Exploration Place and the Two Rivers Gallery. Part of the function of these sites is to provide celebration of colonialist nation building. The Prince George

community, and the larger Canadian nation, uses heritage sites, art galleries and museums to construct their identity and present it to the outside world (Marschall 2004: 96). The advantage of tourism as a profitable industry is increasingly being capitalized upon and these visitors, from within and outside of Canada, describe cultures and exert pressures on how they are expressed (Hollinshead 2004: 31). In addition, the identity of a place is created through “a process of selective remembering, thereby simultaneously legitimating the present socio-political order (Marschall 2004: 96). This practice amongst non-First Nations is an aspect of imperialism which works to repress outward expressions of resistance and the development of a consciousness which is critical of Canadian society (Adams, 2000: 52).

Martin states, “The denial of the complex historical and contemporary realities which inform much art of First Nations’ peoples today underlies most exclusionary practices by ‘mainstream’ art institutions in Canada” (1991: 20). Art galleries and museums are generally known as conservative entities which work to preserve the status quo. “The edge is too risky; artists too unpredictable, too unruly, ideas can be transgressive; they undermine authority, can be politically incorrect, enrage, and infuriate” (Holubizky 2002: 128) and “Art that demonstrates its ‘difference’ from the mainstream or that challenges dominant values is rarely acceptable to white curators, administrators and patrons” (Berger 1990: 71). George Harris has stated that he prefers to engage with artists who are involved with issues-based work and he recently curated *A Bad Colonial Day: Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun* (2005). However, during my interviews and research I found that the Dawson Creek Art Gallery, The Exploration Place, The Museum of Northern British Columbia and ‘Ksan Historical Village and Museum

generally did not explore and disseminate contemporary First Nations art which challenged and criticized Canadian politics, economics, history, culture and society. The avoidance of works of art which attempt to communicate the realities of our social lives denies and suppresses the voice of all First Nations artists.

The commonly perceived popularity and commercialization of some First Nations art has created stereotypical and generalized negative perceptions, amongst both First Nations and non-First Nations, which has caused much of this work to be ignored or avoided by curators of public art galleries and museums. The artists I interviewed communicated their desire to “make a living” from their work and they all understood the time and hard work involved with overcoming the challenges and barriers of their chosen profession. However, some of the staff who worked at the cultural institutions I visited expressed a concern that First Nations art had been “commercialized” and thus corrupted. It appears that there are individuals, including sculptor Bob Haozous, who are critical of this genre of art by First Nations artists as they view the production of much of this work as “selling out” (Cembalest 1992: 88). The artists are seen to be creating work that is not reflective of any kind of reality other than one that is created for “an extremely naive audience that wants decorative art” (qtd. in Cembalest 1992: 88) or a specific style such as “North Coast Art.” From such comments I perceive an expectation by employees of art galleries and museums of First Nations artists to produce work that is “pure” and free of the pressures and influences of the mainstream Canadian marketplace. Yet, once again this is an unrealistic expectation of First Nations artists to work within the Western art intellectual paradigm where the artwork they create is apparently free of influences outside of the traditional culture. As Joanne Danford notes “...Art together with

aesthetics is not the sole domain of the philosopher and artist, unsullied by the democratization of 'taste'. Aesthetics is intimately linked to the workings of the art market..." (1989: 6). The expectation of First Nations artists to avoid this pressure is unrealistic and originates with the romantic idea that "a work originating outside the Great Traditions must have been produced by an unnamed figure who represents his community and whose craftsmanship respects the dictates of its age-old traditions" (Price 1989: 56). Ellen Corea commented on the non-First Nations pressure on First Nations artists to maintain traditional imagery saying, "I think that we made their art a commodity and it has actually hampered their expression" (Corea, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 14). George Harris also noted that "for particular artists, it's expected of them that the artwork that they should be producing is that kind of artwork that's seen more as traditional art" (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 27). However, it is apparent that many First Nations artists are inspired and motivated by many different ideas and issues and they have worked to expand their technical and creative skills thus creating works of art which challenge their own and Western cultures' expectations. Postmodern writer Eric Michaels exalts First Nations artists and art for the range and durability and does not agree with the "corruption" paradigm that some First Nations and non-Aboriginals have imposed on First Nations material culture and art (1994: 57).

In the past I have found it difficult to analyze and reflect critically on the artwork which surrounded me without the cultural and intellectual understandings which have come from a formal education and life experience. Many of the First Nations artists I interviewed do not have access to the opportunities that were presented to me as they live in remote areas with limited educational opportunities in the area of culture and little



recourse but to teach themselves and each other their art. Often these artists barely make enough money to support themselves and their families. Ya'Ya (Chuck) Heit, Garry Oker, Angelique Levac both noted that many artists find marketing and selling their work to be a major stumbling block which prevents a lot of artists from pursuing their chosen careers. All of these artists demonstrated an understanding of the market and what sells and what does not. Rena explained her various production lines of baskets and pointed out her development of baskets which were more likely to sell to tourists. Many First Nations artists have found themselves adjusting the style, medium, technique and skill attributed to a work of art so that it fits into the market they wish to sell to.

Racism has been, and continues to be, a serious problem in Canada. It is often carefully hidden under a thin veneer of civility and tolerance that quickly becomes exposed when the mainstream society feels that their laws, beliefs and values are being challenged. This exposure occurred during the Oka crisis in 1991 when, "Canada's mask slipped to reveal the ugly and treacherous face of racism" (Jensen 1992: 18). Maria Campbell, author of *Halfbreed* (1982), states "Sometimes it seems I've spent my whole life dealing with racism. As an aboriginal woman in Canada its part of our daily life" (Campbell 1992: 7). Rena Bolton and Peter George pointed out the problem of stereotypes, a manifestation of racism, revealed amongst northern community members with whom they live and work. According to the artists stereotypes and racism are creating barriers for the understanding, appreciation and marketing of First Nations art. Marie Campbell, Rena Bolton and Peter George expressed how they also live with racism everyday as they must constantly negotiate with Westerners who perceive exaggerated differences between themselves and First Nations. In some cases, some non-First

Nations have refused to have any business interactions with them. Peter George mentioned an experience he had with a local business owner who would not consider selling his work because he believed that all First Nations artists were selling their artwork in the local bars thus undermining the value and market for their work. Rena has found in her larger local community that a majority of the population is transient and many people don't invest time into understanding or money into supporting the local cultures.

Canadian society and our northern communities would come significantly closer to a social and economic paradigm based on the equality of all of its members if we all learned to value diversity (Weiner 1997: 5). Education is an essential key to accomplishing this and Peter George stressed the need for people to be educated intensely and more accurately about First Nations cultures so that they will understand racism and the misguided concept of superiority and the frequent practice of exclusion of First Nations within Canadian society. Educators and administrators struggle with the inclusion of First Nations culture within the Prince George School District #57 according to Peter. Territorial possession of knowledge and teaching and the Western system of education are issues complicating and even excluding First Nations cultures from schools (George, personal interview 15 Feb. 2006:14).

While working on the *Millennium Unity Pole*, which was carved in front of the Two Rivers Gallery, Peter George recalled the hostility and racism he and Ron Sebastien experienced from occasional observers who passed by their carving site. Peter expressed frustration with the media as they seemed to provoke negative and hostile reactions within the community of Prince George. In their articles reporters of the Prince George

Citizen stressed the cost of the project which was largely funded through public agencies (Prince George Citizen 15 July 2000: 3, front). This strategy created anger amongst many residents as it seemed that they could not reconcile the significant resources that were being invested in what they would perceive as a valueless object. I was working at the art gallery at the time and I don't recall any implementation of educational programming to address the expressed racism. A common criticism of the project developed around Western understandings of authenticity and the persistent perception of First Nations cultures firmly situated in time and space. Peter remembered that people would yell at them about the non-traditional tools they were using to carve the crest pole. They expressed their anger and hostility of the First Nations project by reminding the carvers of their so-called "primitive" origins and the superiority of Western society. Their words were meant to belittle and humiliate the carvers.

Additional negative information was exposed to the public as the project was developed and initiated. I remember the gallery staff were frequently questioned by some members of the public regarding the legitimacy of situating a crest pole in a First Nations territory where apparently the Dakelhne did not traditionally practice or celebrate the artform. The media also picked up on this question and they publicized the carvers' confirmation of a heritage of crest poles in the area. It was pointed out that there were crest poles at one time in Stellako, Nautley, Stoney Creek and in Fort George (PG Citizen 2000: 3). The Two Rivers Gallery holds within its permanent collection a small number of important First Nations works of art and therefore, they have a responsibility to explore the problem of racism towards First Nations within its community which is working to oppress artistic expression and vision. There is a need to educate non-First

Nations about the intellectual vitality and aesthetic integrity of the First Nations artists that the cultural institutions of Prince George should address. Also, First Nations require paths for “expressing their distinctive world view and applying their traditions of knowledge” (INAC v.1: 1.3). The denial of First Nations cultures has thwarted cross-cultural understanding and has prevented many generations of Canadians from being exposed to valuable cultural resources (INAC v.1: 1.3). Critics now look upon the potential of museums to develop and promote multicultural education as necessary and timely (Jones 1993: 203).

On the positive side, the Museum of Northern British Columbia has developed a close working relationship with the local Tsimshian community and their artists and they involve members in all levels of their organization. As I compare this museum to other northern cultural institutions I noted the extensive involvement and representation of the First Nations culture as unusual. I believe the community of Prince Rupert supports the museum largely because of the recognized trade in culture within the tourist industry and the economic benefits from the massive general interest in northwest coast art. Andrew Pekarik commented, “For Westerners, beautiful artifacts are the accepted currency of cultural accomplishment” (qtd. in Myers 1995: 67) and the museum is often the place visitors go to observe them. A similar situation exists at the ‘Ksan Historical Village and Museum but currently, very few Gitksan artists reap any direct financial benefits. Ya’Ya Heit is critical of ‘Ksan’s narrow focus on the tourism industry and its abandonment of the development and support of the fine arts and artists in the Gitksan communities. Many of the Gitksan artists have been left to fend for themselves. Having examined the promotional materials of the other cultural institutions participating in this study I have

concluded that there has also been little or no engagement with local First Nations and artists within the Two Rivers Gallery, Exploration Place and Dawson Creek Art Gallery.

A viable option which some First Nations groups have employed is the construction of their own cultural institutions. Garry Oker pointed out the need for control of the representation and education of First Nations cultures and he has worked on plans for an interpretive center for the Fort St. John area where education on the Dane-zaa culture will be a priority. However, he speculated on the need for experimentation into the technological possibilities of communicating culture through virtual reality and the internet. Garry Oker was not entirely positive or interested in art galleries and museums as sites where First Nations culture could be expressed and learned. He was excited with the potential of exploring and experimenting with other places to express it such as virtual reality, the World Wide Web and the construction of studios or cultural centres, an activity his community, the Doig River First Nation, is currently engaged with (Doig River First Nations, internet source 2007).

### **1.3 Craft/souvenir/artifact/traditional art**

It is not surprising to me that the cultural institutions of northern British Columbia continue to be engaged with the Western traditional concepts and methods of classifications. During my interviews and conversations with art gallery and museum employees they often referred to First Nations artists or their artwork using terms such as artisan, craft, souvenir, artifact and/or traditional art. Racial and gender classifications establishing boundaries between craft, souvenir, artifact, traditional art and “fine art” have limited and countered a holistic, inclusive exploration of First Nations cultural production.

During the late twentieth century Western intellectual thought was critically evaluated and challenged by First Nations artists, curators, academics, and other individuals as they became concerned about the way First Nations peoples were being represented within cultural institutions. The grand narratives and systems of classifications which were prominently integrated into museums' policies and methods of dissemination have continuously been questioned in order to pressure curators to begin to address the need for a more honest, substantial and inclusive perspective on First Nations' cultures and history. However, Ruth Phillips argues that art galleries still largely maintain Western notions of fine art which is "understood as a category of non-utilitarian and decontextualized objects possessed of inherent aesthetic qualities that reward contemplation" (2002: 47). This is a problematic perspective as it creates a categorical hierarchy which curators fall back to in order to justify the exclusion of works of art such as that created by First Nations... particularly the works created by women.

A characteristic of Eurocentrism is phallocentrism, according to which those sexual and social attributes which are regarded as feminine are despised and denigrated. Significantly, the Renaissance marks not only the beginning of Eurocentrism and the conquest of the world by capitalist Europe, it also gave birth to the 'myth of the artist as a heroic (male) figure who struggles to create', while the woman becomes the Other, the individual whose experience is relegated to the margin. A woman's place is in the private sphere, with access only to the so-called minor art forms – quilting, embroidery – that are regarded as lying outside the 'high' art tradition: in other words, women's work or craft. (Martin 1994: 2)

Beadwork, basketry, quillwork, weaving, sewing, birch bark biting and pottery exist outside of the Western understanding of "fine" or "contemporary" art (Clark 1995: 5). R. William Hill is critical of the Western intellectual framing of First Nations cultural production as trivial and the positioning of this material as "craft," "which in turn tends to carry the further stigma of being 'women's' work" (Hill 1996: 11). Catherine

Siermacheski notes that the perception of men as superior and therefore the creators of intellectually and aesthetically greater cultural objects is passed on “through Western and Christian indoctrination” (Siermacheski 2005: 39). In fact, the hierarchical value of work between men and women is not an issue that made sense to many First Nations.

“‘Women’s work’ was highly valued” (Anderson 2000: 60).

The exhibition *What is Dakelh Art?* (1996) and *Under Raven’s Wing* (2001), organized by the Prince George Art/Two Rivers Gallery, were important displays which included an extensive beading and sewing component. However, other than these two times I have not seen a major exhibition which included First Nations women’s artwork in this form at the Two Rivers Gallery since. Exhibiting the artwork of Aboriginal women in its many forms is an opportunity to explore the larger context and diversity of First Nations aesthetics and history. The development of a broader and more flexible knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and mainstream contemporary art needs to be a priority for staff and volunteers working at public art galleries and museums in northern British Columbia. In fact, these are sites where ideas and values could be nourished and cultivated, thus contributing to much needed discourse in this area.

Henderson argues that Western “categories and disciplines deny our holistic knowledge and thought. Indigenous people are forced to exist as an exotic interdisciplinary alterity” (Henderson 2000b: 164). Many academics working within Art History and Anthropology have become self-conscious of the ideas and messages that have been communicated about the people they were studying and representing and they began to examine the rationale for the previous areas of study and naming. They began to consider “alternate histories and classifications, and embracing previously excluded

arts – among them, works by Aboriginals, women, and minorities, including categories such as ‘craft,’ ‘folk’ or ‘popular’” (Jonaitis 2002: 19). Artists and art dealers often find these terms demeaning (Cembalist 1992: 90). Canadian art galleries and museums have begun to diversify their policies and practice as they have started to diverge from traditional Western ideas and work on becoming more inclusive of other ideas and ways of doing things. However, these changes are challenging as there is very little communication between the mainstream art discourse and First Nations art aesthetics. Many aboriginal artists are engrossed in other areas, such as modernism, compared to their non-aboriginal counterparts who are embroiled in conceptual arts (Mithlo 1998: 61). By continuing to focus on Western themes and ideas curators subordinate First Nations and treat them as passive agents. In reality, Aboriginal people actively resist, change and accommodate as integral forces within Canadian society.

In the past, museums have largely distinguished cultural materials collected from non-Western cultures as “artifacts.” During my interviews with museum staff, especially with Tracy Calegheros and Bob Campbell of The Exploration Place, I found we all had to constantly negotiate our concepts of “artifact” and “art” depending on the context which we were discussing. It is apparent that communicating about First Nations art can be difficult and fraught with potential for misunderstandings and oversights. After years of study and observation I believe I have developed a broad and flexible understanding of art and I often attempt to suspend any impulses to categorize and rank. For the purpose of clarification, museum curatorial departments still work within the “First Nations’ material culture = artifact” paradigm. Tracy and Bob at the Exploration Place referred to First Nation’s cultural materials as “artifacts” and interestingly, First Nations works at the



Museum of Northern British Columbia are rarely displayed in the Ruth Harvey Art Gallery and instead appear in the museum galleries. Yet there is some understanding amongst the employees of these museums that many of these objects created by First Nations are beautiful works of “art.” There still exists reluctance among museum personnel to change the perceptions and categories of Western knowledge and understanding. The continued use of these concepts perpetuate the distorted understanding of culture and work to erode the relationship between First Nations and non-First Nations peoples. Yet ideological changes are occurring in other prominent areas of Canada. “The transformation of the concept of artifact into fine art is now becoming more accepted. The National Gallery of Canada has embraced the thought...” (Logan 2004:73). These transformations need to occur within the museums of northern British Columbia.

## **2 First Nations artists of northern British Columbia**

Let us have hope that the year 1992 will bring winds of change that will see America’s first peoples begin to enact in earnest, with their arts, their words and their teachings, the vision of balance and beauty that they have preserved against all odds and expectations for half a millennium, for this time when it is truly needed and searched for. (Georges E. Sioui Wendayete 1992: 68)

First Nations artists face multiple challenges and difficulties in northern BC including limited audiences, isolation, high costs of transportation, lack of role models and mentors, lack of training and education as well as rigid perceptions and stereotyping. Addressing these problems requires action and creativity and will fuel the vitality and strength of northern cultures.

At the *National Gathering on Aboriginal Artistic Expression* in 2002 Alanis Obomsawin, documentary filmmaker, singer, artist, educator and activist, commented on

the importance of Canadian cultural institutions. The winds of change had brought progress regarding the increased inclusion of First Nations artists and improved race relations within art galleries and museums. However, she noted that a great deal of work still needed to be done (National Gathering on Aboriginal Artistic Expression 2002, internet source). Through examining the programming and collecting that is implemented in northern BC cultural institutions the point made by Obomsawin became clear to me. It is important for First Nations artists to know that they can work to help bring about these much needed changes and they can contribute towards improving relationships between themselves, their communities and non-First Nations. Obomsawin encouraged artists to continue supporting each other and praised them for their accomplishments to date (National Gathering on Aboriginal Artistic Expression, 2002 internet source).

Rena Bolton spoke at length about her involvement in the past with the Native Arts and Crafts Society which networked with First Nations artists across the province. With the demise of this group, communication between First Nations artists in northern BC became difficult and they became more isolated from each other. Rena notes that she doesn't know what is happening in other areas. She further notes, "Artists are very silent people. They don't talk about what they sell. That's not something they discuss. It's not a nice thing to talk about: what you've been making or what's sold, and you don't boast about it" (Bolton, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 18). In her article *Weaving Stories of Art*, Delores Churchill refers to the teachings of her elders. "I can remember being told by my grandmother not to put my name on my work at school. She said this was a sign of bragging and we had to stay humble" (Churchill 2002: 219). First Nations artists who

choose to participate in the mainstream commercial market and contemporary art discourse need to understand the conflicting pressures on them from their own and non-Native cultures. First Nations curators understand some of the areas where artists have issues and problems building success. Lee-Ann Martin suggests that First Nations artists “build a wide and strong network with other artists, curators, and communities for support and critique, which are essential for creative growth” (Martin 2006: 17).

The artists I interviewed have been disappointed by the amount and availability of information regarding cultural events in the north and beyond, activities of other artists and other relevant artistic issues. In a few communities there are structures and programming in place that help artists develop professional skills and artistic understandings. At the same time northern artists have an opportunity to network and learn from each other. I am aware of only a few sites in northern BC which have specifically been put in place for First Nations artists including the carving shed at the Museum of Northern British Columbia, the newly implemented Frieda Diesing School of Northwest Coast Art and the Gitanmaax School of Northwest Coast Art at “Ksan. In these spaces students and artists can work and consult with senior carvers. In addition, once a year many British Columbia art galleries have programming for local and regional artists which involves an exhibition, workshops and networking opportunities.<sup>39</sup> However, as far as I could tell very few First Nations artists participate in this programming.<sup>40</sup> In Dawson Creek, Ellen Corea was unsure if there were many First Nations artists participating in their programming and she pointed out that it was difficult

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<sup>39</sup> In Prince George this annual exhibition is called *Arts Fest* and it is organized by the Central Interior Regional Arts Council and hosted by the Two Rivers Gallery.

<sup>40</sup> During the eight year period (1993 – 2001) that I worked at the Prince George Art/Two Rivers Gallery I only know of three First Nations artists who participated in *Arts Fest*, Angelique Levac, Michael Blackstock and Heather Potts.

to know unless they verbalized the fact of their racial background. First Nations artists are conscious and deeply affected by the anti-trickster at play. Peter George, Angelique Levac, Rena Bolton and Garry Oker perceived the limited understanding and knowledge non-First Nations have of what they know of as art. The gallery programming I described above is open to all artists but do they feel welcome to participate when they understand that many non-First Nations do not view them as artists? These artists must understand that their works and their ideas are worthy and valued and they must not accept the status quo that excludes them from mainstream society. Lee-Ann Martin suggests that artists must “always, always keep experimenting and pushing your (frequently self-imposed) boundaries” (Martin 2006: 17).

Angelique Levac has observed that First Nations artists are seeking mentors and/or role models for advice and encouragement and at times some of these artists will consult with her. Ya’Ya (Chuck) Heit also has looked within his community for advisors and he confers with another local artist for technical advice. There are few opportunities for education and mentoring within art and culture in many northern BC communities including Prince George. The College of New Caledonia has a fine arts program with one First Nations art course (First Nations Art, Design and Technology) currently being taught by Peter George. The University of Northern British Columbia did not have a fine arts program until the fall of 2007 when they initiated the Bachelor of Fine Arts jointly with the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. Courses (Art and Material Culture of BC First Nations, Clothing and Adornment, Advanced Topics: Art and Culture) from UNBC’s First Nations Studies may be credited toward the degree but they have been offered inconsistently because of faculty changes. Even in the major urban centre,

Vancouver, artist Lyle Wilson noted that he keenly felt the impact of a lack of mentors and teachers. As a former student of the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, he found that no First Nations art or techniques were taught at Emily Carr when he was there. In addition, the mainstream commercial market can be an intimidating and confusing area to work within and it takes time and effort to become proficient in the promotion and selling of one's artwork. Angelique Levac stated that many artists are frustrated because they don't know how to go about the business of being an artist (Levac, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 32). Some people suggest that training programs be quickly implemented in the arts "to make artists more capable of functioning in the marketplace" (Henighan 1997, internet source). Martin recommends that First Nations artists must "research, research, research – conceptual approaches, materials, professional development opportunities, networking, acquisition and exhibition possibilities" (Martin 2006: 17).

Museums have come under considerable scrutiny by First Nations artists and curators over the past twenty years but many First Nations have come to understand some of their function and potential uses. The preservation of material culture is viewed as a positive action with ramifications for self-determination. These objects inform contemporary living cultures giving opportunities for renewal. Artists, such as Lyle Wilson and Robert Davidson have used museum collections to research and expand their knowledge on technique and form for their work on crest poles (Burnham 2006). The museums and art galleries are reservoirs of past knowledge and techniques as some of them contain works of art by First Nations artists. The Museum of Anthropology and the Royal British Columbia Museum have in their possession a variety of works from all over the province which First Nations artists have used as teaching resources. Rena

Bolton noted that she started her serious comprehension of weaving at the provincial museum in Victoria, BC. A stronger relationship with First Nations artists will reveal paths of opportunity and benefit for art galleries and museums and artists.

The important role artists play is recognized within First Nations cultures. Doreen Jensen perceives artists in her life as spiritual advisors. “In another five hundred years, who is going to remember Prime-Minister-What’s-His-Name or Millionaire-What’s-His-Name? Our cultural life – our art – is all we will be remembered by” (Jensen 1992: 18). All aspects of First Nations culture: song, dance, beading, weaving, carving and other forms provide the foundation for “autonomy, solidarity, self-determination and the means for keeping our spirit alive” (Bereznak Kenny 1998: 77-78).

### **3 Relationships between local and regional**

#### **First Nations artists and art galleries and museums**

Museums across the country have been struggling with their identity as they attempt to reconcile their meaning and purpose to the modern public. The board and staff of the Exploration Place recently attempted to restructure and now presents an altered appearance while attempting to retain some aspects of the original museum. The angst experienced within this institution is evident in their name change and removal of the word “museum” from its title. Other institutions in Canada have also undergone similar upheaval as they transformed from museum to science centre. In Toronto, the Ontario Science Centre was originally constructed in 1966 to be a museum but the government and some board members “had decided that museums were somehow a bad thing” (Cameron 2004: 61). Art galleries in Canada generally have remained fixed on their role as museums of art history and sites for the exhibition and discourse of contemporary art.

Susan Marsden noted the museums' crisis as she questioned the activities of prominent museums in British Columbia and their failure to engage with their communities and collections (personal interview, Feb. 2006: 4).

The relationships between museums and First Nations have been tumultuous as there are ongoing disputes, negotiations and attempts at reconciliation. The Haisla people of British Columbia's north coast struggled for many years to find, and have returned, a sacred crest pole that was removed from their territory in 1929. The pole was reclaimed from Sweden's National Ethnographic Museum (Totem 2003). The development of funding for curatorial internships and fellowships, such as the *The Assistance to Aboriginal Curators for Residencies Program* offered the Canada Council for the Arts, attempts to encourage the inclusion of Aboriginal curators in art centres. However, Cathy Mattes described her experience at the Winnipeg Art Gallery "like being taken to the top of a mountain and shown what you'll never have" (Mattes 2004: 90). Upon the completion of her curatorial residency in 1999 this gallery failed to express a long-term commitment to keeping an Aboriginal curator and thus to Aboriginal art (Mattes 2003: 90). The appeal for the boycott of *The Spirit Sings* (1988) at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary raised awareness of the distrust and anger felt by First Nations in Canada and the ongoing colonialist agendas practiced within cultural institutions. Museums have taken much from First Nations and are slow to repatriate what rightfully belongs to Aboriginal peoples. As well, museums have failed and continue to fail to effectively involve represented First Nations in their program planning. "In too many instances this failure contributes to the continuing sense of alienation and paternalistic exploitation felt by ethnic communities in regard to museums" (Jones 1993: 215). In response to the protests

against *The Spirit Sings* exhibition the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Museums Association formed a task force to address the areas of conflict. *The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* acknowledges that task force's report and rearticulates its ethical implications and guidelines.

Research systems and practices should enable Aboriginal communities to exercise control over information relating to themselves and their heritage. Research projects should be managed jointly with Aboriginal people, and communities being studied should benefit from training and employment opportunities generated by the research. Above all, it is vital that Aboriginal peoples have direct input in developing and defining research practices and projects related to them. (INAC 1996: 3.6.7)

There is still much work to be done amongst many northern cultural institutions to change relationships between First Nations and non-First Nations. The artists I interviewed for this thesis have tapped into the existence of a long and bitter history as they expressed their anger and frustrations with continuing injustices within Canadian society. Rena Bolton pointed out how Westerners "railroad over us" while Peter George observed the refusal to acknowledge First Nations art. They have an understanding of a Canadian society where non-First Nations have largely taken and done what they wanted with First Nations peoples' cultures and art without consulting and including First Nation peoples.

George Harris of the Two Rivers Gallery expressed his "profound, very strong" interest in First Nations art which he has explored with the programming he has implemented at the gallery (Harris, personal interview, 2006: 5). This has contributed to the development of the exhibitions *What is Dakelh Art?* (1996), *Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: A Bad Colonial Day* (2005), borrowing the exhibitions *Rick Rivet: A Survey 2000-2005*, *This Land is Mime Land* (2006) by Shelley Niro and organizing the



Speaker Series with Robert Davidson, Art Wilson and Joane Cardinal Schubert.

However, much more work needs to be done, especially with the local and regional First Nations communities to further contemporary artistic practice and culture under the auspices of this gallery. Most of the First Nations artists George Harris has recently included in the gallery are largely engaged in contemporary Western aesthetics and practices such as paintings on canvas and printmaking. Some artists, such as Robert Davidson and Art Wilson, who presented work and talked at the Two Rivers Gallery, also are engaged in traditional methods of art making such as carving. A more inclusive programming needs to be developed with First Nations to continue researching and exploring traditional Lheidli T'enneh and Dakelhne art discourse. This action would not only empower and recognize the enduring First Nations cultures in northern British Columbia but it also would help to make the gallery's programming more meaningful to its local community.

My observations of many cultural institutions are that many have a problem with establishing meaningful connections with various individuals and the communities in the areas in which they have been established. Art galleries and museums seem to operate with the assumption that the general public and artists understand their purpose and the various practices they employ. Most of the artists I interviewed expressed their lack of knowledge around membership, exhibitions, collecting and curatorial roles. While Peter George knew of many of the works in the permanent collection of the Two Rivers Gallery he was unaware of any cultural material in storage at Exploration Place.

From what I have observed, outside of the museum gift shop, art galleries and museums are not interested in any commercial component of the art they are exhibiting.

George Harris remarked that the Two Rivers Gallery “is absolutely not interested in being a ‘commercial’ gallery and having a ‘commercial’ exhibition” (personal interview 11). My understanding is that museums become vulnerable and may put into jeopardy their status and privileges if it is perceived by funding agencies that are running a business for profit. However, many First Nations artists are engaged in their practice with the intent of making a living. Artists generally cannot afford to give away their works of art as it is usually expected or hoped by art galleries and museums so that they may develop their permanent collections. As First Nations artists originate from oppressed peoples they are marginalized and often do not have as many economic opportunities as non-Native artists. Many First Nations have been creative and persistent as they have attempted to create paths of participation within mainstream Canadian society. Some artists, such as Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Robert Davidson, Joane Cardinal-Schubert and Jane Ash-Poitras have developed very successful artistic careers. However, cultural institutions have unrealistic cultural and economic expectations of First Nations artists as they assume they will work within their established systems and rules of exhibition, collecting and commercial enterprises. Their alternative is to find other avenues in which they can market and sell their work. Art galleries, museums and funding agencies must examine their policies and practices which have perhaps inadvertently worked to exclude First Nations artists.

As I traveled through northern British Columbia I found there existed few sites where First Nations art is celebrated and disseminated. The works of art by local artists are often not included in the physical structure and grounds of cultural institutions, in exhibitions or other events. Amongst the art galleries and museums I visited while

researching this thesis, the Museum of Northern British Columbia was generally an exceptional example of inclusion as they are engaged with First Nations cultures at almost every level of their physical structures and museum practice. However, their museum shop is largely focused on selling jewelry, books and other “trinkets” with limited marketing of other items by First Nations artists. The Museum of Northern British Columbia and Susan Marsden have established and cultivated many extensive relationships with First Nations artists and they are involved at many levels. While the ‘Ksan Historical Village and Museum’s buildings and monumental artworks extensively represents traditional Gitksan culture the extremely limited programming is generally not inclusive of local First Nations artists and contemporary First Nations art. ‘Ksan does have an exhibition space which includes one changing exhibition a year but it does not necessarily include First Nations art. However, during the summer of 2006, Laurel Mould organized a fascinating exhibition that included traditional and contemporary Gitksan button blankets. The purchasing the museum does for its shop is sporadic and it is limited to specific artists and items; again jewelry is a featured product. In addition, although First Nations artists sit on the board of directors, the museum governance appears to be closed to new ideas and opportunities. A limited number of relationships exist between ‘Ksan, Laurel Mould and the Gitksan artists and some are tenuous at best. The Two Rivers Gallery has curated a few important First Nations exhibitions and the acquisition project, the *Millennium Unity Pole*, but they have not been consistent in their inclusion of First Nations artists and art, particularly from the local and regional communities. George Harris and the staff of the Two Rivers Gallery have cultivated a number of relationships with nationally known First Nations artists but they have

developed few relationships within the local community and area. The only First Nations art featured at the Exploration Place was a small display of “artifacts” and they did not carry any First Nations art in their small gift shop at the time of my visit. The Exploration Place has been proactive in their attempts to build working relationships with the Dakelhne but they must look harder and be more flexible in who they chose to engage with. Many elders and leaders are engaged with political and economic developments, but there are other knowledge holders who are available and who are looking for opportunities to explore and express their culture. The physical structure and the accompanying art installation on the grounds of the Dawson Creek Art Gallery together are a monument to Western civilization. Little First Nations art is disseminated in that gallery’s programming with some small works in their gift shop. The Dawson Creek Art Gallery and Ellen Corea have very little interaction with First Nations groups citing the distance of the communities from Dawson Creek despite the extensive region (which encompasses these communities) that is included in its mandate and their connection to significant Canadian artists who originate from the region such as Brian Jungen.

As of ten years ago, in 1997, various studies and reports compiled on Canada’s work organizations speculated that most were only just beginning to become inclusive of workers from cultures not seen as part of the in-group and unfortunately, very few “are even close to succeeding at diversity” (Weiner 1997: 39). Art galleries and museums in northern BC face the challenge to make inclusiveness a core value of their function. The excuse most museum employees voiced, that they have no time or resources, creates a situation which is a poor example for other organizations and individuals in their communities and regions who look upon them for knowledge, ideas and leadership.

Cultural institutions must be more creative and flexible in their approach to building relationships and harnessing the talents within their communities so that they can meet the needs of artists and visitors.

Art exhibitions, accompanied by exhibition catalogues, which are curated in-house by art galleries and museums, contribute to the discourse for contemporary Canadian art. Most artists seek solo exhibitions with public art galleries in an effort to cultivate public recognition of their work and further their artistic careers. The art galleries in Dawson Creek and Prince George reported that they occasionally borrow exhibitions for display featuring solo and group First Nations artists but only the Two Rivers Gallery has curated a solo exhibition with a First Nations artist, *Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: A Bad Colonial Day* (2005). The museums, Exploration Place and 'Ksan, since it lost its funding, rarely organize temporary exhibitions featuring First Nations artists. The Exploration Place organized an important display *Common Language: Artifacts from the Athapaskan Language Group* (2005) which featured a number of spectacular sewn and beaded works. The Museum of Northern British Columbia regularly curated exhibitions featuring First Nations artists in solo and group displays; however, interestingly, the work of First Nations artists are rarely exhibited in the space designated as the art gallery. A sporadic and minor involvement with exhibitions reveals a lack of commitment to First Nations cultures and contemporary art. In 1991, Lee-Ann Martin reported to the Canada Council for the Arts that many of the Canadian cultural institutions in her study were occasionally organizing and/or borrowing exhibitions of works by contemporary First Nations artists. She noted, however, that this periodic

inclusion tended to prevent, “any sustained commitment to developing a collection of First Nations art, thus perpetuating long-term exclusion of these works” (1996: 17).

### **3.1 Tokenism in art galleries and museums of northern British Columbia**

I perceive the practice of tokenism as a frequent and persistent occurrence within the cultural institutions of northern BC. Poka Laenui reiterates tokenism/surface accommodation as a stage of colonization where the surviving remnants of a culture are granted some acceptance. “They are tolerated as an exhibition of the colonial regime’s sense of leniency to the continuing ignorance of the Natives” (Laenui 2000: 151). Susan Marsden spoke of her role at the museum and her conscientious examination of the motivations for programming of events to avoid tokenism. She reassesses each situation to make sure the museum is undertaking a project or an event for the right reasons. Almost two decades ago Lee-Ann Martin found that many cultural institutions in Canada were practicing periodic or “soft” inclusion of works by First Nations artists. Some artists were included within group or small solo exhibitions with minimal or no support materials. Very few art galleries and museums were committed to long-term and intensive studies and promotion of First Nations contemporary art (1991: 25). “This intermittent inclusion, or ‘tokenism,’ almost always guarantees consistent exclusion of these artists and gives the impression that there is no problem of exclusion” (1991: 25).

### **3.2 Art gallery and museum board of directors**

I am passionate about the fine arts, particularly visual art, but my experience as an employee of an art gallery was not entirely positive. While I was working at the Two Rivers Gallery I became increasingly frustrated with the dynamics between the Board of

Directors, the Curator and/or Director, the staff and the artists. I found quite often there were different agendas being applied to the communication of creative expression by people who were in power and who did not necessarily have any artistic background and the people who worked at communicating the art. Rena Bolton also perceived the conflict between the board members and staff of museums which caused her to make the comment, “maybe the artists and the crafts are just a sideline” (Bolton, personal interview, Feb. 2006: 22). Rena Bolton experienced the power the Board of Directors possesses amongst them and questioned the member’s intentions and knowledge. She observed an incident of conflict between member(s) of the board and a museum staff member which left her questioning their commitment to artists and the arts.

From my experience at the Two Rivers Gallery, it appeared to me that most board members were primarily focused on the business and financial aspects of the gallery. They were concerned with the monetary returns of the business of culture which I feel is unrealistic and inappropriate. Interestingly, most board members at both the Two Rivers Gallery and Exploration Place originated from the business and professional sectors of Prince George and the board compilation did not come close to representing the cultural/artistic sector of our community. I also noted at the Two Rivers Gallery that there was often no competition for board seats and, instead, new members were selected by the Board of Directors with some input by staff members. Within the Canadian cultural community concern has been expressed that “positions in public life are being taken up and passed on via a closed network and that the process of appointment is neither fair nor transparent” (Museums Association News 2002: 12). The financial responsibilities taken on by the board members are a heavy and increasingly difficult

burden as they find themselves having to work harder and longer on their fundraising efforts. This has occurred as the private sector of Canadian society is increasingly asked to contribute to their community's cultural institutions. As a result "museums are placing more emphasis on who can raise money rather than who can represent communities" (Bolton 2006, internet source). This is problematic as museums are unable to fully commit themselves to the responsibility of addressing First Nations issues (Bolton 2006, internet source).

Ya'Ya (Chuck) Heit, Angelique Levac and George Harris mentioned the role of the Board of Directors and, from their different experiences, identified deficiencies with how they functioned effectively for the community and/or the artists of their region. Angelique has observed that board members do not know much about First Nations Art as most of these people are not First Nations. Ya'Ya (Chuck) Heit found the board members at 'Ksan to be unmotivated and he was overwhelmed with the futility of his position as an artist in his community. George Harris made a comment about a function of board members as community liaisons between cultural groups that was not being fulfilled. A process involving education and empowered representation needs to be implemented for trustees of cultural institutions to address these significant deficiencies identified by artists and curators. There is also a "...need for trustee training, job descriptions and methods of recruitment designed to draw from a much wider pool" (Morris 2003: 4).

A few of the artists I interviewed expressed their unfamiliarity and confusion regarding the role of the art gallery and museum board of trustees. The Two Rivers Gallery, the Exploration Place, 'Ksan and the Museum of Northern BC had First Nations



representatives sitting on their boards. The Prince Rupert museum was the only cultural institution with a First Nations artist volunteering as a board trustee. The Dawson Creek Art Gallery did not, as far as they were aware, have a First Nations representative on their board of directors.

### **3.3 Permanent collections**

Collections of art in cultural institutions of northern British Columbia may be acquired through programs of purchase or donation and are usually guided by a collection policy framework. As public funding for these institutions becomes increasingly limited acquisition funds have become limited and, in many cases, they are non-existent. Lee-Ann Martin points out the disadvantage of an underdeveloped or absent collecting program which is active and purposeful. "...the acceptance of a disproportionate number of donations implies a lesser commitment in certain collection areas. An active purchase program reflects institutional commitment to build a collection in a serious and systematic manner" (1991: 5). Martin reported that the practice of exclusion was commonly explained by gallery and museum leaders as a problem with inadequate funding (1991: 19). According to the directors and curators of northern art galleries and museums funding is also an issue and acquisition funds are rare.

Some northern art galleries and museums, such as the Two Rivers Gallery, are dependent on the donation of art to build their collections. The development and growth of these collections are dependent upon the financial ability of artists to give up their works in exchange for some tax benefits or the generosity of affluent community members who are also seeking tax benefits or the establishment of a legacy for which they will be recognized by future generations. This strategy creates a hierarchy as to

whose artwork is represented in these cultural institutions as the tastes of affluent community members represent what are in the collections of these art galleries and museums.

### 3.4 Senses of art

#### *The Sense of Art*

Blue is the shade  
Of my anticipation. Dawn  
Speaks in shimmering  
Tones. Somewhere  
An eagle flies

In this blanket of light  
I wait

This is the time to dream  
(Bereznak Kenny 1998: 82)

As I've discussed earlier in this chapter, the relationship between First Nation artists and cultural institutions suffers significantly because these groups have very different understandings of art. Pomo elder Mabel McKay does not recognize the Western concept of art and she describes art in intangible terms. "It's no such a thing art. It's spirit. My grandma never taught me nothing about the baskets. Only the spirit trained me. I only follow my Dream. That's how I learn" (Sarris 1994: 2). Douglas J. Cardinal also spoke of the different perceptions of art and how his Elders instruct that the expression of creativity comes from the heart. He further states, "we always did things beautifully, even our clothes, everything. Art is not a separate word in our language. It was the way we lived" (qtd. in Bereznak Kenny, 1998: 77).

As First Nations peoples we experience and define beauty in relation to the way we live. Our relationship to Mother Earth and to each other, the way we live

together in a place, our appreciation of holistic aspects of life all coalesce to give a sense of coherence to our worlds. It is our ability to sense this coherence that can give us the confidence to express ourselves fully, define ourselves authentically, and assist us in the creation of our own stories. Through this sense of coherence, we know who we are and we can see the visions of who we might become in the future. This visionary landscape is rich in image, metaphor, symbol. It is punctuated by texture, song, color, story, prose. It is implied in the patterns of a basket, the shape of a carving, and reflects the lands that we inhabit, our experiences on it, and the knowledge that we acquire because of our respect for place. This is our sense of art as First Peoples. (Bereznak Kenny, 1998: 77)

#### **4 Conclusion**

We must reflect back our stories, to see ourselves more firmly in the world so that we can dream the future (Martin 2004b: 107).

The representation of First Nations artists and art in the cultural institutions of northern British Columbia is inconsistent and, in some cases, minimal. The practice of tokenism is rampant throughout these cultural institutions. I found that within four of the five art galleries and museums examined for this research the relationships between the staff, curators and/or directors (George Harris, Tracy Calegheros, Bob Campbell, Laurel Mould and Ellen Corea) and the local First Nations artists (Peter George, Angelique Levac, Ya'Ya (Chuck) Heit, Rena Bolton and Garry Oker) were weak and, in some cases, non-existent. Susan Marsden appears to have extensive involvement and knowledge of local and regional First Nations artists but there needs to be an examination of the inclusion of First Nations artists in the art gallery space and the inclusion of northwest coast artists within the Canadian contemporary art discourse. Involvement of these artists in most of these cultural centers was extremely limited with very few artists having their works included in exhibitions (especially solo exhibitions), permanent collections and/or gift shops. As well, very few First Nations artists are included in the operations of art galleries and museums as employees, trustees or volunteers.

Of the five cultural institutions I visited, I think it is significant to note that three of these visually, and often historically, significant sites reflect little or no physical aspects on their grounds or structures of the local First Nations cultures on whose traditional lands they are constructed on. The Museum of Northern British Columbia and 'Ksan Historical Village and Museum are the exception to this observation as, in both cases, the architecture reflects traditional First Nations building styles and they include sculptures, painted murals and objects on their grounds and buildings. The Two Rivers Gallery has installed three crest poles in both the inside and exterior areas of the building.

The Museum of Northern British Columbia, in comparison to the other cultural institutions in northern BC researched for this thesis, reported significant representation of the Tsimshian people throughout their facility. They have developed a good working relationship with the local and regional First Nations people as they are included within all levels of its operations. It is a thriving and popular cultural center and they report good future prospects despite dwindling funding resources. The Two Rivers Gallery has completed some impressive programming including First Nations artists into their exhibitions and other programming but it is sporadic and usually does not include local First Nations artists. Importantly, during 2000, this institution established a connection with local and regional First Nations by undertaking the installation of a crest pole on the new art gallery site but they appear to have not furthered this connection. 'Ksan Historical Village and Museum is an exciting site reflecting the traditional culture of the Gitksan people. However, the primary focus currently implemented at 'Ksan is the development of programming and displays which fulfill the expectations of tourists and not the aesthetic or intellectual development of their community. While staff members

and board members are Gitksan, 'Ksan does not incorporate local First Nations talent to the full extent that it has in the past and that it could potentially surpass. The Exploration Place has expressed some interest in local and regional First Nations culture. A First Nations representative sits on their board of trustees but, other than the recent significant exhibitions *Common Language* and *Where are the Children? Healing the Legacy of the Residential Schools* (with supplemental photographs from the Lejac Residential School) and the small permanent installation of "artifacts," there is little involvement of local and regional First Nations talents. The small gift shop does not contain any First Nations artwork and the newly renovated building does not reflect any aspect of the Dakelh culture. The Dawson Creek Art Gallery expressed little interest nor concern about working with local and regional First Nations artists and communities. The building and the site on which it sits emphatically reflects the historical and contemporary culture of the settler society. While the gift shop carried some artwork by First Nations very little originated from local or regional artists.

In order to stop the continued racism, stereotyping and the oppression of First Nations people in northern British Columbia, and ultimately the rest of Canada, it is vital for curators, other employees, and volunteers of art galleries and museums in northern BC to develop an understanding and sensitivity to First Nations cultures. Inclusivity must be made a core value of their professional activity and a change in mindset needs to occur which involves the realization that all cultures are different and that all differences are equally valid. Thus, First Nations artists' contributions to the contemporary art discourse are relevant and meaningful. As well, there is a clear need for a redistribution of power and privilege which would be accomplished by non-Aboriginals relinquishing

control of the authority over aesthetics and contemporary art discourse. A full and permanent commitment to the hiring and involvement of First Nations within all levels, especially within curatorial departments, of cultural institutions needs to occur.

Indigenous curators would greatly contribute to the knowledge and understanding of Canadian history and aesthetics as well as assist with identification and elimination of discriminatory practices and policies which work to exclude First Nations artists from art galleries and museums.

The social sector which includes arts and culture struggles for legitimization in North America. Governments are continuously diverting funding from the various cultural sectors including from art galleries and museums. As well, the teaching of the arts and culture in all levels of education are perceived as costly and unnecessary. However, this growing belief that is shaping public policy may have detrimental effects upon our humanity which requires further exploration and discussion. The connections which can be forged between peoples through the expression of culture are at risk. Modern trends need to be countered with a body of thought which examines active cultural participation and human relationships. In addition, funding needs to be increased to the arts and culture sectors so that programs, cultural institutions, artists, etc. can begin to express their potential.

First Nations peoples have urgent and important needs, including the recovery and revitalization of their cultures, that are largely not being met by all levels of government and the communities amongst which they live. The federal government's past policy to erode and suppress First Nations cultures has created much spiritual, emotional and physical damage but First Nations artists have worked to heal themselves and their

communities. The struggle to maintain and further their artistic practice weighs heavily on many of these artists. The artists I interviewed for this thesis expressed a range of emotions including anger, frustration, determination and humor as they shared their experiences and understandings with me. While some First Nations artists have given up, others continue to strive to be included in mainstream social structures, such as art galleries and museums, which are well entrenched within northern British Columbian society, as elsewhere, and which have worked to further the Western cultural paradigm. Aboriginal artists must be supported, through various means, to pursue their cultural and educational development according to their interests and decisions.

I believe it is important to be hopeful and to be positive about the social transformations that need to take place, both in First Nations and non-First Nations societies so that relationships between us may be founded on equality and respect. So far, the steps to reconciliation have been long and arduous but I believe art galleries and museums can play a vital role facilitating this process despite their charged histories. However, cultural institutions and their directors and curators must be prepared to have their authority challenged and they must share the power of representation in order to respect and honour First Nations intellectual thought and aesthetic integrity.

First Nations communities should closely examine the purpose and structure of museums and the Anti-trickster at play within their walls to determine how and if they can serve their own needs. The understanding I have developed through the research for this thesis is that museums still primarily serve the interests and needs of Western society. Many First Nations communities are in the process of extensive exploration and experimentation with the different ways of representing and educating people about their

culture. Centers, interpretive centers, cultural centers, museums, art galleries, virtual museums are all being implemented. First Nations need such places where they can work to develop and articulate “a critical vocabulary that incorporates the contemporary, complex realities that we all experience in our communities and share globally” (Martin 2004b: 107). Representing First Nations art, stories, histories, ideas and values in public spaces creates opportunities for social and cultural dialogue in a society which has continued to ignore First Nations and perpetuate inequality and injustice.



## **Appendix 1**

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the challenges of providing culturally diverse programming in museums and art galleries for artists in northern British Columbia?
2. Since 2001, how have First Nations artists participated in the programming and function (exhibitions, workshops, lectures, talks, docents, board of directors, etc) of the art gallery/museum?
3. To what extent are First Nations artists and art currently represented in the permanent collection of the art gallery/museum?
4. What are the challenges of including culturally diverse works of art in the permanent collection of museums and art galleries?
5. What goals do First Nations artists wish to accomplish in northern British Columbia?
6. How does the art gallery/museum assist with fulfilling the goals of First Nations artists in northern British Columbia?
7. What is the state of contemporary First Nations art?

## **Appendix 2**

### **Two Rivers Gallery**

#### **Mission Statement**

The Prince George Regional Art Gallery Association will be a vital centre for visual art in the region. In Prince George and throughout the central interior of British Columbia, we will encourage lifelong learning through the arts, create an environment for vigorous artistic and cultural expression and provide opportunities for diverse experiences through participation and exhibition.

#### **Collections Management Policy: Collection Focus and Selection Criteria**

The Two Rivers Gallery will develop and maintain a collection, primarily of contemporary artwork, stemming from exhibitions, private collections and other sources, which speaks to the history and cultural identity of the Central Interior and to the experience of life in Northwestern Canada.

Acquisition of an artwork may occur after a satisfactory assessment of a series of criteria that include relevance, provenance, condition and cost. The following criteria shall be used, as appropriate, when determining the desirability of an acquisition:

- i) quality; historical value; educational value; cultural importance
- ii) relationship of the material to the already existing gallery collection
- iii) conditions attached to the object (as a general rule, all restrictions will be discouraged)
- iv) use to which the acquisition may be put; display, study, loan, school or other program
- v) geography (referring to the location of the artist and/or subject). In general, the order of priority is: Northern British Columbia, British Columbia, Canada, International
- vi) date of production. In general the focus will be on contemporary material, with historic material acquired for comparative and contextual purposes
- vii) cost
  - value range – as established by a lender for loans material; by appraisal for a donation; or according to the listed purchase price, for a proposed purchase;
  - associated costs to the institution – to consist of both one-time and continuing costs including but not limited to, all exhibition costs, conservation, restoration, packing/unpacking, transportation, insurance and storage costs...

### **Exploration Place**

#### **Mandate**

\*Gathering and preserving artifacts, information and records relevant to the history of the area within the political boundaries of the Regional District of Fraser-Fort George.

\* Administering and developing a museum for the preservation and interpretation of specimens, artifacts and archive material.

\* Developing public knowledge and appreciation of local Science and Technology in

environmental, palaeontological heritage and cultural issues by exhibiting and interpreting acquired artifacts and specimens.

\* Providing professional support services to museums throughout the Regional District of Fraser-Fort George and adjacent districts on request.

#### **Mission Statement**

To create and sustain a unique participatory Museum of regional history, science and technology linking experiences within the Regional District of Fraser-Fort George to the world and providing learning opportunities that foster an understanding of significant past and current issues shaping our community.

#### **'Ksan Historical Village and Museum**

##### **Mandate**

As a cultural centre, 'Ksan is committed to presenting the richness of Gitksan culture, and promoting economic opportunities for local First Nations people of the Upper Skeena River region.

#### **Museum of Northern British Columbia**

##### **Acquisition Policy/Holdings Summary**

The collections policy includes artifacts and archival material relating to the ethnology, history and natural history of our collection area (bounded by Portland Canal to the north and Douglas Channel to the south and including the lower Skeena River Valley). Our archival holdings relate primarily to the early history of Prince Rupert, the U.S. and Canada 54/40 boundary area, and the railway history of this area. The holdings include the diaries (1898-1964) of Ben Codville, a lighthouse keeper on Pointer Island. The photographic collection relates primarily to the history of Prince Rupert, although it also covers a number of coastal communities and the various industries in this area (Archives Association of British Columbia 2007 internet source).

#### **Dawson Creek Art Gallery**

##### **Mandate**

- \* To bring together persons who are actively engaged in creative arts and crafts and persons who are interested in promoting arts and crafts.
- \* To arrange for exhibitions of original works of art by the members of the society, either at the seat of the society or in other centres.
- \* To promote the showing of works of art by similar groups or individuals and public art institutions.
- \* To arrange for its members and interested persons courses and workshops and generally to supply its members with information regarding the evolution and trends in art.
- \* To operate the Dawson Creek Art Gallery and by doing so to increase the appreciation of the visual arts by the general public.

##### **Mission Statement**

To foster the growth, awareness and appreciation of the visual arts in Dawson Creek and area.

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