What is Sacred:
Revitalizing Coast Salish Art and Culture

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines Coast Salish art and its revitalization through storytelling methodology as it relates to my own artistic practice. Bringing together visual art, essay, narrative, poetry, prose, and experimental layout, I examine the complex histories of colonization and ongoing colonialism in the Coast Salish world. My research has been centered on the quote "Coast Salish art is to make the sacred visible," shared by Elder Bill White from my community in Snuneymuxw. This quote has fascinated and inspired me, leading to the question "What is sacred?" Through my own art practice in dialogue with lived experience, the teachings I have received from my family, community, and culture, as well as through my academic training in philosophy, I ask about what it means for us as Coast Salish artists to make work that represents the sacred; how it facilitates the sacred; the ways that we work in both traditional and modern contexts; and what was significant about the efforts beginning in the 1970's by artists like Susan Point, Charles Elliott, Simon Charlie, Stan Greene, and others to bring traditional Coast Salish art forms back to the surface. Teachings from my late great-grandmother, Dr. Ellen Rice White, *Kwulasulwut*, play an intrinsic role in this text. My goal is to share teachings with future generations of Coast Salish peoples and those who wish to learn about who we are and our art.

Keywords: Coast Salish art, Coast Salish culture, Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous storytelling

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***Hul'q'umi'num'* Language**: In this document, words in the *Hul'q'umi'num'* language are italicized. Other languages and dialects are not. The *Hul'q'umi'num'* language is the language of the *Snuneymuxw* people and the Coast Salish peoples of the mid-island region on Vancouver Island. Within *Hul'q'umi'num'*, *Snuneymuxw* speaks its own dialect, *Snuneymuxwqun* (translates literally to "Snuneymuxw throat"). The orthography I use and the *Hul'q'umi'num'* words I draw upon come mostly from my learning with the dictionaries: "Hulquminum Words" (Gerdts et. al 1997), "Hul'q'umi'num' to English Dictionary" (Hukari and Peter, 2021), and "'i'lhe' xwulmuxwqun" (Gerdts 1995). I was also taught in my community by Elder Gary Manson, *Xulsimalt*.

Repetition: Repetition is an intentional device throughout this document. It comes in various forms, including copy and pasting of certain phrases, telling the same story over and over again in the same or different ways. Repetition was used by my great-grandmother and other elders who I have sat with. The same story will be told and retold. This can be to the frustration of Western learners, who I have read of and heard firsthand insisting "I have heard this story before, we've covered this. Can we please move on?" Often the response is to tell the story yet again. Each time we hear them they speak to us in new ways in the moment we now inhabit, there are new teachings there. My attempts may be rough and experimental, so I ask for your patience.

My great-grandmother: When I use this phrase, unless I specifically identify another individual (i.e. one of my other great-grandmothers), I am referencing Dr. Ellen Rice White, *Kwulasulwut*. *Kwulasulwut* is my late great-grandmother on my patrilineal side (my father's father's mother). I will speak extensively about her, her work, and her influence on me in this document.

Alternative Form Text/Layout: To reference Peter Cole (2000) "these literary 'tactics' rhetorically accomplish, then, a significant decolonization, separating Aboriginal being, language and knowing from the violence brought upon them by English grammar, syntax, spelling, and other never merely linguistic conventions which have silenced and absented from serious scholarly attention, indigenous ways of understanding." I use experimental layout in the text in response to writers before me such as Peter Cole (St'at'imc), Jordan Abel (Nisga'a), and Stephane Mallarme. I see these poetic forms as one stream wherein the two adjacent rivers of visual art and creative writing (a false dichotomy that formed within myself at some point) can meet and intermingle.

S'yuth: This word in *Hul'q'umi'num'* is one of three which translate approximately to the English word "story." *S'yuth* refers specifically to "true stories" or histories and legends. In this document, there are two narratives which are *s'yuth*. *Kwulasulwut S'yuth* is a narrative about my great-grandma's teachings and life. *Kwulasultun S'yuth* is a parallel stream of narrative about my own life.

Snuw'uyulh: This word is broadly used to refer to "the teachings." The teachings are our systems of knowledge and their transference that we as Coast Salish peoples carry with us. We have received our teachings through our ancestors and elders and will pass them down to future generations. They have come to us from the land, from the beings here, from the energies of the universe, and from *Xeel's*.

Xeel's: *Xeel's*, the Transformer, is a figure in Coast Salish cosmology who walked the land and changed things into the way they are now. *Xeel's* is the source of many teachings and stories that we carry with us as Coast Salish peoples today. My great-grandma described *Xeel's* as being derived from *xe'xe'*, which is sacred, and *xews*, which is something new. This is the etymology of the word, but I understand, from teachings that she shared with myself, my family, and Jo-Ann Archibald, and many others, *Xeel's* also as a manifestation of the energy of transformation, and that when the different energies come together to create something new it is a realization of *Xeel's*. We carry *Xeel's* with us through these stories, teachings, and through our own creation and transformation.

Coast Salish: Coast Salish is an overarching group of Indigenous nations from the Pacific Northwest. Each nation is distinct with their own territory, culture, teachings, and dialects; but we share similarities culturally and linguistically and have bonds of trade, intermarriage, and cultural exchange. Despite vastly different orthographies (how our languages are written) there are commonalities in how our languages sound, and the words our own dialects. The Coast Salish world extends to Klahuse in the north, to Cowlitz in the south of Washington state and upriver into the continent, where we border with the Interior Salish. The international border between Canada and the United States has a profound impact on us, cutting our world in half. "Coast Salish" is a blanket term which does not give primacy to each nation or language group and it is controversial. It is important to acknowledge the nation(s) whose territory you are on first, ahead of the overarching group. I feel that we as Coast Salish peoples on a national level need to come together in a stronger way politically, economically, and culturally; continuing to bring back the ways that our ancestors interacted, which have been impacted by colonization and ongoing colonialism. Our identities as Coast Salish peoples are pluralistic, we are our own and we share so much. I celebrate that. *Na'utsa mawt shqwaluwun*, our beings are one.

Xwulmuxw: This word has most often been described to me as meaning a First Nations Person. In *Hul'q'umi'num'* when we refer to ourselves as a peoples, this word (or *xwulxwilmuxw*,which is pluralized) emerges. In my learning I have also seen that this word can refer specifically to Indigenous peoples from *Hul'q'umi'num'* and Salishan language speaking peoples. I use this word interchangeably with Coast Salish, First Nations, and Indigenous.

Uy Shqwaluwun: *Uy* means "good" and *Shqwaluwun* is a bit more abstract. On a simplistic level, it has been described as "thoughts, manners" (Gerdts 22) or feelings. I have heard it as referring to both the mind and the spirit. I have learned, particularly through the work of Diamond Jeness, that in *Xwulmuxw* ontology, the body, the mind, and the spirit are all interrelated, distinct facets of our being, our *shqwaluwun*. As opposed to a Western body-mind dualism we believe in a mind-body-spirit triplism.

Four Stars (* * * *): This is used as a device to delineate shifts between sections of text and narrative. I have used throughout my creative writing practice, it references my name *Kwulasultun* (Many Stars). The stars will be used in various orientations, which I see as constellations.

Ontology: What is real.

Epistemology: What is knowable.

Axiology: What is valuable and how to classify knowledge about it.

Art: Art is whatever you make of it.

Coast Salish art is to make the sacred visible.

BILL WHITE, *Xelimulh*, *Kasalid*

This narrative is not meant to be documentary. In fact it is meant to evade documents. It is meant for the reader to feel and to say I was there and indeed I saw.

GEORGE CLUTESI

Acknowledgements

I first want to acknowledge our ancestors and elders, who have left the path for us to walk and the teachings for us to carry as we walk in this world.

I hold my hands up to my relatives, the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples, whose territories I have resided upon and lived with as I complete this work.

I am grateful to my great-grandmother, the late Dr. Ellen Rice White, *Kwulasulwut*. The work that she did and the knowledge that she shared has been the ground upon which I stand in this world.

I am grateful to my family. My parents, Ilse Hill and Doug White III, *Kwulasultun*, Tliishin especially. They are the ones who have made sure that I was included in the teachings, who have empowered me, who have inspired me, and who are there for me always.

I am grateful to my grandparents and my aunties and uncles and all of my extended family who enrich my life and share so generously and support me.

I am grateful to my communities in Snuneymuxw and Hupacasath, and the nations my family is rooted in, and to all of my teachers, friends, relations, and everyone who has supported me and has helped me to become who I am.

I am grateful to my supervisor, Dr. Mimi Gellman, Animkii, who has been like an aunty and whose steady advice and patience has been the reason I've been able to complete this project.

I am grateful to my defense committee, my internal examiner, Lindsay McIntyre, my external examiner, Dr. Jo-Ann Archibald, Q'um Q'um Xiiem, and the defense chair Dr. Randy Lee Cutler, who have all shared their time so generously with me.

I am grateful in more ways than I can describe to the communities I have found at Emily Carr, in my cohort, amongst our faculty and facilities staff, and at the Aboriginal Gathering Place. These relationships and shared moments have enriched my time at the school so much.

I am grateful to the Snuneymuxw First Nation, the First Peoples' Cultural Council, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Emily Carr University of Art + Design, and the YVR Art Foundation, who have provided funding that has made education and doing the work to better myself accessible.

I am grateful to you, who are taking the time to read my words.

Introduction

O si:em nu siyeyu', si:em nu shxwuweli, si:em nu s'uleluxw, si:em nu imush netun mulstimuxw.

Entha pe' Kwulasultun tu ni cun utl Snuneymuxw.

Huy ce:p qu kwuns ulup sqaqip u'tunu kweyul.

Please honoured friends, gather, the work is about to begin. I am grateful to be here with you.

* * * *

When I begin my introduction, I have been taught to first acknowledge my audience. *O si:em*, I am honouring you. *Siyeyu, shxwuweli, s'uleluxw, imush netun mulstimuxw*. Friends, relatives, elders, visitors. You acknowledge those in the audience and then move on to yourself.

Entha pe' is how I introduce myself.

I am (most certainly)

Pe' is a distinctly *Snuneymuxw* word, it is used in broader *Hul'q'umi'num'* across dialects, but us *Snuneymuxw* are known for adding *pe'* after *entha*, which is I am. The use of *pe'* to me speaks to a sense of duty intrinsic to *Snuneymuxw* and our teachings as *Snuneymuxw*. It says to me that when we speak we have a responsibility to our audience, to those whom we engage in dialogue with... that within *pe'* is contained the obligation to go above and beyond to do the best that we can to deliver our message in a good way.

And so I come from these people and these places:

Entha pe' Kwulasultun tu ni cun utl Snuneymuxw 'i' Hupacasat-h *'i' Penelakut 'i'* England *'i'* Ireland *'i'* Scotland *'i'* France *'i'* Denmark *'i'* Germany. *Entha munu utl* Ilse Hill *'i'* Doug White, *Kwulasultun, Tliishin. Entha 'imuth utl* Robyn Lancaster *'i'* Lars Hill *'i'* Joyce Hamilton, *Salay'wi'ah 'i'* Doug White, *Hun'cow'iyus. Entha scamuqw utl* Yvonne Chomat *'i'* Geoffrey Lancaster *'i'* Joan Jensen *'i'* Roy Hill *'i'* Doris Hamilton *'i'* Oscar Thomas *'i'* Hilda Wesley, *Kwustanulwut 'i'* Charles Rice, *Kwulasultun, 'i'* Isabella Wyse *'i'* George White. *Entha thup'i'aqw* Gertrude Alexander *'i'* Henry Chomat *'i'* Fanny Mason *'i'* John Lancaster *'i'* Emma Prevost *'i'* Lauritz Jensen *'i'* Elmina Comrie *'i'* Mason Hill *'i'* Lillian Haslam *'i'* George Hamilton *'i'* Sarah Thomas *'i'* Louise Bob *'i'* Albert Wesley, *Qwustenuxun, 'i'* Mary Pielle, *Xalanamut 'i'* George Rice *'i'* Jenny Peters, *Tsatassaya 'i'* Joe Wyse, *Tsuq'nustun 'i'* Lucy Wilson 'i' Paul White.

I come from these people and places. The old people tell us to go back as far as we can. There is an ancestor who goes back farther than the ancestors above who I would like to acknowledge. *Xulqalustun* from *Penelakut*. He is my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, the grandfather of my great-grandmother's grandmother, Mary Rice, *Xalanamut*.

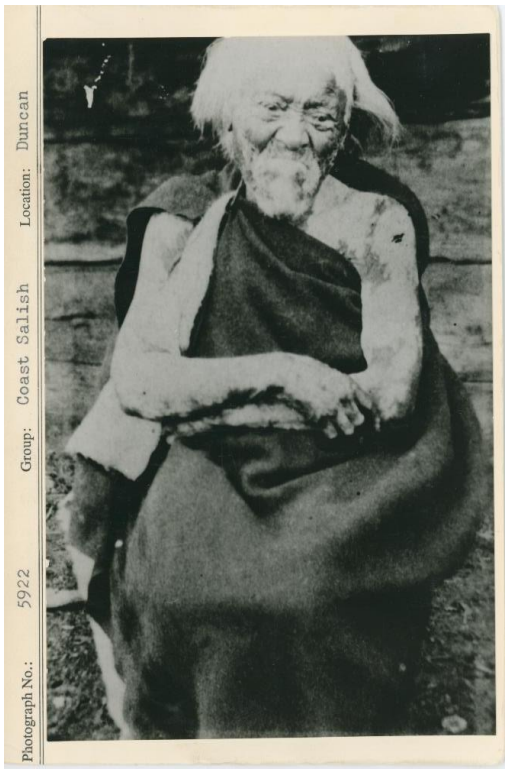

Figure 01. *Xulqalustun*. Image from the Royal BC Museum Archive without permission.

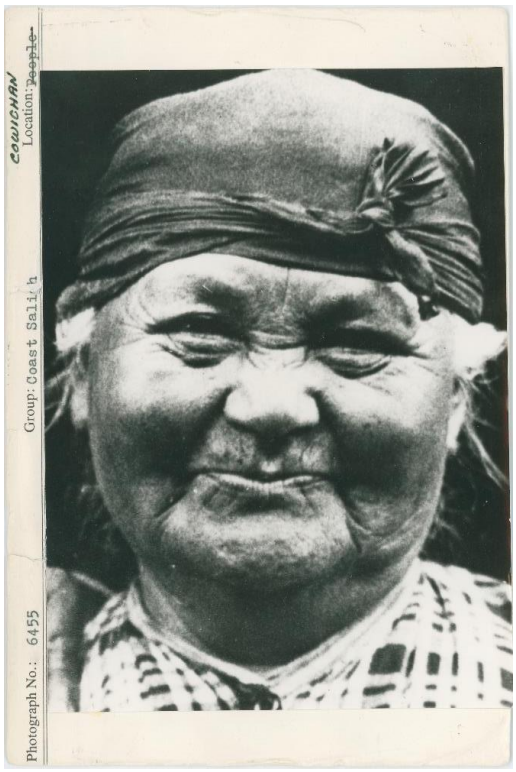

Figure 02. (Right) Mary Rice, *Xalanamut*. Image from the Royal BC Museum Archive without permission.

I do not recall meeting *Xalanamut*, my great-grandmother's beloved Granny Rice. I am certain that she was with me as I was carried from one world into another, and she will be with me again. It is through her and her brother Tommy Pielle, *Quyupulenuxw* and all our relations of that generation where many of the teachings I carry were passed down. My great-grandmother had the good fortunate of not attending the Kuper Island Residential School, instead she was raised in the old way by these elders and taught about our history, stories, healing, and spirituality. It is important for me to situate my teachings in terms of lineage. I feel that *Xalanamut* watched as the teachings were passed down to me. My great-grandmother had a copy of this photo of her (Figure 02) and kept it next to the grandfather clock in her living room. When I think about all the time I spent there listening as a child, *Xalanamut*'s smiling face is always present. Just as *Xalanamut* was the beloved teacher of my great-grandmother, so was *Xulqalustun* was to *Xalanamut*. It was during *Xulqalustun*'s lifetime that first contact with Europeans took place in this part of the world, the east coast of Vancouver Island (Cryer 55). *Xulqalustun* is seven generations back from myself. The whole span of colonization here has taken place in its entirety from the beginning of *Xulqalustun's* lifetime down to mine.

I am a Coast Salish artist and storyteller. My practice includes a range of mediums, primarily digital, mixed media sculpture, painting, public art, installation, and a bit of performance. I work to honour and celebrate the teachings and stories that have been passed down by my family, community, and across shared Coast Salish cultures and world views. My visual art practice began only a few years ago, but for as long as I can remember I have been a storyteller and writer. I see my visual art as an extension of my storytelling. I am both Coast Salish and Nuu Chah Nulth, but at this point in my art practice and my life, I have made the choice to focus on Coast Salish art.

My creative practices, and my life, are influenced by the enormous impact of my great-grandmother, Dr. Ellen Rice White, *Kwulasulwut* and her life's work. She was an amazing person. She worked as an educator, a linguist, a healer, an activist, a storyteller and more. She was especially proud of being a midwife and from the age of nine helped birth children. Her books of Coast Salish traditional stories were read to me by my mother, Ilse Hill, all throughout my childhood. It was from her and my mother that my desire to tell stories came from. In 2018, when she passed away, I realized how much knowledge went with her. I realized how spoiled I had been, being able to sit with her whenever I wanted, and how much more I had to do to be able to continue her work.

After her passing, I began to read everything I could get my hands on about Coast Salish culture, ethnographic texts and academic documents, books of all kinds, I spoke to people in my family and community about where I could learn and I started taking *Hul'q'umi'num'* language classes. I use *Hul'q'umi'num'* throughout this document. It is significant to use our languages because, as writer Alicia Elliott,from the Tuscarora Nation, says, "when you learn a people's language, you learn their culture. It tells you how they think of the world, how they experience it" (Elliott 10). It was from this place of intense and desperate interest that my visual art practice emerged. Through my research, I realized a couple things: First, if one wants to learn about who we are as Coast Salish peoples you have to go to our forms of self expression, and our stories and art; Second, there are countless barriers blocking access to our knowledge about ourselves.

I became obsessed with Coast Salish art. After months of studying Coast Salish stories and art forms, despite no previous artistic inclinations, I felt compelled to doodle and draw. Through visual art I found a new way to use my voice and to express myself; a powerful way to share what I had learned both through this process of learning about my culture and over the course of my life, and this helped with breaking down those barriers of access. The work done by Coast Salish artists such as Susan Point, Charles Elliott, Simon Charlie, Stan Greene, and others to revitalize our art forms allowed me to be able to learn in this way; without them it would not have been possible.

This document is an experimental *s'yuth* ("a true story/history"), bringing together Indigenous storytelling framework and methodologies with my own practice in order to respond to the quote from Elder Bill White that, "Coast Salish art is to make the sacred visible." My thesis art installation accompanying this document includes mixed media sculpture, framed prints, and alternative form poetic text set on the wall in vinyl decal. In this document I hope to situate my work theoretically and create something that is creative non-fiction in nature, interweaving narrative, conversation, poetry, prose, visual art, and other forms of storytelling that play with experimental typography and layout. All of these come together to reflect, what is sacred to us collectively as Coast Salish peoples and to me specifically as Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun* as it relates to my lived experience and practice as an artist. I want to note that it is impossible for me to address these questions wholly, and what I offer here is an answer in small part.

* * * *

The Beginning - Our Creation Stories

I want to begin with our beginning(s).

In *Snuneymuxw* we have a multiplicity of creation stories. Our creation stories are not mutually exclusive, rather I look at them as mutually inclusive; by which I mean that each creation story both validates and is validated by the equally different and true creation stories of those around us, our different families, communities, and relatives. If our relatives were not created here alongside us, we would not be who we are and vice versa. In the same way, if it were not for the land we come from we would not be who we are. The words of Potawatomi scholar, Robin Wall Kimmerer, come to mind: "Creation stories offer a glimpse into the worldview of a people, of how they understand themselves, their place in the world, and the ideals to which they aspire." (305)

Long ago in the time of creation, when animals were as people and *Xeel's* wandered, we were dropped down onto the earth and we emerged from the land.

At *Te'tuxwtun* (Grandmother of the Surrounding Mountains, Mt. Benson), *Soc'a'thock* and his sons fell from the sky. He descended holding arrows and kneeling upon two slaves. On the mountain, he perched upon a rock and sat looking in all four directions. He looked for other people. He knew that they were there. Eventually, he saw smoke in the distance and sent his sons after it, down the mountain and towards the water. The sons descended *Te'tuxwtun*, setting a path that would be followed by future generations for millenia. They ended up in *Stlilup* (Departure Bay) where they saw the smoke coming from a house on the shore. An old man lived there with his daughters. The sons of *Soc'a'thock* and the daughters married and became the progenitors of the tribes of *Snuneymuxw* who lived in *Stlilup*. These four familial groups, *Kwelsi'welh*, *Tuytuxun*, *Yishuxun*, and *'Unwinus* were among the six main familial groups of *Snuneymuxw*. In my great-great-great-grandfather, Albert Wesley, *Qwustenuxun*'s words, *Stlilup* is the "real home" of the *Snuneymuxw* (Barnett 23). To my knowledge, no *Snuneymuxw* lives in Departure Bay today, it is one of the most expensive residential areas in Nanaimo.

Meanwhile, at *Xwsaluxwul*, near downtown Nanaimo, a man crawled out of a pile of grass. He was all alone by the shore. He spent his days walking up and down the beach, looking for others. One day he saw what appeared to be his reflection in a tidal pool, but when he bent down it was actually a person. He reached down into the water and pulled them out. It was the first woman. They became the founding ancestors of the *Xwsaluqun* people, who were the fifth main group and spent their winters where their ancestors were created instead of *Stlilup*.

Tle:ltxw (Rich Place) is the sixth group of *Snuneymuxw*, their village was where Brickyard Beach is now on Gabriola Island at False Narrows. This was the site of the richest clam beds in our territory.

These are brief and rough retellings of stories that have been passed down for thousands of years. They have been passed down through the sole act of retelling by *Snuneymuxw* voices, just as I have now. I wanted to begin here because this is the truest beginning point available to me as a *Snuneymuxw*. These stories have been told by my ancestors, they have been told by my elders, and it becomes my duty to tell them so that they are there for future generations. For us as Coast Salish peoples stories are everything.

In this first telling of stories I want to bring up another important retelling of the *Snuneymuxw* creation. It came in the form of a totem pole carved by *Snuneymuxw* artist Wilkes James in approximately 1922.

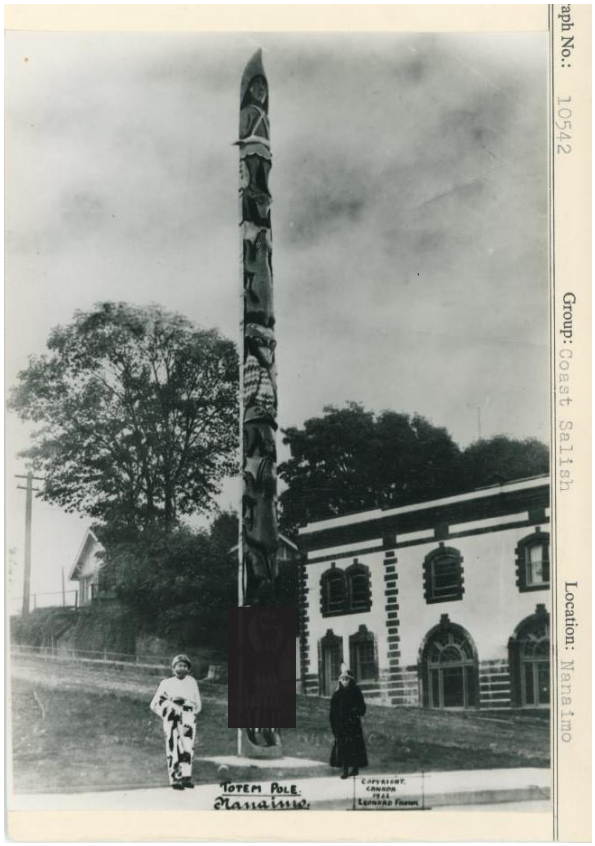

Figure 03. "*Sil-kar-malth*" totem pole carved by Wilkes James. Gifted to the City of Nanaimo. Image from the Royal BC Museum Archive without permission. Although documents exist depicting the entire pole, due to Coast Salish protocol, part of the image is not meant for the general public and has been obscured in this document.

This totem pole, in the same way of the words on the last page, tells the story of *Soc'a'thock* and his sons descending from the sky onto *Te'tuxwtun*, marrying into the family of the house by the water and beginning what we now know today as *Snuneymuxw*. But there is a contradiction with this artwork. Formally, it is a totem pole. The contradiction is that totem poles are not traditional in the Coast Salish world. Our ancestors did not make them, they were not part of our vocabulary. Instead, we carved house posts which are not totem poles. The reason that totem poles came to be carved by Coast Salish artists was the result of expectation by ignorant colonists and what they wanted to see from Coast Salish artists.

A number of factors come into play here, including the tourism industry and the appeal of coming to the Pacific Northwest. Totem poles became iconic imagery, but to see them in their proper context, you had to travel a lot further than the central hub of Vancouver (Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh territories) or the capital in Victoria (Songhees, Esquimalt, and WSANEC territories). And not only that, but also that Coast Salish art came to be seen as less than compared to the Formline artstyle from nations to the North. The earliest instance of this viewpoint is illustrated in Franz Boas' 1927

book "Primitive Art." The 116 page chapter titled "The art of the Northwest coast of North America," which is an adaptation of his 1897 essay "The Decorative Art of the Indiand of the North Pacific Coast of America" is one of the first major academic investigations of Northwest Coast art. He examines primarily Haida, Tlingit, and 'Kwakiutl' (which refers to one band of the much larger Kwakwaka'wakw nation group and was misused in the past to refer to all of its nations) art, which came to be known as "Formline" as coined by Bill Holm (Holm 2015 xxv). Towards the end of the chapter is a subsection of four pages titled "Older art styles of the Gulf of Georgia," wherein he describes Coast Salish art. In doing so, he diminishes our art form in comparison to those of our northern relatives.

Boas refers to Coast Salish as an ancient and rough form, "in many cases the outlines are so crude that the elements of composition are recognized with difficulty only," (Boas 286) continuing his comparison "If we are right in assuming that the fullest development of a rich ornamentation in the north is late, we might say that in the south the ornamentation has not yet encroached." He then abruptly changes back to his conversation on the Kwakiutl and is quick to remind the reader that, for the Kwakiutl, "the skill of the artist is not inferior to that found in the northern tribes." (288)

From a Coast Salish perspective we have no concept of 'art.' Art as we know it is utilitarian and functional. This is not to simplify it, rather it is profoundly complex. Contained within our art are our stories, histories, our relationality to each other, to our territories, to our ancestors, to the cosmos. Within our art is *xe'xe'*, the sacred. Our art served to facilitate the expression and transformation of knowledge. The artists were not just artists, they were historians, they were knowledge keepers, they were ritualists, they were healers. The artists were people working for the benefit of our communities. Unfortunately, these facts were not of concern to colonial agendas.

Thus began an era of disrespect, erasure, and suppression of Coast Salish art forms. Wherein, in order to survive and make a living as artists, our people had to make art that was not traditional to us, and where access to Coast Salish art did not exist. Effectively, they dammed the river of Coast Salish art.

In exactly the same way that there was not space for Indigenous culture, for Indigenous joy, for Indigenous children to learn the ways of their ancestors in Canada, there was not space for Coast Salish art. This history is but one microcosm of the overarching project of Indigenous genocide in so-called "Canada." It is imperative that you understand this in approaching this text.

My goal with this document is to outline as best I can, no matter how faintly it captures the whole, what is sacred to me and to my culture as a Coast Salish person and what the project of Coast Salish art is to myself and my contemporaries. I am driven to centre this project on Indigenous joy, but it is inevitable that discussion of what has happened to us and those ugly elements of history must be spoken of, because if they are not spoken of, they will not be known. It is for that reason that I made sure to note the mention of slavery in our creation myth. Slavery was widespread in Coast Salish history, and it is a history that we carry with shame. We cannot pick and choose which parts of our history to carry and pass down. We must carry all of it and choose to do better and grow with each generation.

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Figure 04. “We Fell From the Sky / Together and Apart” Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, 2021, mixed media on birch panel. Image courtesy of the artist.

My own telling.

Indigenous Storytelling Methodology

When I speak about Indigenous storytelling methodology, I mean to draw upon and engage in dialogue with the work of Jo-Ann Archibald, Q'um Q'um Xiiem's system of Indigenous Storywork (Archibald 2008). I refer first to the communities and nations that I come from, the Coast Salish and Nuu Chah Nulth overarching nation groups and how stories play an integral role within our pedagogical systems. This is illustrated most clearly in my great-grandmother, Dr. Ellen Rice White, *Kwulasulwut*'s story, "The Boys Who Became a Killer Whale," from her book, "Legends and Teachings of *Xeel's* the Creator" (2006) and her story, "The Raven and the Raccoon" from her book, "*Kwulasulwut*: Stories from the Coast Salish" (1981). These two stories explicitly express Coast Salish values and what is considered 'good' behaviour or the 'wrong' way of doing things. In the killer whale story, the importance of the education of children and the inclusion of children in the teachings is emphasized. For us, stories carry great meaning. The meaning grows and changes alongside of us and it can be different for each of us, despite this ineffable and transformational nature, the meaning is always there.

Q'um Q'um Xiiem's approach to Indigenous stories is one that I embrace. These Indigenous storywork principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy guide us (Archibald 129). When I think about how we approach stories as Coast Salish peoples, these principles can be seen as a way of practicing *uy shqwaluwun* (to be of good mind) as a listener, reader, audience member, or story teller. These principles establish a pathway for how we should be in relation to one another and what a good life can look like from a Coast Salish perspective. These principles fundamentally uphold Indigenous systems of knowledge with their protocols and values. This counters the history of anthropological study of Indigenous peoples, which sought to elide and exploit them and their knowledges.

The teachings evolve and grow with us. In order to realize the teachings we internalize them. In Dr. Robina Thomas, *Qwul'sih'yah'maht*'s PhD dissertation, "Protecting the Sacred Cycle: Indigenous Women and Leadership," she interviewed my great-grandmother about storytelling and teachings:

> "[*Kwulasulwut*] told me, this is how teachings work; you must sit with them for three or more months. Then, you make sense of the teachings and what they mean to you. Then, they become your teachings." (Thomas 67)

As indicated in the quote, we understand that in order to realize the teachings is to sit with them, to introduce yourself to them, to come to know them. And from there, you must express them in your own way. This is the motivation of my creative expression. I write my own stories and make my own art and my *snuw'uyulh* (teachings) are contained within them. In a sense, this is a dialogue between myself and my ancestors. My own understanding of the teachings may not be perfect, and though I may not fully comprehend what it is that I am doing in the moment, I know it is of value and has meaning. Through these practices the teachings become embodied knowledge.

An excerpt from "Indigenous Storywork," comes to mind here, which cites my great-grandmother's teachings (this is in reference to walking in two worlds, with traditional knowledge and academic knowledge):

> "You could study the ancestors, but without a deep feeling of communication with them it would be surface learning and surface talking. Once you have gone into yourself and have learnt very deeply, appreciate it, and relate to it very well, everything will come very easily.... When your hands are both full with the knowledge of both sides, you'll grow up to be a great speaker, great organizer, great doer and a helper of your people" (Archibald 40)

When I first began learning about Coast Salish art, it was surface learning. I was just looking at it. I was just introducing myself to it. The dialogue emerged when I began to share from within. This was the energy of the teachings and the energy of myself coming together to make something new. From that something new, the dialogue with my ancestors is enriched, the teachings are enriched. Through the living and being and creation of ourselves and future generations, our culture breathes and grows and transforms. This process will be ongoing throughout my life and the lives of all those alongside me.

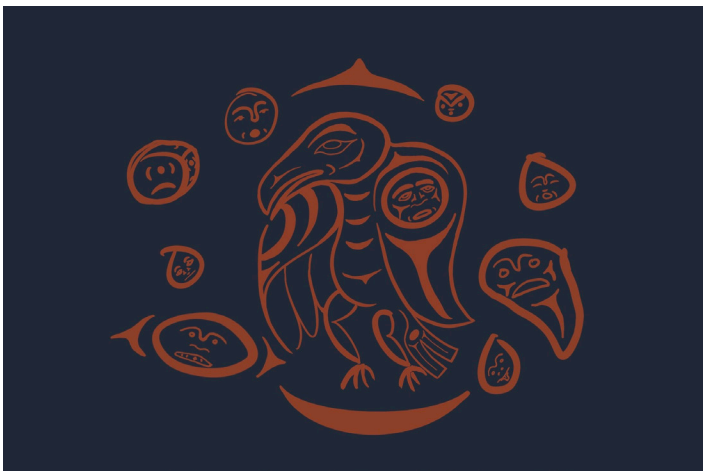

Figure 05. "Story Time," digital design, Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, 2020. Image courtesy of the artist. This is an interpretation of how knowledge is passed down from generation to generation.

The methodology of storytelling is significant within a Coast Salish context because it is the way that we communicate with one another, it is the way that we understand the world and the cosmos. Cherokee author Thomas King is quoting these thoughts in his book, "The Truth About Stories":

> "The truth about stories is that's all we are. The Okanagan storyteller Jeannette Armstrong tells us that 'Through my language I understand I am being spoken to, I'm not the one speaking. The words are coming from many tongues and mouths of Okanagan people an the land around them I am a listener to the language's stories, and when my words form I am merely retelling the same stories in different patterns.'" (King 1)

In summary, I am holding up the teachings that have been shared with me and expressing them and sharing them with others. What I share carries the meaning of what was passed down, but also carries something new. The 'something-new' part is sacred to me, it is a part of me. I will work to describe it in detail, please bear with me as I do.

In the next section I will outline my methodology for creative output, through a process of *uy shqwaluwun*.

* * * *

Uy Shqwaluwun as Methodology

My methodology as an artist, as a storyteller, and as a *xwulmuxw* (human being) is contained within the concept of *uy shqwaluwun*.

Uy Shqwaluwun (*shqweluwun* in *Snuneymuxwqun*) but the way my great-grandmother always said it was *shqwaluwun* means to be of good mind, body, and spirit. These three facets of being are inextricably linked within *shqwaluwun*. To be of good mind is like a state of prayer or meditation, it is something that must be maintained and attended to. It is to be present. It is to let negative thoughts and feelings go. My great-grandmother spoke about how you must let the bad energy go, keep only the good energy inside--the things that have happened to us in daily life or that are on our mind. You speak to the world, to the materials you work with. You introduce yourself. You ask them for help. You let them know what you are doing and how you will be doing it. This is a practice of opening oneself up. It is a practice of being humble and trusting that the energies around you, of the land, the universe, the ancestors, and all of life, will generously share with you.

I have held these teachings close to me. As I've worked more and more as an artist I have found myself working mostly in digital mediums. It can feel absurd at times, holding an iPad and Apple Pencil in my hands and thinking about talking to the materials. I don't even know what materials these are made of or where they came from, or the energy that went into making them, the *shqwaluwuns* of those people doing the making. My great-grandmother told me many times about how electronics are blocking us off from being able to connect with the energy of the ancestors and the universe. Despite that, I have found that it is still important, because even when we are not connecting fully with the energies of the materials, or we have become closed off in certain ways, like water held in a hand, the energies will always find ways to slip through. It becomes a sort of metaphysical act of connecting with the source of the art and the source of the forms regardless of the materials and the processes. It is the same as the source of our teachings.

In the early stages of my creative practice I was guided by the shapes and forms in Coast Salish art. As someone who did not have confidence as an artist or in my artistic abilities, instead of worrying about subject, I went to the shapes. The Circle, the Crescent, and the Trigon. These shapes have been called different things by different people, but this is how I came to know them.

As opposed to worrying too much about a complete design, I devoted myself to the shapes that would compose it. I introduced myself to them. I breathed them in and let them sit within me. I repetitively doodled and drew from them. I came to understand what aspects of each shape I resonated with; how these elements changed within their context and proximity to one another; how the proportions influence each other and how they are in dialogue. These shapes are their own beings and to honour them I needed to let them breathe. These shapes reflect the moment in which they were made.

Somewhere around this time I found myself watching an episode of a docuseries produced by the Japanese Broadcasting Corporation (the NHK) and hosted by Naoki Urasawa, a remarkable manga artist, titled "Manben." The episode was an interview-slash-studio visit with artist Inio Asano as he worked on his serialized manga, "Dead Dead Demon's Dededede Destruction." Asano is a mixed-media artist who works primarily in digital illustration and in this episode shared some astute tips within the field. One thing he said stuck with me; he spoke about how in digital art it is easy to

generate geometrically perfect shapes, shapes that are based upon mathematical formulas. To him, these shapes do not have personality. Rather, he prefers shapes that are imperfect. Shapes that through their imperfection reflect that they could only have been drawn by his hand (Urasawa 2014). To me, Asano's shapes emerged from a moment and are made in a way that honours that moment. This resonated strongly with the philosophy and aesthetic sense I was developing within my own Coast Salish art style. Recently, Luke Marston, *Ts'uts'umutl* from *Stz'uminus* did the remarkable work of collaboratively finding names in our *Hul'q'umi'num'* language for these shapes in his Master's thesis: Trigon: *te'ulh* (spearhead), Crescent: *luwux* (ribs), Circle: *syel'kw* (circle or oval). (Marston 9)

Figure 06. (From Right to Left) Circle, Crescent, and Trigon. Illustrations by Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*.

Today, with a few years' experience of practicing art under my belt, I have acquired a more nuanced understanding of how the Coast Salish shapes function. I now greatly enjoy looking at the shapes within other Coast Salish artists' designs. I find that it is within these shapes where the personality of the artist comes through most clearly. These shapes, which are meant to honour the flow of energy and movement in our designs, reflect that same flow conceptually within our own beings as artists in the moment of making. Whether the shapes are drawn digitally or by hand, they are placed and curated thoughtfully and with care in Coast Salish art. They carry their energy and knowledge embedded within them.

I think about how Coast Salish art was used traditionally. It was used in ceremony and ritual to help facilitate the sacred. It was used similarly in every day objects to facilitate the work at hand, to help bring the energy to the work and guide the work in a good way. For instance, the spindle whorls and their carvings are art that helps the spinner maintain *uy shqwaluwun,* the art propels them further to express, to build, to inhabit, to embody *uy shqwaluwun*. It helps them to open up their *shqwaluwuns* as a corrollary, for the art has come from a state of *uy shqwaluwun*. My great-grandmother spoke about how important it was for artists and people making things to practice this way of being. The energy that we carry goes into the work and it has an impact on others, especially those using it.

When I am working as an artist and in my everyday life I try to practice *uy shqwaluwun*. I try to be present. When I pay attention, I find that things come to me. They emerge from the field of this process. In being present to the knowledge and energies that have been opened up by this process, I find myself influenced by the beings who are visiting me, the places I have been, the people I have been with, and the stories that exist there. This is often where my ideas for designs come from. Living outside of my territories for the first time has made me acutely aware of my connection to home and place. When I am home in my territories in *Snuneymuxw* and Hupacasat-h I feel a strong connection and familiarity with the land. I feel that I am seen and recognized. I feel the energies coming to me in abundance.

There is energy here in Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh territories, and I am grateful to be here, but it is a different kind of connection, and as a visitor here I must tread lightly. The energy of this place and the stories here are not mine to share.

I had the good fortune of being invited to attend a workshop on public art hosted by the City of Vancouver in November of 2022. It was full of more Coast Salish artists than I had ever seen in one room, which filled me with *uy shqwaluwun*. Aaron Nelson Moody, Tawx'sin Yexwulla, or Splash, as he is known, gave a beautiful presentation, which he has given before on numerous occasions. He spoke about how to go about representing Coast Salish art, culture, and teachings in public art. He said that it is important for us to not get too specific with subject matter and the stories we tell. He said that when we get too specific we make things inaccessible for our audiences. By telling stories in a more general way we can make the work accessible for the public. (Nelson-Moody 2022) As an artist who has now worked in territories outside of my own, this is an invaluable teaching. When I approach public art here in Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh territories, I do work that expresses in a more general way, stories and narratives about Coast Salish culture. I try to do work that honours our hosts as a visitor here and that honours my relationship to this place as a guest.

When I am engaged in the process of making, *uy shqwaluwun* comes into play again. As I draw or paint or sculpt, I listen. I make sure to take a pause, which I see as 'letting the work breathe.' In these intermissions I think and try to listen to what the art is telling me to do. How do these lines look? What forms are developing? Are the shapes in dialogue with each other? Is the proportion and flow right? And above all, I try to allow spontaneous and intuitive energy to intervene. I might have one idea coming into the work, and at the end it has transformed into a whole other narrative. Or maybe more layers have unfolded within it. Sometimes there are aspects to pieces that I don't come to see or understand until much later, yet they were there the entire time. In the same way that Q'um Q'um Xiiem said to approach Indigenous Storywork, I try to approach art, both as a maker and as an audience, with the seven principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy.

From the perspective of a graduate student conducting research towards a master's thesis, I came to understand *uy shqwaluwun* as a research methodology within an Indigenous research paradigm. Shawn Wilson, an Opaskwayak Cree scholar, guides me with his text, "Research is Ceremony." Wilson says, "The purpose of any ceremony is to build stronger relationships or bridge the distance between aspects of our cosmos and ourselves. The research that we do as Indigenous people is a ceremony that allows us a raised level of consciousness and insight into our world" (Wilson 11). *Uy shqwaluwun* is a ceremony, and through its process we as Coast Salish peoples are building, strengthening, and deepening our relationships with the cosmos and ourselves.

In the next section, I will further these connections between Coast Salish art and theory in relation to Wilson's writing as well as the work of Margaret Kovach.

* * * *

The Axiology of Coast Salish Art

A major interest of this thesis is axiological in nature. Axiology refers to a system of understanding and assessing what is valuable. I will draw heavily from the work of the Indigenous scholars, Margaret Kovach (Nêhiyaw and Saulteaux), and Shawn Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree). These two writers engage in dialogue with each other about axiology and how it applies within Indigenous research methodologies. In my learning through them I came to realize that Coast Salish art itself is an axiological system.

Axiology and Epistemology are interrelated. Epistemology in a broad sense means what is knowable. Axiology is classified as what is of value. I borrow from Plato here: The Form of the Good ('big G Good' as my professors in undergrad would say) is the highest of values, it is the end unto and the source of knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics, how we can and should be as human beings in nature and the cosmos (Bloom 189). I think of my research question, "What is sacred?" as an axiological pursuit, thus, in axiological terms it means "What is of value?" and in following this line of thinking, one can understand the quote, "Coast Salish art is to make the sacred visible," expresses, "Coast Salish art is to make the valuable visible." *Xe'xe'* (the sacred) is of the highest value.

The remarkable thing is that there is an entire system in place within Coast Salish art within which one can look at the work and understand something important about our world views. The works that exist are of value. What is of value about them? What can we learn through this approach? A deep cultural context is critical to understand the answers to these questions, and this is why in this document I speak at length to Coast Salish culture. I find this pursuit invaluable.

Equally fascinating, and I think is a question that I alone cannot hope to answer independently: What is of value to us as Coast Salish artists today? What does it mean for us to contribute to this collective understanding? One must look at Coast Salish broadly art to understand the answers to these questions.

A critical point to do with axiology is the ethical element. In determining what is worth looking for, we must think about how we go about acquiring knowledge. As Wilson says, "What is ethical to do in order to gain this knowledge, and what will this knowledge be used for?" (Wilson 34). In relation to Coast Salish art, we have a major duty of respect and responsibility when we work as artists. It is like the responsibility that we carry every day as Coast Salish peoples, or as Indigenous peoples. We come from a family, a community, a territory, a culture. We carry relational obligations to them all. When I speak and use my voice, I represent myself first, but I also represent those from which I came. The teachings from my family are to hold yourself well and to speak well, to live and act in a good way, because you are responsible to those who depend on you and those who you exist in relation to. When I speak in an academic framework or in public, as I am doing now, I do not claim to speak for all of *Snuneymuxw* or all of Coast Salish people, because I simply cannot, however, I do have responsibility to them when I speak. There is knowledge that is passed down in our families and communities which is not meant for the public. I have a duty to respect the protocols around our cultural teachings. The knowledge we carry is a gift and doesn't belong to us, as such, we must act with respect for it.

As Coast Salish artists this responsibility is amplified. Coast Salish art is intrinsically linked to its use within ceremony and ritual. There are major forms of our art which are not meant for the public. When we work, we must consider who our intended audience is, who are we working for? What spaces will this art live in? How is this art informing the space? How is the space informing the art? When you are uncertain, ask. Our elders and knowledge keepers are there for you. I think in the same way becoming an artist is not dissimilar to becoming an Elder. One doesn't simply age into being an Elder. As my great-grandmother said, "to be an Elder you first have to be accepted, listened to, and not laughed at. You have to be a good speaker… You always know where it's [knowledge] going to be in your memory, in your mind" (Archibald 37).

In the *Hul'q'umi'num'* language there is no word for artist or art. Art was everywhere, it was part of daily life. It facilitated daily life and ritual life. As my father, Douglas White III, *Kwulasultun*, Tliishin, described in his chapter in "Native Art of the Northwest Coast," that our art, stories, and song played an integral role in facilitating the transformation of everyday space into ritual space (Townsend-Gault et al 640). He further references our late uncle, George Clutesi, who described the role of artists within the community, and how when leaders were unable to conclude regarding a difficult decision, and all avenues had been exhausted, they brought in the artists. They brought in artists because artists were able to "think profoundly and create forms with which to show the people and thereby to stimulate, encourage, provoke and win over to ideas and principles where mere words failed" (Clutesi 32). This is a teaching from my Nuu Chah Nulth side, on the opposite coast of our island, but I think it relevant to include.

In reference to my own practice, I use the terms art and artist loosely. I do feel that what I do is art, and I work as an artist within the contemporary context, but from a traditional standpoint I feel that I am a learner. I am always learning and will continue to learn. It isn't for me to decide when I've gotten 'there' or where 'there' is.

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Revitalizing and Reclaiming Coast Salish Art

Coast Salish art is a unique art style among the Indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast. For the sake of simplicity, I will describe it in two streams. The first is weaving forms, which have emerged from basket and blanket weaving. I am not experienced in these styles. In terms of my previous description of the teachings, I consider myself to be at the point of surface-level introduction. It is important for me to acknowledge that historically and even still, when Coast Salish art is dicussed, weaving is often left out. This happens despite weaving being central to our art forms. My dad, Doug White III, has always said to me that the weavers are the truest Coast Salish artists. In lieu of my own account, I urge you to read and learn of and to look at and appreciate Coast Salish weaving and weavers.

My knowledge and experience comes in the second stream, which I will call graphic Coast Salish art, which has emerged from sculptural forms, wood or stone carving, and painted forms. Graphic Coast Salish art is composed of three primary shapes which I have previously described. The crescent, the trigon, and the circle (see Figure 06). In most cases, these shapes are contained within a figure. The figure (animal/human/supernatural) can retain a firm reference to realistic proportion and form, or it can be extremely abstracted. These figures are what I have come to know as a silhouette, and are where I feel the artist has the most creative freedom within Coast Salish design. The shapes "populate" a design, so to speak. They represent the flow of movement in the design, and energy in the body.

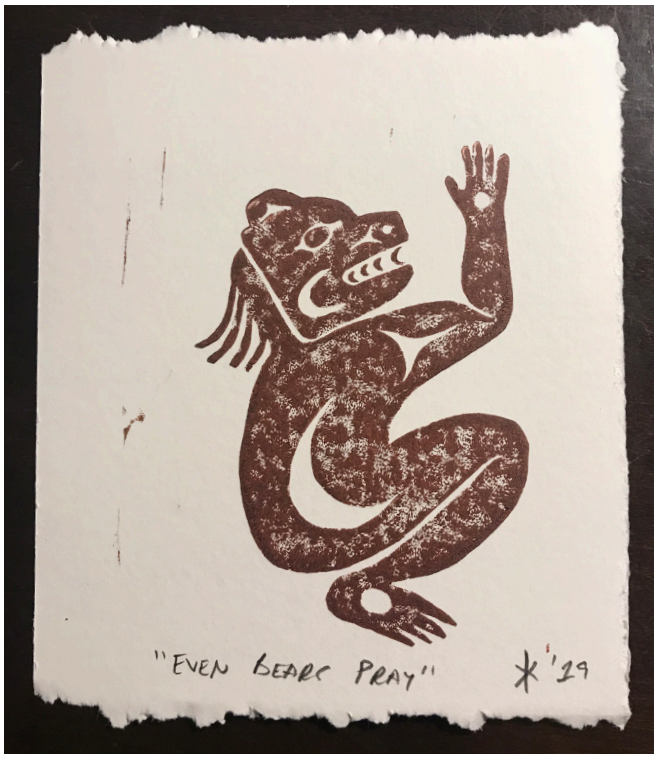

Figure 07. Even Bears Pray, Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, 2019, block print. For my aunty, *Tsatassaya*. Image courtesy of the artist.

Considering the importance of the Salish shapes and how they embody movement, it follows that the designs in which they are composed value movement similarly. *Sul'sul'tun*, or spindle whorls are a key example. Spindle whorls are one of the most frequent and celebrated instances of Coast Salish art in the modern period. The intricate designs are often symmetrical in nature and sometimes reflect the movement intended with their use. Of particular interest here, is that movement in Coast Salish art (and in a more holistic cultural sense) is meant to go from right-to-left, or counterclockwise. This can be seen as a general rule (not strict in that sense, but when you look for it you see this adhered to with consistency) across various old works.

Figure 08. *Quw'utsun* Spindle whorl, stolen prior to 1903, carved wood, collection of the Smithsonian Institute. Image used without permission.

This spindle whorl above, which was stolen from *Quw'utsun* and now can be found in the collections of the Smithsonian Institute in America, is a beautiful representation of the movement of the overarching design following the movement of the spindlewhorl while the movement of the Salish shapes within the body follows the flow of energy within the body. Like ripples on water they radiate out and away from the focal point. Amazingly, the line of the spine is followed by the crescents but you can also see a reverse trigon caressing the base of the palm in the arms (which is a common convention). Not to mention that the tail ends in the mouth. What does all that say about the flow of energy?

* * * *

Here, I want to make space to honour the elders who began the work of waking up Coast Salish art. It wasn't until the 1970's and 80's that this work began, and it was carried and held up by individuals like Susan Point, ʔəy̓xwatiyə (Musqueam), Stan Greene (Sto:lo), Charles Elliott, TEMOSEN (Tsartlip), Simon Charlie (*Quw'utsun*), and the Sparrow family (Musqueam) among many others. They worked against a tide of racism, disrespect, erasure, and suppression. There was not a market or a public interest in Coast Salish art when they started their careers. It is difficult to put into words the significance of their work and the impact it has and will continue to have on current and future generations of Coast Salish peoples.

Susan Point recalls her experience in beginning her practice as a Coast Salish artist in her artist statement from "People Among the People":

> When I began, very little information or documentation could be found on the art style of the Coast Salish people, due to early and extensive European contact in our territory. Many of our traditional artifacts, such as houseposts and other utilitarian pieces created by my ancestors, were collected by eastern Canadian and European museums, or destroyed because of their ceremonial significance in an attempt to assimilate our First Nations Peoples. It was almost a lost art form.…At the same time, because I found so little information on our Salish Peoples' art and culture, and at first I did not yet truly understand the unique significance of our art, I went beyond the traditions of my people to develop my own art style. I re-designed and re-created traditional imagery in my own "original" way, and developed a unique contemporary art style that created a movement. (Watt 7)

What Point talks about is the same experience which to varying degrees all of us as Coast Salish artists have had, the absence of access to knowledge and teachings about Coast Salish art. We all have approached this barrier in different ways. What I find powerful here is how what Susan Point did is so similar to the ways that my great-grandmother talked about the process of embodied learning. The more that I have learned about Coast Salish culture and teachings, the more it has become apparent that the art and our stories come to us in our own way. Our teachings are there to guide us to open ourselves up and what we receive once we are open is unique to ourselves. That which we receive is *xe'xe'* (the sacred). We can share it with each other and enrich each other, but there isn't a singular 'perfect' way or result; it is a plurality of voices, perspectives, and gifts which we have received.

For those in future generations of Coast Salish art, look at all the Coast Salish art you can. Examine it. Ask questions. Think about the flow of the design. Think about how the art is used. Do not feel constrained by materials and form. Embrace your own approach and the ideas that come to you, they are your gift. They came to you for a reason.

To make the sacred visible is to honour yourself, your ancestors, the land, and the universe by responding to them with your own voice.

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Responding to Ancestral Forms

Figure 09. (Left) Healing, 2021, Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, digital. Commission for "In Plain Sight" Report on Racism in BC Health Care.

Figure 10. (Right) 19th Century Coast Salish Spindle-whorl, carved wood, reportedly property of the De Menil Private Collection (does not appear in their online collection). Image only accessible through the Burke Museum website, used without permission.

The spindlewhorl in Figure 10 is, in my opinion, one of the most beautiful instances of Coast Salish art to exist. The use of positive and negative space, especially playing with the spindle-hole as a negative face is genius. The legs of the thunderbirds on the side join the arms and shoulders of the human figure below as one continuous form. The mouths of the human faces are pierced through the wood. I can only imagine the spindle that went with this whorl was also immaculately carved.

My interpretation of this spindle whorl is that it tells a story about healing. The human figure in the upper half of the design is "working" (this is how my great-grandmother referred to healing and energy work) on the person below them. The healer is drawing upon the energy of the thunderbirds to help with this process. This is how spirit helpers worked, and the thunderbird was amongst the most powerful of them. I know that they are thunderbirds specifically because of the curving 'plume' that arches back from the top of the head. This is how thunderbirds are depicted in Coast Salish style.

In my response to this work (Figure 09), I wanted to emphasize the healing taking place and the flow of energy. I use flowing patterns of crescents and trigons to depict that flow. The healer is using their energy to help bring healing 'in' (through the black crescents and trigon) and the thunderbirds are helping to remove the bad and take it 'out' (through the 'feather' pattern of flowing trigons on the wings).

The symmetry on my design (it is perfect, automated symmetry) and the asymmetry on the old work, differs. Willie Good, *Tsusqinuxun*, helped me to understand this distinction.

* * * *

Willie Good, *Ts'usqinuxun'*: The Sacred is Asymmetrical

I recently had the good fortune of getting to spend time with my uncle, the master carver and Coast Salish artist Willie Good, *Ts'usqinuxun*' where he explained to me that the sacred is asymmetrical. I use the name uncle in a more traditional sense, as we are not immediate family, but our families are related. Going back generations, the White family and the Good family are the same. We come from the village of *'Unwinis* in *Snuneymuxw*. During this time, Willie and I talked about art and culture, as we don't get to see each other often. Our conversations are brief but beautiful about who we are as *Snuneymuxw*. He tells me about what it means to make Coast Salish art (he uses the phrase *Hul'q'umi'num'* art), which reminds me of how proud he is of the work I'm doing. I cherish our relationship. I didn't complete a Research Ethics Board Review as I did not intend to interview in person for this document, but this conversation happened and at the end he adamantly said: "You use what I told you in the paper you're writing."

Willie Good is one of the artists in the first wave of the revitalization of Coast Salish art. He told me about how in the 70's there wasn't the internet to research traditional art forms, there wasn't Coast Salish art in public. In order to learn about these subjects, he wrote to all the museums he could and asked them to send him images of any Coast Salish objects they had. Most of the images from museum collections came through as black and white facsimiles, which filled filing cabinets. Through intense study of these images he was able to learn and develop his own style.

Among other things, he learned that signatures exist within the old artworks. These "signatures" were not a name spelled out in cursive, but rather a mark deliberately made in imperfection. He helped me to see that in a design that appears to be symmetrical at a glance, where on either side of the mouth there are crescents, on one side there might be two crescents and the other one; or if there are feathers in a flowing crescent and trigon pattern, there will be one missing or a break to the pattern on one side. This intentional act demonstrates a rich and nuanced system of meaning within Coast Salish art, that goes beyond what can be surmised at surface level.

There is a profound significance in breaking the symmetry of an artwork within an art style where symmetry features prominently. Willie said to me that in the old way, it wasn't meant to be perfectly symmetrical. You look at the human face for example, it isn't perfectly symmetrical. Our eyes or different features are often uneven. This is the way that things are meant to be. To make something perfectly symmetrical was seen as bad luck. I think that it speaks also to a humility that is at the core of Coast Salish culture. We are great not by virtue of individual attributes, properties, or any one thing, but rather by how we are able to hold each other up, to give away and to look after each other. In our art, it was about how it could fulfill its role and facilitate the work at hand as opposed to the perfection of forms. The art does not exist in a vacuum, it is always relational.

From that conversation I learned that the sacred is asymmetrical.

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Figure 11. "Raven Steals the Truth / A Prophecy and a Recollection," detail, Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, public installation at Nanaimo North Town Centre, 2022. Image permission of Jennifer Leigh.

Figure 12. "Comb" (as titled by the British Museum), collection of the British Museum, stolen c. 1870, carved bone. Image used without permission.

As Willie described above, just as my great-grandmother described in her teachings, we internalize the knowledge and teachings from the ancestors through listening, sitting with, and then responding. Every Coast Salish artist has made work that responds to ancestral pieces. When we are learning from the ancestral pieces, we are drawing from our own collective intellectual property as Coast Salish peoples. Our intellectual property is a collective understanding. It's important to acknowledge that Western intellectual rights are not the same as proprietary Indigenous laws. There are limitations and exceptions, while we as Coast Salish peoples generally do not use crest systems or clan symbology (Barnett 56), there are familial and national rights and prerogatives. These need to be respected.

The significance of my great-grandmother's work in sharing her stories in book format was making them accessible to all and especially to future generations. In following the path that she set, I give whatever permission I can to future generations of Coast Salish artists to use and to learn from my art and writing. I feel that all of us as contemporary Coast Salish artists today are contributing to a living and evolving canon of Coast Salish art. Every new piece is inextricably linked to what came before and becomes part of what shall next emerge.

* * * *

When I first arrived at Emily Carr, I was overwhelmed by possibility. I had very little technical experience as an artist and I knew that I wanted to address that deficiency as best I could. And so, I went back to the basics. I did work that addressed the basics of Coast Salish art, the oldest works; those being stone carvings and petroglyphs. I worked primarily in mediums that I had no experience with.

Figure 13. "Rebuilding, Coast Salish Style," Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, 2021, plasticine clay, wire, and painted panel. Image courtesy of the artist.

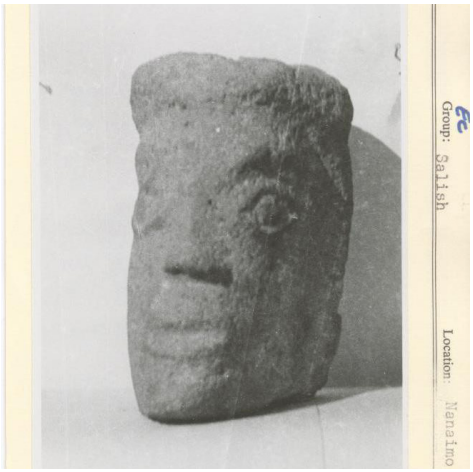

Figure 14. Salish Carved Stone Bowl, found near Nanaimo. Image from the Royal BC Museum Archives without permission.

I created a work, "Rebuilding, Coast Salish Style" in plastiline clay. I love clay as a medium. My ancestors however did not use clay sculpturally, but the ways I have used clay resonates deeply with our philosophies around art making. Here's what I understand about the process of working with clay. You have to wake the clay up through wedging, this is like introducing yourself to it. Engaging in dialogue. When working the clay you have to be present. On the wheel when you centre the clay you centre yourself (this is a quote my dad shared with me from his teacher, the late master potter Wayne Ngan). You get into the rhythms... of the wheel, of the clay drying, of the cycle of processes from start to finish. It is beautiful. And at every stage there is enormous opportunity for spontaneity, usually where the work breaks. You have to accept it and move on. Pottery was a great practice in learning how a material speaks back for me in acceptance of what is. I wonder if this is how the ancestors thought about working with stone.

With this work, "Rebuilding, Coast Salish Style" I wanted to speak to ancestral forms in a new medium, to interweave narrative and breathe new life into the work in a new way. The piece in Figure 13 references first, the carved stone head which was stolen in *Snuneymuxw* at some point in the early 20th century. It also references the work of Constantin Brancusi, a Romanian artist (an aesthetic influence) who was one of the first abstract sculptors and the teacher of Isamu Noguchi, who I will speak about later on. While drawing from these two sources, what also came to mind were recent images of the head of Sir John A. McDonald lying on the ground, having been toppled by Indigenous protestors in a profound moment of cultural and political reclamation.

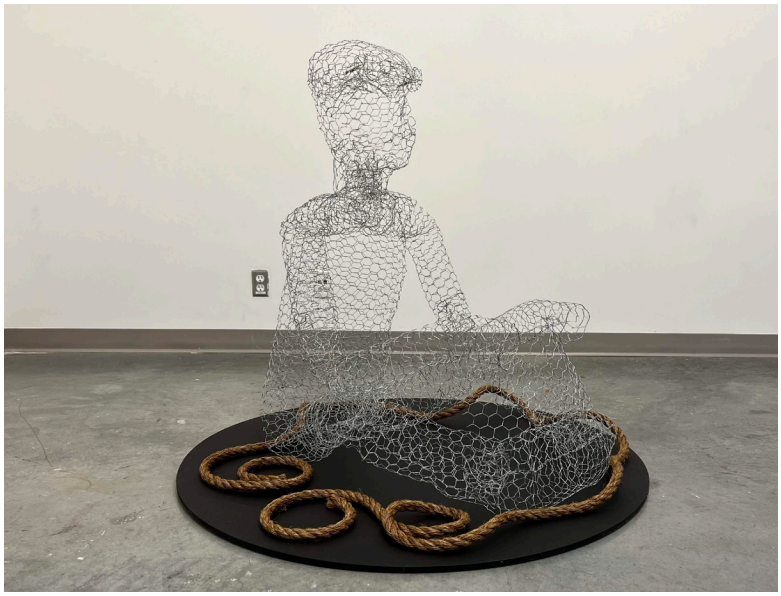

Figure 15. Seated Human Figure Bowl, Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, 2021, chicken wire, hemp rope, painted wood panel. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Figure 16. Lot 4094. A FINE AND RARE COAST SALISH STONE EFFIGY CARVING. Bidding expected between US$ 30,000 - 50,000. Native American and Pre-Columbian Art. 4 Jun 2007, 12:00 PDT. San Francisco. Image from Bonhams Fine Art Auctioneers & Valuers without permission.

After that work, I decided to do a larger scale sculptural work using chicken wire. As I worked with the material, the idea for "Seated Human Figure Bowl" came to mind. I was compelled to make a form that is meant to be a vessel but out of a totally porous and hollow material. The question "what does it mean to be full?" filled my mind as I worked. As I was 'finishing' this piece, I felt that there was something unresolved and so I ended up showing it in multiple different ways over the semester (once as shown as in Figure 14, but with a projected video over it, and again covered in plastic sheeting). A working title I had for it was "It's Coast Salish Because I Tell You It Is," as a commentary on working with contemporary materials and a lack of definition of what Coast Salish art encompasses. I consider it to be a work in progress.

The old people described knowledge as a flow. Our *snuw'uyulth* (teachings) flow from one generation to the next. In the old days the grandparents, the *silu'*, would take the grandchildren and raise them. This was how my great-grandmother, *Kwulasulwut*, was raised. When it comes to the teachings and Coast Salish tradition, we understand that traditions are meant to change. The teachings are meant to evolve and grow. These systems and institutions of Coast Salish knowledge are meant to help us to open ourselves up and be ready to live in this world and succeed. They are meant to guide us to a place. Once we arrive there what comes to us is our own. Just as rivers do, the flow of these teachings is meant to shift. It is meant to expand and contract and disperse and rejoin.

In returning to the core of Coast Salish forms in my work, I hoped to coalesce with the source and to see what emerged from this confluence. I felt guided by the flow intuitively as I continued to work.

The spring semester of first year began with a presention on my great-grandma's story "The Boys Who Became a Killer Whale," which addressed the subjects of Indigenous pedagogy and materiality (White 2008). Materiality from a Coast Salish perspective recognizes the Beingness of all things. The materials we work with have sovereignty, are conscious and sentient, and are not just "materials" but also are Beings who can help or hinder us. *Kwulasulwut*'s story shows a process of "speaking to" materials and asking for help; a way of opening a connection, relationship, and conversation with the materials themselves.

As a Coast Salish artist, a dialogue with the materials requires us to approach the work with humility, to recognize the agency of the materials in the art. My great-grandmother always said that we have to speak to the materials we work with. Whether we are weaving, with cedar or wool, or working with our hands, or in any context, we should speak to them; introduce ourselves; tell them what we are doing; tell them what they will become; how they will be used; ask them for help in the work.

I try to keep this in mind in my work. Even when I work in digital mediums, with an iPad that is composed of materials I can't even begin to comprehend, I understand that I am in a relationship with this machine, and I am learning its language even if I don't understand the syntax. This brings me to the teaching my great-grandmother shared about our prayer songs. She would assure me, if you feel nervous and you don't remember the words, then just hum. Don't use words.

The ancestors and the land and the universe will understand you.

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At Emily Carr I have been interested in exploring my positionality in regards to what knowledge is and to explore knowledge within the Coast Salish world view and ways of knowing. Knowledge, and specifically Coast Salish knowledge within the Western context, has come to be seen as a resource to be exploited. Knowledge is a subject I have explored in my work continuously. My practice has emerged out of the loss of knowledge that took place when my great-grandmother passed away. It has emerged out of a desire to know, as I sought to further understand who we are as Coast Salish peoples and who I am. In all of my art making, I work to reflect and represent our knowledge.

Continuing to build upon the bodies of work I had developed prior at Emily Carr, responding to ancestral forms and expressing the flow of knowledge, I designed the installation, "*Uy Shqweluwun*" which was exhibited as part of the WinterArts Fest 2022. A series of inflatable light sculptures, referencing the "ancestor face" (a simple and almost featureless style of face) featured prominently. These faces represented the ancestors sitting together and the traditional transfer of knowledge. This installation also included a mural and an augmented reality component, which I designed to further express these themes, wherein the faces bob in the air and crescent patterns flow, expand, and contract, to express how knowledge flows like water.

Figure 17. *Uy Shqweluwun* (To Be of Good Mind), Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, 2022. Public installation for VMF Winter Arts Fest. Photo courtesy of the artist.

I have been drawing upon the metaphor of water. This is how the old people would speak about knowledge. Knowledge is like the rivers we as peoples have depended on, which have sustained us. In learning about our language, *Hul'q'umi'num'*, I saw how our languages exist and flow both metaphorically and actually in these same rivers. The language travels the same rivers that we do. Our languages reflect our relations, our ways of life, our ways of knowing in place. This interrelatedness, which I tie back to Jo-Ann Archibald's principle, is the lifeblood of *Snuneymuxw* which flows along the Fraser River as it does the Nanaimo River. As a *Snuneymuxw* I can tell so much about how the ancestors existed in the world because of the way that it is spoken in our languages. I can tell from our dialect, *Snuneymuxwqun*, compared to the dialects from W̱SÁNEĆ nations or Musqueam, that we are more closely related to Musqueam. Our language *Hul'q'umi'num'* is closer related to həl̓q̓əmin̓əm̓ from Musqueam than to SENĆOŦEN from W̱SÁNEĆ. These movements and flows on bodies of water and land are central to how we navigate the world. The interrelatedness of being and place is central to who we are. To reference the anthropologist Wade Davis: "Language is not merely a body of vocabulary or a set of grammatical rules. It is a flash of the human spirit, the means by which the soul of each particular culture reaches into the material world. Every language is an old-growth forest of the mind, a watershed of thought, an entire ecosystem of spiritual possibilities." (Davis 2003)

These same flows, movements, exchanges, and confluences, take place within my body. Within the flow of my blood...not by its quantum but by virtue that it is... within the flow of my breath, and the flow of my mind.

The water and its sustenance, the blood in my body, each breath that I take, all the knowledge I am to receive in this life, comes not by virtue of my own skills and abilities, but rather because of the energy of the universe, the land, the ancestors, that I am connected to. This concept, for me, emerges from the Coast Salish understanding of relationality with fish and fishing, that "no Coast Salish person ever presumed to have caught a fish by virtue of their own skills or abilities, but rather it was entirely by the generosity of the (spirit of the) fish." This came from a book (title unknown), that I happened upon one day in my grandparents living room and read from cover to cover. I have never been able to find it again despite searching high and low both at their house and in catalogues and databases elsewhere. This teaching of the spirit of the fish has informed my process of art making and research in combination with teachings from *Kwulasulwut*, my late great-grandmother. In thinking about the teachings of the fish, I was inspired to wonder what teachings other beings have shared with us and to look in what might be unusual places. In the case below, I went to the mosquito and asked through my creative process what teachings they might have shared with us.

Figure 18. *Qwe'en* (Mosquito), Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, 2022, digital.

My great-grandmother would talk so often about our *snuw'uyulh*, our teachings, and how they were there to guide us, to show us how we should be in this world and in relation with each other and with everything. It was often about how to open oneself, and that once one is able to open themselves they find that there is help everywhere around us. Q'um Q'um Xiiem's writing on holism in "Indigenous Storywork" is a helpful to understand the concentric layers of relatedness and community that surround us physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually (Archibald 11). When we open ourselves up, we let these networks of community in. The act of opening is one of humbly asking the energies of the universe. It is about preparing yourself and entering a space of being ready-to-receive.

The problem is that it is a complex endeavour to inculcate these teachings. The genocidal processes and colonial systems governing the nation known as Canada, have worked very effectively to erase, suppress, and deny the continuance of the flow of Coast Salish knowledge or Indigenous knowledges. In another sense, hydroelectric dams were designed and placed to capitalize upon and disrupt the flow of water, and now no salmon can spawn up and down the coast of the province and the water (what little of it flows down from the diminishing snowmelt) is siphoned off to power the province and sit in bottles bearing corporate brands.

* * * *

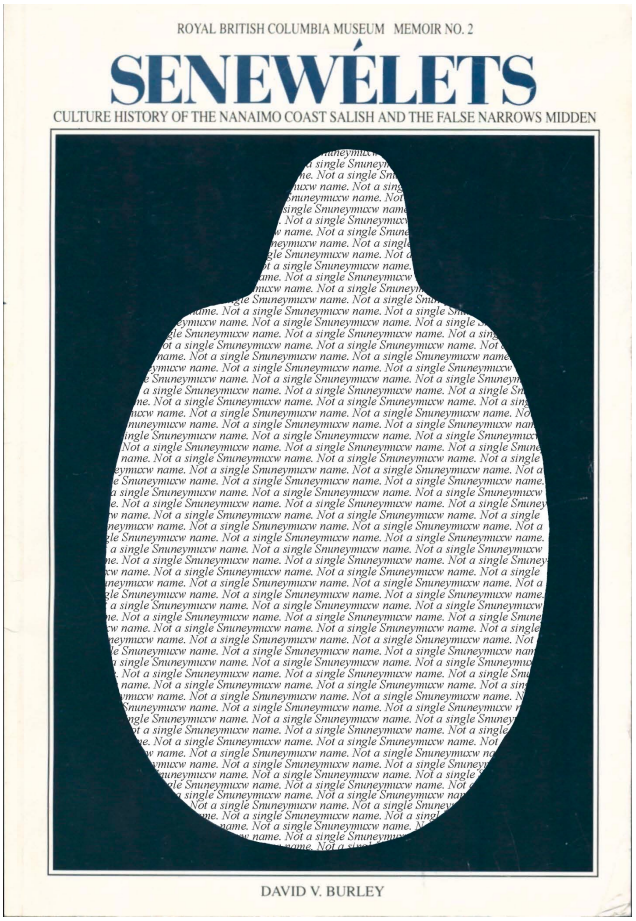

Figure 19. not a single *Snuneymuxw* person is named or referenced in this text, Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, 2022, digital.

Figure 20. Beetle Pendant liberated from the cover of the book, Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, 2022, digital.

Visually, this 'beetle pendant' is one of my favourite instances of Coast Salish art to ever exist. It is so unique and strange relative to most Coast Salish objects of this era. That it depicts an insect is incredibly unique. Our art historically was often used to depict beings who have been spiritual helpers to individuals.

* * * *

kwulasultun syuth

Figure 21. Artifacts of a Modern *Xwulmuxw*, Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, 2022. Pizza Box Cutout Maquettes. Photo courtesy of the artist.

As part of my efforts to continue looking back to the oldest instances of Coast Salish art, I was drawn to the "*Senewelets*" report, which documented and reported upon an archeological dig which took place in *Snuneymuxw* on Gabriola Island from 1966 to 1967. The document was written and compiled by David V. Burley and published by the Royal BC Museum in 1988. In this document not a single *Snuneymuxw* person's name is mentioned and not a single *Snuneymuxw* voice is cited. I was in disbelief as I read it. At this point in time, *Snuneymuxw* still had a whole generation of elders who were fluent *Hul'q'umi'num'* speakers and carried an incredible wealth of knowledge and teachings. Their voices were not given a platform in the document as the anthropologist attempted to discern the meaning of the artifacts that came from *Snuneymuxw* ancestors. What a lost opportunity, Shawn Wilson would concur, saying, "We cannot remove ourselves from our world in order to examine it" (Wilson 14). The absurdity of anthropologists attempting to evaluate and ascribe meaning to artifacts where they had no understanding of the cultural context from which these artifacts emerged became the foundation of this body of work. What emerged from that foundation was a series of cardboard cut-out maquettes using pizza boxes.

The series, "Artifacts of a Modern *Xwulmuxw*" was inspired by the sculptural work of Isamu Noguchi, an artist I greatly admire. Noguchi was an abstract artist (1904-1988) who was a master of the integration of space and sculpture, really that sculpture was not so much the singular artwork on a pedestal, but more so the ways that people experience and interact in the space. Noguchi made several bodies of work that were both flat sheet metal and carved stone sculptures modeled after smaller scale paper or cardboard maquettes. This philosophical approach to art and the experience of art, the phenomenology of art, has been enormously interesting to me. While thinking about Noguchi, I thought about how I wanted to explore the relationship of sculpture and space and decided to do so through paper cutout sculptural maquettes. I see a parallel in the work he did with the work of my ancestors, in how he engaged in dialogue with materials.

Figure 22. Isamu Noguchi, Mother and Child, 1944-45. Onyx. 19 3/8 x 12 3/4 x 8 5/8 in. (49.2 x 32.4 x 21.9 cm). Collection of The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 00083. Photo: Kevin Noble. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / Artists Rights Society [ARS]

Figure 23. Meat Lover / *Stqe:ye'* (Wolf), Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, 2022, cutout pizza box sculpture. Photo couresy of the artist.

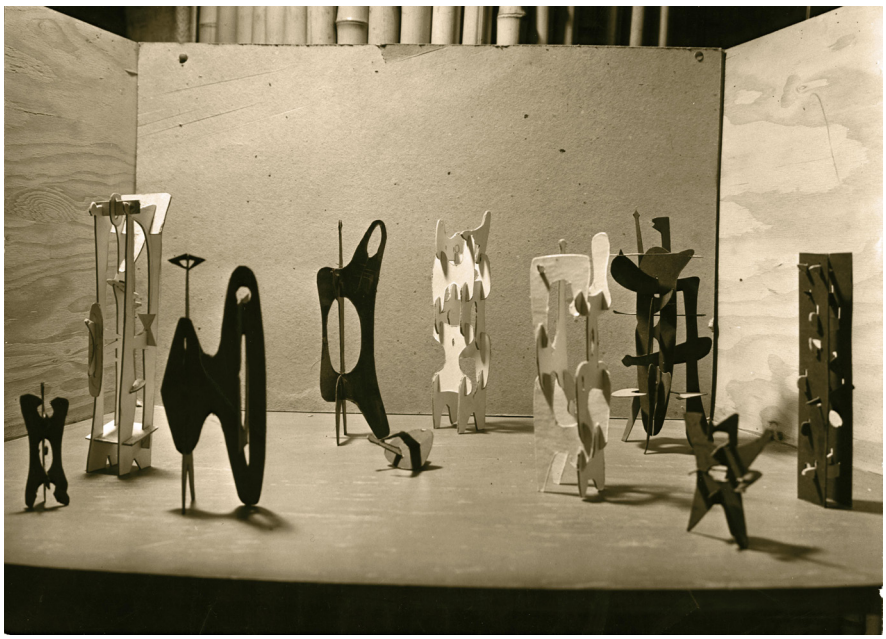

Figure 24. Maquettes for marble slab sculptures set up in Isamu Noguchi's MacDougal Alley Studio, 1946. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 03185. Photo: Eliot Elisofon. ©The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / Artists Rights Society [ARS]

At my supervisor, Mimi Gellman, Animkii's suggestion, I explored architectural models and small-scale maquettes as a way to engage with a sense of scale and in order to develop a new skill to add to my toolkit. As I developed the concept, I used a number of different materials for sculptural 'sketches.' I knew that I wanted to scale up from construction paper, and so I purchased large sheets of cardboard from Opus. When I got them, I don't know what I expected, but I was really disappointed.

As I produced the large scale model using the laser cutter on campus I found that the sculpture was totally lacking in spirit compared to the smaller ones I cut by hand. The perfect and even surface was similarly spiritless. They were also expensive. It was just normal cardboard. It ended up sitting in my studio for months. I thought about it more and through a conversation with my classmate Jenie Gao, I realized how much cardboard I had sitting at home from random junk. That was when I had the epiphany to use pizza boxes.

I had been eating a lot of pizza, as grad students do. The pizza boxes built up like a midden in the corner of my kitchen. In teachings from my family, and from the uncles who I hunt with, we are taught to use everything from what we take from the land; be it harvesting animals, plants, or other resources. Recycling and re-using these pizza boxes as art felt in line with this philosophy. And when I started using the pizza boxes for these sculptures it felt as though new life was breathed into the artwork. The pizza boxes were an artifact of my own life, they carried embodied knowledge. Knowledge about capitalism, commodification, and fast food through the branded images they carry. Knowledge about the ways that colonization and ongoing colonialism have impacted our diets as Indigenous peoples and our abilities to access traditional foods and practice food sovereignty. While the pizza boxes spoke to these issues, they were also objects that I had enjoyed greatly. I love pizza. Since making these sculptures, I have learned that they are in dialogue with the work of Sámi artist Joar Nango, whose notions of Indigenuity grapple with contemporary Indigenous notions of materiality, space, and architecture within the modern context (Pavka 2021).

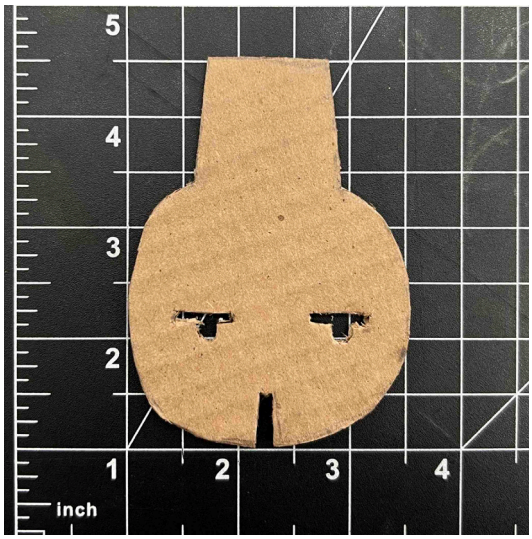

Figure 25. Sketch cutout for paper maquette, Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, 2022. Photo courtesy of the artist.

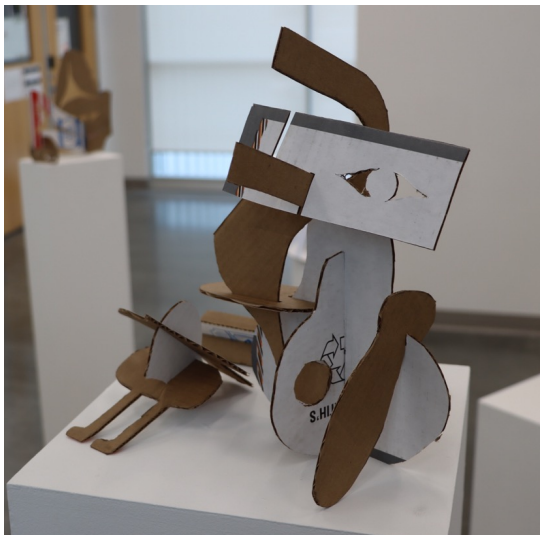

Figure 26. Untitled (the Picasso One), Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, 2022. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The maquettes I had been working with already were responding to forms used by abstract sculptors, which for the most part (Noguchi being an exception as his work responds to forms from his Japanese heritage) had been appropriated from Indigenous peoples around the world by the artists. Artists like Picasso and Giacometti, Brancusi who I mentioned earlier, were interested in abstraction. They found abstraction in the art of Indigenous peoples. What this movement of artists sought so desperately existed already within art forms that we had been practicing for thousands of years. In creating these sculptures, I took those forms back from them.

As I worked with the pizza boxes more and more, I came to understand the material better. I felt like I started to move past surface learning and formed a connection with the materials. Aspects of the cardboard became integrated in my planning and sketching process. These qualities like the proportion of the corrugation in the cardboard, the width of the flaps where the box was folded to add volume for the pizza to be contained within stimulated the way things within my sculptural forms unfolded, in the same way that Salish shapes inform the proportion of a design, these aspects of the pizza box also informed my sculptures.

It amazed me, a crazy synchronicity occured, that a part of the pizza box pattern mimicked an old spindle whorl which comes from *Snuneymuxw*, which has a pattern of hands coming together (Figure 26).

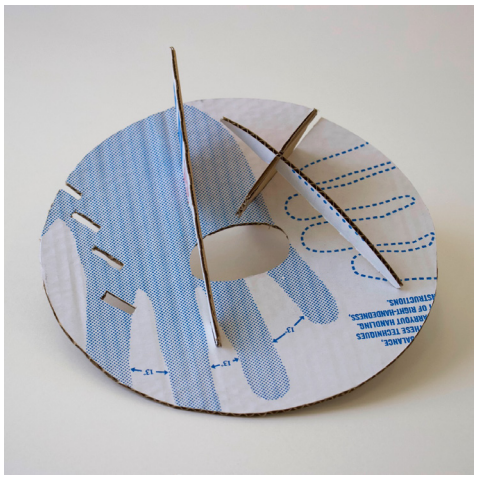

Figure 27. Hands, Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, 2022, cut-out Dominos pizza box. Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 28. Snuneymuxw spindle whorl, collection of the Royal BC Museum. Image from the Royal BC Museum without permission.

Naturally, I had to incorporate this in my design. These are the kind of synergies that I listen for when I work through being present, and as my great-grandmother taught me, when we are working in the right way, they happen.

Figure 29. (Right) Embrace, (Left) Reaching for, Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, 2022, cardboard cutout maquettes. Photo courtesy of the artist.

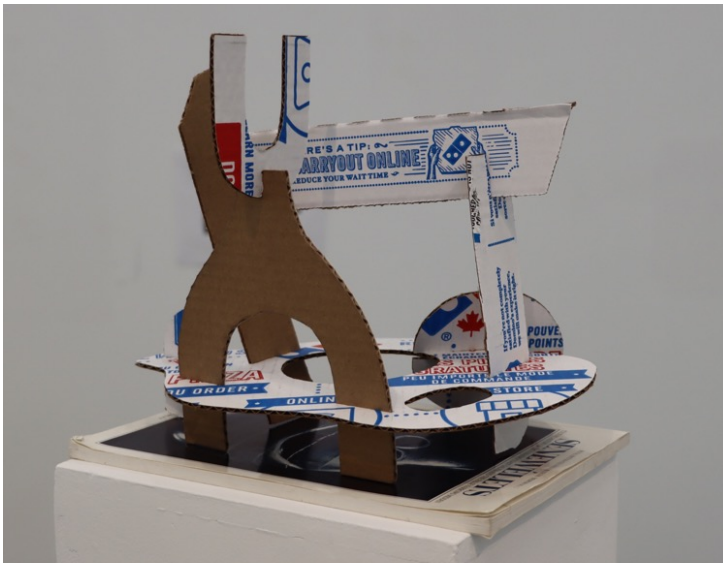

Figure 30. A non-functional table, Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, 2022, mixed media maquette. Photo courtesy of the artist.

This became a very passionate and prolific period of making during my MFA. I covered the walls of my studio with sketches. I thought about the basic forms and how they come together in space. I thought about the materials and how they would impact the sculpture conceptually. This body of work helped me to realize how important this way or working was to my practice and I intend to return to it later and bring it new life in different ways. I feel as though, conceptually, these works are a well that I can draw upon endlessly. This process felt right. Of all the work that I did during my MFA, this felt the most realized and had the most potential. It felt like the truest expression of what I feel is our role as Coast Salish artists, to retell stories in our own way and to make *xe'xe'* and our *snuw'uyulh* visible. For the final thesis installation, I have addressed the ways in which I feel the work in Figure 29 lacked spirit.

Figure 31. Beetle, Eliot White-Hill, *Kwulasultun*, 2022, cardboard maquette. Photo courtesy of the artist.

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Here I want to take pause.

Up to now this document has been written as a standard academic paper, in order to situate the work and to ground the reader theoretically. The following section is more experimental in form. The way that I write in this section represents in a truer way how language flows in *Hul'q'umi'num'*, how our elders spoke slower and gave space for the weight and flow of words.

I want to make space to acknowledge that the following section, "Knowledge Flows Like a River" makes reference to Residential Schools. In writing these passages I can feel the weight of this subject. I ask you to bear with me in this effort.

Please look after yourself and your *shqwaluwuns* (your being).

O si:em.

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Knowledge Flows Like a River

kw'squlquluthun (a dream):

I had this dream some time ago, between my great-grandmothers's passing and beginning to make Coast Salish art:

I stood with my back to a rocky, moss-covered face of sandstone bluff, the kind you see on the south face of Gabriola Island where it looks out towards the Rez. I was high in the air. The stone beneath my feet was damp and slick. It was grey and foggy. I couldn't see far out over the water, which was impermeable and neither turbulent nor still. I found myself face to face with a great serpent. It hovered, suspended in the air. It had a head at either end of its massive grey-green body. I was speaking to one head, and the other head drifted some fifty feet further back, looking away from me.

I want to talk to the other head, I pleaded with the serpent.

The head facing me stared and slowly shook.

You aren't ready, the serpent said.

I struggled to come to terms with this answer
and the dream dissolved around me.

To be honest with you, I can't recall whether this was a dream or that I dreamt it was a dream. Anything further about this moment eludes me, I can't recall how the faces of the *si:nlhqi'* (two headed serpent) looked. As it often is with dreams, I can only recall certain affects.

This dream came to me when I was in a desperate struggle to learn after my great-grandmother had died. An intense urgency arose within me to learn what I could, so that no more would be lost.

In retrospect, I think this dream came to me to remind me that things don't work that way, that knowledge isn't a resource to be extracted, that all things are impermanent. What we learn and experience, and the knowledge that we gain from it, are all gifts. They are gifts from the land, from the ancestors, from the energies of the universe. They don't belong to us.

Despite all of the horrendous and despicable histories of colonization in this place, the overarching reality remains; these energies and these beings exist outside of morality and outside of human understanding. We should do all that we can to preserve ourselves and our teachings, despite the fact that we can't understand everything. This is a message against despair. I am hopeful, because the knowledge was given to us once. When our ancestors are ready, it will be given again. The knowledge still exists in the land. When we are ready, it will be there for us.

* * * *

knowledge

flows

like

a

river

lhuxw (to flow)

means also a baby's first

words to come out

words spilling from lips

babbling along tongues

from one generation

to the next

in the shape

of our ancestors

kwulasulwut syuth

* * * *

As a girl
My great grandmother, *Kwulasulwut*
Was sent to sit
Beneath the floorboards
Beneath the open window
Beneath the "place of learning"

To learn, to wait

What drips of knowledge
Slipped through the cracks

Did they know?
What happened within those walls?

160+ tear drops
Dripped through those cracks
And into the land

a shape, not a static form

meant to change gradually

in gradations, in bursts

in a warped door
in nan's cookie cutters,
long smushed by pans

the river bed rolls

and slithers

and sheds

its skin

shivering

shimmering

the new skin glistens

different but the same

knowledge flows

despite

a hydroelectric dam

funneling, siphoning

indigenous knowledge

so as to power

colonial structures

on stolen land.

how must it feel

torn from bed

fed through pipe

over, under, and along

where forests stood

ash and concrete dust

whispering songs to each other

in the night

* * * *

If you can't go to their school
you'll go to our school,
declared Granny Rice,

and she, along with her only brother Tommy Pielle, *Quyupulenuxw*, and the other elders from the community took my great-grandma and her thirteen cousins and taught them in the old way.

and in that moment,

the tide, having receded

leaving damp sand to bake in the sun and crabs and mollusks to huddle in their dens
half buried in sand

returned again

for one more generation.

* * * *

Education is sacred in our world
Which is one layer to how purely sickening and insidious,
genocide dressed up in a school uniform was.

* * * *

"They're bullshitting us," said one of her cousins, Ernie,
as a young boy about the elders' teachings, "that's too
crazy"

about the capacity of our people,
to connect with energy,
the land, the universe,
each other.

They weren't.

* * * *

My great-grandmother, Dr. Ellen Rice White, *Kwulasulwut*, spent much of her later life looking for someone who could "find the English words" for her stories. It felt as though, just as I became ready-to-receive and ready to ask questions, she was leaving us. I realized how spoiled I have been, being able to sit with her whenever I wanted. She was one of those people where it felt impossible to me that she would leave. When she passed it felt that the light went out. But only in the darkness are the stars visible.

With my great-grandmother's stories, there is always something there for me. I feel that when I read and re-read her stories, I am getting one more chance to sit with her. Her words speak through time to me in the moment. There are new teachings that have revealed themselves to me in that moment, meant for me as I am now. The gifts of these stories are not static, the *snuw'uyulh* are living things that come to you as you grow and change, as you need them. Our ancestors, their teachings, their words, they are never really "gone." They live with us in many ways

* * * *

kwulasultun syuth

sometimes it feels that my art practice has emerged from grief.

personally, the grief of losing my Big Mama

collectively, the grief of everything

grief is a Coast Salish institution

we have professional mourners

we have so much protocol and process

for losing loved ones

and i came to realize

This notion of passing is not the same as ours.

The ancestors are always with us, all around us, all.

When we learn to open ourselves to them,

They are there for us.

grief is gratitude
my practice has emerged from a place of gratitude

i cun ci't (here and now/i am/to be grateful))))
((((
))))
((((

*
* * *

the children decided to use materials

that had already been spoken to

these materials were already awake,

in a way

they were ready to listen

they were happy

to hear the children's voices.

they were happy

to change,

to help;

but not the materials that had not been spoken to,

had not been handled with care and concern by those trained

were they still happy

how can we tell

did they murmur joyfully

in their sleep?

* * * *

I think one way to describe the realm that the ancestors live in would be that this is a similar, if not the same state, in which all things exist. The rocks in the ground, the water, the weed sprouting through the cement, the fly flitting about, and, somehow, the wood laminate table you sit at; they are all sentient beings. They can communicate with us. But not in the sense of

"Hey, how are ya,

how's the family,

pretty tragic

what's going on in the world right now

isn't it?"

Rather it's more of a connection in the energy plane. My great-grandmother would talk about the thought-before-the-thought, which seems to me to be the energy and pure intent prior to the act. This place of thought-prior-to-thought is where the communication takes place—though this is the best I can approximate as someone who has not received the training. Perhaps once you are trained and open to this other realm, conversation in a conventional way is possible. Sitting there as a child listening to the stories that my great-grandmother told, it was apparent to me that she existed in an entirely different reality to my own, or perhaps we existed at an intersection between worlds but I was only able to look one way down the street, whereas she was able to look side to side, up and down, and see the life teeming in the ditch just off the road. She was the other head of the *si:nlhqi'* and I was stuck looking at myself, but we were the same being; of the same body. Her lived experience was so at odds with the laws of nature that Western science had established (maybe not physics, as I suspect that quantum theorists are starting to catch up to where our ancestors got millennia ago). How am I supposed to navigate these inconsistencies, the incongruous and tenuous veneer of the reality that I supposed myself to exist in? I chose simply to believe.

I think of that story she loved to tell about her cousin, a young boy and one of those she was taught alongside in the old way. One day he said to her after teachings about the spiritual and energy side of their work,
"I think those old people are full of shit, you know,"
and she'd laugh. They weren't.

(this section was written at a Denny's at Burrard and Broadway, on stolen Squamish land nearby the Senakw village site, April 6th 2022)

* * * *

* * *

*

What does it mean to speak to the materials?

How can I speak to materials that have been processed

in ways so far from the teachings?

Wood from trees that I never knew, felled
en masse
hauled to places I have never been,
along roads I have never walked
ground into a pulp,
into a form where the only discernible
feature is the smell,
but the smell is enough for the Ancestors,
mashed and mushed and pressed,
and contorted many times more, treated
and cured,
travelling different places for each step
and delivered to my door, as a vessel
for food I did not make, from beings I did
not know,
from hands I have never felt,

How can I speak to these materials that have

not been

What has happened to the energy of those
beings
deconstructed and reconstructed
what form does it now take
in such a monstrous house

when I look to it
does it look back
does it see
does it feel

does it remember

I claim them as artifacts of my own life,
but on what basis do I claim relationship
with those I have not spoken

xwiyune:m ch (listen)

suwqstamu tu nanum u'tu kwulasun
(for the stars to speak)

It feels that all my artwork
emerges from a moment.

It feels that all my artwork emerges from a moment. It feels that all my artwork emerges from a moment.

All my artwork across all forms and media; perhaps, ultimately, every form of expression I have ever released into the world. How it looks and the form it takes isn't so significant as everything prior to the act that culminated in it.

Is it an echo or a response or an impression or a gesture of that moment?

Is it a reflection of that moment and who I was in that moment and in that context?

Is it its own thing distinct and separate from all of that?

And I can puzzle and ruminate and ramble endlessly as to the nature of that and that moment, but it has fled.

And yet, here I am, left with a gift of that moment. An artifact of that moment.

* * * *

here and now I am grateful. *i cun ci't*

Conclusion

In this thesis I have examined Coast Salish art and my process of becoming an artist, and from a causal perspective, my own process of becoming. The mediums I have used are those dearest to me, the gifts I have received from *Kwulasulwut*, my great-grandmother, my family, my community, my culture, the land, and the universe, whether in essay format, prose, or visual art. The act of telling stories has given my life meaning. These relations, what I have received through them, each moment of being and being-with, these are all sacred. The sacred is not meant to have a definitive outline. It is everything around us, everything about who we are and our experience here. It is the coming together of different energies to make what is new. This is the way that my great-grandmother spoke of it to me, and I have tried to express how it was said to me in the best way I can, through new and old stories.

There is a lot to unpack in this thesis. This thesis is an Indigenous story, and the key to unpacking it is described in Jo-Ann Archibald, Q'um Q'um Xiiem's concept of Indigenous Storywork. You as a reader have shared your time with me generously to make it to this point. I ask that you engage with the teachings I have shared both now and on an ongoing basis using the seven principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy, and that you continue to engage with Indigenous art and stories with *uy shqwaluwun*.

I have situated Coast Salish art and my own practice as a Coast Salish artist in theory and philosophy. These are fields where Coast Salish art has not often been discussed in the modern context, and they are fields which can enrich our art and our understanding of our art. Our ancestors were theorists and philosophers in our own way. As we continue the process of revitalizing and reclaiming our art, we continue to learn more about who we are, and we expand our shared identities.

It is critical that I acknowledge that the revitalization of Coast Salish art is an ongoing process, the aspects that I have described are only a small part of the work and from one perspective. There are multiple generations of Coast Salish artists working alongside me, each of us contributing in profound ways to this sacred work. My writing has been geared towards equipping the reader to be able to understand when they look at and how to look at our art, to help fill their basket with knowledge. For future generations of Coast Salish artists and all Coast Salish peoples, I hope that they see themselves reflected when they look. I feel strongly that a connection is formed between the art or story and the audience who experiences it, and that that connection is a place where empathy and understanding can flourish. This connection is a sacred space. It changes and grows as we learn. These connections are invaluable to carry within ourselves.

The work that we do as Indigenous artists in the modern context is affirmative of our cultures, our identities, and our lived experience. The fundamental act of us telling these stories is sacred. Our voices matter, our stories are worth sharing. We enrich everyone around us in doing so. I can only go to the work that Susan Point, ʔəy̓xwatiyə, Stan Greene, Charles Elliott, TEMOSEN, Simon Charlie, and others did to illustrate the incredible impact that we can have. Our world is richer because of what they have shared. Our relations and connections as Coast Salish and non-Coast Salish peoples

are richer and deeper and full of more understanding and compassion because of the work that they did.

When I first set out to pursue an MFA, I saw it as an opportunity for two things, first; to do the work to talk about and honour Coast Salish art in a way that can be shared with others; and second; to better myself as a person and to develop my skills as an artist so that I can better serve my community and the future generations to come. Learning is not an easy path, but it is profoundly rewarding. I do not see what I began and have done here as finished. This is one step on a journey I shall be continuing for the rest of my life. There will be more and other instances and variations of this work. The art that I have made at Emily Carr is reflective of these processes, they are reflective of the various stages of learning I am at as an artist. These artworks are meant to honour that, and they are meant to honour those who walked alongside me here.

Everything that I have done here has been in honour of my late great-grandmother, Dr. Ellen Rice White, *Kwulasulwut*. She left us so much, the more I sit with what she left and the more I try to learn from her, the more that emerges. I hope that I have been able to share her teachings and to honour her in a good way with *uy shqwaluwun*. I hope that she feels proud on the other side.

I feel so excited to continue as an artist. I am grateful to have the opportunity to do this work. There are concepts and ideas and forms that I have only begun to touch on. I want to bring them to realization in many different ways. I want to continue to grapple with and engage with materials and senses of scale. I want to continue to engage in dialogue with my ancestors. I want to keep learning so that I can share more.

Huy ch qu si:em, thank you honoured ones, for walking this path with me.

It is time that we adjourn for this moment. On my Nuu Chah Nulth side we would say, “Chuu.” Chuu is functionally both a greeting and a farewell, but what it really does is it opens and closes a conversation. When we meet again the conversation will be reopened. This conversation is a connection shared between us that exists across lifetimes and realities. On my Coast Salish side we are a little bit more direct. We say, *huye wulh si:em* (leave already, honoured one).

O si:em,

ni hay, huy ch qu (the work is now done / the end, thank you)

* * * *

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