

Dzawada'enuxw Interdisciplinary Artist and Educator

Marianne Nicolson, PhD

By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD

MARIANNE NICOLSON, whose name is also 'Tayagila'ogwa, is of Scottish descent and a member of the Dzawada'enuxw First Nation, a Kwakwaka'wakw people of the Pacific Northwest Coast. She holds a bachelor of fine arts degree from Emily Carr University of Art and Design (1996), a master of fine arts degree from the University of Victoria (1999), a master of arts degree in linguistics and anthropology from the University of Victoria (2005), and a doctoral degree in linguistics, anthropology, and art history from the University of Victoria (2013). Nicolson was also mentored in customary Kwakwaka'wakw drawing, painting, and carving by seminal artists Wayne Alfred (Kwakwaka'wakw) and Clarence Moon (Kwakwaka'wakw). Nicolson's interdisciplinary practice hinges on Kwakwaka'wakw Indigenous knowledge to scrutinize ceremonial procedures, language, and artistic production.

Critics took heed in 1998, when Nicolson scaled a rock face in Kingcome Inlet to paint a massive, 28-by-38-foot pictograph to commemorate the lastingness of her ancestral village of Gway'i. She was the first to do so in over 60 years. Ten years later, in 2008, Nicolson created the site-specific architectural installation *The House of the Ghosts* on the façade of the Vancouver Art Gallery. From dusk to dawn every day of the exhibition, she projected Kwakwaka'wakw-influenced imagery featuring totem poles, a human skeleton, and salmon onto a building whose complicated history as a courthouse and jail includes prosecuting First Nation peoples under the government's potlatch injunction.

Nicolson has exhibited her work in numerous cultural institutions in Canada, including the Art Gallery of Great Victoria, Thunder Bay Art Gallery, and Canadian National Arts Centre, in addition to international exhibitions at National Museum of the American Indian, George Gustav Heye Center, New York, and the 17th Biennale of Sydney, Australia. Nicolson's work is also included in public and private collections and is represented by Equinox Gallery in Vancouver. I had the pleasure of speaking to the artist about her work this past February.

I'd like to begin with your childhood. Where were you raised and how does it affect your current art practice?

My parents met in Alert Bay [on Cormorant Island, British Columbia]—my dad is Scottish and was working for the coast guard; my mom was living in Alert Bay at the time, working at the local residential school. Later they moved



Marianne Nicolson. All images courtesy of the artist.

down island. I was born in Comox, then we moved as a family to Victoria. After my mom and dad split up, my mom moved us to Vancouver. She started sending us to Kingcome Inlet in the summers. That was my introduction to my home community. It had a major effect on my consciousness because the difference in my worldview and lifestyle was still pretty strong. Basically, my mom sent us up there and said, "Your relatives will take care of you." Looking back on it, I guess she had an understanding of the community [laughs]. Sure enough, we were taken in, and we lived with different relatives. It was amazing, actually. When we went up there, there was no electricity, so basically there was this ancient community that still had a viable, old way of seeing their relationships to one another and the land, which had a huge impact on my artwork and my ways of thinking. It's carried through all the way to my practice.



Cliff Painting, 1998, petroglyph, Kingcome Inlet, British Columbia.

In light of your time spent in Kingcome Inlet, how important is the concept of place or home to you and your work?

Oh, absolutely fundamental, because I see my artwork as a public platform for the expression of ideas around how human beings relate—one of the major things I've encountered in my own life and which continues to be a feature, is this notion of home, and what is a homeland, and how do we relate to place. In Canada,

particularly where I come from, this is hotly contested. There is this British colonial notion that this landscape on the coast originated with contact and therefore the colonial history is privileged. And yet what I found out and how I grew to understand things is that Indigenous First Nations have always been on these lands, and that a fair and just negotiation over how that relationship to the land was going to be mapped was never set forth by the colonial government. So

how can the general population be comfortable with calling this their home or understanding this as their home, when this fundamental issue has never been resolved? What I'm trying to do through my artwork is to try and raise awareness of these issues. You could link it to the environmental movement today, where this general societal distance from land and from place has created a cesspool of land abasement that affects all populations. We have to address issues—our issues—of how we consider our homeland and what those issues are. I feel strongly that Indigenous peoples have answers to those questions, if we're willing to listen.

Now, you have undergone extensive academic training covering a breadth of disciplines including visual art studio, linguistics, art history, and anthropology. Can you speak about how your educational background comes to inform your art practice?

It's an interesting and somewhat conflicted relationship, actually. Growing up, it was emphasized that we needed to go out and get an education to figure out how we're going to live in this modern world, then come back ... They wanted us to go out and get an education, so I followed through to get the highest form of education available. In the long run, once I'd gone through all of that, I realized that I didn't get a modern education or a Westernized institutional education ... to have an academic career or to become a professor. It was one avenue, one platform, available to me where I could devote my time to learning. I needed to learn as much as I could about both our traditional systems and the modern systems to succeed in the mandate that had been set out for us. One thing led to another.

For my PhD dissertation, I did a linguistic crossover between English and Kwakwaka'wakw, our Indigenous language, examining the concept of

space and time. In all of that research was the structure, which was good for me because it allowed me to engage in this research intensively, and what I found was that the worldviews were so different. There was this beautiful philosophy behind the way the Kwakwaka'wakw-speaking people understood their relationship to each other, their communities, and their lands that was absolutely fundamental to how we were going to approach the ongoing negotiations being asked of us around land claims, treaty negotiations, and everything else.

It was funny. I thought there was a danger in pursuing too much Western academic education. I thought I might be pulled into that stream, and what it ended up doing was to heavily influence my art practice. The other thing it showed me—which was kind of scary, actually—was I realized that the Western colonial systems we're living under now are extremely detrimental to our future, even as human beings. It was a bit awful because, growing up, I retained a certain trust in the system, and my education—my experience of being cross-cultural—stripped those ideas from me. I realized, holy s—, there are no assurances even at the highest level. All it does for me is show how faulty the systems actually are. It's been motivating, and I'm glad I got the education, because it does give me strength to work from both sides.

Is there a philosophy that drives your work?

Communication, building understanding. Continuing to perpetuate a worldview that I think has tremendous value and that is under duress. I see my art practice as social activism, a way of maintaining a worldview that I strongly believe contains answers to how we're going to survive climate change and what's going to happen to our environment. I use the artwork to advocate for that, and I try to maintain traditional concepts and ideas in the works



Widzotlan's Gwayulalal? What Is to become of Us?, 2007, photograph, silver inlay on wood. Photo: Bob Matheson.

themselves. So, formal qualities of the work are less important. I'm trying to map these concepts and ideas in a modern way for modern audiences, so they can come to an understanding as to what these philosophies must be.

You've spoken about the significance of cultural revitalization for Indigenous communities. Can you talk about how cultural

revitalization is unfolding in North America and how it can be sustained for the future?

Initially, I felt strongly that language was the form under which we were to truly revitalize our cultures. We need to maintain our languages. Across North America, all Indigenous languages are fading; some of them are going to be extinct; few of them



Tunics of the Changing Tide series, installation view, 2007, wood, acrylic, brass, copper, abalone shell, and silver inlay on wood, 57 x 63 in. each. Photo: Bob Matheson.

are slated to survive. But I realized during my research that language was just one major pillar of that understanding, and if we worked hard—not just on language but on other forms as well, such as artwork, ceremony, song, dance, and even our political advocacy—that all those things together would contribute to a revitalization of a worldview.

It's like a heartbeat. We as a people had suffered so much oppression that the heartbeat was just barely discernible, but you can see a shift from the 1960s, 1970s, onwards, where that heartbeat becomes stronger again. I believe North American Indigenous peoples are looking at revitalization, but part of the major fight I see is that we don't succumb to an ideological brainwashing where we accept or attempt to map our culture to Western European notions of capitalism. If we map those things, then it's like our culture becomes more of an outfit we wear but not something we live.

My fight in everything I do—in my art practice and political work at home—is to try to keep the concepts and ideas alive, because they don't fit within the Western European colonial framework; they just don't fit. The danger for us as Indigenous peoples is that we revitalize formal aspects of our cultures but we don't maintain or hold onto what is truly important, which are the concepts,

ideas, and ways of being.

Indigenous history was handed down mainly through storytelling, which doesn't necessarily fit the European model of archivization. Would you say Indigenous languages that follow in the oral tradition are archives in themselves? Is Indigenous language an archive?

Oh, definitely. As a monolingual English speaker who knew a little Kwakwaka'wakw and who had a familiarity with the sound of it because Elders used to speak it around us, I thought to myself, well, why can't we just translate everything? I was able to study the language intensively and do these comparisons. What I realized was that, conceptually, there were such differences, and embedded in those languages, almost as a code, is a way of understanding things that you cannot translate into English. The languages themselves are very structured in how they choose to express ideas that lead to the conceptual underpinnings of the culture itself.

Arguably, you rose to prominence in 1998 when you scaled a rock face in Kingcome Inlet to paint a large-scale pictograph dedicated to Gwa'yi. Could you speak about how this project came about, your experience in painting it, and how it affected the local community?



The House of Ghosts, 2008, drawing, projection on the Vancouver Art Gallery.

It's interesting because everything we're talking about relates to that work. I remember a distinct moment: I was in my early 20s living with one of my uncles in Kingcome. He was bringing me in and out of the village; you could only reach the village by boat. We were in a small boat with an outboard motor, and he stopped the boat on the way back into Kingcome and pointed from one mountain to this other mountain, stretched his arms out wide, and said, "All that you see before you is under our people." I understood, "Ya, he's teaching me."

At that time, I spent my summers in Kingcome and my winters going to university. It took a while for it to sink in but gradually I came to understand that, technically and legally under Canadian law, none of my uncle's interpretation was upheld by the Canadian state. Our reserve was three square miles that was allocated to us, and we had legally become somewhat like squatters on

Queen's land. It was shocking to me the difference in the interpretation.

I thought, f— that, I'm going to abide by what I was taught through my uncle, who handed down to me knowledge that has come from thousands and thousands and thousands of years of our place on this land. I cannot acknowledge, I cannot abide by this imposed notion of what our state is considered to be under Canadian law. The strongest act that I can do artistically is to create something that upholds the traditional place of the land for our people, our understanding, and worldview.

Well, what do you do as an artist? You make something no one can miss. Anyone coming into that territory cannot miss this large declaration of the land of these ancient relationships. That painting is of our original story, so to tie this back to our origin story, they say the beginning

of time, which I translate as when the waters receded and the land was revealed, that's when our people arrived to this land. I wanted to privilege that perspective, I wanted to be very public, and I wanted it to be of strength to the community, because legally—especially when it came to our relationships to government and industry—it was extraordinarily inconvenient for us to have this little village in the middle of all this logging. We were basically inconvenient and in some ways almost nonexistent. That has shifted and changed somewhat in the last 20 years, but I wanted to make this strong political statement, and in recognition of the community, I was going to acknowledge our perspective and worldview.

Another prominent work opened at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2008. Essentially, *The House of Ghosts* transformed the façade of the gallery into a Northwest Coast ceremonial house. When discussing the work, you wrote, "Come ghosts, you whose night is day and whose day is night in this Great House, I beg you, Great Healer, to take pity on us and restore us to life." Could you provide further context on how this quote references the work and the forces beyond it?

The Vancouver Art Gallery was originally built to be the BC courthouse, and I wanted to look at that history of colonial law and place it in relationship to Indigenous understanding, particularly Kwakwaka'wakw. So, I thought, what I'll do is ... a performance akin to our ceremonies. We do these performances that manifest ideas, so I'll do these performances and I'll transform the exterior of this colonial structure into the interior of an Indigenous structure. The exterior of the building through the light projection at nighttime would be transformed into the interior house posts and crossbeam of what we call a big house. In doing so, anybody driving by or in front of the gallery

at that time became, spatially, actors within that performance, because now they're on that ceremonial floor, so they're implicated as participants in the piece.

I wanted to do that because I was questioning Canada's history in relation to Indigenous peoples. Our ceremonies had been banned and outlawed. Our people had been put in jail for practicing these things, yet these things were the manifestation of all these concepts and ideas. The text itself refers to the great house, which either refers to Canada as a nation or the land itself. The ghosts, in our belief system, represent the connection to our ancestors that is very strong, so I wanted to tangibly look back to our ancestors and say, "Help us." I also wanted to look at how we perceive our relationship to the spirit of the land and look to a spiritual presence to help us, recognizing that we are in dire straits, not just as Indigenous peoples but as a nation. The land is completely under duress.

Aesthetically, the work is powerful. Politically, the work holds deep meaning. Could you talk about the general public's reaction to the work? Did their reactions differ from the First Nation community's reaction?

It's hard to gauge people's reactions to artworks. I thought it was well received. I always wanted to create [contemporary] works, but works that were also comprehensible to my own community. I'm not creating works that are so abstract that people say, "I don't know what you're talking about because the language you're speaking is foreign." All of these ideas come out of Kwakwaka'wakw fundamental beliefs, and so I think Indigenous peoples could understand the work's concepts. In a way, I was speaking to the general population from that position of being Kwakwaka'wakw, saying we as a people are not well. We as an Indigenous people have suffered tremendously, yet are working

towards getting better. I also say that we as a people, after living together in this place that we call home, are not well because unresolved issues have not been addressed. And we cannot move forward until these things are addressed. I think Indigenous people should refuse to join in on the trajectory that Western Europeans are on, because it's completely destructive to the land, communities, and individuals.

In recent years, your work has incorporated elements of wood and glass. Certainly evidence of this was present during your 2013 solo exhibition at Equinox Gallery. There, you inscribed, presumably by laser cut, Kwakwaka'wakw iconography onto sculptural objects that resemble whale fins breaking the surface of the water. How did this work come about, and what were its larger implications?

I was looking at notions of performance; that's why I'm interested in installation. At the time, I was working on my dissertation and studying these concepts around space, and I thought I could transplant spaces and apply these ideas. That's where those glass- and light-based works start to come out.

The medium itself helped me translate these ideas. The work was called *Walking on Water*. I wanted to show these beautiful fins. There's this cliché attachment to bears and whales along the coast but our actual relationship with them is destructive. Under Kwakwaka'wakw understanding, killer whales were very much honored. You didn't kill them; you didn't hunt them. There's an intuitive understanding of this when people come to the coast and see killer whales. When you're on the ferry and a pod of killer whales comes by, the entire boat runs to the side. People are all looking for the killer whales.

Walking on Water was a reference to Jesus and the notion of miracles. My



Bax'wana'tsi: The Container for Souls, 2006, glass, light, red cedar, dimensions variable, collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Photo: Scott Massey.

comment was that policy-wise, we're watering down our relationship to the environment. Around that time, Canada passed legislative bills that removed water rights, so for Canada—and the general population—their relationship to these water systems was basically being whittled down to a hope for a miracle. I still believe that. The point we're at in our true understanding of the world and the environment is that we're still hoping for a miracle. That reference to walking on water was a double meaning because the people that were walking around the fins were in the position of walking on water. If those fin backs are breaking the surface of the water, then we're walking on water. I wanted to implicate the audience, because I don't think we're removed from any of these issues. We're involved in these issues, so the people who experience the installation are also the ones walking on water, including myself.

When discussing an artist's work, I'm curious to know what the artist struggled with or continues to struggle with in their practice. Do you encounter a difficulty that resurfaces when making work?

What I struggle with is the responsibility. I feel like it's an extraordinarily privileged position to be in, to have a voice, and I feel my art practice has given me a voice. I feel I have the opportunity to advocate for my family, my community, Indigenous peoples, humanity, and that's so paralyzing at times. I'm thinking, f—, I have to trust that I have the

knowledge, that I'm not going to screw up, and with every exhibition or auction I have to hope that I make something worthy of that privilege.

Would you say there's pressure?

Yes, but I feel like I'm doing all right. I haven't dropped any bombs or dropped the ball, but I do feel pressure. I struggle with that, I do. Some of the subject matter I'm taking on—I'm scared a lot of the times. It's like diving off the high board. I think to myself, why don't you just shut up? It's hard to bring that kind of attention to yourself and to make sure that what you're saying is accurate, well informed, and articulate, because you're representing other people and their experience as well. So, I do; I feel the pressure.

And to do justice to others as well?

Exactly that. Yes.

I'd like to talk about your influences; what or whom is a force behind your work?

A lot of contemporary influences intrigue me. I'm intrigued by certain writings. Anthony Hall wrote a book, *Earth into Property*, which I felt was an absolutely seminal work in terms of understanding the colonial history of North America. Even this notion of earth into property is very fundamental to me. How do we frame our relationships to



The Rivers Project, 2015, etched glass, stainless steel, red cedar, acrylic paint, 28 ft. 1 1/3 in. tall, Vancouver International Airport.

property, to land as a property? It's a concept, it's not a given. I'm interested in Naomi Klein's writings. She has a lucid way of understanding and then putting forward a more general expression of what is happening that is not academic.

Arthur Manuel, the son of George Manuel who was an Indigenous activist all through the '70s, '80s, and '90s, is working with Naomi Klein. They are generating fundamental concepts and ideas that are exciting. As far as artists go, recently Raymond Boisjoly [Haida]; his artwork is

extraordinarily fascinating. Some strong ideas are going on in that work. Marina Abramović, her performance work ...

Her early or later work?

The most recent work, including the show at the Museum of Modern Art, *The Artist is Present*. Initially, I thought, how are you going to pull that off? But it was groundbreaking stuff in terms of art challenging people's ideas.

What projects or exhibitions do you have planned for the near future?

I have a show opening in Philadelphia that deals with residential schools. I think it's a strong work but difficult for me to create because the subject matter is tough. I'm looking forward to seeing what kind of a life it has.

I'm also creating a piece right now that is going to Australia. It's a light-projection work that deals with the 1862–63 smallpox epidemic in Victoria, British Columbia, which decimated the coast nations. It's all there in historical documents, but the general understanding of this history to this place is limited. So, it's going to show in Australia first, and I'm hoping it will show here in Canada afterwards. When smallpox broke out in Victoria, a couple thousand Indigenous people from the coast communities had come to Victoria for trade and were forcibly evicted. At that time, the authorities knew they should quarantine and vaccinate them, but instead they put a gunboat out into the harbor and forced them to leave. That spread the smallpox up and down the coast. It was a massive die-off. These are the types of histories that people need to know and understand.

I have a couple other shows on the go, too; there's an opening at Simon Fraser University in May, which looks at the relationship between non-Indigenous peoples to Indigenous artworks on the coast. There's heavy appropriation, which stems from the desire to engage or share a sense of place with these peoples, but instead of true engagement, there's a topical engagement of, "Maybe if I buy this mask and put it on my wall, then I'll have a connection." I feel compassion around that. What I want is to strip that away and have a real dialogue.

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