From her Grandmother’s House: The Role of Craft and the Significance of Community Public Art in the Work of Haida artist Bemie Williams (formerly Bemie Poitras)

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Abstract
The first European expeditions to North America in the late 1700s found the Haida artists of northern British Columbia to be remarkable painters and sculptors. The coastal peoples of the Queen Charlotte Islands, or Haida Gwaii, northern British Columbia, worked in a variety of materials: woven cedar bark, wood, argillite (a black slate found in local deposits), silver and gold (Drew and Wilson 94). Initial contact and trade in sea otter pelts stimulated the local economy and cultural patronage of artists to fulfill the demand for increasingly ‘taller and more complex totem poles’ for families of nobility (Stewart 20). The Haida have an extended vocabulary of mythological figures, family crests, and beings of legends in flat form-line style, with typically ovoid design shapes. But by the mid 1860s, the Haida had lost an incredible 85-90% of their population due to the smallpox epidemic, spread by European colonisers. During the mid-1880s, devastating displacement of cultural and spiritual practices occurred through the outlawing of shamanic practices and destruction of carvings, as well as a ban on potlatch celebrations that lasted until 1951. The legacy of the residential school system, 1874 to mid-1970s, further oppressed the culture. 1 However, since the 1950s, Haida art has enjoyed a cultural reconstruction and renaissance, due, in part, to collaboration among art historians, anthropologists and artists.

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From her Grandmother’s House:
The Role of Craft and the Significance of Community Public Art in the Work of Haida artist Bernie Williams
(formerly Bernie Poitras)

The first European expeditions to North America in the late 1700s found the Haida artists of northern British Columbia to be remarkable painters and sculptors. The coastal peoples of the Queen Charlotte Islands, or Haida Gwaii, northern British Columbia, worked in a variety of materials: woven cedar bark, wood, argillite (a black slate found in local deposits), silver and gold (Drew and Wilson 94). Initial contact and trade in sea otter pelts stimulated the local economy and cultural patronage of artists to fulfill the demand for increasingly ‘taller and more complex totem poles’ for families of nobility (Stewart 20). The Haida have an extended vocabulary of mythological figures, family crests, and beings of legends in flat form-line style, with typically ovoid design shapes. But by the mid 1860s, the Haida had lost an incredible 85–90% of their population due to the smallpox epidemic, spread by European colonisers. During the mid-1880s, devastating displacement of cultural and spiritual practices occurred through the outlawing of shamanic practices and destruction of carvings, as well as a ban on potlatch celebrations that lasted until 1951. The legacy of the residential school system, 1874 to mid-1970s, further oppressed the culture. However, since the 1950s, Haida art has enjoyed a cultural reconstruction and renaissance, due, in part, to collaboration among art historians, anthropologists and artists.

Bernie Williams, or Skundaal, her Haida name, meaning Little One, has been a traditional carver, textile artist and printmaker for over thirty years. Williams is part of the Haida cultural revival, and contributes to it as an ‘expression of who I am and where I came from’.

This article seeks to explore how Williams has built upon her craft through her chosen relationship to community.

Williams gained increased recognition by working for six years with the late renowned Haida artist Bill Reid (1920–1998), in the late 1980s, as his first female apprentice. Williams’ legacy as that of a sculptor of large-scale work is due, in part, to her training with Reid during his monumental phase. Williams completed an eleven metre tall Timeship Tumanos totem in 1996, and a twelve metre canoe,
The Copper Eagle[see page 75], to mark the Millennium — distinctly rare achievements for a woman.

Williams’ cultural gains have also been accomplished through the inspiration of the art of other female artists, considered part of a tradition of ‘the grand women’ for which the Haida culture is also known. Two such carvers were Charles
Edenshaw’s granddaughter, Lavina Lightbown, a carver of argillite in the 1960s and ‘70s (Drew and Wilson 104–05), and Ellen Neel (1916–1966), sometimes called the ‘first woman of wood’. Neel, trained by her grandfather Charlie James (b. 1867), carved and repaired full-size totem poles in the 1950s and ‘60s. She also created miniature totems during the period of cultural prohibition, (1920s to ‘40s), when Haida artists adapted their work to the dictates of the commercial market demand for seemingly less offensive, ‘non-pagan’ imagery (Stewart 21–22). Williams’ ‘biggest idol’ is Frieda Deising (b. 1926). Deising works in a variety of B.C. Pacific Northwest Coast cultural styles in which she carves totems, and often integrates three-dimensional carving with flat-design textile work in her masks and headdresses (Wyatt 32, 66).

‘Drawing all over her Grandmother’s house’ was how Williams explained to me that she first began to follow an artistic path at a young age. Williams’ early life was spent in Masset, at the northern tip of Haida Gwaii. She spoke her native tongue fluently and was brought up, until the age of ten, by her grandmother, a high-ranking elder and wife of Robert Williams, an Eagle Chief, and one of the last canoe builders at Old Masset Village. As a young girl, she walked every day from the old village to New Masset Indian Day School. She was punished for speaking her native language and she says, ‘I learned to speak English from reading the Archie comics’. Williams’ direct connection to her people, their language and their traditions, was severed at the age of eleven, when, after her ‘grandmother died, she was flown off of The Island [of Haida Gwaii] and placed into government foster care in Vancouver, in 1970. Williams describes this period as one of difficult adjustment and culture shock. Yet, to this day, she still maintains a hold on images drawn from just one year before, when her favourite past-time was swinging on the cedar log which Robert Davidson was carving into the first totem to be raised ceremonially in the village fifty years later.

Williams’ artwork is influenced by the fact that, in her early years, her cultural heritage remained intact. She picked cedar roots with her grandmother — a basket and hat weaver — and Williams recalls, ‘I knew that if we picked the roots from the tree, to make an offering to it — that we got life from it.’ She danced and sang regularly ‘for the women’s auxiliary or her grandmother’s hen parties’. ‘My grandmother was adamant about native spirituality,’ and Williams recalls joyfully, ‘the times when the elders would tell the old legends and laugh with their weird sense of humour’. The old women would ‘rap her ankles with sticks’ if she made a mistake while dancing for them! To this day, in an interesting reversal which symbolises the carrying of her grandmother’s spirit, Williams consistently uses the bear mother, the crest of her grandmother, in the stomach of a Raven as her own crest. ‘We came from a large family — a matrilineal society (Drew and Wilson 30) — in my home,’ she explains, ‘but things have really changed. There are not many of the grand women elders anymore and I want to carry on the teachings.’ When Williams made a mask representing her grandmother’s face,
she described it in the following terms, ‘she is looking out over the land, sea and sky and the damage that has been done’. Today, Williams is a compelling storyteller of her culture, both orally, and in the legends she depicts on her artwork. Yet, Williams rejects the manipulation of her interest in ‘native spirituality’ into a simplistic contemporary New Age settler primitivism; nor does she want to achieve ‘a broader audience [that] retains an appetite for a pure ‘primitive’ culture that can be romanticised’ (Thomas 16).

Williams refuses to be easily defined, commercially marketed or ‘colonised’ as she strives to carve out an authentic path for herself and her artwork. She makes her artwork with the original purpose of Haida crafts in mind, as a living art form, designed to be presented, or used, for particularly significant occasions. This purpose is probably most obvious in her textile work and masks, made for presentation in potlatches or for wearing in ceremonial dances. Williams has been a maker of the robes unique to the indigenous cultures of Canada’s Northwest, called Button Blankets. This unique form of narrative textile art, which demonstrates a powerful cultural heritage, has seen a revitalisation since the 1970s. This also speaks to ‘the social and functional effects of technological changes, the significance of the materials used, the ways in which the objects represent an ideology, their place in trade and marketplace and so on’ (Cochrane 57). The blanket is considered a flat pictograph of totemic imagery — depicting clan crest, family lineage or, today, personal designs. The blankets are made of red and black wool — a traded blanket material which superseded the use of woven, decorated cedar bark cloaks during and after the maritime fur-trade era. Dentalium shells, considered valuable, were replaced by shiny pearl buttons found to be suited to outlining the symbolic images (Jensen and Sargent 63–65).

In an essay about ‘Craft, Modernity and Postmodernity’, Terry Smith suggests that,

Fourth World peoples, marginalised and victimised in the West, also lead with their craftwork. The women’s art movement had been alerting us to this for decades. Another example is craft and multiculturalism. After modernism, the avant-garde, and the superficial modernism of the 1980s (which included a jazzing up of art/craft, and of modernism...), this emergence of the others is indubitably the main direction of innovation in current art practice internationally. Lucy Lippard’s recent book, Mixed Blessings, a compendium of such work, is filled with examples of critical and resistant art, virtually all of which uses craft materials, aesthetics, forms and contexts as its medium. (Smith 26–27)

Place, locality and context are part of the conversation about indigenous art in relation to colonialism today. In the 1960s the resurgence of Haida art was re-contextualised, as a living, innovative and highly skilled art form; this was guaranteed by its placement in public places of visibility and prestige. Reid’s historic achievement in his latter years, was that of ‘lifting a regional craft’ of the major B.C. Pacific Northwest Coast First Nations to an internationally recognised
sculptural form, developed, in part, through its large scale, and placement in international ‘corridors of power’, which included new museums, corporate headquarters and federal buildings. Yet, since the mid-1990s, Williams’ large-scale projects may be seen as bearing the hallmarks of new genre contemporary public art. This art is place and context-specific, and meaningful to the community who are often involved in its creation; community-based public art is ‘accessible art of any species that cares about, challenges, involves, and consults the audience for or with whom it is made, respecting community and the environment’ (Lippard 24). Today, there is another underlying objective at play which is of critical importance to Williams, that being ‘to make locally meaningful art in a place [rather] than on a “site”’. However, as Lucy Lippard discusses in her 1997 book, The Lure of the Local, ‘Art in a more neutrally “public space” (park, corporate, and development contexts) is already displaced. When an artist tries to bring back the original place that lies under the site, s/he runs the danger of creating a nostalgic façade … for “tourists” from other parts of the city’ (264).

Williams takes risks in her choice of site and subject matter for her artwork. Her ‘indigenous cultural pride always carries a political edge that gives this dialogue an unpredictable character’ (Thomas 16). For example, Williams has chosen to donate her work to auctions which fundraise for persons living with HIV, and her next large-scale project is to be a totem pole, entitled Missing Women — a memorial to those who have been murdered in Vancouver’s infamous downtown east-side, many of whom were aboriginal sex trade workers. As Lippard notes, ‘Place-conscious public artists are beginning to create “memorials” to vanished [people] sites, buildings, cultural centers, even topographies…. In doing so, they help to save other places [and persons] from the same fate’ (287).

Williams has also prioritised teaching over the requirements of managing an art career in today’s competitive marketplace. Her artistic engagement is with a ‘profoundly local public art [that] has not caught on in the mainstream because in order to attract sufficient buyers in the current system of distribution, art must be relatively generalised, detachable from politics and pain’ (Lippard 278). Williams’ emphasis is on creating opportunities for young people, ‘the Torchbearers of the next generation’, because over the years, she has observed the people of her urban, multi-nation community struggle with drug addiction and ‘suiciding themselves’. The types of apprenticeship programmes Williams puts into effect are different to the apprenticeship model under which Williams served Reid. Since Reid’s death, his lack of service to apprentices has been criticised because he retained a rigid hierarchical structure which led to the erasure of the contributions of his ‘workers’ and a distinct lack of fostering of their own careers or achievements (O’Hara 20–29). Lippard speaks about apprenticeship models as being another arena of Public Art, one which has served particularly well in the renewal of art practices or skills, like weaving, basket-making and carving, among indigenous groups (Lippard 273–75). The training of apprentices includes the passing on of technical
skills and renewed pride and self-confidence in First Nations culture, often changing the future for a young person. Lippard asserts the importance of working with children, which,

like art education in general, has typically been distained in the art world, although the younger generation may be changing this. The new surge of interest in genealogy as a way of illuminating place has inspired programs nationwide which focus on elders ('national treasures') and their stories or schoolchildren doing oral histories of their own and others' families. Patricia Phillips suggests that as a form of radical education, public art might be used to fulfil a community service or learning component of a high school curricula. (289)

Williams has also chosen to create works which mark occasions of particular significance to indigenous peoples, such as the private Haida presentation of a Button Blanket to Rigoberta Menchu on her receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. Williams recalls this commission as a highlight in her career, over and above her work with Reid, because of Menchu's legacy as a woman who has struggled for her people. In this way, Williams' work runs parallel to both developments in the community art arena of the last ten years, as well as in the gains made through the cultural renaissance of Haida art in the Pacific Northwest, from the 1950s to 1990s.

Williams' visionary work is evidence of how communicating through craft, ceremony and community artwork, one can make important connections between peoples and places. For her, artwork must act as a vehicle for cultural reparation and empowerment, as well as for furthering skilled and innovative craftsmanship. In either sculpture or textiles, Williams' objectives are four-fold: healing, artistic, educational, and political. The struggle between worlds and the economic limitations of her chosen field requires her to take time away from the creation of art and the city, to rejuvenate herself under the guidance of another kind of mentor — a Medicine Woman.

NOTES

1 In 1998 A Statement of Reconciliation was made and The Aboriginal Healing Foundation and Gathering Strength, Canada’s Aboriginal Action Plan was put in place to ‘recognise past mistakes’ and ‘manage the healing strategy, including providing financial support to eligible community-based healing initiatives’. Canadian government website, Backgrounder: The residential school system http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/gs/schl_e.html.

2 Interview with the artist, April 2001

3 Reid gained an international reputation for his jewellery, as well as for his monumental masterpieces in wood and bronze, including The Raven and the First Men (1983), The Chief of the Undersea World (1984). His most famous work is The Spirit of Haida Gwaii, (1991). Reid, whose mother was Haida, is credited with reviving an artistic tradition that was in danger of dying out (Daniel Francis pp. 594–95).
Williams learned her canoe carving techniques while working on Reid’s ocean-going canoe, Lootas, for Expo ’86.

Later in life, Williams recalled in interview, she had fond memories of Reid reading to her (he had an early career in broadcasting), his ‘articulate intelligence’ and ‘passion in being Native, period’. During her apprenticeship, Reid tasked Williams to be ‘well-writ’, as she said in interview. Williams told me her reply was one of surprise and indignation, ‘What the hell was that?! I asked him [Reid]. He wanted to mould me … but I’m not one to wear long slit dresses and get my hair done for $150’. Williams tried out this role, as part of her apprenticeship, for a time. She recalled an incident when Reid handed her $300 to get herself dressed up to accompany him to the ‘Freedom of the City’ event, July 12, 1988, where he was to be presented with an honour award for ‘outstanding contribution to improving the quality of life in the City of Vancouver’. However, the pressure of the conflicting roles under Reid’s mentorship eventually became too demanding, and she left ‘the limelight and living the high life’ for ‘more down-to-earth’ existence where she would be happy ‘passing on what I’ve been blessed with — the talent of who I am’.

‘This event, with its accompanying feast and ceremonies, aroused a new pride in Haida nation’ (Stewart 22).

Also, interview with the artist, April 2001.

Originated with the Nuu-chah-nulth word pa-chitle, meaning ‘to give’ (Stewart 17).

For an evaluation of the criteria and models of new genre public art, see Lucy Lippard p. 286.

Donations for, or questions about, this project can be discussed with Margot MacDonald, administrator of Williams’ large-scale work at wolfmac@portal.ca.

Interview with the artist, July 2000.

‘Rigoberta Menchu, a Guatemalan Indian and human rights advocate accepted the Nobel Peace Prize today, calling it a tribute to exploited people in her country and around the world. “Today we must fight for a better world, without poverty, without racism, with peace,” said Miss Menchu. “I consider this prize not as an award to me personally, but rather as one of the greatest conquests in the struggle for peace, for human rights and for the rights of the indigenous people who, along all the five hundred years, have been victims of genocides, repression and discrimination”’ (New York Times International, Friday, December 11, 1992).

WORKS CITED


Bernie Williams after the successful launch of the Copper Eagle canoe. November, 2000. (Photo: Lycia Trouton)
Bernie Williams and the apprentice carving crew. The *Copper Eagle* canoe was carved from a single 800-years-old Western Red Cedar and took eight months to complete. (Photo: Lycia Trouton)
Carving team apprentices of The Copper Eagle Canoe. Bernie Williams in lead. Launch, November 2000, Britannia Heritage Shipyards. (Photo: Lycia Trouton Trouton)
The *Copper Eagle Canoe*, launch November 2000. Bernie Williams front. Apprentices in canoe. (Photo: Lycia Trouton)
Copper Eagle canoe (end section). Steveston Harbour, British Columbia, Canada.
Timeship Timanos. Totem, 7.3m tall, carved by approximately thirty-five students of the First Nations Awareness program at Vancouver Technical School. 1995.
Debra Sparrow, Wall Hanging, red, grey, white sheeps wool, 51cm x 76cm
(Photo: Stan Gielewski)
Debra Sparrow, red and ochre leggings, part of dance regalia 33cm x 30.5cm
(Photo: Stan Gielewski)