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‘Know Who You Are and Where You Come From’

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Abstract
This interview highlights the work of contemporary artist Debra Sparrow, Coast Salish-Musqueam. Sparrow carries the three-fold responsibility of single-handedly raising children, putting in place a holistic educational programme, and producing excellence in design and art. Debra and her sister, Robyn Sparrow, often work on creative commissions together and have produced a line of modestly-priced machine-woven blankets and vests for the retail market, in partnership with Kanata Company. The backdrop against which they work is one marked by a resilience of spirit against repeated cultural losses incurred through the European colonisation of their homeland, since the late 1700s.

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This interview highlights the work of contemporary artist Debra Sparrow, Coast Salish–Musqueam. Sparrow carries the three-fold responsibility of single-handedly raising children, putting in place a holistic educational programme, and producing excellence in design and art. Debra and her sister, Robyn Sparrow, often work on creative commissions together and have produced a line of modestly-priced machine-woven blankets and vests for the retail market, in partnership with Kanata Company. The backdrop against which they work is one marked by a resilience of spirit against repeated cultural losses incurred through the European colonisation of their homeland, since the late 1700s.

I began the interview by talking to Debra about the background of Kunapipi as a postcolonial journal that symbolised regeneration, whose founding editor had been based in Scandinavia.

DS  My mum is Scottish-Norwegian, and my Dad is Native, but we have been born and raised here. I have always said that one day I would research Norwegian textiles and look at their techniques, for my mum. But I haven’t done it and I should, because my mum’s already seventy-three.

LT  So, your mum is still alive?

DS  Oh yeah! And she will be for a lot longer. She has always raised us to only identify in Musqueam. She married into this community and respected the community by going by my father’s ways. So when we were growing up we never identified with our other side — where she came from. She never talked about it.

My grandmother speaks fluent Norwegian. Of course she didn’t teach the children, but they understood some of it. Mum married early, when she was only nineteen, and we were raised up here. So, we never identified with the outside world very much, and with her culture at all, until just in recent
years, when we started asking questions. We knew we were half-breeds, but we didn’t identify with it; we looked at ourselves as whole.

LT  What do you think of that term, ‘half breeds’? In what way do you use that term?

DS  I think it’s pretty positive because you get to look at things in different ways. I don’t look 100% Native, but I don’t look White either, so nobody knows what I am. I am left open for people to call down the Native people, or call down another culture, and I can sit in the middle of it.

LT  So you’ve looked at it that way in the last few years, but before that you really identified as Musqueam?

DS  Yeah, I did. I never thought, in my twenties, that I would be doing what I am doing today, because we didn’t identify with any textiles here. And I’m also a jewellery maker, and we didn’t identify with that here, either.

LT  And when you say ‘we’?

DS  The whole community! The whole process of weaving was dormant ... so we [Musqueam] didn’t grow up with visuals in our community like we [First Nations Peoples] did North of here, like the Haida people, the Kwakiutl, the West Coast — you can look around the community and see the strong reflection of the people through their work. I lived in Alert Bay for seven years which is strong Kwakiutl country, and I really was respectful of their identity through their artwork, but I couldn’t understand why these people who had so much, were so weak ... in spirit ... with alcohol. So, I guess the influence of Western society was really dominating our cultures all through the coast anyway. So our strength of culture, our strength of identity through our creative process, was weak, I think. But in the last fifteen years there has been a real emerging identity, and I am a part of that. It was about sixteen years ago that I came to a place where I wanted to know more about who I was, wondering ‘Where did aboriginal people and Musqueam fit in, or did they?’ And so my journey is not just about the end results, but it’s about getting there. I think people categorise artists, and think that all aboriginal people on the coast are artists. So they study art to know more about the Haida or the Kwakiutl or the Salish; but I don’t agree with that [...] we lived in that infamous/famous circle where everything is messy. We don’t draw lines and isolate people away from one thing or another.

I remember in grade three that I never felt like I belonged in the public school system. They throw you into their assimilation process — not only
Debra Sparrow at her spinning wheel, September 2001.
(Photo: Stan Gielewski)
aboriginal people, at that time, but Japanese, Chinese, whatever you were, and I didn’t like it.

Everyone goes through these experiences that bring you to where you are, and a lot of the experiences that were hurtful were responsible for [my] growth. ‘What do I have to pull from the depths of darkness to understand why I’m in this condition? And how do I get out of it? Where’s the light at the end of the tunnel?’ It’s very distant in the beginning and it’s very dim, but as you move towards it, and you replace fear with faith, then you are able to take those steps. So I must have, and I know I did, pray very much, which I had never done in my life, because to me prayer was always religion. And religion was Catholicism but everybody told me that Catholicism was not for us.

I don’t know if I have to have an answer, other than to say I have been guided to do what I have to do. I pay attention to it, and I feel very blessed by it. I have to respect that blessing and I take it very seriously.

When I started to evaluate my own life for the [last] twenty-five years, I felt a lot of emptiness. Even though my mother didn’t talk about her culture, we lived in a culture that wasn’t sure of its identity either. So, that was confusing — that we had cultures within cultures on our own reserve. Well, I just decided that I wasn’t going to worry about everyone else, but I would follow my own path and that’s what I do.

LT Did that coincide with the re-emergence of the weaving, or learning those techniques?

DS Not really. What coincided with that was my interest in learning how to do jewellery. And I did that six or seven years before I did the weaving, and that is where I started questioning, and where I was led to the Museum of Anthropology, at the University of British Columbia; not into the museum, but to a professor, Michael Kew who’s wife, Dela, was from here, and with my older sister Wendy John, questioning the subject [of weaving], and in our questioning about our community life here, I spoke to Michael asking for everything that he had on the Musqueam people. He sent me the [historical] slides, and I took a small three-month course on the technicalities of silver-smithing. I did that in order to ‘become’ [self-actualised]; I had to learn what it was I wanted to create. I could make jewellery, out of silver, but I needed to have something to reflect from it what ‘it’ is — not just silver jewellery. So, when I got the slides and I started to look at the slides of the Musqueam content in history, it was then I was moved. I was terribly moved to look at this history that I knew nothing about, never identified with. I was in awe, because Musqueam, as I said earlier, had no visual
reflection in our community. So, we really did have to believe in what we didn’t see.

There is that saying, and I always like to use it in my talks, ‘Blessed are those who believe, but have not seen’. That is so evident amongst our people. We are great believers in the spirit, even though we haven’t seen it. In our society today, we must see everything to believe it. You must show that paper to believe that you are qualified. And I refuse to write a paper like that. We come from an oral tradition. We believe, strongly, in that what I have to say is what has been handed to me from my ancestors and, through that, I have confidence that I will say what I need to say, or what they want to say. So, that is the gift that has been given to me.

When I started to look up the history of people here, I felt very moved because I, too, didn’t believe in those [messages]. We were taught — not openly taught — that we were ‘unworthy’ ... that we were unworthy of anything. By taking us away, and by taking away our whole culture, we couldn’t think that’s [the message of unworthiness] not it. So, the messages were there subliminally. Nobody had to say them, we just knew it; we felt it. We felt we were not worthy of anything.

I mean certainly my father, in the struggle that he had in his life, coming from a residential school — he wanted to be the best he could be ‘for them’. I think it was instilled into him and passed onto us, indirectly, that we were not equal people in our own land ... and you still feel that way today. And so, when you feel [in] second or third [place] to your land, in your land, then it hinders your success ... and so that’s passed on.

**LT** After your father’s generation — some people have called it the ‘dark ages’ or the ‘cultural prohibition’ of the thirties, forties and fifties — how were you able to gather your strength back together as a person and bring out what you have done in your artwork?

**DS** Well, I think, from what I understand in my own journey, that each one of us in this world has a responsibility. I always like to say that out of your weaknesses come your strengths. If we can somehow recognise in our hurts that there is something greater than ourselves — open the doorway when someone knocks on our soul — and then in comes the knowledge of the universe, and with that comes guidance, and with that, comes the steps that you need to take in order to understand the larger picture.

My grandfather has been gone for three years, this year. He was my best friend and my greatest teacher in the second part of my life. He always told me something that I feel the need to pass on, ‘that you have to know who you are and you have to know where you come from. If you don’t know these things then you are nothing’. And by that he confirmed, ‘plant your
feet in the roots of where you come from and you won’t have to waiver and that is your strength’. When you believe in that so strongly, then you do find conviction in it, and it’s something that I felt moved to write about. I feel like not only did my grandfather encourage me, but the ancestors did, because I honestly don’t know how I put this piece of writing together. I just sat down and I got pen and paper, and took one of my son’s school notebooks and this is what I wrote. (she begins to read aloud)

My grandfather was ninety-nine and a half years old, born in 1898, in the village at the mouth of the Fraser River — that’s here in Musqueam. We spent many hours driving along the shoreline of what is now called the city of Vancouver — my grandfather beside me and one or more of my three children in the back of me — listening closely to him tell us the history of our great land. The same history that his grandparents who raised him, told him — driving along in horse and buggy — and their grandparents told them, walking along these same shores. Here there is almost three hundred years and the stories are still passed on, because of these oral traditions. My grandfather can rest in peace, knowing that I have, as he had, retained in my own brain, ‘what we shared as people of this land’. Because I was blessed to have this time with him, I will take with me into the future the success and integrity of our people through these reflections. My roots are planted firmly in the very soil where my ancestors are buried and I am connected, my children are connected, and my grandchildren will be connected. We will be here another millennium, as we have been here for nine millennia past. When it is asked of the First Nations people, ‘Who said this land belongs to you? There are no signs on the mountain tops; I don’t see it written anywhere?’ my reply is, ‘That it is written — written in the earth — anywhere you open the earth, there is evidence of our people’.

And that’s what I wrote — it just came to me — that was for him and about him. (pause) My grandfather was more important than I think he knew he was. In 1998, that story was sandblasted into a ‘story-stone’, a boulder that is now sitting by the Fraser River, near one of our old village sites. It was for him, but also for my ancestors, that people know that we live here. We still have to identify that. We still have to defend ourselves and, to me, that’s […] not equality. It doesn’t matter how long we’ve lived here, we’re still, still, after all these thousands of years, having to prove our existence.

LT  When you think of that story on the stone by the river and about how aboriginal artwork is displayed in museums...?
DS  I think, besides being a person who believes in my history, I also believe in the present. I believe that we have to move with the times but that we’re [Musqueam], at least, honoured enough to make those choices with who is making them. So, that, if we have a blanket in the museum, as long as it’s there with our co-operation and with our understanding then, I think it’s OK!

We have to study the old blankets to learn how to do this — there’s no documentation, there’s nothing ... just that, ‘it was collected at the mouth of the Fraser in 1786’, — not who made it, not what we thought it was, why they did it, what the dye meant. There’s absolutely no history of what any of the design meant. We can only dream about it. (pause) Because we don’t know. So when we work with them and our fingers are actually touching the warp and the work in-between, we have a sense of what they may have meant. If we can connect that — but we don’t know. We don’t know and that’s why when I became interested in jewellery making and I had to teach myself how to draw — I stumbled ... and I really feel strongly that I have to stumble in my own journey. So, I taught myself how to draw the beautiful reflections of the people from the past. And I connected them, and I asked for assistance because I was not an artist and I needed to, I wanted to, make the beautiful things that I saw, so that people in this present day could see them and appreciate them, and connect themselves to it as well.

So, I would think about the person who made it. who was this person? He or she was someone who was my ancestor. So I had the right, and I had the ability to work with it, and I wanted to do that, so I taught myself how to draw. Then the challenge was how am I going to make this beautiful piece of silver which is cold and lifeless ... come alive? I worked with it, and then, at the same time [I was] talking to my sister — she’s the one who started that weaving program. It was the first step I took towards that understanding.

LT  And yet, you are both given credit for starting the Musqueam Weaving School.

DS  Well, yes, because it evolved out of our conversations. There was only one opening, so she [Wendy John] took the opening, and I stayed with my jewellery. And then, when she finished that a year later, she came back here to the reserve and she started the program in a little space not bigger than the upstairs of my house. And they had nothing! They applied for grants and they applied for the wool. And all the women who came into this class knew absolutely nothing about weaving. They thought they were going to make baskets. They didn’t know that it was going to be Salish weaving and they were shocked! You know, it was a stepping stone for my sister, too, because it wasn’t her passion. I think she liked it, but she doesn’t love it. So,
it gave her a step towards what she was doing too, and she stepped out of that after a year, and went on to politics. But I think that’s her foundation. I don’t think — I know it is.

**LT**  *The weaving is her foundation?*

**DS** Yeah! Once we were to get involved and research these women — that’s what I was getting at earlier — the ability that these women have to create?! I found a saying a couple years ago — it says, ‘Creativity is a gift from God, and to create you can give back to Him’. So that if you are given this gift, and you use it, then that is your gift back to him and that is your friendship between him and you. That’s your blessing. That’s *who you are* after you feel that. So, in the beginning, we each felt that.

I was still doing my jewellery, but I’d go and visit them. I’d go in and visit and say, ‘You guys are nuts. I am sure glad I am not involved with this!’ You see, Salish Alt was *not* known then, in 1985. For example, Susan Point had *just* started....

I am not a graphic artist; I am not a creator — a Van Gogh, or anything like that. I have an ability to look at my own people’s history and bring it forward, but I don’t think of myself as an artist.

**LT**  *Do you have a problem with the term ‘Artist’?*

**DS** It’s an English term. I don’t think of myself as one. I am a Mother, I am a Sister. I’m an anything — I am *not* just an Artist.

**LT**  *Can you say anymore about how you made the transition from jewellery to the weaving?*

**DS** Well, what happened was, I would go over and watch the women working. I admired them, I thought they were doing wonderful, beautiful stuff, but I didn’t want to be involved with it. But I did go with them to New York on a trip. We went to the Smithsonian Institute, and to the American Museum of Natural History and to the Museum of the American Indian. All these places housed Salish blankets. Lots of the women had never been off the reserve, let alone getting on a plane and going to New York! Culture shock or what?! I even had culture shock because, and I thought I was pretty worldly — I had been to Toronto — but to get to New York, it was like, ‘Oh my God, what are we doing here!’? (laughs)

**LT**  *What year was that?*
It must have been '85. So, off we went and I went with them. You know, just hung out with them, and we came back and the program had ended. So, my sister thought she’d give it one more round and they applied for more funding. They didn’t get as much as they did the first time, so they thought they’d go on with just eight women, instead of ten. At first we didn’t have funding, so what I did was offer my basement, which was empty at the time. We made it a ‘make-work’ project, which meant for single mothers who were working. My kids were really small — oh, I only had one; I had just split up with her father and I was on social assistance trying to figure out what I’d do. It was a project that would enhance your social assistance. So, we started working in my basement — well, they did. And she [Wendy John] said, ‘Do you want to join?’ and I said, ‘No’. And she said, ‘The money’s good! You’ve got your daughter to look after…’. So she enticed me … with being a single mother. So I went — very reluctantly and pouty — and my other sister, she’s the one I work with today [Robyn Sparrow] […] went reluctantly to the first group, too, and we were working for about two or three months, learning how to spin — I think I worked up a couple pieces and learned how to dye the wool.

I found, fundamentally, I just enjoyed being there with a group of women from the community that I had never really got to know before. It was really interesting the dynamics in there because you have different categories of Musqueam families that might not have really known each other anymore — whereas our grandparents were all very close. They knew each other’s history, they all knew one another, but we had all moved away from that. And the grandparents were afraid to tell us anything or teach us anything, because they all thought we wanted to be ‘out there’, that we wanted to be ‘something else’. That’s what they were taught, and that’s what they thought their kids were teaching us — to get out there and be successful, and it has nothing to do with your identity. It has nothing to do with being Musqueam; there’s a big world out there and ‘get in it’ and do whatever you need to do to ‘be successful.’ So, we still try to encourage our kids to do that — but it doesn’t work very well (laughs) because they don’t go very far — away from us — shouldn’t say they don’t go far away — they don’t go far away.

So, I was in the weaving group for a couple months and one evening — its one of my favourite stories — I went to my grandpa’s [Ed Sparrow] house for tea. It was the only place I ever drank tea! So, I got my tea and I was coming over to sit with him and while I was drinking the tea he said, ‘So, how’s that weaving coming along that you are doing?’ And I looked at him, and I sat down, and said, ‘Well, Grandpa, believe it or not, I have to tell you, I think I am actually starting to enjoy it!’ And he goes, ‘Oh, that’s good, umhm…’. And I said, ‘Yeah, it’s sort of getting a hold of me’. And he said, ‘Oh, yeah … yeah … oh that’s good’. And I said, ‘Do you know
anything about weaving, Grandpa?’ and he said, ‘Well, yeah, yep. I know a little bit’. And I said, (in a shocked tone) ‘You know a little bit?!’ And he goes, ‘Yeah’. And I said, ‘Well, why have you never told me?’ And he said, ‘Well, you didn’t ask me’. And I said, ‘Well, I know I didn’t ask you — but did you ever see it?’ And he goes, ‘Uhmhm’, and I said, ‘Oh, what did you see then and what do you know?’ And he goes, ‘Well, what do you want to know?’ I said, ‘I want to know everything that you know about?!’ Well, he goes, ‘Well, you know, I was pretty young when I last saw it. You know, they haven’t done it here ever since I was a little kid’. And I said, ‘Yeah, I know that. I didn’t even know that we had it’. He goes, ‘Well, you know, I was a little boy’. He said, ‘I don’t know how old I was, I was just coming to my senses’. I thought, ‘Oh, I love that saying ... you are just waking up to the world’. He said, ‘I used to watch the old people’. And I said, ‘You watched them?!’ And he goes, ‘Yep! Selisya, Thellaiwhaltun’s wife; my grandmother Spahquia’. And I said, ‘Oh, my God, I can’t even believe it. You are so lucky to have seen it, Grandpa. Grandpa, we have been sitting up there — those ladies for a year, and me for a half year — not really feeling connected because, we didn’t know these people. We only saw them in a book and now you are sitting here telling me that you actually watched it?! So that just all verifies everything, and it connects us! It connects us to a couple hundred years ... right back’. I said, ‘This is amazing! I didn’t know that you had seen it?! Wow! What did you see there or what were you doing?!’ And he said, ‘Well, I used to go watch them — they’d be working together — the old ladies. You know how kids are ... they crawl underneath there and they’re playing in the balls of wool’. And he said, ‘Every once in a while my grandmother kicked me outside.... Oh, they were working and working, and I didn’t know what they were up to, and then one day I found out’. He said that everyone got called to the longhouse; they were finished on their work and everybody got called and, in those days, when someone got a name in a ceremony they invited people from everywhere, and everybody brought food. They call it a potlatch, but we don’t call it that here. It was a gathering, and he said that people came from all over, and ‘I didn’t know, but it was going to be the evening that I was going to get my name — that’s what they were working for’. So I said, ‘Wow, so it was all for you? And he said, ‘Yes, and I think that was the last time I’d ever seen anyone do that kind of work until you girls...’. I said, ‘What did you just say? You saw your Grandmother Spahqa, and Selisya, and Thellaiwhaltun’s wife working on those pieces and you never saw anything more until your granddaughter started it again?! Eighty-five years there was this darkness in the community and, then, an awakening happened and it’s through you. You are eighty-five years old and you are a blessing!’ He said, ‘Oh, I don’t know about that...’. And I said, ‘It makes my work even more important ...
that I am connected now!’ And he goes, ‘Oh, yeah ... yeah’. He was a man of few words — sometimes very humble (she laughs). So, he never wanted to take the credit for anything, but he didn’t realise how much of a professor he was. He had a wonderful sense of humour and loved life ... loved his history.

LT  Do you think of yourself as a Storyteller?

DS  No, I think of myself as a person who reflects their history through their creative process and I would be doing exactly the same thing had I lived a thousand years ago, or five hundred, or two hundred. I am someone who works very passionately with their identity. (stops herself) I don’t tell a story, though my work does. If you look at a piece of jewellery with beautiful designs on it, you’re the one who wants to know and understand where it comes from.

I think I found that with the blankets, once I got involved with it. When you look at a piece, I always say the educational process starts for the person who’s observing it. When you look at a beautiful piece of weaving, that’s what happens: you go, ‘Wow, I wonder who made that? I wonder where it comes from. Oh, how did they do that?’

That’s what we thought when we looked at the old pieces in the museum and in the books ... you were in awe of these women! These women existed many years ago. No one taught them. I shouldn’t say no one taught them — children learned from their aunts and their grandmothers. We didn’t have that opportunity. But I shouldn’t say we didn’t — we do — because it was from them we still learned, through our ancestral connections. When you look at these pieces and you think about these women — and then about the men who were with them — it really connects you, and the gap that you felt in your life starts to shorten. You start to feel that, ‘This is what I needed to know. This is what I needed to educate myself with, so that I know my history, and I know where I come from’.

I only know ... that after I started working with it [the weaving] that some of the questions I had asked myself were being answered. That whole educational process started, and I started to realise that these people were very educated people. They knew when the salmon was going to run; they knew what the weather was going to be like this year; they knew when they should take and when they shouldn’t. They knew things that we can’t even comprehend anymore — we have to get a scientist to tell us — but they had scientists. They had people who knew the geology; they had people who knew the area; they knew what they should stay away from. Why do we not believe in them? Why are we so leery of our own people? I couldn’t understand it.
So, you have to get yourself into focus, and turn yourself around a little bit, and try and look into the past, and pray for understanding. Pray for a knowledge that isn’t there anymore, because I can’t go read it in the book and most of our Elders are going on. And my grandfather — fortunately I had the last fifteen years with him, one-on-one — he verified things that sometimes I didn’t think that we knew about. I think my Elders hoped that some of us would retain that knowledge. But we know that we live in the year 2001, and that we have to have a balance. I am a traditionalist, but I am also very much a contemporary person who understands what’s going on around me and must defend the integrity of my people through my work.... Recently, I think more than anything, that I have moved past the last one hundred years, into the depth of the thousand years ... and it’s there where I really search for an understanding of where we are today.

Today, I have a school program called The Musqueam Museum School and it gives children an opportunity to have a little insight into what our people were, and who they, partly, are. And I say ‘partly’ because it’s only a part of us today. That gives us success. Those children ought to have a little peek into that....

It’s a five-week program we have and we go into the school on five consecutive terms or they come and see us. We do both. We start at the Museum: we go to the schools and we come here, so that the children have somewhat of an insight into our life, as well. But not to think that we’re all wonderful romantic weavers. Because there’s only a few of us who do this work, and only a few of us who look after the environment, and there’s only a few of us who do politics. We share [with the children] the kind of life [choices]. We may take different little parts of the life that people have here and we interpret it in our way.

We work for a balance with the Museum of Anthropology, at the University of British Columbia, and the education system, so that the children understand that and the teachers, as well. The teachers are very grateful because they knew more about Haidas than they did about Salish people in Vancouver, when we’re all Salish people. It has been our own fault for not taking that responsibility before. But now we do, and we have been doing it for three or four years, and last year was one of our most successful years — we were booked to capacity. One of my goals, with creating this program, was that we would be able to work with our own women, who have been involved with me [in the Weaving School] and teach them to be cultural teachers. We wouldn’t want to pass this on to the teachers so that they could change it, or add to it, or create it the way they wanted it to be. It had to be the way that we felt comfortable, as well as the lady that works with me at the Museum of Anthropology, Jill Baird. We find a way of understanding between both cultures; and lots of times, I’ve had to pull her
back and go over why we started this program. So, we have been able to have a few misunderstandings, but resolve them very quickly because that was our foundation.

LT  *Is it a programme geared for aboriginal kids?*

DS Absolutely not — it’s for everyone. But another one of our goals is that we could use it as an after-school program, here, on the reserve. I am, finally, after four years, going to present it to our educational committee on the reserve so that they will support it to be a program that should be taught to all Musqueam kids. I have been on that educational committee for four years and it’s always been pushed aside, because the focus is academic education — fundamental education.

LT  *...reading, writing, and arithmetic?*

DS Yeah, but our kids are still failing; they’re still disinterested. they are on the bottom of the list. My vision is that if we can slip the foundation under them, then we may succeed with it. I mean, if I can come from grades one to seven and feel inadequate, and then become successful in what I am doing because of what I have learnt through my historical knowledge and from my community and put that into perspective, then we have success! And we share that — it’s not for just me! That’s, I am sure, what we need in our community to be successful — that we have to give back the tools that we took away. Those are the tools that we need, again, and they are there — we just needed to pull them out.

LT  *You have used the word ‘romantic’ in relation to your weaving. Can you say more about that?*

DS I am a romantic about many things in my life — I love romantic comedies, I love romantic movies, and — you know, we are all actors. We came from a ‘dysfunctional era’ — where everyone was, you know, crazy.... And how do we get out of that? So, it becomes very philosophical. And you either get out or you don’t. You either want to survive or you don’t want to survive. And I wanted to survive and I figured out that if I needed to survive, then I needed to let go of the things that were a part of the reason why I wouldn’t. I needed to be responsible for my own happiness, nobody else was. If I wanted to be happy then I had to get out of it, and I just started taking layers off — layer by layer, by layer — and walking out of myself and catching up to who I was. And that’s what the weaving has done for me — it has caught me up to who I am — and it walks with me forward. It guides me in my life.
It gives me strength, identity! That’s what a successful person is, a person who has that balance in their life, an understanding of why they exist.

LT  *Do you feel it is something to do with the daily practice of sitting at the loom?*

DS  No, I don’t think so. I think, also, weaving is the end result of it. It all starts within you and it is a tool. It’s a visual tool, is what it is. It reflects back to the person observing it. I bring it from a place where it was lying dormant and bring it forward again. I think for people to understand that when you look at the work, [you] don’t just look at me, I am not responsible for it. (laughs) But you want to give the credit to me, and it’s not to my credit. It’s to the credit of the people who existed [before us]. I didn’t dream one day I was going to be a weaver — but I do have a vision. I am very much a visionary, and sometimes I do see that in the future, I know where this work will go and I know where it needs to go, and if I didn’t know that then I wouldn’t take it there. I am very careful about where my work goes and that’s why I don’t sell to the galleries.

LT  *So, where does your work go?*

DS  Everything that I do has a home. It has an understanding. We did the big weaving for the Vancouver International Airport in 1996. But that’s my home. That’s tradition and technology together. But that’s my homeland. That’s where my people lived. The very ground there is their foundation and the weaving just shows you where the Musqueam community has gone, from tradition to technology, and that’s why I did that work.

What I mean by technology is the scale, but also the environment that the weaving lives in — the airport; high tech. I think the difference about the piece that is hanging there and the pieces that we had done prior to that — because that was our step from tradition into this century — was the size of it and because of the colours that we used. What we decided was that we would use this really beautiful bright red, which we hadn’t found in any of our dyes in the environment. So, we used a commercial dye. We used the really nice earth, gold/mustard colour which would be representative of the Salish people. The red, black and white is representative of the Northwest Coast — to honour them, and think of them as we were doing our work here — that it wasn’t just for us. We were doing it for the whole coastline, and representing an open door to the world and to our land, here, on the northwest coast [of British Columbia].

We always only used natural colours before that. We only used natural dyes from the environment and we were steadfast to stay there in tradition
until we felt comfortable enough to move out — which took ten years! We wouldn’t share too much with anybody. We worked in our homes; we had commissions to do and we did them for the right moment and the right people, and a few galleries asked us but we said, ‘No. That’s not where we want to go’. I am not in this for the business. (laughs)

LT And the piece you created for the Museum of Anthropology, [see front cover] you dedicated it to your mum....

DS When we did the airport one, we realised that we had come a distance and we were ready for a more contemporary view on what we were doing. We also realised that in all the work that we had done, we only spoke, ever, of our father, our grandfather, or our community, but that we didn’t always give as much credit to our mother, who was really responsible for our well-being, after my Dad died, when we were very young. So I wanted to dedicate it to her for her heritage, and for her contribution to our village, even though other people are not aware of it. She thought of this community as her home and, over the years, felt it was some place that she’d always be, and wanted to be. We’ve lived here, and it’s been a real challenge to understand the changes that go on, and the hardships that we come up against.

NOTES

1 Susan A. Point (b. 1952) has been instrumental in reviving Coast Salish art since she began with a jewellery course in 1981. Now well-known, she produces serigraphs and prints, and public art in wood and glass. Point often starts with a ‘spindle whorl’ motif as the foundation of her imagery.