
Hexsa'am: To Be Here Always – Gallery as Big House

Sarah Shamash *University of British Columbia*

This exhibit review includes a video that can be watched at the following address: <https://vimeo.com/328759754>.

Journeying through the exhibition *Hexsa'am: To Be Here Always*,¹ gallery goers are told a cutting tale of Canadian herstories from an Indigenous-centric position. Yes, matriarchs are also recentred in this exhibition that unsettles the white canvas of the art gallery, and colonial and patriarchal histories and discourses. The handwritten testimony of Chiefs in the McKenna–McBride Royal Commission in 1914 is seen on one of the central exhibition walls. It faces the contemporary testimony of community leaders that resulted in the first-ever British Columbia Supreme Court case petitioning the extension of Aboriginal title into ocean waters just over a century later in May of 2018. Indeed, this Indigenous retelling reclaims history/herstory, making visible power asymmetries, and subverting Winston Churchill's famous dictum, "history is written by the victors."

Beyond a regime of oculo-centric aesthetics, the curators and artists strategically reconceive gallery space as a site for articulating expressive languages and repertoires of Indigenous visual sovereignty across multilayered histories. The concept of visual sovereignty infusing *Hexsa'am* is articulated by leading Indigenous scholars of visual histories. Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora nation), a scholar, curator and art historian, for example, explains how "the concept of sovereignty by Indigenous civilizations is about self-renewal and resistance."² Michelle H. Raheja (Seneca) elaborates the concept of visual sovereignty in a film historical context as a confrontation with spectators' assumptions "around visual representations of Native Americans."³ Raheja's discussion is relevant to the exhibition's subversion of "the larger web of hegemonic discourses of ethnography."⁴ *Hexsa'am's* curatorial framework⁵ expresses the above in literal and more nuanced ways. This is particularly apt in this exhibition, which resituates, as sites to assert sovereignty, both the gallery space and the University of British Columbia's anthropological collections, from which some objects are

borrowed. *Hexsa'am* thus provides a subtle critique of ethnographic discourses, while directly intervening in colonial histories.

In an interview that lead artists Marianne Nicholson "Tayagila'ogwa (Dzawada'enuxw) and Althea Thauberger generously agreed to, (see video for more), they assert that the gallery is used here as a space of advocacy. Nicholson explains that one part of the process of developing the show was based on "the advocacy against the fish farms within our territories."⁶ The highly collaborative process with professional artists⁷ and members of Nicholson's Dzawada'enuxw community partly emerged from Nicholson's desire to give voice to young members of her community through art practice.⁸ The creative process included an artists' residency in Gwa'yi (Kingcome Inlet) as well as an invitation to witness a potlatch ceremony hosted by her relative, Byron Alfred, in Alert Bay. Potlatching – banned in Canada from 1885 to 1951 – is a place to celebrate relationships to land, to animal spirits and to ancestors and is also a place where marriages and naming of babies is witnessed, and Chiefly titles, rights to land and rights to specific dances, songs or stories are passed down.⁹ According to Nicholson, the potlatch helped ground the work "in a more traditional trajectory."¹⁰ The intersection of art-making grounded in Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonial experiences, along with the activism in Nicholson's home community, is the critical genealogy that structures the show.

Spatialized in a way that, Nicholson explains, "reflects our Big House and our ceremonial practices," the exhibition centres on a principal room with "big old masks" that "are placed where we would traditionally have our fire."¹¹ The white cube of the gallery is reclaimed and reimagined as a site for creative expressions of self-determination, activating what Faye Ginsburg calls an "embedded aesthetics."¹² The collaborative methodology rooted in social relationships of kinship, affinity, and pan-Indigenous solidarity across cultures and across fluid temporalities thus collectively

articulates geo-politico-cultural activism, resilience and revival.

Occupying one of the main exhibition spaces, *Hexsa'am* (*To Be There Always*), an immersive three-channel video and sound installation¹³ by Nicholson and Thauberger evokes the idea of testimony and bearing witness, as it relates to a long memory of anticolonial resistance and political action. Acts of testimony and bearing witness as part of a reciprocal pact are significant themes interwoven throughout the show. As Indigenous land is continually expropriated by government in collusion with big oil corporate interests for pipelines and unsustainable development, the works in the show and their often nuanced yet powerful messages politicize the porous gallery walls into an act of collective territory-claiming.

From ancient civilizations to a here and now that reflects the (dis)encounters between Indigenous and non-Indigenous, from Indigenous nation to nation, between humans and other than humans (a sentient environment and spirit world), between our complicated and mixed ancestries all residing today on Turtle Island, the exhibition elaborates an intercultural syntax of Indigenous self-determination, with an emphasis on collaboration and reciprocity. The African-Indigenous artist Diane Roberts' piece, *Six Questions*,¹⁴ further unsettles histories of marginalization and difference.¹⁵ Roberts renders her questions poetically through photography, sound, image and text, and they perform acts of witnessing and listening in dialogue with notions of home, diaspora, exile and a sentient environment.

More than any expression of Indigenous authenticity, the exhibition affirms existence, continuance and renewal rooted in ancestral and dynamic reciprocal relationships to land. *Hexsa'am: To Be Here Always* makes manifest interwoven relationships and timelines that project a futurism for cross-cultural Indigenous resurgence and sovereignty as they intersect with memory, repertoire and creative acts of resistance.

Sarah Shamash, *Interdisciplinary Studies Graduate Program, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Email: sarah@sarahshamash.com.*

Notes

- 1 Exhibition on unceded and ancestral lands of the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam) peoples. Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Exhibition dates for *Hexsa'am*: 11 January–7 April 2019.
- 2 See Rickard (2011, 467).
- 3 See Raheja (2007, 1160).
- 4 See Raheja (2007, 1161).
- 5 *Hexsa'am* is curated by the Morris and Helen Belkin's interim director, Lorna Brown.
- 6 Nicholson, Marianne, personal interview, 28 February 2019.
- 7 Nicholson and Thauberger made a distinction between what they termed "professional artists" and the younger artists from Gwa'yí (Kingcome Inlet). Professional artists were from diverse and often mixed Indigenous backgrounds and were invited to Nicholson's community as part of an artist residency in the summer of 2018. Much of the work by these invited professional artists emerged from reflections on this residency experience in combination with personal histories and trajectories as Indigenous artists and cultural producers.
- 8 Nicholson, personal interview, 28 February 2019.
- 9 See U'mista Cultural Society (2019).
- 10 Nicholson, personal interview, 28 February 2019.
- 11 Nicholson, personal interview, 28 February 2019.
- 12 Ginsburg's discussion, as it relates to Aboriginal video making in Australia, centres on the idea of creative production that sustains, embodies, "and even revive[s] or create[s] certain social relations" (Ginsburg 1994, 368) in an Indigenous community context.
- 13 Nicholson and Thauberger (2018). 26 minutes.
- 14 Roberts (2018).
- 15 Based on Roberts's *Arrivals Legacy Project*.

References

- Ginsburg, Faye. 1994. "Embedded Aesthetics: Creating a Discursive Space for Indigenous Media." *Cultural Anthropology* 9(3): 365–382.
- Nicholson, Marianne ("Tayagila'ogwa") and Althea Thauberger. 2018. *Hexsa'am* [To Be There Always]. Video.
- Raheja, Michell H. 2007. "Reading Nanook's Smile: Visual Sovereignty, Indigenous Revisions of Ethnography, and Artarnajuat (The Fast Runner)." *American Quarterly* 59(4): 1159–1185.
- Rickard, Jolene. 2011. "Visualizing Sovereignty in the Time of Biometric Sensors." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110(2): 465–486.
- Roberts, Diane. 2018. *Six Questions* [sound/video/photographic installation]. Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery.
- U'mista Cultural Society. 2019. "Purposes of the Potlatch." <https://umistapotlatch.ca/potlatch-eng.php>.