

ROYAL BC
MUSEUM

Awakening memory

by France Trépanier

As an artist and curator of Kanien'kehá:ka and French ancestry, I have always had a contentious relationship with museums. After all, they have played a critical role in the colonial project across Canada. Based on the misconception that Indigenous cultures were vanishing, museums have historically had—and still do to some extent—an uncanny ability to perpetuate notions of primitivism and fixity on Indigenous material cultures.

Colonial history has constructed a way of seeing and understanding that privileges the assumptions, beliefs, philosophies, attitudes and logic of the Western world. It is a complex, potent mix of constructs—part jurisprudence, part anthropology and part politics. And it has ramifications for the creation and presentation of art. It also impacts our relationship, as audiences, to historical Indigenous artworks and artifacts.





lessLIE at the Royal BC Museum Museum Happy Hour: Indi-genius event, part of the Awakening Memory exhibit, March 23, 2017. Photo by Kirk Schwartz.

We often hear that there is no word for art in Indigenous languages. In fact, I believe that there are many words for art in different ancestral languages but they do not smoothly translate the concept of art, as we know it from a European perspective. Rather, Indigenous words often reflect process, movement and experience. As a result, Indigenous arts occupy the full spectrum of practice—sacred and ceremonial, customary and contemporary.

Over the years, while visiting Indigenous artists in their communities across the country, I have had the privilege of listening to amazing stories of artworks that had power, that had agency, that had spirit. I was taught that traditionally, objects made by Indigenous artists had a life cycle. Many were created for a purpose. They served that purpose and, at some point, they were allowed to go back to nature. The idea of collecting artworks was somewhat of a foreign concept.

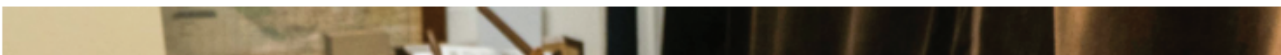




Marianne Nicolson at the Royal BC Museum as part of the *Awakening Memory* exhibit. Photo by Kirk Schwartz, 2017.

A few years back I was invited as a researcher to visit the collection of the Manitoba Museum. Well, more specifically, one object of the collection: a water drum known as the ‘Naamiwan’s Drum’, which belonged to a famous Ojibwe medicine man. Curator of Ethnology Dr. Maureen Matthews is the caretaker of that drum, which is considered a relative by the community. My visit with this sacred drum was a moving and powerful experience. I felt the spirit of that drum. It was a rare encounter.

That visit prompted me to deepen my research into the traditional roles of art within Indigenous communities. I was captivated by the animacy and agency of art objects from an Indigenous perspective—the generative capacity of certain objects to embody life, power and meaning.





Sonny Assu at the Royal BC Museum as part of the *Awakening Memory* exhibit. Photo by Kirk Schwartz, 2017.

Those questions led me to conceptualize the project *Awakening Memory* as a community-based initiative and a contemporary art exhibition. I invited artists Sonny Assu (Ligwilda'xw of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation), lessLIE (Cowichan) and Marianne Nicolson (Dzawada'enuxw Tribe of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation) to join me in this artistic investigation.

One of the curatorial intentions was to explore how an Indigenous art object, when placed in different contexts of reception, reveals different meanings. For example:

- Originating context - how, when, why and by whom the object was created?
Following which tradition? What were the protocols associated with the object?
How was its value determined? How do we remember and understand that

context today?

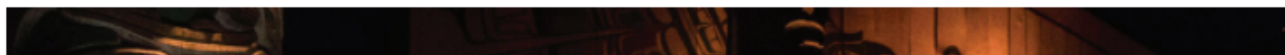
- Museum context - an Indigenous art object behind glass, made precious by a non-Indigenous system of collection and classification; distinct and distant from its original context.
- Community context - historical art objects remembered by the community, revealing forgotten stories and repatriating Indigenous knowledge.
- Gallery context - contemporary artists engaging in a collaborative process and creating new artworks presented at Open Space, a white walled contemporary arts centre; influenced by two contemporary art discourses—Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

Part of the research for this project took place at the Royal BC Museum and Archives. We spent time visiting the *First Peoples* gallery and studying historical art objects from the ethnographic collection. Through conversations with Curator of Ethnology Dr. Martha Black, Anthropology Collection Manager Brian Seymour, and Learning Program Developer Chris O'Connor, we imagined a metaphorical conversation between the artworks from the museum's collection and the contemporary artworks created specifically for the Awakening Memory project.

"It is ironic that part of the recovery of the oral tradition stems from an engagement with the anthropological record. The very system that removed this information from the communities and placed it within Western institutions is being re-appropriated back into Indigenous community consciousness."

- Marianne Nicolson

Marianne's words resonated with me as Chris O'Connor and I devised an activity that would allow the sharing of historical and contemporary narratives about British Columbia, from an Indigenous perspective. This took the form of a Museum Happy Hour on March 23, 2017, during which historical art objects selected by the three artists were displayed and discussed with the audience. It was a rare opportunity to listen to the stories of the artists, to hold some of the objects, to have a direct contact with them. A video animation of the contemporary artworks created by the artists was also projected in the *First Peoples* gallery space.





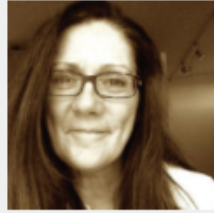
Museum Happy Hour: Indi-genius event, Royal BC Museum, March 23, 2017. Photo by Kirk Schwartz.

That night many audience members were moved by their ‘different’ experience of the museum. Stories were shared about the past, but the conversation was deeply imbedded in the present. At the end of the evening one person came to me and said: “Tonight, I have gained a deeper appreciation of the centrality of Indigenous cultures in informing our collective future. I understand better where I live.” Many people who attended the Museum Happy Hour came to the opening of the *Awakening Memory* exhibition at Open Space gallery the following night. They experienced Indigenous contemporary art in a different and complementary context.

In this time of [re]conciliation with Indigenous peoples, museums have a unique role in helping our country to know its own truth. Truth telling is an essential, yet sometimes uncomfortable, condition of conciliation.

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