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Forum explores First Nations art

Their work is moving in new directions, and they'll explain why

By Grania Litwin, Times Colonist June 12, 2011

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PREVIEW

What: Hiwest First Nations Art Forum

Where: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria

When: 5 to 8: 30 p.m. Thursday, June 16

Tickets: Free admission to event and all galleries

First Nations artists are leaping outside the box.

And anyone who is interested in seeing where today's master carvers, painters, jewelry, mask and print makers are headed should attend the free, Hiwest First Nations Art Forum at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria on Thursday.

The event opens with speeches and drumming, followed by a light buffet and panel discussion featuring some of the shining lights in the native art firmament. Young and old, they are all cutting-edge luminaries, pushing out walls of earlier aboriginal containers.

Rande Cook, a member of the Kwakwaka'wakw nation born in Alert Bay, was steeped in his family's rich heritage from an early age. His grandfather taught him the essentials of aboriginal design but Cook has spun it around, literally.

For the Hiwest event - pronounced Hee-West and meaning "to honour" - he is bringing a bent wood box with a mask attached at the front on a swivel. Spin the mask, lift the long hairpiece and insert your face. Suddenly you are in the midst of a potlatch, dressed for the occasion with flowing rabbit fur on your head and neck.

"I have always been a contemporary artist and like opening doors," said Cook, 34, of the interactive piece that's emblazoned with shaped copper work.

His mother knew his destiny when a school teacher said he'd drawn a giant train all across the blackboard at elementary school.

Cook, a young chief in his village of Matilpi near Alert Bay, absorbed his nation's traditional symbols and was curious about his ancestors, "but it's like music. You study, take lessons, then you make it work for you."

While he has studied with many natives, he is deeply influenced by Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and other greats of the Renaissance. "I'm fusing everything I've learned."

Esquimalt artist Darlene Gait, the only local woman in the forum, will speak about her recent acrylic painting that was inspired by a famous Bouguereau canvas. The French painter completed the original, called Charity, in 1878, but Gait has turned the work on its ear. Her version shows a Salish woman holding Caucasian babies while her own infants play at her feet.

"It represents the fact a lot of teachings from First Nations are now being respected by non-aboriginals. Our spiritual way of life, for instance. At the turn of the century it was derided, now it's sought after. The white babies are closest to the mother, who is willing to share."

A bowl of overflowing blackberries symbolizes the importance of natural sustenance.

"I go to a sweat house now and half the people are non-native," said Gait, 40, who used a European background in her painting, to show her people can flow in and out of both natural and classical worlds.

Event curator Rose Spahan - an artist, teacher and art consultant - said the artists are "walking forward with a past. They represent the evolution in native art today. They are the voice of change and strength."

Other panel members include master carvers Chief Tony Hunt Sr. and Butch Dick, Coast Salish multimedia artist Dylan Thomas and special guest Steven Loft, former aboriginal curator of the National Gallery of Canada.

Loft, a Mohawk-Jewish writer and media artist, noted there is a huge appetite for more engagement with and knowledge of indigenous art and added outdated art history models don't do justice to the "artistic esthetic" of native peoples.

The panel discussion begins at 7 p.m. with moderator France Trépanier, an artist of Mohawk-French ancestry who has worked at the Canada Council for the Arts.

The forum was initiated by the City of Victoria to honour aboriginal artists of this area, said Gail Price Douglas, the city's community development planner.

"We've wanted to have an artists' forum to bring in some of the contemporary, younger artists as well as traditional ones to talk about their work."

She plans to help explode a popular belief that aboriginal art must be based on traditional native artforms and symbols. "These artists are breaking new ground, yet there is little discussion about it. We want these artists to talk about the stories behind their art, the challenges of being aboriginal and working with cultural institutions."

The event leads up to the First People's Festival on June 19, in Spirit Square, next to Victoria City Hall.
glitwin@timescolonist.com

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