**Written by Andrea Walsh**

**On the Solo Exhibition “Behind the Gold Veil”**

**By Artist Randé Cook**

**Campbell River Art Gallery 15 May - 25 June 2015**

**Behind the Gold Veil**

The complete story of gold is not simple, nor is it completely known. Astrophysicists have recently surmised that the origin of this precious metal is a celestial one, and that all of the earth’s gold was created as a result of a massive collision of dead neutron stars. Archaeologists tell us that gold was likely the first metal known and used by early Hominids, and anthropologists chart the use of gold through almost every human culture known to the present day. Legendary stories of lost cities of gold, such as El Dorado, have numinous powers for the people of these cultures. In their quest to find them, and such epic stories have made men lose millions of dollars through their retelling in modern film, art, and literature. We commonly think humanity changed dramatically with the advent of metal and the metal age. But such stories and the metal that was mined and worked by our species. By 550 BC, both Plato and Aristotle wrote about gold and had theories of its origins. At the height of the Roman Empire (98-160 AD) Roman gold coins were commonly used as a form of currency. The precious and rare metal has forced a spiritual connection to this mineral for every human culture that uses it. Plato wrote, “All the gold which is under or upon the earth is not enough to give in exchange for virtue.” What is gold? Is it real wealth and not pieces of gold and silver? Such philosophical questions are balance flows as undercurrents through *Behind the Gold Veil*.

According to Cook, the title of the exhibition, *Behind the Gold Veil*, refers in part to the way a veil obscures our direct line of sight to an object or person. The veil occludes or blocks our direct access or line of sight. We are instead encouraged to witness traces of knowledge about objects and subjects. We must accept fleeting images. The use of shadows in the gallery evokes these thoughts of the world and its content. Along the glass boards that hang like modern mobile sculptures reference their use in the winter ceremonial season. Importantly, the pieces that hang in the gallery are not the same as those used in the Tuxweed ceremony, in which it initiates summon the supernatural powers of the Kwakwaka’wakw. Instead, they demonstrate how gold and other precious metals are used in the ceremonial boards from underground and then make them disappear again. The floating appearance of the boards in ceremony is referenced in the gallery in the way the four boards appear to float in the air. The use of lighting in the gallery allows for the projection of short forms onto the walls, thus making the design of the board both dynamic, and the reference to their power all the more present.

The use of light and shadow to create layers of effect is used to the greatest benefit in the way Cook visualizes the *Namgis story of the Madam, who gains supernatural powers of flight*.

“*As the Madam climbed higher and higher up the mountain, quartz crystals began falling from it, and they clung to his body, giving the boy the power to fly.*”

This quote is taken from Cook’s retelling of a story told by the *Namgis people about a boy who experiences upset, and flies his village, running on foot to a place known as Wals’ (Woss Lake). He attempts to destroy him, but instead of ending his life, his efforts bring on a powerful supernatural strength. In the story, the boy known as the Madam climbs a mountain that rises near the lake. As he climbs the mountain slope, the quartz crystals on the mountain attach to his body and they give him the ability to fly. With his newfound power, the Madam flies around the lake, and is now able to return home to his village, but only to sit up high on a tree top perch and watch his family far below.

Cook interprets this story of spiritual power and superhuman flight through his installation of two etched semi-circles of glass that feature the abstracted design of butterfly wings. In the centre of each piece is a small and intimate figure attached to thecentre of the glass, as if hovering in the air. The tiny figure is the Madam from the *Namgis story, and the half circles of glass represent sunrise and sunset, and the boy’s flight. The glass pieces are installed in an east-west formation, thus strengthening the presence of their celestial referents. Cook uses lighting in this piece as with others in the exhibition, to bring further depth to the piece. In this instance, shadows cast over the walls, which emanate from the glass, echo those cast by the sun’s first light of the day or the brilliant moon at night.

Four gold skulls are positioned on plinths in the middle of the gallery, each having a different symbol attached to the top of the skulls. These are a quartz crystal, Madam (dancer), salmon, and deer antlers. The grouping of skulls addresses the relationship humans have had since time immemorial with the elements of fire, water, air and earth. The elements of earth and air are depicted through the crystal and Madam on top of two of the skulls. The elements of fire and water are depicted through his use of deer antlers and a small carved salmon. Salmon, as it is well known, play a prominent role in Kwakwaka’wakw stories.

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The Madam, who gains supernatural powers of flight, is a Kwakwaka’wakw person, artist, chief, and Hamatsa. The pieces depict the Madam climbing a mountain and his efforts bring on a powerful supernatural strength. In the story, the boy known as the Madam climbs a mountain that rises near the lake. As he climbs the mountain slope, the quartz crystals on the mountain attach to his body and they give him the ability to fly. With his newfound power, the Madam flies around the lake, and is now able to return home to his village, but only to sit up high on a tree top perch and watch his family far below.

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The natural world and its ties to the cultural realm are noted as well in the two diptych canvases in the exhibition, both of mirrored compositions. One of these is a small and intimate figure attached to the top of the skulls. These are a quartz crystal, Madam (dancer), salmon, and deer antlers. The grouping of skulls addresses the relationship humans have had since time immemorial with the elements of fire, water, air and earth. The elements of earth and air are depicted through the crystal and Madam on top of two of the skulls. The elements of fire and water are depicted through his use of deer antlers and a small carved salmon. Salmon, as it is well known, play a prominent role in Kwakwaka’wakw stories. The flowers were picked and tea was created from it for nobility. The flowers were picked and tea was created from it for nobility. The sticks are rubbed together or when lightning strikes, fire may occur.

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To further understand Cook's choice to focus on gold, one needs to delve deeper into the artist's own life experiences, and how they resonate with the larger stories of history and 'Namgis legends that have spanned time and place. His maternal grandmother, Florence Matlipi, figures prominently in his understanding of his own identity, and he is from her stories and teachings that much of his art stems. Florence recounts one story of hers in particular when she took him back to the days of her childhood. What follows are her Matlipi's words.

"I remember being ten or eleven years old, I think, I got these precious little gold earrings from my grandmother Tl'akwetl. I was at my grandfather Harry Mountain's house in Village Island. He called this meeting for all the head chiefs to come, I don't know exactly what was going on but my Aunty Annie did something wrong. He had to correct her right away. All the chiefs were walking the house speaking then when they were done my grandfather started to take things from inside his house and giving them to the chiefs. He gave away beautiful china, teacups and plates plus a few dressers to the bigger chiefs and blankets. Then my grandfather came right over to me and took the earrings right off my ears. I was very sad... But he said not to worry as he gave the earrings away to the chief's wife. Those were my first gold earrings, very beautiful ones, old style you know... I always knew if you wore gold it was important."

– Florence Matlipi (nee Mountain)

Like his grandmother, Cook has his own stories of gold to tell. And these stories are recorded in the art he's produced for this exhibition, but also in his travels as an artist and through the places and peoples who inspire his practice. On a recent (2010) journey to Italy, with friend and artist Luke Marston, the two visited the St. Peter's Basilica. In that is arguably one of the most spiritual places for the Romans, Cook experienced the collision of the power and beauty of gold, and in a completely different context. Yet, the same questions emerged for him around the tension between material and spiritual wealth. In an unplanned act that has come to be recounted and accounted for in a manner makes it akin to a piece of performance art, Cook had Marston snap a photograph of himself in front of Bernini's Baldacchino di San Pietro. Cook was wearing a mask he'd carved, which has since been named the Vatican Mask. Large format photograph of the 'golden' moment, in which the photograph of Cook wearing the mask in the Basilica was taken, is included in Behind the Gold Veil. The Vatican Mask appears in this exhibition as a material trace, or memory, of this encounter.

At his studio in Victoria, BC, Cook's creative process is clearly visible. Cedar boards and blocks wait to be carved, and sand blasted glass leans against canvases with paintings sketched onto them. A bench of knives and carving tools is at the ready, and a large chalkboard has notations and sketches covering its surface. Behind the Gold Veil is an indication of the range of media in which Cook most cleverly reveals what may lie beneath. Through the act of covering objects with gold Cook most cleverly reveals what may lie beneath.

Behind the Gold Veil asks us to reconsider our assumptions on what is valuable, and how something, or someone, comes to be valued. What are the relationships between materialism and spirituality, life and death, and our human existence in the natural world? All these questions intersect with the curious, beautiful, rare, and sought after metal we know as gold. Through the act of covering objects with gold Cook most cleverly reveals what may lie beneath.