

WHAT THE VEIL MAY REVEAL

WRITTEN BY ANDREA WALSH
ON THE SOLO EXHIBITION “BEHIND THE GOLD VEIL”
BY ARTIST RANDE COOK
CAMPBELL RIVER ART GALLERY 15 MAY - 25 JUNE 2015

Behind the Gold Veil brings together elements from the natural and cultural worlds to address the relationship/balance of materialism and spirituality. The pieces in the exhibition are grounded by Rande Cook’s identity and knowledge that stems from his life as a Kwakwaka’wakw person, artist, chief, and Hamatsa. The pieces speak to each other through his use of the colour gold, stories of gold, and deep reflection on the beauty and power of gold. Cook questions the economic value humans place on this precious metal, and he seeks to attain a more spiritual connection to this mineral element, which has claimed its place in almost every culture around the world. Quotes and metaphors abound regarding the struggle of humans to place their actions and intentions equal to or indeed above the value they place on gold. Plato wrote, “All the gold which is under or upon the earth is not enough to give in exchange for virtue.” Mahatma Gandhi is quoted as saying: “It is health that is real wealth and not pieces of gold and silver”. Such philosophical quests for balance flow as undercurrents through *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 seen men lose millions of dollars in their quest to find them, and such epic stories have made men millions of dollars through their retelling in modern film, art, and literature. We commonly think humanity changed dramatically with the use of iron and copper, but it was gold that was the first metal used by our species. By 550 BC, both Plato and Aristototele wrote about gold and had theories of its origins. At the height of the Roman Empire (98-160 AD) Roman gold coins were commonly found in Britain to North Africa. From ancient and historic times to the present, in every culture that can be documented through written and oral histories, gold represents both extreme beauty and extreme power. And the precious and rare metal has forced a precarious, often violent, balance between economics and spirituality.

Behind the Gold Veil references various ways by which gold has figured into cultures around the world, and through time. In the context of Cook’s own ancestry from the ‘Namgis First Nation territory on the northwest coast of North America, the role of gold since colonial exploration has been small, but brilliant. One of Christopher Columbus’ intentions of exploration was to collect as much gold as he could in the name of a foreign ruler to the Indigenous lands on which the metal was taken. This history of gold in the culture of other Indigenous peoples around the world, on other continents, and its link to the northwest coast is made evident in two carved cedar masks in the exhibition. A portrait mask of a human face is covered completely in gold leaf and is seen/sheltered under a halo of shimmering black feathers. This mask represents the Indigenous peoples of South America. Its counterpart in the exhibition is a chief’s mask for which its facial features are emphasized by flowing ovoid and u-forms. Gold leaf covers the expressive metal eyebrows attached to the mask, as well as the repoussé eagle crest on its forehead. This chief’s mask references the Eagle seats held by particular chiefs in the potlatch system. These hereditary, bloodline positions, are passed down in strict law from generation to generation and are held by very few families. Through these seats and the wealth of the chiefs, gold came to play an important role in the potlatch. The precious metal enters Kwakwaka’wakw history through the use of gold coins, which by the end of the 18th Century, were pounded by artists and transformed into extravagant pieces of engraved jewelry worn by nobility. For a chief to give away gold pieces at a potlatch was to elevate his status and wealth.

The reference to the potlatch and its complex role in Kwakwaka’wakw culture, as a system of record keeping and affirmation of title and identity, as well as land rights and language, is evident in a small delicate Hawklet Frontlet Mask. This piece, the smallest in the exhibition, stands alone as a symbol of power and wealth. But it is also symbolic of the spirituality that connects the wearer to the land and to all life forms; this spiritual connection relates to the energy that gives life to everything, says Cook. This then is the tension produced through the exhibition that hinges on the question: when did the material and commercial properties of gold obscure its relationship to spirituality? And, how can that connection be re-established, or nourished today? This balance between materialism and what Cook refers to as a foundations of the potlatch (love, unity, family), is at issue today for many people, as they work to strengthen the culture and its ceremonies.

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 traces, and they bring forth reference to the spirit realm. The power 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 Tuxwid ceremony, in which initiates summon the supernatural powers of Winalagilis’. Initiates demonstrate this power by calling up the spirit 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 shadow forms onto the walls, thus making the design of the boards all the more 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 flees his village, running on foot to a place known as Wa’as (Woss Lake). There he attempts to drown himself in the lake, 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 newly acquired power of flight, he flew around the world night after night. The Madam would often 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 the centre 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 reference the boy’s flight through the night. 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 it. 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 contemporary culture and history, as well as a key role in today’s economic climate and in food security. The deer antlers are symbolic of a very long and complex story of how Cook’s ancestors acquired the use of fire through the deer. In the very beginning the animal carried fire in his tail, and he would run and jump against the trees, and jump as high as he could to the sky to create lightning. This is why, explained Cook, when two sticks are rubbed together or when lightning strikes, fire may occur.

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 images. One of these pieces is inspired by the designs that appear on ceremonial dance aprons, and it depicts a small delicate flower that Cook’s grandmother told him grows at the edge of streams. The flowers were picked and tea was created from it for nobility. The other canvas depicts the Thunderbird taking flight. The canvases echo Cook’s thoughts about linking the natural and cultural worlds with their reference to the earthly flowers and skyward supernatural birds.

The large 6x6 foot carved cedar panel that depicts a spirit whale, is similar in scale to the dance screens that separate spiritual and material worlds in the big house during ceremony. This piece interacts in the exhibition with the other monumental work, which is

a massive raven on top of a box of treasures. Both pieces speak to the power of a chief's wealth in the forms of songs, dances, masks in both material and spiritual forms. The box of treasures and its giant raven adorned with gold leaf highlights holds the ceremonial material property of the chief. Cook challenges us through his abundant use of gold leaf on the Spirit Whale panel to consider what we see. Do we see the opulence and excess of the valuable metal presented to us in a size and format that almost taunts us to not believe its authenticity? Or do we see the traces of what lay behind the veil, or that exist in spite of the gold? How do we access what is behind this veil of materialism? Cook demands we consider these questions through the exhibition, but the question is most present in this panel, which is the signature piece of this body of work.

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 Matilpi, figures prominently in his understanding of his own identity, and it is from her stories that much of his knowledge stems. He recounts one story of hers in particular when she took him back to the days of her childhood. What follows are her Matilpi's words.

"I remember being ten or eleven years old, I think, I got these precious little gold earrings from my grandmother TI'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 Auntie Annie did something wrong. He had to correct it right away. All the chiefs were taking their turn speaking then when they were done my grandfather started to take things from inside his house and gifting 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 Matilpi (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 what is arguably one of the most spiritual places for the Roman Catholics around the world, 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 is comfortable working. His artistic approach is a combination of particular planning and thoughtfulness to cultural protocol, but it almost always contains an element of technical risk, or it challenges his existing skill set. The pieces in this exhibition are exemplary of his first extensive use of gold leaf on monumental works. Most of his time till now has focused on the production of ornate gold jewelry.

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.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This essay was derived from several visits with Rande Cook in his Victoria studio over the spring of 2015. It is with gratitude that the words that appear here stem from conversations we had on these occasions. Cook kindly offered the specific cultural information, and family history, pertaining to the art in Behind the Gold Veil that is re-presented in this essay.

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CLOSING RECEPTION + ARTIST TALK
Thursday, June 25, 2015, 7 PM

Join the discussion at the Campbell River Art Gallery with artist Rande Cook, moderated by Andrea Walsh. Learn more about *Behind the Gold Veil*, the artistic process in creating this body of work, Cook's artistic practice, and an elaboration on the keys themes addressed in Walsh's essay.

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RANDE COOK

Chief Rande Cook (K'alapa) was born May 1977 in culture-rich Alert Bay, a small village on the northern tip of Vancouver Island. Surrounded by the beauty of land and art, Rande found the passion of creativity at an early age. With the strong teachings from his grandparents Gus and Florence Matilpi Rande learned the strong values of life and culture. In 2008 Rande inherited his grandfathers chieftainship and now carries the name Makwala, which means moon. Rande is very involved in his culture and has hosted a Potlatch and two feasts for his family and community. Rande is also known for his traditional dancing and singing in Potlatches.

Rande has worked with many great mentors such as John Livingston for his mastery in wood sculpting, Robert Davidson in metal work, Calvin Hunt for his amazing craftsmanship in wood and most recently Repousee and Chasing master Valentin Yotkov. Rande has been expanding his capacities with new creative ideas and in 2010 traveled to Italy to study under Yotkov. Most recently he travelled to New York to study in Yotkov's studio to increase his craft in Repousse and Chasing. Rande pushes himself in all his mediums looking for perfection of each technique. Rande's works can be seen in many galleries in the United States and Canada, and is now in collections around the world.

Rande now resides in Victoria where he continues to push himself in his creativity by finding many new inspirations in new mediums.

ANDREA WALSH

Andrea Walsh is a visual anthropologist who specializes in twentieth-century and contemporary aboriginal art visual culture in Canada, as well as theoretical and methodological approaches to visual research. Walsh is also an artist who works in photography and video in addition to producing social practice based works. In her development as an anthropologist, Walsh has been inspired by the long history of anthropological studies of art and material culture, and ethnographic film and photography, as well as more recent developments in the field of visual anthropology that have embraced the strengths of interdisciplinary visual culture studies.

Her research and teaching acknowledge and utilize her undergraduate training as a studio based artist (photo-lithography and intaglio printing) and graduate training in documentary and ethnographic film and video production. Walsh's training as an anthropologist is integral to her approach as an artist. Historical and contemporary community-based cultural research and action is the foundation of my art practice in which she is interested in engaging memory, senses of space and place, history and identity.

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