

FIELD NOTES

Tłatłaskudis / Malcolm Island

ASK

THE

MOUNTAINS

*The visual and aural works of
Sylvie Ringer and Jenni Schine*

In the exhibition *Ask the Mountains*, Sylvie Ringer and Jenni Schine conjure deeply meaningful memories and experiences through their use of sound, visual artwork, and installation, allowing the visitors entrance into the world of Malcolm Island through the artists' eyes and ears. Time away from the island and isolation over the course of the pandemic has made those experiences even more valuable. The memories they have of Malcolm Island are a haven they can return to in their minds. The global pandemic exacerbated isolation and travel restrictions; the need to conjure cherished memories in order to sustain ourselves over long periods of fear and instability became even greater. Global travel is affected by volatile political situations, environmental disasters, carbon consequences, and the fragility of ecosystems and cultural sites. It is imperative that we be able to reach places in our minds that we cannot physically visit, or that have drastically changed. Though the project stems from experiences of a remote place off North Vancouver Island, the implications reach beyond that to encompass the fragility of many places, their populations, and the responsibilities visitors have as uninvited guests. *Ask the Mountains* is a meditation on our relationship with the natural world, and the lasting value of memories from places that have deeply impacted us.

*"Places remember events.
What does Thataskudis
// Malcolm Island remember?"*

Tlatłaskudis as it's known in Kwak'waka, or Malcolm Island, is located on the unceded Kwakwaka'wakw Territory of the Kwakiutl, Mamalilikala, and 'Namgis First Nations. The artists and the curator acknowledge our Settler positionality and are grateful for the guidance of 'Namgis Knowledge Keeper Yvonne Wilson. Knowledge passed down through generations of Wilson's family tells of Tlatłaskudis as a bountiful summer place that was shared between the 'Namgis and Kwakiutl. For generations families visited the places they had rights to in order to gather a variety of plants: bog cranberries, thimble berries, huckleberries, salal, spruce



Map of 'Namgis Traditional Territory. <http://www.namgis.bc.ca/namgis-culture-history/>.

1 Dean, Tacita and Miller, Jeremy. "Artworks Place." Thames and Hudson: New York, New York, 2005. 14. The phrase was written by James Joyce as a preparatory note to *Ulysses*. The authors go on to say that time becomes so deeply embedded in a place's identity that it comes to be one of its main characteristics. It is both the *sediment* quality of a place's memory of time and the *embodiment* of time as a mark of character that resonates with this project and beyond as a way of understanding places and their histories.

2 Tlatłaskudis. "Namgis Culture and History." 'Namgis First Nation. Accessed February 12, 2022. <http://www.namgis.bc.ca/namgis-culture-history/>.

3 Positionality refers to how differences in social position and power shape identities and access in society. University of British Columbia CTLT Indigenous Initiatives. "Positionality and Intersociality." <https://indigenousinitiatives.ctl.tu.ca/classroom-climate/positionality-and-intersociality/#:~:text=Positionality%20refers%20to%20the%20how,identities%20and%20access%20in%20society,text=in%20acknowledging%20positionality%20of%20each%20location%20and%20complex%20power%20dynamics.> (Accessed February 15, 2022).

4 Wilson, Yvonne. 'Namgis Elder and Knowledge Keeper. 2022. Interview by author. Campbell River, BC. February 11, 2022.

roots, and seaweed. Due to its location, it is safe from the elements and could be hospitable to longer stays. Measures, such as controlled burns, were always taken to ensure that the plant life would be abundant when the families returned the next year. Archaeological evidence in the form of petroglyphs verifies this history.

Malcolm Island's settler history beyond first contact with Indigenous populations was the founding of a utopian community by Finnish arrivants in the late 19th century. An interest in the historical concepts of utopia drew Sylvie Ringer to the island, where she lived for a year as an artist in residence over the course of 2017: "I was interested in the tipping point moments of Utopias...when they don't work and why and what lies in between....similar to the moment between day and night...the hope and the defeat. Since Malcolm, it has shifted more towards other things. I found the stories I discovered in the natural world more meaningful"

"Landscapes are stakeholders of emotion" - sites of historical or mythical significance.

Malcolm Island exerts influence over the artists, revealing to them the universality of experiences grounded in connection to place. The relationship continues as we carry memories that help shore us up when needed. As we realise we derive physical and emotional sustenance from the land, our connection heightens, creating a visual model, like concentric circles, of ever-expanding impact. Artwork created in this space changes the relationship between the body and the land from consumer and provider to steward and nurturer.

Embodiment involves a positioned thinking subject inseparable from sensory perception. Art is particularly compelling in this project because it is not of the mind or the body but is produced and understood through the intertwined body-mind-world.

The artists reflect on their embodied experiences on the land, but the manner in which they respond to it gives it the agency to move beyond the realm of subject. The installation elements are built structures that emulate the natural form and space of the external world, paying homage to shape and bringing the experience of that place into the gallery. We hear the sounds - the voice of the land - as

5 Yvonne Wilson.

6 Ibid

7 Ibid

8 Ibid

9 Belinda Grace Gardner, "Beyond Dark: Sylvie Ringer's Explorations on the Threshold between Waking and Dreaming, Darkness and Light." Crab, Roak, Stiek, Loss. Kerber Verlag: Bielefeld, Germany. 2019. 83.

Ringer, Sylvie. 2022. Interview by author. Campbell River, BC, Canada and Hamburg, Germany. February 5, 2022.

10 Burke, Sandra Daylene. 2014. "Thinking Bodies and Sensational Minds: Affect and Embodiment in Contemporary Art." Masters diss., Virginia Commonwealth University. In VCU Scholars Compass. <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/ed/609> (accessed December 20, 2021). 15.

11 Sylvie Ringer.



Sylvie Ringer, "Singing Lands," installation, works on paper, Poppenwand, burnt wood. Exhibition Peer to place gallery im Marstall. 2020. Photo credit: Michael Seiwert, Galerie im Marstall, Altmünster, GER.



Sylvie Ringer, left "The Oracle." Ink, pigment, charcoal and crayon on paper. Right, "The Oracle." Crayon and charcoal on paper. 2020. Image credit: Sylvie Ringer.

Left "The Oracle." Ink, pigment, charcoal and Crayon on paper. 2020. Right "The Oracle." Crayon and charcoal on paper. 2020. Image credit: Sylvie Ringer.

12 Stewart, Susan, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Collection*. London: Duke University Press, 1995. 135.

13 Krüger, Anne Simone, "Untitled Essay," Crab, Rock, Stiele, Loss. Kerber Verlag: Bielefeld, Germany, 2019. 6-7.
Ringer, Sylvie. 2022. Interview by author. Campbell River, BC, Canada and Hamburg, Germany. February 5, 2022.

recorded in Jenni Schine's compositions. Sylvie Ringer documents individual elements and characteristics of the land faithfully and lovingly. As her familiarity with the Island grew, her vision of the place deepened. She goes beyond depiction to access the poetics of her surroundings, conveying dream-like states.

The artists convey a connection with a place, its elements of wonder, and the deep emotional states it conjures. These objects of creation are not only relatable, but they tap into the embodied experiences of the viewer through the creation of artworks, souvenirs of their experiences. According to literary theorist Susan Stewart: "this capacity of objects to serve as traces of authentic experience is, in fact, exemplified by the souvenir. The souvenir distinguishes experiences. We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of the narrative." In English we understand souvenir to mean a reminder of a place or time. Over time that word has lessened in value through commercialization. Susan Stewart's definition marks a profound experience that we seek to hold onto through a valued object. In French the word means memory, simply and completely. The artists' interpretations of visual and aural experiences in the gallery are souvenirs. They create a space that references their treasured experiences. It becomes a catalyst that conjures memories the visitors bring. The visitor's intangible souvenirs - their treasured stories - are called upon, thus connecting their personal narrative with the work in the gallery.

Ask the Mountains

Upon entry into the exhibition, the installative elements immediately draw the visitor's attention. You are confronted with a 10' square structure built in the centre of the gallery, with walls standing 8' high. The exterior walls are installed with drawings and paintings of captivating shapes that seem familiar and strange at the same time. An entryway brings you into a semi-enclosed space that spirals inward. Reminiscent of sacred sites and places of worship around the world, the act of spiralling inward can also emulate the process of turning one's attention inward, as they enter a space of meditation or memory. What happens when you spiral into someone else's memories?

Sylvie Ringer's visual work has been lauded as portraying the state between waking and dreaming, myth and reality, memory and metaphor: "I remember that when I first came to Malcolm Island and started to explore artistically what I saw and felt, what came to me...my drawings, sketches were more similar to what really was. Over the course of the years that has changed, I have internalised

14 Schine, Jenni. 2022. Interview by author. Campbell River, BC and Vancouver, BC. February 10, 2022.

15 Magnanensi, Giorgio. "Sound Thinking. TEDxSeefeld. November 1, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xcjo8Y2CZ1g&ab_channel=TEDxTalks. Accessed February 5, 2022.



Sylvie Ringer, "Half Past Three," 2019,
chalk and charcoal on paper, Malcolm
Island. Image credit: Sylvie Ringer.

As you draw toward the centre, the aural elements resonate more intensely. Notice your surroundings and trace the origin of the sounds. Look up, you will see a beautifully smooth Red Cedar or Pacific Maple resonator floating above your head. They are there to amplify and carry the sounds that Jenni Schine has gathered, enlivening and expanding the gallery space: "I'm interested in the subjective experience of the listener and how we can ignite their imaginations through sound, movement, and the tactile experience of Sylvie's images. The installation acts as a character, itself and so do the wooden-speakers. The sonic work is not a composition in the way of a classical composition, rather it works with sound materials and their specific sonic qualities." Perhaps this is the moment your listening goes from inside to outside. The resonators, West Coast Radians, are creations of Vancouver-based composer Giorgio Magnanensi. As someone who has been enthralled with sound his whole life Giorgio poetically articulates the way sound demarcates/fills space: "Sound is like light. What we see is because of it. If you turn the light down you don't see me. Sound in a way reveals something of a space, of a stage, our life in a specific moment. How we listen is what makes sense. The active way of engaging in listening. Sound is what makes and reveals magical things, beautiful things. Things that are difficult to translate into words"

As you move away from the sounds emanating from the resonator, another instal-lative element draws you to look toward the floor. The "Floor Piece" encourages viewers with a sense of play and tactile engagement through changes in levels and elements of touch. In order to connect with "Call and Answer, Unearthing Connections," one must get down on the ground and lean against the smooth curves of driftwood that line the installation. Under sheets of glass lie images of Sylvie Ringer's that make reference to primordial symbols and objects of human

creation from diverse cultures: a cosmic egg and sperm, symbolising the begin-ning of all life taken from a manuscript of the Bhagavata-Purana, India, 1730; The Venus of Willendorf, an 11 cm-tall Venus figurine made an estimated 25,000 years ago and found at a Palaeolithic site near Willendorf, Austria in 1908; "Five Crabs," a drawing to celebrate the dance between the tides, the ocean, the moon, and the harvest, by Qi Baishi, China 1950; the infinity symbol emerging out of seagrass. Rocks are spread across the surface of the glass for participants to push around and shape as they observe the images and lean on the wood. The sound of the rocks sliding across the glass is a prominent aural element that takes effect as play and discovery occurs. Moving the rocks reveals different pictorial elements. The pebbles connect you to the beach, the land outside the gallery, and the land on Malcolm Island. How do the stones feel in your hand? How does the wood feel? What ideas and concepts do the images conjure? The sense of play that comes from getting down on the ground and using one's hands opens up our minds to long stored memories and favoured activities. Let them wash over you, like the sound of water slurping across pebbles as the neverending surf approaches and recedes.

The Artists

Jenni Schine is a sound artist, storyteller, and educator: "At the heart of my work is the act of listening. I want to activate my audience's ears to change how we hear the world around us. I do this through soundwalks, sonic explorations, and audio storytelling. In my work, I use field-recording and interviewing methods to collect audio material in situ and compose soundscape compositions that highlight sonic discoveries. My experimental audio documentaries often interweave sounds and stories with a subtle approach to sound processing.

We cannot underestimate the act of listening. I believe that the principles that are going to create change in this world are the basic values of respect and deep listening. This has profound effects on how we perceive, interact, and engage with our environment, our community, and ourselves."

Sylvie Ringer is a Canadian-German artist based in Hamburg and on Malcolm Island, BC, Canada. Ringer graduated from the University of Applied Sciences, Hamburg from the Department of Design, in Illustration and Drawing. She has worked there as a drawing instructor since 2019. She also teaches workshops and lectures in design universities and art academies, with a focus on encouraging a non-judgemental and free creative process. Sylvie Ringer is the co-founder of the International Achterhaus Residency Programm and Compassion Art Collective, dedicated to encouraging dialogue and de-stigmatization through art.

14 Schine, Jenni. 2022. Interview by author. Campbell River, BC and Vancouver, BC. February 10, 2022.

15 Magnanensi, Giorgio. "Sound Thinking. TEDxSeefeld. November 1, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xcjo8Yz0z1g&ab_channel=TEDxTalks. Accessed February 8, 2022.

Sylvie Ringer, "Call and Answer: Unsettling Conversations," 2022. Various works on paper with charcoal, crayons, ink, pigment, graphite, pebbles from Bert Point, Malcolm Island, B.C. Image credit: Sylvie Ringer.



She has spent many years realising projects, collaborations, and exhibitions in and in-between Canada and Germany.

When Sylvie Ringer first met Jenni Schine through a mutual friend on Malcolm Island, she was intrigued by Schine's approach to her artistic practice: "I was intrigued by her field recordings, the idea of collecting sounds. I liked that she was in a way working like me, just in a different medium: we both derive inspiration and content from our immediate surroundings, places we choose that are of special interest for us. We both have to immerse ourselves in an environment to develop ideas." Ringer and Schine employ similar artistic methodologies, maybe even values; they immerse themselves completely in an environment or subject and create souvenirs of those embodied experiences. Those experiences held within the body are affected by time and circumstance, thus they have lasting effects that deepen over time.



Jenni Schine, collecting sound in the field. Image credit: Jackie Dives.

Giorgio Magnanensi is a composer, the artistic director of Vancouver New Music and Laboratorio, and a lecturer at the School of Music of the Vancouver Community College. He lives as a guest on the traditional territories of the shishalh people of the Coast Salish Nation. His West Coast Radians are an important element of Ask the Mountains, as they help to amplify the voices of Malcolm Island that come through Jenni Schine's compositions. One day Giorgio found himself in a small mill operation on the Sunshine Coast where he saw slabs of red cedar and maple in a refuse pile that would be burned. He took them and sliced them and shaped them, experimenting with the sound they make. He now has an impressive set of 16 Maple and Red Cedar speakers that he calls West Coast Radians.

The radians exemplify the sentence in plant and animal life. They are vital aural and material presences in the exhibition. Each panel is unique and has its own voice; maple is a denser wood that produces higher and brighter pitches, whereas cedar produces smoother and lower tones. One need only know how to listen to hear and appreciate non-human voices and their unique qualities. The resonators help the ear of the listener attune to "affective feel, timbre, touch, and texture, thus listening outside of normative settler foci and engaging with transformative politics of listening that explore Indigenous epistemologies and sensory logics." The Stó:lō scholar, Dylan Robinson's book *Hungry Listening* critiques the insatiable settler listener that consumes and possesses Indigenous culture, and the colonial control of auditory institutions and ideas, while creating space and acknowledging sovereign Indigenous ways of listening and knowing, and the politics of those listening practises. The way he addresses Indigenous listening as a transformative political act can be applied to the voices of plant and animal beings. It is necessary to acknowledge, learn, and preserve those languages at all costs. Taking the time to listen to and amplify those voices is an inherently political act. In "Listening in Reciprocity," Lindsay Dawn Dobbin, Kanien'kehá:ka Acadian Irish water protector, artist, musician, storyteller, curator, and educator beautifully describes the fullness and connection that comes through listening: "The natural world is a teacher who continuously invites us into that which is indescribably yet intimately heard. The tops of trees, the voice of a bird, water flowing on the ground. These resonant places initially act as mirrors, where we encounter ourselves simply through seeing and being witnessed by that which is fully being." It is important to enter a space of listening; to resist doing. To pay attention to the voices of Tlatłskudis and be open to listening is part of a journey toward healing, toward understanding the deep interconnectedness of all things, toward reciprocity.

16 "Sunshine Coast Museum and Archives. "Shishalh Nation." 2022. <https://www.sunshinecoastmuseum.ca/roberts-verse.html#:~:text=The%20roberts%20verse%20was%20a%20recording%20of%20shishalh%20elders.> (accessed February 9, 2022). February 10, 2022.

17 Giorgio Magnanensi West Coast Radians. 2018. WCR Metro Vancouver Video. <https://giorgiomagnanensi.com/wcr-metro-vancouver-video/>. (accessed February 10, 2022).

18 Robinson, Dylan. *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN.



Field Guides for Listeners exhibition opening, Open Space Arts Society, Victoria B.C. 2019. Image credit: Jenni Schine

"The voice of Malcolm Island is still audible"

You will experience the voice of Malcolm Island. Pure sounds gathered into an abstract composition by Jenni Schine, and elegantly strung together to recreate a sense of the place - to honour the wildness and the sentience of it. For Sylvie Ringer, Malcolm has represented that embodied experience of wildness:

For me personally I was able to experience a wildness of the natural world, a strong presence that resonated inside of me in a long forgotten part...maybe human collective memory...And that was and continues to be inspiring. The natural elements of the North Island have a force that I have not encountered in Europe in such a way... nothing is "original" any more. This means that in those places it's like nature's voice is taken...and here it is still audible for me and that evokes memories, emotions, bodily sensations...which brings me images to draw.

The pandemic affected people in many different ways. The pervasive isolation created a strong desire to connect with people and land. The way that Jenni Schine and Sylvie Ringer connected over their experiences of Malcolm Island during the pandemic is rooted in the uniqueness of that place and the way it spoke to each of them:

At the start of the pandemic, I felt the urge to go to the ocean and touch pebbles. Sylvie and I both talked about how our time on Malcolm Island has provided us with ways of being in the world that supported us during the pandemic. When I talked with Giorgio, he also mentioned his desire to start holding/touching rocks during the pandemic as a way to reconnect with

19 Dobbin, Lindsay. "Listening in Reciprocity," Canadian Art, March 11, 2021, Features.
20 Sylvie Ringer.
21 Sylvie Ringer.

something simple. Allowing our audience to touch stones and pebbles in the gallery setting compliments the layers of sound surrounding them; it is the tactility of the rocks that is playful. There are many different kinds of rocks and they are all interesting, but I love the pebbles of Bere Point on Malcolm Island. This is because they have been rounded and smoothed from the ocean over time. When you're on that beach, you can hear a rounder sonic presence and the sound is really beautiful. Bere Point is also a rubbing beach for the northern resident orcas who rub their bellies on the rounded pebbles. This is a cultural behaviour for the northern resident community of orcas and one that is passed intergenerationally.

The impulse to be in nature is something that many felt very strongly about during the time we were most restrained. Schine's beautiful recollection exemplifies the desire to understand phenomenologically the way we fit into our world; to feel rooted and know our positioning within a larger, complex system. Phenomenology offers a way of understanding how bodies are embedded in the world and how subjects come to be in relationship to this world and to others. The cool feel of a rounded pebble in one's hand is something that can be widely understood, especially for those living in coastal regions where the ocean endlessly smooths edges.

The pebbles hold significance for all the artists. In particular, the pebbles of Bere Point transport us to Malcolm Island, to a place culturally and locationally significant for multiple species. Since time immemorial, Tłat̓askudis (Malcolm Island) has been a shared place of abundance and shelter. The artists have lived there and been profoundly influenced by the way the island speaks. These memories resonate within their bodies; they change and deepen over time, called upon to protect and sustain their hearts and minds when a return trip isn't possible. The artists bring these poignant experiences into the gallery and allow us to feel that connection deep inside through engagement with aural, visual, and tactile artworks. The artworks are souvenirs of the artists' embodied experiences. We may be transported simultaneously to their place of comfort and solace, as well as our own. By coming down to ground level, looking up, listening, and touching we can engage with a sense of play, and feel present in that moment that is meant to imbue us with the warmth and fullness of recollection. Where is the sheltered place of abundance that you visit in your mind? What does it sound like, smell like, feel to the touch? Places remember events. What does Tłat̓askudis remember?

22 Jenni Schine.

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FIELD NOTES

What will you remember?

"If we are serious about wanting to affect real changes in our soundscapes and by extension in us, we must never forget the practice of listening as a firm, if complicated foundation for all our teachings, for our efforts to study and research the soundscape and to understand the significance of acoustic ecology on our planet."

Hildegard Westenkamp

"Considering all the ecological and social injustices at present there is so much to do. But there's also space for not doing---for just listening. For finding rest at the base of a tree. For floating in the ocean. For practising gratitude. For offering oneself through humble attention."

Lindsay Dolbin

"By its very nature listening is a continual and gentle process of opening."

Hildegard Westenkamp

I remember that when I first came to Malcolm and started to explore artistically what I saw and felt, what came to me.....my drawings, sketches were more similar to what really was. Over the course of the years that has changed, I have internalised certain forms and shapes and am concentrating more on metaphoric landscapes, atmospheres that I know and that can be presented in many ways, symbols.....in a way my perception of the place has gotten "deeper," more internalised

Sylvie Ringer

Tlatłaskudis / Malcolm Island