

Marianne Nicolson creates a symbolic potlatch in *A Feast of Light and Shadows*. Potlatches—performative winter-time ceremonies of the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples based on sharing wealth and fortifying social contracts, kinships, and reciprocities—were banned by the Canadian government from 1885 to 1951. In criminalizing a dynamic ancient practice that was seen as antithetical to the logics of capitalism and wealth accumulation, the potlatch ban was an attempt by colonizers to destroy cultural cohesion among the many Indigenous peoples on the Pacific Northwest coast. A potlatch raid and mass arrest in 1921 resulted in the imprisonment of 22 women and men, and the confiscation of hundreds of masks and treasured regalia, much of which ended up in private art collections and ethnographic museums. Ultimately unsuccessful, the ban forced generations of Kwakwaka'wakw to continually adapt and reinvent the potlatch, going underground for decades and emerging in the mid-20th century as an enduring touchstone of Native survivance under colonization.

In Kwakwaka'wakw cosmologies, the body is analogous to the house, which is analogous to the land. They are animate vessels for containing souls, families, ancestors, sustenance, and myth. The body, the house, and the land are deeply rooted in the Kwakwaka'wakw ancestral territories, and are reinforced by kinships, material cultures, storytelling, and the Kwak'wala language. The potlatch is the embodied enactment of these pillars of traditional Kwakwaka'wakw culture. In the gallery space, Nicolson creates a micro-cosmology based on the ritual exchange of the potlatch.

Light is the primary medium at play in the Yale Union laundry building. Built before electric lighting was widely available, the building's large windows allowed owners to utilize every hour of daylight for maximum profit, and a modicum of ventilation in an industry suffocating with heat and fumes. Haunted by the twin specters of exploitative labor and capital accumulation, the building persists as a relic amid today's unsettling moment of post-millennial settler colonialism and neoliberal capitalism. In her transformation of the gallery into a Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonial space, Nicolson harnesses the light by changing its color to evoke the feeling of being underwater: From the underground river that surfaces in the Yale Union basement, to colonialism's spiritual debt, to ecological collapse and rising sea levels, water is the giver of life and the bringer of death.

Agency is a key concept in Nicolson's practice as an artist. Within the Western capitalist construct of "contemporary art," which has a history of fetishizing, appropriating, and commodifying Indigenous objects and imagery, Nicolson operates as an agent of occupation. To art gallery visitors and viewers who have become accustomed to

free visual access to the symbols of Indigenous cultures, her work self-consciously reveals as much as it conceals about Kwakwaka'wakw cultural signifiers and the structural contexts in which she shows them. One of Nicolson's goals is to translate tradition into modern contexts: By utilizing the colonizers' tools and technologies to reinforce and reinvent her cultural traditions, she sustains the practice of resistance through adaptation that the Kwakwaka'wakw have been successfully engaged in since European contact. Of her previous exhibitions, she has written:

I was attempting to re-assert a particularly Kwakwaka'wakw connection between formal objects and their meanings by occupying gallery and museum public spaces with Kwakwaka'wakw concepts just as much as with objects. In this regard rather than occupy the periphery with a passive acceptance of imposed contexts I wanted to create agency and occupy spaces conscientiously while acknowledging the histories and contexts of those spaces. Is it possible for a museum or a gallery space, both major sites of public representation to be truly made Kwakwaka'wakw?*

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The figures inscribed on the windows evoke those on a traditional Kwakwaka'wakw bentwood box, which here represents the Kwakwaka'wakw house of the sea—the undersea world and its interrelationships as expressed in stories and myth. The six center windows on the west wall delineate the front of the box, from which everything flows outward, while creatures from all continents are suspended in the water and embroiled in the convolution of survival in a world that is drowning. The bilateral symmetry of the windows reflects the notion of temporal symmetry, in which time is circular and reproductive, as opposed to linear or progressive. Certain nations implicated in the violence of colonial expansion and neoliberal capitalism are represented by symbols: the maple leaf of Canada, the double-headed eagle of Russia, the crown of Great Britain, and the olive branch-wielding eagle of the United States. The representation of the bentwood box in the windows alludes to the gallery space as another kind of box—a container for bodies, for ghosts, and for histories.

In the afternoon if the the sun casts its light into the west-facing windows, the figures perform a slow animation as shadows cast on the wood floor that bears the scars of a hundred years of industrialized labor. An integral part of

*Marianne Nicolson, *Yaxa Uk'wine', yaxa Gukw, dtuwida A'wi'ngawis*/"The Body, the House, and the Land": *The Conceptualization of Space in Kwakwaka'wakw Language and Culture* (PhD dissertation, University of Victoria, 2013), 402.

the potlatch is the collective witnessing of ceremony, dancing, and exchange. Gallery visitors are guests in the ceremonial house, invited to the feast of light and shadows and the symbolic redistribution of wealth that it signifies. The shadows appear as witnesses to the feast, but only consent to be seen when the sun consents to expose them. These shadow-witnesses are invisible at night, in the morning, and on cloudy days. At night the effect is reversed; lit from the inside, the gallery becomes a vessel projecting its turquoise light and the symbolic figures outward into the darkness.

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James Hamdzid with a Dzunuḱwa feast dish in Gwa'yi (Kingcome Inlet), BC, c. 1926. Photo courtesy of the Vancouver Public Library, VPL 1708

Among the most anthropologized peoples in the Americas, the Kwakwaka'wakw were prodigiously documented as their cultures were subject to the annihilating force of colonial conquest. The production of the Canadian settler-state (as well as the American) has a vested interest in representations of Indigeneity even as it subjugates Indigenous bodies. Colonial regimes of representation and the myth of documentary objectivity haunt this larger-than-life archival photograph of James Hamdzid standing next to a giant carved feast dish and two lids from other feast dishes. Hamdzid was Nicolson's great great grandmother's brother. If the contemporary art apparatus is intrinsic to colonialist logics, fueled by the excesses of capitalism and outright land theft, then the image of James Hamdzid operates as a decolonial ghost in the colonizing machine, steadily returning a century of ethnographic gazes. By incorporating this image into her exhibition, Nicolson goes beyond the recuperative function of archive-mining, and entangles her practice in the reclamation of Indigenous intimacies and epistemologies.

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A group of Musgamakw Dzawada'enuxw men pose with a Dzunuḱwa feast dish in Gwa'yi (Kingcome Inlet), BC, c. 1926. Back row, left to right: Bill Wilson, Sam Webber, James Hamdzid, Alex Willie, Dick Webber, Harry Jack, William Webber, Willie Dawson, James King, Albert Dawson, Samuel James. Front row, left to right: Thomas King, Anderson Williams, Alfred Coon. Photo courtesy of the Vancouver Public Library, VPL 1706

In contrast to the photographic singularity of James Hamdzid in the photomural, in this image he is standing by the same feast dish and lids and is surrounded by other Dzawada'enuxw men. This image tells a truer story about the collective labor required to produce the carvings: Felling the trees, transporting, hewing, carving, painting,

and animating them could not be done by one man alone. The Dzunuḱwa, often translated as a "wild woman of the woods," is from a family of giants that lives deep in the forest and preys on unsuspecting children but is usually outwitted by them due to her sluggish demeanor and poor eyesight. Her pursed lips invoke the distinctive "hu hu" sound that she is known to call out.

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Potlatch at Alert Bay, BC. Written on the back of the photo is a note stating "before 1914. Chief Bob Harris' potlatch." Image PN02307-b Courtesy of the Royal British Columbia Museum

Potlatch at Alert Bay, BC. Image PN02779 Courtesy of the Royal British Columbia Museum

The 50 upturned enamelware basins in the gallery mimic the photographic record of Kwakwaka'wakw potlatches held at Alert Bay, B.C. around the turn of the 20th century. Held in spite of the potlatch ban, the documentation reveals the generous scale of the potlatches and the involvement of entire communities. Just as the Dzunuḱwa feast dish in the photomural would have required the collective labor of many, the potlatch requires the participation of the collective body. Global trade networks in the 19th century brought mass-produced enamelware bowls to the Pacific Northwest coast, and they were assimilated into potlatch rituals as vessels for sharing food and goods. They were symbolic of the widespread global movement of goods, technologies, pathogens—and the people who carried them. Here in the gallery, the rows of bowls suggest a feast, a gathering, an offering, and a celebration, implicating the viewer in the ritual performance of the potlatch.

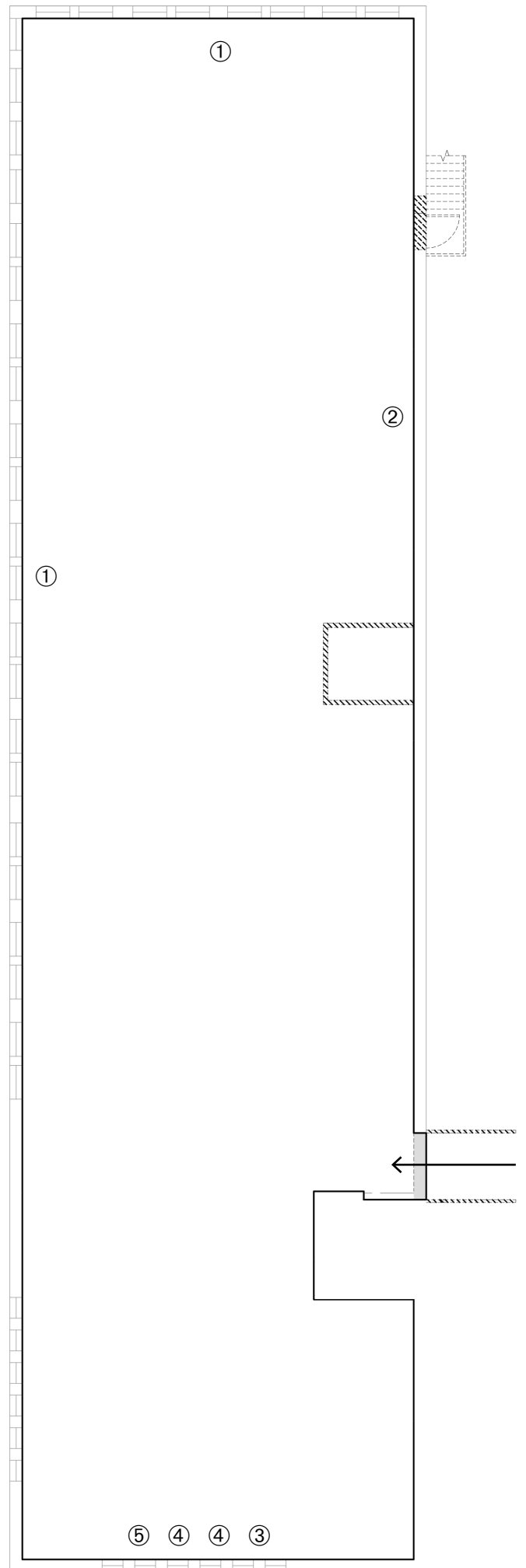
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Dzunuḱwa feast dish in Alert Bay c. 1900–1910. Written on the back of the photo is a note recorded from Billy Sandy Willie in 1974 that states the "bowl was given in marriage for his sister Tletla." Image PN1072 Courtesy of Royal British Columbia Museum.

The carved cedar feast dish in this photograph is currently on display in the Portland Art Museum in the Pat and Trudy Ritz Gallery on the second floor of the Hoffman wing. Collected by Axel Rasmussen in the 1920s–30s while he was superintendent in charge of Native boarding schools in the Alaska Territory, the collection went into the possession of Los Angeles-based art dealer Earl Stendahl after Rasmussen's death in 1945. From there, it was purchased by the Portland Art Museum through a public subscription campaign in 1948. In a 1950 photoessay commissioned by *LIFE* magazine titled "What Do U.S. Museums Buy?" to showcase recent acquisitions, documentary photographer Arnold Newman dedicated a two-page color

spread to Portland Art Museum. Newman's photograph depicts Thomas Colt, then the museum's director, kneeling behind the feast dish, and surrounded by dozens of other Native carvings, masks, and textiles in a display of the wealth of colonial plunder. In the ensuing decades, the museum deaccessioned numerous artifacts from the Rasmussen collection, perpetuating the extraction of profit from Indigenous material culture. In late 2020, Portland Art Museum initiated the repatriation process of nine items from the Rasmussen collection to the Tlingit and Haida tribes. Will the Dzunuḵwa feast dish be returned to the Kwakwaka'wakw?

Marianne Nicolson (b. 1969, British Columbia) is an artist-activist of the Musgamaḵw Dzawada'enuxw First Nations, part of the Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwak'wala speaking peoples) of the Pacific Northwest Coast. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Emily Carr University of Art and Design (Vancouver, BC), a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Victoria (BC), as well as a Master of Arts in Linguistics and Anthropology and a PhD in Linguistics and Anthropology with a focus on space as expressed in the Kwak'wala language. As a First Nations artist, Nicolson works to bring poetry and beauty to highlight some of the most troubling issues of our time around colonization, dispossession, land rights, and cultural genocide. Trained in both traditional Kwakwaka'wakw forms and contemporary gallery- and museum-based practice, Nicolson centers the preservation of Indigenous cultural knowledge but presented in contemporary media, inviting access to First Nations traditional craft and public discourse around the importance of Indigenous autonomy. Her artwork acknowledges the colonial dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands and traditions, while celebrating the re-emergence and empowerment of Indigenous voices.



MARIANNE NICOLSON
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Curated by Hope Svenson

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