



BODY LANGUAGE:

REAWAKENING CULTURAL TATTOOING OF THE NORTHWEST

Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Art

Rosemarie Gresham

The ground-breaking *Body Language* exhibit marks the Bill Reid Gallery's tenth anniversary and its reopening after a 6-month long renovation. The exhibit explores the rich heritage of indigenous tattoo practices and how their revival is an act of healing, empowerment, and resistance for indigenous peoples.

The exhibit features 5 contemporary indigenous artists and cultural tattoo practitioners: Corey Bulpitt (Haida), Dean Hunt (Heiltsuk), Dion Kaszas (Nlaka'pamux), Nahaan (Tlingit), and Nakkita Trimble (Nisga'a). Each shares their journey to bring their cultural practices back to life, including their extensive research into the traditional designs and practices from their region. They have visited museums and archives, hiked territories in search of traditional pictographs, connected with other indigenous tattoo artists around the world, consulted with elders, and collaborated with their communities.

Each artists' voice is a distinct thread running through the exhibit. Kaszas, who is also the lead curator, emphasized the deliberate lack of hierarchy, saying that each artist brought their own unique knowledge of their individual culture and traditions. Kaszas insisted on a diverse Indigenous curatorial and steering committee who had the final say over exhibition content. "The exhibit is less my own vision than the vision of the community," he told the Georgia Straight. "There's a history of appropriation of Indigenous voice in terms of experts and I didn't want to continue that—even though I'm an Indigenous person."¹

At the Stitching Ourselves Back Together symposium held at the gallery in June, Kaszas said that while each artist is honoured and excited to revitalize traditions, it's important to recognize why Indigenous people are in the position to be reviving rather than just living their cultural practices. Traditional tattooing was outlawed by

The Body Language artists displaying the tattoos on their arms.

Photo credit: courtesy of the Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Art

Chilkat Allover, Burke Museum, Seattle, Washington, 2017. This picture depicts Nahaan's hand tattoo done by Corey Bulpitt in the likeness of a naaxein k'udas'I (Chilkat shirt).

Photo credit: Dion Kaszas

the 1885-1951 Potlach ban instituted by the Canadian government. At the symposium, the artists discussed how legislation, missionaries, residential schools, and epidemics deeply affected indigenous populations. Often, these influences were attempts to erase indigenous identity, sovereignty, and self-determination. "Here on these lands, there is a vested interest in the erasure of Indigenous identity because it's identified with land, place and resources," Kaszas said. "The erasure of our identity, including our tattoos, is part of that imperialist, colonialist project."²

The exhibit shows the revival of traditional tattooing as a movement of resistance, resilience, and a celebration of indigenous identity in the face of continued colonial violence. Nahaan's work includes documentation of the intersection of tattooing and activism at Standing Rock and in the fight to abolish Columbus Day in Seattle. Nakkita Trimble talks about how the research process for her large house crest tattoos can take up to a year. She works with her clients to trace their matrilineal lineage and determine what they have the right to wear. These crests proclaim hereditary rights to land and kinship ties. Corey Bulpitt tells of Elders who radiate joy seeing youth wearing their tattoos with pride again after years of being forced to live in shame. "Tattoos are permanent regalia," reads Nahaan's introductory quote in the exhibit. "Upon our bodies, we wear our history, the deeds to our lands, our access to the skies, and seas, our relatives. With our tattoos we indigenize every space we are in."



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— Nahaan



The Body Language artists during planning meetings at Whistler, 2017.
Photo credit:
Aaron Leon

Body adornment is tied to larger indigenous visual languages and cultural practices.

Interspersed with the photos of tattoos and the displays of traditional tattooing tools are a variety of other cultural artifacts such as regalia, masks, carvings, and contemporary artworks by the featured artists, who all work in other mediums. The revival of traditional tattooing is framed as part of a wider effort to create a strong, proud living culture for future generations. "Right now we're all learning, healing and working on different parts of what it really means to get these tattoos," says Trimble. "But my dream is that our tattoos are so normalized for my daughter that she'll know who she is within that."³

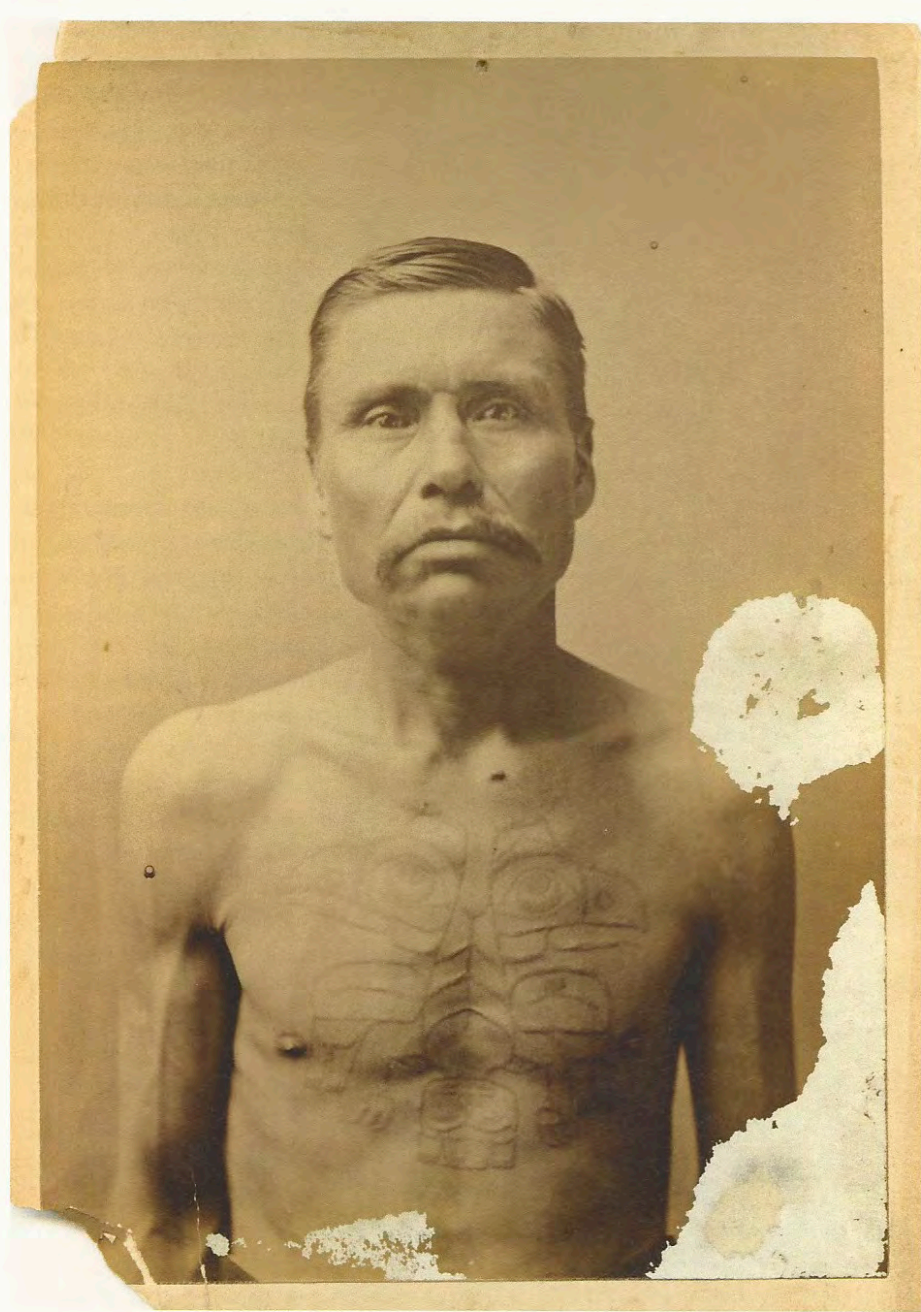
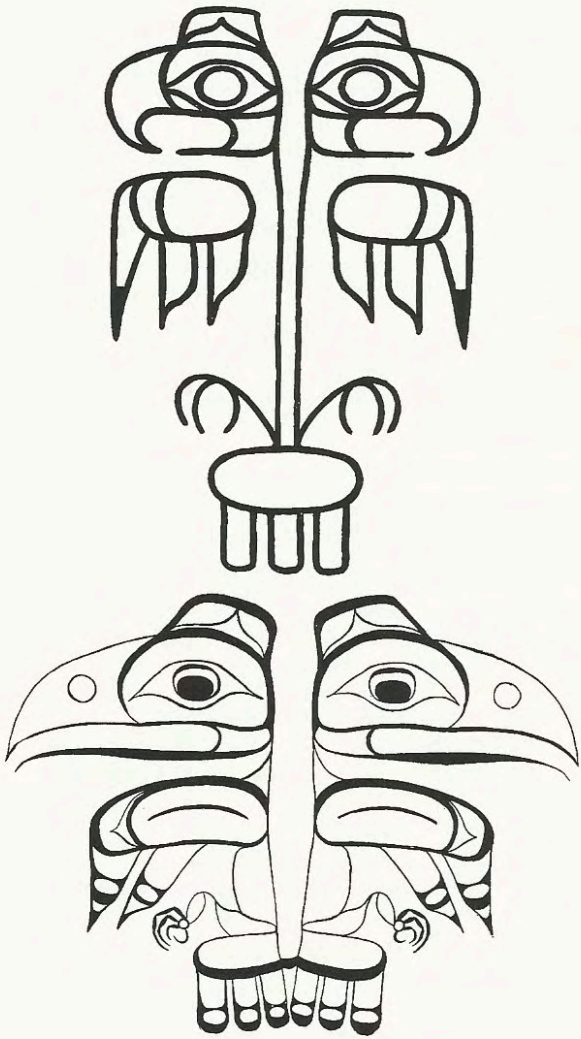
The artists also express their hope that this exhibit will provide education and counteract the appropriation of indigenous tattoos. Since these tattoos are so entwined with identity and spiritual practices, their appropriation is an extension of colonial violence. In the *Body Language* exhibit

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guide Kaszas describes cultural appropriation as "everywhere being seen, but never being heard, of constantly being represented, but never listened to, of being treated like artifacts rather than as peoples. We as indigenous peoples, cultures, and nations work to uncover, wake up, and revive what has been bulldozed over by the processes of genocide, colonization, and imperialism. As such, we are the ones who have a right to do these things for ourselves and no one else has these rights, unless they are invited to participate by those who can offer such an invitation."

Body Language takes the history of indigenous tattooing on the Northwest Coast and situates it within the modern context of de-colonization and the re-awakening of indigenous rights and self-determination. This exhibit is a proud assertion of indigenous identity and belonging, shaped by the voices who are at the forefront of Northwest Coast indigenous tattoo revival. It is a reminder that in our industry we must ensure that we are not just inviting indigenous people to participate in discussions framed by colonial institutions, but that we are upholding their rights to protect, interpret, and maintain their own cultural heritage inside and outside of our spaces.

Body Language will be at the Bill Reid Gallery until March 17, 2018. It will travel to Haida Gwaii in April, after which it will be available for rental.



References

¹Smith, J. (2018, June 7). Body Language tracks reawakening of Indigenous tattoo culture at Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Coast Art. *The Georgia Straight*. Retrieved from <https://www.straight.com/arts/1086046/body-language-tracks-reawakening-indigenous-tattoo-culture-bill-reid-gallery-northwest>

²Griffin, k. (2018, June 26). Body Language reclaims Indigenous tattooing from colonial suppression. *The Vancouver Sun*. Retrieved from <https://vancouversun.com/entertainment/local-arts/>

³Gilpin, E. (2018, August 23). Reawakening cultural tattooing of the Northwest. *The National Observer*. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2018/08/23/these-five-indigenous-tattoo-artists-are-reawakening-cultural-practices>

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Haida man with split raven chest tattoo, c.1890.
Photo credit:
from the Franz Boas Photo Collection (PPCB63, Fldr.1, image 29A)