



LISTENING TO ARTISTS AND AUDIENCES

Surrey Art Gallery's Education & Engagement Programs

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Surrey Art Gallery has a 40-year history of listening and providing opportunities to listen to the diverse, multi-generational voices in Surrey and beyond. Serving to connect art, artists, and audiences, education and engagement programs at the Gallery enable material and ephemeral opportunities for critical, creative explorations of issues and ideas that affect our lives through contemporary art. By listening, the Gallery is able to respond to the needs of artists and audiences and provide relevant, meaningful, and experimental experiences, connecting people in collaborations and conversations.

Reimagining Discarded Materials

Young people's voices inform the direction of the Gallery's youth programs. Through youth and young adult advisory committees and planning teams, the Gallery invites young people to share their ideas on engaging with the world they live in through contemporary art. The Gallery piloted *Youth Art Drop-In* to provide youth with an opportunity to learn and build relationships in a casual environment while contributing to making something creative and significant together. As an inclusive



Above: Using sustainability sourced materials in hands-on artmaking activity in the classroom with artist Roxanne Charles, as part of the School Program *Sharing Perspectives: Indigenous Contemporary Art Workshop*.
Photo credit: Glen Chua

Top: Reusing and recycling clay for maquette building activity with artist Keith Rice-Jones during Family Sunday.
Photo credit: Glen Chua



Photo: Using sustainably sourced cedar and previous City street banners in collaborative weaving project with artist Roxanne Charles, as part of inFlux programming.
Photo credit: Glen Chua



and free program, youth are able to gather and make art with mentoring artists. This past year, the youth and our Youth Engagement Programmer, artist Edward Westerhuis, created collaborative, multiphase projects. One of their projects included using recycled cardboard from discarded boxes to design and construct a large-scale sculpture using a variety of different techniques.

Our Youth Engagement Programmer's research findings demonstrate that young people want their input to have a tangible outcome.^[4] Given this, the Gallery aligns the work of our planning teams with direct implementation in specific initiatives and programs, like that of *inFlux*. As a social night of art action, *inFlux* mixes live performances and do-it-yourself and do-it-together hands-on art activities with mentoring artists, encouraging a deeper exploration of the complex, conceptual themes in the Gallery's current exhibitions.

Moving into its ninth iteration, this Fluxus-like art happening offers several examples of artist-led, process-based experiences and activities that use materials in environmentally responsible and sustainable ways. Recently, Surrey's Poet Laureate, Renée Sarojini Saklikar, developed a collective erasure poetry project where people could use decommissioned print materials to create spatial object text works.

Artists Debbie Westergaard Tuepah and Carlyn Yandle used synthetic waste materials like plastic and poly-

ester to create a group engagement project. The three-dimensional artwork, *The Network* (2015), invites people to use the coloured synthetic strands as an opportunity for visual representation of actual social interaction, resembling something between a free-form macramé sculpture and an electronic conduit system. Suggestive of the unpredictable nature of open dialogue and threads of conversation, the strands, entanglements, and knots become like dangling tangential phrases and sentence fragments. Using the fabrication method of simple knots to connect strands, the work encourages all to join the activity and, ultimately, the conversation – visually represented in the work and verbally enacted during the process of construction.

Mixed media artist Roxanne Charles, of Strait Salish and European descent and an active member of Semiahmoo Nation, brought people together for a collaborative project in the Gallery's *inFlux* this past spring. The Gallery is sited on the traditional and unceded territory of the Salish peoples (including the Katzie, Kwantlen, Musqueam, Semiahmoo, Stó:lō, and Tsawwassen Nations), and Charles invited people in the Gallery on a nature walk to talk about traditional trade routes and the histories and current conditions of the land and people. Upon returning to the Gallery, she encouraged people to join her to weave a performative gown from sustainably sourced cedar and previously used deinstalled City street banners. This project was situated in the Gallery's exhibition installation of *No Pigs in Paradise* (2015-2016),

Top: Reusing synthetic waste materials in group engagement project, *The Network*, with artist Debbie Westergaard Tuepah, as part of *inFlux* programming.
Photo credit: Glen Chua



a work that was created as a response to missing and murdered women in Alaska, Canada, and India. It is comprised of symbolic gown forms and a dual video by Toronto-based artist Nep Sidhu and Alaska-based Tlingit/Unangax artist Nicholas Galanin, along with a repurposed sound piece by Ishmael Butler. Through the collaborative urban weaving with Charles, people were able to consider more deeply the implications and prevalence of violence against women.

Whether using recycled cardboard from discarded boxes, decommissioned print materials, synthetic waste materials, or street banners, the mentoring artists' use of materials is fundamental to the meaning of the project.

Creative Explorations for All Ages

Inside and outside of the Gallery, artists work with families, students, teachers and newcomers. For the Gallery's *Family Sunday* program, artists often source recycled objects and work with materials so that what is made can be enjoyed and then recycled again. In our spring *Family Sunday*, sculptor Keith Rice-Jones worked shoulder-to-shoulder with families, using recycled clay to help them make maquettes inspired by his *Monumental Sculptures* (2016) installed in the

Right: Using sustainably sourced materials in hands-on artmaking activity in the classroom with artist Roxanne Charles, as part of the School Program *Sharing Perspectives: Indigenous Contemporary Art Workshop*.

Photo credit: Amelia Epp

courtyard pool outside the Gallery. Exploring formal geometric and organic shapes and building techniques, families were able to experiment with building miniature configurations and characterizations. While some took home their creations, many were pleased to leave theirs for others to enjoy during the day, knowing the clay would be recycled for future activities.

For our school programs, where artists and art educators bring learning and artmaking opportunities into the classroom, Charles uses responsibly and sustainably sourced materials. In the Gallery's *Sharing Perspectives:*



Indigenous Contemporary Art Workshop, she introduces teachers and students to Northwest Coast cultures and contemporary and traditional artmaking processes. Sharing the collections of the Gallery and Surrey Public Art (both held in trust for the people of Surrey), this workshop encourages teachers and young people to become familiar with the works by Indigenous artists in their local Gallery and neighbourhood. Through images, stories, “touchables,” and a hands-on art activity, which grows out of the Indigenous artist and art educator’s practice, the workshop offers cross-curricular educational experiences for young people in kindergarten to grade 12 and responds to the new BC curriculum’s focus on Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge.

During City and community festivals, artists and art educators offer family-friendly and multi-generational hands-on artmaking activities. For the City’s Earth Day event, *Party for the Planet*, the Gallery often has art-on-a-stick projects, using recycled and scrap materials, or un-prescribed recycled and recyclable clay explorations. Ceramicist and long-time Gallery ceramics teacher Murray Sanders uses recycled clay to demonstrate throwing forms on a wheel at community festivals in the City’s town centres, intriguing passersby with ceramics and the desire to develop ceramics skills through Gallery courses and workshops.

Aiming to be a welcoming space with accessible programs and opportunities to meet people, make art, and explore the world through art, the Gallery piloted and then implemented an ongoing *Newcomers Tour and Workshop* several years ago. Surrey is a City of exponential population growth, with 1000 plus people, many of whom are new Canadians, moving here each month. While there is an age range, 50% of newcomers are 24 or younger upon arrival (as of June this year, 799 Syrian refugees have settled in Surrey, representing 44% of all Government-Assisted Refugees who have arrived in British Columbia since November last year, and about 60% of those settling in Surrey are under 19).^[2] With this knowledge, our free tour and workshop introduces youth to seniors to the Gallery as a place of learning. Participants

are welcomed with a learner-focused tour of the facility and current exhibitions, and then invited to explore ceramics practices, both traditional and contemporary, and the medium of ceramics through hand-building vessels and sculptures with recycled clay.

The Gallery’s education and engagement programs continuously seek effective and effervescent ways to be relevant to diverse local audiences within a contemporary art context and history. Listening to artists and audiences enables the Gallery to be a connecting conduit, even a catalytic space, for experiences that move, inform, inspire, propel, and transform.

[1] *Strengthening Youth and Communities through Art (2016)*. This report was commissioned by the Surrey Art Gallery to enhance its connection with and develop programming for youth and young adults. The research and development of this report was made possible with funding received from the Youth Engagement Grant Program of the BC Arts Council awarded to the Surrey Art Gallery. <http://www.communityschoolpartnership.surrey.ca/culture-recreation/16266.aspx>

[2] These statistics are sourced by the City’s Planning and Development Division and Surrey Local Immigration Partnership, a consortium of government, business, non-profit, and community agencies, and public and private institutions, working together to strengthen Surrey’s integration of newcomers and build a more inclusive and welcoming city.

Alison Rajah serves as the Curator of Education and Engagement at the Surrey Art Gallery, with a core staff team including Interpretive Programmer Amelia Epp, Visual Arts Programmer Lindsay McArthur, and Volunteer Program Coordinator Chris Dawson-Murphy. She did her graduate studies in Critical and Curatorial Studies at UBC, and has taught as part of UBC’s Humanities 101 program since 2008

