



Above: "River NW", Heather MacAskill.

# The Roll On Columbia Project

## Defiance and Cultural Voice

**Leah Best**

The *Roll On Columbia* project was first presented in Spokane, Washington, at the *Columbia River Basin 2014 Conference: Learning From Our Past to Shape Our Future*. Attended by 320 delegates from both sides of the Canada/US border, the conference offered a timely platform for First Nations, politicians, academics, business interests and students to discuss the future of the Columbia River within the context of a potential new treaty to be negotiated between Canada and the United States. With funding provided by the Columbia Basin Trust, Touchstones Nelson (Nelson and District Museum, Archives, Art Gallery and Historical Society) worked with two contract curators, six artists and one performance group to develop *Roll On Columbia (ROC)* in the six month lead-up to the conference. The histo-

ry exhibit of ROC continues to travel throughout the Canadian Columbia Basin with past stops in Nakusp, Cranbrook and Nelson, and future stops anticipated in Fernie and Revelstoke.

*Roll On Columbia*, at its first presentation in Spokane, explored the legacy of the current Columbia River Treaty through the lens of two exhibitions: a visual arts exhibit and a history exhibit made up of eight graphic panels that tell the story of the Columbia River Treaty (CRT), its development and ratification in 1964, and its legacy. The project goal was to inform present day understanding of the trans-boundary Columbia River watershed ecosystem through the lens of art and history. The holistic focus on the river basin as a watershed united by culture, rather than as an industrial resource divided by an international bound-

ary, provided unique opportunities to allow art and history to dialogue with science and politics.

**At its core, *Roll on Columbia* asked of its audience, “Do the public values that originally formed the Columbia River Treaty remain the same? And, how can art and history reflect changing views of the environment and its well being?”**

*Roll On Columbia* is named after the Woody Guthrie folk song of the same name, dating from the era of the Great Depression when mega projects such as dams were celebrated and embraced. In developing the



**Above:** "River NW", Heather MacAskill.

**Right:** Opening of Roll On Columbia at Touchstones Nelson, November 2015.



central thesis of the history exhibit, Eileen Delehanty Pearkes, ROC curator, describes her involvement as a remarkable opportunity, *“to present a story that has nearly departed from living memory. With the upcoming potential re-negotiation of the 1964 Treaty, Touchstones Nelson played an essential role in giving voice to the local experience and preserving the lessons learned from the controversy over the Treaty for the next generation. I had been working on a book on the local experience of the Columbia River Treaty for several years. The challenge of condensing and presenting the story into a lively and digestible format for a museum exhibit taught me something about the sprawling manuscript’s weaknesses. Once the exhibit was completed, I returned to the draft with a fresh eye and revised it to be more readable, which led to its acceptance and upcoming publication by Rocky Mountain Books in November, 2016.”*

The “local experience” Delehanty Pearkes refers to is a direct reference to the displacement of hundreds of families and the loss of sacred Indigenous sites and agricultural land in the Canadian Columbia River Basin (a roughly triangular-shaped region encompassing the East and West Kootenays) as a result of the building of four treaty dams – three in Canada: *Duncan* (1967), *Hugh Keenley Side* (1968), and *Mica* (1973), and one in Montana, *Libby* (1973). In addition to a total lack of public consultation, First Nations living in the Basin were denied a voice during the Treaty negotiations. This is a particularly poignant issue because the building of the dams on the Columbia River in Washington State during the 1930s destroyed the ocean salmon runs that were the beating heart of Indigenous culture along the Columbia River and its tributaries.

**“So often in today’s world, corporate and institutional economies dwarf or silence the indigenous or settler landscapes that are affected by industrial resource extraction, including our water. Roll on Columbia explored honestly the impact of such resource-use on rural populations, a story often neglected. It’s not possible to know the present and to explore future possibilities without understanding well the terrain of the past.” Curator Eileen Delehanty Pearkes**

Panel sections of the travelling exhibit provide insight into the scope of the exhibit and its tone as well as pointing to the complexity of the subject matter:

- *Preparing the Ground*: key historic events that preceded the CRT;
- *A Hydro-Engineer's Dream Landscape*: the geography of the upper Columbia Basin and its role in the watershed's ecosystem;
- *Give and Take*: key events and outcomes in treaty negotiations;
- *Silence and Exclusion*: missing voices during CRT formation;
- *A Puzzling Legacy*: measuring gains and losses; and
- *Piecing the River Back Together*: the role of reconsideration and restoration in river management.

To give full voice to a cultural perspective on the CRT, the original presentation included the work of six visual artists and one performance group. Deborah Thompson, an independent curator, educator and artist living in Nelson, was attached to the project from the beginning. In her words, she felt that *"the inclusion of a visual artist voice in the mix among what was a largely analytical and statistical dialogue on the current state and future of the Columbia River [at the conference] added a sensory aspect to the discussion. In my mind, it brought the river in (which was ironically just outside the doors of the conference centre yet otherwise invisible during the run of the conference). The guiding theme for me as a curator in selecting the artists and their work was thinking with our senses - lest we forget we are not speaking of the deceased rather honoring a massive and dynamic living ecosystem - that of the Columbia River watershed."*

The artists involved in the project included three from Washington State and three from Canada.

- Toma Villa (Portland): born in Oklahoma, but was raised in Portland and is a registered member of Yakama Nation.
- Betty Fahlman (Lardeau): a visual artist focusing primarily on painting. Her series *Imprisonment of Removal* stems from her grief at the loss of landscape from the disruptive actions of hydro projects

on the Columbia River.

- Jan Kabatoff (Slocan): a visual artist whose work spans several mediums, including encaustic painting, fibre work, and photography. Since 2005, she has focused primarily on the effects of climate change and its relationship to glaciers.
- Mary Babcock (Hawaii): an installation, fiber, and mixed media artist. She is deeply interested in the intersection of art, contemplation, and social activism.
- Heather MacAskill (Nelson): a "visual translator" with a background in visual art, graphic design, and surveying. She draws her inspiration from a variety of subject matter, often with her love and concern for the ecosystem at the centre.
- Vaughn Bell (Seattle): an installation and environmental artist whose work reflects her sense of stewardship and concern for the environment.

And finally, as part of the conference program, the Nelson singing trio, *Ananta*, composed of Alison Girvan, Noemi Kiss, and Kathleen Neudorf, sang a blend of world music for delegates.

In April 2015, at the Canadian Museums Association conference in Banff, Eileen, Deborah, and I, as project manager, accepted the award for Outstanding Achievement in Exhibitions for organizations with operating budgets under \$1M, for *Roll On Columbia*. The CMA called the project brave. I would agree – brave and defiant. We were a small team from a rural museum and art gallery with a severe lack of resources and a laughable amount of time to complete the project. But our capacity, with respect to the talented curatorial team, artists, and project designer was without dispute. We were convinced that it was the museum's *social responsibility* to give voice to those who were excluded then and who were in danger of being excluded again from treaty discussions.

In his book, *Museums without Borders*, [Robert Janes](#) describes this conviction as intellectual activism – the essential role that museums can play in making complex contemporary issues more understandable; in fostering critical thinking by audiences; and in embracing

marginalized voices. There is no doubt that activism (as described above) in museum work is challenging but there is also no doubt, at least in my mind, that it is also the most meaningful kind of work and the most needed in contemporary society.

*Credits: Many thanks Eileen Delehanty Pearkes and Deborah Thompson for their inspired work; the participating artists; Nichola Lytle of Pink Dog Design for her outstanding graphic design; David Jensen and Associates for exhibit fabrication; and to the Columbia Basin Trust for providing 100% of the funding for Roll On Columbia.*

**Leah Best has over 15 years professional experience working in museums and galleries. She is currently Head of Knowledge at the Royal BC Museum having worked as Executive Director of Touchstones Nelson: Museum of Art and History in Nelson, BC until August 2016.**

**Below:** Eileen Delehanty Pearkes (History Exhibit Curator) and Nichola Lytle (Exhibit Graphic Designer) in front of the opening panel for ROC at its presentation at Touchstones Nelson in November 15 on the occasion of the launch of their book, *Heart of the River*.

**Below right:** Guests sitting under Vaughn Bell's, *Thinking Caps*, Trans-boundary River Conference, October 2014.

**Below:** Virgil Seymour (Arrow Lakes Facilitator for the Colville Confederated Tribes) speaking at the opening of the Roll on Columbia exhibit at Touchstone Nelson in November 2015. Sadly, Virgil has since passed away.

