

MARCH 7, 2025

AGAINST THE GRAIN: CURVE! WOMEN CARVERS ON THE NORTHWEST COAST

Now on at the Audain Art Museum, an exhibition that honours fourteen women who dared to do things differently.



Veronica Waechter, *Owl Ancestor*, 2024, courtesy of the artist.

Dana Claxton told me recently, "There is a difference between how men and women carve." The Hunkpapa Lakota co-curator of *Curve! Women Carvers on the Northwest Coast* explained it this way: "The incision, precision, and skill of female carvers mean that they make a unique curve with their blade." With this fact in mind, Claxton—who is also a filmmaker, photographer, and performance artist—began working almost three years ago with Curtis Collins, Audain Art Museum director and chief curator, on this milestone exhibition, which features fourteen women carvers, seventy-five years of history, and a rare, rich, and varied selection of over 125 artworks from private and public collections.

For both Claxton and Collins, the vibrant tradition of Northwest Coast female carvers has been largely overlooked. Says Collins, "Carving has been considered a male practice and weaving a female practice in the museum world." *Curve!* changes this narrative, and the first-of-its-kind show highlights the artistic innovations and legacies of female carvers who have been left out of history. On at the Audain Art Museum in Whistler, B.C., until May 5, 2025, *Curve!* is accompanied by an extensive catalogue of the same name. In celebration of the show and in commemoration of March as International Women's Month, we're taking a close look at the inspiring talent and works in *Curve!*—spanning territories and generations.



Curve! co-curators,
Dana Claxton and Curtis Collins

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

ELLEN NEEL (KWAKWAKA'WAKW, 1916–1966) AND CHERISH ALEXANDER (GITWANGAK, B.1987)



Ellen Neel, *Untitled*, 1955, private collection.



Cherish Alexander, *Snake Woman from Snake Hill*, 2014, private collection.



Ellen Neel

Cherish Alexander

Ellen Neel (1916–1966), a Kwakwaka'wakw woodcarver, is the first woman known to have professionally carved totem poles. A leader in contemporary carving practices, she reinterpreted traditional techniques in works like *Untitled*, 1955 (above left). For much of Neel's life, her cultural traditions were outlawed by the Canadian government because of the Potlatch ban, an assimilationist policy that targeted Indigenous cultures from 1885 to 1951. Neel opened the door for the women who followed, demonstrating the viability of carving as a contemporary art form. Her influence can be seen in *Snake Woman from Snake Hill*, 2014 (above right), by contemporary Kitwanga carver Cherish Alexander (b.1987), who attended the Freda Diesing School of Northwest Coast Art in Terrace, B.C. Alexander's piece echoes the strong brows, recessed eyes, wide parted lips, and exaggerated nostrils of Neel's mask nearly sixty years later, continuing her legacy with refined elegance.

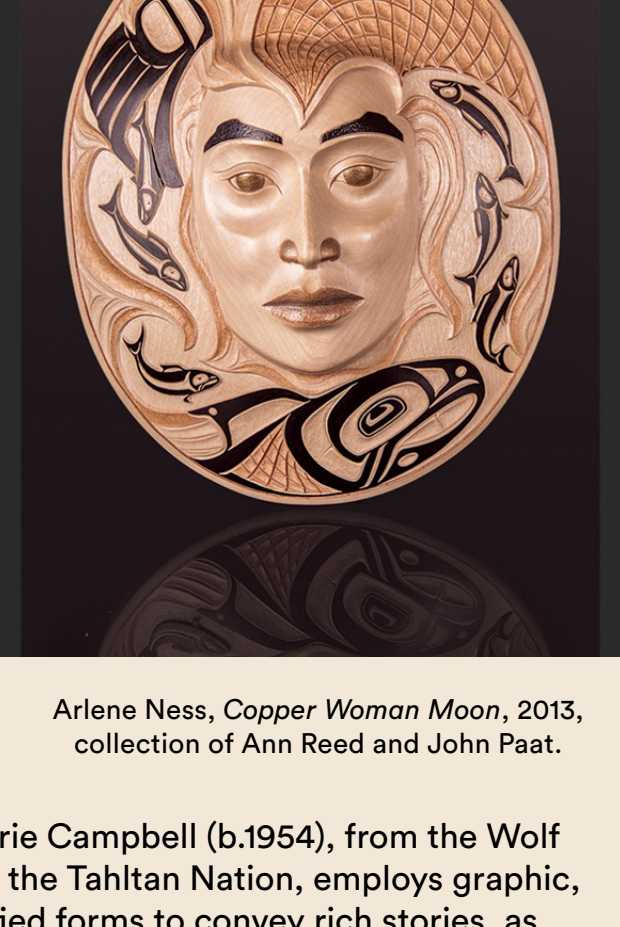
[Learn more about Ellen Neel](#)

[Learn more about Cherish Alexander](#)

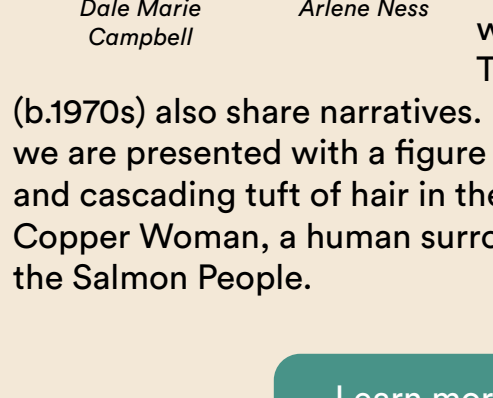
MELANIE RUSS (HAIDA, B.1977) AND MARIANNE NICOLSON (KWAKWAKA'WAKW, B.1969)



Melanie Russ, *MMIWG (Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls)*, 2020, private collection.



Marianne Nicolson, *2N3RCP*, 2023, private collection.



Melanie Russ

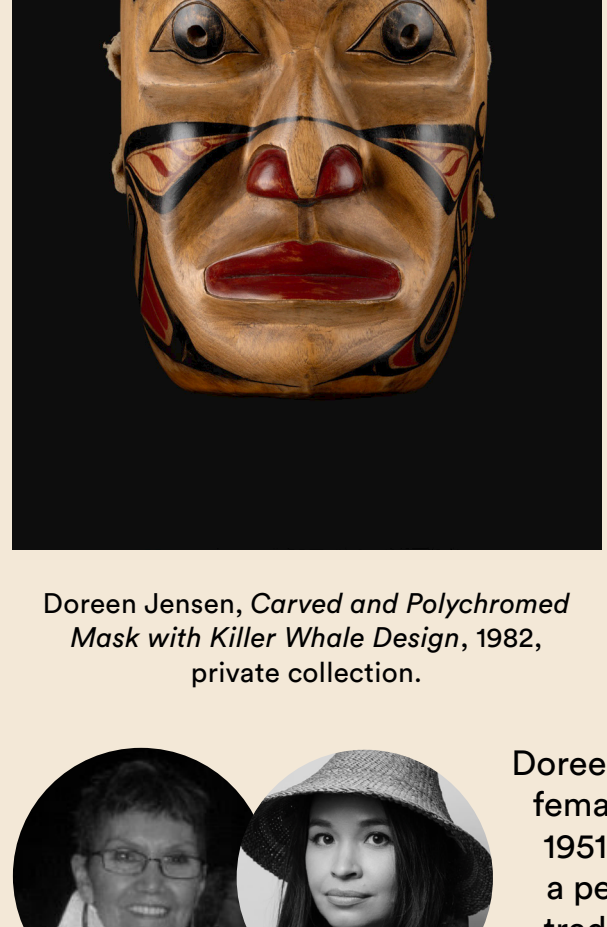
Marianne Nicolson

Haida artist Melanie Russ (b.1977) and Dzawada'enuxw visual artist Marianne Nicolson (b.1969) use their carving practices to speak to contemporary issues facing their communities. In Russ's pendant (above left), she depicts a woman with a red hand across her mouth—a representation of the violent silencing of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Nicolson similarly condemns the effects of colonization in *2N3RCP*, 2023 (above right), a carved panel featuring text that is intentionally unintelligible. In inverting letters, Nicolson reverses the colonial gaze and asks viewers to defy Eurocentrism.

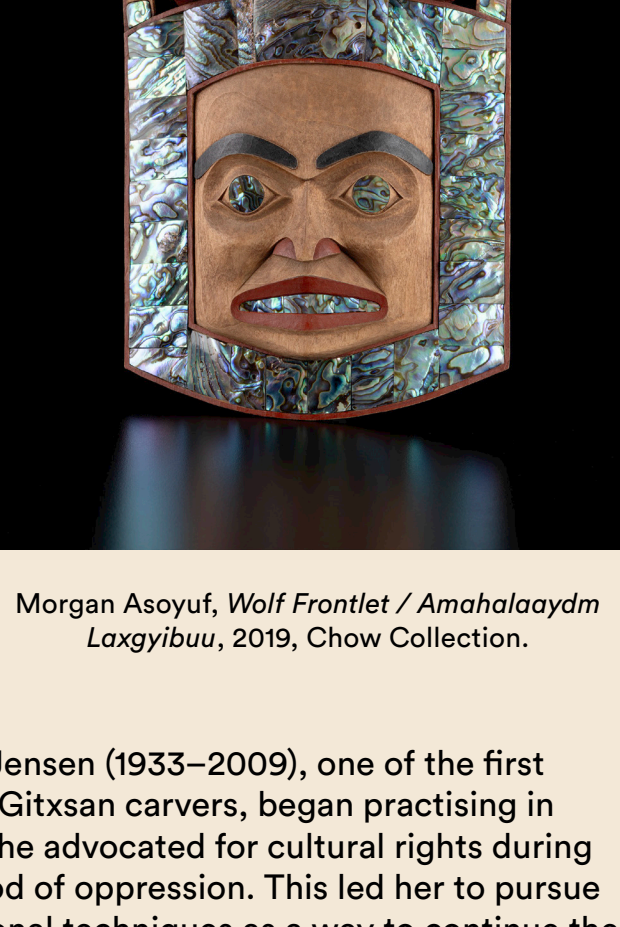
[Learn more about Melanie Russ](#)

[Learn more about Marianne Nicolson](#)

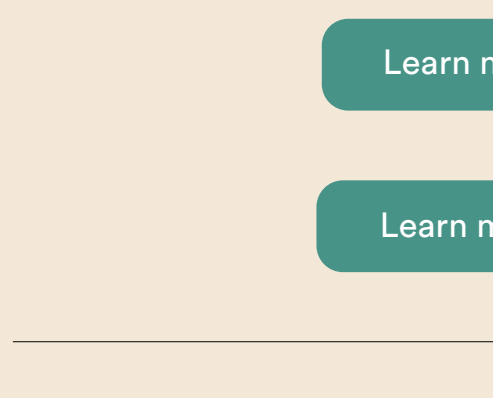
DALE MARIE CAMPBELL (TAHLTAN, B.1954) AND ARLENE NESS (GITXSAN, B.1970S)



Dale Marie Campbell, *Woman Who Brought the Salmon*, 2021, private collection.



Arlene Ness, *Copper Woman Moon*, 2013, collection of Ann Reed and John Paat.



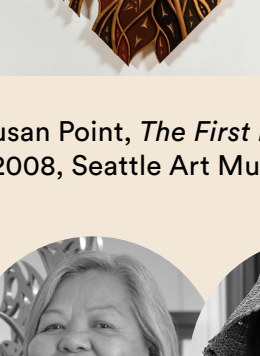
Dale Marie Campbell

Arlene Ness

Dale Marie Campbell (b.1954), from the Wolf Clan of the Tahltan Nation, employs graphic, simplified forms to convey rich stories, as seen in *Woman Who Brought the Salmon*, 2021 (above left). The mask tells the tale of a woman who, when treated kindly, brought a plentiful flow of salmon to her village, but who fled when scorned, taking the fish with her. The skilled carvings of Gitksan artist Arlene Ness (b.1970s) also share narratives. In *Copper Woman Moon*, 2013 (above right), we are presented with a figure whose eyes and lips are copper. Her stoic gaze and cascading tuft of hair in the guise of a fishing net represent the legend of Copper Woman, a human surrounded by water with a supernatural affinity with the Salmon People.

[Learn more about Dale Marie Campbell](#)

[Learn more about Arlene Ness](#)



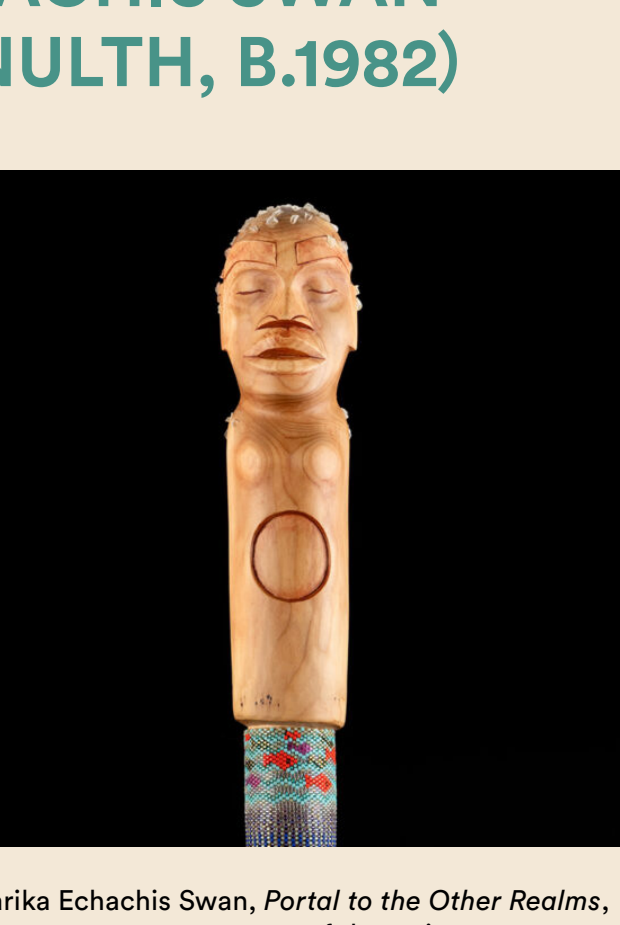
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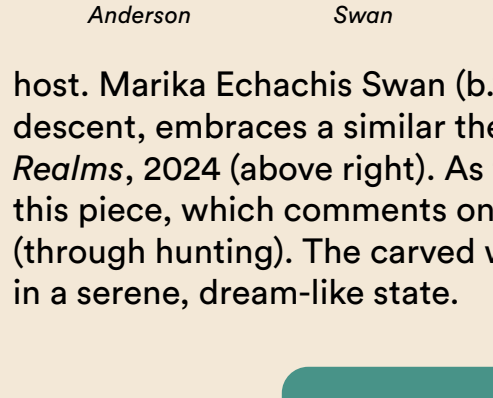
DOREEN JENSEN (GITXSAN, 1933–2009) AND MORGAN ASOYUF (TS'MSYEN, B.1984)



Doreen Jensen, *Carved and Polychromed Mask with Killer Whale Design*, 1982, private collection.



Morgan Asoyuf, *Wolf Frontlet / Amahalaaydm Laxgyibuu*, 2019, Chow Collection.



Doreen Jensen

Morgan Asoyuf

Doreen Jensen (1933–2009), one of the first female Gitksan carvers, began practising in 1951. She advocated for cultural rights during a period of oppression. This led her to pursue traditional techniques as a way to continue the legacies of her ancestors, as demonstrated in her arresting mask adorned with a graphic killer whale (above left). Like Jensen, Morgan Asoyuf (b.1984), a Ts'msyen artist from Prince Rupert, upholds tradition through her work. She also champions the use of handmade tools, a practice carried forward from pre-colonial times. In making *Wolf Frontlet*, 2019 (above right), and other carvings, Asoyuf employs Indigenous tools, including double-edge bent knives, to exemplify her dedication to the legacies of process.

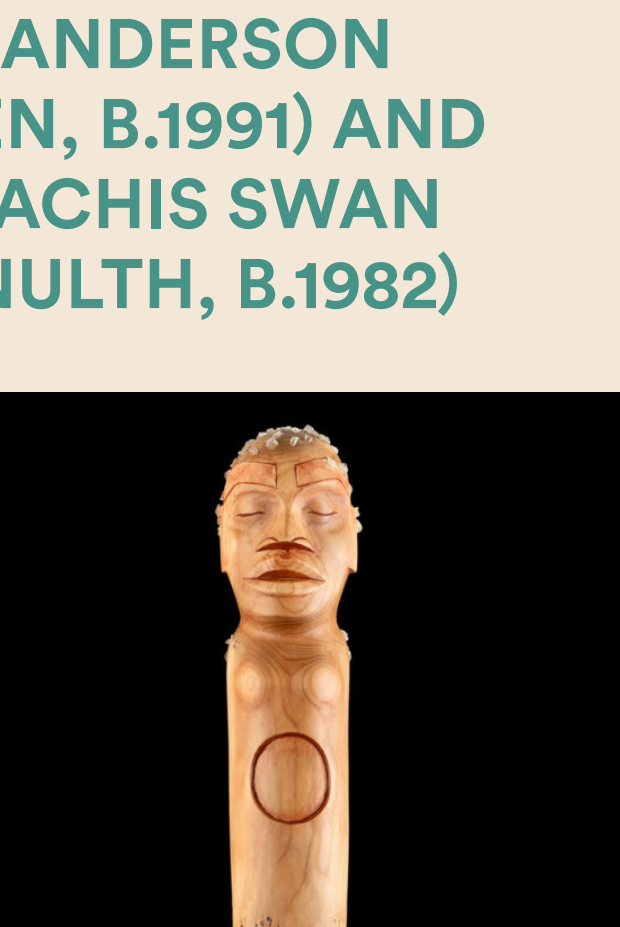
[Learn more about Doreen Jensen](#)

[Learn more about Morgan Asoyuf](#)

SUSAN POINT (MUSQUEAM, B.1952) AND VERONICA WAECHTER (GITXSAN, B.1995)



Susan Point, *The First People*, 2008, Seattle Art Museum.



Veronica Waechter, *Owl Ancestor*, 2024, courtesy of the artist.



Susan Point

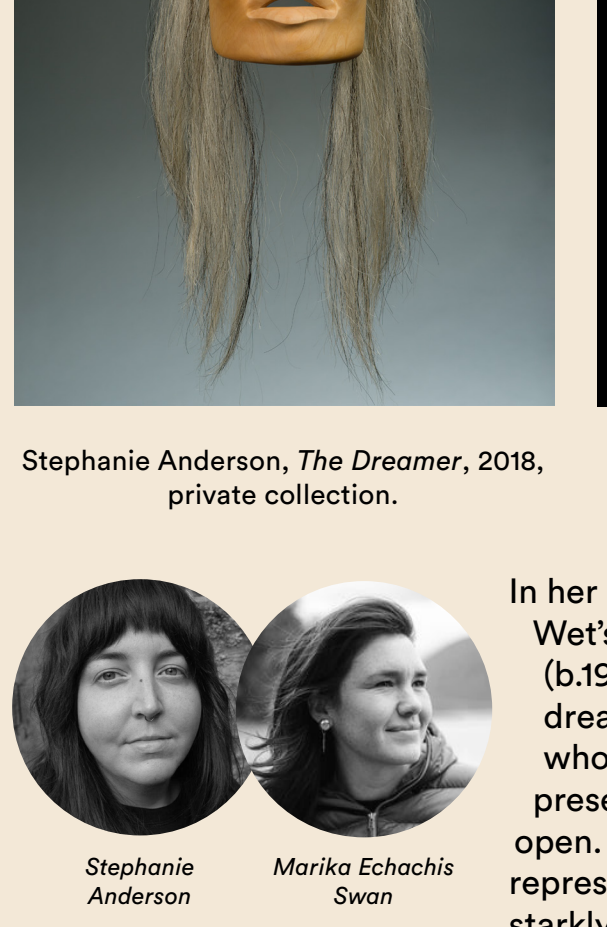
Veronica Waechter

Many of the women featured in *Curve!* reflect on their relationships with ancestors and elders, as evidenced by the work of Musqueam Coast Salish artist Susan Point (b.1952) and Gitksan artist Veronica Waechter (b.1995). Point's greatest influence when connecting with her Salish culture was her mother, who shared the stories and legends that Susan would one day incorporate into her art, including *The First People*, 2008 (above left), which uses a root-like composition to comment on notions of legacy and ancestry. Waechter's *Owl Ancestor*, 2024 (above right), depicts the moving experience of connecting with predecessors through other beings—in this case, a gentle and encompassing white owl.

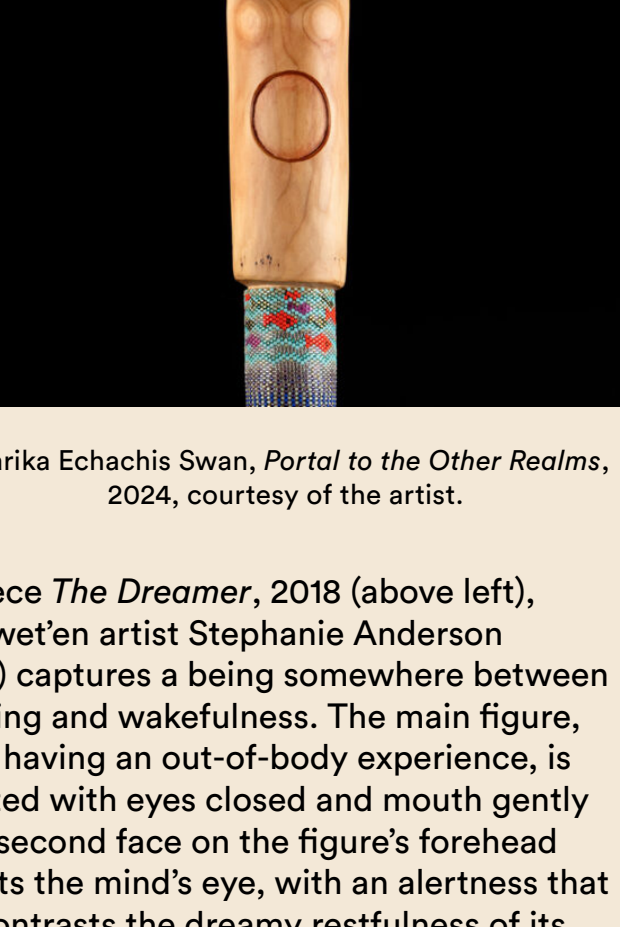
[Learn more about Susan Point](#)

[Learn more about Veronica Waechter](#)

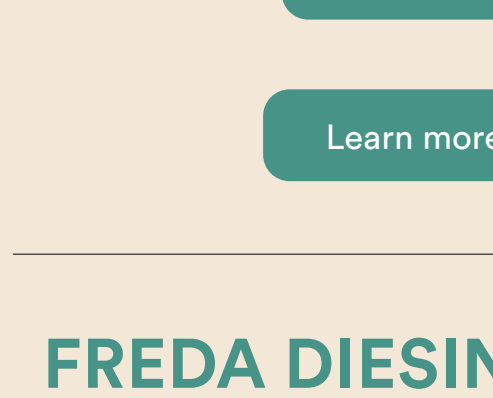
STEPHANIE ANDERSON (WET'SUWET'EN, B.1991) AND MARIKA ECHACHIS SWAN (NUU-CHAH-NULTH, B.1982)



Stephanie Anderson, *The Dreamer*, 2018, private collection.



Marika Echachis Swan, *Portal to the Other Realms*, 2024, courtesy of the artist.



Stephanie Anderson

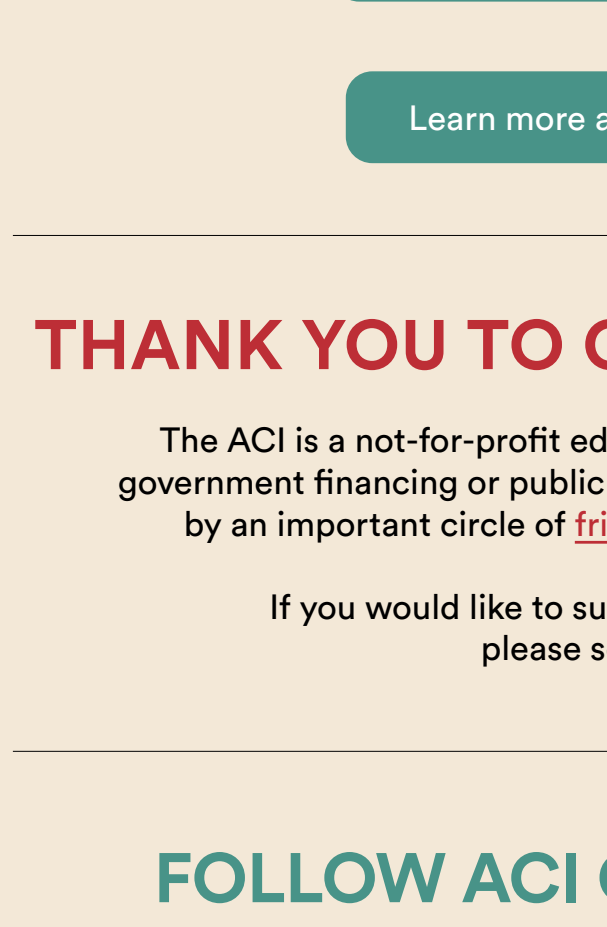
Marika Echachis Swan

In her piece *The Dreamer*, 2018 (above left), Wet'suwet'en artist Stephanie Anderson (b.1991) captures a being somewhere between dreaming and wakefulness. The main figure, who is having an out-of-body experience, is presented with eyes closed and mouth slightly open. A second face on the figure's forehead represents the mind's eye, with an alertness that starkly contrasts the dreamy restfulness of its host. Marika Echachis Swan (b.1982), of mixed Tla-o-qui-ah, Scottish, and Irish descent, embraces a similar theme in her carved fish club, *Portal to the Other Realms*, 2024 (above right). As the title suggests, a mystical quality permeates this piece, which comments on giving life (through birthing) and taking life (through hunting). The carved woman exists in supernatural realms and rests in a serene, dream-like state.

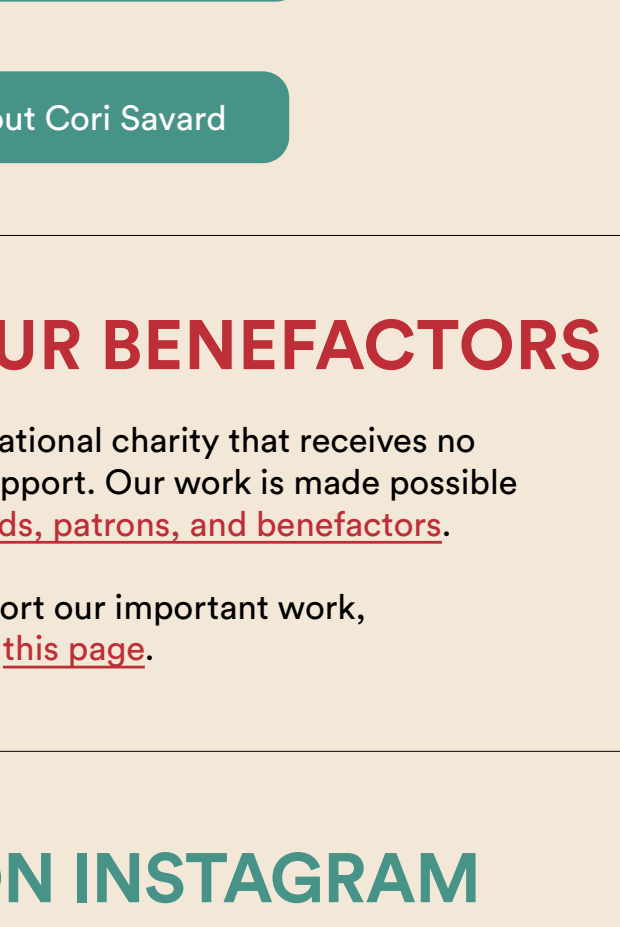
[Learn more about Stephanie Anderson](#)

[Learn more about Marika Echachis Swan](#)

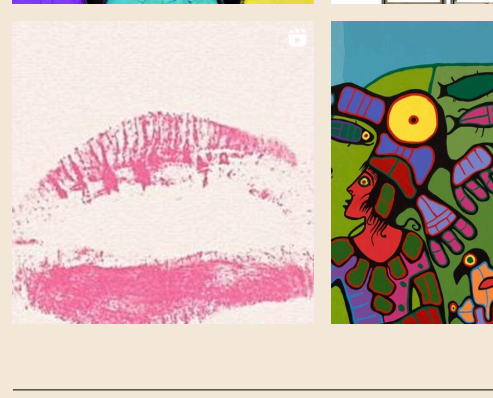
FREDA DIESING (HAIDA, 1925–2002) AND CORI SAVARD (HAIDA, B.1985)



Freda Diesing, *Hawk Man Mask*, 1975, Indigenous Art Centre, Gatineau.



Cori Savard, *Becoming Eagle Spirit*, 2018, collection of Catherine and Spencer Weaver.



Freda Diesing

Cori Savard

One of few female carvers of Northwest Coast totem poles, Freda Diesing (1925–2002), the revered—whose Haida name was Skil Kew Wat, meaning "magical little woman"—taught many of the leading Northwest Coast carvers who were credited with reviving the art form, including Dempsey Bob. During her countless carvings over her decades-long career, including *Hawk Man Mask*, 1975 (above left). Her impact on later generations, as seen in *Becoming Eagle Spirit*, 2018 (above right), by Haida artist Cori Savard (b.1985), cannot be overstated. Savard and her contemporaries ensure that traditional techniques will continue, as their work inspires future generations to learn from the legacies that began with ancestral creation and continue through the work of dedicated women, such as Diesing, across the Northwest Coast.

[Learn more about Freda Diesing](#)

[Learn more about Cori Savard](#)

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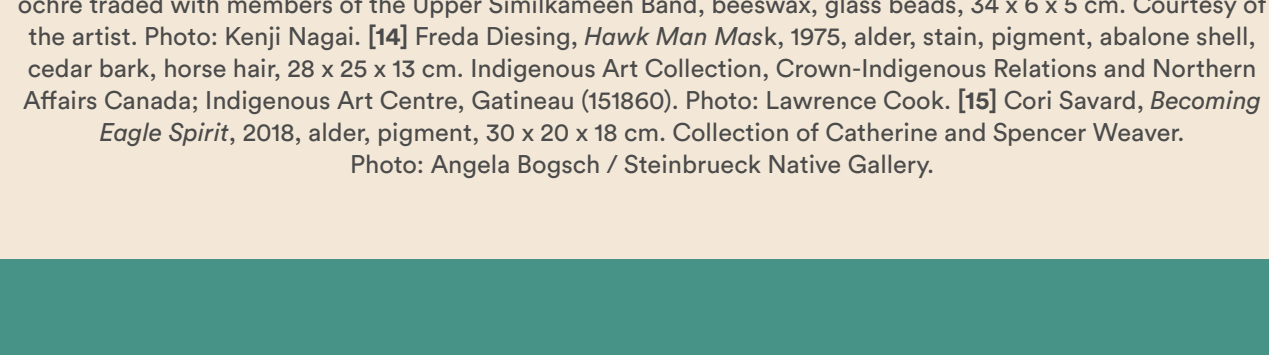


Image Credits: [1, 11] Veronica Waechter, *Owl Ancestor*, 2024, yellow cedar, pigment, copper, 50 x 50 x 4cm. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Veronica Waechter. [2] Ellen Neel, *Untitled*, 1955, wood, pigment, 26 x 22 x 5 cm. Private collection. [3] Cherish Alexander, *Snake Woman from Snake Hill*, 2014, alder, pigment, horse hair, 24 x 24 x 13 cm. Private collection. Photo: Kenji Nagai. [4] Melanie Russ, *MMIWG (Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls)*, 2020, argillite, 3.5 x 4 x 1.5 cm. Private collection. Photo: Kenji Nagai. [5] Marianne Nicolson, *2N3RCP*, 2023, wood, pigment, 105 x 105 x 3 cm. Private collection. Photo: Kenji Nagai. [6] Dale Marie Campbell, *Woman Who Brought the Salmon*, 2021, alder, abalone shell, pigment, 33 x 30 x 10 cm. Private collection. [7] Arlene Ness, *Copper Woman Moon*, 2013, silver, birch, copper, pigment, 40 x 33 x 10 cm. Collection of Ann Reed and John Paat. Photo: Angela Bogoch / Steinbrueck Native Gallery. [8] Doreen Jensen, *Carved and Polychromed Mask with Killer Whale Design*, 1982, red cedar, pigment, 24 x 16 x 11 cm. Private collection. Photo: Kenji Nagai. [9] Morgan Asoyuf, *Wolf Frontlet / Amahalaaydm Laxgyibuu*, 2019, alder, abalone shell, stain, pigment, 26 x 17 x 4 cm. Chow Collection. Photo: Kenji Nagai. [10] Susan Point, *The First People*, 2008, red cedar, yellow cedar, 366 x 226 cm. Collection of the Seattle Art Museum, Margaret E. Fuller Purchase Fund, in honour of the 75th anniversary of the Seattle Art Museum (2008.31). Photo: Nathaniel Wilson. [11] Stephanie Anderson, *The Dreamer*, 2018, alder, horse hair, pigment, 35 x 25 x 8 cm. Private collection. [12] Marika Echachis Swan, *Portal to the Other Realms*, 2024, latmapt / yew wood, fish scales, red ochre traded with members of the Upper Similkameen Band, beeswax, glass beads, 34 x 6 x 5 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Kenji Nagai. [13] Freda Diesing, *Hawk Man Mask*, 1975, alder, stain, pigment, abalone shell, cedar bark, horse hair, 28 x 25 x 13 cm. Indigenous Art Collection, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada; Indigenous Art Centre, Gatineau (151960). Photo: Lawrence Cook. [14] Cori Savard, *Becoming Eagle Spirit*, 2018, alder, pigment, 30 x 20 x 18 cm. Collection of Catherine and Spencer Weaver. Photo: Angela Bogoch / Steinbrueck Native Gallery.