

Point of Contact: On Place and the West Coast Imaginary, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria

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Number 93, Spring 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/88019ac>

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Publisher(s)

Les éditions esse

ISSN

0831-859X (print)

1929-3577 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Kordoski, K. (2018). Review of [Point of Contact: On Place and the West Coast Imaginary, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria]. *esse arts + opinions*, (93), 104–105.



Hjalmer Wenstob

← , interior detail, 2017.

Photo : Andrea Walker Collins,
courtesy of the artist

† , installation view,
Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2017.

Photo : Mike McClean, courtesy of the artist

Point of Contact: On Place and the West Coast Imaginary

Point of Contact, curated by Haema Sivanesan, addresses the concept of a geographic imaginary through a place now known, due to a misinterpretation by the eighteenth-century Briton, Captain Cook, as Nootka. This region, within the traditional territories of the Nuu-chah-nulth Nations on the West Coast of Vancouver Island, was one of the earliest sites of sustained contact between Europeans and Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest. In this exhibition it is taken, according to the gallery didactics, “as a case study to consider how artists have contributed to shaping the idea of place on the West Coast.” The works that have been selected adhere to a basic curatorial division: they are either by non-Indigenous artists who have depicted this place, or by Nuu-chah-nulth artists for whom this place is an ancestral territory.

The pieces that most explicitly express the titular point of contact are etchings made by John Webber, Captain Cook’s ship artist, to record the “New World” for the empire. They were created under the auspices of science rather than art but are rendered with a distinctive—colonial—aesthetic. Jock Macdonald’s lightly abstracted paintings of Nuu-chah-nulth life in the early twentieth century, though very much intended as artworks, have something of an anthropological or documentary quality, particularly here in their physical proximity to Webber’s etchings. These blurred boundaries offer a subtle reminder, acutely relevant in this context, that science involves subjective elements, and that art plays a critical role in the production of historical knowledge. A charcoal drawing of a cedar forest by Emily Carr and an aquatint of the sea and landforms by Takao Tanabe, both rendered in muted monochrome and quasi-abstracted, focus solely and contemplatively on natural elements. Carr’s drawing has a vertical, angular energy that echoes that of Nuu-chah-nulth artist Patrick Amos’s adjacent serigraph *Killer Whale* (1980), and tempera painting *Thunderbird and Killer Whale* (1979).

In Amos’s vividly coloured formline works that relate to pre-contact Northwest Coast art, human figures are embedded within animal, portraying not the visual surface of the land, but intimate relationships between living beings and the culture the land has hosted over thousands of years. This is echoed in serigraphs by Art Thompson and Tim Paul.

Stan Douglas’s video work *Nu·tka·* (1996), features overlapping, historically based monologues of eighteenth-century British and Spanish captains vying for the opportunity to colonize Nootka, only marginally concerned with Indigenous peoples. Two low-res, interwoven clips of landscape footage perpetually move in and out of sync with one another and the soundtrack. They show no human presence. The impression created, likely very intentionally by Douglas whose work regularly explores issues of race, is of a disorienting void that aligns with the colonizing perception that this was a place available to be mastered and harnessed—as if any pre-existing use or value it possessed could only have been marked by a dramatic alteration to the land.

While *Nu·tka·*, like many video pieces, commands a room unto itself, Nuu-chah-nulth artist and recent University of Victoria graduate Hjalmer Wenstob’s replica longhouse installation wields comparable physical presence. Its calm, sparse interior creates its own aesthetic that feels independent from the institutional formality of a gallery. A set of boards (still bearing branded stamps from the lumberyard) lean against the entrance wall, with simple human faces carved into them at one end. They have a nascent, searching quality, as if incomplete. Together with the structure, they reference the Yuquot Whalers’ Shrine that was removed from the community in 1904 and that is currently in storage at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. At the other end of Wenstob’s longhouse, a length of sheer white fabric is draped over a fluorescent lamp. The translucent,



almost spectral form of a mask hovers, illuminated, below the bulb; it has been cast into the fabric with starch. While explicitly addressing loss, his installation speaks to the persistence and resistance of cultural forms through time, and the potential for internally coherent spaces to exist within other, seemingly dominant spaces.

Like Wenstob and Douglas's pieces, this exhibition as a whole is strongly marked by what is absent. The most striking absence is that of the names of any Nuu-chah-nulth women. Their work is represented by a set of small, now anonymous, late nineteenth to mid-twentieth-century cedar bark and sweetgrass weavings. Employing traditional patterns and depicting whaling parties, they form small baskets and wrap tightly around irregularly shaped glass bottles. It seems self-evident that these works would have required great skill, diligence, and knowledge of local materials, and that such mastery might have warranted these artists being historically noted as individuals—as the donors cited on the associated wall labels for these pieces have been. The barks and grasses themselves, as persistent physical elements from and of the place, offer a quiet but pointed challenge to the slipperiness of the 'imaginary' that has lost the names of their weavers.

While the exhibition's framework looks back through time and out into a particular region, it ultimately emphasizes more introspective concerns that investigate the restrictions, responsibilities, and potentials that contemporary art galleries have as points of contact. The scope of what can be presented in this scenario is certainly limited, not only in terms of how much can fit in this particular space, but by the range of works the AGGV, the largest gallery in a smallish Canadian city, has access to. Parameters that would impact any exhibition, but which become more evident and emphatically relevant in this kind of socio-geographic case study include: which works have been brought into the permanent

collection; what arrangements can be negotiated as far as borrowing work; what relationships have been established with local Indigenous communities over the sixty-odd years of the gallery's history. Through pieces carefully selected from those available, but equally through restrictions and absences, the exhibition traces an exploratory, rough outline of conversations around place that could and should happen, and provides a valuable opportunity to reflect on the work institutions need to do to facilitate dialogue.

Kyra Kordoski

Art Gallery of Greater Victoria,
Victoria, October 28, 2017–
April 1, 2018

Stan Douglas

† *Nu-tka*, 1996, installation view,
Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2017.

Photo : Mike McClean, courtesy of
the artist, David Zwirner, New York/London
and Victoria Miro, London