

## Transits and Returns

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[See table of contents](#)

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# ***Transits and Returns***

Joni Low

**VANCOUVER ART GALLERY  
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An exhibition can be a presentation of artworks from different places that connect ideas together in a gallery space for visitors. More powerfully, as with *Transits and Returns*, it can also be a deeply transformative process for all who are involved: a small revolution towards self-determination, sovereignty, and collective liberation, effects which are also felt on encountering its final form. Three years ago, the exhibition began as conversations between curators from the settler colonial nation states of Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the USA—Sarah Biscarra Dilley, Freja Carmichael, Leuli Eshragi, Tarah Hogue and Lana Lopesi—who recognized the Great (Pacific) Ocean between their territories as not neutral, but rather a culturally and politically charged expanse, fluidly connecting different cultures across generations and millennia. *Transits and Returns*, the final chapter in a series of three collaborative exhibitions, facilitating exchange, experimentation and the commissioning of new artworks, brought together 21 Indigenous artists' worldviews from across the regions sharing these waters—from Alutiiq territory in the north to Māori lands in the south, with island and mainland Nations in between—to the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations, presently called Vancouver.<sup>1</sup>

Holding space for Indigenous artists to “articulate their own self-determined visions,” the exhibition empowered the expression of artists' respective sovereignties while being responsive to the territories within which the projects were sited—most notably here during the *Great Ocean Dialogues*, a two-day symposium following the exhibition's opening.<sup>2</sup> The curatorial premise focused on how Indigenous artists' practices “are both rooted in their cultures of origin and routed via their travels—artistic, embodied and intellectual,” observing the interplay of “situatedness and mobility, working in synergy and tension with one another, that have come to shape highly specific and globally interconnected dialogues on Indigeneity.”<sup>3</sup> Rather than pose questions about identity, migration and land in *fixed* ways, they explored how *movement*—of bodies and information flowing between urban centres and home territories, made possible through advancements in transportation and telecommunications technologies—and more implicitly, how collective political *movements* create the conditions of exchange and freedom that enable new expressions and understandings to emerge. In the exhibition catalogue, Kimberley Moulton, Senior Curator of South Eastern Aboriginal Collections, Museums Victoria, and of Yorta Yorta heritage, describes this movement as “a conscious counter-action to the colonial control we have endured as First Peoples.”<sup>4</sup>

Counter-action to colonial control and the thrivance of Indigenous sovereignty could not be more urgent than now. As I write this, the Wet'suwet'en Nation is defending their unceded lands from the invasion of a Canadian government-sanctioned Coastal GasLink pipeline and the RCMP forces into culturally sacred and healing territories on which they depend to survive. They are standing up for collective future generations in the face of an environmentally unsustainable energy project, the logic of which no longer holds in the context of climate crisis and Indigenous reconciliation. Solidarity protests are rippling throughout Turtle Island and internationally with other Nations, allies and supporters—though not without disturbingly racist and divisive resistance. We are at a crossroads and turning point full of potential. With this in mind, the artists' perspectives and personal orbits of experience shared in *Transits and Returns* felt all the more prescient, and the astrological metaphor within the exhibition's title even more symbolic. As dramatic shifts take place on Earth and in our larger universe, the exhibition



**Debra Sparrow**, *Blanketing the City*, site-specific installation, Canada Line Vancouver City Centre Station, 2019. In partnership with the Vancouver Art Gallery and the City of Vancouver Public Art Program. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Maegan Hill-Carroll.



invokes the interpretation of planetary transits—significant movements beyond our control and influential at a molecular level—to forecast our futures, with the momentous hope that they be different than our pasts.

The exhibition reflected such orbits and fluidities: a constellation of artworks in a star-like pattern forged interconnections between works beyond the gentle thematic zones of territory / country / homeland / tribal land, kinship and relations, and strategies of representation. Curator Tarah Hogue shared how initially the arrangement was intended as a full circle, with star-point video-rooms also interconnected. Colour abounded, and artwork plinths extended like the curved rings of Saturn, defying the white cube. Overall, it infused a spiritual symbolism within the colonial courthouse-turned-gallery: four directions, a healing circle and medicine wheel—a meaningful shape across Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. Emphasizing the creative sovereignty of each artistic practice, there were no overarching narratives or geographic categorizing of works in the exhibition. Instead, one encountered the spirit of *Transits and Returns* through movement, haptic sense memory, kinesthetic perception and feeling.<sup>5</sup>

While artists embraced topics spanning environmental and Indigenous rights to traditions, self-representation, and self-determined (if speculative) futures, the common threads of kinship, solidarity and collective world-building ran deeply throughout. In large institutions particularly, which often feel alienating to visitors of colour, the artists' expression of their relations *within* their works—of family, families of friends and other supportive networks—created a welcoming warmth, of intimacy and generosity.<sup>6</sup> Foregrounded in the exhibition's heart were the expressions of local Nations' artist-matriarchs: in the central rotunda, T'uy't'tanat-Cease Wyss

**Cease Wyss,**  
*Shkweh Wew shkem Nexw7iyayulh (To Explore, To Travel by Canoe)* (detail), 2018. Lau hala, coconut hull fibre, seagrass, red cedar bark, wool, abalone shell, mother of pearl buttons. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Louis Lim.





traced her Squamish-Kanaka Maoli-Native Hawai'ian maternal lineage through tactile, woven materiality. Traversing the circle of her installation, one encountered black-and-white photographs of her grandmother Eva Mae Nahanee—surrounded by early 20th century baskets, including a surviving spruce root and wild cherry bark coil-woven one encased directly below the photograph—and a portrait of her grandfather, Lorne Nahanee—of Squamish, Katzie and Kanaka Maoli descent, who first migrated to Coast Salish territory. These hung alongside Wyss' *Shkweri Wéú shk'em Nexw7ijajulh (To Explore, To Travel by Canoe)* (2018), a ceremonial ocean-travellers' cape that the artist made for her daughter. Woven with materials gathered between Squamish and Hawai'ian territories, it represents her *family*: the warp of red cedar bark, and weft of twined coconut hull fibre, pandanus leaf, and dyed wool, all bordering a Northwest Coast canoe as central motif. Arriving full circle, one was invited to touch these materials, to understand the entwinement of intercultural lineages more fully through tactile sensation.

Musqueam artist Debra Sparrow's four blankets flanked the south galleries, greeting us with the haptic power of their patterns and textures. Sparrow, widely acclaimed for rejuvenating Salish weaving practices, which have been dormant since the 1920s, began reconstructing techniques in the 1980s by studying museum collections and texts with sisters Robyn and Wendy. These blankets represent both the reawakening of cultural knowledge and its transference through ceremony and everyday life. *Chief's Blanket* (2013), gifted to Chief Kim Baird in recognition of her leadership of the Tsawwassen First Nation from 1999–2012, was powerfully hung, arms spread: its geometric blue and white patterns, hand-spun sheep's wool, Great Blue Heron appliqué and feathers triggered both a *conscious* optical reading and a more *subconscious* tactile perceiving of its material properties.<sup>7</sup> Instinctively, we know textures and materials within our bodies and recognize their relationships to nature and the land by virtue of human experience. Sparrow's work also extends into public space: *Blanketing the City*, a large-scale photographic reproduction of woven blankets, is wrapped around the city's downtown train station, honouring her vision and intention to help decolonize the city, as part of Vancouver's commitment to reconciliation.

**Cease Wyss**, *Shkweri Wéú shk'em Nexw7ijajulh (To Explore, To Travel by Canoe)*, 2018. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Maegan Hill-Carroll.





**Maureen Gruben**, *We all have to go someday. Do the best you can. Love one another* (detail), 2019. Deer hide, embroidery thread, metallic thread, steel grommets and rivets, aluminum frame. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Kyra Kordoski.

The metaphor of skin as threshold connected many other works throughout the exhibition: skin as comfort and armour, as collaborative animal-plant-human substrate; skin as screen and skin as land. Maureen Gruben's *We all have to go someday. Do the best you can. Love one another* (2019)—a quote from her late father, Eddie Gruben—is a deer hide strung taut with multi-coloured thread in a minimalist aluminum frame. On the left are coloured stitching and grommets, and on the right, a series of holes representing her father's heart angiogram. The mapped patterns also evoke her father's sketches of caribou migration, referencing life back home in Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories and the Inuvialuit knowledge learned from her parents. Relating land to skin to body, Gruben translates history and practices into something deeply personal and immediately accessible, dismantling intellect with an experience to which all can relate.

Directly in conversation is Carol McGregor's *Skin Country*, 2018, a large possum-skin cloak stitched with kangaroo sinew, and lovingly embellished with pyro-gravured and ochre-painted flora. A dark scar scrawled diagonally across the cloak—itsself resembling a map of a vast terrain—while the verso of possum fur remained only suggestively visible against the wall. McGregor, a Brisbane-based artist with Watharung and Scottish ancestry, is part of a larger cultural movement to revive a 5,000-year-old possum-cloak making tradition with elders, strengthening and healing the Indigenous communities of South-eastern Australia through collective intergenerational making. These cloaks embody lineages of emotions and memory; while 20 years ago only a few cloaks from before the 1900s remained, today there are over 100 held and used in community ceremonies.<sup>8</sup> Like Sparrow's



blankets, *Skin Country* represents the survival of cultural practices despite colonial attempts to extinguish them: a collective resilience against intrusions on their ways of life. As such, these skins are protectors from the elements in many metaphoric ways.

*Hākari as guests* (2019), a feasting environment by BC Collective (Cora-Allan Wickliffe and Daniel Twiss, with Louisa Afoa, all based in Tamaki Makaurau / Auckland), actively celebrated acts of kin, joy and the reawakening of traditions within the textures of the installation. Hākari means *feast* in Sāmoan, and many significant layers and activities unfolded in this beautiful and inviting space, which itself interwove their hybrid intercultural ancestries of Ngāpuhi, Tainui, Sāmoa, Niue and Lakota. Louisa Afoa's pastel teal wallpaper—the colour of her great-aunty's kitchen—was playfully patterned with lively graphics of food from her Sāmoan upbringing—Tai-Yo mackerel, pigs, kawa kawa leaves, coconuts and taro leave—conjuring a nostalgia for home.<sup>9</sup> Atop a black velvet longtable were placemats made of beautiful hiapo, a bark cloth originating from the island country of Niue in Oceania, alongside ceramics inspired by Lakota pottery, shaped to hold dishes from the artists' cultures.<sup>10</sup> Napkins drape over each chair, embroidered with leaves similar to those painted on the ceramics and hiapo. Already alive through its materiality, the installation also became an active site for dinners the artists made, sharing food and culture with members of the public as a way of storytelling and exchange. On the eve of the *Transits and Returns* vernissage, this was held with participating artists on local Squamish Nation lands. Here, food acted as a familiar sensual conduit to conjure home across distance and cultural difference, through gestures of hospitality for which all can express gratitude.

BC Collective (Cora-Allan Wickliffe and Daniel Twiss) with Louisa Afoa, *Hākari as guests*, 2019. Niuean hiapo, Lakota ceramics, beaded napkins, velvet tablecloth, dining table, chairs, chandeliers with cut acrylic shapes, vinyl wallpaper. Courtesy of the artists. Photo: Maegan Hill-Carroll.



The most powerful work in light of present-day protests against resource extraction within Indigenous lands was Taloi Havini's *Habitat* (2019). In an immersive 4-channel video installation, she unpacked documentary representations of land and conflicting interests in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, islands in the South Pacific which, until December 2019, were part of Papua New Guinea.<sup>11</sup> Interspersing archival news footage, family archives and civil war images, Havini exposed the harmful consequences of the Panguna Copper Mine on Indigenous landowners and the land, retelling stories from Indigenous perspectives. The mine, operated from 1971–1989 by Bougainville Copper Limited (a subsidiary of Rio Tinto Australia), extracted gold and copper while destroying ecosystems, villages and homes. In 1975, Bougainvilleans' protests and subsequent declarations for independence were ignored by Papua New Guinea; in 1989, violent tensions exploded and closed the mine, leading to a nine-year civil conflict that claimed the lives of 20,000 people—10% of the island's population, many of whom have not been adequately atoned for. In 2001, a peace agreement was reached and in December 2019, Bougainville voted 98% in favour of independence during a much-anticipated referendum, becoming one of the world's newest Indigenous self-determined nation—a liberating victory after years of colonial violence.

In *Habitat*, the contrasts of Bougainville's predominantly matrilineal society and landscape against colonial-biased news reportage render the discrimination, greed and violence all too clear. Wide shots of Bougainville's beautiful coasts and lush jungles zoom into the scar of the mine pit itself; archival news clips of the mine's arrival are interwoven with 16 mm historic footage of Bougainvillean life, traditions and their strong refusal to leave their homeland. Typed accounts of extrajudicial killings and massacres scroll across the screens alongside images and reams of data; women in elegant tuhu hoods made from pandanus leaves walk quietly within lush green tropics.<sup>12</sup> A quote from Elder Raphael Bele lingers still with both resilience and pain, in these matters of life and death: "...To Bougainvilleans, land is like the skin on the back of your hand. You inherit it, and it is your duty to pass it on to your children in as good a condition, or better than, that in which you received it. *You would not expect us to sell our skin, would you?*"

Amidst and perhaps because of such urgent global, political and environmental crises now, the enduring sentiment connecting works in *Transits and Returns* is one that takes injustice and pain and transforms it into expansiveness, joyful resistance, and thriving resilience. Instilled by the artists' and curators' wills to imagine and build worlds beyond colonial borders, to connect not through universalisms but across nuanced differences and shared sentiments—and to find ways to continually connect, even while at a distance—*Transit and Returns* engages in an exercise of inclusive liberation, not just for Indigenous populations, but for everyone. As the curators describe, they "manifest it with and for others." This too echoes the foundational values from their communities: "that health and well-being are rooted in mutual care, shared responsibilities and strong relationships."<sup>13</sup> I can't help but re-read these words—and the quote from Raphael Bele above—in relation to the Wet'suwet'en, Tyendinaga–Mowhawk, Gitksan and other First Nations' words, who also stand in solidarity with each other in peace and across imposed borders, to uphold these values and protect their lands from extraction. They are leading the way to our next planetary shift. In shared spirit, and in their collective refusals to be finite or defined by others, the artists in *Transits and Returns* join the belief in astrological and planetary movements—powers greater than humankind—that forecast futures full of possibilities, built upon a connective and restorative return to their pasts. These deep roots, despite colonialism, are resurfacing stronger than ever now, offering us, with love, a different pattern and a different way forward: the beginning of a new cycle.

1.

*Transits and Returns* was the final iteration of three collaborative projects: *The Commute* at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane (2018), and *Layover* at Aoteoroa Art Space, New Zealand (Spring 2019). Exhibiting artists included Edith Amituanai (Samoan / New Zealand), Christopher Ando (Alutiq-Hungarian-Norwegian / USA), Natalie Ball (USA), BC Collective with Louisa Afoa (Tāmaki Makarau / New Zealand), Drew Kahu'aina Broderick with Nāpali Aluli Souza (Hawai'i, USA), Hannah Brontë (Wakka Wakka / Yaegl-Welsch / Australia), Elisa Jane Carmichael (Ngugi / Australia), Mariquita "Micki" Davis (Chamoru, Guam / USA), Chantal Fraser (Samoan / Australia), Maureen Gruben (Inuvialuit / Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories, Canada), Bracken Hanuse Corlett (Wuikinuxv-Klahoose Nations / Vancouver, Canada), Taloi Havini (Bougainville Autonomous Region), Lisa Hilli (Gunatuna, Australia), Carol McGregor (Wathaurung-Scottish, Australia), Marianne Nicolson (Musgamakw Dzawada'enuxw-Scottish / Victoria, Canada), Ahilapalapa Rands (Kanaka Maoli-iTaukei-Pākehā / Tāmaki Makarau), Debra Sparrow (Musqueam / Vancouver, Canada), and T'uy't'ananat-Cease Wyss (Skwxwu'mesh-Sto:lo-Irish-Métis-Hawaiian-Swiss / Vancouver, Canada).

2.

*Great Ocean Dialogues*, co-organized with the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective and Simon Fraser University Galleries, allowed participating artists and curators to exchange ideas with local cultural producers on Indigenous sovereignty, current challenges in relation to creative practice and efforts to decolonize our artistic fields. [On line]: <http://www.sfu.ca/galleries/SFUGalleriesEvents/2019/great-ocean-dialogues.html>.

3.

Sarah Biscarra Dilley, Freja Carmichael, Leuli Eshragi, Tarah Hogue and Lana Lopesi, "To softer waters between us," curatorial essay in the exhibition catalogue *Transits and Returns* (Brisbane and Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery and Institute of Modern Art, 2019), 29.

4.

David Garneau and Kimberley Moulton, "Sovereign by virtue of our motion," in *Transits and Returns*, 21.

5.

T'ai Smith, "Limits of the Tactile and the Optical: Bauhaus Fabric in the Frame of Photography," *Grey Room* (MIT Press), No. 25 (Fall, 2006), 6–31.

6.

For a similar reflection, see Jessica Johns, "Indigenous World-Building at the Vancouver Art Gallery," *Canadian Art online*, December 19, 2018. [On line]: [bit.ly/2yvCx4W](http://bit.ly/2yvCx4W).

7.

Smith, "Limits of the Tactile and the Optical..." 21. Smith studies weaver Otti Berger's explorations in 1930 alongside the rise of photography, describing how through *perpetual contact* "one approaches the object not simply through visual conscious perception (which leads to the recognition of textiles as objects) but also through tactile (unconscious) perception (which contributes strongly to the haptic experience of an environment)."

8.

See [bit.ly/2WolXLe](http://bit.ly/2WolXLe) and [bit.ly/2xEfe8U](http://bit.ly/2xEfe8U).

9.

Vancouver Art Gallery audio guides: artist and curator interviews. [On line]: [bit.ly/2zZWFN9](http://bit.ly/2zZWFN9).





**Taloi Havini**, *Habitat*, 2018. Still from the four-channel HD video ,4 min. 3 sec. colour, black-and-white with 5.1 surround sound. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Natasha Harth.

10.

Dishes such as Indian tacos (using frybread instead of tortillas), kina (sea urchin), Lu'au (corned beef with coconut and onion wrapped in taro leaves) and pineapple pie are among those mentioned in the catalogue *Transits and Returns*, 34.

11.

Damian Cave, "Bougainville Votes for Independence from Papua New Guinea", *The New York Times*, December 11, 2019. [On line]: [nyti.ms/3fjOpHZ](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/11/world/pacific/bougainville-votes.html).

12.

For more information on these traditions, see Sana Balai and Ruth McDougall, "Women's Wealth Project: Biruko and Tuhu Hoods," *Garland Magazine*, December 4, 2018. [On line]: <https://garlandmag.com/article/womens-wealth/>.

**Joni Low** is a curator and critic living in the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations (Vancouver). Her research explores interconnection, intercultural conversations, public space, sensory experience and the effect of telecommunication technologies on everyday life. Recent exhibitions include *What Are Our Supports?*, *Afterlives: Germaine Koh and Aron Louis Cohen*, *Hank Bull: Connexion* and the symposium *Underground in the Aether*. She has presented projects at Galerie de L'UQAM (Montréal), Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Flotilla Atlantic (Charlottetown), Burnaby Art Gallery, VIVO and Or Gallery (Vancouver). Her essays appear in catalogues and publications including *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *ESPACE art actuel*, *Momus* and *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*.