

PERSONAL AND MATERIAL GEOGRAPHIES, 2020

By Mary-Beth Laviolette

In 2020, what does it mean to have a craft practice in Canada's western-most province? As an exhibition, *Personal + Material Geographies* (PMG) offers a rich and varied reply. A response that in "Craft Year 2020" can be seen and sensed through the 27 works on display.

Featuring the imaginative labours of twenty-three artists – 16 juried and 6 invited – PMG set out to focus on a different kind of geography. Rather than B.C's vast and varied physical being, the Craft Council of BC (CCBC) challenged craftspeople to consider "personal geographies that include different backgrounds and ways of working". Or, what in this unique partnership between the Council and the Italian Cultural Centre of Vancouver, described as craft practices which "reference community traditions and history, placing it in opposition to Fine Art which values individualism."

This emphasis on the gifts of community, whether racial, ethnic, activist or discipline-related (e.g., ceramics, tapestry and basketmaking), seems all the more pertinent given the dramatic disruptions of the 2020 Covid 19 epidemic. Examples of the sustaining power of community are reflected throughout PMG.

There is Meghann O'Brien's use of Chilkat weaving – one of the world's most complex weaving techniques – to create two pendants. Rather than the customary Chilkat blanket or robe, these are small-scale works but still able to be worn. They also incorporate the formlines of Northwest Coast design (i.e., the ovoid shape) as well as wool stiffened with thinly shredded yellow cedar bark strips. In one hanging pendant the salmon berry is honoured as a welcomed food source for bears and humans. "They are quiet spirits who do not yell for our attention (O'Brien)."

In a similar vein, there is also Kari Woo's hanging neck piece, *Mater/Matter* (2020) which, with its use of family pictures and other found materials like jade and birch bark allude to the staying power of family and culture in the long long story of Chinese migration. This includes the multi-generational Woo family who are poignantly represented in the pendant's heart-shaped format..

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Community of a different type also exists for those nurtured by their chosen discipline and its own particular histories and stories. For textile artist, Barbara Heller, the practice of tapestry is linked though *Moirai* (2018) with the Greek mythological story of the powerful Moirai sisters. They who, for both the gods and humankind, symbolised Fate and Destiny – beginning with “Clotho who spun the thread of life from her distaff to her spindle (Heller)”.

In the field of Northwest Coast sculpture, the mentorship of master carver, Dempsey Bob, supported the creation of Veronica Rose Waechter’s *The Best Berries are on Top of the Mountain* (2019). Connecting, above all, this distinctive practice to the importance of Indigenous people’s oral traditions with a reminder to the younger artist to nonetheless express through carving the stories of her own time.

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The art of basketry is another strong theme in PMG. With contributions from Christi York, Melanie Thompson and Haida Gwaii’s Marlene Liddle – who has already over 240 cedar containers to her credit – evoked by these crafters is basketmaking’s “communal history in nearly every culture on the planet (York)”. In looped copper wire and vintage sequins and cane there is Thompson’s recent interpretation of the traditional fish trap; York’s more sculptural treatment with twigs and a single copper ‘vein’ and, Liddle’s contemporary clam basket with its tell-tale cedar knot paying respect to this iconic tree species.

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Another communal sentiment present in the exhibition is a palpable concern for the environment. This was expressed in many different media. It’s present in the bold ceramics of Amy Gogarty’s *Container/Ship* with its symbolic litter as well as Nancy Walker’s whimsical expression of *Lifeboat ~ Hope* (2019). In her whiter-than-white porcelain lifeboat, the artist attached handbuilt small figures and animals: once inhabitants of “a giving yet struggling planet (Walker).” Debbie Katz connects to the theme with her felted sculpture of spawning fish in *Salmon Run* (2019) while Christianity’s *Cruxifix* (2019) is employed by backcountry rambler and textile artist, Bettina Matzkuhn. Represented on the large-scale cross of painted fabric and embroidery is a summer-time mountainscape with a dwindling glacier.

Recycling or repurposing also stands out. Some very fine examples of this ethos are seen in the Scottish lacework veil of Catherine Thomson who, influenced by the natural

environment around her explored new fibers and new designs. In *Serenity* (2018), this was accomplished with Tencel, a wood fiber certified as compostable and biodegradable. For *Precious Commodity* (2016), Michelle Sirois Silver relied on recycled waste hosiery to hand-hook the final piece in artist's *The Recovery Series*.

But nothing speaks more assertively about the environment, and, as it happens, British Columbia than the broken-faced bear rug resurrected by Annie Ross. Obtained from a thrift store, Ross embellished the animal's red felted underside with embroidered birds and animals, appliqué, sequins, glass beads and buttons recalling Indigenous button blankets. The result is a lush cosmos of coastal life in *put back together all we have broken apart* (2020).

This work, along with other allegiances to not just the environment but to a sense of place – however it is manifested – makes 'crafting' in 2020 very different in sensibility from the concurrent survey of mid-century craft and design in BC, 1945 to 1975, on view at the Vancouver Art Gallery. It may be a stretch to compare an exhibition with a modest 27 works to *Modern in the Making*. The latter comprising over 300 objects and other items related to architecture and industrial design but the word Modernism is not one that comes to mind in relation to *Personal + Material Geographies*.

There is little purity or simplicity to be found in PMG and the avant-garde emphasis on new and ground-breaking is nowhere to be seen. As for Progress – where did it go? Artists, it appears, like those on display at the Italian Centre are preoccupied with other concerns both formally and conceptually. It's less reductive, less ordered and prescriptive.

Overall, things get mixed-up, blended, hybridized and infused with an enthusiastic cacophony of different opinions. In addition, these are artists who happen to *value* history and tradition without apology. Thus, Lou Lynn's homage to her garden shed with its 17 ordinary and specialized shovels. It became a site of inspiration for reconceptualizing a common everyday tool into life-size bronze/ glass/steel objects for "imagined tasks (Lynn)". Viewed in the context of *Personal + Material Geographies* and its 23 creative contributors, *the field* as they say is wide-open.

Personal + Material Geographies: Il Centro celebrates contemporary craft in partnership with the Craft Council of BC is on view at the Italian Cultural Centre of Vancouver until December 11, 2020.

Modern in the Making: Post-War Craft and Design in British Columbia is on view at the Vancouver Art Gallery until January 3, 2021.

Mary-Beth Laviolette, August 2020

Mary-Beth Laviolette is an independent curator and art writer based in Canmore, AB. In the last decade, she has contributed to or curated exhibitions including craft for Glenbow Museum (Calgary), Art Gallery of Alberta (Edmonton), Okotoks Art Gallery, The Esplanade Gallery (Medicine Hat) and the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies (Banff).

In 2017, Mary-Beth curated a major exhibition, *Eye of the Needle: Beading, Embroidery & Needlework* at the Glenbow Museum. The contents of this major exhibition included historic material from the museum's Cultural History Collection and recent work from artists in craft. In addition, her most recent project involved the curation of fine craft commissions for a new multipurpose centre in Calgary housing homeless single women. Fourteen artists working in fibre and indigenous beading received commissions and nearly sixty works were created for the newly opened YW Hub Facility in the city's oldest neighborhood, Inglewood. She has been on the board of the Alberta Craft Council since 2009.