

# SURREY ART GALLERY PRESENTS

Marianne Nicolson

## THE WAY IN WHICH IT WAS GIVEN TO US



### **Bearing Witness: The Way In Which It Was Given to Us**

**SIKU ALLOOLOO**

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**MARIANNE NICOLSON  
SIKU ALLOOLOO**

Marianne Nicolson  
*The Way In Which It Was Given to Us*, 2017

Animation with sound, UrbanScreen  
installation

Photograph by Brian Giebelhaus

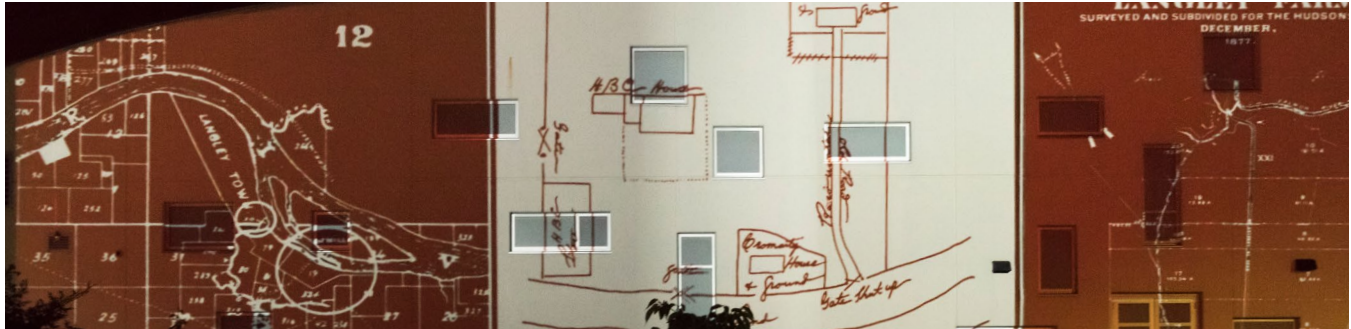
### ***Bearing Witness: The Way In Which It Was Given to Us***

**Siku Allooooloo**

We hope that you will see yourself, our wants, and our desires, and you will remove that veil of sorrow which is spreading over our hearts...<sup>1</sup>

Address of Ayessik, Chief of Hope, Chiefs of the Lower Fraser River and others to I. W. Powell, Superintendent of Indian Affairs at New Westminster,

26 May 1873



Installation view of *The Way In Which It Was Given to Us*. Photograph by Brian Giebelhaus.

*The Way In Which It Was Given To Us* is a testimony of history and place, as well as a revelation of the present, through a Kwakwaka'wakw lens.

Marianne Nicolson's animation draws upon different forms of archival references, including pictographs, oral history, and colonial mapping, to reveal the history of land dispossession in her territory and that of the Kwantlen peoples, wherein the work is situated. The form of the piece itself draws upon her ancestral practice of documenting stories directly onto the land through pictographs, though as a projected artwork it also holds an urban pop-culture aesthetic in the tradition of graffiti. Taken together, *The Way In Which It Was Given To Us* is an assertion of Indigenous sovereignty, ongoing presence, and a call for accountability. It is a re-presencing in the face of erasure, as well as speaking back in response to a history that has unilaterally silenced and imposed itself upon Indigenous nations and territories.

By projecting these images onto a building situated upon unceded lands, Marianne reclaims control over the narrative of history and reflects it back through the visual language of her culture, onto something considered, like Canada, to be "fixed." This graceful work confronts Canada's willful denial of Indigenous land rights, by laying bare the means by which the Kwakwaka'wakw and Kwantlen nations have been dispossessed of and erased within their own

homelands, while giving voice to their resistance and resilience.

The animation begins with reference to Marianne's Dzawada'enuxw origin story, in which her people were placed on the land at "the beginning of light in the world." The projection is accompanied by the sound of water, wherein human and non-human relations appear throughout time and space.

Ominous red dots soon appear throughout the piece, followed by two crying faces (adapted from local pictographs in Kwantlen territory). Solid boxes depicting land allotments invade the spaces between pictographic forms, like a discordant and strangely arbitrary division of space. The screen goes dark and images of the Langley Farm emerge, followed by a wash of red. Text from Chief Cassimer's address to the Royal Commission in 1915 then appears on the screen, the pacing and simplicity of which holds enormous weight:

**The whitemen have taken our land and we have never got anything. During the time Simon Fraser came here mygrandfather was up at Sapperton - when he came they were kindto him - was it because the Indians were too kind to him that the Government is not going to give us a square deal?<sup>2</sup>**

Chief Cassimer's address to Royal Commission at McMillan Island 1915

Indigenous peoples throughout the continent have shared similar sentiments, right from the dawn of European conquest to many other nations to this day whose territories have become subsumed within colonies such as Canada and the United States. My Taino ancestors, for example, were the first to meet the conquistadores in 1492, in Kiskeya (now divided into Haiti and the Dominican Republic). They greeted the newcomers with generosity and graciousness, which was returned with acts of genocide and enslavement in the violent appropriation of land and lust for gold.

This is now an age-old story, shared by Indigenous nations worldwide who retain a similar inherent basis steeped in principles of dignity, generosity, and respect for the humanity of others—even in the face of gross and overt injustice. Colonial regimes have continually misjudged these principled manners of diplomacy as weakness and taken advantage of them in order to build their colonies upon us and reap wealth from our lands and waterways.

However, the great irony, and the great shame, is that true wealth—as embodied and extended by all of these Indigenous nations—exists only in the sharing. To objectify wealth, by exploiting material resources such as gold, is to miss the whole point. And as history proves, doing so leads not only to the objectification of the earth and also of people, but it culminates very dangerously into atrocities such as genocide, residential schools, environmental devastation, and even now the global climate crisis.

In this light, *The Way In Which It Was Given To Us* can be seen as an act of bearing witness, an important responsibility in Kwakwaka'wakw practices of governance; a way of documenting histories directly onto memory the way that pictographs do with land.

As Marianne's animation depicts, the release of a smallpox epidemic in 1862-3 decimated populations along the Pacific Northwest Coast, including the Kwakwaka'wakw and Kwantlen nations, and made way for the colonial acquisition of their lands. Within



Kwakwaka'wakw chiefs at the McKenna-McBride Royal Commission on Indian Lands (Alert Bay, 1914). From the *Our Homes are Bleeding Digital Collection*, Union of BC Indian Chiefs. Retrieved from <http://ourhomesarebleeding.ubcic.bc.ca/gallery/photos/Kwawkewlth.htm>.

that year, and in large part due to the genocidal opportunism of colonial authorities, about 60 per cent of the Indigenous populations perished—“a crisis that left mass graves, deserted villages, traumatized survivors and societal collapse and, in a real way, created the conditions for modern-day British Columbia.”<sup>3</sup>

This epidemic was the primary reason that virtually no treaties were made within what became British Columbia, as the self-fulfilling belief in a dying race and an empty land made treaty-making seem like a non-issue.<sup>4</sup> Instead of negotiating agreements for coexistence, as colonial governments had done with Indigenous nations throughout the rest of the country, they divided up the land into allotments and simply gave it away. To be clear, this was illegally acquired land, which is why many Indigenous nations make a point to identify their territories as unceded, or illegally occupied.

Kwakwaka'wakw and Kwantlen peoples were relegated to reserves on small fragments of their territories, while the best and largest allotments were given as farmland to settlers. As with every Indigenous nation across the country, their systems of governance, spiritual practice, oral history, cultural continuity, and distribution of wealth were outlawed, and their children were forcibly stolen and put into residential schools.

Most Canadians are unaware of this history. However, as Canada wraps up celebrations for its 150th anniversary since Confederation, the unjust means by which it has come into existence, as well as the ongoing domination and injustice bearing down upon Indigenous peoples and homelands to this day must also be recognized. Canadians too must be aware of the ways in which this land was handed over to them—though in this case, not by a Creator at the



Marianne Nicolson's *Cliff Painting*, 1998 (photo by Siku Allooooloo, 2017)

beginning of time, but rather through the calculated theft of land and erasure of peoples already present, and whose presence, despite all odds, remains.

The erasure of this history from public consciousness is a great injustice to Canadian society, and it is the root of why most Canadians misunderstand Indigenous movements to protect the sources of life that we have left, and to assert our autonomy. In this way, Marianne's work is a gift and an act of dignity in the right of her ancestral tradition of truth-telling and documentation of history onto the landscape, in order to provide a long range perspective on what has brought us to this moment. It is also in keeping with many of her other works, such as her 1998 *Cliff Painting* (located at the mouth of the river in her home territory)—an emblem of continuity and assertion of presence and place, a powerful reminder to both Kwakwaka'wakw and outsiders of unceded territories and time immemorial.

The sound of the water that plays with the projection artwork is from Great Slave Lake, one of the largest freshwater sources on the planet. The audio suggests a sense of timelessness (in that water has always been revered as an essential source of life) and also subtle urgency—as sources of clean water are increasingly threatened by extractive resource

development. In the same way that the voices of local chiefs are brought to light in the artwork through direct quotes from land commission hearings, the accompanying audio of water enables the earth, which has bared witness to so much, to speak for itself.

I made this recording on the shore in my hometown of Yellowknife, Northwest Territories (which was built during the Gold Rush), just a few kilometers away from the defunct site of Giant Mine—one of the richest gold mines in Canadian history, and certainly the most toxic. While the water is still clean in many parts of the lake, this essential source of life has become a repository of lethal contamination brought on through the colonial invasion of land. The future survival of human beings everywhere demands that we begin to pay attention.

Presently, the Kwakwaka'wakw are working to protect the salmon in their territory from fish farming, an extractive industry that is destroying a vital source of sustenance for their people as well as the whole ecosystem. Indigenous nations throughout the entire coast, and indeed the continent, are fighting to protect their homelands from oil tankers, pipelines, and tar sands. The stakes are incredibly high, but the cost of failure is devastating, not only for local nations and all of the life forms that depend on healthy homelands, but indeed for the planet. Climate change is the biggest global crisis of our time, and the rapid loss of biodiversity presents a glaring warning for the future of humanity itself.

The fundamental change so desperately needed requires that we face the tough truths about our history and present reality. Telling truthful history then, and bearing witness, is both an honouring of place and ancestral experience that makes the present more tangible, and us more empowered

within it. How else can we ever know where and who we truly are?

Just as neither the making of this country nor its future are inevitable or “fixed,” *The Way In Which It Was Given To Us* is a powerful reminder of the importance of respecting how things have come to be, with the aim of attending to what now must (and can) be done. In this way, the Surry Art Gallery's UrbanScreen exhibition of this artwork is a hopeful example of making space to illuminate different knowledge systems and possibilities, as well as a necessary willingness to face uncomfortable truths.

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#### Notes

1. National Energy Board, “Exhibit “J” to the Statement of Evidence of Marilyn Gabriel Chief of Kwantlen First Nation.” National Energy Board (Hearing Order OH-001-2014). C198-11-7 - Evidence of Chief Marilyn Gabriel - Vol. 7 - A4L8K1 2015-05-27, page 7. Retrieved from: [https://apps.neb-one.gc.ca/REGDOCS/Search?loc=2784857&txthl=marilyn%20gabriel&sr=1&filter=Attr\\_12629\\_16&dt=73](https://apps.neb-one.gc.ca/REGDOCS/Search?loc=2784857&txthl=marilyn%20gabriel&sr=1&filter=Attr_12629_16&dt=73).
2. 5, Ibid.
3. Ostroff, J. (2017, August 1). “How a smallpox epidemic forged modern British Columbia,” *Macleans*. Retrieved from <http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/how-a-smallpox-epidemic-forged-modern-british-columbia/>.
4. Ibid.

## ***Exhibition Statement***

### **Marianne Nicolson and Alison Rajah**

Referencing the pictograph as a way of recording stories on the land, Marianne Nicolson's animation with sound, *The Way In Which It Was Given To Us* (2017), speaks to the pre-emption of Indigenous lands.

Nicolson has explored the pictograph in previous works, including in her early large scale mural *Cliff Painting* (1998) and, more recently, in her banner project *Inquiry to the Newcomers* (2017). The originating images for the latter work are based on a real pictograph that exists at the mouth of the Kingcome River in coastal BC, home of the Dzawada'enuxw People, and depicts original contact with trade ships in 1792. Other Nations local to Surrey share histories of contact, reserve commissions, and processes of dispossession. The artist's UrbanScreen work is informed by this as well as research into Kwantlen and Semiahmoo pictographs. Nicolson's work celebrates the re-emergence of Indigenous Peoples' voices while articulating that there can be no true reconciliation between Indigenous and settler societies without an acknowledgement of Indigenous Peoples' displacement from their lands.

## ***About the Artist***

Marianne Nicolson ('Tayagila'ogwa) is an artist of Scottish and Dzawada'enuxw First Nations descent. Dzawada'enuxw People are a member tribe of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nations of the Pacific Northwest Coast. Her training encompasses both traditional Kwakwaka'wakw forms and culture and Western European based art practice. She has completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Emily Carr University of Art and Design (1996), a Masters in Fine Arts (1999), a Masters in Linguistics and Anthropology (2005), and a PhD in Linguistics and Anthropology (2013) at the University of Victoria. She has exhibited her artwork locally, nationally, and internationally as a painter, photographer, and installation artist, has written and published numerous essays and articles, and has participated in multiple speaking engagements. Her practice engages with issues of Aboriginal histories and politics arising from a passionate involvement in cultural revitalization and sustainability.

## ***About the Writer***

Siku Allooloo is an Inuit/Haitian Taino writer, activist, and community builder from Denendeh (Northwest Territories). She has a BA in Anthropology and Indigenous Studies from the University of Victoria, and a diverse background in Indigenous land-based education, youth work, solidarity building, and community-based research. Her advocacy work through writing and speaking centers on issues of climate change, environmental protection, ending gender violence and decolonial politics. Siku is also an emerging creative nonfiction writer and poet. Her work has been featured in *The New Quarterly*, *The Malahat Review*, *Briarpatch*, *The Guardian*, and *Truthout*, among others.



About UrbanScreen

Imagined by artists and built by the City, Surrey’s UrbanScreen is Canada’s largest non-commercial outdoor urban screen dedicated to presenting digital and interactive art. UrbanScreen is an offsite venue of the Surrey Art Gallery and is located on the west wall of Chuck Bailey Recreation Centre in City Centre. The venue can be viewed from SkyTrain, between Gateway and Surrey Central stations. Exhibitions begin 30 minutes after sunset, and end at midnight.

UrbanScreen was made possible by the City of Surrey Public Art Program, with support from the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Surrey Art Gallery Association, and the BC Arts Council Unique Opportunities Program, and is a legacy of the Vancouver 2010 Cultural Olympiad project CODE. Surrey Art Gallery gratefully acknowledges funding support from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Province of BC through the BC Arts Council for its ongoing programming. UrbanScreen’s 2015 equipment renewal was made possible by the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage / Government of Canada and the City of Surrey.

**Surrey Art Gallery Presents**  
**a series of publications on exhibitions and projects**

ISSN 1918-1302 ISBN 978-1-926573-48-9 Published 2017

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