

Tradition in the making and breaking

By KIMBERLEY FEHR
PHOTOS: KENJI NAGAI



Bill Reid's bronze *Bear Head* was created in 1981 as a prototype for a doorknob.

The smooth voice of legendary Haida artist Bill Reid echoes under the high ceilings of the Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Coast Art. His larger-than-life image moves ghost-like across a movie screen. His presence is infused in the walls, in the art (look closely at the totem pole in the Audain Great Hall and Reid's face will look back at you) and in his unearthly work that embodies the essence of mystery and culture.

Martine Reid, impossibly elegant in a mauve suit that complements her flowing blonde hair, was married to the artist for

17 years before he passed away. Today she is guiding me on a tour of the Bill Reid Gallery, tucked away at 639 Hornby Street in front of a beautiful green square in downtown Vancouver.

"We want it to be as if Bill were taking you by the hand and saying, 'I'm giving you a tour of my jewellery box,'" says Martine in her gregarious French accent. Martine is an anthropologist and consulting curator with the gallery. It was her gift of the Bill Reid Collection, worth \$3.4 million, and the support of the federal government, that led to the gallery's creation. »



Above: A mask by Philip Gray.
Right: Shawn Hunt's *Trickster*.

The result is the same hushed feeling you get in Paris in the Rodin Museum, or Amsterdam at the Van Gogh Museum: as though you are in the presence of greatness. Home to the largest public collection of his works in the world, the gallery includes Reid's eight-and-a-half-metre-long bronze frieze *Mythic Messengers*, and a full-scale totem pole carved by Reid's apprentice James Hart of Haida Gwaii. The gallery takes you on the journey of Reid's life from his time as a 28-year-old CBC radio announcer to him becoming one of the great artists of our time – a journey back to his Haida roots and beyond.

Opened in May 2008, the Bill Reid Gallery received philanthropic support from many, including a \$20,000 grant from Vancouver Foundation donors to help display the permanent collection.

"Our goal is not to create a shrine to Bill Reid," says Martine. "What Bill did was bring back the magic; the power of the work; the well-made object by adding new skills and technologies and crossing

boundaries. Many of the techniques Bill used did not exist among the Haida at all."

Reid led a renaissance of canoe carving among the Haida, creating a 50-foot craft, the *Lootas*, for Expo '86 in Vancouver. He chose to carve the *Lootas* in Skidegate on Haida Gwaii, with the help of several assistants. "He did it there because he wanted to train his assistants with new skills for their well-being," Martine says.

When Expo was over, the Haida paddled the canoe back home in a weeklong journey. In 1989, the *Lootas* went to Paris and travelled the Seine, before being displayed at the Museum of Man. When Reid died in 1998, the canoe was used to transport his ashes to Tanu, his grandmother's ancestral home. Now villages up and down the coast are carving their own canoes, says Martine.

Reid also took jewellery-making skills learned in London, England in 1968-69 and applied them to Haida bracelets to make the pieces more three-dimensional. Some were even based on tattoo designs. The work he did was not traditional, says Martine, but it has become traditional now.

"Tradition is a lie," she says. "Tradition is not something fixed. Things have always been borrowed since the beginning of time; ideas as well as things – tangible and intangible things. This is how a culture remains alive."

The Bill Reid Gallery's latest show, appropriately called *Continuum*, commissioned 23 up-and-coming Aboriginal artists to turn tradition upside down with new works of art.

Two of the artists played off Reid's famous work at the UBC Museum of Anthropology, *Raven and the First Men*. Heiltsuk artist Shawn Hunt's *Trickster* painting depicts Raven on top of a tin of Campbell's Soup, with the trickster smiling out from his body.

Tlingit artist Nicholas Galanin displays a roughshod rendition of Reid's masterpiece, in contrast with the smooth, sleek carving usually seen in Northwest Coast art.



Titled *Raven and the First Immigrants*, Galanin outsourced the carving of this work to a chain-saw artist in Oregon.

"Nicolas is a very fine jewellery artist and we were expecting a piece of jewellery, and this is what we got," says Martine. "But it says a lot about cultural appropriation."

Kelly Cannell goes beyond traditional Coast Salish style by putting

horses and hoofprints on

an elegant rendition of a Coast Salish paddle in yellow cedar, while Heiltsuk artist Ian Reid (no relation) takes traditional Chilkat blanket designs and transposes them in black and yellow onto a raven's beak on a mask, which has never been done before.

And then there's Sonny Assu, a 34-year-old Kwakwaka'wakw artist.

"I see Bill Reid as one of my mentors. I never met him. But I studied his work extensively," says Assu.

Martine gestures to Assu's acrylic painting *iPotlatch v2 10,000 Ancestors in Your Pocket*, which curves and undulates in pinks and reds, faintly reminiscent of Aboriginal motifs. "This doesn't look like First Nations art, does it? It's an indigenized iPod," she says.

This is the idea behind *Continuum*. "They explore the traditions and rituals, but there are new ways of expressing things," says Martine. "We don't want to be boxed in the past. This work shows that the gallery is alive." **VF**

The Bill Reid Gallery received support from the Vancouver Foundation Community Impact Fund. For information, call 604-688-2204. Contact the Bill Reid Gallery at 604-682-3455 or www.billreidgallery.ca. *Continuum* runs until January 31, 2010.