Memories on Canvas
A path to recovery through art in the first responder community
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04 Masthead and Messages

05 Drawing Success
by Isabelle Orr

06 A Mutual Benefit
by Dana Cvitanovich

08 Piecing it Together
by María Eugenia Fernández

11 Lifelines
by Alayna Fairman

16 The Show Must Go On
by Alexandre Jay

20 Dot-by-Dot
by Isabelle Orr

22 Scien-tea-fic!
by Mishayla Van Ry
From the President

The current situation with the COVID-19 pandemic has created unbelievable pressure around the world, in our country, province, and our local communities. We need light, kindness, and hope that there are better days ahead. That is why I am especially proud of Langara’s Digital and Print Publishing students for digging deep and unearthing stories of hope and resilience in this year’s edition of PRM (formerly Pacific Rim Magazine). At Langara, our community values collaboration and experiential learning, and this 32nd edition of PRM shows those strands woven together.

From the Editors

In this 2020 issue of PRM, we wish to encourage and inspire you with stories that demonstrate how art can be a catalyst for change. From a personal perspective, where art helps individuals process, recover, and find new ways to express themselves, to a broader perspective, where art can heal and strengthen communities. In a time full of uncertainty, where COVID-19 looms over every aspect of our lives, we believe the message of this magazine could not be more timely: that art can give us the ability to move towards the future with hope and resilience.

The Editorial Team

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Drawing Success

An interview with Cole Pauls, whose graphic novels have found readership across Canada.

story Isabelle Orr

COLE PAULS HAS come a long way from photocopying handmade comics in his room. A Tahltan First Nation comic artist, printmaker, and illustrator from Haines Junction, Yukon, Pauls has gained recognition across Canada for his award-winning graphic novel series, Dakwákâda Warriors.

Spanning three parts, the series features two warriors from Southern Tutchone who protect Earth from Cyber Nāa’į and Space Kwâdây Dân. In part one, Pauls uses the traditional Northwest Coast legend “Raven Steals the Sun” to shape the narrative. Part two shows Cyber Nāa’į’s kidnapping and forced assimilation at the hands of Space Kwâdây Dân. Cyber Nāa’į’s backstory parallels the history of the residential school system in Canada, where thousands of Indigenous children were stolen from their homes and forced to assimilate into colonial culture. In part three, with help from other warriors—the Łu’an Män and Dakhká Khwáan—the Dakwákâda Warriors engage in a final confrontation with Space Kwâdây Dân.

When Pauls first started writing the series, he was self-publishing comics and zines. “A lot of that was just me in my room making comics…. And then folding, and collating, and stapling, and numbering the zines all myself,” he says. In 2019, Conundrum Press, based in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, picked up the three-part Dakwákâda Warriors series to publish in a single compilation.

Dakwákâda Warriors is written in a mix of English and two Southern Tutchone dialects: Champagne and Aishihik. Pauls worked with two language preservers for translation from English into Southern Tutchone. In his self-published issues, he includes both dialects, but in the compilation published by Conundrum Press, a simplified Aishihik dialect is used. Pauls says that including the two languages was kind of a snowball effect: “When I incorporated the imagery with the book, I had it written in all English, and it made sense to incorporate the language…. So, I contacted my old language teacher from my hometown, and I asked her if she wanted to collaborate with me. And she said yes right away.”

After moving to Vancouver from Haines Junction, Pauls found a supportive community of artists whom he considers family: “It’s really nice, because we really support and uplift each other, and everyone’s really encouraging, and it’s a very welcoming community to be a part of.” Pauls has done zinc and art direction work with his partner, Kirsten Hatfield, as well as a collaboration with Squamish herbalist and storyteller Cease Wyss. In 2019, Pauls and Wyss worked on illustrating a series of eight masks based on sacred plants used by the Squamish Nation. The mask artwork decorates a utility box located on Squamish land, in Vanier Park, Vancouver. “I’m really happy to have collaborated with her,” Pauls says.

Back in his hometown of Haines Junction, Yukon, Pauls’s community is very supportive of his work. When Pauls held a launch for Dakwákâda Warriors, he said the result was “like a celebration.” The event was attended by over 80 people, and they were joined by Dakwákâda dancers: a traditional song and dance group that Pauls was once a member of, and of which both his parents and sisters are current members. He danced with them for the first time in ten years. “It was like a real party,” he recalls.

Pauls’s new comic Äsúya, the Beaverman will be published by Colour Code Press. While he is not publishing this new comic himself, he has not forgotten about the realities of self-publishing: “One thing about self-publishing people don’t tell you about is the stack of paper you’ll have in your house of unsold comics. And unfolded and made comics. You kind of learn to live around those things.”
More than just beautiful works of art, murals can benefit businesses, artists, and communities.

story Dana Cvitanovich
photography Joyce Arends

WHEN THE OLDEST John Fluevog Shoes location on Granville Street, in downtown Vancouver, needed a new look, store manager Patrick Davidson thought of holding an international competition for artists to design a storefront mural: “The idea was to sort of refresh the store because it hadn’t been painted for a long time, and we wanted to incorporate something fun—something that would liven Granville Street.”

After a 5-month competition, artist Jorge-Miguel Rodriguez from Miami was chosen as the winner. Rodriguez then collaborated with John Fluevog Shoes to create the mural titled Bloom, which was based on an original Fluevog design. Bloom covers the storefront with abstract flowers painted in vibrant colours. “Once I saw the design for it,” says Davidson, “I was like, ‘Oh wow, this is going to be pretty loud.’”

Rodriguez’s mural benefits the store from both a visual and a business standpoint. Bloom communicates John Fluevog Shoes’ avant-garde approach to design: bold colours and unique, playful patterns. The mural also draws customer interest: “We even get people that have lived in Vancouver for years, or even in the neighbourhood, and they’ll come into the store now after it’s been painted and they will ask, ‘When did you guys open?’” Davidson says.

Working on a mural for a business requires collaboration between the artist and the client. Sandeep Johal, a Vancouver-based visual artist and muralist, says “[Clients] often have a specific vision or a specific colour palette that they want incorporated, and so then I have to create what the client wants but still retain my aesthetic.” Johal’s work combines strong lines with imagery that represents her South Asian heritage.
Murals not only help businesses and artists, but they also help build community. “For me, it is really important that my work is accessible,” Johal says. “People often feel really intimidated walking into a gallery space to look at work, and so if you can bring the gallery to them, I think that’s the best-case scenario.”

Though VMF helps spread accessible art throughout Vancouver, the festival has been criticized for gentrifying the city. With real estate companies like Edgar Development, Low Tide Properties, and Wesgroup as sponsors, the VMF murals have been seen as “artwashing.” In Melody Ma’s article in The Tyee, “Vancouver Should Stop Subsidizing Developers’ Artwashing and Protect Creative Spaces,” she defines artwashing as “a Trojan horse tactic [developers] use to ‘revitalize’ lower-income and working-class neighbourhoods where they own property.”

Johal believes VMF has made parts of Vancouver more accessible and inviting. “People tend not to tag buildings with murals on them, so it can decrease vandalism.” She adds, “when I was doing my first VMF mural, two women commented that they felt safer walking through the alleyway now that there was art in it, and I never thought about that… I never walked through that alleyway until I did my mural, and now I walk through all the time because [other] people walk through.”

Living in Mount Pleasant, the location of many VMF murals, Johal can see the benefits they bring to the neighbourhood. “Every day when I’m out walking with my son, we see these murals on a regular basis, and it creates this sense of pride in your community,” she says. “I think it can bring people respite from these rainy days during the winter when things are pretty dark and gloomy, and I think these murals can be a real high point to the day.”

Davidson believes Rodriguez’s mural has increased both foot traffic and interest in the store. He says Fluevog has been in the heart of Granville Street for decades, but “it hasn’t really been noticed until recently.” He explains that Rodriguez’s mural has sparked interest in the downtown business community and suggests that other stores should follow suit: “Why not showcase art on buildings?”

Known for her unique style, Johal’s clients include the Vancouver Art Gallery and Lululemon. Johal’s work has also been featured in the Vancouver Mural Festival (VMF), which creates large-scale public murals that contribute to Vancouver’s growing art scene. Her 2017 VMF piece Girls Are Fierce Like Tigers, near the intersection of Main and Broadway, was her first outdoor mural: “With that mural, I received a lot of press and a lot of visibility because I was just starting out as an artist… there was absolutely a direct correlation with that mural and my subsequent projects and jobs.”

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EMILY LIU BEGAN practicing kintsugi when a friend asked her to mend a broken cup that held precious memories. Thanks to Liu’s background in dentistry, she was familiar with restoring porcelain, so she repaired the piece; however, she disliked the look of the finished cup and decided to embellish it using the Japanese technique known as kintsugi. Wanting to learn more about the craft, Liu studied under pottery Master HiDe Ebina and kintsugi Master Asami at the Vancouver-based studio, HiDe Ceramic Works.

Kintsugi, which can translate to “gold joining,” is thought to have originated in Japan during the late 15th century. The process was first used to mend objects of great importance, such as bowls and utensils that were “the central components of the Japanese tea ceremony,” explains Rebecca Cragg, owner of Camellia Teas of Ottawa. Kintsugi exposes the fractures in a broken object, highlighting them with gold as a testimony of its history.

The process begins by determining how to put the broken pieces back together. According to Dave Pike, an American artist living in Nara, Japan, it can take from ten minutes to an hour to decide how the pieces fit and how to approach the mending. Once this step is complete, multiple layers of lacquer are used to fill in the cracks, and finally gold or other metals are painted overtop.

Most kintsugi artists agree that it is a time-consuming process. Liu explains that 200 to 300 layers of lacquer must be applied, and each layer must dry for anywhere from 7 to 12 days before another is added. In Liu’s experience, it can take a month to six months to finish a piece. “You need a lot of patience,” she says. “It’s fine work. If you rush it, it’s not art. I can give it to you in a week if you use superglue and paint gold on it, but it’s not the same as kintsugi. I’ve never had a person say, ‘Oh, I can’t wait that long.’ They understand that you have to take time: you have to do it right.”

However, kintsugi should not be applied to just any object. “The purpose of kintsugi was to repair something of value and sentimental worth, so that you could continue to use it,” says Cragg. According to Liu, such emotional value means “you’re willing to
spend hundreds of dollars to fix something that might have only cost fifty dollars in the first place.”

Despite the tradition behind kintsugi, Cragg has noticed some of her clients see it only as a decorative art form: “People in the West are being drawn by this notion of the broken being beautiful… So I’ve had, for example, clients come to me and say things like ‘I really want to learn how to do kintsugi,’… and they’ll come in with nothing broken and shatter something on my floor!”

“You’re willing to spend hundreds of dollars to fix something that might have only cost fifty dollars in the first place.”

Cragg emphasizes the importance of an emotional connection with the broken item when performing kintsugi. She tells the story of one of her clients whose wife had bought a beautiful, blue salad bowl when the couple lived in Germany. The bowl was always on the table as a centrepiece; it was part of the family. Unfortunately, the bowl was broken in a move back to Canada. The client explained that his wife was so devastated that she could not even bear to see the pieces, so he stored them in a box in the garage. The pieces remained there for 15 years.

By chance, this client came across the concept of kintsugi and learned about Cragg’s work. So, he took the box with the bowl...
pieces to her studio—without telling his wife. Cragg was in tears after she listened to the story and said, “I can, of course, repair this bowl for you, but there is no way that you’re not [going to be] a part of the repair of this item because it’s way too important.”

After six months of work, Cragg’s client gave the blue bowl to his wife as an anniversary present: “For an hour and a half,” says Cragg of the wife’s reaction, “all she could do was hold that bowl in her arms... and it was the most amazing, touching moment... this is what kintsugi is about.”

Apart from being a deeply personal process, kintsugi can be therapeutic as it requires full awareness and attention to detail. An individual must be mindfully present while filling in the cracks of a broken item. For some, it can feel like filling in the cracks of their heart. One of Cragg’s clients had a son who died in a car crash. Around the same time as the accident, the client’s favourite ikebana (floral arranging) bowl had broken. The client worked alongside Cragg, repairing the bowl near the anniversary of her son’s passing. “For her, it was not about it looking good by the end of it—it was simply the task of piecing it back together,” Cragg recalls. “I asked her, ‘How did it feel doing this?’ and she cried and said, ‘I feel like I put my heart back together again.’”

Whether it is restoring an item of great value, or the process of finding mindfulness, kintsugi is an art form that provides the artist with something meaningful. After all, “kintsugi is a very potent, emotional experience,” Cragg says, “if we allow ourselves to engage with that dimension of it.”

With the process of kintsugi, broken pottery is mended using lacquer and gold. Crafted by artist Emily Liu.

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Art has the ability to open doors and build bridges. In the first responder community, art has helped heal, connect, and raise awareness about mental health.

story Alayna Fairman

THE LITTLE GIRL is found in her car seat, her teddy bear no longer safe in her arms. An irreversible silence enshrouds her, separating her from the sirens and the flashing red and blue lights. She will never be able to tell the first responder the name of the bear he found in the ditch.

This is just one reality of the calls first responders may attend to. As heroes and helpers, they routinely face stress, trauma, and life and death situations. While not all first responders will develop an occupational stress injury, a study published in 2018 by the Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, “Mental Disorder Symptoms among Public Safety Personnel in Canada,” indicates traumatic events elevate mental injury risk, including post-traumatic stress injury (ptsd), which is clinically known as post-traumatic stress disorder (ptsd). Julia Hyslop, a registered clinical counsellor and trained...
occupationally aware clinician in Vancouver, says, “the stressors are diverse, and I think that’s important. Like PTSD and trauma, there’s diversity there. In what it looks like but also how it happens and why it happens.”

Statistically, because of their line of work, first responders are at a greater risk of sustaining mental health injuries. Hyslop explains that the longer responders serve and the more calls they attend, the greater that risk becomes: “Mental health issues are positively correlated with call volume.” In this regard, the British Columbia Professional Fire Fighters’ Association (BCPFFA) reported on their website in 2019 that a 2017 Canadian survey of 6,000 first responders found 44.5 percent were affected by mental health injuries or disorders, while the average for the general public is 10 percent.

For a long time, the memory of the little girl haunted Daniel Sundahl, the Alberta paramedic and firefighter who found the teddy bear at the collision site. It was only when he began recreating the image with photo art (photography and digital painting) that he was able to work through the memory and emotions. By depicting the girl sitting on a fire truck bumper, with angelic wings and holding her bear once more, Sundahl could remember her differently from the accident scene: “I was able to almost change my memory of that. The first image I have of her now is that image I created of her on the back of the bumper.”

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Approximately five years ago, Sundahl embraced art as a way to work through trauma and complex emotions after his therapist suggested he apply his painting hobby to process his memories. His first paintings were based on a call to a scene that stayed with him for over ten years: a 22-year-old motorcyclist hit by a drunk driver. He vividly recalls the dying man calling out, “mommy, mommy!” What impacted Sundahl deeply was that the mother would never hear these final words.

Sundahl portrayed the complex emotion of this call in two paintings. In *Trauma Code 2*, the man’s spirit watches a paramedic who sits holding his bowed head with gloved hands. He explains that “the spirit is basically telling the paramedic that you failed his mom.”

Sundahl did not share the completed image for a long time. He was concerned about what others would think, especially having depicted the paramedic touching his head with gloved hands: this is not an approved practice in paramedic culture and operation, since it is in conflict with hygiene protocols. Additionally, at the time there was greater stigma surrounding first responders’ mental health than there is today.

Melanie Stephens, a paramedic and the mental health and wellness coordinator for Ambulance Paramedics of British Columbia (APBC), explains, “the culture of first responder organizations in the past has been an attitude of ‘This is what you signed up to do, so no matter what you see or do, you need to suck it up and find a way to deal with it.’” Hyslop adds that the idea of counselling can go against the identity of a first responder as a protector and dependable peer and can stir up perceptions of weakness, shame, and guilt.

However, when Sundahl posted the painting of the paramedic and the motorcyclist on Facebook, the response was unimaginable. In one day, his followers went from 30 to 30,000. “I thought my phone was broken,” he says. Many comments left on the post were from other first responders telling Sundahl what the painting meant to them: “It went viral right away, and people really connected.” He says that everything changed that day.

**From Memory to Concept**

Cassandra Evans, a registered clinical counsellor and BC art therapist, explains that art can act as a practice of de-stressing and regulating emotion (inherently therapeutic) or as an exploratory medium (in therapy). In either application, art is successful in helping individuals process trauma or mental injury, as it bypasses language and communication barriers allowing access to, and expression of, trauma, which is often stored as mental images. In addition, moving
an emotion or thought out of the body into a physical space can also make it easier to understand.

In Sundahl’s case, art has acted “as a way to purge these calls from my memory.” When creating his concept paintings, he searches for an image to convey the complexity of a recurring idea, emotion, or memory in an understandable way. He stages and photographs the base image and digitally paints overtop, adding elements like spirits, angels (representative of recovery), and demons (representative of trauma).

The painting that most authentically portrays concept and process—and Sundahl’s favourite—is *Demon Eats the Ambulance Driver*. This powerful piece depicts a demon devouring a paramedic. It expresses the point of giving up, laying down defences, and ultimately giving in to suicide. Sundahl clarifies that while “ambulance driver” is a derogatory term in paramedic culture, he intentionally used it to communicate that “he’s no longer a paramedic: he’s simply an ambulance driver at that point, ‘cause he’s just given in.”

Death by suicide is devastating in the first responder community. Erica Koopmans’s article, “Emergency Response Services Suicide: A Crisis in Canada?” published in 2017 in the *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, reviews statistics that report there were 51 deaths by suicide in 2015, and 48 in 2016.

Suicide has been one of the forces mobilizing first responder communities to raise awareness for mental health and breaking the stigma. Stephens says that over the past five to six years, there has been significant improvement. In 2015, Worksafe BC created the BC First Responders’ Mental Health Committee and launched the *Share It. Don’t Wear It* campaign.

In addition, the BC Professional Fire Fighters’ Association started a task force in May 2015 to address the mental health of Canadian first responders. In October 2017, the task force introduced training for counsellors in BC. The goal was to create a website directory of occupationally aware clinicians specifically for responders, which launched on November 12, 2019, and contains over 150 professionals in BC. The training has gained interest in other provinces and has extended into Alberta and Saskatchewan. Hyslop, who completed the training, says one of its main focuses “is about the unique culture and experiences of first responders that are needing to be understood in order to build bridges with the first responder community… They don’t need to teach us about their culture, we already know it. And that’s really important for them to get through the door to get help.”

Randy Stephens says people to know that post-traumatic growth and recovery are possible and has been a passionate advocate for first responders’ mental health. He is the founder and president of the Peer Recovery and Resiliency Society, which was established in 2018 and holds yearly conferences. In addition to his concept art, he promotes the first responder profession through group and individual portraits. Ultimately, his journey led him to a deeper connection with first responders in Canada and worldwide. He recalls a profound moment from a recent speaking session: “This one woman came up and she had tears in her eyes. And she just gave me a hug and said, ‘You just saved my life.’”
Regardless of the medium, art enables individuals to process emotions and memories differently than any language. As Hyslop puts it, “art offers, really beautifully, a non-verbal language with which to communicate and process trauma where words fail.”

Not the End of the Story

Teresa Coulter, a primary care paramedic in Calgary, AB, found that art not only builds resiliency, but also allows her to form deeper connections with other first responders. In the year-long project Sock Drawer Stories, each month she painted a portrait of a paramedic dealing with PTSD. Originally, Coulter intended the project as a way to understand this injury: at the time, there was less awareness about mental health, and the community was hearing of peers dying by suicide.

While some of the paramedics who sat for Coulter told their stories and others did not, the space that she provided in the painting sessions allowed each to be seen and understood as they were. After the project’s completion, Coulter felt more connected to these paramedics, and saw her art reaching further than she imagined. The 12 portraits were showcased at the University of Calgary in June 2015 and gained national attention. “It was this non-invasive way of talking about mental health without actually talking about mental health,” says Coulter. Now five years later, she is still encouraged by the letter one participant sent her: “He said that finally he felt like somebody had reached inside of him, and he knew he wasn’t alone anymore.”

Following Sock Drawer Stories, Coulter has sat on advisory boards, spoken at conferences, and connected with over 300 first responders. In 2018, she painted eight portraits of first responders for a project called Operation C Formation for a suicide awareness conference held by the Calgary Police Department and the Legacy Police Society. Today she remains passionate about first responders’ mental health and finds that art works as a bridge to open up conversations and create connections. “The creative process was really quite something to be a part of and to watch, and to hear people come up with their ideas and why it was important for them,” she says.

While art aided in healing and building bridges, Fitzgerald points out that the mosaic was not the only road to healing. “It’s not like we took it on ourselves to heal everybody through art,” Fitzgerald explains. “If there was someone who was struggling, that needed professional care, that was offered, and avenues were made easy for that person to reach out.” She also believes that the mosaic would never have been created without a growing awareness and decreasing stigma around first responders’ mental health.
“We’re just not alone,” Fitzgerald reflects. “We just have to open our mouths and hearts to know that. And sometimes that’s the hardest thing to do. Especially when you’re used to being the one running into it, not running away.”

If you or someone you know is wrestling with a mental health injury or suicidal ideation, you are not alone: help and support are available. As Coulter assures you, “being injured is not the end of your story.”

For help or support, contact
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BC Mental Health Support Line: 310-6789
BC Suicide Help Line: 1-800-784-2433
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WHEN AMY AMANTEA unexpectedly lost her sight at 24, she assumed she would never be able to enjoy the arts again. At that time, Amantea was passionate about visual arts and an aspiring actor. With no sight in her right eye, and about two percent in the left one, and no central vision, her sight loss changed much of what she took for granted: “When I lost my sight, I actually thought to myself that there’s no way I’ll ever be able to experience [the arts] again.”

To describe what it is like for how her sight works now, Amantea uses the analogy of a jigsaw puzzle. “For me, my jigsaw puzzle is missing lots of pieces. And so, if you’ve got a puzzle... and you take out a bunch of the pieces, sometimes you can’t tell what that puzzle is creating. Then imagine that the pieces that still exist are a little bit fuzzy.”

Sometimes when Amantea looks at familiar objects, such as a tree, she thinks she can see it perfectly, but doctors explained to her that the retina is part of the brain and not part of the eye. This means that when she looks at certain objects, the brain can fill in the gap of missing information based on what she has seen before. It is not the same for everyone who is blind or partially sighted. “Blindness is like a fingerprint,” Amantea explains, “and it’s unique to everybody who experiences it.”

After losing her sight, Amantea had to face many challenges, including simple tasks like brushing her teeth and matching socks. “You’re learning everything from scratch,” she says.

Amy Amantea will not allow barriers stand in her way. As an actor, art enthusiast, and jewellery designer, she has not let the loss of her sight deter her from the pursuit and enjoyment of art.
Since the beginning, one of her biggest challenges has been people asking her how she lost her sight. While Amantea understands the curiosity, these conversations consistently remind her that she is different, which is not what she wants to focus on or finds important, “and so, the conversation about, ‘Are you enjoying the weather today?’ as mundane as that sounds, is such a ‘normal thing’ that it doesn’t remind me every two seconds that I’m different.”

Indeed, every human being is unique, and the most unique thing about a person who is blind, is not their blindness. Talking with Amantea makes it apparent that she does not want to hide her disability, but she also does not want it to limit her life.

To keep her passion for art alive, Amantea initially attended plays with friends and family. Yet, she found the performances hard to follow and often fell asleep. “A really expensive 2-hour nap,” she jokes. It was when she joined VocalEye that she realized she could access art in a whole new way.

**VocalEye**

VocalEye is a non-profit society that was established in 2012. The first of its kind in Canada, VocalEye strives to make visual art more accessible to the blind community: notably by providing live description of both art and cultural events. As a member, and the community outreach coordinator, Amantea explains the society’s importance: “People who are blind or partially sighted have lots of barriers to participating in our local arts and cultural scene.” She goes on to say, “VocalEye really looks at what those barriers are and how we reduce them, so people who have sight loss can participate as anybody else can participate.”

VocalEye originated from Kickstart Disability Art and Culture (KDAC), an organization that introduced live audio description to Vancouver in 2009. Steph Kirkland, the founder and executive director of VocalEye, was working as a theatre director and recording textbooks for post-secondary students, when KDAC offered training in *The Art of Live Description*. “It was a strange coming together of these two things for me… with the theatre world and transcribing for the blind.” After providing live description for various theatre productions in Vancouver over the next three years, KDAC transferred the live description program to Kirkland in 2012. And VocalEye was born.

**The Art of Description**

Composed of sighted and non-sighted volunteers and employees, VocalEye provides live description for art and cultural events, including gallery tours, public art walking tours, and touch tours. Apart from their live events, VocalEye also offers training for describers.

“A describer is trained in the art of description,” explains Kirkland. “They fill in the blanks for the listener of important visual material, by performance or event. So, what they need to do is to discern what are the most important elements in the show that need to be described.” In order to create a description script, a describer must be familiar with the story, which often means they attend a show up to three times. They take notes about information not conveyed in dialogue or sound that would be important to describe. The describer’s main challenge is to communicate in a way that stimulates the listener’s understanding, while at the same time leaving enough room for the imagination to be active.

Describers must also find the right balance between describing too much and not enough. For instance, in a two character show, the describer can take time to describe each actor. In a show with ten characters, the describer has to decide what makes each character stand out (physical attributes, status, costume, and mannerisms) and focus on those characteristics. Kirkland points out that the trap of describing is to over describe. “And we all did that at the beginning,” she laughs. She goes on to explain, “the people who should be describing are the people who have the most experience in that area.” For instance, people who are experienced in visual arts should describe visual arts, while people who are experienced in dance should describe dance.

During a show, a small, handheld receiver and earpiece provide the live description to VocalEye users. The describer, usually at the back of the theatre, describes important information and actions between lines of dialogue. In a show without dialogue, the describer has to choose which parts of the experience to share and what can be left to the listener’s imagination. However, during events such as public art tours, the attendees have the chance to ask for more detail and can then decide what is important to be described for them.

Attendees also have the opportunity for a personal experience during touch tours. These tours allow an individual to interact with and understand objects by touch. The items explored must be so
uncommon that they could not be understood by verbal description alone: “Nobody's going to hand you a spoon and say this is part of the touch tour,” says Amantea, “unless what they've done with the spoon is made it so unique that you have to experience it to understand what it is.” Puppets, costumes, time period pieces, and weaponry have been popular objects included in these tours.

VocalEye has recognized that incorporating other senses adds to an individual’s experience. “My sense of touch has certainly become more important than it was when I could see, because sight is your primary source of information,” Amantea explains. “But since I don’t have that to rely on, now I’m using my fingers, and I can get some of the small details. Whereas I wouldn’t have been able to recognize those before, but now I’m looking at them with my hands.”

Describing is a real art. Like any art, it teaches a new way of experiencing things. For the describers themselves, the process can enhance the way they see the world. “The way I look at everything has changed. And just the act of looking, and just because I can see, doesn’t mean that I do,” says Kirkland about her experience as a describer. “I’m hoping it’s making me a bit more attentive to things, and also more aware of how we all see things differently, and we all express things differently.”

Because description is based on a describer’s perspective, a blind person has “a really interesting experience, which is I get somebody else’s perspective so to speak,” explains Amantea. “And not in a way where they’re telling me what I should experience, but by osmosis they’re telling me how they experience it, and then I sort of get to decide.”

Being a subjective process, the art of description is constantly evolving, aiming to serve the blind community as best as it can, with a full and immersive experience in art and culture. After each event, VocalEye invites its attendees to provide feedback, so the organization can identify ways to improve the experience in future events.

Beads and Stage Lights

As “an artist of opportunities,” Amantea does not just enjoy art: when she finds something that she likes and wants to experience, she dives into it. Self-titled “The Blind Beader,” she designs and handcrafts her own line of beaded jewellery, including earrings, bracelets, and necklaces. She specifically designed a series for VocalEye using Evil Eye glass beads, with all proceeds going to the organization.

With a love for the stage, Amantea continues to work as an actor. She is involved with Realwheels Theatre, an organization that produces theatre performances with the disability community. Along with other productions, she was part of a stage show called Sequence, where her character, Dr. Guzman, was losing her sight. To play this role was a very exciting opportunity for Amantea. “It’s kind of interesting,” Amantea reflects, “having lost my sight has actually given me a gift. It’s made me unique in such a way that when opportunities come I’m part of the niche, instead of part of the majority.”
Moving Forward

Year after year, accessibility is gradually improving for the disability community. In Canada, acts have been passed in various provinces, including the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act in 2005, the Accessibility for Manitobans Act in 2013, and the Nova Scotia Accessibility Act in 2017.

Many organizations are involved in working with disability communities, and cities are trying to enhance infrastructure to increase accessibility. While live description is common in the United States because of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which imposes legislation that requires art events to be accessible, Canada is working on implementing further legislation to remove barriers for the disability community. Bill c-81, The Accessible Canada Act, passed the House of Commons in May 2019 and became law on June 21, 2019. According to the 2019 news release on the Government of Canada’s Employment and Social Development Canada website, c-81 will “transform how the Government of Canada addresses accessibility across the country.” While c-81 states that federally regulated organizations must develop plans for, and adhere to, accessibility requirements, Amantea is concerned about the implementation: “It doesn't quite have any feet yet, so we won't know what our Canadian act of accessibility will look like fully, but maybe that will change things.”

Individuals and organizations are working toward a day when all communities will be able to access not only arts and cultural events, but every experience life has to offer. One thing should never be forgotten: to ask the communities what their needs are. Nothing About Us Without Us is a movement that promotes open discussion with the disability community to understand their needs, accessibility included. The main message is that no decision about disabilities should be made without consulting the disability community.

While her life has changed drastically over the 12 years since the loss of her sight, Amantea maintains a grateful mindset. “If there's been a gift in the loss of my sight—and some people can't understand what I mean by that—but I have had opportunities, I have met people, I have done projects, I have experienced things that I never would have had the opportunity or desire to have done before. Or even thought about.”

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ARTIST KATE HOLLEY started her stick and poke tattoo career when a friend returned from a party with a half-finished tattoo. Equipped with a sterilized needle and ink, Holley finished the job. After successfully using a similar method to give tattoos to friends and family, she took a break from school and rented a studio space in the hope of launching a new career. “I said to myself, ‘Okay, let’s just see how this works. If it doesn’t work, I’ll go back to school.’” She adds, “it’s been four years and I haven’t gone back.” Now one of many independent Vancouver tattoo artists, Holley has made a viable career from hand-poke tattooing.

Pifa Alarcon says her visa was at stake, and a lot was on the line when she made the transition from corporate graphic designer to freelancer and tattoo artist. “It was big for me, changing my job,” Alarcon explains. “I thought, ‘If I’m going to go for this, I have to do it right.’” Like Holley, who attended Emily Carr University of Art + Design, Alarcon has a formal art background. After finding herself in a creative rut with her corporate design job, she bought a hand-poke tattoo kit and began practicing on herself—it quickly turned from a hobby to a career.

Both Holley and Alarcon provide an alternative to the mainstream approach of machine tattooing. The spaces both artists work in foster a more inclusive and less daunting environment for those who do not feel welcomed by machine tattoo culture, which can be challenging and intimidating to break into. Alarcon has experienced multiple rejections and dismissals of her interest in the tattoo industry, both before her career as a hand-poke artist and as an established artist. Similarly, Holley felt that she did not fit in the typical tattoo shop mould. “I had never thought about being a tattoo artist, because when I was growing up it was never a thing like it is now,” she says. “The only tattoos I knew of were Sailor Jerry, hardcore, traditional, skulls and blood, and I was not into any of that. ‘Tattoo artist’ sounds so gritty and aggressive, and I’m not like that at all.”

With the wealth of information on the internet and the availability of materials, both Holley and Alarcon were able to immerse...
themselves in the hand poking craft. This style of tattooing is quite different from machine tattooing, which uses dual electric coils to push and pull groups of needles a millimetre below the skin, injecting ink at rates of 50 to 3,000 times a minute. In hand poking, also known as stick and poke, ink is pushed into the skin by individual needles. The tattoos from this process are made dot-by-dot, with each dot contributing to the lines and shading of the tattoo. In some places, natural materials like bamboo or thread are used as alternatives. Due to the dot-by-dot method, these tattoos are often smaller than machine tattoos. Because they tend to cause less trauma on the skin, they also heal faster and are less painful.

Social media platforms, like Instagram, helped Holley and Alarcon establish their presence in Vancouver. Holley credits Instagram as essential to the launch and success of her career, saying "it would've been impossible otherwise." As a result, these artists have become well-known among the East Vancouver population, particularly in the LGBTQ2+ scene. Holley says the majority of her clients are women and people from the LGBTQ2+ community. And it's easy to see why—independent hand-poke artists create a space and dialogue for women and LGBTQ2+ individuals that mainstream tattooing often fails to provide.

For many women, going to a tattoo parlour can mean entering into an uncomfortable situation. "I've heard of this feeling of discomfort from clients, and it's not even something you can complain about," Holley says. "It's not an actual assault, but a lot of male tattoo artists have made comments about clients' bodies in a sexual way, or had them take off more clothes than they've needed to. It's happened so many times to so many people, and no one's talking about it—it's just a thing that happens."

Settings are crucial for many women and LGBTQ2+ individuals to relax. Holley describes her studio space as "somewhere I would want to hang out if I wasn't working. There's a bunch of plants and art all over the walls, and everything's white. I have essential oils going." Alarcon's workspace is also a safe environment, located in a private studio in the Eastside. As part of a tattooing collective, the studio is known for its inclusivity and support of the LGBTQ2+ community.

Another desirable characteristic of hand-poke tattooing is the time the process takes. While both machine and hand-poke tattooing times vary based on the design, machine tattoos are usually quicker than the individual needle process of hand poking. Even though the duration of a stick and poke session is project specific, Alarcon says the minimum is usually two hours, which means the client and artist have space to talk and share. It is the opportunity to connect that emerging tattoo artist April Baker-Garrison appreciates. "There's something really vulnerable about getting a tattoo," they say, "it's not just lying there for however many hours. You're trusting someone to mark your body forever."

During the stick and poke tattooing process, the artist must make space to listen to the client. "I have this joke that as soon as people lie back on the table, it's like lying back on Freud's couch," Holley says. "Everything comes out. There's something about seeing a stranger that you're never going to see again that makes people share their entire life." In this way, artists provide two services—the tattoo itself and a supportive ear. Holley views this as a symbiotic exchange. "I think we both benefit. I think in Vancouver you can feel very isolated, and after talking to these people, it gives me hope for humanity."

It is because of the differences between mainstream and hand-poke tattooing that Baker-Garrison sought out the safe spaces hand-poke artists provide. They agree that many machine shops "don't create the safest, friendliest space for women or LGBTQ2+ individuals who also want to be a part of this really cool culture."

The space that hand-poke tattooing provides means that many people will be able to receive a tattoo in a comfortable setting without judgement. Holley feels such a connection to her work that when asked to do a larger machine piece, she says, "it's something that I want to learn, but I love stick and poke so much that it's hard to switch over."
Scien-tea-fic!

At Paragon Tea Room, traditional flavours combine with modern technology to bring people and cultures together.

story Mishayla Van Ry
photography Lorenza Tessari

MICHELLE CHEUNG, owner of Paragon Tea Room, says her company is known to customers not only as a tea room but also as a tea laboratory. Cheung has reinvented tea service by combining technology with traditional tea cultures. “I think for any tradition to pass on to the next generation, there has to be some kind of change,” she says.

Through experimentation, Cheung has developed delicious tea recipes with distinct and balanced flavours. Each one of her infusions requires precise brewing methods and an understanding of the history of tea. Paragon uses a tea espresso machine, which renders six to eight tea bags worth of loose-leaf tea to make a concentrated shot. Paragon’s inventive ways of crafting a cup of tea can convert even the most skeptical customer: “I heard a lot of people tell me, especially when I first opened, ‘Oh, I’m not a tea drinker.’ ” Cheung says this could be “because they never had a good experience with tea bags.”

Using the tea espresso machine, Paragon combines hojicha—a traditional roasted Japanese green tea—with oat milk to make a hojicha tea misto. Another favourite is the pu-erh oat chocolate, which mixes a shot of dark Chinese pu-erh tea with oat milk and pure cacao powder. “We all love hot chocolate, and we all love mochas: how about a tea version of a mocha?” Cheung says. She believes drinks like these can bridge the gap between tea cultures around the world.

Cheung and her team strive to improve business every day, making meaningful connections with their customers: “Traditionally when you make tea, you’re hosting a tea ceremony, you’re making tea for friends or a guest. It has to be a very genuine connection.” The products at Paragon are always made and shared with intention and appreciation. It is Cheung’s goal to bring people together and build a long-lasting tea culture.

Michelle Cheung, Anna Chemoff, and Yurique Chang brew their tea creations alongside treats like their matcha bubble waffle.
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