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Woven In: Indigenous Women's Activism and Media
Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, BC

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Woven In: Indigenous Women's Activism and Media. Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, BC. November 19, 2022 – May 7, 2023. Curated by Gerry Ambers, Marianne Nicolson, and Siku Allooloo.

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When entering the exhibition *Woven In: Indigenous Women's Activism and Media*, the first thing the visitor notices is the sound of laughter and voices. Other spaces in the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria are quiet, or have soft music playing, but this room fills with the sound of children playing and talking.

The audio is coming from a screen showing a short film directed by Slts'lani (Banchi Hanuse) about Nuxalk Radio, the station out of Bella Coola created to "help keep the Nuxalkmc language alive and broadcast the laws of the lands and waters."¹

It is appropriate to engage all the senses in an exhibit featuring Indigenous archival research and materials. Indigenous records come in all formats, but oral/aural records are particularly important. As Kim Lawson states, Indigenous peoples not only create and use information, they "also have their own knowledge systems rooted in complex oral cultures."² This difference in terminology – *knowledge system* versus *knowledge institution* – represents a fundamental difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches to archives. In a culture in which everything – governance, the marking of social and cultural

1 Gerry Ambers, Marianne Nicolson, and Siku Allooloo, *Woven In: Indigenous Women's Activism and Media* (Victoria, BC: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2022), interpretation panel.

2 Kim Lawson, "Precious Fragments: First Nations Materials in Archives, Libraries and Museums" (master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 2004), 1.



FIGURE 1 Homage to Indian Women, an excerpt from the Winter 1975–76 issue of Indígena: News from Indian America. Source: Courtesy of Siku Allooloo.

occasions, the capturing of history, education, and more – is centred on orality, the documentation of that culture that is preserved in a repository can only ever represent a fraction of the true record.³

Activism is the use of intentional action to bring about political or social change. Curated by Gerry Ambers, Marianne Nicolson, and Siku Allooloo, this exhibit demonstrates activism in its fight for basic human rights. The right to land, language, and control over traditional knowledge are all ratified in the

3 For examples of text illustrating the functioning of Indigenous oral societies, see Thomas Boston, Shirley Morven, and Nisga'a Language and Culture Department, *From Time Before Memory: The People of K'amligihahlhaahl* (New Aiyansh, BC: School District No. 92 [Nisga'a], 1996); George Clutesi, *Potlatch* (Sidney, BC: Gray's Publishing Ltd, 1969); and Shauna McRanor, "Maintaining the Reliability of Aboriginal Oral Records and their Material Manifestations: Implications for Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 64–88. McRanor's article examines Indigenous oral records and compares their authenticity and reliability to that of written and other records.



United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).⁴ Many people enjoy these rights without giving them any thought; they take them for granted. But Indigenous peoples are forced to prove their rights and entitlement. Accessing archival documentation, which is often created and almost always managed by non-Indigenous people, is key to this process. This establishes the archives as both a place that can wield power and control over Indigenous users and a place in which those same people can reclaim language, identity, and control over knowledge.

⁴ UN General Assembly, Resolution 61/295, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, A/RES/61/295 (September 13, 2007).



FIGURE 2 Compilation of grassroots media from Gerry Amber's personal archives, late 1960s to late 1990s. Source: Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

The exhibit is therefore both an illustration of activism and an act of activism in itself. By taking archival materials, removing them from their context as records preserved in a repository, and exhibiting them in a way that tells a specific story, the curators/activists have turned the documents into tools that aid in subverting the common narrative and enhancing the voices of the underrepresented.

With every sense engaged, the visitor experiences the exhibit rather than simply observing it. Through headphones, the sounds of the Nuxalk language provide a captivating soundscape as visitors read through Native Alliance for Red Power (NARP) newsletters. The newsletters include NARP's mandate, beginning with the statement "We will not be free until we are able to determine our destiny." The station played through the headphones features Nuxalk Radio

segments recorded entirely in the Nuxalk language. Being immersed in this language while reading articles, written in English, that relay Indigenous authors' experiences at the Kamloops Indian Residential School or describe instances of police violence against Indigenous people is jarring. The juxtaposition of the language, the vehicle for the transmission of intangible cultural heritage and the instrument for keeping the culture alive and thriving, against the written word, which was often weaponized by colonial oppressors, is powerful. The resulting message is subtle but clear: after years of fighting for survival, Indigenous people are not only here; they are thriving.

Lawson describes the Indigenous knowledge found in archives as "precious fragments": pieces of information torn from their original contexts and uses and scattered throughout settler and government narratives. The pieces can be used to inform, revitalize, teach, and heal. Indigenous people feel strong connections to cultural material in archives, libraries, and museums.⁵ Indigenous archives are created and maintained in homes and organizations and in communities, assembled from their own records but also often supplemented with material compiled from other sources. The binders of NARP newsletters bear the citation, "from the archives of Gerry Ambers." On examination of the pages, traces of the custodial history of the records are apparent. Each newsletter is annotated with a call number from a different source: the provincial archives, a local library, etc. The newsletters were catalogued and preserved by these large repositories, accessed and copied by Gerry Ambers, and became something new: a personal archive – a collection of fragments that together form a body of knowledge. From the personal archives of Gerry Ambers, they have once again been transformed by this exhibit; their incorporation is a display of activism. By taking the fragments and combining them with the sounds of the Nuxalk language, the curators have used the written word and sound recordings to produce a new understanding of the trajectory of Indigenous activism, resilience, and endurance, weaving the past seamlessly with the present.

Continuing through the exhibit, the visitor is confronted with representations of Indigenous labour and activism through archival-fragments-turned-artworks, graphic art, and filmed interviews. Somewhere between the looming enlarged prints of *Indigena News* and Tania Willard's comic series *Red Flags Red Skin*, depicting graphic stories of labour strikes and activism related to Cowichan

5 Lawson, "Precious Fragments," 97.



FIGURE 3 Community pictographs, 2019, Dzawadq'enuxw territory, Ukwanelis Village, along the Gwa'yi (Kingcome) River. Source: Photo courtesy of Marianne Nicolson.

sweater production, a theme emerges: communication. Each piece or combination of archival pieces demonstrates a dissemination of information and a sharing of experiences. The wall of ephemera from Gerry Ambers' personal archives (pages from newsletters, articles, poetry, posters) illustrates the impact of the written word on knowledge sharing, and interviews with Ethel Pearson, in the film *Dancing Around the Table: Part One*, confirm the power of oral testimony.

The final piece in the exhibit is a series of images of community pictographs, by Marianne Nicolson. This installation juxtaposes the traditional recordkeeping practice of rock art with the modern capture of information through photography. The merging of these traditions encapsulates the successful usurpation of the archival record: throughout the exhibition, it is the non-Indigenous record that is transformed and repurposed, and in the final installation, the Indigenous record is made "legitimate" by non-Indigenous archival standards through the activist's method of capturing it in a photographic record. Not only does the exhibition demonstrate a reimagining of archival material and its use as a tool for activism, it also causes viewers to rethink and confront our understandings of recordkeeping and storytelling.