



Portraits of Robbie George (left) and Miya Thomas, great-great-grandchildren of Chief Dan George, are included in the Children of Tomorrow exhibit currently on view at the Seymour Art Gallery. Photographer Nancy Bleck and Tsleil-Waututh councillor Charlene Aleck will speak at the gallery today at 2 p.m. PHOTOS SUPPLIED NANCY BLECK

Tsleil-Waututh Nation assert their role as protectors of the Sacred Trust

Children of tomorrow

"Prior to contact, a population of up to several thousand Tsleil-Waututh people were living within eastern Burrard Inlet by actively and expertly managing the rich natural resources of Burrard Inlet and surrounding areas. Indeed, the entire Coast Salish cultural pattern of living in large houses and large villages could only be supported by such a pattern of regular intensive use. This essentially Coast Salish pattern of dense settlement and corresponding intensive regular resource use has been well-demonstrated to have been established for the last 2,500 years or so (at least) for Coast Salish ancestors generally, and Tsleil-Waututh ancestors specifically."

— Jesse Morin, report: Tsleil-Waututh Nation's History, Culture and Aboriginal Interests in Eastern Burrard Inlet

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Once upon a time, not that long ago, Downriver Halkomelem was spoken here on the north shore of Burrard Inlet.

The Tsleil-Waututh (People of the Inlet) shared the distinct Coast Salish dialect with their neighbours the Musqueam, Tsawwassen, Kwawwaten, Qayqayt, Kwikwetlem and Katzie First Nations in a regional social network.

The tribes lived in an area we now know as the Lower Mainland of Vancouver and the Fraser Valley, with populations numbering in the tens of thousands prior to European contact.

Eastern Vancouver Island and Strait of Georgia groups speaking an island variant, as well as an Upriver dialect spoken by the Sto:lo, were also part of the Halkomelem language axis.

Although each group was a separate cultural entity they

co-operated at times during the year to harvest the region's incredibly rich array of resources.

Through intermarriage they were kin, members of extended families in cultures where family meant everything. They partied together and would have been among the first to get invites to the next potlatch.

Anthropologist Jesse Morin has done extensive research into traditional Coast Salish practices while preparing an expert report, Tsleil-Waututh Nation's History, Culture and Aboriginal Interests in Eastern Burrard Inlet, to accompany the Tsleil-Waututh's Trans Mountain Assessment Report, which was released in May. Morin says that within the Halkomelem-speaking cultures all members of a tribe held collective territorial and resource rights within their own area. "However, Coast Salish people were highly mobile (canoe-borne) and practised a seasonal round that brought most families beyond their tribal territory for at least part of the year. The notable examples of this are Straits Salish groups travelling to Point Roberts to harvest sockeye and all Halkomelem-speaking groups (from as distant as Vancouver Island) partaking in the Fraser River sockeye fishery. Because of their sophisticated canoe technology, Coast Salish peoples could transport their house planks, storage boxes, and extended families considerable distances. Travel from Cowichan to Yale (a distance of approximately 200 kilometres) by canoe was not unusual during the late-summer sockeye fishing season."

Prior to European contact, and going back millennia, the Tsleil-Waututh considered all of Burrard Inlet, as well as lands north to Indian River, south to Point Grey and east to Port Moody, as part of their traditional territory. Post-European contact, and especially after the small-pox epidemic of the late 18th century, things changed considerably as populations were decimated by disease and entire villages disappeared.

Nearly all members of the modern Tsleil-Waututh Nation can trace their ancestral roots back to a single

common ancestor, Chief Waut-salk I (c. 1750-1800), who lived primarily at Tum-tumay-whueton (near present-day Belcarra) in the late 18th century.

The Tsleil-Waututh leader is said to have actually met Captain George Vancouver in June 1792, while the English Royal Navy officer was charting the Pacific Coast for King George III. Vancouver was one of the first Europeans to enter Tsleil-Waututh territory and in honour of the occasion he named the main body of water between First and Second Narrows "Burrard's Canal" as a tribute to one of his officers Harry Burrard. The previous year Spanish naval officer José María Narváez had already christened the Tsleil-Waututh inlet as "Boca de Florida Blanca" but that place name only existed on a few obscure maps. Somewhere up the colonial corporate ladder Spain ceded the region to Britain, making Vancouver winner of the name game without even getting out of his boat.

A two-headed serpent once lay across the Inlet blocking all that wanted to pass. To paddle up the Inlet, they had to carry their canoes around Say Nutl Kanw. It is said that on the ground over which his frightful body crawled as it travelled to Lake Beautiful (Buntzen Lake), no living thing has ever grown. Not a blade of grass or moss could survive.

— adapted from story told by Annie George (196

The sacred nature of water is very much on the minds of photographer Nancy Bleck and the Tsleil-Waututh Nation in their project, Children of Tomorrow. Currently on view at North Vancouver's Seymour Art Gallery, the work addresses issues concerning the proposed Kinder Morgan pipeline expansion project in terms of an indigenous cultural worldview that takes into account the traditional Tsleil-Waututh cultural practice of stewardship of resources and the impact

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Gene Guss, a junior elder and one of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation's spiritual leaders talks with hereditary chief Ernest George during the official release of the Trans Mountain Assessment Report in May at Whye-ah-Wichen/Cates Park with Burnaby Mountain and the site of Kinder Morgan behind them across the water. PHOTO SUPPLIED NANCY BLECK

Tsleil-Waututh life revolves around inlet

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of the proposed TMX pipeline on future generations.

The Tsleil-Waututh refer to Burrard Inlet as Tsleil-Wat. In Morin's report accompanying the Trans Mountain Assessment, Gabriel George — a Tsleil-Waututh shxw'lam (shaman) — is quoted as saying that translation can only give a poor approximation of what the Halkomelem words mean. "Tsleil is the inlet... English isn't the same as how we translate it. It's an attempt to translate it. That ending 'uth,' something that's long gone, something that we own. Tsleil is the water, the salt water."

Tsleil-Waututh Nation councillor Charlene Aleck, a granddaughter of Chief Dan George, remembers the waters of Burrard Inlet as a constant presence during her childhood. Even though her family lived in Mission where her father worked, they spent much of their time on the North Shore. "My mom is from Sleil-Waututh (village) and my dad is from Cheam out in the Valley. We lived out there but we'd come to Burrard every summer. Growing up here we would always be swimming in the inlet. My mom was an avid swimmer so we would hear stories of her and her cousins swimming across the inlet and back for a race. And then digging clams, going fishing up in Indian River.

"There was no way that we could pick clams anymore and we were only allowed to go swimming once in a while but we'd always hear these wonderful stories about oysters and cockles and clams and just the abundance of food. We weren't allowed to go down to the beach sometimes because there was a spill that happened in the '70s. I remember swimming a lot and then trying to sneak down there with my cousins and stuff."

Aleck's mother, Irene George, was the fourth of six kids. The days of the seasonal rounds were long over but the George family still managed to do their fair share of camping. "Grandpa and grandma still did that even though it wasn't for traditional ceremonial reasons," says Aleck. "My cousin and I were just talking about that. We always travelled together whether it was with the canoes or just family days going fishing or whatever. Our aunts and uncles bundled all of us up and set a tent up for the day — just going places whether it was picking berries or fishing or whatever, picking clams, we'd always be travelling together. Grandpa, mom and dad, my aunts and uncles, Auntie



A portrait of Amy George, also known as Ta'ah (grandmother). PHOTO SUPPLIED NANCY BLECK

Rose and Uncle Les, Uncle Bob and Auntie Kathy, and all their kids. We'd all travel together."

Aleck particularly remembers the fun times her family had making annual visits to relatives in the States. "We'd go fishing and pick berries and get crabs. We had relatives there as well in the Nooksack Lummi area. We went down there every year. They are brothers and the family that lives down there are children of one of his brothers."

Like her grandfather, Aleck became an actor and for much of her childhood and

young adult life starred in *The Beachcombers* TV series. She also followed Chief Dan George's footsteps into the public service sphere and is one of five elected councillors working with elected chief Maureen Thomas as a representative of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation. One of her portfolios is the Sacred Trust initiative which is mandated to oppose and stop the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain pipeline project. "We've been opposed to it since Day 1," Aleck says. "Even at the lowest level when there was no project outline. We just said it wasn't viable for our people, it wasn't viable for our land and it

wasn't viable for us as a nation. In Children of Tomorrow we're just trying to tell our story of how we've been stewards of the land for many years and that has sustained us as people. We've lived off this land for years. Since industries have affected us we haven't been able to harvest out of the inlet. We want to get to that point where we tell that story of how much that means to us. In our creation story we are derived from the inlet — it gives us the strength and the life that we need to survive as a people. Telling our story, telling about the inlet, about water what it means to us as a traditional First Nations people in a contemporary world. Having all those traditions and then bringing them forward.

"Our leaders used to make decisions for our people with the mindset of looking back seven generations to see what sustained them and looking seven generations ahead to see how they would be affected. Looking at these big corporations in our territory we make decisions with our youth and our elders on our minds. We always make decisions for our children of tomorrow. The Kinder Morgan translation of Children of Tomorrow is a spooky coincidence. It really clicked."

"We have a sacred, legal obligation to protect, defend, and steward the water, land, air, and resources in our territory... The Tsleil-Waututh Nation, along with other Coast Salish Nations, signed the International Treaty to Protect the Salish Sea which, among other things, affirms that our ancestral laws place upon us the sacred responsibility to protect the Salish Sea and requires us to take all lawful actions necessary to protect the Salish Sea."

— excerpt from Tsleil-Waututh Nation Council Resolution May 21, 2015

"It's such an eye-opening experience to see how Tsleil-Waututh operate as a government," says North Vancouver photographer Nancy Bleck. "They put so much of their resources into culture, housing, education, elders' programs, daycare. It's such a good example of what good government looks like. I was already so disheartened by the Harper government and how we're losing our environmental protection. I just got so inspired by how the Tsleil-Waututh work and what their values are. I just feel so grateful to live

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Call to action inspired photography project

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where I live. I feel like I live in paradise. I didn't grow up here, I grew up in Toronto and I can tell you it's nothing like this place. There's just something really worth protecting. I feel so grateful to the Tsleil-Waututh for their commitment to protect what they have for everybody. They make that clear. They say this is just not for them, this is for everybody."

Bleck teaches photography, social practice and community arts at Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Born in Toronto she developed her interest in photography at an early age. Her mother worked as a specialist in darkroom technology and both of her parents supported her interest to the point where they had a darkroom installed for her in their basement. Bleck originally visited Vancouver after winning a photography contest at Expo '86. She eventually studied at Emily Carr and also spent three years documenting the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia.

For Bleck, socially-engaged art practice is as important as the photograph. "It's a greater part of where I spend my time," she says. "It's like artistic research. For me it's as important to be an active member of the community as showing the photos. The photos are the kind of the shell of an experience, the real experience is the community building, the friendships, the kind of work that you form in the making of the family. It's not really about the end result of the photograph, in fact it's the other way around. The photographs are just kind of a residue of the experience."

Between 1997 and 2007 Bleck worked with mountaineer John Clarke and Squamish Nation hereditary chief Bill Williams on the U's'am Witness Project. The trio drew attention to part of Squamish Nation territory in the Elahó Valley, known at the time as "Tree Farm License 38," that was threatened with logging. Through their epic efforts (documented in the book *Picturing Transformation Nexto-giyantsu*) the area was not only protected from logging but returned to its ancestral name of Newx-ayantsut, which means 'place of transformation' in the Squamish language.

The way in which the Tsleil-Waututh participated in the First Nations Kinder Morgan protest on Burnaby Mountain in November 2014 first caught Bleck's attention. "I'm a little bit weary of protests because with Witlee we took a different approach," she says. "For me the key was about non-violence, it was about taking up a non-violent practice that you could bring people in from all walks of life and inspire them and bring them into ceremony with an authentic experience on the land so that you're not actually giving any rhetoric to anybody — they're figuring it out for themselves. And figuring out for themselves because the land is speaking through them."



Tsleil-Waututh elders Ernest George and Deanna George exhibit to the youth of today on a sound piece made for the Children of Tomorrow exhibit. PHOTO SUPPLIED NANCY BLECK

they did it as protectors."

The Kinder Morgan proposal of additional oil shipments coming through the West Coast motivated Bleck into action. The TMX plan calls for installation of 987 kilometres of new pipeline from Edmonton, Alberta to Burnaby to transport bitumen oil to an expanded petroleum storage facility. The expansion would mean roughly a seven-fold increase in the frequency of tanker departures from Burrard Inlet, from about once a week to once or more each day.

"I thought I cannot sit back and do nothing. I have to do something and what I do is I pick up my camera. For me it's a non-violent way to get people in a kind of gently inspiring way to get people to want to do and say, 'Hey this is what's happening.' I like to create beautiful images but I also like to create images that invoke a kind of eye-opening reality. A lot of people go about their comfortable lives but they don't necessarily want to get involved because it seems daunting or they don't know what to do. Even myself at times I've felt very helpless in the face of this horrible government. You think you are going to be taken care of in some shape or form by our leaders but at some point you realize it's not happening and we have something amazing to protect here. This is a unique part of the world. We have something worth protecting."

Stepped into a technological world of pre-digital photography Bleck used three cameras in the Children of Tomorrow project: a Cambo 8X10 large format camera, a Hasselblad medium format camera and a Fujica 617 medium format panoramic camera. "I prefer large format

just because I love the quality," she says. "I really like slowing down my process. I find the world is such a rush anyway that for me working with large format helps me to go into a zone of almost a meditative space."

Usually Bleck takes very few images with her cameras. The Fujica 617 is limited to four shots on a roll while portrait sessions with the Cambo only require three or four exposures. "It used to be done like that with plates and glass," she says. "It's like a box camera with bellows and it looks like something from the 18th century. In fact that's what Ta'ah (Amy George), the daughter of Chief Dan George) said when I photographed her for the exhibition. She laughed and said it looked like something from the 1800s because I have to go under a dark cloth and everything is upside down and backwards when I look at it through the glass."

Bleck uses film and then scans the negatives to make digital prints. "There aren't labs that will take my film anymore and create a seed print unless I do it myself. So I've switched over but I still prefer the look of film and even in some of the images you'll see some of the grain of the film even though it's digitally scanned. The information is on the material."

**Kinder = Children
Morgen = Tomorrow
— German to English translation**

**"It's really ironic the children of tomorrow could have nothing."
— Deanna George**

Arts. The photographs will be exhibited in Hamburg for the International Year of Soils (2015) with a few of those images shot in Alberta also included in the Seymour Art Gallery show.

The panoramic shots featured in Children of Tomorrow are interspersed with portraits of the Tsleil-Waututh community that continue around the art space in a long, uninterrupted line. "They go all the way around the gallery like a pipeline," says Bleck. "You walk through an opening in the pipeline and for me that's also a metaphor of the double-headed serpent which is a strong symbol in the Tsleil-Waututh culture. There's an image of Rueben George in the Tar Sands wearing a Warrior Up T-shirt. For me it's like creating that metaphor of the serpent slayer."

A 10-minute sound piece, created in collaboration with Métis-Cree media artist Kamela Todd, features Tsleil-Waututh elders Deanna George and Ernest George talking about the past, present and future of Burrard Inlet and its environs. The continuous testimonial loop of what once was and what has been lost adds an overwhelming poignancy to the photographic display.

Artwork always takes on a life of its own for Bleck and the Children of Tomorrow project was no different. "I didn't know what it would look like or how it would be shaped but I asked for direction (and the focus became) about Kinder Morgan and what it's doing with our water. It's directly across from where we do sweat lodge. We share the same water. If you use toxic water it changes everything. It's the most sacred thing, the water — it's who we are, where we come from."

"Our bodies are made of water. Because we have water on this planet that we are even here. If you think of it in terms of the bigger picture, in terms of our whole evolution as humanity, the water is the most sacred thing and if we cannot keep it fresh and pure and clean we've got nothing. There's no tomorrow, there's just nothing. Everything will die. It's so critical. It is life or death. Tsleil-Waututh Nation get that. They unanimously said as a whole community that they agree to oppose Kinder Morgan's pipeline expansion carrying bitumen oil from the Alberta Tar Sands. It was Amy George (also known as Ta'ah) who famously invoked the momentum to warrior up. She said "This is the moment. And what that looks like is not necessarily what people might think — what that looks like is a spiritual strengthening but also a strengthening of mind, body, spirit, heart where people work together as one."

Photographer Nancy Bleck and Tsleil-Waututh Nation councillor Charlene Aleck will talk about Children of Tomorrow in the gallery on Sunday, Aug. 23 at 2 p.m. with a reception to follow. For more information, visit seymourartgallery.com and twsacredtrust.ca.