

The Middle Ground

Dean Hunt's creative style sits between his late father Bradley's and brother Shawn's

STORY BY
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INSIDE A LARGE DAVIS BAY studio, Haitzaqv (Heiltsuk) artist Dean Hunt leans over his carved, red-cedar panel of a raven and eagle dancing around a fire. He explains how the eagle represents his great-grandmother Lena Stewart, of Bella Bella's Heiltsuk Eagle clan, while the raven signifies his great-grandfather Willie Hunt from the Raven clan of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation/Blunden Harbour on Vancouver Island. His uncle Allen Hunt commissioned the piece, comprised of laminated 2x6 panels glued together.

The essence of ancestry infuses Dean's work as he reenvisioned traditional Heiltsuk formline designs into new "harmonizing" compositions that flow visually. >>



DEAN'S PK'VS: WILD MAN OF THE WOODS MASK, 2009, RED CEDAR, ACRYLIC, HORSE HAIR, SKUNK HAIR, EAGLE AND FLICKER FEATHERS, HERKIMER DIAMONDS.

PHOTO COURTESY AUDAIN ART MUSEUM

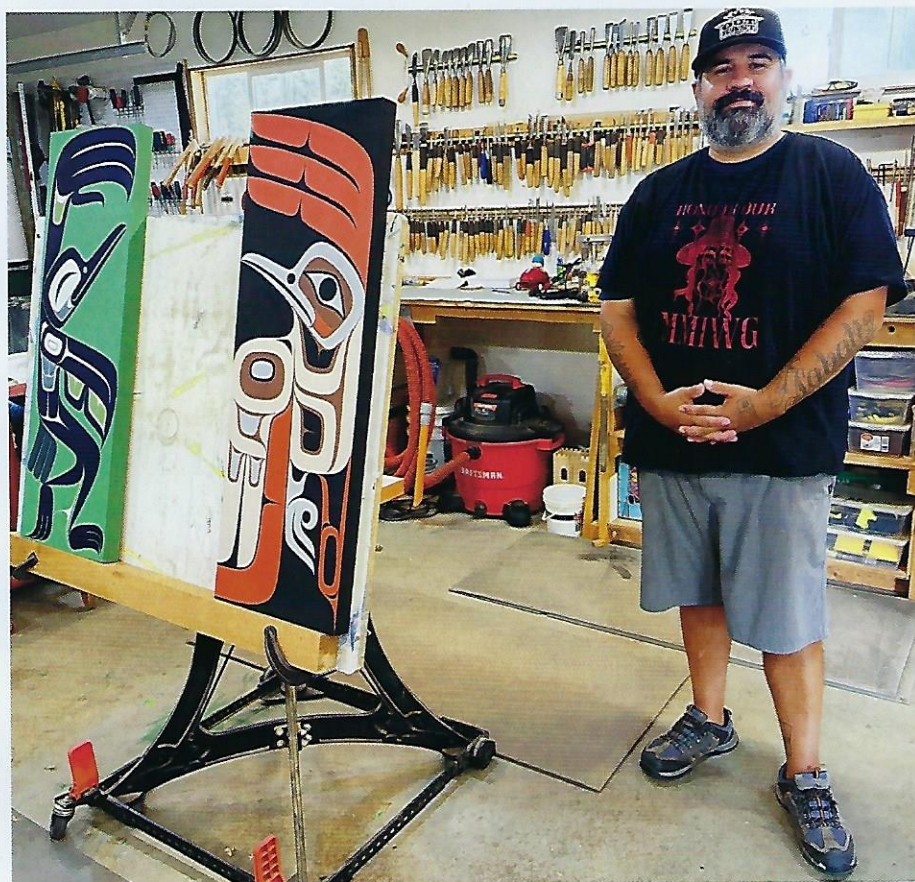


PHOTO: HEATHER CONN

combs in yew, alder, yellow and red cedar. Dean says his art is the creative middle ground between his brother's and dad's. He characterizes Shawn's Cubist-style sculptural assemblage as "exploding boundaries" and his father's design styles as "super-forward thinking."

Dean's newly completed combs are destined for Seattle's Steinbrueck Gallery. He is also represented at North Vancouver's Inuit Gallery. His original works are in private collections around the world and have displayed at diverse venues including Vancouver's Douglas Reynolds and Spirit Wrestler galleries and Horseshoe Bay's Spirit Gallery.

In 2021, Dean was one of six recipients of the Fulmer Award in First Nations art from the B.C. Achievement Foundation. Two years earlier, he was featured in the Greystone Books' *Understanding Northwest Coast Indigenous Jewelry*, written by Alexander Dawkins, co-owner of Vancouver's Lattimer Gallery, and Corrine Hunt, a Kwakwaka'wakw/Tlingit artist who co-designed the medals for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games.

In 2017, Dean's work appeared at the Lattimer Gallery alongside creations by Heiltsuk artist K.C. Hall in an exhibition titled *Hálú* (Fresh). Dean's carved *Shaman's Portrait* mask was featured in *Cindy Sherman Meets Dzunik'wa*, a 2014 exhibition at Vancouver's Satellite Gallery.

At Vancouver's Bill Reid Gallery, his *PK's: Wild Man of the Woods* mask was part of the 2009-10 exhibition *Continuum: Vision and Creativity on the Northwest Coast*. The Audain Art Museum in Whistler purchased it in 2010 and it is on permanent display there. The next year, the same mask was featured in *Shore, Forest, and Beyond: Art from the Audain Collection*, a Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition.

Locally, Dean's artistry was on display at three events last year: in *New Directions: Contemporary Heiltsuk Paintings*, a Gibsons Public Art Gallery exhibition honouring his father's work, at *Journey Beyond*, a four-day, immersive, multimedia show at Trail Bay Mall, spearheaded by artist Mieke Jay, which projected images of his masks and paintings to music and sound effects, and at the Heritage Theatre as part of the Sunshine Coast Art Crawl. >>



PHOTO COURTESY DEAN HUNT



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"I push boundaries in my own way," he says. "I have such reverence for the shapes and appreciation for how they fit together and how they tell the story. It's our [Heiltsuk] visual language, our ABCs."

The mentoring impact of his talented late father Bradley Hunt, who died last fall, is never far away. Dean apprenticed under him from 2003-2007; his older artist brother Shawn did so in 2001-2004. About two decades ago, the family trio built the studio where Dean now stands. There, they spent three years carving house posts, a gable end, two masks, interior carvings and a cast bronze water feature commissioned by the late local resident Michael O'Brian.

"After I finished a panel a few weeks ago, I had a moment of really being grateful for the lessons he [his dad] imparted," Dean says. "I felt thankful for having such a great teacher and father." He adds that he misses sharing photos of a new artistic creation with Bradley. "I still talk to him. I can hear his laughter."

Dean paints, makes gold and silver jewelry and carves, whether it's masks, panels, house posts and door inserts or

FROM TOP: DEAN IN HIS STUDIO WITH TWO FINISHED PAINTINGS

WAVE BASKET WEAVE BRACELET; H'LULU (BUTTERFLY) WITH SKULL BRACELET



PHOTO: HEATHER CONN

LEFT: TWO CARVED COMBS HEADED TO SEATTLE'S STEINBRUECK GALLERY.

CENTRE: *MOUSE WOMAN MASK*, 2025, ALDER, ABALONE, PAINT AND DYED SHEEP SKIN;

RIGHT: *KLAH (BLACK BEAR) MASK* IN RED CEDAR, HORSE HAIR, COPPER, TWINE, AND ACRYLIC PAINT.



PHOTO COURTESY DEAN HUNT



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Music wise, some locals might know Dean as "DJ Deano" from Skookum Sound System and See [sic] Monsters. As a DJ, he appeared at the 2014 Adaka Festival in the Yukon and toured to Montreal, Toronto, and Halifax.

In Kingston, he performed at the opera house with Jeremy Dutcher, a Two-Spirit composer, song carrier, activist, and ethnomusicologist from Tobique First Nation in New Brunswick.

As a music producer, Dean has blended natural sounds, such as whale calls he recorded live in Bella Bella, with Indigenous drums, rattles and hip-hop and performed at galleries

such as Vancouver's Western Front. He studied music production and studio engineering at the city's Columbia Academy.

Now a semi-retired DJ, Dean keeps a turntable and scratch record (a disc featuring sound effects, vocal samples and drum hits) in his studio, where he "scratches" in solo fun. No more large stage shows although he admits he might consider going public again in a year.

Dean worked as a tattoo artist from 2015 to 2020, using traditional Indigenous hand-poke and skin-stitch techniques. One mentor included Dion Kaszas at Kelowna's Earthline

Tattoo Collective. While at a tattoo festival in Majorca, Spain, Dean did Heiltsuk tattoos and watched Maori and Taiwanese using traditional techniques.

Using the phrase "Chase Yo Dreams" on Instagram, Dean says he continues to try to improve his understanding of Heiltsuk language, art and of each medium he uses. He says he'd love to be part of a canoe-carving team or another group project like the carving he did with his dad in 2019 for the ceremonial Big House in Waglisla (Bella Bella).

"I've been working for 26 years," says the dad of two stepdaughters. "I feel like I'm just getting started. There is so much to learn and look forward to." **CL**

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