

# MOVING PARTS

Manuela Salinas creates art respecting her ancestors and Elders

STORY BY **HEATHER CONN**

**T**WICE DURING OUR INFORMAL interview, multimedia artist and shíshálh Nation member Manuela Salinas uses the phrase “There are so many moving parts.” The first time is when she describes learning how to draw a wing span or tail or fin in traditional Coast Salish design forms. The second is when she suggests how she might explain decolonization to a non-Indigenous person.

In both cases, the term “moving” can evoke its emotional meaning, beyond the ordinary, since Manuela’s art, whether a painting, 3-D image or wearable piece, transforms historical and cultural loss, pain and harm into resilience, beauty and power.

Two of her original designs, which address the destructive impact of our nation’s residential schools, appeared on the shíshálh Nation’s Every Child Matters orange T-shirts in 2023 and 2024. Hundreds wore them during both annual Truth and Reconciliation Day marches in ch’atlich (Sechelt). Manuela is the descendant of multiple residential school survivors. >>



TOP: MANUELA APPEARS WITH HER DESIGN OF THE DOUBLE-HEADED SEA SERPENT AT TSAIN-KO CENTRE.

BOTTOM, L TO R: HER DESIGNS OF WOLF, FROG, KILLER WHALE, AND THUNDERBIRD.

ALL PHOTOS: HEATHER CONN





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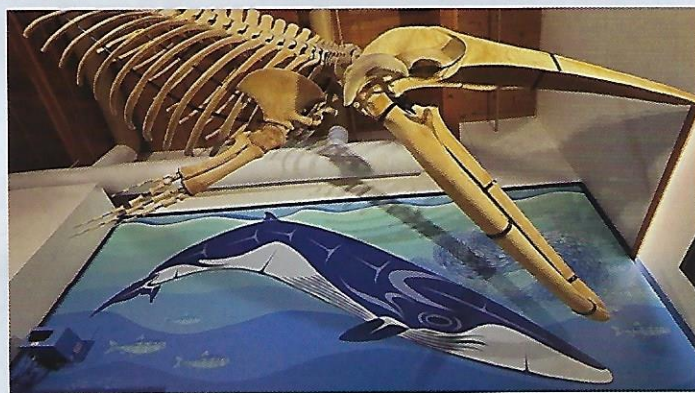
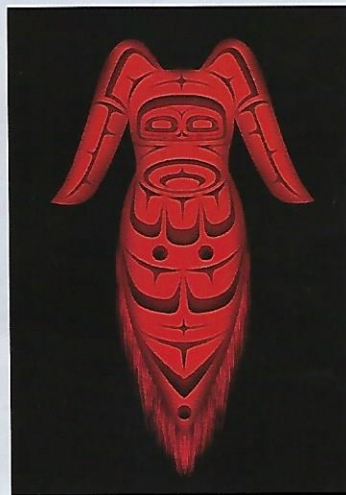
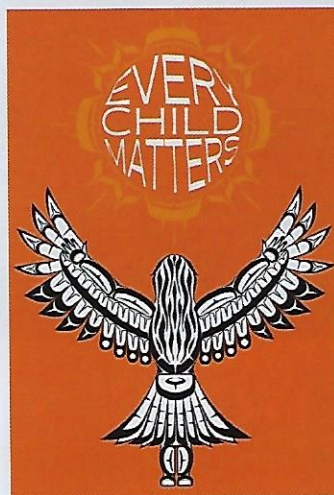


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PHOTOS COURTESY MANUELA SALINAS

FROM TOP: MANUELA WITH THE TWO CHILDREN SHE CARVED ON THE RECONCILIATION POLE; A MURAL BY MANUELA SALINAS AND DEAN SCHUTZ COMMEMORATES A FIN WHALE THAT WASHED ASHORE NEAR KALPILIN (PENDER HARBOUR) IN 2022; MANUELA'S RED DRESS IMAGE HONOURS THE MEMORY OF MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GIRLS; MANUELA'S ORIGINAL DESIGN APPEARED ON EVERY CHILD MATTERS T-SHIRTS IN 2024.

Along with other local Indigenous artists, she did carving work on the shíshálh Nation's Reconciliation Pole after *?antuni*, the late Tony Paul, its original designer and master carver, died. (The pole was unveiled last summer at Our House of Clans in ch'atlich.) A former early childhood and special needs educator for the Nation's mem7iman Child Development Centre, Manuela worked on parts of the pole's animals, eagles, and hummingbird, besides the two children who appear at its bottom. The latter depict Cecelia August and Dave Paul, two shíshálh students forced to attend the residential school that once stood where the pole now stands.

Manuela has created red dress imagery, which represents the injustice of Canada's missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG), for earrings, necklaces, temporary tattoos, zipped bags, bookmarks and keychains. Starting last year, the shíshálh Nation has hosted an annual MMIWG march in May (May 5 is Red Dress Day, a national day of awareness).

Cheryl Ann Joe of the shíshálh Nation, whose brutal 1992 murder in East Vancouver spawned annual MMIWG marches across North America, was Manuela's cousin. Cheryl and Manuela's mother were best friends.

To highlight Indigenous movements such as Every Child Matters and MMIWG, Manuela produced *Towards Freedom*, a Truth and Reconciliation banner, in 2022.

A recent example of her art is the large mural of *xwamstut ?e te tl'ep te sinkwu* ("ambassador of the deep sea": a fin whale) in the Tems Swiya Museum in ch'atlich, which she created in collaboration with local muralist Dean Schutz. Initially, Manuela designed it on her iPad after conducting online research about this specific whale species.

Usually, she starts sketches on her iPad, rather than paper, and uses software such as Procreate, Apple Pencil, Adobe Fresco and Adobe Illustrator. "There's room for error when you paint on an iPad," she says. "It's easier to fix your mistakes."

At Tsain-Ko Shopping Centre in ch'atlich, Manuela's art adorns its exterior walls. The predominant image is a large, aluminum design of *ch'inkw'u*, the double-headed sea serpent, created in collaboration with Tsain-Ko Development Corp. and Venture Fabrication Inc. As the mall's accompanying information board says, *ch'inkw'u* symbolizes "a legendary animal with infinite strength to preserve and restore balance amongst all living things."

Manuela also designed the six aluminum creatures spread throughout the mall's exterior walls as *ch'inkw'u*'s friends and allies: *ch'askin* (thunderbird), *huham* (frog), *syaxw* (salmon), *wewekw'nachem* (wolf), *sxixenik'* (owl) and *stalashen* (killer whale). Within the mall's parking area, you can see Manuela's 2020 painted design on a hydro box of a Coast Salish mother and baby orca.

"With every art piece, I try to do it in a way that respects our ancestors and Elders," says the "proud mom" of a nine-year-old boy. "I take kindness and the [traditional] story and refer to the land. I learn from the land, the animals, the trees and plants, everything that coexists with us." >>



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Although she has a certificate in drawing from the Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Manuela says that she has mostly learned by observing artists and master carvers such as *antuni* the late Tony Paul, Arnold Jones, James Jeffries, Dionne Paul, Xwalacktun Rick Harry and others. "I've always been curious about artistic practices, ever since I was little," she says.

Manuela's animal designs, in traditional Coast Salish style, appeared as animated figures in the 2008 short drama *Sháshishálem Class*. Manuela and Malcolm Paul co-directed and starred in the film as students in a shishálh Nation language class who observe wild birds and animals and name them in their traditional language. The film, which includes a prayer and honouring of the elders, was created through the Connexions Youth Forum, part of Vancouver's Documentary Film Festival (DOXA).

Currently, Manuela works as a supported child development consultant for Sunshine Coast Community Services. The daughter of a Nicaraguan father, she has Mayan and Aztec roots but says she has not yet done a "deep dive" into the artistic side of her Latin American heritage.

Next year, Manuela will receive a professional education master's degree in education leadership, an online program offered by Western University in London, Ont. She has a bachelor's degree in early childhood care and education, and a certificate in business administration from Capilano University. **CL**

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