

# Shape-shifting Artist

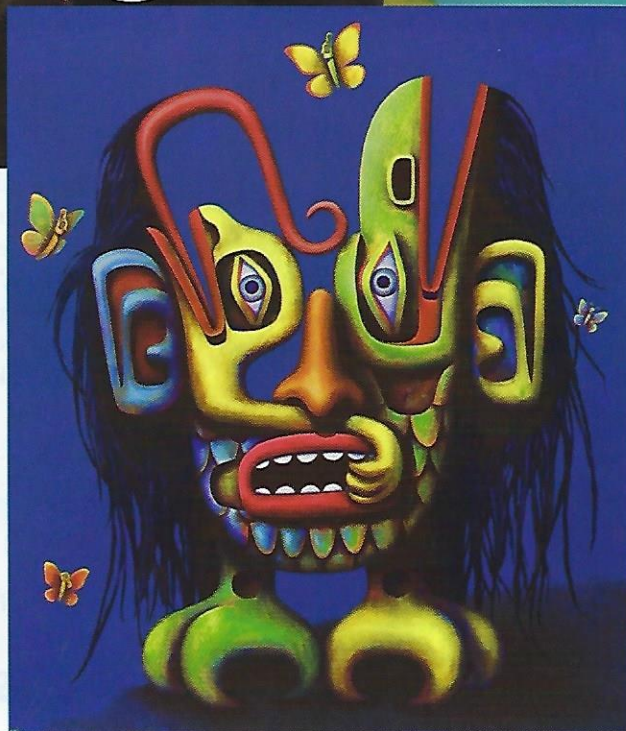
Shawn Hunt's array of works unmasks his limitless creativity

STORY BY **HEATHER CONN**

**A** RED PADDLER IN A CANOE EMERGES FROM A man's green head, backed by wave-like black hair. In startling colours, a green frog tucks behind an orange eagle's vertical head, creating the human eye on a large face. Toothy mouths gape. Bright tongues flicker. Like strands of bull kelp, blue hair flows horizontally.

Any attempt to describe the sculpture-like paintings of multi-disciplinary Heiltsuk artist Shawn Hunt, which combine traditional and mythic Heiltsuk forms with Cubist and surrealist styles, is too reductionist. Picasso meets Magritte meets ancestral cosmology meets Salvador Dali doesn't come close. And that's the way Shawn likes it: no limiting labels.

Dubbed a "trickster artist" by one Vancouver reviewer, he has transitioned over decades from jewellery making to wood carving to five-by-seven-foot paintings that explode with fluid edginess. Today's young Heiltsuk artists tell him that his work inspired theirs, just as his artist father, the late Bradley Hunt, inspired him. From 2001 to 2004, Shawn apprenticed in traditional design, carving and engraving with his accomplished dad, who received the BC Foundation's First Nation Art Award in 2018. >>



TOP: SHAWN WORKS ON A NEW PAINTING IN HIS HOME STUDIO.

BOTTOM: A 2017 ACRYLIC ON CANVAS EAGLE/WOLF TOTEM PORTRAIT.

PHOTO: HEATHER CONN

PHOTO: EQUINOX GALLERY



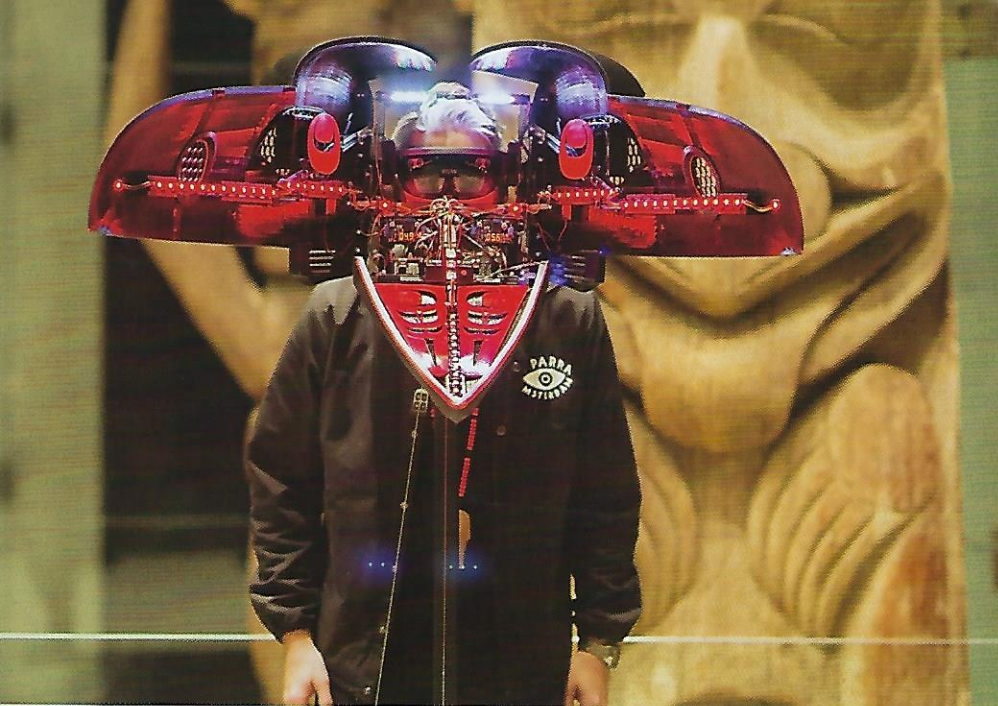


PHOTO: PAMELA SAUNDERS

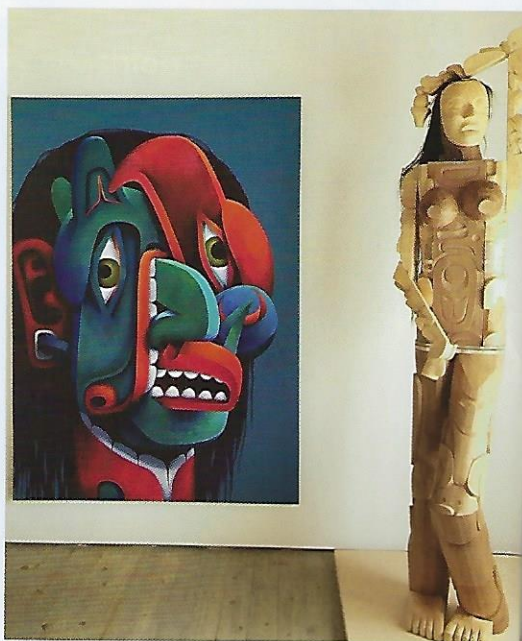


PHOTO: SHAWN HUNT

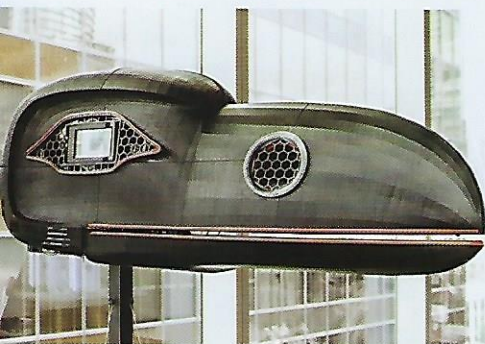


PHOTO: PAMELA SAUNDERS

TOP LEFT: SHAWN'S TRANSFORMATION MASK WITH THE RAVEN BEAK OPEN.

RIGHT: THE 2017 PAINTING *SEER OF THE PAST AND THE FUTURE/EAGLE WOLF MASK FACE* APPEARS NEXT TO SHAWN'S WOOD CARVING *GODDESS*.

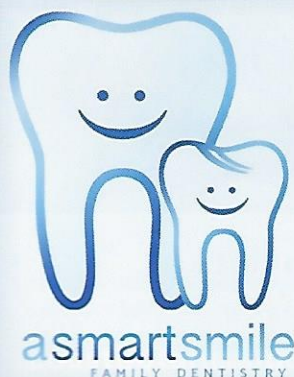
BOTTOM: TRANSFORMATION MASK WITH BEAK CLOSED.

His fearlessness as an artist comes from his father, Shawn says. His dad encouraged him and his artist brother Dean to find their own creative path and ensure that their work constantly evolved. Each new piece had to be better than the last. Hence, when Shawn grew frustrated with all the planning and lack of randomness involved with wood carving, he wondered: "How can I do carving differently?"

His answer: assemblage. For six months, he carved masks, bowls, rattles and other items, then over several weeks, cut them up and put them together in new forms, creating bodies or faces. "That lit a fire in me," he says, "to create from nowhere and nothing. Let it [creativity] pour out and see where it takes you. I don't want to know the outcome."

With his paintings, Shawn applies a low-tech approach: He starts with a sketch book drawing, photographs it, then projects it onto a canvas. No need for an iPad or stylus. "I try not to get caught up in the fads of the day," says the Davis Bay resident. "I'm trying to make timeless works of art that people can still love 150 years from now. That's what excites me."

Yet, he went boldly high-tech in 2017 with *Transformation Mask*, an animatronic raven head based on a traditional crest figure. It started simply enough with a cardboard form that was animated and then printed in 3-D. Shawn used the curved lines of a raven's face and beak to evoke the sleek lines of a race car, shaping each eye like a vent. A horizontal LED strip adorns both sides of the bottom of the beak.



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Instead of opening to reveal a human face, as in a traditional Coast Salish mask, a viewer wears an augmented-reality headset, a Microsoft Hololens with a built-in computer. This reveals a series of holographic images from Shawn's designs: an orca, raven and eagle emerging from a fire, accompanied by cyborg-like calls.

To bring the mask alive, Shawn worked with a Microsoft Vancouver design team and technical artists who used robotics, sensors, 3-D printers and then-cutting-edge audio/visual effects. The mask is now on display at the Autry Museum in Los Angeles, Calif.

In 2025, Shawn curated *New Directions: Contemporary Heiltsuk Paintings*, an exhibition that opened in late May at Gibsons Public Art Gallery. It highlighted recent paintings and ink and pencil drawings by his father, who died in September. The show featured works by three generations of the Hunt family: Bradley, Shawn and Dean, and Bradley's grandchildren, including Shawn's homeschooled son and daughter, age eight and six, respectively.

In 2011, Shawn received the B.C. Creative Achievement Award for First Nations Art, while apprenticing in painting (from 2012-15) with Coast Salish artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun. He graduated with a bachelor of fine arts from the University of B.C. in 2000, majoring in sculpture and drawing.

Today, Shawn is represented by Equinox Gallery in Vancouver. Three of his paintings are part of the permanent collection at the Audain Art Museum in Whistler. >>

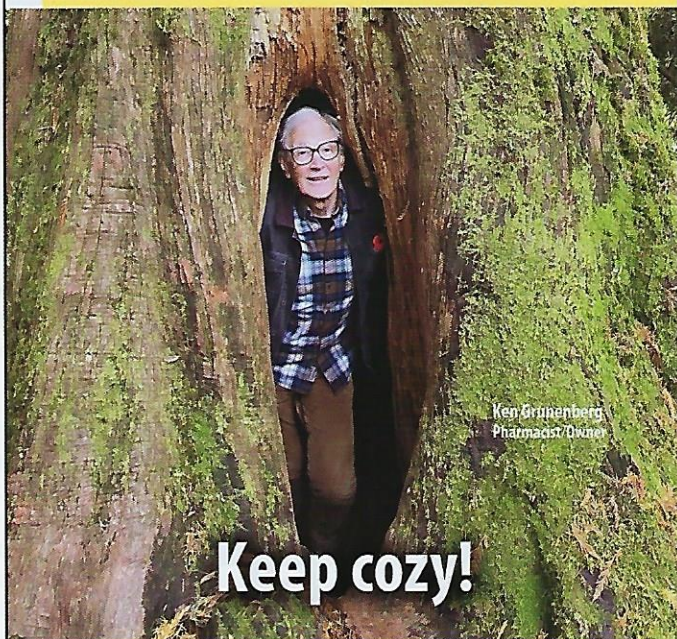


SHAWN'S 2025 PAINTING *RADIANCE TOTEM PORTRAIT* (WOLF, EAGLE, FROG), PHOTOGRAPHED IN HIS STUDIO.

PHOTO: HEATHER CONN

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He has exhibited at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ont., home to the Group of Seven's works.

Shawn's art has shown in cities like Shanghai, Maui, New York, Portland, Ore., Montreal, Toronto and in Vancouver at multiple places including the Vancouver Art Gallery, Museum of Anthropology and Bill Reid Gallery. He'd like to exhibit more in the U.S. and internationally and hopes to collaborate with commercial brands.

In current public art, Shawn has designed an urban totem pole, which will be made from steel and fabricated by Carvel Creative in Calgary, Alta. When complete, it will stand at a Polygon development in Semiahmoo, Surrey, B.C. He's working on a bronze sculpture, has created limited-edition prints for the first time and continues to paint.

Shawn plans to produce smaller paintings, which he says will make them more affordable and accessible to more people. He'd like to do a retrospective and catalogue of his art and wants to take his work beyond museums and galleries.

For example, his solo exhibition *Kátlá* ("to dream" in Heiltsuk) at Vancouver's Fairmont Pacific Rim Hotel in the summer of 2024 introduced his art to a broader audience like tourists rather than view-by-appointment collectors.

"I'm seeing the benefit of touching more people [emotionally], getting more visibility rather than in museums where it [his art] just goes into a collection and sits in a drawer. I intend to have my art in a more casual setting, not pristine, white-walled spaces." But he adds: "I want to keep it 'high art.'" **CL**

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