

The Collaborator



Multimedia artist Shain Jackson works with others to build unity within diversity

AN EVOCATIVE SCULPTURAL MURAL, made from salvaged cedar, adorns a wall and ceiling in the tower lobby of Sechelt Hospital. A pedestrian overpass at the base of the Stawamus Chief mountain in Squamish rests on the head of a thunderbird on one side and a serpent on the other. In repeated, wave-like arcs, rows of identical salmon hang as a distinctive mobile inside BC Place. And soon, a large, traditional Coast Salish welcome figure, with outstretched arms, will appear in xwesam (Roberts Creek).

These are only a few of the public art projects designed by Coast Salish multimedia artist and “recovering lawyer” Shain Níniw-ém Salepem

Jackson. (His Indigenous name, given by elders, means “to advise and help, to serve.”) Yet, for an accomplished artist whose ideas have inspired such high-visibility works, this talented member of the shíshálh Nation balks at drawing attention to himself or his individual creative output.

Instead, he praises the collective efforts of the six Indigenous artists at Spirit Works Ltd., the company he founded in 2007 to create and distribute authentic Indigenous products. Besides public art, this ranges from bentwood boxes and wooden jewellery to practical items like doors and board room tables. “I love sharing ideas, talents and processes,” says the father of two girls. “I love collaboration. Everything we do is a collaboration.” >>

STORY &
PHOTOS BY
**HEATHER
CONN**

ABOVE: SHAIN
DISPLAYS ONE OF
THE HANDMADE,
CEDAR BENTWOOD
BOXES CREATED AT
SPIRIT WORKS LTD.

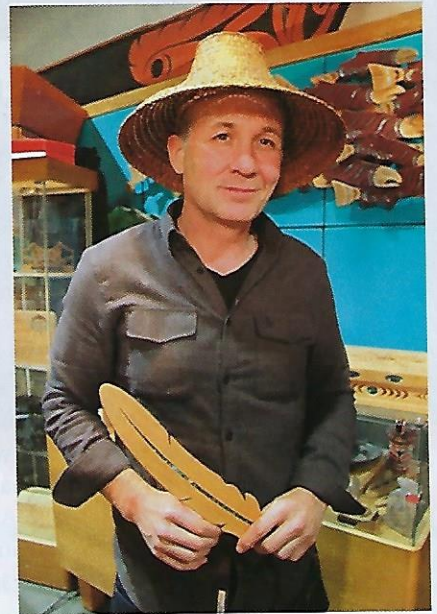
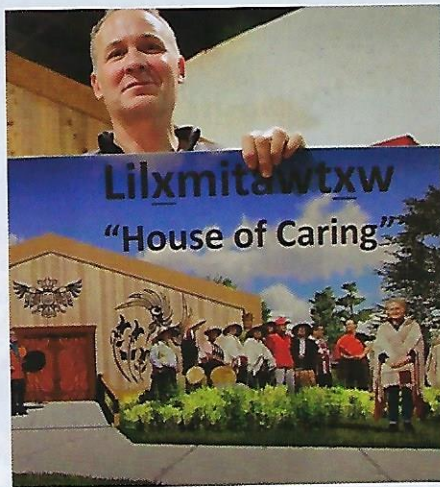
At Spirit Works' large, warehouse-like studio in North Vancouver, Shain demonstrates a storytelling booth with an interior screen that will share traditional and localized Indigenous stories via a code-entered app. He aims to put a booth in every B.C. coastal First Nation and at cultural centres and universities.

From a tall display case, he pulls out a rectangular bentwood box, one of 50 created to hold medals for the 2025 Invictus Games, held in Whistler and Vancouver. Drawing on traditional methods passed down by Indigenous cultural keepers, the boxes were handmade by Spirit Works and students from the Teslin Tlingit Council in partnership with the Squamish Nation Nexw7áystway Training and Trades Centre in North Vancouver. Each box is made from a single piece of West Coast cedar and includes four pieces of inlaid abalone, representing the Games' four host First Nations.

Both at Spirit Works and in his own art, Shain says he strives to use salvaged wood as much as possible. His first solo art piece was a carved dogfish mask when he was 18, whereby he tried to follow traditional Coast Salish symbols. However, many of these original art forms disappeared due to colonization and artists' death by disease, he says. "A lot of [coastal First Nations] artists did Haida designs," he says. "We lost so much."

He calls high-profile Coast Salish artist Susan Point a creative influence and credits her as one of the first to launch a modern resurgence of Coast Salish art. Shain readily shares how much he has learned from mentors like Xwalacktun Rick Harry, the Squamish and Kwakwaka'wakw sculptor and master carver who helped complete the shíshálh Nation's reconciliation pole after its original master carver ?antuni Tony Paul died. Last summer, Shain attended the pole's unveiling in ch'atlich (Sechelt) and supports the local syiyaya Reconciliation Movement, whose members participated in the event.

Two years earlier, Shain's art exhibition *Unity Within Diversity* appeared at Gibsons Public Art Gallery. The show included a large cedar Coast Salish figure that he designed, along with other works of his and those by friends Xwalacktun, Ximiq (Dionne Paul), Splashing Eagle (Aaron Nelson-Moody), Ray Natraoro and Chief Janice George. >>



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP: CLOSE-UP OF THE SUN FROM THE MURAL AT THE SEHEL T HOSPITAL; SHAIN WITH ONE OF SPIRIT WORKS' CEDAR FEATHERS; SHAIN HOLDS THE PROMOTIONAL SIGN FOR THE "HOUSE OF CARING" FACILITY

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Featured in that show, Shain's framed mixed-media exhibit *Double Headed Golden Eagle (Ch'as-kin)* toured Canada as part of an initiative to help lawyers understand that cultural artifacts and art comprise the shape of Indigenous heritage. He said that the work, which shows the sacred double-headed eagle, or thunderbird, hovering above excerpts from Canadian legal codes, acts like a modern-day Rosetta stone.

"Art-making is definitely political," Shain says over a Thai lunch in East Vancouver. "Our [Indigenous] art is our history and world view. Our laws are all codified in the art work." After studying law at UBC, he practised with Mandell Pinder LLP until 2007, litigating for Indigenous title and rights. Shain continues to advocate for others, following Indigenous law.

As executive director of the Golden Eagle Rising Society, Spirit Works' charitable arm, Shain helped facilitate production of a trauma-informed toolkit for lawyers and judges. He says it has revolutionized how the legal profession works with Indigenous communities.

After Spirit Works' *Pulling Together* cedar mural, commissioned by Vancouver Coastal Health, was installed at Sechelt Hospital in 2013, it won an international design award at the Academy for Design and Health's World Congress, and appeared on the cover of *World Health Design* magazine. shísháhlh Nation elders, youth, and cultural keepers all collaborated to help create the piece. It aimed to build unity both within the shísháhlh Nation and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people on the Sunshine Coast.

Through both art and business ventures, Shain passionately advocates to protect and share the cultural values and knowledge of his people, from humility, acceptance and living in balance with humanity to social responsibility and egalitarianism. The former shísháhlh Nation councillor strives to have Canadians acknowledge the First Nations contribution to "what is Canada."

"Especially now, in this moment in history, when we are seeing adversarial chaos and hierarchically based power and control, people are yearning for another way," he says. "We want people to turn to some of our teachings and some of our laws. The tenets of our principles are the way to get the best out of everybody: unity in diversity."

Locally, Shain says he's most excited about Golden Eagle Rising's latest project: *Lilxmitawtxw* (House of Caring), an Indigenous-led primary care clinic to be constructed in ch'atlich (Sechelt) in longhouse-style design. It will provide safe medical care within a culturally respectful environment in rooms enhanced by Indigenous art and motifs.

Shain says he developed PTSD after witnessing too many loved ones and elders needlessly suffer or die under the systemic racism of our current "broken" medical system. Fifteen years ago, the life expectancy of a shísháhlh Nation member was only 58 years, he says. Statistics Canada identifies the overall life expectancy in B.C. at that time as almost 82 years.

For Shain, art and such stark realities are inextricably linked. He says: "You learn to take solace in the struggle. Every day is a fight. Art is part of the fight." **CL**