



Oyster Catcher, 2008, Robert Davidson, Haida, Masset, ts'aa7ahl'laanaas Eagle clan, born 1946, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 40 in. (76.2 x 101.6 cm), Cutshall collection. © Robert Davidson, Photo: Kenji Nagai. In the exhibition "Robert Davidson: Abstract Impulse" Seattle Art Museum November 16, 2013 – February 16, 2014

### **Setting Our Hearts on Fire**

By Susan Noyes Platt

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The brilliantly colored paintings and sculptures of Haida artist Robert Davidson at the Seattle Art Museum warm our bodies and actually set our hearts on fire during these short winter days. There couldn't be a better time to see this radical exhibition of highly saturated red, black and white paintings and carved painted wooden sculptures.

For those of you who follow this column, you know that two months ago I wrote about Haida and their fight for survival ("A Magical Land Reclaimed and Threatened," still available online), as well as an exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery curated by Burke Museum curator Robin Wright about Charles Edenshaw (1839 – 1920). Charles Edenshaw preserved, resurrected and transformed traditional Haida art forms mainly for sale to tourists and ethnographic and natural history museums at a time when practice of his culture was banned in his homeland. More specifically, the potlatch, the communal gift giving ceremony that honored special events such as pole raising that was accompanied by singing, storytelling and exchange of wealth, was banned from 1884 to 1951, devastating cultural practices among First Nations people and native tribes in the Northwest.

Finally in the 1950s, Bill Reid, Edenshaw's descendent, began to resurrect and recreate Haida carving and imagery and a decade later, he mentored the young Robert Davidson. As Edenshaw's great grandson Robert Davidson is now himself transforming Haida art. He does so from the foundation of a deep knowledge of traditional Haida media, imagery, and art principles.

His career really began as he carved the first totem pole to be raised on Haida Gwaii for almost a century. The pole was Davidson's response to the cultural vacuum that he experienced as a child and young man in Massett, on Haida Gwaii (then Queen Charlotte Islands). He spent months learning the traditional stories, making tools and teaching himself carving techniques. The communal celebration that accompanied the pole raising in 1969 inspired grandparents to sing and dance based on ancient memories preserved in secret and in their souls. The ritual celebration brought the community back alive. That pole raising has galvanized Davidson to this day.

Davidson's transformation of tradition is as bold as his decision at the age of 22 to carve that first pole, but it is possible only because of his life-long engagement with traditional culture. As we are overwhelmed by the beauty of his artworks in the Seattle Art Museum exhibition we also have the opportunity to understand their roots in realism and myth.

"Abstract Impulse" is a carefully considered title and the labels for each work are respectfully detailed in order for us to understand that this abstract impulse is not related to mid century abstract painting in the US (ie Mark Tobey, Jackson Pollock, et. al. ). It is in fact the other way around, those artists ignorantly took abstract motifs from native art. In Davidson's work, though, the abstraction is based on deep connections to abstract principles coming from Haida design itself. He transforms and enlarges, he gives us a fragment of a whole, he creates an interior space in a traditional totem design.

Traditional references to the whale, the bear, the raven, the human, are integral to the brilliantly saturated colors, the contemporary media, the suggestion of shapes, even the reduction to a single line; we are embraced and even enveloped by the art and its underlying stories.

Robert Davidson reminds us of our deep connections to the natural world. Davidson and the Haida stand for respect for land, sea and sky, and for all the creatures of the earth as interdependent equals. This understanding refutes the "enlightenment" hierarchy that places humans as superior beings, a world view that justifies ferocious extraction and destruction of the earth's precious resources.

What a perfect celebration and inspiration Davidson gives us for a New Year in which we must continue to stand up for our planet's survival. If we can carry the warmth of these paintings, based in passion and love for a ten thousand year old history, we will also be inspired to help in a continued preservation and transformation as a legacy for our own grandchildren.

Interpretation of Oyster Catcher by Barbara Brotherton, Curator of Native American Art:

"Do the stylized shapes suggest a sea creature with fins or flukes? Could it allude to the liminal position or boundary occupied by this unusual bird, one that inhabits the sky but feeds and nests at the water's edge—the rich zone between sea and earth? In its travels it crosses the three realms" of earth, water, and sky that comprise the Haida universe. Because of its abilities in many domains, Oyster Catcher was a favorite helping spirit of shamans. In Haida myth, Oyster Catcher is the daughter of Southeast Wind and the daughter-in-law of North Wind who sends freezing ice to encase her, thus turning her legs white."