

KWELEXWELSTEN: BRANDON GABRIEL

ABSTRACT. This feature highlights four pieces created by Kwelexwelsten [Brandon Gabriel], a Kwantlen First Nation. The highlight includes past, present, and future thought-provoking pieces in multiple mediums to underscore the breadth and depth of the artist's influence.

Kwelexwelsten [Brandon Gabriel] is a Kwantlen First Nation artist whose family also extends to the Shakan First Nation in N'lkapa'mux territory in Merritt and St'ail'es First Nation territory in Harrison Lake. 'Kwantlen' translates to tireless runner. Kwantlen Traditional Territory extends from Richmond and New Westminster in the west, to Surrey and Langley in the south, east to Mission, and to the northernmost reaches of Stave Lake. The Kwantlen People have lived on this land since time immemorial.

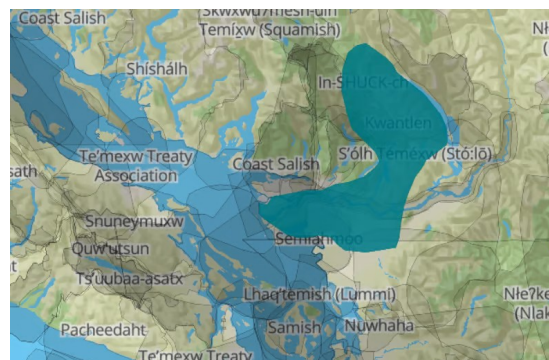


FIGURE 1. Map of Kwantlen Territory

Starting his career after being recognized as an art prodigy at twelve years old, he has become an award-winning multi-media artist creating as a photographer, painter, muralist, graphic designer, illustrator and mixed-media sculptor. He trained at Kwantlen Polytechnic University (1999-2002) and Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design (2002-2006). He is internationally recognized and award-winning and has exhibited in the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, the United States,

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and throughout Canada. He has been an artist-in-residence for the City of Surrey, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, and Langley School Division. Gabriel was a recipient of grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, the BC Arts Council, and the Vancouver Foundation, among others, and was awarded the TD Canada Trust Langley International Festival Society Ambassador of Diversity Award in 2021 for his achievements in arts and culture, as well as community service in Langley. Gabriel teaches indigenous studies at KPU, gives guest lectures throughout the country, and advocates for social justice and environmental awareness. His art, featured in exhibitions, sports medals, and global events, continues to honour his heritage and inspire future generations.



FIGURE 2. Brandon Gabriel

My art practice varies like my work schedule. I have many tasks to complete on any given day, week, and month. So I have come up with a definition for being an artist that helps me keep my mind at ease. If I compartmentalize everything I do then I am in danger of running all parts of myself into the ground. I have been down this path many times. So my solution to this conundrum is quite simple: everything I do is about embracing where I come from, and I strive to exemplify my community's best attributes through my work in all its forms. I pride myself on working well with others and through collaboration we can all achieve success in all our endeavors together.

[From 2012 Artist Statement].



FIGURE 3. Cover Art "Sacred Paint: Ethereal Passage"

1. "SACRED PAINT: ETHEREAL PASSAGE"

*Sacred Paint: Ethereal Passage*¹ (Figure 3) is a 4 by 4-foot acrylic on canvas, according to Gabriel:

that journeys beyond the physical world. This bear's face emerges through layers of Coast Salish forms—trigons, crescents, and y-forms—woven with color that shifts between realms. The vibrant hues are not simply paint, but a passage into another space where the bear exists in a fluid, spiritual presence. The eyes hold a quiet intensity, a reminder that this is no ordinary animal but a keeper of stories and forces far larger than ourselves. Through this work, I explore the convergence of tradition and the unseen, honoring the bear's enduring place in the cosmos

(Gabriel, n.d.-a).

This impressive piece using oil paint captures a kindness that comes through the eyes of the bear asking the viewer to take a pause and consider our understandings of these incredible beings. An oral history speaks of the role of the bear as a teacher. According to the Mission Museum: When the world was very young and the people lived with no guidance, the Great Creator either became the *Xe:xals*, or appointed the *Xe:xals* as guardians of the Stó:l ō and to show the people how

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to live. The *Xe:xa:ls*, three male bears and one female bear, travelled the earth to “make things right” again” (para 5).

2. WORLD’S LARGEST COAST SALISH WELCOME FIGURE



FIGURE 4. "World's Largest Coast Salish Welcome Figure"

Figure 4 is titled "World's Largest Coast Salish Welcome Figure," and is part of a digital mapping projection installation by Brandon Gabriel, Octopus Spirit Enterprises, Savage Production Society, Pablo Muñoz Photography, and the City of New Westminster. Savage Society stated: 'Brandon's light carving challenges us to reconsider the stories monuments tell and to ask whose stories are we telling?' (para. 1) while citing Gabriel as saying: "The symbol of this statue is not just a harmless, benign depiction of a tin soldier. It is actually a symbol of violence" (para. 1). On the waterfront boardwalk in the City of New Westminster in British Columbia stands the Guinness World Records as the world's tallest tin soldier, reaching 32 feet (9.75 meters) tall and weighing 10,000 pounds (4,540 kg). In this digital reclamation and cultural celebration through light projection, Gabriel interrupts settler concepts of militarization and reminds the audience of the constant Coast Salish presence on these lands.

Gabriel (n.d-b) shared:

Carved cedar Welcome Figures have long been integral to Coast Salish governance, ceremony, and heraldry. European colonial records, including Simon Fraser’s 1808 expedition, documented these monumental sculptures along the riverbanks. The 1858 arrival of the Royal Engineers marked colonial expansion and Indigenous displacement. Today, New Westminster’s ”World’s Largest Tin Soldier” symbolizes this legacy.

3. THE HUNTER’S MOON



FIGURE 5. ”The Hunter’s Moon”

Figure 5 ”The Hunter’s Moon” is a conceptual design by Gabriel and others at Octopus Spirit Enterprises, which recently won the bid to be installed on the massive Patullo Bridge Replacement Project. The design will be constructed using embossed concrete and illuminated at night. It will be 35 feet tall and 5 feet wide. It will have a monumental impact on the new bridge infrastructure and will be visible to millions of people in the Lower Mainland and around the world. When sharing the successful bid, the artist told followers, “Our design, *The Hunter’s Moon*, tells the ancient story of the annual Autumn salmon harvest on Kwantlen’s River (the Fraser River). A celestial lunar event important in Coast Salish cosmology” (Gabriel,n.d-c)

For decades, Gabriel has been bringing together Kwantlen ways of knowing and being, asking audiences to question ’what do you know?’ And ’how do

you know? ’ Educating and illuminating the complicated history of settlers in Kwantlen territory.

4. REFERENCES

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