

Tania Willard: *Entwined*

John K. Grande (**JG**): So here we are in Stanley Park with Tania Willard. Tania, before this project you had done other projects. Can you tell me a little about your background and how you got here?

Tania Willard (**TW**): I have been working as an artist and graphic designer for a few years, but what brought me to a lot of my creative work was years with an aboriginal youth publication called *Redwire*, which really stimulated a lot of stuff for me around the use of narrative and the power of expression. I did a fine arts degree at the University of Victoria and travelled for a while. A lot of my work was themed around social justice, aboriginal rights, narrative and story in many different ways. I have done projects with Kamala Todd<sup>i</sup>, like *Storyscapes*.

**JG**: What was *Storyscapes* about?

**TW**: That was basically looking at aboriginal history and experience and finding ways to reintroduce that to the Vancouver landscape on the premise that aboriginal storytelling is often erased, suppressed or forgotten in different areas. Lots of different things were affecting that project, so it reignited an interest in narrative for me. I have worked a lot in printmaking and painting. I started with work that was really accessible for demonstrations and events.

**JG**: Do you introduce a political narrative into your printmaking?

**TW**: Yes. They are all political graphics.

**JG**: So you know Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun<sup>ii</sup> and some of the others.

**TW**: I have recently been working with Grunt Gallery as a curatorial resident, so Lawrence and Dana Claxton<sup>iii</sup> and all those amazing artists who work there have been really important for me as a younger aboriginal artist looking into their work.

**JG**: And here at Stanley Park, did you begin the project in 2008?

**TW**: I did. We all did ephemeral pieces, so it was a first introduction to the park and materials and the way to approach how we would work. So I did a piece called *Birth* that was working with an exposed root ball system on Cathedral Trail.

**JG**: Was it a living tree?

**TW**: No it was a fallen tree. It took me a long time to find my location in the park. I kept going back and forth. I had this quirky ability to pick locations I wasn't allowed to work in because they were so special.<sup>iv</sup> So it took me a while. Eventually I was walking along Cathedral Trail and I was really struck. Down there it was mostly Douglas firs and some cedars that fell. Because that area of the park was quite swampy with moist, thin soils, the

root ball systems were kind of flat and spread out. When the storm came through there, the trees were upturned and really exposed as magnificent examples of resistance.



*Birth* by Tania Willard. Photo by Paul Colangelo.

**JG:** They were probably all connected underground.

**TW:** Exactly. One of the things I was really inspired by was in the early part of this project. We were introduced to the park by ecologists and they talked about mycorrhizae fungi.

**JG:** And what are mycorrhizae fungi?

**TW:** That is a kind of fungal system that networks everything in a forest. It is fascinating stuff. It is one of the largest organisms on earth. What is amazing about it and what inspired me is that mycorrhizae fungi possess a type of intelligence. It can selectively deliver nutrients throughout the forest. Say you might have a fir that is deficient in a certain nutrient and a cedar that is in excess. The mycorrhizae fungi can deliver the nutrient to only areas deficient in nutrients.

**JG:** So they are like a kind of interwoven nutrient system, a nutrient two-way highway, but not roots, fungi.

**TW:** In *Wisdom of the Elders*, David Suzuki and Peter Knudtson interestingly look at similarities between ecological views and indigenous knowledge. Looking at mycorrhizae fungi you have this kind of specialized scientific ecologist's knowledge, but it is equally indigenous knowledge and culture in nature.

**JG:** And you were assisting these exposed root balls, or what were you doing?



Tania at work on *Birth*

**TW:** Basically I stripped a layer of the bark, creating this spatial drawing on the bark by exposing the lighter coloured wood underneath.

**JG:** Some areas were stripped, and others were left. And for this year (2009) you are using cedar bark. And I believe, traditionally, the Coast Salish harvested cedar bark and wood from living trees, didn't they?

**TW:** Interestingly, some of the early sites I picked I couldn't work on because they were culturally modified trees. They were areas where the Coast Salish people had stripped cedar trees. They have a way of stripping them so they continue to live. The cedars develop this really amazing scar that is a vertical path from the stripping of cedar bark.



An example of a culturally modified tree found in Stanley Park

**JG:** Was this a few centuries ago?

**TW:** People still do this but not in Stanley Park. It is considered poaching, which is interesting because this is still considered Coast Salish territory.

**JG:** And how is the land claim settlement going for this coastal area in Vancouver. Who owns this land? Is it still up for negotiation?

**TW:** Certainly there are a number of outstanding claims with the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh people. In much of my approach to this project, this was something that I really thought about. The way that I approached this project was influenced by my background in social justice and aboriginal rights, but I am from the Secwepemc Nation in the interior of BC so I was sensitive to the fact that this is not my home territory.

**JG:** Is the language a little different?

**TW:** The language and culture are completely different. There are some basic principles that are similar to all indigenous cultures, but they are also very distinct from each other. So I certainly didn't want to appropriate a Coast Salish method or art form, but I was also very inspired by, and wanted to create a thank you, to the Coast Salish people, and to the lands and spirits of the people of this territory.

**JG:** And the bark that you are using for this project comes from Stanley Park?

**TW:** This is bark that has been sitting out for some time, so this is not live harvested bark. Actually it is from trees that fell during or after the storm.

**JG:** And you are integrating the cedar bark with sheep's wool?

**TW:** This is sheep's wool that is dyed with red alder bark, and hemlock bark, both harvested from Stanley Park, as well as madder. Madder is a natural dye originally from a flower in Egypt that is now grown in Holland. I did not harvest the madder.



Dyed sheep's wool waiting to be braided.

**JG:** And do you roll the wool to make these long braids?

**TW:** This wool is called sliver, and it is carded this way, so when it comes off the machine it is a continuous fluffy line. So instead of choosing pre-spun yarn, I chose to work with the raw sliver.

**JG:** We can see you are bringing together the raw cedar bark from the forest and the wool to create these braids. So I can see you have combined a bit from farming and a bit from harvesting together.

**TW:** Exactly. The piece is called *Entwined*, so it is basically looking at and referencing histories of both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, which really sums up Stanley Park. So *Entwined* is a reflection on all those different aspects of it.



Braiding *Entwined*. Photo by Paul Colangelo

**JG:** And where will *Entwined* be sited in this urban park where nature abounds so splendidly?

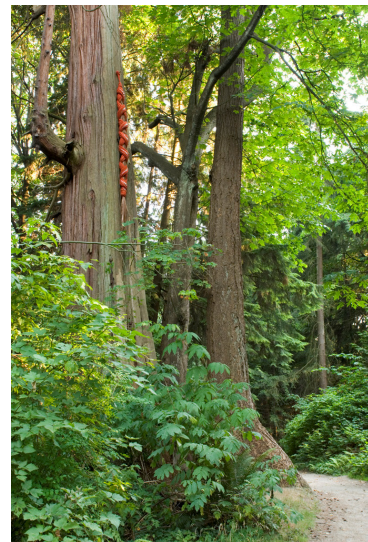
**TW:** This will be installed on a beautiful big cedar tree on a trail behind Lumberman's Arch Café. I am hoping it will be about fifteen feet long and it will be at least fifteen to twenty feet off the ground. The cedar tree I have chosen to site it on is living on one side. The whole thing is living, but on the other side it is like a snag, with a few living parts of the cedar way up high.

**JG:** And will this be hanging like a braid line, or will it have a configuration?

**TW:** The braid will have a core of cedar bark with wool woven around it, and it will hang down.

**JG:** And will there be other elements attached to *Entwined*?

**TW:** Importantly, oyster shell buttons. Near the Lumberman’s Arch Café in the 1880s they unearthed a big shell midden that was eight feet deep. This discovery demonstrated the intense use of this area by Coast Salish people. *Entwined* is in part an homage to the Coast Salish people and the midden. Instead of being considered an important archaeological site at the time it was discovered, the oyster shell was all carted out. The oyster shell from the midden was actually mixed with aggregate to pave the park roads.



*Entwined* by Tania Willard. Photos by Paul Colangelo.

---

<sup>i</sup> Kamala Todd is a Metis-Cree writer, filmmaker, community planner and mother living in Vancouver.

<sup>ii</sup> Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun is a First Nations painter who addresses the issues of indigenous Canadians in his work. [www.lawrencepaulyuxweluptun.com](http://www.lawrencepaulyuxweluptun.com)

<sup>iii</sup> Dana Claxton is an artist who works in a variety of media, including video and performance, all with the commitment to the Aboriginal Community. She describes herself as a “mixed blood Canadian.” [www.danaclaxton.com](http://www.danaclaxton.com)

<sup>iv</sup> Artists consulted with ecologists and park stewards to determine sites and processes which would be ecologically and culturally sensitive to the existing nature and history.