

MICHAEL NICOLL
YAHGULANAAS
Abundance Fenced



PUBLIC
ART
vancouver



About the Work

Abundance Fenced takes the form of a pod of whales pursuing a stream of salmon cascading down the slope at the corner of Kensington Park at Knight Street and 33rd Avenue in Vancouver. The 42-metre-long steel fence designed by Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas sits on top of a retaining wall and shields the pedestrian pathway. The artwork, with its distinctive Haida formline design, reminds those who pass by of the historic and contemporary influences of indigenous nations along the Pacific Northwest coast and speaks to the inextricable ties Vancouver has to the water that both embraces it and provides abundantly for its inhabitants.

The Pacific Ocean is a vast conduit that shapes the city and connects it to other parts of the world. The ships that traverse this ocean bring great bounty yet pose potentially irreparable risks, exhaling pollutants into the same water from which food is harvested. The steel fence, with its grids and rivets that delineate the eyes, mouths and fins of the whales and the salmon, represents a type of vessel similar to the ships that anchor at Port Metro Vancouver—the destination of the majority of the trucks driving along the street below the artwork. The materials and the construction process of the fence mimic the ships and reference the industrial corridor to the port. The whales and the salmon themselves can also be

understood as vessels. Beyond commercial values assigned to each pound of their flesh as consumable goods, their presence in the larger ecology is invaluable. Nutrients from the ocean are brought onto land through their bodies in a cycle of the interdependence of land and water species. By rendering the fish and whales in the material form of the ships that threaten them, Yahgulanaas juxtaposes different ways of understanding the ocean. Known for his graphic novels, he often brings together what appear to be incongruous elements to question naturalized understandings of human relationships to the environment.

Yahgulanaas is inspired by what he calls “the tradition of adaptation” in Haida culture. The silver and gold bracelets that bear the varied indigenous designs of the Pacific Northwest—to which this fence is a giant cousin—exemplify this tradition. As a marker of identity and lineage, crests were historically tattooed onto the arms of indigenous peoples in coastal British Columbia. With disapproval from Christian missionaries and other pressures of Euro-Canadian societal norms, tattoos were gradually replaced by bracelets. At a time when indigenous law and culture were demeaned and suppressed in Canada, engraving on smaller objects such as bracelets was part of an important process of handing down and inheriting cultural knowledge and form, visually communicating histories and values to younger generations.

The fence similarly narrates a story for generations to come, declaring the resilient strength of nature as well as indigenous peoples, yet also cautioning about the declining population of whales, salmon and other marine life. Heeding this caution is crucial for indigenous peoples and newcomers alike. In this way *Abundance Fenced* serves as another type of vessel—containing a story of both the fragility of the ecosystem and the richness of water resources.

— Liz Park

Liz Park is a curator and writer. She recently edited *Old Growth: Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas* (2011).

Images Installation details of *Abundance Fenced*, 2011. Photos: Robert Keziere



About the Artist

Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas is a renowned Haida artist who, after decades as a political activist, began to apply classic Haida visual forms and narratives to contemporary graphic communications, including political cartoons and comics. He gained recognition for what he calls Haida Manga, a distinct approach to visual narrative that combines the Northwest Coast stories and formlines with the dynamic style of Asian graphic novels called manga or manhwa. His publications include *A Tale of Two Shamans* (2001), *The Last Voyage of the Black Ship* (2002), *A Lousy Tale* (2004), *Flight of the Hummingbird* (2008), *RED: A Haida Manga* (2009), and *The Canoe He Called Loo Taas* (2010). He also did the illustrations for David Suzuki's book *Interdependence* (2010). The retrospective publication *Old Growth: Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas* (2011) chronicles more than thirty years of his graphic works that document a history of political negotiations and cultural conflicts off the Northwest Coast of Canada from the 1970s to the early 2000s.

Above Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas. Photo: Yukiko Onley

The City of Vancouver Public Art Program commissions contemporary art for public spaces. The program supports excellence in art making by emerging and established artists, in new and traditional media and from stand-alone commissions to artist collaborations. Projects at civic buildings, greenways, parks and other public spaces are funded through annual civic capital budgets. Private sector projects are funded by developments in the rezoning process. Learn more about this and other public artworks in the Public Art Registry at www.vancouver.ca/publicart; subscribe to the Public Art Listserv to be notified of upcoming artist opportunities.



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Coverpage Installation detail of *Abundance Fenced*, 2011, Knight Street at 33rd Avenue, Vancouver, British Columbia. Photo: Robert Keziere



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