

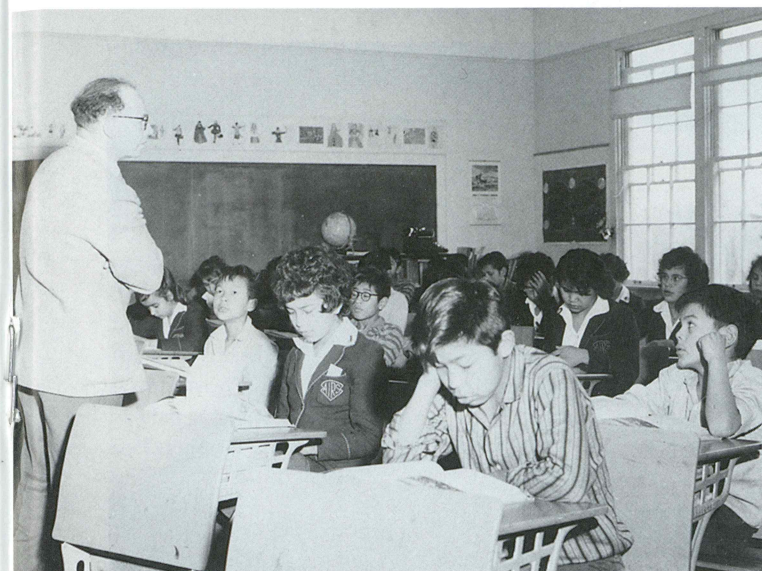
There is truth here

AAREN MADDEN

First Nations children's art, created at residential and day schools, opens pathways for healing and reconciliation.



PHOTO: TONY BOUNSALL



Unidentified teacher and class at Alberni Indian Residential School. Photo is from the United Church of Canada's archives.

Mark Atleo (Kiikitakashuaa) of the Ahousaht First Nation is a survivor of the Alberni Indian Residential School. He was there for nine years, beginning when he was seven years old. Away from his family, he had to be brave not just for himself: "I had a younger brother who I had to watch over when I was there," recounts Atleo. "He was crying every day that he wanted to go home, wondering why we were there. So I had to console him in the classroom, just being a big brother." Atleo recalls running away, only to be brought back, during his last year there. He ran away because he was not allowed to attend his grandmother's funeral.

I had the honour of hearing Atleo's words in the upstairs curatorial spaces of the University of Victoria's Legacy Downtown art gallery. He was there with Andrea Walsh, PhD, the curator of *There is Truth Here: Creativity and Resilience in Children's Art from Indian Residential and Indian Day Schools*. It was an emotional conversation; the three of us were each weeping at some time during our hour together.

A visual anthropologist at the University of Victoria, Walsh collaborates with First Nations groups across Canada to research and repatriate artwork that was created by residential and day school students. In 2008, a collection of paintings was bequeathed to UVic from the family of Port Alberni artist Robert Aller, who volunteered at the Alberni Indian Residential School (IRS) teaching extracurricular art classes. Shortly afterward, Walsh got involved in the process of repatriating these artworks to the survivors who had created them as children between the late 1950s and early 1970s. Following cultural protocols and collaborating with survivors, these paintings formed an exhibition at Legacy Downtown in 2013 and the Alberni Valley Museum in 2015.

In September 2013, the Commissioners for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission invited the Alberni survivors to share their stories and paintings at the closing ceremonies in Vancouver. Again following cultural protocols, Walsh and her group used the opportunity to reunite Mark Atleo with a painting he had done as a child. In front of 1000 witnesses, "I cried," Atleo says in his quiet voice.

Photo to left: Andrea Walsh and Mark Atleo with a painting Atleo created while attending Alberni Indian Residential School

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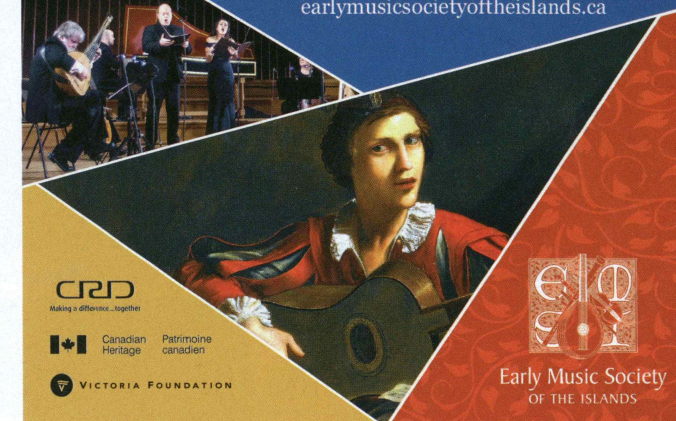
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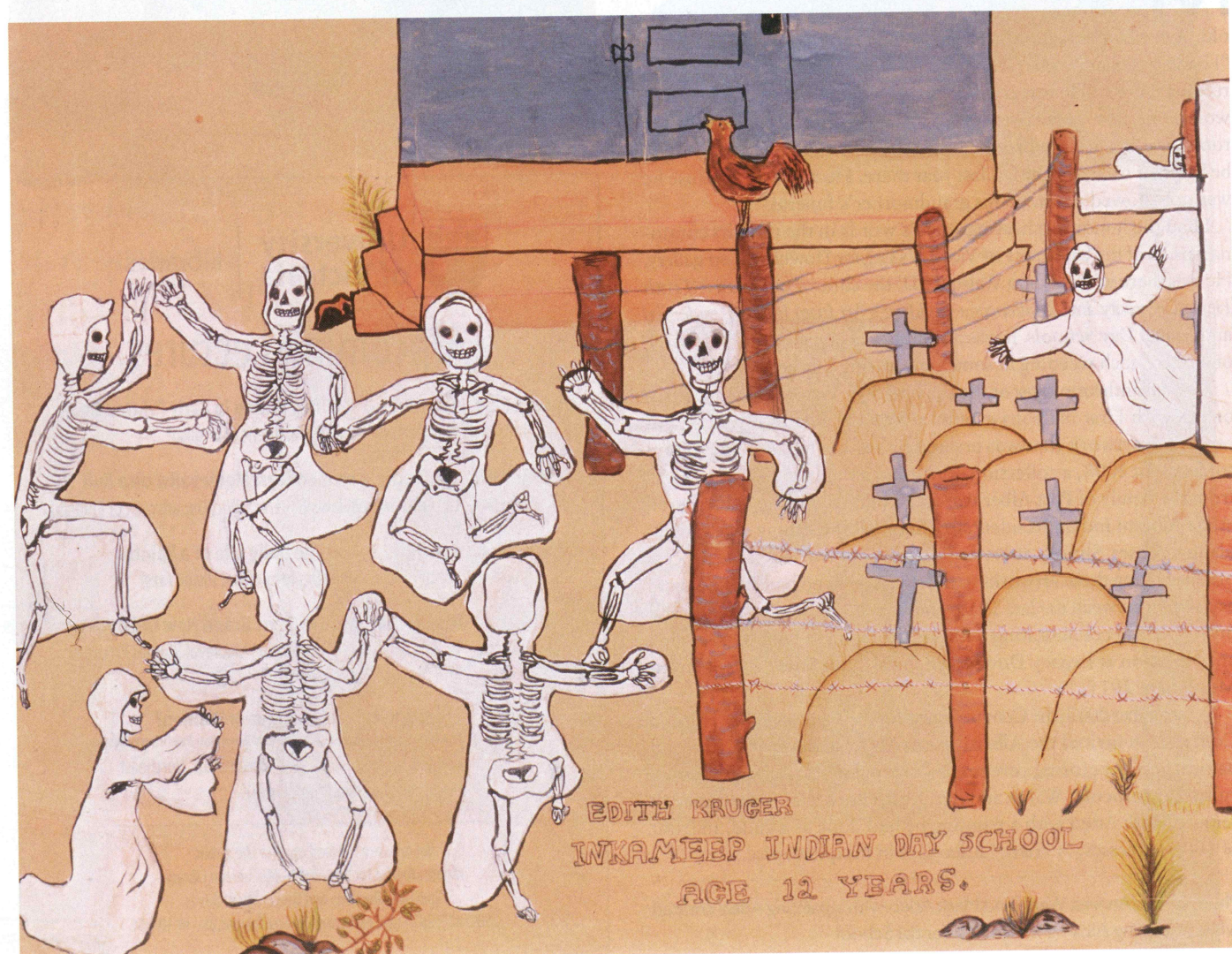
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1:00 pm Sandra Meigs (UVic, Department of Visual Arts)
- 16 OCTOBER **Manuscripts on Mondays: Brand New Old Books**
1:00 pm Dr. Iain Macleod Higgins (UVic, Medieval Studies Program and Department of English)
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Right: A painting by Georgina Cootes, a student at Alberni Indian Residential School

Below: As noted on her painting, the ghosts dancing outside the cemetery were conjured up by Edith Kruger while at Inkameep Indian Day School



Before this painting came back to him, Atleo had been through therapies for his experiences, and says, “I thought I was ok—but I wasn’t...It’s like I was looking in a telescope upside down. Everything was locked up.” He had completely forgotten the painting, but now he had a direct, focused sightline back to the child he was. “When you turn the telescope the right way, it opens up the hurt, and see what happens when you get the help you need to see the better life that is out there.”

That child painted a vibrant blue fish—a sockeye; that’s our favourite fish—adorned with yellow and green, in a style mimicking what he would have seen at home. It rests in a net above a swirling blue and purple poster-paint sea. Recalling the painting of it, Atleo says, “All it was is that dark, shady background. Mr. Aller said, ‘paint what you really like; what’s in your life.’ I just thought about fishing. [What] I wanted when I grew up was to be a fisherman. We were taken away when I was just starting.” His grandfather had taught him all about fishing.

After his residential school experience ended, Atleo did go on to be a fisherman for 36 years. Now 65, he is a BC Transit driver. He acknowledges BCT’s support of his journey; the organization posted photos on their website of a later trip to Ottawa he and his Alberni classmates took to record their experiences for the Canada Hall at the Canadian Museum of History. At work, “people talk; they come and ask questions,” he says. “[My work colleagues and I] met years ago, and now we are much closer. And there are still people asking questions.”

“To get this [painting] back was something else,” he shares. The painting “opened me up towards my other classmates, our group. We had been apart for so long; now we see more of each other. It’s great.” Atleo has since shared his story on panel discussions and with university students.

While they remain owners of the work, many survivors of the Alberni school have chosen to keep their paintings at the University of Victoria so that they may be used as teaching tools. “What a generous thing,” Walsh declares with emotion. While most people have countless photos and mementos from childhood, “these [survivors] don’t have pictures. They don’t have little things from their school time... But the way they share so selflessly...saying, ‘Let’s talk about this.’”

Fifty paintings from Alberni Indian Residential School survivors, including Atleo’s,

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Left: Painting on cedar plank by Edward Baptiste while at Inkameep Indian Day School, likely between 1938 and 1941

will be displayed as part of *There is Truth Here*, along with collections from students who attended the McKay Indian Residential School in Manitoba, the Alert Bay Indian Day School, and the Inkameep Indian Day School in the Okanagan, between the early 1950s and early 1970s. Works will include drawings, paintings, exquisite hand-made buckskin costumes, and many photographs depicting dramatic children's performances of Okanagan stories.

All the works on display will be put into context. For instance, the Alberni and Inkameep collections exist due to teachers who would be considered renegades for encouraging the children to express themselves and their culture authentically, without censorship. Other collections show a more practical intention, but still contain marks that connect to and evidence an individual, a unique person, a person of value in an impossible place—one that had been wiped from collective memory. Displaying these works is a step toward correcting that erasure.

Walsh reflects, "When we think about the visual legacy of the [residential] schools, they are in the thousands of pictures of children. But they were taken *of* children, not *by* children. And they were taken to demonstrate the value of what the government saw as this assimilative policy that was being carried out in the schools. So these pictures are often of [children] in uniforms, and they are anonymous. But they are not, because they were brothers and sisters and cousins and daughters and sons and grandsons and granddaughters. And although we can't—nor should we—feel like we have access to those relations, what the art does is highlight that all of the children in those pictures were wonderful little children...they had ideas and they had creativity. There is a creativity to these pieces and there is a resilience to them. [The children] were staying strong. The pieces here were evidence of that strength."

These works are truths, but also pathways to understanding and reconciliation. Says Atleo, "I would hope other people would see there are stories to these artworks. We are always taught, culture-wise, when people carved or made anything—like that costume," he says, gesturing to the archival storage box containing a tiny buckskin dress, "that's a story in that box there. My painting has a story to it—to share with other people...What's here being displayed is an eye-opener. It's not just to look at...I think it's a teaching tool for younger people nowadays. It's a good tool. It's like we were hidden away from society. Now it's open."

There is Truth Here: Creativity and Resilience in Children's Art from Indian Residential and Indian Day Schools is at the Legacy Downtown Art Gallery from September 23, 2017 to January 6, 2018. Panel discussion with survivors September 30. Contact Legacy Downtown for more information. 630 Yates Street, 250-721-6562, www.uvic.ca/Locations/legacy.



When Aaren Madden discussed the subject of this article with her family, she listened as her son jumped in to explain to his younger sister what residential schools were. Rightly, finally, he had learned about them in school.

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