

# PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF TRADITION IN ART:

## *An Interview with Susan Point*

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JAN HARE

**I** MET WITH SUSAN POINT in her studio at Musqueam First Nation, situated between a neighbourhood in southwest Vancouver and the banks of the Fraser River. Musqueam, meaning “people of the grass,” is where she lives and works. Having lived all her life on the Musqueam Reserve, Susan’s life has been shaped by her family and community and the traditions which have sustained them as Salish peoples. Her world is reflected in the themes, motifs, and images that mark her unique Salish art. I had the opportunity to meet with Susan Point, where she reflected on the creative style and the influences on her work.

When I entered the studio, the space was neatly defined, with pieces of her work positioned in careful relation to one another. Waiting for Susan, I walked around the studio paying closer attention to the visual presentation and detail of the work. It was very clear: Susan Point is one who is meticulous and stylized in her space and the creation of her work. She has innovatively brought together the traditional elements of Coast Salish art with contemporary style in new mediums. In a recent book about the artist, *Susan Point, Coast Salish Artist*, her work has been described by Peter Macnair as visionary, innovative and exacting. “She has brought the two thousand-year-old Coast Salish art form – which many scholars see as the ancient prototype for the more recent formalized and intellectualized two-dimensional art of the northern coast – to a position of admired and deserved appreciation, giving it new life and definition, an encouraging introduction to the new millennium” (p. 43). Our conversation took us in many directions. I am tremendously grateful to Susan Point for taking the time to share her insights.

## THE ARTIST

J: Tell me about how you started out?

S: That's a good question. I think it was always something that I wanted to do. I got married young and had to find a job to support my family. I went to a 9 to 5 job every day. I just never had the time to do what it was that I really wanted to do. I had two children with my first husband. Then I met Jeff, my current husband, and I had another two children. When Jeff and I first met I didn't know he was an artist. I always used to help my children with their art projects; and Jeff would say, "I didn't know you could draw." And I would say, "of course I can." He suggested that I should do something. He was the one who found out about a jewelry course that I could take. I was on maternity leave at the time and they were offering a jewelry course at Vancouver Community College. It wasn't a Native jewelry course, but there were a lot of Natives enrolled in the course. Jeff encouraged me to try it and that's how I got started. I started out doing jewelry, mostly as a hobby. Then things got a little more interesting – I then tried doing a print. Jeff, who is also an artist, helped me along in terms of acrylic painting. When I first started doing jewelry I adopted the Northern art styles for awhile. Most Salish artists were doing the same thing too. I guess it was because of the prominence in the market place as well as the media at that time. Anyway, it got to a point where I was working 9 to 5 and coming home and trying to complete jewelry pieces which were ordered through some of the galleries in Vancouver. From there, the demand grew ... that's when I started getting into printmaking and, all of a sudden, it wasn't a hobby anymore. I should note that my first print was the beginning of my work solely based on design in the Salish tradition.

## DEVELOPING STYLE, FORM AND TECHNIQUE

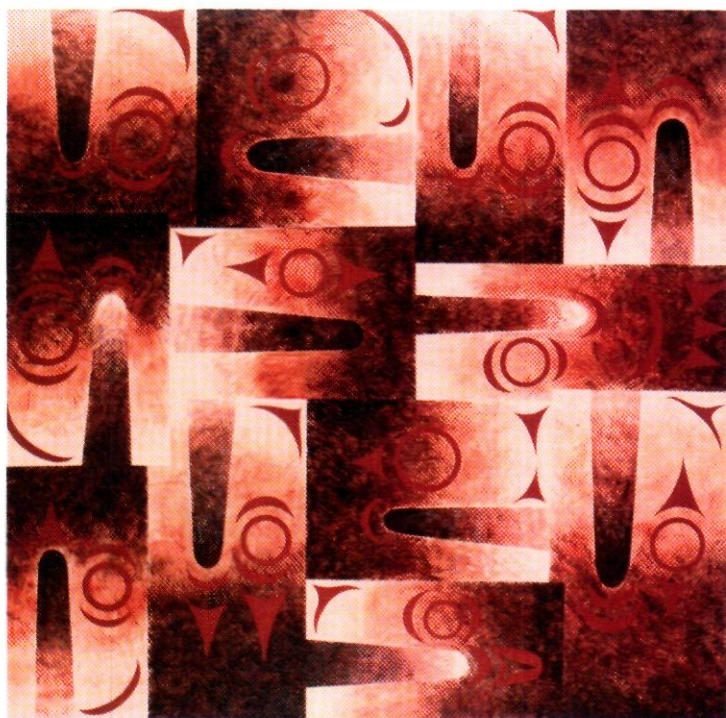
J: In the book about you and your work, *Susan Point, Coast Salish Artist* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000), you said, "My rapid mastery of the design form resulted in a sense because I was copying. Everything was already in place, it looked as if I knew all about it, but I didn't" (p. 30). I thought that was really interesting and would like to know when you felt you had achieved mastery of the design form. When did you feel that you had control of the style, the form, and technique that you now possess in your work?



S: It has really only been in the last while that I feel I have a good understanding of the design form. I've been doing artwork for almost 22 years. It's in the last ten years, I guess, that I've been really in control. It's been difficult and has taken me years to understand the placement of the elements and when and where they should be used. At first, I didn't pay too much attention as to how the elements were used and when they should be used. Now I have a better understanding of where certain things should go. When you look at the salmon, for instance, you can draw it in so many ways; and there are many ways you can work the elements into the salmon. It's taken me years just to research and understand Salish art.

J: You say it has taken you years to learn Salish art. Could you describe the process that it took for you to come to understand Salish art?

S: I researched. I tried to find documentation and imagery from the Salish peoples. It was very difficult to find images because a lot of it wasn't documented. With European contact and the arrival of the missionaries, a lot of things were destroyed or sent off to museums. So, it was really difficult doing research ... trying to find slides, photos, written documentation or anything on Salish art. With the little collection of images I accumulated over time, I would study the pieces to try and understand the placement of the elements and how they were being used in certain images. I would visit with Mike Kew, who was married to my Aunt Della. Mike was a Professor out at UBC who specialized in Salish art and culture. Anyway, we would visit them and have tea and he would try and explain what certain things were in terms of imagery. Some of the images represented mythical creatures. I would ask questions about what some of the images represented. I also did a lot of talking with my mom and my uncle, Dominic Point, to get a better understanding of the Salish art form. Also, Bill Holm, then with the Burke Museum in Seattle, was a great source for my research. When I first started doing Salish artwork, a lot of my images were circular. That was because I was inspired by the images of Coast Salish spindle whorls; and besides, I only had a small collection of slides and spindle whorls to work from. Many of the spindles whorls which I took images from were either round, soft-cornered or oval. Over time, I used the circular format when I created an original image of my own. Only the odd time did I go into using the square format. I did an artwork reworking a panel image which I saw out at the University of British Columbia that had square salmon heads. It was really quite interesting ... but,



*Salmon Run* (above), 1989, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 100 centimetres, located at the Ethnological Museum of the University of Zurich. *Salmon People* (right), 04/1990, Serigraph, 12 x 18 inches, was inspired by the legends of the Salmon People. *Preservation* (opposite page), 09/1996, Serigraph, 20 x 20 inches. Taken together, these images illustrate the evolution of Ms. Point's style and use of colour.





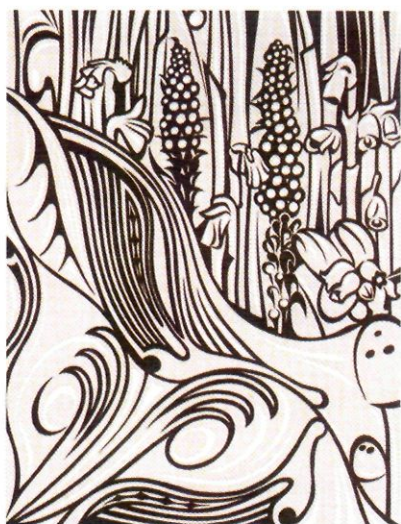
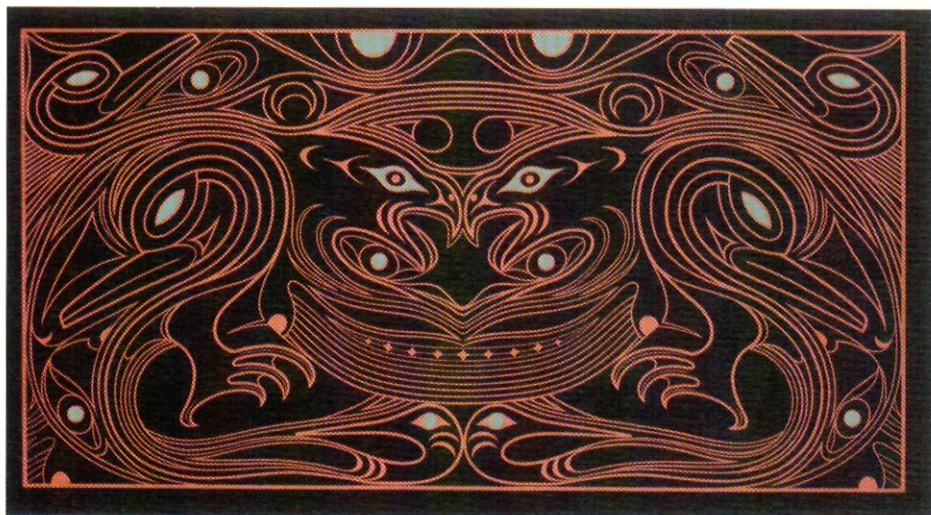


anyway, those are the kind of images I used and reworked when I initially started doing Salish art.

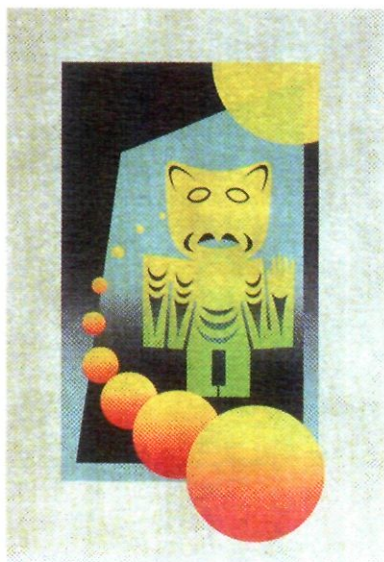
#### BALANCE BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCES

J: How do you balance tradition with the need for invention and creativity in your work?

S: When I do contemporary images, I use crescents, the wedges, and the other elements of Salish art. I will always incorporate these elements into my designs to keep them unique in the sense of being truly Salish ... although they may be very non-traditional with respect to subject, format, and medium. The work I am doing now is mainly contemporary; but I will always go back to doing a traditional piece the odd time. There is this very old wood fragment whereby only a portion of the imagery was still there, and I used that to recreate an overall design. Using that little piece of fragment, the images that



*Images* (above), *Imagination* (left), *Imagism* (below), (set of two serigraphs, one woodblock) 2000, respectively 23 x 37 inches, 21 x 15 inches, 24 x 18 inches, edition of 25 each. Three of the figures inspired by a wood fragment (opposite page) "from the lid of an engraved wooden box over two thousand years old.... only about 21 cm (about 8 inches) at its widest, [it] was found at the Esilao dig site in the Fraser Canyon, where the burnt remains of an ancient pit house were discovered" (Susan Point, *Coast Salish Artist*, 2000, p. 102).







can be drawn from it are endless. [This one is in the book too.] It's like the game you play when you are a kid. You draw a line and then try to make something out of it by adding to it. That's kind of how I worked the lines on the wood fragment. In my first attempt to extend the image, I created two eagles coming together. Yet if you really look at the design you can see a number of different images within it. Using the same lines from the wood fragment, I created yet another design incorporating a snail and the Indian pipe plant which are native plants. I was trying to be a bit more creative by adding to the imagery. There are so many images that one can create from this one little fragment.

J: In what other ways are you being pulled towards the contemporary in your work?

S: Well, not only with imagery, but in medium as well. I have gone into glass, which is something that no Native artist used before; and I've worked in stainless steel, which is something that Native people never used before. It has only been in the last ten years or so that I have gotten into wood, which is something that Native people have always worked with.

J: Given that you are working across a wide range of mediums, what are some of the challenges to this?

S: Well, with glass for instance, you have to be very careful with it because it's very fragile...you break it, that's it. Also, it scratches very easily. Mind you, there are different kinds of glass that you can use which will, more or less, eliminate these problems. Also, when I do large-scale public art commissions, there are certain restraints. I work very closely with design teams, architects, or the contractors who let me know exactly what can and cannot be done. They are

pretty strict when it comes to seismology, and protecting a structure from earthquakes. For example, when I did the housepost for the First Nations House of Learning [at the University of British Columbia], I was only allowed to carve into the wood four inches deep because of regulations. Working in different mediums, there is always some kind of challenge. The interesting thing is you can use one basic image for various media and the end result will always be different.

J: How do you think the presentation or creativity of your work is affected by such restrictions?

S: I don't think my work is affected that much by restrictions; other than having to work within certain safety regulations. It's a good learning process in understanding that you can only do so much when using certain mediums.

J: Is there a particular medium that you really enjoy working with?

S: Oh yes! Wood. I like the smell and it's very calming. I can just take my time. It's very relaxing...therapeutic almost. And, as you're working along, you can actually see the imagery coming to life. I like that. When you're working with a piece of wood there is no end because you can keep adding to it; mind you, there is a time when you have to stop. Although I've become slightly allergic to cedar, I still like working in wood. And I also like painting.

#### PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF TRADITION

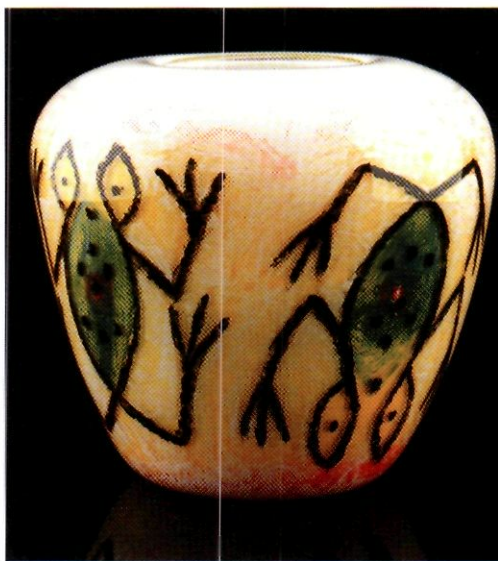
J: I also read in the book there was a time when your work was described as being unique among Northwest Coast art, but also contrary to the dictates of traditional Northwest Coast color schemes. You say in the book, "it was scary introducing my own sense of colour, people reacted negatively telling me it was not Coast Salish art. It took a long time until it was accepted." Can you talk about that?

S: When I started going contemporary, changing from traditional into doing my own style, people were saying it wasn't really traditional. Not only was I using totally new colours in my prints, but I was also doing blends (which is a fading process). There was a negative sense in that I was doing something totally different ... swaying away from tradition.

J: How did you feel about that, how did that make you feel?



*Spotted Toad* (right), 2002, 12 x 18 inches. This was created using the Graal technique, one of the most demanding glass blowers can attempt, and a completely new process for Ms. Point. Developed in 1916, the process is long, complicated, and risky, as each stage of heating and annealing cycle generates pressures and stress within the different layers of the glass. A complex Graal piece with many layers can take several days to create. The vase shown here was initially a bubble of glass (very small and thick). Ms. Point hand painted the vase with paints made of glass inside and out. The vase was cooled and then reheated and re-attached to the blowpipe by placing a ball of clear or coloured glass suspended on the blowpipe into the centre of the vase. Ms. Point then supervised the blowing of the vase into its final shape and size. It was then dipped into clear molten glass and baked one more time.



S: It didn't really bother me. I felt a little bad, but I thought you have to move ahead at some point. You can't stay in one place forever. You can only do so many things so many ways in a traditional sense. You have to use your ideas and creativity to come up with something totally original. It's a challenge for me, and I like to experiment ... to test the boundaries and go beyond traditional. I love doing contemporary pieces.

J: What have been some of the break-through points for you as an artist where you feel you took some real chances?

S: I think working in different mediums. Probably, in the glass field. In 1986 I did a few glass pieces and it didn't go over very well. Some people felt that it wasn't traditional Native work. Then, in 1990, I did a glass commission for the Vancouver Airport (in an area which used to be gates 9 and 10); and from there, I got into other carved glass works. At that time, with the exception of a few, a number of galleries were a little reluctant to purchase anything I did in glass because it was a new medium that wasn't done before. Now, it is something that's accepted. Every Native artist seems to be doing it. I could say breaking from tradition and going contemporary is an area where I took some chances, but that was more of a transition. When I started working in wood I think that was a break-through. I really didn't think that it was something I could do. But once I started, I loved it.

J: You mention that glass has been a relatively new medium for you to be working with, part of pushing the boundaries of tradition. How do you prepare for these new experiences?

S: I always like to do new things "hand-on" so I understand the whole process. With glass, for instance, I originally cut my own work, but I was a little too heavy handed. When hand cutting the rubber resist (that goes onto the glass), every now and then I would cut into the glass. Basically, right now, I direct and oversee the works to be done. It's a long process but I like my work to be perfect. The first time I started working in wood was 1990. John Livingston was my teacher. He taught me the basics of wood carving. Ever since then I have been working in wood on both a large and small scale. Most often, whenever I get a large-scale wood carving commission I coordinate John to work along with me. I will direct him to remove the bulk of the wood and I will always do the finishing work. When working in other mediums such as concrete, cast iron, or whatever, I work with the necessary people right from square one.

#### INFLUENCES AND INFLUENCING OTHERS

J: What have been some of the sources of inspiration for your work?

S: In the beginning, imagery from the spindle whorl. In doing my research, at that time, slides and photographs of traditional spindle whorls were about all I could find, which all had intricate designs carved into them. I am also inspired by nature, issues about the environment, and ideas that evolve from personal thoughts, experiences and observations.

J: What have been some other influences on your work?

S: Stan Green was an inspiration. He is probably one of the reasons I got into Salish art. He did a show strictly on Salish art in terms of limited edition prints. I saw his show shortly after I got into doing jewelry. I was already designing Salish art on a small scale for my jewelry pieces; so shortly thereafter I did my first limited edition print. That was in April of 1981. I did the four salmon which is an image I use on my business card. When I really got into doing Salish art I wanted to educate the general public to the fact that we, as Salish people, had our own art style ... something totally different from the Northern art style.



J: There is a growing Aboriginal artist community. Have other artists influenced your style?

S: Although they haven't influenced my style, I am very proud of Bill Reid as well as Robert Davidson. It's been a challenge for me to get to the level I am now.

J: What has it been like for you as a Coast Salish woman artist? Are there particular challenges?

S: I don't think I've had a problem as a woman artist. Initially, most of the artists out there were men ... I think there were only a few woman artists doing Native art at the time.

J: You really seem to break with what non-Aboriginal people think of as traditional Salish art. In what ways have you and work responded to a non-Aboriginal audience?

S: Well, setting the Salish footprint onto our traditional lands has made non-Aboriginal people more aware of Salish art. Whether I do traditional or contemporary Salish art, on a large scale in Washington State or in the Vancouver area, they will realize that it is Salish territory. I have made the general public more aware of the art of the Salish peoples and I like that. In Washington State, the non-Aboriginal people are just starting to recognize and understand all this. At one time, they would raise a totem pole wherever and whenever they wanted without consulting the Salish people's in the area. Totem poles are not a part of our tradition ... Salish do houseposts. By my doing public art commissions, it has opened up a lot of people eyes to Salish culture and art.

J: How does preparing for a largely non-Aboriginal audience affect how you approach your work?

S: Sometimes my approach to my work is affected. For instance, one time I was short-listed for a commission. The criteria asked for contemporary artworks and I was restricted in that sense. But in preparing a proposed artwork I wanted to create something that combined both traditional and contemporary ideas in my Salish style. In the end, it was felt that my work was too traditional. Another time I did a commission based on a Salish legend whereby the imagery had to reflect on imagery within the legend. Anyway, sometimes my approach to my work is affected by certain criteria in a commissioned



*Glass House Post*, one of three pieces commissioned by Sprint Canada for their main board room, 1997, 24 x 84 inches.



project. But, I think that the non-Aboriginal audience relates easily to Salish art because it speaks a universal visual language.

J: What advice might you have to other artists who are finding new expressions with early Salish traditions?

S: I love just knowing that the younger generation are actually doing Salish art; and I just hope that they do their research so as to understand what they're doing, otherwise, it's all for naught. I've noticed that some of these new emerging artists are somewhat doing what I am doing; and I hope that they understand that the work that I am doing now is not traditional ... that it's original contemporary Salish art. Like I said, most of the work I am doing now is more contemporary than the odd traditional piece that I will go back to every now and then. It has taken me years to understand Salish art, and to have someone jump into it without really doing their homework would be kind of sad. So, I guess, my advice for other upcoming artists is do their research and talk with their Elders to get a good understanding of what it is they're trying to do so that they can develop their own unique approach and personal style.

J: Do you still return to the Elders?

S: Right now, no, but I used to on a regular basis. We really don't have that many Elders left today. The last Elder I would regularly visit was my Uncle Dominic ... who was very familiar with our traditions. There really isn't anyone now that I can go to who will explain things to me. I sometimes have questions that I can't answer. I miss them a lot.

J: Your mother and Uncle Dominic helped shape your understanding of traditional Salish art. What do you think they would have said about the kinds of things you are doing now that really push the boundaries of tradition?

S: I think they would both be very proud of me, regardless of the fact that I have been going into different mediums or working different designs. And, that's what I want...not only to make them proud of me but my ancestors as well, as I am trying to carry on their legacy of our traditional art form. I just hope that my children and, of course, my grandchildren will follow in my footsteps; or at least, understand that they can transform perception empowered by tradition.

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