

# THE FRONT

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SHAWN HUNT

*Shapeshifter/The Watcher*, 36 x 48 inches, acrylic on canvas, 2016.  
Private collection.

SHAWN HUNT WORKS with the traditional Northwest Coast design principle known as formline to create abstract, surreal, and sculptural paintings based on ancestral Heiltsuk Cosmology. The formline is the unbroken outline in traditional design employed to contain different motifs into figures and patterning. Hunt's work explores new ways of using this structure while still maintaining the fundamental characteristics of the traditional formline. He often refers to this as neoformline. The meandering, unbroken line draws the eye across and around the surface of the work, becoming thicker and thinner, speeding up and slowing down rhythmically. There is a tension throughout the work an interplay between light and darkness, figuration and abstraction.

*Shapeshifter/The Watcher* is part of Hunt's *Line as Language* series, featured in a solo exhibition at the Burrard Arts Foundation (BAF) in 2016. In an interview with Alexandra Best at the BAF, initially published online in 2016, he describes his work in this series and discusses the concept of neoformline.<sup>1</sup>

**Alexandra Best (AB):** What themes are you working on in your upcoming show, *Line as Language*?

**Shawn Hunt (SH):** I feel like my Heiltsuk culture has always been described as having an oral history, meaning that we did not write down our history; instead, we told stories to pass on our history and our mythology. I think just as importantly, we have had a visual culture history. Our art is a language. It is not something that can be directly

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from Shawn Hunt and Alexandra Best, "Shawn Hunt Uses Art to Tell His Stories," *Shawn Hunt: Line as Language*, <http://www.shawnhunt.net/?p=507>.

translated into English, and I think that this just has to be accepted. Our style of art, Northern art, has been referred to as formline art. The formline is basically the black line that acts like a skeleton for the red elements in the design. The design style is very complex, yet at the same time incredibly simple, like a paradox; magic in its truest sense. I'm trying to work with this line, its characteristics and its principles in new ways. To be free with it, yet retaining its integrity. It's a puzzle, a game, an obsession. It's a language of line that is constantly evolving, and I'm continuing to learn the language as I go.

**AB:** Can you tell us bit more about the concept of neoformline?

**SH:** Neoformline is just a term that I started using to describe a style of Northwest Coast art where the artist was pushing the boundaries of formline style; when he or she was trying to use formline in new and sometimes unconventional ways. There are quite a few artists that have done this and I am by no means the first. I'm just putting my own spin on it. This art form is a very old one, it goes back to the beginning. It is a continuum. What artists like myself and others are doing today will be built on by the next generation, just as we built our artwork on the work of the artists that came before us.

**AB:** A lot of your past work depicts traditional Heiltsuk history – what are some stories that you are exploring in this current show?

**SH:** I feel like I am trying to answer the big questions, to try and seek out the answers to life's mysteries. Creation, purpose, why we are here, who are we, and what are we here to do. I don't have the answers, I probably never will, but that's not the point. The point is to ask the questions and to seek the answers. In fact the more I learn, and the more I work, the more I realize that I know so very little. It's like that with life and it's like that with the art.

<http://www.shawnhunt.net>