

EXHIBITION, FILM, AND NEW MEDIA REVIEWS

Chief Supernatural Being with the Big Eyes

Ernest Swanson

AR Installation, MNP Tower – Oxford Place,
Vancouver Mural Festival, 2021.

APRIL LIU

Vancouver

EXPLORING THE CREATIVE possibilities offered by augmented reality (AR) technology, Vancouver-based Haida artist Ernest Swanson has teamed up with the Vancouver Mural Festival (VMF) and AR designer Mark Illing to present *Chief Supernatural Being with the Big Eyes*, an interactive piece inspired by the stories of Walter McGregor, a Haida weather-prophet and astronomer from the early twentieth century. Situated in the heart of Vancouver's downtown at the MNP Tower at Oxford Place, the piece is one of many exciting new works presented by VMF's Winter Arts AR Festival, the very first of its kind in Canada, and a trailblazing solution for viewing public art while adhering to the health and safety protocols of the COVID-19 global pandemic. To gain access to the works, viewers use their cellphones to scan a QR code displayed on the festival's outdoor signage. This prompts a viewing experience through Instagram or Facebook via Spark AR, where the phone's camera is activated to show one's immediate surroundings "augmented" by the virtual piece that appears within it.

In Swanson's piece, we see the *Chief Supernatural Being with the Big Eyes* depicted as a large, imposing head with two masterfully carved faces, floating in the sky and surrounded by Vancouver's tallest skyscrapers. As the viewer interacts with the piece, walking under or around it, the head spins alive on an axis, bathed in waves of light and shadow, emitting magical puffs of magenta-coloured clouds. One soon discovers the head's hollow centre, which is filled with glassy, translucent spheres



Chief Supernatural Being with the Big Eyes, by Ernest Swanson, 2021. AR Installation, MNP Tower – Oxford Place, Vancouver Mural Festival. Image courtesy of Vancouver Mural Festival.

with imagery from Haida Gwaii and reminiscent of distant planets or otherworldly eyes. Viewers can further explore the piece by pinching their screens to resize it or by dragging it to move it around.

Swanson's work is part of a groundbreaking effort to revitalize Haida astronomy through a combination of archival research, community outreach, and artistic innovation. It is based on Walter McGregor's story "Canoe People Who Wear Headdresses," recorded by anthropologist John Swanton in 1900–01.¹ *Chief Supernatural Being with the Big Eyes* represents one of the eleven supernatural beings in the story, with each figure correlated with specific aspects of the Haida sky and calendar. According to Norman Newton's research conducted in the 1970s, the story is an important key to understanding an interconnected body of stories from McGregor related to the weather-prophet's significant role in observing the skies, predicting weather phenomena, and transmitting calendrical and ritual knowledge.²

Developed in collaboration with the Dark Skies project led by Nicola Levell, April Liu, and Jisgang Nika Collison at the Haida Gwaii Museum, Swanson's work is part of a broader effort to open up culturally

¹ John R. Swanton, *Haida Myths and Texts: Skidegate Dialect* (Washington: G.P.O., 1905), 36–43.

² Norman Newton, "Wilderness No Wilderness," *Canadian Literature* 63 (February 1975): 18–34.

diverse ways of seeing and experiencing the night sky – its infinite stars, planets, and constellations. The mainstream, popular representations of the night sky are currently dominated by modern scientific discourses and Greco-Roman star mythologies. The Dark Skies project harnesses the power of digital technologies and community outreach to reveal alternative perspectives of the night sky and to underscore the need for dark sky conservation, a global environmental movement focused on battling the detrimental effects of light pollution on humans and wildlife.

It is a timely issue, as urban light pollution overtakes 80 percent of the world population and 99 percent of the dark skies in Europe and the United States.³ The towering MNP skyscraper in Vancouver's financial district, electrically illuminated at all hours of the night and day, is a monument to modernity, urbanization, and economic development. The light pollution emanating from such a building impedes our ability to see the night skies, while countless birds die each year from crashing into the building's reflective and disorienting surfaces. Swanson's piece serves as a powerful intervention in this space, vividly bringing forth a Haida view of the cosmos that has been largely displaced by colonial discourses since the days of Walter McGregor.

Swanson is currently working with the Dark Skies team and fellow Haida artist Derek Edenshaw to visualize all eleven characters in this story as a way of bringing it out of the archives and back into contemporary popular culture. The artists are working in close consultation with various members of the Haida community to integrate contemporary Haida night sky knowledge into their works and to generate awareness of the many Indigenous star stories preserved in archival documents such as Swanton's publications. The final work, supported by the technical direction of artist Ben Z. Cooper, will be in the form of an interactive new media installation and, possibly, a series of AR pieces to be featured at the Haida Gwaii Museum when it safely reopens. *Chief Supernatural Being with the Big Eyes* is therefore an exciting preview of what is yet to come in the Dark Skies project and the movement to decolonize night sky knowledge while preserving the precious and natural darkness of night.

Ernest Swanson, who holds the traditional name Giinowaan, is a Haida artist from Old Massett and is currently living in Vancouver. As a matrilineal descendent of iconic Haida artist Charles Edenshaw and a grandson of the late Rufus Moody, Swanson has continued his family

³ Fabio Falchi, Pierantonio Cinzano, Dan Duriscoe, Christopher Kyba, Christopher Elvidge, Kimberly Baugh, Boris Portnov, Nataliya Rybnikova, and Riccardo Furgoni, "World Atlas of Artificial Night Sky Brightness," *Science Advances* 2, no. 6 (2016): 1–2.

legacy by developing his creative practice in wood, silver, gold, and argillite. Having worked with artists such as Jim McGuire, Christian White, and Chief 7idansuu James Hart, Swanson is deeply versed in traditional Haida art, and this shines through in his first AR piece. In *Chief Supernatural Being with the Big Eyes*, Swanson has brilliantly translated his traditional carving practice into a three-dimensional and interactive realm while expanding his repertoire to include the various animated effects of lighting and textured forms. This boundary-pushing work gives us a tantalizing glimpse of how AR technology is being taken up by a new generation of Haida artists.

Future Ecologies

Podcast audio, 2018–.

<https://www.futureecologies.net>

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FUTURE ECOLOGIES is not your typical science podcast. Strongly reminiscent of *Radiolab* (2002–), the renowned WNYC series from the “golden age” of podcasting (Barry 2015), *Future Ecologies* investigates “the shape of our world,” or the ways we relate to the environment and our planet. An independent podcast, supported by a seed fund from the Vancouver Foundation, and ongoingly by volunteer labour from the creators, *Future Ecologies* features hosts Adam Higgins, Mendel Skulski, and associate producers Simone Miller, Andrej Kozłowski, and Fern Yip as they take us on a curated journey of ecology science through specific case studies of species, technologies, and geographic communities. But *Future Ecologies* is no *Radiolab*, aside from the “vernacular, narrative-driven, tightly mixed and host-led” brand of journalism (McHugh, 2016). Rather than whimsically exploring science esoterica – arguably the quality that made *Radiolab* so successful – *Future Ecologies* takes a sustained ethical and decolonial approach to the study of natural ecology in its full cultural, social, and political implications. So much so, that the hosts and producers routinely engage with questions of decoloniality as part of advancing the podcast. In fact, their very first episode is called “Decolonize This Podcast” and features guest T’uy’tanat Cease Wyss, a healer, artist, and Indigenous storyteller, who offers us the very frames through which we must understand the world with spiritual and scientific rigour. In her words, “if you really want to remediate and restore ... you

have go and allow [the environment] to know you.” Certainly, a fresh relationality! Given that the hosts present as white and male, this kind of gesturing to decolonization comes with a hefty responsibility. And short of having direct Indigenous leadership, *Future Ecologies* lives up to this responsibility by continuously returning to critique colonization and resource extraction capitalism as well as to credit Indigenous ways of knowing and doing.

Season 1 begins with the ecological repercussions of settler economies in North America on the heels of Indigenous genocide. From there, the podcast tells a number of stories about habitat and climate shifts as a result of economic policy, migration, and expansion patterns across the Pacific Northwest. Each story focuses on a single case, whether forest fires, the last Manzanita bush, jellyfish, or dams, in order to trace the effects of human interference on the environment. Together, these cases demonstrate the complex and compounded effects of the set of conditions we call *climate change*. In the course of exploring various topics the podcast raises important ethical questions: Do we create “conservation-dependent species” as part of efforts and legislation to reverse extinction or does that prevent the emergence of natural diversity? Do we create alternative uses and markets for invasive species like jellyfish or does that play into capitalist determinism – mending a problem created by extractionist economies with a capitalist solution that is likely to bring about other ecosystem shifts? In other words, what does ecological restoration look like when approached with an ethical, decolonial, long-term vision? In the two-part series on dams, *Future Ecologies* traces the history of dam creation in North America as a narrative of conquest of taming nature to provide for thousands – the results being a devastating blow to the salmon population and all its surrounding ecosystems. The podcast demonstrates how the lack of understanding of the unique migration patterns of salmon led to decades of damage that now have to be reversed, partially through “storying” the technology of dams in a different way: as intrusive obstacles to the ebbs and flows of local ecosystems and local cosmologies.

Future Ecologies is refreshingly West Coast and British Columbia-based; however, at the same time, it hosts key experts to comment on environmental phenomena all over the world. In keeping with the polished, well-researched aesthetic of NPR podcasts we’ve come to know and love, *Future Ecologies* can also be seen as part of the emerging genre of scholarly podcasting (*Below the Radar* 2020). In addition to a substantive bibliography of academic sources for each episode, the podcast

features research notes, credits, and full transcripts. The hosts certainly experiment with formatting options, including more and less formal elements such as banter, point-of-view storytelling, sonic poetry, sound art, and even Autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR). According to both Berry (2015) and McHugh (2016), podcasting differs from radio in that it produces captive localized audiences who are actively seeking the content presented rather than passively “listening in” (Lacey 2013) to a media stream. This is where the podcast format has me concerned about accessibility to a younger, less patient audience.

The similarities to *Radiolab*, I would argue, actually detract from *Future Ecologies*' mission: the banter and sound-effect gimmicks feel strained at times and, most important, the length of each episode almost entirely precludes Gen Z listenership. While the complexity of each topic undoubtedly deserves an hour, those who need this message the most would benefit from a more compact format. After all, the future citizens and designers of our world have to internalize that science and technology are political entities that continue to frame and enclose the environment. And they have to understand that resistance has to come from within a relational model, from a place that enables a richer understanding of the natural world.

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