

THE FRONT

JACK LITRELL

Haida Gwaii mural series (2022) digital image.

Birds of Haida Gwaii mural (2013) by Thomas Arnatt in collaboration with Stlaakuum Jaadaas *Dejah Busch*, Haida Gwaii Community Futures, Masset.

THE *Birds of Haida Gwaii* mural was commissioned by the Haida Gwaii Community Futures organization in 2013. A member of the National Aboriginal Capital Corporation Association, this progressive, non-profit organization, with offices in Masset and Daajing Giids (Queen Charlotte), fosters and supports entrepreneurial and grassroots community projects on Haida Gwaii oriented to sustainable economic development, creativity, and community growth.

The striking mural on the side of the Community Futures building embodies and communicates the organization's philosophy and core values. Conceptualized and executed by the local artist Thomas Arnatt, whose artworks adorn a number of buildings on Haida Gwaii, the imagery represents the different birds of Haida Gwaii and metaphorically gestures to the colourful diversity and interconnectivity of the island's communities. In line with his established working practice, Arnatt invited the Haida artist Stlaakuum Jaadaas *Dejah Busch* to collaborate on the project. Busch, whose public artworks and illustrations often incorporate birds, designed Eagle and Raven – two birds of Haida Gwaii that are central to the Haida people's patterns of kinship and worldview in which human, natural, and supernatural beings and ecologies are interwoven and interdependent.

In the mural, the trunk of a tree with grounding roots twists up through the centre line and, at different points, branch-like structures connect to the side-profiled heads of seven birds of Haida Gwaii. Whereas the five birds that occupy the lower branches are rendered in a naturalistic form, Eagle and Raven who are represented at the top of the tree exude a dramatic and spiritual sensibility. They have a multifaceted surface and luminosity and appear to be made of argillite with abalone

eyes – a materiality that speaks to historical and contemporary Haida art forms and practice.

The photograph of the *Birds of Haida Gwaii* mural is the work of the Masset-based professional photographer Jack Litrell – a graduate of the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, New York – who is known for his sensitive portrayal of different peoples and cultures, his theatre photography, and his superb documentation of artworks for museum publications. He has undertaken photographic and filmic projects in Canada, Cuba, Zimbabwe, and South Africa and his work has been exhibited in galleries in Canada, the United States, and Cuba. On Haida Gwaii he has worked closely with different communities and organizations including, X̱aaydaG̱a Waadlux̱an Naay (the Council of the Haida Nation), Saahlinda Naay (Haida Gwaii Museum), Skidegate Band Council, All About U Gallery, and White Raven Law, among others. Notably, his photography features in many Haida-related publications, including *Breathing Stone: Contemporary Haida Argillite Sculpture* (2008), *Gina Suuda Tl'ł Xasii – Came to Tell Something: Art and Artist in Haida Society* (2014), *Reflections – Celebrating 15 years of the Gwaii Trust Arts Program* (2016), *Out of Concealment: Female Supernatural Beings of Haida Gwaii* (2017), and *Athlii Gwaii: Upholding Haida Law on Lyell Island* (2018).

Nicola Levell, cover curator