

# HONOURING PLACE, HONOURING SELF:

The Art of Francis Dick in Retrospective



Francis Dick Comes a Woman 1993

March 15 to April 5, 2000

Maltwood Art Museum and Gallery, University of Victoria

UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA  
*Millennium*  
festival 2000



FIGURE 1: Kawadelakala serigraph print 1986

## HONOURING PLACE, HONOURING SELF: The Art of Francis Dick in Retrospective

The starting point for any consideration of art produced by Francis Dick is the small village of Kingcome Inlet in the traditional territory of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation. The Kwakwaka'wakw people who live in this place call themselves Dzawadaenutw, and they have lived there since time immemorial. Francis Dick was born in this small village in 1959 and it is where she spent the majority of her childhood until she moved away to Victoria as a young adult. The village of Kingcome Inlet is known to locals as Gwa'yi and it sits at the end of a long inlet carved into the coast of British Columbia just north of Johnstone Strait. Gwa'yi plays a paramount role in

Kwakwaka'wakw history and mythology because it is known to be the originating place of human life for the Dzawadaenutw people. As an adult, Francis Dick returned to Kingcome to work as a Social Worker from 1990-1992. The emotional and physical stresses from working with her community during these years proved to be difficult. After two years of living and working in the village, Francis moved to Victoria and began to create art for a living. Over ten years later she continues to reside in Victoria working full time as an artist, and she continues to return to Kingcome Inlet to visit relatives and attend gatherings. Gwa'yi, the place of her beginnings remains paramount to her identity as an aboriginal woman and as a contemporary artist.

Francis Dick and her family are descendents of the wolf Kawadelakala through her paternal grandmother Anitsa's lineage. The image of this mythical being is prominent in much of the art of Francis Dick. The wolf Kawadelakala is one of four wolf siblings, which came from a wolf, named Galalilit'e'. In the origin story of Dick's family, Galalilit'e' came out of the top end of Kingcome Inlet. From Galalilit'e' came four wolves: Kawadelakala, his brother Kwalili, their sister Hayalilegas and the youngest brother Na'nola'kw. Kawadelakala stayed at Kingcome Inlet and shed his animal form to become the first of the Kingcome people of whom Francis Dick's family are descendants.

In the remote village, Francis grew up listening to stories like the origin of Kawadelakala while absorbing much of the respected traditional teachings that elders like her grandmother Anitsa followed. Despite this rich environment of cultural heritage, physical and sexual abuse along with her mother's death when she was nine years old tainted

her childhood. This early period of Francis Dick's life also cultivated feelings of displacement as she moved between the care of different family members who often lived in different towns. As an adult and as an artist Francis has come to reflect upon her art as the product of her own emotional, spiritual and cultural awakening from these situations of disadvantage. Both Native and non-Native audiences have viewed Francis Dick's art as representative of human ability to overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges through journeys of self-discovery. Her own journey of self-discovery that is documented in her art has dealt primarily with the politics of aboriginal identity in native and non-native worlds and issues of gender, particularly the plight and honour of women.

The art of Francis Dick contributes to the ongoing formal history of art production by aboriginal artists on the Northwest coast because of her demonstrated skilled use of ancient visual design in innovative ways. Moreover, the body of work presented in this retrospective deserves critical consideration because of its particular narrative quality and autobiographical focus. The enduring value of the work the artist has created over the last 15 years is her portrayal or documentation of her experiences living as an aboriginal woman within a gendered neo-colonial cultural landscape. The narratives that accompany the paintings in this retrospective are at once personal and political, individual and cultural. The visual images and narratives are considered in this essay as fragments of a symbolic whole, that which can only be known and completely understood by the artist.

There is an immediate connection in the work of Francis Dick between identity and sense of place; a cultural landscape, or ethnoscape

emerges. This ethnoscape is constructed from the artist's own life experiences, which have in turn informed her sense of place. When we think of the concept of sense of place, we most readily think of our relationship to physical places. In Dick's art, representation of this kind of sense of place is made tangible through her visual reference to geographical locations (i.e. Kingcome Inlet). Francis also infers a sense of place that is based upon intangible notions of identity and spirituality. Her work begs the questions, where are the places of contemporary aboriginal women in a dominantly non-native society? Where do women in general find their place? How do women create places (of shelter, of resistance, of power)? Where is the place of truthfulness, purity, and spirituality in the ever-increasing urban dissonance? Her art confronts (sometimes with rage) the problems that certain people experience because of their 'place' in life. Her work speaks to both native and non-native peoples in societies who struggle to free themselves from places of oppression (Indian Reserves, urban ghettos, physical and sexual abuse, racial violence, political exile, gender discrimination).

As a painter, carver, singer, performer, and a writer, Francis Dick has made significant contributions to the arts. Her formal education spans a period in residential school at an early age to the award of a Bachelor of Social Work from the University of Victoria in 1991. Her relationship with the university continues as a well-received guest speaker on art and aboriginal issues. Francis is largely a self-taught artist through years of persistent studio work. During her early years as an artist, she worked closely with her cousin Beau Dick and artists Bruce Alfred and Fah Ambers. In many ways she believes her artmaking to be much less a career than a way of life.

Francis Dick published her first serigraph print titled KAWADELAKALA in 1986 to honour the life and death of her grandmother, Anitsa. Just before her grandmother's death, Francis heard her grandmother recite the birth story of Kawadelakala one last time. The irony of the elder descendant of this mythical wolf reciting the story of its birth at the end of her own life was not lost on Francis Dick. In honour of her grandmother, and her family's continued existence, Francis created the image titled KAWADELAKALA (1986) (see Figure 1). The image is one of simple elegance demonstrated through the artist's design and use of colour (dark blue on grey paper), and it is congruent with the meaning behind the work that connotes concepts of strength and purity. The image KAWADELAKALA represents the extraordinary dynamic, complex and ever-changing conditions of contemporary Native identity that are associated with the passing of older traditionally knowledgeable generations. At the same time, it honours the core structures and knowledge that have guided and supported the Dzawadaenutw as long as they have been a people. The quest for balance between every day life experiences and time honoured tradition and knowledge is a theme revealed throughout the art of Francis Dick.

Shortly after her grandmother's death, Francis lost her younger brother Jesse to suicide. Her close relationship with her younger brother made his death particularly difficult. She poetically describes her brother as "a young person born with a very old soul." Her experiences from this somber event prompted the artist to compose a mourning song for her brother and to create her second published image titled K'ALALILAM (1987) (see Figure 2). The title of this work translated into English from the Kwakwala language means to "shake off." The creation of the image

was a way in which Francis could let go of the sadness she possessed from her brother's death, and move on with her own life. The work features a human face, which transforms to an eagle as the viewer's eye moves from right to left across the image. This directional movement within the print symbolically represents the manner in which individuals move within the Kwakwaka'wakw big house. Time honoured laws dictate when individuals enter the big house, or when they dance around the fire, they move from the right to make a complete circle. When a dancer's regalia includes a button blanket with a crest image on the back, the motion created by turning in tight counter-clockwise circles alternately exposes the human body with the crest image connoting transformation. K'ALALILAM metaphorically represents the personal transformation of Francis' brother Jesse from this world to another.



FIGURE 2: K'atalitam original acrylic painting, 1987

The concept of cultural transformation is present in many paintings by Francis; particularly those which acknowledge the contested arena of contemporary identity politics and historical record. In large part, these works document her own family's history and political struggles within her nation as it evolves and its members redefine

themselves. Early in her career Francis began to create a series of images that would tell the story of her family's legend of Kawadelakala. These paintings visually recreate part of the cultural history of the Dzawadaenutw people. These paintings also represent the political and historical property for which Francis Dick's family claims ownership. Thus, the paintings and their stories become double-edged; they may be of general cultural interest to some viewers, but they are also contested political statements to others. Two paintings that form part of this series (which is ongoing) are U'MATA YA (1990) (see Figure 3), and HAYALILEGAS (1991). The painting U'MATA YA is the third print she designed for the Kawadelakala Legend series. Translated from the Kwakwala language to English, the title refers to coming to a place of peacefulness within oneself. The painting depicts Kawadelakala and his younger brother Kwalili. Francis explains the piece in her artist statement:



FIGURE 3: U'mata Ya original acrylic painting, 1990

*The image represents the part of the legend where Kawadelakala and Kwalili are engaged in a fight and Kawadelekala has torn Kwalili apart in small pieces and with Kwalili's fur in his hands, Kawadelakala blows the fur upward to the sky changing "Ai, Ai, Ai, Ai." Speaking in ancient Kwakwala language, he says, "Wherever your pieces will fall, these will become nations among themselves, and within these nations they shall have and speak their own languages."*

According to her grandmother, says Francis, this is the story of how different races and cultures came into being. For the artist, the print also has contemporary significance with a multicultural twist. The full circle print which depicts the two wolves as flowing signifies the continuous circle of life. The abstract moon with the Tao-like symbol represents the balance that she continuously strives to attain in her art and life. The colours of the print express peace - not only on a personal level but on a universal level as well. This image could be interpreted as a violent depiction of loss of either something or someone. Yet, Francis believes the work to be about the bestowal of a "treasure or gift, like the nations, languages and cultures that came into being because of this supernatural event between the two supernatural beings. The painting HAYALILEGAS (see Figure 4) represents the female wolf sibling of Kawadelekala. In the legend, Kawadelekala brings Hayalilegas down to the mouth of Kingcome River.

At that place, he said to his sister that her home would always be that area and her duty was to protect the people who would arrive in the future. In this print Francis honours the female

wolf and says that she also honours herself as a woman as well as her female ancestors and contemporaries. In her own words:

*The culture that this legend is derived from was a patriarchal system, however, it has always been the women who have worked, largely unacknowledged, to support the culture. Even after the banning of potlatches, it was the women who preserved the dances and songs and passed these on to the younger generations. With this print I honour those women.*



FIGURE 4: Hayalilegas original acrylic painting, 1991

A significant shift in Dick's work appears in the early 1990s when her gaze turns inward upon her own life and her subject matter becomes more introspective. Until this point, Dick's art did contain personal elements via reference to family connections and the history of Kwakwaka'wakw peoples. However, these connections were visually related through images of mythical and supernatural beings that have existed in Kwakwaka'wakw culture since time immemorial. Beginning in 1991 with the painting *MAYA XA LA* (see Figure 5), Dick introduces contemporary human forms, particularly her own self-portrait to her work. The

painting *MAYA XA LA* is a self-portrait of Francis that depicts the artist sitting on a bentwood box mourning the loss of her mother. Previously, the artist expressed mourning in the painting *KALALILAM*. However, unlike the expression of quiet sorrow in *KALALILAM*, Dick's paintings of the early 1990s express increasing notions of anger, personal unhappiness, and confusion over significant personal and cultural changes. The most emotionally aggressive piece in the entire body of work presented in this retrospective is *WALKING THRU MY FIRES* (1992) (see Figure 6). In this painting, Francis's self portrait is depicted within a phoenix rising from the fires surrounded by many faces of extreme anger. Her reoccurring struggle to live a balanced life is signified by the colour red, the colour of anger that lines her belly anger coupled with the depiction of her sitting upon a light that represents her faith in what is good. A faith that Francis believes she always has, but can not always feel. In this painting, the artist confronts her abuse plagued past and deals with present-day frustrations that stem from those years of oppression. In her artist statement for this piece, she begins to talk openly about her journey of self-discovery and of healing.



FIGURE 5: Maya Xa La original acrylic painting, 1991



**FIGURE 6: Walking Thru My Fires**  
original acrylic painting, 1992

*Walking Thru My Fires is an expression of my experiences of journeying within myself, facing my fears and reclaiming back my spirit and power. Before I am able to reclaim back my power I believe it is necessary for myself to acknowledge, own, understand and honour my many faces of anger.*

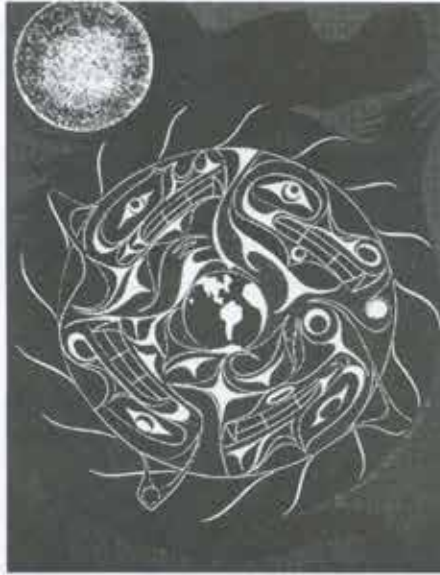
The painting COMES A WOMAN (1993) (see Figure 7) is perhaps the most revealing piece of work concerning the processes of self-reflection and discovery that Francis Dick has documented through her art. This painting signifies an unprecedented point of spiritual centeredness for the artist. In the work Francis demonstrates an ability to look within herself and simultaneously gaze outward to other woman of all races whom she feels are also searching for their own power and strength. As she says, "COMES A WOMAN is a celebration of women's spiritual awakenings worldwide." In the work there remains, however, an awareness of the need for balance between, as she states, "power of spirit, truth and light and power of deception, exploitation, and darkness."

Overall, the painting espouses emancipation from the bonds of the abuse she suffered in her childhood and the feelings of oppression she has encountered as an adult. This feeling of newfound freedom is signified by the eagle wings the woman extends, which as Francis says, "represent our ability to eventually fly beyond our places of stagnation."



**FIGURE 7: Comes A Woman** original acrylic painting, 1993

Following the publication of these images that portray victory over intense personal struggles within her own life, Francis produced three prints during 1994-1995 documenting the political struggles of her family within her nation. The painting KWAXSISTALA'S BEGINNINGS (1994) (see Figure 8), honours Francis's father, Hereditary Chief Kwaxsistala, whose name means The smoke from his house reaches around the world. In her artist statement Francis acknowledges and honours the traditional knowledge and teachings of her father and openly reproaches the disrespectful manner in which she sees the younger generation of men in her community behaving toward her father. The work is an open



**FIGURE 8: Kwaxsisstala's Beginnings**  
original acrylic painting, 1994

and honest statement about her belief that the smoke of her father's house will continue to drift towards the heavens, and that he too will continue in spite of the internal political dynamics of his nation.

The painting KAWADELEKALA'S HOUSE (1994) (see Figure 9) depicts the dance screen used in this house to separate the human world from the supernatural world. Francis explains, "the dancers from this house come out from behind the screen turning left onto the dirt floor to enter the world of spirits, dancing sacred dances around sacred fires." The wolf Kawadelakala is prominently portrayed within the house itself. Yet, the essential symbolic element of this painting is its least significant visual element; it is the star placed at the top of the house. According to Francis, this star signifies that the magic contained within the structure will always connect her family to Kawadelekala, and she strongly believes this will not change. Says Francis, "no matter what is said or done to discourage this reality. To walk behind

the dance screen exists generations of the Dick family and the treasures passed down from the beginning of time." The artist concludes that "in spite of living in new days and new ways, we have a common thread that connects us all, and this I honour."



**FIGURE 9: Kawadelekala's House**  
original acrylic painting, 1994

KWAXSISTALA'S BEGINNINGS and KAWADELEKALA'S HOUSE reference contemporary political dynamics between generations and families living in contemporary Kwakwaka'wakw communities. The manner in which Francis Dick narrates the images illuminates the images with personal experiences associated with this contemporary cultural transformation. In the painting, BREAKING THRU (1995) (see Figure 10) Dick makes her most candid statement regarding contemporary community dynamics and transformation. Francis created the piece during a time when she felt her personal and familial relationship to the potlatch system reached a particular low point. Finding herself in disagreement with people whom she felt were using, or abusing power within the traditional system, she concurrently felt little control over the disharmony, conflict, separation, and division she was witnessing amongst her community over such issues of power. Again, in



FIGURE 10: **Breaking Thru** original acrylic painting, 1995

this painting we see a central Tao-like image that represents the balancing of power between destructive forces and those that give life. The depiction of oolichan fish in this print is a reminder to all people of the richness of her culture at a time when people respected the balance of power. The artist surmises the scarcity of oolichan in the Kingcome River today signals different forms of imbalance in the lives of her people, sometimes at the fate of their own hands. The image of the eagle is placed outside the circle, its talons hang below. The bird of prey's wings, "wanting no longer to continue the round and round" according to Francis, signify a desire to escape the cultural vortex created around the contemporary contest over power, a situation in which she feels powerless. "Outside," (of this circle) writes Francis in her artist statement, "there is movement, life, changes, breath, and air, breaking through and moving on."

In many ways, the two paintings described above are similar to Dick's early work where she primarily referenced the connection between the past and present through familial ties and legends.

However, these paintings represent this kind of information differently from those produced in the late 1980s. There is new personal confidence that underlies these works that is not present in earlier pieces. Specifically, there is a clearer sense that Francis Dick understands her place in her family and community. This self-assuredness is exhibited in the candid statements she makes about father's role within the community of Kingcome and her will to produce a

visual record of contested events that make up the history of cultural change within her nation. By the end of the 1990s Francis Dick's work came to represent to her and to others a visual autobiography of her struggles to achieve a life premised on emotional, physical and spiritual balance. Her art represents both extreme pain and anger, but it also represents victory.

Victory, in the manner she associates the term with her art is not a process that pits winning versus loss. Rather, victory represents the ability to continue on a path of self-discovery. "To me," says Francis "victory means, 'Yes, I have traveled. I feel strong and alive and, yes, I will continue to journey.'" The paintings HONOURING MALADI (1995) (see Figure 11) and CHILD TO MOTHER (1997) (see Figure 12) are visually symbolic of a shift in the way Francis Dick represents often difficult and meaningful events in her life. These paintings honour the lives



FIGURE 11: **Honouring Maladi** original acrylic painting, 1995



FIGURE 12: **Child to Mother** original acrylic painting, 1997

and deaths of the artist's cousin and mother respectively. Human female bodies are shown (with Kawadelakala inside) engaged in different forms of embrace. These paintings differ dramatically from the mourning painting for her brother Jesse (KALALILAM). In this latter painting, all eyes in the image are open, and there is a sense of anxious vigilance about the work - despite the painting's simultaneous attempt at closure. In the two paintings produced in the 1990s (HONOURING MALADI and CHILD TO MOTHER), all eyes of the figures are closed or peacefully downward cast. If the open eyes represented in KALALILAM represented a young artist's uncertainty about her own future, the closed eyes in her later works exhibit a mature confidence about the artist's own reason for still being alive. Paintings by Francis Dick created in the late 1990s are almost completely dedicated to contemporary events that are a part of the artist's daily life, and they depict people involved with the artist on such levels. The human form continues to be significant to her art as evident in the works, CONNECTION (1998) (see Figure 13) and RAELENE (1999) (see Figure 14). In both of these most recent works, the women depicted in the paintings assume a sculptural pose

that suggests physical beauty and spiritual repose. Perhaps the essence of these latter works demonstrates not only the mature stages of the artist's full circle journey of self-discovery, but also a departure point for new work that builds on the intensity of the artist's state of well-being and balance. This retrospective represents over 15 years of painting, but it also represents a lifetime to date of personal and cultural experiences that the artist has shared through her art. The final words regarding the meaning of this retrospective then belong to the artist herself.

*This body of work represents my journey. It's about being an aboriginal woman who, in a non-aboriginal society does this kind of work for a living, and the struggles I go through, the struggles of being First Nations, the struggles of being a First Nations woman, the struggles of being a First Nations artist, and a celebration that I'm still here and that we are still here as aboriginal people.*

- Written by Andrea Naomi Walsh  
for the Maltwood Art Museum and Gallery



FIGURE 13: **Connection** original acrylic painting, 1998

**Abundance**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1995  
45.5 x 47 cm

**Angel**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1999  
76 x 58.5 cm

**Awakenings**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1994  
33 x 33 cm

**Breaking Thru**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1995  
45 x 46 cm

**Child to Mother**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1997  
41.5 x 50.5 cm

**Comes a Woman**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1993  
56 x 76 cm (paper size)

**Connection**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1998  
51 x 37.5 cm

**The Dragon**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1996  
41.5 x 57 cm

**Drum**

Deer Skin and Acrylic Paint, 2000  
40.5 cm

**The Gatherer**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1994  
37.5 x 69 cm

**The Gift**

Original Acrylic Painting  
76 x 56 cm

**Gwa'yi**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1987  
57 x 43 cm (paper size)



FIGURE 14: Raelene serigraph print, 1999

**Hayalilagas**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1991  
47.5 x 66.5 cm

**Honouring Maladi**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1995  
63.5 x 28 cm

**K'alalilam**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1987  
38 x 56 cm (paper size)

**Kankalanukw**

Serigraph Print, 1989  
48 x 64 cm (paper size)

**Kawadelakala**

Serigraph Print, 1986  
44.5 x 50.5 cm (paper size)

**Kawadelakala's House**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1994  
31.5 x 46 cm

**Kumala**

Serigraph Print, 1989  
48.5 x 63.5 cm

**Kwaxsistala's Beginnings**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1994  
53.5 x 71 cm

**Letting Go**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1992  
40 x 50 cm

**Long Beach**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1992  
23 x 58 cm

**Makwala**

Serigraph Print, 1991  
34.5 x 47 cm

**Maya Xa La**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1991  
37 x 47 cm

**Moon (female)**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1997  
40.5 x 32 cm

**Nawalakw**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1998  
58.5 x 40.5 cm

**Paddle (Yellow Cedar)**

Original Acrylic Painting, 2000  
132 x 14 cm

**Raelene**

Serigraph Print, 1999  
56 x 40.5 cm

**Sisiutl (Yellow Cedar Sofa Table)**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1994  
43 w x 99 l x 91.5 h cm

**Spiritual Truth**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1998  
49 x 53 cm

**Umataya**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1991  
52 x 58 cm

**Untitled**

Original Acrylic Painting, 2000  
33 x 33 cm

**Untitled**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1999  
40.5 x 30.5 cm

**Walking Thru My Fires**

Original Acrylic Painting, 1992  
42.5 x 56 cm

**'Wiuma**

Serigraph Print, 1991  
56 x 76 cm

**Wondering**

Original Acrylic Painting, 2000  
43 x 43 cm

**Exhibition Credits:**

Director: Martin Segger  
Curator: Andrea Naomi Walsh  
Registrar: Caroline Riedel  
Curatorial  
Assistants: Julianne Burslem  
Jim Galvao  
Catalogue  
Design: Jason George

# Nax'wida gyax xux

*("Let there be light.")*

**An Aboriginal Cultural Evening  
featuring a performance by the family of Francis Dick**

---

UniCentre Auditorium

University of Victoria

Mon. April 3, 2000, 7:00pm

Ticket: £ 18, \$10 (386-6121)

## **The Atlakima**

All families of the Kwakwaka'wakw have a Gil'gya'lis (origin story), but only certain families have rights to an Atlakima. The Atlakima is an encounter that happens after the creation of the people and is specific to certain families, with rights, obligations and prerogatives fully entrenched in the laws and protocols of our people.

The Atlakima tells the story of the many different characteristics, personalities, and peculiarities of the human spirit and speaks to our encounters with both mortal and spirit worlds. Each of 16 masks shows a reflection of human experiences manifested and connected through song, dance, family, community, and environment.

- Francis Dick and Lou-ann Neel, 2000



Maltwood Art Museum & Gallery



*This document produced compliments of The Document Company Xerox*