



Works by Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas include (clockwise from top) “Red,” “Copper from the Hood,” “Raven Exercise Series 2 (#6)” and “War of the Blink”



Better Living Through Art

Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas shares his thoughts on art and artists—and always saying yes to new opportunities **BY SHERI RADFORD**

Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas has never shied away from a challenge. At age 63, he keeps agreeing to demanding new undertakings, everything from creating an enormous piece for the Seattle Art Museum to writing the libretto for an opera based on one of his books. He says with a laugh, “A young man’s brain says yes, and an old man’s body says *whoops*.”

Originally from the remote islands of Haida Gwaii, tucked away on British Columbia’s West Coast, Yahgulanaas spent 27 years working in community politics, helping to build bridges between people: “If everyone’s got a voice and everyone counts, then everybody’s included.” Eventually, in his late 40s, he realized that if he didn’t start pursuing his art, he never would, so he left politics. “It was a good decision,” he says. Thankfully, the Haida culture he grew up in has “a strong visual community,” and “being an artist is a respected career path.”

Since that monumental decision, Yahgulanaas has worked in various media, including acrylics, watercolours, ink drawings, ceramics, illustrated books, mixed-media sculptures, large-scale public-art projects and even repurposed automobile parts. “I like doing things at the same time. I like to keep it busy.” And his pieces have hung in venues as close to home as the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Vancouver International Airport and as far-flung as the British Museum in London and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

To house all his different ongoing projects, he has a studio in West Vancouver and another in downtown Vancouver. But he covets one more, specifically for the wintertime light: “I’d love to have a big studio in Calgary for a couple of months, just January and February, when that white light is just amazing. Here, on the West Coast, it’s always blues, greys, silvers.” The natural environment of the West Coast inspires Yahgulanaas, and a sense of place deeply informs his work.

More than a decade ago, Yahgulanaas invented Haida manga, which combines Haida iconography with a Japanese manga style to create a wholly original art form. *War of the Blink*, his

newest book to employ this blend of indigenous and Asian cultural references, retells an ancient Haida tale about the bravery required to choose peace instead of war. It’s a follow-up to his immensely popular *Red: A Haida Manga*, which draws upon another timeless Haida story, this one about a leader whose obsession for revenge brings his community to the brink of war.

When asked why he chose to incorporate elements of Japanese culture into his hybrid art form, Yahgulanaas responds with praise for the country. Over a century ago, when Canada wasn’t treating his indigenous ancestors well, those same people could travel to Japan and “were treated like a whole human person.” He also wanted to acknowledge his mixed heritage, honouring his ancestors from both Haida Gwaii and Northern Asia. He strives for “ways to break through these identity barriers that we’ve constructed.” Art is especially good at breaking down barriers, he says. “Art should be in service of all people, regardless of language, regardless of education, regardless of money.”

Yahgulanaas’s influences roam through different cultures and even different centuries. Japanese contemporary pop artist Takashi Murakami tops his list of favourites: “He takes work centred in his ethnic identity and he kicks it out of the park,” he says, adding, “He makes it accessible. That’s exactly what I’m trying to do here.” Other picks include British sculptor Anish Kapoor, for “his sculpting and cleverness,” and English Romantic landscape painter William Turner, for “his amazing capture of atmosphere.” He also admires cartoonists Will Eisner and Rand Holmes, indigenous artist Brian Jungen, and painter and printmaker Hokusai, of Japan’s Edo period.

What’s next for Yahgulanaas? The perpetually busy artist shows no signs of slowing down. He figures he has another 15 or 20 years to create art, and in that time he wants to take on bigger projects with bigger teams. “I like working with people who are really good at what they do. It’s exciting,” he says. And he needs new challenges: “I need to create artwork that doesn’t thunder the same story over and over again.” **RM**



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