

Soaring Above *the Challenges*

Story by Sheri Radford & Art by Margaret August



“I felt the fire in my heart.”



Two-spirit Coast Salish artist Margaret August discusses their work, where they find inspiration, and how birds can lead the way



Margaret August is busy working on some new pieces for their solo show at the Aunty Collective in Victoria, but they take a short break to chat by video. “People think I’m saying Anti, like A-N-T-I,” the two-spirit Coast Salish artist says with a laugh, but the Aunty Collective is actually a hub for art, culture, and learning, owned and run by Indigenous aunties. “I’m going to be one of the first artists to have a solo show there.”

Though August has always been artistically inclined, it took a while for the Victoria resident to decide on art as a viable career path. In their 20s, August felt a bit aimless, pursuing—but never quite getting enthused enough to finish—a univer-



sity degree in child and youth care, while periodically doing odd jobs in the hospitality industry and selling “little art cards for like 10 bucks, 20 bucks, 40 bucks.” When it comes to art, they say, “I never thought it would be anything more than that.”

With their 30th birthday approaching and still no clear idea of a career path, August followed the advice of a job coach and connected with a printmaker who happened to be doing silkscreen prints for Susan Point. August spent much time simply staring at pieces by the renowned Coast Salish artist, absolutely entranced. And that’s when it hit them: “I want to be like Susan Point.” August recalls, “I said it out loud in my driveway one time. Not too long after that, an eagle flew over.” They add, “I felt the fire in my heart.”

Throughout their life, August has learned not to ignore signs from birds. “Eagles always show me to soar above challenges, and owls always show up when there’s fear or darkness or endings.” August senses that the owls are there for protection. “And herons bring back peace and tranquility.” Other birds carry personal significance, too. “Falcons always show up when I’m about to get a message for a commission,” they say. “Ravens always show up when there’s something for me to learn karmically.” Perhaps, the artist ponders, the ancestors sent that timely eagle to encourage August to take a chance and follow the risky—but spiritually rewarding—path of art.

Whether the advice came from the ancestors or their own heart, August heeded it and began pursuing art seriously. About six years ago, they started working with a mentor, Coast Salish artist Dylan Thomas, who encouraged August to study Indigenous artifacts such as spindle whorls and to try working in many different media. August experimented, creating silkscreens, paddles, and bentwood boxes. In 2020, they produced a large mural called *Two Spirit Rising* for the Vancouver Mural Festival. “If I do too much of the same thing, I do get tired of it,” they explain. “I like versatility. It’s probably my personality as an artist to be a free spirit.” A more recent challenge has been constructing a 42-inch drum. “All my skills are applied.”

Many of August’s pieces can be found in galleries such as Coastal Peoples, Douglas Reynolds, and Lattimer, in Vancouver; The Guild, in Montreal; and Steinbrueck, in Seattle. In the future, August plans to expand the offerings on their website (margaretaugust.com). “I do work with galleries a lot, but I think I want to develop my own autonomy in my ecommerce.”

August, who hails from the *shísháłh* Nation, incorporates Indigenous teachings and traditions into each piece. They have been greatly influenced by the works of other Indigenous artists, including Mark Preston, LessLIE, and Charles Elliott. Now, as August matures as an artist and

gains ever more confidence in their abilities, they find their art changing. “In the last couple years, I’ve been definitely incorporating more concepts of myself into my art, now that I have that foundation of the aesthetics,” they say. “I like to use colours a lot, and asymmetry.” Coast Salish art is usually very symmetrical, but August uses asymmetry to add a female-male energy to pieces.

Whenever August feels stuck while working on something, they head out into nature. Being near the water helps, as does the simple movement of walking. “I think when I’m stuck, it’s that I’m too much in my head, and I’m not letting myself just be in flow,” they say. “I think I push myself to work a lot. And so maybe it’s my spirit, my body, telling me to take a break and the creativity will come, because it’s in me.”

Having just entered their 40s, August feels excited to see what the new decade holds. They intend to keep growing as an artist: “I just feel like I want to push myself in ways that I haven’t pushed myself.” And regardless of where they ultimately end up, art definitely feels like the right path. “This is it. This is my purpose.”



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