



Meghann O'Brien is weaving new life into a time-honoured Indigenous art form

By Sheri Radford

Meghann O'Brien recalls clearly the very first piece she ever wove, at age 27: a red cedar bark basket. She didn't have a teacher or even a book to guide her. "I just had the cedar bark, and so I was just working from a place of imagining," she says. "What I found with that was a really deep connection to the material itself."

Next she tried weaving a berry basket. "I wove it completely the opposite of how you should weave," she says with a laugh, "but it was still functional."

O'Brien had already tried out a few careers by that point in her life: competitive snowboarding in Whistler, commercial fishing with her family. But something about weaving connected with her.

Soon she found herself hanging around the studio of carver Beau Dick, where her uncle was working

at the time. When the celebrated Kwakwaka'wakw artist learned about O'Brien's newfound interest in weaving, he recommended his daughter, Kerri Dick, as a teacher. "She was my first teacher. She'd been trained since she was five or six years old," O'Brien says. Later, O'Brien also trained with Kerri's mother, Sherri Dick, as well as Sherri's own teacher, Tsimshian artist William White.

O'Brien's years as a snowboarder proved to be a useful foundation for her new passion. "There's a lot of crossovers between being an artist and being an athlete," she says, such as the unfortunate reality of "everybody wanting me to do stuff for free." She observes that it's "humiliating how you got treated as a new artist."

But her experience on the mountains made her resilient: "I feel I got taken advantage of so much in the snowboarding world, at a really high cost to my body, that I drew some lines really early on that I wasn't going to get pushed around as much in the art world."

One valuable lesson came from the helpful folks at Spirit Wrestler, a



former gallery in Vancouver that showcased Indigenous art. O'Brien brought in a piece and asked them to put a value on it. "They were like, no, we're not going to do that. You need to decide what your work is worth, and only you can do that," she recalls. "The idea that somebody else can't assign a value for you, or on the work you do—it's something that needs to come from inside."

O'Brien hails from Alert Bay, a mainly Indigenous village on a tiny island just off Vancouver Island, and her heritage is a blend of Haida, Kwakwaka'wakw and Irish. She sometimes uses her Haida name, Jaad Kuujus, and she feels keenly aware that the art she creates represents her Indigenous roots. "That comes with a huge responsibility culturally, to be a part

of contributing to the revitalization of our communities," she says.

"I got some really good advice early on from Beau Dick. He told me that our job as artists is to create, and no matter where those pieces go, they're doing their job, which is represent the culture."

O'Brien's own introduction to her culture started with an interest in harvesting food plants that grew wild. She says it "came through a deeply personal relationship with the land and plants and wanting to deepen that, and everything else followed from there, through different teachers."

"I felt like they were a really nice balance point between honouring the materials and the process and the techniques of our ancestors and weaving, and translating that into a new form so that it can be worn outside of culture in an appropriate way."

Over the years she's learned Raven's Tail and Chilkat weaving, and now she works with materials such as yellow cedar bark, merino wool, cashmere, and mountain goat wool. Her pieces can be large, such as a chief's blanket, or mid-sized, such as a ceremonial dance apron.

"And then I've done some pieces that were more with the commercial market in mind, where they're more miniature pieces that are worn around the neck," she says. "I felt like they were a really nice balance point between honouring the materials and the process and the techniques of our ancestors and weaving, and translating that into a new form



PHOTOS BY DAVID KOPPE, COURTESY DOUGLAS REYNOLDS GALLERY

so that it can be worn outside of culture in an appropriate way."

O'Brien's major influences include Beau Dick and all of her weaving teachers, plus she singles out two others: Wolfgang Laib, a German sculptor known for his vibrant installations of pollen, and Agnes Martin, an American abstract expressionist painter. She explains, "There's an element in both of their work of dedication to repetition, almost a dedication to not changing, to having one thing that they just stick with over decades that's really, really simple."

As for O'Brien, now age 39 and living in Vancouver, she feels herself increasingly drawn toward larger, more long-term projects, what she describes as "something with some staying power in community." She's in the middle of a Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship, and she's also pregnant. "Baby is a big project," she says, laughing.

No matter what comes next, it's certain that O'Brien will be trying new things and exploring new techniques. As she says, "You never stop learning."

