E'yies'lek

Rocky LaRock

The Wild Inside

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In from the Wild

Adrienne Fast, Curator of Art & Visual Culture

It has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my professional life to get to know Stó:lō master carver Claude "Rocky" LaRock, and to be able to share his remarkable work with the public through the solo exhibition *E'yies'lek Rocky LaRock: The Wild Inside*, on display at The Reach from January 28 to May 8, 2021. I was first introduced to Rocky and his talent as a carver through his involvement with the exhibition *Li iyá:qtset – We Transform It*, which was presented at The Reach in 2019. That exhibition featured the work of 14 creative Indigenous innovators drawn from a range of creative, scholarly, and professional backgrounds, who were all connected through their Stó:lō heritage and/or the contributions they have made to culture in Stó:lō territory. Rocky's contribution was a striking, skeletal mask titled *The Northlander*, which was one of the highlights of the exhibition and was very popular with visitors.

For myself as a curator, it was clear after meeting and talking with Rocky and visiting his home and studio in Chehalis that the scope and quality of his career was deserving of a much larger, more dedicated platform than that original group exhibition could accommodate. Soon after the opening of *Li iyá:qtset*, we began discussions about mounting a solo exhibition of Rocky's work, and those conversations have led directly to the current exhibition. Remarkably, this is the first time that a breadth of Rocky's creative practice has been brought together and exhibited at a professional, public gallery.

Rocky LaRock was born in 1958 in Seattle, Washington. At the age of 12, he moved with this mother and his siblings to her traditional Coast Salish territory where he still resides, in the

community of Sts'ailes (Chehalis) in the Fraser Valley. Rocky has maintained a steady career as a carver for more than 40 years, making work for businesses and private collections, carving welcome figures, benches, and other large-scale work for band offices and schools. He also worked at the University of the Fraser Valley in 2008 and 2009 in the Visual Arts Department as an instructor and studio technician for the Indigenous Design and Technology Program. For years he also worked with at-risk Indigenous youth and with prison inmates as a counsellor and a teacher, using art as a path to recovery and wellness of mind and spirit.

LaRock's practice is inseparable from his Stó:lō identity and his relationships to community, family, and land. He has mastered the skills, techniques, and stories of traditional hand-carving, but he is equally committed to experimentation, incorporating contemporary elements and techniques, creating carvings intended solely for display, and using a unique visual language to express contemporary, global concerns through the lens of a Stó:lō cosmology. Having worked with hand tools and techniques for many years, he has more recently embraced a new way of working with chainsaws and power tools. As a result, his newest work embodies an untamed and rough aesthetic that is uniquely is own, that also challenges some of the most common assumptions about what Indigenous carving should look like. LaRock's work makes space for more voices and approaches in contemporary carving, eschewing a pristine or precise approach for something altogether more wild, but not at all less powerful or important.

The exhibition is generously sponsored by the Canada Council for the Arts and Aldergrove Credit Union.

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On March 11, 2021, The Reach's Curator of Art & Visual Culture Adrienne Fast met with Rocky LaRock in his exhibition space for a wide-ranging interview that was simultaneously broadcast to students and faculty of the University of the Fraser Valley's School of Creative Arts. A transcribed version of that conversation appears below. It has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Adrienne Fast:

Hello Rocky, thank you for joining me today, I'm looking forward to chatting with you, as I always do. My first question is about something I just witnessed you doing, something I've noticed you do every time you come into this exhibition space: you always make a point of first going and spending a bit of time visiting each of the masks, and you sing to them. Can you tell me about what you're doing in those moments, and why it's important to you?

Rocky LaRock:

Well, in our culture, everything that we do, that we make, that we create, has a meaning and a job to do. When I make a mask it has spirit, it has hair, it has bark, and that mask is doing a job. All the people that come into the gallery stand here and look at that piece, and all the while that mask is helping that person. It's helping them with their stuff and their baggage, stuff that they don't even know they've picked up. They don't know what they've walked through, they can't see it or hear it. We all live in a spirit world that most people can't see, but you pick stuff up from the spirit world all the time, some good and some bad. And that mask is doing its job, it's cleansing and purifying all the evil stuff that people have picked up without even knowing it. So I go up to that mask and I acknowledge it and I acknowledge the work it's doing, because it's alive. Every part of that mask was alive once, and it's alive again now.

AF:

I remember you came in to see the exhibition after not seeing it for a week or two, and I remember the first thing you said when you walked into the space was "They've all changed." I asked what you meant and you explained sort of what you just said, that all of these masks have been doing important work, helping every person who comes into this space. And now they're carrying all of that, so it's important also to cleanse the masks themselves, so they can continue to do the work they're doing.

RLR:

Absolutely.

AF:

You started your career as a carver more than 40 years ago. Could you talk a bit about what led you to pursue this kind of career, and about some of your earliest teachers and mentors?

RLR:

Back when I was in high school, I wasn't exactly a straight A student. At that time my brother-in-law Ron Austin, who was married to my oldest sister, he had taken a carving course up north in 'Ksan, near Hazelton. One day he invited me to move in with him and my sister because he could see I wasn't doing so well in school, and he offered to teach me how to carve. So I lived with them for a year, and Ron taught me the basics of wood and knives—of making knives—and sanding and painting, and he taught me how to make totem poles and masks. And I've been at it ever since.

AF:

How did you come to learn also under Francis Horne?

RLR:

A long time ago back in the day, I used to go with this beautiful young lady, and Francis Horne was married to my girlfriend's older sister. He was a pretty well-known artist by then already, so I went and did a lot of projects working with him and he taught me all kinds of things just by working alongside him. I've picked up a little bit of styles and ways of doing things from different people, and I've ended up creating my own way out of it all.

AF:

You absolutely have. But it must have been difficult at times, trying to maintain a career and a livelihood, working with hand tools over all those years. What were some of the challenges you faced, and what it is about carving and working with wood that has sustained you through it all?

RLR:

Well I definitely know what's meant by that saying "a starving artist," because it's a rough go sometimes. It's tough trying to sell work. I used to go into Vancouver and go to all these different galleries with my work, and sometimes I'd just get spun around right at the front door. And sometimes buyers take advantage of that. They'll offer you just a little something and they'll barter and bicker with you, because they know you're in a tough position and have to take what they give you. That's hard.

But working with wood and going to the forest and the river—I think that's what kept me going and kept me doing what I do. I've noticed too that in our culture, I was always taught that cedar is medicine, and it's our strength. We use it for everything and to do everything. It's a medicine working with cedar, and that's helped me a lot too.

AF:

Is there any advice you would give to young artists just starting out, who might be looking for guidance on how to start and maintain a career?

RLR:

Get a good chainsaw. And safety first. But if you're working with wood, you'll learn something new every day. Every piece that you make is going to teach you something. And working with wood now, if you have the right teacher, the right tools, and the right attitude, whatever you make is going take on whatever you're carrying in your heart and your mind. Whatever you're going through, it's going to go into that thing you make with your hands, so you have to be careful.

At the same time, cedar being the medicine that it is, it helps you with whatever you're going through so you can get over a particular hurdle and carry on in a good way. So if you're not necessarily in a good place when you start the work, by working the cedar it can help you get into a good place. That's probably why I've been carving for so long, I'm working stuff out.

AF:

You mentioned chainsaws, and I know that for many years you used traditional hand carving tools and techniques. But in recent years you have really embraced working with chainsaws and other power tools. Can you tell the story about what brought about that change, and why you love chainsaws so much?

RLR:

Well, I was sitting in a restaurant one day having a meal, and I picked up the local newspaper and saw they were having a chainsaw carving competition out in Hope. So I phoned the number and asked if I could get in, and the guy said "Sure, we've got one place left!" So I went out here with all my hand tools, and it was just embarrassing. I was working away with my hand tools and 12 other guys are ripping through with chainsaws, dremels, die grinders, everything you could think of to move through wood really fast.

So long story short, I went home and threw away all my hand tools and I bought all power tools. Now I have a dozen chainsaws, I've got every tool you can imagine for any possible cut I want to make. And something that used to take me a month I can now create in just a few hours.

Power is good. After working with your hands for 30 or 40 years, you start to think about your grandfather. If my grandfather could have had a chainsaw, he would have gotten rid of the axe and the adze as well. So I figured I was going to do it too.

AF:

With that in mind, one of the things I'm glad we decided to do in the exhibition is to include one of your early masks. It's the Raven mask that is one of the first pieces visitors encounter when they come into the space, and it was carved entirely with hand tools and traditional techniques. I'm glad we included that piece because I think the public sometimes expects contemporary Indigenous carving to be entirely "traditional" and to look like that mask.

But as you once said to me, that mask is "a dime a dozen" and lots of people could make that. I'm glad we included that piece because it shows people that you're perfectly capable of doing that kind of work if you wanted to, but everything else in the exhibition is your newer work that you've done using power tools. And all of that work is completely unique, and it is undeniably Rocky LaRock. I can recognize it as a Rocky LaRock carving from across the room. And it is just as powerful, just as important, just as grand, and just as impressive, if not more so. Your work challenges some of the assumptions and expectations that people have about Indigenous carving, and I think that's really important. Contemporary carving can embrace new technologies and ways of doing while still being vibrant, important, and valid.

I've been lucky enough to visit you at your home in Chehalis several times, and I think it's important for people to know also that you work entirely outdoors, in all weather, and there are carvings and artworks scattered all around your property in various stages of completion, and that's how you live with them. Can you talk a bit about what it was like for you when you came into the gallery and saw your works hung in the exhibition for the first time?

RLR:

When I walked in here and I saw these pieces hanging on the wall, I was stunned. I was floored, I was in awe. I have never seen anything like this, not with my work. Mostly I live with these masks around me in trees and on the ground and all over the place. To see it on display like this, kind of put a lump in my throat. I was blown away by how I could be working at something for so long, and then all of the sudden it comes out of the forest into the gallery where it took on a whole new meaning for me. It was pretty breathtaking.

AF:

One of the other things we tried to do in the exhibition was to still try to capture a little bit of what it it's like to encounter these carvings on your property. I remember the first time I visited you, we went for a walk in the woods behind your house and I kept seeing carved faces amongst the trees everywhere. So we painted the gallery walls dark and soft green shades, and we've hung the masks at all different heights, and we've kept the lighting kind of shady and moody, so the impression is a little bit like walking in your woods and seeing the work the way you make it and live with it.

One of the last decisions we made about the exhibition, just a couple of days before it opened, was to add music. When visitors come into the space they hear a series of traditional songs and drumming that was recorded in your community in Chehalis. Why was it important to you to include music with the exhibition?

RLR:

Back home we have four longhouses, and every winter we help our own people with whatever they're dealing with. We help them to change, and to overcome. And we help them with song, and dance, and fire. So those three elements are really important to me to distinguish who we are today as a people. They're our strength, they bring us together and make us one with spirit.
The longhouse was my medicine too, it helped me, taught me a new way of living, a new way of looking at things. I need to have the music and the drums when I'm doing the work. Now I do that every morning, I listen to the drums and the songs, and I go to the forest and do what they taught me in the longhouse, which is to give thanks and be grateful for what you have. And to never throw food away but to save a little food and bring it to the forest. Leave it on a stump and give thanks for another day, for our health, the roof over our head, the food we eat. And be grateful.

AF:

Earlier you talked about the work that the masks are doing, how they're taking away the burdens carried by people who visit the space. Is the music is part of that too, is it helping the work?

RLR:

Of course, because I was taught that the drum and the rattles call the spirit. And when there's a drum playing, the spirits are already here. And so when the drums are playing here, the spirit goes into every one of these masks, and the masks come alive. When the music is playing, the masks are doing their work.


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AF:

I believe this exhibition has been really good medicine, not only for our visitors but also for all of us who work here at The Reach, especially as we're still going through the stress and disruption of the pandemic. I hear and feel the responses we're getting from the public, and I feel it myself when I'm in the space. I keep saying that it's impossible to stand in this space and feel nothing.

There are several masks in your exhibition that are split down the middle, with one side that is like a skeleton or ghost face while the other side is more human. What is the significance of that to you?

RLR:

In this world we live in today, there are ghosts and spirits from the past, people that have been traumatized. And some of them linger, they never went to the light. They don't know they're gone, they just keep doing the same things they did when they were alive, over and over until somebody comes along who has the gift to see that, and feel it. And for that person that doesn't know they're gone, that spirit has to be shown to the light. It has to be told what happened and what it has to do. Just like some people today don't know why they're feeling the way they are, why they're hurting the way they are.

But in our culture, we have the gift to see, feel, and understand, and to act on spiritual matters in the spirit world. Because of who we are as Stó:lō people, we have that wonderful connection. Being one with the creator's creation is beautiful and powerful. And being able to connect with spirits that not everybody can see or understand, is a blessing and a gift. So we're always walking in the spirit world and the material world, most people just don't know they're a part of the spirit world. The split masks kind of represent that though, they're one creature that exists in both worlds.

My baby sister, she just recently passed. She's in the spirit world now, and I'm trying to teach her kids that she's still here too. That's why I carved tears into some of these masks, because I'm in mourning for my sister. Not a day goes by that I don't think of her, and talk to her. It's good that we still communicate. She comes to me in my dreams, and we have a good time.

AF:

There is one particularly beautiful, and also quite commanding, carving in the exhibition of Sasquatch (Sásq'ets). Can you talk a bit about what Sasquatch means to you?

RLR:

When we go out into the woods, it's important that we always acknowledge Sasquatch, or Sásq'ets. We bring him food, we pray to him, we give him fish and meat, plants and berries, and medicines. He's our go-to guy, he's our god.

One morning, it had just snowed. I was on my usual morning trek into the forest with a bag of leftovers for the ravens and the eagles, and I dumped my food onto a stump and faced the east, and acknowledged gave thanks to creator, to spirit, for everything. On my way back home, I looked down and there was a big indentation in the snow. At first I thought it was maybe just from the snow falling off the branches. But it was shaped just like a bear foot, but it was much bigger. So I stepped back and looked back, and there was another one, and another one. And they were really far apart, so I had to jump to get from one to the other. And when I followed the tracks back, they went right from the stump where I'd left the food, all the way right to my yard. And that showed me I wasn't walking alone, and I wasn't only feeding the eagles and the ravens.

There's lots of stories back home, all the elders could tell you stories of encounters with Sasquatch. To the Coast Salish people, he's what we have left of our culture. We don't hunt him, we don't exploit him, we leave gifts for him and we respect him. Every winter and spring all the longhouses make plates of food for him, and we spoil him rotten.

AF:

One of the final pieces in the exhibition is a grizzly bear mask carved by your son Cody LaRock, who has carried on with your tradition of carving with chainsaws and power tools. And your daughter Nikki LaRock is also an accomplished artist. What does that mean to you that some of your children are also learning to express themselves through artmaking?

RLR:

You know, I started out learning and doing everything by hand, and just now I'm learning about technology. But my kids seem like they're born knowing how to use it, it's amazing. I don't know how my son did it but he bought a log, then he got a company to rip it into boards, then he got another company to kiln dry it, and he got another company to sand it down and build a table. Then he drew a design of a fish and got another company that does copper work to make the fish and inlay it into the table, and he got another company to deliver it and he didn't have to lift a finger! That's my boy! I wish I knew how to do that 40 years ago!

My kids today are thriving in the arts, it's wonderful. And my little kids, every day I make them draw something. I did that with the kids I taught in school too, I'd tell them they have to draw something when they get to class, and before they go to bed they should draw something else. And some of those kids are still making work today that's really good. One kid became a tattoo artist.

AF:

For many years, you worked with at-risk Indigenous youth and with prison inmates as a counsellor and a teacher. What was that experience like for you?

RLR:

I remember back in the day teaching at the school and a lot of these kids were troubled, they had problems. They were put in my path and I had to do something to help them along. So every morning when the grade 11s and 12s came in, I would take them out to the lakes and rivers and make them swim, make them take a spirit bath. And I'd make them sit down in the forest and I would teach them what I learned in the longhouse about waking up your spirit. And it was like day and night, these kids they got it. This one boy, I see him now and he's thriving, he's living well.

AF:

I know it's important to you to do spirit baths in the river to cleanse yourself, it helps you to be right with the world.

RLR:

Yeah, back in the early 1990s I was initiated into the longhouse. The elders then taught us to swim every morning. And we found out that the devil doesn't like cold water. I figure I've got three-quarters of my battles already won if I can muster up the strength and the courage to go into the cold water and do my four dunks.

I sometimes get creative blocks, where I don't know what to make. But most of the time my drive for making things never shuts off. That's probably why my yard is filled with stuff. I make it a point that every time I go into the woods, I'll take a chainsaw. And every time I go to feed raven, I carve something while I'm out there.

AF:
I think it would be hard for you to not make things, is that right?

RLR:

Now, for sure it would be hard. But I used to get burnt out quite a bit, and I noticed I had to change and develop my own steady work habits, and to feed what was feeding me good energy, and get rid of what was holding me back. And when I did that, the things that I made were filled with that good energy too. If I make something from a dark place or with bad energy, it's not good if I try to sell that or give that to someone else and pass all that bad energy onto them. Things have to be right in all aspects of your life, and you have to work at it.

AF:
Thank you Rocky, for doing the work, and for sharing your good work with us.

Ch'íthométsel Francine Douglas interviews her uncle Rocky LaRock about his exhibition E'yies'lek Rocky LaRock: The Wild Inside.

Francine Douglas:

I can't wait to see the exhibition. How many pieces do you have in it?

Rocky LaRock:

I don't even know. They're huge! One of Glenn Roy [Felix]'s is there and two of Donny [Joe]'s. They always came here to sell me carvings, and I strip them down and re-carve them and paint them, and add a whole bunch of stuff to them, and then I brought them to the show. It's good too, because the people just love Glenn Roy and Donny's work. You'll be able to tell which ones they are. I love that piece of Glenn Roy's that you have. I kind of wish I didn't touch their work, but I've added to it with colour, antlers, abalone, etc. So it's like a collaboration with my brothers.

FD:

How did the exhibition come about, how did they find you?

RLR:

Carrielynn [Victor], Theresa [Warbus], and Nicola [Campbell] were all doing an exhibition there, and they asked me if I wanted to be a part of it. I guess somebody told them about me or gave them my name. And they asked me if I wanted to submit a piece of art into this exhibition they were doing. All these artists they got together from the [Fraser] Valley to collaborate on different pieces. We would all watch a show; they had a bunch of movies to

watch and then we had to make a piece about what we thought about it. And this movie that I watched[1] was like it was about my yard, and everything about me. Remember your mom called my yard "pet cemetery"? I've got bones and antlers, and dead animals and skulls, and feathers and hair everywhere. And this movie I watched was perfect for me, it was just like that. So I made this mask that's there now too, and they just loved it, I don't know why. And they said "We want you to have a show here, a show of your own." And I said "For me?" I'd never done my own show in my life, I was scared and I actually started to shake. But then I thought why not, may as well give it a shot.

So I went down around the Sandpiper [golf course] and there was this great big cedar tree that had blown over. It was 6 feet tall lying down. So me and Kristin went down and cut into it, and it was totally rotten. But the hollow part of the log was huge and could be used for masks. So I started cutting out really big shapes that were about 4 feet high or 4 feet wide, and I just started making Sasquatches, and skulls, and all sorts of scary stuff. I love Beau Dick, and they call him "the maker of monsters." I have pictures of his work all over, and he's my idol. I love his work. That's what I was shooting for, and I'd watch videos about him every day to get in the flow. I was trying to be like him, a maker of monsters.

Beau died a while ago. My buddy Joey called me and told me that Beau was in the hospital, he was sick. I was doing a burning down at the smokehouse, and I asked if we could put another plate in for Beau. And right away they said they'd already made an extra plate, but they didn't know who it was for! I just got goosebumps, and the next day he died.

But I promised him at the burning that I would carry on his legacy, I would be a maker of monsters. And it's like he's telling me to keep going, keep working. He's keeping me focused on what I promised. And I love that connection I have now with the work I do, making things with my hands, keeping Glenn Roy and Donny alive with me, in my art and in my heart.

[1] "The Northlander" (2016), directed by Benjamin Ross Hayden.

FD:

How was it getting everything ready for the exhibit, what was that like for you? I remember I saw you made a [social media] post saying you needed cedar and other stuff, did that work out?

RLR:

It was unbelievable, I was like a hummingbird flying all over the place. But when I put that post up, so many people came forward with offers, everything just came together: horsetails, bark, feathers, everything I needed or wanted. It was like Creator made it all show up. That's the connection that I love too. Whenever I need something, it comes somehow, someway, and everything aligned. I just love my life.

And you know that mask that you have, that has a half skull face? I'm going to the university tomorrow to teach them about those spirit masks that are like half death, in the afterlife. But that also reminds me of many people we know, who are possessed by demons.

FD:

Is that the message of the exhibition?

RLR:

Yeah, it's like every day there are people, even people in our family, who are possessed by a demon. And it rips my heart out, but there's no going back for some of them. But I'm bringing it out in my art, and making a statement about it. I'm trying to educate people, show them how to open the doors, spill the beans, show that you don't have to hold the demon in and suffer your whole life. You have to find medicine somehow, some way, somewhere. It's quite the subject in this show – I'm shaking just talking about it.

FD:

I was really excited when I saw your post, and I didn't realize the exhibition was already open.

RLR:

It just opened, on January 28. The last thing we did was somebody had brought me a couple of beautiful birds so I striped them down and I put feathers in all the carvings. And I want Carrielynn, and my brother Stud to go there with me. Because I've got to take back what I put into every one of those carvings. And I want Carrielynn to spread the eagle down, and I want my brother to sing while I'm doing the work of taking back. But I also have to feed them too, because here at home I feed Sasquatch and Raven every morning, ever since I went in the Big House. And I think that's got a lot to do with my art, what I see, what I feel, what I dream. I love it.

FD:

Thank you uncle, I love you lots.

RLR:

I love you too. I think of your mom every day.

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