

Ideas, Dreams, Struggle & Vision

*Crazymaking and
the Art of Healing*

An interview with Tania Willard



RIGHT: "I Guess I Don't Know," woodcut by Taylor Omelak. **BELOW:** "Transformers," lino by Tania Willard. **FACING:** "Free Your Mind," woodcut by Tania Willard.



Crazymaking, a public exhibition of mental-health-related art by young First Nations artists, is the culmination of a five-month long residency project with artist Tania Willard. This public exhibition, hosted by Gallery Gachet in Vancouver and mentored by Willard, featured powerful original prints created by some of BC's most prolific young First Nations artists. As part of the project, more than 40 Vancouver residents also participated in community printmaking workshops.

Recently, Briarpatch had the opportunity to correspond with Willard about the initiative.

Briarpatch: What is the Crazymaking project and what inspired you to start it?

Tania Willard: The project was inspired both by an interest in printmaking and in working with Gallery Gachet, a member-run gallery of artists living



with mental health issues. I wanted to do a project that made a safe place for us to talk about mental health within Native communities and to explore our strength in the face of the past traumas and injustices that have had such an impact on our communities.

I think of mental health in general terms; that we are all affected in some way by it and that it is not isolated and should not be stigmatized. We should all be able to speak openly and honestly about our mental health and the factors that contribute to it, positively and negatively.

I also think that other cultural models need to be looked at, not just a narrow, Western, medical model of mental

health. Other cultural models can include more holistic approaches, traditional medicines and spirituality. For many Native people, reconnecting with their culture and their spiritual traditions is part of their path to healing.

Has this project changed how you perceive the mental health situation for First Nations people?

Not really. Again, I think mental health affects us all, though we may not frame our experiences that way because of a stigma attached to mental health issues. To deal with all the weight of aboriginal injustice and history, we need to look at healing

When we engage in creative pursuits, we release some of our stress, tension, and trauma. This can help us see clearly and to find our path again.

our mental, spiritual, emotional and physical selves, so in this project I was looking at one aspect of a larger search for healing.

What kinds of stories were told by the artwork that resulted?



There were many layers of stories that emerged in the process. There were stories of our ancestors, of our cultures, our histories and our legends. There were personal accounts of being in the psych ward, and stories of losing and then finding our paths again. We strove to understand the layers involved in these stories, and I think you can see that layering in the artwork.

Histories and personal experience overlap with the stories our ancestors carried, with what our bones and blood have to tell us, all stamped onto paper, filled with ideas, dreams, struggle and vision.

How did this legacy of colonization and injustice affect the kinds of issues the participants made art about?

These legacies of injustice affect every part of our lives, Native and non-Native. Our country is still based on these models of exploitation, assimilation and extinguishment. So while there was not an explicit emphasis on this colonial legacy, we all knew it would come out in different ways in our work as Native artists. From the very personal and family stories to the more general and critical works about the mental health system or poverty, all the artwork spoke to the ways in which we cope, gather strength and overcome to walk our path.

You've described the project as being about both history and healing. How did this project contribute to the healing process, and what are the next steps?

We are continuing to look for opportunities to talk about the project and show the work that resulted from it as a way to further the dialogue and encourage others to look at mental health in their lives and their communities. I think that creation and expression have an innate and immeasurable effect in healing. When we make art, write, and engage in other creative pursuits, we release some of our stress, tension, and trauma. This can help us see clearly and to find our path again, and to make healthy choices for ourselves and the people around us.

How did this project differ from the kind of work that is typically done at Gallery Gachet?



Gallery Gachet is a member-run gallery of artists living with mental health issues, so their work is similar in many ways. However, they do not have a strong representation of Aboriginal people within the collective, so this project was envisioned as a way to bring that perspective to Gallery Gachet and hopefully start some cultural bridging that will continue.

Your artwork features prominently in the *Crazymaking* exhibit. How has your work been informed by this need for cultural healing?

My work is informed by pain, beauty, anger and love, all wrapped together in an uneasy and regularly redistributed bundle. It is sometimes a heavy bundle to carry, sometimes comforting and sometimes joyful. In my work over the years for *Redwire Magazine*, a National native youth publication, I've seen the way that story and expression can change people, can open them up and can prepare the way for healing. I was inspired by the way that expression can have this holistic effect.

I think that great art is about feeling, and about good stories. I try to practice this and to share in the expression of others in these types of projects. **b**

An artist and designer from the Secwepemc (Shuswap) Nation in the Interior of B.C., Tania Willard works in the arts, media and advocacy to share peoples stories, history and experiences.

CLOCK-WISE FROM LOWER LEFT: *"Streets of Death,"* lino by Tyler Toews ("I have seen women and men turn to coping tools like crime and addiction to deal with the pain of everyday life. This print depicts the struggles I went through and the injustices that many of us experience and the inner strength we all have to get us through."); *"Log Blessing Ceremony,"* lino by Marika Swan; *"Balancing Act,"* woodcut by Peter Morin ("I've tried to show another piece of the Creation Story. If I was going to speak the story, it might go something a little like this: That Crow is rushing because he stole the sun, the moon, and the daylight from somebody, somebody who (maybe) was a little tougher than him. That Crow, because he was rushing with the lights, he doesn't notice anything, all he sees is the light he just stole. So, he ended up spilling out that bottle, because that bottle was in the way. The young Crow, standing there, watched what happened. The young Crow tried to yell to that Crow to stop and look where he was going, but was too late. The wine spilled out all over the ground. That Crow knows he has to pick up what he dropped, so he decides to bury that bottle so it will not be spilt out again."); *"Remember Howard Fleury, Dudley George, Matthew Dumas, Neil Stonechild, Ty Jacobs, Connie Jacobs, Gerald Chenery, Lorraine Jacobson and JJ Harper,"* woodcut by Gabe L'Hirondelle; *"Traps and Cats,"* triptych woodcut by Erick Greene.



Ideas, Dreams, Struggle & Vision: Crazy-making and the Art of Healing

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Crazy-making, a public exhibition of mental-health-related art by young First Nations artists, is the culmination of a five-month long residency project with artist Tania Willard. This public exhibition, hosted by Gallery Gachet in Vancouver and mentored by Willard, featured powerful original prints created by some of BC's most prolific young First Nations artists. As part of the project, more than 40 Vancouver residents also participated in community printmaking workshops.

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Briarpatch: What is the Crazy-making project and what inspired you to start it?

Tania Willard: The project was inspired both by an interest in printmaking and in working with Gallery Gachet, a member-run gallery of artists living with mental health issues. I wanted to do a project that made a safe place for us to talk about mental health within Native communities and to explore our strength in the face of the past traumas and injustices that have had such an impact on our communities.

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