SUSAN POINT WORKS ON PAPER

DALE CROES | SUSAN POINT | GARY WYATT
To put into words what my art means to me would be like trying to count the facets on each grain of a handful of sand... each with its own story. I am briefly going to talk about my printmaking.

Firstly, prints are my life! I have made many works of art other than prints, and I am baffled when I see what I have done. That being said, what I consider to be my real body of work is my limited-edition prints.

All the work I have realized, in one form or another, is connected to a common foundation: making prints. The works I have made from wood, stone, glass, bronze, copper, aluminium, bone, horn, ceramic, steel, polymer, concrete, cast iron, silver, gold and canvas, for me, are equally as important as my works on paper.

In fact, I print just about every day—in my mind, that is. I love making prints and I love to teach others different techniques that I have learned over the years.

Digital technology is gaining prominence in the art world and can result in real works of art, to be sure. But I believe that making prints by hand has a direct simplicity. The knowledge and skill of pulling each print is the process I would like to pass on to my children and grandchildren, and other artisans as well.

My approach to drawing has a definitive link to my experience as a printmaker. While making prints, I have learned that there is much to be gained through Murphy’s Law. My imagery evolves through understanding process and practice. Experimenting can always provide new possibilities. My need to find answers opens new doors to more inspired questions about the possibilities of printmaking.

One of the things I like about printmaking is that it gives me a chance to reach a greater audience. For me, my prints are my fingerprints; they reveal my thoughts and feelings on paper.
My early works are very important to me, as during those years I was discovering the stories and legends that had been passed on orally by my Salish ancestors. The prints all have their own story and, in some cases, multiple stories.

To try to summarize what this all means to me is very difficult. There is so much that I would like to share but struggle to put into words.

I would like to share one story about a print I produced in 2007 entitled Missing Pieces. I drew this image on a hilltop in Yelapa, Mexico. Missing Pieces originated from a commission from B.C. Ferries via satellite phone. My assistant and friend Linda Gillan gave my husband the dimensions for the artwork. He wrote down the dimensions but inadvertently reversed them. The artwork was to have been for a vertical space… not a horizontal one. The colour and beauty of my surroundings was infused into the overall design. At the time, I was thinking about how much nature is being lost—thus the title Missing Pieces. To make a long story short, I finished the artwork only to discover it was for a vertical stairwell, so I drew a new design, Visual Perception, for the commission. Regardless, I produced Missing Pieces (a limited edition of 26) anyway, because it was an image I loved and had created based on where it was conceived, and why.

Many of my images are based on nature, where one can see colour in constant transition in the changing light. Everyone has their own memories and experiences with nature, and I hope that my images can evoke these. I have made many prints about the cause and effect of losing our natural world, and hope my work communicates the value of nature and the absolute need to protect what remains.

As every print begins with a black-and–white drawing, I often see the power of that stark contrast. Sometimes the power of the black and white allows me to see images in the negative space that inevitably become part of the design.

I have used printmaking to create images of educational value, giving historical insight into the roots of my culture, the environment and current social issues. With each theme, my primary objective has always been to create an image that challenges the viewer to use their own imagination, with the hope that they see more than what is obvious.

Overall, I hope that through my artwork I have used a visual language to help carry the torch, a torch that was lit by my ancestors. A value of tradition and originality. Most importantly, I have gained by researching and studying the surviving examples of my ancestral legacy is a personal respect for the individual innovations and expressions that were nurtured by generations of my people tied to this land. Printmaking has been the flame of my torch. I am so happy to see printmaking continued by my children, my grandchildren and other Salish artisans, and hope that a unique Salish legacy will continue for generations.

I would like to express my gratitude to all, for their appreciation and support of my artwork. Their interest in my work is truly inspiring to me. I would also like to thank Dale Croes and Gary Wyatt for this publication—their words add a new perspective and foundation to my prints.

Susan Point

Missing Pieces
November 2007
Edition size: 26
Serigraph, 18 x 72 inches
Susan Point is from Musqueam, a Coast Salish village situated near the mouth of the Fraser River that is now incorporated into the city of Vancouver, British Columbia. Her family has lived at Musqueam for countless generations. The word Musqueam means “People of the Grass,” a reference to the grassy marshes of the river’s edge, which offered plentiful materials for weaving. Susan has a row of intricately woven baskets created by her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother on display in her home today. She often references the design forms of Coast Salish woven arts in both her sculpture and graphics, weaving together literal woven patterns and metaphors of ideas. The river’s edge and the great Pacific Ocean also offered a wealth of salmon, sea life, plants, berries and animals. These sustained the village and were the subject of thousands of stories that defined the relationship between the people and their environment—and provided Susan with endless inspiration for her prints and sculptural artworks.

Susan Agnes Martha Point was born in 1952 and has lived surrounded by Coast Salish art and culture ever since. She began making prints on her kitchen table in 1981, completing her first one, Salmon (page 18) in April. Her earliest works were interpretations of the unique designs carved on historic spindle whorls, definitive Coast Salish objects. The spindle whorl was a flat disk, approximately 20 to 25 centimetres (8 to 10 inches) in diameter, carved from wood or stone. It was elaborately carved on one or both sides, with a central hole where a long spindle was inserted for spinning wool.

The Salish nation is the largest Northwest Coast nation. Stretching north–south from the mid coast of British Columbia deep into Oregon and east–west from the eastern coast of Vancouver Island into the central interior of British Columbia.
the Salish’s traditional territory covers a landscape of extraordinary diversity, including coastal mountains, rivers, forests, desert plains and the jagged coastline of the Pacific Ocean.

Early in her career Susan was offered several prestigious commissions, and as her reputation as an artist began to grow, public art became a dominant part of her artistic production. Public art offered her unlimited possibilities for exploring Salish art as fine art by playing with scale, new materials and mixed media. Susan quickly earned a reputation for large-scale private and public art commissions in wood, glass, stone and, particularly, mixed-media sculpture. She has remained dedicated to the print medium and has released a few limited-edition prints every year throughout her career. Her husband, Jeff Cannell, and their children, Brent, Rhea, Thomas and Kelly (all four of whom are established artists themselves), assist Susan on larger projects.

The majority of Northwest Coast prints, including Susan’s, are serigraphs, but she has mastered most printmaking techniques and has frequently played with a variety of techniques in creating a single print. This collection includes prints produced using woodblock, reduction woodblock, plate woodblock, intaglio, chine-collé, lithography, aquatint and embossing, as well as a variety of mono prints and handcrafted papers. To date she has produced more than 320 limited-edition prints, of which only 160 could be included in this book as a cross-section of her techniques and subjects. Prints have allowed her to support numerous charities and causes with particular emphasis on education, culture, environmental protection and women’s issues.

“I have been fortunate to work with the best printmakers over my career,” Susan explains. “It is this accumulated knowledge and expertise that they shared with me that inspired me to love the various processes as much as I love creating my imagery. This has pushed me to find original ways of using the printmaking media.”

This collection is compiled from a privately held collection that includes every print Susan has ever produced. This very early recognition of her potential as an artist has led to a long-term friendship and the opportunity to share in an extraordinary career over the past thirty-plus years. Every year a few prints were added to the collection, each one revealing Susan Point’s unique ability to design, tell stories and describe cultural histories.
Jeff Cannell, Susan Point’s husband, contacted me a number of years back and asked me if I could show the couple a waterlogged archeological site we were excavating with the Squaxin Island Tribe. The site, in Puget Sound, Washington, is known as Qwu?gwes, a Lushootseed Salish name meaning “a place to come together,” a reference to the fact that archaeological scientists and indigenous cultural experts were working in partnership on it; it had been excavated in this collaborative fashion for eleven summers. I was a big fan of Susan’s work and was thrilled to be asked. I was also amazed when she told me later that it was the first archaeological site she had ever visited.

As an archaeologist I was just as surprised to be asked to help introduce Susan Point: Works on Paper. All my forty-plus-year career I have specialized in waterlogged or wet sites, which preserve wood and fiber artifacts excellently—typically up to 90 percent of the artifacts and material culture of ancient Northwest Coast peoples come from such sites. As in the title of one of her prints, Echoing the Past, Susan possibly felt that my exposure to the wealth of this ancient cultural art tradition might help describe some of her efforts to transmit it into our future.

Many of Susan’s prints show this rich wood and fiber material culture. Sacred Weave, rich in symbolism, reflects the beauty of woven basketry thousands of years old, recovered from Northwest Coast wet archeological sites. Musqueam Northeast, a three-thousand-year-old wet site in Susan’s own cultural territory on the Fraser River, revealed more than 125 examples of carefully woven basketry items—including pack baskets, 33 constructed with the checker weave shown in Susan’s print. Also recovered were cedar bark string gill nets and three-strand twisted cedar bough ropes. The ropes were probably used as harpoon lines for hunting seals attracted to salmon caught in the ancient gill net. The cordage was
twisted in a Z direction, just like Susan’s Salmon Cedar Rope—State 1 print here (which I proudly own). These are just a few examples of Susan Echoing [her Musqueam cultural] Past into the present and future.

_Twisted_ shows two important items we see for millennia in the archaeological past—an ornate comb and mat creaser, the latter used in making sewn tule/cattail mats. As we know from the ancient Ozette wet site, a village on the Olympic Peninsula where entire houses were encased and preserved under a massive clay mudslide three hundred years ago, many utilitarian wooden items were beautifully sculpted as a matter of course.

Over fifty carved combs, mostly wooden, were found in the ancient Ozette houses. These were typically worn as necklaces by Salish women, who would (and still do) use them both as hair combs and as scratchers. Touching one’s skin is/was considered improper (low class), so a comb serves/served that purpose. The Ozette examples, as in Susan’s print, often had elaborately carved figures on the handle and comb teeth either on one or both ends. One had separately carved teeth bound together in a fan; it may have been used for grooming wool dogs or for carding wool to create the roving used in yarn production.

The oldest known wooden comb, discovered in a three-thousand-year-old wet site on the Hoko River in Washington State, has 13 intricately carved wood teeth twined together at one end. Also found at the Hoko wet site, at the western end of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, was a beautifully sculpted wooden mat creaser, with two beak-to-beak belted kingfishers forming the handle. Susan’s print shows another water animal, a duck with the handle hole cut through its wing. The beak-to-beak kingfishers on the ancient creaser were of opposite genders, one with belt ruffles on its neck (female) and one without (male). Not only is the Hoko wet site mat creaser one of the oldest wooden sculptural art pieces ever found, having been made and used at the time Tutankhamen ruled Egypt, but it was also painted, with the eyes and the head tufts of the kingfishers painted in black.

One of the most important Central Northwest Coast—Coast Salish and Makah—“machines” was undoubtedly the elaborately carved wooden spindle whorl, which generated most of the people’s wealth or “currency”—the blankets. In the excavated Ozette plank houses, 23 were found, averaging an amazing nine spinners per household! Some were still on their wooden shaft, which had a slight knob on one end to hold in one’s palm and spin the loose roving of wool into tight spun yarn. The side facing the spinner or weaver was carved with an ornate design that she viewed as she made the yarn. Of the xxx [confirm #] Susan Point prints in this volume,

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2 Kent 1975
3 Croes 1995:176–77
4 Croes 1995:174–76
5 Croes 2005:171–73, Draper 1989:6
about 70—almost half—are based on this critical implement, the tool that produced the wealth, the yarn to weave the blankets—the Western equivalent of currency.

Since ancient and contemporary Central Northwest Coast peoples emphasize carved art in implements for making blankets, as Susan Point does here in spindle whorl forms in her print work (and elsewhere in her monumental sculptural work), this focus on blanket production equipment, past, present and future, needs to be explored. Archaeologists see spindle whorls, usually of bone or stone in dry sites and sometimes elaborately carved, in sites going back at least a thousand years, giving us some idea when the Central Northwest Coast spinning industry may have begun. The sites with ancient spinners from this time period are concentrated in what is now called the Salish Sea, in archaeological sites of the southern Kwakwaka’wakw; Coast Salish in the Gulf, straits, and Puget Sound; and Makah/southern Nuu-chah-nulth on the west end of the Strait of Juan de Fuca (also suggesting a cultural time dimension for this inland sea, characterized as a single functioning estuarine ecosystem). Interestingly, the Nuu-chah-nulth archaeological sites north of the mouth of the Strait of Juan de Fuca do not have spindle whorls in their ancient or contemporary communities, meaning this blanket-weaving complex was limited to Salish Sea traditions over at least the past millennium.

To better understand Susan’s 70 spindle whorl–based print designs, we should see how they fit into the complex blanket-weaving industry developed along the Northwest Coast. Along with the ancient and contemporary Central Northwest Coast spinners, the region developed true double-bar looms (the northern Tlingit [Chilkat] and Haida use single-bar hanging looms woven like baskets), weaver swords/batons, yarn spools and a domesticated source for yarn to make the wealth—wool dogs. Through husbandry and intentional breeding practices developed in the past millennium, a wool or hair dog was domesticated as a controlled source for the production of blanket yarn. Archaeological examples of these dogs (distinct from village dogs) are well documented and they were often reported by early Western explorers in the Makah and Coast Salish territories. In the entire American continent only two Native peoples domesticated an animal for its hair for spinning wool to make their textiles: the ancient Peruvians (Inca) bred alpaca from llamas and the ancient Salish Sea peoples bred wool dogs from the common dog to establish control over the production of the yarn they needed for blanket weaving. The Northern Northwest Coast peoples collected mountain goat wool, but on the Central Northwest Coast, where mountain goats are not native to the Olympic Peninsula, and possibly Vancouver Island, the Salish Sea people domesticated and used active husbandry to control this critical aspect of their yarn production.

6 Wyatt 2010
Wayne Suttles, an anthropologist who specialized in Central Northwest Coast traditions, notes in Coast Salish Art that objects made by men and used by men were “usually undecorated or decorated sparsely.” In contrast, “implements made by men but used by women, such as mat creasers, spindle whorls, swords for beating wool, the posts of weaving frames ‘loom’s), etc. were often, though not always, decorated with carving and/or painting.”10 He then wondered, “why should they use what appears to be the most structured style on one article, the spindle whorl?” (emphasis mine).11 We could ask the same question here: why are half of Susan’s prints focused on the wool spinners? Suttles and I have the same suggestion—“the answers lie in the use to which these implements were put, producing that other, essential source of power and prestige—wealth” (emphasis mine).12 And visible wealth—blankets one could produce—has been a primary medium of exchange along the Northwest Coast, from archaeological evidence of wool, for at least a thousand years.

The Ozette village site, central to the study, states the emphasis on wealth production in ancient households. Besides the 23 elaborately carved wooden spindle whorls, six wooden yarn spools, some with sculpted human heads on end knobs, were found.13 Fourteen decorated and slotted wooden loom uprights and loom roller bars were also uncovered, meaning that an average of three true looms were found per household—again emphasizing the industry of blanket weaving on complex shuttle looms, and not hanging looms as seen to the north. Ten wooden weavers’ swords/batons, possibly used as shuttle sticks, were also recorded, some with wolf-like carvings on their handles.14

Since soft organic materials such as hair, wool, hide, flesh and sinew do not normally preserve in wet sites, the only example of a multi-layer folded ancient blanket was found at Ozette, probably because it was in a concentrated pile and in a crushed wooden box.15 This blanket was woven in the true-loom plaited twill weave with mostly white (likely dog) wool with dark elements added to create a distinct plaid design.16

Having conducted decades of archaeological work on the Northwest Coast, not only the well-preserved wood and fiber artifacts from ancient wet sites, I have proposed that the cultural economies and arts seem to have evolved first in the Central Northwest Coast and then influenced the cultural directions of the arts and economies in the Northern (and possibly Southern) Northwest Coast. The archaeological evidence shows that some of the art forms and subsistence equipment, including ancient wooden fishhooks types, developed earliest in the Central Northwest Coast sites, around two thousand years ago in what is known as the Marpole Phase.17 With time this technology appears to have diffused from the Central to the Northern Northwest Coast, where it blended into the development and use of these cultural techniques and styles in later periods, including into the contact period. In a sense this is proposing that some of the evolving technologies and art styles of the Northern Northwest Coast reflect a diffusion or “spin-off” of cultural ideas developed at least two millennia earlier amongst the Central Northwest Coast populations.

For the arts, this would seem counter to the general anthropological perspective that the “center for the development of Northwest Coast Indian art” was the Northern Northwest Coast.18 Squaxin Island Tribe master artist Andrea Wilbur-Sigo, a close associate and student of Susan Point, shows me how easy it was to transform Northern art elements into Coast Salish art elements, which may in turn have been a transformation from ancient Central Coast styles: the ovoids become crescents and the split-Uss become trigons.19 In a sense she sees how part of this earlier cultural style shift could have taken place—simply evolving in a different direction on the Central Coast using the core elements developed earlier. This transition does not show a lessening of complexity in design, but rather a shift in focus by connecting the art to song, dance, vision and religion in a new trajectory for the Central Coast arts. Suttles states it well in Coast Salish Art: it “may have been the result of shifts in importance, back and forth, between the power of the vision and the power of the ritual word or shifts in the concentrations of wealth and authority”20— a dynamic part of Central Northwest Coast cultures that endures today.

Susan Point takes her Salish cultural training, including echoes from the ancient past, and transmits the crucial elements into the future through her visions. This is a Salish tradition that has always influenced cultures around it, especially those to the north, but now also a Western culture residing in the nation’s traditional Salish Sea territories. This transmission moves the culture forwards into new generations of Salish youth and continues to educate outside cultures about the considerable wealth of the Coast Salish. A focus on the spindle whorl reflects the making of Salish wealth—blankets—in spinning yarn from indigenous domesticated wool dogs, weaving on true looms and using ornate weavers’ swords/batons. Explaining the actual meaning of the spindle whorl designs is best done by cultural experts, such as by Susan Point in her discussions of her work here. Her work enriches our world community, becomes part of the world’s wealth and is now compiled on paper here…

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REFERENCES


