Responsible Hearts: T’uy’t’tanat-Cease Wyss and Anne Riley by Tarin Dehod

This begins with land.
Soundtrack for The Radical Love of Butterflies
by T'uy'tanat Cease Wyss & Anne Riley

SIDE A
1. SONG: Pollinators & Lifegivers by Cease Wyss & Semaquila Wyss & Kamaya
   2. INTERVIEW: Anne Riley speaks with Mark Handley about Mike MacKinnon
   3. SOUNDSCAPE: Harmony Garden Bees. 2 min
   4. INTERVIEW: Anne Riley speaks with Lorelei Williams, founder of Bioneers
   5. INTERVIEW: Anne Riley speaks with Lillian Howard, Community Matron

SIDE B
1. OVERVIEW with Dawn Morrison of Food Sovereignty. 35 min
2. SONG: Kwiligay, 3 min

Recorded on Unceded Coast Salish Territory

T'uy'tanat-Cease Wyss & Semaquila Wyss & Kamaya/Mark Handley/Harmony
Garden Pollinators/Lorelei Williams/Lillian Howard/Dawn Morrison/Kwilgay

By Cease Wyss & Anne Riley
This begins with land. With T’uy’t’tanat-Cease Wyss (Sḵwx̱wú7mesh, Sto:lo, Irish Métis, Hawaiian, Swiss) and Anne Riley (Cree, Slavey Dene, German, Fort Nelson First Nation) sitting in Wyss’ garden in Humulch’sen (Capilano Reserve), in her home territory of Sḵwx̱wú7mesh. With the butterfly gardens planted by Mike MacDonald (Mi’kmaq, 1941-2006), created across Canada throughout the mid-90s.

I am visiting the Walter Phillips Gallery (WPG) for a series of events as part of the group exhibition “If the river ran upwards” (2018), curated by Jacqueline Bell, and featuring Silvina Babich, Alana Bartol, Diane Borsato, Carolina Caycedo, and Genevieve Robertson. Specifically, I am at the gallery for a gathering in Mike MacDonald’s Butterfly Garden (1999) wherein T’uy’t’tanat-Cease Wyss and Anne Riley will reveal Soundtrack for the Radical Love of Butterflies. The exhibition contextualizes artists’ practices through visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff’s term, “Anthropocene visuality”, and the related writings of T.J. Demos and Macarena Gómez-Barris. These scholars and critics endeavour to identify the impacts of industrial imagery, working through concepts of cultural erasure and the politics of extraction. Speaking at the WPG, Gómez-Barris described her research around the geopolitical implications of “extractive capitalism,” framing the practice of Carolina Caycedo in a dual extractive/non-human view and an Indigenous viewpoint. The symbolism of the macro/industrial/satellite scale, cross-referenced with immersive and sometimes waterlogged imagery, is the backbone of the show.

In the gallery, Caycedo’s nets have a larger-than-life bodily presence – a mix of hand-woven fishing nets, a hammock and a cascade of brightly coloured candles, each adorned with charged items: a gold-washing pan, lead weights, a wooden paddle. They stand out starkly among the rest of the image-based work. While the nets seem to overwhelm Genevieve Robertson’s series River Drawing (2015), the alchemical relationship between the works is evident. Robertson used the gesture of her body to draw within the Fraser River, collecting sediment and drawing implements to form her work.

This submerged view, full of the feeling that the artist used her body as a vulnerable and porous tool is powerfully embodied in Silvina Banbich’s From Port to Port, along the Uruguay River (2017-ongoing). Within two screens an ever-changing Google Earth video syncs and bleeds across accompanying hand-drawn notes and images done by the artist as she followed the river through the grace and generosity of those that work and live around it. Port to Port feels very much like it could fill its own space, despite the intimate view through small-scale monitors. It does share a room with two other works by Caycedo, Serpent River Book and To stop being a threat and to become a promise (2017), each portraying the artist’s research with river systems and the tension between corporate resource development and human use, knowledge and resistance.

In the reconstructed rear space of the gallery, Alana Bartol and Diane Borsato offer works that, while compelling in their own right, appear to be unrelated. Bartol’s recent practice in water divination is the subject of the videos Pendulum I (the dowser’s pendulum) and reading wild lands (2018), and five framed collections of iron filings held together by an undisclosed magnet. In her videos, Bartol uses the process of dousing in a performative practice to gather information from inactive oil refineries. The videos express tension between a spiritual practice, and a silliness largely borne of a contemporary loyalty to scientific/industrial knowledge. That silliness or awkwardness carries into Borsato’s video Gems and Minerals (2018), a stunning depiction of a group of docents within a glassy installation of glinting gems and geodes. Working with dancers, storytelling entirely in ASL (accompanied by subtitles), the movements of the docents are elaborate, breaking the formality of the institutional setting. Filmed in the Teck Suite: Earth’s Treasures at the Royal Ontario Museum, the performers share absurd stories and illustrate the weirdness of the institution and, in this case, the
industry it represents.

There is no question that a viewer can relate the works included in “If the river ran upwards.” The threads between the works, the artists, and the resistance in response to industry, embody interconnectedness. However, the show feels heavily weighted around the captivating practice of Caycedo and does not leave enough physical or emotional space for the other works to have their due. Soundtrack makes its own space. The work defies visuality and is entirely held in the heart.

Mike MacDonald’s Butterfly Garden, located just outside the WPG, is a reprieve from the white cube. On August 4, a group of us find places to linger in the garden, sipping our tea, making whispered conversation until we are quieted by Elder Una Wesely, smudging while sharing her story and leading a prayer on Sleeping Buffalo, the sacred Territory of the Blackfoot, Stoney Nakoda and Tsuut’ina First Nations People and Treaty 7 Territory. I assume that together, this group will listen to the soundtrack, surrounded by the delphinium, asters and sweet grass. Instead, Wyss and Riley talk about finding the butterflies in their communities, about interconnectedness. When they finish speaking, they tell us that because we came and gave time, we can each take one cassette tape. This gesture has gravity, laden with the words of the artists and Elder Una Wesely. I keep it knowing that A Soundtrack for the Radical Love of Butterflies is not a tape to be played casually in the background. Unintentionally, I carry it with me for three weeks — waiting on an opportunity to use a cassette player — and it becomes familiar and vital to the daily contents of my commute.

Throughout the week leading up to this event, Wyss and Riley have spent a few days in the garden, with caretaker Katherine Ylitalo and artists-in-residence, working, planting, and talking. When they received the invitation to participate in “If the river ran upwards,” Riley and Wyss knew that they would choose to do something that would transform them, would lead them.

The day before the event, they tell me that it came together while they were sitting in Wyss’ garden on her reserve. They wanted to know more about MacDonald’s Butterfly Garden at the Banff Centre. This garden is one of many planted by the artist, most of which were located in urban areas, inserting these intimate spaces into the humdrum of city life, making space for butterflies and humans to transform, bringing the land and environment back into our awareness. Wyss had known MacDonald and knew that Mark Handley, MacDonald’s mentee, could talk to them about the work.

I have never met T’uy’t’탄-See Wyss or Anne Riley, but it becomes quite clear that they have an uncommonly special relationship. Riley has a lot to say, in an unhurried, determined way, often catching a point in her narrative where Wyss adds brief and purposeful words. When one is talking and the other is silent, the conversation continues to be active between them, animated through gesture and emotion, as if the words are coming from a shared place. The care and spirit of their relationship has a presence in their collaborative work.

Renowned cultural activist, artist and Or Gallery founder Laiwan brought Wyss and Riley together because, as Riley says, she knew that they should be connected “to have conversations on the land about the land.” Through their friendship and partnership, the artists began work on an 18-month project, A Constellation of Remediation (2017-2019), commissioned by the City of Vancouver, working with Urban Native Youth to plant Indigenous remediation gardens on sites that have been contaminated by Industry, that will utilize permaculture to reconcile the soil and focus on the life and care of the gardens, not on developing land. In many ways, Soundtrack and A Constellation feel related; both projects are rooted in the land, and they defy consumption as the process of the work is experiential and dialogic. Wyss explains that A Constellation undertakes “what it means to heal the earth and heal ourselves.” This statement seems ever-present in Mike MacDonald’s practice, exhibiting such care for the environment with intuitive and simple gestures acting as provocative, but gentle reminders.

Picking up on conversations about MacDonald and feeling the labour and love of butterflies, Riley learned that MacDonald was a two-spirit artist and wanted to acknowledge, through this new work, artist practices that are marginalized. To think about how to love like a butterfly became a radical idea. In Riley’s interview with Handley, he remembers MacDonald saying, “I didn’t come out, I came in.”

Riley and Cease tell me that butterflies do not exist in colonial time. They defy human-made borders and migrate in a phenomenal cycle that includes multiple generations of butterflies. Monarchs rely on milkweed for chrysalis, laying eggs on the plant that will feed caterpillars until they are ready to metamorphose. While in the chrysalis phase, the change from the caterpillar to the butterfly is invisible. We cannot own, or objectify this organic process.

Taken with this transformation and the symbolism of it, the artists began to consider “the sounds that break colonial time.” The clear answer that came through within the spirit of this work was Indigenous women involved in activism as a result of ongoing oppression. Wyss and Riley detail with care, considerations of what it means to be programmed as an Indigenous body within an institutionalized system organized and largely operated by white people. Riley states clearly that Indigenous pain is not for consumption. Soundtrack needed to be about learning and relationship building, demonstrative of the interconnectedness between Wyss, Riley and MacDonald. This work could forge a renewed relationship between the Banff Centre and the Butterfly Garden. The artists envision a reality where every orientation to the Banff Centre includes the garden and time in the garden. They wonder if the sum of this work is institutional remediation.

There is quite a heady constellation, to borrow Wyss and Riley’s term, of making space within the scope of Soundtrack. Founded on the plot that MacDonald planted, a garden that is at once an artwork in a permanent collection and a living presence connected to MacDonald’s other gardens and the migratory patterns of butterflies, Soundtrack calls to the butterflies identified by Wyss and Riley. The tape is medicine. The transparent blue honours the Coast Salish Territory, and the Cedar branch honours the West Coast. Riley explains the medicine to me, and the card cover has descriptions of the ingredients, how long it is, and instructions on how to take it; you have to listen with a responsible heart.

The experience of listening to the tape has been hard won, meaningfully, I have had to make an effort to play it. The interplay between songs and interviews has been carefully chosen: beginning with a song by Wyss, her daughter Senaquila and her granddaughter Kamaya; audio of Kamaya’s heartbeat drumming in the background. Mark Handley’s recollection of Mike MacDonald is a potent 10 minutes, recalling the connection between the two, their roadtrips, MacDonald’s mentorship as a two-spirit artist. Handley is now a support care worker, working with the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, continuing to spread the knowledge and care imparted by MacDonald. Riley’s conversation with Handley is followed by a soundscape filled with the buzzing of Wyss’ Harmony Garden. As a listener, if you have ever spent time in the soil, you immediately recall your own memories of planting and putting your hands in the earth. For me, it was working with my grandparents. The beginning of the tape sets up multiple threads and reiterates the interconnectedness of Soundtrack, of MacDonald’s living works, of gardens and, ultimately, of the powerful butterflies that Wyss and Riley have given space to, Indigenous community leaders, their stories and how their history has led them to share their butterfly medicine.

Lorelei Williams (Skatin Nations and Sts’al’ilks) started the Butterflies in Spirit dance group in October 2011 in an effort to get an image of her missing aunt Belinda Williams out into the public, and to honour her cousin Tanya Holyk who was murdered by Robert Pickton. Williams wanted to bring together Indigenous women and girls to do a dance routine. The idea was simple, and at the time Williams didn’t realize the power that it might have for others who would want to do the same. The name of the group honours
the missing and murdered women, remembering them as butterflies transforming into the spirit world. Next, Lillian Howard (Mowachaht/ Muchalaht First Nation, Nuu-chah-nulth, Kwakwaka’wakw and Tlingit ancestry) an elder, activist, advocate, organizer, and co-chair of Vancouver’s Urban Indigenous Peoples’ Advisory Committee. At the time of the recording, Howard was preparing to leave on a Tribal Journey, and she talks about the deep healing that comes with a canoe journey. As a residential school survivor, and a sexual assault and rape survivor, her advice to young Indigenous women survivors is to state it, reclaiming their ancestral rights. Howard and Williams are connected. Howard joined Butterflies in Spirit as a way to find healing around two of her aunts who went missing.

The interviews finish with, Dawn Morrison (Secwépemc), the Founder, Chair and Coordinator of the B.C. Food Systems Networking Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty. She carries with her a past of intergenerational trauma from the many residential school survivors in her family, her own mother being in a residential school from ages 5 to 13, giving birth to Morrison only two years later at the age of 15. At that time, young Indigenous men and women were leaving residential schools only to be used in the Okanagan orchard and agricultural systems that are now mainly serviced by exploited migrants. When Morrison was recovering from her own addiction, she returned to her Secwépemc community, to the land, and learned about the plants that she could use to heal herself. She began working with elders and going to BC Food Systems Network gatherings to question colonial policies that, as she describes at length, dispossessed Indigenous peoples. In her work, she seeks to create foundational change that recognizes the regenerative relationships that the body has with food. She says that our interactions with food are powerful transformations; we eat and drink from the land and become part of it.

Finishing with a song, “Kwiigay,” and the lapping of water, maybe the crackling of a fire, a blowing breeze, Soundtrack is a heavy reminder of the systemized genocide and ongoing oppression of Indigenous peoples. But it also contains messages of healing and strength, of knowledge sharing, of the healing power of the land, and women. There is also such a fragility felt through the compilation of these voices, not in their spirit, but in the necessity for transformation, in our relationships with one another and with our environment. This fragility is echoed in the symbolism of the garden and its reliance on pollinators.

As part of “If the river ran upwards,” this work feels the closest and most intimate. Perhaps that is the reality of the work; it prompts deep thought, requiring an investment that continues after the show, outside the gallery. Each voice is with you, spiritually and literally. The radicality of sincere love and care generates a real interrogation of the self. I recall, as we were wrapping up our conversation, Wyss and Riley brought up the chrysalis again, how you can’t use, or consume or degrade it. Chrysalis is an unseen, natural transformation of the self. I recall, as we were wrapping up our conversation, Wyss and Riley brought up the chrysalis again, how you can’t use, or consume or degrade it. Chrysalis is an unseen, natural transformation and they ask: isn’t that what we need from everyone?

An interview with T’uy’t’tanat-Cease Wyss and Anne Riley took place on August 3, 2018, at the Banff Centre for the Arts.

Tarin Dehod is a curator currently working and living on Treaty 6 Territory and the Homeland of the Métis.

List of Works:
Page 16: T’uy’t’tanat-Cease Wyss and Anne Riley, Soundtrack for the Radical Love of Butterflies, 2018, sound work on cassette tape, Side A: 45 minutes; Side B: 38 minutes, photo by Jessica Wittman.
Page 19 clockwise starting at top left: Alana Bartol, reading wild lands, 2018. HDV 1080p film. 22:32 minutes; Exhibition view of “If the river ran upwards”, Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, photo by Tania Willard.