

Hannah Claus Interview

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Interview with Hannah Claus

Visual artist of English and Kanien'kehà:ka / Mohawk ancestries

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Interview conducted by AbTeC Research Assistant Dion Smith-Dokkie

00:00 Dion Smith-Dokkie: So what brought you to the Initiative For Indigenous Futures?

00:04 Hannah Claus: I'm working on a project called Hochelaga Rock. And really, it started with an encounter I had with an elder in Edmonton who's Dené. And he told me that Hochelaga is the Dene name for Montreal. And I thought that was really fascinating. I got really excited, because here in Kanien'kehaka territory, it's always said, because it's true, that Hochelaga isn't a word that exists in the Kanien'keha language, the Mohawk language, and that Cartier must have misunderstood. And so I've been researching this since I had that story. I guess the Dene elder's story is that the Dene would travel from the northern Tundra through to Montreal, and they would stay for 12 to 18 months, sometimes two years, because it's a long journey, until the signs were right to go back again.

01:23 HC: And it was really to engage in the ceremony of trade, that trade is more than just exchanging items. It's an actual ceremony of renewing alliances and understandings between nations. And that it was something that was done with respect, that it was, he was very clear that it was Mohawk territory, that it was Kanien'kehaka territory, and that they were there for that reason, to trade, and to work with the Mohawk, but that then they would leave. So I just thought, "Oh, then maybe Jacques Cartier was talking to a Dene and not actually talking to someone who was Mohawk."

[chuckle]

02:06 HC: I mean, you can take it anywhere, but it's just that idea that history isn't written in stone. We've got this one version because it's really what is in the diaries of Jacques Cartier, and then later on, the Jesuits and the rest of it. But maybe it explains why when Champlain came back 30 years later, that the village wasn't there anymore. Well, it would have been this temporary setup that was meant to just be there for a certain period of time until they left. I don't know, I've been talking to different people. The different Mohawk people I've approached dismiss it, saying that Hochelaga is a post-contact word, and for them the word that's the proper... That is, the one that is understood, is probably Otsira'kéhne, which means "at the fire", and that that could have been understood as Hochelaga, so with the pronunciation and French understanding and whatever.

03:12 HC: There is also a justification for how that would be. There would have been always fires at the edge of the wood for strangers, for people not of the territory, where they could then keep warm and eat while the runners would go back to the council, the chiefs, and decide whether or not they would come and let these people in and talk with them or whatever, figure out what business it was that these people had and what they could do. So that's another version.

03:48 HC: But I just was really intrigued and excited by this idea of any fluidity of people and space time, and that it's in such a contrast with that kind of written chronology that's recorded in the school books, that my daughter had in grade three and four, and that is recorded on the rock at McGill University as being the site of Hochelaga and what that was. So that's why I'm focusing on

the rock, all that long story to say, this is why I'm focusing on the rock. It's to try and undo that permanence that that suggests, that idea the monument suggests, to allow space for these other possible histories, particularly oral histories, to come through in its place.

04:43 DSD: That's really, really cool and really interesting, because it's true that certain narratives get calcified and...

04:50 HC: Very definitely. I mean, it's the conquerors that write history. So I think to me it's almost become more than just what is the origin of Hochelaga, to be more about let's just try and take away that permanence and see what light can come through.

05:10 DSD: And then also something that comes up for me is the relationship building between say the Dene way out west and the Mohawks here.

05:21 HC: Yeah, yeah. Well, it definitely happened with the fur trade, clearly. But then with the fur trade, they were using these routes that would have been ancestral routes to take and ways to move and exchange. And that's I think the thing that was fascinating about listening to these people in Edmonton, that corn coming from South America and becoming a staple here. They were saying, "Well, we would go and get canoes and tobacco from the Mohawks who had the best tobacco."

06:00 HC: So yeah, again it's just that idea that there is a whole network of nation-to-nation relationships that has been going on long before Europeans came to this land. I've told this story to some people and they think it's wonderful, but then they say, "You need to get other facts, other sources to back it up", and that sort of thing. And I agree, I think you do, but at the same time, I think there's matter to work with, there's potentiality just within that telling on its own. And I do want to do more research to try and see what other sources, for this sort of thing.

06:50 HC: Like I said, I've worked a little bit with talking with some Mohawk historians and researchers, and so far not got a lot. But I think I want to get to the McCord and see if there are just even in letters or journals or something about voyages and trips, if there might be anything there. For the moment, for the first step of the project, this is looking at this idea of the rock. The exhibition is going to be at Ace Art in Winnipeg, and then at Articule here in Montreal, in October. I'm really excited that it's going to be here in Montreal. And then potentially in Peterborough. I haven't decided if I'm going to do that in Peterborough or do something else, but they're interested in this.

07:31 DSD: Cool.

07:31 HC: Yeah.

07:32 DSD: Wow, okay. We look forward to seeing it. And then you're involved in a few different shows as well in Montreal right now. At present the show *Elements* at the Maison de la culture Villeray Saint-Michel Parc Extension as well, on the 28th.

07:52 HC: Yes, that one I did actually the video here for the first part of my residency, so that's done, great, moved on to the next one. But yes, it's actually getting installed this week and the opening is at the end of the month, I think it's the 26th, it's a Wednesday.

08:09 DSD: Very exciting.

08:10 HC: Yeah, yeah.

08:11 DSD: What is that?

08:13 HC: Well, it's part of a larger project that is part of the 375th of Montreal anniversary, and it's initiated by Accès culture, which as far as I can figure out works with... It's a part of what the Maisons de la culture, which are basically the municipal art galleries, there's one in every neighbourhood, there's 19 neighbourhoods in Montreal. So, their theme was 19 beaches equals a million horizons. They wanted to have things to do with the fact that this is an island and water, and just it was an open call for proposals.

09:02 HC: So I submitted a proposal talking about the Saint Lawrence and the idea of rivers. I work with that in my work. Rivers being a means of that the original highway for communication between communities, the idea it comes into wampum for the Kanien'kehaka, the word in Kanien'keha is kahionni, which is river made by hand, is a wampum belt. And it's that idea that it's a body of water that's always flowing, it's always moving, so it's alive in that way. So like the wampum belt, the agreement that it signifies needs to stay alive and not just be left to gather dust. It needs to be living and alive and acted upon to keep it living. And that it is a means of communication, that can define and join nations.

10:09 HC: So, I just was talking about those ideas, and in the end I ended up creating a video projection. I thought initially it was going to be, and I even went and did all kinds of recordings everywhere of people. I thought [chuckle] it was going to be an audio-video piece where I had stories of people talking about what the river meant to them, just persons from different Indigenous communities. And I ended up getting footage on a really bright day and focusing on the intense sparkles or reflections on the waves of the river, of the current.

10:51 HC: And I just ended up deciding that it needed to just be that and not have the stories, so I'm saving the audio for maybe, probably another project, but that this one will be... It's got the sound of all the birds that were going crazy on this bright, sunny day after so much rain, that period of a lot of rain that we had. And the water is brown because there was rain after the flooding that was happening with the Saint Lawrence around the island. So the water's really brown with these bright reflections, and it gradually... I introduce a filter and it turns blue and it turns darker blue, and it becomes, to me, like the sky with the stars sparkling in the sky. So it's making this link between water, river and sky constellations.

11:43 DSD: Okay. And then you are also... You're so busy. You're also a part of *Les fenêtres qui parlent*?

11:51 HC: Yeah, it's a little bit of a crazy time. [chuckle] This project, *Les fenêtres qui parlent*, is, again a 375th project. I hesitated quite a long time before taking it, but ended up deciding to do it, that it was a good opportunity. I just knew, it was gonna be a lot of work [chuckle] And I think there's a way you could do that, that it's not a lot of work, but I ended up choosing the option that was a little bit more work than it could have been. I was asked to be a part of this. I like the community aspect of it. It's like a week-long exhibition but it's never even quite a week long 'cause that includes the put-up and take-down time.

12:32 HC: So generally, it's sort of a four-day exhibition in a different neighborhood each week, and it's gonna go through all of the neighborhoods of the island of Montreal, so 19 neighbourhoods. And basically each neighborhood, there are people who've offered their windows, either these are businesses with storefronts, or individuals' homes, the apartments or homes. And then there's artists that are from that neighbourhood, and then also six artists, so I'm one of the six that are showing in each of the neighborhoods. So basically it's like 19 exhibitions within 19 weeks.

13:15 HC: We're now entering week six. I'm getting week seven ready. And my project is something called "Je Me Souviens", "I Remember", or "I Will Remember", and it's to do with the crisis with missing Aboriginal and Indigenous women and girls in Canada and in Quebec. I ended up deciding to do that one, to choose that as my subject, just because I think the inquiry is going on, it started May 29th, I believe, in Whitehorse. And it's been a long time coming, and at the same time there's been a lot of... When you look into getting information, it just is talking about different problems that are going on just for communication with the families and really being able to get the involvement it needs. It seems to be tied up in bureaucracy. It seems like there's problems before it even began. It was what I was seeing throughout the winter.

14:16 HC: And then also realizing that it's something that people don't seem to be as aware of, or conscious of, at the moment. I think also with the 375 there's a certain amount of... That's just the nature of these kind of celebrations, there's a certain amount of rah-rah kind of thing going on. And certainly, Indigenous issues are not at the forefront at all. I think they've done a pretty good job of trying to catch up and include more Indigenous content, but at the same time, it wasn't at all at the... One of the concerns within the organization, of the celebrations initially, anyway.

15:02 HC: So, I felt like I wanted if the title for "fenêtres qui parlent" translates to windows that talk or windows that speak. And I felt like if I'm gonna have a window that speaks, I want it to really speak about something that matters, and use it as a window, like an opportunity to say something. And I don't usually get that, I think, specific with text-based works in my work. But I just felt like, I'm tired of all the subtlety let's just [chuckle] get to the point and say something.

15:34 HC: So in part, it alternates. I'd done a project in 2015, that was a video projection and an installation that involved getting participants from different communities. I approached the cultural centers in Kahnawà:ke, Kanehsàtà:ke, and I teach at Kiuna Post-Secondary Institute in Odanak, which is 90 minutes out of Montreal. And then also I've taught at Concordia and at McGill, and so I actually approached Skawennati and Jason to see if I could do a workshop here for students. So I had four different workshops, and I had the list of names that Maryanne Pearce had compiled and published via Google for her doctorate thesis, I believe, that was compiled from the different police databases at the time of all missing and murdered women. And there were 812 names that were identified as Indigenous names.

16:44 HC: And people would come and choose the names that they wanted to write and they would write it onto a piece. It's like a translucent piece of, kind of like Mylar, it's sort of a plasticky film. And I filmed them from underneath, on a table where I had the surface cut out and I would film the writing of the hand. So in the video you get the names that are being written as well as the shadow of the hand. And that became my video. So that's the 2015 piece. But then I always kept these pieces of paper. I never felt I could just throw them out. Like the consideration and care that went into choosing the names, people would really look at the list and sort of choose names, not

necessarily... Some do it alphabetically, others would choose based on if they knew that family name, or if they thought that this person might be someone that someone they knew, knew. There was really a lot of consideration that went into this.

17:45 HC: So I just respected that too much of those papers. I never threw them out. So they've been sitting in my studio. When this came up with the windows, I thought, well, here's an opportunity to use those. I could display them and it's bringing all of these women's names, along with the people who did the writing into this other community in Montreal's home and, I like the idea of sort of bringing all of that together. So one week, it's this, and then the next week I do a piece that is taken... It's more hard-hitting. I didn't want this to simply be a sentimental memorial. I wanted people to see that this is an ongoing crisis. And I, in charcoal, select a sentence or a phrase to copy out, and that goes in big letters into someone's window. Generally, to date, those of the ones that get the messages like that are more organizations that have larger windows, as opposed to personal homes.

19:00 DSD: I saw a picture of one of those pieces in Phonopolis, in Mile End.

19:08 HC: Yeah, so far there's been three of them that have happened, and the three have been at the homes. And then the people that have it in, so far that have had the names in their homes have been very, very open to it. Part of what this is, it becomes a little more complicated, is I want to make sure people know what's gonna come in, like what they're getting involved with with the project. I don't actually show them the message. When it comes to the sentences, I don't show them exactly what the message is going to be beforehand, but I make sure they understand what my description is.

19:42 HC: I mean, I have a write up that explains what the project is and what I intend to do, and now I guess they could probably show them some photos of what it has been to date. So I make sure that people are aware of what they're getting into 'cause I wouldn't want... Well, one, for someone to feel like they don't want that in their window, then that would be a problem. [chuckle] And to make sure that they have an understanding. I think the names as well, to me it's something that I thought about it quite a while before putting the names up, because that also is a vulnerability. Someone's name. So, just to make sure that they're in a good place. And yeah, I put tobacco down to make sure that that helps to ground them, and protect and have strength in the windows.

20:42 DSD: Thank you so much for sitting down with me today. And I'm excited to see what comes in the rest of your residency.

20:48 HC: Well thanks. It's a pleasure.