

Roxanne Charles

Capture is pleased to partner with the Museum of Vancouver (MOV) to commission artist Roxanne Charles to create an artwork in response to the exhibition *There Is Truth Here* at the MOV as well as to the museum's collection of archival photographs of St. Mary's Residential School in Mission, BC. In the following text piece, Charles explores through words her personal response to the exhibition and archival images. See more about the companion artwork, *The Strata of Many Truths*, on page 96.

Generously supported by a City of Vancouver Creative City Strategic Grant.

Fragments of the truth are everywhere. There are many truths. Layers of many truths. Strata.

Artist intervention or response? Who am I, and what am I doing here?

You might ask yourself the very same thing as reader of this page. Do you question the voyeuristic nature of this ritual? Where are the sovereign spaces of such a spectacle?

Traces, fragments, ideas, reflections ... Archive, memory, moments, history, interpretation ... Documentation, desire, despair ...

Who has the voice, the authority? What do we save, and what do we not? What do we share, and what must we keep for the sovereign spaces of our sacred bundle? Whose stories remain silent, and whose are forcibly told? What stories choose to bury themselves deep inside our DNA, carrying themselves from generation to generation? What stories hide themselves at the outer layer of the picture frame or under the innocence of these children's precious faces?

The history of Canada, like the history of anything, is deeply complex with numerous layers, each rich in memory, and not all of them pleasant, to say the least.

I question my authority. I question my authority to have voice in such matters. My interpretation of the data lies not only in the photographs on the museum walls or the transcriptions of our aunties' voices, but also in the perpetual beast that still roars through our communities, cities, and streets—disguised as prosperity to all.

When looking upon these photographs of children of St Mary's residential school, I am attuned not only to what is visible but also to what is not. I am present to the memories and stories of this place ... a place so many children were forced to make their home.

I am present to the generations and history lost, to the shame, pain, torment, and humiliation cast upon Indigenous bodies. To the pain carried by our Elders, whom we love so dearly.

I cannot and will not formally look at and discuss these photos through some scientific or academic lens. Instead, I will question and authentically respond in a way that is true to myself, respectfully acknowledging the limitations of the visual plane, which so many hold in such high regard. Instead, I will follow my instincts and intuition into the unknown ... the unseen.

I am honoured by the opportunity to be in conversation with such vibrant spirits and souls—souls radiating with resistance, resiliency, and creativity, provoking questioning and thought much deeper than the images that document them. What stories do these

18



Roxanne Charles of Semiahmoo First Nation is a cultural historian employing means of visual representation, oral history, and ceremony.

19



photographs tell? What pictures remain unseen? What images never made it to the archives?

Ask yourself, whose perspective do these photographs show? What narrative do they tell? What do they want us to see? Or perhaps even more importantly: What do they not want us to see? What are the truths left untold? Where are the voices of those who have been silenced? How can we honour all those who became lost within these walls ... those who never made it home?

We choose to honour both the Survivors and those who never made it home to their loved ones. It is our deep respect and admiration for their tremendous beauty, creativity, and resistance. The Indigenous students and their artworks shown in the *There Is Truth Here* exhibit offer a glimpse into the strength of young children—a strength that continues to flow through the veins of our little ones today.

If you are open enough to seeing beyond the image, you may learn to see with your heart, listen with your body, speak with your spirit, and love with every ounce of your soul.

Today, the RCMP continue to remove Indigenous families off their land in the name of “progress,” “prosperity,” and “development,” perpetuating assimilative mandates, using brutal force, hurting our women and children ... never learning from their past mistakes. Within our museum walls, we must remember, we must understand that this is not just about the past. We cannot mourn, sympathize, and regret a dark era while continuing to allow our government to simultaneously execute one. There are many truths here.

18

*Gathering Grapes*, 1920, donated by Joe Siah (Sto:lo), Museum of Vancouver Collection, pic.861.001

19

*Untitled* (Girls in the Vineyard), donated by Joe Siah (Sto:lo), Museum of Vancouver Collection, pic.883.001