

ARTS & LIFE

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Exhibition features work of Haida carver

Mike Bellis's first solo exhibition is on at the McMillan Arts Centre until March 5

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Mike Bellis's first solo exhibition is inspired by Haida mythology and culture, as well as his own experiences with nature.

Counting Rings is on display at the McMillan Arts Centre (133 McMillan St.) in Parksville until March 5.

Bellis, who comes from a family with multiple generations of artists, enjoys putting his own take on traditional Haida art. He is a citizen of the Haida Nation of Old Massett and was born into the Eagle Clan.

One piece, called "Life Force" stands out to Bellis especially.

"It started when I wanted to carve a sun mask and I think with this exhibition, *Counting Rings*, that piece of wood found me and it was like 'I want to be a sun,'" he explained. "I have an attachment to that because we brought that into our house and our house looks empty now that it's up here at the exhibition."

Bellis knew he wanted the eyes to be piercing and to include the details found in the sun's nose and chin.

"I had picture in my mind, did a little sketch," he said. "I think hats off the wood, because it made it even better than what it was in my mind, which was, for the first time probably I think, was how it came about."

The sun mask is carved from reclaimed old-growth red cedar.

"If there were two things that really sum up the backbone of Haida culture, it's the cedar and the salmon," said Kristi Bellis. "That was sort of the focus of the show, was to really talk about the connection that the Haida have to cedar and the importance of cedar."

Kristi and Mike live in Nanoose Bay and operate a charter boat business called Haida Gold Ocean Adventures.

"I get so much inspiration out on the water," Mike said. "Whether it is salmon or whales or dolphins or eagles. You're surrounded by it."

The show brings together recent creations, but also older pieces Mike felt worked well with the exhibition's theme. The wood itself is a focus of the exhibit, particularly yellow cedar and red cedar.

Haida mythology and figures are also important aspects of the exhibition.

"What we wanted to do with this show is, if



Mike Bellis with "Life Force", a piece in his first exhibition 'Counting Rings' at the McMillan Arts Centre (MAC) in Parksville on Feb. 18. (Kevin Forsyth photo)

somebody was living in a bubble for the last x amount of years, that they could come in here and get a lesson in Haida art," he said. "And some Haida culture and some Haida myths."

One prominent myth tells the story of Raven stealing back the light, escaping through a chimney from a house where the sun, moon and stars had been held captive. The raven returns the light to the sky and takes on its familiar black colour in the process of escaping through the soot.

Mike has created a number of works based on that story, including one called "The Imposter," part of *Counting Rings*.

A carving, big or small, begins as an idea and in many cases, the next step is finding the right piece of wood.

Mike then does a rough out, sometimes with a chainsaw, then carves, sometimes a sanding,

then painting and finishing.

"Taan", a five-and-a-half-foot totem pole, was a two-month process, although Mike did not work on it every single day.

"You need a break from it and your eyes need a break from it — your body needs a break from it," he said. Hollowing out the back of a totem pole or a canoe is a physically demanding process, he added.

After chiseling and sanding out in his studio, Mike will often bring completed wood home into the living room to paint, while spending time with Kristi and watching a movie.

The name *Counting Rings* refers to more than how old a tree was before it was felled.

"We weren't just counting the rings on the specific wood, but it was the journey of me as an artist and as a carver and my experience of every year that goes by," Mike said.

Looking around at the exhibition, it's easy to assume Mike has been carving for decades, but in reality his first totem pole was carved in late 2018, Kristi pointed out.

She asked for a homemade Christmas present that year and was amazed with what she received.

Since then, Mike has done a lot of carving and said it is a pleasure and an honour to have his work on display at the MAC.

His father, John Bellis, has been instrumental in passing on knowledge of traditional Haida craftsmanship.

"It's exciting to see how far we've come," Mike Bellis said. "And what's to come in the next few years."

For more information about Mike's art, visit MichaelBellis.com, or find him on Facebook and Instagram.

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