



Figure 6. *Four worlds*. Watercolour. Sheila Karrow

The following narrative was playfully written by a Kindergarten Art teacher from Haida Gwaii, British Columbia. Recalling many romanticized moments of 'Art Education talk' with intelligent like-minded teachers and artists, Sheila Karrow finds humour in the daily life happenings of a classroom with 5-year-olds.



THE RED NAAW:

Introduction

As all teachers are aware, there are days in the classroom where one must ask, "Is this even remotely connected to my teacher training days?" On more than one occasion, I have felt the urge to satirize my teaching role and workload. This generally happens on a Friday night, following the after school

nap, take-out pizza, and the 'lie flat on the carpet, and straighten out the bent back' daily recovery position of a primary teacher.

At the end of one particularly demanding day, imagination, play, and love, collided with art philosophy and this story being written. Many details are either fictional or exaggerated to convey the wild and unique experience of Haida Gwaii, in island outpost. Certain details



Figure 1. BC Ferry docked at Skidegate Landing.

EDUCATIONAL IMPROVISATIONS IN A HIGH TIDE ENVIRONMENT

however, are surprisingly true, like the single traffic light on the islands, or the many names for rain and fish, and the ongoing challenge around food and fuel resources.

Haida Gwaii is an archipelago found off the northern shores of the west coast of British Columbia. It's a six-hour ferry ride to Prince Rupert and an almost two-hour flight to Vancouver. During the school year, there is just one flight a day arriving from Vancouver. Upon arrival, visitors take a 20-minute ferry ride across Bear Skin Bay to reach Queen Charlotte and Skidegate. Transportation to the mainland is available via ferry, twice a week from Prince Rupert.

Students are raised with a keen awareness of the landscape and ocean, weather conditions and the Haida culture of the islands. At Sk'aadga Naay, the school where I teach, students can visit a forest, a

waterfall, a salmon creek, or a beach, all within a five to ten minute walk. Children have rich opportunities to live off the land and to learn from the natural world around them. From an early age, they develop a deep awareness of their place. This narrative was written with a deep respect for those who have lived on these islands for over 13,000 years and for the current residents who have made sacrifices to live here and call this magical place their community and their home. I cannot imagine living anywhere but on Haida Gwaii, a true 'place of wonder.' On Haida Gwaii one learns to live with humility, respect and gratitude.

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The Haida word of the day:

Aawaayaa (Oh my goodness)

Figure 2. On a serenely calm day, the view east of Skidegate, across Hecate Strait is awe-inspiring.

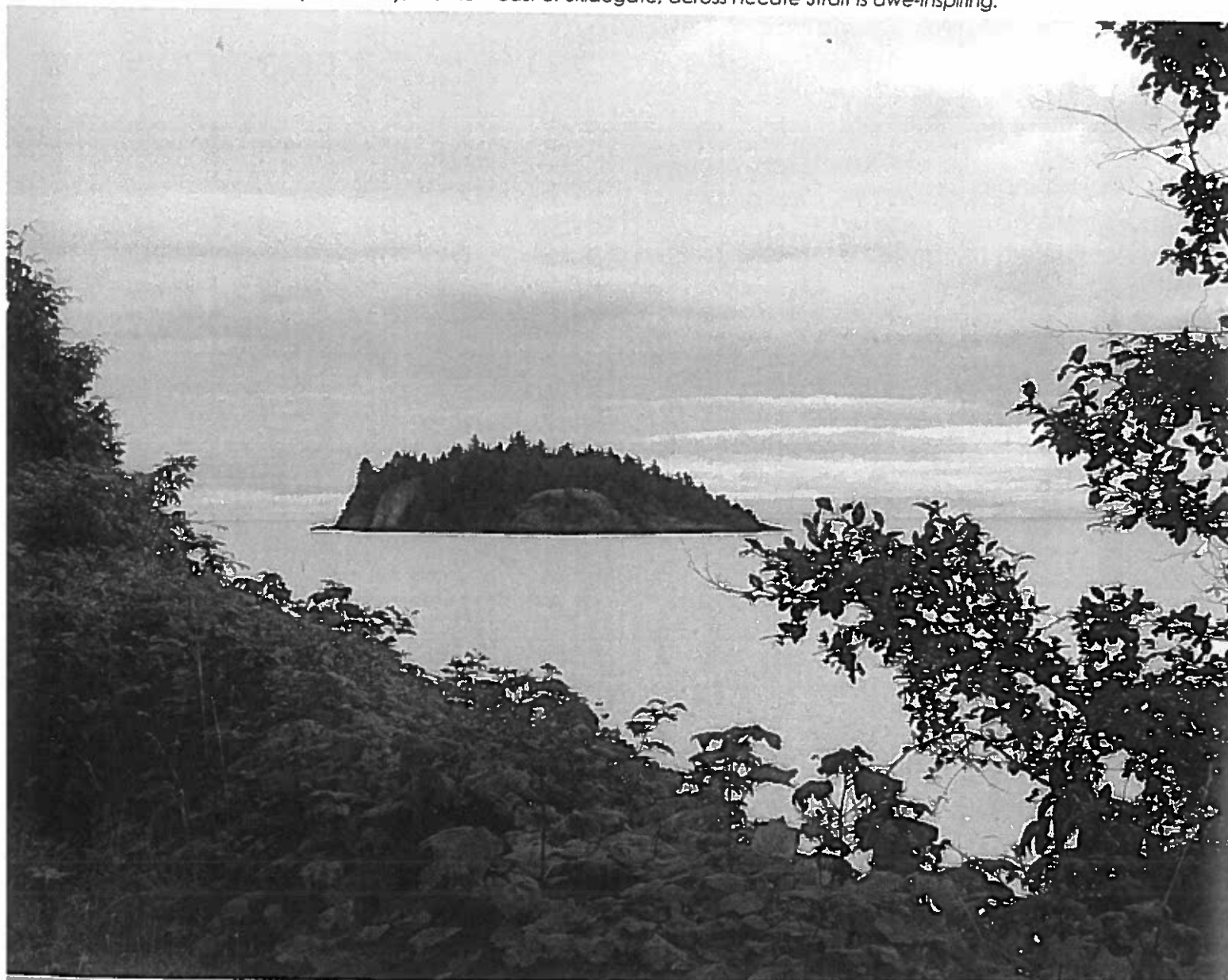




Figure 3. This young student is holding a bundle of freshly stripped cedar bark. After it is cleaned with a knife (the brown part removed) it is tied and soaked in the classroom where it becomes pliable enough to be woven as in traditional Haida crafts.

A Kindergarten Far Away

Far away at the edge of the continent, some would say the edge of the earth, there is a very special group of five-year-olds. And this very special class has a very lucky teacher whose name is Miss K. Now Miss K was not always a Kindergarten teacher. In past 'cat lives' she was an adult and youth art teacher as well as a mom and artist. Miss K was not exactly sure how she was going to teach these five-year-olds but she was determined to do so and these children proved to be good teachers. There are tough days teaching Kindergarten here and on some of those days, Miss K questions her Masters in Art Education, the higher learning that was intended to enrich her curricular



Figure 4. Kindergarten students exploring the low tide in Skidegate. The beach is just a ten-minute walk from school. This student is testing the strength of a crab's pincers with a stick. Children know how to be gentle with the sea life.

instruction. She questions its relevance especially when dealing with very practical issues such as toilets flooding, nose blowing and dealing with leaky juice boxes in a culturally sensitive facility. At this little school, in the tiny town of Skidegate, on the teeny tiny islands of Haida Gwaii out in the Pacific ocean, six hours from the mainland, where kids do not know what a traffic light looks like but can name every type of salmon, the twelve Haida seasons, and at least three of the innumerable Haida words for rain, Miss K attempts to educate her children in the post modernist manner of multi-faceted interdisciplinary art-based curriculum. This curriculum is inspired by indigenous place-based eco-art influences as well as inquiry-based learning, employing a differentiated curriculum focused on a heightened consciousness, especially necessary on the darker rainy days where orange outdoor flood lights are needed to see in the playground during normal day hours.

This school has been architecturally designed (even won an award) to showcase local cedar beams, having a central totem pole with outdoor overflowing eaves where children have built-in puddles and moats in which to practice wearing hip waders. This reconceptualization of indoor and outdoor space was created to 'maximize' the influence of local species as well as non-native ones including: the



Figure 5. Tide coming in. Watercolour. Sheila Karrow



raccoon, rat, deer and even the buttercup. We can include here some non-native humans: English, Irish, Scandinavian and Scottish.

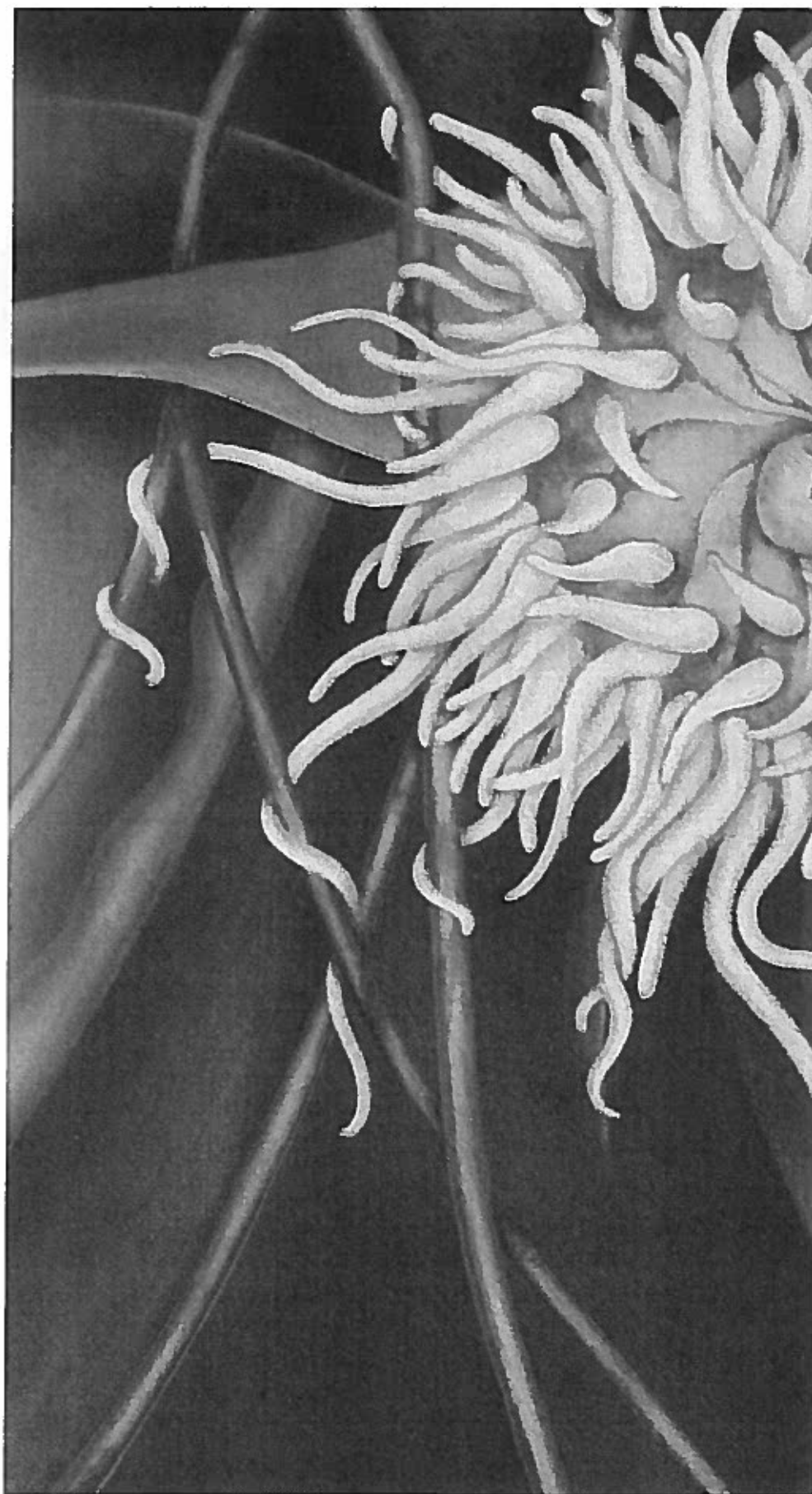
These children have opportunities to experience what most others do not. They experience sideways rain, frequent power outages, storm surges and ferry cancellations, all allowing for a deeper understanding of the influence of their environment. Right now, our school district is considering an eco-friendly nature kindergarten where kids are given their own backpacks, raincoats and survival gear to enjoy the many benefits of outdoor education here on Haida Gwaii. The district is grateful for the substantial financial support of Enbridge that contributes two million dollars in grants for our project each year.

After morning earthquake and tsunami drills, children are reacquainted with their local flora and fauna as well as the beach and intertidal zones. Educators, community elders, and parent volunteers securely tie ship ropes made of environmentally friendly bio-corn products, to each child's waist, ensuring that all have a safe outdoor learning environment. The children are grounded in recycled anchors and buoys found on the beaches after the Japanese tsunami. This secure foundation prevents the children from being washed away into the Hecate Strait by rain, wind or current. One of the many benefits of this process is a continual cleaning process for the four and five-year-olds that have become coated in mud from outdoor play in naturally created mudslides. All school supplies are carefully zip locked in watertight, moss and mold-resistant bags made from hemp. To prevent bear attacks, lunches and snacks are securely tied in the few remaining tall cedar trees that have been marked 'culturally modified'. We have yet to find solutions for the raven, eagle and rat invasions.

One fine day in this very special Kindergarten class, a student brought an octopus (Haida word: Naw) to class, which of course is against the rules. As the Naw fell out of the hiding place in Mary's gumboot she looked up at the teacher and said, "But Miss K this is a special Naw and I REALLY want to take it home to show my Mom and then eat it for dinner." Miss K, who is an artist and believes that art and beauty come from making the ordinary extraordinary, allows the child to keep her

Naw because this is a teachable moment. Different forms of praxis like history, politics, race, gender, phenomenology, postmodernism, autobiography, aesthetics, and theology converge. Miss K believes the institution of schooling can provide learning opportunities for the children by integrating the Naw into cross-curricular studies through a range of subject areas. In math it will be used by stretching the tentacles along a ruler. Each child will determine how many tentacles tall they are. Then the creature will be studied under a variety of emotional conditions led by our 'Cahoots of Empathy' (1) instructor, illustrating feelings and moods as well as colour theory. All feelings are considered valid and the Naw is provoked to insure it experiences the full spectrum of colours. A red Naw illustrates anger and stress. A grey Naw shows a calm and relaxed state; however, it has too many colours mixed together creating a tertiary gray. The next day Mary brings in two gumboots full of Naw and has a different sea creature – a sea cucumber – still alive, hidden in her mouth. The complexity of the situation has dramatically increased.

The opportunity to find beauty has to be balanced with a responsibility to contain chaos (not to mention protect the child's life). In general terms, teachers regularly deal with situations like this all the time. It is Aoki's lived curriculum. How the teacher responds is a specific site of tidal struggles that illustrates Pinar's argument for water resistance to the neo liberal conformity of curriculum in



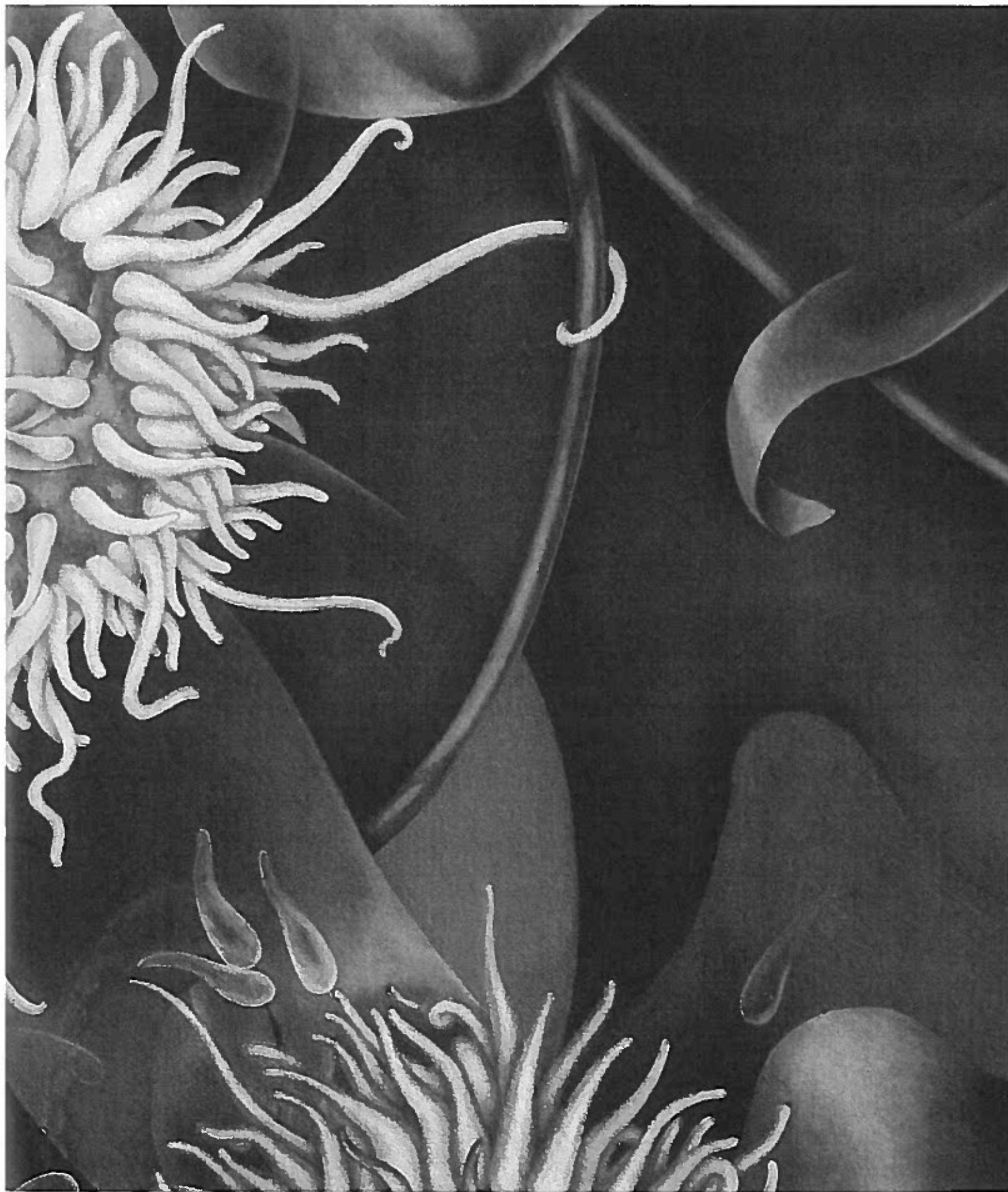


Figure 7. *Sacrifice*. Watercolour. Sheila Karrow

schools. When the children are asked at dinner what they are eating, they can say they are eating the curriculum. We are what we eat. I bet that most of us would relate to the Naw and sea cucumber-in-mouth story. Few teachers, not even Miss K, would remember the planned lesson that had something to do with being tied by ship ropes during a high tide. Pinar's call for cosmopolitanism in curriculum is academic knowledge and how Miss K responds is where this knowledge meets the neighbourhood, or is it the shoreline? In class, students have been introduced to a dress-up Barbie Geoduck diving centre ensuring the cosmopolitan and affirmative gender aspect of local industry (2).

Meanwhile, the complexity of this situation was again 'bivalved' when another girl started crying because the Norwegian invasive species rat, donated by the ferry dock employee, peed on her blouse. Phone calls to parents were made but no parents were reached due to a power outage and poor cell service. Fifteen sump pumps were backed up with school generators while parents came to build beach bonfires with driftwood. The Nawes were put back outside to fend for themselves until the next tsunami reached the school.

At the end of a long day, Miss K drives on the only road to town to pick up her mail (it arrives once a week by ferry) and also to purchase a bottle of wine. She changes her clothing to PJs, baseball cap and gumboots to look like a local parent and avoid recognition when entering the post office. Unfortunately, the children recognize her from last month's pajama day and a flock of happy kindergarteners, covered in mud and beach debris (it was a low tide that day, therefore the cleaning system did not work) greet her to assist with groceries and mail. As Miss K sneaks over to the liquor store she is greeted by a happy village parent saying, "I didn't think Kindergarten teachers were allowed to go to the liquor store." Miss K replies, "After a day like today with this crazy outdoor nature Kindergarten program on Haida Gwaii, what can you expect?" Even the Haida, hundreds of years ago, built solid structures

with roofs and walls of cedar to separate humans from the madness of this west coast environment. She offers the parent a half-dissected purple Naw from her school bag to keep her secret.

The experiences of Miss K and her Kindergarten class are a lesson to us all. The ontological belief in phenomenological patterns of a Kindergarten room in a little school, in a tiny town, on a teeny tiny island is not an intellectual breakthrough nor a movement to open up to a heightened consciousness (unless you are a tree faller with good insurance).

It's called 'survival', not to be confused with the non-reality television show 'Survivor' that couldn't be filmed here due to ferry cancellations, flight delays and high travel costs.

"I believe that environmental education should not be a subdivision of schooling but should describe the way we educate altogether...All of the topics entrusted to teachers in school can be understood as living fields, living inheritances, living places with ways and relations and inter-dependencies, including but not restricted to those topics that usually fall under environmental education currently in schools" p.144 Curriculum in Abundance – David Jardine.

Endnotes

1. Cahoots of Empathy is a modification of the real program called Roots of Empathy where a parent and newborn visit a class to teach empathy and childcare.
2. Barbie Geoduck Centre: Barbie is no longer politically correct for many reasons. Ironically this Barbie is given a purposeful Haida Gwaii gender-neutral occupation of high monetary value.

The teacher as artist:

Sheila Karrow's paintings reflect her deep attachment to the marine environment. Three examples of her studio work are showcased throughout this article.

Reference

Jardine, D., Friesen, S., & Clifford, P. (1997). Curriculum in Abundance. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.