

the beat

arts and leisure

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ART

Fish tale inspired display of Steveston's sights, sounds

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Ruth Beer's diverse exhibit pays tribute to the village's evolving industry

It all started with a book. Ruth Beer was reading *Cod: A Biography of The Fish that Changed the World* by Mark Kurlansky and it spawned her interest in the "social history of our fishing industry." "The author uses the fish to explain our world today," said Beer, whose exhibit, *Catch + Release: Mapping Stories of Geographical and Cultural Transitions* opened last week at the Gulf of Georgia Cannery. She went on to say that the author speaks about how the cod helped inspire the discovery and exploration of North America. "This fish had a huge impact on the economic development of Eastern Canada," said Beer. "Today, as we know, overfishing is a constant threat, but more than that the book speaks about how commercial fishing was the glue for coastal cities across the country." As an associate professor and assistant dean of visual art at Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Beer is used to teaching her students to think outside the box.

As an artist, the subject matter was so fascinating to her, Beer became a student. Last year, Beer was awarded a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada grant, in collaboration with Kit Grauer and Jim Budd, to research and create works of art that spoke to the history and marine conditions of Steveston's fishing industry.

"It took one year to plan, refine and add to it," added Beer.

As she moved around her installation in the Gulf of Georgia Cannery, Beer's excitement on the subject matter was palpable.

In one corner, Beer fashioned dozens of tin cans to a pole. Fairly rudimentary one might think. However, when Beer places her ear to one of the cans, she urged the *News* photographer to do the same.

"Can you hear the sounds of water, wind and the sound post ... like a shell in years gone by, it's a metaphor for how we communicate."

Beer explains that her exhibit is so much more than just about the salmon fishing industry; it's a social commentary on the community of Steveston, as well as coastal communities across Canada.

"Much of the growth in this region can be traced back to the fishing industry," she



CHUNG CHOW/RICHMOND NEWS

Ruth Beer checks out her Sound Post, a collection of tin cans which transmit, she says, the sound of the water, wind and rain.

added.

Close by, Beer uses a large projection screen to tell today's stories of salmon using diverse voices and perspectives. She spent months interviewing and videotaping nine people — such as a chef, scientist, sport and commercial fishermen and Jim Hart, a Haida

First Nations artist — and put all of it together into collage excerpts. The end result is a cross section of snippets of her interviews, telling unique points of view about what salmon means to each person.

On an even larger screen, Beer captures the sights and sounds deep below the sea and projects it back using white pixels on a black screen. What the viewer

sees are live streams of ever-changing patterns of small white dots, while hearing minute-by-minute sounds and echoes. As the dots are every changing, each viewer will interpret the shapes and patterns in their own way.

"Do you see how it looks like waves crashing against the rocks?" she asked.



CHUNG CHOW/RICHMOND NEWS

A series of geologically inspired rock sculptures or meteorite oil slicks is a thought-provoking addition to the

with salmon)," said Beer. "It registers changes below the sea and you can hear the sounds

of all the life down below."

The last component to her show is the series of geologically inspired rock sculptures or meteorite oil slicks.

"It took me several months to create these five formations," said Beer. "I used lots of metallic pigments to reflect the light from the LED lights that encircle the formations."

The lights rotate constantly, offering up 200 colour variations; simulating a cyclical process that happens in geology.

Beer sees the exhibit as a whole as a metaphor or focus point to "speak about Steveston, the economy and environment in general, ecology and today's global conditions."

"It's a look at how these components and fishing changed and shaped our lives today," she said. "For example, real estate in Steveston during the early 1900s was cheap and not desirable."

When asked why she chose to focus on Steveston rather than any other coastal region, Beer said: "I like the idea that here is at the threshold of where the river and sea merge... not only is it beautiful and energizing but that's where dynamic change and shifts occurs at the junction."

Meanwhile, Beer hopes to engage viewers in new, interactive ways.

"I'm primarily a sculptor and videographer, but now I'm very much interested in new media," she added. "By me using new technology and ideas, I feel that rather than someone just looking at a sculpture, they become part of the art."

"I think this exhibit asks questions rather than provide answers ... I want people to think about what I'm trying to say, but also question what relevance this has on their lives."

Beer also hopes she has managed to be at once entertaining and provocative, without as she puts it "using a layer of glitz."

"I wish that I have provided an in depth look at the fishing industry and its ripple effect on our world, while challenging viewers to pause and think."

Catch + Release: Mapping Stories of Geographical and Cultural Transitions is on now until May 30 at the Steveston's Gulf of Georgia Cannery National historic Site, 12138 4th Avenue.

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