

Artist's statement, George Rammell, Aug.5, 2026

Night Walker; a new edition of cast panels related to my work;

The Persistence of Instinct.



Over the past decades I've revisited my work casting rectangular panels with grizzly tracks. This new edition, cast in acrylic polymer, combines positive and negative tracks on a shared field. The positive tracks are cast with an aggregate of copper powder and glass bead, with a blue patina. Lines carved across the surface delineate a map of the constellation Ursa Major. The negative tracks are cast with iron powders to convey the terrestrial, hibernation and the colour of the bear.

"The Bear lives in the future, and looks back at the present".

Oliver Grimm

"A presence that is the absence of presence".

Michael Heizer

I'm motivated to give sculptural form to my discoveries as I continue my research into the history of bear-human relations throughout Eurasia and North America. The genesis of my work entitled *The Persistence of Instinct* began when I was sculpting bears into the foundations of small Bernini-like helical columns.

I needed to study live grizzlies at close range to understand their anatomy and movement. I made trips to three locations in the B.C interior and the Olympic Peninsula where bears live domestically on "game farms". My observations sparked more research and a range of responses to what I saw.



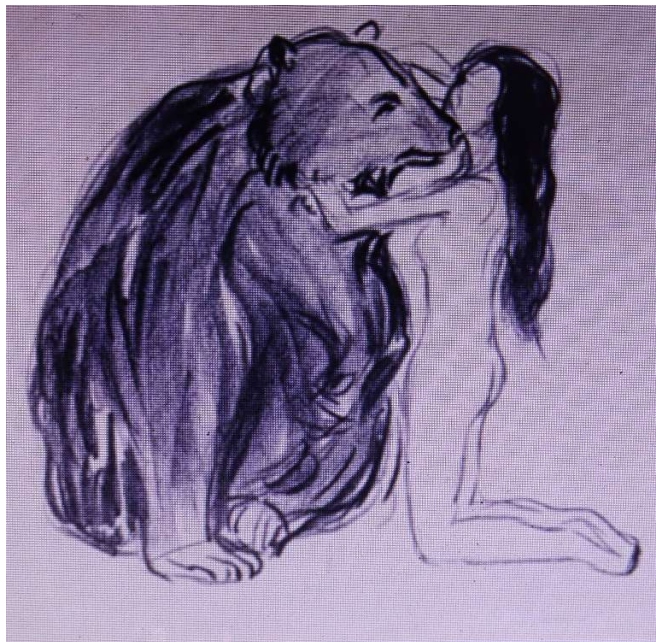
Since the Ice Age, *Ursus Arctos*, the Brown Bear or Grizzly as it's known in North America, and the larger extinct *Ursus Spelaeus*, were animistic guides for early cultures throughout the northern hemisphere. Archeological inventories from cave sites throughout Europe contain a vast number of artifacts and remnants of bear veneration, providing a view of Paleolithic spirituality, including remnants of enactments of the bear's emergence from hibernation. Belief in the bear's annual death and rebirth appear to be the precursor for Christian anthropocentric beliefs in the ascension. Throughout the Middle Ages from Spain to the Baltics, and from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean, the Catholic church worked to convert Pagans away from ursine culture to a Christian worldview that placed humans above animals. This process took place throughout the Medieval era, a 1000-year period when bear claws were often positioned beneath the foundations of churches to provide them with metaphysical powers. During this era the bodies of people with high social status were commonly wrapped in bear skins for burials and funerary pyres. It wasn't until the 13th century that the Christian worldview dominated Europe and imposed a conceptual divide between humans and animals. The bear was demonized and persecuted as it couldn't be domesticated in agrarian society. The bull and bear financial markets are an enduring example of this world view; the bull is domestic stock, the bear is seen as unpredictable, wild and symbolic of an approaching storm.

The late Haida sculptor Bill Reid portrayed the bear supporting the woman suckling her two half-human cubs on his gold dish in 1972, now in the Canadian Museum of History. The bear-mother story also appears at the base of his Skidegate totem pole from 1975. During my extensive work as a studio sculptor for Reid throughout the 1980's, I facilitated the clay and plaster sculpting of

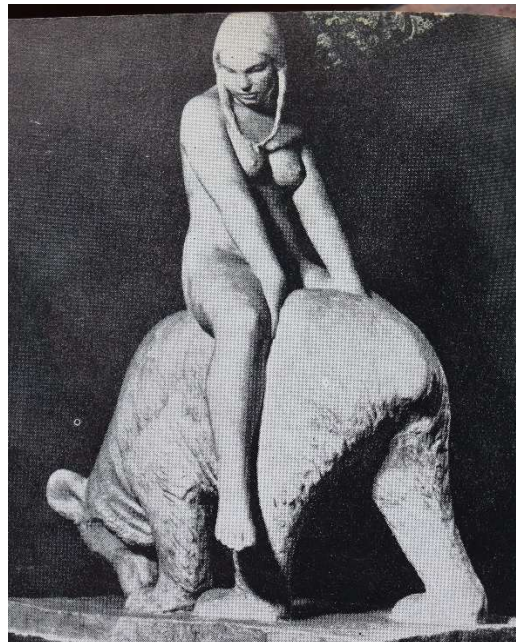
several of his monumental versions of the Haida Bear-Mother story in his *Mythic Messengers* and on the back side of his *Spirit of Haida Gwaii*.

I naively assumed the clan-creation story of a man who seduces a woman to his cave, then becomes a bear at night was specific to Indigenous peoples of the West Coast, until I learned that therianthropic beliefs of bear-human relations are integral to cultures throughout the northern hemisphere. In spite of vastly different epistemologies between Indigenous peoples of the West Coast and early Europeans, the Germanic and Nordic people have similar clan origin sagas of Bera and Bjorn and their human-bear offspring. This Pagen clan origin story describes a bear by day who becomes a man by night. Many communities across Europe hold bear festivals in February, such as the Catalan festival at Arles-sur-Tech in the Pyrenees Mountains, where the brown bear still lives in pocket populations. Performances of the bear abducting a shepherdess, a matrimonial hibernation, and an ensuing spring hunt are performed there annually. The theme is strikingly similar to a performance of the Haida Bear-Mother story I witnessed at Chief Gidansda's potlatch in Skidegate, Haida Gwaii in 2017.

Up until the 13th century Europeans believed that bears and humans could mate and produce fertile offspring. The Danish Royal family's coat of arms still depicts their deified status derived from the hereditary union of humans and bears.



Edvard Munch 1909, *Kuinnen og Bjornen*



Gustav Vigeland 1921, *Tjej og Bjorn*

My large work *The Persistence of Instinct* is a 17-meter panel of bear tracks traversing its constellations. The bears tracks are oriented from right to left as cultures throughout the northern hemisphere believed the bear pushed the night sky counterclockwise around Polaris, controlling the seasons and migrations. Settlers were surprised Indigenous peoples across the North America identified the same Bear constellations European cultures recognized since Greek antiquity.



Two of eight panels that form a 17m composition, *The Persistence of Instinct*

My original intention for *The Persistence of Instinct* was to make plaster moulds of wild bear trails on the central B.C. coast, but I eventually decided that moulding tracks on river banks simply reproduced nature without including the long history of a shared geography between bears and humans. I wanted the bear to traverse the flatness of a picture plane, making its marks on the clay surface like imagery on a stretched canvas, within the context of architecture. I also felt working with a tame bear brought complexity to the work by including the strange and historic reality of captivity. In Greek mythology the bear allowed itself to be captured, to spy on humans to understand the reasoning behind our culture of betrayal and slavery, and to plan for retaliation on behalf of its kin.

While studying the anatomy of bears at Sequim, on the Olympic Peninsula, I observed how the bears there habitually stepped in their previous tracks, as they do in the wild, leaving trails of sequential depressions. I found it astounding that the instinctive ritual of walking in orderly social patterns persists in captivity. These stepping trails once served as the earliest models for temporal-based thought and writing for early humans. Sequentially notched ribs and bear figurines detailed with celestial relief from Paleolithic caves in France and Germany are the first calendars, conveying evidence that early people believed the bear controlled the lunar cycles, seasons and migrations.

These stepping trails inspired my sculptural collaboration with the largest bear, an 18-year-old, 820-kilogram grizzly named Mac. This bear, whose mother was killed by a trophy hunter on the central B.C. coast was raised with his sister Tina, on the Olympic Game Farm, by the late couple Lloyd and Catherine Beebe. These bears were considered part of their family. When their five children were young, they had often ridden on Mac's back. This trust reminded me of the late naturalist Charlie Russell who lived amongst grizzlies on the Kamchatka Peninsula in northeastern Russia. He gained so much familiarity with wild bears they would leave their cubs in his care when they went foraging for food.

When I first observed Mac in Sequim, he was scooping up egg-size rocks in his claws in an open field and throwing them at me from a distance of 30 meters. I was humored until one stone narrowly missed my head. I retreated to my car and eventually told Lloyd Beebe about the incident. He was angry Mac was throwing rocks again. Lloyd knew Mac was playing a defiant game to hit visitors from a distance, he also knew bears have the strongest memory of any animal he had lived with.



Following a year of preparation Mac watched for days as four tons of my clay, that I had prepared to a specific consistency was spread over a 17-meter path. I felt I was preparing the surface for the world's original artist to make its marks. Lloyd knew Mac would like the feel of the clay, and he explained he would probably cooperate unless he picked up the scent of anyone that was menstruating, as he would be distracted and walk towards them and nudge them around with his nose.

A friend and filmmaker Ann Marie Flemming, who videoed the event had patted her hands across the entire surface of my clay. I saw this fingerprinting as a matriarchal ground, symbolizing a

shared geography. Thankfully, Mac strode across the entire clay path in 29 seconds, placing his back feet over the tracks of his front feet as he walked, leaving 24 compound paw-prints that recorded the bulging displacement of the clay under his weight. The details of his pads, claws, and the fur between his toes was exquisite. He was rewarded with a big bowl of barbecued chicken and peaches.

With the help of my crew, I plaster-molded the clay in 8 sections. I then cast the panels with silicone rubber which I pigmented to match the colour of the clay. Using these rubber moulds, I cast highly detailed maps of the bear's constellations with acrylic-polymer mixed with metal powders and glass bead aggregates. These eight castings form a panel 17 meters long, they hang like paintings of the night sky; beneath them the silicone rubber mould lays on a structure of alder poles. The alder structure functions as a mediator between nature and culture. Alder alludes to the bears physiology and its mythic role as healer.

One evening in Sequim, I had an intimate sojourn with Mac's sister Tina while she was eating her dinner. With Catherine's permission, I wrapped my arms around Tina's neck and shoulders and felt her muscles rippling beneath her thick skin and her deep layer of gold fur. I caressed the immensity of her power, I felt I was hugging the entire species since time began. Knowing bears can sense your sincerity, I had a sensation of safety. I must confess she was more interested in her dinner than me, but I wasn't offended, having a long embrace with a grizzly bear was life changing. Afterwards, while I was contemplating what had happened, I felt I was in a sequel to a Marian Engel novel.

Engel was a Canadian author who died at the age of 51. She wrote her provocative novel BEAR in 1972, the same year Bill Reid created his gold Bear-Mother Dish. Engel's short novel portrays a summer relationship between a modern woman and a bear. Her original inspiration for the book was sparked by discussions with Bill Reid who she met during his jewelry study period at Ryerson Polytechnic in Toronto. Her novel brought a modern context to animistic beliefs of the bear's inter-cultural role as a revered ancestor. In her story the bear is leashed on a long chain but is eventually free to engage in a symmetrical balance of power with his human counterpart. There is no apotheosis, no half-human cubs or brothers avenging the abduction of their sister, but both woman and bear are charged with agency, desires and morality. They separate at the end of the summer due to irreconcilable differences. Engel was part of a group of emerging novelists that included Margaret Atwood. They each planned to write a short erotic story that would be compiled into a highly saleable book to raise funds for a woman's writer's union. Engel's BEAR was the only story that was completed and she eventually published it independently. It was initially ignored due to its quirky bestiality, but scholars recognized her extensive research in ursine mythologies and her important contribution to Canadian literary history.

Through small plaster models, I'm currently planning my own sculptural version of a union of bear and woman; a large Baroque style laminated wood carving entitled *The Ecstasy of Ursus Arctos*. I'm inspired by the post-Renaissance artist Gian Bernini whose helical columns support the baldacchino, a monumental bronze canopy in Saint Peter's Basilica. Completed in 1633, Bernini based his design on ancient Greek Solomonic "barley-sugar columns", which appear like umbilical cords between the terrestrial and celestial realms. Bernini detailed the upper surfaces of his columns with bees and barley vines (bear grass), a plant that is extremely attractive, almost addictive to bears. His detailing appears to convey the distillation of alcohol conveying the bears cultural mentorship and its role in Greek cosmology. His four mirrored spiral columns attracted a revival of interest to contemporary artists in the 1970's due to their organic geometry, inter-cultural sources and massive scale. Bernini's carved marble and metal work, such as the *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* is a complex figurative installation portraying passion, mysticism and death. I see this work as a bridge from the enlightenment era to the contemporary world.





In 2010 I attended the SilvrettAtelier, an artist's residency in the Austrian Alps. In preparation for the adventure, I cast rubber strap-on bear feet from moulds of Mac's tracks here on the West Coast. Once in the Alps I made bear tracks across snowfields and alluvial silt beds beneath shrinking glaciers. To walk with bear feet was to write on the European ground of a geography shared with the great bear.

As an original mentor for culture, the bear deserves its place in the ecosystems of its historic range. In areas of western Canada and Alaska, in spite of climate change, habitat loss and declining salmon populations, the bear's future is tenuously stable due to its omnivorous nature and adaptability. Current efforts to protect the bear are challenged by trophy hunting lobbyists who are defending their industry. The work of restoring bear populations throughout the European Alps and the Pyrenees are ongoing and somewhat successful, while Scandinavia, Eastern Europe and Russia still have sustainable Brown Bear populations. The animal's long-term survival depends on public education and ecopolitics to protect bear habitat.

The bear sensed the arrival of migrations and shared an omnivorous diet with us for millions of years. The health of this keystone species is an indicator of the health of the diversity of life in the forests and oceans. Medical science is now studying and utilizing the preservative nature of the bear's gallbladder bile. This liquid, ursodeoxycholic acid, enables the bear to maintain its hydration during hibernation; it also preserves tissue during human organ transplant surgery. Pharmacologists of the Tang Dynasty in China used the medicinal properties of bear bile to treat a range of illnesses. Synthetic alternatives to bear bile are now being developed which should curtail the poaching of bears for their gallbladders.

Shaman of Siberia used bear claws as talismans, here on the West Coast shaman wore coronas of grizzly claws aiming skyward. These healers knew the bear was a carrier of medicine, and they knew what modern genetics discovered; that we are related.

I see these pantheistic values in the expressions of the people I bonded with in Reid's studio, who are inextricably connected to their ancestral lands and their many non-human relatives.

Roy Izony, a Tsay Keh Dene knowledge-keeper from north central B.C. speaks of how the animals "miss our songs", that were silenced due to smallpox and the impacts of colonialism. He conveys the reciprocity humans once had with animals and the urgent need to re-establish those bonds.

Through my work I'm attempting to create an experiential encounter with the great bear through its palpable tracks, and by giving form to many shared relationships in life and myth. Through this work I'm speaking to the diasporas of global settlers who have lost knowledge of their deeply indebted relationship their cultures owe to the bear. Outside of anthropological circles I've seen little understanding of Eurasia's legacy of bear ceremonialism which continues in the present. I'm hoping the authenticity of this work is recognized as it serves as a precautionary memorial to the species and to our long-shared relationship with it throughout the northern hemisphere.

Sources

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