Profiles, Sustainability

Diane Roy: One with the Sea

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By **Andrea Marvan**

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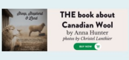
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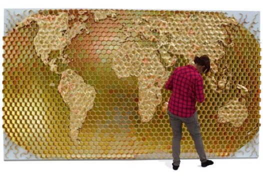
Born in Ontario, fibre artist Diane Roy grew up in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, Québec. Coming from a small community, Diane was exposed to crocheting, weaving and other fiber arts early on. Even at a young age, she was interested in art and building things from discarded objects and would construct tiny sculptures by gluing rocks together, so it's no surprise that after she finished her degrees in Fine Arts and Education from the University of Québec in Chicoutimi, Diane decided to experiment with sculpture. "But I didn't have any money for an expensive studio and all that. I had a lot of student debt," she recalls. "So I decided I wanted to work with something simple." Fibre arts was an easy choice as she had previously enjoyed being introduced to traditional tapestry work. "I bought a hook and a spool, and I started doing little shapes," she says.

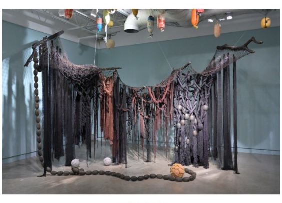
With a sense of awe and wonder, Diane's work began to beautifully blend traditional and nontraditional forms, creating a rich tactile experience that reflected the world around her, inviting us to open the conversation about the preservation of our environment. This love for nature and a passion for protecting it was always present in Diane's art. But around 1986, when she moved to Western Canada, the beauty of the Pacific Northwest landscape—particularly the ocean—became an important subject in her work. Even back then, a concern for preserving our marine life was constantly on her mind. "I remember in those days there was a lot of talk about acid rain and the idea of those huge nets dragging the bottom of the ocean and killing everything in sight." she recalls. "I was kind of worried even in the 1980s about these facts, and I guess I rapidly began introducing that into my art and into my work, making it a focus, and it began to be important to me."



"Common Unity"

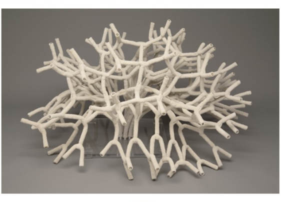
An enthusiastic hiker and gardener, Diane is deeply influenced by nature and the creatures that inhabit our oceans. "The only thing that really inspires me is nature," she says. "It always has. There are so many beautiful shapes and colours, and it's so plentiful that even at my age now I still see new things that I've never seen before." While her fascination for nature has always been at the centre of her work, in recent years, the preservation of species has taken on an even more important role—addressing the destruction of coastal sea life and the impact of human actions. Diane's work centres on conservation and highlights the gentleness of nature and its vulnerability, its calming effect yet its powerful scream, pleading to be protected.

Using organic and recycled materials and experimenting with different techniques, textures, and materials—from the roughness of cotton to the soft shimmer of foiled paper—Diane has amassed a substantial body of work that has been shown around the world in both solo and group exhibitions over the span of forty years. "The idea of exploring, basically that's what art is about—being interested in some material and what you can do with it. It doesn't matter if it's very tacky or very bad at the beginning, that is part of the process."

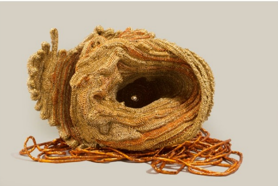


"Curtain of Death"

In her most recent exhibition, *The Deep and the Shallows*, hosted last summer at the Surrey Art Gallery, Diane presented a collection of West Coast marine life—inspired pieces that addressed the deteriorating health of the ocean and the impact of industrialized fishing and climate change. Surrounded by "corals" crocheted in white cotton, the show's centrepiece was an immense tapestry in silver, rich blues and teals, of a life-size blue whale head, titled *The Magnificent*. Created over the course of more than three years, the six-metre [twenty-foot] -long tapestry was made of salvaged materials, in particular a recycled foiled plastic paper that Diane first manually transformed into rope before painstakingly creating the artwork. "When I discovered this material," explains Diane, "I thought it was perfect because it had the colour and the vibrancy that I was looking for, and I could turn it into any size cable that I wanted to. For me it was the perfect material."

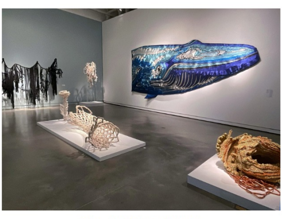


"Habitat"



"Umbilicus"

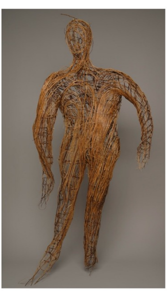
While most of her projects start with an idea in her head that sometimes evolves into something else as she's working on it, the process was different for *The Magnificent*. Diane wanted to make a life-size whale head to truly represent the blue whale's actual dimension and the magnitude of its endangered status, so the project had to start with a drawing that carefully planned the whole process. It took her ten years from the time the idea first popped into her head to completion. Learning that the blue whale is the biggest mammal that ever existed on Earth and is an endangered species really made an impression on Diane. "An actual blue whale itself could measure from twenty-five to thirty metres [eighty to one hundred feet] long," she explains. "For me it was important that the final piece was the real size, so I decided to do only the head at twenty feet long."



"The Deep And The Shallows" exhibition, 2023

The scope of the project felt overwhelmingly big, so it was not until 2020 that Diane decided to finally give it a try. "When COVID came," she recalls, "I thought, 'Oh my God, I don't know how long we are going to be locked down.' It was during that time that the Surrey Art Gallery asked me to do this piece and I said, 'Okay, if I don't do it now, I will never do it, and I'll never rest in peace,'" she adds with a laugh.

After the colossal work that was her last exhibition, Diane is currently taking a break to reflect and plan the next steps in her journey. Not one to sit still, Diane can't help her curious self even when she is not sure of her next project. But one thing is for certain—it will have nature at its heart.



"Icarus"

You can see more of Diane's work on her website.

All photos courtesy Diane Roy.

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About Andrea Marvan

Andrea Marván is a writer and photographer with a passion for design, travel, and all things handmade. Being a creative person herself, she loves using photography to tell captivating stories about makers and creative individuals. Her work has been published in magazines such as UPPERCASE, Little U, Montecristo, Maple, Sweet Potato and Edible Vancouver. She resides in Maple Ridge, BC.

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