

North Vancouver Museum explores history of Burrard Inlet

Blue Cabin featured as part of new exhibit at Presentation House

John Goodman | North Shore News

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Artist Carole Itter in front of the Blue Cabin on the waterfront in 2015. Photo Mike Wakefield, North Shore News -

Water's Edge: Stories from the North Shore of Burrard Inlet, North Vancouver Museum and Archives at Presentation House, 209 West 4th St. , North Vancouver (Thursday-Sunday noon to 5 p.m.). For more information visit nvma.ca/exhibits/#house.

For decades artists Al Neil and Carole Itter lived in the “Blue Cabin” on the North Vancouver waterfront surrounded by the flotsam and jetsam of life on Burrard Inlet.

Malcolm Lowry, who also resided on the shoreline in the ‘40s and ‘50s, called the area “Paradise” with “Hell” literally visible on the south shore when the “S” flickered out on the Shell refinery sign.

For Neil and Itter the Inlet was a “West Coast Lokas,” a special place where there was room to breathe and create. Some of their artwork was left in situ in the forest and on the beach where it was made while other pieces were shown in galleries and art spaces worldwide.

Neil’s free-form music was a seminal part of Vancouver’s counter-culture scene for many years and in books like *West Coast Lokas* (1972), *Changes* (1975), *Slammer* (1980) and *Origins* (1989) he further refined his singular vision living off the grid on the water’s edge of Burrard Inlet.

That world is featured as part of a new interactive exhibit currently on view at Presentation House focusing on the history of Burrard Inlet from 1850 to the present. The exhibit was put together by a North Vancouver Museum and Archives team including writer Eve Lazarus, archivist Janet Turner and Juan Tanus’ Kei Space design company.

“The exhibit is all about showing the changes to the shoreline on the waterfront over the last couple of hundred years,” says Lazarus, a North Vancouver writer who specializes in historical narratives. “We particularly researched the last one hundred where it’s really dramatic and looked at how it changed and why, including changes in industry, infrastructure, development, transportation and environment. We ended up looking from Indian Arm to just beyond Ambleside at Reardon Point and mainly that was all part of North Vancouver until 1912.”

Lazarus was responsible for shaping the initial framework of the Water’s Edge project. “It was kind of like putting a book together,” she says. “I fit it into a framework and looked at where the chapters were going to fall.”

The exhibit has been divided into 10 geographical regions: Indian Arm, Maplewood, Dollarton, Second Narrows, Moodyville, Lonsdale, Mission Reserve, Harbourside Pemberton, the First Narrows/Capilano area and Ambleside.

“We sliced the whole thing up into six time periods from precontact to the present,” says Lazarus. “The fun for me was finding some of the quirky stories that I’d never heard before. Did you know that we had the only floating post office in Canada? For 62 years we had a floating post office that went right up Indian Arm. With no roads water was the only way to go anywhere.

“In 1947, Madge Winfield, a piano teacher, came out from Saskatchewan and took over as skipper of the Seabisquit, which was a floating grocery store. She had no experience whatsoever. Never been on the water – she just sort of let the wind blow her into the wharf. She visited 25 different wharves, five days a week in summer and three in winter. Just so many great stories.”

French actress Sarah Bernhardt brought a company of 50 and five carloads of scenery for her performances of two plays by Victorien Sardou, *Fédora* and *La Tosca*, at Vancouver’s Opera House on Sept. 21 and 22, 1891.

“The Divine Sarah also brought her own rifles and went duck shooting up Indian Arm,” says Lazarus. “We found a picture of Sarah Bernhardt. Janet Turner did an amazing job finding all the photos. You tap on to Indian Arm (in the interactive exhibit) and several stories come up on a scroll, including Sarah Bernhardt.”

There are a total of 92 stories from the 10 geographical regions of Burrard Inlet included in this initial iteration of Water’s Edge.

“When you look at the maps in the exhibit you can see how the shorelines changed then you tap on to a story,” says Lazarus. “You can access the area you want interactively and the time period. The stories can be added on to like an ongoing project. They want to do more of this interactive work in the new museum. It’s a bit of a pilot in some ways of what can be done.”

For more information on the efforts to save the Blue Cabin visit bit.ly/1WWtTRv.

For more information on Burrard Inlet history go to: Squatters recycled utopian dreams (bit.ly/1TDawfk); Malcolm Lowry/Dollarton Days (bit.ly/1B1yGE4); Boot and Fog (bit.ly/1wCgwXY), Children of Tomorrow/Tsleil-Waututh (bit.ly/1Lofll9) and Tsleil-Waututh culture writes themselves back into Western history books (bit.ly/1NgZzJZ).

Off the Cuff playlist: Al Neil/Carole Itter

Sound

Al Neil (who lived in the Blue Cabin on the North Vancouver waterfront for many decades, paying the rent by working as a night watchman for McKenzie Barge shipyard next door) first came to prominence on the local jazz scene playing bop piano. He was one of the original founders of The Cellar jazz club in the ‘50s and later formed a trio which featured North Vancouver teen Gregg Simpson on drums and Richard Anstey on bass. The free-form jazz group opened for the likes of Janis Joplin and the Grateful Dead as well as maintaining a local presence playing

their inside/outside music in galleries and art spaces. A two-CD release on Blue Minor Records, Al Neil Trio, Retrospective 1965-1968, documents those heady times. Other Neil recordings include Boot and Fog, released on Music Gallery Editions in 1980 and Kenneth Patchen Reads With Jazz in Canada, originally released on Folkways in 1959 and rereleased on Locust Music in 2004.

Al Neil Trio “In Search of Innocence” (1964):

<http://bit.ly/1IRMGn3>

Al Neil Trio on the CBC show Enterprise, 1967:

<http://bit.ly/1NS5auq>

<http://bit.ly/25mqQTJ>

Al Neil profiled at All Music Guide:

<http://bit.ly/1ORBLvf>

Word

Al Neil’s published works – including West Coast Lokas (1972), Changes (1975), Slammer (1980) and Origins (1989) – capture what UK writer Bill Shoemaker of Wire Magazine called “a Canadian original, whose passionate abandon blurred the line between genius and goof.” Carole Itter, co-edited with Daphne Marlatt, 2011’s Opening Doors, In Vancouver’s East End: Strathcona, considered one of the best books ever written about Vancouver history.

Al Neil website:

alnel.vancouverartinthesixties.com/

Al Neil bio at BC Bookworld:

<http://bit.ly/1NS7T73>

Vision

Carole Itter is an accomplished assemblage artist whose work, Grand Piano Rattle: A Bosendorfer for Al Neil (1984), is included in the permanent collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Both Itter and Neil filled the landscape around the Blue Cabin with their found art assemblages.

Carole Itter CV:

<http://vancouverartinthesixties.com/people/133>

Carole Itter – Grand Piano Rattle: A Bosendorfer for Al Neil, 1984:

<http://8oartworks.vanartgallery.bc.ca/carole-itter/>

Al Neil – A Portrait by David Rimmer (shot at the Blue Cabin, 1979):

<http://vancouverartinthesixties.com/archive/763>

- See more at: <http://www.nsnews.com/entertainment/dossier/north-vancouver-museum-explores-history-of-burrard-inlet-1.2264616#sthash.SyRUBGg1.dpuf>