



Elizabeth Carefoot

Agents of Transformation

Words by Virginia Gillespie

Displaced people travel light, often carrying only stories that become remnants to rebuild the fabric of their lineage. In the case of artist Elizabeth Carefoot, the connection with her Siberian Grandmother and her own family migration from northern China to British Columbia inspires her shamanic art objects. A retired graphic designer, she now creates an ever growing body of work called Agents of Transformation that will be on exhibit at Douglas College in September.



From left to right: Robe of Fishes, Birthing Robe, Robe of Migration, Robe of Good Fortune. Artwork photos ©

What motivates you as an artist?
E: My experience with the storytelling from my Grandmother motivates my shamanic art objects. She was from Siberia and described her life to me - the cold, beautiful summers and wet, soggy springs. She had a pet deer and a pet snake at the same time. She wasn't an artist, but was some kind of shamanic practitioner like a lot of older women were in those villages. With each new piece I create, I feel closer to her, like I am becoming my Grandmother. It gives me a lot of fulfillment to do a series of things in different aspects - the fibre, the bottles and the three dimensional altars – three aspects of the same thing.

What do you mean by shamanic artwork?

E: I want to stress that these objects are not magical or healing in themselves, I am more

interested in the art of the shamanic objects. I find them very theatrical and moving from an art perspective. I use found objects and whatever comes to hand that appeals to me. The shaman robes don't have the traditional Siberian authentic materials. But, they are authentic to me because I love them. This is how a shaman would work, choosing materials to make sacred objects because they appeal to him.

What was the first piece you made?

E: A robe called Dark Eclipse. Eclipses were very important because they could be easily seen from the flat steppes. Siberian shamanic robes usually have some shiny metal on the shoulder or the back to ward off the evil eye. There are always fringes, tassels and noisemakers so when the shaman dances, the robe has a life of its own. Tassles fly, fringe shakes and bells rattle. Sometimes a robe tells me what it wants or doesn't want. Things keep falling off. So I continue and do something else.

I never rip things out. The layers are old history building up. I never look back over my shoulder and regret what I have done. I look forward.

Which of your altars has a meaning that speaks to you?

E: The first one. It has a door I made it out of an old Victorian writing case that is an odd shape and it has bones and a picture of a snake inside. It is very beautiful on the outside and when you open it, there is a surprise. The outside gives no indication of what is inside and that is part of the purpose of the altar. You want to catch the client unawares to get his true reaction.

In your process does one form lend itself to another or are you deliberate in exploring elements of shamanism one category at a time?

E: I jump around. Something in a robe might trigger me so that I can see an altar



Deer Man Staff – Autumn (above), Sky Serpent Box (below) and Robe of the Full Moon (right above), Birdie Rattle (right below)



coming out of it. They don't mix and match. But while I am making something, I might wonder what would happen if I put similar mirrors from a robe into a box. I only have a vague idea of what I will make because I think that intuition is the essence of shamanism.

If you had to move suddenly, what is the one piece you would take with you that symbolizes this body of work?

E: My latest robe. I put everything I had into this robe. It was a challenge. My husband and I recently visited Roatan island for a month on holiday. I packed materials in my suitcase, determined to make a robe. I took all the elements I thought I would need and imagined I could add raw materials found in my travels. The challenge was to make something out of what I had, which fits the shamanic tradition. I ran out of red embroidery thread, so I used blue. I had to make do in quite an isolated place. While out walking I searched to find something that would speak to me to go on it. I found absolutely nothing, but when I looked at the robe when I returned home I really liked it.

What kind of reactions do you get from your work?

E: I made the mistake the first exhibit at SFU of not being clear that these were art forms, not real shamanic objects. I got a lot of very scary phone calls from people who were very ill wanting me to

heal them. They were so desperate thinking this artist could heal them through shamanism. In subsequent exhibits I have made it clear these are art objects and not healing objects.

How do you facilitate the educational aspect of your art?

E: I give lectures and I also make sure to include an explanation of why objects are put together in a certain way. For example there is a shamanic tradition of putting on bells which represent spiritual voices from other worlds. When these bells tinkle they are voices speaking. Each element on the robe is very specific, even found objects. Horns are symbols of power and where they are placed upper, middle or lower part of the robe exhibits the realm where the power is. I try to keep to those shamanic traditions when I can. On the edges of the robes there are often triangular points which are the edges of the universe. When you stay within them you are safe. My robes do have structure, even though it may seem they are wild.

You have a exhibit coming up in September, how is this one different from your other exhibitions?

E: I have many new works. Since my last exhibit I have grown as an artist. This is an ongoing project that will never really finish. There is always another piece percolating in my head. I'm not ambitions, I just love what I do. For me exhibiting is secondary to the process. I love the process. I would like this to become a free travelling exhibition so more people could view it in small towns where there is not access to a larger museum.

What inspired you to collaborate in your upcoming exhibit?

E: I like collaborating with women. We have so much to offer each other. I discovered a poet to work with. It is totally mysterious to me how you can put one word after the other and make it sound



Why do you think art is important for the world?

E: Because it is humanizing. Only people make art. While you are doing art it takes you to another plane. Whenever I am doing art, or dancing I feel in a state of grace. I am really sorry that the whole world can't experience that state of grace that I feel when I am creating. It's like being with the angels. I am out of my body and everything is right with the universe. If more people were given a chance to feel that way they would see they could make the world a better place.

If your Grandmother were sitting here right now beside you, how would you describe your artwork to her?

great. It is so magical to me, as is singing. I don't have chanting in the exhibit so I will include another element of the shamanic tradition with voice and words. I also have included words because a lot of people are

totally lost when viewing artwork. So, here is a word artist, Virginia, who is reacting to my pieces. It gives another passageway into the artwork through words.

What can this exhibit of shamanic art objects give to people at this time?

E: With all art, what you put into it as a viewer is what you will get out of it. So if you look at a piece that is very revolting to you, it is good to step back and ask, "What is it in me that is so turned off?" Go deep with your own symbolism, not necessarily mine. I think it will give you tremendous insight into who you are. Shamanic artwork contains many hidden and many personal symbols of the artist. The combination of secret and obvious gives double layers of meaning.



Elizabeth Carefoot in her studio
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Agents of Transformation
opens September 16, 2010 at Douglas College, New Westminster, B.C. [www.elizabethcarefoot.com](http://elizabethcarefoot.com)