Robert Davidson, Ravenous (2003). Red cedar and acrylic. 68.6 × 52.7 × 10.2 cm. Private collection, Goderich, Ont. Photograph: Kenji Nagai. In Ravenous, Davidson draws on Haida mythology to make a statement about the myopia of our behaviour in contemporary society. Davidson depicts the Haida story of a trickster raven who eats one eye from each person in a fishing village. Davidson remarks, “Raven creates an imbalance with his voraciousness, because if you take away one eye, you take away depth of vision” (quoted in Duffek1 [page 36]).

Lifeworks

Exploring beyond our limits

Robert Davidson: The abstract edge
Curator: Karen Duffek
Organized by Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia
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When is the last time you explored beyond the limits, to the edge, of your experiences? Perhaps you travelled somewhere in the past year and encountered different cultural, linguistic and gastronomic experiences. Or you took up a new sport, read a new author, gave birth to a child, chose to walk a new route to work.

The abstract edge is an exhibit of works by Haida painter, printmaker, jeweler and sculptor, Robert Davidson. The exhibit is the first collaboration between the Museum of Anthropology and the National Gallery of Canada, and is touring across Canada.

Davidson grew up on the northern coast of British Columbia at Old Massett, Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands) where he erected his first totem pole in 1969. He was taught by his grandmother, grandfather and father, apprenticed with Haida artist Bill Reid, and later studied at the Vancouver School of Art (now the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design). A recipient of the Order of Canada (1996), Order of British Columbia (1995), National...
Aboriginal Achievement Award for Art and Culture (1995), and 5 honorary doctorate degrees, Davidson challenges us to open our minds to new ways of seeing.

We experience an infinite number of mundane to fantastic events in our lives that continuously and uniquely shape our senses of self and our understandings of the world around us. Yet we are frightened of change; there is comfort in the familiar, in stasis. For historical and political reasons, we are reluctant to acknowledge that languages, beliefs and practices are fluid. Hence the ubiquitous museum dioramas that capture societies and cultures in a moment of time: “This is it. End of story.”

Davidson moves beyond the limits of his own experiences with Haida art and encourages us to join him on that journey. His work in The abstract edge evokes traditional Haida motifs — sea monsters, ravens, killer whales — but the forms are manipulated, stretched, lose their symmetry and take on new meanings in the context of the 21st century.

Davidson challenges the dualisms of past and present, traditional and contemporary: he alternates between the public, ceremonial space of potlatches (music, dance, gift exchange as ritualized redistribution of wealth) and the private, high-tech space of his studios. He uses ancient forms with modern materials. His work is informed by his Haida heritage but is transformed and interpreted through his own lens. Commenting on one painting, The world is as sharp as the edge of a knife (1992), Davidson asserts, “What’s inside is the past — the knowledge and experience — and what’s outside is yet to be experienced.”

His work bears relevance for physicians: medicine has its corpus, the knowledge and practices that each medical student inherits from his or her predecessors. Ongoing medical research builds on that knowledge at a staggering rate, often requiring physicians to open their minds to new ideas. Patients may also challenge physicians to see or act differently. The adage that more than 50% of what students learn in medical school will be outdated by the time they graduate is testimony to the inherent uncertainty of medicine.

The abstract edge is a reminder that exploring beyond the limits of our experiences can be unsettling but also exciting.

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REFERENCE
1. Duffek, Karen, editor. The present moment: Conversations with good san glans, Robert Davidson. In: Robert Davidson: The abstract edge. Vancouver: Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia; 2004. p. 9-48.

Robert Davidson, The world is as sharp as the edge of a knife (1992). Gouache and watercolour on paper. 73.7 × 101.6 cm. Collection of John and Penelope McCaig. The world is as sharp as the edge of a knife is Davidson’s interpretation of an old Haida expression about treading carefully through life. He suggests that, at our core, we are our pasts, but we have the potential to venture beyond: “I see the knife’s edge as the present moment. The abstraction is the thin yellow circle: the edge of the knife. What’s inside is the past — the knowledge and experience — and what’s outside is yet to be experienced” (quoted in Duffek[1] page 26).