

Embracing her art and her identity

Identifying as two-spirit is Raven John's way of resisting the bullying she experienced as a teen. Today, the animation artist is creating choices for indigenous youths that were lacking for her.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RAVEN JOHN

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Artist Raven John is carving her own path and finding work as a professional in spaces that celebrate both her indigenous and two-spirit identity.

Bullied as a teenager, John didn't finish high school. But now 28, she has a Bachelor of Fine Arts and is working on a certificate in Northwest Coast jewelry arts from Native Education College in Vancouver, B.C. She was a featured artist at Vancouver's Queer Arts Festival this past spring, and she's now working on her second stop-motion-animation film.

The term "two-spirit" is a way for LGBTQ indigenous people to articulate a gender identity or sexual orientation that is connected to their culture and spirituality.

I sat down with John in the college's lunchroom. Her voice was calm and confident. She was wearing a turquoise and purple thin-strapped dress that she made herself.

As a kid, John said, she loved the fantasy dreamscapes in films such as "The Little Mermaid" and 1985's "Legend." Now, she has turned toward stop-motion animation and was recruited to work for a local, indigenous-owned stop-motion animation company, Spotted Fawn Productions. There, she creates sets, and sculpts the faces of figurine-size characters.

"With 3D and illustrated animation ... it still comes down to a flat image or digital image," she said, "whereas with stop-motion animation, you're creating real things in real spaces, and there's a tactile nature to it that is just really alluring."

Beyond artistic fulfillment, John said, the production team offers her a safe, supportive space where her two-spirit identity is recognized.

"Where other productions aim to diversify

their crew and programs, (this) company starts from a talented and diverse crew of women, queer identified, indigenous and people of color. There is no glass ceiling to break; we all come from a point of understanding and growth, each working to our strengths," John said.

"Our sexual and gender orientations have more to do with our spiritual and cultural beliefs than simply being bisexual, homosexual or gender-fluid or gendervariant or transsexual," John said.

Pushing back

Before identifying as two-spirit, John identified as a pansexual woman. It was only after coming to embrace and accept her Coast Salish and Sto:lo identity that she adopted the term. Her decision to identify as two-spirit is one of the many ways she is resisting the racism that she has witnessed since a young age.

"I know a lot of the hatred I received and the bullying I received through high school was racialized, that it was because I was Native," she said. "That was something that for the longest time I tried to ignore and separate myself from."

"I think attempting to be, or (to) act, colorblind is a coping mechanism that a lot of people use when they don't know any other way of moving forward."

When John was a teen, she distanced herself from cultural practices, she said, because she didn't want to "draw further attention from bullies and racists." She recalls turning down her family's offer of teachings, explaining, "I did not want to wear my Nativeness."

Aside from being public about her two-spirit identity, John is pushing back against racism and colonialism in other ways. She has led several workshops on the impact of



residential schools, attended anti-fascist rallies where she's handed out anti-Nazi buttons, and has coordinated art workshops for indigenous youths in rural areas outside Vancouver.

Make art, not war

Her work with youths is both a way to move forward and a reckoning with her past. John said she wants a different future for indigenous youths.

"For the rest of my life, I'm hoping to make art, and to continue to make art," she said. "I plan on taking up spaces that future generations can see themselves in."

While her future looks bright, John laments that when she was younger, she did not "think highly enough" of herself and did

Raven John, of Vancouver, B.C., uses stop-motion animation in her art. "There's a tactile nature to it that is just really alluring," she says.

not believe that she could one day study art at the university level. She also credits the barriers to her self-esteem as being due to the legal, institutionalized and social racism that she faced growing up.

"But seeing the cleverness and humor and talent in the youths from my communities in Hope and in Mission and Chilliwack, I know how far they can go, and that they can go much farther than me in their careers," John said, adding that all they need is the support and opportunities she lacked in her youth.

"It's been my goal to take up space in the public eye," she said, "to show indigenous youth that they can do what I'm doing - and that they can do much more."

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