

Tracing the Path of a River

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Most weekends I like to spend time walking along Scale Bar, part of the shore of the Fraser River near Landstrom Ridge in the district of Hope (Figure 1).



Figure 1. *Scale Bar at night*

In winter, the river levels drop and at the edge of the water, it is clear enough to see part of the river’s rocky bottom where thousands of salmon would have passed through on their way to their spawning grounds earlier in the summer. Along the beach, I can see the submerged large mossy rocks giving way to sand, gravel, stones half buried, caked with mud and then a large ribbon of exposed river rocks for nearly ¾ mile (Figure 2), tumbled smooth by the action of moving water. The river never stays the same. Each spring, when the snows melt from far up north and the freshet arrives, the course of the river shifts ever so much. The ribbon of river rocks that I find this winter might not be there next year.

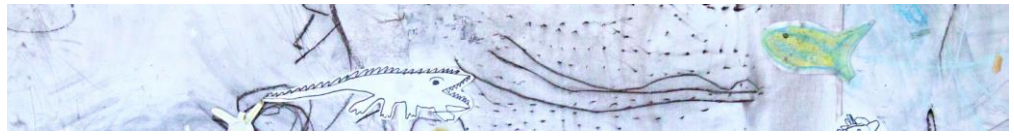


Figure 2. *Scale Bar*, February 14, 2021

Walking on river rocks can be dangerous. Because they are round, they move clacking like marbles when I set my foot down – each step a potential twisted ankle. So, I walk slowly head down, mesmerized at times by the disarray of rocks. Once I picked what I thought was a solid white stone which when I held it up to the sun, instead of it casting a shadow, it absorbed the rays of light and glowed. Collecting rocks from the river have been my passion long before I began painting on them.

Rock painting is a new pastime – almost obsession as I continually look to find the perfect stones to serve as canvasses. When I spy a prospective rock, I pick it up, weigh it in my hand and I run my fingers around the edges and surface. If there is the slightest inward curve, paint will pool. Small pits make paint dry unevenly and make the scars stand out more. The shape and surface of the stone determines the placement of patterns of points of paint with careful attention paid to blank spaces (Figure 3).



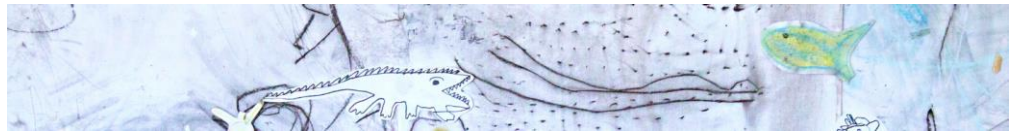
Figure 3. *Different shaped rocks create different patterns*

My first attempts were with simple tools such as a bobby pin and metal screws. I've now discovered dotting tools which provide a wider range of possibilities. Painting this way requires a steady hand and uninterrupted blocks of time. One dot too many or too much paint on the dotting tool can instantly disrupt the flow of pattern, lines and clusters of points on tiny canvasses which might measure no more than 2-3 inches across. The perfect rock canvas does not exist as I have discovered. Just as rocks have had to yield to the river, my tools and paint must also follow its path.



Figure 4. *Curved lines mimicking flowing water*

I have painted mandala-type patterns and images *but* it feels constraining. I find that I like using more curved lines and graduated points. The way I applied the dots of paint to this rock (Figure 4) my eyes move to the different points of colour. The lines are livelier and reminds me of how the river would have moved over and around the rock, wearing the surface smooth – a rock that holds the memories and traces of a rushing river.



Artist Bio

Violet Jessen is an instructor in the Capilano University Early Childhood Care and Education Degree/Diploma program. She has a personal art studio outside of Hope near Scale Bar which is located on the trails that intersect the traditional territories of the Nl̓eʔkepmx Tmíxʷ (Nlaka'pamux), S'ólh Téméxw (Stó:lō), and Stz'uminus (www.native-land.ca).