

Mountain, Sea & Sky
The Art of Gazing and Imagining

by Bill Zuk

cover image by Bill Zuk

MOUNTAIN, SKY AND SEA: THE ART OF GAZING AND IMAGINING

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There are many places of great natural beauty on British Columbia's west coast which offer peace, quiet and solitude, where you can gaze, reflect and imagine away from the maddening crowd and the fast pace of life. You do not have to travel long distances along the BC coast to be captivated by the majesty of towering mountains, the timeless quality of ocean waters, or the exotic magic of stars and galaxies – readily accessible even in urban areas. As an artist, this is what makes Vancouver Island and Victoria in particular, special for me. I am drawn to the ring of vistas offered by the mountains where I live. Their ancient origins, massive stature and spiritual presence are profound and form an integral part of my artwork. The story of their connection to gazing which involves scanning and a meditative state of awe and wonder, and imagining that includes fanciful thinking begins in my own back yard.

Mountains in Our Midst

My wife and I live on a lower slope of Mount Tolmie where geological history indicates a period of glaciation 15,000 years ago, and a subsequent period 8,000 years ago when glacial sediments were transformed into a hospitable environment for plants, animals and people (Mount Tolmie Conservancy Association, 1996). The Salish peoples called this mountain Pkaals. They harvested the oak meadow plants for food and medicine, like the tuberous Camus lily bulb, a favourite vegetable dish.

Now this mass of craggy, moss-covered substratum fills our front yard, spreading into a corner of our basement. Young children who visit are always amazed when we tell them we have a mountain living in our basement. They love clambering and perching on the outcropping,

which runs from floor to near ceiling height. Over the years, we have become accustomed to sharing our home with Mount Tolmie, and Tolmie has become the subject of a series of my sketchbooks (Zuk, 2009), as many other Vancouver Island mountains have become subjects of my art.

Peak Beauty

The most spectacular features of Mount Tolmie are its summit and breathtaking views. Some might say Tolmie is really ‘an overgrown hill,’ at a height of 120 metres above sea-level. When compared to other mountains, it is modest in height and expanse, and a short hike to the top along any one of several winding pathways takes me to another world. On one such hike, I noted in my sketchbook:

At the top, I find myself sitting on a bumpy, glaciated ridge with deep scratches and crevices. I can imagine the torrential slurry of ice, boulders and gravel that scoured and abraded the rock mass during the glacial epoch. In the distance, the Sooke Hills are covered in mist while Mount Olympus, home of the gods, is shrouded in cloud and barely visible on the Washington Peninsula. To the southeast, Mount Baker pushes its white cap into a porous powder of baby blue.

This is the first step of a gazing experience. It begins by attuning yourself to nature, by entering into a state of calm and tranquillity, and by developing an intimate connection with the natural surroundings (Dalton, 2009).



Malahat Mist, digital print

Malahat Mist is a digital print that records a scene of gentle light filtering through mountains, hills and trees. The impact of the scene stirred my imagination and led to a short alliterative poem entitled *Malahat Mountain Mist*:

Mountains rise and fall

Like gentle beings

In soft silk mist.

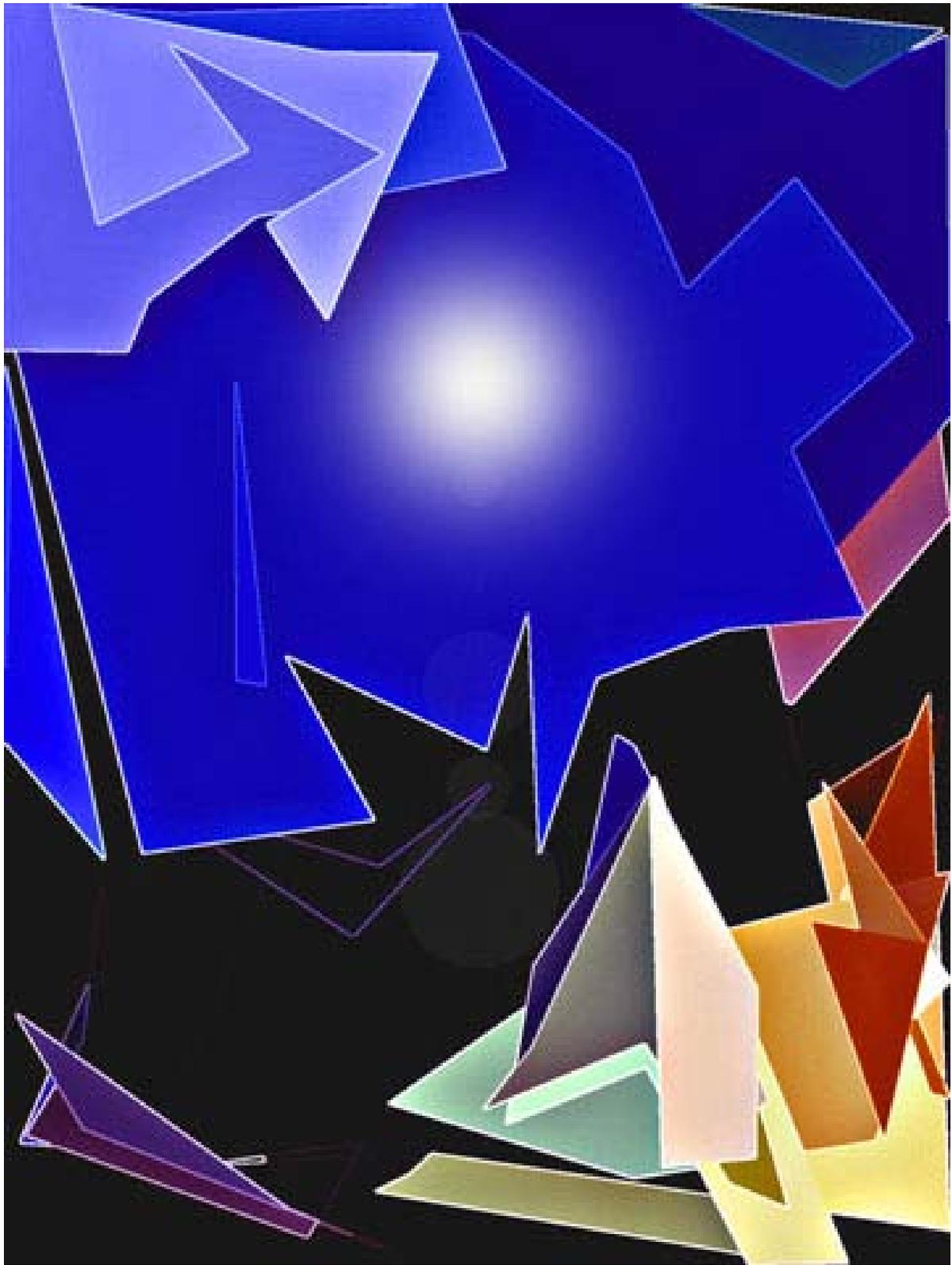
Valleys dip

And melt

And merge
In far-off fog.
Only a
Slender
Silvery
Spar
Rises
From the
Milky mist

This photograph reminds me of an essay by Rudolf Steiner who suggests that we are “equipped with two sets of sensory perception – one physical and capable of perceiving objects in the material world, the other spiritual and capable of sensing the spirit” (Regier, 1987, p.58).

Perceiving and sensing the physical and spiritual stirs my imagination and inspires my artful expressions. I continue to be drawn by the allure of the physical character and charm of Mount Tolmie with its gentle slopes, small open meadows, and tangled Garry Oaks. I also sense its life force and celestial presence as it rises to touch the sky.



Life Force, print, artist proof

Life Force aims to encapsulate the intrinsic beauty of Tolmie by reducing and distilling it to pure, geometrical forms with triangles featured prominently in this shifting, faceted composition. I created *Life Force* with the idea of working towards the essence of artistic simplicity in an effort to move closer to a purification of thinking processes (Pohribny, 1979). Because triangles call to mind images of pyramids, one of the most enduring architectural wonders of the world, the comparison to mountains is, in some ways, ideal. In ancient Egypt, pyramids were thought to embody the Sun God Re who rose from the primeval mound to create life. The pyramid epitomizes glory, energy and might. Mount Tolmie has those enduring qualities for me, and like a pyramid, Tolmie remains solid, withstanding tremors and quakes caused by shifting movements of subduction plates far below the earth's surface in Georgia Strait.

Cosmic Splendor

I turn to another of my sketchbook accounts of Tolmie:

I rise slowly to my feet on the highest point of rock to experience the fullness of the landscape. It forms a series of concentric circles with hills and mountains looming in the outermost ring and a moat of dark blue water lying within. Closer, a scattering of city dwellings form a dotted mosaic that blends into the forest growth. Finally, the skirt of Tolmie spreads like a protective shield with rocky bluffs, sprawling trees, and open meadows.

This great expanse harkens to the words of Black Elk, a revered Medicine Man of the Lakota people:

Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. The Sky is round and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball and so are all the Stars. The Wind, in its greatest power whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The Sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The Moon does the same and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing and always come again to where they were. The life of a person is a circle from childhood and so it is with everything where power moves. (Neihardt, 1979, p.5).

Ursa Spirit draws upon multiple levels of meaning associated with cosmic consciousness and explores hidden meanings in art (Tuchman, 1986). Spirituality became increasingly popular in late 20th century European art, based on a desire to depict utopian or metaphysical ideals that were difficult to express in traditional terms. *Ursa Spirit* is a tribute to mountains: the chevron shape with its purple-green magma pushing up from the base; the stars and galaxies whirling in concentric circles; spirit bears travelling in a circular path among the stars. The spirit bear, or Kermode, has special significance in the far west coast. Aboriginal nations honour and respect the white bear, especially the Kwakiutl and Tsimshian. Its Tsimshian name, Mosqm'ol, is found in numerous stories. One of the stories speaks of Raven who travelled among the black bears, promising every tenth bear cub would be born white to remind us of a time when the world was clean, pure, and covered with snow and ice blue glaciers (Tessier, 2000).



Ursa Spirit, print

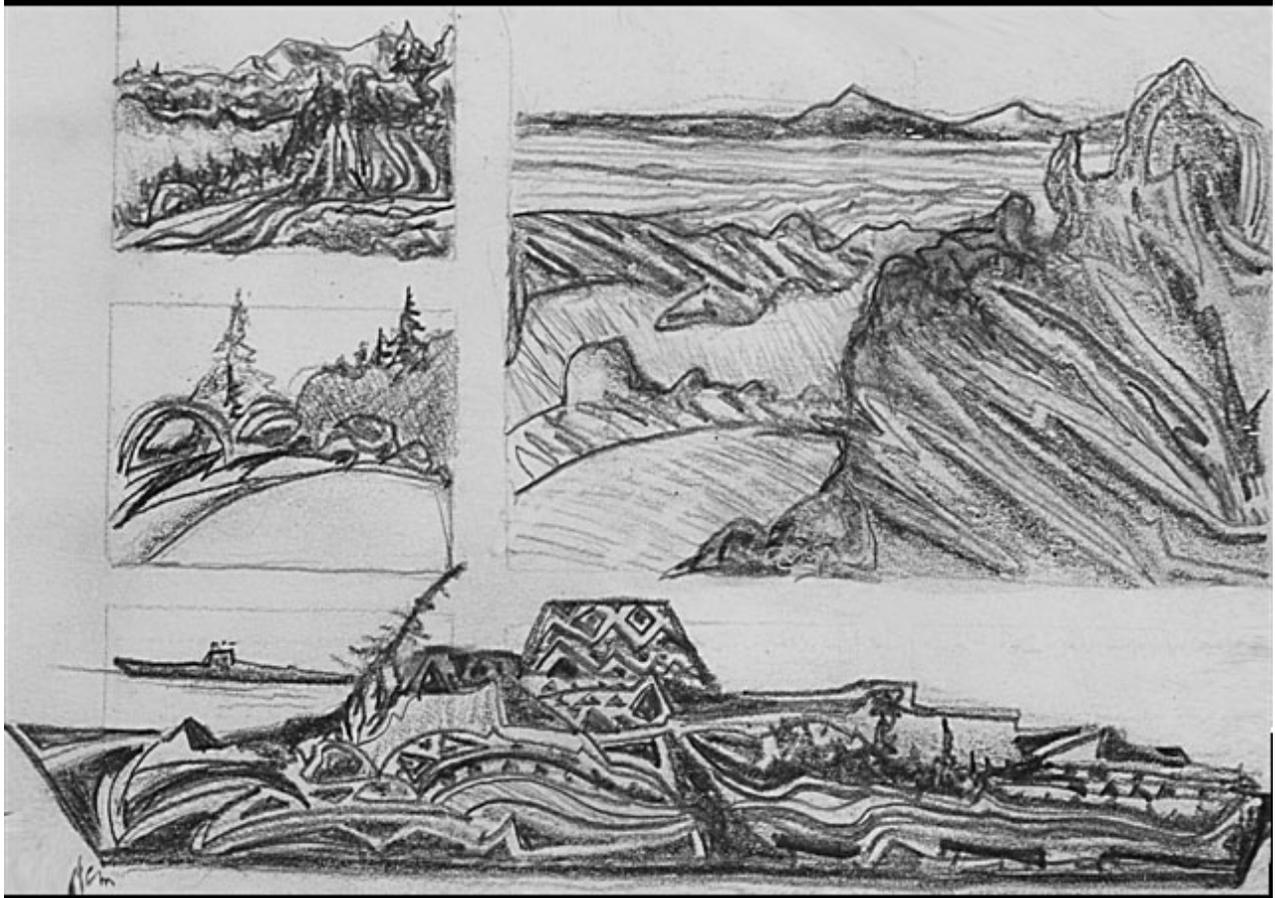
Biologists tell us that the spirit bear is a species of black bear indigenous to the rainforest areas of British Columbia from Princess Royal Island to Prince Rupert and inland to Hazelton, this bear has a genetic anomaly that results in a white or creamy coloured coat, a characteristic found in only ten percent of the black bear population. The provincial government has declared

the spirit bear the official animal of the province. My artwork celebrates the unique qualities of this bear in relation to the 2009 United Nations Year of Astronomy, a global effort to inspire a sense of awe and wonder in the universe.

Sky to Sea

Contemplating the sky and sea reminds me of two modalities of visualization (Gawain, 2002). One is a receptive mode which involves relaxing and allowing impressions or images to enter our consciousness without choosing details. I prefer to call this mode gazing. The other is a more active mode where we consciously choose and create what we wish to see or imagine. A sketchbook account looking down to the sea from the heights of Mount Tolmie is reminiscent of the two modalities:

Cargo ships come and go down the stormy straits of Juan de Fuca and the Gulf of Georgia. I gaze at the silvery waters and through my binoculars spot a container ship with a long, black, sleek hull and burnt orange top deck outlined in the dim light of the late afternoon sun. It cruises slowly past a small red-capped lighthouse on one of the scattered islands and then reappears to pursue its tedious journey through whitecaps and choppy seas.



Sky to Sea Sketches

Sky to Sea records some of my impressions of Mount Tolmie in several thumbnail sketches from tiny close-up rock and tree scenes with boulders, treelines, and rhythmic rock patterns, to imagined connections between landscapes and ocean vessels. A ship teeming with scenery appears in the lowermost sketch. Every space from bow to stern is filled with the landscape of Mount Tolmie, even the aerial pole which contains an angled tree. The notion of Canada as an exporter of raw material does not escape me, nor does the slogan “Super, Natural British Columbia,” which has appeared in countless tourist information guides. Rather than tourists coming to see the beauty of the province, they will see this ship exporting it out of the province, and out of the country.

Mountain in a Glass

I recall a recent exhibition catalogue dealing with the ethos of humour, and the Greek scholar, Ahnokatos, who lived in the time of the great thinkers Aristotle, Socrates and Plato (Roukes, 2008). Ahnokatos was noted as a brilliant ironist of great wit who thought that, to be truly artful and creative, you must look at everything in reverse —turn the world topsy-turvy, symbolically speaking. He promoted the use of surprise, contradiction and the unexpected because these have the potential to tickle the funny bone. My final tribute to mountains involves a tongue-in-cheek exploration that began on a car trip to Sooke, a community thirty kilometres northwest of Victoria. In my sketchbook, I recorded some highlights:

We are on an afternoon trip to Sooke, once a prosperous fishing and logging community. Mountains are on my mind as we stop at the Sooke Fine Arts Show and then at Mom's Café, a 1950s-style diner. Baby blue upholstery and a large floor model Wurlitzer jukebox grace the interior, reviving the nostalgia of a bygone era. Our meal is generous and flavourful, down to the fresh blackberry pie with ice cream and a lavish swirl of whipped cream topping. As we depart, I look more closely at the jukebox with its large curved plastic face bathed in luminous neon light. Without really thinking, I insert a quarter and press a selection button pointing to "Blueberry Hill". The machine comes to life with a heave of whirling gears and the strains of Louis Armstrong's music filling the air. The waitress who served us calls out, "That's my favourite piece of music!" I respond with a smile, "Next time we'll be back for blueberry pie."



Ice Cream Mountain, print

This episode fueled my determination to continue a series of imaginative artwork depicting mountains as ice cream desserts from a previous exhibition (Zuk, 2004). *Ice Cream Mountain* is based on a celebration of the 2002 United Nations International Year of Mountains devoted to the conservation and sustainable development of the world's most rugged and

inspiring places. It uses a neon cybre colour palette reminiscent of a Wurlitzer jukebox and revives the soda fountain ice cream parlour era, too, allowing imagination and fantasy to roam between exotic sights and elusive mouth-watering extravaganzas. *Ice Cream Mountain* brings me back once again to Mount Tolmie.

Living in Mount Tolmie's midst is like being in the protection and nurturing care of a worldly matriarch. Tolmie has opened my eyes to the richness of her geological and cultural history and the diversity of her flora and fauna. She has allowed me to roam freely over her pathways and provided a place of refuge and solitude to develop my artistic ideas. She has opened up opportunities for gazing and reflecting on the mysteries of the universe, especially when constellations shift their positions and comets flash through the heavens. More importantly, she has stirred my passion for nature which resonates with the thinking of Claus Oldenberg: "I am for an art...that makes flowers weep and the heavens tremble and the stars to forget their places" (in Gates, 2007, p.36).

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