By June 5, 1792, the Musqueam were prepared to encounter Captain George Vancouver and his crew. They had heard stories of European maritime expeditions on the outer coast. In the interim thousands of people had died as the strangers also brought epidemics of smallpox and other diseases which were transmitted from the west to the east coast of Vancouver Island and into the heart of Coast Salish territory.

Vancouver and its environs are ancestral territories of the Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh, First Nations of the Coast Salish whose descendents continue to live here. Their traditional language is Hunq’umi’num and their ancient villages and resource sites are scattered throughout the inlets and the river delta. The Squamish from Howe Sound, speaking a different Salishan language, also have historical associations here. They came to Burrard Inlet first as seasonal visitors and later as permanent residents participating in the economic life of the new colony.

In the photographic exhibition Sites & Place Names, Christos Dikeakos asks us to look at Vancouver in a new way, seeking what was in what is or appears to be. Our unexamined assumptions about the urban landscape are challenged in this work. Normally it’s easy to forget that vigorous and exuberant communities once flourished here in places still considered special parts of the city. Fishing streams, berry grounds, hunting meadows, forests and villages, beaches and camps have been swallowed up. Vancouver is a new city built on ancient ground.

At the end of the twentieth century we reexamine an old puzzle: nothing has changed, everything is different. In Dikeakos’ work the past is represented by the word, the present by the image. Word merges into image because it is unfamiliar, “unenglish”. Its meaning is inferred—a place name resonating down the years to remind us that what is here today is built on generations of human experience.

Here in the rain forest the great monuments of the past were built of perishable wood. From Vancouver’s archaeological sites at Marpole and Musqueam, non-perishable items have been recovered—stone and bone and antler carvings with unique design elements—dated over 2000 years before present. But how many wooden pieces, fashioned by human intelligence, have disappeared long since back into the natural world?

The western red cedar gave its bountiful gifts to make practical everyday items too: planks for house boards and
boxes, inner bark for clothing and padding, roots for basketry,
and withes for cordage. A thousand things were gathered
from the earth where we now park our cars, heading off on
errands east or south, forgetting the ancient forest floor
beneath the street.

What unchanged views remain?—the fog over the inlets,
the river and the low-lying delta lands, wet after the rain and
reflecting the setting sun; the wild waterfowl swooping and
clattering at the mouth of the river; and, invisible but not
forgotten as they pass upstream, ancient races of salmon
seeking out their natal streams.

On the landscape of my inner eye I sometimes see it as it
was. The forest and the sea, the salmon-drying racks, the
winter villages, the firelit faces of people in the longhouse,
and canoes drawn on the ancient beaches of Vancouver.

Dikeakos takes us through the looking glass to what lies
within: an invisible world superimposed by scenes of post-
industrial Vancouver. Under the bridges, the roads, the
railway tracks is the earth, our common foundation. This is
not a contrast between the ideal life (then) and the less than
ideal (now). Rather it offers a perspective for a new
recombinant possibility, a sense of the past in the present.

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