

Haida artist combines past, present

By Gary Kingston
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VANCOUVER (CP) — On the eve of his first solo exhibit in 11 years, acclaimed Haida artist Robert Davidson admits to some anxious moments.

"I have all kinds of feelings going through me," he said as he sipped a cappuccino in the back-room office of the Inuit Gallery in Gastown.

"It's like being on top of a roller coaster . . . you have that feeling of going down and, whoa! You're going and you wonder if the coaster will make the upswing.

"It's not so much that I'm afraid, it's more of an excitement. It's not like this is new to me, but every event has its own life, its own experience."

Davidson's world is an amalgam of past and present — mixing an introspective examination of his ancestral roots with a desire to break barriers.

"I feel it's very important to come from a foundation. And the Haida culture has proven itself in that people have survived for 10,000 years.

"And now we've been groping and searching for an identity and the strongest identity is to go back to the grassroots. And from that we're able to grow and expand and the expansion can only happen after you've gained that knowledge."

Davidson, 42, was born in Alaska, grew up in the Queen Charlotte Islands off the coast of British Columbia and apprenticed under legendary Haida artist Bill Reid.

His works hang in galleries around the world. In the last five years, he has done several major commission pieces, including three-totem structures at the Maclean Hunter Building in Toronto and at Pepsico's international sculpture park in New York.

One of his carved walking sticks was presented to Pope John Paul

during the pontiff's 1984 visit to Canada.

The three-week exhibition includes nine never-before-exhibited paintings. The show will also feature a bronze whale sculpture 12 months in the making and five wooden masks.

Davidson's favorite mask is a red cedar work entitled Crab of the Woods. Accented in acrylic, graphite and cedar bark, it will sell for \$15,000.

Inuit Gallery director Joseph Murphy said he expects collectors from Los Angeles, Chicago and New York at this week's premiere.

"I suspect that the masks will be sold in the first five minutes," said Murphy. "And we've had expressions of interest in the (\$40,000) bronze sculpture."

The soft-spoken Davidson, his wife and two children live in suburban Surrey and return frequently to the Queen Charlottes for spiritual renewal.

This month's solo show, he said is the product of a decade of an artist's evolution.

"I feel it's very important to test yourself . . . and it's a way of sharing . . . This art form that I work in, Haida art, has had a revival in that there was this stagnation in its lifespan of approximately 50 years. What we're doing is putting the puzzle back together again."

Davidson, who has two apprentices working with him and often has five or six projects on the go, said he finds his biggest challenge now is to give meaning to his art.

"One of the strongest questions that was asked of me was 'Why should I buy this, what meaning does it have for me?'"

"When I do a commission piece, whether it's for the chief of my village or whether it's for a corporation in New York, I give it the same attention. I try to have the piece relate to the person. "



Haida artist Robert Davidson displays two masks that will be part of his first solo exhibition in 11 years.