

## **Fabiola Carranza and Michelle Helene MacKenzie on Althea Thauberger**

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 03:38

Here we are, in La Jolla, San Diego

**Fabiola Carranza** 03:45

The territory of the Kumeyaay. The SFU Art Collection invited us to look at one artwork in the collection. When they first approached us I sort of thought about looking at artworks that used magic as a form to defend yourself against magic. And in many ways, this artwork isn't one of those artworks that was pulled for me. You know, originally, I was like, studying medieval art and thinking along those lines, but I feel like in many ways, this artwork is like has two heads or two tails, and sort of starts and ends with a process of referentiality. But before I talk about that, I should tell you what the artwork is that we decided to look at and depending on how your Latin is, if it's rusty or not, or if you pronounce it in English, it might be said in a different way. But *Ecce Homo* if it's an English. But in Latin or in my version of Latin, which would come from like a Spanish vein it would be *Ecce Homo*, you wouldn't pronounce the "H". It is a digital adhesive photographic mural commissioned by the city in celebration of the 125 anniversary. And it was installed on the west entrance of the Canada line, at the Vancouver Central Station on September 12, of 2011. What's interesting about this artwork to me is that I remember when I first saw it, I thought it was ridiculous (laughter) because of the scale, but also because I immediately recognized the actor who was hired by Althea to lie down and pretend to be dead. It's basically a figure lying down on top of an autopsy table. And he's looking straight at the camera. Do you want to help describe what do we see?

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 05:42

Yeah, it's kind of there's a just sort of dark black background, lying on one hand kind of up and staring blankly. When I first saw it, I thought he was wearing a kind of billowing skirt. And then thought maybe some kind of yeah, like loincloth reference, which we'll probably get into a little bit.

**Fabiola Carranza** 06:09

This is your first exposure to this artwork is now right?

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 06:13

It is now, also first exposure to the show and the actor. So entirely new when I first saw it, and the more I've kind of watched the show and done a bit of research into the

symbolism of the kind of the Ecce Homo reference, it's sort of been like, super interesting. Yeah. Interesting. That I'd never encountered the show and then getting to see this kind of like historical piece of Vancouver. In the what was it? Do you know the timeframe of the when that how long the series ran, it was like the...

**Fabiola Carranza** 06:47

It ran from like 1998 to 2005. And the show we're talking about, I don't know if, I mean in my nervousness I may not have said what it's called, but it's called *Da Vinci's Inquest*. And there was a spin off later. But it's loosely based on the life of Larry Campbell, who, you know, worked as the chief coroner and Vancouver for the city and later went on to become a politician for the city as well. The part of Dominique DaVinci, was written specifically for Nicholas Campbell, although that to bear the same last name they have no relation. But Nicholas Campbell is a figure who's very controversial at the moment because he, in newer TV shows, sort of people of color who worked on set with him overheard him using racial slurs. And so he's sort of infamous now. So I feel like the meanings or the readings that we can give his artwork now are very different than maybe Althea would have intended, and maybe as they would have been understood in 2011. It's interesting, because, you know, we don't see a crown in this artwork, you don't see a background, you don't see other people, the people are us. The audience will see this immense photo mural. But the hand gesture. So you know, Dominique de Vinci's, or Nathan Campbell, was holding one hand up, so the body is not a corpse. It's not dead. Yes, he's lying down and resting on top of this autopsy table and the hand gesture is one of amusement. It's, you know, in sort of, like the religious symbolism when you look at that it's entertainment, basically, which I think is interesting, because it's referring to Vancouver's entertainment industry.

08:38

You know, it's almost cynical of itself as an artwork, which I appreciate. And just to introduce a bit more about her art practice. So, you know, her artworks are really expensive in the sense that they usually intersect lots of media, like photography, film, video, but also installation, performance. And I think, to me, it's interesting to think about her artwork, because it usually involves something, some element that's like extremely ambitious and hard to achieve, you know, shooting a 35 millimeter film, working with a large crew, working on, you know, in water, trying to record like make a film in, you know, raising levels of water, or something where she's really challenging the structure of time based elements in her artworks, but also sort of manipulating or instrumentalizing the subjectivity with her collaborators. I find that fascinating, and sometimes, you know, it kind of turns to questions of ethics in art that I find to be

sometimes really boring and limiting but also really important to be asked. And so it puts that responsibility on the beholder rather than the artwork or the art sometimes in interesting ways. And I'm not saying you know not to pass judgment and how these gestures are being presented in this artwork specifically, but it's definitely something that I think about when I've seen her work. Other reasons I like this artwork is because when I was a student at Emily Carr in my undergrad, I took a set design class, and it was the first time I had ever been into a film set and they took us to *Da Vinci's Inquest* to the location to go see the set, and I was so shocked and mesmerized by the light in there, it was very green. So here and obvious picture, the light is very, like blue white, very clean, but it's not clinical. In the set it was very yellow and green. And it was because the walls, certain parts of the walls were almost minty in the pathology room or in the sort of morgue room, which is a set we got to visit. And it was kind of amazing to be in a set because you see the inside and the outside as well. You know, and it's all like, more spacious than it would be in real life. And that has to do with you know, camera, film crew, everybody has to fit in this is kind of like precisely tiny, tiny locations that somehow have to appear tiny on screen, but are actually quite vast. It was fascinating to see the set. Pat Campbell was the professor. Just want to note how odd and funny it is that the professor that took us on this field trip, her name was Pat Campbell and Larry Campbell is a you know, real life subject under his life story this is sort of based on and he's actually credited as a writer.

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 11:43

So they must have

**Fabiola Carranza** 11:44

he was a collaborator. And then, you know, to make Vancouver's arts scene seemed even smaller, Chris Haddock, who is the writer for *Da Vinci's Inquest*, years later went on to collaborate with Stan Douglas, in Stan Douglas' play *Helen Lawrence*, but they actually went to high school together. I think that, you know, those relationships can't be made up. There's something quite humorous about them.

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 12:15

What do you make of the fact that there is no set that it's just the figure on the kind of given just sort of the interest you had in the particularity of the set and the playing kind of scale of having to make it so big in order to make it seem small? And then the fact that, yeah, she would choose this kind of like, very foregrounded figure.

**Fabiola Carranza** 12:37

That's a good point. Like, the fact that there is no set to me sort of presents me with three elements, you know: the table, the actor, and the nothingness of it. But it also makes me aware of the question of the dead who is undead. So, the animation of the figure becomes really apparent. And also, black almost, you know, in the case of this installation would act as reflective mirror. So, it's like bouncing back to you how you yourself could be put into the scene at a much smaller scale, because, you know, in this artwork, the human figure is probably five times its real-life scale. But you, as a viewer, when you walked by, you would be, you know, smaller even, depending on how far you were from the artwork. So, there was something sort of interesting, but also flattening, it sort of just made the work, more, I don't know, ridiculous. A bit more playful. And I think that playfulness was kind of what was really striking to me about it. Because it meant that you didn't need to know anything about the artwork to be sort of made uncomfortable by it. Yeah, even children could become uncomfortable by seeing the super large feet, you know, exposed feet, the body looks cold. And, yeah, what do you make of his face? Do you think he's having like, is there a smirk in there? Or am I imagining it?

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 14:09

No, I don't see a smirk, I see—but I think it's because I had done a bit of this research and I associate it with both that figure, you know, that kind of like historical reference to Jesus, the moment that the crowd is kind of like looking at him in kind of mockery. So, it's kind of confronting, antagonistic crowd. It's sort of what I see. But then there's also, I mean for me, there's another interesting reference point which I thought of coming from a literature theory background, which would be like Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, and in sort of, which I hadn't read, but I kind of went and read a little bit about and a bit of the introduction, but thinking about the play on these depictions of the kind of Christ figure, you know, in the Passion, that like I guess in the earlier versions would always have the figures like there would always be this setting or that stage with the figures around him. And then in later versions, it would always be like a close up of his face more focused on the expression. And then with Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, the way that Walter Kaufmann writes about it, it's like, this kind of what becomes like a self-portrait of a person that is facing the idea of a future audience, misrecognizing them. It's this idea of like, I'm going to write my *Ecce Homo*, like give a representation that is warding off a potentially antagonistic or misreading future audience that is going to use me against my will, to make sense of the reading of the past. And in so doing kind of create their present, which will be our future. As I'm like reading this, I'm like, Okay. So, I'm skipping through these three moments of time of like, these kinds of different ideas of the Passion as a representation of, I don't know,

like, of whatever it would mean to be the human in these historical moments. And if so, what is this as we look back on it, you know, how does our listening to this picture kind of resonate with our like, I don't know how to articulate what I'm trying to say. It seemed interesting when I was thinking about it before

**Fabiola Carranza** 16:48

I think you keyed onto something central to it, which is it's about how...it instrumentalized an allegory between art, life, and politics. You know, what's interesting about *Da Vinci's Inquest*, is that I imagine, because you talked about listening to this picture, I imagine it sounds like that intro of the TV show. That's kind of what I picture, but I also imagined it as like as a deafening infinitude of silences. Like if you were to put an infinity mirror in his artwork. You know, cut to silence, cut to silence, cut to silence, that's maybe what it would sound like?

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 17:24

Well, I think of the, I mean it's like an obvious sort of thing, but I think of images in general as very silent and like, hard to...

**Fabiola Carranza** 17:33

Interesting. Yeah, that's funny, because to me some images have a sound, like they just have a sound to me and register because of the way the colours are. I feel like Althea is an artist that has worked with a lot of like state patronage from, you know, whether it be Canada Council or research council or public art commissions very much working within and critiquing state commissions, and I feel like this is somewhat doing that. But it's almost more fun than it is critique.

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 18:11

It's interesting that she chooses this figure. I mean, I haven't really watched much of the show, so I can't say but he seems like something of, not an antihero, but it's like, he's an ex undercover detective who's now the chief coroner. You know, he's someone who's handling the dead. So I think to choose that as your *Ecce Homo*, like protagonist kind of figure. There seems to be some type of critique in there, but I can't quite pin up.

**Fabiola Carranza** 18:51

And it's not that there has to be either, like, you know, sometimes just sometimes there's some delight and just being able to sit with the references. But I think the way that they're mobilized here is saying something that's not transparent. He was, yeah,

definitely an antihero. He was like doing the right things, sometimes in the wrong way. But, I mean, when you take the real live Nathan Campbell into account, as well as Dominique DaVinci, it becomes even more Canadian. That plurality of moral dilemma questions comes into play in a way that I think is a critique of Canadian life. Or, maybe not exactly just or only Canadian, but perhaps like Protestantism and notions of moral superiority. Looking at the artwork now, I'm seeing the left and right side to it, you know, when on the one hand, he's covered with this white cloth, a medical cloth that you would normally cover the entire corpse before refrigerating it, between sections of the autopsy. And on the other hand, he's wearing an executive or like professional wear, like tie, blue shirt, a dress shirt, with the sleeves rolled up, that are referring to some sort of professionalism. So yeah, it puts into play this idea of like, how professional and how playful you can be. And which of the two will kill you first? (laughter)

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 20:46

Going back to the like, not to keep riffing on Nietzsche, but one tidbit that I thought was so interesting and sort of connected to this was this description of the way that after Nietzsche died, and his sister was taking control, there's a lot of critique of the way that his sister was taking control of the message of his theory and editing things really heavily in a way, the whole association with, like Nazism, there's a lot of questions around to what extent she was viewing the politics in ways that were kind of circumscribing them in a way that he would have not been chill with. But in part of this description, there's also the fact that she had commissioned all of these portraits of Nietzsche after he died, that were styled completely differently from the way he actually looked. She would give him a mustache that was stylish at the time that he had never worn or put him in clothing that he wouldn't wear. And there was this kind of like, having him live on through these portraits, feeding right into the fears, he was describing in *Ecce Homo*, in what ways is my thought or philosophy or like the idea of who I am going to be misrepresented or something in the future that his sister goes on, to kind of create these series of portraits that even now when you can pick up books that feature these weird speculative, almost like portraits...

**Fabiola Carranza** 22:38

Have you seen any of the portraits?

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 22:41

I have not

**Fabiola Carranza** 22:44

So much of a man's life is, you know, is in his moustache.

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 22:51

Does he seem vulnerable to you? This character?

**Fabiola Carranza** 22:57

No, absolutely not. Does he seem vulnerable to you?

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie**

Yeah.

**Fabiola Carranza**

That's fascinating. Like, you could go sit on his belly.

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 23:12

Well, he seems maybe compromised, like in a slightly compromised position. But is the gag on the viewer? It's the moment where he's like, "No, I'm not dead." The arm comes up as you pull back the cloth

**Fabiola Carranza** 23:31

What is he at risk of? I think to me, it's like, is somebody gonna come play peekaboo with one of the garments that he's wearing? Is there something like a necrophilia attack that we're afraid of? I feel like he's part zombie, like he's gonna jump at you. I feel maybe not threatened, but somehow, you know, because he's kind of alive.

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 23:58

There's something just sort of delicate about his hand on what I see as a skirt and his leg. Like if you looked at just the bottom half, I think of a kind of femme character, lying in a field or something. The way that the cloth is kind of billowing to me is quite beautiful.

**Fabiola Carranza** 24:18

He's styled in a very delicate way. You're right. It's almost like sculpture, like neoclassical.

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 24:26

And even the hand, it feels very like ballet. Almost like everything except for when you see the character and make the association and then of course, like what you're

mentioning before the dress, kind of shirt and tie reads to me as like, elegant, maybe slightly fragile or vulnerable.

**Fabiola Carranza** 24:46

I don't know if it's worth talking about in terms of gender, but it does feel like he is exposed. But I don't know, I didn't identify that myself as a vulnerability or like I thought it more as a I just found it funny.

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 25:15

Yeah. Well probably particularly given his character.

**Fabiola Carranza** 25:21

The character in the show was sort of noble and a little bit sad, frumpy. He would wear maybe a tie that looks like that one, wide maybe synthetic fibers. He was somebody who wouldn't bother with expensive attire or food. Not somebody extravagant. And I think something about this reads as sort of like, fashion.

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 25:51

Totally. That's when I first saw it, that's what I thought it was. I thought it was like a kind of fashion image that was potentially playing with, I don't know what gender may be or something.

**Fabiola Carranza** 26:05

I wonder what else I want to think about. That's not the artwork, but the artwork takes me to?

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 26:16

Yeah, well, we could talk about the song because I like the theme song.

**Fabiola Carranza** 26:28

Yeah, it is like, very metallic sounding song also, I don't know what instrument is that like a clarinet?

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 26:36

Tim McCauley, the composer, described wanting to create a combination of like, or kind of flowing between opera, rap, and jazz. Tim McCauley, the composer, described wanting to do something that would be like a Henry Mancini meets hip hop. And he includes the trumpet



**Fabiola Carranza** 27:07

That's the beautiful sound

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 27:10

doo doo doo doo. Guitar by Jay Sinclair. And there's a bass player, Mike McKay, and then drummer Darren Gilmore, and you have some computer-generated sounds and bass as well.

**Fabiola Carranza** 27:26

I wish we could isolate those.

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 27:27

I know, I definitely want to listen a few more times and get a sense of what is exactly happening. But yeah, as I looked into that a little bit, it was interesting to see that McCauley had worked with this person, Jane Tattersall, who's a sound designer. And apparently Chris Haddock who produced or kind of created the show, had described very early on that he really wanted this series to take sound design I guess seriously, and really wanted it to quote unquote, sound like Vancouver. As far as I understand they did a lot of acoustic research.

**Fabiola Carranza** 28:09

That shows actually. And it's funny because I think we moved away from Vancouver in 2016 and when Jonah and I found out that *Da Vinci's* was all streamable for free and when we first moved to San Diego we just started rewatching the show. Part of it was the fun of just hearing the seagulls, or key Vancouver noises like the sound of the, what are those called, that you press when you are crossing the street?

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie**

Oh, the crosswalk

**Fabiola Carranza**

But who I really would like to talk to is Chris Haddock. I think I have like a secret creative crush on Chris Haddock. But it's not so secret, I'm divulging it here.

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 28:59

One more interesting sound tidbit is that Jane Tattersall actually had a background she'd just come out of school, doing kind of research and philosophy. And someone had

contacted her who worked in film and they said that they had needed a philosopher, someone with a background in philosophy, to do research for the show. Which I was surprised to know that a job like that even existed. Once she got on set, she just became really fascinated by the way that the life and the kind of spirit of the show was always through the sound. And so that was her entry point into sound design, kind of like a fascination

**Fabiola Carranza 29:44**

That's true, and I think that showed in the editing, like sometimes you'd hear a sound and it would cut there'll be a new sound before you actually got a sense of where the scene was beforehand. That was kind of magical to in its application. Like it sort of was seamless. And I guess that's what I mean by magic. And I think the magic that I'm reading here is magic that's used to avert magic. I see that in this artwork because it's doing those things at the structural level. And I think also, the TV showed that at a structural level, it sounds like, which is also kind of fun to think about.

This week I got to see a lecture by Michael Taussig. And there were six people in the audience, it was like post COVID, I thought it was gonna be packed. Yeah, you know, not post, I know, COVID is ongoing. Just to clarify. But we're back in school, we're teaching online, we're all wearing masks, blah, blah. Anyhow, there were six people, so it was an incredible small group of people. But anyhow, he was talking about corpse magic. He called it like the magic realism of corpses. And one of the sentences that he used, he was talking specifically about the war on drugs and different communities that he spent time with in Colombia and their beliefs about magic and like, you know, whether you'd be like a gang member, or killer. At some point, if you'd killed more than four or five people, you'd have to go buy into this magic to protect yourself from the bad energy that the victim's families would send your way. So, there's all this kind of crazy communities of people who walk around who are shadowless. The church had to build this enormous wall to protect, a 30-foot-tall wall, to protect the corpses from being interfered with by members of the community. And yeah, gang members and the like. But anyhow, he was equating that with the fetish of the bullet in North America, you know, gun violence. But he did talk about how, in a way, the corpse is the coroner's prey. And here we have the coroner, as prey. And that's kind of such an artistic ouroboros, of a gesture like there's, you know, it starts and ends with the same gesture. But at the same time, it's obviously only able to do that if we buy into the illusion that these three subjectivities are the same that of Nicholas Campbell's that of Dominique DaVinci and that of, I don't know, a corpse. Those are my sort of very loose thoughts. It's the point of my own reception with you know, Michael Taussig's

beautifully crafted ideas in my head, but he did say that line “corner’s prey.” And I think I see this as, you know, the corner’s his own prey. The city mayor was his own prey and it's all instrumentalized for the sake of art.

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 33:07

That’s a good point to wrap it up.

**Fabiola Carranza** 33:13

Maybe you can say something funny, Michelle.

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 33:18

I am not funny. (laughter).

**Fabiola Carranza** 33:19

I wish I was funnier.

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie**

Me too.

**Fabiola Carranza**

I'm funny, but it's never intentional.

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie**

for me also.

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 33:25

All right, well,

**Fabiola Carranza** 33:30

yeah. Thank you, everyone who listened to this far. I also want to thank Kim and Karina for inviting us to do this and giving us an extension, time and support, and I just really hope a lot of people get to see this artwork and engage with it, whether it's online through SFU Art Collection’s website or at some shows at the gallery. Those of you that remember the show, who watched it, maybe we'll revisit or reach out to Althea and ask questions that we can't answer for you.

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 34:10

Yes. And thank you, Fabi for asking me to do this.

**Fabiola Carranza** 34:13

Thank you for joining me.

**Michelle Helene MacKenzie** 34:16

Bye.

**Fabiola Carranza** 34:17

Bye everyone.