

Place of Harmony

The radical history of BC's Malcolm Island

AS TOLD TO GENEVIEVE MICHAELS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SYLVANA D'ANGELO



*Sylvana D'Angelo never expected to find herself living in a socialist utopian society. The photographer, after searching through Canada's artist-residency options, had decided on a program in Saskatchewan. By the time it was set to begin, one year later, the program had moved across the country and become the Sointula Art Shed. D'Angelo, upon learning of the island village's history, "freaked out". It was the perfect setting for her to work on *Satanic Panic*, a photography project three years in the making, which explored the infamous 1980s Satanism hysteria. Originally planning on a residency of one month, she found herself spending three in Sointula, on Malcolm Island, and the neighbouring community of Alert Bay.*

"When I had a story about the wildlife that I saw, that made me feel like I was part of the community."

Founded by disenfranchised Finnish mine workers in the 1800's, the Sointulian way of life is difficult for a city dweller to comprehend. The village, which has a population of just over five hundred, is still mostly comprised of the original families who settled it, people who held radical beliefs and dreams of a fair, connected, communal way of living. Its residents live there quietly—just five hundred kilometres from the energy of the city—growing food, making beautiful artisan crafts, and spending time with dolphins and orcas.

"It just felt like a really different way to live your life," Sylvana told me. In our long conversation, it felt like we had barely scratched the surface.

These people tried really hard. They had suffered. There was a large Finnish community that had emigrated to Canada, and they had suffered at the hands of the Canadian government. They were given a large territory of land, but had no employment, and most of the people had been exploited by the mining community.

They found this island, and they wrote to King George, saying, "Can we have it?" And he gave it to them. I guess we would call it more of a commune, what they set up, but they called it a utopian society. This was in the 1800s. For a really long time you couldn't move to this island. It wasn't until the 1980's that people could go there. For myself, even being there just a short amount of time, people would come up to me and say, "I don't know who you are. What are you doing here?"

They were very radical when they came over. They did not want to be part of the world. They wanted to have their own world where they chose all the rules. It was a really unusual community. There were hammers and sickles on the gravestones. But, I think, they wouldn't call themselves communists. They would say that they were a socialist utopian society.

They tried to uphold these values until World War II, when, of course, it became culturally taboo to live in Canada and be a communist. That's when they switched over to using the word socialist.

I think it happened naturally, the transition. Originally they wrote to this man named Matti Kurikka, and he made a big splash. He was a communist visionary, a philosopher, a writer for a newspaper in Finland. He had tried to form a utopian society in Finland and it failed. So these people, the Sointulians, were like, hey, come to our island and try again. He came to Sointula specifically to lead them... But then, sometime around World War I, they found out that he was not running the community well. He would go and get work for them—for example, they built the Capilano Bridge. He would get these contracts for them, but he wasn't good at negotiating, so he

would end up negotiating a price that was less than what they were getting when they were oppressed. Or, for example, he would get paid all the money, and instead of buying rice he would buy a [musical organ]... It got to a point where they had to kick him off the island because he wasn't a good leader.

One of the other guys who had come over with him, also named Matti, stepped in and kind of ran the community until he died, and that's when history got a little bit muddy, even in the books I read. And then, [after World War II], they started saying socialist instead of communist, and it kind of turned into something else. Something almost religious, in a way... Maybe religious isn't the right word. Maybe sect is a better word. A small community of individuals that had a specific way of living.

In the seventies, a bunch of white people came, the draft dodgers. The Sointulians would not accept them, and they did not let them into their town. That's why [the draft dodgers] had to start their own community on their side of the island. It's really, really hippie there. They're more friendly now, but they're still not best friends, not completely integrated. I was told when I was there that you need

"As soon as they heard I knew how to use the internet they wanted an Etsy, a WordPress..."

to have the acceptance of one of the original families. That was why, when I became friends with Katherine, because she loved me, everybody loved me.

Katherine, my friend, doesn't have a bank account. They don't have a bank there. Their lifestyle is based on trade, and money that they pick up from odd jobs. I would say that maybe 40 percent of them are artists, and that's how they make their money. I went there and spent basically no money, because there's nothing to spend it on. Everything is there. They do have farming, but it's all small personal or community gardens, stuff like that. It's an interesting style of living. Almost everybody was 60 or older.

The whole experience of being there was magnetic, but there was nobody my age. There were really old people or young babies, before school age. I didn't want to leave. I loved it there. It wasn't really real.

Everybody who lives there is emotionally connected to the community. They have these two giant [structures]... they're like houses, from the old commune, that still stand, and everybody in the community meets there. Everyone has private residences now, and you can do normal things, like there's yoga on the island, and there's a huge Korean population, and it's also a port for fishermen, because it's so close to Port Hardy, so there's a hotel and stuff, but the core residents of the island are still very utopian-ish. They're probably 90% of the people that live there.

As soon as you get on the island you get a bike. If you don't have a car, they just give you a bike. They're these green bikes and it's crazy. I would ride my green bike around and it was kind of like a beacon so people knew I wasn't from the island. They were really friendly and welcoming, but they also wanted people to know that I wasn't from there.

One day I was on the ferry to Alert Bay. I had been there for about two weeks when this happened: fifty dolphins came and surrounded my boat and they were jumping, looking at me. It's something like a forty-five minute ferry ride, and the dolphins were just jumping and hanging out with us the whole time. So close that I could see their eyeballs... Having witnessed that really helped me ease in better. Every night people get together and say "Oh, we saw seven otters today," or "There was a grizzly bear on the mainland," you know what I mean? When I had a story about the wildlife that I saw, that made me feel like I was part of the community.

My main goal was to meet everybody there and chat with them. This one guy was really interesting, he would kayak around and find pieces of wood, carve them, and then kayak his sculpture up to one of those fantasy fishing compounds way up north. Up in the north they have these remote places that you have

to fly into and rich people pay so much, hundreds of thousands of dollars for a fishing experience. He'd kayak up there with his sculpture and sell it for a whole bunch of money and then come back and live on the island. I hung out with him a bunch, I enjoyed how he lived his life just traveling around and selling stuff. He'd make a whole year's wage off of one sculpture. He had worked out this persona that allowed him to be an escapist for his whole life.

It was so dramatic. It was the time of year when the rains come in, so sometimes for three days it would be so foggy I couldn't see anything, couldn't see a few feet in front of me. The weather was so

unique, storms and stuff. It's a pretty traditional BC forest, though, I would say. The whole cove, where the town is, is a gorgeous sandy beach. There are no stoplights on the whole [of Malcolm Island]. There are no restaurants on the island. You can't get a coffee that you didn't make yourself. It's right at the tip of Vancouver Island. It's a huge island, but people only live on a small part of it.

On the other side of the island there's this extremely rare orca beach where killer whales come up and rub their bellies on the beach and it's insane. I think it's legitimately one of three places in the entire world where this happens. There's a little camp of scientists who live on that beach. There are two scientists that are from the community, not university educated

was bigger than my house is now. The buildings were all similar. The Finnish have a specific style of building. My cottage was one of the original settlements, and you could tell that some guy had built it with his hands over a hundred years ago. It had gorgeous light and they were living on the main drag so I could see the sunset, everything. Since I'm mostly a found photographer I ended up turning my studio space into a terrarium-building spot... I became obsessed with wild mushrooms. I had meaningful baths every day. I read so many books. It wasn't real life.

I was obsessed with the sunrise. I started getting up at five, and I'd make a big meal, and then I'd ride my bike somewhere that I hadn't been and I'd wait

is a million percent different. I was astounded by the indigenous culture there. It gave me chills on so many different occasions. Religion is alive on that island. Indigenous religion, and also Catholicism.

On Cormorant Island, where Alert Bay is, there are five churches, even though it's a quarter of the size of Sointula. Everybody is extremely religious, it is also probably 80% First Nations. It's a fascinating mix of Christianity and indigenous spirituality. And I should say, as soon as you come into the island the very first thing you see is a giant residential school.

Four of the totem poles in Stanley Park are from Alert Bay. It's an important community for native culture. They took me to a secret burial ground which has all these insane Christian influenced totem poles and masks and flowers. I'd never seen anything like it.

Alert Bay has one big hill, and at the top of the hill is this secret burial ground. You have to go through the reserve to get to it. The reserve is a place where, I guess, white people aren't really liked to begin with, a remote place. I didn't want to go there because people told me to "give it a second before I went there", if you know what I mean. But I thought, because I was with my boyfriend, who is First Nations, it would be fine.

But as soon as we get onto the reservation, a dog comes and attacks me, because I stick out, as a white person. I fall, and I smash my camera, and then all of a sudden we run away from the dog and we get to this incredible totem pole. And there are all these crosses with masks on them.

It looked like medieval stone carvings, only it was a totem pole. It was the craziest place I'd ever been. I felt like I had to suffer in a way to get there, because I wrecked my camera and I was attacked by a dog, and then once I got to this place everything was calm.

The whole experience, made me feel... when I got back, I was trying to explain to my boyfriend how we should move there and start a cheetah farm. How we could do whatever we want. It gave me this feeling that I didn't have to conform. That at any point, I could just escape, and live a fantastical life.

Next page:

*Alert Bay, BC Residential School,
top floor co-ed bathroom*

Kodak Portra 160 

“But as soon as we get onto the reservation, a dog comes and attacks me, because I stick out, as a white person.”

scientists, and there are four of them in total. They just monitor the whales, watch the whales.

They have to educate people, because... I have to be honest with you, the first time I saw one I freaked out, I was screaming and you can't do that. They're wild, you'll scare them. They're kind of monitoring this beach because nobody wants the outside world to know that this exists, because they don't want people coming and ruining their utopian society and their whale beach. I mean, obviously, it's known about or whatever, but before I went I had no idea it was there.

The beach is little pebbles, and apparently the whales like the way that feels. They swim in and then rub their bellies on the pebbles and then they swim out. I became friends with one of the Finnish women that lived on the beach, we went to the sauna together. I love the sauna. She showed me footage she has of hundreds of orcas coming to the beach, and taking turns rolling in the pebbles, showing the babies how to do it, showing off, jumping together.

A core group of individuals have been living on that beach for 18 years. They have a cord that runs into the ocean so they can hear the dolphins and whales and they just leave it there, pick it up and listen to what's happening in the ocean.

Kerri and Tyler [who run the Sointula Art Shed] have a house. Behind the house they have a cottage, and behind the cottage they have a barn that's been turned into a studio, so I had my own cottage, which

for the sun to come up. And then usually I would come home, have a nap or something and then I'd go out again. I basically just got up for the sunrise, and then I was outside till seven, and then I was sleeping all night. There's no parties, no nothing, I'm by myself. They would just let the animals roam free, so for a little bit I got obsessed with trying to find the same cow every day, because he would be all over the island. Goats, and sheep, and stuff, they would just let them wander around.

A lot of them spoke Finnish. But not to me. Sointula means place of harmony in Finnish. It feels like a big family. Everybody knows everything about everybody and everybody looks out for everyone. If you sit in the bay when the ships come in they'll just give you a giant fish. They ate regular stuff, prawns, halibut, lots of seafood. And they're so open about sex, about not getting married, there was none of that stigma.

It was pretty remarkable how everybody made beautiful stuff with their hands. Maybe artist is the wrong word but they were definitely artisans. Woodcrafting, knitting, painting, jewelry. That's why I did so well. As soon as they heard I knew how to use the internet they wanted an Etsy, a WordPress... At first they distrusted me because I was doing this internet thing, I was teaching the women how to use the internet. All the men were like, who is this girl?

The ferry between Sointula and Alert Bay is free, so I would go back and forth all the time. Alert Bay

TRANSLINK YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

Uh-oh, Tinder Guy “forgot” to change the oil. The car “breaks down” beside Queen Elizabeth Park. He calls BCAA, then pulls out a picnic basket and a growler. What should you do?

Option 1:

Run to catch the Canada Line
(go to page 46)

Option 2:

Run to catch the #15 Cambie bus and charm the bus driver into giving you a 3-zone ticket
(go to page 31)

Option 3:

Run... all the way to South Delta, it's only exactly one marathon from the park
(go to page 23)

