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Interview by Sheryl MacKay of David A. Haughton: Artist and Pediatric Emergency Physician

Sheryl MacKay: Last weekend I had a chance to go and see a show that is on at the Pine Street Gallery called *the Kindertotentanz*, a series of paintings and etchings by Dr. David Haughton. Dr. Haughton paints in two very distinct styles: One style is beautiful landscapes of Vancouver and the lower mainland, with a very hazy look at the landscape, very peaceful and dreamy.

The other is exhibited in a separate gallery upstairs, *the Kindertotentanz*. They are a series of images of young children and infants afflicted with serious disease and disorders. The paintings feel like icons in that sense of detail. They are little pieces, little gems, with a dream-like quality to them, and sometimes with the subject matter almost a nightmarishly-real kind of quality as well.

The titles show a scientific detachment where they name the diseases and the conditions... *Amniotic Band Sequence* for example, or *Prematurity* or *Meningitis*. But when you look at the paintings and you spend some time in the room with them, you feel that, although there is a lot of sadness depicted here in the situations these children are facing, overall the paintings somehow manage to convey a sense of caring and a sense of being at peace. Although they are surrounded by images of things that are attacking them or look quite frightening, there is somehow a peaceful feeling as well. David, can you tell us, why did you start this series?

David Haughton: I started the series of paintings back in 1985 when I was a pediatric resident. They just almost literally burst out of me during some of the difficult months of covering the cancer wards and the neo-natal nursery.

I have had a number of people say just how much the paintings have hit them emotionally. If that is the case then I have succeeded in expressing how "hit emotionally" I had been by the experience that I was going through then, and even now as I work as an Emergency physician.



Prematurity III, 14 x 18 inches

In 1984, I was sent (as if by the gods) to New York. My father had emergency surgery. I ended up in New York during the time of the *Te Maori* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I had been feeling all these emotions about the patients I had been caring for, the treatments that they were receiving: the effect on the patients, the effect on the parents, the effect on me. I felt rage that disease could be so malevolent. I was looking for a way of expressing my anger and helplessness in my art. I walked into the museum and saw the imagery that I was looking for. It literally grabbed me by the spine.

There were small misshapen fetus-like creatures called *Tiki*... the lizards (*ngarara*) that are both a sign of life and death, and particularly these beaky birds – I don't know their name (*manaia*) – that are found throughout the carvings *biting each other*. They expressed the malevolence of disease better than anything I could come up with on my own. They echo the nastiness of misfortune: how it can destroy families, how it can destroy individual children, and how it can tear at the people who are trying to help them.

MacKay: The images recall almost icons with the depths of colour; and the fact that in the background of many of them are religious figures with gold halos around their heads as well, along with the images that you are mentioning.

Haughton: Lying on the floor in my room between night calls in Los Angeles, during the residency, I starting to draw images that I had seen the week before in New York, channeling my anger and fear of disease into these images of beaky birds etc. At some point my emotions became so overwhelming that I started to put in some images of Greece (I am half-Greek). I realized that by putting in the icons I could express some of my ambivalence at God...I think a great deal on the dilemma that good people have bad things happen to them and “why is this so?”

MacKay: A lot of the Saints seem to be distanced in the paintings....right?or they seem to be looking on as opposed to acting or intervening.

Haughton: Look where the eyes go....their eyes are all averted from the disaster that is in front of them. At times it feels that way, at least to me.



Partial Chromosome Deletion, 20 x 24 inches



Ship of Woe, 12 x 12 inches

MacKay: Let's just come over here and we will look at this painting which is titled *Chromosome Deletion* [above]. It shows a child attached to a cord of some kind and there is the bird thing up there, with a couple of the saints looking away.

Haughton: The child has partial chromosome deletion. Which chromosome really doesn't matter other than it has left the child severely impaired. The child is still a child, he has made it to probably four or five years of age, but still wears diapers, and can't feed himself or be fed. The tube that you mentioned coming from above is a gastric feeding tube. What I [now] see as successful about the painting is just the way the boy seems to float in a very peaceful way in a blue ether. The nasty things around him are attacking themselves as much as attacking him. They are just pure malevolence... he is beyond the attack.

There are two saints there on either corner. They “weren't on duty”, I guess, at the time the chromosome deletion happened...they look a bit sheepish and guilty. You can't fix something like this. I was originally painting the anguish that you can't fix it: that the family now has a baby that it

loves, a four year old in this case, that cannot be cured of its affliction. The incidence of divorce in a family with a severely impaired child approaches 80-90%. It is a tremendous stress and pain in the family.

What I am painting here is the moment when “the perfect child” ceases to be. Whether it be in utero or at play outside, it was perfect this morning....then the chute opens and you slide down to hell. I paint the moment when the infant is born and all fall silent, the second when the truck hits the child, when the bacteria hits the brain, when the cancer cell collection becomes big enough to cause pain. It is my job as an emergency physician often to tell the parents that “your life has changed”.

MacKay: What gave me a feeling with you as an artist is your care for, your love for, your attention to these children and treating them also with a real dignity as well. Is that part of what is going through you when you are painting these?

Haughton: I certainly would like to think so. Often I'm not painting a specific patient I have taken care of. I'm painting one partial chromosome deletion, that I have a photo of somewhere in the medical literature, to represent another one that I saw back ten years ago. The goal is to maintain respect and to bring the person who looks at them to the same point of understanding or feeling that I had at the time... I can't sell them. I don't want to sell them.. and I don't think it's right to sell them. I've put together a booklet that I'm sending to museums and non-profit galleries.



Triptych Encephalocele, 10 x 20 inches

MacKay: What does painting these images do for you?

Haughton: Oh my. I guess... they allow me to record a series of feelings that otherwise I would keep locked up, metaphorically, behind a very thick Plexiglas shield. I can go there [to where these feelings are stored] if I listen to the right music and if I look at these images, but I am not very functional when I arrive. When I am working in the Emergency Room, whatever I'm feeling, whatever I see that upsets me, I throw that memory up and back into that “Plexiglas box” and seal it up promising to myself that “I'll get back to it later”. These images allow me to get back to those feelings. I think many physicians just keep it locked up or don't admit that they're there....I mean [look at] the rates of alcoholism and depression among physicians.

MacKay: Your paintings downstairs are so different....the landscape paintings. I'm wondering how different the experience is for you of painting those paintings, as opposed to painting the paintings of the children in the series.

Haughton: I don't go there [paint both] at the same time. I don't go back from one to the other at all. I make a conscious decision and I go into these works, the *Kindertotentanz*, for periods of two to five months at a time. I went back to them in 2000 because of another emotional upset. I thought, "As long as I am upset about something else I might as well paint these as well". It wasn't the same cause, but it certainly was an analogous feeling of despair and anguish.

The ones downstairs are also, in a much less obvious way, an attempt to paint an emotional reaction. Because I'm not really painting mountains... I mean, I'm painting *mountains*, I'm painting *ships*, I'm painting the *sky*, but what I am really painting is my emotional reaction. As I'm going along I will suddenly be hit by something in the landscape, some detail that moves me.

MacKay: I was going to ask you if any of the families that you have dealt with over the years....have they ever seen your paintings?

Haughton: Not many people have seen them at all. A few of the etchings were shown at the Barrett-Post Gallery in 1990. They've been shown to one or two people a year as they come and visit my studio. Even I haven't seen them like this.

MacKay: What was it like for you when you came in....I mean I guess you were involved in the hanging but what was it like when at the end you could stand back and see them all like this, David?

Haughton: Well, for the last week I have been cleaning and re-painting the walls. All of the business of putting together a gallery from disrepair had to be dealt with. I was focused on the task. It was only the morning of the opening, I came back here early and the morning light was coming in the upstairs gallery. I played the recording [of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau singing the] *Kindertotenlieder* of Mahler, to unofficially open the show. Anyway, the emotion took me then.



Installation view of second floor



Hydranencephaly, 10 x 12 inches

MacKay: I just wanted to ask you one more thing....you mentioned that the prints, the early the black and white *Hope versus Anguish*, and somehow the coloured paintings here, seem to embody *hope* somehow, and I am not sure how that's there. Can you explain?

Haughton: No. Not really. [choked up] If it does, that's good because families don't lose hope. Do I lose hope? I don't know....I keep going to work.

MacKay: Well thank you so much David....It's great to meet you and it's been really an amazing experience to look at these paintings and be with them for a while and thank you for that.

That is Dr. David Haughton. We were talking about a collection of his art that is on display now at a gallery at 2060 Pine Street in Vancouver. David Haughton, an artist and an Emergency Pediatrician at BC Children's Hospital. When you go to the art gallery at 2060 Pine Street.... downstairs a collection of David Haughton's landscapes of British Columbia then upstairs the group we were looking at: the *Kindertotentanz*.