

# In conversation: "Singing law into creation"

Morgan Asoyuf & Afuwa

**Afuwa:** What was the germ, the seedling that started this show?

**Morgan Asoyuf:** *Royal Portrait* has been in development for seven years. It started when fellow artist and goldsmith Rick Adkins and I were talking; we're really close, we discuss everything. We started talking about the idea of royalty, of addressing the differences between Western colonial ideas of what royalty is and what it is within our Indigenous communities, which is so, so different. We thought, "Okay, this would be an interesting statement to make using the crown—but in a very different context."

**A:** In a context that's culturally relevant to you.

**MA:** Absolutely, and the political side of it is something that I wanted to challenge myself with. *Royal Portrait* isn't just about jewellery, carving, and textiles. This is a show about honouring land and water protectors, and the people out here doing MMIW2S work. Some people are very well taken care of by their communities, and some are

not. I see people without proper regalia who are out here doing this groundwork...and historically, these were our royal people. They were the people taking care of everybody. They were the people held up in positions of power. Seeing them not getting proper recognition through the art form...that bothered me. So I wanted to put some light on that and remind everybody that we need to be properly outfitting land and water defenders. If you're going to make regalia for somebody, let's do it for these matriarchs. Let's do it for these women and two-spirit folks, because they need to be held up just as much as any chief that has inherited the name. Some are out working for the land, and some are not, but they're still getting adorned properly.

**A:** So, regalia is gifted to you by your community?

**MA:** Generally, yes, or your family or parents make it for you.

**A:** It's not something that you acquire for yourself. It's something that you receive.

**MA:** Some people do make their own, but it's not as common. Some people use it in a more showboat-y way, where it's like, "Look at my beautiful regalia. I've got all these great outfits on." It's become common to heavily adorn male chiefs and to not at all adorn the female chiefs. Not every single culture is matriarchal on the coast, but Tsm'syen culture is, so this practice doesn't make sense in our political system, and I see that as a sign that, via colonization, patriarchy has seeped into some of our spaces. There are also huge problems with issues like homophobia, which is not a part of our traditional systems.

**A:** So, this exhibition is almost a corrective measure, a rebalancing?

**MA:** Yeah, it is. [laughs] It's pushing for these things to be corrected. The last place that we should see inequality for our women and two-spirit folks is in our own culture, because if you look at what's going on for us, especially with missing women and abuse rates, women and two-spirit folks face the worst of these issues. Yet women and two-spirit folks are doing the most. They're on the frontlines, they're out protecting the land, they're out on the streets doing MMIW2S work, but they are not having the regalia, status, or power placed on them that the culture should be putting on them. Artists have the ability to legitimize people through regalia, and that's where we have to stand up and push for changes. We have to start putting

wealth and power on these incredible people that deserve to be honoured.

What's also notable is that when you are a creator of certain forms of regalia and you do crest work, you're creating an actual, legal document that states, for example, somebody's ownership of a territory. Not every art form is a document of law, but a lot of them are. There's a similar saying about the singing, which is that you're singing the law. It's a living document. All these art forms together are our cultural law in action. I've been struggling to articulate this within the show, because it's hard to explain how we feel about all these different forms that are legalities too. They're not just performance. You're also singing law into creation, you know?

**A:** What has the impact been on the land defenders and water defenders who received the regalia in *Royal Portrait*?

**MA:** One important aspect has been to make the work they're doing more visible. Kota Gallipeau, who is also a DJ, has received some jobs out of it, which is really awesome. Ta'Kaiya Blaney and Sii-am Hamilton are visible already, but it's been a really cool way to spread their message and support their ongoing resistance to extractive industry projects. Another aspect is that I've been able to use the show to push donations to Tiny House Warriors. I wouldn't say that I

can necessarily measure the impact at this point, but one person was talking to me about how necessary it was for Indigenous, two-spirit, and femme people just to have some sort of public space. I hope that *Royal Portrait* will travel more—it will be at NONAM in Switzerland next—because of the impact on the people who've seen it, and because I think seeing it in person is vital.

**A:** With these life-sized portraits, not only do you see land and water defenders being honoured for their work, but at the same time the portraits look back at you, asking, “What is your contribution to this land you're standing on?”

**MA:** By doing my work, I do what I can to honour them. Because of colonization and residential school and the Sixties Scoop, there are people who don't know their families, and don't have people to provide these things for them. So those are the places where artists themselves can start filling in the gaps, where I feel we have a duty to honour these people who are royalty within our culture—whether or not they have a family structure of support around them.

**A:** You're giving to them, and they're giving to everyone. Reciprocity.

**MA:** It's like the universe, right? It's more than just person-to-person. That's why I think it is important to

be careful. Artists get asked to work for free all the time, but you have to direct your work to the right places, where it's really going to make a difference, or where it's really going to honour the right people, promote the right people, because associations are recommendations, right? Let's make sure we're recommending the people who are stepping up and doing the work and who are really standing up for our people and our lands. It's all intertwined to me.

**A:** And it's a way of valuing their work.

**MA:** That's part of the purpose, too, right? There's so much value there. The work that I see so many people doing is just incredible: the time that they spend and the emotional energy... They sacrifice so much. Honouring that sacrifice is a really good thing to do, and I would like to see more of it.

I'm always pushing myself forward, asking, “What can I do technically? What types of ideas can I experiment with?” I don't always know where it's going. But I feel that a lot of pieces in the show will have lives afterwards. Part of the prerogative was to create a bold, impressive collection with the intent to use these pieces later in actions and events. I think it's really important to show that people are not protestors. This is royalty you're talking to.