

# A WHALE OF A TALE TO REMIND US WE ARE ALL CONNECTED

Tough questions,  
painstaking creations

By Kanina Holmes  
Photos by Brette Little

Yukon artist Joyce Majiski surrounds herself with chunks of Styrofoam salvaged from the ocean, wading, as well, through a sea of single-use plastic bags. Her muse, focus, and growing companion for the last few months: a nine-metre skeleton of a juvenile humpback whale.

"I want to sort of be in a space where I'm either in the ocean or I am the whale," says Majiski, who has painstakingly recreated the life-sized model, carving each piece of Styrofoam bone and cutting, sewing, and ironing plastic bags to form the whale's skin. "I want to feel what it would be like if I was the ocean, if I was the queen of the ocean. What would I say to humanity?"

Her upcoming multimedia art installation is called *Song of the Whale* and part of Majiski's growing body of work that asks audiences tough questions and makes expansive statements about problems facing the planet. It seems fitting that to pursue this work Majiski pushes herself, her ideas, and her techniques to the edge.



Working from a studio on Salt Spring Island, where she's an artist in residence, Majiski says each piece of Styrofoam—colours ranging from ochre to pink, orange, white, and blue—like each bone, has its own character. She uses a small handsaw to break up the chunks, an X-ACTO knife to carve, and a small rasp to scoop out concave spaces.

"I started with the atlas and axis, the first bones after the skull, and am slowly working my way down the humpback-whale's backbone, vertebrae by vertebrae," says Majiski from her temporary quarters in British Columbia. The skull alone will measure roughly two-metres long and 1.2 metres across when complete.

Over the past year, Majiski, who has called the Yukon home since 1984, made a commitment to save every single-use plastic that came into her life so she could, in turn, use it in *Song of the Whale*. She also spent days dumpster diving in Vancouver in search of materials to experiment with. Her only criteria was to find and work with garbage that's showing up in seas and oceans and inside whales' bodies. In keeping with her environmental consciousness, Majiski only incorporates reclaimed material, including the plastic bags and Styrofoam. She is also recycling some of her ideas to give this particular whale a voice.



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sea. And I was thinking of water through our bodies and water through other creatures' bodies.

"In quiet times when I sit by the sea and dream, I can imagine living underwater and experiencing all of the human activity from that perspective," she continues. "It is a profound experience and adds a different depth to the work I have already done, so I think it is an important part of my process."

And for Majiski, the process she's engaged with is as important as the work itself. She visited the Vancouver Aquarium and spent days at the Beaty Biodiversity Museum, building relationships with biologists. She dived into marine science and keeps tabs on statistics that express the human impact on seas. While much of this information can be depressing, Majiski says she focuses on research that points to alternative ways of doing things and changing the way we live.

*Song of the Whale* will open at the Yukon Arts Centre in December and run through February 2021. The humpback-whale skeleton will be suspended from the ceiling, with lights creating an underwater atmosphere that is further enhanced with a soundscape by Yukon composer and media artist Daniel Janke. Audiences will hear sounds of whales as well as human sounds sourced by Majiski, including military testing and sonar drilling, that whales would experience underwater. There will also be water dispensers scattered around the exhibit fittingly full of the same microplastics that float around our oceans.

Majiski wants people to understand that ocean currents connect us all around the world. She also wants people to take the extra step of connecting the dots of awareness and action and seeing a bigger picture. "People get very strident in their single-use-plastic bags and their straws, but then they still go and they buy stuff that's wrapped in plastic or they buy too much. It's consumerism in a bigger sense," she says.

At its heart, *Song of the Whale* is really about immersing ourselves in a whale's perspective, even from landlocked Whitehorse, she says.

"The ocean touches all of the planet. We are all connected, whether we live inland or outland," says Majiski. "I live beside the Yukon River. It goes to the sea. The fish come back in from the sea. I don't think we can think of ourselves as being isolated anymore."

"We breathe all of the same air; that sea air cycles around and around," she continues. "I don't think there needs to be a distinction as to where you live. We can still feel that empathy for the planet and the planet is everything." **Y**

*Song of the Whale* emerges from a larger body of Majiski's recent work focusing on water, including *Catch of the Day*, exhibited in Mexico, and *Tales from the Tideline*, assembled in Spain. The ideas behind these projects grew out of a two-month, seaside art residency during which Majiski would take daily walks on the beach and discover just how much garbage—everything from children's toys, plastic bags, tampons, and human waste—gets dumped into the water and returns ashore.

"I wanted to trace water through its different forms—from air to land to sea," says Majiski. "I was thinking about snow to glacier, glacier to river, river to