

Voyages into the misty past of our West Coast history

By ANN ROSENBERG

VISUAL ARTS

Two hundred years ago, the first Europeans to visit the western shores of North America were easing their sailing ships into the straits and misty inlets of what is now British Columbia. Mariners such as Alejandro Malaspina and Dionisio Alcalá Galiano left their names on bits of Canadian geography in exchange for the furs and artifacts they traded away from the native peoples of the region.

The lustrous sea otter furs found their way to the Orient, and the cultural artifacts of the Nootka (Nuu-Chah-Nulth), the Tlingit and the Haida came to rest in the ethnographic collections of imperial Spain.

Enlightened Voyages — an ambitious exhibition recently opened at the Maritime Museum — traces these early Spanish explorations of the Northwest Coast, and brings to Vancouver for the first time many native artifacts that have been in Spanish collections since the 18th century.

Conceived by Vancouver author and historian John Kendrick and Maritime Museum director Robin Inglis, the show will travel in July to the Washington State Historical Museum and in September to the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa. This well-researched display — over three years and \$200,000 in the planning — will appeal to anyone with a love of navigation history and geography, as well as to people who wish to know more about the early native societies along the West Coast.

Laden with documents and artifacts, the show brings to life centuries of Spanish exploration in the Great South Sea. As you might expect, charts, maps, sketches of sites, nautical instruments, models of ships, botanical drawings and portraits (of Spaniards and natives alike) abound.

After passing through a brief introductory section containing modern-day paintings of Galiano, Malaspina and Valdez, the visitor moves back in time. Next comes a series of chambers with historical

images of Christopher Columbus, Ferdinand Magellan and the many kings and queens who supported Spanish navigation; artifacts, and photographs of artifacts documenting maritime history.

The most fascinating objects — and the only ones really pertinent to the voyages of Malaspina and Galiano — are in the innermost recesses of the exhibition, sections we reach after this lengthy, information-packed preamble.

If you believe in submerging yourself in history, the gems that pop to the surface like glass floats on turbulent waters will make the trip through the exhibition worthwhile. The several native artifacts and original ink drawings borrowed from the Museo de America and Museo Naval in Madrid and from other collections are outstanding.

The Tlingit slat armor, the drawing of the Nootka (Nuu-Chah-Nulth) woman in her cedar bark dress, the ink painting of strange totems at Port Mulgrave, bring home some fragments of Canada's earliest history.

Research and Discovery is the title of Panya Clark's show at Artspeak (311 West Hastings, to Feb. 16); an exhibition that owes its content and form to the world's most widely consumed exploration magazine — National Geographic.

Spread through the gallery, a series of simple gold-painted stands serve as pedestals. On each one, a copy of National Geographic is open to an illustration that inspired the associated sculpture.

In one piece, a sailboat fashioned from tin cans is an exact copy of the one a beaming Ionian boy cradles in his arms. In another, a suitcase full of wrapped plastic hummingbirds is an interpretation of a Brazilian bird nursery shown in the pages of National Geo.

The desk that forms part of the installation shows a work in progress — a partially finished watercolor of market baskets and some paints are set beside a magazine open to the appropriate



CHIEF OF THE POINT OF LANGARA, from Enlightened Voyages exhibition

page. Pieces of fruit sculpted in clay are intimations of the sculpture that will be the final result of the artist's process of discovery.

A frieze decorated with the National Geographic's oak leaf and acorn border circles the gallery walls just below ceiling level. The frieze is designed to function as a book shelf for hundreds of copies of the popular, yellow-covered journal.

Clark works as a display assistant at the Royal Ontario Museum, and in this show she's created a witty commentary on the traditional museum's dependence on artifacts (both real and

false) for its scholarly credibility and financial stability. She is also acknowledging the seductiveness of the images National Geographic has provided for generations of armchair travellers — the millions of people who have learned about life in faraway places through its lively pages.

Three exhibitions at the Vancouver Art Gallery (on display until March 3) use geography to present political and personal issues. Two of these interrelated shows are installations by Allan Sekula, who heads the photography program of the California Institute of the Arts, in Valencia.

The third is by Sara Diamond, Vancouver artist, feminist historian and expert in the field of labor studies.

Sekula's Geography Lesson began with a desire to discover and record evidence of the little differences that could help him distinguish Canada from America. One of the things he noticed was Canadian currency, which led him to an examination of the Bank of Canada's headquarters in Ottawa.

Eventually he selected Ottawa and Sudbury as the geographic sites that could symbolize, for him, the authority asserted by the capital on other less advantaged

Artspeak's witty, evocative exhibition draws its inspiration from the good old National Geo

cities in this country. The Erickson-designed headquarters of the national bank and industrial settings in Sudbury are the physical environments most frequently documented in the photographs that elucidate the exhibition's companion essay.

The essay (and the photos) address the other problem of paternalism that is apparent here to visitors and residents, namely the American domination of Canadian economics and industry. This complex work, like the Enlightened Voyages show at the Maritime Museum, requires lengthy and careful consideration.

At the centre of the installation stands a reading desk where copies of the essay are placed. The photographs are carefully labelled so that the spectator knows exactly what is being represented. Some of the juxtapositions that occur within the sets of images are very insightful.

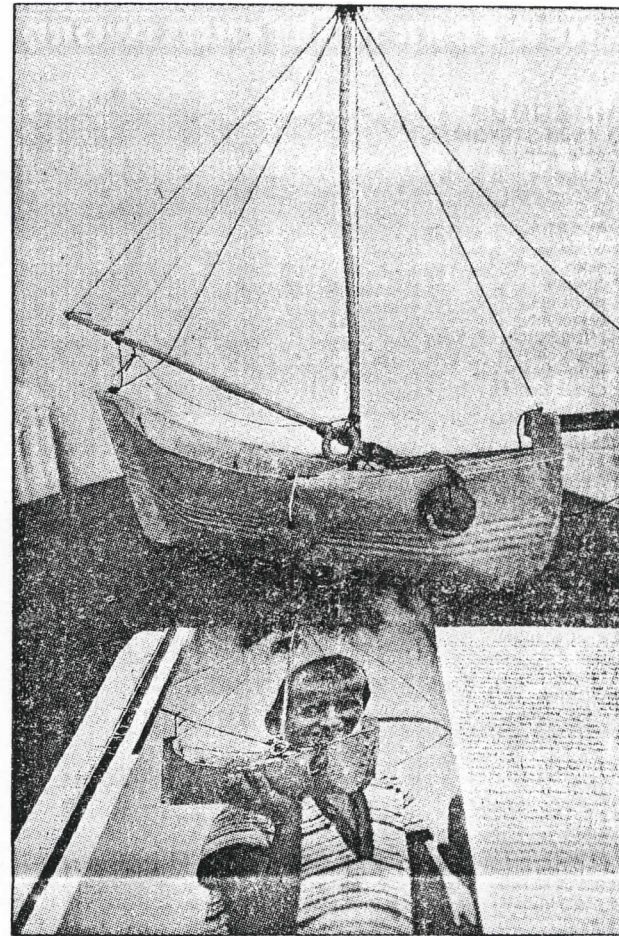
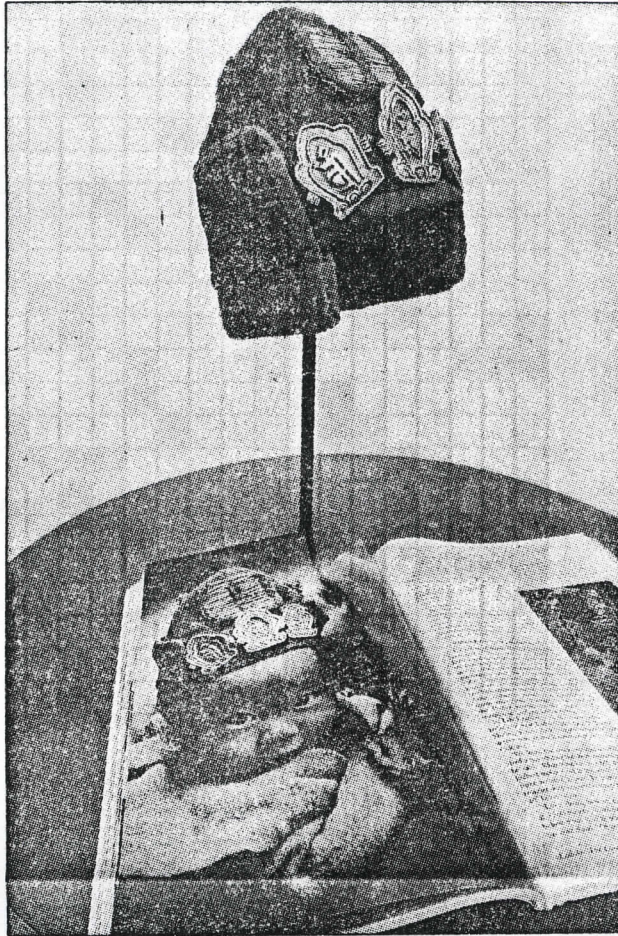
For example, the grouping that includes photographs of an A.Y. Jackson painting in a union office in Sudbury, other Jacksons in the reception room of Eldorado Resources in Ottawa, and a Jackson and several Group of Seven works in the National Gallery in Ottawa, makes several ironic comments about the relationship between money and culture, and culture and control.

This is one instance where description falls very short of experience. Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes — a recent addition to the VAG's permanent collection — is as elusive as it is demanding.

Sekula's second installation is equally analytical in intent and needs careful scrutiny. In this work, however, an unspecified North American location becomes the site for Aerospace Folktales. Here, the artist's father exerts authority, although other family members are also part of the history that's presented.

Two overlapping sound systems play over and against each other within the confines of the room, so that the words are difficult to distinguish. But discussions, arguments, ambient sounds of traffic and the clatter of dishes give soul and life to the sterile, orderly environments depicted in the photo documents.

The visual condensing of lifestyle begins with a double portrait of the artist's parents and a photograph of the Marine View apartment hotel that served as the family home in the late '60s when the documentation was made. Beside this rather seedy dwelling is an image listing the rules its tenants abide by — no



TREAT FOR ARMCHAIR TRAVELLERS: images from National Geographic-inspired Research and Discovery show

loud parties, that sort of thing.

In this context, the shabby furniture (plastic wood coffee tables, plastic-covered chesterfields) looks rented. Every room is shown as painfully clean and neat. Terse, typewritten statements establish the rationales for the sequences of images that follow them.

"In the evening the engineer would write letters and straighten the lamps. His wife would cook dinner." These phrases preface photographs where letters are being written, the pesky fixtures of a Woolco-quality tri-lite struggled with and dinner prepared and served on the spotless kitchen dinette.

This is, in a sense, a modern equivalent to ancient folktales of domesticity. (At night the woodcutter sat before his fire. His wife brought him a flagon of ale.) But Formica has supplanted wood and the tri-lite stands in place of the hearth. And the aerospace engineer who brings home the bacon is served by his wife.

Clues to the cultural life within the home are contained in these statements: "Every two weeks a new edition of Great Literature would arrive. The engineer offered his children a dollar for every book they read." This prefaces a photograph of a bookshelf filled with appropriate tomes. It

is qualified soon by another text that says: "At some point in his career the engineer studied the effects of nuclear weapons."

This phrase directs us to consider several other photographs that have been taken from a book on that subject. In these the tissue damage that results from nuclear heat and a graft that schematizes the forces of an atom blast are coolly presented. At this point one understands that the engineer and his children read books, the same books, but are motivated to read and interpret in different ways.

The locale in which the engineer exercises his expertise is a Lockheed plant whose precise location, like the exact site of the Marine View apartments, is not disclosed. And the teenaged boy and girl who are depicted in some of the photographs lounging on their beds, helping with the chores, or smiling awkwardly for the camera are, like the parents, never identified by name in the accompanying texts.

For some reason the impersonality does not seem heartless, but rather necessary in establishing everything as a fable of life lived by the folks who serve in any contemporary industry.

Although similar in intent, Sara Diamond's Pattertnity has a

warm, welcoming temperature that contrasts with the intellectual chill of Aerospace Folktales. Her multi-media installation is composed of eight monitors that play three different but complementary programs, striking photographic murals of street life in New York, and wonderfully comfortable chesterfields in which to lounge while falling under the spell of a compelling narrative.

Pattertnity manages to interweave facts about the history of the family, 20th-century Judaism and the labor movement, and to give us a lesson in the urban geography of America's most polyglot city without losing our interest for a second.

This two-hour experience is animated by the intelligent,

sprightly disclosures of the artist's father, Jerome, who is a man engaged equally in his past and present. I will be reviewing Pattertnity at length next week.

Meanwhile, if you have an afternoon to spare see Sekula and Diamond's works at the VAG and put yourself in touch with their new modes of storytelling and historical documentation. ♦

BAU-XI
VERONICA PLEWMAN
JAN. 28-FEB. 16, 1991
 Meet the artist: Sat., Feb. 2, 2-4 pm
 3045 GRANVILLE ST. 733-7011

PAINTINGS OF THE 60'S
WILLIAM PEREHUDOFF
 OPENS TODAY
WOLTJEN/UDELL GALLERY
 IN Vancouver
 1558 W 6 Ave.
 738-8900