

## BEAR -dweller of the wilderness

Nature has been important to me since my childhood. Growing up in rural Finland, surrounded by forest and animals, my family's everyday life created a connection to the natural world and a sounding board for my art. Due to this, I seek visual harmony in my works and attempt to awaken us to respect and protect the fragile ecosystem.



The bear is often considered a symbol of masculinity and power but I have chosen to represent it through the traditionally feminine fibre arts technique, where the deliberate small scale, the woven structure and soft pastel colours depict a softer view.

In my first bear themed exhibit, that took place years ago, I got permission to use images of a photographer friend and subsequently created a few works based on them. However, I did not feel comfortable with the idea of using his photos without having my own experience of encountering bears in the wild.

Most of the pieces in this exhibition were inspired by my recent trip to the *Khutzeymateen Inlet* north of Prince Rupert. There I observed both the grizzlies and the amazing beauty of the estuary as I was immersed by the harmony of this wild place and its inhabitants, grizzly bears. They had come from their winter quarters to graze on the nutrient-rich spring sage grasses that grow in thick mats. These juicy leaves give hungry bears roughly as much protein as does the salmon.

A small group of us in a rubber zodiac floated engine-off in shallow channels of the estuary and, without making any abrupt gestures, and noise the bears put up with us and allowed us to get a close look at them. Sometimes we were entertained by sub-adults who played and wrestled in the field while at low tide in the adjoining bay, we observed a mother bear with cubs turning over rocks in search of crabs and clams. We believed that this sow and its cubs felt safe despite our proximity.

The male grizzlies come to the estuary and kill cubs in order to send females into heat and to continue their own genes. The protective mother bears may have realized, however, that the presence of these "boat people" scares the males away and creates a sanctuary where to feed the offsprings. When I viewed my photos afterwards I realized that the majority were of these round and fuzzy cubs, and they became the subjects for my works.

Nowadays we tend to either hunt bears or see them as a tourist attraction. Thus we have taken on their future, which now depends on us, and I hope that the exhibition of my woven bear images awakens positive thoughts and a willingness to protect these magnificent dwellers of the wilderness.

*Khutzeymateen* is a Tsimshian word that means "sheltered place of fish and bears", a spiritual and protected place. Now it is a grizzly sanctuary and forms a part of the great bear rain forest.