On August 12, 2021 a crowd had gathered in Opera Alley, looking at the forty-foot long, vibrantly painted mural stretching along the long brick wall.

The mural is titled “The Sun Set Twice on the People That Day,” and was originally painted in 2000 by Brian and Jasper Tripp and Alme Allen. It was painted for many reasons, but one of them was to pay homage to Humboldt Bay’s first people, the Wiyot, and to remember the 1860 massacre that took place on Tuluwat, an island in Humboldt Bay in other years known as Indian Island. And also, though Brian and Alme are both Karuk traditionalists, they thought it to be important that even they acknowledge through this work that they are guests on this land that is now called Eureka. The title of the mural was drawn from a poem of the same name written by Brian Tripp. The mural was relocated during the Eureka Street Art Festival to the Clarke Museum only three blocks from Humboldt Bay, and within viewing distance of Tuluwat. Brian Tripp, who is in hospice, would be making a special appearance to add his finishing touches to the mural.

Around 6:00 p.m., a silver car pulled up and I heard some whooping coming from the car.
Brian Tripp, who I'd only seen in photos from a few years ago, was grinning widely in the front passenger seat. He was helped to a chair near the center of the alley with a full view of the mural, surrounded by friends and family. The clock was ticking, as Alme said “before Uncle Brian’s ride turns into a pumpkin,” meaning, given Brian’s current declining health he couldn’t be out for too long, especially with how cold it was getting.

A tour group led by the Street Art Festival stopped by shortly after Brian arrived, and Alme gave a bit of information and told the group they were lucky that Brian, one of the original artists on the mural, was there that evening.

It was then that Brian began to sing in Karuk.

Brian sang a bit quietly at first and people started leaning in. Many who didn’t already have their cameras out took them out and started recording Brian in his chair under a blanket, hunched over and singing with his eyes closed. Family members, mostly other men from what I could see and hear, began to add into the song. Sonny, Brian’s nephew, was leaning into the song, tapping his foot and nodding his head as he added a beat and his voice to the song. Brian and everyone else were singing louder now, but the others faded away as the song neared its end and Brian sang alone.

Brian is a noted cultural leader among the Karuk and the people on the Klamath, along with being a nationally and internationally known artist. He and people of his generation like Julian Lang and Lyn Risling are key players in bringing back the songs, language, dances, and especially important, the pikiyávish (world renewal) ceremonies as well as the Brush Dance ceremony at the village of Katimiin (Somes Bar) after they had been gravely damaged by policies of government agencies suppressing Native cultural activities in the area for over 150 years.

The generation that followed Brian, Alme’s generation, continues those dances today, making regalia from traditional and modern materials. The generation after Alme are participating in dances and ceremonies from their childhood, having coming of age dances, and growing up with these important spiritual traditions that are being widely used to promote community wellness. Alme, in some of his free time, teaches the Karuk/Yurok style of woodcarving to other Native men and high school students as a continuation of this cultural revival movement. His kids participate in ceremonies throughout the summer, and his grandkids are also being raised in these traditions.

After serving in Vietnam, Brian came back to Humboldt County, became an artist (after getting an art degree at HSU and teaching there for a time), and moved back to Karuk country in Orleans about twenty years ago. Brian invested himself in his art, and promoted other Native artists in his gallery which was in Old Town, a block away from the Clarke Museum, bordering Opera Alley where the “Sun Set Twice” mural was now on display.
With a ruffling sigh by Brian to signal the end of the song, everyone fell quiet. Brian began to speak.

“Out on the Island,
In the middle of the Bay,
The sun set twice, on the people that day…”

At the close of the poem, we milled about, more relatives and friends came to greet Brian and see the mural. I used my thirty second spot in the dedication event to thank Alme for his time and energy, and for all the information he shared with me and other mural visitors over the course of the week.

After Alme’s intro of how the mural was moved from the Eureka Theater to the Clarke via storage at the Potawot barn at United Indian Health Services, he turned it to Brian, whose voice seemed to fill the alleyway. People moved in closer to hear him speak, and later, sing.

“When I heard the mural came down from the Morris Graves, I said, ‘what the shit?’ People laughed at that and Brian smiled. “I took some friends to see it and it was gone. I was upset by that.” Shirley, Clarke Museum board president and member of the Trinidad Rancheria, told me earlier that Brian was quite a character when he was a bit younger. It wasn’t hard to imagine.

Later on, he said with a smile, “This is the best place for this mural, the Clarke Museum. It’ll be here forever”. He then began singing his Jump Dance song that he uses to accompany the “Sun Set Twice” poem.

When Brian’s encore performance of “The Sun Set Twice on the People That Day” concluded, Pimm Allen, Alme’s wife and Brian’s niece, added that the mural was not only a memory of the massacre, but was an act in healing for Native and non-Native people by creating a physical space for discussion and better understanding of this complicated place’s history.

When the mural first went up, the city was hesitant about a huge piece of art that could be seen as divisive by reviving the history of the place. The mural, which was originally going to take a large section of the Eureka Theater, was shrunk down to be forty feet by twelve feet at its tallest point. There were no words on the mural itself, only an informational sign next to it.

Since those days in 2000, a lot has changed. The city has given back two sections of city-owned land on Tuluwat to the Wiyot people, who have been the historic residents of Wigi (Humboldt Bay in Wiyot). More murals by Native artists have gone up including a series of four murals on the Discovery Shop in
Henderson Center from 2020’s mural festival, one of which was painted by almost the same crew who worked on the mural now at the Clarke.

The theme of the mural festival was: “Wayfinding,” and Pimm talked about how this piece could serve as a signpost of where the Karuk and other Native people have been and where they are going—reclaiming mental spaces for Native folks through visual arts and reclaiming physical space through the return of Tuluwat to the Wiyot tribe.

Nearby, a mural was going up at the site of Eureka’s historic Chinatown. The artist, Korean-American David Young Kim had explained how the mural serves to reclaim the history of an area and a whole community that has been largely erased from public memory.

The “Sun Set...” and Chinatown murals occupy spots in the world of local public art that evoke a sense of historical place from which viewers can learn and draw strength and solidarity. The murals also provide help in finding one’s way in a place that was once familiar spatially, culturally or religiously, but now, for many reasons, is not.

The “Sun Set...” mural serves as a concrete representation of the passage of time and a touchstone to remember the lineage of ongoing struggles for cultural revitalization. Pimm called attention to the importance of reclaiming Native land not just for Native people, but for sharing among all people in a sustainable way conscious of the delicate balance of the world.

This is a key aspect of the “Land Back” movement, which strikes fear into many a confused bystander. It does not mean a Native person will show up Christopher-Columbus-style and stake a flag on your yard and claim it. It has to do with allowing more Native agency over Native sovereign land, promoting stewardship rather than exploitation of resources and support for natural systems to repair the world physically and spiritually. The ongoing restoration of Tuluwat is a great example of what Land Back can look like, but so is the inclusion of Native art in places like the Clarke Museum, Henderson Center murals, and the Spawning Ground Spiral on the Eureka Waterfront trail, which also features concrete cast stools made by Alme. Artwork reclaims these spaces through decolonizing ideas of what “art” is and provides a public space to learn more about Native lifeways, revitalization, and history.

The “Sun Set...” mural, and its namesake poem, is a public acknowledgment of a massive, continuing tear, and efforts to repair it using the traditional tools provided by the spirit people that came before and taught the people the proper way to do things. Even in the immediate memory of a massacre, the people

Far left: Alme Allen working on the rocks, Eli Hensher-Aubrey on the ladder working on the edge of the obsidian. Pimm Allen is at far right supervising progress being made.
planned to meet back for the next dance to repair the
tears in the fabric of their world, noted in Brian’s poem
that “we must take time to rest, because we know
daylight is coming and we have to give it our best”.

The rising of this mural seventeen months into the
COVID pandemic during the “Wayfinding”-themed
Street Art festival is impactful. The mural proposes a
spiritual method, and a larger repairing mindset used
to navigate through the dark, confusing dangerous
alleys of modern life by focusing on rituals of repair,
restoration, and return of land, cultures, languages,
and people.

Progress is visible in Humboldt County as seen
through the continued return of land to the Wiyot
tribe, the purchase of land for community gardens
by the Blue Lake Rancheria and the establishment
of the Food Sovereignty lab at Humboldt State
University. Further evidence of progress is the Wiyot
tribe’s presence in Old Town through the Da gow
louwi’ Cultural Center formerly known as the Wiyot
Cultural Center. The name Da gow louwi’ means
“the ongoing or continuing return to all,” a fitting
and hopeful look into the future.

Brian’s generation follows one that remembers their
experiences in Indian Schools and when policies of
cultural suppression were normalized and visibly
supported by the government. Nowadays the forces
impacting Native communities are more subversive—
blaming the struggles that these communities face
on the communities themselves though they have
been systematically set up to fail through recorded
historical systemic divestment of natural and financial
resources. Repairs to facilitate a sense of community
and connection, despite existing in a world designed
to divide, are happening in many ways. These include
hearkening back to crafting traditions like basket
weaving and woodcarving, along with the purchase
of land to stabilize and strengthen the health of the
community through access to healthy food.

Understanding the symbolism and the larger
meaning of the mural provides access to a repair-
oriented mindset that helps one live in a world that
is increasingly difficult. The Native people of this
area have fought (and researched and meditated
and recreated and collaborated) for decades to bring
back these traditions because they mean something,
and continue to be incredibly relevant today in our
damaged world. Understanding the work and the
mindset that fuels it is powerful and inspiring.

Brian was helped over to the left side of the
mural to add his signature. Alme had told me that
Brian sometimes painted with his hands, usually
incorporating a thumb print. He did just that to sign
his initials—B.D.T. while a crowd of at least forty
people looked on, cameras flashing.

Brian completed his initials with two dots, one
before the B and one after the T, and dipped his finger
in the red paint again. He wrote J E…

“You writing Jesus, Brian?” Julian Lang, another
cultural leader and elder asked over the crowd,
laughing a bit. I think Brian subtly flipped him off
and completed the T. “JET” represented Brian’s son,
who helped with the initial mural painting, but wasn’t
present at the dedication.

Later, I introduced myself to Brian and thanked him
again for making the trip out.

“I used to come into the museum all the time” he
said, “looking at the displays and all. Lots of great stuff.
I used to be on the board, way back when the museum
opened this section” He pointed at the building
the mural was on, the Nealis Hall Native American Wing.
“I don’t know how I got on the board but I was on it
for a few years. This is a good place for the mural to be
and stay forever.”

Some other folks came by to say bye to Brian,
and I moved away. It had been a long day, but I was
energized by what I had seen in Opera Alley.

People were headed home, and out of a cooler
under a table came smoked albacore, cheese, crackers,
and drinks. “How do you turn those lights on?” Alme
asked, pointing to the string lights over the alleyway
above the mural. “We’re going to stay out here and
party all night!”

Before I left, I asked Alme “Will you be out here in
twenty-one years to repaint it again?” At that point,
Alme would be just a little younger than Brian, who
was seventy-eight.

“Nah, my kids will be the ones doing it” He smiled.

And so, with the matte sealant painted on the mural
to seal it from the elements for the next few decades,
another layer has been added to the depth of the
mural, and the meaning of this place we call home.

We continue our trip along the spiral.

HH
Peeling away the layers of the mural...

The mural features a number of images with multiple meanings layered to create a complex image of spiritual and historical meaning. Throughout the week, each time I went out to see the mural, I learned another snippet about the section being worked on.

Alme told me how the spirit people (A) appear in the background of the mural’s left side, and came into appearance as he added paint to the panels. Alme explained how the spirit people were accompanying the people in the basket boat (B) through the waters of Humboldt Bay, moving away from the massacre site at Tuluwat.

The choppy waters (C) represent the turbulence and hardships that not just the Wiyot, but all indigenous people are going through since settler colonization. The red oval (D) at the center symbolized Tuluwat, but also the obsidian blades used in the White Deerskin Dance used to cut away sickness from the world in the Karuk world renewal ceremony (pikyávish). As we understand that the Wiyot were conducting their world renewal at the time of the massacre, this is a very important reference.

He also explained that the baskets (E) that appeared to be floating on the far right side were being held by the figure of a spirit medicine woman (F), maintaining balance in the dance and ceremony here on earth and in the spirit world. There are white thumbprints (G) here—some were made by Brian in the original painting, others by the next generation in the Allen and Tripp lines.

Some original features on the mural were painted over and covered up, while others were highlighted with layers of new paint. The texture (H) of the mural is most visibly seen in the red blade at the center, which was painted by the younger muralist who put their hands in paint and drew lines sweeping upward and inward to the center of the blade, thus leaving their generations “marks” on the world.

When Alme first participated in creating the mural, he and the other young muralists participated in this way too. In the mural the two strands of twisted dentalium (I) between two male figures represent the genetic family ties between people, and the two male figures also represent the Rock Packers (J) who carry the obsidian dance blades during the White Deerskin Dance.

The Spiral (K) is the spawning ground, where we all come from and where we all return, with an extra line added to the spiral with this repainting to represent the next generation, with some blue to represent the role of water in the life cycle not only of the ever important salmon, but the life cycle of people and the earth.

From the author:

Thank you to Alme Allen and the Karuk Mural Team for their work on the mural itself and their sharing of information on the meaning behind the mural. They were great to work with and I feel so lucky to have been able to meet them and learn from them—they were very generous with their knowledge and this project is definitely a high point in my time working at the Museum.
Revealing elements of the mural through the Clarke Museum collection

Curator and author of the article, Katie Buesch, went through the Clarke Museum collection to highlight a few of the recurring designs used not only in the mural but in baskets and other objects within the museum. For the mural, the artists traced the original zoomorphs from the Clark Museum collection.

On the left, a zoomorph found near Happy Camp after a landslide c. 1980. On the right, a zoomorph from the lower left hand side of the mural.

The basket design between the two moons (right) is called “Stairway to our Ancestors” and appears on a basket cap (left) belonging to Leona Wilkinson, sister of then Wiyot Tribal Chairperson Cheryl Seidner. According to Alme, the inclusion of that pattern in the mural was the only request of the Wiyot Tribe while the mural was being planned.

On the left, a twined storage basket pre-1900 by an unknown Karuk weaver with a friendship design. The basket is woven from beargrass, Woodwardia, spruce root and hazel sticks. In the middle, the two baskets held aloft by the medicine woman in the right hand panel of the mural. On the right, a decorative basket with a stacked wood design (rectangles) and snake nose (triangles).

On the left a storage basket pre-1900 by an unknown Hupa weaver with a stacked snakenose design. On the right a similar design used in a spiral on the right hand side of the mural.

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