

## BLUE THUNDERBIRD - 1995

During the period of 1994-95, I began telling stories of my life and family in cast paper reliefs. The move into cast paper wasn't new. At the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, I had experimented with paper casting, first by painting on large handmade textured paper, and later making small paper casts reliefs. The purpose of exploring handmade paper was to find a common ground between three-dimensional and two dimensional. The paper cast relief offered textural and formal qualities of sculpture with the addition of mix-media painting and drawing. It was also an opportunity to sculpt in clay, which has always been a satisfying way for me to work due to its flexible and forgiving nature and earthy qualities. At the time it seemed to be the perfect medium to express some personal stories that had happened at the time, in a realistic, meaningful way that reflected the reality of my world. By casting directly from my family members' faces, these casts became realistic traces of their portrait identity, proof of their stories, rather than being distant, faceless or imagined 'Indians' from a past long ago.

*Blue Thunderbird* ( Figure 17) was dedicated to my younger sister, whose native name is Blue Thunderbird. She received her name from my great-grandmother because she had become severely ill and it is believed that a Native name will give a person strength. To have the thunderbird in your name is said to be an honour as it is the most



Figure 17. *Blue Thunderbird*, (detail) 1995. Handmade paper, mix media. 63x36"

powerful of all birds. Images of thunderbirds have existed across the country for several thousands of years, found on early artefacts and petroglyphs and pictographs. Stories about the thunderbird still exist today amongst aboriginal groups, commonly described as a massive, powerful bird. In my territory, the thunderbird is said to have black feathers and large glowing eyes. On the west coast, the thunderbird is said to be so large it could pick up whales right out of ocean, and its home is a nest made of rocks in the mountains. This thunderbird was also known for casting lightning bolts and sounding like thunder in flight. The Anishnabe stories say that there are two kinds of thunderbirds, one of which is a man transformed into a thunderbird, the other, the mighty, powerful thunderbird. These birds lived in the mountains and some even say left large circular impressions of their nests in the earth. The Anishnabe say they traveled disguised in storm clouds. Across Canada, the stories of the thunderbird's power vary, but generally, it is known for its ability to be a

guardian in life and in ceremony, to protect one from destructive or enemy forces, and to bring rain.

In the work *Blue thunderbird*, I inserted mould impressions of my sister's face and my own, and added the face of a thunderbird. Our faces are surrounded by seed bead impressions and old Saulteaux floral patterns. The work reveals my closeness and love for my sister and the concern and protectiveness I felt when she suddenly fell ill after a summer of family tragedies.

Even though these paper casts works were representational, my sculptural forms were moving in another direction of distilled forms with the incorporation of more natural materials as opposed to cast materials. Working in a more distilled fashion, there was certainly the lingering concern of reducing access, though I did not want to compromise my creative intuition to appease the expectations of the audience, instead I needed to follow my own creative truth and felt confident that the natural materials and forms would provide the entry way into further investigation of the subject matter.