

# Surviving as a Native Woman Artist

BY JOANE CARDINAL-SCHUBERT

**T**his is an excerpt from a speech given at the opening of "Diversities," an exhibition of the work of George Little Child, Jane Ash Poitras and Joane Cardinal-Schubert at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary in October 1989.

Some of you people here today are here out of respect, some out of curiosity, some as disbelievers. You don't know whether we belong here — showing in your museum as artists. After all, Native people have been curiosities for so long.

It is only a hundred years since our ancestors lived in tipis, hunted the buffalo and invented beef jerky. It is only a hundred years and some since your ancestors herded us onto reserves, washed us with scrub brushes and lye soap and chopped our hair off, uniforming the children in religious residential schools in an attempt to knock out the savagery. Our ancestors were beaten for speaking their language, their mother tongue: now we have major political battles in this country over whose mother tongue is the most important. It is only a hundred years and now we stand before you in this institution with our art work on the walls. Now we are civilized, aren't we?

We have come from a culture that has developed in one hundred years to the space age, something that has taken your collective cultures thousands of years. Yet still our people are criticized. We have to try harder than anyone else because we are diplomats for each other. We cannot afford one drunk in the street, one panhandler: we are stereotyping each other every day with our actions. People ask me questions about other Native people in this country, they ask me what they think, they think we are connected by some form of micro chip. This country is as full of as many diverse nations and languages as the continent of Europe. If Native people across the country appear to agree on issues it is because the issues are all the same: land, education, money, culture, language rights and the environment.

I am here today as an artist, as a communicator, as a maker of visual imagery; one of the most powerful forms of communicative expression that we have. I have included words for those of you who have a hard time with pictures; there is no excuse for you not understanding what my work is about if you take the time to really look and see, as I have been doing. I feel a responsibility to communicate.

In 1983 I travelled to Stonehenge fulfilling a childhood dream. I travelled through landscape that could have been in British Columbia. Arriving, I saw huge stones in a circle erected by a then primitive people. It was while standing near these huge landmarks that I thought of the very ancient consideration of the future that was a part of this indigenous culture and I realized how

very harmonious this beginning was with the indigenous peoples of North America. We too have erected stone landmarks of astronomical size, some many thousands of years old. These are, however, not revered as is Stonehenge — many saw their demise with the beginning of agriculture, others more recently at the hands of the developers, many only exist in the memory of the people or as a part of archaeological record, some are displayed in part as curiosities.

For thousands of years our culture respected nature and only took from the environment what it needed. It did not need mandates to understand the balance of nature but took its direction from the dictates of nature. It was a culture that took note when the leaves fell, when the snow fell, how much rain there was in a year, how the coats of the animals looked. It was a culture that did not make divisions between life, art and religion.

My part in the preservation of a seemingly invisible culture — on the plains we don't have totem poles — is as a receptor or translator, one who would point out what there once was, what there still is and the importance of all this to us. If it only serves to interest the viewer on the level of "nice pictures," that's fine with me, but it is made with the intent of serving many viewers on many levels and as a form of expression that I must take.

I am here out of respect for my people — the people that were unknown to me for most of my life. Other people knew more about me than I knew about myself. "You're an Indian!" the kids screamed at me at school. "You're a half-breed!" they said as they got older and had listened to their parents' dinner conversations. "You're a Métis!" they started to whisper in the 1970s, gentrifying the term "half-breed" or "mixed blood."

With all these people knowing more about me than I did, I thought it required a closer look. I was coming from a position of weakness, which is what lack of knowledge is. I found out that my father and his brother had had Indian names. I found out that my greatgrandmother had lived in Rocky Mountain House in the 1950s. We used to go blueberry and Saskatoonberry picking there and my father would disappear for hours — gone to visit his grandmother. I found out that I had relatives at Morley and a whole other family in southern Alberta.

I found out other things too. I found out that Indian people couldn't vote until after 1960, I found out that if they wished to leave the reserve they had to pay for a pass, I found out that most of the government issue meat that came to the reserves disappeared and either no meat or rotten meat was distributed. I found out that smallpox blankets were distributed to the Indians from the United States. I found out that whole villages filled with death lodges were left on the prairie, filled with thousands of people

who had died from smallpox. I found letters in the Canada sessional papers that talked about funding for residential schools and the disparaging influences camped around the schools — parents trying to see their children who were taken away to become statistics.

In a museum in Rocky Mountain House, I found the Tree of Life chart drawn by pious Father Lacombe, who started Dunbow school near Calgary. I found the pathway to heaven known only to one Indian. The rest came along the path where one of the seven deadly sins — that of slothfulness — had been depicted. You can see this chart on the third floor of the museum. It has every Indian going to hell.

I found out that being an Indian was determined by treaty right and I found out that a lot of the people in the cities, the urban Indians, were non-status and that I was one of them.

I started asking questions in my artwork, drawing pictures of all those chiefs, those Canadian heroes with their Victoria medals burning a hole in their chests for the generations to come. I did these paintings from 1969 to 1973. I drew and painted very personal statements then.

oriental eye folds and telling us he could see a few in the class.

But things are different now, aren't they?

Not much. Look at this exhibition here at the Glenbow. Look at "The Spirit Sings" show. During a time when the world's eyes were on us, a major exhibition is created that travels across the country freezing the Native people into a romantic notion of the seventeenth-century. Look at the exhibition in the Vancouver Art Gallery: "Beyond History—10 Little Indians." Here we're three.

Don't misunderstand me — I have absolutely no problem exhibiting my work with my own kind. But I am different. You have all made me different. You taught me about the discipline of art and being a professional and to me that means it is art that is shown in this category "New Alberta Art." I have been around a long time — it's a good thing I left the country and the province with my work or I may never have been shown at the Glenbow. It's a good thing that the assistant curator is from the east. It's pretty hard to deny excellence when other people celebrate it and recognize it.

That is not really the part I have the problem with because it is

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As the years went by and I continued to work I began to see a pattern among other peoples of the world. People united to form lobby groups to save Africa, and to help the people in India, and people began to immigrate here from war-torn countries. I kept hearing about the Third World. Finally in 1984 on a trip to Ottawa I asked the question of International Development for Education in the Arts (CIDEA): what are you doing for our Third World country that exists in Canada?

My work began to take a more political — as some people called it — bent. It seems anything involved with Native people is categorized as being political or an artefact. I began to make contemporary artefacts in protest against the National Gallery's treatment of artists of Native heritage.

I started to like myself, I began to take a stand, I was proud of my heritage. I had always been taught by my parents to be proud of who I was and I now extended it to be proud of my people. I liked the person I saw in the mirror, but I noticed that the sight of me brought a kind of shifty-foot-changing attitude. I was watched in stores, I stood for a long time at counters waiting to be waited on, I heard people talk about my people in the streets, the panhandlers, the drunks, the stories about needing a bus ticket to visit the wife in hospital. I remembered the boys joking in high school through clenched teeth about picking up a squaw at Smokey Lake. I remembered my biology teacher talking about

pretty standard for artists not to be appreciated in their home town; in fact it is fairly standard among all creators. What I have a problem with is the categorization of Native Artist in a museum that does not separate other Canadian artists in exhibitions according to their race.

It seems Native people cannot do anything without that adjective in front of their name.

The other artists in the exhibition, George Little Child and Jane Ash Poitras, may not share my views. That is understandable; they are just beginning their careers. For me it has been a constant battle since entering art college here in Calgary in 1962. Nothing has been handed to me on a silver platter, but I have drawn the energy from all this negativity and turned it into a positive force. The racism I have suffered has only focused me more on the battle against racism. It is one of the warshirts that I wear now. I know there is a purpose for me on this earth and I will make a difference.

To my fellow exhibitors: I am proud to exhibit my work with you and to know that even though your road will be rough that I will have helped to create some smooth patches for you as those artists I have listed on the blackboards have done for me and for us all.

To those people whose life is affected by racism, I say as my father taught me, "Just take a stand, just fight and never give in, never give in to those bastards."