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An Essential Personal Journey Through Iroquois Myths, Legends, Icons and History

by

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Abstract

This essay will cover issues directly influencing my life and work as an Iroquois artist. Going back to myth, linking it to legend and using historical fact, I will acknowledge the foundation and the importance of certain parts of the Iroquois culture.

The personal journey answers questions how one generation leaves a residue of knowledge. Sometimes a clear path is seen, other times that path has to be discovered, deciphered and/or searched out.

I have used this time to look for paths. I realize now there never is one, nor is it linear, nor is it one dimentional.

Keywords

Sky Woman

The Peacemaker

Joseph Brant

Brantford

Mohawk Valley

Displacement

Hiawatha

Iroquois art

Hotinohsioni

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Preface

I have been an artist for as long as I can remember. My work is the result of emotion and personal interpretation. It hinges on a taste, feel, or smell of events.

I was five years old when my family and I moved from Niagara Falls, N.Y. Even though Niagara Falls is not a big city, the makings of a metropolis have always fascinated and intrigued me. The interaction of people and the continuous change gives me reason to journey to these kinds of social settings. Here I have a choice to participate or not but curiosity always wins out as I emerge as an observer.

When I was five in 1959, my family moved back to the Six Nations Reserve. Life changed dramatically. Leaving an urban setting and coming to a rural one left me, always, yearning for the other.

The city, despite the noise and constriction that results from the need to conform, provided electricity, water out of a tap, and easy access to basic needs like food and medical supplies. Reserve life on the other hand, evoked different sights and sounds but was without running water, electricity and entailed a subtle dependence on neighbours.

On first contact, our neighbours were friendly but a little

strange. The distance between the houses seemed to be vast. We were more isolated than alienated. We moved there in the early summer. By the time school started my brother and sisters and I felt as strange as the rest of the neighbourhood children.

The feeling of transition between being an urban Indian and a reserve Indian has remained with me. Being an urbanite today has always left me craving certain elements from the natural environment. I also know that if I were living in a rural setting that I would want some aspects the urban scene has to offer.

As a child living with my biological family, I assimilated certain Iroquois perspectives. They were perspectives that were reinforced through the elementary school system on the reserve.

Surrounded by cultural icons of Iroquoia all of my life made me, in my adolescent years, reject a lot of these ideas and what they entailed. What I realize now is that I was not rejecting the ideas but the straight-forward acceptance by my community of these ideas and philosophies.

Many members from my community, the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, proudly know their cultural history and

the basis of their religious beliefs. I could not accept this melding of ideologies without questioning and have always placed myself on an edge of this culture, trying to question and formulate my own version of what is important and why.

I have been brought up with the knowledge that the Iroquois are known to have created the most powerful union of nations in North America as a defense against other nations, Native and Non-Native alike. We were known for war tactics and the ability to control large masses of land, particularly the area engulfing the Adirondack Mountains, the Catskills, the Mohawk, and the Hudson Rivers. We have held onto this notion of nationhood, jealously.

As children we were told of our sovereignty and how we are not subjects under the present day British Crown. But as a child I could not understand what this special title or hereditary right meant. Poverty levels were apparent and family living and coping on a day- to-day basis was difficult. These contradictions have surfaced in my artwork throughout the years.

Independence of mind and will has been instilled in me. The power to think and make decisions is personal, but to know from where that privilege first came has been given to me through legend. Exploring Deganawida's, the Peacemaker, path

and remembering, without cynicism, has made me consider how a philosophical construct from many years ago is still observed today by a small but growing number.

I have also included in my work Hiawatha's tale. His inclusion is important as he demonstrates a human element. His need to express his deepest emotions is channelled through the Peacemaker's quest. As an example of pre-modern medicine, we are shown through the Peacemaker's example, how to heal the psyche and it is our responsibility to generate stimulation to awaken the senses. We are given instruction as to how to bring someone out of a state of depression.

As an artist this leaves a window open. We become aware of those around us. Even though our work is not always made for people who are going through tough times, it can act as a catalyst in reversing negative self-image, presenting alternative attitudes, or as an individual expression of the self.

Travelling even further back in time and looking at myth, I looked closely at the Sky Woman. The imagery always made me think of the weakness of this falling, helpless woman and I never took her destination too seriously. Her would-be demise ultimately has her landing on the back of a turtle.

I have been using the emotions experienced by Sky Woman throughout my art as revealed in many of my pieces. These works deal with my own displacement, loneliness and the necessity of making my own environment work for me. I realize now that Sky Woman's displacement is about conditioning us to be ready for the unexpected. Through her, we prepare ourselves for the unknown and deal in the present with what we have.

I have also used Joseph Brant as a symbol to show where many of my cultural and historical ideas originate from. These ideas are seen in artwork directly influenced by the surrounding area of Brantford. In the United States he is seen as a man, basically as weak. He is seen in the position of royalty but uses his power for his own purposes. Not only does he lose the land which provides economic resources but also the right to remain there and live in a homeland with historical and cultural roots. His fate continues to influence many of the descendants that now live on the Six Nations and in the city of Brantford. Because of Brant's failures, many today still question his motives and are dismayed by the actions which continue to affect us all.

These popular figures in Iroquoian culture will be discussed extensively in this essay. I want to examine some elements of their stories. Sometimes the small details are the most

important and their inclusion enriches and emboldens central characters. It allows them their individuality as they contribute to the whole story on their terms. I have included these small details in my work, notably, my paintings for the exhibition. In past work I have also made a point of making these figures a major component, giving the work a distinguishing Iroquoian aesthetic.

The last two years of research and study have allowed me to explore and peel back the multi-dimensional layers of Iroquoia cultural icons. Setting aside the time to search out and contemplate the intention and the meanings of legends, myths, and historical moments has confirmed my appreciation of their importance.

In an attempt to fully give credit to past leaders, teachers, artists, I have directed my readings towards historical texts, Native community based journals, catalogues from Native based exhibitions, and translations of traditional teachings.

Giving credence to Western European art theory and philosophy would undermine the intent of my research. Incorporating theorists and their perspectives into an indigenous formulation of thought would be a superficial exercise. Curator/writer, Theresa Harlan asserts:

The colonization of Native thought and intelligence

> will continue to operate as long as we do not understand our own history and the cultivation of Native survival. It will continue as long as Native artists reject early Native artists in favour of Euro-American artists and allow Non-Native writers as authorities to validate Native expression. What we should be challenging is the ownership of that Native ideological space of authority and power in which Native art is interpreted and discussed.1

As an awakening for a self-actualization in our creative process, Deborah Doxtater adds that "Unlike western notions of hierarchical ordering of those differentiations, however, Native thought has conceptualized art in its varied forms as permeating everything in every day life."2.

I will discuss my artmaking process and show where in Native culture it is based. But because my art has formal roots in history does not mean it stays within the construct of Iroquois-centric thinking. I employ ancestral memory and use it as a springboard for inspiration to begin the process of

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1. Theresa Harlan, Watchful Eyes, Native American Women Artists, curated by Theresa Harlan, The Heard Museum, Phoenix Arizona, (1994) :10.

2. Deborah Doxtator, Basket, Bead and Quill, curated by Janet Clark, Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Thunder Bay, Ontario, (1995):18.

artmaking. I am also aware of the shift that takes place once work is constructed and is seen in a public place. Those open to discourse will identify the work with what it has to say to them and proceed in a dialogue on a personal level.

The culmination of my study, will be realized in an exhibition of paintings. Each painting will be directly influenced and translated from the myths, legends, and historical facts interpreted into my own voice. These works will reflect each other as I find the interaction of ideas that form a basis of culture, in this case Iroquois culture, concentrating on the Six Nations of the Grand River.

Essential Beginnings

When I was born in Niagara Falls, New York my father was a construction worker. He worked on the Adam Beck Hydro Electric Plant, Robert Moses Parkway, and other hi-tech projects that came into existence early in the 1950's. Times were prosperous for industry and trade.

My memory, teetering on imagination, recalls everyone with a car and a television set. Viewing the world from this constant beacon of light from a corner in the living room gave me an impression of what was happening in the rest of the world.

The continent was grabbing onto other peoples' culture like it was their own. Every North American town had a Chinese restaurant, "l'amore" was whispered to express romantic desire in everybody's language.

My early recollections from television involve American icons such as the Three Stooges, Zorro, Rin Tin Tin, and Cochise. Mothers were not yet aware of the long-term effects of TV and mine chose to let my young mind be influenced by the constant hum and visual spectacle of tomfoolery. These spectacles were a direct contradiction to other issues I witnessed via the "set" at the time, not fully understanding what I had seen. I am referring to Adolf Eichmann's war trial, newsreel footage of the effects of Hiroshima, and race riots that were taking

place in the southern states of America. Somehow the seriousness of the world was permeating my personal space.

Years later, I believe these earlier influences motivated me to respond to the world through art that used irony as a base for expression. *Waitress*(1986)(Figure 1) is an oil painting I created out of a direct confrontation with a sales clerk. I felt subjected to a subtle kind of racism. The unpleasant encounter created through an icy glance and covert body language prompted me to capture the moment and, in turn, communicate my interpretation of the world and how I saw it at that particular time.

Aggression seeps from the canvas. I have placed myself as the *Waitress*. The drama that unfolds shows me putting in time in my nine to five job, participating in the work force of Canada.* At the time of the creation of this piece, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney was hosting the First Nations Ministers Conference. This televised mock-up of serious negotiations between representatives of First Nations people lost all significant

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*(The usual conclusion about Native people in Canada is that Native people live on Welfare and wait for handouts from the government. This stereotypical statement seems a bit trite in this day and age, but it has been said to me by some well meaning, some not so well meaning, and some grossly misinformed non-Natives on a number of occasions. I feel that a cross section of Canada shares in this belief.)

purpose with the appearance of Brian Mulroney at centre stage. His smug demeanour symbolically declared that nothing of any importance was happening here. (So as the flames engulf the backdrop of a culture, Mila and Brian laugh and dance the night away.) Meanwhile real life continues with its accidents, real or fake, and makes what is left more important and more resilient. This painting started out with a hard edge, but as I progressed the anger and aggression subsided. The drama I was composing gave way to acts of revenge through paint.

Waitress took me about six months to complete. I always doubted my painting skills and technique. I was cautious about the application of paint. I had viewed paintings in galleries and wanted to copy the varnish I had seen on turn-of-the-century masterpieces. Wanting it to look like "real" art and not junk, I deliberately took great caution and spread the paint on like it was peanut butter, never leaving a trace of human presence.

In *Waitress* I also pushed the content of my work. I questioned the use of False Faces. In Iroquois communities the False Face is to only be used with reverence. False Face Societies are put in place and are used exclusively for medicinal purposes. The power they hold is intrinsically known by the residents of the Six Nations and everyone

responds with respect. I did not want to exhibit disrespect, but I felt that I needed to show the power Mulroney was playing with. This piece has been exhibited in at least twenty exhibitions and I have never been confronted about my use of the False Face that I employ as the background panel in the painting.

The narrative in the work also became important. It is here that I responded to story lines, drama, colour, composition, and later saw film as an extension of painting. My formative years were informed by the popular culture of the 50s. I believe that a sense of satire and playfulness has stayed with me directly influenced by early television. This has become a tool which contemporary North American and European audiences alike can respond to.

The continuous outpouring of media was not always a positive experience. The influence of television and films is expressed in the minds of North Americans, Native and non-Native. Native American film producer Phil Lucas claims:

> **Early on, I discovered that media is the most powerful force shaping the thoughts, feelings and opinions of people. I clearly remember sitting, at the age of twelve, in a darkened theatre on a Saturday afternoon watching the larger-than-life images of the movie "Stage Coach". I suddenly**

> found myself spontaneously cheering for the cavalry along with the rest of the audience. As the realization of what I was doing hit me, I was devastated. I left the theatre and walked the five miles home, thinking about the power of film to manipulate and influence.1

Gerald McMaster, experiencing the same confusion, recalls a similar moment. He states:

> we did not dispute it at first. These children mocked us further with Hollywood-style war whoops. I wondered: where did they get this stuff? An experience never to forget; I still remember all the fights we got into,...2

Aside from being a construction worker and experiencing the freedom of monetary gains from having such a job, my father also exhibited an unquenchable need to create objects which he thought captured an Indian aesthetic. Iroquois culture has always been aware of its identity but in the fifties it was prone to follow popular examples of what Indian identity was.

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1. Phil Lucas, *Imagining Indians, Native American Film and Video Festival*, Artistic Director, Victor Masayesva Jr., Scottsdale Center for the Arts, Scottsdale, Arizona(1994) :4

2. Gerald McMaster, *The cowboy/Indian Show*, curated by Jean Blodgett, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario (1991) :20

Hence, Western Plains headdresses became the symbol of all North American Indians, regardless of indigenous distinction. (At some Iroquois gatherings, headdresses are still to be seen on the heads of older Indian men.)

My father could make great Western Plains headdresses. He made them from turkey feathers and horse hair, following many steps which he knew down to the smallest detail. When Iroquois people started to realize that these particular headdresses were undesirable within this region, he shifted effortlessly to creating the traditional Iroquois counterpart, otherwise known as a Gastowah.

Jeffrey Thomas takes note of George Catlin's portraits: their use of Plains tribesmen, and how the images become the North American monument to Aboriginal people. He writes:

> **Catlin opened the door for a succession of strategies that would use Indians for commercial or academic gain: Buffalo Bill and his Wild West Shows, P.T. Barnum's circus, dime store novels, Hollywood Westerns, anthropological fascination with Plains warrior societies, countless books about old-time Indians and even the Boy Scouts.1**

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1. Jeffrey Thomas, The Portfolio: Luminance-Aboriginal Photographic Portraits, curated by Jeffrey Thomas and Edward Tompkins, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa (1996) :9.

As the fifties were coming to a close, a new chapter was being written, hypothetically called "What's An Indian?" The national Indian voice was starting to question who had control of the Indian image and how was it going to be changed, righted, and honestly portrayed.

> Jolene Rickard fits this new/old way of relooking at ourselves as:
>
> **...continued interest by Indian artists in renewal themes. By linking our cultural priorities, as demonstrated by art, to critical political and philosophical dialogues anchored in our multitude worldviews, our survival continues. Many indigenous peoples defined this relationship in the past. Why not again?1**

Another of my father's favourite objects to make was war tomahawks. As a child I spent many days with him by the river looking for stones perfectly shaped to portray a killing device. He would strap these into tree crotches, holding them in place with buckskin laces. The handles were decorated with leather and paint to signify a warrior's possession. For

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1. Jolene Rickard, *Watchful Eyes, Native American Women Artists,* curated by Theresa Harlan, The Heard Museum, Phoenix, Arizona (1994) :17.

final effect he would glue a few strands of horse hair onto one end and apply drops of red enamel to cover the glue and to make this object look like it was dripping in blood, possibly an remnant from a war.

He enjoyed his version of artmaking, playing with the stereotype of Iroquois imagery. I also think he was trying to create a serious discourse dealing with history and what it meant to be a warrior.

(While he was a construction worker), he gave most of his objects away. His activity kept our house filled with materials evoking a sense of history, culture, and it made my imagination curious as to how something could be made from inorganic objects to become items representative of days gone by.

During these years I watched him gather and assemble his materials. I watched how the routine became ritual. As he worked he concentrated on the delivery of his objects. As he worked, I played Cowboys and Indians with my brother and sisters, occasionally getting a bonk on the head, `a la Three Stooges.

To this day I still use rocks which I find from river beds. They act as objects from which I get inspiration. An example

of this inspiration is *Urging On The New*(1994)(Figure 2). Here I searched for round, smooth, egg-shaped stones. I placed them on top of small tubular pedestals that would elevate them to various heights. The pedestals were covered in velvet with beadwork around the edges. These pedestals were placed on top of a velvet cover that went on top of the stand on which the whole piece was to be exhibited.

I treated these hard things as precious objects. They became hatchlings. Each one was given a place of its own and uplifted to different degrees as if not to compete with each other. Like children they each had to be left alone with no demands for performance or no rushed example of what they should be capable of doing.

As a statement directed towards Iroquois culture, *Urging On The New* cautions against accepting rhetoric without question. It becomes much easier to recite the Great Law, quote facts about history, and leave the thinking to someone in power. *Urging On The New* is to act as a plea to others in the Iroquois community to respond to situations with a new perspective. Once we open new channels, we can also apply this new perspective to every aspect of existence. We must give new thought some consideration and leave minds open so contemporary participation becomes a real lived experience. Alfred Young Man echoes these ideas:

> Young, energetic aboriginals are learning to use the technology of Western and Oriental creation to recreate the world according to the truisms of the native perspective. With the advent of the computer, First Nations peoples can now more easily challenge scientific authority, Western philosophy, art history, and theories.1

All of my father's artmaking took place before Indian politics took hold in the sixties. Then it was seen as a quaint hobbyist pastime. He was doing Indian things when it wasn't cool and was laughed at for holding onto ideas that weren't (encouraged) at the time.

We were also taken to Mohawk language classes. It seemed to be a waste of time as the only ones who spoke the language were the older people, the ones who grew up speaking it. For two hours a week we were drilled to speak Mohawk. To this day I don't know anything beyond a couple of phrases.

The women who gave instruction were two elderly, retired school teachers. They were Julie and Nora Jamieson. The school was the David Thomas Schoolhouse, which was no longer used as a school.

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1. Alfred Young Man, New Territories 350/500 Years After, curated by Pierre-Leon Tetreault, Montreal(1992) :37.

On the walls of this vacated building hung many watercolour paintings. These paintings depicted representations of Iroquois people from an era gone by. The work showed Iroquois communities hunting, cultivating, and taking part in family life. I felt they were links to something I was born too late to participate in. I knew that the figures in the works were Iroquois by the design of clothing and beadwork designs painted on their clothes. The men always had the usual Mohawk haircut and wore a breechcloth. The women, in traditional Iroquois clothes, pounded corn with their pedestals and participated in the business of agriculture.

I believe the Jamieson sisters did the paintings. They obviously were to be used for illustration in an educational setting. The formatting and composition contained an element of control. These paintings also acted like testaments rather than as artistic expression. They were culturally correct but were none-the-less stuck in a time warp with no window or door offering inclusion into this community's contemporary lifestyle.

At the same time I also started to see drawings of Daphne Odjig. She was an Ojibway from Manitoulin Island, another indigenous community to the north of us, but I could relate more easily to her domestic scenes. Her piece *Man With Axe* (1968)(Figure 3) shows a man with an axe cutting wood to heat the house. *Boys With Sled* (1968) also portrays a scene I

appreciate on a personal level. I responded to this particular work at a particular time in my life. Living on the reserve at that time, I spent many hours outside in the summer and the winter. The drawing of the boys casually playing made me study the work closer. I appreciated Odjig's skill. I marvelled at her ability to be accurate with her gesture and I wanted to draw like she did.

Shortly after this time I started to become aware of earlier Iroquois artists, especially older artists like Ernest Smith. His *Sky Woman* (1924)(Figure 6) is a recreation of the Creation Story. His watercolour painting uses imagination and a sophisticated handling of the medium. This is not a two-dimensional, naive, portrayal but one with cinescopic capacities.

Like many other Iroquois artists, Six Nations artist Arnold Jacobs has done his own version of the Sky Woman. His version "*Sky Woman Descending on Great Turtle Island*" (1981)(Figure 7) gives us a closer look at Sky Woman as she falls through the hole in the sky. I feel that these illustrations are the result of good story telling and the innate desire to gather our own versions of the world around us while incorporating a high standard in presentation.

Many artists from my region and with an Iroquois background

have used their oral tradition of legends and story telling to exemplify their own identity with the surrounding community. Here a critical audience is formed and can respond to the work in a personal, informed practice.

I want to establish my desire to be a part of the Iroquois programme. I also want to view and decipher occurrences directly affecting me. My father was an influence in the first stages of my artmaking. As I developed past the initial stages, I soon started observing those around me. The twists and turns of eccentricity was as an important ingredient into this pot of stoic, orthodox, and stubborn groups. There were divisions between religious groups on the reserve, differences in social status(if you think being poverty stricken is tough in a city, it's worse on a reserve),and power struggles between men and women. These are just a few of the issues I feel I amplify in my work that is directed towards my own identity.

In one of my earlier pieces, *She Likes To Watch Him Dance*(1986)(Figure 8), I collaged a watercolour of a woman's portrait and black and photos of a male pow-wow dancer. I was steering away from legend and Indian-style painting, especially work made popular by Norval Morriseau. I don't want to be negative about Morriseau's work but by this time it seemed to be the only kind of work that was accepted as Native

or Indian. I also wanted to invest the personal into the concept of what is Indian. The personal, as I saw it at that time reflected narratives expressing great loss, via residential schools, language, culture, appropriation of history, and many other examples of tragedy.

Artists who have travelled the road to exploring their feelings and who have discovered the roots of their anguish must be acknowledged and respected for their honesty. But I felt I had another path to follow and ultimately, I saw humour as an important component that was not being explored.

In *She Likes To Watch Him Dance*, the image of a middle-aged woman is the key figure in the frame. On closer inspection we see another figure inside of her sunglasses. The photographic figure is of a dancer. This image is a realistic version of what you would see at any pow-wow. The woman is also reminiscent of a typical audience member. For me this framework was done in protest. I was working with a group of single women who classified themselves as feminists. They were constantly male-bashing. Within the confines of this working atmosphere, it was accepted to voice these kinds of sexist attitudes and even encouraged. I was not comfortable with this practice and wanted to express appreciation for the male presence in a playful and distant manner. What I found to be most rewarding about this work is the courage I had to

find to produce and then exhibit it.

Another piece in which I had to confront my fear of exhibition in a public place is *The Iroquois Is A Highly Developed Matriarchal Society*(1991)(Figure 9). There are three hand-coloured black and white photographs; the first and the last are the same photo. They are placed in a wide black mat. The mat has been etched with a dremel drill and looks like it could be a beadwork design. In this case, it is the dome-shaped Iroquois symbol for the celestial tree. The figure in the photos are of my mother. She sits in a kitchen under a portable hair dryer having her hair done, possibly a home perm. As she looks out at the viewer she laughs like she is participating in a secret joke. The second image shows her pushing her head inside the dryer; maybe she is being consumed by it. The third, the same image as the first, we see her again, repeating her all too knowing smile.

In this piece I was questioning an anthropological investment into the Iroquois culture. We smugly repeat these great statements and believe what we are saying. We become appropriators of our own history and become complacent. No longer willing to be critical of how to make present day living situations better, we revert to these kinds of comforting grandiose declarations.

Iroquois women have always participated in the economic and cultural growth of the society. They controlled agriculture, from planting seeds and harvesting to the marketing of crops. Women also were the heads of the clan, the oldest being the matriarch. Men did serve as an important aspect of the whole of society but as participants rather than as patriarchs and figures of domination.

The Effects of Colonization:

With the onset of colonialization, historian Sylvia Van Kirk claims:

A convincing argument can be made that relatively-speaking pre-contact Indian societies were less oppressive with regard to women than the European societies which subsequently sought to impose their own patterns of sex roles and values on Native societies.1

With reports detailing abusive situations on Indian reservations Harry S. LaForme factually states:

First Nations are compelled to give necessary and serious consideration to the pressing need to immediately address the "Third World" conditions many of them try to survive within. These conditions include such items as the fact that 29% of all housing on Indian Reserves is overcrowded as compared to 2% for the rest of Canada, and 38% of all dwellings are

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1. Sylvia Van Kirk, Thresholds of Difference, Julia V. Emberley, University of Toronto Press (1993) :110.

without central heating as compared to 5% for the rest of the country. And, while Status Indian people represent only about 1.6% of the total population of Canada they represent an unemployment rate of approximately 16% at any given time when the rest of Canada is around 7%.

As of 1988, the life expectancy for Indians was about 8 years less than the Canadian average. Death by suicide was 2.5 times more common, death from injury or poisoning four times more common. Infant mortality was 1.7 times the national rate. For many the choice is made simply because there is no other choice other than to continue the futile task of attempting to confront the problems by relying on the confining and limited provisions of the Indian Act.1

The Iroquois Is A Highly Developed Matriarchal Society is a direct challenge. The satire is intended. I want to address sensitive issues but use humour as a portal to allow people to come closer and examine the work. Maybe they won't get the message but it does allow me to address Iroquois women's ability to change and control their destiny.

A series which encompasses different themes and sensibilities is realized in *Mohawks In Beehives*(1991)(Figure 10). This group of photos was made in retaliation over recent summer's events, namely Oka. A newsreel spectacle, this histo ical

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1. Harry S. LaForme, *Indian Sovereignty, The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, Brandon University (1991) :261.

Canadian event left many in the Native community feeling helpless and in a state of despair.

As we recall the summer of 1990, Mohawks from the small town of Oka took over a grove of pines. The protest occurred after the town wanted to cut down these pines and use the land for a golf course. The series of events started in March and culminated in the death of a Canadian soldier in July. The Mohawks at Oka held off the Canadian army till the end of September.

I watched the events as they happened on the CBC, not from desire to see if anything ghoulish or strange would happen but because the event was constantly being broadcast. Hours of footage was devoted to possible weapons that might be found in the compound. Politicians, Native leaders, or anyone who had an opinion about the circumstances would get their two minutes on air. CBC radio aired minute-by-minute details of a would-be assault by the army on the Treatment Centre where the main body of people occupied their headquarters.

This constant hammering of events about people in the compound left me in a state of depression and confusion. I convinced myself that the government was using this opportunity to play good army.(After Oka, enrollment in the Canadian Army drastically increased.) In this politically correct society,

it now was acceptable to voice any racist comment towards First Nations people. It was an exercise in propaganda. Newspaper articles were written pinpointing Native people as the cause and reason for anything from welfare, to ripping off the government, onto being unreasonable. The summer of 1990 cost Canada multi-millions of dollars primarily in the dispatchment of the Canadian Army and the Surete de Quebec.

In January 1991 the Gulf War started. This was another show of strength. Now the United States was broadcasting their form of good citizenship using think-this-way type of propaganda.

I was psychologically beaten. My mere existences had no influence over the state of the world. With the press of a button whole cities are zapped out of existence. It is that where I began my concept for the series *Mohawks In Beehives*. (Figure 10)

I rallied my three sisters, who agreed to come and dress up for the day. We were going to be outrageous. With the help of make-up, gaudy jewellery, and our version of bee-hive hairdos, we created personas of obtuseness, obnoxiousness, and glamour. This method of frivolity and arrogance helped in the creation of three tough, devil-may-care attitudes. I took the photos but my sisters used the moment to display sides of

their personalities they usually didn't. We took some photos in my house and eventually went downtown to claim our positions in front of the Joseph Brant Monument. A piece called *Standing On Guard For Thee* (1991)(Figure 11) is a direct result of this.

I had never done anything as loud or invasive of public spaces, but I realized after the fact what was happening. The work became therapeutic. We were reclaiming spaces as ours. We could not change the world or have any influence over its huge power structures, but we could make immediate changes and control the smaller business of everyday life, even when it was done with the pretence of fun.

My work stems from historical, political, and personal places and its roots are influenced by the artistic endeavours previously accomplished by other artists from my community.

The Essential Iroquois Ceremony of Life and Creation

One of the clearest explanations of where the Iroquois' name is derived comes from a main character in *Beautiful Losers(1966)*, written by Leonard Cohen:

They called themselves Hotinonshoni, which means People of the Longhouse. They developed a new dimension to conversation. They ended every speech with the word hiro, which means: like I said. Thus each man took full responsibility for intruding in the inarticulation murmur of the spheres. To hiro they added the word koue, a cry of joy or distress, according to whether it was sung or howled. Thus they essayed to pierce the mysterious curtain which hangs between all talking men: at the end of every utterance a man stepped back, so to speak, and attempted to subvert the beguiling intellect with the noise of true emotion. Catherine Tekakwitha, speak to me in Hiro-Koue.1

The Iroquois called themselves Hotinonshoni. They also referred to themselves Ong-wa-hooi, this meaning Real People. In their living existence they believed everything had a spirit, animals, acts of nature and they, being humans, had the spirit of persons. George E. Sioui believes this to be a universal Amerindian experience: **This order is called the Great Mystery. To the traditional Amerindian, life finds**

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1. Leonard Cohen, *Beautiful Losers*, Viking Compass Edition (1996): 7

its meaning in the implicit and admiring recognition of the existence, role, and power of all the forms of life that compose the circle. Amerindians, by nature, strive to respect the sacred character of the relations that exist among all forms of life.1

The Six Nations are a unique and diverse group originating from the Mohawk Valley in the area of Albany and the Adirondack Mountains. Originally known as the Five Nations, the Tuscarora were adopted into the Confederacy in 1712 as they fled from their traditional homelands in Northern Carolina. Today the nations that make up the Six Nations are: Mohawk, Seneca, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Tuscarora. The Six Nations have also accepted into this reserve other groups such as Delaware, Chippewa(Ojibway), Muntures, Nanticokes, Cherokees, Creeks, the remaining Tutelo, and other displaced groups of persecuted wanderers or decimated members from existing tribes. To this day families still live here with names such as Montures, Nanticokes, and Tobicoes. Remnants of these cultures can still be observed in the traditional longhouse today.

The residents of the Six Nations Reserve live along the Grand

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1. George E. Sioue, *For An Amerindian Autohistory: An Essay on the Foundations of a Social Ethic,* McGill-Queen's University Press, (1992) :9.

River. This river begins at Fergus, Ontario and empties into Lake Erie at Dunnville, Ontario. The original tract of land given to the Six Nations comprised six miles on both sides of the river from its source to its mouth. This was granted by the British in exchange for the allegiance the Iroquois provided during the American Revolutionary War. Jaye E. Fredrickson confirms that "the Iroquois allies left their New York territory to settle on the 768,000 acres along the Grand River provided by the Haldimand treaty of 1784 as compensation for their losses."1

The Grand River flows through Brantford, Ontario. This was Joseph_Brant's chosen homebase upon leaving the Mohawk Valley.

The social dynamics of the Six Nations have been in a constant flux for the last two centuries. Sides are still taken as a Brant supporter or a Brant detractor. There are the opposing traditional longhouse people and the opposing Christians, hereditary chiefs vs. the elected chiefs. This assembly of people have been trying to readjust and come together for common betterment and is still finding its place amongst the heap of disillusion and detriment of past decisions.

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1. Jaye E. Fredrickson, *The Covenant Chain: Indian Silver; Ceremonial And Trade*. National Museum of Man (1980) :28.

Some of the cultural and social changes that occurred are articulated in *The Shattered Confederacy*:

> The term reservation restricted their freedom. Soon their old hunting grounds would be dotted with white farms and settlements. Iroquois men felt a greater jolt than the women, for most men now had lost their callings as warriors and diplomats and long-range hunters. Soon the main occupation open to them would be farming, but that was seen as women's work.1

And according to Isabel Thompson Kelsay she writes: too many women, jealous of their consequence as the tillers of their society, were still scratching the earth with hoes.2

Before the historical becomes the focus of this paper, I want to return to a pre-historical time. The Iroquois is traditionally an oral history society. In order to fully establish a foundation that, I believe, my culturally based ideas come from, I must give a presentation on some of the Iroquois fundamental figures passed on through this tradition, Sky Woman, the Peacemaker and Hiawatha. Joseph Brant plays a

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1. *The Shattered Confederacy, Realm of the Iroquois,* Time Life Books (1993) :143
2. Isabel Thompson Kelsay, *Joseph Brant, Man of Two Worlds*:Syracuse University Press (1984) :614

real influence in this work as his decisions still affect many of the residents of the Six Nations even today. I am using him as a physical link to the past. His story directly involves a geographical area and embodies what the Iroquois Confederacy represented. He is the pivot to the twentieth century.

Sky Woman: Symbol Of Displacement

In traditional Iroquoian legend (the Mohawk version), there is an important story about a woman who was living with people known as man-beings. Man-beings could be referred to as both male and female. At great length, the story describes how the "man-beings" are free from disease, death and sorrow. These man-beings had never seen a person die and, therefore, did not know how to react to death. One of the principal male characters gives instructions to his mother as to how to react once he stops breathing:

> My breathing will cease, besides that, my flesh will become cold, and then, also the joints of my bones will become stiff. And when I cease breathing you must close my eyes, using your hands. At that time you will weep, even the act of weeping will move you (that is, you will instinctively weep). Besides that, the others, who are in the lodge and who have their eyes fixed on me when I die, all these, I say, will be affected in the same manner. You will weep and your minds will be grieved.1

Grieving is a trait that, after experiencing a tragedy, is

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1. J.N.B. Hewitt, *Creation, Iroquoian Cosmology,* Smithsonian Institution Press (1903) :127.

encouraged and expected. Step by step instructions for how to grieve are given. The beginning of the myth also establishes the human presence and does not take this living form for granted. In describing the importance of the grieving procedure, Lynn Hill states in her curatorial essay concerning Greg Staats photographic installation *"The Requickening Address"* that it:

> **is named for its symbolic power and its strength to uplift and restore the minds of those depressed by grief. There are fifteen "words" or "messages" recited during this ceremony and each is accompanied by strings of wampum. Each message makes mention of a particular hurt or feeling brought on by grief. It is through this recitation and symbolic use of the wampum that the hurt is removed and the healing process begins.1**

I have never directly referred to acts of grief or the healing of grief in my work. However, I want to establish how my works will affect the viewer. The concept of a work sometimes (as in *Waitress)*, emerges from incidents that upset me or place me in a situation that I feel I have no control over, *(Mohawks In Beehives)*. The catharsis in creating art helps me

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1. Lynn Hill, *AlterNative, Contemporary Photo Compostions*, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, (1995) :24

to work my way through to a point where I am no longer angry or disempowered. Humanizing the myth gives it a context of universality. Therefore we recognize emotions as a shared living experience.

As the story continues, the man's daughter matures and takes on a husband, she too is confronted by the possibility of mortal illness in her spouse. The pregnant woman tries to ease her husband's suffering. He instructs her to go to the "tree of life" and take from it some fruit which has medicinal properties. As she proceeds to the tree, it becomes uprooted and out of the ground through a hole comes a bluish glow. A spring is running from the roots. The woman struggles to get enough for her husband to drink. As she bends over to retrieve some water she loses her balance; this causes her to fall into the abyss. As she endlessly falls, she tries to grab onto different plants that are growing around the opening. These plants she holds onto are strawberries and tobacco. Deborah Doxtater challenges us to think about how the Sky Woman felt as she descended through that hole:

> **...it is her insatiable curiosity, her craving for something, or the disquiet of her husband's troubled, uncertain mind which causes her to fall through the hole under the tree of light and into a dark unformed world below. In all versions this world clearly began with an unsettled, restless**

> mind searching for a solution to some sort of unresolved problem. The dissatisfied mind becomes the motivation for a creative act in this story and so it might very well become the catalyst for creative re-envisionings of how we perceive our intellectual connections to the world we live in now.1

As she falls she is seen by creatures floating in the water. A loon cries: **"A man-being, a female one is coming from the depths of the water."** Then the Heron speaks and says, **"She is not coming up from the water but rather she falling from above."** The animals hold council and decide they should provide for her welfare. They invite the Great Turtle to come. Loon says to him: **"You should float your body above the place where you are, in the depths of the water."** Ducks are sent to meet her in the air and elevate her onto the back of the turtle. The Muskrat and the Otter are sent to the surface of the water to find earth to place on the back of the turtle at which time it grows and increases in size. She is provided here with meat and a fire. The earth continues to grow. After the land is formed, the woman gives birth to a baby girl. This is their new home. This is only a portion

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1. Dr. Deborah Doxtator, *Godi'Nigoha':The Women's Mind and Seeing Through To The Land;* Woodland Cultural Centre, (1997) :29

of the story but I want to emphasize that I am most interested in the section between the fall through the hole and Sky Woman landing on the Turtle's back.

Sky Woman Falls Onto My Canvas

This story has many postmodern references. Sky Woman is an outcast through an act of bad timing. People who know the story can feel her suffering. She has left behind a loving situation. The long journey from the sky above to her impending destiny makes us feel her loneliness. Her physical journey ends amongst creatures that give her food and warmth but do not necessarily know how to communicate with her.

Perhaps I am responding to a need to travel back in time and protect Sky Woman as she descends through the sky. The same feeling occurs when I read accounts about children in residential schools: the abuse children suffered when they spoke their Native language in schools; how parents felt as their children were taken from them to be placed into those schools; the way the colonial process stripped away anything distinctively indigenous from these people under a corporal law mentality; how assimilation was an imposed alternative; the cost of broken treaties, historical accounts, and the deliberate and intentional misplacement of recorded documents realized through wampum belts.

Gerald McMaster mirrors these thoughts:

> **The next one hundred years, boarding schools dotted the Canadian landscape,leaving in their wake a legacy that has scarred many Native people. Forced**

> removal broke up homes and families. Devastated mothers, fathers, and grandparents felt like prisoners on their own land. Legislators, however, insisted it was for the Indians' own good.1

Beth Brant in her introduction for the book *I'll Sing Till The Day I Die* recounts:

> Many of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte are retracing the footsteps of those who came before us, in order to restore the language, laws and culture as set down by the Peacemaker. After years of oppression, deprivation and cultural loss, it is difficult to trace the roots of the Great Tree of Peace. But, as our Elders teach us, everything has a cycle-life, Mother Earth, the creatures and the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte.2

In an attempt to make my existence known, I am using artmaking as a way of leaving my mark. These visual testimonies while working within an Iroquois framework are left open so other people from other cultures can approach and experience the work as art. I say this because I can look at

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1. Gerald McMaster, *Colonial Alchemy, Partial Recall* (1992):80

2. Beth Brant, *I'll Sing Till I Die*: Conversations With Tyendinaga Elders. McGilligan Books, (1995):15

work made by other societies and cultures and do not necessarily confine art within an artist's cultural construct.

The Peacemaker: The Essential Legend

(Note to the reader; this story has been handed down for centuries. Traditionally it is told over a period of seven to ten days at what is called the Great Law Recital. Its origins are from the Iroquois Confederacy. The story is given to a young boy who learns the recitation and this recitation becomes his mission to the community. As the responsibility is taught to him, he becomes the holder of this legend.1)

Indigenous nations, who were living along the North Eastern area of North America, (before the arrival of the whiteman) were at war with each other. Acts of revenge and war were common. Mistrust, murderous plots, unkind deeds made the different societies suspicious of each other. There was no ethical structure in place, no law, and nothing to establish a council for the common good.

A boy of Huron origin was born near the Bay of Quinte. A messenger of the Creator told his virgin mother she would have a son.

> "He will be a messenger of the Creator and will bring peace and harmony to the people on earth. When he has grown to manhood and wants to leave home to spread the good message of the Creator among the Nations, see that no obstacle is placed in his way."

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1. Mike Mitchell, *The Birth of the Peacemaker: Traditional Teachings*, North American Indian Travelling College, (1984):17-30

When he reached manhood, the Peacemaker told his mother that he was going to build a canoe out of white stone to be used to start his mission in the world. He was to travel many miles across lakes and rivers beyond Lake Ontario going in the direction of the sunrise. He told his mother, **"It is now time for me to go and stop the shedding of blood among human beings."**

Along the way he meets with hunters. He tells them to return to their village and to let the village know he is coming to spread the word of Peace, Power, and Righteousness. At first they don't want to return there, as they had left the village in state of bloodshed, but eventually they do return.

The Peacemaker continues on his journey. He comes to a house which belongs to an evil woman. She would invite warriors and hunters into the house with the promise of rest and a homecooked meal. However, she would then poison them. The Peacemaker knew what she was up to and after the invitation of welcome and the offer of food, the traveller said to her:

> **"I know what you have been doing to men who have passed through your lodge. You will stop this wicked practice and accept the message I bring from my father who sent me here to offer it to all human beings in the world."**

She is overcome with his powers and asks for the words of his

message.

> **"The message I bring is that all people shall love one another and live together in Peace. This message has three parts: Peace, Righteousness, and Power, and each part has two branches. Health means soundness of mind and body. It also means Peace, for that is what comes when minds are sane and bodies cared for. Righteousness means just practices between men and between nations. It means a desire to see justice prevail. It also means religion, for justice enforced is the will of the Creator and has his sanction."**

The woman accepts his words and promises to give up her evil ways. Because she is the first person to accept the Law of Peace, he declares that it is women who shall possess the title of Chieftainship. They will name who is to be chief.

As the Peacemaker leaves the woman's house she cautions him: **"That way is dangerous for in that direction lives the house of the man who eats humans."**
The Peacemaker replies: **"Then that is where I will go first so man can go about the earth without fear."**

The Peacemaker continues his journey until he reaches the Flint (also known as the Mohawk Nation). He arrives at the

house of the man who eats humans. He waits until the man comes home carrying a human body, which he puts into a kettle on the fire. The Peacemaker lays his body on the roof and peers down into the kettle. The man thinking it is his own reflection, asks himself: **"Why would a man with such a kind and wise face resort to eating humans?"**

The face of the Peacemaker affected this evil one. He realized the suffering he had caused and states that he will no longer kill humans and eat their flesh. The Peacemaker comes down from the roof. They sit across from each other with a fire between them.

"I am the Peacemaker and the one who has caused this change in you. I am the messenger of the Creator an the message is that all men should live together in Peace and live in unity based on the Laws of Righteousness, Peace, and Power."

The Peacemaker then leaves the man to show him how to hunt and to show him what he should be eating. He returns with a deer. The man is told that certain animals are left on Earth to benefit mankind. He tells the once evil one: **"I shall cook the deer now and we can celebrate with your meal by giving you a new purpose in life."** The man, now with a good mind, wants to know what he can do to further the cause of Peace. The Peacemaker replies: **"Now that evil has passed through your**

mind you must return to the places where you brought injury."

This man was the first person to accept the Great Law and because of it was made the First Sachem in the Mohawk Nation. The Peacemaker enforces his role by saying: **"Because your people have always been afraid of your evil powers you must show your new powers in the cause of Peace, Power, and Righteousness."**

Flint, now a changed man, returns to the people who feared him. They cannot believe this is the same man. Upon hearing his words and the reason for his change in attitude, they learn about the Peacemaker and his mission and follow his words.

The Peacemaker continues on to the village of the Mohawk Nation, the one the previous hunters came from. He offers his plan of peace and unity. He will send for the Flint to take his place once he is successful with this nation.

When the hunters return to the village, they tell of the messenger and pass on his message. A smoke signal comes from a clearing down from the village. This custom serves to let the village know that he is a stranger and that he wants to meet with them. This custom allows visitors a peaceful visit.

Warriors approach the visitor, who is not bearing any weapons, and escort the Peacemaker to the village where they hear his plan. They agree that it would be good to see all men live together in peace and harmony. They still do not trust this messenger and challenge him saying: **"If you are who you say are, prove to us you are a messenger of the Creator. You should be able to die and come back to life."** The warrior council then selects a tree. The Peacemaker climbs to the top of it. The tree is cut down making the Peacemaker crash into the falls where the Mohawk River meets the Hudson River. Should he survive, they would accept his message.

Once this test was completed the Peacemaker and the tree fall into the water. The people from the village watch hoping he will survive. There is no sign of him. The people turn away and go back to their village and continue with their everyday life.

The next day, the children see a man sitting by his fire. It is the Peacemaker. The children return to the village telling what they have seen. The village then brings him back to the place of Council and they accept this man as a messenger of the Creator and accept his message of Peace and Unity. He tells them of the people he has met on his journey to the Mohawk Nation. These people would now use their power to further the cause of peace.

This is how women became the selectors of the chiefs and how the first Sachem Chief was selected for the Mohawk Nation. The Mohawk Nation was the first nation to accept the terms of the Great Law of Peace.

At the same time in the Onondaga Nation, a man by the name of Hiawatha was doing the same work as the Peacemaker. He had suffered personal losses and much sadness due to the death of his seven daughters. In his depression he wanted to test his powers. He saw a flock of ducks on the water. He cried: "If I am a leader amongst men, all the ducks floating in the water will lift up the water and let me pass." The ducks flew together so swiftly they lifted the water up with them. Hiawatha walked across the dry bottom of the lake. He started to collect shells from the bottom of it. Here he gathered white and purple empty shells of fresh water clams. He continued to do this as he crossed the lake until he reached the other side. Once he reached the other side, the ducks returned to the lake replacing the water.

On the seventh day of his journey he took three strings of shells. These were made to console anyone who was in a period of grief. They were to lift away darkness and act as words to take darkness out from feelings of grief.

In his journey Hiawatha was recognized as being the man who

will meet the great man, the Peacemaker. As time went on, the other nations realized there were prophecies about Hiawatha and the Peacemaker meeting. The man from the south, Hiawatha, was to meet a man from the north, the Peacemaker.

After they met, the Peacemaker recognized Hiawatha's sorrow. Hiawatha's mind had to be cleared of grief. The Peacemaker took the shells Hiawatha collected and proceded to create 15 strings of wampum to console him with. Hiawatha finally found a person he could share and express his grief with. In the sharing of this consolation, Hiawatha feels he has a brother. Together they decide how to establish a council they will call The Great Peace. One by one the Nations agree to accept this proposal. Eventually Five Nations come together and accept this agreement.

This takes five years to accomplish. The symbol for this union becomes the Tree of Great Peace and the roots are known as the Great White Root, symbolizing peace and charity. Any nation outside the Sachem can adopt the Great Law upon learning the laws or tracing the roots to the Great Tree. They must learn to discipline their minds and spirits to obey and honour the wishes of the Council of the League. Then they will be made welcome to take shelter under the branches of this tree.

An eagle is placed at the top of the tree to see far into the distance. Should any danger threaten the lives of the people of the Hotinonshonni, an eagle will immediately warn of its approach. Five arrows bound together will symbolize the complete union. The Five Nations are tied as one head, one body, one spirit, and one soul to settle all matters as one.

The purpose of the Five Nations shall be to work, counsel, and consult together for the future of coming generations. The Sachems will be unified in a circle.

A pine tree has been pulled out by its roots, and into the depths of the hole, all weapons of war will be thrown into the hole. There strong currents of water will carry the weapons to an unknown area. The tree will be replaced thereby burying the weapons of war from sight. Peace will now be preserved among the Hotinonshonni.

The stories of the Peacemaker and Hiawatha contain many symbols of Iroquoia still resonating in contemporary Hotinonshonni societies. These symbols are used on a continual basis by many Iroquoian artists.

Again, grief is an important, elemental factor. Recognizing it and ways to assuming the role of healer, is placed into human hands. Dr. Deborah Doxtater writes:

> In the condolence ritual for the raising of new chiefs, the physical and mental are completely interconnected in that in order to assuage grief of the mind the "clear minded" side metaphorically clears the throat, wipes clear the eyes and unblocks the ears of the grieving side.1

From the beginning, the formation of the Iroquois League depended on a partnership. It is known that the Peacemaker suffered from a stutter.2 Positions of power and respect amongst the Hotinonshonni people relied on the ability to speak and influence others. Consequently, Hiawatha appreciates the Peacemaker's dilemma and protectively decides to become his spokesman. After his grief is assuaged through the use of wampum, he now has a clear
mind and dedicates the rest of his life to the Peacemaker's vision of peace.

What also comes to light in this legend is the use of wampum. This tiny expression of gift giving connotes acts of sacrifice with in this society. What is behind the creation of

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1. Dr. Deborah Doxtater, Godi'Nigoha': The Women's Mind, The Woodland Cultural Centre, Brantford, Ontario(1997):34
2. Scott Peterson, Native American Prophecies; Examining the History, Wisdom and Startling Predictions of Visionary Native Americans, Paragon House,New York, New York(1990)69

wampum could also be paralleled with contemporary artmaking. The tiny beads were created to be given away. As an exchange of goodwill, an acknowledgement of the other person's presence and as cultural good manners, these were accepted as gifts symbolizing real time spent on earth.

The history of wampum is intrinsic to the Iroquois culture. To relate to it in these contemporary times is almost impossible; we know its historic significance but wampum has a deeply rooted and powerful presence not fully understood by the majority of twentieth-century Iroquois people. Historian Barbara A. Mann writes:

> **Wampum was a core concept to the Iroquois, so central as to have become unconscious, invisible. No clan mother, sachem or shaman ever felt compelled to explicate references to it, no matter how cryptic, just as no modern evangelist feels it necessary to preface a reference to the snake of Eden with an extended discourse on Adam, Eden and their relationship to the Christian god. Some cultural concepts simply attain "common knowledge" status. Wampum was one of them.1**

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1. Barbara A. Mann, *The Fire at Onondaga: Wampum as Proto-Writing*. Akwesasne Notes, Spring Issue (1995), 42

Dreams of wampum held an important role in everyday life and were given serious consideration. If an individual dreamt of wampum this person's role in the community was seen to be as a disperser of the spirit world. He/she was seen as a direct link to wisdom. Mann continues with this thought: **"To dream of wampum was to be touched by sacred purposes".1** This blending of dream world and waking hours focuses on wampum as a medium to enhance knowledge, making it a source of truth and authority. (Like with art, we want the artist to authenticate his/her experience. Much time and care is given over to discovering the source of the artist's ideas and inspiration. Many wait to hear the story, the point at which the artist conceives of an idea. Society still holds onto the notion that the artist is going to reveal a message or a sign from a higher being. This is not just an Iroquois-centric sensibility but one shared by the world.)

Using the simplicity of patterning, I have tried to create my own form of wampum. Instead of using black and white beads (which are really purple and white), I have used black and white photographs. Knowing that a certain placement of the black and white photos will create a dialogue with the viewer, I contemplate the arrangement of my images. My choice of

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1. Barbara A. Mann, *The Fire at Onondage: Wampum as Proto-Writing. Akwesasne Notes,* Spring Issue(1995),43

images consists of my daughter, my mother, and myself. The piece is called *Continuum.*(1996)(Figure 12). The impetus for the piece came from a photo of my nineteen-year-old daughter. She(Figure 13), standing with her arms stretched as if she is going to take up as much space as possible, becomes the drama and the subject of the work. The first panel is quite the opposite of this particular pose. Here we see her standing very straight, with her arms crossed, looking into the camera. She becomes the bead. I wanted to create this piece concentrating on the design aspect of it. I wanted her to be the belt. As the viewer proceeds through the work and descends towards the floor, they start to see images of my mother and myself. But they never see the whole image, just the face with sections cut out. My daughter's stretched out image(Fig.14) fills the face where the sections have been taken out. The rhythm continues with images of my mother, then myself, then my daughter as a young child. The one row, straight forward, the next one a whirl of images; this time these have sections cut out. The next row reveals singular dramatic image with the negative flip-flopped. This creates a tension, is it pulling or is it pushing? Again the rhythm establishes the composition. Like the spiral in DNA, these images are meant to whirl in the frame. The final row ends the piece with a gentle floating image similar to the first. But I wanted to let the impact drift away as if it is a continuing link to another era, a continuation of life and a

feeling that we are constantly changing yet remaining the same.

In the process of creating *Continuum,* I thought heavily on the creation of wampum making. I wanted to relate my process to the time honoured creation of wampum. As previously explained, wampum has a significant and important role in history telling, serving as a legal document and fulfilling its duty as a cultural signifier indigenous to Iroquois roots.

In my interpretation, perhaps, wampum doesn't act as a legal document but it does carry other responsibilities. As in wampum, I manually manipulated the image by cutting each figure out as a separate entity on its own. As I worked with each image, I subconsciously thought about the person associated with the image. With my mother's image I saw her as a young woman. Her smiling, happy face made me think of her now and about her life. My daughter, now as the young woman, combined with images of her as a young child, catapulting time from the past to the future. My own image acts as a pivot between the two. Because I am using personal images, I realize that I cannot expect viewers who do not know my daughter, my mother or myself to share in this record of familial history. However, I want them to see the movement, the story elements, and get a feeling for the composition as a whole. Through the use of this distinct Hotinonshonni

artmaking process, I hope to peel back one of those forgotten layers in our psyche.

Joseph Brant: Displaced Person

Although Joseph Brant was not a hereditary chief, he was a war chief in the Grand Council of the Iroquois Confederacy of the Six Nations. Because of his ascension in council due to his diplomatic abilities, he achieved the realm of royalty within the Confederacy. He also was given the title of Captain in the British army; this was the highest position a non-British subject could attain.

Brant was the first Indian to have mediations with the British concerning land settlements in North America. Valerie Greenfield writes:

> **Perhaps his greatest accomplishments were found in his work towards improving their bargaining position regarding land rights and compensation for losses suffered during the Seven Years War and during and after the Revolutionary War.1**

This resulted in having land granted to the Mohawks along the Grand River. The land was to have been from the mouth to the source of the river.

As the American Revolution came to a close, Brant with members of the Six Nations, resettled to what is now known as

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1. Valerie Greenfield, Portraits of Thayendanegea, Joseph Brant.Burlington Cultural Centre(1993):9

Brantford. The Mohawks left their ancestral homeland in search of prosperity, tranquility, and in loyalty to Brant.

Like Sky Woman, Brant was pushed through a hole causing him to descend to a place he didn't know. Leaving the Mohawk Valley, he and his followers came to a place where they had to start anew. Their sacred places, their ancestral sites, and familiar landmarks were no longer to be a part of their day-to-day lives. The struggles of re-establishing themselves and promises of abundance in the new land were part of the period. Barbara Graymont declares:

> **From a free-roving, independent, powerful people, the Iroquois became a divided Confederacy, living upon restricted land holdings, subjected to the management and mismanagement of the white man's government. The Iroquois now entered upon the reservation period and a new era in their history.1**

I see myself as a pivot in portraying a link between the past and the future, but I also see the life of Brant as this pivotal point in history. His goal of trying to make things better for the Mohawks in the Mohawk Valley, and later along the Grand River, clearly illustrates the results of certain

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1. Barbara Graymont, The Iroquois in the American Revolution, Syracuse University Press(1972):285

decisions he made. And we, the bearers of those consequences, still question his judgments.

Still, knowing the history, having researched why certain decisions were made, I feel an urge to reclaim the Mohawk Valley.

Experiencing this geographical area, I feel a shiver of sentiment, nostalgia (maybe) and an acknowledgement of our land base. Dr. Deborah Doxtator expresses this thought:

> **Recently I visited the Mohawk Valley where my ancestors lived. I was struck by the perplexing and confounding experience of feeling and thinking simultaneously how this place was both still me and yet looked nothing like me. What does it take to divide mind from land? Does it take believing in your mind that only surface is reality, and refusing to see beyond the surface impositions to something deeper? It does matter how our minds are.1**

I have used Brant in some of my artwork, namely the Brant statue that stands in Victoria Park, downtown Brantford.

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1. Dr. Deborah Doxtator, Godi'Nigoha: The Women's Mind, Woodland Cultural Centre, Brantford, Ontario (1997)39

Standing in front of the statue are my three sisters, another piece from *Mohawks in Beehives*. This piece is called *Standing On Guard For Thee*(1991)(Figure 11). They have playfully taken their places, realizing what has brought them to this specific regional locale. *Standing On Guard For Thee* is a reference again to protection of heritage, culture, and distinct indigenous presence.

Passage: The Exhibition

My exhibition will consist of four oil paintings. Each painting is 10' X 12' in size. They will be hung in a rectangle. In the middle space will stand a platform. Here the viewer can look at the work from an elevated position, allowing the viewer to participate in the exhibition in an organic way rather than looking at the painting as one might in a gallery.

The canvases I am using were constructed for me at W. Blank and Sons Ltd. Canvas manufacturing goods company. In my work I like to use materials close at hand as opposed to specially ordering goods to create work. I believe this should never be a limitation as it stops the process in creation.

Mr. Blank has sewn pieces of canvas together, and stitched a hem around the edge. He also puts rivets into place. These are used to hold the canvas in place on a large frame.

Painting #1

This painting is a scene from the Grand River near Brantford. I have often used this location in other work, from a place called Tutela Heights. The Tutelo Indians lived on this cliff before their demise to disease. Standing at a cliff's edge

you get a good view of the Grand River as it flows by.

Knowing that in the not-too-far distance you can see the cityscape of Brantford gives me a sense of these people who no longer have a voice. This particular spot has a name that bears their tribal affiliation and is known as Tutela Heights. At this point I feel a responsibility to acknowledge they once lived here. Now they no longer do, but I must keep their presence known if only through the title of my work which would signify this place.

On this piece of property adjacent to Tutela Heights is a Brant Historical sight, the Bell Homestead. In the summertime buses of tourists unload almost daily. Here they see where the telephone was invented and see the home of Alexander Graham Bell.

I feel this scene represents Brant's chosen area of settlement after he left the Mohawk Valley.

The trees in my paintings are stylized as I want them to replicate beadwork designs used in traditional beadwork applied onto clothing of the Iroquois. The abstract shapes follow primarily the shapes of trees, foliage, and the presence of nature that surrounded the Iroquois nations.

I believe by conscientiously looking at landscape and making conscientious decisions about portraying it, one can take possession of it, if only as an intellectual exercise. By seeing landscape, representing it, I become a part of it, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Painting #2

This painting is of the Cohoes, the falls where the Hudson River meets the Mohawk River. At this location the Mohawks first met with the Peacemaker. They questioned his prophesy. They doubted him as the man who was sent to lead them out of their dark times. In their ignorance and, because they wanted to know if he was truly this man, they tied him to a tree and threw him over the falls. If he perished they would then know he was a fake and if he survived they would follow him and his teachings.

Ultimately, he did survive. He went on to unite the Hotinonshonni and make it into a powerful confederacy, bringing together the Five Nations.

I travelled to this place last summer. The NO TRESPASSING signs did not keep my brother and I out. We followed the path that took us to the point where the waterfall was. Now all that remained was a mere trickle. Hydro electric towers loomed overhead. The water from this energy source was being

used for hydro-electric power. The city of Albany could be seen from across the river. The once raging river was now a river bed of stones.

Witnessing a landscape which is significant to the Iroquois life, again, I felt a responsibility to reclaim the land through landscape painting.

In this painting I wanted to conjure the energy I felt that day.

Painting #3

I will use the longhouse as a metaphor for shelter. The shape duplicates the shape of the turtle's back. Remembering the fall of Sky Woman and knowing that she ended up on the back of the Great Turtle, we imply that it is here where life begins. So the dome shaped building refers to our origins. This dome is also seen in the basic design of the Iroquois. Jolene Rickard explains: **"Beadwork designs like the tree of life reflected Native spiritual beliefs while others may have been inspired by the beauty of the natural world."1**

We are reminded of our reasoning power. Because we have to live with others we must learn to think about others. Like the animals who looked over the welfare of Sky Woman as she descended to earth, we must remember to share with those who are not as fortunate as ourselves. Living as a community we m u s t

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1. Jolene Rickard, New Traditions From Old, Iroquois Beaded Christmas Ornaments, Castellani Art Museum of Niagara

University,(1996)3
try and enrich our surroundings.

There is an image of a doorway to suggest all are welcome. The viewer is meant to have a feeling of inclusion and become part of the dialogue.

Painting #4

In this work I want the viewer to have the impression that they are falling like Sky Woman. On her descent through the hole in the sky the last things she tries to grab hold of are the roots of the tree.

Instead she manages to grab strawberry and tobacco plants. As she falls through the hole she is rescued by a flock of birds and placed onto the back of a turtle.

This painting will focus on the fall. I want to convey a feeling of disorientation. The emotional disarray of not knowing where you will land or what the impact will be. Like Brant who didn't know what to expect on his arrival in his promised land.

Soundtrack

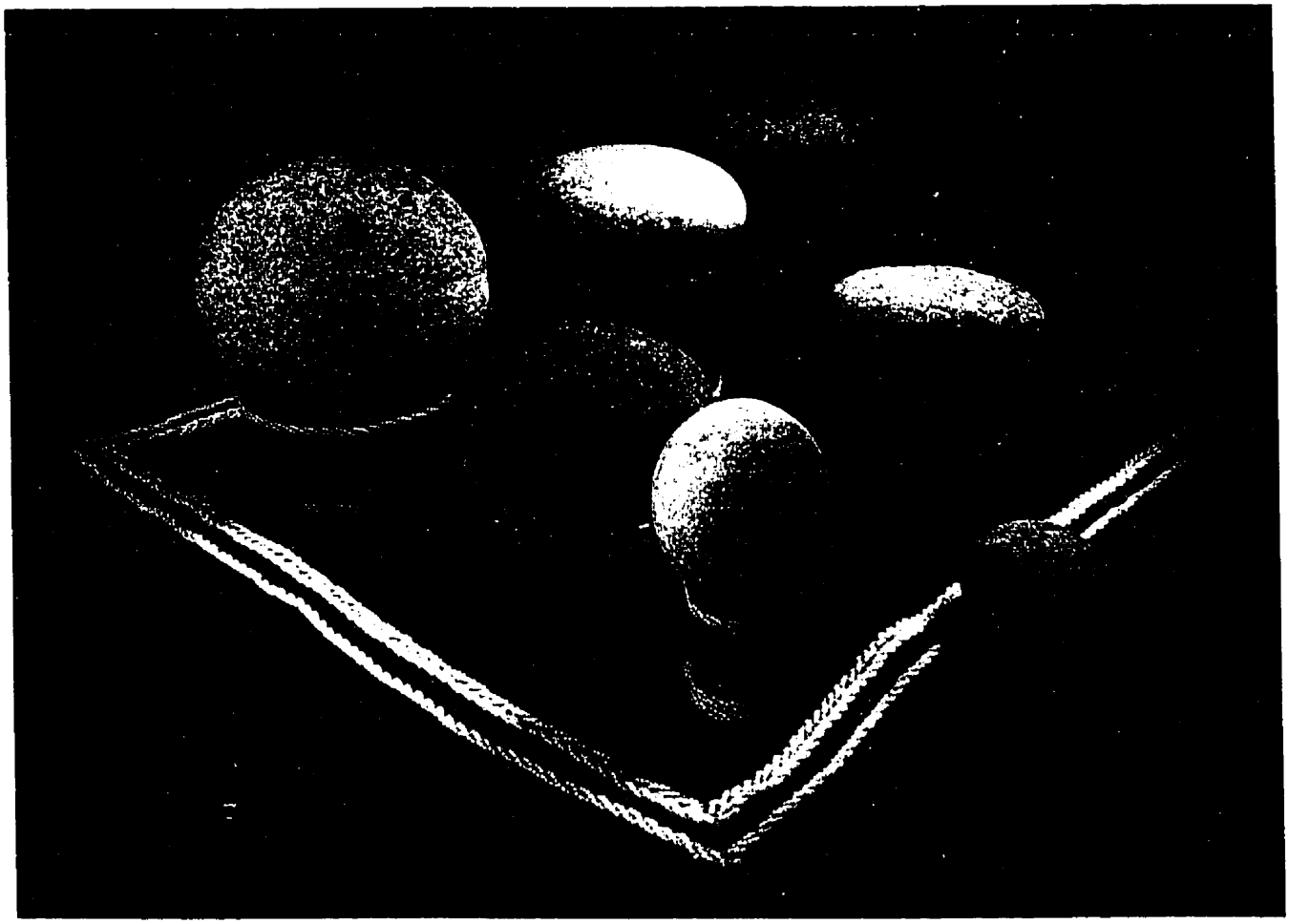
I am going to use the theme song from the television show "Voyageur". The premise of this series has the crew aboard the starship Voyageur hurling into space millions of light years away. Their mission is to find their way home.

I am inviting community members to a recording session at which time we will remake/recreate this theme, Iroquoizing it to be included into this exhibit.

Conclusion

I want this exhibit to express the love of artmaking. I want to express the need to be creative using the tools and materials at hand, basing it on cultural knowledge and directing that work to an audience who understand, the concept in which it has been made.

I believe in narrowing a focus, not to exclude but to make the personal honest and authentic. Authenticating the source of ideas gives me personal strength in depicting my own vision. I also trust this gives the viewer the ability to use his/her own imagination to decipher the images the way they want to. Usually the design I use is hidden and not stated as being distinctly Indian, Iroquois or Hotinonshonni. But this current approach has liberated me in my quest to exemplify those origins.



MAN WITH AXE, 1968
Pen and ink on paper
88.3 x 68.5 (framed)
From the Collection of the Manitoba Government

Fig. 3

BOYS WITH SLED, 1968
Pen and ink on paper
57.7 x 77.4 (framed)
From the Collection of the Manitoba Government

Fig. 4

She Likes To Watch Him Dance
1986
Shelly Niro
Mixed Media
70.5 x 45.5 cm

The Iroquois Is A Highly Developed Matriarchal Society, 1992
Shelley Niro
Hand Tinted Photo
53 x 100 cm

Fig. 9

ng On Guard For Thee, 1991 Fig. 11

Detail from Continuum 1996 Fig. 13

Letti... Trou... "Continuum." 17-6

Fig. 1

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