

Linked Histories

Recent Art by Three First Nations Women

PAMELA McCALLUM



A gallery visitor who stepped into Joane Cardinal-Schubert's *Kitchen Works: sstorsiinao'si*, installation was confronted with compelling and contradictory images during the

'98-'99 Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art. The black and white squares of the floor are reassuringly familiar, evoking kitchens both of the 1950s and today's retro styles. Yet one side of this 'kitchen' contains a schoolroom dominated by a blackboard filled with writing, and a white wall covered with drawings of a church, soldiers (or are they settlers?), and other distressed, howling figures. On the opposite wall hangs a portrait of a young woman, an adolescent on the threshold of adulthood, who gazes across at the blackboard. There is no table, but there is a glass-topped display case, and it is to an eerie, disturbing object on this case that the visitor's eye inevitably will be drawn: a delicate china teacup filled with blood—blood which has spattered across the crisply clean floor tiles. How might a viewer feel about such unsettling images? Puzzled? Shocked? Unnerved? Intrigued? All of these conflicting emotions at once?

Contradictory thoughts and emotions are not unexpected reactions to the work of contemporary Canadian First Nations artists. In "The Sky is the Limit," an article published in *Border Crossings*, Canadian art critic Robert Enright observes, "The undercurrent in much of this art is

doubly charged with anger and dispossession and with pride and a sense of belonging." Anger and dispossession are represented in the relationships, both historical and contemporary, of First Nations peoples with a dominant, colonizing culture and society. Pride and sense of belonging situate their art within aboriginal cultures and express the continuing strengths of those cultures as they struggle with the legacies of history. These qualities are amply evident in the art of three Alberta women, Joane Cardinal-Schubert, Jane Ash Poitras and Linda Red Hawk. The first two are established artists with national and international reputations; the third is a younger artist whose work is beginning to receive recognition.

Born in Red Deer, into an artistically talented family (the architect Douglas Cardinal is her brother), Cardinal-Schubert graduated from the Alberta College of Art and the University of Calgary. Over the past 20 years she has gained a reputation as a major contemporary artist. Her provocative art, which challenges viewers to experience troubling emotions, to confront unquestioned assumptions and to think in new ways, is held in many public, corporate and private collections, including the National Gallery in Ottawa. In the late 1980s Cardinal-Schubert expressed uneasiness about being grouped with other First Nations artists. On the occasion of the 'Diversities' exhibition in October 1989 she frankly told the Glenbow Museum such a grouping was racist: "We were the only people in Canada

OPPOSITE PAGE: *Kitchen Works: sstorsiinao'si*, installation by Joane Cardinal-Schubert, photographed at the Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art. Courtesy of Glenbow Museum.



Photo: RON MARSH

in an art exhibition who were labelled because of our race.” But by the early 1990s she had revised her views: “I think as Native artists we have taken the term ‘Native’ and we’ve changed it into something which really has meaning now. It’s on the level of the Group of Seven.” If the Group of Seven developed new styles to represent the texture and space of the Canadian landscape, First Nations artists have forged new styles to portray the stories of their peoples.

How are these persistent issues inscribed in *Kitchen Works: sstorsiinao’si*? A puzzled viewer might begin to decipher the installation by turning to the writing on the blackboard. The words invite the reader into a “shared frontier of understanding,” which would explore “our linked histories” and “the imposition of those histories on each other.” In this context the ghostly drawings come into focus: the settlement of the West, the residential schools, the isolation of young children from their families, their cultures and their languages, the profound pain and loss. Indeed, the image of the blackboard itself, with its echoes of residential schools and forced learning imposed on Native children, is a disquieting symbol here and elsewhere in Cardinal-Schubert’s art. And yet this is a strange blackboard; stretching 7 or 8 metres along the length of the installation, it makes reading an uncomfortable act. It is impossible to step back far enough to have the whole blackboard in view, so that

anyone reading the text must move back and forth to follow the words, shuffling a few feet to the right to read the end of one line, taking several steps back to the left before catching the first word of the next line. The act of reading is broken up, made unusually difficult, giving the viewer a momentary sense of the discomfort of a Native child staring at strange writing in a residential school. The similarity, once registered, is ironically undercut by the fact that the gallery visitor, unlike a small child far away from family and friends, is free to walk away, to turn around and look at the other side, to step outside the installation altogether.

But the viewer who persists with the awkward reading will discover other connections. “I am looking,” the chalk writing says, “and I am seeing with the eyes

you taught me to use.” On the opposite wall of the installation hangs a self-portrait, a woodcut Cardinal-Schubert made when she was 19. The face of a young woman, repeated nine times in the pattern of a larger square, gazes intently at the blackboard and drawings and at the gallery visitors. The past, a younger self, watches the present, embodied both in the creations of the older artist and the viewers who walk through the installation. By multiplying the faces in the self-portrait and by varying the tone and shadow, Cardinal-Schubert draws attention to the diverse possibilities in every 19-

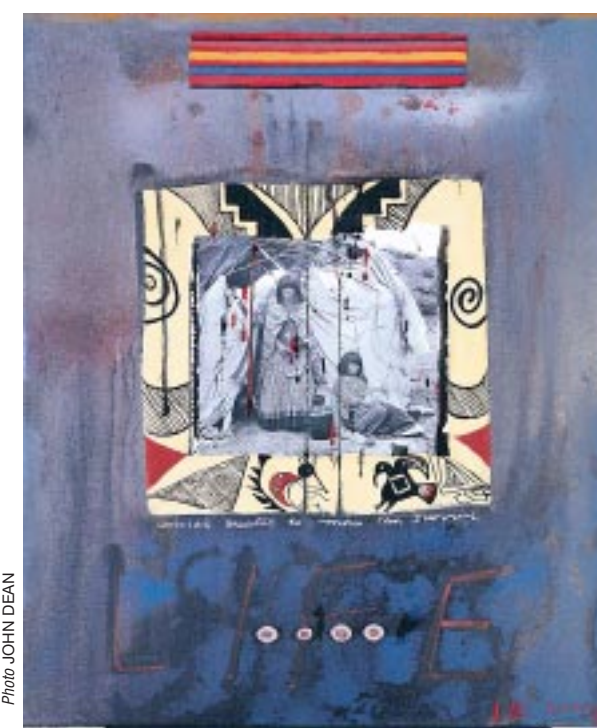
year-old life. In her own development she has “looked” with the skills and techniques she learned in the dominant white society. What she sees with the eyes that society “taught [her] to use” are the histories of First Nations people in the West and the constructions of those histories in cultural institutions.

One of the institutions which Cardinal-Schubert’s work has persistently challenged and critiqued is the museum itself. In a museum, artifacts from the daily lives and sacred spiritual traditions of First Nations cultures are not only taken from the people and communities to whom they belong, but are also displayed as lifeless objects imprisoned in the past. In *Kitchen Works: sstorsiinao’si*, the viewer encounters a glass-topped museum cabinet, neatly roped off, containing six small papooses, marked with scraps of texts, some from newspapers (“Mohawks, police clash”), some

from scripture (“suffer the little children to come unto me”). Cardinal-Schubert’s art challenges us to think about our “linked histories”: how has a culture whose religion teaches peace and love caused so much conflict? And it is these linked histories which are focused in that striking image, the pretty, flowered teacup filled with blood. In European traditions, the cup of blood has associations with the sacrament of Christian communion or with the restful English institution of afternoon tea. Here, these positive figures are transformed into a symbol of horror, just as the good intentions to educate Native children issued into the terrors of residential schools and child abuse, and the preservation of Native culture in museums tore objects out of the very communities which gave them life.



Lightning Shaman, by Jane Ash Poitras. Private collection. Courtesy of The Collector’s Gallery, Calgary.



Woman Creates so Man Can Survive, by Jane Ash Poitras. Courtesy of The Collector’s Gallery, Calgary.

Cardinal-Schubert is cautious about labelling herself as a political artist. “I am tired of hearing that my art is political,” she says, “If people think that emotion and caring about issues are political then I can’t stop dealing with that. It is too much of a reality for Native people. I don’t want to do empty art.” As passionately intense as her art is, it combines deeply emotional images with gentle humour. Looking more closely at the fantastically gilt frame surrounding the self-portrait reveals that it is made up of many tiny plastic figures of cowboys and Indians sprayed with gold paint. These are the very playthings through which children all too often first encounter the idea of an “Indian,” ideas which in turn constructed white society’s reactions to the young artist enclosed by the frame.

The erasure of Native cultures and communities, the layered histories which cry out to be retrieved by their people, are also powerfully figured in the work of Edmonton artist Jane Ash Poitras. Born on a remote trapline near Fort Chipewyan, in northern Alberta, Poitras was left at age 6 with Edmonton social services when her mother, in hospital dying of tuberculosis, was unable to care for her. Poitras’ life was changed by a serendipitous meeting of the old and the young. Marguerite Runck, a widow with grown children of her own, found the young girl and simply took her home. “It was like I was a puppy” is Poitras’ description. Although social services were eventually informed, they made no effort to contact her extended family in Fort Chipewyan, and Poitras grew up in the care of the elderly German woman. “Mrs. Runck,” she says, “was my protector, my warrior, my elder, my grandmother, my everything.” A devout Catholic, Mrs. Runck raised the young girl in a deeply spiritual household, taking her to mass at least once a day. She also encouraged her budding artistic talent. Poitras remembers the magic of sitting at the kitchen table for hours drawing with pencil and indelible ink: “I was so happy with this pencil. I could draw anything I wanted, and no one seemed to mind. There I was in heaven, not knowing that someday that same

little girl would grow up and still be drawing pictures, visions, shaman.”

But Poitras’ apparent good fortune was not without a price. Mrs. Runck tried to hide the ancestry of her adopted granddaughter, curling her hair and powdering her skin to make it appear lighter. Indeed, Poitras had completed a degree in microbiology at the University of Alberta and was taking a printmaking course when another chance meeting altered the direction of her life. A fellow student, Nora Yellowknife, confronted her with a frank and direct question: why was she pretending not to be Native? That question provoked a search for her roots and the discovery of a large, welcoming extended family in Fort Chipewyan. At the same time, she resolved to pursue her art, receiving a B.F.A. from the University of Alberta in 1983 and an M.F.A. from Columbia University in New York City in 1985. She also holds a B.Sc. in microbiology from U of A.

Visitors to the exhibition of Poitras’ art at The Collector’s Gallery in Calgary during the summer of 1998 saw superb examples of her style. In *Woman Creates so Man Can Survive*, a background washed with deep greys and blues gives the impression of ancient slate walls. In the centre is a square band of buff, terracotta and black patterns and figures surrounding a photograph of two women. The photograph,

difficult to place in time (is it the late 1800s? the early 1900s? mid-century?), portrays two Native women, one standing, one seated, who stare impassively at the camera. They seem to gaze across a vast void, into an unfamiliar world. In *Woman Creates so Man Can Survive*, Poitras depicts cultures in collision. Dressed in western clothing, in front of a partially dismantled shelter, the women inhabit a culture in transition, caught between traditional and settler ways of life. The border framing the photograph is filled with drawings which reflect the patterns of south-western Native cultures. These figures, especially the kokopeli flute player, have been extensively appropriated and marketed in popular Santa Fe fabrics and furnishings, in notepaper and posters, in jewellery and scarves, even in Tex-Mex restaurant menus. At the same time, then, that

Poitras reminds us how the art produced by Native societies has been wrenched from them for someone else's profit, her own art returns the southwestern figures to First Nations cultures.

At the bottom of the painting are four small circles made of antlers; at the top, a band of brightly coloured fabric. 'Life' moves from the natural world of the animal to the human world of the fabric: women's work draws material from nature to remake it into the intricate lines of woven cloth, a creativity which often passes unregarded. Both the circles and the strip of fabric pick up and repeat the red, which shadows into rose on the background and spills across the photograph. There is a double irony in this dripping red: it is both the blood flowing from people suffering centuries of domination and the pulsing blood of a way of life which has survived that domination.

Another mixed media work, *Lightning Shaman*, addresses similar issues of erasure, survival and retrieval. Within a border made up of traditional patterns from blankets, clothing and beadwork, three images float, seemingly suspended in time: a photograph of a sacred procession, a flash of forked lightning, and a scrap of oriental characters. On a sandstone-coloured background reminiscent of the petroglyphs in southeastern Alberta are markings and symbols of ancient Native cultures: horned and antlered shamanist figures, animal tracks, handprints. At the bottom of the painting, as if it were a transient visitor from the natural world, a beautiful, realistically rendered butterfly seems to alight on the surface. Poitras here brings traditional Native spirituality into juxtaposition with other religions in the animistic flash of lightning and the echo of Buddhism in the oriental characters. While her work has never avoided the pain of First Nations peoples in Christian institutions, Poitras also wants to portray the interconnections of spiritual beliefs. "There have been many shamans, saints, prophets and visionaries since

time immemorial," she writes, "and they have been martyred, assassinated, incarcerated and demeaned. Big Bear, Poundmaker, Martin Luther King, Jesus and many, many more were all masters of the spirit world and devoted to the good of their people."

Spirituality and the visionary traditions of First Nations peoples are also central themes in the work of Calgary artist Linda Red Hawk. Born to an Anishanabe mother from Kipawa, Quebec, and an Italian-Canadian father, she grew up on the mean streets of Vancouver's East End in a family that chose to ignore her aboriginal ancestry. But if her mother had learned to deny her people, she did not ignore her daughter's artistic talents; even as she struggled with alcoholism and addiction, she supported her little girl's love of art. Some of Red Hawk's earliest memories are of doing beadwork and batik under her mother's encouragement.

At 16, exhausted with the bleak and demeaning world of Hastings Street and the East End, Red Hawk hopped on a bus to Calgary, and has been a Calgarian ever since. A yoga teacher whose classes offer a dynamic interweaving of Native and eastern spirituality, Red Hawk honours visionary experience and creativity.

The city of Calgary seemed to have an almost mystical pull on her spirit. When Red Hawk attended an alternative program at Bowness High School, she felt respected and encouraged to pursue her art. "I spent hours in the art class," she remembers, "drawing, painting, sculpting." Living in the Parkdale district, she was fascinated by the presence and strength of the Bow River running through the city; it was a place to draw, a place to regain energy. As well, the Rocky Mountains on the western horizon acted as a protective barrier separating her from her old life in Vancouver, and offering the opportunity for new beginnings. As her art developed, Red Hawk realized how profoundly the environment of the foothills and mountains sustains her. "Working with the earth and the mediums of the earth

incarnates me," she says. "It keeps me grounded." A crucial part of moving forward in her new life and reclaiming her First Nations ancestry was changing her name. 'Red Hawk' was given to her in a vision: "I saw myself running along, holding my sister's hand, when a voice said, 'Fly, Red Hawk, fly.' It was like a new birthing."

Although she took some courses in sculpture at Alberta College of Art, she found formal study uncongenial, preferring instead the resources of her Native traditions. Each work begins with a vision. To incorporate the beauty of the natural world—the ordinary which is often overlooked—Red Hawk collects plant fibres, petals, grasses, bones, fur, shells. Her creative process involves shamanic practices—meditation, drumming, chanting and dancing—through which she integrates the plant and animal spirits into each piece. "In my art," Red Hawk says, "I want to bring honour to aboriginal spirituality." The unity of spirituality and the natural world is amply evident in her large mixed media wallpieces. Against a background of grey-green, the colour of Rocky Mountain spruce forests, the shapes of *Yohani-Shewolf Medicine* vibrate with a striking intensity. The curved outlines evoke both the vastness of the universe—interlocking crescent and full moons—and the intimate female body—womblike roundness. The wolf spirit, who walks upright on her hind legs, is at once embryonic and fully grown; she is surrounded by bright pink flowers, which evoke both the wild roses of the Alberta summer and the intricate patterning of Native bead and leather work. Nature and culture, the creativity of the environment and the human transformation of it are brought together and interconnected.

The basic medium of Red Hawk's wallpieces is a paper pulp, soaked for three days, coloured with light-fast dye. She adds petals, fur, bark, seeds, moss, all of which become part of the paper. When the paper is ready to be worked, she shapes it onto forms sculpted from modelling clay; the resulting cast forms the surface on which she

will paint. Inspired by a trip to the Queen Charlotte Islands in 1998, *Embodying the Ancestors* is dominated by a large spirit face, resembling the ceremonial masks of west coast Native cultures. And yet, the spikes radiating from the mask suggest it is also a sun, a life force whose vitality supports both the human figure—a self-portrait—and the animal figure rising out of its head. Exquisitely intense colours of deep green (the sea, the rainforest) and bright rust (cedar, sand) glow with a dazzling brilliance. The life of the staghorn moss and pine needles from the Queen Charlottes—incorporated into the paper—seems to pulse through the work.

At first Red Hawk's art seems less committed to social issues. But such an impression might be misleading. Red Hawk deeply admires and respects the responsibility that Cardinal-Schubert, Poitras and other artists have taken on to represent the suffering and abuse of First Nations peoples. "Everybody has been hurt," she says. But she also feels that the efforts of earlier artists have opened a space of freedom for her to explore her own personal journey, which she characterizes as "a powerful story of honouring aboriginal voice," a story offering hope to young men and women faced with difficult circumstances. "Aboriginal spiritual integrity has a place in the world," she says, "especially aboriginal women's spirituality. I feel called upon to work with aboriginal feminine energy. Women's voices need to become part of the foreground."

Viewers who are open to what this art is saying will enter into fascinating dialogues of past and present, dialogues which challenge them to see differently and teach them to feel in new ways. At the Alberta Biennial, the Glenbow Museum offered visitors the opportunity to write about the art they had just seen. One posted note, in a child's printing, commented on Cardinal-Schubert's *Kitchen Works: storsimao'si*: "I also liked the art with the blood on everything. It made me think." 🐾

Pam McCallum teaches English at the University of Calgary. She has a particular interest in the representation of history.



Yohani - Shewolf Medicine, mixed media wallpiece by Linda Red Hawk. Courtesy of Webster Galleries, Calgary.



Embodying The Ancestors, mixed media wallpiece by Linda Red Hawk. Courtesy of Webster Galleries, Calgary.