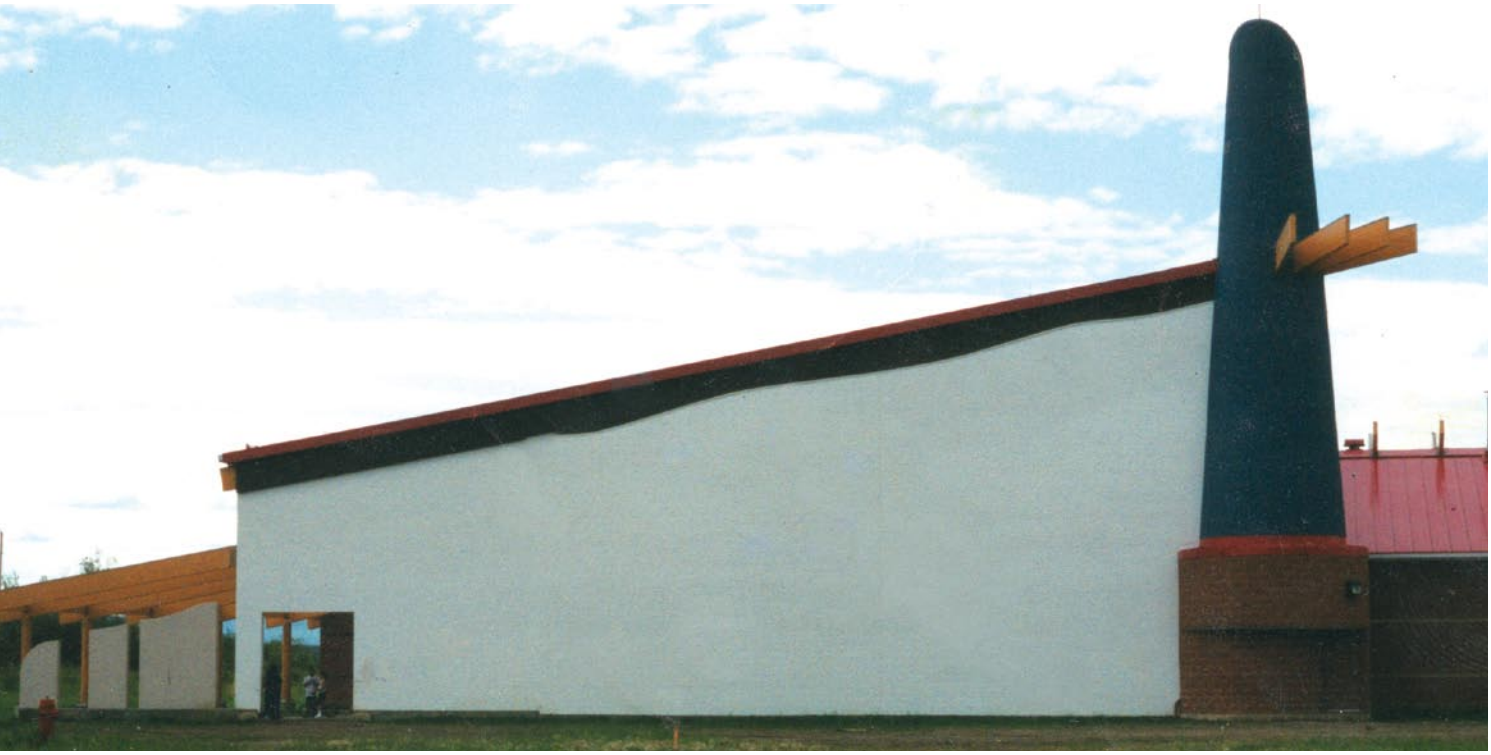

MURAL, MURAL ON THE WALL

THE TALLCREE PROJECT: A COMMUNITY DESIGN PROCESS

STORY AND PHOTOS BY IAN MULDER

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE GREAT, LONG MIDSUMMER EVENINGS in the north, the sun still high at nine o'clock, kids roaming around the reserve and playing in the park, and in the background the high-pitched whine of a quad ripping up and down the road in front of the band office. We were playing softball. The diamond was a grass field beside the school, with an old car mat for home plate. All the guys were out, many sharing cigarettes on the log that served as the team bench. I had been up to TallCree before and had met some of the guys but didn't know most of their names. Many seemed to know who I was but weren't sure why I was there.

When it was my turn to hit, I approached the old Ford mat and picked up one of the many aluminum bats lying around. The first pitch was high but I swung anyway, the weight of the bat and my rusty skills making me stumble. Everyone laughed. I finally connected on the third pitch, but it soared high into the movie-screen-like sky and was summarily caught by the second baseman. It was then that John, whom everyone called Leprechaun, turned to me and said with a laugh, "Well, I hope you paint pictures better than you play baseball!"

The community of North TallCree is 50 kilometres south of Fort Vermilion on Highway 88, one of the last remaining unpaved north/south routes in Alberta. It is one of the three major settlements of the TallCree band and, like many reserves, the homes are spread out on small plots, rusted trucks on blocks are displayed in front yards, and small paths weave through the community linking houses with the band office, health centre and school. I first visited the community in the summer of 2003 when I was leading art workshops for youth as part of a joint initiative between the Alberta Foundation for the Arts and Alberta Community Development. Of all the communities I got to know, North TallCree was one of my favourites, so I was excited when I was invited to return to paint a huge outdoor mural on the school wall.

The education director of the TallCree School Division is a forward-looking, cigar-appreciating Bob Dylanophile named Norman Champagne, whom I'd met and liked immediately. A major renovation of the school had been finished three years earlier, creating a brand new gym with a massive, 27-metre-long white exterior wall that faced out onto much of the reserve. They had thought about painting a mural on this giant canvas since its completion; when I came along Norman said it was "serendipitous."

I had been interested in murals for years and completed or worked on about a dozen large pieces in clubs, bars, recording studios and schools in the Edmonton area. In fact, Norman knew my portrait of the venerable Pierre Couchard on the outside wall of the old Chez Pierre Nightclub on 105 Street in downtown Edmonton. He would often—good-naturedly—mention this fact when introducing me to people familiar with the city. I would cringe, given that Chez Pierre is one of Edmonton's best known strip clubs.

While murals don't play a big role in Canadian cultural history, large-scale public paintings have been around pretty much forever in most of the world. Indeed, some of the first paintings, on the walls of caves in France, were murals of sorts. More recently, the great Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and David Siquieros explored the form as a means of political expression. Murals have been popular in the United States as well, especially during the community movements of the 1960s and '70s in cities like San Francisco, Philadelphia and New York. In Canada, dozens of small towns, often facing declining economic importance, have been reborn as tourist destinations with the help of a series of commissioned, community-driven, mostly historical pieces. You can see wonderful examples in Stony Plain, Alberta and Chemainus, B.C. What connects all of this art—and what I find most interesting—is the sheer public-ness of murals, their deep and permanent community roots.

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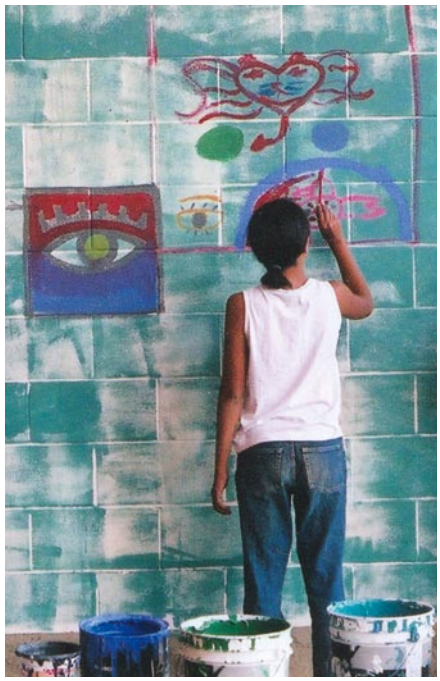

Opposite: the brand new gym with a massive, 27-metre-long white exterior wall that faced out onto the reserve. **Right:** TallCree School Division student participating in an art workshop.

With the education director keen on my TallCree project, I was invited to meet with the rest of the education council. I proposed doing a community-design-style process whereby locals would work through me to create the piece, utilizing my technical skills as a mural artist to make it happen. We wanted something that would deeply involve the people who lived there and who would be living with the work once it was finished. It was decided that I would spend a substantial amount of time in the community, attempting to understand what themes and images people might be interested in, and then use my skills to bring it into being. In September 2003, I returned to TallCree to begin the process.

Nobody on the reserve ever asked me why council had decided to hire a non-native artist, though it was a question posed to me often by friends in the city. There's certainly no shortage of highly talented First Nations artists in Alberta. Both Jane Ash Poitras and Alex Janvier are living examples of world-class First Nation artists working here today. That said, not many artists of any background do large-scale outdoor mural work. I suppose the fact that I had taught up in the community and had spent time in several other First Nations communities made the council trust me. However, I think what attracted us all to the project was the nature of the community design process, with its emphasis on working with local people and using my skills merely as an instrument.

That fall, I spent time in the community meeting people and letting everyone I met know what this tall white guy was doing hanging around the reserve. I set up a little studio space in the adult education room. I finished several dozen sketches and a few colour designs. I also learned a great deal more about the community. I learned about Chief Kinasayoo (or Kinuso), the Cree chief who was one of the prominent native negotiators at the Treaty 8 signing at Slave Lake in 1899. It is said that he is the great-grandfather of many of the people in TallCree and a respected figure in the Cree history of northern Alberta. I was led to him by Cathy Auger, the Cree language teacher at the school who later helped me to translate into Cree syllabics a phrase from the treaty negotiations that appears on the mural.

When I returned in the spring of 2004, I found that someone had dragged over an old concession stand for the upcoming Treaty Day celebrations, and I used it as a studio. I put mosquito netting across the serving window and found an old table and chair. All the kids would come and watch me work through the mesh window (without getting their hands in the paint). It was a very public environment, so people could see what I was doing, ask questions, engage in conversation, all the while (mostly) keeping the bugs out.

At the outset I imagined a formal process by which I could connect with different members of the community, bounce ideas off of them and get their input. I had thought of holding town-hall-style sessions in the health centre or meeting formally with the chief and council. After spending some time on the reserve, I realized this wasn't possible and likely wouldn't work anyway. The chief and council spend much of their time in Edmonton. Formal events like I had envisioned are very difficult to plan; people in TallCree tend to prefer more casual, one-to-one encounters. So I tried to get input on the project while playing softball, doing art workshops with the kids during Treaty Days, singing with the local band, and hanging out at the nightly roadside "ditch parties" along the historic wagon trail from South TallCree to Fort Vermilion during the week prior to Canada Day. I would often have coffee in the education office and speak about the project over cigars with Norman and the variety of people that stopped by. I even voted in the band office at the federal election.

This page, above: Ian Mulder preparing his paint. **Bottom:** live performance painting while elevated 25 feet in the air. **Opposite:** the mural with landscape motif—a big sky and the gentle Buffalo Head Hills, including a portrait of Chief Kinasayoo and an eagle grasping a treaty medallion.

AT THE END OF THE DESIGN PERIOD, I DECIDED UPON A LANDSCAPE MOTIF REMINISCENT of the local environment, with a big sky and the gentle Buffalo Head Hills that lie beyond the reserve to the south. I included elements that the community wanted, most notably a portrait of Chief Kinasayoo and an eagle grasping a treaty medallion. The centre piece of the mural was my own take on a four-directions symbol, above two figures, an elder and a youth, both pointing up at the elements in the sky, both wearing traditional outfits used in the jingle and grass dances. People seemed to like the design. (Among the responses I got, however, was the comment, "That looks great, but where is the Montreal Canadiens logo going to go?")

Mural painting is a different game altogether from easel work. The scale is the most obvious reason, but working outdoors—and painting while elevated 25 feet in the air—are additional stresses. Moreover, one element not often considered is the "performance" aspect of on-site mural painting. The event is live; something tangible emerges day by day. Nearing completion, I began working on the portrait of Chief Kinasayoo. At the end of a particularly long day, I was packing up and took a few steps back to look at the work I had just completed. As always, some of the kids were around.

"You made him look like a monkey," said one.

"Yeah," added another. "Why'd you make him look like a monkey?"

What critics! I had been working for 12 hours and out of the mouths of babes comes word that what I had done was no good! I shrugged and with a bit of a heavy heart returned to my trailer.

Because mechanical lifts are very expensive to rent, especially in remote locations, I had to be efficient. By the time I finished the picture, barrier-coated it with gel and sealed the wall with UV-resistant clear coat, I had been on the wall for a mere 12 days. When I finished the final brush stroke I felt surprised rather than elated, more relief than jubilation. I was exhausted but happy with what we had accomplished. I felt like I got as much out of the process as the community did. I met interesting and kind people and was able to spend a lot of time with kids and teens. And now there is a permanent piece of public art in North TallCree, one which hopefully will remain as long as the sun shines and the water flows.

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Ian Mulder has painted in Turkey, Mexico and throughout Alberta. He lives in Edmonton, where every naked wall is a potential canvas. This story was originally published in the Alberta Foundation for the Arts 2003/04 annual report.