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THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

**MOTHER EARTH FATHER SKY**

A written accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition

By

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## **Abstract**

The installation **MOTHER EARTH FATHER SKY** is a departure point from previous sculptures that I created in my undergraduate degree, when I started to bridge the European philosophy of art with my own Native cultural heritage. By living and experiencing the combination of these two worlds, it has made me aware of the conflict North American Native art faces in the dilemma of classifying art as either high art or as craft art.

After recognizing that most Native American fabricating was and still is romanticized, it will always be housed under the roof of an anthropological museum. I believe the key to breaking the tradition of this dogma is to learn a wide variety of techniques of art making from many cultural sources. But most of all, it is imperative that an artist be connected to his or her roots even if they have but a strand left connected to Mother Earth. After all, culture is art and art is culture.

This paper outlines my experiences and discoveries living in diverse cultures. I will examine various historical artistic practices that gives relevance to my artistic growth as I make sense of where my aesthetic creations belong in the two world in which I live in.

## Acknowledgements

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## **Dedication**

The two short years at the University of Calgary has been a privileged experience that I will never forget. However, It was also a learning experience for my whole family and myself. I am dedicating this thesis to my wife Sandra, daughters Mackenzie, Alana, Krista, and son Jace. Thank you for putting up with dad's shortcomings and long awaited hours. It was a hard fought battle but, we did it. With all my gratitude and appreciation, Thank-you and I love you all.

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## Introduction

North American Native art comes from diverse Native American societies that varies in habitat, and is produced for many different customs and beliefs. The art making was also equally influenced by various European colonizing practices which nearly wiped out the entire North American Native Identity. Europeans often stereotype all Native cultures as typical. The following paragraph exemplifies this well:

The high sense of dress of the Plains Indians and their skill in creating beautiful effects in both motion and repose so impressed Europeans that these customs have come to be considered as typical for all Indians. The fact is, of course, that such Indians as the Naskapi of Northern Quebec and Labrador probably never saw a Sioux war bonnet and would have been just as impressed as the Europeans if they had; and an 18th. Century Odawa chief and a Tsimshian chief, in the unlikely event of their meeting would each have impressed the other with the strangeness of his dress<sup>1</sup>

Since first contact, Europeans have classified all Indians on the basis of having similar qualities in art and culture. The fact is North American Indian art occurs among a multiplicity of Native groups in a variety of places. In this paper I am going to discuss the diversity of Native art, and where my art practice originated in the context of my upbringing. I will determine where my style is rooted in relation to other geographical regions where

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<sup>1</sup> Olive Patricia Dickason, Indian Arts in Canada (Montreal: Montreal Lithographing, 1974), p.17.

Native people are located, such as Indians from the Southwest, the Northern Inuit and the Northwest Coast. Living intimately with and responding directly to a variety of environments, Native American people quite naturally develop considerable divergent economies. The way a Native society lives, for example fishing along the coast or hunting and gathering on the prairies, or even the amount of exploitation by colonization, seems to have suggested patterns of the basic principles of design and composition that recur at all times and specific places.

Art is an important part of all cultures. Art helps us see the subtlest differences in the way we visualize and interpret the world around us. North American Indian and Inuit art also interpret their own distinct culture through folk tale, in the images painted upon pottery and rocks, among Indian rituals and dances, Inuit stone carving and totem pole making of the Northwest Coast Indians. The diverse artistic images, both ancient and modern, are the true records of Native American Life, told through the Indian groups' own sense of reality and surroundings.

Aesthetic forms, which are the outward and visible expressions of Indian philosophy, are found almost intact among some Native groups and in others are nearly lost or been totally disseminated. The more devoted Indian communities possess social ceremonial traditions that go back to ancient customs. Perhaps the most perfect survival is found in the Southwestern States, where a long archeological record reveals the steady enrichment of the social purpose. Some of the earliest designs emerged from constructional

creations, as in basketry and pottery which were illustrated magic, to designs that were prayers for rain, and to design on shields that would ward off danger or give power of the enemies whereabouts to the warrior. It is a rule rather than an exception for Indian design to have symbolic meaning.

In European view the Southwest is defined in two parts: (1) by what was present prehistorically – agriculture, the use of digging sticks, flat grinding stones (metates) and hand stones (monos), the manufacture and use of ceramics, the construction of aggregated multi-room villages as well as dispersed settlements, and the occasional development of more complex towns with some unique forms of public architecture; and (2) by what was absent – the achievement of state-level societies with well-developed systems of writing and notation, large urban centers, and public architecture on the scale of the pyramids of Teotihuacan.<sup>2</sup>

The Native peoples within the Southwestern area are heterogeneous in language and culture, but the cultivation of corn, beans, and squash sets this region apart from both hunting and gathering areas of California and the great Basin and the bison-hunting lands of the western great plains. The physical landscape includes extensive mesas, rugged mountains, and low-lying deserts. Despite the variety of landforms and vegetation the entire southwest is unified by a dry climate. Water is the most critical resource for people developing a way of life dependent on farming Native American crops.

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<sup>2</sup> Linda S. Cordell, Prehistory of the Southwest (Orlando, Florida: Academic Press, Inc. 1984), p.4.

After years of living off the land, a lifestyle centered upon big game hunting shifted to a wider economy based on domesticating a large variety of plants native to the Americas. This alternative style of life could have had a cultural impact in art making. There was a shift away from pictographic art celebrating hunting expeditions to more geometric designs woven into objects produced by the newly invented art of basketry, which provided an ideal collecting container.

Since rain is a major concern in the region, rainmaking rituals and dances are held among the Tarahumara and Papago, and deer dances are part of the Yagui ritual. The medicine men are widespread, and beliefs often include the association of serpents with water sources. Rain magic symbolism in which pictures of clouds, frogs, dragonflies, are used to express a wish for rain may be due to their relationship with water. The very powerful plumed serpent is believed to dwell in storm clouds. Its body is marked with clouds and rain streaks that were often illustrated in Pueblo art. The rain Gods called, 'cloud people' live in the cloud mansions where they drum out thunder and hurl lightning. The rain Gods are imitated in sacred dances by masked persons impersonating the Gods, again dealing with symbols of rain or freshly awakened flowers. The modern Pueblo Indian personifies nature at every point of contact with his own welfare. He believes that the spiritual powers behind the phenomena of the world can be won by the flattery of artistic imitation to the point that they will assist man

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in his struggle for existence.<sup>3</sup>

In another struggle for existence is a culture clear across the continent to the cold northern region. No human race has endured a harsher environment than the Inuit. Archeologists estimate that the period from 1000 BC to AD 1000, the Inuit witnessed at first a steady improvement in climate, and towards the end, the first signs of the approaching return to colder conditions. This must have greatly influenced life for the hunters of the frozen sea, at first by making the arctic region more open to experience various habitats, and later, by restricting their exploration of other environments.

The Inuit of the north adapted to an extremely harsh, treeless environment in a very efficient and creative way. They were unique from the rest of North American Natives in their art practice. The Inuit lived in harmony with the land in small groups, and survived by devising means to catch animals, sea mammals and fish living in the region's climate.

The art of the Inuit is the art of a people who, until European contact, had used virtually no materials other than bone, animal skin, stone, fur, snow and ice from which to make their weapons and tools for hunting, their clothing and their dwellings, for there were absolutely no other materials with which to work. It is the ingenuity of the people and the environment who produced the beautifully sculpted kayak and who fabricated the snow house, the most perfect structure for its environment.

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert J. Spiden, Fine Art and the First Americans: Introduction to American Indian Art, Part 2 (New York, N.Y.: Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts, Inc. 1931), p.8.

Faced with tremendous powers of nature that governed their lives, the Inuit developed a system of beliefs based on the existence of spirits and supernatural beings and forces in an effort to explain and perhaps to control natural events. The intermediary between the real world of humans and the world of unseen spirits was the medicine man, who was considered imbued with magic powers. The medicine man's role was to protect, to heal and to reveal the ritual or taboos which had to be observed in order for life to function well. To this end, amulets and charms, sometimes of great beauty, were carved for protection or as magical objects.<sup>4</sup>

A close bonding family among Inuit society continues to be its most important foundation. The Inuit still speak their own language, although their children learn English or French at school. But along with what the children observe on television and formal studies at school, children still learn from their parents and grandparents stories of danger, or exploits or the wisdom of the past.

The subject matter in all Inuit art is mainly about living on the harsh land and what techniques and skills were needed to survive. Their art is also influenced by the abundant wildlife of the north. The art subject sometimes depicts the spirit of those animals, or the mythology and the medicine men that were links to the spiritual world. Humor that is prevalent in Inuit culture, also exists in their art making. Humor makes it possible to face

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Lipton, Arctic Vision: Art of the Canadian Inuit (Ottawa, Canada: Canadian Arctic Producers, 1984), p.11.

constant dangers inherent in northern life and, most likely, acts as an escape from other more hostile or aggressive emotions.

The Contemporary art of the Inuit is shifting to a life as it is experienced today, depicting airplanes, motorboats and new houses or even subjects seen on television. Inuit art is quickly being commercialized to be sold on the mainstream market. So now, the Inuit who have struggled for centuries can now earn the money so necessary for them to exist in the modern world. But whatever the economic motivation for its production, the art of the Inuit exists in and of itself, able to take its place alongside any great work of art of the world. They also exist as testimony and record of a culture and a unique way of life that is rapidly changing. Through their art, the Inuit reaffirm their own sense of identity and pride.<sup>5</sup>

In comparing all of Native North America societies, the Northwest Coast Indians are the most blessed with nature's environmental generosity. Unlike other Native societies, these people became rich and comfortable in their occupation in their rain drenched land, a land abundant with forests of spruce and cedar that provided the materials for the development of what is generally regarded as the finest achievement of North American carving.

The warm ocean current, which sweeps by the entire coast, causes much rain and fog but also prevents the cold temperatures, which ordinarily would exist at this northern latitude. The current also helps support a wealth of marine life in the form of shellfish, waterfowl, sea going mammals and

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<sup>5</sup> Lipton, 1984: p.14.

fish, which is a major influence in Northwestern Native art.

The Northwest Coast environment is rich with vegetation and animal life. Their material culture can then be characterized by a large dependency on wildlife and an extensive use of cedar and spruce for their textile decoration. At this point we begin to characterize and contrast other Native societies such as the southern traditions where there is a dependence on agriculture and their art making, like pottery, is practiced for the simple reason that clay is abundant in the southern environments.

The rich natural environment does clearly influence the purpose of Northwest Coast art. Art was largely to provide luster to the prestige and power of the individual, in this way it is similar to the political use of art by the merchant princess of the Italian renaissance. In both societies wealth was the principal criterion of power.<sup>6</sup>

Existing in a region secluded from other societies helped perpetuate the strong social organization of the Coastal Indians in a clan system. Each clan is divided into an aristocracy with a clan leader, who is also known to acquire the greatest wealth. Various animals represent each clan from that particular region. Ravens, bears, wolves, eagles and the frog are a few depictions that are carved and made into ceremonial outfits, serving implements, and containers of various kinds.

The Northwest Coast Indians filled their surroundings with a wide selection of creative artistry. Art played an important role in the lives of their

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<sup>6</sup> Jamake highwater, Arts of the Indian Americas: Leaves from the Sacred Tree (New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row Publishers, 1994), p. 21.



people. Great totem poles lined their beaches. Dancers wore dramatic cedar and pine masks at potlatch ceremonies, performing family owned dances that are passed on through cultural tradition from generation to generation.

The West Coast, with the chain of high mountains and thickly covered forests helped create a physical barrier which protected the greater part of the region from immediate contact with other societies. The geographical isolation of the region may well have been the reason for the formation of such a distinct culture. But like the Inuit further north, the West Coast Indian art making did not vanish. Although their style is slightly altered, today with the commitment of contemporary artists, this traditionally based art persists and flourishes.

Compared to the geographical isolation of the Northwest Coast and Inuit, the Indians of the North American Plains live in the broad expanse of the open heartland. The area is one which environmentally has not been overly hospitable to man. The region suffers long, bitterly cold winters; short, brief summers which demands a major effort on the part of its inhabitants for survival.

Before European contact the Indians of the plains were a nomadic culture and relied primarily on the buffalo as their main food source. After the introduction of the horse from the Europeans the Indians of the plains developed a remarkable and vigorous lifestyle, which, during the summer months centered on the horse, the hunt and warfare and during fall, winter and spring months, upon a more sedentary village life. During these settled

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with designs that appeared to warriors in dreams. While some designs are really personal, others keep close to a custom in which the thunderbird, buffalo, the whirlwind and the spider, just to name a few, are the special protectors of warriors.

The acquiring of the horse would have to be the most influential impact in creating the Plains Native art subject matter. The horse of the plains allowed people of this area to evolve the traditions, art, and lifestyle that are so famous today. Not until the mobility given by the horse, did the Plains Indians become great hunting and warring tribes, and by being a great warring society, they produced theatricality in to their colorful art that was as unique as other Indian cultures in the North Americas.

The most rewarding approach to Native art was through an appreciation of its design and understanding of its significance to the group that created it. Through understanding their customs, it gives answers to how a culture may have influenced its artists and how, they in turn, may have moved within those limitations to create objects that hold meaning for themselves and others today.

Throughout this paper I have been discussing the natural environmental and ecological factors in contributing to the uniqueness of four distinct Native societies. We should not leave out the most contributing influence that all Native North Americans experience nation wide. That is the response of the Indians to the European invasion and domination of his ancient world. The conflict that Indian religious movements were having in

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coexisting with Europeans, while remaining spiritually independent, is exactly the same dilemma that most Native American art attempts to rectify.

When European settlers came it was a time of rapid and radical change in economic growth, and none were more sensitive to the need to cope with a changing world than those of Native culture. Governments practiced assimilation by removing Native children from homes, often for their entire childhood. At the time Native people did not have federal voting rights, so they could not voice a protest over unfair laws of the government. As a result Native parents were coerced into sending their children to schools against their will. Children were required by law to attend these schools, and parents who withheld their children were threatened with fines or imprisonment.

The object of the government was the total elimination of all Indian culture including their expression in art and religion. The intention of residential schools, under the guidance of missionaries and government officials, was to cut off from Indian children their habits and feelings inherited from their ancestors. The shock was too much for most students. A sense of self-worth disappeared taking along with it their natural born gifts, their inner life, their relationship to the world, which is essentials for expressing their true Native creativity.

From some type of human instinct for survival, Native art making continued to exist even through gross exploitation, devastating epidemics, and various warfare. Indian art making survived although normal activities

like the Sun dance and the potlatch were made illegal. Native culture continued to exist through the prevailing Christian cultures like the residential schools that made Native people uncomfortable in their own environment.

The trend now is to encourage Native people to discover facts, to think for themselves as researchers, to seek to define problems and issues, and to try to work out solutions. Particular encouragement is given to children to express themselves. In this approach Native art and culture will not be lost.

It is important for the Indian to realize that being an artist is a matter of being an individual. In many cases tribal customs inhibit this, but I am convinced that only an individually creative approach can bring about a growth in art produced by the Indians. It seems to me that the real problem the Indian artist faces is the insistence that he be an Indian. He should be an Indian only if he simply cannot help it. To dwell too much on his only alternative is to become a museum piece himself. According to author, painter and carver, George Clutesi, a Nootka, "Indians must find their place in the contemporary art world; they cannot turn the clock back. The last canoe has moved down stream into the midst." He further says, "Canada's Indians represent the only group, who are producing a distinctive, easily, identifiable Canadian art."

The solution can be found in the Indian himself, we must try harder. No matter in what area of North America Indian art occurs, the art is a form

not found anywhere else in the world. As Clutesi puts it, "We must say to the white man, I don't care what you think, this is what I can produce, write or paint."

## **Background**

The definite manner that results in the style of what we see in the visible objects or events is motivated by a number of influences on the artist. Every type of art is made in a specific environment, of certain materials with specific tools and techniques; we, the art makers, have our own personalities and motivations, and operate within the context of a society; the art form may be related to a particular life in time and space.

In the following portion of this paper I will examine the various aspects of my cultural context, the variety of influences that has effected my situation as an artist, and the way these factors have set the precedence in determining the existence of my art form. The various aspects will include: (1) determining an identity and role in a society as an artist, (2) the spirituality which motivates my art practice, (3) the physical environment within which I experienced my upbringing, (4) the influence of mediums and techniques, (5) the uses and functions of the art forms in the society, (6) the nature of the physical language that I use, (7) the visual forms to which I have been exposed in the history of my own culture and those with whom I

have been in contact and (8) the nature of the aesthetic influence by which the creative process is guided and referenced.

To begin to understand the origin of my practice, which is having a North American Indian content, we must realize that North American Indian art making comes from diverse Native American societies that varies in environmental habitat. The origin of my art making is correlated to my Plains Cree background. In my sculptures, an attempt is made, in the use of environmentally specific Native elements consisting of prairie stone, animal skin and sinew and natural wood to recreate the environment from which a heterogeneous mass of artifacts and regalia originally came. Growing up in a specific location and experiencing the dogma of reserve life holds exotic fragments of an alternative culture possessing a way of life, which restricted us from technological influence. Most household, and all religious items, were extracted off the land and made manually. As young children, we were taught what elements to use in fabricating various functional objects and ornaments. In our Cree culture we saw no need to draw a distinction between objects of menial use and objects of ceremony, which did not use the word "art" but instinctively expressed the harmonious totality of man and nature in everything we made.

For a brief time, there was a definite distinction between art and artifact amongst European societies as influenced by, the anthropologists. Most Native art making was being dispersed between the art gallery and museums across the world. My sculptures may reflect my attempt to

reinstates the idea that implements and artifacts are a form of art in the European sense. To do this I take objects of menial use and decontextualize them to possibly elevate them to a higher social art context. Maybe I am attempting to invite the archeologist to try and make a definition or classify the artifacts that I make. I believe they are/were responsible in defining what Native art is and what it is not. Just by assuming whether an artifact is a child's toy or a ceremonial implement relegates the art making into a place in which times would not belong. The fact is that all objects which originate from man or nature, whether art or artifact has some form of aesthetic value. In my sculpture, my goal is to incorporate harmony, pattern, balance, proportion, movement, space, rhythm, repetition, form, line, shape and texture, the essential elements of visual art.

## **Identity**

Identity is one of the major players in motivating an artist's perception of art making. The two main aspects that influence identity are constructed from the way an individual relates to a certain physical environment and learned experience. In identifying myself with a place of origin, it is crucial to connect family members and their customs; to be able to familiarize family history through the elders' origin. Ancestors are the precursors who define who I am by connecting me through understanding of cultural values. By giving me a traditional Indian name, the elders are

responsible in connecting me to the cosmos. It is difficult to imagine myself separated from my roots. Although I live and go to university in the city, I spend a great deal of my time on a reserve setting. I often think of myself as living in two worlds. My work will sometimes reflect on both environments.

It is essential to know who you are by getting to know your own culture. All forms of cultural rituals must be experienced to appreciate the diversity of all people. I have often connected my identity through various functions and ceremonies like the pow-wow, sun dance and sweats. These gatherings offer a rich conglomerate of traditional philosophies and values. The rituals also offer a knowledge system that has developed over thousands of years of living with lands, waters, plants, animals and skies. The ecosystems explain the fundamental structure of the cosmos, an important aspect in the nature of spirit and power, and of life and death. Native religions express the collective processes through which the people share in maintaining and creating. Cultural Identity and spirituality provides the framework that co-exists in my personal outlook, problem solving, and how art stimulation gets interpreted.

### **Spirituality**

Before missionary contact with the First Nations, the Cree culture was a firm believer in the one, true, and all-powerful God whom we call "Kessa Munito". There were also other munitos in a sense of guardian spirits



to individual Indians. There is a belief that every phenomenon in nature has an indwelling Spirit. An individual is given the power to exercise a certain quality possessed by the phenomenon in which the spirit resides. An example would be, to use my own name Peyachew, meaning thunderbird, may give to a pitied human being its powers over rain and lightning. A spirit power may enter an individual through a dream or even through a long series of dreams over a period of time. The spirit who encounters the pitied will address him "no-si-say", which means grandchild, then would promise him a certain power. This power may be used miraculously, when the need arises.

In my dreams, I have never experienced anything at this major level but have experienced natural conscious phenomenon that I cannot explain, but can only assume. The experiences that come to mind the most, was the time when two of my friends and myself went on a camping trip to the wilderness. After a long day of hiking and fishing we decided to turn in for the night. While my two friends slept about twenty-five yards inland from the river, I decided to sleep closer to the river shore. It was here by the river, while sleeping, I sensed that someone was trying to wake me by pushing me on my side. When I finally awoke, as I am a sound sleeper, I looked around and down the river in the clear moonlight I focused my eyes on a south end of a bear going north. When the bear was a safe distance down the river, I packed my sleeping bag and ran to my friends. When I told them about my experience they laughed it off and said I must have been in a dream state. This was a true experience, because the exact area of where I was nudged

while sleeping was wet and muddied.

The second incident that I find crucial to my natural experience was when on another camping trip I became lost in the heart of the wilderness. In this incident I was on a hiking expedition with a group of people when I decided to wander off on my own. When the time came, I did not realize how rapid the sun went down in the midst of the towering pine and spruce. In no time I was caught in the blinding darkness without any sign of life. At this point, after shouting as loud as I could to locate any human presence and failed, I thought it would be in my best interests to lay down for the night until sun-up. My only setback was I had left without any matches, and I had to conquer the long cold night. I sat against a large pine tree and asked the Great Spirit for strength and a safe return. When I finally began to fall asleep, a rustling of trees and stomping of feet startled me. Then I heard a familiar sound of a horse rattling his lips together. Slowly a white image of a horse came walking by the tree under which I was sitting. The horse smelled my hand then continued to walk. I figured this horse is too tame to be wild, so I followed it, keeping a close eye on and sometimes clutching its long tail. In no time we came to a clearing and began to recognize some land features that included a road that led to our camp. The white horse kept walking across the road into the other side of the bush, I kept walking up the road feeling a reverence. I did not tell many people about this experience and simply told my peers that I had wandered off for a brief period.

Sometimes I think I should keep these experiences to myself, but

there are times, like now when they should be addressed to come to some correlation with the cosmos. My father was a practicing peyote church follower and when I was very young had asked an elder to grant me an Indian name in exchange for tobacco and possibly smoking of the pipe. The pipe was smoked and the elder gave a name then begged the spirits to give good luck so that I may grow up and become old. He asked the spirits that gave him the power to give that name to be the guardian of that child. The elder had granted me the name "Sa-Ka", meaning, "forest".

It had taken me a while to be aware of the significance of these incidents. Now I am convinced that the spirit power of the forest is somehow connected to my being. In Native American cosmology, space is experienced in relation to specific configurations of land, sky and water. Earth is also conceived of as circular; it is divided into quadrants identified with the four directions of north, south, east and west, and winds that blow from these directions being the changes of season. My spatial zone is associated with the land order of power. The land offers me a continuous growth of forest that allows me to do a proper orientation in relation to the special structures that I build. The forest is vital for the efficacy of my ritual.

### **Environment**

The terrain of a specific environment can also be seen as a vehicle for expressing the essentials of art. My ethnic origin, of the Plains Cree, live on the northern edge of the Saskatchewan plains, preferably in the Park Belt, the

transitional area between the forests and plains. There is ample evidence by living elders that we originated from the Cree Nations of Eastern Canada. The Plain's Cree apparently invaded and took over the Saskatchewan territory from former inhabitants of the Gros Ventre and Assiniboin tribes. The Plain Cree continued to extend their tribal land toward Alberta predominantly the now Edmonton area. Before allocated reserves, life of my homogeneous ancestors centered their existence on the river basins of the Qu'Appelle Valley, the lower North Saskatchewan, and the lower Battle rivers. My Reserve called Red Pheasant First Nations now exists at the meeting of the two rivers: North Saskatchewan and the Battle River. Red Pheasant is located on the park belt, within which a black soil terrain helped fertilize healthy grass vegetation and hilly woodlands. Because of this rich grassy territory, buffalo, elk, deer and other smaller game are abundant in this region.

I can say that the reserve life in this region was where my creative process began to materialize. Being raised on an isolated reserve gave a challenge to an existence in the middle of nowhere twenty-five miles to the nearest 7-11. The horse and wagon was our sole transportation, and during the winter travelling to the nearest town would have been disastrous. Here, we learned to adapt to the environment by utilizing the natural elements that surrounded us to conquer Mother Nature's hardships. Everything from the dirt, stones, grass, herbs and trees were given a place of utilitarian function.

Living with few factory-made distractions made my upbringing far

closer to the natural forces and phenomena than people living in a structured community. When a certain tool or implement was not accessible, my grandmother would look to the wilderness for its abundance of possibilities. She was heir to unique knowledge systems through generations of living in a certain environment. By being exposed to years of improvisations my grandmother taught me the ways to be closer to the natural forces and phenomena. My grandmother would often tell me the soul and spirit is not only present in the human body but is also present in such entities as animals, features of the land and water, stone, plants, and the heavenly bodies. Being aware of this I always had this feeling that someone was watching over me when I was alone in the wilderness. There was a sense of living harmony within the context of a unique feature of the land.

The unique feature of the land is the foundation, which enabled us to utilize the wide range of trees from young saplings that were used for small fabrications to large poplar, birch, maple, and pine for monumental construction.

### **Medium and Techniques**

Being raised in an isolated wilderness gave me the opportunity to experience the significant attributes of natural elements. Everything from eating, hunting or ceremonial purposes was evolved from the ecological system. In order to eat, at times, we had to make some sort of projectile or snare to immobilize various animals and fowl. These were carefully

constructed mainly of chokecherry, saskatoon, willow trees and sinew, elements I formally use in my sculptures. Other natural edible and medicinal growth such as various berries, wild onion, wild turnips and various herbal medicines inspired my close relation to the natural found elements, the life line of our existence.

Other household makeshift fabrications that I can remember that were made while growing up on the reserve were snow scoops made out of split logs. They were made with a handle that widened into a round blade; stone mauls and hammers were used to pound meat and chokecherries. The stones were grooved or abraded with a harder stone. To form the handle, a willow was twisted and bent around the groove. Wet sinew was then tied around two ends up to the stone; various raw hide was used to make rope for horse ties, bags for storing dried food, hand drums and ground drums for ceremonies and other cloths making and ornaments. Birch bark containers were used for berries, roots and even for holding water; a soft black stone was used to make pipes and was extracted from the nearby Battle River; the inner bark of red willow or bear berry leaves were used for smoking when domestic tobacco was scarce.

The larger structures that influenced my strong desire for using natural wood would be the fabrication of tipi. This simple structure seems to be the sole vehicle for motivating Native men to continue their dream-induced painting on their cultural dwellings. The sweat lodge gave me inspiration by the way willow is arched over to fabricate the aesthetic dome-

shaped structures. The sun dance structures are a strong signifier as a ritual performance. From the hunting for the central pole to the making of the circular module with trees, reinstates a present day experience of the historical medicine wheel, which exemplifies the existence of a culture from time immemorial.

### EARLY WORKS

*Our Great chief, Big Bear stood by a cliff and carved with a stick in the stone; and the first crude sketch the world had seen was joy to his mighty heart, till the devil whispered behind the trees, 'Its pretty. But is it art?'*

### Bow and Arrow Series (1997- 19998)

It was through my experience of making and selling Native crafts and implements to local craft stores that it finally dawned on me that the only market for North American Native art is to anthropological museums. World-renowned museums of ethnology in Europe still categorize and exhibit contemporary Native artists according to the archaic classification system invented in the age of Queen Victoria. It is not uncommon to find a contemporary Native artist's work being naively displayed alongside artifacts from the ancient civilizations of the Sumerians, Egyptians, Mayans, Persians, or Phoenicians, or with those from the modern headhunting people

of Guinea.<sup>8</sup> Whenever I would present my work to art Galleries, They would simply say, “we deal in mostly fine art and not artifacts.” I had a problem with this conflict for a long time and decided that there must be some sort of an alternative. My dilemma gradually came to light after I began taking university art courses under the direction of Professor Carl Granzow. Professor Granzow took notice of my craft, and began introducing me to contemporary artists that I could use as a departure point. The artists which interested me throughout my referencing were Marcel Duchamp, Richard Long, Andy Godsworthy and Robert Morris. All of these artists seemed to have some sort of parallel to what I was doing, even if it was not directly connected.

In my Bow and Arrow Series, I began to interplay with the idea of taking a utilitarian object and transforming it into a none-functional one. This idea was referencing Marcel Duchamp’s “Readymades,” where he took an ordinary article of life and placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view. This created a new thought for the object. The difference is that Duchamp’s found objects originated from the industrial manufacturer, while mine were found objects from the natural environment like stones, skulls, and wood.

To some cultures, one stone is like another stone and a corkscrew is like another corkscrew. The resemblance between stone is natural and

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<sup>8</sup> Alfred Young man, “The Arts in Canada: The State, Academia, and the Cultural Establishment,” Beyond Quebec: Taking Stock of Canada. Ed. Kenneth McRoberts, (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1995), p.219.



involuntary; between manufactured objects it is artificial and deliberate. The fact that all corkscrews are the same is a consequence of their significance. They are objects that have been manufactured for the purpose of drawing corks, the similarity between stones has no inherent significance.<sup>9</sup>

Contrary to Native cultures, stones were and are used in a wide sphere of significance. In reality my version of taking Native implements from the past and transforming them to an alternative experience could be parallel to Duchamp's unpredictable, ironic, paradoxical transformations. The Bows in "Cultural Tension" or the arrow in "Cycle of Life," are replicated from the past and have been similarly removed from their original usefulness and context.

While my sculptures might have some holistic significance, Duchamp's "Readymades" are not religious, they are secular and individual. The mutual characteristics that one finds in Duchamp's "Readymades" is their symmetry – nearly all his work is symmetrical around the axis. You can notice symmetry in works like "Hat Rack" and "Bottle Rack."

Another parallel but in a slightly different context, is that the significance in Duchamp's "Readymades" seemed to originate from his dissatisfaction with his past work having too many aesthetic conventions that relied on formalist principles. My transformations might have been produced to protest against the misconception that all Native fabrication was made for

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<sup>9</sup>Octavio Paz, Marcel Duchamp Or The Castle of Purity (London, England: Cape Goliard Press, 1970),p. 15.

a utilitarian purpose. By simply bonding two bows together like “Cultural Tension,” I am also making a comment that not all fabricating is intended to perpetuate an established tradition.

Another art movement that interested me because of their yearning to step away from conventional aesthetics were the Site or Earth artists. Ever since the early 1960s, artists have shown a growing interest in environmental art. They have created artworks specifically designed for a particular environment, and where the surroundings are a vital character in the way they express themselves. Earthworks are particularly representative of a combination of artistic concepts with natural, outdoor materials. Richard Long made earth works that impressed me most. I relate to Long by how his work is created, by and during, the course of his walks when he can receive energy for his ideas. A good portion of my work evolved from miles of walking through various terrains or along banks of rivers. Through Long’s various ordinary actions, he makes us conscious of the interpenetrating, interacting, moving world of nature, from trees to rivers, to the path of the wind, the different cycles of existence of living things – in short, the entire visible and invisible flux of the structure of life. The walks stimulate the imagination and in turn the concept of the sculpture feeds the senses.<sup>10</sup>

During the 1960s, Richard Long’s earth works were subsumed under the heading of minimal art and conceptual art. I personally like to classify

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<sup>10</sup> Ann Seymour, Hamish Fulton, Richard Cork, Richard Long: Walking in Circles (London, England: Thames & Hudson, 1991)

this type of work as environmental art by the idea of using simple, primal, geometric, natural forms, which are inherent to the natural environmental elements. In my early works like "Balance of Nature," I reinstate the idea that the two stones are in direct relation to each other, having the same significance and by being resurrected from the same womb of mother nature, it reflects the birth of being from a specific context. One side of the stone counter-balances the other side of the stone to imply a harmonious nature. The shaft of the war club ironically acts as the mediator for the balance of nature.

## MOTHER EARTH FATHER SKY

The visual creative process of the First Nations has a tendency of evoking the mysteries of Mother Nature. Their art making may be divided into prehistoric, colonial and contemporary periods. After the government repealed the bill that banished Native cultural and religious practice, there has been a progressive revitalization of the cultural arts. Native art now falls into at least three or four major subdivisions, each fulfilling different functions and each catering to a different audience: (1) Traditional art forms such as sacred drums and ceremonial outfits produced for use within the Native communities themselves mainly for spiritual occasions and powwows; (2) "Tourist" or "Popular" art forms for sale to non-native travelers and collectors at such places as airports and "Indian art and craft" shops; (3) "Contemporary" Native art for sale in art galleries specializing in Indian and Inuit carving, prints, and various crafts; and (4) What could be described as "mainstream" or "high" art, created by artists of Native ancestry trained in

major Europe and American art schools and Universities, who perceive themselves primarily as self-directed individuals but who work with Native values, beliefs, and concerns always uppermost in their practice.<sup>11</sup>

Along my creative path, I have touched on the first three subdivisions in some way or another. My assemblages in my present work more often resurface in relation to these groups. However, In my graduate work, I have focused my intentions of making sense of where my aesthetic creations belong in the two worlds in which I live. My goal has been to establish an art form that can be read and appreciated by all cultures, in the hopes of carving a niche in the universal sphere.

In my installation MOTHER EARTH FATHER SKY, it can be observed as an intention to alter the perception of North American Native art. Although my fundamental use of object, form and space is deliberate, I adhere to the fact that First Nation's art making still has a sacred soulful function. MOTHER EARTH FATHER SKY is a revival of myths and meanings of holistic practices in art function. Holistic art existed in all cultures by expressing a basic connection to the universe in general, and to nature in particular. Ironically, like my work, these fragile, ephemeral works of art were not seen as having a specific economic value. Like talisman or emblems of nature, they only hold great symbolic and spiritual value.<sup>12</sup>

MOTHER EARTH FATHER SKY adheres to the fact that all

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<sup>12</sup>Duane Champagne, Native America: Portrait of the Peoples, (Detroit, MI.: Visible Ink Press, 1994), p.550.

elements used to assemble my fabrications are gifts from Mother Earth. Materialism is not important at this time. Eventually with the passage of time, all the work would disintegrate and return to Mother Earth. In the passage below it is great to hear that Earth artists like Andy Goldsworthy have similar insights:

Movement, change, light, growth and decay are the life blood of nature, the energies that I try to tap through my work. When I work with a leaf, rock, stick, it is not just material in itself, it is an opening into the process of life within around it. When I leave it, These Processes continue.<sup>13</sup>

The environmental diversity sets various Native Americans apart in the way they view the cosmos and its information. However, They share some religious insights such as the need to build a relationship among themselves and with the mysteries of the cosmos. It is important to build a bonding relationship with one another; with the Great Spirit of the four directions, with the Spirits of the above and below, and with the Spirits co-existing with humans being on the earthly plane. Native people chose to symbolize the Spirits and their cosmic domain in various ways. For many, the four directions are fundamental, for others, up-river and down-river describe the central relationship. Whatever the symbolic orientation to the world's person, Native Americans ritual action aims for balance, cooperation,

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<sup>12</sup> John K. Grande, Balance: Art and Nature, (Montreal: Black Rose Books Ltd., 1994), p.43.

<sup>13</sup> John Fowles and Andy Goldsworthy, Hand to Earth: Andy Goldsworthy Sculpture 1976-1990, (Leeds: W.S. Maney & Sons, 1990), p.160.

and mutual interdependence.<sup>14</sup>

MOTHER EARTH FATHER SKY acts as a ritual that aims to relate balance, harmony and well being. In the center of the installation the middle rock signifies the dwelling place of the Great Spirit or God; the circle of rocks acknowledges the cosmic cycle of life; *The Four Directions* above it rectifies the powers of the four quarterly directions of the universe;<sup>15</sup> the four lines of stones leading to the center signifies the four quadrant plains of the earth. The four lines are intentionally ordered to seek a straight path of life during our journey. I have included four sculptures that I feel balance the four quadrants of my installation. Harmony of life is bestowed by song and dance, which is represented by the work titled: "*Quiet Drum*". Peace is restored with nature and fellow human beings that is represented by the sculpture "*Stem*," which reflects the Sacred Pipe. The piece "*Four-Legged*" relates to the respect towards the great others and how we express gratitude towards plants and living animals that make human life possible. The fourth quadrant contains "*matrix*," a symbol of birth and the life giving qualities of Mother Earth and the celestial cycles as the heart of Native American ritual.

By expressing through their art, music, dance, ritual and ceremony, The First Nations people have distinguished themselves not only from other North Americans, but also from each other. Although Native arts have

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<sup>14</sup> Champagne, p. 454.

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A tree erected in the center of the nation is symbolic of a dance circle. The centerpiece signifies a vertical extension upward to Father Sky.

always been performed solely for entertainment, many ceremonies are practiced to renew the world or keep it in balance. Like nature, one function can not exist without the other.

Throughout the two years as a graduate student I have often questioned the function of art. During my extended experience working with natural elements in a city environment, I have developed an entirely different view of the world around me. Although I have matured my knowledge of European art traditions, I believe it is imperative to keep our Native art heritage alive. I honestly have faith that this will do me more justice than any “Salon” show in Paris.

As the author Jerry Mander says “For if we are separated from our roots, from the organic body of which we are part, from the sources of life, from the sense of the sacred rhythms of the planets, from the sense of the sacred relationships between human beings and the rest of life, living in our concrete artificial environments, we have effectively become like the astronauts in space: afloat, unconscious, uprooted, adrift, living in our own abstract homocentric reality, utterly dependent on technology for sustenance, survival and knowledge.<sup>16</sup>”

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<sup>16</sup> Jerry Mander, “Tyranny of Technology,” *Resurgence*, #164, (May/June, 1994), p.22. Grande, p.50.



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