

Wild roses, wolf willow, and forget-me-nots: reflections on Bruno Canadien's Séot'je

By Angela Marie Schenstead

In *Séot'je*, Bruno Canadien has created a moving exhibition to honour his family, Dene culture and the lands of Denendeh¹ where the Dene people have been stewards for over a millennia. With the untimely death of Canadien's brother as a catalyst for the portrait series, this exhibition acts as a memorial and gift to his family. In *Séot'je*, Canadien has collaborated with his aunts Elsie and Albertine Canadien, which builds upon his past exhibition *Mother Tongue/ Ehts'o Ket'a*. Together they demonstrate the richness of inter-generational relationships as they exchange knowledge, skills, experience, memories and stories – and assert Dene language, visual motifs and material culture through the colourful paintings presented in this exhibition.

Upon entering the gallery, visitors are warmly met by the smiling faces of the painted portraits. The walls are painted sky blue, the vaulted ceiling and molding are white and cloud like. The blue-coloured wall paint has nostalgic significance to Canadien, reminiscent of the northern interiors from his home community. It feels as though someone might come around the corner with an invitation to sit down at a kitchen table for a cup of tea. On the wall opposite to the entrance, floats a floral painting. Unlike the portraits which meet the viewer at eye level, one must lift one's gaze from a distance to take in the full effect of this painting, embellished with a long, colourful skirt of ribbon that just skims the gallery floor – this is Mary Agnes. A second, similar painting but in moodier tones, can be seen to the right, floating on the wall in the next room – this is Lucy. These were created for *Mother Tongue/ Ehts'o Ket'a*, an exhibition that celebrated Canadien's family of Dene matriarchs, heritage, and culture – themes that continue throughout *Séot'je*.

There is an intangible quality to these floral works similar to a rainbow after a storm that evokes an immaterial, loving omnipresence. The gallery space

¹In speaking with Canadien, he shared that “de” indicates the flow of rivers or water, “ne” refers to land or earth. Denendeh means where “the Creator’s [or, Great] Spirit flows through this land.” Dene means “flow from the land”.

has an unearthly yet peaceful quality with the installation of *Séot'ye*. The paintings, however, are made with earthly materials: canvas, wood, ribbon, beads, thread and paint. The paint strokes are considered and thoughtful. All of the portraits except one, are set against a background colour that suggests moose hide – a suggestion made by Elsie Canadien. The exception is *Setsy Mechie Hépi* (*My grandmother's younger brother, deceased*) whose portrait is set to a background of sky blue like the walls. Floral motifs halo the friendly faces in each portrait.

Indigenous peoples' cultural practices are relational, oriented by the ecosystems they are akin to, and encompass human and non-human beings alike. Prior to contact, Indigenous peoples moved freely across the great expanses of their homelands. Here in Canada, the Dene are often thought of as a Northern people, but in reality, their traditional territory extends far west to the Yukon and Alaska, and includes northern parts of British Columbia and southern Alberta. In fact, as an Athabaskan people, the Dene have reach that extends as far as the southwestern States and have linguistic and cultural ties to the Navajo in Mexico. Canadien's roots in the Deh Cho² Region are deep, and according to his exhibition's dedication, go back over "1500 generations of so." Generations of Dene have closely observed, collected, and passed on knowledge about the natural world, the cycles of the seasons, and of life and death. Before modern day conveniences, Dene people developed methods of food preparation and storage, and inventive lodging systems which were particularly important to their survival. This knowledge informed wise and sustainable living practices that enabled Northern peoples to survive thousands of years. Traditional skills such as hunting, fishing and gathering continue to be practiced by the Dene and neighbouring Métis Nation of the Deh Cho Region – as well as many other Indigenous and naturalized³ peoples who live close to the land.

² Deh Cho translates to Big River and refers to the MacKenzie River, one of the largest rivers in North America.

³ In *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, Robin Wall Kimmerer draws parallels between the naturalized Plantain aka "White Man's Footsteps" (who is so common they are often mistaken as an Indigenous plant to these lands) to how immigrants are "naturalized" when they become citizens to a new country: "Being naturalized to a place means to live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit. To become naturalized is to know that your ancestors lie in this ground. Here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities. To become naturalized is to live as if your children's future matter, to take care of the land as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives depend on it. Because they do."

A Dene hunter exercises great respect and gratitude for the life that is sacrificed when an animal, such as a moose, is gifted to them. Hunting is physically demanding. In times before motor toboggans and quads, the practice required a hunter to be in good physical health with great endurance and strength in order to walk long distances and deal with their prey. In a traditional way, all parts of the animal are used – and many hands go into the processing of the animal. Meat and organs provide nourishment as food, bones and antlers can be made into tools, and hide can be tanned to make moccasins and other such items. Moose hide wearables are often made by women’s hands, generally as gifts for loved ones, skillfully sown and decorated with beaded, quilled, and tufted designs that reference Indigenous flora and fauna. These works of art are treasured as heirloom pieces by the recipients of such gifts.

Canadien’s artistic practice is relational too. Spending time in nature walking and observing the rhythms of the land inform his visual vocabulary and colour palette in the studio. Maintaining connection with his family is also important to him. This is apparent in the floral motifs depicted throughout *Séot’ye*, which are referenced from his family’s designs. The five petal floral motif suggest forget-me-nots, while other florals depict the wild rose.⁴ Most of the florals are painted by his hand. Notably, the floral motif from Lucy is repeated on the portrait of Canadien’s nephew in *Sedée Mezhaa* (*My younger sister’s son*) which is one of the only portraits depicting a child in the exhibition – the other being *Gozhaa in Séot’ye Medené Hé’ni gots’eh Gozhaa*, which describes the complexity of mixed Indigenous identity when families blend culture and race. These children represent the next generation of Dene people.

The stylized flowers depicted in the exhibition are all significant Indigenous plants found throughout the North and central provinces. After a long cold winter, it is a hopeful sign to see flowers in the spring – they attract pollinators who continue the propagation of life. Springtime flowers are followed by summertime berries that provide sustenance to humans and animals alike. In the fall, it is customary to prepare food for winter’s rest. In death, our bodies, like the leaves under snow, go through a process of

⁴The wild rose is a traditional Indigenous medicine and food found commonly across Canada. It is related to the apple family, and produces a small rosehip that is tasty and immune boosting, rich in anti-oxidants and nutrients, especially vitamin C. Rosehip oil is used in beauty products for its collagen building properties.

decomposition and return to the earth, our breath returns to the ether, and the cycle of life continues. For some, it is customary to place flowers at a person's memorial or grave site, so it is a fitting and uplifting symbol to have florals painted lovingly throughout this exhibition. The portraits of the children are like flowers, representing the renewal and vibrancy of life.

Dene language is an important element of the exhibition. The exhibition title *Séot'ie* means “my relatives,” and each portrait's title describes the familial relationships to Canadien. The word “séot'ie” is sourced from the South Slavey language app created by Yamózha Kúé Society; however, his Aunt Elsie advised that “my relatives” is spoken using “sóot'ie” – a word that is used in the title for the portrait *Sóot'ie Medené Hépi gots'eh Gozhaa*, also meaning “my cousin.”⁵ As advisors and collaborators to *Séot'ie*, his Aunts Elsie and Albertine beaded floral adornments directly onto stretched and painted canvases for three of the portraits. Albertine chose to bead a motif that resembles wild strawberries for *Emóq Mezhaa Hépi* (*My aunt's son, deceased*). Elsie beaded a cranberry plant⁶ for *Setsu Hépi* (*My grandmother, deceased*) and wolf willow⁷ for *Sechéé Hépi* (*My younger brother, deceased*). Pairing the portraits with florals on a backdrop colour similar to moose hide suggests that kinship extends beyond the human family to include ecological relationships. By inviting his aunts to collaborate, Canadien fosters and strengthens his relationship with family and the continuance of culture and language through artistic practice.

Canadien's past works have often taken a more activist approach, clearly drawing attention to the devastating and ongoing effects of colonialism, genocide and ecocide. Different systems were introduced by the Canadian government to clear the land for settlement and manage the so called “Indian problem”⁸ with the Reserve, Pass, Parks, and Residential School

⁵In my correspondence with Canadien, he wrote about the use of “séot'ie” vs “sóot'ie”: “The word my Aunt Elsie knows as meaning “my relatives” is sóot'í. You'll notice that sóot'ie also means “my cousin” and is included in a portrait title. I mostly referenced the South Slavey Topical Dictionary (2nd ed.) for the kinship terms, with edits provided by Elsie (she added “h” to the book's version of “épi”).

⁶Like rosehips, wild strawberries and cranberries are also Indigenous superfoods and medicine.

⁷Wolf willow seeds can be used as beads for jewelry and adorn garments.

⁸Duncan Campbell Scott who oversaw the Residential School system from 1913-32 is known for referring to Indigenous peoples as the “Indian problem”. The last Residential School closed in 1996 in Saskatchewan.

systems, just to name a few. The Indian Act was introduced to erode Treaty agreements, First Nations sovereignty and the right to self-determination. The Reserve system restricted First Nations to small areas of land, and the Pass system regulated their movement. Prior to the Residential school system that forcibly removed children from their families and mandated only English to be spoken, Indigenous peoples were fluent in their own languages and were often multilingual in the various dialects and languages of neighbouring Nations. These systems have dramatically impacted Indigenous ways of life and continue to threaten pristine territories. Though *Séot'ze* takes a much more personal approach than previous exhibitions, Canadien's use of language and inclusion of kin, demonstrates a reclamation of culture that asserts an Indigenous, specifically Dene, worldview and presence in contemporary society.

Ultimately, Canadien created these works as a gift for his family. The process was an act of care, and a way to grieve and heal. Artists know that art making has an undeniable therapeutic effect on the heart and soul. Art allows us to express and experience culture, and a wide breadth of sentiment and emotion. Most of the persons portrayed have passed on, and are now in the realm of the ancestors. While their faces are significant and lovingly remembered by Canadien and his family, they remind us of our own family members who have passed, and the myriads of Indigenous persons lost to colonial forces and grieved. The exhibition is a reminder of the responsibilities we have to our communities, the environment, and the next generations – and our own mortality. *Séot'ze* surpasses gallery walls, commercial gains, and shirks the colonial gaze. These portraits affirm our innate value as Indigenous peoples, powerfully representing Indigenous faces in contemporary art and portraiture. Canadien's paintings radically counter oppressive narratives by contributing to a legacy of Indigenous resistance and resilience in painting.

Angela Marie Schenstead was born and raised in Saskatoon, and is a member of One Arrow First Nation (nêhiyawak), Treaty 6, Saskatchewan. Her artistic practice is informed by her experience growing up in an intercultural and mixed-race family, who value both urban and rural lifestyles. Themes she often considers in her work include Indigeneity, identity, place, kinship, language, land, water, environmental concerns, and the effects of systemic racism and colonialism. Her visual and text-based works have been featured in various exhibitions and publications across Canada. In her spare time, she enjoys being outdoors and is happiest walking in the bush or swimming in fresh water.

Bruno Canadien is a member of the Deh Gah Got'íé Kóé First Nation, a Deh Cho Region member of the Dene Nation.

Canadien's art practice is primarily focused on addressing issues surrounding the intersection of First Nations/Tribal sovereignty, resource exploitation and environmental concerns. Using collage, adornment, painting and drawing, Canadien presents evidence of contemporary Indigenous presence and resistance throughout his work. His work has evoked concern Indigenous communities in so-called western Canada and the U.S. have for their territories in the face of aggressive oil and gas exploration and extraction. As a member of a northern First Nation and a resident of the province of Alberta, this issue carries personal resonance for Canadien, especially in regards to the effects of the Athabasca Tarsands development, which is located upstream from his home community of Fort Providence, within the MacKenzie-Peace watershed.

Bruno currently resides in the Moh'kinsstis (Calgary) area, gratefully grounding himself in the landscapes and traditional territories of the Siksikaitapi, Tsuut'ina and Îethka Nakoda Wícastabi nations.

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