

# 'Our wilderness is wisdom...'

*If you know wilderness in the way that you know love you would be unwell to let it go. We are talking about the body of the beloved, not real estate.... Our sense of community and compassionate intelligence must be extended to all life forms, plants, animals, rocks, rivers, and human beings. This is the story of our past and it will be the story of our future.*

Terry Tempest Williams  
Writer, Activist, Environmentalist

When trying to draw a line from artist to artist the subject matter is the relationship they share. The artists in this exhibition tell a story using contrasting mediums to carry a message unique to them. Our ancestors used metaphors in storytelling for everything including lessons to teach children how to hunt, sew and live. The simple life they led was reliant on the land they lived in and respected through prayer to the Great Spirit or Creator. What is unique for us to remember of this existence and ever flowing change of our society is that we need to return to our roots. The artists in the exhibition '**Our wilderness is wisdom....**' examine their own lives and their canvases are like the soles of their moccasins: the land underneath them is what they understand. Through their paintings they become many voices telling stories of the past, present and future.

The exhibition '**Our wilderness is wisdom...**' features the work of First Nations artists Tanya Harnett, Alex Janvier, and Curtis Johnson. During my studio visits with the artists I learned a great deal about them as personalities and how their lives in the way they live filters into the art and how this story is then weaved into their art.

What the artists shared with me was initiated by questions that I asked each artist. The answers to these questions have been summarized in the exhibition as artist statements. The viewer can review the actual questions which can be found in the Education Interpretive Guide for this exhibition.

Heather Shillinglaw - Curator

The exhibition '**Our wilderness is wisdom...**' was curated by Heather Shillinglaw and organized by the Art Gallery of Alberta for the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program. The AFA Travelling Exhibition program is supported by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts. This exhibition was made possible through sponsorship from Syncrude Canada Ltd.

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program

## Travelling Exhibition 2012-2014 Season

The Art Gallery of Alberta is pleased to present this travelling exhibition for the 2012-2014 season. Currently the Art Gallery of Alberta serves over 60 venues in approximately 45 communities. Exhibitions on tour from the Art Gallery of Alberta easily adapt to space requirements of smaller venues: schools, libraries, museums, health care centres and other community facilities. The exhibitions are organized in such a manner as to make unpacking, packing, hanging and shipping as easy as possible. Along with the exhibition, each venue receives an Educational Interpretive Guide for the show. These materials enable teachers to use the exhibition within the school curriculum.

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Collection is the primary source of works featured in the travelling exhibitions. Other sources for exhibitions may include community partners, archives, private collections and loans from artists. Each year we welcome new venues to enrich their community art through the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program.

### Our Thanks

The curator and artists:

Heather Shillinglaw      Alex Janvier  
Tanya Harnett              Curtis Johnson

Syncrude Canada Ltd.,

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts

and to the many individuals, organizations and communities who contribute to the success of the the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program each year.

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Front Cover Images:

Top left: Curtis Johnson, *Harvest Snow*, 2011, Acrylic, canvas collage on canvas, Collection of the artist

Bottom left: Alex Janvier, *Red Moss*, 2005, Oil on canvas, Collection of the artist

Top right: Alex Janvier, *Muskeg Symphony*, 2005, Oil on canvas, Collection of the artist

Bottom right: Tanya Harnett, *Lubicon Lake First Nations: Warning Oil Pipeline*, 2011, Digital print on rag paper, Collection of the artist



The Alberta Foundation for the Arts  
Travelling Exhibition Program

# 'Our wilderness is wisdom...'





Alex Janvier  
Blue Berry Edge, 2005  
Oil on canvas  
Collection of the artist

The exhibition **'Our wilderness is wisdom...'** examines the theme of nature as seen through the eyes of three contemporary Albertan First Nations artists. While utilizing different artistic media and stylistic expressions, all three communicate a spiritual connection to, and deep and abiding love and concern for, the wilderness around us.

**Alex Janvier** was born on the Le Goff Reserve, Cold Lake First Nations, Alberta, in 1935. Raised in the Chipewyan tradition, while at home he was exposed to the richness of traditional abstraction in beadwork and quill work. At school he gained an awareness of and experience in art based on European traditions. Janvier's formal art studies began in 1956 at what is now the Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary. Since his graduation in 1960 he has consistently explored new directions within a distinctly modernist abstract style. In his work he explores the spectrum between abstraction and representation and his imagery is a combination of traditional native decorative motifs, floral designs, and symbolic colour combinations. His work has been described as a kind of 'nature mysticism' achieved through the simplification and abstraction of organic forms.

A central theme explored by Janvier in many of his works concerns the loss of land. This concern can be directly linked to the year 1952, when the Federal Government removed the people from the Le Goff Reserve and gave the land to the Primrose Air Weapons Range. Since the late 1980s many of Janvier's paintings have been concerned with specific issues such as land claims and the environment. These concerns, and his intent as an artist, are evident in Janvier's works in the exhibition **'Our wilderness is wisdom...'** and have been eloquently expressed by the artist:

*Our wilderness is no longer ours, as was known by the Denesuline of Cold Lake. The wilderness is now taken as property of the government of Alberta. So the difficulty arises even in the thought, that it is managed by a government. The only sharing that an artist can do now is to bring this awareness (of the land) to the public eye to care for it. It is not the artist who should be front line care-taker. It should be the care of all citizens who want to preserve the wilderness for the generations to come. As a Denesuline, this has been given as wisdom since we were knee-high.*



Tanya Harnett  
Driftpile First Nation: Driftpile River from Swan Hills, 2011  
Digital print on rag paper  
Collection of the artist

**Tanya Harnett's** studio practice is a diverse one including painting, printmaking, photography and drawing. Working in a variety of modes and methods she explores themes of spirituality, materiality and, most recently, storytelling and the environment. In the works created for the exhibition **'Our wilderness is wisdom...'** Harnett focused her gaze on the water, waterways and rivers of Alberta believing that, as a First Nations person and Nakota artist, she has *...an obligation and responsibility to be aware of the land that we all stand on.*

For the body of work included in the exhibition **'Our wilderness is wisdom...'** Harnett chose photography as her medium, believing that it would best capture the subject at hand and her concerns regarding this subject. As expressed by the artist, *...with photography there is a tendency to believe what we see.* Focusing on issues of water contamination and the loss of water resources, Harnett approached this subject like a photo-journalist and with a sense of reportage, recording 'real' images of waterways and then, through the addition of red dye, drawing viewers' attention to what might be in the water or is happening to water resources. As stated by the artist concerning both her art practice and this project in particular:

*Everything we know is spiritual. All matter has energy. The notion of place and spirit with the land is simple. It's a round and a holistic idea. In acknowledging the complicated connections and relationships of the environment, it makes it easier for us to see how everything is spiritually connected.*

*Communicating through art is a strong medium. In making my artwork, I simply have questions and they are expressed visually. Hopefully the work might lead someone to join me in my pondering. These pictures lead me to more questioning. Why are these places of concern to those living on the land? What is the history of these places, the usage, and the state of their waterways? Who are the stewards of these places and who is responsible for their care? Is it a question of responsibility or sustainably or is there more to it?*

*I really do hope that people will have more questions and, if we are lucky, maybe even answers. As First Nations people we believe the waterways hold important spiritual relevance and that these waters should be held in respect by all of our relations.*



Curtis Johnson  
Treelines, 2011  
Acrylic, canvas collage on wood  
Collection of the artist

**Curtis Johnson** likens his art practice to his Métis heritage. Like his ancestry his art is part one thing and part another, and 'duality' is a constant in his artistic expression.

Growing up on a farm near Valleyview in the Peace River region, Johnson has an innate appreciation for the landscape. At the same time urban elements, especially such things as movies, television and comics, were a source of fascination to him. These varied sensibilities are expressed in Johnson's landscape paintings. Colour, for example, often references a particular time of day or a season. It may also, however, be inspired by more 'industrial' sources. The use of rectangular elements and grid-like structures, meanwhile, references his agricultural background, specifically the patterning of farm fields. These geometric elements, however, also have 'urban' sources. As described by Johnson, he went to art school to focus on comic illustration and the geometric storyboard/narrative structure of comics creeps into his works.

The concept of 'duality' is also seen in the artist's artistic style. Johnson moves fluidly between abstraction and representation in his works. Taking elements such as colours and forms that occur in nature, he applies them in non-representational ways, concentrating on the formal elements of line, shape, colour, and texture and enjoying how these elements interact on the painting's surface. As witnessed in his paintings, however, he will also draw on or scratch back into the surface to create representational forms such as a stand of trees or a fence-line. As related by Johnson concerning his paintings in the exhibition **'Our wilderness is wisdom...'**:

*As an artist one can take inspiration from just about anything. It all depends on how you look at things. With the land there is so much inspiration right at the surface. There is colour, form, line, pattern, contrast and texture.... All of these go into any dynamic piece of work. There is also a spiritual connection when I paint. ...when I am working and forms and images and ideas start flowing it is as if that is what I was meant to do. The spiritual side is also present when I am outside and see how the colours and forms interact with one another. When I see the harmony that exists in seeming chaos I feel that there is a God that has provided for us and has blessed us with many gifts.*