

Naturalist LauraLee K. Harris is able to heighten human awareness and understanding of the First Peoples through wood, poetry and painting. She expresses her creativity through a combination of historical and contemporary knowledge as well as subconscious dream like imagery. Harris allows the grains of the panel wood she selects to speak to her guiding her process of creation. Working backward discovering and visualizing art forms as well as the interwoven stories within her surface material is a compelling method of creation. Many of Harris's formulated ideas are richly intermingled with her knowledge of Ojibwa story telling, conveying the oral histories of the First peoples through the expressive medium of acrylic paint on wood panel. The wood itself presents the necessary hidden messages and symbolic imagery required for Harris to reach the final stages of her art creations. LauraLee K. Harris's inherent theme of *Water and Women of the First Peoples* breaks from the traditional Western practice of producing an artwork with a preconceived notion and preliminary design. Spontaneity emulates Harris's naturalist style her use of vibrant colours intensifies the preexisting bold grains of the natural wood. The emphasis of the wood grains is reminiscent of the Woodland School of Art an Ojibwa art style devised of several common practices such as the use of bold line connectors. This exhibit is a reminder of the traditional matriarchal practices of the First peoples and the importance of women as the givers of life, knowledge and protection. Harris's works protest the necessity of environmental and political action, justice and the mourning of missing women. The audience is meant to distinguish the importance of their individual decision making, recognizing the ramifications of their every resolve spanning seven generations.

Harris's painting entitled *She Holds Them All* is an expressive design of vibrant red, orange and green colour washes with a complementary balance of blues. The artist colour balance mirrors the interwoven association of water (blue), fertility (red), harmony (orange) and

the environment (green). The contours of the wood strengthen the artists' colour scheme as the grains run parallel in several tight clusters from top to bottom. This piece shares a strong affiliation with the First peoples and the importance of drawing meaning from individual dreams. Harris uniquely breaks from her common practice of using the knots, grains or rings within the wood panel as her main focus. She reverts to imagery revealed to her subconscious devising a balance of natural and dream like objectification. The woman's body is presented through Harris's personal artistic expression as the majority of the panel depicts a figurative object. Harris is guided by subtle preexisting lines from the grains of wood, yet her illustration of the jaw and neck line as well as the breast and torso share limited attention to the natural path of "the story lines." Harris's conscious involvement in this painting reveals that she is not restricted to the woods natural patterning and can morph her technique freely. This painting has a strong organic feel as the knots in the panel materialize into reproductive imagery of the female body. In a sense the panel manipulates the artist judgment as multiple things can be revealed over the extensive period of time that the artist is involved in the creation process. In *She Holds Them All*, the Earth is given shape through natural, emotional and physical construction helping to assist the artist in their creative design and inevitable story path.

The artist painting entitled *Flying Home On Beads of The Traded Past* illustrates the transportation and transmittance of cultural stories. The Canadian geese fly in a V shape often one goose will fly lower than the rest of the flock. The First peoples believe that this lone goose gathers the stories of villagers below for safe keeping. Harris has incorporated beads into her panel painting demonstrating the valued importance of this traditional item. First peoples traded for beads holding them in high regard, including them into their clothing and wampum belts. Wampum belts were used to illustrate cultural story telling and past history such as trades,

battles, migration or money itself. Harris uses the beads symbolically creating a trail from the geese in the sky to Turtle Island below. The back of the turtle in the creation story is the earth's surface and the thirteen sections on his shell represent the months of the year. Harris's clan is the wolf, a totem passed on through her mother's lineage. Many animals play significant roles in the creation story and symbolize unique human and animal characteristics illustrated in the transformation process. Nevertheless, no character is more important than woman herself. In *Legends of The Falls*, without her curiosity the First peoples place on earth would cease to exist. Pregnant she would fall through the hole in the sky on to the back of turtle surrounded by *water*. This painting truthfully echoes the creation story of the First peoples and the importance of *water* as a means of livelihood, transportation and food. Harris also conveys her respect for the animal world and the natural environment. *Water and Women of the First Peoples* is defined through the *Echoes of Creation*.

The *White Buffalo Peace* is possibly the most intricate acrylic on panel painting in Harris's exhibit. This artwork compels the viewer with the recognition of the spiritual importance of the albino Buffalo. The First peoples traveled with the migrating herds of buffalo as a means of survival. In times of drought and difficulty in the hunt the original peoples relied on one person to go on a sacred journey in search of a sign. This person acted as the messenger receiving premonitions of things to come. Fasting was a frequently used method helping the individual witness subconscious dream like visions or to speak to the protector of his or her people such as the sun and the moon. In many ways Harris possesses a unique ability to visualize the "story lines" within a panel of wood bringing these stories to completion or full circle. Harris is like the chosen individual searching for a sign to guide the First peoples on their essential path. The albino buffalo is a rare specimen and very difficult to find hiding in nature's foliage during

the peak hours of daylight because of their sensitive eyes. The white buffalo is hidden within the grains of wood and “story lines” of this painting. Harris personalizes the event as the viewer feels as if they are the first to discover the *White Buffalo*. This painting is one of Harris’s darker works as she makes use of rich contrasting values giving central emphasis to the significant creature. Her painting is seeded in the spiritual, which is one of the four stages of the life cycle.

Harris’s natural style emulates the oral history of the First peoples. Her artworks share various regularities despite the inevitable distinct differences within each artwork. Similarly traditional stories differ over time as new practices and knowledge introduced to the First peoples with the arrival of Europeans instigated change. The introduction of Christianity among the First people’s allocated a unique intermixing of ideas. During the peak of the fur trade Ojibwa women married voyageurs as a means of political alliance, status and regained freedoms. Upon the arrival of Europeans to North America a transformation in societal hierarchy took place. Amerindian culture was based on a matriarchal lead society the European model is patriarchal and as a result foreigners only wanted to trade with native men. This changed the cultural fabric of the First peoples. Women than took it upon themselves to secretly assure that traditional cultural practices were passed on. However, subtle this continuation may have been it was of huge educational importance. The arts allowed cultural practices to sustain through fashion design, story telling, pottery and much more. LauraLee K. Harris has taken it upon herself to educate the youth through the traditional role of women as educators. She has reverted to the natural “story lines” evident in each panel expressing her knowledge through visual and literary ideas inspired by hidden imagery. Harris has a strong affiliation to each wood surface she begins working on. She has a compelling ability to analyze and discover stories waiting to be told.