

ARTS & LEISURE

Artist explores aboriginal roots

By Frank Matys
The Villager

While many people talk about getting back to nature, few will try to become one with it. And even fewer can recreate its splendor successfully.

That is why viewing the work of High Park artist LauraLee K. Harris can be such a rewarding experience, a moment in which the spiritual world meshes with the rich history of native life.

Having learned only two years ago about her native background, which includes strains of Sioux, Cree and Chippewyan, Harris has in a sense re-discovered her "roots." By talking with elders and poring over native literature, she became educated in the traditions and beliefs of her forbearers, creating a base for her artwork. The result is that Harris is able to portray in her art the kinship she has long felt for native culture.

"I've always felt inside that I was native," she said in a recent interview with *The Villager*. "My ancestors speak to me and guide me."

For Harris, the marriage of the artistic process and the spiritual world comes from within and finds its voice through both poems and paintings, the most recent of which are collected as *Sacred Way*.

"*Sacred Way* is about living life in a more thoughtful process, as opposed to rushing through, and it's about seeking solitudes," she said of her work to be displayed at Gate 403 starting early this month. "It's about getting from nature what it gives to us. It's already there but we never sort of seek it out."

And for those wondering where to find such inspiration but just don't know where to look, Harris suggests a trip to the backyard.

"You have to respect that everything has a spirit," she said. "A lot of times people don't realize that if you can align yourself with the birds, or a tree, and actually be with



Aboriginal art: LauraLee K. Harris' painting titled *Who Cries For The Trees* is part of the exhibit the artist is holding at Gate 403 which opens on May 8, at 7 p.m. Her paintings and poetry will be on display until June 9.

them in their spirit, that you will be part of everything.

"I go through a spiritual walk when I do my paintings because I find that they speak to me," she said. "Everything (artistic inspiration) comes if I just let it. If mistakes happen, they happen for a reason."

The paintings are striking. Bold strokes of acrylic give life to canvas, wood and Masonite, rendering images that suggest a wide array of emotions and experiences. Each painting is partnered with a poem, which is, Harris said, "a natural way of expressing the work without clinically analyzing it."

In a piece titled *No turning back*, four robed figures are painted in vivid hues while overhead darkened skies give way to ocean-blue expanses. Each figure, Harris said, is symbolic of a journey or vision quest - in a sense going through

pain in order to "seek your vision": the face of fear, the face of pain, the face of alertness and that of peace. She then explained that unlike the more conventional view of life, in which "you're born, you get married and then you die," natives believe that everything is part of a cycle, where time cannot be measured.

"If we learn from the things that happen and (cause) pains in our life, then we will see our vision and our future," she said. "But we have to use the pain in our life in a positive way to get to the other side."

Those interested in viewing the exhibit and meeting the artist can do so from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m., May 8 at the Gate 403 Bar and Grill, 403 Roncesvalles Ave. The show runs through Sunday, June 9.