

# Woodland displaying Chee Chee collection

Benjamin Chee Chee's life story is not a happy one.

He was born in 1944 on the Temagami reserve in north-eastern Ontario. His father died when he was a baby and his mother worked as a charwoman.

At age 12, he was sent to training school because of a joyriding incident. When he got out four years later, he rejoined his mother, who had remarried and was living in Sudbury.

But he soon drifted on, wandering from town to town and job to job. He lost track of his mother.

Yet he eventually became a successful commercial artist. He was noticed by a lawyer who helped him connect with the Nicholas Art Gallery of Canada.

The art-buying public liked his work and his art was exhibited by the McMichael Collection, The Royal Ontario Museum and the National Museum of Man.

Mr. Chee Chee reunited with his mother and planned to move to Victoria with her.

But then in 1977, at the age of 32, he was arrested in Ottawa for disturbing the peace through drunken behavior. At the height of his career, he committed suicide in his jail cell by hanging himself with his shirt.

Mr. Chee Chee was especially known for a series of whimsical, floating, serene images of birds which became popular in the 1970's. Some of those bird images are part of the display at the centre.

The artist also experimented with broad applications of color. "He had a completely different understanding of color," said Tom Hill, the museum director at the Woodland centre.

"He was a gentle person, but very intense in trying to find out who he was. His art reflects that struggle, but it unfortunately concluded in his untimely death," said Mr. Hill.

"It's not a large show, but people interested in his work would want to see it."

Although Mr. Chee Chee died in that Ottawa jail cell, his work lives on and continues to be popular.