

Political comment now being seen in native art

By Vicki White, Expositor Staff *May 10/91*

The anger and turmoil within Canadian native communities has found its way on to the canvasses of native artists and into the new exhibit at the Woodland Cultural Centre.

First Nations Art '91 is filled with artwork which reflects and comments upon events such as last year's Oka crisis, and related issues such as ethnocentrism and racism.

"I think there's no question that the events of last summer have affected the artist," said museum director Tom Hill.

He said many artists who have previously submitted very attractive, "marketable" pieces, have taken a dramatic turn to the political.

Mr. Hill says he welcomes the change and is proud of the fact that the gallery will accept all points of view.

"I would much rather debate the issues with a painting or a piece of literature or a play, than by manning a barricade" with a rifle, he said. "I think it's wonderful."

One artist who may surprise those familiar with his work is Arnold Jacobs. His installation piece, the Real Victims, brings together many of the symbols of the conflict at Oka.

A large painting on plywood asks the question: Who's proud to be a Canadian? It shows two native children with tears in their eyes on either side of armed people in uniforms. Above them is a fleur-de-lis, dripping in blood.

In a gravel box below the painting is a collection of items with which most Canadians became familiar during the 78-day standoff between Mohawks and law enforcement officials.

A rifle, a golf club and a bandana sit beside a copy of the Indian Act, with a dirty foot print

over top.

A miniature television, frozen on the image of angry men and women throwing stones at cars leaving the Kahnawake reserve just outside Montreal, also sits among the objects.

Another Six Nations artist, Wayne Skye, contributed a soapstone sculpture which deals with the conflict in a less intense fashion.

Mulrone and Bourassa on Vacation During the Mohawk Sun looks almost like a caricature of the two politicians — something which would be more common on the editorial pages of a newspaper than in the hallowed halls of an art gallery.

A challenge

Six Nations photographer Greg Staats collaborated with Robert Houle to produce a two-photograph piece titled Extinct-Distinct.

One of the poster-size black and white photographs is a display at the Art Gallery of Ontario which is dedicated to the native people of Ontario. The other captures a ray of light shining through a traditional Iroquois longhouse.

In an accompanying explanation, the artists say they wanted to "challenge the present reality which perpetuates the white, male, middle-class hierarchy to speak for us."

The piece "honors the 'extinct' First Nations of North America and expresses the 'distinct' character of our contemporary sisters and brothers."

In all, 41 artists contributed to the exhibition, which also includes tapestry, pen and paper sketches and copper etchings.

The juried exhibit runs until July 4.



Photos by Brian Thompson, Expositor
How The West Was Won, 1990. By Teresa MacPhee. Clay, fibre and wood.