



Voice of the landscape

A spiritual search leads to art and serenity
for Indigenous painter Jessie Buchanan

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Naabe-Mooz, Algonquin Park



Mukwa-Spirit Bear

Sitting in a kayak on the Churchill River, Indigenous artist Jessie Buchanan can't take her eyes off the beluga whales skimming the water nearby.

"You guys are beautiful," she calls gently.

It's a peaceful moment, captured on her cellphone during a stop in Churchill, Manitoba, where she was leading art workshops in a mobile art gallery – a souped-up shipping container – as part of Winnipeg Art Gallery's celebration of Canada's 150th birthday.

But better than any video footage, almost better than the memory itself, will be Buchanan's oil painting of a whale serenely swimming beneath her kayak that she'll later create at home in Guelph.

On a fall day in her basement studio, Buchanan is applying the final brush strokes to the large whale painting, called "Meeting Qilalugaq, Churchill River." She's

wearing a green shirt and capri pants that are as paint-splattered as the concrete floor.

"I go to the grocery store in my 'uniform,'" she says. "People stop me. They're interested. They say, 'Are you a painter?'"

On the walls in an adjoining room, several large, evocative, oil and acrylic paintings express her spirituality and influences – Lake Superior, Algonquin Park, the Woodland style of painting, British Columbia artist Emily Carr and Yukon-based artist Nathalie Parenteau to name a few.

"I try to come up with my own visual expression riding on the shoulders of these giants," she says.

One of her paintings shows a man canoeing peacefully into a horizon of blues and white. She painted the scene after her father-in-law died.

"I have a spiritual belief that is connected to my ancestors," she says. "The elders talk about the other side. There is comfort. The spiritual search is what in many ways drives my work; that searching for that comfort in what's to come, and faith."

Buchanan, 34, a member of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation, chose "Voice of the Landscape" as her theme for the Canada 150 journey. Her mother is Ojibwe. Her father has an Irish-Scottish background. Her parents met in Toronto and moved to Caledonia where Buchanan and her siblings grew up.

The summer project, called "Art Express'd" acted like a lightning bolt that fired up Buchanan's creativity for a new series of paintings based on her experiences as a painter-guide this summer in Northern Canada.

"I want to be able to reach more people and show the beauty of Northern Canada," she says. "I feel like I'm full of images and experiences that I just really want to, need to, get out on canvas."

From June to August, Buchanan met a large transport truck hauling the brightly painted, six-metre-long shipping container



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when it made stops in Yellowknife and Inuvik in Northwest Territories; Whitehorse, Yukon; Churchill in northern Manitoba; and Baker Lake, Nunavut.

At each community, truck driver Kevin Major unhitched the trailer and laid down a ramp so that Buchanan could invite people to climb inside the mobile gallery-workshop to paint their vision of Canada.

“It felt like being in an art circus in the best possible sense,” she says.

Buchanan, 34, a friendly, expressive woman with lively, brown eyes and long, dark hair, was one of three artists chosen by the Winnipeg Art Gallery to accompany the modified shipping containers to 16 communities across the country.

After their cross-country tours, the mobile art galleries were dropped off in Winnipeg where Canadians’ artwork was displayed at Nuit Blanche festivities.

Buchanan alone collected more than 200 small paintings, drawings and pieces of bead work.

She flew to most places, but rode in the truck along the Dempster Highway, which begins east of Dawson city in the Yukon and ends in Inuvik in the Northwest Territories, so she wouldn’t miss the stunning wilderness scenery.

Buchanan knew that many Indigenous people viewed Canada’s 150th birthday celebrations as hypocritical given that colonization was the beginning of the injustices and abuse they suffered. There is frustration with the slow progress that has been made on recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up to try to address abuse in residential schools.

She wrestled with whether she should take part in the program. In the end, Buchanan, who is also a qualified professional art therapist, decided that art can serve to help people protest. It can heal, advocate and

Hole in the Rock Trail, Elora Gorge

reconcile, she says.

“Reporters have been asking me about this, and I’ve been saying there is a place I believe for both voices. It is important to protest and boycott,” Buchanan says. “It is also important to use it as an opportunity to engage with the community, not only Indigenous peoples, but all communities.

“I went with an open heart and an open mind.”

A mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people agreed to make art in the shipping container gallery equipped with lights, heating, hardwood floors and art supplies. Most of their works conveyed joy in the landscape and traditional ways of life, such as the image of a fishing camp on the Arctic Ocean. Many immigrants incorporated the Canadian flag in their paintings.

But some Indigenous painters expressed their pain about how the land and their people had been traumatized by colonization. Many elders were concerned about the loss of their languages.

One woman criticized the spending of money on the project while “the community was hurting.” Buchanan hoped she would incorporate her feelings into a painting.

She says people were surprised that she was so open about “the elephant in the room.”

“I was so energized about using art as a way to help their social activism and advocacy.”

In Whitehorse, an Indigenous woman painted a scene showing how land claims had splintered her community.

“She painted a map of the Yukon and showed how split up and broken up the land had become. She educated me about how badly the land claims have ripped apart the Yukon. There were lines everywhere and little pieces of land.”

A Parks Canada employee painted a mountain in a national park west of Nunavut and called it “Disconnect 150” to illustrate our need to disconnect from



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technology and reconnect with nature.

Buchanan visited libraries, schools and community centres to invite residents to attend her workshops.

“I was out almost every night meeting people,” she says. “It opened my eyes. Everyone needs to go to Northern Canada to really understand what the people are like there.”

In the mainstream press, you read mostly about poverty and struggle, she says.

“But when I was there, I saw this whole other side – the retention of culture and strength and sustainability, the tight-knit communities. It broke my stereotypes. I admired the way they lived their lives.”

And then there’s the raw beauty of the landscape. In a boat on the Mackenzie River in the middle of the night with the sun high in the sky, she felt the “beautiful and bizarre” features of nature.

“They’re more connected in the North to the Earth and the natural rhythms than we are in the South,” she says.

In a teepee in Inuvik, Buchanan and Major talked for hours with a young Inuvialuit carver and healer from Tuktoyaktuk who fed them goose and caribou.

“We all have moments where we feel sort of touched by greatness in a spiritual way,” Buchanan says. “He was talking about his traditions and people . . . and I felt proud and so much comfort and clarity about our place in the world.”

Art and ancestry came together when Buchanan travelled eight hours north of her home to Algoma University in Sault Ste. Marie.

Along with her fine arts degree, she took native studies courses at Shingwauk Kinoomaage Gamig, a sister institution that provides education from an Anishinaabe world view.

“I think my identity crisis with being

.....
Ahmik after the Storm,
Lake Superior Provincial Park

an aboriginal woman was connected to my identity crisis as an artist,” Buchanan says. “I felt I should have brown skin and be from a reserve. I hadn’t yet seen the diversity in the community until Algoma.”

Her mother, proud of her Ojibwe ancestry, took her family to pow-wows where they could experience their culture and hear the language, but they never lived on their reserve outside Sarnia. “It’s interesting belonging to a place where you’ve never lived,” she says.

Buchanan didn’t have an opportunity to learn the Anishinaabe language, which she wants to do. She was raised in the Catholic church, her father’s church.

Though she has “status Indian” designation, she doesn’t “look” like an Indigenous person, she says. “It made me hesitant about embracing my blood.” Later, she came to realize there are many people like her. “We don’t all look the same or speak the same.”

She admires her 97-year-old maternal grandmother, a painter of impressionistic landscapes. When Buchanan was 13 years old, she saw an image in a magazine of an Indigenous man proudly holding up a fist full of paint brushes in front of him.

“It really resonated with me. It felt like something stirred.”

In Sault Ste. Marie, instructors such as Edward Benton-Banai, presiding Grand Chief of the Three Fires Midewiwin Lodge, helped her figure out who she is. She was able to cope with the depression that had dogged her in her late teens.

“I got a handle on it in university because I was starting to embrace who I really was and not be afraid of what people think.”

She met her future husband, Andrew Muncaster, a musician-songwriter and member of the band, the Granola People. At the time, Muncaster was working on his PhD in religious studies at McMaster University in Hamilton and teaching part time at Algoma.

“It was instant fireworks, the music

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and him.”

Muncaster took her 45 minutes north to see Lake Superior. She loves the unpredictability of the largest of the Great Lakes; its wildness and its serenity. She has returned many times with her family and has experienced the lake’s contrariness.

After graduating, Buchanan was a curatorial assistant at the Art Gallery of Sudbury for a couple of years. Then she and Muncaster decided to see more of Canada. They packed everything up and drove to Whitehorse where they worked while touring the Yukon.

Buchanan started painting again in Whitehorse, something she had put off while working at the art gallery.

An encounter with a grizzly bear while they were driving in heavy snow up the Rocky Mountains on the way to Whitehorse

left its mark on her.

“We came over a hill and it was right in front of us. We slammed on the brakes and there was the largest bear we’d ever seen.” The huge bear sauntered to the side of the road. They watched it from the car for half an hour and drove away.

“It was almost like a dream,” she says. “It took my imagination to that place where magic happens in artwork and writing, where things happen when you’re so inspired and in awe.”

She worked all summer on a painting of the “Spirit Bear.”

And then she threw it out while packing the car to return to Ontario.

“I threw it in a dumpster because it was so painful coming from me. I was working full-time and I was rusty. I had given up on painting, on being an artist, for three years and then I was trying to push out this thing

and it was agonizing.”

They were well on their way before she realized Muncaster had rescued the painting.

“She left Spirit Bear up there leaning against a bin. I thought that was a travesty,” says Muncaster, who is a sessional instructor at Humber College in Toronto and has taught at several other universities, including Wilfrid Laurier University and University of Guelph.

“I’ve always thought if Jess got enough time to focus on her art, there is no limit to where she can go. She’s inspiring. Her personality comes through in her work – creative, energetic, fun, deep, multi-faceted.”

Buchanan says she “exploded with painting” when the couple moved to London, Ont. “I sold a lot of paintings in acrylic. I was so happy I was painting.”

They came to Guelph when Muncaster started teaching at Humber.

In 2016, Buchanan graduated with a post-graduate diploma in art therapy from the Toronto Art Therapy Institute. “I thought about how connected my mental health was to my painting,” she says.

Her thesis explored art therapy in First Nations communities and she visited her reserve for the first time. “It was overwhelming in a positive way” as people were curious about who she was and to whom she was related.

She was painting every day when their son, Dayton, was born. “When I gave birth, I felt I saw myself for the first time,” she says. “Maybe it’s wanting to be a role model, a better person.”

The Winnipeg Art Gallery’s project for Canada’s 150th birthday seemed a good opportunity “to use art to give people a voice

as to how they feel about themselves.”

Buchanan has shown her paintings in venues such as Agawa Bay Visitor Centre in Lake Superior Provincial Park, Kloepfer Custom Framing and Gallery in Guelph and Mijidaa café + bistro in Guelph. A portion of her sales of original artwork goes toward sending art supplies to First Nations, Inuit and Metis youth in remote communities in Canada through the Art for Aid Project.

“What I like about her is she paints what she wants and she paints what she feels,” says Kloepfer gallery owner Audrey Kloepfer. “I got the feeling from her that she is an outgoing, inspiring person.”

A collector of her works, Lauren Katsuno, owns four of Buchanan’s paintings and aims to add more so there is one in each room of her family’s Guelph home.

“Her work has an ineffable beauty that speaks to me on a very primal level,” says

Katsuno who grew up around North Bay, Sudbury and Manitoulin Island. “Her work makes me happy every day, because it is like having little pieces of the places I love most.”

Buchanan has shows in Guelph at Mijidaa café + bistro until Dec. 12 and at Kloepfer gallery in September 2018.

“Her paintings are so vibrant and they seem to speak to people,” says Mijidaa’s Rebecca Gordon, who is in charge of the art program. Buchanan was the first of many local artists whose work the café has featured.

The café-bistro, whose name means “let’s eat” in Ojibwe, is honoured to host Buchanan’s work again, Gordon says. “We’re really proud of her.”

Jessie Buchanan’s website:
artistjessiebuchanan.ca

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