

# We Are Still Here! challenges stereotypes surrounding Indigenous peoples



By Brock Weir

Deron Ahsen:nase Douglas bristles at the word “resilient.”

All too often Indigenous children are being described that way. It often comes first, ahead of “That person is smart,” or, “That person is beautiful,” or “That person has great leadership skills.”

“It’s great that they are resilient, but if you were to talk about a non-Indigenous teenager or child, you wouldn’t think of resiliency,” says Mr. Douglas. “It occurred to me that resiliency is something we have had to develop in order to survive and I would like to see a time when resiliency is no longer a character trait people will immediately think of, but they will think of the other things is well.”

Mr. Douglas, a Kanien’keha:ka painter, is doing his part to achieve this goal one brushstroke at a time and Aurorans will

have the opportunity to be a part of the conversation as We’re Still Here! A Solo Exhibition of his work opens at the Aurora Cultural Centre on May 9.

The roots of We Are Still Here, a showcase of very contemporary art, were formed through Mr. Douglas’ work as Indigenous Artist in Residence with the York Region District School Board.

Nearly a decade ago after working with one particular class, he still vividly remembers a young female student running up to her father, pointing at him, as if to say, “He’s a real Indian!” Her exact wording, he says, has been lost to the mists of time, but the feeling is still vivid as ever.

“I started going into different schools in York Region on a volunteer basis to talk about Indigenous culture,” he explains. “Her words really struck me strongly because I realised kids these days don’t know anything about Indigenous people. As I started to investigate further, I learned that the only thing they knew about

Indigenous people was from history books. They actually believed that we no longer existed and only existed within history books.

“After that, I found it was important for me to continue to go into schools and speak to kids and talk about my culture and social issues and, depending on the grade and how old they were, talk about Residential Schools and that kind of thing, in order to tell them that we are still here and we’re not just a part of history.”

In some respects, Mr. Douglas’ art might not be what many non-Indigenous viewers have come to expect when they hear the phrase “Indigenous art.” He does not follow what he describes as “woodland-style” art with its trademark totem poles and like symbolism. His paintings are figurative, a collection of portraits and different characterisations intended to represent various topics related to contemporary Indigenous life.

“People are expecting woodland style art and because of their expectations, artists are painting these types of paintings with spirit animals and those kinds of things and it really doesn’t open up a discussions round current issues – the current social issues – that effect indigenous people,” he says. “Basically, those artists are pandering to the marketplace and they are working within the context of what is currently expected or what is currently known about indigenous people. In a lot of cases, some of them are stereotypes. I felt that because of the way I paint and because of the topics that I paint, it would open up a discussion and it would bring to the non-Indigenous audience things about Indigenous people that currently exist: their social structures, social struggles, the problems they are having, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, teen suicide and that type of things – things not covered in stereotypical woodland-style art.

“I am trying to take indigenous people out of the history books. When people think of indigenous people, they think of feathers, headdresses, leather and that sort of thing, so all the portraits that I create

are of contemporary indigenous people doing contemporary things. For example, I have one woman who is actually dressed up as Princess Leia, and Star Wars is really popular with Indigenous people because it is about an oppressed society being overrun by a huge empire. It is about their survival. Indigenous people actually relate to that quite well.”

We Are Still Here! A Solo Exhibition featuring the work of Deron Ahsen:nase Douglas runs at the Aurora Cultural Centre from May 9 through August 3. The Artist’s Opening Reception will take place Saturday, May 25, from 1 – 4 p.m. and all are welcome. Light refreshments will be served.

Mr. Douglas will be present for an In Conversation event on Wednesday, June 5, from 6 – 7.30 p.m., and will host a portrait painting demonstration on Wednesday, July 10 from 6 – 7.30 p.m.

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