

## The Art of Leo Yerxa

*Unfold Time* celebrates the life and work of Leo Yerxa (1947-2017),

award – winning artist from Couchiching First Nation

### Isolation

On a point of land jutting out onto Otter Bay, tall pine trees grow. The ground is covered with their soft brown needles. Smooth rocks lead down to the water's edge. The trapshack built by Leo's father, when Leo was a young child still stands. Moss grows on what remains of the roof. Animals have found shelter within its decaying walls. No roads lead here. A sacred presence is felt on this land.

It is here that Leo speaks with joy of childhood memories- berry picking with his older sisters, trips by boat with his mother and father to visit family on reserves further north, exploring the rocky shoreline with his mother with a rope tied around his waist to keep him safe. The spirit of the land is always a part of Leo. It is reflected in his words.

*I am*

*the one closest to the earth*

*where every breath is felt*

*every murmur is heard*

*and the heartbeat is like*

*an ever-pounding drum*

*This is Home.*

Leo's childhood was snatched from him. He shares a childhood memory of a moment in time, before he was taken from his home in a black car by a clergy, a police officer, and the Indian agent.

*Imagine then a beautiful morning. The kind with fresh cool air that is a joy to breathe in and watch it float away as you exhale. The kind with warm sunlight*

*streaming in through the windows of your home. The kind with leaves changing colour and hue on the trees, a stone's throw away from the back door. Your children are helping with chores. You are happy. They are happy. Quiet talk, almost a whisper, and laughter barely escaping a smile add to the warmth of the sunlight.*

He was torn away from a loving family. A memory haunts Leo. After being back at home for Christmas, he had to return to residential school. He was filled with dread. His mother could offer him no comfort as she walked him to school.

*A morning cold mingles with a breeze resulting in shivers sent down his spine. The buttons on his coat seem larger than they were yesterday and no matter how hard he tries, he cannot make them fit into the button holes, which seemed to have shrunk. His tiny hands coupled with his lack of desire make the task even more difficult, so he lets his arms drop to his sides, and his hands dangle in total frustration. Mother's hands wrap his scarf around his neck and fold then ends across his chest. She buttons the coat securing the warmth within. His mitts are pulled on and tucked into the sleeves of his coat, and his toque pulled over his head covering his ears.*

*The first leg of the journey is along a highway that runs along a small section of shoreline. Mother's slowed footsteps still quicken his pace, and he feels hurried. The road finally loses itself amidst three or four large buildings. Those monolithic obscenities – Journey's End.*

His mother nudges him towards those building – the residential school. He has to walk by himself the remaining way.

I used to wonder why

My mother never walked me to the door

She couldn't

Who would want to see their child

disappear into the darkness.

The residential school system was set up to separate Indigenous children from their parents, their language, culture, and traditions. Parents could be arrested if they refused to send their children to school. School staff treated children with indifference and subjected them to harsh discipline. Housing and food were inadequate. Leo could not forgive the government for the neglect, cruelty, and pain that he and thousands of Indigenous children endured. Leo, when asked directly about his residential school experience, stated,

*It was not only assimilation but isolation. It was a process for making little brown white men.*

At 14, Leo left school for good.

*I remember the beautiful spring day when my spirit left for good. There I sat looking out the window, which must have given call for the teacher to use me as an example of laziness. Everybody laughed. The laughter angered the teacher. I was told to go to the principals' office to be punished for the misdeed of looking out a window at a beautiful spring day.*

*My heart broken. My spirit escaped. I felt like running through a field trying to catch my spirit, inside a box as if it were a butterfly.*

On leaving school, Leo felt worthless, like he had been

*...tossed out as garbage. Who was I? I don't know. I believed the lies. I disbelieved the truth. After awhile, I could not distinguish one from another. What I should have been given to rely on was taken away from me. My home life, my parents, and the knowledge required to live a full life.*

For the next five years, Leo made a living trapping with his father and guiding at a sportsman camp. At 19 years old, he moved to Ottawa and took a graphic arts course at Algonquin College. He later studied art at the University of Waterloo.

In the years following, his reputation as an accomplished artist grew. During the 1970s and early 1980s, press coverage of Leo's art often took note of the "overriding theme of loneliness" in works with solitary figures set against large empty backgrounds. Leo commented on his early works, stating,

*The Indian Residential School experience mercilessly invades my soul giving rise to darker works. It is one of those things that cannot be ignored and should not be ignored.*

### **Our Healing Land**

Throughout his life, Leo remained grounded to the land, his community, and spirituality. Having left Couchiching, a community that lives closer to the land, he found it hard living in the city where he felt “unwelcome.” Leo longed for the quiet and peace of the land.

*I often felt trapped in a white world. I was most at home in the forest, Native world, Native ways – no voice required.*

To reconnect with the land, Leo painted places from memory and wrote poetry.

*It is autumn  
mist lifts from the ground  
and drifts across the lake  
a light wind makes a path  
through rusted leaves  
though most of them have fallen  
clouds lie overhead  
an eagle flies by  
the still water of the lake  
reflects the surrounding shore  
green leaves have surrendered  
to the cold  
broken away  
from their tree of life*

*leaving the eye to see the inland  
they are on the ground  
a blanket of colour  
the autumn morning is warm  
perhaps a last farewell to summer*

Nature helps with healing. Leo's favourite outdoor activities were canoeing, fishing, and snowshoeing. He walked every morning. He preferred trails along the Ottawa River. When driving on quiet, country roads, Leo would see a rainbow and say with some urgency, "Pull over!" He would then step out, lean on the car, and go on imaginary journeys along that colourful arc. And then he would chuckle and say,

*I look up...who can say I've never been anywhere?*

Leo would wake well after midnight, get up, and stand by the window to gaze at the full moon. All was illuminated in a heavenly light. He would whisper,

*In stillness, you sometimes journey further than you could possibly imagine.*

In his landscapes, Leo captures that stillness, that simple beauty. When all too often we overlook the daily miracles of nature right in front of us, Leo's art welcomes us into his world of wonder.

### **Art of Story Telling**

Leo watched his young son stare intently at birds in flight and fluttering leaves. His thoughts drifted back to a special day with his own father. In the beauty of untouched nature, Leo, the child, walked the trapline with his father as fall gave way to winter. Leo's spirits lifted at the memory of that day with his father. It was an experience he wanted to preserve and pass on.

And so, Leo embarked on a twenty-year journey bringing that time to life through visual images and poetic verse. As he described it,

*It took years of experimentation and a lot of hard work. I searched for a medium that could express the same spontaneity of colour found in nature. I wanted as much a three-dimensional effect as I could possibly achieve so the viewer would want to reach into the illustration, I finally decided on dyed tissue paper and a collage technique.*

This journey concluded with the 1994 publication of *Last Leaf First Snowflake to Fall*, an illustrated children's book that won multiple awards, such as the Amelia Frances Howard-Gibbon Medal from the Canadian Association of Children's Librarians. The importance of respect – respect for family, respect for the land, respect for all living things – lies at the heart of this book.

The book's stunning illustrations portray the close bond between father and son. Reflecting on this bond. Leo wrote,

*The person whose influence I treasure is my father, a highly creative person, who could seemingly make anything from anything. I have a favourite picture of my father. It is a comforting image. In the picture, my father is sitting on a rock near a tree line, and he is blended into the backgrounds. He's just sitting still, just there.*

The tissue paper illustrations so richly textured cast a spell of peace on the viewer. One of Leo's nephew tells a story:

*I recall a visit that my uncle Leo made during the summer when I was visiting. We had taken a boat trip to our old reserve, and as we were walking along the shoreline, he came upon an eagle feather but did not pick it up because he noticed there was a small bug on it. He did not want to disturb the bug, so he left the feather in its place. This shows Leo's gentle nature and respect for all living things. In our culture, finding an eagle feather in the wild is considered a gift or a blessing. In return for the gift of the feather, tobacco is left in its place as an offering because the eagle gave the gift of the feather, and the tobacco is a representation of living thing from earth.*

Leo shares the fullness of his personal experience through his tissue paper creations – taking us home to a place not only of enchantment and beauty, but also a place fragile and delicate.

## Horse Teachings

Leo enjoyed watching classic western movies and their modern adaptations. He admired the horsemanship skills of both cowboys and Indians on the big screen. He imagined himself riding long before he first rode a horse.

In 1994, Leo met Danny, a well-mannered and well-trained Quarter horse. Leo was drawn to Danny's calm presence. Danny stood quietly whenever Leo stroked his neck. Danny would gently take the treats Leo offered him and then nuzzle him for more. As trust developed between them, Leo gained the confidence to ride him. On a well-worn path around the field, Leo rode Danny bareback at a slow and easy pace that suited them both.

After his ride, Leo would release the horses into a wide-open field. He would watch as they raced and romped about. He listened. The sound of their pounding hooves inspired the title *Ancient Thunder* for his book, which paid tribute to the wild horses and the Native people of the Plains.

Leo enjoyed the process of experimentation. He found handmade watercolour paper from Quebec that he treated in a manner to make it look like leather. He discovered the right combination of watercolour and gouache paint to create bold and vibrant images that celebrate the relationship between man, animals, and nature.

In 2006, Leo's book *Ancient Thunder* won the Governor General's Literary Award in Children's Literature – Illustration category. In his acceptance speech at Rideau Hall, he stated,

*I stand before you tonight because my father Bert spent hours teaching me to move quietly and to sit in silence. It was not punishment. We were hunting. My mother Frances spent many hours telling stories to me. My brother Wayne is an artist and a story teller. And today my children create wonderful stories. We are of the Sturgeon Clan who oddly enough are the Keepers and Tellers of stories.*

*I owe a barrel of apples to some horses. Danny and Sarah, out near Metcalfe. Danny is still trying to teach me about life whenever I have the good sense to listen.*

## Connections

*The path my Father's Father's Father walked found him signing a treaty he hoped would secure the well-being of his children for generations to come.*

*The path my Father's Father walked was one of heartbreak. The pieces of broken treaties, like shards of shattered glass, cut deep with each step taken.*

*The path my Father walked was anchored to the land and to traditional beliefs that had long been demonized by a society that hoped we would disappear unnoticed.*

*To make sense of it all became my path.*

As Chief of the Rainy Lake Band, Leo's great-great-grandfather signed Treaty 3 on October 3, 1873. The treaty states, "And whereas the said Indians have been notified and informed by Her Majesty's said Commissioners that it is the desire of Her Majesty to open up for settlement, immigration, and such other purpose as Her Majesty may seem meet, a tract of country... the tract embracing an area of 55,000 square miles..." Leo stated with emotion,

*We didn't even know about owning land. The land is a part of us. We share it with all living things. How can the Crown just take it?*

The clarity to find an answer to the theft of lands and freedoms could not be found. Leo, an Ojibway, felt a strong kinship with Native groups and their leaders who struggled to save their people from the unrelenting tide of encroachment.

At the age of 24, Leo published his first short story *Tecumseh Speaks of Death*. It is a sensitive account of the thoughts and feelings the legendary Shawnee Chief Tecumseh may have had before going into a battle that ended his life at the age of 44. In hopes of securing a large tract of land for his people, Tecumseh fought alongside Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, commander of the British forces, against the American invasion of Upper Canada in the War of 1812. Tecumseh's dream of a Native homeland was forever lost. Leo stated,

*As my interest in horses grew, so did my interest in Chief Joseph, leader of the Nez Perce people, and the spotted horses they bred and raised.*



Leo went on to raise a beautiful Appaloosa filly that he called his Big Baby. He said,

*Perhaps Chief Joseph who suffered the loss of his beloved horses and homeland is smiling wherever he is, heaven I'm sure, at this spotted horse.*

The U.S. government waged war against Indians for decades. In 1877, the U.S. cavalry pursued the Nez Perce people, who embarked on a 1300-mile journey north to seek refuge in Canada. Only a few miles from the border, Chief Joseph and his people were forced to surrender.

For Leo, the past remained ever present. For the voices now still, we honour them by remembering.

### **Finding Truth**

*The afternoon moves*

*like a snail*

*first a breeze*

*wiggles through the curtains*

*then sunlight*

*bounces off the walls*

*and streaks*

*across the bookshelves*

*all lingers*

*slowing time.*

Leo's place provided a sense of calm. He would be pleased with that. His art hung throughout the rooms. On the wall-to-wall shelves, items personally significant to Leo were thoughtfully displayed: the smooth rocks he handpicked from the shores of Lake Superior, the wooden bird carving he rescued from a garbage bin and

lovingly glued back together, photographs of family, Gordon Lightfoot CDs. There were antlers on which he had etched intricately detailed pictures and carvings out of pipestone. The value he placed on his hundreds of books was evident in the way he gently took them off the shelf and the manner in which he turned each page. Yet, his books were not for the faint of heart. They deal with the destruction of Indigenous people since the arrival of Europeans on this continent.

Leo needed to know the Truth. In the residential school's history classes, Leo was told that Indians lived lives of sin, and they should be grateful to church and state for removing them from their heathen ways. Leo and his classmates were frequently referred to as savages who needed to be civilized. Leo, throughout his adult life, felt compelled to understand the devastating effects colonization had on Indigenous people. He stated,

*There can be no reconciliation without first knowing the Truth.*

Leo accepted that life could be unjust, but he could not accept that the brutalities towards and the inhumane treatment of Indigenous people had largely been omitted or suppressed from history.

Not wanting to miss an opportunity to read, Leo carried a book with him almost everywhere he went. Books were tucked into a brown faded leather satchel, nicknamed his "bookbag." For many years, he had a routine of reading government policies relating to Indigenous people and treaty documents at Library and Archives Canada. On the evening before his surgery to remove tumours from his bowels and liver, Leo packed his bookbag with *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (2013) by James Daschuk. That book stayed in his bag until Leo and his family made the decision to discontinue any further medical treatment. On his return home, when Leo pulled the book out of his bag, he said almost in disbelief, *"I haven't read a book in over a year"*.

Shortly after Leo's return home, he received a call from a dear friend, inviting him to participate in an exhibition with a group who called themselves 007 (from Ottawa, Ontario, a seven-member Indigenous artist collective). The show would

be called *It's Complicated* and held the summer of 2017, during Canada's "150<sup>th</sup> birthday". The exhibition title refers to a relationship in which Indigenous people continue to be affected by issues such as the lack of clean drinking water, substandard housing, high youth suicide rates, and land rights. This exhibition responds to Canada 150 through art from Indigenous perspectives. Leo, despite his declining health, did not hesitate in agreeing to provide submissions for the show.

Leo made a frequent statement about Canada's first prime minister.

*Macdonald's national dream was our nightmare.*

Macdonald's "dream" was to build a railroad that would run from coast to coast, opening up the lands to white settlers and ensuring colonial domination. The "nightmare" was that Macdonald, with the backing of his conservative government was intent on the control and removal of Indigenous people from their lands, stripping them of their basic rights and freedoms. By completing his last art pieces, Leo exposed a part of the past that had remained hidden for too long.

Within a generation, the Indigenous people of the Plains went from hunting buffalo to provide their families with food, shelter, and clothing to living on the verge of starvation. On reading Daschuk's book *Clearing the Plains*, Leo wanted to reveal Macdonald's deliberate efforts to keep the Indigenous people undernourished and prone to disease so they wouldn't threaten his plans for western expansion. Macdonald sanctioned the slaughter of buffalo to near extinction. He also withheld food promised in treaty agreements and supplied tainted food. Leo was unable to comprehend the depravity of this man.

*Listen, you won't find this truth in any history textbooks.*

Leo read a speech Macdonald made in the House of Commons on May 3, 1880, to justify his spending to the opposition. "In some instances, perhaps, the Indians have been fed when they might not have been in an extreme position of hunger or starvation...[I]t is by being rigid, even stingy, in the distribution of food and require absolute proof of starvation before distributing it" Leo continued his reading and came across the 1879 Annual Report from the Department of the Interior. The report states, "In a camp of 150 lodges of Blackfeet Indians young

men who were a few months before had been stout and hardy, reduced to perfect skeletons.” That image stayed with Leo. His graphite drawings, one framed with and abandoned teepee and the other a 25-foot-long scroll, depict the suffering of the Indigenous people of the Plains. These works, featured in the 007 exhibition, moved some to tears at the opening event on Saturday, June 17, 2017. Leo’s last public appearance was appreciated by all who attended the show.

Macdonald’s legacy casts a long dark shadow from the past onto the present. The wrongs done to Indigenous peoples need to be acknowledged. Leo hoped to shed light on the Truth. He felt that, in Truth, lay the hope of re-establishing positive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. A note was found on a table beside his bed after he passed on September 1, 2017.

*There is a truth dwelling deep within us, magnificent and beautiful, once found releases our souls to soar to their intended heights.*