

## **Et'sehch'i; The Traditional Dene Burial Practices**

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## Abstract

### Et'sehch'i: The Traditional Dene Burial Practice

Antoine Mountain

My research into Et'sehch'i, the Traditional Dene Burial Practices, is a comprehensive study into how smaller groups, clans, of our northern Dene understood and handled matters of funerals. The research focuses on the Dene community of Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope in the Northwest Territories of Canada, my home community. In these Pre-Contact times, there weren't any of the modern tools we are now familiar with. The dead were interred on outdoor stages, raised platforms.

The most important part of Et'sehch'i involved the matriarch or another Elder of the clan hand-picking individual youths to help keep the Community together. They kept together as a group, going around together, cutting wood for people, hauling water or ice and generally reinstalling joy into the People's lives. Another form of these coming-of-age ceremonies involved young girls becoming women.

The research involves the ways in which the Dene handled anything to do with major changes throughout our history. It was mandated by the Elders Council and Band Council of Fort Good Hope and followed a community protocol of respect for culturally sensitive material. These traditions, following ethical standards, account in good part for our survival from a time we call "When the World was New", from dinosaurs to today's computers.

**Keywords:** Dene Community, Burial Practice, Et'sehch'i, Ceremony, Funeral, Youth, Painting, Ceremonial Practice, Ways of Being

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## **Introduction: Charting the Journey**

Et'sehch'i, the Traditional Dene Burial Practices, is a cultural practice of respect for the dead that, in its most ceremonial aspects, helps bring the community together, while teaching our Dene Ways of Being, finding ways to relate to one another in meaningful ways and allows for healing to happen.

My research focuses on the Dene community, and how to strengthen today's Youth and develop a stronger Indigenous identity using cultural ceremonies like Et'sehch'i. I began my journey to highlight the talents of our Sahtu, Great Bear Lake Region, with the Government of the NWT's input, starting in 2008. The process has taken me deep enough into Dene culture to be considered a scholar-practitioner. A unique, first-hand connection to the land affords me a rare insight into an Indigenous perspective, thus a practitioner of our epistemology.

As a student of the PhD Program in Indigenous Studies, I have chosen the Knowledge Basket Dissertation Path B. The creative component of my dissertation consists of twenty-one paintings depicting Traditional Dene Burial Practices that, along with a supporting video, will be shown in the Art Gallery of Peterborough. A video of the art opening and the current written component help to support my research.

This project was possible thanks to the support of Elders Florence Barnaby, Joe Orlas, John Blanco Sr., John Cotchelly, John Louison Sr., John T'seleie, Lucy Jackson, Michel Lafferty, Thomas Manuel Sr., and Victorina Orlas.

### **A Note to the Reader**

As a note to the reader, this research into Et'sehch'i was originally mandated by the Elders Council and Band Council in my home community of Fort Good Hope, NWT. They wanted to eventually include these aspects of Indigenous Knowledge into our educational systems. Students of the future need to know the true meaning of Community.

The original intention of the Elders Council was to be aware of and be respectful of culturally sensitive material, which we have rigorously followed throughout this research. The meaning of Et'sehch'i in these traditional practices includes those involved with burials and even the coming-of-age, basically of teens of both sexes. Thus, all ethical guidelines, considerations and standards have been both stipulated and honored.

### **Acknowledgments: Gratitude for Community**

First of all, this work about Et'sehch'i, The Traditional Dene Burial Practices, would not have been possible without the permission of the community of Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope, and the support and wisdom of the Elders Florence Barnaby, Joe Orlias, John Blancho Sr., John Cotchelly, John Louison Sr., John T'seleie, Lucy Jackson, Michel Lafferty, Thomas Manuel Sr., Victorina Orlias.

All along the way, I've been grateful to the staff of our Indigenous PhD Studies at Trent University, for allowing major changes and the visuals, a set of twenty-one paintings that depict the ceremonials involved in Et'sehch'i, The Traditional Dene Burial Practices.

My Knowledge Basket, Rakeh Ohsho, Our Packsack, is now full of the new tools to allow me to take my place in our Elders Council at home in Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope.

Mahsi, Miigwetch and Nia:wen

## **Initial Inspiration**

During the past decades, our Youth has become disconnected from Dene tradition and our ways of life. Even today, most of the local Youth have lost a vital connection to their own relatives and Dene culture. Over two decades ago, we had a serious problem with the Youth acting out. In their frustration of being left out of Community, they were burning buildings in town. One irreplaceable one was our magnificent two-story Band Office Complex, which was completely razed to the ground. When the Northern Store also went up in flames, we adults met to see what could be done. At a meeting about the issue, we resolved to each in our way volunteer to set aside time to work with the Youth, and keep them involved in their Dene Ways of Being. Mine included doing murals to showcase the Arts and Dene culture.

As a part of this communal effort, I was approached by the Elders Council to make the subject of Et'sehch'i; The Traditional Dene Burial Practices, my research for Trent University's Indigenous PhD Studies. We want our Youth involved in helping out at funerals and to have a permanent living record of the meaning of Dene.

## **Navigating Academic requirements and Indigenous research**

Me and my oldest sister, Judy, were raised by our grandparents on both sides, giving us a rare insight into the world of former Dene times. My grandmother on my dad's side was born before the end of the Indian Wars, in 1889. People say that my grandmother on my mom's side was born even before that. My late sister said that 'Antoine has always been an Elder'. Yet cultural sensitivity is always a serious matter and requires protocols to be observed. For example, when I showed signs early on to be gifted with the Arts, my Shehulyieh, (Shares My Name, like a Dene relative), Antoine Abelon, sternly advised me that our Dene culture is 'not for sale', but if it is used as a teaching tool it is okay to do so. These ethical considerations are meant to be observed.

Another example of cultural sensitivity that came up in the research is that there was some culturally sensitive material that had to do with former practices within the community. Our Roman Catholic religion was not there before, when Et'sehch'i was in

practice. The process of our people being led into a different religious practice resulted in this dysfunctional situation that makes it very hard to include certain types of information for our students of the future.

As for my art, when I finished my first term of formal artistic training in Toronto, in the early Seventies I had done art shows with the Anishinabek artists of the time, including Norval Morrisseau and others. Upon my return to the North, I had to make a conscious decision not to do my Art in the more commercial, at the time, Wood Land style. I have always strived to render my talents into a unique combination of Dene culture and a more Western illustrative manner. I am sharing an Indigenous visual view of the world through my style of painting that, because of the use of color, goes all the way back to French Impressionism.

In practice, navigating Dene cultural protocols also involves no small measure of diplomacy. Luckily, I already had a lifetime of practice, in the household of leadership. My father was Chief of Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope, for 25 years. A sense of leadership and community duty has always been a hallmark in our family, and we were always cautioned not to pick sides on any issue, but to remind people of their responsibilities to the Dene Way of Life.

In addition, the two heads of the Elders Council let me know in no uncertain terms that even though a position of political leadership might make an Elder believe their place amongst those of deeper thought, this doesn't make the person a viable informant on the ceremonials of Et'sehch'i. We had at least one Elder who went through the older, truer version of the ceremonial in his teen years. But as he didn't want to be named, as a researcher I had to suggest that contributing as an anonymous source solved this problem.

Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope, has always been regarded in all of the North as a place of cultural and even political leadership. A community member even served as Premier for the North for a time. Of the five communities in the Sahtu our town is seen as being the strongest in speaking our Dene language the proper way. For a place of less than a thousand People, Radelie Koe has six different tribes, extending all the way

to the Rocky Mountains and to the Arctic Coast. The political leadership of Radelie Koe can be seen in its registration as a group hunting area within the Canadian Parliament since 1914, and now beginning towards self-government. With all the internal cultural diversity, we individually have very opposing views on how we should be living. Yet when it comes to a common future, we know how to put our differences aside towards a common goal. I have always been the type to hold to my own beliefs, but able to set them on hold to work with the People.

One of the remaining features of our recent past is the residential school traumas we all share. Throughout my research, I had to deal with a decidedly dysfunctional environment, even among close relatives. Yet the idea to feature Et'sehch'i for our future students is a strong enough goal to have made my research and PhD dissertation possible to its completion.

Another thing to consider is that there has always been a spiritual component missing in European understanding of the World and its possibilities. It is, at times, difficult to include something like spirituality within the academic world because it has not been acknowledged until lately.

As an Indigenous researcher, my writing reflects an Indigenous style. For more information about this style, please refer to Gregory Younging's book *Elements of Indigenous Style: A guide for writing by and about Indigenous peoples*. In this reference you will find this quote: "Indigenous authors have a different sense of what is important and significant. [...] Indigenous writing is about writing from the centre to the edge, to create a circle. We don't say things in a linear way. We have long sentences and we grocery-list things with lots of semicolons." (2018. p.21-22).

It is important to state that as a People we Dene are more accustomed to seeing what there is at issue. All of our teachings and traditions are oral. This is why the video for my End-of-PhD Art Show at the Art Gallery of Peterborough will give a more pictorial presentation on the results of my research.



## **Part I: Roots and Identity: The Calling of Et'sehch'i, Embracing a Prophetic Destiny**

### **Introduction**

This section shares my story as Dene and explains the events in my life that led me to this research on Et'sehch'i, the Traditional Dene Burial Practices. I explore the impacts of residential schools in our community, and how they fragmented our sense of belonging and community, changing our Ways of Being, and causing intergenerational trauma, creating a cultural battlefield that continues to be hard to navigate. I explain my experience with Et'sehch'i as a teenager, focusing on helping community members in their time of need. Finally, I share how my work with Youth on murals, my background in Arts and my experience with Et'sehch'i resulted in the Elder's Council directing me to point my research into Et'sehch'i, the Traditional Dene Burial Practices.

### **Ancestral Echoes: My Life Among the K'asho Got'ine Dene**

My journey in relation to the practice of Et'sehch'i, The Traditional Dene Burial Practices would have to be viewed from a truly Dene experience. As was with my generation I was born right on the land with only Dene being spoken at home. My father was the only one who spoke English. In point of fact, though, our older relatives already had direct contact with people from the outside, traders and missionaries, so many grandparents could not only speak a little English but even French.

My grandfather's brother, the late Maurice Mendo said that his generation did not go through what we did, as survivors of residential schools, but our older people could already see what was happening in our Dene world.

In the late 1950's and early Sixties, with the move into the communities for the residential school systems, two things were quite apparent. One was that people who had only lived by sharing food, supplies, and culture, now had to compete for what little work the town offered. The second was that you now had to go further up from the community for the essentials, especially for wood. These created problems and changes in cultural lifestyles that would turn the People into a more precarious life, from being proud and capable to having now a needy relation to the World.

Furthermore, one outstanding feature of being a residential school survivor in my experience, is that we each, in our own way, live with an ongoing feeling of simply having been left out and neglected, even from our own Dene Ways. Even upon our return home from residential schools our own relatives would criticize us for our lack of Dene skills, be they of language or what we needed to know of life on the land. Even having been selected to attend the elite Grandin College for my high school years, with its emphasis on academic excellence did not bring me any closer to my true Dene self. Residential school survivors only began to realize our Indigeneity after entering into our early adult years, going to Pow-Wows, sweat lodges and eventually moving back home to a hunting life (for more information about my personal experience please refer to my previous works *Bear Rock Mountain: The Life and Times of a Dene Residential School Survivor*, 2019 and *Child of Morning Star: Embers of an Ancient Dawn*, 2022).

There is intergenerational residential school trauma. Although my generation, now over seventy and older, were all born on the land we had to make concerted individual efforts to relearn our language. Younger members of our families had no such severe stigma, nor memories of severe physical and psychological torture at the hands of our zealous Roman Catholic priests and nuns.

The ensuing onslaught of intergenerational residential school trauma has made all northern Indigenous communities a cultural battlefield, between the modern and our traditional Dene past. When you consider the European traders and zealous missionaries stilted and self-serving view of our world, you also need to go directly to the People, especially our Elders, who yet retain the greater body of Indigenous

Knowledge to draw from. What I have personally found in just the decade or so of working with our local Elders Council in Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope, is that with each passing of these custodians of our cultural ways, we lose volumes of what we need to know.

My personal connection with this cultural practice of Et'sehch'i is as a lifetime member of the K'asho Got'ine Dene Band at Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope, NWT. My journey began in the fishing village of Deline in 2010, on the shores of the Sahtu, Great Bear Lake where I was doing a summer of work with the Youth, constructing murals for the community. An Elder, Joe Blindin Jr. would come in daily and tell our group about the four prophets of Deline: Etseo Ayha, Joseph Naedzo, Andre Andre and Joseph Bayha. Joe Blindin Jr. had quite a collection of information on the Dene prophet and related one particular fascinating story, of Etseo Ayha foretelling of the atomic bombs to be dropped on Japan to end WWII, beginning as uranium ore coming of the nearby Port Radium. A group of high-level government and military top leaders, including from then Indian Affairs, a US general, RCMP and interpreters came to visit the seer, wanting to know if the German army would attack the West. His answer was that the 'German bullet', meaning military would not reach our shores. After also being asked what he might want for such valuable information Etseo Ayha said he wanted 'two winters' supply of food for his People.

I first experienced Et'sehch'i and how our Ways of Being invariably connect back to community when, as a teenager, I and other Youth were asked to help out various bereaved families in their time of need. Without any in-depth input from the Elders on the ceremonial of these ways of respect for the dead, we were simply handed the tools to help bury the dead and expected to do so under any weather conditions, even when the ground was frozen solid in winter. We kept together as a group, busy going around doing things for people.

It was while working with the Youth in all of the Sahtu, Great Bear Lake Region, on murals to add meaning to our lives that I was directed by our local Elders Council to point my research into Et'sehch'i, the Traditional Dene Burial Practices. The Elders

noticed that we were quickly losing respect for one another. These Ways of Being and doing from our history are seen as a way of recalling the ways in which our Youth can take part in a renewal of our Dene culture.

The Elders Council knew of the great number of murals I had done for each of our five communities in the Sahtu, Great Bear Lake Region, beginning in 2008. I graduated with a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts from the Ontario College of Art & Design University in 2011 and have been a professional artist since the early Seventies, making me a necessary part of our visual output and local display.

It was actually only quite recently, after I had begun my Indigenous PhD Studies, that I realized that a prophetic destiny was leading me to this research.

## **Conclusion**

My journey with Et'sehch'i is deeply rooted in my personal experiences as Dene. From being born on the land to moving into communities and surviving the residential school system, to then helping as a teenager in Et'sehch'i, becoming a professional artist, and using my skills with our Youth to help them reconnect to their Dene selves. These experiences have shaped my path, and have led me to fulfill a prophetic destiny through this research.

The relocation to communities turned a collaborative community into a competitive one. It fragmented our sense of community and belonging, and it changed our Ways of Being. There is also intergenerational residential school trauma, which creates a cultural battlefield in the community that continues to be hard to navigate, causing a disconnect from our Dene traditions.

Our Elders have the knowledge we need to reconnect with our Dene selves, but as time goes by, we are losing them and the knowledge they carry. Through my research and artistic work, I aim to bridge the gap between the modern world and our traditions, honoring the wisdom of our Elders and preserving and renewing our Dene culture.

## **Part II: Practice and Praxis: Research and Revelation**

### **Introduction**

In this section, I explain the Elders Council directive to focus my research on Et'sehch'i due to the disconnect between Youth and Dene Ways of Being. I expand on the methodology I used in my research and the different authors that influenced my work. I offer insights about the need to return to an original interpretation of Indigeneity from the perspective of several Indigenous scholars. I explain the role ceremonies play in restoring our Indigenous traditions, how traditional teaching tools can help humanize research, and how Indigenous methodologies recognize the use of stories in research. I expand on my creative process for my art work and how it ties with Dene tradition. Finally, I share the Elders' response to the passing of Et'sehch'i to the Youth and the learnings it provides.

### **The Craft of Et'sehch'i: Tradition as Teacher**

I approached the development of the creative component and my apprenticeship by acknowledging the formal request of our Elders Council in Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope. Their request was based on a missing component of our present-day lack of reference to former times, when the more ceremonial aspects of Et'sehch'i served to keep our community together and intact. My overall methodology is an Indigenous, interactive and participatory community-based inductive approach.

The Medicine Wheel, an Indigenous teaching tool, helped me organize and visualize what we needed to see in our distant past. Using this framework, *Rakeh Oshu: Our Packsack* focused on the epistemology of change; *Goshene He: With Great Care*

focused on Methodology; *Ko Wineh: Around the Fire* focused on Axiology and land as pedagogy and *Neho Dayine: Your Spirit* focused on Ontology.

For her part, Margaret Kovach (2009) helped me realize the various meanings of an Indigenous methodology, and the use of stories and conversations as valid sources of knowledge. Much of our past, our languages, and personal histories prove Keith Basso's (1996) reference to the land itself as a living component, proof that we are tied in many ways to our lands.

When I first started with our Indigenous PhD Studies I immediately recognized that various Indigenous scholars shared their cultural alignment with my specific Indigenous practice as there are similarities between different Indigenous groups, like our shared view of how the world was created and the use of the Medicine Wheel.

In the case of Shawn Wilson (2008), for instance, I'd already used the Medicine Wheel to organize a third-year university course I taught at my alma mater, the Ontario College of Arts & Design University. Other teachers immediately recognized the change from problematic students they had in their classes.

The references made by Kulchyski, McCaskill and Newhouse (1999) of two of our Sahtu Elders, the Dene stateman, George Blondin and our local, Martha Rabesca made it a personal effort on my part to keep their word and examples alive. In fact, the former came right from the tiny fishing village of Deline, where my research had its roots.

I even found that Leanne Simpson's (2011) teachings and her concept of resurgence, reached all the way to my hometown. When the Youth held their own cultural conference, her name came up prominently.

An invaluable source for any work in education and community becomes possible, more alive with Linda Tuhawai Smith work (2013) on how to impart language into the community, and combine educational thoughts, even history, with Indigenous culture.

Our Indigenous world has always been an oral one. Indigenous oral culture is action-based, which means that there is something that has to go with it, some type of action. This oral tradition translated to my use of visuals for my creative component. Besides, an oral culture is one that is based on the land. So, to be able to speak our Indigenous language, I can already visualize how it would look in pictorial form. Speaking our Dene language fluently offered a rare insight into the lives of our Elders. To reach as far back into our cultural history, to the times when the world was new, made it possible to comply with the set of paintings for my End-of-PhD Art Show, held at the Art Gallery of Peterborough.

When I thought of how to put together this set of visuals I also had to come up with a way to do so. What would the paintings themselves look like and in what setting exactly?

I was born right on the land, but the details for Et'sehch'i, the Traditional Dene Burial Practices go back to when the Dene World was New, even to when the dinosaurs roamed the Earth. My late grandfather, Peter Mountain, Sr., also took a number of his final years to tell me about a time before any of our modern conveniences, before we had canvas, tea, flour and sugar, or any modern weapons or metal tools.

As a practitioner of our Indigenous cultural ways, I just lit up a braid of sweetgrass, with a prayer that the project would somehow come to mind. It took over 2 months of steady painting, often to four or five in the morning, but the sweetgrass opened up our ancient world to me. I could physically see what my canvasses needed to say. This was also a time of great melancholy, the earliest Dene in a mind wondering if their ways would survive to this day.

As I completed the last of the twenty-one paintings I was also made to realize that this was IT, nothing more to see. To say of visions, yes, aplenty, but no more pictures to behold and interpret. A great window to a time when we humans spoke a common language with animal relatives lost its light.

As an artist with extra Vision, I have had times like these before, when you dare not even breathe, lest it leaves you behind. But not like this, and for such a rare, afforded provenance. Such is the power of Dene prophecy.

In its way, my research is about Community. From a time when there was almost no regular contact with the outside world. Few people even had radios, much less television. Each family belonged to a different clan. Camping and trapping areas followed the same basic pattern, with visitors from our neighbours from Kabami Tue, Colville Lake.

We only heard and spoke Dene at home. The value of a person had little to do with anything related to paper. My mother must have picked up something valuable and other-worldly from her dad, a noted Medicine Man. At the time the things she had to say sounded a little strange to our everyday lives. She always wanted us to keep the place clean and go out of our way to especially wash the dishes right away. She spoke of 'visitors coming'. When I think of it now, it matches how other relatives speaking of the Spirits, only wanting to go to a clean place.

Little wonder indeed that a good number of our family, mom, two sisters and myself became professional artists.

All of these memories were my company whilst working on my dissertation, and I took great pains to render my visuals in such a way that the related stories will make sense to future generations of Dene students.

### **Relearning: Reinterpretation of Indigeneity**

The profound significance of the practice of Et'sehch'i within my Dene cultural context and community actually involves a host of Indigenous scholars like Leroy Little Bear (2000), Willie Ermine (1995), Mark Dockstator (1996), Shawn Wilson (2008), Margaret Kovach (2009), Keith Basso (1996), Kulchyski, McCaskill & Newhouse (1999), Leanne Simpson (2011) and Linda Tuhawai Smith (2013); who have each in their way highlighted the need to go back to an original interpretation of Indigeneity itself.



At the very roots of my understanding of Indigeneity are the teachings of Leroy Little Bear and Willie Ermine. Leroy Little Bear (2000), in particular, sees our ceremonials, like Et'sehch'i, as a form of renewal. A continuing way to renew and restore our Indigenous traditions is always central to the spirals of core knowledge that keep our Ways of Being intact. We need to keep reminding ourselves of our responsibility to carry on our traditions (Leroy Little Bear, 2000; Willie Ermine, 1995).

A singular source for any Indigenous research has to begin with Mark Dockstator's (1996) contention that we have to go beyond our written context to pre-contact times when we shared a common language with our animal relatives. I would favour his approach (1996), that we need to intellectually remove ourselves from a continued and needless reliance on the paper trail left to us.

Put into practice, I would have to agree with Mark Dockstator (1996) that Indigenous culture does not simply go back to Contact to read through volumes of written material to truly appreciate the complexities of just how individual Indigenous societies succeeded to not only survive but flourish for tens of thousands of years.

Shawn Wilson's (2008) reference and usage of our traditional teaching tool, the Medicine Wheel is what struck me at first when I began with our Indigenous PhD Studies as a foundation to build on. Its related concentric circles, beginning with the individual, family, community, and outside world, are a unique way to humanize these studies. One is made to feel more than just an insignificant part of an intellectual whole.

Margaret Kovach's (2009) understanding of Indigenous methodologies especially adds to how to appreciate and use their meanings and purposes, and how stories and dialogue are a valid way to do research.

In terms of related materials available, I have always been struck by people like Keith Basso (1996) pointing to the land itself as a marker, if you will, of individual tribes living within. The Apache he mentions are related to our northern Dene. We also believe that individual landmarks retain a human enough memory for us to regard them as a vocalizing relation. In my home of Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope and Kabami Tue,

Colville Lake are four such places, which the Elders say 'talk to each other' every day for news and the future of our Peoples.

Our Sahtu, Great Bear Lake Region, also features a landmark, Bear Rock Mountain, central to all of our Dene Nation. This spot is where Yamoria, He Who Walks the Universe, caught up with three giant beavers who were terrorizing the People. He killed the three and pegged their hides to Bear Rock Mountain, still visible today. Even visible to Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope, is Yamoga Fieh, where our culture hero, Yamoria's warrior brother, Yamoga, fought in battle with another giant, Ko Hehdin, Without Fire, so tough he went around barefoot, even in the coldest of winters.

I also find Kulchyski, McCaskill and Newhouse (1999), to be an immediate reference for how the teachings of our ancestors and relatives keep our Dene ways intact, teaching how to live in harmony among each other.

One person, Martha Rabisca, was one with whom I had a lot of contact. Her son Gene was one of my hunting partners. She especially admonished us to always be of a merry, pleasant frame of mind, especially when traveling on the land with others. "You don't know what kind of day the other person is having, and that person might save your life someday, so watch what you say around people", she would advise us.

Leanne Simpson's (2011) writings had more than one immediate impact on my research at home. There was one conference the Youth at home asked me to help out with. At first, I thought they needed help to organize the conference they had in mind. But when I met with them, they already had it all set up, with themes, speakers, and events all at the ready. They said they had some contact and experience with Leanne Simpson and only wanted me to do a small mural to help signify their activities.

Finally, I would always have to go back to how Indigenous scholars like Linda Tuhawai Smith link meaningful and workable ways to tie Indigenous Knowledge to Community. With Community-based research and related activities it is often difficult to know how to take ethical standards to the People to stay a futuristic course.

## **Voices of the Elders: Guiding the Research Journey and Teachings of Et'sehch'i**

Right from the start of my Indigenous PhD Studies, I have been granted and enjoyed the support of our K'asho Gotine Band and Community Council. Over the past few years, I've also worked with our Elders Council, at their direction. I have personally found that it is one thing to volunteer your time to do art projects with our young people, but quite another for people to know that we are making serious inroads to awaken our Dene selves.

The Elders, especially, find new vigour in their Traditional Knowledge, knowing that Et'sehch'i will long live on with students of the future. One caution we have been aware of, though, is that some of the activities from our past can easily be misunderstood and may even pose a threat to young people who think that former realities can be carried out without regard for proper protocols involved. Knowing this we have held to caution, yet keeping to the basic idea of Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope, as a bastion of care for one another.

One other thing I have noticed is that individual members of the Elders always feel grateful to be acknowledged for this contribution to our future. I spent a week living with the last remaining of our Elders, Joe Orlias, to go through the entire traditional Et'sehch'i ceremonial. He gave a personal rendition of serving the Community in this manner, explaining in great detail that as a teen, this was something entirely new. Young people were more or less involved in daily camp life chores, cutting wood or hauling water and ice. His eyes fairly shone as he afforded me a rare insight into the spiritual powers pillaring Dene culture.

Through this research, I noticed that when burials are done today, it is largely left up to the bereaved family to do all of the work required. In former times, each of the members of the burial detail were handpicked and even became members of the bereaved family. Each member, too, were beholding to each other and were called upon even before actual family members and close relatives.

Finding out about the way people respected those who lost a relative, what went on in those times of mourning and most importantly, the meaning of Community has shone a light on the way we should conduct ourselves.

## **Conclusion**

The disconnect between our Youth and our Dene Ways of Being resulted in the Elders Council directing me to focus my research on Et'sehch'i, as their ceremonial aspects helped maintain our community together. Ceremonies can be an opportunity for the renewal and restoration of our Indigenous traditions, and we need to remember our shared responsibility to carry them on (Little Bear, 2000; Ermine, 1995).

My research was guided by an Indigenous, interactive and participatory community-based inductive approach. Traditional teaching tools like the Medicine Wheel, allow one to go beyond the intellectual aspect of research. Rooting our work in self, family, community and the world, humanizes it (Wilson, 2008). The Medicine Wheel helped me organize my research and what needed to be seen from our past. We also need to lean into Indigenous methodologies. Margaret Kovach (2009), for example, recognizes the use of stories and conversations in research, and after all, Dene teachings and traditions are oral. Finally, Linda Tuhawai Smith's (2013) teachings provided insights into how to combine educational thoughts with Indigenous culture.

For the creative component of this research, I chose to do paintings. The Dene tradition is oral and action-based. When I speak my language, I can already visualize how it would look in pictorial form. Thus, my oral tradition translated to my use of visuals for my creative component. To start, as a practitioner of our Indigenous cultural ways, I lit up a braid of sweetgrass, with a prayer that the project would come to mind. The sweetgrass opened up our ancient world to me and I could physically see what my canvasses needed to say. After two months, I painted twenty-one paintings in such a way that the related stories would make sense to future generations of Dene students.

Elders in our community feel invigorated and relieved that Et'sehch'i will be passed on to our students. They also feel grateful to be acknowledged for their

contribution. However, teaching Et'sehch'i to Youth requires caution and underlining proper protocols, as there might be certain aspects of the teachings that might be misunderstood as they don't align with the present reality.

Learning about Et'sehch'i, how people behaved during the death of a community member, the respect they give to the grieving family, and the process of mourning teaches us the meaning of community and how to properly conduct ourselves.

### **Part III: Contributions and Community, Et'sehch'i's Contribution to the Human Experience**

#### **Introduction**

In this section, I expand on Et'sehch'i's role in reconnecting Youth with Dene tradition and preserving knowledge that is at risk of being lost as our Elders age. I share how Educational institutions can play a pivotal role in spreading these teachings. Finally, I explain the importance of involving Youth in art and how it can be a conduit for cultural connection, knowledge preservation, healing and recognition.

#### **Bridging Generations: Cultural Revival through Art and Educational Integration**

Our Youth has become disconnected from Dene tradition and ways of life. Through cultural practices like Et'sehch'i, Indigenous Youth can reconnect with their Dene values, knowledge, and self while also preserving knowledge that could be lost as our Elders grow older.

Working with Youth on murals, I found that they actually spoke our Dene language quite well, without the flattened-out accents you hear when others try our

complicated wording. I was able to bridge the gap, to take these younger ones back to the days of life on the land, as they had no first-hand knowledge. In particular, they got to hear about the lives of their own immediate family members. When a parent passes on, for instance, they were heartened to hear that they don't go very far, most often to their favourite family camps on the land.

There are many ways in which these references to the past can be passed along artistically. Many of our Youth are talented in one creative way or another. Our Elders feel that much of the meaning of being Dene has been lost in the Youth, that they are strangers to their own culture. Outside teachers to our community are seen as baby-sitters for our children. In Dene culture, the Elders Council holds the overall power over the community, even having the authority to suggest to the RCMP that a particular person be banned for serious damage to our society.

Through it all, I would have to say that the most profound significance of Et'sehch'i within my cultural context is to help institute our Ways of Being in the grasp of our children of the future. Too often they fail to find their place in an unacknowledged future, not knowing enough of their Dene selves to escape a dysfunctional present.

The struggle with our Youth continues to this day, but we all have noticed that with the heightened attention we have given them, we now have banners –that acknowledge awards, and Youth accomplishments– festooning our local school, testament to the regard young people now get. We also have a person on Band staff specifically involved in physical activities for the Youth, there are Dene language classes, and even youngsters starting to learn drumming from the age of seven.

The truth is that Council members are aging and steadily dwindling, but now that the research is done, we are well on our way to including these memories of the past in alignment with present realities –some of the things of the practice worked at the time but don't make sense today–. One thing that remained in our Elders' memory was the need to save what we could of our former ways, including ceremonials like Et'sehch'i.

It took me a few years to realize that I had been 'appointed', if you will, into the ways of Dene Prophecy. The Dene prophet Etseo Ayha was one who had been given the divine gift of foretelling the future. Amongst his many looks into the future of our Dene world, one in particular stands out. He foretold the use of uranium ore that was taken out of our Sahtu, Great Bear Lake Region and used to drop the two atomic bombs dropped on Japan to end World War Two. For the purposes of my research I found myself a part of one of this wise seer's visions, that the roots of our culture would find their way into the educational system.

During my work with our Elders Council, Thomas Manuel told me that I am 'keeping the words of our Dene prophet Etseo Ayha alive, for the children in our schools'. As an Elder now I can appreciate the value of educational institutions like Trent, which in particular still leads the way forward into the experience of an Indigenous World. I am overjoyed that Trent University now has this Knowledge Basket way to bring our various Indigenous cultures to the World's attention.

## **Legacy and Renewal**

By its nature, art is an inherently healing practice. But also, it can be a form of recognition. For example, an individual tombstone recognizes visually, something from the past, the value of a former time. A few years ago, I had the thought to place a better, headstone marker on my late-grandmother's grave. My neighbour here in Peterborough works in stone, so I bought the Carrera marble headstone from him and sent it North by truck to Inuvik. Before the annual Great Northern Arts Festival began that July I talked it over with one of the Inuit carvers from Nunavut. With no local place that far north to do so, I asked him how I could possibly have the marker ready to place at my grandmother's grave.

"Well, I work in stone, too", he said "and I can put whatever you want on the headstone you have".

With that settled I also wanted to have an inscription in Dene, something our T'seduweh, ancestors, would say and do at the passing of an Elder. I have three sisters

who do the simultaneous translation, the way they do at the United Nations. One of them, Lucy Ann, advised me that it would be best to call some Elders at home to get their input. A few days later, I got back to her with the closest I thought would honour our grandmother. To Lucy Ann's professional self, it seemed there was still something missing from the wording. She suggested I contact our oldest sister, Judy, to hear what she had to say. Eventually we came out with what satisfied the lead Elder, who turned out to be one of the co-leaders of our Elders Council. What we now had was the phrase, 'T'sdeuwe Beragodehwe', the meaning being that upon the passing of the Elder, other deceased relatives meet her to plan where exactly she would fit into the Next World.

Individual stories like this, highlight what my research is all about, that it is not just some distant relative that lived there in a former time. It's our own relatives, that is what connection is all about.

I believe art is a sign of a healthy community and I have done my part, almost all voluntarily, to remind the People of our culture. Many People tell me that the murals I've done over the years just give them a good feeling about being Dene and being from a place like ours.

Even in a small town, everything involves collaboration to some extent. When I wanted to do a Cancer Victims Memorial Mural I had to know some of the details of this particular epidemic which struck our home. I broached the subject to our local historians, the husband wife team of George and Florence Barnaby. The latter had the dreaded disease at the time. They first carefully explained to me how everyone in Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope, are related. They then presented me with the individual names of each community member who had passed from Cancer, numbering over fifty and going back almost a quarter of a century. Many community members were grateful that at least their relatives were being remembered in this public format. I spent a summer there in 2010. One Elder in particular, Joe Blondin, Jr, took great pains to let me know of how Etseo Ayha's words affected the history of the place and the rest of the North. A member of our Elders Council let me know that what I've already done to further these teachings will live on in our school.



In the small Dene community like our Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope, we are quite isolated, even from the rest of the North. A good part of this is intentional. We have the best moose-hunting country and most of the Youth have no intention of living anywhere else. With no driveable roads going in, all of the groceries and supplies have to be flown in, making for a very high cost of living. There is also a continuing battle to keep bootleggers and drug-dealers from further harm to the People.

In a largely dysfunctional environment, even my research for Et'sehch'i has been an uphill battle. Yet we Dene persevere. Over the years we now have a solid body of sobriety within and do our level best to keep the Youth, at least, safe. The Elders Council saw the potential for the community to know about our former way of life. One issue they were very concerned about was the lack of social cohesion we had before.

All of our teachings and traditions are oral. We grew up listening to the stories and legends from our past. Especially revered are the prophecies from recognized seers like Etseo Ayha of Deline. A good number of what this man had to impart of the future have already come to pass.

## **Conclusion**

The modern generation has no first-hand information about living on the land, and they struggle to find their place and feel like they belong. Et'sehch'i helps bridge the gap through references to the past; it allows Youth to reconnect with their Dene self, learn about their family members and where they go when they die. Et'sehch'i includes memories from the past and tries to save our former ways, preserving knowledge that could be lost as our Elders grow older. Educational institutions can play a pivotal role in sharing these teachings.

Our Youth is creative and talented in the arts. Making art about Et'sehch'i helps me share our former way of being with the community. Art is a sign of a healthy community and a healing practice in itself, it can also be a way of recognition. Recognition of the past, the individual stories, the importance of collaboration and community.

## **Conclusion: Returning Home, A Journey of Growth and Understanding**

A lack of social cohesion in our community inspired this research about Et'sehch'i: The Traditional Dene Burial Practices. When I was first directed to aim and involve my Indigenous PhD Studies in ways to get young people to help out in times of funerals, I thought this to be a pretty straightforward task. It was, but it also opened up the vast scope of what Community really means.

Working with the Elders has been a very rewarding personal experience. My profound personal journey took me from being a student to being now regarded as an Elder and Knowledge Holder amongst our Mountain Dene at home, carrying on the prophecies of Etseo Ayha and others. The Elders speak of a 'fork in the road' of one's life. Most choose the easier one, which continues on to old age and passing. A real Dene Elder is one who chooses to stop and help others along the way. The Youth especially are grateful to know more about their own personal Dene selves, their family and relatives. They are eager to find out for themselves what even the school has not given them, a direct connection to Dene culture and history.

Along the way I have learned patience, the most elusive of traits for a successful artist. Too often we assume that a personal statement is all the World needs from you. When you add the discipline to go with patience your expressions take on a worldwide message.

As time goes by, I can also learn to appreciate what my grandparents saw and nurtured within me. My grandfather, Peter Mountain, Sr, especially groomed me for

what, at the time, I thought to be an impossible task. This man knew what I wanted to do with my life long before I did. He said that to do anything for your People you need to go far, far from home:

As you become involved in your work you will find yourself coming back, closer to home. Your relatives are the only ones who can take you back to what you remember as a child.

You will then find a set of tracks you've never seen before, grandson.

Those are the ones you made just learning to walk.

They will take You the rest of the way Home.

To our modern ears these instructions seem cryptic, poetic thoughts from a time long gone. He also took great pains in the last four years of his life to tell me of the times before anything we now have. Before the days of canvas, tea, flour and sugar, even new weapons and tools, the way our Dene Peoples lived was so close to nature that we even spoke a common language with our Animal Relatives. All of his teachings came in handy as I worked on the set of twenty-one paintings for my End-of-PhD Art Show.

In their own way, each of the Elders in the Elders Council is a Knowledge Holder. One especially, Joe Orlias, is the last of our People to have direct experience in the ceremonial itself. I spent two weeks living in his home, as he recounted his experiences with Et'sehch'i. For him it was a magical time, when a group of his teenage friends were called upon for this community service. Other knowledge Holders, in particular Thomas Manuel still wants to expand upon research into our trade routes, all the way into the Arctic Ocean.

A number of years ago when I worked in our regional neighboring Tulita my granduncle, the late-Maurice Mendo, told a group of us artists that in his day the shadow of the residential schools was just not there. Still living on the land year-round, the People did have a hard life, but happily kept themselves busy. But after the move was made to town, there were not enough paying jobs to go around. Trips out to get burning wood were further out, costing more gas. People began to get lazy and abused alcohol and treated each other different. I have had to deal with a good deal of apathy

whilst doing the research for this Indigenous PhD Studies, so I can only imagine what the other Elders were trying to hold onto, our older and necessary way of keeping the community intact.

Now done, these preserved former traditional practices can help our local school find ways to help out in times of funerals, making their students available to meaningfully participate, providing the tools at hand, shovels, ropes, etc. As I mentioned before, our Youth are able to speak their language well enough, and they also contribute to the community, knowing how to hunt and sew. But it takes a person with the extra effort to get them to appreciate their own culture, basically, that is what it is. Otherwise, they just feel like they don't belong. And they shut themselves off.

The Elders Council is satisfied with the approach and work I've done to highlight their memories of the past and understanding of Dene culture. All of our Elders are now over eighty, knowing that their words need to be remembered in one way or another. One, my uncle Thomas Manuel, now over 90, especially wants our stories and culture to be carried forth. Others like him take the time to impart their wisdoms, and what makes this research so valuable is that all agree that we need to have our traditional knowledge incorporated into our school systems.

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## **Appendices: Additional Materials for In-depth Exploration**

### **Artistic Expressions: Visualizing Dene Knowledge**

For the visual presentation of my research, we settled on a total of twenty-one paintings to be presented at an End-of-PhD Art Show. One of my teachers from my alma mater, the Ontario College of Art & Design U, Bonnie Devine, agreed to act as my Arts advisor. She already had a show at the Art Gallery of Peterborough and they welcomed the idea of my event there.

It brings me great faith and hope that other students will participate in the new Indigenous Knowledge Basket approach.

**Paintings from the Et'sehch'i; Traditional Dene Burial Practices Exhibition at the  
Art Gallery of Peterborough**

1.	Koho Dayineh; Soul of Fire	(20x24")	Before
2.	K'ait'uwe Mileh	(20x24")	"
3.	Grandma's Gifted Hide Scraper	(24x30")	"
4.	Tahso, Trickster!	(20x20")	"
5.	The Ehch'ineh Teweh	(22x28")	"
6.	Making Ehch'ineh	(20x24")	During
7.	Ehch'ineh Help	(22x28")	"
8.	The Ehch'ineh Shout!	(20x30")	"
9.	Mehkoih Musings	(20x24")	"
10.	Eagle, Bear and Wolf	(22x28")	"
11.	Dehw'ie Days	(20x24")	"
12.	The Waking Dream	(18x24")	"
13.	Her Favourite Patch	(18x24")	"
14.	Her Gohseh Mileh	(20x24")	"
15.	His Last Daht'o	(22x28")	"
16.	Grizzly Bear Road	(20x24")	"
17.	The Ghost Parade	(24x30")	"
18.	Ready to Smoke	(20x24")	Today
19.	The Olde Style	(22x28")	"
20.	Raining Moon	(18x24")	"
21.	Koghats'ededi, Feeding the Fire	(22x28")	"



1. Antoine Mountain, Koho Dayineh; Soul of Fire, 2023, acrylic on canvas



## **Koho Dayineh, Soul of Fire**

### **.. All must know Ko ..**

In a cold, unforgiving north, besides the need for food and warm clothing, the very first lessons for children involved fire.

Eldest daughter, herself yet a child, listens intently as amah, mother explains the real meaning of Fire. An uncle who just happened to be passing by, stands at the old-style teepee's entrance, to add a few thoughts, if needed. He's always interested in what his favourite niece is up to. He sees her watching over her younger brother even now, always an arm around. 'That one li'l guy', thought Ehdewe, Uncle, 'always wants to make his little carvings fight, but he loves wrestling not'.

Before the arrival of trade goods like canvas shelters were made of whatever the local camp spots had to offer. High in the mountains, where no birch grew, the larger spruce bark was just as carefully stripped from trees in Spring, when the sap was still running, keeping it from drying up. It made for a solid, rainproof permanent dwelling, banked up with snow, ever warm and out of wintry winds. The smooth inner bark caught firelight for a bright, cheerful interior.

He recalled that his aunt was the one who first taught him about Ko, when he was about as small as these here. At first it was puzzling when she said that it was 'the air which makes the warmth come alive'. Now, after a lifetime on the land, he knows to always keep some space in between the wood, so it doesn't choke up from lack of air. Spotting him there the excited little one feels like asking him questions, questions, right away!

Ama now mentions the ts'iduwe, ancestors, to her children. These relatives, now long gone, come back to cook your food, keep you warm and even keep you company. Over her shoulders she wears a caribou hide cloak, hair still on, to ward off the evening's chill. The two opposite sit on theirs, which will also serve as a warm bedtime mat.

Holding an aromatic birchbark bowl of boiled moose meat, she explains that ko makes different kinds of noises, some telling of a successful hunt... or one like right now a high-pitched whistled squeak.

'The ts'iduwe, Old Ones are hungry', she simply says as she takes and puts some of the food to the fire. 'We call it Feeding the Fire', Uncle quietly offers. As she gazes long, lovingly into the flames mother, also has the feeling her daughter will in time learn the real Soul of Ko.

Early memories of just such a life make this probably the most peaceful of my experiences with this suite of painted works. My generation of Dene were pretty well all born right on the land.

The enclosed warmth of teepee life mingles with close relatives near... and hazy hues of the past, all the way to the far-off high country. The Mountain Dene are naturally of a world apart, in its way separate from our usual worldly cares and woes.

To help keep it alive is an education in itself.



2. Antoine Mountain, K'ait'uwe Mileh, 2023, acrylic on canvas

## **K'aiit'uwe Mileh**

### **.. Survival was brutal ..**

Our People had to know their world inside out to be able to make it to the next day. The fact that we have been around for well over ten thousands of years, speaks to the fact that the Dene even enjoyed their times of luxury.

The coldest and most unforgiving of any lands on the Earth is one which demands you know what you're doing.

Before the time of gill nets and fiberglass canoes the People still had to make use of a country mainly covered by water. When out on the land you would know the good fish lakes and sheltered places along the flowing waters. At least then you'd be able to secure enough food to stay alive and to store up for the coming colder seasons.

Man and son are on top of the creek bank, stretching out a new k'ai t'uwe mileh, willow bark net. Long durable strands were stripped from the supple willow, in Spring when the sap is running, easier to produce enough lengths to weave a sizeable and tough net. These older kinds had to be kept wet or at least out of direct sunlight, so as not to dry out, becoming useless in water. Stored underground under cool layers of moss would be one way to do so.

Mother and daughters are testing older nets to make sure they are still usable. Most just need a little soaking, with gohsheneh, loving care. The tiny girl beside her loves her bubbles! The family's birchbark canoe awaits their work, to eventually harvest whitefish and grayling, maybe even coney from this spot. A camp was usually set where the water made an eddy, for easier fishing.

Mom is deep in thought, of her first husband drowned in an accident on this very creek, his body never found. Her moments of dread also tell her to face this new day, in a normal manner, with others, especially for her tiny one right here. None would miss a tear or two. Anyway, it was her other, older girl, from the man then, who only wanted to come here for the Spring, nowhere else. Her late father was he who built the canoe. He

loved to cook his grayling to an open fire. To Little Girl, the family birchbark canoe always kind of looks like a fish! She loves to just pet it.

Over the coming summers bales and bales of dry fish are made, for the long, frigid winter. The dry fish racks are kept full under the Sa Ra-ahyile, Midnight Sun. An older teepee, its caribou hide cover all patches by now, smokes the dry fish. Fish pits, too, were dug out of the banks, right down to the permafrost, to store whole gutted 'stickfish', for dog feed.

As a work of Art, this painting is intentionally slightly removed from an outright illustration, as is this entire suite of works. Although it has its own tales to tell, the colour scheme, from a pinkish magenta, lends an air of mystery. The two men working on top are almost part of the background scenery, even though they get the direct light.

The true reveal, though, are the three, mother and daughters at shadowed bottom.

All in a world of their own in their shades of dark

To Magical,

Including the birchbark canoe.



3. Antoine Mountain, Grandma's Gifted Hide Scraper, 2023, acrylic on canvas

## **Grandma's Gifted Hide-Scraper**

### **.. The aroma was stupendous! ..**

In a time when people had to do everything for themselves, they also had to start off their training quite early.

One of the very major tasks at hand on the land was hide tanning. Teepee poles were usually set up to mark the spot where this work would be done, usually a little way from all else. You certainly didn't want the camp dogs to disturb your chores.

A hole was dug in the center of the structure, with sticks coming out of it, to keep the moose or caribou hide from getting too close to the hot coals.

Another important job to tan hides was to go out of camp to select some shingerih, older rotten wood, from trees that had fallen or simply grown too old. Just the right kind of spruce would impart the heavenly smoky smell of the finished product. The completed hide would then be said to be of 'Dene Gold'. Too a bag of moose brains was kept stored away in a cool spot, for the tanning process itself.

Here we see a grandmother passing along one of the most important tools to her granddaughter, a curved metal scraper, to help with the laborious jobs a lifetime ahead. Other tools used started from a large butcher knife, to take all of the hair off the tough hide. Having tried to do some of the tanning myself all I know is that it's a lot of work, getting right into every muscle in your body.

Even upon ending the tanning teepee, the young child would be overwhelmed by the majesty of the work ahead! From watching her elders at work, she realizes her childish games are now coming to an end, with this new adventure of tanning.



4. Antoine Mountain, Tahsoh, Trickster!, 2023, acrylic on canvas



## **Tahsoh, Trickster!**

### **.. He said they are the Boss ..**

This one bird, raven, is a good part of my story.

My grandfather, Peter Mountain, Sr. originally came from the Yukon. Like others in my hometown of Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope, he traveled over the mountains and made a home further east. Amongst the more Western tribes, Tahsoh is big medicine. Raven is even one of the two major clans, along with Wolf.

He always told me that tahsoh, raven, is the 'boss of this land'. 'Tahsoh is always around with us, summer and winter. One tough bird, to survive out there, nothing moving, 40 below, in the open, all winter. Tahsoh has a big job to do, cleaning up wherever there is a mess. He's the boss.'

He also told me to watch out for Tahsoh's feathers. "If You see one on the ground, just laying around, take it and put it somewhere out of sight, so tahsoh can't see it. This bird does not like to see its feather just laying around'.

Every time I left home for the winter, I would take a long, all-day walk, just to beath in the land one more day. Tahsoh would always be right there, either on a nearby tree or right on a log, squawking away and telling me all the things I should keep in mind, same way as my late grandfather would.

In the summer of 2021, tahsoh were all around my old house as I painted two murals for this PhD dissertation and one for the Sahtu Land and Water Board. When I put one of the ravens in a central spot for one of the large pictures, the entire flock sitting up in the birch trees outside my cabin raised such a fuss, as if they were overjoyed to be included.

Since then, one way or another, I've started to realize the power of Tahsoh, raven!

Most times it just comes across as a lot of quirky dribbling and such, but after a while, you get this feeling there is a lot more going on with this trickster than what appears so comical.

If there are any who might know how to harness the power of the stars, Tahsoh would have to be one.

Too, there are many stories in the Legends of Tahsoh. One hold that this bird was very colorful When the World was New, but because of his foolish ways, he's now all black but yet very different from others.

These and other Spirits are said to be a part of Et'sehch'i, the Traditional Dene Burial Practices.



5. Antoine Mountain, The Ehch'ineh Teweh, 2023, acrylic on canvas

## **The Ehch'ineh Teweh .. of such Mystery! ..**

As evening falls, the usual time for winter stories, a group of young boys has been summoned to hear the tales of this ancient burial cane, the Ehtch'ineh Teweh, carried by members of the burial detail.

An elder has been assigned the duty of telling these lads what little is known of this ceremonial object. Its history goes so far back into northern Dene history that, like some older words and phrases are now seldom used, nor known the true meanings of.

In the warmth of the caribou-hide teepee she now holds the cane before her, as if asking questions of the relatives known to be present at such times within the fire ever lit. Her talk this evening is about the importance of the dead, those who took their turn to show the people the skills needed to live in this frozen country.

She also reminds the Youth that should they be chosen to carry forth their part in the upcoming funeral they must not stray from reminders of the meaning of Et'sehch'i, the upcoming funeral. So shrouded in mystery are her words, that few others ever know the entirety of these ways.

Some simple words, though, remain; 'Don't compare yourself to others, for they may do many more things well, but you and only you can truly be yourself and know the meaning of your life'... and 'Never feel sorry for yourself, for then you will be of no use to anyone'.

Deaths were actually few and far between, the People knowing their world of survival so well. Even the ones who finally perished of old age, lived much longer than at present.

For the time being these children of the Arctic need to know of their roles in these important times. Camps were spread out all the way to the far ocean's shores, so runners had to be sent with word to gather, to send the departed back to the ancestors.

Pictorially, right about this same time, the Italian Renaissance began, with the great Michelangelo beginning his lifelong bargaining with the Popes for commissioned works. His first of eight pontiffs began with making plans for Julius II's elaborate tomb, of which the Dying Slave seen in shadows, was one of the lone survivors

To give these suites of paintings a bit of breadth, some of the figures here spring forth from such Grecian/Roman artistic origins.

Extraordinary times touch such fantasy.



6. Antoine Mountain, Making Ehch'ineh, 2023, acrylic on canvas

## **Making Ehtchi'ineh**

### **.. Burial duty was a serious job ..**

People were more likely to die of old age, but accidents did happen in such a cruel world.

At the time of a death, life still had to go on, with more work than anything to do. It usually fell to the elders in the aggrieved, mourning family to handpick the ones they wanted to take care of the burial of their relative.

One major consideration involved the Ehtchi'neh Teweh, a special cane meant for just this one occasion. It was simply a stick, usually from a small spruce tree, carved to a sharp point at one end. The person selected to be a member of the small burial party always carried his cane, as a sign of his authority.

When not busy with all the myriad community-related tasks at hand to take the Peoples' minds off their sorrow, the person could manage to catch a little bit of rest. While still standing, he would try to catch a brief nap, but with the sharpened end of the Ehtchi'ineh Teweh right to his forehead, he would be wide awake in an instant, to carry on his duties.

In this painting we see an elderly matriarch about to hand off such a burial cane to one of the young men carefully selected to act on the family's behalf. Behind her, her husband waits, a handful of other such sticks in front of him. Sitting at the front of the lodge is another young person, waiting to be summoned.

These traditional Dene burial practices, Et'sehch'i, proved an abiding link with ancestral Ways of Knowing. As history would have it, the advent of Christianity would eventually mean an irreparable loss of some of this respect for the dead and all relatives in general.

Yet, in these times of peril,  
the World is looking to these Indigenous beliefs and ways.



7. Antoine Mountain, Ehch'ineh Help, 2023, acrylic on canvas



## **Ehch'ineh Help**

### **.. They were a busy bunch! ..**

The young able-bodied men who formed the Et'sehch'i burial party were kept on their toes.

For the week of the funeral itself, these lads got very little sleep. Part of their duties included what you see here, all scurrying about like wild goslings, cutting wood for those in need and hauling ice for the Elders' tea. They were a raucous group, meant to keep the People in a good mood during such trying times.

In back are a group of caribou hide teepees, set for the occasion, away from the tribe's winter lodgings, often hundreds of miles apart. Their winter food stores of caribou, fish and moose were not to be depleted.

This was also a very strict time, taboos making for no contact with women or children. Members of Ehch'ineh were said to be 'very dangerous' right at this time.

It was a tight-knit group, handpicked for the emotional times involved. Custom made them related to the bereaved family for life. There was even a stronger bond, beyond family, these youthful workers developed between them, often going way out of their way to do things together.

Elders today still speak of the Feh Fieh, Stone Axes, used in these long-ago ages, when there were no metal tools to be had. Even One of the local surnames, Orlias, derives from a handheld hatchet in use then. A blade of chert sharp enough to chop wood came from far off Thunder River, north of Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope. There were trade routes all the way to the Arctic Coast, birchbark from southern Dene relatives in exchange for stores of moose dried meat the Mountain People were known for.

And again, visually, the use of just a certain colour scheme, creates that dramatic appeal, the muted deep blue twilight in back giving forth of simple, yet complex, lucid imagery on top, in multi-dimensional LIFE!



8. Antoine Mountain, The Ehch'ineh Shout, 2023, acrylic on canvas

## **The Ehch'ineh Shout!**

**.. With a Clap like rolling thunder,..**

Deep into the arctic twilight, a thousand miles from the first of the Silence... a sound rings forth, reverberating, echoing strangely human, off yon trees and nearby willows.

A member of the traditional Dene burial party, the Ehch'ineh, kneels before a flock of kabah, ptarmigan. Whilst deep into his duties in this Et'sehch'i, the burial detail, he has been imbued with certain powers, even over animals. With a sudden loud shout, he's able to bring down the entire flock. The surprised birds are inexorably caught up in the web of one facet of Dene life, in a prism going back to the very beginnings.

All members of Etch'ineh were expected to be on their best behaviour. They were to stay together as a group, doing necessary chores for people in need of wood or ice for tea. They also saw to much-needed cheer in the midst of emotional chaos, for the time making a noisy presence. In all northern communities, a single life lost meant a momentary stray from convention, even survival for some.

As with another in this suite of works, Mehkoieh Musings, the underlying idea was to mold something useful to Community of these teens. Some were expected to spend an entire winter by themselves. They learned to get by on minimal sleep and to concentrate on what their dreams were trying to tell them.

A rare few were already gifted in the Ways of the Land of Medicine Powers... and in recognition were given a certain pair of mink fur pants. When needed the young boy would prove his Powers. One even flew to Adzieh, Moon, to be with his future bride.

I first got involved in my Indigenous PhD Studies without even knowing about it at the time. Our late Elder, Joe Blondin, Jr, saw that I got to know bit by bit these traditional Dene ways. Another in this case was Hyacinthe Andre of Tsiigetichic, who knew stories and legends from long ago.

It was only after I had applied for and been involved with my PhD that it finally came to me.

After a good decade of going back in time to When the World was New, Uncle Thomas Manuel told me that I was 'making the prophecies of Etseo Ayha come true'. He was foremost of a small group of those who saw the future.

The idea is to have these lessons of our former way of life available to future Dene students.

Visually, as with every story, the main actor, in this case the young man, is like the theme in an orchestral, a central point, more or less. It is in his actions, perceived, which make this kind of work come to life. He has shouted in a Medicine Way... and with a clap for effect, the World before him suddenly stops... even slowly changing its future.

. The same effect also makes for the other, right side of the canvas, becoming a Place of its own and caught for all with eyes to see. These particular visions include a very shallow depth of field, the darker colours falling back... the silvers to emerge.



9. Antoine Mountain, Mehkoih Musings, 2023, acrylic on canvas

## **Mehkoih Musings**

### **.. as a Feather alights ..**

Deep in the silence of another arctic winter, a lone man Etch'ineh, sits with his thoughts.

He has been handpicked back in the village for the Et'sehch'i, Traditional Dene Burial Practices. Now he must spend this entire cold season tucked away out on the land with his thoughts, about the person he serves passed away... perhaps even somewhere near.

The youngster has built a mehkoih, an overnight brush shelter, simply a long pole tied between two tall trees and two more for the sides, spruce boughs covering the frame. These were usually for an overnight place to rest on the hunt or travel. A warm fire keeps him company, casting its hopeful light as a blanket. He recalled being told, 'Every place has a Spirit of its own and these may choose to talk with you'...

He holds a replica of the Ehtch'ineh Teweh, burial cane, before him, to remind of his duties to the People, to think of ways to become a better person.

Guarding the site and times is behleh, Wolf Spirit, said to be able sustain itself for weeks without food, and travel long distances at a steady pace... moving across the lands as a ghost.

These Spirits are the lonely young man's Other companions, at least to ensure his safety... and more.

Unbeknownst to him, a single raven feather falls to the snow. His grandfather had reminded him that Crow Spirit does not like to see its own right on the ground, as if carelessly cast aside. When noticed he will pick it up and put it in a shaded place, where Trickster will not see.

As expected, he spends a good deal of these times away from the People, just sorting through some different thoughts.

Thoughts as such weren't really, but maybe somehow familiar with this burial detail he'd become a part of. This will all give him a sense of purpose, away from the fun and games of his age.

Some of the way his mind now works took up an interest of its own ... he thought for a while and discarded them for others, reminding of how one may be confused in a Fast. For whatever or other reason, tonight, in this clear tawa, night air, he distinctly thinks he can hear the sound of hoofs, of a great many tle cho, Big Dog, horses... and shouted commands of a war party.

He had also been told that if he chose, he could be started in with the ways of the Tah Chieh, Sweat Lodge. In this home of purification, one travels to other places the People are, great distances away, ... And other times...

Again, raising and pricking an ear for a word he might catch, the young man checks the fire once more before rambling off to a deeper sleep...

.. Meanwhile, back in the world of painting, a very rare few, like this one, not only want to take you back in time, but, also... a different world,

When the World was New!



10. Antoine Mountain, Eagle, Bear and Wolf, 2023, acrylic on canvas



## **Eagle, Bear and Wolf**

### **.. All know of Them ..**

Many Indigenous tribes make simple mention of these three totems, to stand for the rest of our animal, or non-human Relations

. Wageh, Eagle, soars to the very Gates of the Beyond, bringing prayed thought. In an instant, it will swoop straight down and snatch a trout, not even aware of its danger. Sah, Bear, may stand in freezing water, in the Land of Sparkling Waters, and with a swipe of his paws have the tastiest of fish. Beleh, Wolf, is well known for being able to stay alive without food for ages. Its love of companion and family for life bespeaks love and devotion.

Each of these, too, in their way enVision themselves in the young man's dreams, as he hopes, against all odds, that he will yet again see the Spring thaw. He is there by custom of Et'sehch'i, one of the bearers of the dead, in a mehkoih, way out on the land for the winter.

Just now, he stirs, restless, after hearing the haunted hoots of bedzih, owl. He has been told these are portending death. Now, farther off, but as chill to his meager warmth as the dying embers of his evening fire ... the long, wailing howl of Beleh.

The Great White Bear slowly turns. Something beyond has caught its attention, a Wishing Moon, just risen, over yon mountains and a strange flapping of wings. Could be the young man in that winter lodge wants Sah's in a new name? Being away from his parents and close relatives he has no choice but become a man.

For all of it, in the brightest Midnight Sun, the new Man will return undaunted, able to speak for himself and about his new Relatives.

Whenever legends are made

Tahsoh, Raven is not far behind



11. Antoine Mountain, Dehw'ie Days, 2023, acrylic on canvas

## **Dehw'ie Days**

### **.. The spruce still stand ..**

The simple phrase, Sela Bedehw'ie, My Brother-in-Law's Kindling, means a lot to a Dene hunter.

A group of three stalwarts gather on the banks of the Duhogah, Mackenzie River, far to the northern reaches. They'd left Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope, a few days ago and had some luck, now on the return trip.

The shooting done is the time for the jokes, good natured pranks and all that goes with such adventure for the young and strong. As the late fall twilights slowly dim, the oldest and hunt leader stands, strenuously testing his uncle's bone and antler reinforced bow, making sure it still has its tensile strength. This time, it has proven its worth, two arrows to help bring the big animal down. He has tried before, quite a number of times, but he's not about to tell his friends He can only pull uncle's bow back three quarters.

Having shared in the kill, the two others can now relax, proud of their share in the work and reward. The younger sits at the campfire, straightening an arrow bent a little, probably hitting hard moose bone. He is joyfully making a hand sign, showing the way tahsoh, raven is making falling motions back at home, telling of their success.

The last and yet still a boy, gets to test his skills as camp cook. Now keeping a careful eye on a rack of ribs, he occasionally sprinkles on some lacy stomach fat, or seeming so. Mouth stuffed he is busy. They all know the roasted meat will taste much better out here in the fresh air.

The cook's also been carefully advised to pack away all the 'goodies', the heart, kidneys and liver, for the Elders at home. Their teeth can no longer handle too tough meat but live for these delicacies.

These are the moments we've all gone through to keep the tribe alive.

It usually starts with the ones having the most sisters in the family. When the time is right, playmates start coming around, suggesting a hunt on the land. Some even meet as teens, at times of Et'sehch'i, burials, and are now Ehch'ineh, an elevated kind of Relation, For Life.

At times like this, with the air becoming crisper, the small hunting party still had to stay up as long as possible. You never knew when a large animal might slowly wade into the water, right across from you on the banks of a narrow creek.

With the rayuka, northern lights just now starting to play across the river, stories are told of ghosts in there, not here of this earth nor where all the rest of the departed go...

Over the years, young men grew to spend much time together. There were these fall moose hunts and winters further towards the Barren Lands, after caribou. In between, Spring Hunting, families, clans, camping together to harvest all kinds of ducks, muskrats and beaver.

Endless summers are spent at fishcamps, under the magic of Sa Ra-ahyile, the Midnight Sun.

When many winters have passed the memories become all that is left of a lifetime of adventure. As life goes, the day will come when his older hunting brother-in-law will have passed away. On a different trip, the younger may happen to come upon one of their many former campfires.

You see the little fuzzy kindling branches on a spruce tree and say to yourself, 'Sela Bedehw'ie!', My Brother-in-Law's Kindling... and can then cry as a man, over the lost galaxy of memories, feelings.

From these Dehw'ie, Kindling Days.

As a visual you have the three main subjects interacting without knowing so, with 'negative space', that this is Their Day, their time to just have fun!

The Place, too, finds a way to make the tale come alive. The first of rayuka, northern lights play along with the tall tales, ghost stories, happening at their fingertips. It could be their exploits are now part of the show!

Once in a great while an artist will be able to create characters to fit a narrative or story. In this case the happy-go-lucky person on the left is the real main actor in this set. He relaxes and really enjoys this as part of a lifetime of commitment to family. The youngest in middle, busy cooking, is already making it a personal practice to be of service to others, in a practical, do-it, way...

The oldest of the little hunting party, at right is showing by example what's going to happen next. He often doesn't know himself but has a keen ear for what the rest want to do. In their own way, each of these three wear their characters, same as their outdoor setting, hide clothing and home-made tools.



12. Antoine Mountain, The Waking Dream, 2023, acrylic on canvas

## **The Waking Dream**

### **.. In Your sleep, these Visions ..**

These words often were the last to echo in the young man's mind as he lay down to rest.

The cold arctic nights were unrelenting, draining, often running into one another in a stream which lasted until well into the southern summer. Throughout these dark days he was most often tasked with the constant chore of just staying alive, cutting wood and looking for something to eat.

Night found him back in his mehkoih, brush shelter, forcing himself to stay warm in a spartan regimen. Real rested sleep though, this was not. His now was to use a simple block of wood for a pillow.

His dreams, though troubled often saw him in the acts he most wanted to do.

Alone way out on the land the young man kept busy fulfilling his part of the Et'sehch'i, Traditional Dene Burial Practices. In his mind's eye he had to eventually learn to both prove himself worthy to take on the responsibilities and mantles of a man for the tribe and to somehow learn how to become a better person. The first came back to him on its own, having watched and listened carefully to abah, dad and ehdeweh, uncle. Gone now the childish games of play, as he dove deeper in dreams to realize the better person within.

For the time being, the hunter he most admired was sah cho, grizzly bear, who with a mighty swoop of its claws could easily catch any fish it wanted, even in a high mountain torrent. Wageh, eagle, too, flew effortless, broad wings wide, riding the winds into tomorrow and beyond. Maybe even, tahsoh, raven would fall, as they sometimes did, calling it a 'great hunt with much meat!'

These animal relatives right here must have known somehow what the young man was doing in their midst, for he'd learned to talk with wageh into sharing a fish it easily caught with him.

Years later he would recall the cold journey far away from the warmth of home as tough, yes, but carefree in a strangely familiar way.

.. now 'a Waking Dream', thought he.

Except for once in a long while now, he sometimes

Found sleep hard to find,

For the sound,

And splashing waters to lids and face!

Visually the only constant for such a cramped, though outdoor space and smaller painting size is the light source, Fire, unseen, just outside the brush shelter, lower far left. Yellows, orange to reds slowly rise from the youth in troubled sleep to the dying but playful fishtail slap. A feeding bear recalled from the past fall is as totem to the hunt. In a more defined outdoors, the dreaming youth's hope to become a successful provider of food for the tribe takes wary aim, fingers all aknot.

He sights upon the future already unfolding, two ravens giving him their sign that all will be fulfilled, struck in flight, making as if at loss for life,

For this Waking Dream.





13. Antoine Mountain, Her Favourite Patch, 2023, acrylic on canvas

## **Her Favourite Patch**

### **.. Every picker has one ..**

One of the more enjoyable and fondest of times on the land involves berry-picking.

In the North, as elsewhere, every woman in the tribe has her best spots to pick, a closely guarded secret. Right after the hottest of days, beginning about the end of July the prized berries start to ripen, calling for small parties to go out for the day, just gathering as much as possible, in a short summer.

Blueberries are likeliest the most plentiful. They grow on low lying bushes and can be gathered by the handful. These jiyewah always go best with any kind of fish. Old timers made many different kinds of containers out of birchbark stitched and sewn even tightly enough to hold water.

This small family of mom, daughter and younger son are after cranberries today. These can usually be found wherever there is a bit of sand, very likely a smaller hill with birch trees.

A constant summertime danger are the many bears, attracted to camp with its smells of fish. A young brave one was usually volunteered to watch over things, armed with spear or bow and arrow. Like Bear, he's found just a standing rub to a rough birch tree the best of back-scratchers, if you didn't a white back afterwards.

Others of the finest picking include dahkaleh, cloudberry, loved for its richness of flavour. These grow a plenty on more marshy grounds, the bright orange easy to see over a large distance.

Today, mom is a little tired after helping to set nets back at camp. She leisurely stretches the bunched muscles around her neck and in the small of her back, from bending over so low. Most of the harvest of berries will be carefully stored for winter, in the largest of holders, just under cool mossy layers close to camp. When the time comes, these stores will prove a gift from the heavens, in freezing mid-winter.

Thinking this far ahead and good for the family, are the olde, olde-time legends. Knowing the children are near, she will go all the way back to the Dene hero, Yamoria, He Who Travels the Universe. He was the one who made it safe when giant beavers and eagles devoured the People, for food.

Working as in a trance, she carefully takes them back to a time when the first Dene found themselves in these lands.

One berry in particular, is an orange one, kind of chalky white inside. These were used, even mixed with fish eggs, to make a kind of bread, so delicious!

As an exercise in challenge, you now bear witness to a loose mix of master Impressionist Edgar Degas and just a hint a fellow Frenchman, the indomitable Henri Matisse and just a touch of Renoir, Van Gogh. Chagall, too, in a primordial DreamLand. Strangely, the Free Spirits are a natural, especially at such places, where the measure of Art is as nature.

A colorist touch is about all the bond which can exist here between these manners of expression. The idea, as always, is to keep a unified statement in mind, the magentas of the cranberry patches tying all together, even to yon Wishing Moon.

From there 'tis a simple step to feature and blend in one bold but tired mama having a mid-work stretch. For the children this is a bit of an outing and a chance to have a taste of what will be stored right away back in camp, except for the more plentiful blueberries. Mom can tell they are snatching bites, catching them furtively spitting out the little leaves and wincing to the sharp taste.

Even though the story is about her, she is rendered in almost neutral hues, cueing the viewer in for a better look. Then a different vista presents itself.

The grouping, with the steep hill rising behind, is a natural high mountain theatre, the elderly storyteller as imposing as any Greek orator.

She never fails to mention her innocent nephew standing guard, spear at the ready. She says that now he's Ehchh'ineh, a member of a burial party, he brings Pride, honour, to the family...

He Dreams of it... taking your memory all the way back, to more melancholic times, devoid of modern-day cares, details could wait a decade or so... to

When the World was New.

People and animal Relatives

Spoke a common language.

Young at Heart become one,

With bountiful Mother Earth.



14. Antoine Mountain, Her Gohseh Mileh, 2023, acrylic on canvas

## **Her Gohseh Mileh**

### **.. In a small World ..**

The young girl spent most of her time deep in deep, puzzled thought. Once hearing of her new situation, of now becoming a woman, her relatives took her a little distance from the main camp. She was to be left there for some time, apart from the People, so the Spirits might set her on the right path to growing up.

Even though it seemed so harsh when first seen, her new temporary home, this cave was still on the dank, dark side, high up as it sat... The air that did make it in smelled of the fresh waterfall screen it had to go through.

People thought of this one cave as a bit strange. All others they knew of were often in use by bears, wolves and other creatures, who knew what. Why not this one? Thinking of anything of mystery as somehow bearing Big Medicine, she was brought here for her time of passage from childhood to soon an adult member of the tribe.

After a few days here, all she had for company was this small fire she kept lit from the little branches of bushes she could easily gather. She had to be careful, for the hungry predators all around. Even only a little ways from the clan's lodgings, her relatives took to bringing her just enough to eat and containers of ledi mahgeh, the Labrador tea which lent its unique tangy, mossy aroma. She especially loved the reminder of home fires, close by, but yet so far.

She was told not to bring any of her childhood toys, dolls and such. Her headstrong ways were well known, and she made sure to sneak in at least a good length of hide string. Her many hours now filled of one silly game after another. Being so nimble of finger she could easily envision the most complex of designs. Her favorite involved Gohseh Mileh, Spider's Net, the rainbow. She would close her eyes and hope its colours would somehow take her away from this foreboding of places in the cold heights.

The just wanted to ride its wave back out.

Yet again this one had its Ways, thought she.

That distance away grew farther yet when even the waters above her dwelling proved too weighty. In an instant it all fell in. After a great while she was found under a pile of rubble. A large crack must have formed from the constant trickle, the combined load eventually simply collapsing on the poor maiden.

It was as if the land itself could not bear to part with such a young, virile Spirit and a giant hand simply closed in, claiming her. Because of what she was doing there and what happened, strange portents came out of her final resting place ...

Over the years hers was now a place of pilgrimage, for people wanting personal help for this or that ailment.

Only her woven

Gohseh Mileh remains.

Pictorially the idea is to suggest a high altitude with the light blue background doing so. The darker colours of the cave's rock serve as a solid foundation for the rest, the texture, to work. The water flowing above directs that visual along the top and right side. Starting from the little fire on the shelter's floor the reds arise, to mark the outside curve of the rainbow. Yellows and golds now line the inside of these crimsons. Last is the turquoise. Where water meet rainbow, an interplay of textures, one dotted the other linear.

To continue suggesting an integral unity this same set of colours line the inside of the cave, reds on the outside, just under the water and ice. Yellows and gold then give light to the darker figure of the little girl. Finally, more turquoise cushions the viewer's eyes.



15. Antoine Mountain, His Last Daht'o, 2023, acrylic on canvas



## **His Last Daht'o**

### **.. Only lonely winds bear witness ..**

Deep in Dene country a small group of relatives and Ehch'ineh, burial party, gather for a final farewell to a tribal hunter.

Long before the coming of the Mola, white man, there were no such tools as shovels. A person's final resting place is a daht'o, stage, upon which the body was left for Mother Earth to embrace back. Some chose to do as the Vikings, set the body adrift, on a raft in open water.

All of the Et'sehch'i, Traditional Dene Burial Practices and special ceremonials now at an end, all the person takes to the next world is maybe a favoured bow and some arrows. Near, too, the family shield with their totem. Each clan owned their own iconic emblems, be it a Spirit protector or an image dreamed for protection.

People lived much longer in these ancient times, with as Elder Martha Rabesca once said, 'people were so old that something started growing out of them just like little growths, that's how old they were'. There were no modern diseases to kill people off. Even this Elder said that her dad cautioned that now that Europeans were coming in, the Dene would start dying.

But as twilight gathers all of remaining light, the young husband's pregnant wife reaches for his hand one last time. She now still tries to understand that for some reason he always talked about these 'relatives to our South, who ride horses and do battle'. It must be from those burial parties he was always a part of. And now it's probably real for him, too. Where he's going now. Although all that can, have been done, his younger sister and older brother-in-law don't quite want to leave either.

Whilst directing the build of his dead relative's last daht'o, the young man's brother-in-law could see signs of the dehwi'e, fuzzy, filmy twigs at the bottom of spruce trees they'd used many times to start fire on the hunt. He knows, too, seeing those reminders of their early teen and manly years is the only time he is expected to cry.

All to console are the far-off cries from a group of floating loons.

Farther off, on the other side of the little pond in back,

A muted, haunting owl,

Plays Taps

For His Last Daht'o

.. and as with at least one other in this PhD Suite of works, the light source here comes from out of the painting itself, a warming fire where the Ehch'ineh, the burial party itself, having done with their tribal duties, keep warm, waiting for any other relatives who want to bid the young hunter a fond, final adieu.

Firelight moves as none other,  
seemingly picking its spots at will, darting all hither and yon.

This one, said to house the ts'iduwe, ancestors,

Too, bids a new arrival

Its hearty welcome!



16. Antoine Mountain, Grizzly Bear Road, 2023, acrylic on canvas

## **Grizzly Bear Road**

### **.. The first of bird song's been heard ..**

Across the cold tundra of winter, in this land Time has forgotten, a certain Springtime thaw is slowly melting the thick blankets of snow.

Now the young man who's been sent forth for all these months stands before Father, also, grandma and mom, the rest of the family eagerly waiting inside. Expecting him back just before the mosquito's, Mother has prepared his favourite of meals, beaver meat with its soft delicious tail.

In midnight stars and rayuka, northern lights, the first moments in Father's embrace mark a new man in the caribou hide teepee. Now the boy can be expected to do all asked of any, hunting, even the difficult task of setting nets under the ice.

For now, close moon as big as Beziayu, Male Caribou Range, the mountain across, he thought of the coming of the Light, brighter yet by the day, until a good month and a half as a single suspended moment, Sa Ra-ahyile, Midnight Sun playing above... forever...

Village life goes on, a number of smaller boys using their slippery moose shin hides to slide down nearby slopes. They must stay close, for wolves may be lurking near, to get at any new pups or stray bits of beh, food.

Once inside and well fed, the young man will be asked so many questions. How did you keep your fire going? Was it a good enough place for rabbits, ptarmigan? Any caribou to keep you company?

As usual Father says little. It's plenty good enough that his pride and joy is alive and back! Many a sleepless night, between mom and he.

The lad has even proven up to the new name he's earned. All now hear of Sahsho Gere, his son's late favorite uncle's Dene name, Grizzly Bear Road, one of healing he's now set foot on.

The name originally came from the land of Etseo Ahya, the Dene Prophet just to their south. He no doubt meant these moments when saying of the future Dene ways would be taught to the young.

Long into many warming nights Sahsho Gere will be made to feel all the closeness the Dene hold for one another in their unforgiving lands. When he's rested and ready, he will take his story to an Elder, a tribal seer, to probe the inner depths of any Visions he may have had out there.

The new name, Sahsho Gere, even put a special spring to tired legs... Sahsho Gere... he always walking to new adventure.

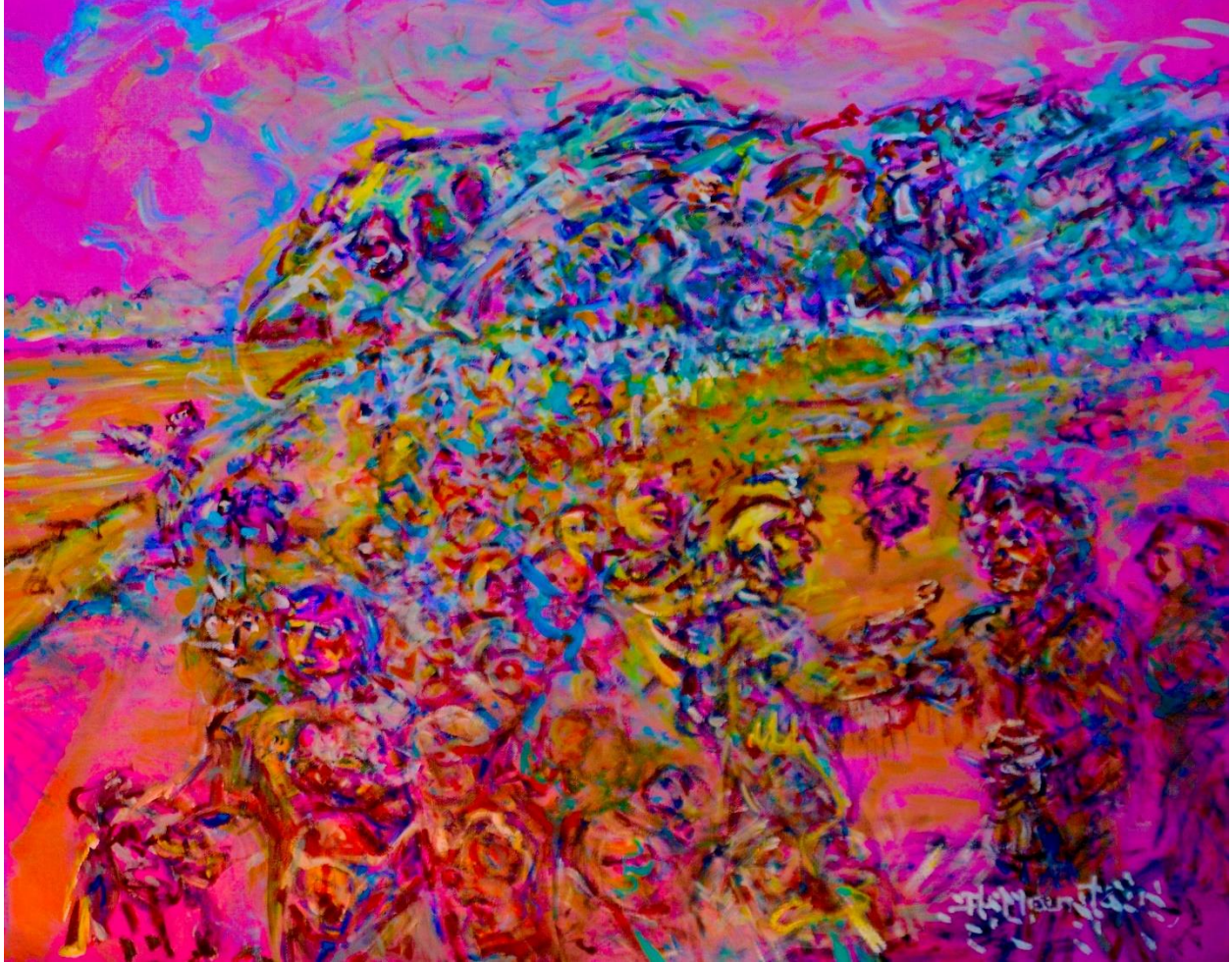
Visually this has more shades of a master colorist like French Impressionist Edgar Degas' to it. The yellows and interference blues highlighted but effectively muted with turquoise and defining darkers accent the story and most of all, the twilight northern setting.

With the right turn of heart, any work of Art will take its breath...

Telling you things

How to pet the Wolf,

Not fear Death... nor Life



17. Antoine Mountain, The Ghost Parade, 2023, acrylic on canvas

## **The Ghost Parade**

**.. Behold, a grim specter cometh ..**

Our Dene Elders today sometimes speak of 'People out there', just travelling on foot. We are a nation on the move. In our traditional hunting grounds, all the way west to the Rocky Mountains, east to the arctic coast, the People would have to keep moving, either following the caribou herds or finding good fishing.

One Elder in particular, Gabe Kochon spoke of people sometimes even Meeting up with such a column of ancestors, way out on the land, wandering, aimless. There never was any real physical contact with these ewih, ghosts, but a small item, tobacco, a pipe, tea, might pass hands from one present to witness such a wonder. Embers from the last fire would always be carefully carried, in these far-off times, when with no such thing as matches for a lighter.

Here at days end the wanderers are within site of the most iconic of symbols in Denendeh, the Dene Nation. In the near background looms Bear Rock Mountain, long believed to have the future of our People set in stone.

For some reason the ghosts long to go over where Tulita meets, Bear River running along the foot of Bear Rock from the Sahtu, Great Bear Lake. It could have to do with legends connected with this one place, where our cultural hero, Yamoria, He Who Travels the Universe, caught up with and killed three giant beavers. He tacked their pelts to Bear Rock Mountain, making it once again safe for people to move around. These giant creatures would swim close to hunters in canoes, upsetting them and eating their human prey. Giant eagles, too, ate human flesh.

Talk is also of individuals who had passed not going anywhere in the heavens as held by Mola, white missionaries. Rather the departed would be expected to just want to live on for eternity, content at their favourite camping spot.

We are reminded that as long as we remember these tales of ancient lore we shall have no problem living on as a People.



18. Antoine Mountain, Ready to Smoke, 2023, acrylic on canvas



## **Ready to Smoke**

### **.. You'd see these everywhere ..**

In the late-Fall, after people moved back into town from summer fishcamps, hunters would go out for moose and come back with plenty for the coming winter.

The brisk August/September autumn air made the People feel livelier, after a lazy Midnight Sun's summer. Some even said their Spring was actually this time of year, with a fresh winter coming. They said life was easier then, with no bothersome hordes of mosquitos and mud all over. Snow made the sledding easier, over having to deal with heavy, cumbersome boatloads.

If you were still out at the fishing places this late in fall, you could hear the sounds of drumming echoing off the ramparts, our famous rock cliffs, which dropped several hundred feet right into the water. Drummers were as vocal as today, for their songs to carry 10 miles or more!

Back in town you'd see the women set up with these, teepee frames for their home moose-tanning. Here the young mom is busy tying a crossbar over the top of a column she's made of her hide.

When ready the hide hangs over a small smoldering fire of rotten 'shingerih', spruce tree stumps, to give that Dene Gold, a golden sheen, to the completed hide.

For now, everywhere was an absolutely divine and earthy aroma of moosehides slowly going through this final step of its tanning.

Even in town, this was the only life we knew.



19. Antoine Mountain, The Olde Style, 2023, acrylic on canvas

## **The Olde Style**

### **.. 'Gah's sure to come this way ..'**

Some of the skills to survive in the World's coldest places were highly technical, but effective.

Probably the safest way to snare the little hopper involved a long pole, instead of just tying a snare wire to the crossbar over the rabbit trail. The stick was trimmed with the smaller end where the set was. The heavier end balanced on a branch in a nearby sturdy tree. Old tyme Dene even carried a carved flat wooden holder with quite a number of string snares ready to be used, complete with tripstick. You tie one end of the snare to the pole, and holding it all steady to the crossbar, loop your string around one end of the tripstick. The string runs to the other end of the short stick, looped again and hangs loose, ready.

The woman in this painting has just dared to give the taut line a little 'spring' test, to see it hold. She patiently sets two thinner sticks to hold her snare string circle, about the size of a rabbit's head. Once a number of other smaller brushes blocks of the rest of gah's trail, the trap is left overnight.

Although taking a bit more time to set such a snare, the best feature is that when she returns, her gah will be hanging about a foot off the ground, no other animals able to reach it. With the modern wire, once caught, gah is still right on the ground, easy pickings for any raven or whiskey jack coming along, looking for free eats. When the rabbit's head goes through the snare loop, its forward motion trips the stick on one end, then the other, releasing the rest of the trap, its weight leaving gah suddenly suspended.

This way of catching rabbits works so well it's still in use today, as we see from the child in back, taking note of all she sees her mother doing, patiently holding mom's trail snowshoes, as she works for their next meal. The child's expression says: "Well here goes amah, mom, again, making me feel 'Somehow!'".

Artistically this harkens all the way back to probably the first ever action painting, Italian great Caravaggio's *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*. In this one, the Dene woman suddenly springs back... hoping her balanced set will hold.



20. Antoine Mountain, Raining Moon, 2023, acrylic on canvas

## **Raining Moon**

### **.. We all take turns getting marooned ..**

The old Dene saying probably applies to anyone spending their time outdoors.

At one of my favourite camp spots, Bluefish Creek, south of Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope, a family patiently waits out the wet weather. Their canoe's also sprung a leak, just before the rainy summer storm.

Bluefish is named for the grayling, most tasty of fishes. It also cooks very fast, making for a quick, delicious meal.

When stuck out on the land, it's always a good idea to go to a more prominent place, so people on the move know right away where you are and may've planned to stop there anyway. Bluefish Creek is in between a set of two rapids on the Duhogah, Mackenzie River. It's always been a natural spot to recoup in case of travel problems or just to rest. There are plenty of rabbits back in the bushes and the fishing is good.

The children have been begging abah, father, for more stories. Now he tells them the birchbark is so light, first time out he put so much weight on one paddle that the canoe just tipped over on that side! They especially love the part where he had to make camp like this, just to dry out his soggy clothes and wet hunting gear. When the little boy asked if even his bow and arrows got wet, he says that 'yes, my arrows were so wet they weren't even straight any more, just kinda flopped over! "I had no choice, I had to hang them up to dry... and straighten them out later, on a rock".

After all had something warm to eat, their father would look longingly out into the dreamy mist beyond... and, "Look across and just down, that's the big giant's canoe, where he left it", pointing out a huge boat-shaped island. Thus, began stories and legends of a Time When the World was New. Giant, evil animals, beaver, eagles ate the People. Finally, when no-one was safe to hunt or even live, along came their cultural hero, Yamoria, He Who Travels the Universe', the Peacemaker...

These were legends of a day long gone, when dinosaurs roamed the Earth at will, even here, where even now you can pick up a fossil anywhere along this part of the Duhogah.

No Raining Moon could outlast these chronicles of the ages. After the storm lets up a bit, a small fire will be made to melt some dze lineh, spruce gum, to patch up the holes in the small family's birchbark canoe. The light canoe cover was traded from Dene further to the south, along the Nahanni River, where birch grow tall enough for larger sections of the bark.

The children notice, too, to their delight, that their father ended up sitting right under the hole in their canoe. He got so busy telling them stories he doesn't even notice rain dripping right on his neck.

No wonder all he's talking about is on water.

Raining Moon!



21. Antoine Mountain, Koghats'ededi, Feeding the Fire, 2023, acrylic on canvas



## **Koghats'ededi, Feeding the Fire**

**.. Our relatives are all in there ..**

Long before the coming of strangers to our Dene lands we looked to Ko, to stay alive.

Fire not only cooked the food and kept you warm but could also keep you company. Anyone who has just silently stared into those lively flames for hours, even in company of others, senses this.

Here a group gather around the Fire for a very sacred ceremonial. Feeding the Fire is a form of renewing our contact with Ts'iduwe, our ancestors. Those who've gone before are sometimes hungry and send sign to let us know.

Of course, the drums and Prayer Songs are always called for at any special time the People are gathered.

Now an elder with her grandson make an offering to Ko. First, is the food itself, in a birchbark container with a little offering from each person's meal. He will give of tobacco, long revered by all tribes. In back, drummers sing a Prayer Song, often about Spirits Who Dwell in the Skies.

There are places, ways, times, that remember each person. The land is a person, like you and I, only a little removed, for now. Memory draws you to certain places. The People who've been there in your youth and before will still be there. The ts'iduwe patiently wait, but have their means, like prophesy, to keep in touch with us.

In ancient times, though, When the World was New, drums were not present at all for Et'sehch'i, the Traditional Dene Burial Practices. That time was set aside strictly in honour of dead relatives. The only signs of life were the Ehch'ineh, burial party, whose merry, noisy antics reminded people of the life they still have.

.. and carries on, today.

Koghats'ededi is solemn, to help recall a former life and Ways of Being. We gather, to meet up again, feast and dance.

As a work of Art, the idea is to visually try to capture the stories, individual glances of interest and warnings to take note of yourself. Even as a viewer, this kind of basic humanity begins with our roots, land, fire, food, language, all we need. Thus, the light from the fire leads the eye where it needs to go.

A shallow depth of field shows you different views as you look closely... especially passing by, you, beyond mirage. Smoke gives wings to these prayers to the Above, and helps highlight little wonders within.

In a way, we are like this small group,  
Almost urgent, cramped, even on this Turtle Island  
of HOPE.

## **Community Voices: Engaging Youth in Tradition**

### ***Introduction***

Blackfoot scholar, Leroy Little Bear (2000) says that all Indigenous ceremonials serve as renewals. In terms of our northern Dene, we understand our annual Spring Hunts the same way, as reaffirming ourselves as Dene. For example, a few years ago a communal vote was to be held on whether to leave the best of our lands, the Ramparts River, Tuyeta Region, as is, or if we should allow oil and mining interests in. A large portion of our Youth, who make up the majority of Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope's population, favoured the development route. This would not only severely affect the best of our Spring Hunting lands, the annual duck migrations, muskrat, and beaver, but it would also impact the grizzly bears and woodland caribou that inhabit that region.

In a series of meeting our leadership pointed out to the younger population that even if the oil and mining were allowed in, they would not get the jobs they wanted and expected. These interests already have their own trained crews, meaning that no jobs would be available to anyone local. On the other hand, if the vote went to keep the Tuyeta Region as is, there were already several millions of dollars set aside specifically for the Youth to have work, monitoring the Ramparts River. Besides, young workers could work as they please, on a rotating basis, allowing for more of them to be able to work. The vote went overwhelming in favour of keeping the best of our lands safe.

In the same way, my research into Et'sehch'i, The Traditional Burial Practices of the Dene serves to remind the Youth that they have a responsibility to continue our Dene Ways of Being. This Guide exists to find ways to keep our sense of Community together and intact.

We have no way of knowing what the future holds for our small northern communities. What we do know is that, with the help of groups like our Elders Council, we can at least be assured that students in the future will be made aware of their Dene selves.

## ***Why Learn Et'sehch'i?***

As with all other smaller northern Dene communities, Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope, has been severely affected by social changes. In the past half-century, we have been socially thrust into a foreign modern world. At the same time, intergenerational residential school trauma has left parents with none of the child-rearing practices to ensure a healthy future for our Youth.

About fifteen years ago, I was involved in our Sahtu in the Arts, a government initiative to highlight our cultural gifts. Whenever I was brought into any of our five Sahtu, Great Bear Lake Regions' communities I would first meet with the artists, visual and otherwise, to begin work towards ways for our Dene to make a living with their talents. At one in particular, Tulita, we were just beginning to talk about these ideas when the Public Government Apology for Residential Schools came on the tv. Indigenous leaders were about to address the then Harper administration on our treatment at the hands of the churches and educational systems of the past. We just decided to watch it and talk later. When it was over we went around the table with our own private memories and impressions. At the very end sat an Elder, Maurice Mendo. He began by talking about how our Dene lived on the land when he was younger. His older generation was not affected by these drastic changes. He said that things began to change in very real and uncontrollable ways. People were now under stress for finding work to pay their bills. They also had to go further out for wood for their homes. It has now taken just over three generations for boot-legging and serious drugs to take hold of our future, our Youth.

When I was directed by our Elders Council to concentrate my research for this Indigenous PhD Studies towards Et'sehch'i I only knew that this is what our Elders mandated. They are the ultimate authority in Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope, even above our local Band Council and business interests.

Having already done a good fifteen years of work on murals for our Sahtu communities I also knew that our Youth, as are all Indigenous Youth, are naturally gifted

for the Arts. But without the tools, especially in terms of the cultural component, they are largely unrecognized by the community.

With the personal direction of the Elders Council over the past decade I have found a way to reach each individual young person in different ways. Without their practice of Et'sehch'i I know for a fact that each of the Youth would not even know about their own parents, much less the rest of their immediate relatives and their grandparents.

I grew up in Radelie Koe when there were only several hundred Dene living there. Each adult was a teacher, each with their expertise in our cultural Ways of Being. Now we have our own doctor and a lawyer from such a small northern community. Our lawyer helps in our drive towards self-government. We also have a growing number of Youth involved in further education.

The real reasons for ceremonials like Et'sehch'i, The Traditional Dene Burial Practices are many and varied. The most important has to do with Community, finding ways to relate to one another in meaningful, human ways. There is really no other way to accomplish these goals than with the input from our Elders.

One sure sign that these cultural practices can and do work is that our People yet don't want any major contact with the outside world. Most of the Youth want to stay in our small, safe community. Through the hard lessons of suicide and drug and alcohol-related deaths, we are learning that the only way to survive is to listen to our Elders.

Thus, Et'sehch'i has taken root, even in our present educational system.

## ***Cultural Connection, Community and Personal Growth***

Over the past decade and a half, I have worked closely with all five communities of the Sahtu, Great Bear Lake Region of the NWT. At first, it was with Sahtu in the Arts an initiative to feature the talents of our Dene. We even chartered airplanes to take our artists to the capital of Yellowknife, where the buyers are. The fact that our group won the prestigious Premier's Award for group initiatives proves that there are ways to further our cultural causes.

In one of the communities, Tulita, in the shadows of Bear Rock Mountain, a central landmark of our Dene Nation, an opportunity came to decorate the new swimming pool. Because this would involve the Youth I thought it would be a good idea to illustrate one of our creation stories, How Muskrat Created the World. Everyone I spoke to mentioned that an Elder, Maurice Mendo would be the one to relate such a legend. In each of the communities Aurora College made their campus building available to do the murals involved. A group of the local talented Youth helped to produce the work of art now on the swimming pool's front outside wall. Again, a combination of initiative and community involvement makes a cultural connection possible. One advantage I've always found is that although some of these legends and stories are more or less common knowledge amongst our People, it takes an Elder to really make it come to life, even to the point of Mr. Mendo acting out the poor condition of the out-of-breath Muskrat barely alive on the Animal's raft, with just a tiny paw full of dirt from the bottom of the flooded waters, from which the Earth was renewed to its present form.

From having worked closely with the Youth, I also know that their generation knows practically nothing of their Dene selves. Their own parents, close relatives and especially Elders are strangers to them, much less their own culture. This is not to say, though, that they don't know their language. When given the chance they speak Dene very well, without the jangling accents others do.

One of the very first of about ten murals I was involved with is the Dog team Mural, for the Band Office. At that time, we were having a great deal of problems with

the Youth. In their frustration of being left out of Community they were burning down buildings in town. I was worried that this work of art which featured the way our People used to travel, only by dogs, in days past, would be vandalized. I asked an Elder, the late Jim Pierrot, to say a prayer for the mural's safety. Upon doing so he also assured me that 'no-one would ever touch this painting'. To this day it remains in pristine condition, from over fifteen years, while other newer ones have deteriorated or needed repairs.

All of my generation were born right on the land. Personally, this gives you the feeling of being at home in the country. Even though we survived the dread residential school we were also left with a good education. Spending at least a part of the year, two months, along the Duhoga, Mackenzie River, in summer fish camps we maintained a closer familial contact than the present Youth.

To this day, we have managed to function as Dene, but without the inner depths of meaning our Elders and ancestors have been privy to. As an individual, my research into Et'sehchi' has afforded me a rare insight into the workings of our distant past, thanks to the direction of our Elders Council. Yet there is a legacy of the intergenerational residential school trauma. The social ills of a dysfunctional community are ones we all have had to deal with.

One lasting feature I've found of working in our Sahtu, Great Bear Lake Region is that in Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope is that despite the differences we might have -the main ones created and left from the Roman Catholic Church-, our commitment to work with and for the future of our Youth allows us to put these social differences aside whilst we do our individual projects and tasks.

One specific thing I've found from my research into our distant past is that even though our ancestors did not have any of the annuities and benefits of our modern world, ceremonials like Et'sehch'i served to cement the Youth to Community in no uncertain way.

Because of their energy, the community's teens were given the chance to prove themselves valuable, by helping send off the deceased to a spiritual future. Too, and just as importantly, they learned at this critical coming of age to become valuable to Community by working as a group to provide wood and ice for every family.

In contrast, our Elders see today's young people as living in a technological world of their own, with their noses in cell phones, not connected in any meaningful way with the Dene present. I firmly believe that this is the main reason our Elders Council wanted me to do my Indigenous PhD Studies to leave a lasting reference for our future students. Our school has even committed to do its part to provide working tools for our students to help out at funerals. The Elders, in their turn, can come into our institution of learning to reach over the generations to the Youth.

Over the last few years we have had a growing number of young people prove themselves both in Band Council leadership and in taking on post-secondary education.

I feel that all, myself personally, the Elders and the Youth have in turn benefitted from our knowledge of Et'sehch'i.



## ***Conclusion and Encouragement***

From having begun with Et'sehch'i almost ten years ago I've personally found that our ancestral Dene past and prophesies have their way of ensuring our future. When I first met the late Joe Blondin, Jr, even a half decade before I knew that his intimate knowledge of Etseo Ayha and its meaning for our Dene People is a vital part of our children's future, I really had no idea what it had to do with me. All I knew at the time was that it fit in well with the talents of the Youth I was working with. This connection, of our T'siduweh, ancestors, traditional ceremonials, and culture is what this Youth Guide consists of.

The various ways to tie it all together and with research from institutions of learning like Trent University are the missing links to involve the Youth. My involvement and those of almost all of the adults of Radelie Koe, Fort Good Hope, also comprise what we need to do to move our futures forward.

When I started, all I had is my talent as an artist. Official bodies like the Government of the NWT, Trent University and our local Elders Council all worked together to create the spark to reach the Youth. With the realization of my Indigenous PhD Studies I feel that my part is done. I've always only wanted to keep our young people out of trouble, and at the very least, give them hope. The Youth for their part, know, that they, too, can do THIS!