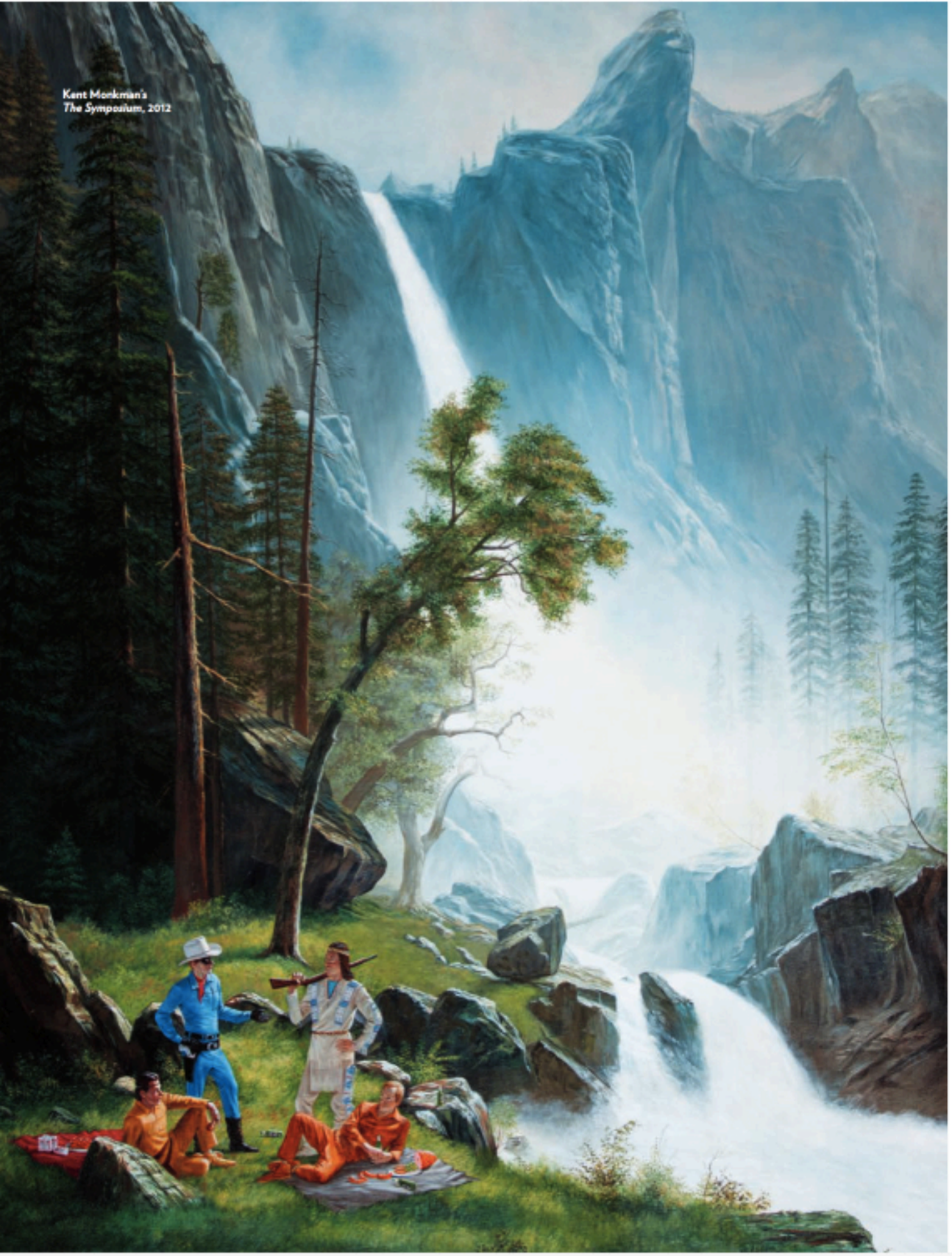


Kent Monkman's
The Symposium, 2012

FIRST VISIONS

INDIGENOUS ART IS ENJOYING A RENAISSANCE, AND TORONTO IS AT THE COLORFUL EPICENTER. HERE, WE MEET THE FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE MOVEMENT

Words **ALEC JACOBSON**

NEARLY 500 YEARS AGO, EXPLORER Jacques Cartier sailed up the St. Lawrence River to what is now Quebec City and put the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) word for village, *kanata*, on a map to claim the area for France. At that time, 500 miles southwest, the site of Toronto was already a lively center of indigenous trade, the home, over the centuries, to various indigenous tribes, including the Chippewa, the Wendat and the Mississaugas of the Credit.

Today, when you walk into Toronto's Art Gallery of Ontario, you are confronted with indigenous artist Kent Monkman's vivid yet haunting painting, *The Academy*, which depicts native and colonial artists sitting in a wigwam studying and painting idealized Grecian figures entwined with large serpents. The contemporary piece is emblematic of Monkman's provocative work and hints at the long, complex and often tragic history of European influence on his Cree ancestors.

Monkman is already one of Canada's most well-known living artists—the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York recently commissioned one of his works to hang in the foyer. But there is now a growing cadre of native artists producing striking pieces and making Toronto the gravitational center of the contemporary indigenous art world.

All this comes at a time when western culture is reexamining its histories—Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has recently committed to reconciliation between the Canadian government and First Nations, and similar topics have become a focus of international dialogue.

Here, we meet some of Toronto's indigenous creators bringing their point of view to a global stage. ›

THE VOICE

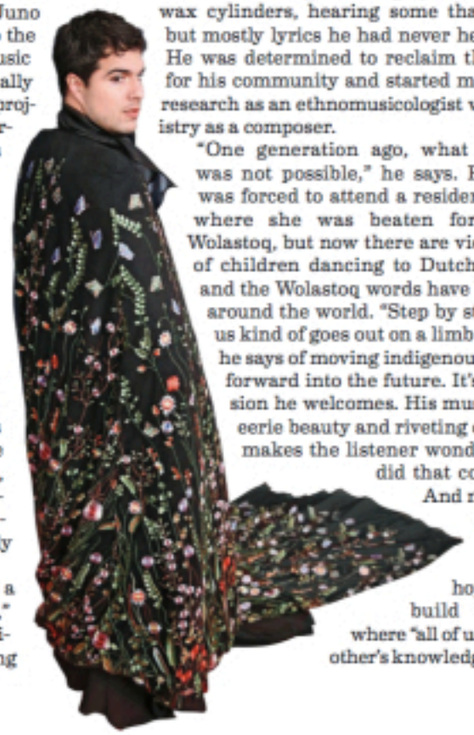
JEREMY DUTCHER

JEREMY DUTCHER WALKS INTO ALLAN Gardens, a quiet park in the center of downtown Toronto, carrying a bushel made of cedar strips on his back. "It's a fiddlehead basket," he says, noting my curious look, and goes on to explain that his brother made it for him, following a tradition of their Wolastoqiyik ancestors who lived in what is now New Brunswick, and carried such baskets to harvest the tender young ferns. "I use it for my laptop," he laughs.

Dutcher is a classically trained tenor but his work, so far entirely in his native language, blurs the lines of musical categories with his rich, operatic vocals set to pop beats and moody grand piano melodies. His first album, *Wolastoqiyik Lintuwakonawa*, won honors both at the 2019 Juno Awards, Canada's equivalent to the Grammys, and the Polaris Music Prize as Canada's most musically impressive album of 2018. The project is based on a set of 100-year-old wax cylinder recordings of Wolastoqiyik songs, many of which were thought to have been lost to history. Dutcher mixes the historic voices with his own soaring arias and jazzy piano riffs that seem pulled from the future.

On stage, Dutcher's outfits can be similarly arresting and transgressive—when performing at the Juno Awards he wore a floor-length cape embroidered with wild flowers, which he flipped off mid-performance to reveal a diaphanous black leotard with frilly cuffs.

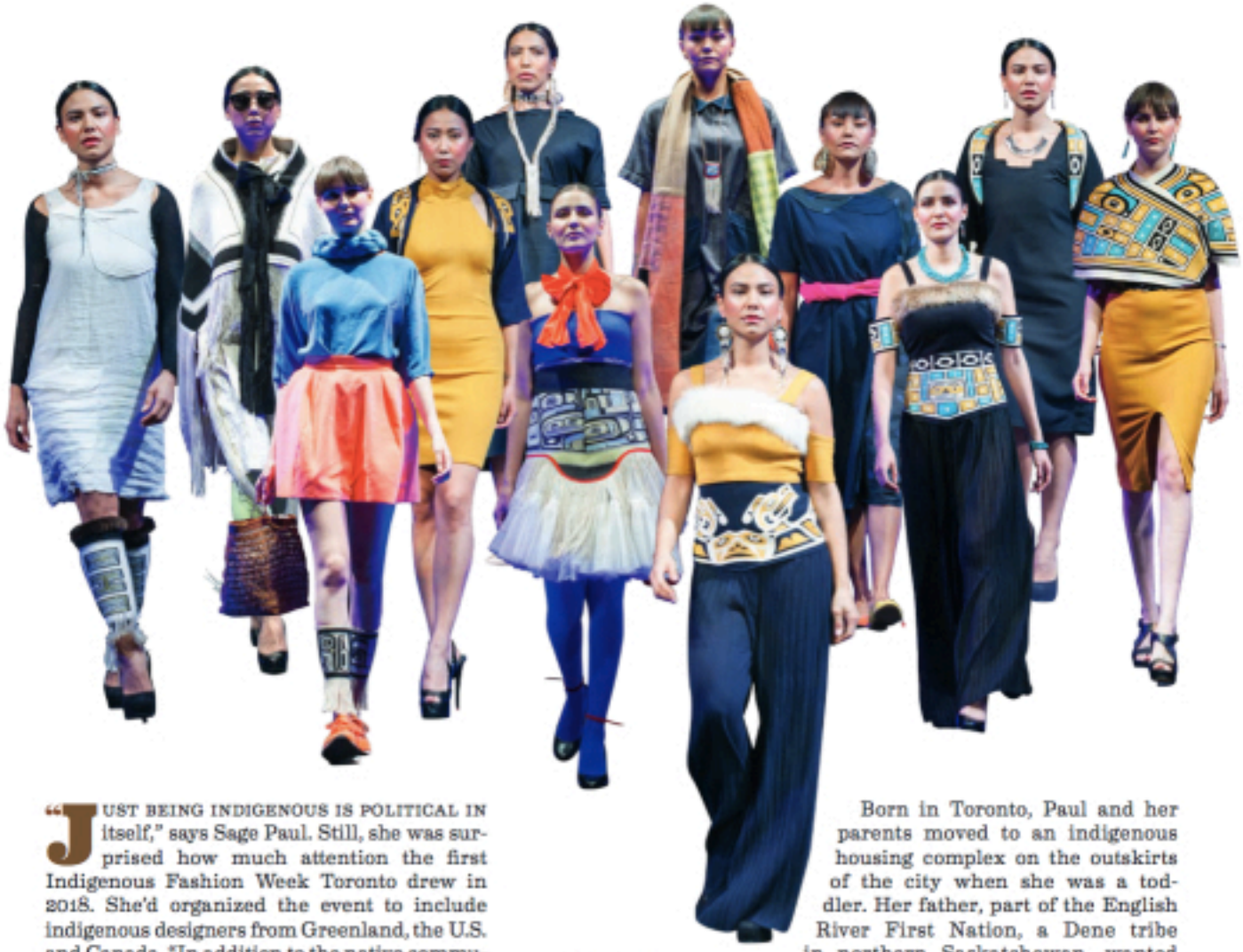
"I think it's foolish to think a tradition is fixed in the past," he says of his visual and musical mélange. As a child growing up in rural New Brunswick on the Tobique Reserve, just over the border from northern Maine, he was immersed in songs that had been carried through generations to preserve Wolastoq history, often listening to them with his family gathered around a drum. This led him to study music and anthropology at Dalhousie University in Halifax, where he trained as a tenor and performed classics of the Western canon wearing a tuxedo. But he also met Maggie Paul, a Wolastoq song carrier who pointed him to a cache of archival recordings that she had found at the Canadian Museum of History. After graduating in 2012, Dutcher traveled to Ottawa and spent five years painstakingly researching, organizing and transcribing the songs preserved on the wax cylinders, hearing some that he knew but mostly lyrics he had never heard before. He was determined to reclaim those pieces for his community and started marrying his research as an ethnomusicologist with his artistry as a composer.



"One generation ago, what I'm doing was not possible," he says. His mother was forced to attend a residential school where she was beaten for speaking Wolastoq, but now there are videos online of children dancing to Dutcher's album and the Wolastoq words have been heard around the world. "Step by step, each of us kind of goes out on a limb a little bit," he says of moving indigenous traditions forward into the future. It's a progression he welcomes. His music, with its eerie beauty and riveting crescendos, makes the listener wonder, "Where did that come from?" And maybe that's the point. Dutcher says he hopes to help build a world where "all of us value each other's knowledge fully." ›

LEFT: GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT: MATT BARNES PHOTOGRAPHY

Dutcher pictured on the album cover for *Wolastoqiyik Lintuwakonawa*
Left: Dutcher arriving on the red carpet at the 2019 Juno Awards in London, Canada



THE ORGANIZER

SAGE PAUL

"JUST BEING INDIGENOUS IS POLITICAL IN itself," says Sage Paul. Still, she was surprised how much attention the first Indigenous Fashion Week Toronto drew in 2018. She'd organized the event to include indigenous designers from Greenland, the U.S. and Canada. "In addition to the native community, the fashion community was very present, the arts community came out, too," Paul says.

One Canadian designer, Warren Steven Scott, who debuted there, has since been written up in *Vogue*. And now, as Paul and her cofounders, Kerry Swanson and Heather Haynes, prep for the second biennial IFWTO in May 2020, which will also include indigenous designers from the Philippines and Australia, they're looking to bring their message to a broader audience.

The show comes at a pivotal time, as the world of fashion wrestles with cultural appropriation. Kim Kardashian's line of kimono shapewear, Carolina Herrera's unattributed designs from indigenous Mexican communities and Kendall Jenner's afro have all created social media firestorms. Fittingly, the Indigenous Fashion Week team is preparing panels to discuss the issue, and is eager to show indigenous design in a context that's connected to culture and heritage. "I don't want to sell our culture, I want to celebrate it," Paul says.

Born in Toronto, Paul and her parents moved to an indigenous housing complex on the outskirts of the city when she was a toddler. Her father, part of the English River First Nation, a Dene tribe in northern Saskatchewan, wanted her to grow up around other indigenous people. She learned to sew as she made herself costumes for neighborhood powwows, and her parents, both artists, encouraged her to follow her passion, which led to studying fashion design at George Brown College in Toronto. These days she calls herself an "urban Dene."

Right now, Paul is working on her own highly conceptual collection, Rations, that she plans to show in art galleries. The work, she says, is an "abstraction of the devastating impacts of rationed food used as a tactic to starve and control indigenous peoples."

Though Indigenous Fashion Week participants are looking for commercial exposure, for Paul, one of the larger goals is to introduce a new ethic to the industry: sustainability over fast fashion. "Fashion is probably the most powerful platform of expression," says Paul, noting that every one of us has the chance every day to wear our ethics on our sleeve. "I don't need to make another basic white shirt." ›

Top: Various looks from the 2018 Indigenous Fashion Week Toronto

TOP: NADYA KWANDIBENS. SAGE PAUL PORTRAIT: JOHN BALL

THE HOST

MELISSA GENERAL

THERE WERE ALWAYS PEOPLE making things," Melissa General remembers, thinking back to her childhood on the largest indigenous reserve in Canada, Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, a flat and forested area an hour outside Toronto. "Art is so engrained in the culture, but sometimes people don't think of it as art." Her uncle, David General, was a sculptor, chiseling sweeping stone figures and emerging from his studio covered in fine dust. With that vision in her head, Melissa General left the Six Nations reserve and enrolled at the Ontario College of Art and Design University.

When she arrived in 1997, there were few other indigenous people on campus. "I think when I came to OCAD, there was one indigenous faculty member," she explains. But there was a small group of indigenous students and, she remembers, "I think the students did a good job of supporting each other."

At OCAD, General honed her artistic practice, focusing on blending photos, videos and audio recordings into works that have been shown in galleries around Canada. In 2018, the Ontario Arts Council named her an Emerging Artist laureate and her work was part of the Planet IndigenUS show this summer at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre. Since graduating, she has built a body of multimedia pieces that is focused on her uncle's land, where she often returns to reconnect with nature and her family's history. In *Kehyá·ra's*, from 2016, General dons moccasins on the banks of the Grand River and wades waist deep into the gentle flow to collect water in mason jars. Throughout, she intersperses audio recordings she made of herself taking a medicine bath, evoking the sounds she remembers from childhood under the water in the tub. When she has filled her collection of seven jars, she gingerly carries them out of the frame, taking a piece of the landscape with her.

"It's good to go home and be on the land," she says, smiling, and explains that making this kind of work is an act of "sharing my story: sharing a piece of home and an experience."

We sit in front of a student coop across the street from OCAD, where General manages the new Indigenous Students Centre. There are now 11 indigenous, full-time faculty at the university and the number of First Nations students has risen dramatically. General has helped build a space in the city that feels like home for many of these students, including Philip Cote, who in 2015 completed a master's degree at OCAD (see following profile).

Though the land that she grew up on is still home for her, the indigenous community in Toronto, the largest in Ontario, is making the city feel more and more like not only a friendly place, but one where a mix of native artists are feeding off each other, pushing each other forward. General waves at a passing colleague and muses, "It's beautiful to see so many indigenous artists in one place." ›

Image from the series *Kéyahra: I Remember Akonhwéntsya*, 2013 Above: *Nitewakó:non*, 2015

Toronto Picks

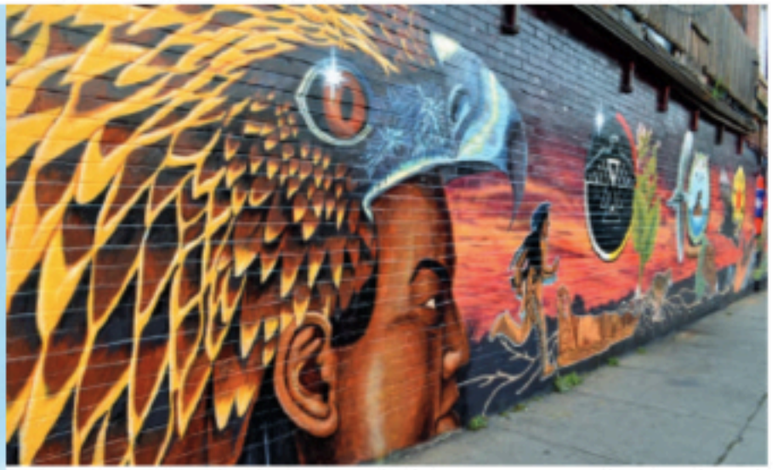
STAY

Kimpton Saint George
Opened last year in the trendy Annex neighborhood, the 188-room Saint George is full of mod furniture, offers pet-friendly amenities and boasts gastropub The Fortunate Fox, with drinks like the Spirit Animal (tequila, lime, pineapple and cassis).
kimptonsaintgeorge.com

EAT

Pow Wow Cafe
In hip Kensington Market, Pow Wow Cafe's Ojibwa chef Shawn Adler plates indigenous-inspired eats such as smoked salmon croquettes with sumac tartar sauce and tacos served on bannock fry bread. Try the cedar soda.
facebook.com/CafePowWow

NishDish
The menu is rooted in traditional ingredients, like beans, corn and squash, which were grown together symbiotically for centuries. Try the Three Sisters Soup, which brings those ingredients together, or the elk skewer wrapped in parsnip with balsamic dressing, above.
nishdish.com



FOR NELLY TOROSSIAN (L), RIGHT COLLIER; TOP TO BOTTOM: COURTESY OF AGO; COURTESY OF PHILIP COTE; SAM JAWANDO; AND COURTESY OF PATEL GALLERY

THE ELDER

PHILIP COTE

When Philip Cote was growing up in Toronto in the '60s, he argued with his teachers. The history books that they read focused on European fur traders and rarely lined up with the histories that he'd learned from the elders in his Moose Deer Point First Nation community on the rural shores of Lake Huron. Half a century later, the city of Toronto has commissioned him to paint the stories of his people in public spaces. "I'm allowed to have a voice now," he reflects as we gaze upon the tail feathers of a van-sized mythical thunderbird he's finishing on the side of a pontoon boat in Lake Ontario.

Over his long career, Cote has worked in many media, carving wood, beading bison skulls and creating stencils of moccasins that are spray-painted on the streets around Toronto. But his best-known murals are raw and graphic, with colorful figures strikingly outlined in black. It's a style that Cote traces back to sketches he made in his school books as a child, but also one that he honed studying the famous works of Norval Morrisseau, the "Picasso of the North," as some call him. Morrisseau brought the vivid Woodland art genre, with its paintings of legends and origin stories handed down through generations on birch bark scrolls, to a global audience in the '60s. In that style, Cote saw an opportunity to share his tribal learning with a broad audience.

As we talk, Cote's assistant, Nelly Torossian, and friend Dr. Duke Redbird, paint in details on both the thunderbird (creator of all things) and an otter, who the stories say taught all knowledge to native people.

When the paintings are done, the installation, called *Wigwam Chi-Chemung*, will be a hub for indigenous learning on the waterfront. Cote, a young elder, and Redbird, an elder, will take groups on boat tours to engage with the waterfront through the lens of indigenous history.

"I'm not a politician, but my work is political," he explains. "It takes on the systemic racism built into our country." Seeing his murals stick out against the backdrop of modern Toronto skyscrapers is both beautiful and jarring. "A lot of people ask questions," says Cote, and that gives him a chance to share his side of history.

Though Cote started going to sweat lodge ceremonies in his 20s, soaking in knowledge from elders, he laments that "a lot of our young people [today] don't participate in those kinds of rituals. They're just trying to fit in. So, to fit in means to avoid being indigenous." He hopes that he and his art can reach those kids and assure them that it's OK to be indigenous, while also sparking thought within the broader public. "I love being an Indian," Cote chuckles, "it's been a hard road, but it's been a gift to be an indigenous person in this moment." AW

Clockwise from top left: Cote in front of *The Original Family*; detail from a Cote mural in Toronto; mural from the Old Mill subway station's *Resurge: First Timeline* series

Finding Stories

where to see indigenous art around Toronto

Art Gallery of Ontario

The AGO has the best collection of contemporary work by First Nations artists in the city. It includes Toronto-based artists like Kent Monkman, but also leading figures such as Brian Jungen, whose *Warrior* sculpture series features masks made from dismembered Air Jordan sneakers.

ago.ca

Old Mill Subway Station

Take a short ride on the green line from downtown to the Old Mill station. At street level (within King's Mill Park) you'll find some of Philip Cote's largest murals on the bridge stanchions, surrounded by green space and deer tracks.

Royal Ontario Museum

The ROM's collection of indigenous art spans the continent and includes generations' worth of artifacts that help tell the story of colonialism and indigenous history in Canada.

rom.on.ca/en

Patel Gallery

A hub of Canadian contemporary artists, including Kent Monkman, Patel is a short trip from downtown. There's a large vinyl print outside, reminiscent of *The Creation of Adam*, but with a man in high heels locking eyes with a bald eagle: Monkman's *Being Legendary*.

patel.gallery