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## We Are Still Here! sparks dialogue on contemporary Indigenous issues

By Brock Weir

Their eyes were glued to an evocative triptych – that is, a painting done by three parts.

It was a depiction of a wendigo, a man-eating mythical creature in Indigenous folklore, who is an evil spirit, sometimes in the form of a human.

The painting, later this summer, will take pride of place in the Residential Schools exhibit at the Woodland Cultural Centre, the Brantford-based museum focused on Indigenous studies, where it will serve as a reminder of cultural genocide for generations to come.

But this dialogue is currently underway in Aurora, where the

triptych forms one of the key focal points in artist Deron Ahsen:nase Douglas's new exhibition, *We Are Still Here*, which runs through August 3 at the Aurora Cultural Centre.

The Indigenous Artist in Residence for the York Region District School Board, Mr. Douglas's triple painting recently caught the eyes of several Grade Five and Six students who toured the exhibition ahead of its opening last Saturday.

"This was one of the most interesting school groups that I have ever taken through," said curator Clare Bolton at the reception honouring the exhibition's opening. "I was showing them some of the paintings and one young boy asked about a painting in the Blue Gallery called *The Windigo Triptych*, and



Artist Deron Ahsen:nase Douglas is pictured at the Aurora Cultural Centre with three of his paintings at the opening reception for "We Are Still Here!"

Auroran photo by Brock Weir

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an important conversation began with these students and it was very inspiring. The Woodland Cultural Centre has acquired this triptych for their permanent collection and it will be delivered for placement within the museum's Residential School exhibit at the end of July. We're really grateful to be able to have this in the exhibition."

Ahsen:nase is a Kanien'keha:ka painter, author and teacher with roots in the Kahnawa:ke Mohawk Territory. As the York Region District School Board's Indigenous Artist in Residence, he has had the opportunity to share his art, culture and stories with a variety of students.

While this exhibition shows the humour and beauty of a vibrant culture, it touches upon serious contemporary issues facing Canada's Indigenous communities as well, including Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and the lingering effects of the residential school system. And, in the beginning, this particular artistic journey was inspired by the work Ahsen:nase does within local schools.

"I typically ask students, what is meant by *We Are Still Here*? What does it mean?" he explained. "The theme for this show first occurred to me about nine years ago. I was teaching within a Grade 5 class. It was near the end of the day, I did my thing, I told some stories, I told

some history. I was leaving, I saw one of the little girls run out to her father and whisper in his ear, and I was close enough that I was able to actually hear what she had to say, and she pointed at me and said, 'Look! There's a real Indian.' That really took me by surprise, but it also made me realise that the youth and general society, they don't really think we're still around; they think we are extinct, that we no longer exist, that we're part of the history books.

"I felt at that point that it was important for me to go out from school to school and tell people that we're still here. This thought kept on running through my mind and when I was given the opportunity by Clare to actually create these paintings, I jumped at the chance."

When Ms. Bolton saw the opportunity, she jumped at it as well.

"This is a project close to my heart," she concluded. "I have taken the responsibility seriously of educating myself on contemporary Indigenous issues over the past years, through exhibitions at the Cultural Centre and also in my own personal life. I would really like to thank Deron for creating a meaningful exhibition of storytelling. His generosity with his time and his dedication to expressing many aspects of being an Indigenous artist at this time in history."

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