

Jane Ash Poitras

believes her

paintings help

heal the wounds

of Canada's

native people.

And she's not

complaining

that her art sells

like hotcakes.

Myrna Kostash

reports

THE SHAMAN

A few steps up the driveway and through the wide-open garage doors took me straight into Jane Ash Poitras's studio, attached to her large house in one of Edmonton's leafy residential neighborhoods. She wasn't there. Apparently unconcerned that tens of thousands of dollars' worth of paintings lay open to view from the

sidewalk, she was in another part of the house, on the phone. It's not that I'd been expecting security guards, but I hadn't thought I could just walk in on one of Canada's eminent artists.

At 45, Jane Ash Poitras has streaked across the Canadian art world with swift and dazzling success since her first public >

exhibition in Edmonton in 1984. Her vivid canvases—most depicting native images, many with a fiery message—hang in at least 50 collections in North America. Some are valued as high as \$50,000. Her last show at the Mira Godard Gallery in Toronto sold out. She is now preparing for a cross-Canada traveling show.

In the midst of this, Poitras is disarmingly casual. Flopped at the kitchen table or on the deck, in T-shirt, shorts and bare feet, braced with a cup of coffee, she answers my questions with nonstop storytelling. You'd think we'd known each other for years.

And so I learn that this aboriginal artist grew up in a white world, torn from the native roots she would later rediscover almost by accident. I learn that her current life of domestic happiness and wealth belies her miserable lonely beginnings. And I learn that on a spiritual quest for "healing," she has also become an art-world celebrity and adept businesswoman, juggling and even enjoying the pressures of dealers, bankers and the media.

But 40 years ago, her very survival was at stake.

Jane Ash Poitras was born in 1951 on a trapline near Fort Chipewyan, Alta., the daughter of a Cree camp cook and a father whose name she would never know. Bounced around among Edmonton foster homes in the 1950s while her mother was dying of tuberculosis (an illness that would claim most of Poitras's close relatives in northern Alberta) she herself was so sick with severe eczema, psoriasis, malnutrition and a hernia, that "I might have died at age 6," she says matter-of-factly.

It is now part of the legend of Jane Ash Poitras that in 1957 Marguerite Runck, a 65-year-old German Catholic immigrant with a grown-up family, found the sickly 6-year-old apparently lost in the streets of her daughter's neighborhood and took her home.

Up they went, up a flight of 350 wooden steps climbing the bank of the North Saskatchewan River. "That's when I learned to climb stairs. There were no staircases on the reserves." Mrs. Runck took Jane on a round of visits to doctors and hospitals and to a language laboratory to learn English. She curled Jane's hair and sent her to Brownies: her home would be Jane's for the next 20 years.

A photograph of Marguerite Runck, a nurturing yet tough woman "who picked me off the street and saved my ass," hangs—like a picture of a household saint—in the kitchen where we're talking. If today Poitras seems serene in the face of her own past, unburdened by bitterness, it is because of the rock-solid security provided by Mrs. Runck's love. Poitras has even used old Runck family photos in her work, to represent the idealized family.

The world Jane thus entered was filled with the church, with the ritual that would emerge so powerfully in her painting, with singing and visiting. A devout Catholic, Mrs. Runck took the girl to Mass every morning and again in the evening. It was a world

of intense listening—to sermons and prayers, and to Mrs. Runck's circle of German-speaking old folk who related their life stories over tea. This oral tradition was the closest thing in the white world to the Cree culture from which she had been taken.

But Jane knew she came from a different world. Mrs. Runck's white lie—that Jane had "only a little bit of Indian blood"—was meant to give the child a sense of belonging even though she stood out visually. "Of course I wondered where I came from," Poitras says. "All the time. It was my curse and my sadness as a child."

Kids threw rocks at her, shrieking "Chinky Chinky Chinaman!" Once, still struggling with English, she was tossed out of school as "retarded." She would find refuge in Mrs. Runck's garden, where she'd sit alone for hours, absorbed by the clouds above and the rocks below.

She also found refuge in the pleasures of drawing, scribbling, cutting and pasting. "I was born an artist," she declares with characteristic bravura, and tells of the "magic" she found in the black ballpoint and purple pens she used to sketch at Mrs. Runck's kitchen table.

The artist was honing her tools. But to find her theme, she would have to become an Indian again.

It didn't happen until the early 1980s, when Poitras, age 30, was studying fine arts at the University of Alberta, having already completed a degree in microbiology. Despite her childhood questions about her origins, she had never probed further. Now, in an undergraduate art class, Poitras met Nora Yellowknee, a Cree student who asked her, "Do you know where your people are?"

Suddenly, Poitras was stirred by the possibility that there *were* people to whom she "belonged." She knew

that the trail began in Fort Chipewyan. A phone call to the nearest Indian agent in Cold Lake, Alta., disclosed "my entire history," and the fact that her mother's sister, Alphonsine, was still alive. Meeting Alphonsine, then going with her to Fort Chipewyan to find other relatives, was like a "rebirthing," Poitras says. "I melted right into them. My behavior was like theirs. The world wasn't all white. I had an identity."

Gaining confidence in her new identity, Poitras participated in several "sweats" in southern Alberta, vision-inducing ceremonies in a stone-heated hut of animal skins. But while exploring this new-found heritage, she was still keen on what the white world had to offer. In 1984 an Alberta native arts and crafts society honored her with an award for emerging native artists; that same year, she headed for New York City on a scholarship to the printmaking program at Columbia University.

A decade later, she still lights up with the remembered excitement of those incandescent years, when "everything was magical." She took anthropology and philosophy courses, prowled galleries to stand awed before Rothkos and Picassos, met other >



Poitras's painting *Living in the Storm Too Long* combines collage, painted images and lettering.

artists, and spent long fierce hours at work in her own studio.

Ironically, it was in the centre of New York City that Poitras metamorphosed into a native artist. Before, her paintings had been competent but conventional abstractions. Now, she began working with aboriginal themes, creating for her graduate exhibition a series of white-and-black prints based on her visions in the stifling heat of the "sweat." It was a hit: the Brooklyn Museum bought one, and upon Poitras's return to Edmonton in 1985, the curator of the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia offered her a solo show, which then toured Canada.

She was 35 years old, "as green as they come," and didn't even know what a curator did, or what to charge for her paintings. "The phone started ringing and it hasn't stopped since," she told an interviewer in 1992.

Poitras learned fast. The "green" artist who stood, knees knocking and with the dry heaves, at her first commercial show in 1987, is now a seasoned professional who has lectured from Charlottetown, P.E.I., to Washington, D.C., and has exhibited her work as far away as Japan. She teaches the history and philosophy of native art at the University of Alberta and serves as secretary of the Canadian Native Arts Foundation. Although Poitras delegates tasks to accountants and agents, she keeps close track of her business affairs; she talks animatedly of her bank accounts and the wild success of her sold-out shows. She bears no coyness as she says, "Money is a powerful thing. It can buy lawyers, computers and housekeepers."

Poitras is also a working mother who shares an absorbing family life with partner Clint Buehler, a German-Canadian journalist she met in 1983, and their sons Joshua, 11, and Eli, 8. As we're chatting in the kitchen, the large, white-bearded Buehler trudges back and forth from the garage, hauling in groceries. Eli wanders in for a snack, and any minute Joshua will arrive with a pack of friends to play Nintendo.

Her family and her business concerns keep Poitras firmly rooted in the everyday. Yet her painting takes her into a spiritual world of native myths and beliefs—a world she has learned to explore through her involvement in the American Indian Church. She took one of her frequent trips to the Salt River Indian reserve in Arizona at Easter 1995 for a ceremony in which Christ's crucifixion was reenacted by deer dancers of the Yaqui Indian nation. She also reads prodigiously about indigenous peoples.

Poitras believes that, like the shaman of the ancient tribes, she has the gift through her art to act as a visionary healer. To make a painting, she literally enters a trance in the studio, usually late at night, in a process akin to prayer or meditation. She lays her canvas or board on the floor, pacing and swooping down with paintbrushes and her bare hands, smearing paint and slapping down photographs or newspaper fragments. It's a kind of craziness and then it's over. She goes to bed and in the morning returns to the painting to put on finishing touches.

The results are works such as 1992's *Living in the Storm Too Long*, with block lettering crowding black-and-white photos of Indians, while text tells us: "Canada's First People: 1. Highest infant mortality. 2. Highest suicide rate." On fields of bold orange and blue, Christopher Columbus's Santa Maria appears on a collision course with a buffalo. Such images and colors, Poitras believes,

help to make the spirit world visible. By putting this world on canvas, she feels she is bringing peace and confidence to the native community, confirming its existence and its dignity.

This emphasis on healing and wholeness explains, I think, why, in spite of the fury and grief she expresses as an artist, Poitras is not an angry person. She does not clobber the guilty White Man; in fact she feels that, by coming to the New World, Europeans "shared their ways with us." When the Edmonton Art Gallery (EAG) asked her to select works for a show on the history of Canadian painting, she included Ukrainian and Chinese, as well as native, artists. "Her selection was both a critique of the way we look at our art history, and a wish to be reconciliatory," says the EAG's former executive director, Alf Bogusky.

Even the recollection of her childhood sadness and the painful anonymous death of her relatives doesn't provoke a rise. "Artists must never forget," Poitras tells me. "But we must forgive. You forgive, you let it go, drop it back into the earth and let the earth deal with it." Then, with a grin, she adds, "I still have to learn how to drop it right away."

A new trial Poitras faced last summer was her diagnosis with cancer in the pelvic area. A few days before surgery, she was remarkably calm about her illness, speaking more passionately about a biography she'd been reading on an authority on shamanism. "I'm not afraid of death," she says. "I'd be just as happy on the other side, but I've got two young kids and they'd be devastated." The surgery was successful; doctors removed the cancer.

Straddling the native and white worlds, Poitras has found a way to feel at home in both, and retains an essential openness that often strikes those who meet her. "She has a childlike enthusiasm," says Pamela Knott, an assistant registrar at a Banff museum who interviewed Poitras in 1989 for a documentary film. Knott remembers admiring the way Poitras was arranging photographs on a collage. "You can do it too," Poitras replied. "It's easy." As though this art business were nothing special.

Poitras's partner, Clint, says he sometimes worries that she is *too* honest, *too* open in her public encounters. One public encounter that brought nasty complications was a late-night run-in with Edmonton police in the summer of 1995, when Poitras was arrested on her bike near some words painted on a roadway. While she initially lashed out at police, accusing them of racism, the dustup ended with Poitras again sounding a conciliatory note (after pleading guilty to causing a disturbance). "Sometimes the justice system does work," she told a reporter.

In her studio, flipping through a stack of painted boards and canvases, she spoke casually of how quickly she had painted them and of how much they were worth, almost as though her studio were a production line and she a jobber. They were all vivid works seemingly executed with conviction but, with the market clamoring year after year for more of the same, Poitras runs the danger of repeating herself.

Perhaps she is already mulling this over. When I asked what her next big project is likely to be, she replied, "Maybe just white canvases!" She sounded only half serious, but it should surprise no one if one of these days Jane Ash Poitras's life and work change again: she will have had another vision. □

Meeting her mother's

family, Poitras felt

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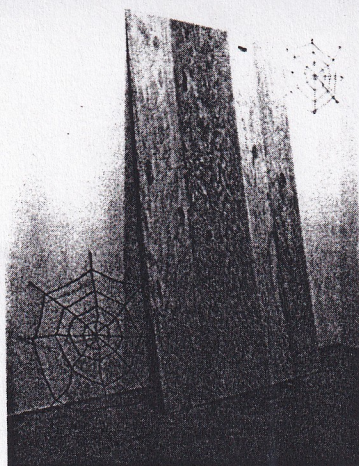
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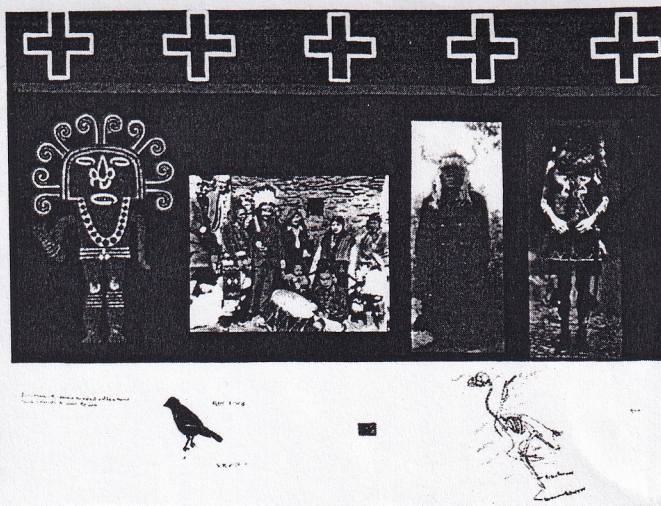
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Michael Coughlan, *Still Life*, 1994, wood, nylon, cord, rubber, 98 x 100 x 19".



Jane Ash Poitras, *Albert Indianstein*, 1994, mixed media on canvas, 3 x 4'.

proved adequate to entrapping and entangling fussy art viewers, often the most elusive of prey.

—Lisa Anne Auerbach

TORONTO

JANE ASH POITRAS

LEO KAMEN GALLERY

Many of Jane Ash Poitras' paintings are detailed homages to traditional First Nations leaders: Poundmaker, Short Bull, Tatanka Pteila, Isapo Mukito, Crowfoot. For Poitras history is not static but vital. She takes the power away from forces of destruction by focusing on the genealogies and contemporary lives of her own people. In *Generations Late* (all works 1994), for example, Black Elk and his descendants share the frame with "Chris" Columbus as though the latter were a casual afterthought, just another relative. Yet the 1930 picture of Black Elk and his son has a much more colonial inflection: it was taken in Germany, in the "Wild Bill West" show. In *Poundmaker I Dance for You*, the photographs acknowledged that Native culture has long survived in interactions with Europeans, that is, that such interactions are not always annihilating and sometimes productive.

Young people—anonymous faces from archival photographs and Poitras' own children—populate her canvases. In *Eyes of Shamans*, an archival photograph of three dark-eyed children, one gently draping his arm around another, gazes from one side of the canvas. This painting balances a contemporary photo of three kids with sweet, goofy grins and stringy hair, sitting on a couch. Below these children a phalanx of wide-mouthed shamanistic figures in

shouting colors—turquoise, red, lime green—stand against a mountainous backdrop. Two bird skeletons rendered exquisitely in chalky white occupy the painting's top panel, painted a matte charcoal gray. The shamans seem to be offering protection to the newest generation of First Nations children, while the delicate skeletons hint at the fragility of these lives.

While much of Poitras' previous work seemed to flirt with chaos, these paintings are carefully structured, their collage elements isolated and contained. Many are organized in three horizontal bands as if to mark the tensions and overlaps between different worlds. In *Navajo Comic Adobe*, for example, the middle of the painting depicts a conquered landscape in ochre with stick figures of mounted priests and armed men. Above them a painterly adobe village is slapped onto a page of comics whose colorful figures appear in the windows and doors, alongside a photograph of a sad-eyed young man. The lowest band, as in most of these works, is abstract. These contrasting pictorial elements, grounded in an awareness of recent history, recreate the tension between the forces of cultural destruction and those of renewal.

Wiry linear patterns that suggest blanket designs surround Poitras' photographs like force fields. These ziggurats, spirals, and concentric diamonds draw on both traditional Native patterns and Modernist abstraction, uniting the distinct spiritual forces that underlie each tradition. Cy Twombly-esque pentimenti of equations and molecular diagrams are scattered in the fringes of the canvases. *Albert Indianstein*—Einstein looking improbable in a feathered bonnet—represents another of the elders, the sources of wisdom that Poitras has gathered around herself. The equations, especially Poitras' variations on the equation relating mass and energy, seem like spirit figures, dif-

ferent from the shaman figures but possessing a similarly whimsical inextorability.

—Laura U. Marks

MONTERREY

FRANCIS ALÿS

GALERÍA RAMIS
BARQUET

The twin series of paintings in Francis Alÿs' recent gallery show probably originated as illustrations to the urban interventions he executed after moving to Mexico City from Belgium five years ago. While the spirit of those ephemeral pieces swiftly spread among the work of many young Mexican artists—including that of Gabriel Orozco—Alÿs' paintings evolved into works that defamiliarize our viewing habits.

In "The Liar," 1993–94—a series of strangely delicate paintings in resin, wax, and oil—an archetypal clerk in a standard gray suit is the agent of seemingly incoherent actions and situations. Awkwardly but forthrightly rendered over muddy, monochromatic backgrounds, this Magritte-like character sits on a bed holding pillows under his arms and between his legs in one work; arranges food and dinnerware on a table in a precarious circle, in another; and, in yet another, blindly pats that same table, a blond wig covering his face.

Alÿs apparently views the canvas as a stage for his own theater of the absurd. But beyond his disregard of functionality, Alÿs' Everyman turns out to be a means of scrutinizing the paintings' properties as objects (i.e. mass, volume, separateness). Having realized these sorts of properties can only be alluded to but not directly presented in a picture, we are provoked into "testing" the paintings' pictorial proper-