

About the illustrations:

Content of the selected illustrations ranges from listening to our ancestors, to wearing the land as your identity, to carrying on tradition.

The illustrations are inspired by historical moments of personal interest as well as emotions felt while researching.



Painting 1: Rossdale

This painting features a female figure between dark soil and a vibrant sky. She is connected to the earth she is resting on. Underneath her is a map of the Edmonton River Valley roads painted as bones. The bones represent the Indigenous burial ground and human remains that continue to be found there. A medicine wheel marks the exact location of Rossdale Memorial, formerly Old Fort Edmonton Cemetery, where the commemorative site lies overshadowed by the electric plant.

“Most Edmontonians don’t know that for more than 50 years we’ve been desecrating a cemetery almost daily.”

Agnieszka Matejko (VueWeekly, 2008)

Painting 2: REDress

In the center of this painting is a red dress, symbolizing the REDress Project, which was created in 2010 by Jaime Black as a response to the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada. The National Inquiry into MMIWG in Canada was launched in December 2015, and report cards are released periodically. The dress is comprised of artistic styles from different Indigenous peoples in Canada. Main pattern influences include Inuit, Metis, Algonquin (Frank Polson), Haida, and Coast Salish. Frozen budding branches surround the dress as an abstract depiction of the women and girls lost at various stages of life.

“Black said a friend of hers, who is also an aboriginal, explained that red was the only color spirits could see. “So (red) is really a calling back of the spirits of these women and allowing them a chance to be among us and have their voices heard through their family members and community.”

Fan-Yee Suen (Interview with Jaime Black for CTV News, 2015)

Painting 3: Residential

A bison and calf face each other on a split horizon, embodying the families and children affected by the Residential School System in Canada. They are on yellow ground suggestive of the prairies, however the bison is on a red sky, symbolic of the way Indigenous peoples were perceived at this time in history (see color explanations). The calf is isolated on a white background, separated from its parent and marked by a red outline. The shadows of this event stretch to the present day.

“In his writings, Woodsworth often extolled the Christian virtues of farming life, a conviction that reflected the church’s position that Aboriginal fishers, hunters, and trappers should transform into Christian farmers.”

J.F. Woodsworth (Principal of Edmonton IRS from 1924-46) to Secretary, Department of Indian Affairs (DIA), 1932

Painting 4: Reconciliation

The highway road is the Highway of Tears in BC, a place where many Indigenous women have gone missing or have been found murdered. This is to acknowledge the high rate of violence that Indigenous women and girls experience. Reconciliation is a controversial topic due to the many perspectives and complicated emotions that surface when reflecting on the consequences of Residential Schools. The yellow represents the western provinces beginning their reconciliation efforts toward Residential School Survivors. The Government of Alberta’s Apology for the Sixties Scoop was on May 28, 2018, demonstrating that we are on the right path, but there is still a long road ahead of us.

“Reconciliation will take some time.”

Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015

Painting 5: Redefine

A figure stands on the prairies with her back turned. The black shawl joins the land representing immigrated and natural-born Japanese Canadian citizens. Both groups were discriminated against during the Canadian government’s implementation of prejudicial World War II policies. The red circle is the red sun of the Japanese flag, as well as the red circle used to outfit ‘prisoners’ who opposed family separation throughout the years of internment. The fence in the distance mirrors the high wire fence of Hastings Park in Vancouver, where men, women and children were detained as they were forced to leave the west coast.

“The pants had a red stripe down both legs, and on the back of our uniforms was a twelve-inch red circle . . . The circle was actually a target for the guards to shoot at should they try to escape!”

(23, May 1942) Okazaki, Robert A. Private Printing, 1996. The Nisei Mass Evacuation Group and P.O.W. Camp ‘101’.

Painting 6: Redress

Echoing the name of ‘REDress’, ‘Redress’ is about the Redress Movement. This was the Japanese Canadian call for recognition of injustices they endured through World War II, such as dispossession, displacement and internment. When war-time restrictions were finally lifted in 1949, Japanese Canadian citizens quietly re-established their lives in a country that had become hostile. After the 100th anniversary in 1977 of Manzo Nagano coming to Canada, pride in being Japanese Canadian was renewed. This kimono serves as a symbol of Japanese traditions once again being celebrated.

“Japanese Canadians have been compared to a stand of bamboo that bends in a storm but straightens up once the storm has past, quickly regenerating its broken shoots and continuing to thrive.”

Ann Gomer Sunahara, The Politics of Racism, japanesecanadianhistory.ca

About the colors:

Up until this point, my work has been primarily black and white to convey ideas simply and concisely. I decided to introduce three colors to the paintings of this project. In the past, these colors were used to discriminate, to define individuals by their skin, and to create fear based around an incorrect perception. At the very least, the color left a painful memory, as detailed by the references below. I hope to draw attention to the impact these colors have by explaining their negative connotations, as well as reframe that negativity into the positive focus of these paintings; both by giving them new meanings and illuminating other interpretations of the colors.

Red Ochre

Redskin: A dated, offensive term for Indigenous Peoples in North America. (Found on oxforddictionaries.com)

Yellow Ochre

Yellow Peril: A phrase used to create fear towards people of Asian descent, beginning in WWI. It was a racial construct in response to rising concerns of an Asian invasion. (Found on thecanadianencyclopedia.ca)

Orange

Orange Shirt Day: “...former student Phyllis (Jack) Webstad told her story of her first day at residential school when her shiny new orange shirt, bought by her grandmother, was taken from her as a six-year old girl. The annual Orange Shirt Day on September 30th opens the door to global conversation on all aspects of Residential Schools.” (On the Home page of orangeshirtday.org)

“I Know What It Looks Like” is a research based art project about personal heritage and events throughout Canadian history.

This show focuses on my Metis and Japanese Canadian background, and it is an artistic expression of controversial cultural events in the history of Canada related to those two sides of my ancestry.

6 large paintings and a selection of original illustrations will be displayed.

Themes include Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, the Residential School system, Reconciliation, Japanese Canadian Internment and the Redress Movement. With recognition of the events that guide the themes in this project, we become part of the process of healing and justice; carrying the stories for future generations to learn from.

Special thanks to Edmonton Arts Council Individual Project Grant.

A compilation of my references and more information about the symbolism in the paintings can be found under “IKWILL” on my website, www.miaohki.com

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#ohkiartshow

“I KNOW WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE”

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