

Bancroft artist featured by UN



David Maris 'Truth and Reconciliation' piece was inaugurated into the UNOG permanent art collection this fall. / SUBMITTED
By Sarah Sobanski

Canada's only piece of art in the United Nations Office at Geneva permanent art collection has Bancroft roots.

Artist David Maris, formerly of Bancroft, had his painting 'Truth and Reconciliation' inaugurated into the collection this fall.

Locals might know his work from his 2015 gallery Consensual Discomfort, with *Bancroft This Week's* Nate Smelle at the Art Gallery of Bancroft, or seen it currently for sale at Country Camera on Bancroft's main street.

The UNOG first saw Maris's work last year during an art exhibition hosted by the Permanent Mission of Canada to the UNOG 'on the causes and consequences of violence against Indigenous women and girls,' said program assistant for human rights Iolanda Joltopuf. The event at Palais des Nations was held 'on the margins of the 33rd session of the Human Rights Council and the annual day of discussion on Indigenous rights,' she said.



Left, Chief Wilton Littlechild, commissioner for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission greets artist David Maris at the an art exhibition hosted by the Permanent Mission of Canada to the UNOG last year. / SUBMITTED

'A great honour for me, was that there were three Indigenous people from around the world? Each one of them said to me this portrays our experience exactly,' said Maris. 'For me, that was the greatest honour because these people have lost family members, communities, [they've been] hunted and murdered and [they're] fighting the fight every day.'

Maris said after the exhibition he received an email detailing that, in closed sessions, the council had spoken about his art and it was looking for a donation for Canada.

'They talked about how art can bring people together and portray stories,' he said noting he was wowed and jumped at the opportunity to be among 'the Picassos of the world.' He said he thought it would be a part of the semi-permanent collection because in the permanent collection each country is only allowed one piece of art.

‘The piece was chosen for its particular link with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its final report launched earlier in 2015. It was also an opportunity for Canada to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Geneva,’ said Joltopuf. ‘Grand Chief Wilton Littlechild [commissioner for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission] spoke of how a dark chapter in Canada's past on residential schools is being rectified using UNDRIP as the basis for reconciliation. We felt the piece represented a good bridge in that respect.’

‘Truth and Reconciliation’ isn't pretty to look at, it's jarring. It's splashed with blood red and a quote by chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Justice Murray Sinclair is painted in a fashion that is almost dug into the canvas over top. Human figures like shadows dancing represent those who have been lost and the cultural voice that was stolen. It's also littered with the word ‘no,’ which Maris suggested may have been some of the last words as Indigenous peoples were killed.

‘I want to make you uncomfortable’ It's an ugly issue,’ said Maris. ‘I don't do pretty pictures about this, I do it to represent the issue itself.’

Marris said he hoped when people looked at the piece they saw the tragedies committed against Indigenous peoples, including the unanswered missing and murdered women and children, residential schools and authorities' bias to Indigenous people.

He said he was honoured that among many other exceptional Canadian and Aboriginal artists he was chosen and that his piece speaks to his role as a ‘60-plus white male and [his] outrage that these issues [of the fight for reconciliation] still aren't being dealt with correctly.’ He defines himself as an ally and advocate through his art.

‘I speak as a white male, I'm angry. I'm not comfortable. I'm not happy that these tragedies continue today and we are not solving them or working aggressively enough on rectifying these issues and bringing our peoples together,’ said Maris.

He added, ‘What we have done to the Indigenous people is horrific. You talk to the survivors? Children six years of age ? that's usually when they would steal them from their families, kidnap them ? but they were placed in these schools? never spoke English at all, never spoke French at all, but from day one when they went in there if they spoke their native language the nuns would pull their tongues out and stick pins through them... This is what was happening within my lifetime to Indigenous people.’

Maris relocated to Switzerland after marrying. He stopped at *Bancroft This Week* while vacationing in the area to visit family and friends.