



THE LAND THAT OWNS ME • Acrylic, 25 x 66"

FIRST NATIONS ARTIST CREATES ART TO SERVE HER PEOPLE

Esquimalt Nations artist Darlene Gait paints colorful and spiritual images that capture the pride of her people.

First Nations artist Darlene Gait of Vancouver Island, BC, is inspired by her Coast Salish culture. The acrylic paintings done by this Esquimalt Nations artist come alive with vibrant colours, poignant subject matter, and strong designs, making them immediately recognizable and in demand worldwide.

Gait says her art reflects her passion for protecting the environment and wildlife as well as her belief in the oneness of humanity and the beauty of its diversity. "I always combine nature with my heritage in a simple way that is easy to understand for the viewer. It's done in a way that hopefully stirs emotion in the individual. There are many layers in my work: the landscape, the people, the nature and the wildlife, all combined to create the feeling of unit."

Noticing other artists' work at an early age, Gait remembers walking past gallery windows in Victoria and Sidney, seeing pieces by Robert Bateman, Roy Henry Vickers and Marla Wilson. Referring to Wilson, Gait says, "Her talent blew me away. It really helped having someone to look up to when I was so young."

The influence of these artists played a huge role in defining the artist Gait is today.

"I was inspired by Robert Bateman's love of nature, and Roy Vickers bravery of painting outside the traditional boundaries. I also loved Emily Carr's work. Her colours are so rich," said Gait.

Another prodigious factor in Gait's artistic and creative development was her grandmother, Hilda Cooper. "My grandmother was a medicine woman — a real medicine woman — I want to make that clear," she insists. People would seek her out and pay her well to make their problems go away. Not just marital or health problems, but she even had a talent for quickly getting people out of jail when needed, according to Gait.

Cooper began training Gait, at 3-yrs-old, to take over the role of medicine woman. "I was like a sponge. I wanted to know everything. She would explain to me how nature worked, how patterns work in nature, how to associate colour patterns with nature. Teaching me really strange things like that."

But Cooper died when Gait was 7-yrs.-old. "It was a really traumatic event in my life. Within three years I started painting. I kept thinking about the things my grandmother had taught me. I still think there was something she said to me, or did to me, when I was a kid that made me love art so much. I was ten when I picked up a paintbrush and it was like everything was defined from that moment forward." Now 39, Gait has painted for 29 years.

Thinking of herself as a spiritual being in a human body, and faithfully practicing the art of meditation, Gait believes her contributions to the First Nations people include spirituality and uniting them through the arts. "I know that's what I'm meant to do and it's a good feeling...I know what I'm going to be remembered for."

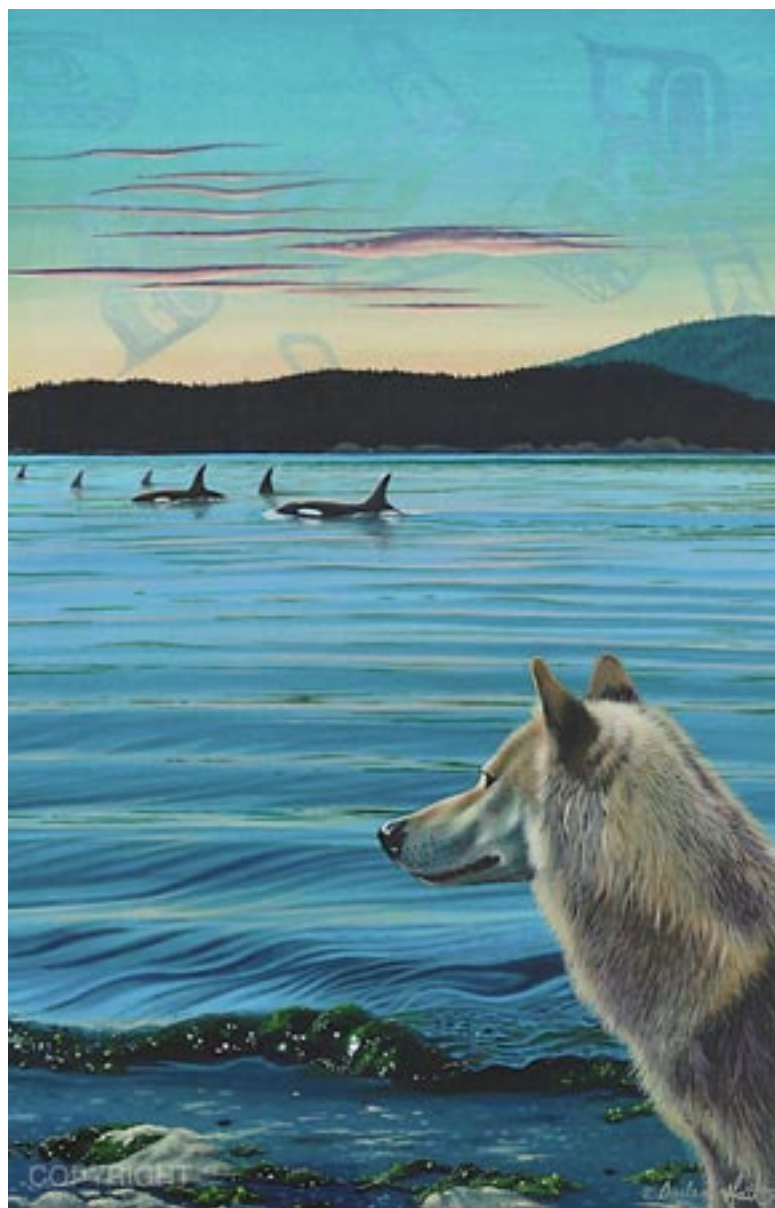
Believing that one of the biggest gifts you can give is learning how to serve others, Gait has found ways to create art that she feels best serves her people.

"If you look at almost any piece I've done, it's designed to show pride of the people. They are looking ahead; they're not looking behind anymore."

By being able to capture that feeling through a painting, and by explaining that feeling to people, Gait hopes it might give upcoming First Nations' artists a sense of direction. "I believe it's important to think more about the future and focus less on the past. The past is part of our heritage, but the future is important for our next generations. We need to look ahead."



THE WATCHER • Acrylic, 20 x 28"



LEGEND OF THE ORCA • Acrylic, 18 x 22"



EQUALITY • Acrylic, 28 x 36"

And Gait has a big challenge ahead of her. In October, 2007 her One Moon Gallery, along with the Esquimalt Longhouse, hosted 'The Spirit of the Fall' event. It featured Native arts, crafts, a mini pow wow and several Native dance performances. From these dances sprung the latest project idea, one that will be perhaps her greatest in scope.

"I want to do life-size canvas paintings of the Esquimalt Nation dancers in full regalia." Her biggest challenge is creating these life-size images of dance with movement and spirituality, "like our ancestors are watching over it."

The images she captured in her mind and on videotape from these dances will help detail her canvases. She wants to show a spiritual side, an artistic side, and a humorous side of the children, the dancers and the elders she knows so well. "I just have to bring it all out. It's historic to me."

This latest project, what she hopes will be a series of 20 paintings, will take her the better part of the next year to complete.

One of the artistic accomplishments that makes Gait most proud is being an invited member of The Artists for Conservation Foundation - www.natureartists.com. The AFC represents a who's who of nature artists worldwide. Limited to 500 members, this prestigious group of many of the world's skilled nature artists is dedicated to the celebration and preservation of our natural heritage.

The honour is two-fold for Gait. Aside from allowing her to give back to the nature that she so vividly portrays in her paintings, it also permits her to be part of an organization that includes one of the people who was so influential in her becoming the artist she is today: Robert Bateman.

Today you can walk into Gait's One Moon Gallery in Esquimalt and be swept into another world. The walls are covered with dynamic visions of eagles and elders, children and birds, wolves and wildflowers.

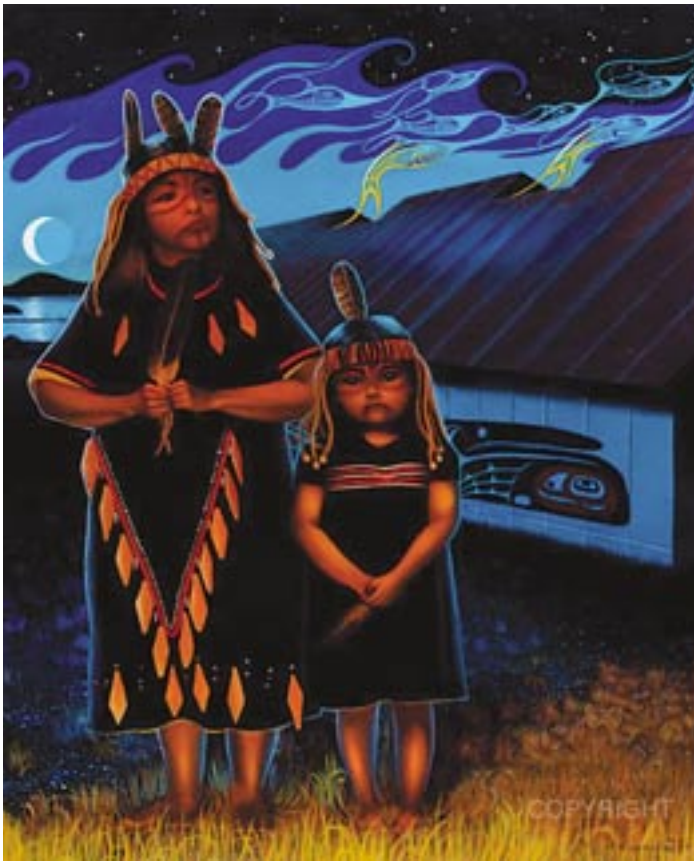
"My studio is quite small but fairly organized. I like surrounding myself with inspiring photographs, art and sage. I always have a candle lit when I work, and listen to the radio or soft music. My dog Lily and my cat Henry are always at my feet." Gait also has a laptop computer that she uses for research and to store photographs that she often uses as reference. Aside from working in her studio, "I paint live during art exhibits or shows and occasionally in my art gallery for the public."

She likes to use a mixture of mediums: acrylic on canvas, acrylic on paper, watercolor paint, coloured pencil, gouache, oil. pen. markers, ink and pencil. Before starting a new painting, Gait always sketches it out in pencil.

The number of paintings Gait completes in an average year varies. "Some years I have done as many as 50, and the next it's closer to 20."

The one thing that remains consistent is her love for color. "I use Liquitex, Atelier Interactive and Golden acrylic paints. Mars Black, Burnt Sienna, Hookers Green, Cerulean Blue Hue, Unbleached Titanium, Paynes Gray, Cadmium Red Medium, Van Dyke Red, Medium Violet, Chromium Oxide Green, Cadmium Red Light Hue, Prussian Blue, Cadmium Yellow Deep Hue, Light Portrait Pink, Naples Yellow Reddish...the colors go on and on and on!"

As for brushes, Gait uses two good larger brushes: A one-inch Gold Sable Series and one-inch H.J. Series 968.



CHILDREN OF THE SEA • Acrylic, 18 x 24"



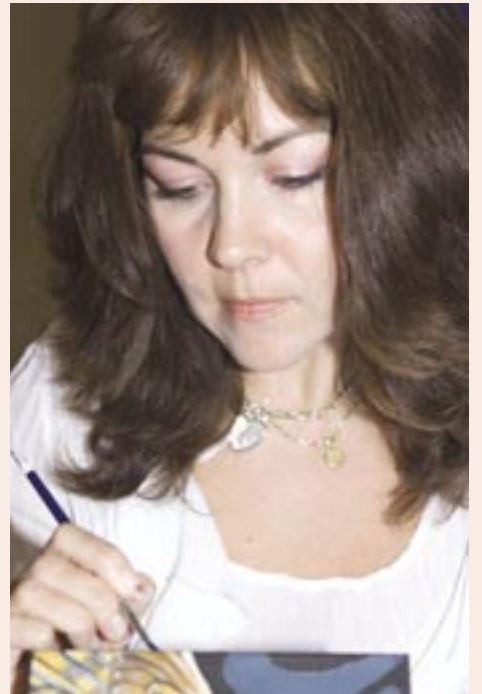
SWEET-GRASS • Acrylic, 18 x 24"

She also uses medium-sized brushes for laying color: four H.J. Aquatec Series 940; and four H.J. Aquatec Series 911. "And for detail I absolutely love these brushes: No. 1 and No. 2 Gold Sable Series 700. Also maybe a No. 1 Artisan Classique AC 802 White Nylon Round."

Gait feels strongly that formal education does not make the artist. "Don't believe you have to go to school to learn to paint. You can do it on your own. It's your unique ability that will get you recognized in the end, not the diploma on your wall. There are millions of artists who went to school to learn to paint who nobody has ever heard of. In the beginning and the end, it will always be your unique style that will set you apart. Hold onto it and try to find people who inspire you to go further." •

Story and artist photo by Penny Rogers

Darlene Gait is recognized internationally, her art is exhibited and held in private and public collections worldwide. Her art is published by Rizvan Fine Arts, Island Art and Orca Publishing.



Darlene has completed many commissions as a book illustrator of Native children's stories including the best seller 'The Secret of the Dance' written by Andrea Spalding and Judge Alfred Scow. She has received many awards including Book Illustrator of the Year, Verse and Vision Peoples Choice Award and the Aboriginal Achievement Foundation Award. She studied graphic design and illustration at Malaspina College. Her work can be found in One Moon Gallery and Eagle Feather Gallery in Victoria, Copper Moon Gallery in Nanaimo, Judy Hill Gallery in Duncan, and The Village Gallery Ltd. in Sidney, BC. For more information, you can visit her websites at www.onemoon.ca or www.darlenegait.com .