

## ANCESTORS RISING-2006

*Ancestors rising* is a site specific bronze sculpture located on the grounds of the the McKenzie Art Gallery sculpture garden in Regina. This site-specific piece researches Wascana Park area in the context of the shared history of Aboriginals and early settlers with the bison. Since the earliest existence of Paleo Aboriginals in this territory (approximately 27,000 years ago), they have co-existed with the bison, first hunting the giant bison alongside the mighty mammoths and in later years, hunting the bison we know today. The bison not only contributed food for the survival of the people, their hides, bones, horns and hooves contributed to many aspects of cultural production such ceremonial items like headdresses and Sundance items, to narrative hide paintings, to utilitarian items such as tipis, clothing, blankets, and implements.

This history is central to the site of Wascana Park, which was formerly known as Wascana Creek (Figure 32) until it was built into a lake with the parliament buildings constructed beside it. The term, 'Wascana' is a variation of a Cree word translating to, "pile of bones" which refers to the piles of bison bones that were seen by early settlers on this prairie landscape. The bones were placed there by the local Cree and Saukteaux people, who believed that the bison would return to the bones of their dead ancestors, and therefore their people would always have food to eat.



Figure 33. Piles of bison bones awaiting shipment at Saskatoon, ca.1890-R-B677-2. Saskatchewan Archives.

When Colonel Palliser arrived in 1857, he named the settlement *Pile-o-Bone*. Shortly there after, new piles of bison bones were made by the colonists, but for a different purposes, export industry and sports hunting. Massive piles of bison bones were sold for fertilizer and chinaware, colonial sport safaris killed off large numbers as they rode through the prairies on their trains. As well, government policy encouraged the death of all bison in order to starve Aboriginal people, whom they viewed as a hindrance to their colonial

expansion. Several archival photographs reveal early settlers posing beside massive pile of bones ready for manufacturing and export. (Figure 31) The combination of the bison industry with sport hunting, eventually culminated in the extermination of wild bison from the prairie landscape. This extermination marked a significant change of life for Aboriginals of the plains, their main staple of food was gone, bringing much hardship, and the long history of cultural production of bison materials had ceased.

Today, 'pile of bones' has a different meaning to the people of Regina, it marks the annual celebration of colonial settlement. This celebration highlights early 1900 style



Figure 34. *Ancestors rising*. (Detail of work in progress). 2006. Artist with son, Art Longman. Bronze. H: 54" x D: 228."

costumes and stage shows of singing and dancing. Curiously absent for many years was any sign of aboriginals in these historical re-enactments, until very recently, some aboriginal shows began to appear. Perhaps one day, 'Pile of Bones Day' will truly reflect the original history of this land, though for now, the bones lay silently beneath the soil of which they dance upon.

To address the silence of this submerged history, *Ancestors Rising*, becomes the symbolic metaphor and the voice of the silenced spirits and calls to their resurrection from the soil so their presences is known. The bison horn in and of itself, was a powerful symbol for Plains

Aboriginals, its zymology referenced respect, strength and courage. In the old days bison horns could be seen on prestigious head regalia that symbolized the wearer's status of a respected leader.

The four horns stand in a circle, each in the position of the exact direction of north, south, east and west, referencing the ultimate power of the balance in life. From each of the tips of the horns flows a braided rope, which all meet in the center of the circle to suspend, and cradle a woven net of rocks, that hovers just above the ground. These braided ropes of copper patina, refers to the ancestors power as conduits of energy that combine their energies to help heal the people.



Figure 35, 36. *Ancestors rising*. 2006. Bronze. Diameter: 20', Each Horn- H: 54" x D: 228."

The stones recall early burial sites made of stone mounds and red ochre pigment. The stones also reference a long history of their use in Plains culture. The permanence of stones traced the history and cultural practices, and documented important places, events, commemorations and memorials. They were used for its

practical physical properties and for its spiritual and metaphysical properties. The dense, physical properties of the stone served well for utilitarian purposes such as tipi rings, fire pits, burial sites, and caches, and in items used for tools and warfare. The metaphysical properties of the stone served as a medium of communication to the spiritual realm, which could be seen in the remnants of medicine wheels, pictographs, petroglyphs, petroforms, sacred boulders, amulets and carved figures and pipes.

In conclusion, the sculpture, *Ancestors Rising* serves as an urban historical marker that memorializes the Aboriginal and bison that lived off of this very land, only two hundred years ago. From this work, I ask the audience to bear witness to this history, to acknowledge it and give this place and its spirits, the respect and commemoration it deserves.