

ELK MAN WAITING FOR LOVE-1999 AND ELK WOMAN'S STRENGTH- 2004

In 1999 and later in 2004 I created two sister pieces surrounding the topic of love and courtship. The work *Elk man waiting for love* (Figure 28, 29), produced in 1999, was an exploration of the universal topic of love, spoken from traditional courting rituals of Plains Aborigines. The elk was a predominant figure in Plains courting rituals, with its head carved into the flute and its mouth open to allow for the song to escape. A male would serenade a woman with this courting flute as a form of anticipated engagement for marriage. The elk was revered for its powerful songs during the time of mating and



Figure 28, 29. *Elk Man Waiting for Love*, 1999. Matrix, elk antlers, CD sound track, 60 x 55 x 41cm.

fertility. Its natural song during the mating season emanates power and longing and if heard in the distant forests, can sound magical and intimidating. The traditional courting ritual usually occurred at large events, in order to guarantee witnesses at the time of the proposal, and is said to occur at public events such as at Sun dances. These events were not only a time of annual ceremonies but an opportunity for socializing and "snagging." If a young man was interested in a woman, he would come by her tent at night and serenade her with his flute. It was believed that if he played the flute exceptionally well, he could entice any woman with the beauty of the song and the power of the elk would assist him. If the woman was agreeable to his request, she would bring out her blanket and the two would promenade around the camp, announcing their commitment.

The life size *Elk man* represents the longing for love and courtship symbolized by the two rocks in his hand bound together with a lock of hair taken from his desired love. His longing is expressed through his elk calls that exit his mouth, made possible with a recorded loop tape played on a CD player, hidden inside his body. This work revives traditional courting rituals with a contemporary twist, in that the humanizing of the elk and reminds us of the universal power of love. It is unfortunate that this courting ritual is not practised today, as I am sure many

women would love to have this early romantic engagement revived along with traditional aboriginal weddings. In such a short period of colonial history, these practises have been forgotten, being replaced with the Christian white wedding, which now is unconsciously the norm, despite not having any cultural ties to their traditions. It is interesting that many recent immigrants of this country marry within their traditional practises of their country such as those of Asian and East Indian descent, yet aboriginal people have adopted the colonial wedding, despite their long history of traditional practises here, which may be indicative of the impact of the power of enforced assimilation strategies.

Elk woman's strength (Figure 30, 31) was initially inspired by my life's passage into motherhood which led to an appreciation and acknowledgement of women's contributions to life, family and community. My role as a mother began late in life at the age of forty. With years of concentrating on education and my career, and waiting for the right time to have a child, I realized that now I had to make it a priority. The experience of giving birth in and of itself gave me a renewed appreciation for women's strength and courage. When my son came into my life, he dramatically changed my life in that he filled my heart with an explosion of love and joy that was unparalleled to anything I have ever felt before. I named him 'Art' because he certainly was my most favourite work of art and he certainly was the most challenging to produce. I had waited and wanted the best situation for my first born, though sometimes life doesn't go as planned and I found myself as a single mother shortly after his birth, so I had to do the best I could to provide for him, meet his needs, and give him all the love that I had for our journey together.

At this time I thought about woman's natural instinct to nurture and their gift to the world which is her life-giving force and her ability to provide love and leadership in family and community. A testament to her strength is evidenced in giving birth itself, which is a tremendous act of courage that some women do over and over again because their love



Figure 30, 31. *Elk Woman's Strength*. 2004. Matrix G, elk antlers, wood, stones, horse hair, glass ball, light, synthetic eyes, teeth and tongue, paint 114 x 100 x 100 cm

outweighs their pain and discomfort. A mother can sacrifice much for her family, putting aside her career and independence in order to concentrate on providing a home of love, support and security. In the Aboriginal community it is often the women who are the silent pillars of strength, who organize events which ultimately support the healing, cultural pride and strength that is needed to advance their communities.

At times these sacrifices and efforts can be taken for granted, and the woman's personal power is undermined. Gender issues and feminism have been addressing inequalities for years and within our own communities what was once egalitarian roles where women commonly held leadership roles, as medicine women, as wise elders, as the carriers of family names in matrilineal societies, has changed in the recent past. The adoption of patriarchal perspectives and increased violence against women, have led community values a stray. Though now women are regaining their positions of leadership in communities, becoming educators, medicine people and chiefs. With this change, it is expected that they will be the ones to address the violence against women in their own communities, which would require the community to come together as a whole to draw upon their courage to stand up and oppose abuse so victimizers realize that abuse is no longer an option because the community will no longer turn a blind eye.

The work *Elk woman* serves as a reminder to men and women of women's personal power in all its facets. Women deserve the reciprocation of respect and love that they freely give to others. In her human and elk metamorphism form, *Elk woman* appears to return the mating call of *Elk man* as she gently cradles her illuminated unborn fetus. Despite her metamorphic appearance, she has a realistic presence due to the materials used to construct her, such as her eyes, teeth and tongue which are replicas of elk parts from a taxidermist. Her hair comes from a horse and her spine is made of cow bones. Her hands and feet are a direct cast of my hands and feet.

In a recent solo exhibit, that was a 12-year survey of my work at the McKenzie Art Gallery in 2004-2005, *Elk woman* and *Elk man* were brought together for the first time. They shared an entire room, sitting across from each other, appearing to have a conversation. Their physical appearance connects them, the space connects them though physically there is a large distance between them. Their longing has taken them on two different paths of love. In conclusion, *Elk women* revealed my own matters of the heart, of love, separation and motherhood as a single parent, though I had hoped that the worked bridged that shared experience with other women and inspired them with the reminder of their own personal strength.