

Rocky Mountain Outlook

## Activist using art to achieve peace

By Rob Alexander - Rocky Mountain Outlook

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When we talk about peace as the opposite of war, Victoria artist and peace activist Deryk Houston believes what we are looking for can be found in the Muskwa-Kechika region of British Columbia.

The Muskwa-Kechika, which means 'bear' and 'long, inclining river', respectively, is a 6.4 million hectare region of northeastern B. C. initially established as a management area in 1998 and enlarged in 2000.

It is a culturally and ecologically significant landscape that is not entirely closed to industry, but in areas resource extraction is allowed, demands a higher standard of practice than the rest of the province.

It is a region Houston has visited twice now to understand life and it is a place that he believes epitomizes what peace should be.

As an artist, Houston began travelling to Iraq in 1999 to witness the effect war and international sanctions were having on the Iraqi people, specifically the children.

It created a lasting effect on Houston that continues to influence him and his work.

"My art practice is related directly to Iraq," Houston said Tuesday (March 16) from his home in Victoria.



Nettie Wild in the Muskwa-Kechika Wilderness acrylic on canvas by Deryk Houston.

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And his current body of work – a series of acrylic-on-canvas paintings featuring the Muskwa-Kechika – now on display at the Canada House Gallery in Banff is connected to his experiences in Iraq, his quest to seek understanding and to help bring peace one step closer.

“This a way to work through it as well and trying to find a gentler way to do that. There are so many different ways to use your art. When you have an issue you are passionate about, you want to let people know about it. It has taken quite a bit of time to evolve and find a way to be more gentle and more acceptable for people to listen to,” he said.

Even though Houston’s paintings of the Muskwa-Kechika, inspired by a summer 2008 visit when he spent 11 days travelling through the region by horse with conservationist and guide Wayne Sawchuk, are moderately small in physical size – 36 in. by 36 in. – they are massive in scale, reflecting the nature of the region.

Houston paints, sculpts and creates large-scale landscape installations, making him difficult to categorize, something he prefers as all of his work is interconnected and, as he says, a part of the same fabric.

“When I see war and I see peace, I want peace and when I see the wilderness I want connections to that. This is really what we want: it is beautiful, untouched landscape in the world, like Muskwa-Kechika, that has not been touched or broken yet. It is like a beautiful vase that hasn’t been broken. And if it gets broken, it could be glued back together again, but it’s got little cracks in it. It’s not the same as the pristine one. The Muskwa-Kechika is still in its pristine state,” Houston said.

By displaying paintings of the Muskwa-Kechika, Houston hopes to inspire people to talk.

“That is how you solve or find solutions. That is the same thing with war; that is the same thing when countries are battling each other. Ultimately, the battlefield is not where it is decided. You have to start talking and bringing people together and that is why I am doing this show,” he said.

“I want to be reaching the very people who haven’t quite made up their minds yet.

“That is what I try to do with my art.”