Indoctrination of Natives (Front Cover Art) Celina Ritter

photocopies, latex paint, acrylic, rhoplex, glitter, magazine cutouts, candles, felttipped pen, mylar, pigment on plywood. 99.0 x 122.1 cm 1990 Saskatchewan Arts Board Permanent Collection

There were eighteen children in our family from one mother and father. Six siblings died before I was born. All of my siblings and me were born at home, while the three younger ones were born in the hospital. We were raised on the farm and had all the fresh vegetables, meat, poultry, eggs, milk, and cold clear water from the well. We could go outside anytime and play all day. We were free and happy.

In contrast, my four-year experience at Blue Quills Residential School was the most horrific time of my life. When I was six years old, I was forced to go to the residential school at St Paul, Alberta, which was about seventy-five miles from home. We were trucked there and not allowed to go home until June. All our personal clothing was taken from us, and we were issued cotton dresses and shoes. We were all given short haircuts and forbidden to speak our languages. If we did we were punished. The

CELINA RITTER is a Dene from the Cold Lake First Nation in Alberta. She holds a Bachelor of Education from the University of Calgary and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Regina. Her work has appeared in a number of group exhibitions, including Running Wild (Saskatchewan Arts Board, 2003-05), Cold Lake Native Friendship Centre Art Show (2004), Honouring the Staff of Life (Triangle Gallery, Calgary, 1995), It's a Cultural Thing (Chinese Cultural Centre, Calgary, 1993), and Sharing the Circle: Contemporary Work by First Nations Artists (1992), the Saskatchewan Arts Board exhibition in which the collage, Indoctrination of Natives, first appeared. Her work forms part of the permanent collections of the University of Regina and the Saskatchewan Arts Board. She currently lives in Onoway, Alberta.

food was terrible, and the water tasted like rusty pipes. Any letters which were written home were scrutinized by the nuns and sometimes were never mailed. I was traumatized considerably, suffered humiliation from the nuns and Cree children who were there. We were called "savages" and were made to be ashamed of our bodies (my skinny legs). Today, I still have a hard time wearing a dress. I went to church with my parents when I was young and always loved going there, because of the love I felt from a Higher Power. But when I was at the residential school, I prayed that I could be rescued by my parents. I used to stand at the dorm window praying and crying.

My interest in art began with my first colouring books and crayons. I remember colouring by the light of the woodstove in the morning when no one else was up. This interest continued.

The collaged artwork, *Indoctrination of Natives* (1990), was a way to express my feelings about the forced religion on us. It is a white painted church on varnished ply board. The white paint represents the government and the white society who tried to assimilate us into their cultures. The ply board represents the cold and hardness of the scheme. The smell of the varnish brought back the memory of smells foreign to me when I first entered the residential school. The roof of the church is pages from the Bible, with verses about sin, evil, devil, and the fires of hell. The church door is also a copy of the Bible text and the crucifixion of Christ who died to save our souls.

The Bible is good, but the manner in which we were indoctrinated by those who represented the church is the issue I have a problem with. To this day, I am still in the process of re-establishing myself and reclaiming my true identity which I lost innocently. Today, I can laugh again, sing, and be free to carry on my life's journey.

Celina Ritter March 2010