



Ganawenda (To Protect)

by Jessica Somers

Art is a way for me to give a voice to my ancestor's connection to the land, their suffering, their pride and beauty as a nation. I lay down my tobacco and ask my ancestors for the guidance, love and support to create. Some of my pieces have bold bright colors reflecting the beauty of nature, others are dark, dramatic and sometimes controversial. The paintings help me connect to the spirits around me and allow me to find some peace and healing within myself. Painting, for me is another way to bring awareness to the dark chapter of Canada's First Nation people.

It is estimated that there are over 4000 Indigenous Women, girls and gender diverse individuals that have been murdered and missing in the last 3 decades.

I can't imagine what it would be like to lose a mother, sister, auntie or loved one. Or when dealing with the police, you're subjected to discrimination and racism. Your loved one is automatically labeled as someone who has lived as "high risk," or it's suggested that they are just partying. You are re-victimized—treated like your loved one's life is not important enough to be a priority. You can never have closure. You will always have

a feeling of hopelessness, and experience a lifetime of unresolved loss and grief. Your loved one is just another faceless statistic.

In this painting, the color Red is dominant. The red dress and shirt symbolize the Indigenous women and gender diverse individuals who have been murdered or are missing. The red hand symbolizes solidarity and that we will be silenced no more.

The bear spirit is the protector. She is a strong source of support in times of difficulty. She guides you to be a leader. Her spirit may ask us to accept an authoritative role, not only directing our own lives but guiding others. Think of the height and weight of the Bear – her presence demands respect; this is not the time to be silent, but rather a time to challenge, to engage, to educate and to inspire! She is feared and admired for her courage. She stands tall facing the threat of harm without fear. She invokes power, inner strength, fearlessness and healing as she holds the woman in the red dress.

May we all be bears in these times of reconciliation.