An Interview with Katsi'tsakwas Ellen Gabriel, of the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation, Turtle Clan

INTERVIEWED BY KIM ANDERSON

Présidente de l'Association des femmes autochones du Québec depuis 2004. Ellen Gabriel défend la cause des femmes autochtones pour le gain de leurs droits face aux politiques sexistes incluses dans la loi des Indiens. Son travail consiste à aider les femmes à porter leurs messages aux niveau provincial, national et international. Madame Gabriel a été choisie par le clan de la Maison longue et a été mandatée durant la crise d'Oka en 1990 pour protéger les Pins de l'expansion d'un terrain de golf à Oka. Elle a voyagé à travers le Canada, à La Haye en Hollande, à Strasbourg en France pour parler au Parlement européen et au Japon. Au cours de ses voyages, elle a informé les gens des événements dans sa communauté en 1990 et les a sensibilisés à la culture, à l'histoire et à l'identité des autochtones . Elle croit que l'éducation est une des façons qui va leur permettre de surmonter leur statut d'opprimés tout en gardant leur langue, leur culture. leurs coutumes et leur structure politique.

President of Quebec Native Women's Association since October 2004, Ellen Gabriel advocates on behalf of Aboriginal women so they may gain their rights back in the wake of sexist policies coming from the Indian Act. This work includes assisting women to carry their messages to provincial, national, and international levels. Ms. Gabriel was chosen by the People of the Longhouse and then her community to be a spokesperson during the 1990 "Oka" Crisis, which involved protecting the Pines from the expansion of a nine-hole golf course in Oka. She has traveled across Canada, to the Hague in Holland, to Strasbourg in France to address the European parliament, and to Japan. In her travels she has worked to educate people about the 1990 events in her community and to sensitize the public on the history, culture, and identity of Aboriginal people.

Ellen has a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Concordia University. She worked as an illustrator/curriculum developer for Tsi Ronteriwanónha ne Kanien'kéka/ Kanehsatà:ke Resource Center in Kanehsatà:Ke and also worked as an art teacher for the Mohawk Immersion School for grades 1–6. Ellen has also worked on videos illustrating some of the legends of the Iroquois people and the local stories of the community of Kanehsatà:ke. She believes that education is one of the ways Aboriginal people can overcome oppression while still maintaining Indigenous languages, cultures, traditions and traditional forms of political structure.

Kim: *Can you talk a little bit about your work as the President of Quebec Native Women's Association, and how you got involved?*

Ellen: I observed that the work being done by the Association was effective and well respected; as well, I admired the past presidents who strengthened the work of the organization so I decided to join. Plus I'm motivated to be an agent of social change and I was interested in continuing to do advocacy work outside of my community and nation. I started attending Quebec Native Women's Association meetings and now I've become the President. In between all that, of course, I've tried to maintain my artistic side and keep that creative ideas flowing because that has been a good outlet for me.

Kim: Q*uebec Native Women has always struck me as one of the most dynamic Native women's organizations in the country. What are some of the initiatives you've been working on?*

Ellen: Well, first of all, the organization was really well established before I came on. It has been nourished by the dedicated women who have been part of the organization, accompanied by some dynamic individuals who have dedication, passion, and care for the women in the communities and at the urban level. That is why I think the Quebec Native Women has always been one of the more active associations, like you said. We are well organized and we have people who are very dedicated and don't mind a low-paying job. I'm not too sure if it's also be-

Ellen Gabriel, 2005. Photo: Kenneth Deer.

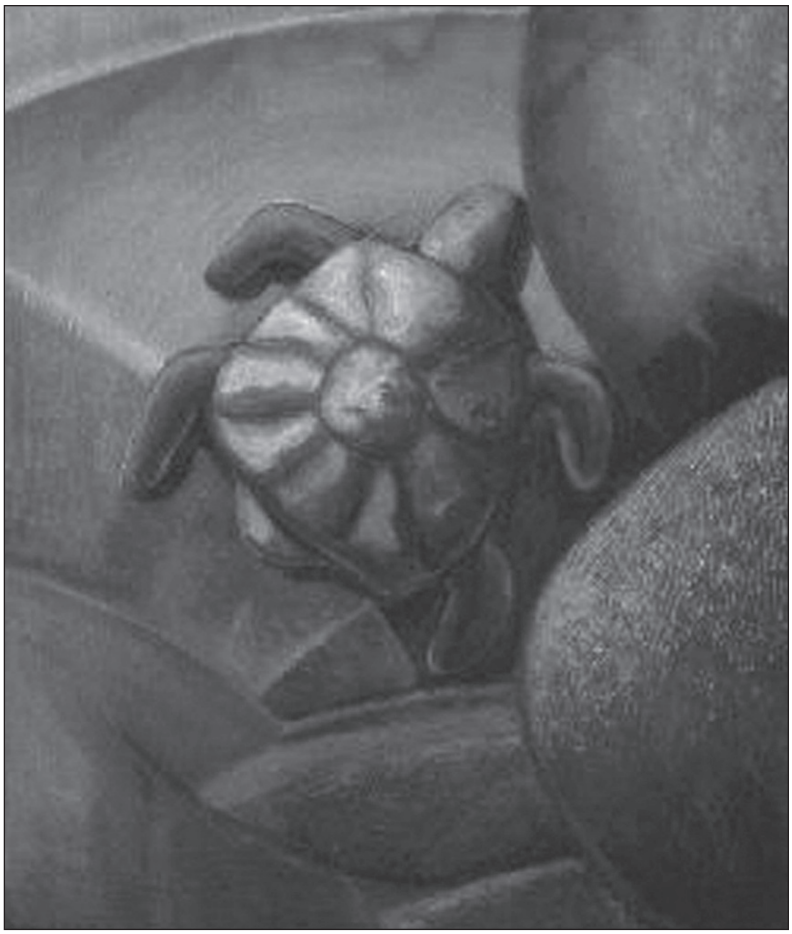
cause the French-English situation has caused us to struggle more than other provinces to maintain our identity. There have also been some interesting allies along the way that have helped the Aboriginal women's movement in Quebec become so well-established. Like the late Rene Levesque, as well as some of the major women leaders of the women's movement in Quebec.

In 1988, QNWA was the first [Native] group in Canada to publicly denounce the violence happening in our communities, and that work has continued to this day. When I came on, there were new projects, such as the sexual abuse file, matrimonial real property, Native Women Shelters network, amongst others. We're going into our third year with that. There's a youth program, justice and public security, employment and training, a health file, and an international file. QNWA creates research to make tools that frontline workers can use in their work. The board is comprised of nine out of eleven nations in the region as well as an urban women's representative and a youth representative.

Kim: *Can you describe some of the international work of QNWA?*

Ellen: The international file was one of the things that was just starting when I got on. Now we have partners in Latin America. It has been eye-opening to see the impact colonization has had, and to see how similar our experiences are with other Indigenous peoples. One striking effect is the impact of machismo on our languages, cultures, and identities amongst all our people, and in particular how it is affecting the lives of Indigenous women in Latin America.

We now have a partner in Panama who's developed a course on leadership for Indigenous women, as well as on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. We would like to see an on-line course on writing a business proposal and how we in the North can help Indigneous women entrepreneurs partner with women [from other countries] to help create a market for our goods. Presently, we are working with a consultant that



Ellen Gabriel, "Turtle's Journey," oil on canvas, 41 cm x 51 cm, 2001.

Ellen Gabriel, "Remnants of Overdevelopment," acrylic on canvas, 4' x 4', 1989.

works with the Asia-Pacific Economic Council to create different kinds of market models so that Indigenous women can become more self-sufficient, because anywhere in the world Indigenous women are marginalized, and are the poorest of the poor.

We also want to submit an economic development proposal to CIDA this year, to partner with some businesswomen in Panama and maybe some other parts of Latin America. We'd like to do an exchange; bring some of their products up here, help them write business proposals, have a partner in Canada, and so on.

Kim: *I've always been interested in leadership and Indigenous women. What's involved in the course you offer?*

Ellen: Well, it's all in Spanish right now, and it's a computer-based course. There are over three hundred participants so far. There are little sections and each one is a scene. Participants talk about social issues of violence as well as how to use international instruments to lobby our governments, how to give a speech, how to do research on issues—so there's some really interesting things that are being developed.

I find that the women in Latin America are very well organized. They don't have funding, but they march in the thousands, and they're very vocal. They do work with men's groups too. It's interesting to see the differences between us and the passion we share for social justice issues.

Kim: *Is there anything distinct about they way they teach leadership?*

Ellen: I remember attending a three-week workshop in Peru in 1985, and it really covered the gamut of identity. They'd say, "Okay what is so special about you region?" Women would bring in plants. If they didn't have the plants they would bring in vegetables like corn; they would bring in whatever they had. They would talk about their language; they would talk

about their home, their family, their ceremonies, their spirituality. These are the things they talked about as necessary for defining the characteristics of a leader. A leader should know where they come from, who they are, and have a link to their ancestry. I found it really refreshing, as opposed to what we learn up here: how to be a good administrator, how to write proposals to government, how to do your budget and stuff like that. They teach them that too, but we don't see the other stuff.

Kim: *That's a very different type of grounding.*

Ellen: Yes, very much. They did a lot of bonding exercises to get to know one another.

The solidarity is really evident there. There's a unity. Like before Apartheid was broken in Africa, people would march in demonstrations in the hundreds of thousands. They had this collective experience. For Aboriginal people in Canada at least, the collective experience is gone. The collectivity remains in the past and we're not using it now, unless we organize blockades.

Kim: *Let's talk a little bit about Oka and what's changed, because that was a defining moment for a lot of people across the country. And of course, you had people coming from all over to unite. It really flared up with that and it's never happened in that way again. As you think back over the last twenty years, what has changed in terms of activism?*

Ellen: Well, I think what was interesting was that people behind the barricades had no clue what was going on in the rest of Canada until a few weeks after it started. I mean, TV was not our priority. I think we could catch the 11 o'clock news if we had time. And so when we heard about the support, it was really empowering for us because it was a time in everybody's lives—I'll just speak for myself—where there was so much unknown. *There could be a gun battle any second. Am I going to make it through this experience? What's going to happen to me afterwards? Am I going to jail and am I going to jail for a long time?* There were a lot of uncertainties, so when we heard about protests and when we had people from all over Canada sneaking in behind the barricades to come and tell us: "Our community supports you, our community donated food," it brought back our faith in people and humanized us again. Because the media certainly took that away from us, and the government certainly took that away from us. And so morally, spiritually, we needed that.

There were a lot of uncertainties, so when we had people from all over Canada sneaking in behind the barricades to come and tell us: "Our community supports you, our community donated food," it brought back our faith in people and humanized us again.

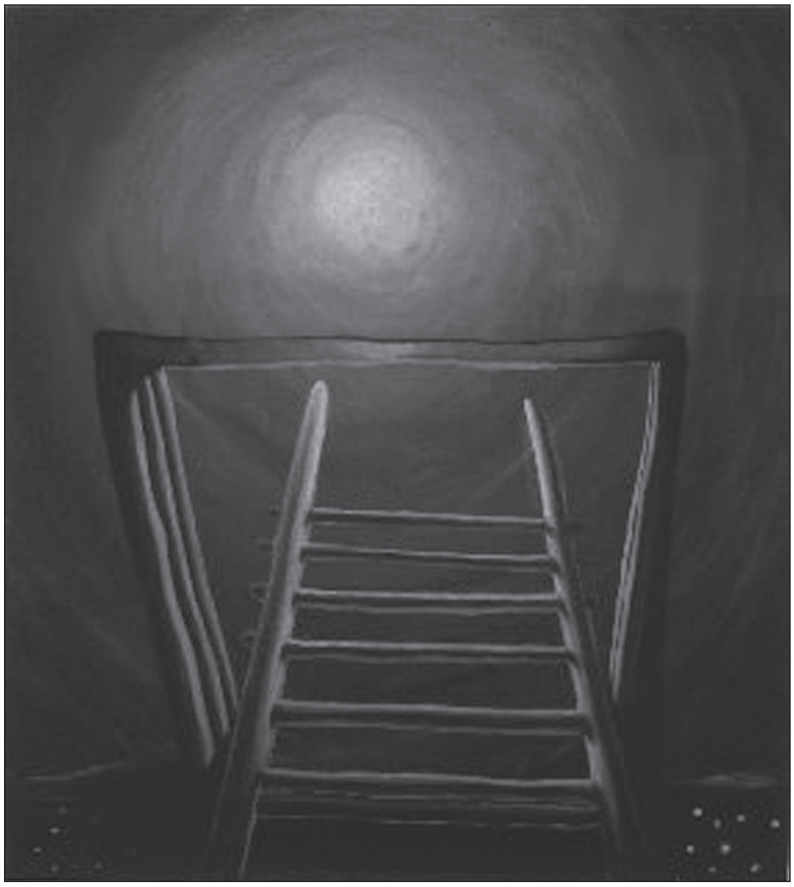
Then afterwards, it took a few months for me to realize that the youth were really affected by this and nobody was there for them. Their impression was that being a Mohawk meant being a warrior and being a warrior meant being a badass. And this is the problem that we have today; I find that my community has gone backwards in growth, rather than forwards, whereas a lot of the other communities have grown.

Kim: *You mean communities that weren't actively engaged had more opportunity to grow from this experience? Maybe people that were witness to it, but necessarily not right in the middle of it?*

Ellen: Well, it surprises me, because even now I get people telling me what was happening to them during that time, and it's eighteen years later! People seem to have the need to tell me what was going on for them; that Oka was such a good thing that happened for everybody. Meanwhile I'm thinking, "Well no, not for my community." But it did that; it inspired pride, empowerment—and people became more aware on the state of our languages, for example, which is really important to me. I think it also empowered other communities to say, "Okay, well we're not taking this anymore. We're going to put up blockades." And they know how to use the media now, which was not there before. So there were a lot of positive things that happened for Aboriginal people.

I think it was a good thing and it was worth the sacrifice. Just to know at least we did something that might help one little community that no one has ever been aware of before. I guess it's difficult to say how deep it goes, not just for me personally, but for others.

Kim: *Well, and for non-Aboriginal people too right? Because I know both Native and non-Native people who told me that it was a life-changing experience. I have non-Native friends who left Quebec as a result of what happened. They were so appalled at the reaction that they lost their faith in the province. Of course, the federal government was involved too, but I guess they thought that Quebec was better than that. So it had such a profound effect on all different types of people. But it's interesting to hear you talk about what happens to a community after all the press and the people go away.*



Ellen Gabriel, "Gazing at the Ancestors," oil on canvas, 41 cm x 51 cm, 2001.

Ellen: Yes … there were programs for healing. We had a lot of people that came to us. Some said, "We'll do sweats for you," but what they were thinking about was power. Kanehsatake was like a magnet, bringing together a diversity of people. There were those who wanted our stories; who wanted to take something from us that they thought was power. There were a lot of charlatans, people who saw money opportunities, maybe thought that we were like hicks or hillbillies that would fall for their storyline. But we were very careful and cautious because we made decisions as a group.

It was also a little scary at the time, because the whole idea was to stop development of a golf course. The issue was our rights to that land. And people came in with their own agendas that we didn't know about.

Kim: *Was Oka your first foray into activism? How did you get involved?*

Ellen: Well, there was a certain faction of the Longhouse that decided to maintain the barricades after all the injunctions came in against us, and I was close to that family. I had taken an oath when I joined the Longhouse to uphold those laws and those values. So when this came along, I thought: *it's not like I have a decision or a choice; I have to do this*. And I learned as I went along. I learned from my Elders who were there. I learned from people who had some experience in negotiation and so I'm really thankful for them.

Kim: *So you hadn't been a leader in that sense before? You hadn't had experience negotiating?*

Ellen: People might be surprised when I say this, but I'm very much an introvert. I think most artists are; they like time alone right? I always had problems doing presentations and I hated talking in front of a class, so some time afterwards, I met some of my university professors who were really surprised at what I was doing. So I was very fortunate to receive caring support and feedback from my Elders. I had just graduated from Concordia, and so it was a kind of tough summer school. Survival 101, kind of thing. It was pretty much a war zone: you were denied food; you were denied medicine; people were being beaten and tortured; and you really didn't have time to think about yourself. You just need to do what you have to do. The whole process was: *I'm on automatic mode, here*. So I had maybe one time during the whole summer when I broke down and then I got back up and did my work.

But it wasn't until years later that I really started taking care of myself and getting rid of some of the stuff I felt was poisonous to keep. The philosophy behind our traditions is one of the things that has kept me strong. Having good support systems, my family, my Elder and his family. Another thing that kept me going was my respect for nature. I've always loved nature and the environment and I have always been into preserving the environment, even as a young child. So I feel it's important to be part of the efforts regarding the issue of defending Indigenous peoples' rights, especially now that we're looking at climate change and global warming. I look at our traditions, our Indigenous knowledge sources from around the world. I'm trying to see how we can get the international community to accept, respect, and value Indigenous knowledge.

For me I go back again to that obligation, when I took that oath. What do we want to preserve for future generations? What I may contribute may be a very small pebble in the whole ocean of water, but whether I do it through my art or my activism doesn't matter, as I think this is probably something I'll do for the rest of my life. I think that's what I took with me from Oka.

Kim: *Can you talk about how your art and activism come together?*

Ellen: I was fortunate that as a

child, my parents supported and encouraged my artistic endeavours. It gave me a solid base from which to express myself and to hone my craft. I have always been attracted to imagery that reflects my identity as an Indigenous person and so historical images and traditional forms of art are obvious icons that help me convey my message. Art is a non-threatening from of expression that can spark discussion, curiosity, it can be aesthetically pleasing or not, and can convey a message which can introduce an issue without necessarily overwhelming the audience. Consequently, as I became more politically active, it was a natural progression for me to incorporate my activism into my art work. I like the affect that my socio-political work has upon viewers and their interpretation of my work. And because I am visual, I like to utilize images as either symbols or icons of both contemporary and historical references to get my point across. Coming from a people who have always fought against colonization and oppression, it seems natural in a way, that I would incorporate my activism with my art. But I am an artist and so as my work evolves, so does my choice of medium, iconography and motivation. It is important for me to continue using my art as a form of cultural sensitization but as well, to continue creating art such as landscapes, portraits, etc, for the sheer pleasure of expressing myself without the use of words.

Kim: Before we go, I wanted to

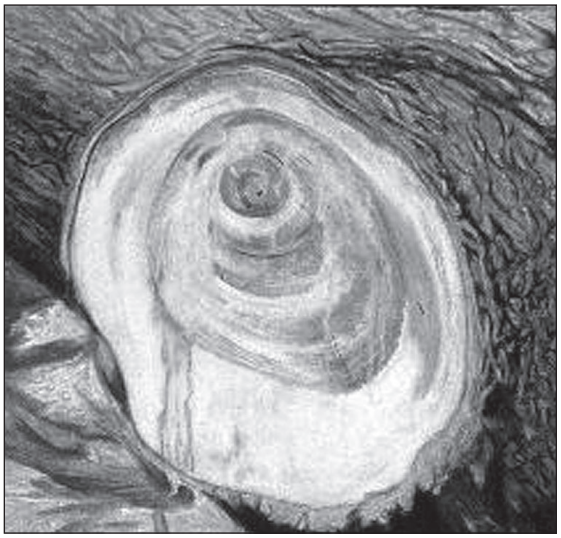
Ellen Gabriel, "Doda Elizabeth," oil pastel on stonehenge paper, 74 cm x 100 cm, 2000.

Artist Statement

Katsi'tsakwas Ellen Gabriel
Kanehsatà:ke
Mohawk Territory

Throughout my career as an artist, I have been inspired by an immense variety of things like: nature, the work of other artists, and the everyday occurrences in life. The stresses of life can be often daunting and frustrating therefore it is important for one to draw from the strengths of our support networks and our spirituality. My strengths center around the love of my partner and family, my spirituality, taking time to enjoy life, walking in the pines and utilizing my creative skills in activities such as writing, photography, painting, reading, and other activities.

I have found that our daily lives, and our identity as Indigenous peoples is often a challenge in this world. In order to survive, be it identity wise or a job we enjoy, that my artistic side has had to be sacrificed. This is why lately, my creative endeavours have focused in the area of digital photography. It is instant and provides me with plenty of images at my disposal, instantly. Digital Photography has allowed me to capture moments that are often difficult in mediums such as painting or drawing; my two first passions in visual art. I have photographed snow storms, Kanehsatà:ke's famous and beautiful pine forest during the four seasons, and have captured precious family moments. Digital photography is becoming a medium that I wish to explore and develop in a way that will allow me to utilize it as source of inspiration and documentation.



know if you had any reflections on some of the activism that has been going on in recent years. What are your observations based on your own experience?

Ellen: I can see problems sometimes when that machismo element comes in, because it clouds the mind. I think, again, it goes back to people wanting their fifteen minutes of fame, which means they are not there for the right reasons. I think it's so important now to be aware of the issues; to be able to argue without fault. To justify your actions of why you are doing something. It's not enough to block a road or to block a railroad; you have to justify and have a complete understanding of what you are doing and why. Because that's the nature of our relationship with Canadians and their government—we as Indigenous peoples have to continuously teach them about us, our perspectives, our history, our identity, and why they are important to us; why we want to perpetuate our languages, and why we want to continue being stewards of the land. And most times people don't have enough of that knowledge or opportunities to share information. I believe that change will come with the people of this country, not the politicians or governments who have, in the past, been motivated to protect the bottom-line or interests of the corporations exploiting our lands and resources.

Kim: *Well, it's interesting to think about it in the context of youth, too.*

Ellen: The youth need guidance, and they need role models. They need reassurances that it's okay to be "Indian," "Native," or "First Nations" and that they don't need drugs, alcohol, or the latest fashions to be proud of who they are. There is not enough in our school systems to reinforce that pride in their identities. Science, math, and all those things that are taught in school are important, but there must also be something that teaches them about who they are as Indigenous peoples. Otherwise, in the future, the only way they will see or live their identity will be through museums, in documentaries, or in books. We have a duty to the future generations to perpetuate traditional knowledge and teach this in the schools because lots of youth don't have that opportunity at home.

So in conjunction with school curriculums, we should start encouraging our youth to learn their culture and languages, start creating those books and filming those documentaries, otherwise, future generations will be people with Indigenous ancestry but without living the experience of being Indigenous.

Kim: *Well you certainly have been a role model for many of us. Thanks for sharing with us here.*

Top left:

Ellen Gabriel, "Night Travelling," acrylic on unstretched canvas, 2' x 3', 1989.

Bottom left:

Ellen Gabriel, "Grandfather Weeps," oil pastel on stonehenge paper, 2.5' x 3', 1999.