

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Penticton Art Gallery is seeking the public's help in uncovering the art, life and legacy of the late Cree Artist, Alvin Elif Constant "Wandering Spirit" (1946-2006)**

**Penticton, [November 1, 2023]** — The Penticton Art Gallery extends a warm and heartfelt invitation to the public to join us in our mission to uncover and document the art and stories surrounding the life of the late Cree Artist, Alvin Elif Constant, lovingly known as "Wandering Spirit" (1946-2006). This collaborative effort is in support of our upcoming exhibition, aptly named "In Search of Wandering Spirit," scheduled to open at the Penticton Art Gallery on Saturday, November 18, 2023, and grace our gallery walls until Saturday, January 27, 2024.

This exhibition signifies the initial chapter of a broader initiative dedicated to the documentation, preservation, and celebration of not only the legacy of "Wandering Spirit" but also an entire generation of Indigenous Artists whose remarkable contributions have, until now, remained hidden in the recesses of our recorded art history. Your active involvement in this meaningful endeavor serves to illuminate these underappreciated artists and their profound impact on the cultural and artistic landscape.

**Alvin Elif Constant** was born February 18, 1946, in James Smith Cree Nation located 58 kilometers east of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan Nation where he was the sixth of nine children born to Guy and Myrtle Constant. He was a residential school survivor having first attended the Gordon's Indian Residential School before moving to the James Smith Indian Day School where he claimed he did "grade 13".

In his teenage years, Alvin left his close-knit community behind, driven by his unwavering dream of becoming a renowned artist. However, the urban landscape brought forth unforeseen challenges, including the daunting tasks of securing employment, finding stable housing, and gaining support for his artistic pursuits. Ultimately, Alvin found himself without a home, seeking shelter under bridges and in homeless shelters. Yet, in the face of such dire circumstances, he clung steadfastly to his art, utilizing whatever materials he could scrounge together, from cardboard to paper bags and even newspapers, to breathe life into his paintings.

In the early 1970s, Alvin's life took a new turn as he enrolled in the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural College in Saskatoon. It was here immersed in this nurturing environment, where Alvin unearthed the rich culture and traditions of his people. The stories shared by the elders were filled with courage, wisdom, tradition and humor and these narratives resonated deeply within him, fostering a newfound sense of belonging and unwavering dedication. Alvin's life mission henceforth became preserving and promoting his culture through storytelling and art, using his voice and imagination to inspire others.

During his travels across Western Canada, Alvin would often set up his paintings on the sidewalks of the various cities he visited, aiming to catch the attention of passersby. On occasion, he managed to sell a piece or two for modest sums, promptly reinvesting the proceeds in art supplies and sustenance. It was during this challenging period that Alvin found a sense of

camaraderie among fellow homeless artists who shared his passion and vision. Together, they forged a tight-knit community of street artists, offering one another mutual support, companionship, and the exchange of creative ideas and techniques.

Alvin's art functioned as a profound vehicle for the articulation of his emotions, struggles, and aspirations. Tragically, Alvin's life was overshadowed by a prolonged battle with addiction and mental health challenges, and it was through his art that he sought to depict not only the beauty but also the anguish of existence on the margins of society. His artistic creations were a poignant mirror, not only reflecting his pain and despair but also showcasing his unwavering hope and resilience.

Through his creative expressions, Alvin embarked on a relentless mission to inspire people to transcend superficial judgments and stereotypes, harboring a profound ambition to trigger a paradigm shift in how individuals perceived and connected with one another. His art possessed the profound ability to challenge preconceived notions and foster a deeper, more empathetic understanding among people, leaving a lasting impact on the way society viewed and treated its marginalized members.

Known widely by his Cree name "Wandering Spirit," Alvin in the 1990's and 2000's Alvin would become a prominent and familiar figure on the streets of Victoria and Vancouver where he would sell his art to tourists. He held a profound passion for books and learning, often frequenting local bookstores to engage in conversations with tourists, staff, and customers. Alvin generously shared his knowledge and stories, and he approached each exchange with an open heart, always receptive to different perspectives. Alvin's friendly and curious nature enriched the lives of many tourists who had the privilege of crossing his path. When he did manage to sell one of his paintings, he was well known for selflessly sharing the proceeds amongst his homeless friends.

Tragically on November 24, 2006, Alvin "Wandering Spirit" Constant was discovered frozen to death on the streets of Calgary, just a stone's throw away from the Mustard Seed Shelter. His passing reverberated across Canada, casting a spotlight on the plight of homelessness and serving as a stark reminder of the struggles faced by those on the margins of society. On December 5, 2006, Alvin was laid to rest in the James Smith Reserve, his final resting place.

Alvin's story serves as a powerful and poignant symbol of the countless lives tragically cut short, providing yet another stark reminder of the profound tragedy deeply embedded in our colonial history.

Throughout our history, many Indigenous artists held a sense of caution when it came to traditional commercial galleries where artists would consign their work, and this wariness was entirely justified. Instead, these artists often chose to sell their creations directly to various Indigenous "craft" and "tourist shops" in exchange for immediate cash. However, this approach had a couple of significant drawbacks. Firstly, it often resulted in scant or nonexistent records

documenting the life stories of these artists. Secondly, purchasers typically fail to recognize the object they were acquiring as "fine" art.

Unfortunately, a significant body of work created by Indigenous Artists has been unduly connected to the circumstances of its acquisition, which has had the regrettable effect of erecting a substantial barrier to its inclusion in prominent exhibitions and the permanent collections of our nation's art museums. This, in turn, has resulted in an inadequate acknowledgment and representation of the artistic and cultural significance of these Indigenous Artists within the broader cultural landscape.

Our hope is that this exhibition will serve as a catalyst, inspiring art historians and museums to proactively address this void in our collective art history. They can do so by acknowledging, researching, documenting, and preserving the stories and artistic legacies that have, for the most part, remained concealed and underappreciated beyond the boundaries of their immediate communities, friends and family and all those who have had the foresight and privileged of owning a piece of their work. Our aim is to foster a deeper understanding of these artists and their invaluable contributions, ultimately dispelling the obscurity that has overshadowed their substantial impact on our nation's art history.

We are committed to embarking on this important journey by delving deep into the life, art, and enduring legacy of Alvin Elif Constant, affectionately known as "Wandering Spirit" (1946-2006). To accomplish this, we extend a heartfelt invitation to the broader community, urging you to share your stories and any artworks you may have collected from Alvin throughout the years. Your contributions will play a pivotal role in our forthcoming comprehensive exhibition at the Penticton Art Gallery, as well as our ongoing mission to meticulously document his life and lasting impact.

If you have artworks that you'd be willing to lend for this or any potential exhibitions in the future, or if you're willing to share photos, cherished stories, or memories, we wholeheartedly invite you to reach out to us here at the gallery. Your active participation is pivotal, as it will assist us not only in accurately conveying his story but, even more significantly, in preserving Alvin's extraordinary legacy for the enrichment of future generations. Your contribution plays a vital role in ensuring that the legacy of Alvin endures and continues to inspire and educate future generations.

We are also looking to tour this exhibition to other communities and we would love to talk with anyone who might be interested in exploring this opportunity. We deeply appreciate your time and consideration, and your involvement is of immeasurable importance in our mission to celebrate and commemorate the life and artistic contributions of this exceptional individual.

Please direct all inquiries to:

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