

ART

Aboriginal photos focus on curing planet

Galleries

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If Danny Beaton's means were as grand as his aims, he'd be running the world. As it is, he's only trying to change it.

Activist, photographer and budding musician, Beaton is founder of the Artists'/Environment Forum, an organization dedicated to raising awareness of the mess planet Earth is in.

A Mohawk from the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy, he also believes the way to save the world is to return to traditional aboriginal values.

To that end, he arranges for Indian elders to speak at Toronto schools, organizes concerts and conferences — and generally keeps busy making things happen.

Beaton's latest venture is an exhibition of photographs he took during his travels and at the various events he organized.

On display at the Spadina Public Library, 10 Spadina Rd., his show documents the efforts of his small but dedicated group to alter the future by reacquainting us with the past.

The occasion for the exhibition is that the United Nations has declared 1993 to be the International Year Of Indigenous Peoples and the display's 45 or so color pictures are of kids playing, musicians performing, elders speaking.

They were taken in places as near to us as downtown Toronto and as far away as Ecuador.

Though Beaton has a strong sense of composition and keen eye for portraiture, he has concentrated above all on recording aboriginal communities' activities on behalf of the environment.

"I don't agree with what's happening around me," he explains adamantly.

"I don't agree with what's happening to the world. I don't agree with people leaving these problems for future generations."

As a survivor of alcoholism, drug abuse, poverty and 15 years of life on the street, Beaton is a walking symbol of the need to heal both ourselves and nature.

He has been clean now for five years, but came close to death before finally swearing off.

He compares the damage he did himself to the destruction humanity has wrought upon the Earth.

"I was dying," he recalls. "But I didn't want to die."

"I love life. Your life is a sacred gift. When you realize that, you want to get involved in life."

Sitting in his closet-sized office off Bloor St. W., Beaton is a picture of a man involved. Surrounded — no, swamped — by the contradictory stuff that defines his existence, he seems to be in the middle of everything.

An enormous eagle feather rests on random piles of papers and books.

His collection of indigenous flutes is on one side, a fax machine on the other.

From here, Beaton keeps in touch with his network of contacts across Canada and the U.S.

He never has learned to be awkward with the famous and powerful and knows no better than to phone and ask.

He tracked down musician and mega-producer Daniel Lanois through the latter's mother; as a result, Lanois was a headliner at the two Indigenous Restoration concerts Beaton organized in '91 and '92.

"More and more people are looking to native people because they're beginning to understand that our way of life is a very spiritual one," says Beaton.

"Native people have great understanding of how to take care of the Earth.

"Before Europeans came to this continent, there was no over-fishing, no over-hunting.

"Indians never misused the Earth, they took only what they needed.

"The idea is to educate people about what's happening to the environment by bringing an indigenous perspective on caring for the Earth."

The exhibition isn't about pollution or the pressure the planet is under, but the people who are trying to make it a better place.

In that sense, Beaton's photographs are a means of recognizing their concern and celebrating their accomplishments.

Sponsored by Riley's Color Lab, Toronto Image Works, Steichen Lab and Picture Possibilities, the show continues until Feb. 28.