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Carl Gawboy: Transforming the Cutover

Exhibit Dates: January 8 to February 13, 2009

In coordination with the annual Heikinpäivä celebration

Opening reception: Thursday, January 22, 2009, 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.

Artist Talk Beginning at 7:15 p.m.

HANCOCK, MI – An exhibit titled “Transforming the Cutover” by artist Carl Gawboy is featured at the Finlandia University Gallery, located in the Finnish American Heritage Center (FAHC), Hancock, January 8 to February 13, 2009.

An opening reception for the artist will take place at gallery Thursday, January 22, from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m., with an artist talk beginning at 7:15 p.m. The reception is free and open to the public. Refreshments will be served.

Gawboy’s opening reception is part of a special event at the FAHC dubbed, “Indigenous Night.” On the same evening, at 6:00 p.m., Sámi scholars Faith Fjeld and Nathan Muus will present a program about the Alaska Reindeer Project of the late 1890s. An exhibit exploring the Reindeer Project is also on display at the Heritage Center.

As the son of a Finnish mother and an Ojibwe father, Carl Gawboy’s paintings convey a unique vantage point. Raised on his mother’s family farm in northern Minnesota, the youngest of eight children, Gawboy decided early to become an artist. He was determined that his art would not be falsely romantic, but would rather draw on his unique childhood experiences to tell the story of his dual heritage. Whether harvesting rice, duck hunting, or making hay, the subjects of Gawboy’s work carry the authenticity of an experienced lived.

“Some artists ride trends, some labor for self-expression, some artists seek to incite revolutions. Carl Gawboy strikes for something more simple, more pure: Truth.”, states a review of Gawboy’s 2007 exhibit, “Carl Gawboy: 50 Years Standing” at Ancient Traders Gallery in Minneapolis, Minn.

In his art Gawboy focuses on bringing to life scenes of Ojibwe culture that, until now, have not been documented by painters or photographers. He paints with historical accuracy and often challenges popular

and academic paradigms about American Indian cultures.

For his Finlandia University exhibit, "Transforming the Cutover," Gawboy borrowed a phrase he first heard at a workshop.

"I first heard the term "Cutover Lands" at a workshop conducted by Arne Alanen. He was referring to a geo-cultural region encompassing Upper Michigan, Northern Wisconsin and Northern Minnesota. This region was occupied by the Ojibwe peoples, and their land-use patterns included a maple sugar industry and participation in the fur trade," explains Gawboy.

With the introduction of mining and logging to the region, life changed for the people living on the land. Mining brought large numbers of European immigrants, while logging corporations clear-cut vast tracts of land and left behind acres of stumps, branches and broken tree tops. It was on this deforested land that a farming culture arose.

"There was hardly a tree left to build their cabin and barns," notes Gawboy. "Piles of dead branches and tops made the land susceptible to fire. Building agriculture communities was hampered by the short growing season and poor soils. Yet, the characteristics of a community took root: cooperatives, one-room schoolhouses, 4-H clubs and dance halls."

By the 1950s most of these farms disappeared with trees and alders overwhelming the fields and rock piles. "People who lived on the land were held in utter contempt by the miners in town," says Gawboy. "Suddenly in the 1950s rural real estate was the next industry to sweep through the north. 'Country' went from a symbol of rural poverty to a status symbol. As a witness to these changes, I saw my artistic mission to record the life of the people of the cutover to the best of my memory and ability."

Gawboy has been commissioned to create murals for the Grand Portage National Monument, the Bois Fort Museum, and Ely City Hall, all in Minnesota; and the Superior (Wisconsin) Public Library. His most recent mural, "Tribute to the Finnish Homesteader," commemorates the centennial of Cloquet, Minnesota.

Gawboy has exhibited his work nationwide, including at the Eiteljorg Museum, Indianapolis, and the Great Turtle Museum, Niagara Falls, New York. He was also a cartoonist for the "New World Finn" newspaper and these cartoons are collected in the book, "In With the Finn Crowd."

In 2008 Gawboy was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Depot Foundation in Duluth for his extensive contributions in the field of art and art education in the Duluth region.

Gawboy graduated in 1965 from the University of Minnesota-Duluth with a B.A. in the arts, and in 1972 he received a masters degree in American Indian art from the University of Montana-Missoula. He taught Indian studies for six years at University of Minnesota-Duluth. From 1990–2005 Gawboy taught American Indian studies and watercolor painting at College of St. Scholastica, Minnesota. He is now retired and devotes much of his time to painting and is co-authoring a book.

"Transforming the Cutover" is on display at the Finlandia University Gallery through February 13.

The Finlandia University Gallery is in the Finnish American Heritage Center, 435 Quincy Street, Hancock. Gallery hours are Monday to Friday 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Wednesday, 8:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., or by appointment. Please call 906-487-7500 for more information.

Photo Cutlines:

Photo 1: "In the Fields Down by the River" by Carl Gawboy

Photo 2: The Native American artist Carl Gawboy

Please contact Karen Johnson, karen.johnson@finlandia.edu, if you would like to receive the photos.