



Don Ense



Don Ense (b. 1953, Manitoulin Island) is a master artist whose work is grounded in memory, culture, and lived experience. His artistic journey spans more than five decades and began in childhood, designing patterns for his mother's handmade clothing, copying comic book illustrations, and listening to stories shared by his great-grandparents. These early influences shaped his lifelong commitment to storytelling through art.

Largely self-taught, Ense developed his skills through observation and guidance from a local community artist. Alongside his artistic practice, he worked with his father, a stonemason, building fireplaces for island tourists. His creativity also extended into writing; influenced by his grandfather and a Canadian poet, Ense wrote poetry and illustrated works published by an Ojibwe cultural organization. In the 1970s, he taught art and storytelling at a community summer camp.

A pivotal moment came after moving to Vancouver, where mentors Bill Reid and Daphne Odjig encouraged him to develop his own voice. Though initially influenced by Norval Morrisseau, Ense returned to a personal style inspired by childhood memories—playing hockey, gathering maple sap, and the close rhythms of community life before modern technology.

His evolving visual language blends Impressionist influences with a vibrant palette of eight self-mixed colors. In addition to painting, Ense creates linocut prints and is expanding into pastels. His work reflects traditions passed down through generations, including fishing, trapping, syrup-making, and boat-building.

Beyond visual art, Ense finds balance through walking, music, and songwriting. Influenced by his father, Buffy Sainte-Marie, and Bob Dylan, he developed a finger-picking guitar style and performed in coffee houses.

Today, Ense works more deliberately, taking time with each piece. Don Ense's art continues to honour memory, craftsmanship, and a deeply connected way of life.

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