

The background of the cover is a dark, textured surface. A horizontal band of blue and yellow paint runs across the upper third, with numerous thin, silver pins or needles protruding from it. In the lower third, there are several vertical, elongated shapes made of red and orange paint, some with dark outlines.

ROBERT HOULE

Life & Work

By Shirley Madill

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BIOGRAPHY

From growing up in Sandy Bay First Nation / Kaa-wii-kwe-tawang-kak and attending residential school to pursuing extensive academic studies and becoming an internationally recognized artist, Robert Houle (b. 1947) has played a pivotal role in bridging the gap between contemporary Indigenous art and the Canadian art scene. As an artist, curator, writer, educator, and critic, he has created change in museums and public art galleries, initiating critical discussions about the history and representation of Indigenous peoples.

EARLY YEARS

Robert Houle was born to Gladys and Solomon Houle on March 28, 1947, in St. Boniface, Manitoba, the eldest of fifteen children. His early childhood was spent in the extended-family home at Sandy Bay First Nation, where he was immersed in Saulteaux culture, spoke Saulteaux, and witnessed traditional ceremonies. Houle's family belongs to the Plains Ojibwa, or Anishnabe¹ Saulteaux, who live along the western sandy shores of Lake Manitoba.²



LEFT: Robert Houle wearing a headdress at the North American Indian Institute, Montreal, Quebec, 1974, photographer unknown, archive of the artist. Although not seen, Houle was with George Miller and Reta Phillips, two influential people in his life. He met Mohawk activist Louis Karoniaktajeh Hall, the designer of the warrior flag (used at protests and other actions), in Kahnawake Mohawk Territory that year. RIGHT: Robert Houle's parents, Gladys and Solomon Houle, 1981, in front of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Sandy Bay with the Sandy Bay Residential School in the background, photographer unknown, archive of the artist.

Like many children of his generation, Houle was forced to go to a Catholic mission-run residential school for grade school and high school, where he was removed from both the Saulteaux language and its spiritual traditions. From grades one to eight, Houle attended The Oblates of Mary Immaculate and Sisters of St. Joseph of St. Hyacinth School in Sandy Bay. Residential schools were part of the Canadian government's program to "assimilate" Indigenous populations.³ The great damage these schools have done to Indigenous peoples, their communities, and their culture has been widely documented.⁴ Houle's years at residential school would have a profound effect on him and his career. Referring to his Roman Catholic upbringing, he stated, "The Bible is the single most important cultural influence on my shamanistic heritage."⁵ Christianity combined with his Saulteaux heritage would become integral to his personal and artistic identity.

Houle's early educational experiences in Sandy Bay were unpleasant. He was not allowed to paint sacred objects, such as warrior staffs, or experiences from his own culture, nor to speak to his sisters who also attended the school. It was difficult for him to look out the classroom window and see his family's house yet not be permitted to go home after school. He regularly joined his family during their annual Sun Dance ceremony to mark the summer solstice; however, after Houle returned to school, the priest would force him to go to confession and repent for worshipping false gods.⁶ This difficult part of his life would later inform two emotionally charged artworks: *Sandy Bay*, 1998-99, and *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009.



Robert Houle, *Sandy Bay*, 2007, oil on Masonite, 22.9 x 29.8 cm, collection of the artist.

In 1961 Houle moved to Winnipeg to attend the Assiniboia Residential High School run by the Oblates and Grey Nuns. He has happy memories of his high school years—being in a co-ed classroom, playing football and hockey, and being the editor of the high school yearbook and newspaper. Although art classes were a small part of the curriculum, he was introduced to art practice and his teachers recognized him for his artistic gifts. At the school he won a drawing competition that allowed him to take extracurricular art classes. Houle's high school years coincided with a change in Canadian politics surrounding First Nations' treaty rights. Reading the Indian Act was a mandatory part of his studies in Canadian history and made him acutely aware of the issues facing his people. On March 31, 1960, under Prime Minister John Diefenbaker's tenure, portions of the Canada Elections Act were repealed to grant a federal vote to First Nations peoples, without loss of their status. After he graduated Houle was able to vote.

Following high school Houle attended the Jesuit Centre for Catholic Studies, St. Paul's College, at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, for one year. Education was valued in Houle's family: "My parents encouraged us to attend university. They felt that a solid education would enable us to be more self-sufficient in our future endeavours."⁷ Houle enrolled in a degree program at the University of Manitoba and in the summer of 1969 worked as a summer student at the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (now Indigenous and Northern Affairs

Canada) in Ottawa. There he joined First Nations' protests against a federal government policy paper known as the 1969 White Paper, which called for an end to federal fiduciary responsibility for First Nations' special status.⁸ Many Indigenous peoples viewed the paper as an extension of the federal government's assimilationist policies,⁹ and the Canadian government withdrew it in 1970.

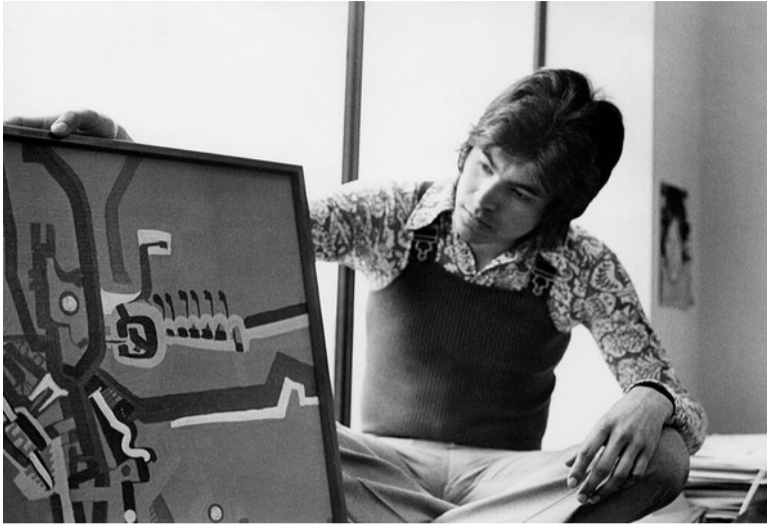
STUDIES IN ART

While at the University of Manitoba, Houle concurrently began studies at McGill University in Montreal. In 1972 Houle earned a degree in art history from the University of Manitoba, following which, to improve his skills in drawing and painting, he travelled from Montreal to Austria to attend the Salzburg International Summer Academy. He then moved to Montreal to complete his bachelor of education with a major in the teaching of art from McGill and also taught art at the Indian Way School, located in a longhouse in Kahnawake, across the St. Lawrence River from Montreal.¹⁰ He completed his teaching degree in 1975. Houle stated, "It was an aspiration of mine to be an art teacher as well as an artist. When I decided to be an artist, my mother told me to paint only what I know."¹¹ After receiving his certification as an art specialist, Houle taught a grade five art class for one year, following which he instructed at a Catholic school in Verdun (a borough of Montreal) until 1977.



LEFT: Robert Houle at the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development regional office in Winnipeg, Manitoba, as a summer student, 1966, photographer unknown, archive of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. Houle designed the image for the window of the office entrance. RIGHT: Robert Houle at the Assiniboia Residential High School dormitory in Winnipeg, preparing to go on the Centennial Train, which travelled across the country telling the story of "Canada," in 1967, photographer unknown, archive of the artist.





LEFT: Robert Houle, with a work by Alex Janvier, at the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development in Ottawa in 1969, when Houle was a summer student, photographer unknown, archive of the artist. RIGHT: Robert Houle, *Morning Star*, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 121 x 151 cm, Indigenous Art Centre, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Gatineau.

At McGill Houle had received formal education in studio work. He also audited studio classes at Concordia University with the Quebecois hard-edge painter Guido Molinari (1933-2004). While researching art history, Houle became interested in the work of Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), Barnett Newman (1905-1970) and the New York School of Abstract Expressionism, and Jasper Johns (b. 1930). He focused mostly on European art, ranging from pre-Columbian sculpture and Greek and Roman art and archaeology to twentieth-century European painting. While studying the Romantics in an art history class, he came across the work of French painter Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) and, in the artist's journal among sketches of Indigenous subjects, a statement referring to the Ojibwa as "nobles of the Woodlands."¹² Decades later, Houle would reference Delacroix in a multimedia installation, *Paris/Ojibwa*, 2010.

During the early 1970s, Houle produced abstract geometric paintings inspired by Ojibwa designs published in Carrie A. Lyford's book *Ojibwa Crafts* (1943). Works such as *Red Is Beautiful*, 1970, and *Ojibwa Purple Leaves, No. 1*, 1972, are indicative of his early style. Houle stated:

I found the geometrical patterns represented in the book had a spiritual connection to traditional ritual and ceremonial objects, and this in turn led to a series of geometric acrylic paintings I produced inspired by love poems written by a friend, Brenda Gureshko, that were purchased by the Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs.¹³



LEFT: Cover of the 1943 edition of *Ojibwa Crafts* by Carrie A. Lyford. RIGHT: Robert Houle, *Epigram the Shortest Distance*, 1972, acrylic on canvas, 125 x 128 cm, Indigenous Art Centre, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Gatineau. This is one of twelve paintings by Houle based on love poems.

Epigram the Shortest Distance, 1972; *Wigwam*, 1972; and *The First Step*, 1972, are from the love poems series and show his early dedication to creating abstract works connected with Indigenous traditional geometric designs.

Houle's time in Montreal was in the wake of the October Crisis of 1970. It was a period of political unrest regarding Quebec sovereignty, during which the city was also experiencing a surge of activity in contemporary visual and performance art. In 1975, while still at McGill, Houle saw the group exhibition *Colours of Pride: Paintings by Seven Professional Native Artists*. Held at the Dominion Gallery from March 11 to April 5, the show introduced him to the art of the Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. (PNIAI). The exhibition included the work of Jackson Beardy (1944-1984), Eddy Cobiness (1933-1996), Alex Janvier (b. 1935), Norval Morrisseau (1931-2007), Daphne Odjig (1919-2016), Carl Ray (1943-1978), and Joseph Sanchez (b. 1948). Houle was intrigued.

Few mainstream art museums and private galleries organized exhibitions of Indigenous art in the 1970s. The PNIAI's purpose was to gain recognition of its members as professional, contemporary artists. They challenged old constructs and stimulated a new way of thinking about contemporary First Nations peoples, their lives, and their art. Houle recounted, "Before seeing this exhibition, I was not aware of work by contemporary Indigenous artists and was struck by the power of their work. Norval Morrisseau was an inspiration and I wanted to meet him. The exhibition laid the foundation of a distinctive narrative style solidly based on Anishnabe stories."¹⁴

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LES BEAUX ARTS ET VOUS

Carl Ray est un peintre autodidacte lui aussi et il aime être très influencé par les légendes de son peuple.

La Galerie Dominion, qui est l'une des plus anciennes et des plus importantes galeries d'art au Canada, présente récemment une exposition tout à fait spéciale. En effet, le Dr Max Stern a exposé à sa galerie de la rue Sherbrooke ouest, à Montréal, un groupe de peintres composé de sept Indiens, la plupart originaires de tribus différentes. L'exposition qui avait pour titre "FIERTÉ SUR TOILE" a été une réussite et le public montréalais a pu apprécier le talent et l'originalité de ces artistes. Je dis bien artistes, car plusieurs croient encore que le travail des Indiens est surtout de l'artisanat; mais dans le cas des peintres dont nous parlons, c'est tout à fait différent.

SEPT PEINTRES INDIENS EXPOSENT À LA GALERIE DOMINION

UN GROUPE QUI A ÉTÉ FONDÉ IL Y A UN AN

Lors de notre visite à la galerie Dominion, nous avons eu l'occasion de rencontrer un porte-parole du groupe qui nous a expliqué que la formation du groupe remontait à un an environ. Les sept peintres indiens ont exposé ensemble à quelques reprises, mais leur exposition à la galerie Dominion est la première importante au Canada. Nous allons vous les présenter à tour de rôle: Norval Morrisseau, c'est sûrement le plus connu du groupe car il a tenu des expositions importantes dans des endroits tels que le Musée de Québec et le Musée Royal d'Ontario. C'est également lui qui a eu l'honneur d'exécuter la murale du Pavillon indien lors de l'Expo 67.

EDDY COBINESS: Un autre indien Chippewan, qui a grandi dans la réserve de Buffalo Point au Manitoba. Il a lui aussi exposé ses œuvres au Canada et aux États-Unis et la Reine d'Angleterre possède un de ses tableaux.

CARL RAY: C'est un Indien Cri, né dans la réserve de Sandy Lake, en Ontario. À l'aide de peintures et de gravures, ce peintre autodidacte raconte les légendes de son peuple, qui lui ont été transmises par son grand-père, qui était guerrier. Il s'est mérité une bourse du Conseil des arts du Canada en 1968 et tout comme Morrisseau il a participé à différents travaux artistiques au Pavillon des Indiens de l'Expo 67.

DAPHNE ODJIG BEAUVEN: C'est la seule femme du groupe et ses œuvres illustrent le mode de vie et les légendes des Indiens Ottawa, tribu à laquelle elle appartient. Plusieurs collectionneurs importants du Canada et des États-Unis s'intéressent à son travail.

JOSEPH SANCHEZ: C'est un Indien Pueblo, qui est né au Colorado (U.S.A.) en 1948. Il a vécu une grande partie de son enfance sur une réserve Apache, où son père était professeur. C'est d'ailleurs à cette époque qu'il commença à s'intéresser à la peinture. Un peu plus tard, il a suivi des cours à l'Université de l'Arizona, pour ensuite émigrer au Canada avec son épouse. Il demeure actuellement au Manitoba.

ALEX JANVIER: Indien Chippewan, Alex possède son diplôme en Arts de "l'Alberta College of Art". Ses modes d'expression sont variés et plusieurs de ses dessins ont un caractère mystique. Il avoue quand même être influencé par des symboles indiens. Les derniers donnent d'ailleurs à son art une force et une cohérence.

JACKSON BEARDY: Né au Manitoba, dans la réserve de Garden Hill, le 24 juillet, 1944, Beardy a étudié l'art commercial et il a même travaillé dans la décoration pour un grand magasin, avant de se consacrer exclusivement à la peinture. C'est un excellent artiste, qui a mérité la médaille du Centenaire du Canada.

Les œuvres du peintre Daphne Odjig Beauven, la seule femme du groupe, possèdent une grande originalité.

On voit ici le peintre Daphne Odjig Beauven, qui fait partie de la tribu des Ottawa, dont elle se promène dans la forêt non loin de sa demeure.

Joseph Sanchez, qui est un indien Pueblo, est né au Colorado mais il vit au Canada depuis de nombreuses années.

Jackey Beardy a débuté comme artiste commercial, mais depuis quelques années il consacre toutes ses énergies à son art.

Carl Ray a participé avec Norval Morrisseau à la décoration du pavillon des Indiens de l'Expo 67.

Voici un tableau d'Eddy Cobiness, qui est originaire du Manitoba et dont la peinture est très représentative.

Les œuvres d'un Eddy Cobiness, qui nous montre un tableau qui se rapproche d'un peu plus de l'abstraction.

La peinture de Joseph Sanchez s'apparente un peu au Surréalisme, tout en conservant un style bien particulier.

La peinture d'Alex Janvier touche parfois à l'abstraction, mais elle demeure quand même influencée par les symboles indiens.

Voici un exemple du travail de Norval Morrisseau, qui est considéré comme l'un des meilleurs peintres Indiens en Amérique.

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A spread from the Montreal magazine *Secrets des Artistes* advertising *Colours of Pride: Paintings by Seven Professional Native Artists*, 1975.

EARLY CAREER

In 1970 Houle submitted the painting *Red Is Beautiful*, 1970, to an exhibition of the Canadian Guild of Crafts in Montreal at Hotel Bonaventure. Dr. Ted J. Brasser, Plains ethnologist at the National Museum of Man in Hull (now the Canadian Museum of History), saw it there and proposed its purchase for the museum. *Red Is Beautiful* was the first of Houle's works to enter a museum collection. After its acquisition, while pursuing his education, he had turned painting into a full-time occupation.

In 1977, with the intention of eventually moving to Toronto, Houle travelled from Montreal to Ottawa in search of a summer job. His friend Tom Hill (b. 1943) gave him the phone number of the executive director of the National Museum of Man, Barbara Tyler, and recommended that he call and apply for a position. Houle did, and

was subsequently hired as the first Indigenous curator of contemporary Indian art. The commitment of an important national museum to create the job was significant—most institutions did not have such roles—and Houle was honoured to have been offered the position. The museum had an extensive collection of Indigenous art but previously had not had any staff with expertise in Indigenous knowledge and artmaking.



Daphne Odjig, *The Indian in Transition*, 1978, acrylic on wood, 245 x 827 cm, Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau.

Houle's curatorial work involved researching the museum's existing collection, writing about Indigenous artists and their work, and curating exhibitions drawn from the collection. For the purposes of his research, he travelled across Canada to meet artists whose work, until then, he had seen only in books or on exhibition, developing close relationships with Abraham Anghik Ruben (b. 1951), Robert Davidson (b. 1946), Alex Janvier, Daphne Odjig, Carl Beam (1943–2005), and Bob Boyer (1948–2004), among others. At the museum, he championed the artists, proposing pieces for acquisition and writing about their work. On one of his trips Houle met Norval Morrisseau for the first time. Morrisseau became a major influence and close friend. Houle recalled:

When I was writing a paper on Morrisseau for the museum and arranged to meet him, I was initially terrified. His reputation as an artist preceded him. When we met, we spoke in Anishnabe Ojibwa and we had a ball. He was so warm and engaging and from then on we became close friends.¹⁵

Because Houle met with these artists in person and had an acute understanding of Indigenous knowledge, his curatorial work surrounding their art was more specific than what had previously been accomplished at the museum.



LEFT: Norval Morrisseau and Robert Houle in Beardmore, Ontario, during a tea party held by Morrisseau in 1978, photograph by Barbara Stimpson, archive of the artist. RIGHT: Carl Beam and Robert Houle in 1985, photograph by Ann Beam.

In his own artistic practice, Houle was searching for a personal vision informed by modernist aesthetics and spiritual concepts. He dedicated Mondays at the museum to artistic research, studying the styles associated with De Stijl and Neo-Plasticism, and the work of Piet Mondrian, whose purist approach, theosophical focus, “paring down of excess cultural baggage,”¹⁶ and insistence on order appealed to Houle.

As part of his duties at the museum, Houle also met Jack Pollock (1930-1992), founder of The Pollock Gallery in Toronto. Pollock represented Morrisseau and Abraham Anghik Ruben, and he gave Houle his first solo exhibition at a commercial gallery in 1978.

NEW CAREER DIRECTIONS

After three years at the National Museum of Man, Houle had grown tired of seeing contemporary Indigenous art placed in ethnographic collections and of witnessing the inappropriate treatment of ceremonial objects. In an interview, he later stated, “I realized that artistically and aesthetically I was in hostile territory. There was no place to exhibit the contemporary works I bought for the museum, and I just could not accept that, as a practising artist, what I made had to be relegated to the realm of anthropology.”¹⁷ At a crucial

moment, he witnessed a visiting ethnochemist (conservator) opening and examining the contents of an object in the museum’s collection: a medicine bundle—a living, holy object. This intrusion was a reflection of the museum’s misperception of what should be treated as sacred. For Houle, his curatorial role had become a burden. One day in the summer of 1980, armed with a sketch pad and pencil, he drew ceremonial

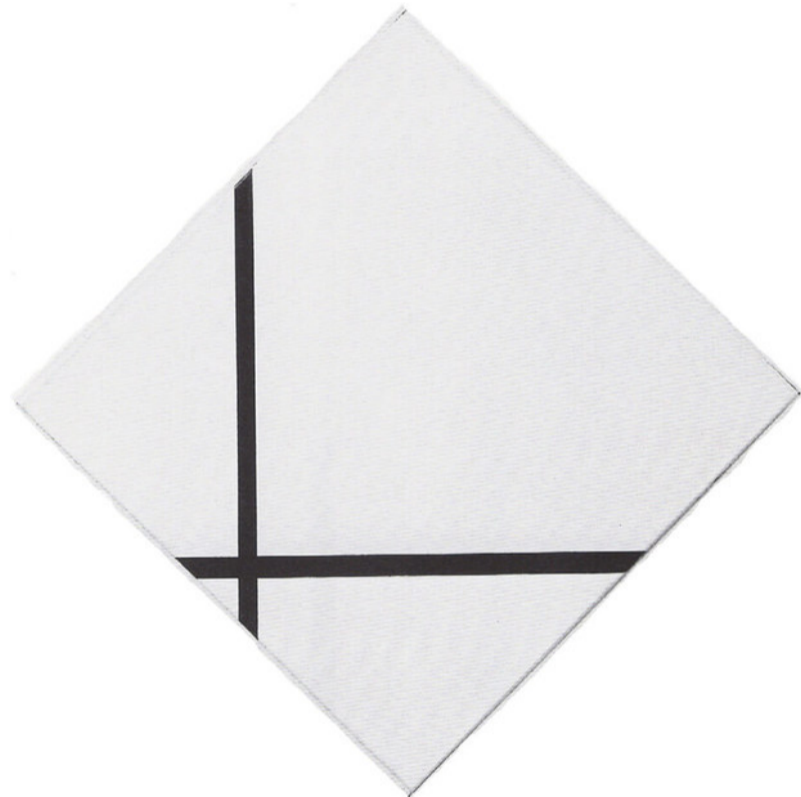
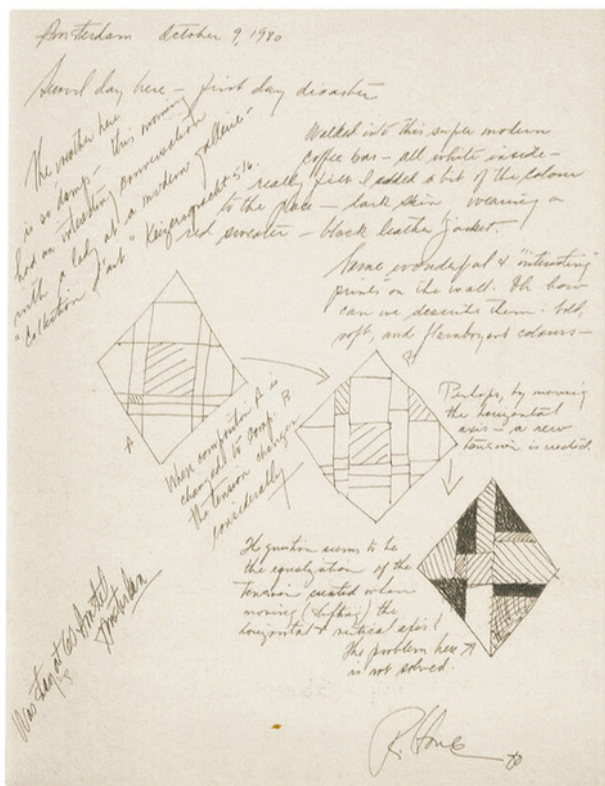


LEFT: A miniature parfleche, Crow, 1890-1910, rawhide and natural dyes, collection of the artist. RIGHT: Paul Gardner and Robert Houle with their cats, Simon and Windigo, in front of a series of paintings from Houle’s installation *Zero Hour*, 1988, photograph by Andre Leduc, archive of the artist.

objects, such as a parfleche, warrior staffs, and shields, held in the display cases. That afternoon he handed in his resignation.

Houle relayed, "When I was standing in that gallery surrounded by all those objects, presented in a context that isolated them from life and reality, all I could think of was that I wanted to liberate them."¹⁸ His resignation was a pronounced refusal to condone the museum's spiritual transgressions against sacred objects and Indigenous knowledge. It made national headlines and would come to mark the year 1980 as a pivotal moment in the post-colonial history of North American visual art. "I had to start exhibiting in the U.S.," Houle later said, "because somehow I'd gotten blacklisted—this young red boy holds a prestigious position and throws it back to the wolves. But I made the move from a survival instinct, not malice."¹⁹ Houle determined that the best way to promote Indigenous art and representation was as an artist: to connect contemporary artistic expression with objects associated with shamanistic and ritualistic art.

The day Houle quit the museum, he received his first call from the man who would later become his partner in life, Paul Gardner, who had met Houle one evening in Hull (now called Gatineau) a while before.

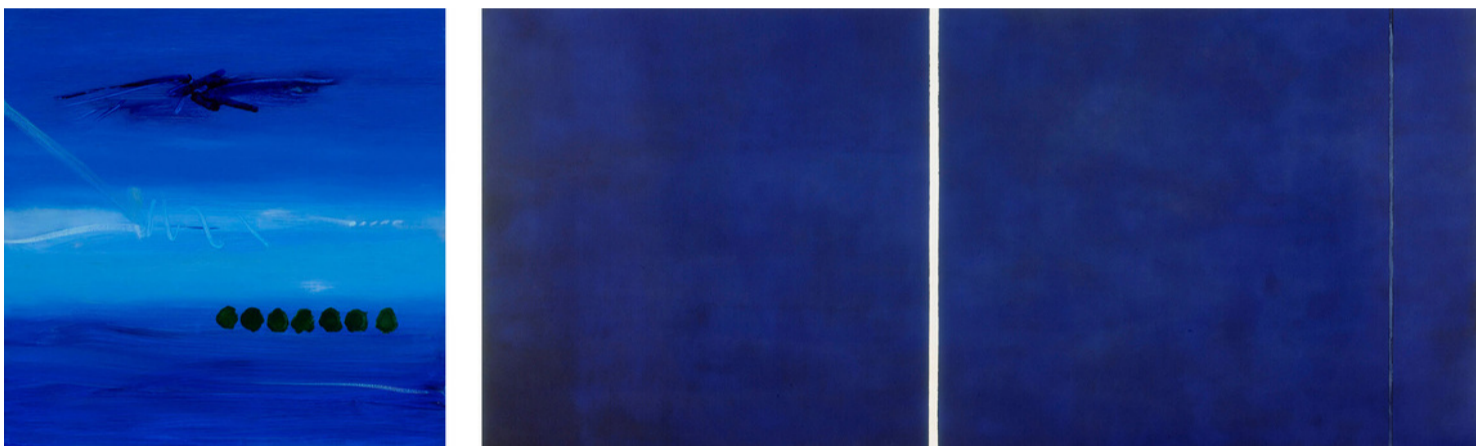


LEFT: A page from Robert Houle's Amsterdam sketchbook dated October 9, 1980. RIGHT: Piet Mondrian, *Lozenge Composition with Two Lines*, 1931, oil on canvas, 114 cm diagonal, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

In September 1980 Houle travelled to The Hague and Amsterdam with a mission to study the work of Piet Mondrian first-hand. He was surprised to view Mondrian's delicate small brushwork, which he perceived as giving humanity to the tension created by the Dutch painter's shifting of horizontal and vertical axes, as in *Lozenge Composition with Two Lines*, 1931. In a drawing pad dated from 1980, Houle writes about how the gesture of the artist's hand guiding the paint expresses the ineffable: "The application of paint, its own intuitive ability to make the unknown into a reality—the hand holding the brush must show as in Malevich, Mondrian and Vermeer."²⁰ But upon closer investigation, he found Mondrian's approach too objective, lacking a natural palette and direct

relationship with nature; too “man-centred” and not suited to Houle’s “holistic belief system”²¹ and connectedness with the earth.

It was in Amsterdam that Houle’s attention turned to the American Abstract Expressionist painter Barnett Newman when, in the same gallery that held Mondrian’s works, he encountered Newman’s painting *Cathedra*, 1951, and his series consisting of eighteen colour lithographs (*Cantos*, 1963–64). “When I turned around in the gallery and saw *Cathedra*, I was completely taken aback and absorbed into the painting’s monumentality and the artist’s monochromatic approach, his direct method to convey spiritualism through abstraction and colour.”²²



LEFT: Robert Houle, *Blue Thunder*, 2012, oil on canvas, 45.7 x 45.7 cm, private collection. RIGHT: Barnett Newman, *Cathedra*, 1951, oil and Magna acrylic on canvas, 243 x 543 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Inspired by his visit overseas and eager to begin new work, Houle returned to Ottawa and in 1981 relocated to Toronto with Paul Gardner. Houle had found that the colour-field painting of Abstract Expressionism, with its exploration of gesture, line, shape, and colour to evoke strong emotional and spiritual reactions, was perfectly suited to communicating his own Indigenous spirituality. Colour-field influences would come to be seen throughout Houle’s oeuvre, in such works as *Parfleches for the Last Supper*, 1983; *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk* (*Where the gods are present*), 1989; *Blue Thunder*, 2012; and *Morningstar II*, 2014.

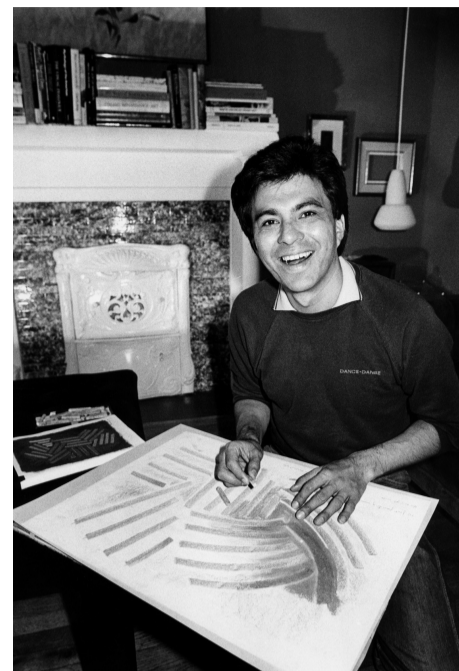
CURATOR OF GROUNDBREAKING EXHIBITIONS

In 1981 Houle curated his first set of group exhibitions, *Art Amerindian*, which consisted of shows at the National Arts Centre, the National Library and Archives, and the Robertson Galleries in Ottawa, and the Municipal Art Gallery in Hull. The National Library and Archives exhibit included work by Gerald Tailfeathers (1925–1975) and Arthur Shilling (1941–1986). Other sites featured work by Alex Janvier, Benjamin Chee Chee (1944–1977), Jackson Beardy (1944–1984), Daphne Odjig, and Beau Dick (1955–2017), among others. The exhibitions explored realism, abstraction, and narrative in the work of First Nations artists and, along with well-known artists, introduced those whose work previously had not been profiled.

There were few appointments of Indigenous curators in Canadian art museums in the 1980s, and often Indigenous artists were called upon to advise and co-curate exhibitions with institutional curators. In 1982 Houle was invited to co-

curate the exhibition *New Work by a New Generation* at the Norman MacKenzie Art Gallery (now the MacKenzie Art Gallery) in Regina with Bob Boyer and Carol Phillips, the gallery's director. This was the first major exhibition of contemporary Indigenous art from Canada and the United States, and it helped establish relationships between artists from across Turtle Island (known in colonial terms as North America). Houle's own work was exhibited alongside that of Boyer, Abraham Anghik Ruben, Carl Beam, Domingo Cisneros (b. 1942), Douglas Coffin (b. 1946), Phyllis Fife (b. 1948), Harry Fonseca (1946–2006), George C. Longfish (b. 1942), Leonard Paul (b. 1953), Edward Poitras (b. 1953), Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (b. 1940), and R. Lee White (b. 1951).

The exhibit was also the first in Canada to situate this emerging generation of contemporary Indigenous artists whose work is informed by their history, values, and culture.²³ It showed a radical departure from previous conceptions of Indigenous art often associated with traditional practices, such as the Woodland School or Haida art. Boyer, for instance, produced political abstract paintings on blankets with geometric designs derived from the traditional motifs of Siouan and Cree groups in Western Canada. Beam worked with photography and collage in an aesthetic style akin to the expressive layering of American pop artist Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) yet engaged with his Ojibwa traditions. Two of the four works of his own that Houle included were *Punk Schtick*, 1982, and *Rainbow Woman*, 1982.



Robert Houle drawing in his Wellesley Street East apartment in Toronto, 1981, photograph by the *Globe and Mail*, Toronto, archive of the artist.



Robert Houle, *Rainbow Woman*, 1982, wood with alkyd paint, 13.6 x 249 x 4.2 cm, Indigenous Art Centre, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Gatineau.

ART THAT RECONSTRUCTED HISTORIES

In 1983 Houle produced a work that marked a turning point in his oeuvre, *Parfleches for the Last Supper*, a series of thirteen paintings that combine two diametrically opposed ideologies: Christianity and his Saulteaux heritage. Here the Last Supper functions as a metaphor for the times his mother would call the naming shaman to come and give spirit names to her newborns. The ritual included a special meal, with the name-giver opening his medicine bag to reveal his rattle and sacred amulets and medicines. By traditional people in his community, Jesus at the Last Supper is understood to be a shaman with healing powers. The work represents Houle's synthesis of the two epistemologies, or systems of knowledge, that most influenced his artistic formation.

In Canada throughout the 1980s, curators and artists were still debating whether contemporary Indigenous art had a place in mainstream galleries or if it should be situated anthropologically in museums. In response, between 1983 and 1988, Houle inflected his artwork with a profoundly more political hue, focusing on reconstructed histories of Indigenous peoples, as in *Everything You Wanted to Know about Indians from A to Z* and *The Only Good Indians I Ever Saw Were Dead*, both from 1985. Houle documented the names of North American Indigenous nations, many of which had vanished as a result of colonization. Subsequent works—for example, *In Memoriam*, 1987; *New Sentinel*, 1987; and *Lost Tribes*, 1990–91—continued the discourse about representation and naming, and made the extinct visible again.



LEFT: Robert Houle, *New Sentinel*, 1987, oil on wood panel, ribbons and encaustic on cow skull, 244.3 x 45.5 x 3.5 cm, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. RIGHT: Robert Houle, *In Memoriam*, 1987, oil, feathers, and ribbon on plywood, overall 137.2 x 151.9 x 9 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Two residencies in 1989 moved Houle to explore the subject of land with a fresh outlook. From February to April 1989, Houle was artist-in-residence at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. He noted:

I had turned to oils at that time, because two years before that my mother had died, somebody who had brought me into this world, and I wanted to make a demarcation in my career forever.... Up to that point I had been working almost exclusively in acrylic. I switched to oils.²⁴

The residency allowed Houle to immerse himself in new work connected to his heritage. The result was the completion of four monumental abstract paintings, *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk*, 1989. The work continued the spirituality of *Parfleches for the Last Supper* but with an emphasis on the prairie landscape, in particular a spiritual place of legend on the northern part of Lake Manitoba, known in Anishnabemowin as *muhnedobe uhyahyuk*, meaning “the place where the gods are present.”²⁵



LEFT: Robert Houle in the doorway of Tom Thomson's shack at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario, 1989, photograph by Greg Staats, archive of the artist. RIGHT: Robert Houle working in the gallery at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario, 1989, photograph by Linda Morita.

In the fall of 1989, Houle was artist-in-residence at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinberg, Ontario. By then he had well established himself as an abstract artist, but he realized that he had no visual vocabulary for landscape painting in the literal sense. Houle's understanding of land differs from the typical Western perspective of ownership. Land is a shared source of being; the interconnectedness of humankind and nature, and the spirituality in the land, is fundamental to how earth-centred people view their relationship with Mother Earth. While at the McMichael Houle photographed the grounds and studied paintings by Tom Thomson (1877-1917) and the Group of Seven in the permanent collection. Thomson's work, especially the tactile physicality of his paint and technique, intrigued Houle. But the ghosts of the Group and their nationalistic approach were challenging.

The outcome of the residency was a work that elucidates both an earth-centred relationship to land and the losses First Nations experienced as a result of contact with Europeans: *Seven in Steel*, 1989, an impressive installation consisting of seven highly polished steel slabs that incorporate small, semi-abstract painted vignettes of Indigenous art objects held in the McMichael Collection, including a totem pole fragment, Inuit hunting spears, and animal figures. Lined up side by side at ground level and held together by strategically placed narrow strips of colour—red, yellow, and blue—each component of the installation is designated in memory of seven extinct nations and corresponds to a work by the Group of Seven.



Robert Houle, *Seven in Steel*, 1989, oil on steel and maple, 130.9 x 644 x 9.5 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Houle's first solo exhibition in a public art gallery was held at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 1990, *Robert Houle: Indians from A to Z*. Group exhibitions had become an issue for Houle, as he resisted being segregated as solely an Indigenous artist, aspiring that his work be considered mainstream within contemporary Canadian art. Some Indigenous artists believed Houle's position on the matter denounced Indigenous heritage in his work, which was not the case. Before 1986 many public institutions, including the National Gallery, had practised a form of "cultural apartheid"—a phrase used by Houle in an interview with Carole Corbeil in the *Globe and Mail*.²⁶ He felt that with a solo exhibition, he was taken seriously as a contemporary Canadian artist.

Houle also accepted a position as a professor of Native Studies at the Ontario College of Art (now OCAD University), Toronto, in 1990, becoming the first person to teach Indigenous studies at Canada's oldest institute for art education. He would instruct there for fifteen years, sharing his knowledge of history and Indigenous culture and mentoring a new generation of curators and artists, including Shelley Niro (b. 1954), Bonnie Devine (b. 1952), and Michael Belmore (b. 1971). Houle was one of just a handful of Indigenous art professors in Canada at the time of his appointment.

RESPONDING AS AN ARTIST AND ACTIVIST

The 1980s and 1990s were a politically turbulent period affecting Indigenous communities across the country. One such instance was when, in conjunction with the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary, the Glenbow Museum organized *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples*, which included historical objects borrowed from national and international ethnographic collections. The Cree Lubicon Lake Nation in northern Alberta led a widely publicized campaign to boycott the exhibition. The Lubicon had been resisting oil exploration in their traditional territory, with oil companies raking in profits while the federal government would not grant the Lubicon a reserve. Meanwhile the federal government and the oil company Shell Canada were sponsors of the exhibit. The Lubicon asked for museums not to lend objects to the show and for people not to attend, but to little effect.

In sympathy with the Lubicon, Houle had no intention of viewing the exhibition. However, after learning that there were artifacts borrowed from private collections in Europe that he wanted to see, Houle purchased a yard of black ribbon, which he wore as an armband while attending the touring show at the National Gallery of Canada in the Lorne Building.²⁷ He was totally repulsed by a display of a pair of tiny moccasins and an effigy from the grave of a four-year-old. "Viewing these looted Beothuk artifacts in the former bastion of European aesthetics—the National Gallery of Canada—the trivialization of a human tragedy was compounded by my knowledge that the sponsoring institution, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, was the depository of sacred and ceremonial regalia seized by the federal government."²⁸



Rebecca Belmore, *Artifact 671B*, 1988, performance, Thunder Bay, Ontario, photograph by William Lindsay.

Subsequently, Houle produced *Warrior Shield for the Lubicon*, 1989, a work that transforms the lid of an oil drum into a shield showing an abstracted landscape. Ruth B. Phillips notes the work confronted contemporary political issues using "a complex language of styles, genres, and media," through which the artist "announces himself the postmodern inheritor of multiple and distinct artistic traditions."²⁹

In the summer of 1990 for seventy-eight days a small group from the Mohawk nation of Kanesatake stood off against the Quebec provincial police and the Canadian army in defence of a sacred burial ground from the impending encroachment of a golf course in the town of Oka, Quebec. The dispute was the first well-publicized violent conflict between First Nations and the Canadian government in the late twentieth century. Houle writes, "For the people of Kanehsatake and Kahnawake it was state terrorism, the act of war without a declaration of war, so that there is no formal protection of civil rights or internationally regulated political rights...."³⁰

During this crisis, police and soldiers surrounded the same longhouse in Kahnawake where Houle had taught in 1972. He created a window installation in his Toronto apartment, *Mohawk Summer*, 1991, in support of the Mohawk. "When that longhouse was surrounded, it really hit me," Houle said. "That's why I blocked my Queen Street studio windows with banners, and literally deprived myself of light so I could not paint."³¹ The historic crisis has reverberated through other works, including *Kanehsatake*, 1990-93, and *Kanehsatake X*, 2000. It was while the banners of *Mohawk Summer* hung in his windows that Houle was visited by curators Diana Nemiroff and Charlotte Townsend-Gault

and began discussions that would lead to a crucial exhibition in the history of Indigenous and Canadian art.



LEFT: Robert Houle, *Kanehsatake*, 1990-93, oil on etched steel panels, treated wood, 221 x 122 cm, Art Gallery of Hamilton.
 RIGHT: Robert Houle's second-floor apartment on Queen Street West, Toronto, with *Mohawk Summer*, 1990, hanging in the windows, during the Oka Crisis, 1990, photograph by Greg Staats, archive of the artist. A word adorns each banner. The words are: "Landclaim," "Longhouse," "Sovereign," and "Falseface." Houle also painted the façade of the building blue.

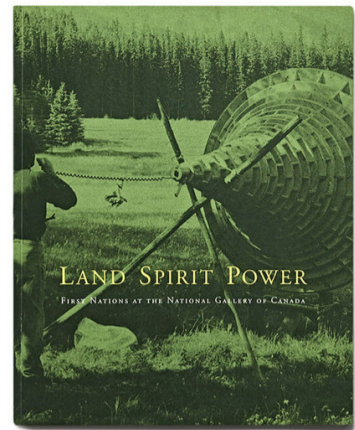
LAND, SPIRIT, POWER: FIRST NATIONS AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA

In 1992, at the invitation of Diana Nemiroff, curator of modern art at the National Gallery of Canada, Houle agreed to co-curate *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada*,³² with Nemiroff and Charlotte Townsend-Gault. Previous to this exhibit, Indigenous art had not yet been widely seen as contemporary, and generally it was still acquired and exhibited in historical contexts rather than in contemporary art galleries. *Land, Spirit, Power* brought an unprecedented level of mainstream recognition and prompted the integration of Indigenous art into contemporary art collections, impacting the permanent installations and the documentation of work by Indigenous artists in museums across the country.

While researching *Land, Spirit, Power*, Houle visited artists across North America, including Rebecca Belmore (b. 1960), Dempsey Bob (b. 1948), Jimmie Durham (b. 1940), Edgar Heap of Birds (b. 1954), Faye HeavyShield (b. 1953), Zacharias Kunuk (b. 1957), and Kay WalkingStick (b. 1935). In his influential essay for the show's catalogue, Houle frames these contemporary artists within an art tradition that predates European settlement by thousands of years. He further attests that their knowledge acquired at Western art schools "(sometimes minefields netted with trenches of assimilation, discrimination, and oblivion), combines with their unique legacy to prepare them to create a new plastic language that has a spirit. A contemporary art, which is both new and indigenous ..."³³



LEFT: Rebecca Belmore, *Mawu-che-hitoowin: A Gathering of People for Any Purpose*, 1992, installation: audio recordings, headsets, chairs, plywood, linoleum, wood stain, at *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada*, 1992, photograph by Louis Joncas. RIGHT: Cover of *Land, Spirit, Power* exhibition publication, 1992.



During Houle's work on the exhibition, he encountered the painting *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770, by Benjamin West (1738–1820), owned by the National Gallery and displayed alongside a selection of Indigenous objects—a pouch, and a garter and hatband as worn by one of the soldiers—on loan from the British Museum, London. While Indigenous artists were taking control of their own representation in *Land, Spirit, Power*, in another part of the gallery, heritage was being represented in a conventionally ethnographic way. Such irony was not lost on Houle. Seeing *The Death of General Wolfe* inspired his inquiry into the history of the French and English. His research resulted in the creation of *Kanata*, 1992, a controversial historical revisionism created during a tense period of constitutional deliberations in Canada, during which he felt First Nations were in "parenthesis."³⁴ In discussing *Kanata*, Houle articulated the place of Indigenous peoples in the history of Canada as one leg in "a tripod in Confederation, a land of French, British, and First Nations."³⁵



Robert Houle, *Coming Home*, 1995, oil on photo emulsion on canvas, 76.2 x 254 cm, private collection.

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, Houle continued to make art with a focus on First Nations and land issues, as seen in *Premises for Self-Rule*, 1994, a series of five lushly coloured paintings combined with photographs and texts from five treaties that confirm First Nations' self-government and sovereignty over land in Canada.³⁶ In 1999 the Winnipeg Art Gallery organized a second solo exhibition of work by Houle, *Sovereignty over Subjectivity*, marking another milestone in his career. The exhibition included three site-specific public artworks: *These Apaches Are Not Helicopters*, *Morningstar*, and *Gambling Sticks*, all from 1999, that combined with the works on display at the gallery posed many questions about political and cultural issues in the history of Canada, including land claims, self-government, residential schools, and nomenclature. Works such as *Coming Home*, 1995; *Aboriginal Title*, 1989-90; and *I Stand ...*, 1999, were included in the exhibition.

INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Houle has received much recognition for his contributions to Canadian visual culture and for his stature as a pre-eminent artist, educator, curator, and critic. He became a member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts in 2000, received the Toronto Arts Award for Visual Arts in 2001, and was awarded the Distinguished Alumnus Award by the University of Manitoba in 2004. Houle has received two honorary doctorates and, in 2015, the prestigious Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts.



Robert Houle, *Saysaygon*, 2016, oil on canvas, two panels, each 213 x 152 cm, collection of the artist.

Houle resigned from the Ontario College of Art and Design (now OCAD University) in 2005 after receiving a major grant from the Canada Council for the Arts, which included participation in the Canada Council International Residency Program at the Cité internationale des arts in Paris, in 2006. This residency resulted in an iconic work, *Paris/Ojibwa*, 2010, which continued Houle's research into the nineteenth-century Romanticist painter Eugène Delacroix begun during his university days in Montreal.

In 2009 Houle created the *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, a highly personal artwork that reclaims his memories of the residential school experience. Two years later the Canadian government's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) began taking testimony from an estimated eighty thousand residential school survivors across Canada. To the TRC, reconciliation is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the country. For that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour.

Houle chose not to participate in the TRC largely because of the prominence of the concept of “reconciliation” as a form of forgiveness.³⁷ More meaningful to Houle is *pahgedenaun*, an Anishnabe term that translates roughly as “let it go from your mind.”³⁸

At a solo show at Toronto’s Kinsman Robinson Galleries in 2016, *Robert Houle: Shaman Dream in Colour*, Houle exhibited works created between 1998 and 2015, including abstractions of intense colour, such as *Shaman*, 2011; *Blue Thunder*, 2012; and *Morningstar I*, 2014. More recent figurative renderings in monochromatic shades of black, white, and grey, such as *Shaman Takes Away the Pain*, 2015, and *Shaman Never Die*, 2015, honour the influence of shamans on his life and work. In June 2017 Houle completed a triptych, *O-ween du muh waun (We Were Told)*, which continues the polemics that began with *Kanata*, 1992, with the same Delaware warrior featured as the central figure. Whereas some of this recent work is rendered in richly evocative and subtle monochromatic shadings, others are abstractions in vibrant colours.



LEFT: Robert Houle, *Shaman Dream in Colour*, 1975, oil on canvas, 91.44 x 60.96 cm, private collection. Based on a portrait of Morrisseau at the famous Beardmore tea party in 1978. RIGHT: Robert Houle, *Shaman Never Die*, 2015, oil on canvas, 44 x 60.96 cm, collection of the artist.

The year 2017 witnessed significant moves in art museums and public art galleries across Canada, as well as in funding agencies such as the Canada Council for the Arts, to focus on the work of Indigenous artists and curators through special programs and grants. The confluence aligned with subjects Houle had been discussing for forty years. As an artist, curator, and educator, he has been working for the recognition of Indigenous art and artists in North America; to raise awareness of issues surrounding land claims, water, and

Indigenous rights; to decolonize museums; and to assert Indigenous peoples' rights to their own representation. He has disrupted outdated methods of exhibiting Indigenous art and created paths for future curators of Indigenous art, such as Greg Hill (b. 1967), Gerald McMaster (b. 1953), and Wanda Nanibush (b. 1976). His work has inspired two generations of Indigenous artists to move bravely beyond traditional methods, embrace mainstream contemporary discourse, and proactively challenge colonial narratives of art history.



Robert Houle in 2015 with his triptych *Colours of Love*, 2015, photograph by Patti Ross Milne. Houle dreamed of the work *Colours of Love* while he was a student in Montreal working on *Red Is Beautiful*, 1970.



KEY WORKS

Robert Houle's artistic endeavours span more than forty years of intense production. His use of abstraction and colour is key in understanding his paintings. In Houle's work the land and natural environment provide metaphors for spiritual concepts, as seen in his selection of specific colours to evoke a relationship with nature. Through his paintings, mixed-media works, and site-specific commissions, Houle has exposed historical and contemporary issues affecting Indigenous cultures.

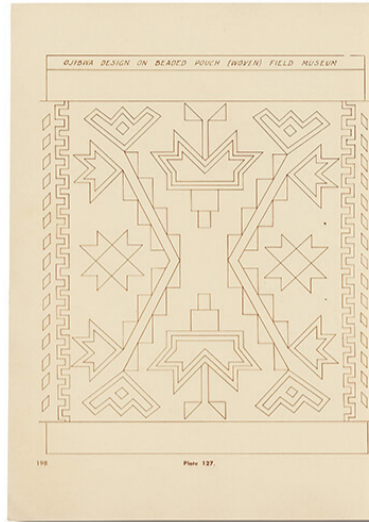
RED IS BEAUTIFUL 1970



Robert Houle, *Red Is Beautiful*, 1970
Acrylic on canvas, 45 x 61 cm
Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau

One of Houle's earliest paintings, *Red Is Beautiful* was produced while he was a student at McGill University. The painting's smooth surface consists of two diagonal geometric forms in shades of red and pink, set against a flat red background, with the forms converging at the centre of the canvas. The composition was inspired by geometric designs used in traditional woven bags, patterns that Houle encountered in Carrie A. Lyford's book *Ojibwa Crafts* (1943), which provided him with an early introduction to traditional Ojibwa designs. He was drawn to the spiritual relationships between these patterns and traditional ceremonial objects.

Red Is Beautiful is linked stylistically to twelve other paintings influenced by the designs in Lyford's book and that took inspiration from love poems written by Houle's friend Brenda Gureshko. Responding to an assignment from a professor at McGill University in Montreal to paint "love," Houle created twelve monochromatic, pastel-coloured abstractions on rectangular canvases, including *Epigram the Shortest Distance*, *The First Step*, and *The Stuff of Which Dreams Are Made*, all 1972; and one triangular-shaped painting, *Wigwam*, 1972. The paintings were acquired by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (now Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada) in 1972.



LEFT: An interior page from *Ojibwa Crafts* (1943) by Carrie A. Lyford. RIGHT: Robert Houle, *Love Games*, 1972, acrylic on canvas, 127.5 x 127.5 cm, Indigenous Art Centre, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Gatineau. This is one of twelve paintings by Houle based on love poems.



Several of Houle's early abstractions, including *Red Is Beautiful* and another early work, *Ojibwa Purple Leaves, No. 1*, 1972, also reveal the influence of painters Frank Stella (b. 1936) and Barnett Newman (1905–1970). A relatively unknown and rarely exhibited work, *Red Is Beautiful* foreshadows Houle's future direction—a vision and practice that embraces modernism, Indigenous designs, and the spiritualism that he discovered in the geometric patterns of Ojibwa crafts.

PARFLECHES FOR THE LAST SUPPER 1983



Robert Houle, *Parfleches for the Last Supper*, 1983, (*Matthew, James the Less, Jude, Simon, Philip, Andrew, Bartholomew, Thomas, Peter, James, John, Judas, Jesus*)
Acrylic and porcupine quills on paper, thirteen paintings, each 56 x 56 cm
Winnipeg Art Gallery

This work comprises thirteen paintings, each of which echoes the shape of a traditional parfleche and symbolizes one of the twelve apostles or Jesus. Houle imagines the disciples and their leader at the final meal, each carrying a parfleche. The paintings are composed of handmade paper folded at the top to create a flap, then painted with acrylic and stitched together decoratively with porcupine quills.

The work is pivotal in Houle's career as a personal and political statement after his resignation from the National Museum of Man in Hull (now the Canadian Museum of History) and marks his mission to devote his artistic practice to issues surrounding the representation of Indigenous art and artists.



Robert Houle, *Parfleches for the Last Supper* (from top, left to right: Matthew, James the Less, Jude, Simon, Philip, Andrew, Bartholomew, Thomas, Peter, James, John, Judas, Jesus), 1983, acrylic and porcupine quills on paper, thirteen paintings, each 56 x 56 cm, Winnipeg Art Gallery.

In *Parfleches for the Last Supper*, Houle attempts to reconcile his traditional adherence to the Sun Dance ceremony¹ with Christian beliefs—both of which served to gather and ally families. The Christian gospels assume the form of the traditional travel pouches, and the cultural icon of the parfleche takes on new meaning as an object that unites the two cultures. Applying colour theory, Houle carefully selected hues to suit each apostle's temperament and for their symbolic properties. Manipulated symbols that represent warrior staffs and morning stars adorn the works. The parfleches have the appearance of skin; the quills reference shamanistic powers and are meant to impart totemic spirits. Passages from the gospel are written on the back of each work and are sometimes reproduced in didactic texts when the work is shown.

The idea of creating a work inspired by the Passion of Christ first occurred to Houle as early as 1979, after seeing the *Stations of the Cross*, 1958–66, a major series of paintings by Barnett Newman (1905–1970): “The parfleches were created out of a desire to combine a single continuum of the effect of Catholicism and Saukteaux spirituality; the monolithic and monumentality of Newman's *Stations of the Cross* captured the singularity in the geometric forms as notions of ritual art created by a shaman.”²

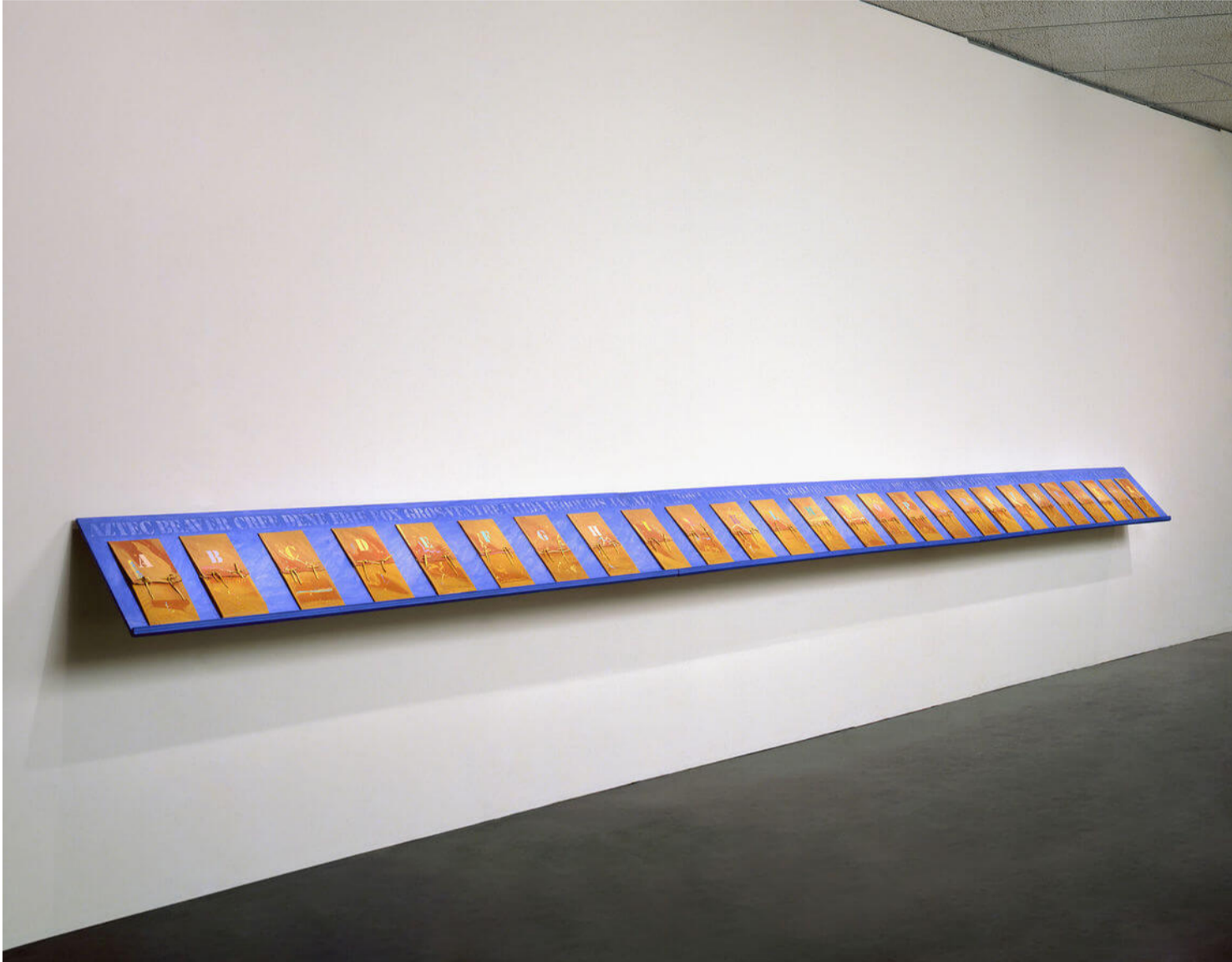


ROBERT HOULE

Life & Work by Shirley Madill

Houle thought of Newman as a kindred spirit—Jewish and taking on a work with Catholic subject matter, while Houle was Anishnabe³ and addressing the same topic. In *Parfleches for the Last Supper*, mystical and exotic elements, acrylic and quills, Indigenous and Christian symbols exist side by side.

EVERYTHING YOU WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT INDIANS FROM A TO Z 1985

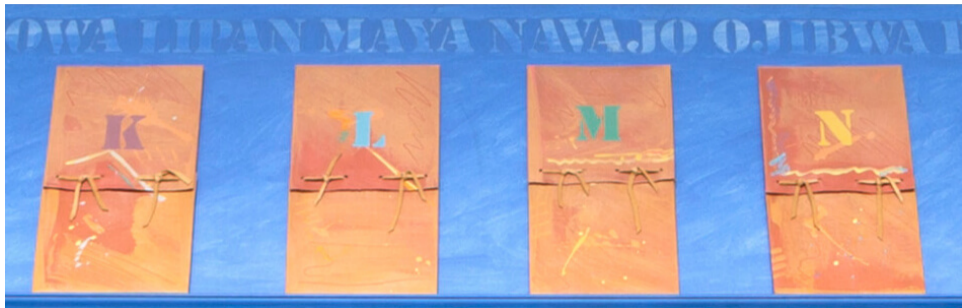


Robert Houle, *Everything You Wanted to Know about Indians from A to Z*, 1985
Acrylic, rawhide, wood, and linen, installation of twenty-six objects, 45.3 x 735 cm
Winnipeg Art Gallery

Everything You Wanted to Know about Indians from A to Z represents Houle's first exploration of sculptural installation. It is a multimedia work consisting of twenty-six linen and rawhide parfleches, each resting on a blue ledge fastened to a wall. The installation resembles a library shelf, or perhaps a church pew holding hymn books. Each parfleche is identified with a stencilled letter of the English alphabet on the upper flap and a corresponding Indigenous nation in the lower portion, beginning with the Aztec and ending with the Zuni (B corresponds with Beaver, C corresponds with Cree, and so on). The work is an extension, in three-dimensional form, of the paintings that compose *Parfleches for the Last Supper*, 1983.

By showing the alphabet as a piece of European technology and a microcosm of language, Houle employs metaphor. A viewer's act of reading letters that represent the names of Indigenous nations speaks to the cultural appropriation

of and misinformation about Indigenous cultures and history found in books. Houle questions whether total knowledge of a tribe or culture can be contained in such a format. Although this work may appear simple in form, it references several complex societies with many differing identities. By using the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, it also questions the scientific strategies for classification employed by ethnographers and in the display of objects for pedagogical purposes, critiquing how such objects have been presented as curiosities.

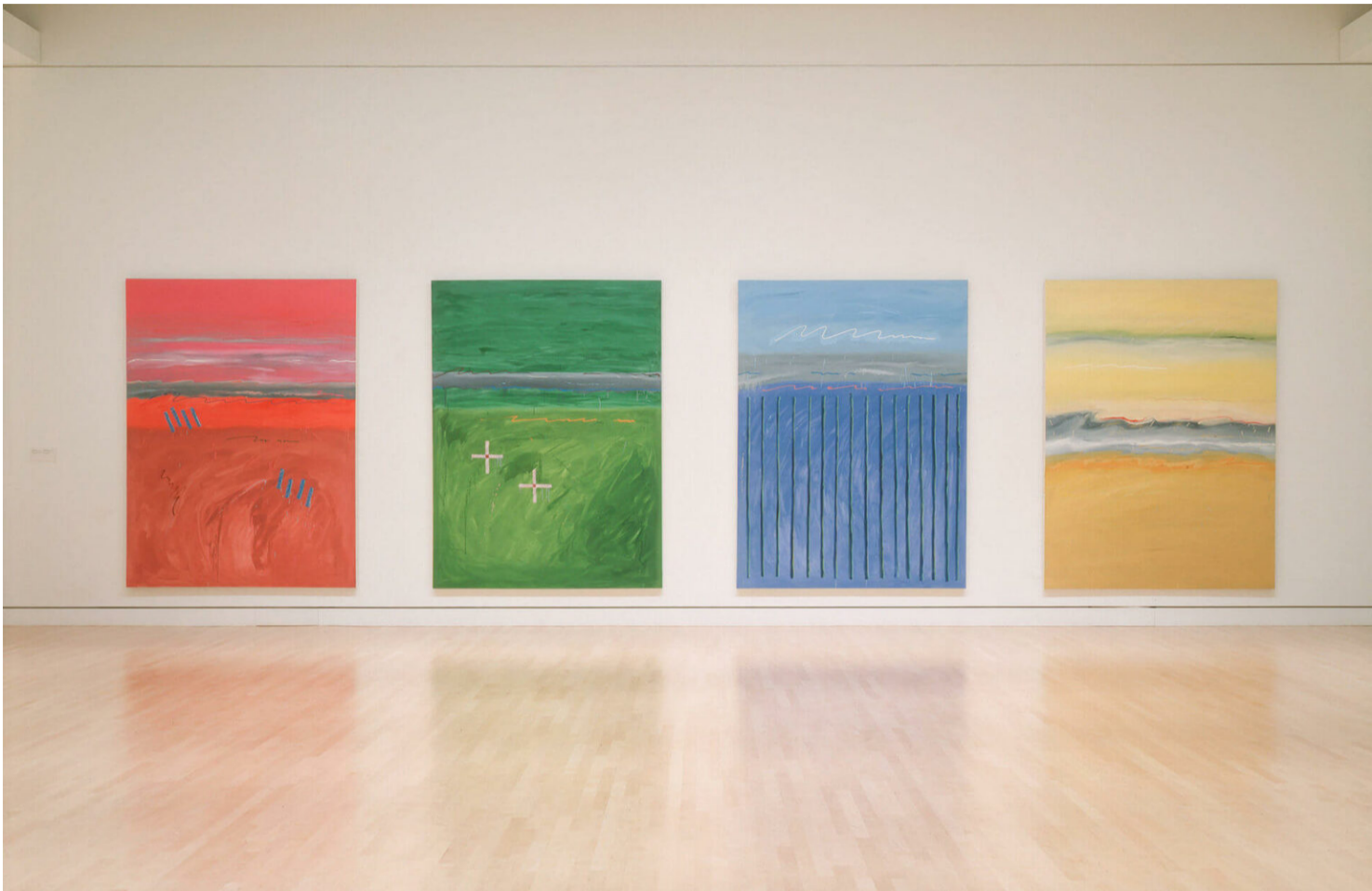


Robert Houle, *Everything You Wanted to Know about Indians from A to Z* (detail), 1985, acrylic, rawhide, wood, and linen, installation of twenty-six objects, 45.3 x 735 cm, Winnipeg Art Gallery.

The work's significance hearkens back to the artist's tenure at the National Museum of Man in Hull (now the Canadian Museum of History), where he witnessed a conservation staff member, an ethnochemist, opening up a medicine bundle and examining its contents. Houle saw this act as an intrusion and a reflection of the museum's perception of the medicine bundle as an artifact rather than as a living entity. *Everything You Wanted to Know ...* explores the tensions between Indigenous traditions (such as sacredness of speech and the authority of naming) and contemporary artistic expression that uses language and European systems of classification.

Many North and South American Indigenous languages have fallen silent, a reminder of the relationship between colonial oppression and the transmission of language based on oral tradition. Indigenous knowledge is passed on through oral histories, storytelling, family narratives, and visual records. With the arrival of missionaries bringing bibles and settlers holding deeds to land parcels, control was eventually awarded to the literate colonizers.

MUHNEDOBE UHYAHYUK (WHERE THE GODS ARE PRESENT) 1989



Robert Houle, *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk (Where the gods are present)*, 1989

(Matthew, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas)

Oil on canvas, four paintings, each 244 x 182.4 x 5 cm

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Created during Houle's 1989 residency at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk* consists of four monumental abstract paintings, each named after an apostle and derived from sketches for *Parfleches for the Last Supper*, 1983. Its production was a means of celebrating the origins of the name "Manitoba."

Situated near Houle's childhood home, the sacred place referred to in these paintings is a revered natural phenomenon that was legendary and a site of pilgrimage for the Saulteaux. It is also the place from which the province of Manitoba derived its name. The Anishnabec refer to it as *Manitowapah* or *manitou-pii-uhyahuk*. Approximately 200 kilometres northwest of Winnipeg, it is a specific spot where the current ebbs and flows on a narrow stretch of Lake Manitoba. As the water hits the porous limestone of the shore, it makes a muffled drone resembling faraway drums, creating the sound of *ke-mishomis-na-ug* ("our ancestors"), believed to be the voice of Manitou. For the Saulteaux, the Narrows are known as *muhnedobe uhyahyuk*, meaning the "divine straits," or translated as "the place where the gods are present."¹

In this work, Houle employs broad gestural painting techniques, using space and light brushed in pigments sourced from the local natural environment—red, green, blue, and ochre—a vibrant response to the earth, light, and sky of Manitoba’s prairie landscape. Although, with an ambiguous painterly horizon line, the paintings allude to the landscape, Houle did not create the works as landscape paintings. Rather, they are “landscapes for the mind.”²

Initially during his residency, in the winter, Houle painted in a studio in the basement of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, and he encountered

challenges mixing colours due to the lack of natural light. Colour is critical to Houle’s methodology. To gain distance, he decided to take a break and travelled by bus northwest to Elphinstone, Manitoba, to visit his brother-in-law. During the journey he was struck by the barren landscape between Portage la Prairie and his destination, reminded how, on a grey day in the middle of winter, on a prairie landscape the demarcation between earth and sky practically disappears, giving the appearance of a monochromatic, flat, two-dimensional wall, similar to an abstract painting. When he shared with his family his challenges of painting in a windowless space, a relative pointed out to him that “there is colour in the snow.” Upon returning to Winnipeg, Houle mixed his colours in daylight.

Muhnedobe uhyahyuk is a work of re-appropriating and reclaiming Manitoba. It was subsequently exhibited in his first solo exhibition in a public art gallery in Canada, *Robert Houle: Indians from A to Z*, at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 1990. The residency allowed Houle to explore and reconnect with his Plains identity. It marked the first time he realized how natural light played an important role in mixing colours and that he encountered the spirituality felt through direct sunlight.



LEFT: Robert Houle, *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk (Where the gods are present) (Philip)*, 1989, oil on canvas, one of four paintings, each 244 x 182.4 x 5 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. RIGHT: Robert Houle, *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk (Where the gods are present) (Bartholomew)*, 1989, oil on canvas, one of four paintings, each 244 x 182.4 x 5 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

KANATA 1992

Robert Houle, *Kanata*, 1992
Acrylic and Conté crayon on canvas, 228.7 x 732 cm
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Kanata is a signature work by Houle, marking an important investigation and inquiry into the place of First Nations peoples in the French and English histories of Canada. Houle had a dream about the work seven years before he painted it. *Kanata* is essential to an understanding of historical accuracy in the context of colonialism. Houle echoes what his grandfather used to say concerning colonization: "*Jiishin gegoo wiiseg maa akiing, Nishnaabe waabdaan*" ("If history is going to happen, our people will witness it").¹

In this monumental painting, Houle appropriates a canonical image from a painting by Benjamin West (1738-1820), *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770. Houle captured West's painting digitally and, using sepia-coloured Conté crayon, copied the image, painting only the regalia of a lone Delaware warrior, in blue and red.² The image is centrally located and flanked by a blue panel on the left and a red panel on the right, giving the work a geometric layout and playing with the modernist formalism that so influences the artist. Houle says of the image, "The Indian is in parentheses ...

surrounded by this gigantic red and this gigantic blue and is sandwiched in that environment, is surrounded. And that is reality because the English and the French are still the major players in the making of this history, history as it was."³ Houle's painting forces recognition of First Nations and addresses the historical inaccuracy of the idea that the founding nations of Canada are England and France.

West's painting has been described as revolutionary, a watershed in the history of Western art. It depicts the death of the valiant British hero of the Seven Years' War (1756-63), the battle that resulted in Britain's success over France and her colonial subjects. The Delaware warrior is seen as a silent witness to the colonial struggle to found the Dominion of Canada. In *Kanata*, Houle challenges the authority and ability of non-Indigenous artists to represent Indigenous experiences. West was convinced of the truth in his details, though the eighteenth-century painting lacked historical accuracy. When an observer noted that the man in the foreground wasn't wearing the moccasins all warriors wore into battle, West inserted them into subsequent versions of the work.



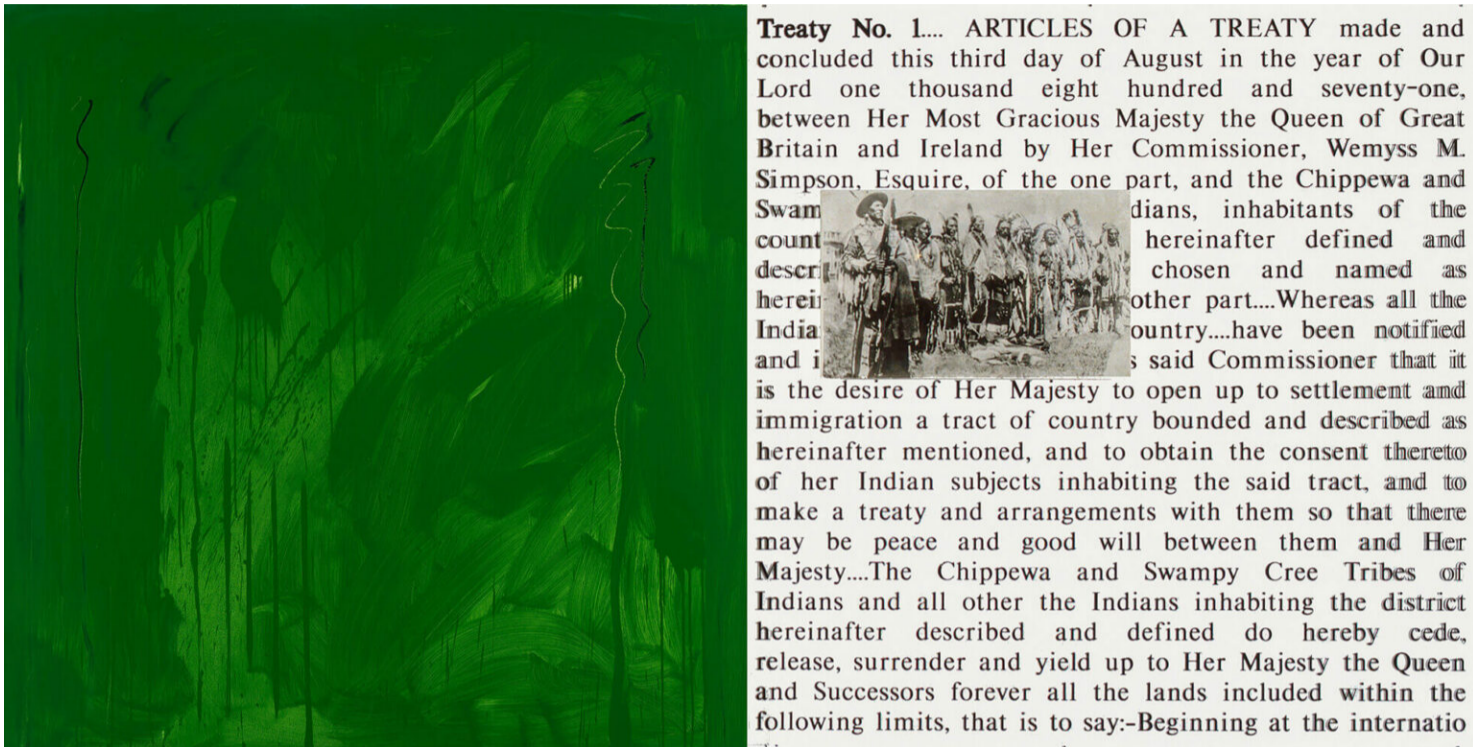
Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770, oil on canvas, 152.6 x 214.5 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Houle later produced a series of works revisiting the image of West's painting that were exhibited in *Kanata: Robert Houle's Histories* at Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, in 1993. The exhibition included a multimedia installation titled *Contact/Content/Context*, 1992, and two computer collage series: *Lost Tribes Series*, 1990-91, and *Kanata Series*, 1991. The works coincided with constitutional deliberations around the Meech Lake Accord.⁴ Canadian politician and chief of the Red Sucker Lake band (now Red Sucker Lake First Nation) Elijah Harper voted against the Accord in 1990 in the Manitoba Legislature, asserting Indigenous Canadians' control over their destinies. The exhibition continued the polemics that began with *Kanata*.



LEFT: Robert Houle, *Kanata* (detail), 1992, acrylic and Conté crayon on canvas, 228.7 x 732 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
RIGHT: Robert Houle, *Lost Tribes*, 1990-91, one of twelve computer printout collages, two with hand-tinting, overall (each of eleven components, each overall): 38.3 x 57.3 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

PREMISES FOR SELF-RULE: TREATY NO. 1 1994



Robert Houle, *Premises for Self-Rule: Treaty No. 1*, 1994
 Oil on canvas, photo emulsion on canvas, laser cut vinyl, 152.4 x 304.8 cm
 Winnipeg Art Gallery

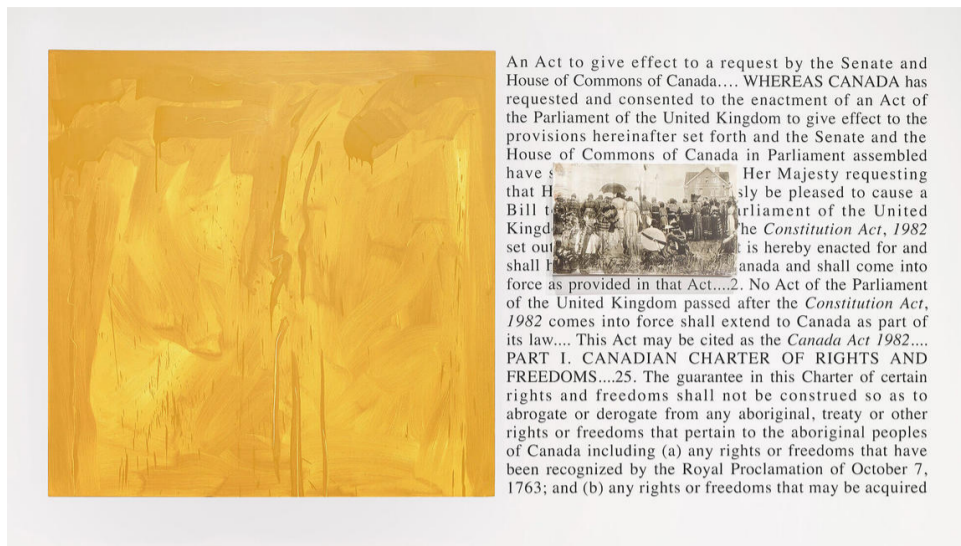
On the left of this bilaterally symmetrical work is a green colour-field abstract; on the right is a field of legal text appropriated from Treaty No. 1 (signed in 1871), upon a portion of which is superimposed an archival photograph of warriors looking at a medicine bundle.

When Manitoba joined Confederation in 1870, Treaty No. 1 was concluded between Queen Victoria, her commissioner Wemyss M. Simpson, and the Saulteaux and Cree, transforming the District of Assiniboia into a new province. However, the colonial government did not uphold the right of First Nations to the land title established by the treaty. In this work, Houle visually restores control and ownership of the land to First Nations. Historically, government legislation has institutionalized and rationalized the subjugation of First Nations; Houle turns that rhetoric against itself. By placing an archival image over legal text, he not only creates tension through visual strain but also foregrounds First Nations over Euro-North American legislative history, thereby subverting the document.

The work is part of a five-painting series, *Premises for Self-Rule*, 1994, which focuses on the false promises of the Canadian government regarding land rights. It emphasizes how places can be socially and politically constructed, and asserts First Nations' historic and legal connections to the land. More political than spiritual in nature, each work in the series consists of lushly coloured paintings combined with photographs of Indigenous subjects and legal texts from treaties that confirm self-government, from the Royal Proclamation of 1763 and the British North America Act of 1867 to the Indian Act of 1876 and the

Constitution Act of 1982. Through his process, Houle uses three distinct Western cultural forms—modernism (with abstract painting), the archive (with photographs), and the colonial government (with the treaties)—in making a powerful statement about the inherent right of First Nations to autonomy, self-rule, and title to sovereign lands.

The photographs used by Houle to create the series were from a booklet of ten postcards published in 1907 by A. Young & Co., Department of Agriculture, that show Blackfoot (Niitsitapi) gatherings in Fort Macleod, Alberta. They were a gift from fellow artist Faye HeavyShield (b. 1953), who, with Houle, discovered them in an antique store in Calgary. She said to him, “Welcome to my territory.”¹ This work represents Houle’s entry into postmodernism, with a fearless mixing of modes of representation: abstraction, appropriated photographs, and text.



Robert Houle, *Premises for Self-Rule: Constitution Act, 1982, 1994*, oil on canvas, photo emulsion on canvas, laser cut vinyl, 152.4 x 304.8 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

SANDY BAY 1998–99



Robert Houle, *Sandy Bay*, 1998–99

Oil on canvas, black and white photograph, colour photograph on canvas, Masonite,
300 x 548.4 cm

Winnipeg Art Gallery

After Houle read Ruth Teichroeb's book *Flowers on My Grave: How an Ojibwa Boy's Death Helped Break the Silence on Child Abuse* (1998), an account of the suicide of a boy victimized by multigenerational residential school violence on his reserve, he created this deeply emotional work completed over eighteen months.

The book activated Houle's memories of the Sandy Bay residential school. The work reflects the cultural tradition of telling—remembering, recounting, and recording a difficult experience as a path to healing. It functions as text in the absence of writing, as history in the absence of official account. Its narrative elements are a passage through memory that begins with two photographs as evidence and moves through a majestic resurrection in which the school's ghostly form, in monochromatic tones of light grey and blue, seems to emerge from the landscape.

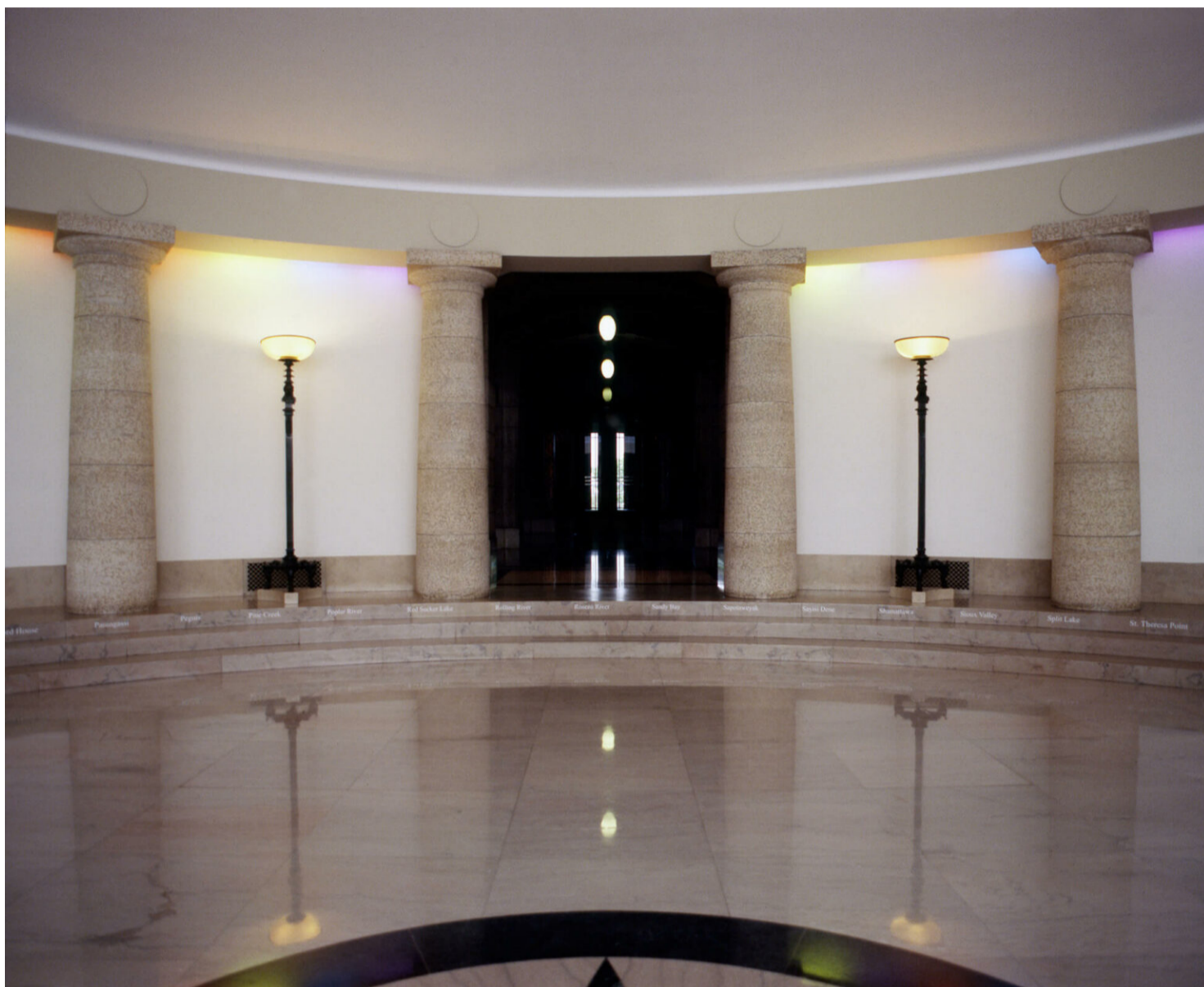
Sandy Bay consists of five parts, meant to be viewed from left to right, and morphs subtly from representation to abstraction. Two mounted, enlarged photographs on Masonite are situated at the work's far left: one is of the first priest to be buried in the reserve cemetery; below is an image of a First Communion class that includes Houle's sister Marilyn. In a clouded area in the middle left section of the painting are words from a hymn that his mother used to sing to him and that would come to be used during family burials: "ON SAM KI KISEWATIS ANA MANITOWIYAN" ("Oh you are so kind and so treasured although you are god-like").¹ Each window on the building above takes on a metaphorical reference to one of Houle's siblings. To the right are two panels: one depicts the landscape of Sandy Bay rendered in deep blue, the other a landscape in red with Houle's trademark gestural line in green. Other characteristic marks include references to traditional quillwork and the morning star.

This healing work exemplifies Houle's approach and style of symbolically organizing every element. The artist's calming brush balances the inner tempest, finding the quiet centre within each of us.



Robert Houle painting *Sandy Bay* in 1999, photograph by David Recollet, archive of the artist.

MORNINGSTAR 1999



Robert Houle, *Morningstar*, 1999

Coloured lights, vinyl lettering, sound, site-specific installation

Pool of the Black Star, Manitoba Legislative Building, Winnipeg

Morningstar is a politically charged, site-specific installation that was produced in conjunction with Houle's solo exhibition *Sovereignty over Subjectivity* at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 1999. He created the work for the Pool of the Black Star, a circular room in the middle of the Manitoba Legislative Building. The room sits directly below the building's legislative dome and is marked by three steps that form its circumference and a black star in the centre. In creating *Morningstar*, Houle transformed this political arena into a healing circle.

The development of *Morningstar* was a journey mediated by poignant experience and memory. Houle wanted to find the place of legend known as "the place where the gods are present" and capture the sound of the water hitting the porous limestone rocks at the Narrows on Manitou Island, in Lake Manitoba. With his father, a sound technician named Ken Gregory, and this author as curator, Houle set forth to the island in the summer of 1998 to record

and then transport the legendary sound of Manitou Island to the site of the Pool of the Black Star.

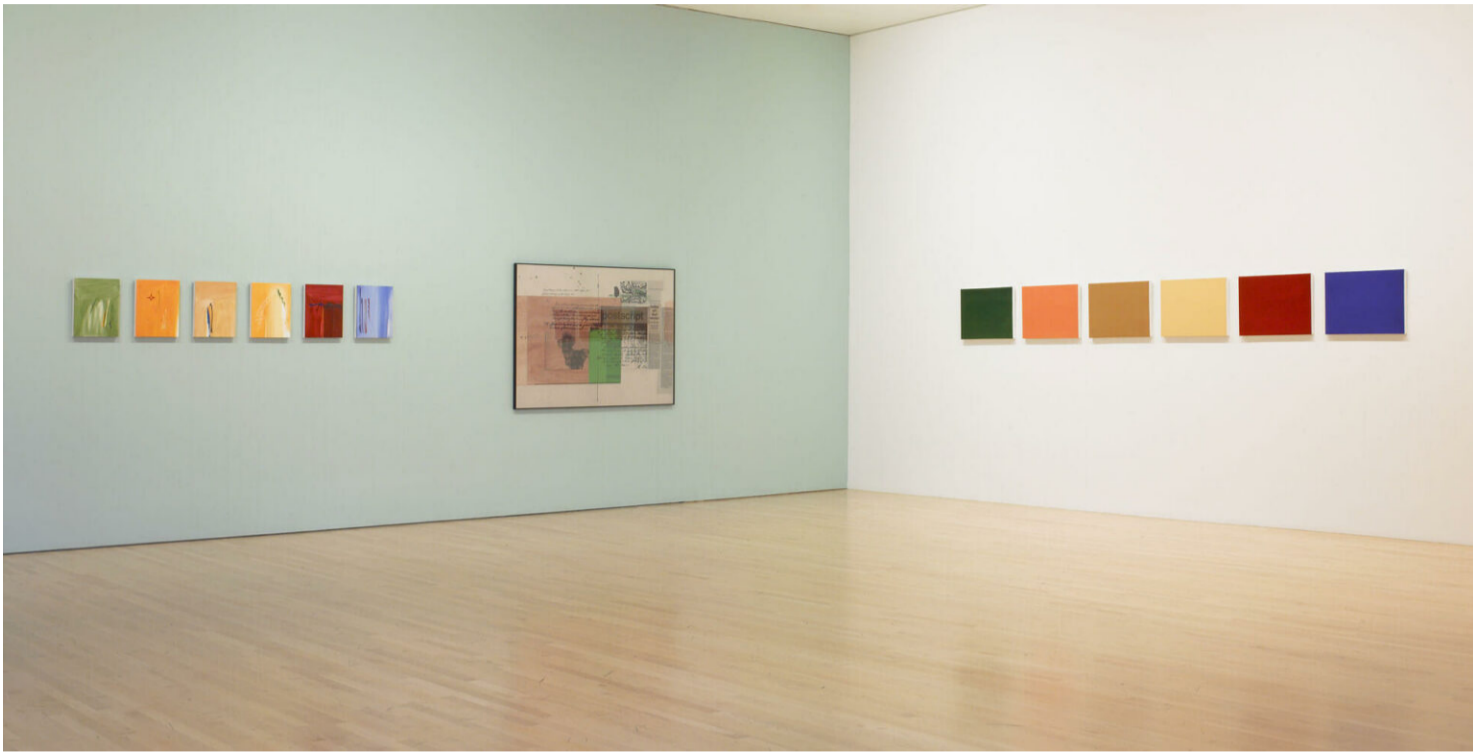
For the installation Houle placed around the room's circumference vinyl lettering of the names of sixty-one First Nations communities and reserves in Manitoba. The room's edges were lit with coloured lights of yellow, blue, purple, and red, symbolizing the hem of the traditional Rainbow Woman's skirt. According to Saulteaux legend, after each storm Rainbow Woman displays these colours to calm the elements. An audio component began softly with the hypnotic sound of the water at the Narrows hitting rocks, gradually moving into beating drums, and ending in a crescendo with the Grand Entry song performed by the Kicking Woman singers. For Houle, it was powerful to hear the haunting voices of women travelling across the hallways of power in the Manitoba Legislature. Received positively by politicians, staff, and Indigenous communities, the installation was the first public artwork on the premises, and it charged this political site with emotion.

For Houle, the significance of the work lies in his journey of recalling memories and legends, and in returning to his cultural heritage and language in Sandy Bay. Relevant on a political level as well, the work illumines the seat of government following politician and chief Elijah Harper's vote in the Manitoba Legislature, when he rejected the passing of the Meech Lake Accord in 1990. Houle's spiritual values are made apparent in *Morningstar*, while the relationship between First Nations and the provincial government plays out visually and aurally.



Robert Houle at the site of *Morningstar*, 1999, with Shirley Madill, in Winnipeg, photograph by Ernest Mayer, archive of the artist. The written names of sixty-one First Nations from the province were placed around the room's circumference in vinyl lettering.

PALISADE II 2007



Robert Houle, *Palisade II*, 2007

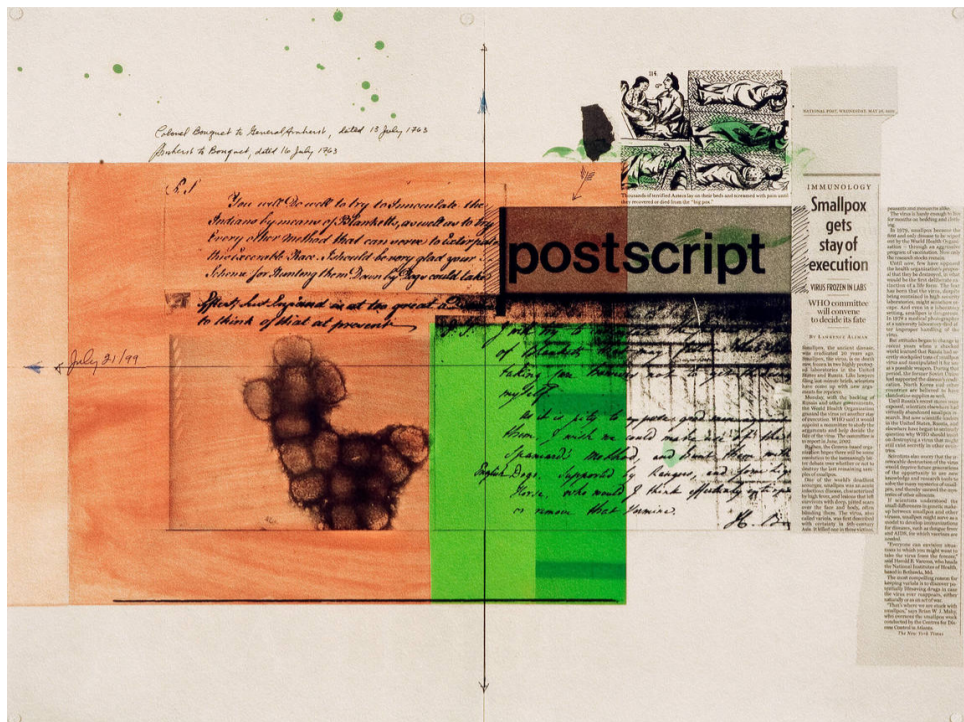
Three-part painting installation: twelve oils on canvas, six at 40 x 30 cm each, six at 45 x 60 cm each, and one digital photographic print (*Postscript*), 121.9 x 163.2 cm
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Palisade II is an installation consisting of three parts: six gestural paintings that include pictography and abstracted figuration on one wall and six monochromatic paintings on another. In between them is *Postscript*, a collage of photocopied texts and images resembling an historical archive. The work is a memorial to the Seneca, Keepers of the Western Door of the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee, who were the only group of this alliance to join the other nations that resisted the British during Chief Pontiac's confederacy in the 1760s—one of the most successful campaigns by First Nations against the European invasion, though it did not ultimately repel the British. In six delicate gestural paintings Houle references each of the six nations, and a corresponding monochromatic work suggests the commingling of art, nature, and history.

The installation connects with a previous work, *Palisade I*, 1999, that consists of paintings recalling the tactics of General Jeffrey Amherst, commander of the British military in North America during the Seven Years' War (1756-63), and his collaborator Colonel Henry Bouquet. They had a diabolical plan to present smallpox-tainted blankets and a snuff box containing an infected cloth to a Seneca delegation during "peace" negotiations. The insertion of the text component *Postscript* into *Palisade I* unbalances the whole as it refers to the history of smallpox and the fatal effect of this biological warfare using European pathology on First Nations peoples in 1763.

In *Palisade II* the collage *Postscript* is the hinge that joins the two painting installations and presents the key to understanding the history. As well, the

arrangement of the canvases mirrors the geographical deployment of the Six Nations from west to east (left to right): green (Seneca), orange (Cayuga), gold (Onondaga, the Council Keepers), yellow (Tuscarora), crimson (Oneida), and cobalt blue (Mohawk, Keepers of the Eastern Door). As with *Parfleches for the Last Supper*, 1983, the abstract paintings are autonomous objects. Houle thought of the panels of the gestural paintings as “medicine bags” and completed one daily, as a means to maintain immediacy, vibrancy, and simplicity within them.



Robert Houle, *Postscript*, 1999, lithographic print, 121.9 x 163.2 cm, MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina.

While commemorating the Six Nations' struggle against British colonizers, *Palisade II* confirms Houle's place within modernism through the use of colour and accompanying elements that visually reference the works of Abstract Expressionist painter Barnett Newman (1905–1970).

PARIS/OJIBWA 2010



Robert Houle, *Paris/Ojibwa*, 2010
Multimedia installation
Collection of the artist

Paris/Ojibwa takes the form of a tableau¹ that is simultaneously a salon, theatre, and archive, and that reformulates the history and function of *tableaux vivants*. With a raised *trompe l'oeil* marble floor, free-standing colonnade, and four oil paintings on panels, the work recalls the grand Parisian salons where French elites entertained. On the top third of each panel are paintings of human figures –representing a Dancer, Shaman, Warrior, and Healer–wearing blankets or Greco-Roman-style robes, their backs to viewers.

The work was inspired by Houle's encounter with a sketch by Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), *Cinq études d'indiens Ojibwas*, 1845. Delacroix depicted members of a party of travelling Ojibwa performers in various states of repose. While researching, Houle later discovered that the troupe were Mississaugas² of the Walpole Island First Nation



LEFT: Eugène Delacroix, *Cinq études d'indiens Ojibwas*, 1845, pen and brown ink on velum, 25.6 x 38.7 cm, Louvre Museum, Paris. RIGHT: Robert Houle, *Study for Reclining Ojibwa*, 2006, graphite on paper, 20.9 x 29.8 cm, collection of Barry Ace.

located on the Great Lakes waterway. His installation takes viewers back to the time when these Ojibwa dancers, led by a man named Maungwudaus,³ travelled from Canada to Paris to dance for King Louis-Phillipe and an audience of four thousand French citizens. The appearances of the Mississaugas inspired poets, writers, and painters, including Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), George Sand (1804–1876), and Delacroix. The names of some of the members of Maungwudaus's troupe are situated at the top of the panels.

The horizon lines over the figures' heads deflect ethnographic curiosity and redirect the gaze over their shoulders. While the blue skies of Warrior and Shaman appear naturalistic, in Healer and Dancer the area is green and orange, expanding beyond the clouds and hinting at celestial origins of the Mississaugas. Their figuration is soft, slightly fragmented, with plumes fading into the sky. They all face an eastern horizon but outward from the work, in the four sacred directions. Each horizon has a physical referent: a view of the prairie from the Sandy Bay First Nations cemetery near Lake Manitoba. An abstract painting of smallpox is located on the bottom third section of each panel.

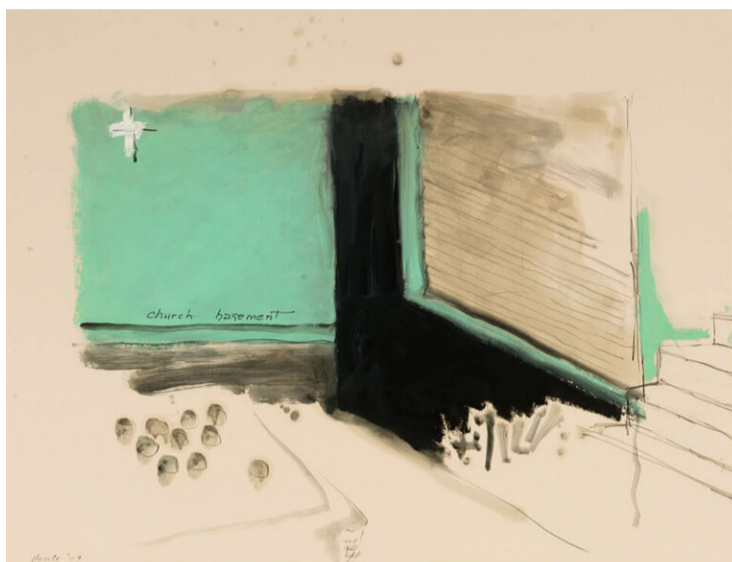
In conjunction with the exhibition of *Paris/Ojibwa*, Barry Ace (b. 1958) performed a traditional dance at the opening in Tuileries Gardens, Place de la Concorde, and at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris, honouring the dancers who came before him. Also part of the work is an animation, *Uhnemekeka* (*thundering*), commissioned by Houle and produced by Parisian web designer and mathematician Hervé Dagois. In it, jingle dress dancers appear floating in a colour field. Both the jingle dress dance and Ace's dance are healing performances.



Robert Houle, *Paris/Ojibwa* (detail), 2010, multimedia installation. From left to right, the figures in the panel represent a Shaman, Warrior, Dancer, and Healer.

Maungwudaus's dancers performed for the American frontier painter George Catlin (1796-1872) and became part of Catlin's Indian Gallery, known for presenting exhibits of what he considered an ancient and disappearing culture of a vanishing race. The Ojibwa that Houle rendered face their ancestral homeland from a cemetery across the ocean. Houle transports their story to the present day. His research into the journals of Maungwudaus and his creation of *Paris/Ojibwa* breathes life back into the forms of the Mississauga dancers, making possible their transatlantic spiritual return from Paris to his home in Sandy Bay, a metaphor for Turtle Island.

SANDY BAY RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL SERIES 2009



Robert Houle, *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009

Oilstick on paper, twenty-four drawings, each 58.4 x 76.2 cm or 76.2 x 58.4 cm

School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg

(Shown here, from top, left to right, are *Church Basement*, *I'm Cornered*, *Night Predator*, and *Drive-In Predator*)

This series of twenty-four drawings was triggered, in part, by a nightmare about an incident Houle had repressed; the dream occurred after he returned to Sandy Bay for a funeral in 2009. Also an influence was Prime Minister Stephen Harper's formal statement of apology made on June 11, 2008, on behalf of the Government of Canada to former students, their families, and communities for the federal government's role in the operation of the residential schools. Houle attended the event.

The drawings embody three main subjects: the school playground, dormitory beds, and religious figures. Stylistically the works are a marked departure from Houle's abstractions. Loose and spontaneous, they emit a remarkable sense of movement and immediacy as they transition from one image to another, offering different perspectives, like frames in a film. "My residential school drawings are about what happened to me," Houle stated, "without the language of judgement and forgiveness."¹



Installation view of Robert Houle's *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, in the exhibition *Robert Houle: Memory Drawings*, 2016, at Latcham Gallery in Stouffville, Ontario, photograph by Toni Hafkenscheid.

This highly personal work reclaims the artist's memories of the residential school experience—of physical, sexual, and spiritual abuse. Images of dormitory beds, crosses, and shadowy figures occupy the spaces in the drawings, with disturbing inscriptions written in his own hand, such as "night predator," "I'm cornered," "outhouse abuse," "drive-in terror," "*uhnuhmeahkazoo*h—pretending to pray," and "fear." The pieces are a powerful testament to a dark, shameful period of Canadian history.

While creating the work, as his memories came to him, Houle spoke in Saulteaux and immediately inscribed those words in pencil on the drawings. Having been forbidden to speak his maternal language during residential school, and realizing that for years he had been "thinking in English," he recognized this action as critical to a healing process and an act of decolonization. Houle considered a drawing finished as soon as the memory of an experience left him. The completion of each drawing meant *pahgedenaun*, "letting it go from your mind," which for him was a more meaningful concept than forgiveness.²

SEVEN GRANDFATHERS 2014



Robert Houle, *Seven Grandfathers*, 2014

Oil on canvas, digital prints, Mylar, watercolour on paper, seven site-specific works, each 20.3 cm (diameter)

Walker Court, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

Seven Grandfathers was commissioned by the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto to coincide with the 2014 group exhibition *Before and after the Horizon: Anishinaabe Artists of the Great Lakes*. The work consists of seven vibrant abstract gestural paintings that resemble ceremonial drums, installed in the rondels of Walker Court, located at the heart of the gallery. *Seven Grandfathers* reveals the "concepts of respect, and sharing that form the foundation of an Anishnabe way of life."¹

Reflecting the traditional seven teachings in Anishnabe culture,² also known as the Seven Grandfathers, each disc corresponds to an animal spirit and imparts one of the sacred teachings: the eagle embodies love; the beaver embodies wisdom; the wolf embodies humility; the buffalo embodies respect; the turtle embodies truth; the bear embodies courage; and a woodland transformational figure embodies honesty. The seven ceremonial drums, made specifically for this space, symbolize visions of nature and the perceptions of memory.

Seven Grandfathers is intended to be a healing work. Houle noted, "As an Anishnabe artist, I wanted my Saulteaux maternal language, culture, and history to play an important role in defining my response to Walker Court and its institutional history.... It was my desire to create a new mediated space here that would give visitors an active sense of an expanded, living presence."³ Relating to Houle's curatorship at the National Museum of Man in Hull (now the Canadian Museum of History) and his ongoing criticism of the ruling colonial structures and the museums they spawned, *Seven Grandfathers* confronts a history at the AGO: the commissioned installation by German artist Lothar Baumgarten (b. 1944), *Monument for the Native People of Ontario*, 1984–85, for *The European Iceberg* exhibition in 1985.

Baumgarten's installation was a nostalgic homage to eight nations of the province, with Indigenous nations' names written in large Roman text. Although Houle appreciated Baumgarten's well-meaning gesture to address issues of colonization, he could not reconcile with the Eurocentric, non-objective knowledge displayed by Baumgarten's incorrect use of names inscribed on the walls. At the invitation of the AGO's former curator of contemporary art, Philip Monk, Houle responded directly to Baumgarten's installation on the occasion of the opening of a newly renovated Walker Court in 1992. He took possession of the court, renaming it Anishnabe Walker Court, bestowing it with the name by which his people refer to themselves (as opposed to "Ojibwa," given by the Europeans). He inscribed the improper names used by Baumgarten on the inside walls along the court, in lowercase letters and quotation marks. When the AGO underwent another transformation, completed in 2008, these names were removed and Houle was once again commissioned. He thus produced *Seven Grandfathers*.



LEFT: Robert Houle, *Seven Grandfathers (Mahéen gun [Wolf])*, 2014, oil on canvas, digital prints, Mylar, and watercolour on paper, 20.3 cm (diameter), site-specific installation, Walker Court, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. RIGHT: Robert Houle, *Seven Grandfathers (Músh kooda pezhéke [Buffalo])*, 2014, oil on canvas, digital prints, and Mylar, watercolour on paper, 20.3 cm (diameter), site-specific installation, Walker Court, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



SIGNIFICANCE & CRITICAL ISSUES

As an artist, curator, and educator, Robert Houle has made an indelible impact on Canadian and Indigenous art. For four decades he has been reconciling and synthesizing contemporary art trends and Anishnabe traditions: encouraging a renewed vision of the world that includes cultural memory; exposing and challenging the government on political issues affecting Indigenous peoples, including land rights and the rights of Indigenous art and artists; and decolonizing the museum and the self.

THE LAND

The importance of the land, its sacredness and history, is a thread that runs through Houle's work. Most of his artwork emphasizes how land is the key element in understanding one's history and future path, and in shaping his Anishnabe identity.¹ For Houle, the loss of ancestral land has been a cause of a grave identity crisis for generations of First Nations. His own connection to a particular geography is evident in *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk (Where the gods are present)*, 1989, in which he renewed his relationship with the prairie landscape and reclaimed it for his people in Sandy Bay, Manitoba.

The legacy of European colonization has rendered First Nations peoples alienated in their own territories. Houle believes that places "can be socially and politically constructed and this construction is about power."² His work frequently emphasizes political issues related to land, visually asserting First Nations' historic and legal connection to it, as in *Premises for Self-Rule*, 1994. *Aboriginal Title*, 1989-90, is another such example. This work presents four crucial dates marking years when legislation was passed that served as legal precedents for First Nations' rights and freedoms regarding land: 1763, 1867, 1876, and 1982.³



RIGHT: Robert Houle, *Aboriginal Title*, 1989-90, oil on canvas, 228 x 167.6 cm, Art Gallery of Hamilton. LEFT: Robert Houle, *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk (Where the gods are present) (Thomas)*, 1989, oil on canvas, one of four paintings, each 244 x 182.4 x 5 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, political events across Canada galvanized Indigenous solidarity and aroused activism that would resonate throughout the decades. It was a charged period, when First Nations articulated clear positions regarding land claims, human rights, self-determination, and self-government, including the "no" vote to the Meech Lake Accord by Elijah Harper, a Cree member of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly.⁴

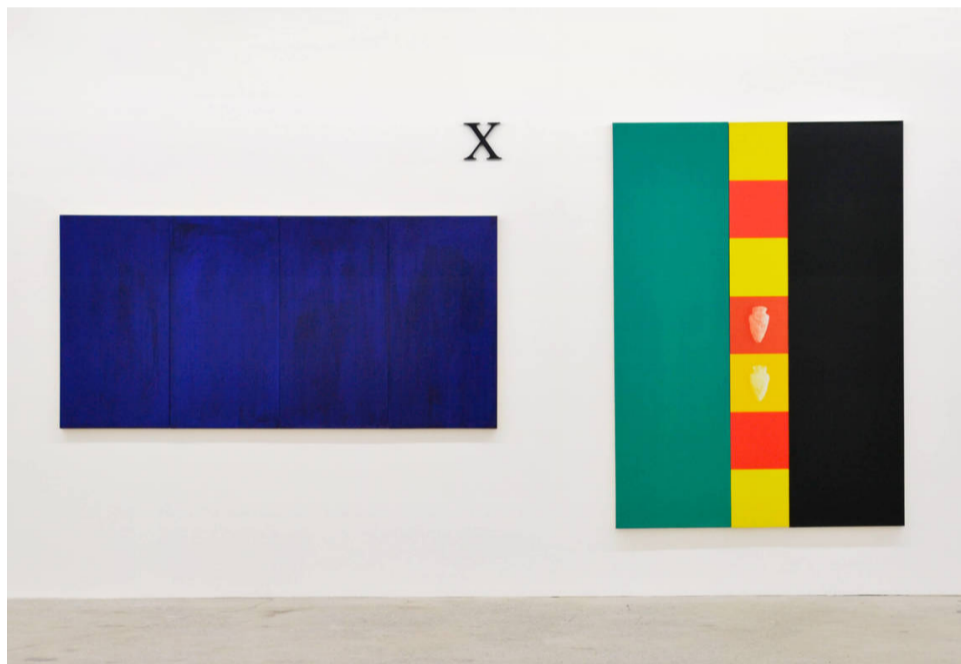
The tension was exacerbated by controversies that also shook up the museum world. For instance, in connection with a land dispute, the Lubicon Lake Nation boycotted the exhibit *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples*, organized by the Glenbow Museum, Calgary, in conjunction with the 1988 Winter Olympics. The show included historical Indigenous objects previously removed from their communities without permission and loaned to the Glenbow from national and international ethnographic and anthropological collections. At the same time, Indigenous artists across Canada were vocalizing the ongoing exclusion of their art from the majority of mainstream art institutions. Boycotts, demonstrations, media storms, and protest art had a profound impact on the content of—and contexts for—Houle's work.

In his first solo exhibition in Montreal in 1992, at articule, Houle premiered a significant multimedia installation, *Hochelaga*, which was a testimony to his aesthetics and social commitments—and to land reclamation. The month-long exhibit confronted the public with work that challenged Western/European notions of ownership of the land and highlighted the struggle of First Nations for independence, promoting their sovereignty. The title piece, for example, used images and text to address First Nations' autonomy from a local perspective. Yellow vinyl letters on a white surface spelled out the names of Iroquoian communities from the past and present, such as the Mohawk locales of Kanesatake, Kahnawake, and Akwesasne, which have been at the centre of sovereignty disputes with municipal, provincial, and federal governments. By linking these communities to Hochelaga, the ancient Haudenosaunee settlement that was located on the island of Montreal, Houle connected them to a long history associated with the land and supported their right to independence.

Several of Houle's works between 1990 and 2000 were political responses to contemporary land disputes between First Nations and the Canadian government, reflecting what he has been stating and painting most eloquently for years: that history has been a continuous process of limiting power and land for his people. *Kanehsatake X*, 2000, and *Ipperwash*, 2000-1, are two works that respond to the Oka Crisis—when Mohawks protested the encroachment of a golf course into their traditional territory and burial ground in Quebec—and to events at Ipperwash, Ontario—a land

dispute during which Ontario Provincial Police shot and killed an unarmed Ojibwa protestor, Dudley George. Both *Kanehsatake X* and *Ipperwash* juxtapose canvas, panel, and text to denote ownership; both feature digitized photo images of arrowheads buried in cautionary red and yellow stripes that mimic urban warning signs. The canvases are painted in cobalt green and cobalt dark green—referring to the golf course at the centre of the Oka dispute and the pines that lined the roads. They are like palisades and protect the ancestors, who are symbolized by the arrows. In *Kanehsatake X* there is also a blue panel, an emotional colour that for Houle relates to his ancestry and to the power of water.

Houle's curatorial work has also underscored the relationship between land and Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island (North America) as one with an ancient history. In 1992 official celebrations on both sides of the Atlantic marked the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the Americas. The celebratory spirit was not shared by Indigenous peoples who reacted against five centuries of oppression and exclusion. During that year Houle co-curated



Robert Houle, *Kanehsatake X*, 2000, oil on canvas, digital photographic print, ionized steel letter, 244 x 503 cm, private collection.

Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. While a simultaneous exhibition by the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA)⁵ and the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, titled *Indigena: Perspectives of Indigenous Peoples on Five Hundred Years*, focused on a critique of colonial history, *Land, Spirit, Power* highlighted land as a spiritual and political legacy.



Installation view of Faye HeavyShield's *Untitled*, 1992, wood, cement, acrylic: 190.5 cm diameter installed; elements: 244.5 x 13.5 cm diameter each, at the *Land, Spirit, Power* exhibition, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, photograph by Louis Joncas.

Houle's research for the exhibition prompted its focus on land, a subject consistent in his artistic production but that he addressed in his curatorial work for the first time here. He had interviewed Indigenous artists in the United States and Canada, including Rebecca Belmore (b. 1960), James Luna (1950–2018), Kay WalkingStick (b. 1935), and others. In the article "Sovereignty over Subjectivity," he describes the experience: "Criss-crossing this vast continent, one thing became evident: the persistent impact and ever-changing physicality of the landscape. And among these artists, regardless of where they lived, there existed some common relationship to the surrounding space and in the sanctifying of territory."⁶ In his catalogue essay "The Spiritual Legacy of the Ancient Ones," Houle recognizes the artists' connection to antiquity, giving a context to the legacy left to them; he asserts an abiding conviction about First Nations' inherent right to the land that their ancestors enjoyed and respected.⁷

REVISIONING REPRESENTATION

Through his curatorial work and artistic projects, Houle has challenged colonialist notions of Indigenous art as primitive and as an extension of ethnological collections. Art historian and curator Ruth B. Phillips notes that the Indigenization of Canadian museums was shaped by two consequential events.⁸ First, the Indians of Canada pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal critiqued conventional Indigenous-settler narratives that positioned the colonizer as civilized and Indigenous peoples as a vanishing race or one in need of assimilation. Second, because of the widespread protest of Indigenous leaders and communities—a protest that Houle participated in—the Government of Canada was forced to withdraw its 1969 White Paper (the “Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy”), which intended to make all peoples of Canada heterogeneous and which would impact First Nations cultural and land rights.



LEFT: A mural by Norval Morrisseau for the Indians of Canada pavilion at Expo 67, 1967, photographer unknown. Government officials deemed Morrisseau’s design, which was of bear cubs nursing from Mother Earth, too controversial, and Morrisseau left the project. RIGHT: A view of the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo 67, 1967, photographer unknown. The murals were painted by Francis Kagige. The Kwakiutl totem pole was carved by Tony and Henry Hunt. Inside the pavilion, documents, drawings, works of art, and archival and contemporary photographs showed deplorable conditions accompanied by pointed comments about what colonization has done to First Nations peoples.

Houle’s resignation from the National Museum of Man in Hull (now the Canadian Museum of History) helped force museums and public art galleries to change their collection and exhibition practices to include Indigenous voices. The exhibition *Land, Spirit, Power*, 1992, for instance, while not eschewing the political, was first and foremost about art. It revealed the two imperatives to which contemporary Indigenous artists were responding: the call of a moment in history for cultural and political intervention and the demand for serious acceptance of the aesthetic value of contemporary Indigenous art. The National Gallery of Canada embraced this and began integrating the acquisition of work by Indigenous artists into the permanent collection alongside other contemporary Canadian and international artists.

As well Houle has long been committed to repatriating historic objects from ethnographic museums and correcting inappropriate presentations of them. Through his visual art, Houle amplified this undertaking in a 1993 exhibition at Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa: *Kanata: Robert Houle's Histories*. At the National Gallery of Canada in 1992, Houle had come across an interpretative area near the

installation of *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770, by Benjamin West (1738–1820). He discovered that the gallery had borrowed, from the British Museum, sacred Indigenous objects that were used as studio props by West for his fictional painting. In his Carleton University exhibit, Houle parodied the National Gallery's treatment with two works: *Contact/Content/Context*, 1992, which displays his own moccasins in a Plexiglas box that Houle placed near *Kanata*, 1992, a painting that comments on West's incorrect portrayal of a Delaware warrior in bare feet. Houle's installation questioned the museum's representation of Indigenous history by mimicking its construction while using his own language and personal objects. He thereby formulated a different history—one that undermines a Western perspective limited by self-serving biases of colonialism.

Such politically charged work of Houle's has inspired a new generation working in performance, video, new media, and photography. Houle's friend and colleague Bill Reid (1920–1998) revitalized traditional Haida art and mentored Robert Davidson (b. 1946). Shelley Niro (b. 1954), Greg Staats (b. 1963), and Jeff Thomas (b. 1956) have taken on issues surrounding Indigenous identity through their works. As well Houle provided the foundation for curators—including Greg Hill (b. 1967), Gerald McMaster (b. 1953), and Wanda Nanibush (b. 1976)—to revisit collection strategies and position Indigenous art within contemporary art practice.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Robert Houle's work has deepened the understanding of cultural appropriation in museums and art galleries, and in a broad spectrum of institutions and disciplines (for example, advertising) invested in maintaining false notions of Western and Indigenous cultures. Cultural appropriation refers to a power dynamic in which members of a dominant culture take elements from a culture of people who have been systematically oppressed. For Houle, cultural appropriation is about Western culture's erasing and ignoring of Indigenous voices by misrepresenting its cultures. Running parallel to an entire history of incorrect cultural projections in paintings, photographs, and written accounts by Europeans in North America is a lack of First Nations' representation in



RIGHT: Robert Houle, *Working study for Kanata* (painting based on Benjamin West's painting *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770), 1991–92, screenprint ink on transparent plastic sheet, overall: 21.8 x 28.1 cm, image: 41.9 x 47 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. LEFT: Robert Houle, *Kanata* (detail), 1992, acrylic and Conté crayon on canvas, 228.7 x 732 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

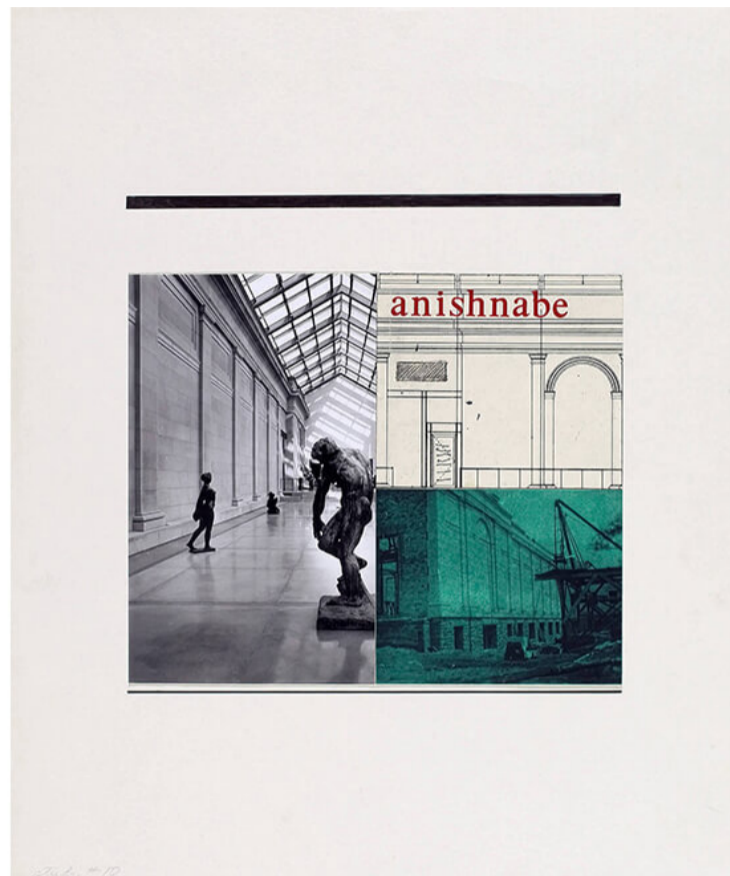
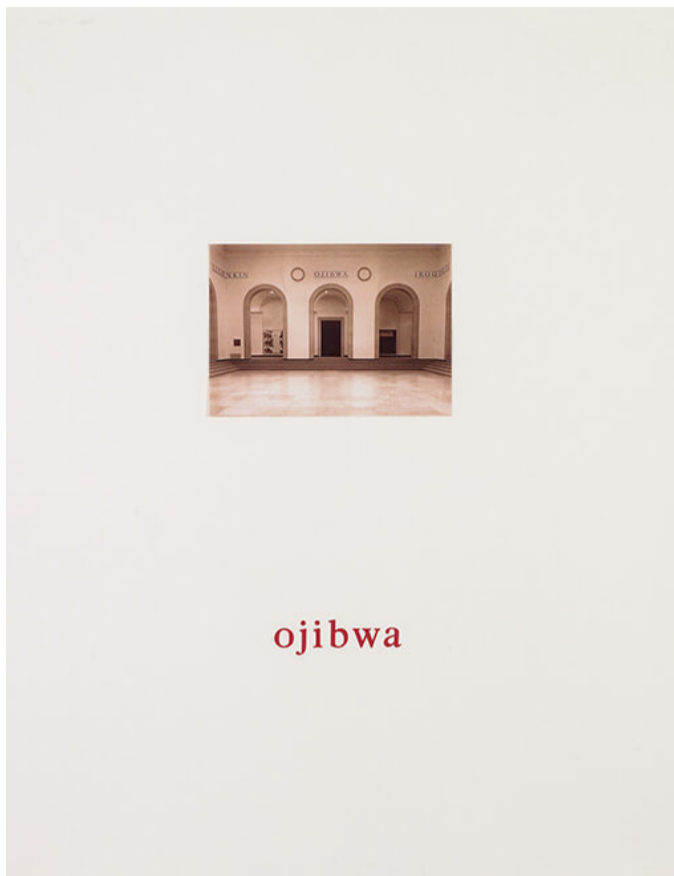
contemporary culture. He writes, "Exclusion from Western representation is deeply rooted in and even protected by a structure that authorizes and legitimizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting or invalidating others."⁹

In 1985 Houle's encounter with an installation by German artist Lothar Baumgarten (b. 1944) at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), Toronto, brought the issue of cultural appropriation to the fore. The AGO invited Baumgarten to produce a site-specific work for Walker Court as part of the exhibit *The European Iceberg: Creativity in Germany and Italy Today*. Baumgarten created *Monument for the Native People of Ontario*, 1984-85, meant to pay homage to eight nations of the province. Their names were printed in large Roman type on the walls surrounding the court at the centre of the AGO. Houle was jolted by the lack of research in documenting the names. Some were misspelled, and linguistic groups, regions, tribes, and bands were intermingled without distinction. Also disturbing was Baumgarten's appropriation of the right to document the names. About the installation, Houle writes, "It is a beautiful work, styled as a tribute, but the human drama it presents is unfortunately simply a program of romantic twentieth century anthropology ... a transgression of the spiritual integrity of those whose names he has written is to point out that their oral tradition was violated."¹⁰

When Houle responded to Baumgarten's installation with *Anishnabe Walker Court*, 1993, he re-appropriated the German artist's tribal names, placing them in quotation marks and re-inscribing them in lowercase on the outer wall surrounding Walker Court. Also featuring photographic documentation of the changes to Walker Court over the years, the work comments on the histories of change and memory and how museums such as the AGO, as colonial institutions, are prone to improper memorialization, as in the case of Baumgarten's installation incorrectly displaying past images and icons of Ontario Native culture.¹¹



Robert Houle, *Anishnabe Walker Court*, 1993, site-specific installation at Walker Court, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



LEFT: Robert Houle, *Ojibwa*, from *Anishnabe Walker Court preliminary study #8*, 1994, collage, electrographic prints on wove paper, 43.5 x 35.5 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. RIGHT: Robert Houle, *Study #10 (for Anishnabe Walker Court)*, 1994, gelatin silver print, photocopy, ink on coloured plastic sheet, vinyl self-adhesive letters, black porous point marker, graphite on paper, resin-coated photographic paper, and coloured transparent sheet, 43.2 x 35.7 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Houle frequently selects words from archival documents, implements of war, and consumer goods to highlight how imagery from Indigenous cultures has been exploited for commercial or military enterprise. In the mid-1990s, Houle began to research the commodification of names of famous chiefs and tribes. *These Apaches Are Not Helicopters*, 1999, for instance, examines the appropriation of Indigenous names as commodities and emblems of war. A site-specific work installed in four half-moon windows at Winnipeg's VIA Rail train station, the work presented an imaginary homecoming for Chief Geronimo (1829–1909) and his warrior Apaches. Geronimo was famous for resisting colonization and taking a stand against the U.S. government for almost twenty-five years. Houle strategically placed an enlarged archival photograph of Geronimo on the south window of the station, signalling the customary direction of the arrival of Apaches. The final image, on the east window, was of the McDonnell Douglas Apache helicopter.

Similarly, the legacy of Chief Pontiac (1720–1769), an important Odawa warrior chief and diplomat who worked to unite the Algonquian-speaking nations of the Great Lakes area with those of the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys, appears in Houle's work as interventions to restore Pontiac's identity. Chief Pontiac is a symbol of strength and was murdered for financial gain; centuries after his death General Motors named a car after the legendary hero. Houle sees this as white capitalist supremacy appropriating the power associated with the chief. Houle's work *Kekabishcoon Peenish Chipedahbung (I Will Stand in Your Path Till Dawn)*, 1997, draws on Pontiac's history, image, and promise of endurance.

Houle assembled reproductions of thirty-six twentieth-century advertisements for various automobiles on which he overlaid vinyl lettering that spells out "Pontiac" and the names of the Algonquian nations, thereby reclaiming Indigenous history and heritage.



LEFT: Robert Houle, *These Apaches Are Not Helicopters* (detail), 1999, four photo enlargements, site-specific installation at the VIA Rail train station in Winnipeg. RIGHT: Robert Houle, *These Apaches Are Not Helicopters* (detail), 1999, four photo enlargements, site-specific installation at the VIA Rail train station in Winnipeg.

DECOLONIZATION

Houle's intentions focus on forcing viewers to reconsider the colonial past. His artistic process of dealing with the legacy of colonialism, including his time at residential school, incorporates varied forms of both personal and collective remembering through drawing and painting, and sometimes strategically includes postmodernist approaches.

The production of two major works addressed the legacy of the residential school system: *Sandy Bay*, 1998-99, and *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009.

The latter recalls dark experiences the artist had at residential school. In creating the drawings, he visually rendered memories associated with the experience that came to him through dreams:¹²

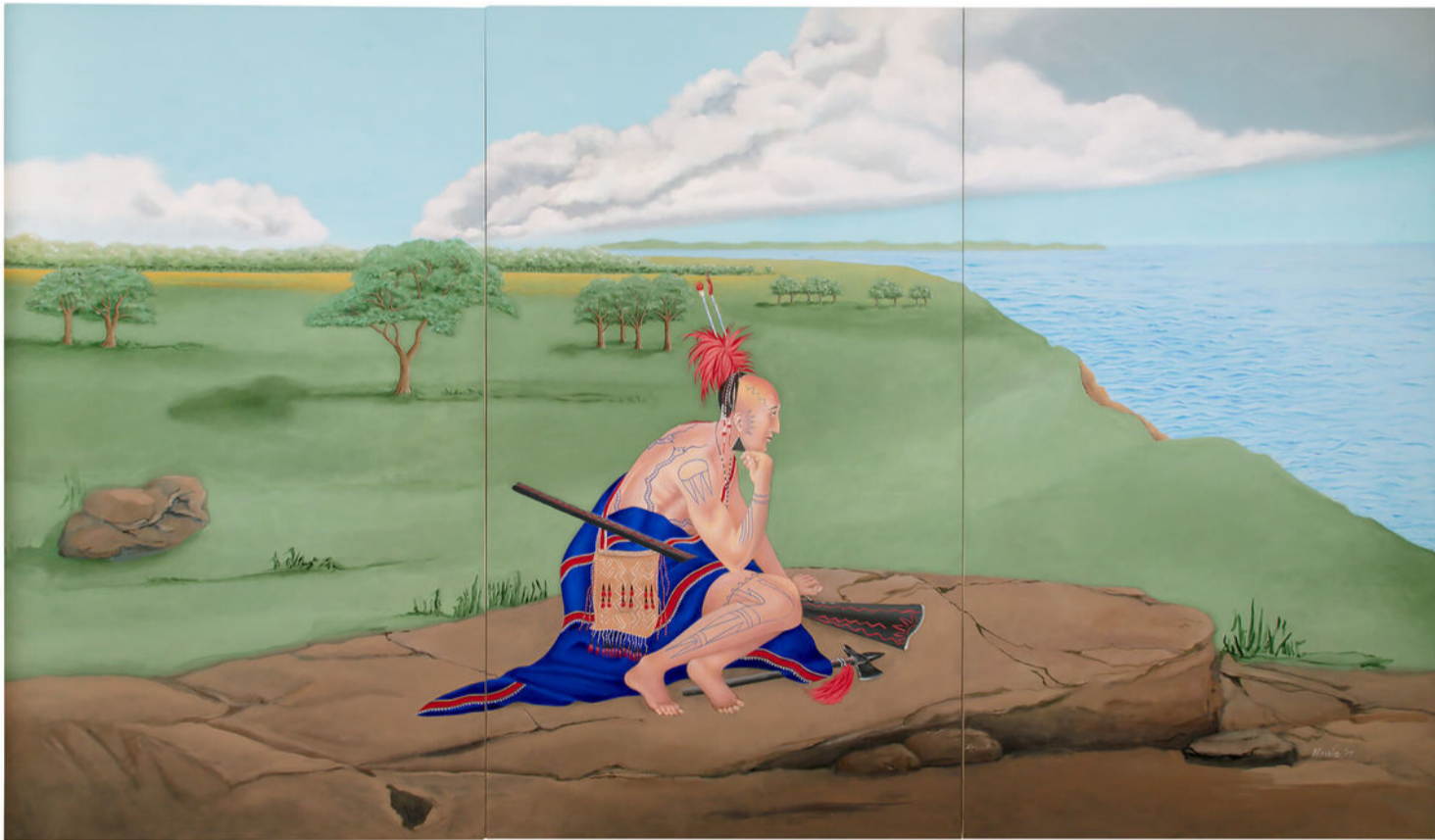
I had a horrible, vivid dream about an incident that had happened to me that I had completely forgotten.... So I ... decided once and for all that I was going to deal with this.... After each drawing I would be totally emotionally exhausted.... But I would get a good sleep and the next morning I would begin again.¹³



Robert Houle, *Sandy Bay Residential School Series (The Morning)*, 2009, oilstick on paper, one of twenty-four drawings, each 58.4 x 76.2 cm or 76.2 x 58.4 cm, School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg.

The work's creation was a personal decolonization: "For the first time I began to talk to myself when painting. My body would decolonize itself with my voice."¹⁴

In *Kanata*, 1992, Houle visually asserts an Indigenous account of a political history to invoke another history radically different from the one painted by Benjamin West in *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770. In his work, Houle "bleached" the colour out of the European figures copied from West's painting and vivified the warrior in colour, thereby reversing the power relations. The work was "contemporary with parallel constitutional deliberations in which the presence of Native Canadians had been looming larger as they [sought] control over their destinies."¹⁵ By appropriating West's painting, Houle avowed his right to depict the First Nations experience and revised colonial history, positioning First Nations as "founding nations" of Canada alongside the French and English.



Robert Houle, *O-ween du muh waun (We Were Told)*, 2017, oil on canvas, triptych, 213.4 x 365.8 cm, Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown.

A recent work by Houle, *O-ween du muh waun (We Were Told)*, 2017, further challenges the long history of colonial assumptions about the place of Indigenous peoples within Confederation. Commissioned by the Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Charlottetown, the painting offers a revised vision of Canada's sesquicentennial. Elaborating on *Kanata*, Houle focuses his attention once again on the Delaware warrior from *The Death of General Wolfe*, only this time the warrior is painted in oil (as opposed to coloured Conté), seated alone, in the same location where Wolfe died in West's painting, facing east on the Plains of Abraham. By eliminating all other figures from the composition, Houle effectively erases the colonizer and addresses current political and cultural issues. As Canada seeks reconciliation with First Nations, Houle points to a

history that predates the European invasion of the land. “The 150 idea [celebrations to acknowledge the 150th anniversary of Canadian Confederation] was not an issue for me, but rather a correction to clarify that my sense of country dates back further than 1867,” Houle offered. “Our friendship and numbered treaties are also preceded by the presence of our ancestors going back millennia.”¹⁶

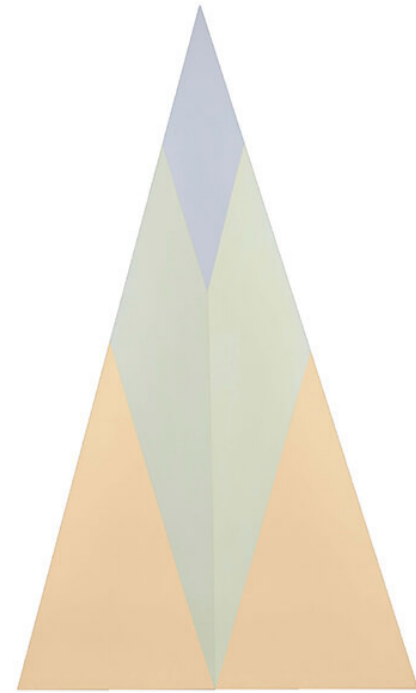
IMPACT

Robert Houle has perforated the space of a Eurocentric art history in Canada and offered other histories apart from a European lineage. Using modern, postmodern, and post-colonial critiques in his art, curatorial work, and teaching, he has broken the shackles of colonialism to recover and engage artists of the past—from Benjamin West and George Catlin (1796–1872) to Barnett Newman (1905–1970)—in dialogues that re-contextualize the present.

As the first curator of contemporary Indian art at the National Museum of Man, in 1977 Houle’s critique of the collection and exhibition practices there raised awareness of how Canadian museums and art

galleries were mistreating the work of Indigenous artists. He advanced the belief that their art should be seen foremost in art galleries and not in the context of anthropological or ethnographic artifacts. Despite resistance from museum authorities, he proposed purchases of work by Carl Beam (1943–2005) and Bob Boyer (1948–2004), among others. After his resignation, he pursued independent curatorial work and was responsible for two landmark exhibitions—*New Work by a New Generation*, in 1982 and *Land, Spirit, Power*, in 1992—both of which foregrounded Indigenous art within a contemporary milieu.

As a curator and a creator, Houle was part of this important group of Indigenous artists emerging as distinct, relevant creators within the Canadian art landscape. In *New Work by a New Generation*, and in his accompanying catalogue essay, for instance, Houle built a case for Indigenous artistic practice presenting fresh and contemporary artwork. He showed the capacity of these artists to synthesize their backgrounds, each standing at the edge of the mainstream or between it and their community. This inspired younger generations of Indigenous artists, including Bonnie Devine (b. 1952), Rebecca Belmore, and Shelley Niro. Houle was never against tradition but was among the first to herald Indigenous work as sophisticated enough to warrant attention as mainstream art.



RIGHT: Robert Houle, *Warrior Lances for Temagami*, 1989, mixed media, base: 5 x 76.2 cm diameter, overall: 152.5 x 76.2 cm diameter, Indigenous Art Centre, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Gatineau. LEFT: Robert Houle, *Wigwam*, 1972, acrylic on canvas, 209 x 121 cm, Indigenous Art Centre, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Gatineau. This is one of twelve paintings by Houle based on love poems.

That Houle changed the landscape of Canadian art is undeniable. Today, art museums and public art galleries are hiring Indigenous curators; Wanda Nanibush holds a position at the Art Gallery of Ontario and Greg Hill at the National Gallery of Canada. Contemporary Indigenous artists are included in permanent collections and aligned with contemporary artists and movements rather than treated as separate entities. There is a conscious move on the part of institutions towards decolonizing spaces and readdressing collection policies. Indigenous artists are now exhibited alongside other artists of different backgrounds and countries. Amid all these positive changes, Houle led the way, his work a part of rewriting art and cultural history.



Robert Houle working on *Sandy Bay Indian Residential School I*, 2012, a still from Shelley Niro's video, *Robert's Paintings* (2011).



STYLE & TECHNIQUE

Robert Houle's artistic practice embraces cultural traditions associated with his Saulteaux heritage, reflected in his use of colour, his formalism, and his sensitivity to materials and their symbolic properties. As well, the Abstract Expressionist school, and especially the painter Barnett Newman, has been a major influence on his work. Houle's practice combines abstract and figurative techniques, and features multiple stylistic approaches. He employs collage, text, sound, video, and mixed-media installation, although painting remains his most essential form of expression.

ABSTRACTION AND COLOUR

Some Indigenous cultural traditions avoid representation in their designs because it impedes creating the “essence” of an object.¹ By integrating elements of Anishnabe² heritage with abstraction, fusing Saulteaux and modernist spiritualism, Houle reconciles contemporary art trends with such Indigenous traditions. From the beginning of his artistic journey, Houle was attracted to and nourished by modern art movements and practitioners—such as Neo-Plasticism, Abstract Expressionism, and the Plasticiens—and geometric Anishnabe designs and traditional quillwork. His influences in abstraction include several iconic figures: Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), Barnett Newman (1905–1970), Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), and Mark Rothko (1903–1970), artists whose works depended upon structural clarity and the expression of spirituality and emotions through colour fields.

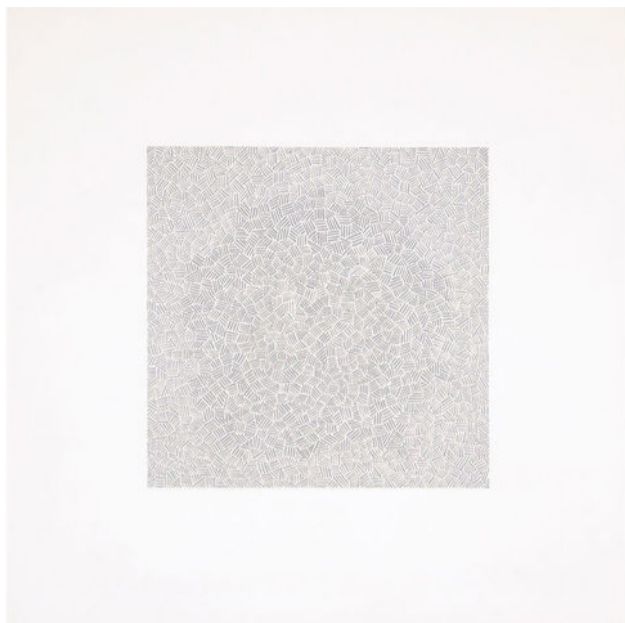
One example of his blending of modern art and Indigenous designs is Houle’s painting *Ojibwa Motif, Purple Leaves, Series No. 2*, 1972. The work’s leaf-like abstractions resemble traditional Anishnabe geometric designs yet echo a stylistic approach used by New York abstractionist Frank Stella (b. 1936) in its monochromatic geometric forms and shapes.

Houle attributes his use of abstraction in early works such as *Red Is Beautiful*, 1970, to his time at McGill University as a serious student of abstract art, and to his research on sacred objects, such as warrior staffs, parfleches, and Sun Dance poles found in the permanent collection of the National Museum of Man in Hull (now the Canadian Museum of History).



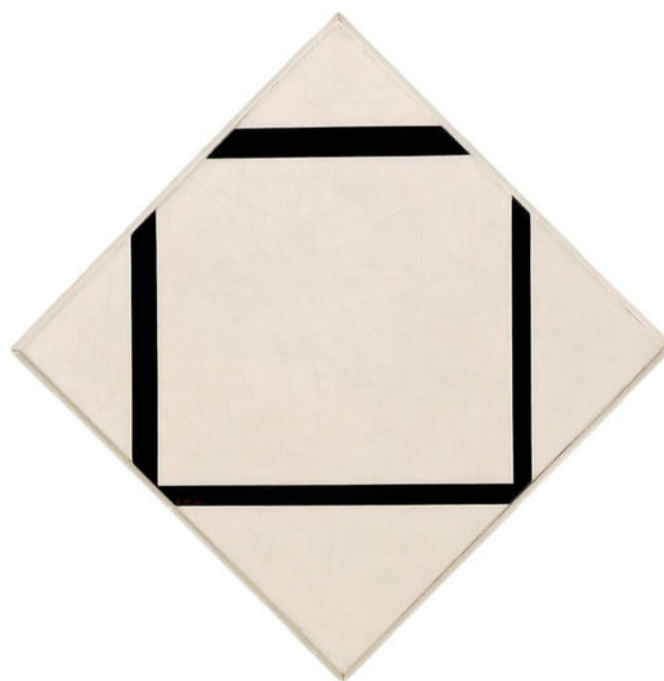
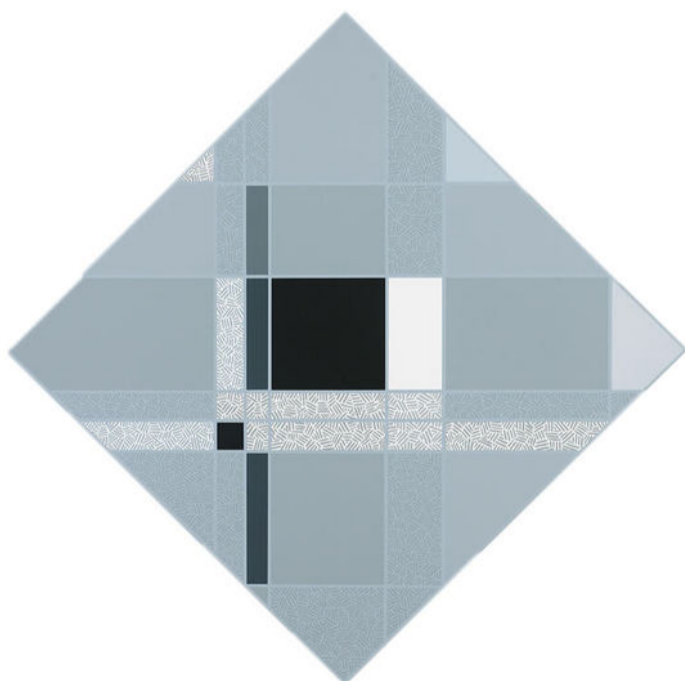
LEFT: Robert Houle, *Ojibwa Motif, Purple Leaves, Series No. 2*, 1972, oil on canvas, 91.4 x 61 cm, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa. RIGHT: Frank Stella, *Lac Laronge IV*, 1969, acrylic polymer on raw canvas, 274.6 x 411.5 cm, Toledo Museum of Art.

For Houle colour and light is spiritual, and the commingling of Native spiritualism and modernism through colour becomes a dialogue between the spiritual and poetic. In an untitled abstract series from 1972 inspired by love poems, Houle uses the tradition of sacred geometry and symbolic colour to speak of the earth and the cosmos. The paintings are composed of simple geometric shapes and muted colours, as in *Wigwam* and *The Stuff of Which Dreams Are Made*. Their spare quality embraces spiritual abstraction as practised by Newman, Rothko, and other Abstract Expressionists and in turn, with reference to traditional Ojibwa geometric designs, asserts the survival of Native spirituality within the modern world. In paintings such as *Square No. 3*, 1978, and *Punk Schtick*, 1982, Houle uses small *taches* to create an effect of linear hatching that echoes both quillwork embroidery and the style of Jasper Johns (b. 1930), whose work Houle discovered in the late 1970s.



LEFT: Robert Houle, *Square No. 3*, 1978, acrylic on canvas, on painted wooden mount, 85.2 x 85.2 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. RIGHT: Jasper Johns, *Corpse and Mirror*, 1976, lithograph, edition fifty-eight, 73.2 x 96.4 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Houle often overlays Indigenous motifs on practices associated with Western art. For example, *Diamond Composition*, 1980, recalls Mondrian's diamond-shaped geometric works. Using a monochromatic blue, Houle's spiritual colour (given through ceremony, as part of Anishnabe tradition), Houle disrupts the painting's geometry by incorporating cross-hatching—parallel strokes that resemble porcupine quills. By doing so, art historian Mark Cheetham says, Houle "infects" the purity often associated with modernism.³ The cross-hatching creates an intrusion or aesthetic tension in the work because it "adds an additional element"—a technique that Houle borrowed from the Suprematist theory of Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935). Throughout his oeuvre, Houle's "additional elements" range from porcupine quills to the symbol of a Saulteaux Morningstar to the overlay of archival photographs on text.



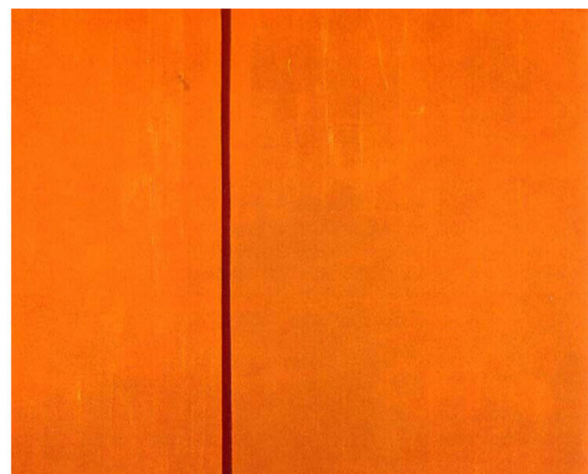
LEFT: Robert Houle, *Diamond Composition*, 1980, silkscreen on paper, edition number 11/75, 87 x 87 cm, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa. RIGHT: Piet Mondrian, *Composition No. 1 Lozenge with Four Lines*, 1930, oil on canvas, vertical axis 105 cm, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Houle also often conceives landscape in abstract terms. *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk* (*Where the gods are present*), 1989, for example, shows large fields of expressive and symbolic colour while it testifies to the grandeur of the light, water, and sky of Manitoba. Houle writes, "There is no word for 'landscape' in any of the languages of the ancient ones.... In Ojibwa, whenever the word *uhke* is pronounced, it is more an exaltation of humanness [being connected as part of nature] than a declaration of property."⁴ The canvases are brushed loosely and their distinctiveness is enhanced through gestural marks, crosses, and vertical, horizontal, and oblique lines that reference warrior staffs and quillwork. Reminiscent of Rothko's spiritualized colour fields, the softly edged rectangles of unmodulated colour each have an upper and lower register that can be read as sky and earth. The interior spaces are articulated by blended, rather than hard-edged, linear elements. Across the canvas is Houle's characteristic gestural mark, which resembles a spontaneous signature. This gesture permeates all of his paintings and for him is the "the healing line in his art."⁵

INFLUENCE OF BARNETT NEWMAN

The Abstract Expressionist painter Barnett Newman is perhaps the singular stylistic and technical influence on Houle's artwork. Houle recalled, "I was standing in the gallery at the Stedelijk Museum looking at Piet Mondrian's work and turned around and there it was, Barnett Newman's *Cathedral* and beside it *Cantos*. It encapsulated all I aspired for."⁶ The lack of any reference to nature literally or indirectly through symbols or colour in Mondrian's work was disappointing for Houle, who comes from what he calls "an earth-centered culture"; Newman's artwork propelled Houle's practice in a new direction. Newman, Houle stated, "saved me from Mondrian."⁷

Like Houle, Newman felt keenly the spiritual power of ancient and historic Native American art, although he never studied it. Newman organized exhibitions, as in *Northwest Coast Indian Painting* (with Tony Smith), held at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York City in 1946. For his own artwork, Newman searched for a spiritual power similar to what he encountered in Indigenous art; and he insisted on the aesthetic value of Northwest Coast art rather than its ethnographic merit—a position Houle appreciated, along with the American artist's understanding of abstraction as form and emotion.



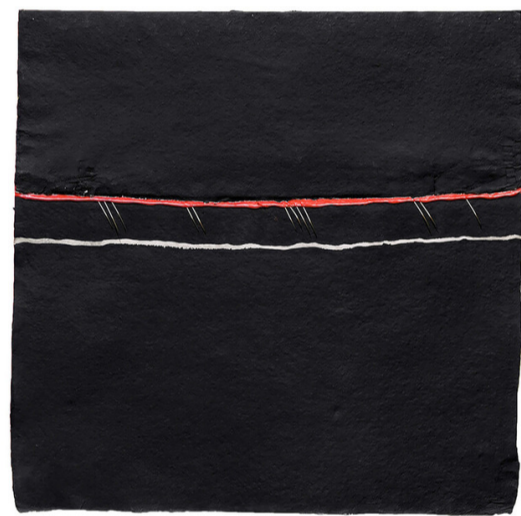
LEFT: Robert Houle, *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk* (*Where the gods are present*) (*Matthew*), 1989, oil on canvas, one of four paintings, each 244 x 182.4 x 5 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. RIGHT: Barnett Newman, *Tundra*, 1950, oil on canvas, 182.3 x 226.1 cm, private collection.

Place looms large in the practice and theory of both artists. Newman produced an immense colour-field abstraction triggered by the expansive space of northern Canada in *Tundra*, 1950. This work influenced Houle's abstracted representation of a northern Manitoban landscape in *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk*, 1989.⁸ Both artists also produced abstractions that referenced historic conflicts: Newman in *Jericho*, 1968–69 (when Jericho was occupied by Israel during the Six-Day War of 1967), and Houle in *Kanehsatake X*, 2000 (referring to the Oka Crisis of 1990).

Newman and Houle honoured heroic figures—Newman with *Ulysses*, 1952, an homage to the classical Greek king of Ithaca, and Houle with a series of works celebrating Chief Pontiac, as in *Pontiac Conspiracy*, 1997. Also significant are the serial abstractions addressing biblical themes: Newman in *Stations of the Cross*, 1958–66, and Houle in *Parfleches for the Last Supper*, 1983. That Newman was Jewish taking on Catholic subject matter inspired Houle, as *Saulteaux*, to do the same.

Similar to Newman, Houle paints large fields of expressive colour to evoke emotion. Unlike Newman, Houle's use of abstraction is informed by a desire to reverse the history of excluding Indigenous artists from museums and public art galleries. Although his iconic painting *Kanata*, 1992, quotes Newman's use of red and blue in the work *Voice of Fire*, 1967, Houle's appropriation of these colour fields serves a political end as well.⁹ The red and blue signify his anguish for the Indigenous position between the two

European countries—British and French—that formed the nation state of Canada. As well Houle's *Palisade I*, 1999, and *Palisade II*, 2007, contain direct visual references to Newman's three-part abstractions—the *Onement* series, 1948, and *Stations of the Cross*—with their vertical bands of colour, or “rips.”¹⁰ However, in Houle's works, the green and white vertical bands represent the formal structure and memorial function of wampum belts.



LEFT: Barnett Newman, *First Station*, 1958, from the *Stations of the Cross* series, Magna acrylic on canvas, 197.8 x 153.7 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
RIGHT: Robert Houle, *Parfleches for the Last Supper (Judas)*, 1983, acrylic and porcupine quills on paper, one of thirteen paintings, each 56 x 56 cm, Winnipeg Art Gallery.

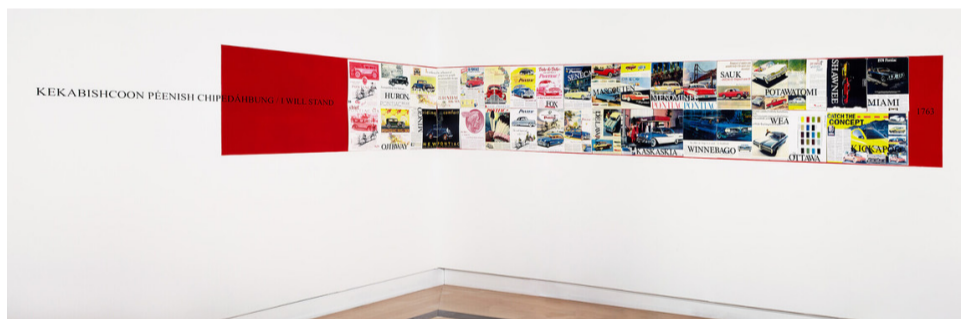
APPROPRIATION AND DECONSTRUCTION

One of the most powerful and persuasive ways to address historical inaccuracy or identity politics is appropriation, usually through photographs and text. Revisiting images and writings from the past or popular culture allows artists to call attention to the ideological dimensions of visual representation, raising questions about subjects such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. The reworking of images can be an affirmative gesture, a method of investing culture with new truths. Since the beginning of his career, Houle has been addressing issues of cultural appropriation and representation in his work. Re-appropriation as a means of reclaiming Indigenous identity and sovereignty is a core strategy in his oeuvre.

Premises for Self-Rule, 1994, was the first work in which Houle incorporated photographs—in this case, old postcards with ethnographic photographic images that document a group of Indigenous men and women gathering at Fort Macleod, Alberta, in 1907. Chosen for their narrative qualities and strategically placed over excerpts of text from treaties stencilled on Plexiglas, the photo emulsions play an important role in activating both the formal and historical content of each work. Parallel to a process of deconstruction (the photographs masking parts of the treaties) is a powerful tension between the written word of the texts and the oral tradition signified by the photographs.

Houle carries appropriation and deconstruction further in his nomenclature work that explores Western cultural appropriation of names for commercial purposes (for example, Washington Redskins, Edmonton Eskimos, Oneida flatware, Jeep Cherokee). Until recently, the use of such epithets was so entrenched that it was not questioned. In the mid-

1990s, Houle began creating works that delicately probe the objectification of Indigenous peoples and heroes such as chiefs Geronimo and Pontiac, as in *Kekabishcoon Peenish Chipedahbung (I Will Stand in Your Path Till Dawn)*, 1997. Here Houle appropriated reproductions of thirty-six vintage Pontiac automobile advertisements over which he laid text in vinyl lettering on behalf of eighteen Indigenous nations who joined the original bearer of the Pontiac name—Kaskaskia, Miami, Ojibwa, Winnebago, Mascouten, Fox, Ottawa, Kickapoo, Wea, Huron, Piankashaw, Seneca, Delaware, Mingo, Potawotomi, Shawnee, Menominee, Sauk. Whatever subliminal messages may have been intended by the advertisers, Houle's alterations subvert them. In framing these mid-century icons and superimposing his own comments, Houle reclaims his history and heritage.



Robert Houle, *Kekabishcoon Peenish Chipedahbung (I Will Stand in Your Path Till Dawn)*, 1997, thirty-six third-generation advertisements on red latex background with vinyl lettering, 63.8 x 550 cm, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa.

EMULATION OF THE SACRED

Running through Houle's artmaking is the emulation of ritual objects. Houle envisioned in the practice of painting the potential to restore life to Native materials that had been left for dead inside ethnographic museums and galleries. He began making works resembling parfleches, warrior staffs, and shields with the intent to rehabilitate the sacred objects.

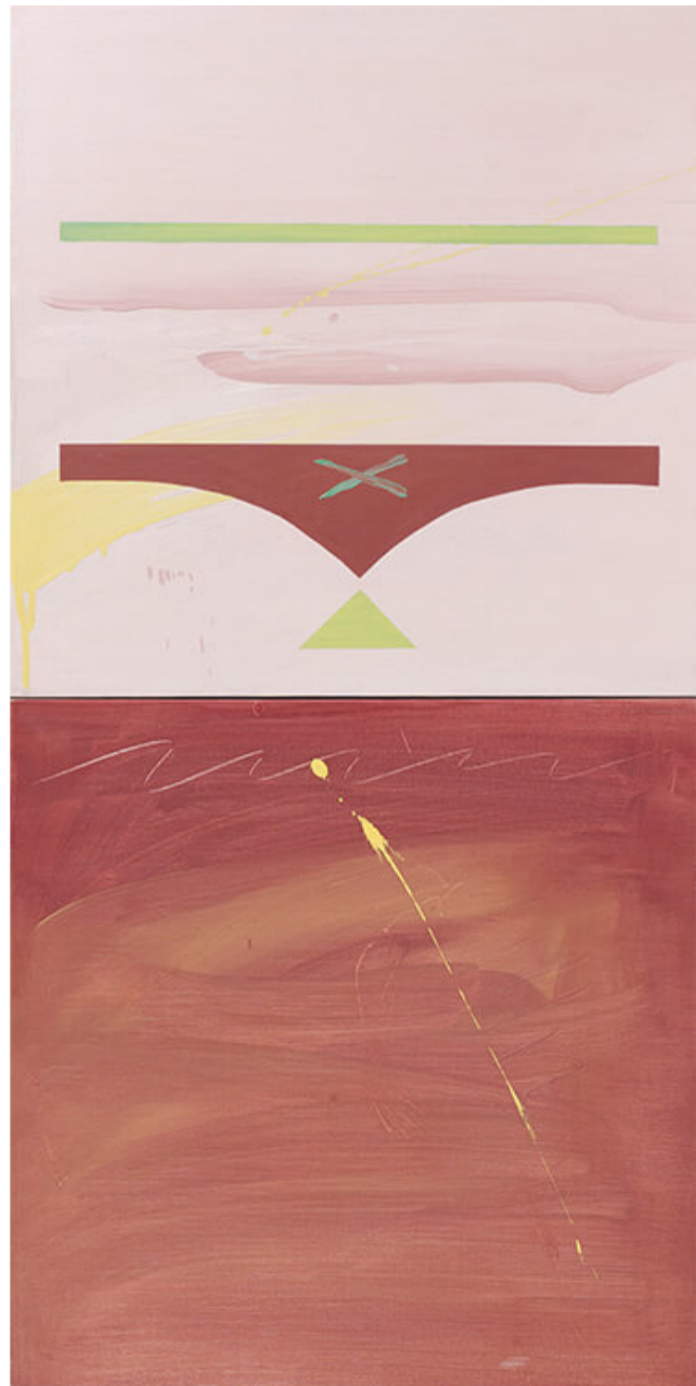
Two early works both titled *Warrior Stick*, 1982 and 1983, are abstracted renditions of sacred warrior sticks that Houle encountered at the National Museum of Man. In *Punk Schtick*, 1982 (with a title that belies its serious reference to axis mundi such as poles of the Sun Dance), a cross-hatching technique divides the upper and lower areas; and yet the work connects sky and earth—two highly significant entities in the Plains cosmos and subsequently to Houle's aesthetic. Another work, *Sun Dance Pole*, 1982, is similar to *Punk Schtick* formally but is sculptural in rendition and topped with a tuft of sweetgrass. By merging techniques of abstraction with traditional sacred objects, Houle communicates the nature of these Indigenous symbols of the Plains as elevated beyond the physical and into the realm of the spiritual. These works are precursors to others in which he uses abstraction in rendering images while also employing symbolic colour, as in *Parfleches for the Last Supper*, 1983; incorporating materials such as the steel used in *Innu Parfleche*, 1990; and emphasizing shape, as in *Drum*, 2015.



Robert Houle, *Innu Parfleche*, 1990, oil, acrylic, iron, ink, metal, owl feather, and mammal leather, 66.2 x 68 x 8 cm, Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau.

Many of Houle's paintings have been depictions of a parfleche, a traditional travel pouch rectangular in shape with a fold that represents the meeting of land and sky. Houle imbues his parfleche-inspired artworks with private, personal meaning by incorporating into them codified elements known only to him. He also includes references to cultural objects and symbols. For example, in *Parfleches for the Last Supper*, Houle used handmade paper, folded the top portion over to resemble a parfleche, and after painting the surface physically joined the fold with penetrating diagonal stitches of porcupine quills like those that decorated Northeast Indigenous clothing and containers. In *Parfleches for the Last Supper #5: Philip*, equal-armed yellow crosses float across a vibrant red colour field. Though resonant with the Christian cross, this Saulteaux cross references the morningstar in the cosmos and the colour yellow refers to the Sun Dance ceremony.

In 1990, when Houle began experimenting with steel, he produced *Innu Parfleche* using pieces of scrap iron that Houle asked the late and legendary programmer of the Toronto International Film Festival, David Overby (1936–1998), to drive over repeatedly with his car to alter its shape. The work honoured the Innu people of northern Quebec who, in the late 1980s, were engrossed in struggles to prevent military flight manoeuvres over their territory. Here the form of the parfleche functions as a metaphor for resistance. In paintings such as *Parfleche for Norval Morrisseau*, 1999, and *Parfleche for Edna Manitowabi*, 1999, Houle specially chose his colours to symbolically represent the two influential artists and, in abstract terms, invokes the form of the traditional object in homage to them. In Houle's words, "What better way to recognize people who have played a significant role in my life?"¹¹



RIGHT: Robert Houle, *Parfleche for Norval Morrisseau*, 1999, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 50.8 cm, collection of the artist. LEFT: Robert Houle, *Parfleche for Edna Manitowabi*, 1999, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 50.8 cm, collection of the artist.

FROM PAINTING TO INSTALLATION

While painting has been and remains a mainstay of Houle's work, he began making installations in the mid-1980s as a means of creatively expressing his political ideas, as can be seen in *Everything You Wanted to Know about Indians from A to Z*, 1985. Here, by suggesting the common, accessible form of a library shelf, Houle raises awareness of the inappropriate documentation and appropriation of Indigenous names in books. For Houle the process of a work's creation combined with the placement of a work—in this case in an art museum—is a site of political and cultural change.

Houle is an artist who understands sacred space, and his work soon expanded into site-specific installations that focus on sovereignty. With reclamation as his objective, he treats his installation sites as landmarks where knowledge exists. *Zero Hour*, his first site-specific installation, was part of the 1989 exhibition *Beyond History* at the Vancouver Art Gallery. The work marked the forty-fourth anniversary of the first nuclear explosion in the New Mexico desert, its intent an ominous warning to humankind. An inscription featured on a black wall, "For as long as the sun shines, the rivers flow, the grass grows ...," is a well-known, much quoted phrase that once referred to the possibility of the harmonious co-existence of colonizers and First Nations peoples for time eternal.



Robert Houle, *Zero Hour*, 1988, mixed media installation: oil on canvas, text on a wall painted with opaque black latex, a red laser with mirror, and sand, two sand paintings, one rectangular and one circular, and four paintings, each: 168 x 168 cm, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston.

In the history of Canada numerous documents tell stories of conquest and expansion, trade and development, in which colonial aspirations harmed countless Indigenous peoples. First Nations have been excluded from the telling of such history. Houle's impeccable research into official and unofficial documents involves the extensive recovering of information related to a true history of First Nations. For his site-specific work, he begins with research on the location and its previous history, whether it be of a museum, government institution, or particular piece of land.



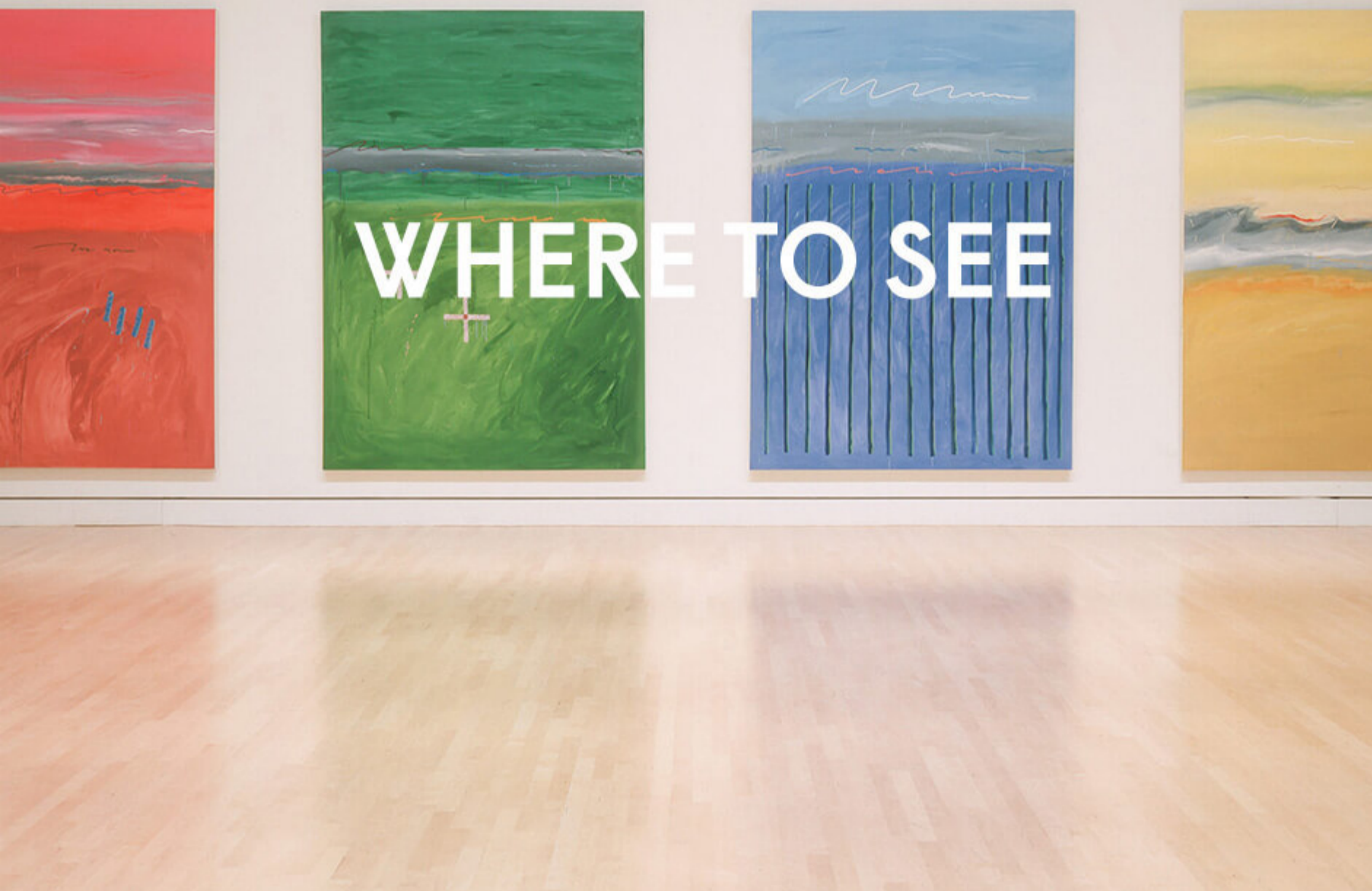
LEFT: Robert Houle, *These Apaches Are Not Helicopters* (detail), 1999, four photo enlargements, site-specific installation at the VIA Rail train station in Winnipeg. RIGHT: Robert Houle, *These Apaches Are Not Helicopters* (detail), 1999, four photo enlargements, site-specific installation at the VIA Rail train station in Winnipeg.

For his exhibition *Sovereignty over Subjectivity* at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 1999, Houle produced three site-specific projects that year, all associated with history and sovereignty: *Morningstar* at the Manitoba Legislative Buildings, *These Apaches Are Not Helicopters* at the VIA Rail train station, and *Gambling Sticks*, a permanent installation on a sacred site where the Red and Assiniboine rivers meet in Winnipeg and a place where, historically, Indigenous people would rendezvous, camp, and trade goods. In *Gambling Sticks*, Houle visually marked the significance of the place with twenty-one enlarged bronze replicas of Tahltan gambling sticks. Historically, gambling sticks were used to pass the time when First Nations people met at the river junction and were not directly occupied with trading. By planting these sticks in this place, Houle symbolically honoured the location and turned it into a spiritual space that grounds his cultural identity and personal connection to Manitoba.

Between 1994 and 1996, Houle undertook several design works with the City of Toronto's Department of Urban Design, City Planning. After doing extensive archival research, Houle elicited ancient voices from the written records, materializing them in the works. The resulting permanent public art installations are statements about the ownership of memory and affirm that which historically existed—waterways, frogs, and canoes, for instance—in what are now cityscapes. Alongside York Street in an area that connects Toronto's railway station and subway loop with the shore of Lake Ontario is a pedestrian walkway. Houle marked a route to the lake over this land, which fills in an area that used to be water. Another of Houle's installations traces the path of Garrison Creek, which now flows underground through a series of storm sewers. In both works, Houle arranged cast bronze animals set into sidewalks among the neighbourhood streets and parks.



LEFT: Robert Houle, *Gambling Sticks*, 1999, bronze, twenty-one site-specific works, each 8.3 x 40 cm, The Forks in Winnipeg, photograph by Serge Saurette. RIGHT: Robert Houle, *Gambling Sticks* (detail), 1999, bronze, twenty-one site-specific works, each 8.3 x 40 cm, The Forks in Winnipeg, photograph by Serge Saurette.



Robert Houle's works can be found in numerous public and private collections across Canada. The most significant public collections of his work are at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; and the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Notable public installations are located in Toronto and Winnipeg. The works listed below may not always be on view and do not represent the complete collection of Houle's work at each institution. For works produced in multiple editions, the following selection of institutions includes those that have at least one edition in their collection.

AGNES ETHERINGTON ART CENTRE

Queen's University
36 University Avenue
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
613-513-2190
agnes.queensu.ca



Robert Houle, *Zero Hour*, 1988
Mixed Media Installation: oil on canvas, text on a wall painted with opaque black latex, a red laser with mirror, and sand, two sand paintings, one rectangular and one circular, and four paintings, each: 168 x 168 cm

ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO

317 Dundas Street West
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
1-877-225-4246 or 416-979-6648
ago.ca



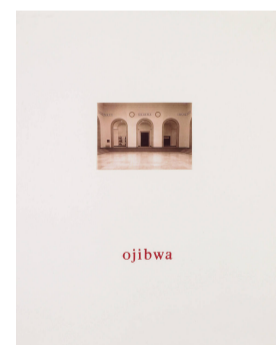
Robert Houle, *In Memorium*, 1987
Oil, feathers, leather, and ribbon on plywood
Overall: 137.2 x 151.9 x 9 cm



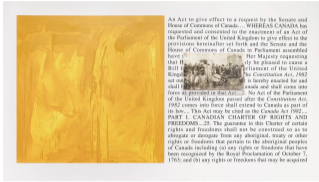
Robert Houle, *Lost Tribes*, 1990-91
Twelve computer printout collages, two with hand-tinting
Eleven components, each overall: 38.3 x 57.3 x 57.3 cm



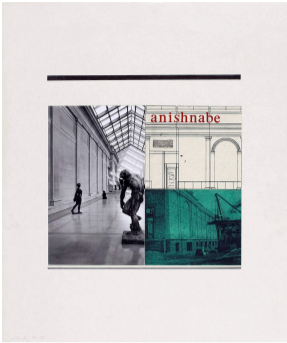
Robert Houle, *Working study for Kanata* (painting based on Benjamin West's painting *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770), 1991-92
Screenprint ink on transparent plastic sheet
Overall: 21.8 x 28.1 cm, image: 41.9 x 47 cm



Robert Houle, *Ojibwa*, from Anishnabe Walker Court preliminary study #8, 1994
collage, electrographic prints on wove paper
43.5 x 35.5 cm



Robert Houle, *Premises for Self-Rule: Constitution Act, 1982, 1994*
Oil on canvas, photo emulsion on canvas, laser cut vinyl
152.4 x 304.8 cm



Robert Houle, *Study #10 (for Anishnabe Walker Court)*, 1994
Gelatin silver print, photocopy, ink on coloured plastic sheet, vinyl self-adhesive letters, black porous point marker, graphite on paper, resin-coated photographic paper, and coloured transparent sheet
43.2 x 35.7 cm



Robert Houle, *Seven Grandfathers*, 2014
Oil on canvas, digital prints, Mylar, and watercolour on paper
Seven site-specific paintings, each 20.3 cm (diameter), Walker Court

ART GALLERY OF HAMILTON

123 King Street West
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
905-527-6610
artgalleryofhamilton.com



Robert Houle, *Aboriginal Title*, 1989-90
Oil on canvas
228 x 167.6 cm



Robert Houle, *Kanehsatake*, 1990-93
Oil on etched steel panels, treated wood
221 x 122 cm

CANADIAN MUSEUM OF HISTORY

100 Laurier Street
Gatineau, Quebec, Canada
1-800-555-5621
historymuseum.ca



Robert Houle, *Red Is Beautiful*, 1970

Acrylic on canvas
45 x 61 cm

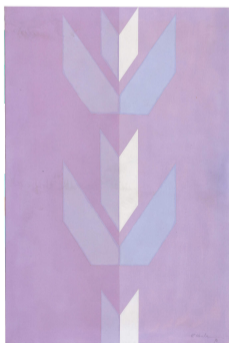


Robert Houle, *Innu Parfleche*, 1990

Oil, acrylic, iron, metal, owl feather, and mammal leather
66.2 x 68 x 8 cm

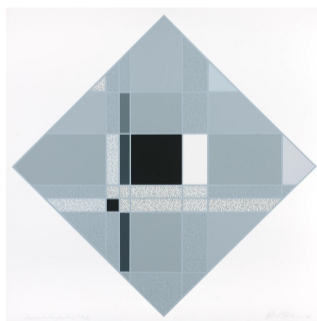
CARLETON UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

St. Patrick's Building, Carleton University
1125 Colonel By Drive
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
613-520-2120
cuag.ca



Robert Houle, *Ojibwa Motif, Purple Leaves, Series No. 2*, 1972

Oil on canvas
91.4 x 61 cm



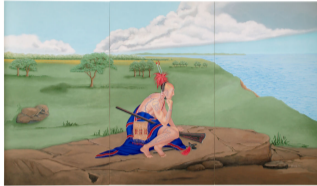
Robert Houle, *Diamond Composition*, 1980

Silkscreen on paper, edition number 11/75
87 x 87 cm



CONFEDERATION CENTRE ART GALLERY

145 Richmond Street
Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada
902-628-6142
confederationcentre.com/venues/art-gallery/



Robert Houle, *O-ween du muh waun (We Were Told)*, 2017

Oil on canvas
Triptych, 213.4 x 365.8 cm

THE FORKS

1 Forks Market Road
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
1-800-942-6302
theforks.com



Robert Houle, *Gambling Sticks*, 1999

Bronze, twenty-one site-specific works
Each 8.3 x 40 cm

INDIGENOUS ART CENTRE

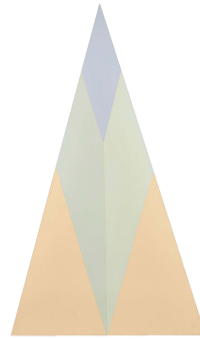
Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada
10 Wellington Street
Gatineau, Quebec, Canada
819-994-1262
aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/



Robert Houle, *Epigram the Shortest Distance*, 1972
Acrylic on canvas
125 x 128 cm



Robert Houle, *Love Games*, 1972
Acrylic on canvas
127.5 x 127.5 cm



Robert Houle, *Wigwam*, 1972
Acrylic on canvas
209 x 121 cm



Robert Houle, *Morning Star*, 1976
Acrylic on canvas
121 x 151 cm



Robert Houle, *Rainbow Woman*, 1982
Wood with alkyd paint
13.6 x 249 x 4.2 cm



Robert Houle, *Warrior Lances for Temagami*, 1989
Mixed media
Base: 5 x 76.2 cm
diameter, overall:
152.5 x 76.2 cm
diameter

LAKESHORE

Young Street and Queens Quay West
Toronto, Ontario, Canada



**Robert Houle, *Untitled (Toronto Lakeshore Installation)*,
c. 1994-96**

Site specific work covering
approximately 30 meters

MACKENZIE ART GALLERY

3475 Albert Street, University of Regina
Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada
306-584-4250
mackenzieartgallery.ca

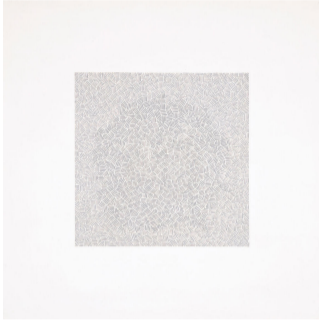


Robert Houle, *Postscript*, 1999

Lithographic print
121.9 x 163.2 cm

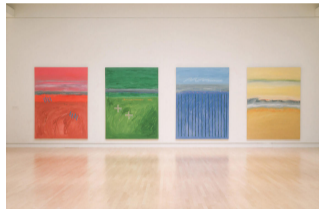
NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA

380 Sussex Drive
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
613-990-1985
gallery.ca



Robert Houle, *Square No. 3*, 1978

Acrylic on canvas, on
painted wooden mount
85.2 x 85.2 cm



Robert Houle, *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk (Where the gods are present) (Matthew, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas)*, 1989

Oil on canvas
Four paintings, each
244 x 182.4 x 5 cm



Robert Houle, *Seven in Steel*, 1989

Oil on steel and maple
130.9 x 644 x 9.5 cm



Robert Houle, *Kanata*, 1992

Acrylic and Conté
crayon on canvas
228.7 x 732 cm



Robert Houle, *Palisade II*, 2007

Three-part painting
installation
Twelve oil canvases,
six 40 x 30 cm each,
six 45 x 60 cm each, and
one digital
photographic print
(*Postscript*)
121.9 x 163.2 cm



THE ROBERT MCLAUGHLIN GALLERY

72 Queen Street
Oshawa, Ontario, Canada
905-576-3000
rmg.on.ca



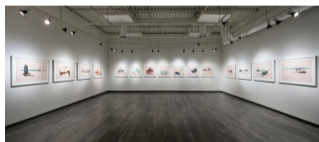
Robert Houle, *New Sentinel*, 1987
Oil on wood panel, ribbons and encaustic on cow skull, 244.3 x 45.5 x 3.5 cm



Robert Houle, *Kekabishcoon Peenish Chipedahbung (I Will Stand in Your Path Till Dawn)*, 1997
Thirty-six third-generation advertisements on red latex background with vinyl lettering
63.8 x 550 cm

SCHOOL OF ART GALLERY

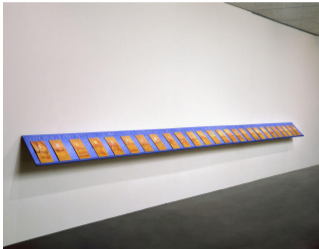
255 ARTlab, 180 Dafoe Road, University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
204-474-9322
umanitoba.ca/schools/art/gallery/



Robert Houle, *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009
Oilstick on paper
Twenty-four drawings, each either 58.4 x 76.2 cm or 76.2 x 54.4 cm

WINNIPEG ART GALLERY

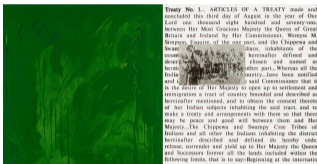
300 Memorial Boulevard
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
204-786-6641
wag.ca



Robert Houle,
Everything You Wanted to Know about Indians from A to Z, 1985
 Installation of twenty-six objects
 Surface: 45.3 x 735 cm



Robert Houle,
Parfleches for the Last Supper, 1983
 Acrylic and porcupine quills on paper
 Thirteen paintings, each 56 x 56 cm



Robert Houle, *Premises for Self-Rule: Treaty No. 1, 1994*
 Oil canvas, photo emulsion on canvas, laser cut vinyl
 152.4 x 304.8 cm



Robert Houle, *Sandy Bay, 1998-99*
 Oil on canvas, black and white photograph, colour photograph on canvas, Masonite
 300 x 548.4 cm



NOTES

BIOGRAPHY

1. Robert Houle notes that, as a speaker, he prefers the spelling “Anishnabe” (as opposed to “Anishinaabe”). The spelling of certain words in this book relates to Houle’s home or geographical location and follows Saulteaux; however, the spelling of names and terms related to other Indigenous identities varies.
2. In the eastern part of their territory, towards Lake Superior, the preference is to be referred to as Ojibwa or Anishinaabeg, meaning “first peoples.” Communities to the west prefer Plains Ojibwa or Anishnabe Saulteaux or just Saulteaux. These terms are used interchangeably.
3. The Canadian government’s policy was called “aggressive assimilation.” The church-run, government-funded residential schools were established in the nineteenth century and attendance was mandatory. Indigenous children were removed from their families and pressured to adopt Christianity and Canadian customs. See <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/a-history-of-residential-schools-in-canada-1.702280>.
4. For example, see the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s documents at www.trc.ca.
5. Robert Houle, quoted in *Notion of Conflict: A Selection of Contemporary Canadian Art*, ed. Dorine Mignot (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1995), 22.
6. Robert Houle, interview with MaryLou Dreidger, “Parfleches for the Last Supper,” *What Next?* (blog), Nov. 9, 2014, <https://maryloudriedger2.wordpress.com/2014/11/page/3/>.
7. Robert Houle in his acceptance speech for his honorary doctorate from the University of Manitoba in 2014 and in an interview with the author, December 15, 2017.
8. The 1969 White Paper proposed, among other things, to abolish the Indian Act, in an effort to establish equality between First Nations and Canadians. Now in existence for over 140 years, the Act remains controversial for its regressive, paternalistic views. See Bob Joseph, *21 Things You May Not Know about the Indian Act* (Port Coquitlam: Indigenous Relations Press, 2018).
9. “The White Paper 1969,” Indigenous Foundations, First Nations and Indigenous Studies, University of British Columbia, http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_white_paper_1969/, accessed January 4, 2018.
10. Deirdre Hanna, “Robert Houle: Native Sovereignty’s Aesthetic Warrior,” *NOW Magazine*, November 19, 1992, <https://www.pressreader.com/canada/now-magazine/19921119/282574491580596>.
11. Houle, interview, December 15, 2017.
12. Houle, interview, December 15, 2017.

13. Houle, interview, December 15, 2017.
14. Houle, interview, December 15, 2017.
15. Houle, interview, December 15, 2017.
16. Houle, interview, December 15, 2017.
17. Houle in Hanna, "Robert Houle."
18. Robert Houle, interviewed by Clara Hargittay, "The Struggle Against Cultural Apartheid," *Muse* (Autumn 1988): 58-60.
19. Houle in Hanna, "Robert Houle."
20. Robert Houle, quote from art drawing pad done in Amsterdam, October 11, 1980.
21. Robert Houle, interview with Nancy Baele, "Cultural Extinction and Renewal," *Ottawa Citizen*, March 29, 1990.
22. Houle, interview, December 15, 2017.
23. See the groundbreaking catalogue essay by Robert Houle, "Emergence of a New Aesthetic Tradition," in *New Work by a New Generation* (Regina: Norman MacKenzie Art Gallery, 1982), 2.
24. Robert Houle in "Anishnabe in the City," video by Winnipeg Arts Council, 20:22, <https://vimeo.com/21083289>, accessed January 16, 2018.
25. When acquired by the National Gallery of Canada, this work was mistakenly catalogued as *The Place Where God Lives*. In 2017 Greg Hill, Audain Senior Curator of Indigenous Art at the National Gallery of Canada, and the artist agreed to reverse what Houle labels as the "Christianization upon its purchase."
26. Carole Corbeil, "Beyond Cultural Apartheid," *Globe and Mail*, April 19, 1986.
27. The Lorne Building was a nomadic satellite building of the early National Gallery of Canada until the institution moved to Nepean Point in 1988.
28. Robert Houle, "Sovereignty over Subjectivity," *C Magazine* (Summer 1991): 29.
29. Ruth B. Phillips, "What Is 'Huron Art'? Native American Art and the New Art History," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 9, no. 2 (1989): 161-86.
30. Robert Houle, "The Spiritual Legacy of the Ancient Ones," in *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada*, ed. Susan McMaster and Claire Rochon (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992), 47.
31. Houle in Hanna, "Robert Houle."



32. The exhibition title was supported by Dr. Shirley Thomson, director of the National Gallery of Canada.

33. Houle, "The Spiritual Legacy of the Ancient Ones," 72.

34. Four Indigenous organizations, including the Assembly of First Nations, were included in constitutional deliberations that culminated in the Charlottetown Accord, which was subjected to a national referendum in 1992. The accord had included a proposed addition stating, "The Aboriginal peoples of Canada have the inherent right of self-government within Canada." The word "inherent" was intended to demonstrate that the right derived not from the Crown but from the histories, distinct identities, and self-determination of Indigenous peoples, whose existence predates that of Canada. Federal and provincial governments of Canada and First Nations groups had supported the document, but a majority voted against it in a Canadian referendum.

35. Houle, interview, December 15, 2017.

36. Ancestral rights and titles are dominant issues between the Canadian government and First Nations, and a narrow view of treaties has produced a huge divide. The non-Indigenous peoples who implemented the treaties tend to view them as self-serving legal deals rather than sacred pacts and do not honour them.

37. David McIntosh, "*uhpé guhnoodezowan* (when I speak to myself)," in *Robert Houle: enuhmo andúhyaun (the road home)* (Winnipeg: School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, 2012), 1-9, 6.

38. McIntosh, "*uhpé guhnoodezowan*," 1-9, 6.

KEY WORKS: PARFLECHES FOR THE LAST SUPPER

1. Held during spring or early summer, the Sun Dance is an annual ceremony that revolves around renewal of self and world. Houle made a concerted effort to relearn his native language and regain his Saulteaux identity, and he became well versed in spiritual traditions.

2. Robert Houle, interview with the author, December 15, 2017.

3. Robert Houle notes "Anishnabe" as the correct transliteration from Saulteaux and prefers its use.

KEY WORKS: MUHNEDOBE UHYAHYUK (WHERE THE GODS ARE PRESENT)

1. When acquired by the National Gallery of Canada, this work was mistakenly catalogued as *The Place Where God Lives*. In 2017 Houle and Greg Hill, Audain Senior Curator of Indigenous Art at the National Gallery of Canada, agreed to reverse what the artist labels as the "Christianization upon its purchase."

2. Gerald McMaster, "The Persistence of Land Claims," in *Robert Houle: Indians from A to Z*, ed. Gullwing Consulting (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1990), 32-44, 42.



KEY WORKS: KANATA

1. Robert Houle interview with the author, December 15, 2017, and relayed in an interview with Michael Bell, in *Kanata: Robert Houle's Histories*, ed. Madge Pon (Ottawa: Carleton University Art Gallery, 1993), 19.
2. W. Jackson Rushing III, "Beautiful Object = Paradigm of Power: Robert Houle from A to Z," *Robert Houle: Sovereignty over Subjectivity*, ed. Gary Genosko (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1999), 27.
3. Houle, interview with Bell, 19.
4. The Meech Lake Accord was an agreement between the federal and provincial governments in 1987 to amend the Constitution by strengthening provincial powers and declaring Quebec a "distinct society." Indigenous groups opposed the amendments, as they had not had any representation in the negotiations.

KEY WORKS: PREMISES FOR SELF-RULE: TREATY NO. 1

1. Robert Houle, interview with the author, December 15, 2017.

KEY WORKS: SANDY BAY

1. Saulteaux and translation by Robert Houle in conversation with the author for the exhibition *Robert Houle: Sovereignty over Subjectivity* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1999).

KEY WORKS: PARIS/OJIBWA

1. The tableau was designed by Michael Egan and built by Rick Dawson, both based in Montreal.
2. Houle uncovered this information in the article by Nelcya Delanoë, "Dernière rencontre, ou comment Baudelaire, George Sand, et Delacroix s'épurent des Indiens du peintre Catlin," in *Destins Croisés: Cinq siècles de rencontres avec les Amérindiens* (Paris: Albin Michel and UNESCO, 1992), 263-81. Houle met Delanoë in Paris and continued his research in conversation with her. He spent time in the Louvre studying Delacroix's watercolours, and steeped himself in the painter's work at Delacroix's studio, now a museum, on Place de Furstenburg, Paris.
3. Maungwudaus worked as a translator and writer before performing in Wild West shows that toured in the United States and Europe.

KEY WORKS: SANDY BAY RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL SERIES

1. Robert Houle, interview with the author, December 15, 2017.
2. David McIntosh, "*uhpé guhnoodezowan* (when I speak to myself)," in *Robert Houle: enuhmo andúhyaun (the road home)* (Winnipeg: School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, 2012), 1-9, 6.

KEY WORKS: SEVEN GRANDFATHERS

1. From the artist statement accompanying the installation *Seven Grandfathers*.



2. Robert Houle notes "Anishnabe" as the correct transliteration from Saulteaux and prefers its use.

3. Robert Houle, "Robert Houle's 'Seven Grandfathers at Walker Court,' 2014," AGO Facebook, July 18, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10152538983059144.1073741870.7834249143&type=1&l=2a35d9da4>

SIGNIFICANCE & CRITICAL ISSUES

1. Robert Houle notes that, as a speaker, he prefers the spelling "Anishnabe" (as opposed to "Anishinaabe"). The spelling of certain words in this book relates to Houle's home or geographical location and follows Saulteaux; however, the spelling of names and terms related to other Indigenous identities varies.

2. Robert Houle in conversation with the author for the exhibition *Robert Houle: Sovereignty over Subjectivity* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1999), 12.

3. The date 1763 refers to the Treaty of Paris, which ceded New France to Great Britain. The Royal Proclamation of 1763 renamed Canada the Province of Quebec with redefined borders and established a British-appointed colonial government. The year 1867 refers to the British North America Act, which established the Dominion of Canada. The year 1876 refers to the Indian Act, which allowed the government to control most aspects of Indigenous life, including status, land, resources, wills, etc. Canada and Great Britain signed the Constitution Act in 1982 as a final step in Canadian sovereignty.

4. The Meech Lake Accord was an agreement between the federal and provincial governments in 1987 to amend the Constitution by strengthening provincial powers and declaring Quebec a "distinct society." Indigenous groups opposed the amendments, as they had not had any representation in negotiations.

5. SCANA was formed in 1985 with a mandate to increase recognition of contemporary First Nations artists. Houle was not a member of SCANA and felt shunned by the organization.

6. Robert Houle, "Sovereignty over Subjectivity," *C Magazine* (Summer 1991): 30.

7. Robert Houle, "The Spiritual Legacy of the Ancient Ones," in *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations Art at the National Gallery of Canada*, ed. Susan McMaster and Claire Rochon (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992), 45-49.

8. Ruth B. Phillips, *Museum Pieces: Towards the Indigenization of Canadian Museums* (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 2011).

9. Houle, "Sovereignty over Subjectivity," 31.

10. Houle, "The Spiritual Legacy," 50-51.

11. Ruth B. Phillips, "Settler Monuments, Indigenous Memory: Dismembering and Remembering Canadian Art History," in *Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Margaret Olin (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 285–86.

12. The importance that Houle ascribes to his dreams reveals his belief in spiritual worlds beyond the physical. Dreams continue to be of significance to him as they were to his ancestors.

13. Robert Houle quoted in Leah Sandals, "York Wilson Award Honours Robert Houle's Residential School Art," *Canadian Art*, September 24, 2014, <https://canadianart.ca/news/robert-houle-york-wilson-prize/>.

14. Robert Houle quoted in Hillary Windsor, "How Robert Houle 'Decolonized' Himself through Painting," *The Coast*, April 9, 2013, <https://www.thecoast.ca/halifax/how-robert-houle-decolonized-himself-through-painting/Content?oid=4586584>.

15. Michael Bell, "Making an Excursion," in *Kanata: Robert Houle's Histories*, ed. Madge Pon (Ottawa: Carleton University Art Gallery, 1992), 7.

16. Robert Houle, quoted in press release, "Confederation Centre Art Gallery Unveils New Commission in Murals Series," August 16, 2017.

STYLE & TECHNIQUE

1. There are contemporary Indigenous artists who have incorporated traditional designs and representational elements in their work. For example, Bob Boyer (1948–2004) blended historical Plains imagery with a distinct contemporary sensibility in his painted blankets. Bill Reid (1920–1998) combined the aesthetics of nineteenth-century Haida art with modern techniques and materials. Norval Morrisseau (1931–2007) introduced visual storytelling through symbolic painting associated with the Woodland School.

2. Robert Houle notes that, as a speaker, he prefers the spelling "Anishnabe" (as opposed to "Anishinaabe"). The spelling of certain words in this book relates to Houle's home or geographical location and follows Saulteaux; however, the spelling of names and terms related to other Indigenous identities varies.

3. Mark Cheetham, "The Transformative Abstraction of Robert Houle," in *Troubling Abstraction: Robert Houle* (Hamilton: McMaster Museum of Art, 2007), 41–55, 44.

4. Robert Houle, "The Spiritual Legacy of the Ancient Ones," *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada*, ed. Susan McMaster and Claire Rochon (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992), 61.

5. Robert Houle, interview with the author, September 16, 2017.

6. Robert Houle, interview with the author, December 15, 2017.

7. Houle, interview, December 15, 2017.



8. W. Jackson Rushing III, "Troubling Abstraction: Robert Houle's Indigenous Modernism," in *Troubling Abstraction: Robert Houle* (Hamilton: McMaster Museum of Art, 2007), 23.

9. Conflict surrounded *Kanata* in its quotation of Newman's *Voice of Fire* because of a nationwide controversy over Newman's painting in 1990 that focused on two issues: the merits of Abstract Expressionism and the use of Canadian taxpayers' dollars to purchase a painting by an American artist.

10. Cheetham, "Transformative Abstraction," 46.

11. Houle, interview, December 15, 2017.

GLOSSARY

abstract art

Visual art that uses form, colour, line, and gestural marks in compositions that do not attempt to represent images of real things. Abstract art may interpret reality in an altered form, or depart from it entirely. Also called nonfigurative or nonrepresentational art.

Abstract Expressionism

A style that flourished in New York in the 1940s and 1950s, defined by its combination of formal abstraction and self-conscious expression. The term describes a wide variety of work; among the most famous Abstract Expressionists are Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Willem de Kooning.

Ace, Barry (Anishinaabe [Odawa] M'Chigeeng First Nation, b. 1958)

A textile, digital, and mixed-media artist who draws from Anishinaabeg traditional beadwork and salvaged electronic parts to explore where the past, present, and future converge for Indigenous peoples. Ace transforms technological waste into floral motifs as an act of cultural continuity and nationhood. In 2015 Ace received the K.M. Hunter Visual Arts Award.

Anishinaabe/Anishnabe

A collective term that means “the people” or “original people” and refers to a number of interconnected communities such as the Ojibway/Ojibwa/Ojibwe, Odawa, Chippewa, Saulteaux, Mississauga, Potawatomi, and others. In Canada, the Anishinaabe region includes areas of Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec.

Baudelaire, Charles (French, 1821–1867)

An influential poet and art critic who inspired the Symbolist movement and reveled in the sensual contradictions between the ruins of urban life and beauty. Baudelaire is perhaps best known for his 1857 poetry collection *Les fleurs du mal*, which explored taboos of bourgeois values. He is associated with philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin and the figures of the *flâneur* and the bohemian.

Baumgarten, Lothar (German, b. 1944)

A conceptual installation artist, photographer, and filmmaker interested in the Western ethnographic tradition and how the colonialist perspective has been constructed. Baumgarten was criticized for his 1984–85 work *Monument for the Native People of Ontario*, which Saulteaux artist Robert Houle referred to as “romantic anthropology.” Baumgarten teaches at the Universität der Künste Berlin.

Beam, Carl (Ojibwe, M'Chigeeng First Nation, 1943–2005)

A mixed-media artist who experimented with the photographic medium and spearheaded the reclamation of space by contemporary Indigenous artists in Canada. Beam often worked in photographic collage that featured family photos, text, drawings, and recurring images such as bird anatomy, Christian iconography, and famed freedom fighters. His painting *The North American Iceberg*, 1985, was the first work recognized as contemporary art by an

Indigenous artist purchased by the National Gallery of Canada. In 2005 he received the Governor General's Award for Visual and Media Arts.

Beardy, Jackson (Oji-Cree, Wasagamack First Nation, 1944–1984)

A painter known for employing a graphic style that incorporates flat areas of warm colour and for depicting Indigenous legends and spiritual and cosmological concepts in his work. A founding member of the Professional Native Indian Artists Inc., Beardy spent most of the latter part of his career as an Aboriginal arts advisor and educator.

Belmore, Michael (Ojibway, Lac Seul First Nation, b. 1971)

A sculptor and installation artist primarily working with stone carving and copper metalsmithing techniques to create forms that reflect on Indigenous and settler relationships to nature. In response to the treatment of nature as a commodity, Belmore depicts the environment's understated actions: watersheds, changing shorelines, the weathering of stone, and the landscape's experience of time. He is the recipient of several awards and a member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts.

Belmore, Rebecca (Anishinaabe, Lac Seul First Nation, b. 1960)

Widely recognized for her contributions to Canadian art, Belmore is a prominent performance and installation artist known for her politically charged work addressing the unresolved issues of history, trauma, and identity in the colonial spaces of Canada and the Americas. Among her most recognized works is the performance video *Vigil*, 2002, which calls attention to the hundreds of Indigenous women gone missing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. In 2005 Belmore became the first Indigenous woman to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale.

Betty Parsons Gallery

A gallery founded by art dealer, collector, and painter Betty Parsons in 1946 in Manhattan. Betty Parsons Gallery was an early supporter of many American Abstract Expressionist artists. The gallery closed in the 1980s.

Bob, Dempsey (Tahltan, Tlingit, Wolf Clan, b. 1948)

A master woodcarver, bronze sculptor, and arts educator recognized for his Tlingit-style bowls, masks, and totem poles, Bob began carving in 1969 when studying with the famed Haida artist Freda Diesing in Prince Rupert, British Columbia. He often works with alder and cedar wood and references the oral histories of his community. In 2013 Bob was made an Officer of the Order of Canada.

Boyer, Bob (Métis, 1948–2004)

A nonrepresentational painter known for his use of symmetric patterns of arrows, triangles, and rectangles found in Plains First Nations beadwork and hide painting. Boyer was influenced by colour-field painting and the Abstract Expressionism of the Regina Five in the 1960s. In the 1980s he began painting on blankets to signal the fraught Indigenous histories in Canada. From 1978 to 1998 and in 2004 Boyer served as Head of Visual Arts at the First Nations University of Canada (formerly the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College).

Canadian Guild of Crafts

Established in 1906, this Montreal-based organization preserves, promotes, and distributes Inuit and First Nations art and fine crafts in Canada. It also houses a permanent collection of Inuit art.

Catlin, George (American, 1796–1872)

A painter, writer, and traveller passionately devoted to the subject of American Aboriginal culture. Hundreds of Catlin's ethnographic paintings—some of which garnered high praise from contemporary critics, including Charles Baudelaire—are now held by the Smithsonian Institution and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

Chee Chee, Benjamin (Ojibway, 1944–1977)

A painter and prominent member of the Woodland School. Influenced by modern abstract movements and known for his spare representations of birds and animals, Chee Chee painted in a style more abstract and graphic than that of his Woodland School contemporaries.

Cisneros, Domingo (métis Tepehuane, b. 1942)

A mixed-media artist interested in the continual cycle of life and death, humanity's relationship to nature, and the sense of a primordial place where the self can be reborn. Cisneros's works often feature bones, animal pelts, and driftwood. Before immigrating to Canada from Mexico in 1969, Cisneros founded an art movement called La Rabia ("Rage"). In the 1970s he taught at Manitou College in La Macaza, Quebec.

Cobiness, Eddy (Ojibway, 1933–1996)

An original member of the Professional Native Indian Artists Inc., Cobiness was associated with the Woodland School and is noted for having signed his paintings with his nation's treaty number (47). Early in his career he painted realistic scenes of outdoor life and nature. His later work tended toward the abstract.

Coffin, Douglas (Potawatomi, Creek, b. 1946)

A painter and mixed-media sculptor known for his use of monumental structures, brightly painted steel, and totem pole forms combined with modernist abstraction. Spirituality is essential to Coffin's artistic practice. He has taught at many institutions including the Institute of American Indian Arts, New Mexico.

colour-field painting

A term first used to describe Abstract Expressionist works that use simplified or minimalist forms of flat or nuanced colour, as in paintings by Morris Louis. It was later applied to works by such artists as Kenneth Noland and Barnett Newman in the United States and Jack Bush in Canada, whose geometric or abstract motifs highlight variations in colour. Post-Painterly Abstraction, a description coined by the critic Clement Greenberg, includes colour-field painting.

colour theory

A collection of ideas and concepts—scientific, philosophical, and psychological—related to human perception of colour. For centuries, painters have looked to

colour theory for practical guidance on how to create specific effects in their works, and several modern art movements, including Pointillism, Orphism, and Synchronism, are rooted in specific theories of colour.

Davidson, Robert (Haida, Tlingit, b. 1946)

A celebrated carver of totem poles and masks, painter, printmaker, and jeweller, Davidson is recognized for reviving and perpetuating various aspects of Haida art and cultural expression. In 1969, at the age of twenty-two, he carved a totem pole in his hometown of Masset, British Columbia, which became the first to be raised there in ninety years. In 2010, he received the Governor General's Award for Visual and Media Arts.

Delacroix, Eugène (French, 1798–1863)

A leading French Romantic painter whose use of rich, sensual colours influenced the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. Following the Romantic tradition, Delacroix portrayed exoticized Moroccan subjects and dramatic scenes from history and contemporary events. His frenzied brushwork conveyed tragedy and emotion. Among his most well-known paintings is *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830.

De Stijl (The Style)

An influential Dutch movement in art and architecture founded in 1917 by abstractionists Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, and Bart van der Leek. De Stijl originated as a publication in which Mondrian elaborated on Neo-Plasticism, a restrained visual language based on primary colours and simple geometric forms that embodied a spiritualism derived from theosophy. After the First World War, De Stijl embraced the utopian potential of art. De Stijl heavily influenced the International Modern style of architecture.

Devine, Bonnie (Anishinaabe/Ojibwa, Serpent River First Nation, b. 1952)

A mixed-media installation artist, videomaker, sculptor, and curator, acclaimed for her explorations of Ojibwa traditions in criticizing colonial legacies. Devine has used textiles, storytelling, and weaving to interrogate complicated issues of land, treaties, and Indigenous-settler contact. She is an associate professor at OCAD University, where she founded the Indigenous Visual Culture Program.

Dominion Gallery of Fine Art

One of the foremost commercial galleries in Canada, the Dominion Gallery in Montreal was founded in 1941 by Rose Millman. The gallery was purchased in 1947 by Max Stern, who became its major proponent and director for the next forty years. The gallery promoted contemporary Canadian artists, both established and emerging, and was the first in Canada to offer represented artists a guaranteed annual income. The gallery closed in December 2000, reopening in 2005.

Durham, Jimmie (American, b. 1940)

A sculptor, poet, and activist involved in the American Indian Movement of the 1970s, Durham is known for combining natural materials and found objects to challenge Western representations of North American Indigenous peoples. While Durham identifies as Cherokee, in 2017 his claims as such were rejected by prominent Cherokee groups, artists, and curators.

Fife, Phyllis (Muscogee [Creek] Nation, b. 1948)

A painter, clothing designer, and arts educator, Fife works in an expressionistic mode with subtle colours and brush strokes as metaphors for inner thought. She is the founder of the Fife Collection, a Native American clothing line with international recognition.

Fonseca, Harry (Nisenan Maidu, Hawaiian, American, 1946–2006)

A mixed-media painter influenced by basketry designs, Maidu creation myths, and the trickster figure of the coyote. In 1979 Fonseca began his Coyote series, which depicted the traditional figure as a contemporary persona variously donning a leather jacket, clad in high-top sneakers, or situated in San Francisco's Mission District or a Parisian café. Fonseca is known for connecting a past Native American identity to the present. In the 1990s his works became more abstract and political, referencing the physical and spiritual genocide of the Indigenous peoples of California.

formalism

The study of art by analyzing a work's form and style to determine its meaning and quality. It emphasizes colour, texture, composition, and line over narrative, concept, or social and political context. In the 1960s the American critic Clement Greenberg strongly championed formalism. By the end of the 1960s postmodernism and conceptual art began to challenge formalism as a system of critique.

gestural painting

A process of painting based on intuitive movement and direct transmission of the artist's state of mind through the brush stroke. In gestural painting, the paint can also be applied freely through a number of different acts, including pouring, dripping, and splattering. Gestural painting is associated with the Abstract Expressionists and action painting.

Group of Seven

A progressive and nationalistic school of landscape painting in Canada, active between 1920 (the year of the group's first exhibition, at the Art Gallery of Toronto, now the Art Gallery of Ontario) and 1933. Founding members were the artists Franklin Carmichael, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, J.E.H. MacDonald, and Frederick Varley.

hard-edge painting

A technical term coined in 1958 by the art critic Jules Langsner, referring to paintings marked by well-defined areas of colour. It is widely associated with geometric abstraction and the work of artists such as Ellsworth Kelly and Kenneth Noland.

Heap of Birds, Edgar (Southern Cheyenne/Arapaho, b. 1954)

An artist known for his text-based public art signage and large-scale drawings that comment on contemporary Native American experience and the history of settler violence. Heap of Birds's site-specific works have been commissioned for Purchase College in New York, downtown Minnesota, and the Denver Art Museum. He has taught at several institutions, including Yale University and

Rhode Island School of Design in the United States and the University of Cape Town in South Africa.

HeavyShield, Faye (Káínaiwa-Blood, Kainai First Nation, b. 1953)

A sculptor and installation artist influenced by the geography of southern Alberta and the Kainai community where she was born and raised. HeavyShield utilizes repetition and minimalist forms to reference prairie grass, river currents, wind, and the complications of the body, residential school experiences, and language. She is invested in youth-based community art projects and was a facilitator of *The Shawls Project*, 2016, which combined dance shawls with Edmonton audioscapes to reflect on missing and murdered Indigenous women.

Hill, Greg (Kayen'kahaka [Mohawk]/French, Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, b. 1967)

An artist and a curator specializing in Aboriginal art. A Mohawk member of the Six Nations of the Grand River, Hill has led the Department of Indigenous Art at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa since 2007. (He was previously the gallery's Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art.) His installation pieces are held in major national collections around the country.

Hill, Tom (Seneca, Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, b. 1943)

An artist, curator, and policy-maker who played a major role in the ongoing process of forging space for Indigenous voices in the Canadian art world. In 1968 Hill became the first Indigenous intern at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa and that same year took a position as cultural director in the federal Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (now Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada). From 1982 to 2004, he served as museum director at the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ontario, where he curated many innovative exhibitions about Indigenous identities.

Janvier, Alex (Dene Suline/Saulteaux, b. 1935)

Influenced by Expressionism and strongly by his First Nations heritage, Janvier was a founding member of the Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. and is a pioneering figure in Indigenous art in Canada. Often composed with bright, symbolic colours and curvilinear lines, his nonrepresentational paintings address themes of land, spirit, and the struggles and triumphs of Indigenous culture.

Johns, Jasper (American, b. 1930)

One of the most significant figures in twentieth-century American art, Johns—a painter, printmaker, and sculptor—is credited, with Robert Rauschenberg, with renewing interest in figurative painting following Abstract Expressionism's dominance of the New York scene. Among his best-known works are those incorporating the motif of the American flag.

Kunuk, Zacharias (Kapuivik, b. 1957)

A filmmaker and producer whose film *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001) was the first Inuit-made feature film entirely in Inuktitut with an all-Indigenous cast. In 1988 Kunuk co-founded the independent production company Igloolik Isuma Productions, based in Nunavut. He has championed Inuit self-representation through broadcast media and video in order to prevent further collective memory loss due to the influence of foreign missionaries, priests, schools, and

mass media. Kunuk received the Golden Camera Award at the 2001 Cannes Film Festival.

Longfish, George C. (Seneca, Tuscarora, b. 1942)

A painter and sculptor influenced by Native American activism and modernist abstraction. Longfish's use of bold colours and text examines the idea of the "soul theft" of Native Americans and explores the path to re-owning one's spirituality, addressing the loss of information that Indigenous peoples need to spiritually, culturally, and physically thrive. Longfish was a professor of Native American Studies at the University of California, Davis, for over thirty years and Director at the C.N. Gorman Museum from 1974 to 1996.

Luna, James (Puyukitchum/Ipai/Mexican American Indian, 1950–2018)

A Native American conceptual performance and installation artist known for his modes of using his body to critique institutions. In *The Artifact Piece*, Luna lay with personal objects inside a glass vitrine in a museum and presented himself as an artifact. Luna's provocation and humour aim to confront the audience with the biases of cultural institutions and the dominant culture. In 2005 he was sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution to appear in the Venice Biennale.

Malevich, Kazimir (Russian, 1878–1935)

An important figure in the development of geometric abstraction, whose religious and mystical proclivities deeply influenced his wish to abandon, as an artist, the representation of the visible world. His radically austere Suprematist works were first shown in Moscow in 1915. Malevich resumed figure painting in the late 1920s.

manitous

Manitous or *manidoogs* are common to many Native groups in North America, including the Anishnabee. The sacred spirit-beings are tied to organisms, the environment, and events that help connect cultural narratives and their ways of being.

McMaster, Gerald (Plains Cree, Siksika First Nation, b. 1953)

An artist, educator, and curator, McMaster has worked at national and international institutions, including the National Museum of Man (now the Canadian Museum of History) in Canada and the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in the United States. His artwork, which juxtaposes contemporary pop culture and traditional elements, has been exhibited at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, and SITE Santa Fe, among others.

modernism

A movement extending from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century in all the arts, modernism rejected academic traditions in favour of innovative styles developed in response to contemporary industrialized society. Beginning in painting with the Realist movement led by Gustave Courbet, it progressed through Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism and on to abstraction. By the 1960s, anti-authoritarian postmodernist styles such as Pop art, Conceptual art, and Neo-Expressionism blurred the distinction between high art and mass culture.

Molinari, Guido (Canadian, 1933–2004)

A painter and theorist who was a member of the Plasticien movement in Montreal. His work, beginning in the mid-1950s, set new models for geometric painting internationally. His “razor-edged” Stripe Paintings create the illusion of a dynamic space, evoked by the viewer’s active engagement with how colours appear to change as they rhythmically repeat themselves across the canvas.

Mondrian, Piet (Dutch, 1872–1944)

A leading figure in abstract art, known for his geometric “grid” paintings of straight black lines and brightly coloured squares, whose influence on contemporary visual culture has been called the most far-reaching of any artist. Mondrian saw his highly restrictive and rigorous style, dubbed Neo-Plasticism, as expressive of universal truths.

Morrisseau, Norval (Anishinaabe, 1931–2007)

A painter known for depicting Anishinaabe legends and personal, hybrid spiritual themes with vibrant colours and strong lines, Morrisseau was a crucial figure in introducing contemporary Indigenous art into the wider Canadian art scene. He founded the Woodland School and inspired a generation of younger First Nations artists. In 1978 Morrisseau was appointed to the Order of Canada, and in 2006 the National Gallery mounted a major retrospective of his work. (See *Norval Morrisseau: Life & Work* by Carmen Robertson.)

Nanibush, Wanda (Anishinaabe-kwe, Beausoleil First Nation, b. 1976)

A visual artist, writer, curator, and activist, Nanibush was the first assistant curator of Canadian and Indigenous art at the Art Gallery of Ontario and in 2017 became Curator of Indigenous Art at the gallery. Through her work, Nanibush has highlighted, among other aspects, social-political-cultural struggles; land, water, and human relations; and the creation of an art history based on First Nations methodologies.

Neo-Plasticism

Piet Mondrian’s term for his highly reduced mode of abstract art, characterized by black grid structures organizing tautly balanced flat planes of colour, using only the three primary colours, as well as white. Neo-Plasticism profoundly influenced the advancement of geometric art throughout Europe and spread to the United States, where Mondrian moved in 1940. It later inspired the Montreal Plasticiens.

Newman, Barnett (American, 1905–1970)

A key proponent of Abstract Expressionism, known primarily for his colour-field paintings. Newman’s writings of the 1940s argue for a break from European artistic traditions and the adoption of techniques and subject matter more suited to the troubled contemporary moment, and for the expression of truth as he saw it.

New York School

The group of avant-garde painters based in New York City in the 1940s and 1950s whose activities led that city to replace Paris as the capital of the modern art world. Chiefly Abstract Expressionists, the principal artists of the New York

School include Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, and Mark Rothko.

Niro, Shelley (Kanien'kehaka [Mohawk], Turtle Clan, Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, b. 1954)

A multidisciplinary artist who uses brazen humour in beadwork, sculpture, video, and photography to challenge colonial and mainstream portrayals of Indigenous peoples. In acts of parody and reimagination, Niro has combined depictions of herself and female family members with traditional Mohawk imagery and pop cultural references. In 2017 she received the Scotiabank Photography Award and the Governor General's Award for Visual and Media Arts.

Northwest Coast carvings

Carvings made in wood, stone, and bone by Haida, Tlingit, Kwakiutl, and other First Nations of North America's Northwest Coast region. Highly formalized, curvilinear lines, internal design elements, and abstract compositions are characteristic motifs in these carvings that depict animal and human forms.

Odjig, Daphne (Odawa/Potawatomi/English, Wikwemikong First Nation, 1919–2016)

A founding member of the Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. and a prominent Indigenous painter in Canada. Odjig's work blends traditional First Nations styles with Cubist and Surrealist aesthetics. Soft contours, bold colours, and black outlines are characteristic of her work, which thematically focuses on issues of Indigenous politics in art.

parfleche

A light and durable rawhide pouch used by Plains Indigenous peoples. A parfleche is often made from a single piece of dried, untanned animal skin that is folded and laced together with leather strings. The term may also refer to bags, often decorated, made from rawhide.

Paul, Leonard (Mi'kmaq, b. 1953)

A watercolourist and painter working in a high-realist style with interest in natural forms, like rivers and wildlife, as well as Mi'kmaq legends. Paul places importance in art's role in therapy. He studied therapy counselling at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, and suicide prevention training in Calgary. Paul has illustrated several books and was commissioned by the Nova Scotia government to create the province's welcome sign.

pictographs

An ancient art form, pictographs constitute a category of rock art in which images were created by applying, with a finger or brushes, paints or dyes (commonly red ochre, black, white, and yellow) to rock surfaces.

Plasticiens

A Montreal-based artists' group active from 1955 to 1959. Although not opposed to their contemporaries the Automatistes, the Plasticiens encouraged a more formalist, less subjective approach to abstract art, such as that of Neo-Plasticist Piet Mondrian. Members included Louis Belzile, Jean-Paul Jérôme, Fernand Toupin, and Jauran (Rodolphe de Repentigny).

Poitras, Edward (Métis, b. 1953)

A mixed-media sculptor and installation artist known for his combination of dissimilar materials, such as eroded animal bones, beadwork, transistor boards, audiotapes, and electrical wires, to explore the interrelationships between Indigenous and European or settler cultures. From 1975 to 1976 Poitras studied with Domingo Cisneros in La Macaza, Quebec. In 1995 he became the first Indigenous artist to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale.

Pollock, Jack (Canadian, 1930–1992)

A gallerist, art dealer, and educator known for an eccentric, vibrant personality and his early support of young artists, including Norval Morrisseau and David Hockney. In 1960 Pollock opened the Pollock Gallery in Toronto and two years later mounted a solo exhibition of Morrisseau's works, the first time an Indigenous artist was shown in a contemporary Canadian gallery. He closed the Pollock Gallery in 1981.

Pollock, Jackson (American, 1912–1956)

Leader of the Abstract Expressionist movement, best known for his drip paintings of the 1940s and 1950s. Pollock is also closely associated with action painting, in which the act of painting is gestural and the artist approaches the canvas with little notion of what he or she will create.

Pop art

A movement of the late 1950s to early 1970s in Britain and the United States, which adopted imagery from commercial design, television, and cinema. Pop art's most recognized proponents are Richard Hamilton, David Hockney, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein.

post-colonial art history

An art history informed by critical theorization of the social, political, and cultural consequences of colonialism or imperialism for both the colonizers and the colonized. Post-colonial or settler art history explores questions of national identity, ethnicity, agency, and authenticity in the work of artists within cross-cultural contexts.

postmodernism

A broad art historical category of contemporary art that uses both traditional and new media to deconstruct cultural history and deploys theory in its attack on modernist ideals. Canadian postmodern artists include Janice Gurney, Mark Lewis, Ken Lum, and Joanne Tod.

Professional Native Indian Artists Inc.

Informally founded in the early 1970s and incorporated in 1975, this avant-garde association of Woodland School artists championed the inclusion of Indigenous art in mainstream Canadian art circles and aimed to foster revisionist thinking about Indigenous art and culture. Members included Jackson Beardy, Eddy Cobiness, Alex Janvier, Norval Morrisseau, Daphne Odjig, Carl Ray, and Joseph Sanchez.

Quick-to-See Smith, Jaune (Salish, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Nation, b. 1940)

A painter and cultural worker who combines Salish mythology with collage, appropriated imagery, and formal elements of Western canon artists to consider environmental destruction and the systemic oppression of Indigenous peoples. In the 1970s Smith founded the Grey Canyon Artists based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to advocate for Indigenous women artists.

Rauschenberg, Robert (American, 1925–2008)

A significant figure in twentieth-century American art whose paintings, sculptures, prints, photographs, collages, and installations span styles and movements from Abstract Expressionism to Pop art. Together with Jasper Johns he led a revival of interest in Dada. Among Rauschenberg's best-known works is *Bed*, 1955, one of his first "combines," or paintings that incorporate found objects.

Ray, Carl (Cree, 1943–1978)

A member of the Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. and the Woodland School who was mentored by Norval Morrisseau, Ray was an influential painter of wildlife, northern landscapes, and Medicine art. Held by the Winnipeg Art Gallery in Manitoba; the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario; and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, his work is known for its three-dimensional quality, flowing lines, and original composition.

realism

A style of art in which subjects are depicted as factually as possible. Realism also refers to a nineteenth-century art movement, led by Gustave Courbet, concerned with the representation of daily modern life, rather than mythological, religious, or historical subjects.

Reid, Bill (Haida, 1920–1998)

A sculptor, painter, and jeweller known for his championing of Haida culture and land claims and his skills as a master carver. Reid created monumental public sculptures, found at the University of British Columbia, the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C., and the Vancouver International Airport. His *Lootaas (Wave-Eater)*, 1986, is a 15-metre canoe carved from a single cedar log, commissioned for Expo 86 in Vancouver.

Romantic tradition

A multi-faceted movement that affected most areas of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western culture, including art, literature, and philosophy. Romanticism privileged the emotional and the subjective; it arose in opposition to Enlightenment-era rationalism.

Rothko, Mark (American, 1903–1970)

A leading figure of Abstract Expressionism, Rothko began his career as an illustrator and watercolourist. In the late 1940s he developed the style that would come to define his career, creating intense colour-field oil paintings that express the same anxiety and mystery that informed his earlier figurative work.

Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (RCA)

An organization of professional artists and architects, modelled after national academies long present in Europe, such as the Royal Academy of Arts in the U.K. (founded in 1768) and the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture in Paris (founded in 1648). The RCA was founded in 1880 by the Ontario Society of Artists and the Art Association of Montreal.

Ruben, Abraham Anghik (Inuvialuit, Salt Spring Island, b. 1951)

A sculptor who incorporates stories, tales, and experiences from Inuit and western Arctic cultures into stone and bronze works, Anghik often explores the encounters between the Nordic Vikings and the Inuit during a historic period when the two cultures found similarity in the practice of shamanism. In 2016, Anghik received the Order of Canada.

sacred geometry

A term that describes sacred or spiritual meanings attached to geometric shapes and their specific orientations. In modern art sacred geometry has been associated with many abstract artists, including Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, and Yves Gaucher.

Sanchez, Joseph (American, White Mountain Apache Reservation and Taos Pueblo, b. 1948)

A founding member of the Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. and the only non-Canadian artist of the group, Sanchez takes nature and spirituality as a primary concern in his paintings. After spending several years in Canada, he returned to the United States in the mid-1970s, helping to form various artists' groups.

Sand, George (French, 1804–1876)

Pseudonym of the novelist Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin, known for referencing the countryside of her youth, sporting men's clothes, and having love affairs with well-known figures, including Frédéric Chopin.

Shilling, Arthur (Ojibwa, 1941–1986)

Painter of expressionistic portraits of Ojibwa people, friends, and family members. Shilling was known for his bold use of colour and broad brush strokes, which convey the spiritual integrity of his subjects. To encourage talent where he grew up, Shilling built and opened an art gallery on the Chippewas of Rama First Nation lands. The 1978 National Film Board of Canada film *The Beauty of My People* documents Shilling's life.

spiritual colour

A term that describes sacred meanings attached to specific colours. Spiritual colour is associated with modernism and also appears in Indigenous spirituality. In Anishnabe tradition everything in creation has a colour that represents a particular form of power; each person is associated with a spiritual colour that supports focusing, receiving guidance, and living a good life.

Staats, Greg (Kanien'kehá:ka [Mohawk], Ohsweken, Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, b. 1963)

A photographer and video artist whose work is imbued with a traditional Haudenosaunee healing aesthetic that captures both trauma and renewal. Staats's works combine the natural world with language and mnemonics to

effect a sense of condolence, loss, and the materialization of what is within the body as it navigates land, nation, community, and family.

Stella, Frank (American, b. 1936)

An Abstract Expressionist painter and sculptor and a major figure in American art. Stella often works in series, developing a formal theme over an extended period. Primarily a painter and printmaker, he began taking on decorative commissions in the 1990s; the Princess of Wales theatre in Toronto features decorations and vast murals by Stella.

Suprematism

A movement developed about 1915 by the Russian artist and writer Kazimir Malevich, who proclaimed it finished before 1920. Characterized by radical austerity of form and geometric abstraction, Suprematism had a powerful influence on European and American art and design of the twentieth century.

tableau

French for “picture,” the term “tableau” refers to a formal grouping of people or objects, a striking scene.

taches

French word for “spots” or “markings,” used to describe artist Robert Houle’s technique of linear hatching, which echoes Indigenous aesthetic practices such as quillwork and the painterly hatch-marks of Jasper Johns.

Tailfeathers, Gerald (Káíñai, 1925–1975)

One of the first professional Indigenous artists in the Canadian art world, Tailfeathers became known in the 1950s for his paintings and drawings of the Blood people’s life in the late nineteenth century, often featuring ceremonial life and hunting scenes. Concurrent to his career as a painter and sculptor, he worked as a graphic artist for the Hudson’s Bay Company.

The European Iceberg

The European Iceberg: Creativity in Germany and Italy Today was a 1985 exhibition of contemporary German and Italian art mounted by the invited curator, Germano Celant, at the Art Gallery of Ontario. The exhibit included Lothar Baumgarten’s *Monument for the Native People of Ontario*, a Eurocentric criticism of colonial rule. Artists such as Carl Beam and Robert Houle responded with work that highlighted issues of self-determination and representation in contemporary Indigenous art.

Thomas, Jeff (urban-Iroquois, b. 1956)

Photographer and curator whose work is informed by the absent identity of the “urban Iroquois.” Thomas seeks to create an image archive of his experiences as an Iroquois man living in cities and to place Indigenous peoples in contemporary urban contexts, sometimes with a wry tone. His series *Indians on Tour* adopts a street photography aesthetic to capture plastic Indigenous figurines within city scenes.

Thomson, Tom (Canadian, 1877–1917)

A seminal figure in the creation of a national school of painting, whose bold vision of Algonquin Park—aligned stylistically with Post-Impressionism and Art Nouveau—has come to symbolize both the Canadian landscape and Canadian landscape painting. Thomson and the members of what would in 1920 become the Group of Seven profoundly influenced one another's work. (See *Tom Thomson: Life & Work* by David P. Silcox.)

trompe l'oeil

French for “deceives the eye,” *trompe l'oeil* refers to visual illusion in art, especially images and painted objects that appear to exist in three dimensions and even aim to trick the viewer into thinking that they are real. Common examples are the painted insects that appear to sit on the surface of Renaissance paintings, and murals that make flat walls appear to open into spaces beyond.

Vermeer, Johannes (Dutch, 1632–1675)

A major figure in seventeenth-century Dutch art, whose technically masterful and evocative paintings are among the most celebrated in Western art history. He is best known for genre scenes—such as *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*—that display meticulous construction and attention to light.

WalkingStick, Kay (Cherokee, b. 1935)

A prominent practitioner of contemporary landscape painting, WalkingStick is known for creating monumental works that communicate spiritual truth and the symbolic importance of land in relation to its first inhabitants and all its citizens. Her work engages with Indigenous cultural identity and history, feminism, and Minimalism, and other art historical movements. Her first major retrospective was a touring exhibition, which opened at the National Museum of the American Indian in 2015.

wampum belt

A belt created from purple and white wampum beads made from clamshells. Traditional to Eastern Woodlands Indigenous peoples, wampum belts have various purposes, generally ceremonial and diplomatic in nature. The belts' coded and symbolic bead arrangements may be used to invite other nations to a meeting, serve as a record of an agreement or treaty, or represent leadership positions or a person's certificate of office. For the Haudenosaunee, for instance, wampum belts are also used to raise a new chief and as a way to bind peace between nations.

West, Benjamin (American/British, 1738–1820)

Influential painter of historical, mythological, and religious subjects, as well as commissioned portraits. West co-founded the Royal Academy of Arts in London and served as its president in 1792. One of his most recognized paintings, *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770), is a fictionalized portrayal of the death of British general James Wolfe at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham (1759) during the Seven Years' War.

**White, R. Lee (American, b. 1951)**

An artist who drew imagery from Plains Indigenous art and claimed to be a member of the Sioux Nation. In the 1990s White came under criticism when it was revealed that he was not of Indigenous descent.

Woodland School (of art)

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Norval Morrisseau pioneered this school of artistic practice. Key characteristics of Woodland School art include the fusion of traditional Ojibway imagery and symbols with sensibilities of modernism and Pop art, as well as the fusion of X-ray-style motifs with bold colours and interconnected, curvilinear lines. Alex Janvier, Daphne Odjig, and Carl Ray are other prominent artists associated with the Woodland School.



SOURCES & RESOURCES

Robert Houle has been exhibiting his work since the early 1970s. His artistic career is punctuated by solo and group exhibitions in Canada, the United States, and abroad. He has curated many groundbreaking exhibitions and has written insightful essays on political and cultural issues surrounding Indigenous peoples, and monographs on contemporary Indigenous artists.



Robert Houle, *Mississauga Portraits* (from left to right: *Waubuddick*, *Maungwudaus*, *Hannah*), 2012, oil on Masonite, three panels each 172.7 x 121.9 cm, collection of the artist.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

-
- 1989** *Seven in Steel*, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario.
-
- 1990** *Robert Houle: Indians from A to Z*, Winnipeg Art Gallery. Toured to the Glenbow Museum, Calgary; MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina; and Museum of Civilization (now Canadian Museum of History), Gatineau. Exhibition publication.
-
- 1991** *Lost Tribes*, Hood College, Frederick, Maryland.
-
- 1992** *Hochelaga*, article, Montreal, and YYZ, Toronto.
-
- 1993** *Kanata: Robert Houle's Histories*, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa. Exhibition publication.
- Anishnabe Walker Court*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.
-
- 1994** *Premises for Self-Rule*, Garnet Press Gallery, Toronto.
-
- 1996** *Pontiac's Conspiracy*, Garnet Press Gallery, Toronto.
-
- 1999** *Robert Houle: Sovereignty over Subjectivity*, Winnipeg Art Gallery. Toured to the Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, and Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto. Exhibition publication.
-
- 2000–01** *Palisade*, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa. Exhibition publication.



2006	<i>Nomenclature: Apache Bombs and Helicopters</i> , Urban Shaman, Winnipeg.
2007	<i>Troubling Abstraction: Robert Houle</i> , McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton, in collaboration with The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. Exhibition publication.
2010–11	<i>Robert Houle's Paris/Ojibwa</i> , Canadian Cultural Centre, Paris, France, and Art Gallery of Peterborough, Ontario. Toured to Art Gallery of Windsor. Exhibition publication.
2012	<i>enuhmo andúhyaun (the road home)</i> , School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg. Exhibition publication.
2014	<i>Seven Grandfathers</i> , Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.
2015	<i>Robert Houle: Obscured Horizons</i> , MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie.
2016	<i>Robert Houle: Shaman Dream in Colour</i> , Kinsman Robinson Galleries, Toronto. Exhibition publication.
2018	<i>Pahgedenaun</i> , Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1982	<i>New Work by a New Generation</i> , MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina. Exhibition publication.
1983	<i>Innovations: New Expressions in Native American Painting</i> , Heard Museum, Phoenix.
1985	<i>Challenges</i> , de Meervaat Cultural Centre, Amsterdam.
1987	<i>Eight from the Prairies</i> , Part Two, Thunder Bay Art Gallery and Southwest Museum, Los Angeles.
1989	<i>Beyond History</i> , Vancouver Art Gallery. Exhibition publication.
1990	<i>Why Do You Call Us Indian?</i> Gettysburg College Art Gallery, Pennsylvania. Contemporary Rituals, White Water Gallery, North Bay, Ontario.
1992	<i>Rethinking History</i> , Mercer Union, Toronto.
1995	<i>Notions of Conflict</i> , Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
	<i>Displaced Histories</i> , Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa.



1996	<i>Real Fictions: Four Canadian Artists</i> , Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.
2000	<i>Tout le temps/Every Time: La Biennale 2000</i> , Montreal. Exhibition publication.
2001	<i>Landmark</i> , University of Waterloo Art Gallery in collaboration with the Tom Thomson Art Gallery, Owen Sound, Ontario, and The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. Exhibition publication.
2003	<i>Pathbreakers: Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art</i> , Eiteljorg Museum, Indianapolis. Exhibition publication.
2004	<i>We Come in Peace...: Histories of the Americas</i> , Musée d'art Contemporain de Montréal. Exhibition publication.
2007	<i>Testbed</i> , Nuit Blanche, Ontario College of Art and Design, Toronto.
2012	<i>Changing Hands: Art without Reservation</i> , Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Exhibition publication. <i>Sovereign Acts</i> , Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Art Museum at the University of Toronto.
2013	<i>1992: Robert Houle, Duane Linklater, Nadia Myre</i> , MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie. <i>Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art</i> , National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Exhibition publication. <i>IN/digitized: Indigenous Culture in a Digital World</i> , SAW Gallery, Ottawa. <i>Four Contemporary Artists: Barry Ace, Bonnie Devine, Rosalie Favell, and Robert Houle</i> , Carmel Art Gallery, Ottawa.
2013–14	<i>Before and after the Horizon: Anishinaabe Artists of the Great Lakes</i> , National Museum of the American Indian, New York, and Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Exhibition publication.
2016	<i>Form Follows Fiction: Art and Artists in Toronto</i> , University of Toronto Art Centre. <i>Toronto: Tributes + Tributaries, 1971–1989</i> , Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Exhibition publication.
2017	<i>Re:collection</i> , Confederation Centre of the Arts, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. Exhibition publication.

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"Odjig: An Artist's Transition." *The Native Perspective* 3, no. 2 (1978): 42–46.

"The Emergence of a New Aesthetic Tradition." In *New Work by a New Generation*, 2–5. Exhibition publication. Regina: Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery, 1982.

"The Spiritual Legacy of the Ancient Ones." In *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada*, edited by Susan McMaster and Claire Rochon. Exhibition publication. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992.

"A Context for the Janvier Legacy." In *The Art of Alex Janvier: His First Thirty Years, 1960-1990*, by Lee-Ann Martin, 49-65. Exhibition publication. Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Art Gallery, 1993.

"A Context for Haida Abstraction." In *Robert Davidson: The Abstract Edge*, edited by Karen Duffek. Exhibition publication. Vancouver: Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, 2004.

"Dibaajimowin/Storytelling." In *Stories from the Shield: Bonnie Devine*. Exhibition publication. Brantford: Woodland Cultural Centre, 2004.

"Translation/Transportation." In *Nadia Myre: Cont[r]act*, by Joan Reid Acland, Rhonda L. Meir, Robert Houle, and Anne Collett. Exhibition publication. Montreal: Dark Horse Productions, 2004.

"Creating Space within a National Identity." In *Vision, Space, Desire: Global Perspectives and Cultural Hybridity*. Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian, 2006.

"Odjig: A Pictorial Style in Transition." In *The Drawings and Paintings of Daphne Odjig: A Retrospective Exhibition*, by Bonnie Devine, 37-42. Exhibition publication. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2007.

"Poetic Portals of Memory." In *Greg Staats: Reciprocity*. Exhibition publication. Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, 2007.

"Interiority as Allegory." In *Rebecca Belmore: Rising to the Occasion*, edited by Daina Augaitis and Kathleen Ritter, 19-23. Exhibition publication. Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2008.

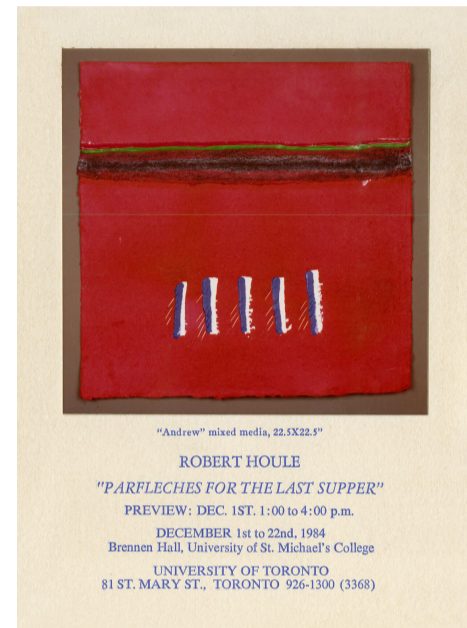
"Shape-shifting Images." In *The Colour of My Dreams: The Surrealist Revolution in Art*, edited by Dawn Ades, 27-75. Exhibition publication. Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2011.

"Bonnie Devine: Land as Metaphor for Survival." Exhibition catalogue essay for *We Are Here: 7th Biennial Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship*, Indianapolis: Eiteljorg Museum, 2011.

"The Beardmore Garden Party." In *Norval Morrisseau 2012 Retrospective*. Exhibition publication. Toronto: Kinsman Robinson Galleries, 2012.

"Anishnabe Supernova." Exhibition catalogue essay for *Copper Thunderbird: The Art of Norval Morrisseau*, Toronto: Westerkirk Works of Art, 2012.

"Kay WalkingStick: Landscape, the Living Synthesis of Human Presence and Place." Exhibition catalogue essay for *Kay WalkingStick: An American Artist*, Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian, 2013.



Invitation to the opening of Robert Houle's first solo exhibition, *Parfleches for the Last Supper*, 1984, held at the University of Toronto.

SELECTED WRITINGS ABOUT ROBERT HOULE

Douglas, Susan. "Crossroads Visualism: Robert Houle." *Parachute* (Fall 1995): 42-46.

Hargittay, Clara. "The Struggle Against Cultural Apartheid." *Muse* 6, no. 3 (1988): 58-63.

Longchamps, Denis. "Contemporary Art and Religion in Canada: A Selection of Works." *Journal of Canadian Art History* 33, no. 2: 214-49.

McMaster, Gerald. *Challenges*. Exhibition publication. Hull: National Museum of Man; Amsterdam: de Meervaart Cultural Centre, 1985.

Musiol, Marie-Jeanne. "Robert Houle and the Ojibway Leaves." *The Native Perspective* 2, no. 10 (1978): 21-23.

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Scott, Jay. "I Lost It at the Trading Post." *Canadian Art* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1985): 33-39.

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VIDEOS

Niro, Shelley, writer, producer, and editor. *Robert's Paintings*. 2011. Turtle Night Productions. Colour video, 52:00 min.

Roemer, Derreck, director. *Robert Houle, Visual Artist*. Canada Council for the Arts. Colour video, 4:15 min.

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Wasserman, Leslie, producer. *The Art of Robert Houle*. 2000. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.



Robert Houle in his studio, observing the light and colour with his work *Colours of Love*, 2015, photograph by Patti Ross Milne.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SHIRLEY MADILL

Shirley Madill curated two solo exhibitions of work by Robert Houle—*Indians from A to Z*, 1990, and *Sovereignty over Subjectivity*, 1999—when she was curator of contemporary art and photography at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Madill was chief curator and director of programming at the Art Gallery of Hamilton between 1999 and 2006 and later accepted the position of director and CEO at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. She returned to Ontario as director of the Rodman Hall Art Centre, Brock University, in 2008 and is currently executive director at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery. In 1993 Madill spent a residency in Valenciennes, France, at the École supérieure des beaux-arts de Valenciennes as part of the Canada-France agreement with Canadian Heritage. She was the Canadian commissioner for the Bienal de São Paulo in 2004 featuring the work of David Rokeby. Her curatorial projects include *Future Cities*, Art Gallery of Hamilton, 2004; *Sublime Embrace: Experiencing Consciousness in Contemporary Art*, Art Gallery of Hamilton, 2006; *David Hoffos: Scenes from the House Dream*, Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge, 2009, and Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto, 2010; *The Future of the Present*, Scotiabank Nuit Blanche Toronto, 2011; *Milutin Gubash*, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, 2012; and *Kent Monkman: Four Continents*, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, 2016–17.



“Meeting with Robert Houle in his Toronto studio to prepare for his first solo exhibition, in Winnipeg, I was immediately struck and moved by his fearless determination to create awareness and make a difference in the treatment of Indigenous art and artists. His capacities as leader, catalyst, and committed agent of change are amplified by a subtle, empathetic, and humanistic approach, both personal and political, seen in all that he does in his daily life.”



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From the Author

I am both honoured and humbled to author this important and timely publication on Robert Houle. I extend a special thank you to Sara Angel for the opportunity. I am grateful for the assistance provided by her remarkable team at ACI. Their professionalism and help throughout the project was nothing less than stellar. I am also indebted to all editors, in particular Amanda Lewis and Kendra Ward, who provided me with valuable suggestions and advice on the manuscript. My colleagues in art museums across the country, in particular the Winnipeg Art Gallery; Canadian Museum of History, Ottawa; and Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Gatineau, have been of great help responding to my inquiries on specific works by Houle during the research phase.

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The ACI also sincerely thanks Robert Houle and Paul Gardner for their image research assistance.

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Robert Houle, *Parfleches for the Last Supper (Matthew)*, 1983. (See below for details.)

Credit for Banner Images



Biography: Robert Houle at the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1970. (See below for details.)



Key Works: Robert Houle, *Parfleches for the Last Supper (Bartholomew)*, 1983. (See below for details.)



Significance & Critical Issues: Robert Houle, *Kanata*, 1992. (See below for details.)



Style & Technique: Robert Houle, *Parfleche for Norval Morrisseau*, 1999. (See below for details.)



Sources & Resources: Robert Houle, *Parfleche for Edna Manitowabi*, 1999. (See below for details.)



Where to See: Robert Houle, *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk (Where the gods are present)*, 1989. (See below for details.)

Credits for Works by Robert Houle



Aboriginal Title, 1989-90. Art Gallery of Hamilton, purchased with funds from the Alfred Wavell Peene and Susan Nottle Peene Memorial, 1992 (1992.3). © Robert Houle.



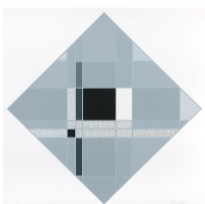
Anishnabe Walker Court, 1993. Walker Court, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Photo credit: Art Gallery of Ontario. © Robert Houle.



Blue Thunder, 2012. Private collection. Courtesy of Kinsman Robinson Galleries, Toronto. © Robert Houle.



Coming Home, 1995. Private collection. Courtesy of the Winnipeg Art Gallery. © Robert Houle. Photo credit: Ernest Mayer.



Diamond Composition, 1980. Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, gift of Victoria Henry (1995.16.11). Courtesy of the artist. © Robert Houle.



Epigram the Shortest Distance, 1972. Indigenous Art Centre, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Gatineau (151968). © Robert Houle. Photo credit: Lawrence Cook.



Everything You Wanted to Know about Indians from A to Z, 1985. Winnipeg Art Gallery, acquired with funds from The Winnipeg Art Gallery Foundation Inc. (G-89-1501 a-cc). Detail image courtesy of McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton. © Robert Houle.



Gambling Sticks, 1999. The Forks, Winnipeg. Photograph by Serge Saurette. © Robert Houle.



In Memoriam, 1987. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of Vanessa, Britney, and Nelson Niedzielski, 2000 (2000/1196). © Robert Houle.



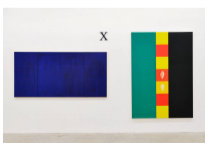
Innu Parfleche, 1990. Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau (V-F-190). Courtesy of McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton. © Robert Houle.



Kanata, 1992. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1994 (37479.1-4). Courtesy of the artist. © Robert Houle.



Kanehsatake, 1990-93. Art Gallery of Hamilton, gift of the artist, 1994 (1994.40). © Robert Houle.



Kanehsatake X, 2000. Private collection. © Robert Houle. Photo credit: Galerie Nicolas Robert.



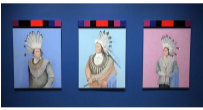
Kekabishcoon Peenish Chipedahbung (I Will Stand in Your Path Till Dawn), 1997. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, gift of Paul Gardner in memory of Donald Gardner, 2007. © Robert Houle.



Lost Tribes, 1990-91. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, purchased with funds donated by AGO Members, 1994 (93/257.1-.12). © Robert Houle.



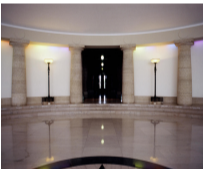
Love Games, 1972. Indigenous Art Centre, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Gatineau (151969). © Robert Houle. Photo credit: Lawrence Cook.



Mississauga Portraits (from left to right: *Waubuddick*, *Maungwudaus*, *Hannah*), 2012. Collection of the artist. © Robert Houle. Photo credit: Art Gallery of Windsor.



Morning Star, 1976. Indigenous Art Centre, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Gatineau (151808). © Robert Houle. Photo credit: Lawrence Cook.



Morningstar, 1999. Pool of the Black Star, Manitoba Legislative Building, Winnipeg. Courtesy of the Winnipeg Art Gallery. © Robert Houle.



Muhnedobe uhyahyuk (*Where the gods are present*), 1989. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1992 (36168.1-4). Courtesy of the artist. © Robert Houle.



New Sentinel, 1987. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. © Robert Houle. Photo credit: Ernest Mayer.



Palisade II, 2007. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © Robert Houle.



Parfleche for Edna Manitowabi, 1999. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of McMaster Museum of Art. Photo credit: Michael Cullen. © Robert Houle.



Parfleches for the Last Supper, 1983. (Matthew, James the Less, Jude, Simone, Philip, Andrew, Bartholomew, Thomas, Peter, James, John, Judas, Jesus). Winnipeg Art Gallery, gift of Mr. Carl T. Grant, Artvest Inc., (G-86-460 to G-86-472). © Robert Houle.



Parfleche for Norval Morrisseau, 1999. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of McMaster Museum of Art. Photo credit: Michael Cullen. © Robert Houle.



Paris/Ojibwa, 2010. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the Peterborough Art Gallery. © Robert Houle. Photo credit: Michael Cullen.



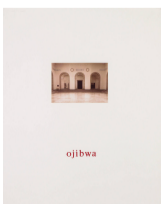
Premises for Self-Rule: Constitution Act, 1982, 1994. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, purchased with funds from the Estate of Mary Eileen Ash, 2014 (2014/1). © Robert Houle



Premises for Self-Rule: Treaty No. 1, 1994. Winnipeg Art Gallery, acquired with funds from the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program (G-96-11 abc). © Robert Houle.



Postscript, 1999. MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina, purchased with the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program (2000-01-01). © Robert Houle.



Ojibwa, from *Anishnabe Walker Court preliminary study #8*, 1994. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, purchased with funds donated by AGO Members, 1996 (96/4.8). © Robert Houle.



Ojibwa Motif, Purple Leaves, Series No. 2, 1972. Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, gift of Raymonde Falardeau, 1998 (1998.25.1). © Robert Houle. Photo credit: Justin Wonnacott.



O-ween du muh waun (We Were Told), 2017. Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown, commissioned with the A.G. and Eliza Jane Ramsden Endowment Fund, 2017. Courtesy of the artist. © Robert Houle.



Rainbow Woman, 1982. Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Gatineau (306032). © Robert Houle. Photo credit: Lawrence Cook.



Red Is Beautiful, 1970. Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau (V-F-174). © Robert Houle.



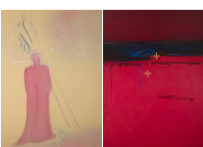
Sandy Bay, 1998-99. Winnipeg Art Gallery, acquired with funds from the President's Appeal 2000 and with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program (2000-87 a-e). © Robert Houle.



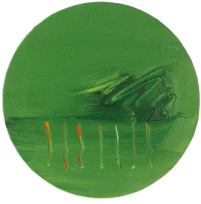
Sandy Bay, 2007. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of Peterborough Art Gallery. © Robert Houle. Photo credit: Michael Cullen.



Sandy Bay Residential School Series, 2009. School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, purchased with funds from York Wilson Endowment Award (13.069 to 13.092). Courtesy of the artist. © Robert Houle.



Saysaygon, 2016. Collection of artist. © Robert Houle.



Seven Grandfathers (Mahéen gun [Wolf]), 2014. Walker Court, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, purchased with the assistance of the Martinsell Fund, 2016 (2015/38.1-14). © Robert Houle.



Seven Grandfathers (Músh kooda pezhéke [Buffalo]), 2014. Walker Court, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, purchased with the assistance of the Martinsell Fund, 2016 (2015/38.1-14). © Robert Houle.



Seven in Steel, 1989. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, gift of Norman Garnet, Toronto, 1996 (38374.1-10). © Robert Houle.



Shaman Dream in Colour, 1975. Private collection. Courtesy of Kinsman Robinson Galleries, Toronto. © Robert Houle.



Shaman Never Die, 2015. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of Kinsman Robinson Galleries, Toronto. © Robert Houle.



Study #10 (for Anishnabe Walker Court), 1994. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of Lynn and Stephen Smart, 2004 (2005/46). © Robert Houle.



Study for Reclining Ojibwa, 2006. Collection of Barry Ace. Courtesy of Peterborough Art Gallery. © Robert Houle. Photo credit: Michael Cullen.



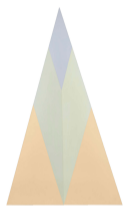
Square No. 3, 1978. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, gift of Myron Laskin, Santa Monica, California, 1987 (29856). © Robert Houle.



These Apaches Are Not Helicopters, 1999. VIA Rail train station in Winnipeg. Courtesy of the Winnipeg Art Gallery. © Robert Houle.



Warrior Lances for Temagami, 1989. Indigenous Art Centre, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Gatineau (306425 A-H). © Robert Houle.



Wigwam, 1972. Indigenous Art Centre, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Gatineau (151967). © Robert Houle.



Working study for Kanata (painting based on Benjamin West's painting *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770), 1991-92, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. © Robert Houle.



Zero Hour, 1988, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston (41-001). © Robert Houle.

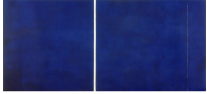
Credits for Photographs and Works by Other Artists



Artifact 671B, 1988, by Rebecca Belmore, photograph by William Lindsay. © Rebecca Belmore.



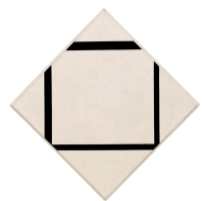
Carl Beam and Robert Houle in 1985, photograph by Ann Beam. Courtesy of Anong Beam. © Estate of Carl Beam.



Cathedra, 1951, by Barnett Newman. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, acquired with the generous support of the Vereniging Rembrandt, Theo van Gogh Stichting and N.N. (A 35917) © The Barnett Newman Foundation. Courtesy of Albertis Window.



Cinq études d'indiens Ojibwas, 1845, by Eugène Delacroix. Louvre Museum, Paris (RF 9311).



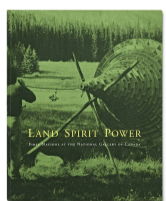
Composition No. 1 Lozenge with Four Lines, 1930, by Piet Mondrian. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Hilla Rebay Collection, New York. Courtesy of the Guggenheim Collection Online.



Corpse and Mirror, 1976, by Jasper Johns. Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Celeste Bartos (534.1976). © Jasper Johns. Courtesy of the MOMA Collection Online.



Cover of the 1943 edition of *Ojibwa Crafts* by Carrie A. Lyford, photograph by Rachel Topham.



Cover of *Land, Spirit, Power* exhibition catalogue, 1994. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



The Death of General Wolfe, 1770, by Benjamin West. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, gift of the 2nd Duke of Westminster to the Canadian War Memorials, 1918; Transfer from the Canadian War Memorials, 1921 (8007).



First Station, 1958, by Barnett Newman. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection (1986.65.1). © The Barnett Newman Foundation. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



The Indian in Transition, 1978, by Daphne Odjig. Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau (III-M-15).



Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo 67, 1967, photographer unknown. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.



Installation view of Faye HeavyShield's *Untitled*, 1992, at the *Land, Spirit, Power* exhibition, photograph by Louis Joncas. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.



Installation view of *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, at Latcham Gallery, Stouffville, Ontario, 2016, photograph by Toni Hafkenscheid. Courtesy of the author.



Installation view of *Seven Grandfathers*, 2014, at Walker Court, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, photograph by Dean Tomlinson.



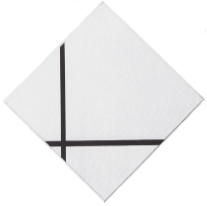
Interior page from *Ojibwa Crafts* (1943) by Carrie A. Lyford, photograph by Rachel Topham.



Invitation to Robert Houle's first solo exhibition, 1984. Archive of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



Lac Laronge IV, 1969, by Frank Stella. Toledo Museum of Art, purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, gift of Edward Drummond Libbey, 1972.4. © Frank Stella. Courtesy of the Detroit Art Review online.



Lozenge Composition with Two Lines, 1931, by Piet Mondrian. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, acquired with the generous support of the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, the Algemene Loterij Nederland, and the Vereniging Rembrandt (1988.1.0016). Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



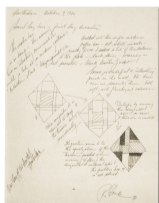
A miniature parfleche, Crow, 1890-1910. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton.



Mural by Norval Morrisseau for the Indians of Canada pavilion at Expo 67, 1967, photographer unknown. Courtesy of Kinsman Robinson Galleries, Toronto.



Norval Morrisseau and Robert Houle in Beardmore, Ontario, 1978, photograph by Barbara Stimpson. Archive of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



A page from Robert Houle's Amsterdam notebook, 1980. © Greg Staats/Visual Arts-CARCC (2018).



Paul Gardner and Robert Houle with their cats, 1988, photograph by Andre Leduc. Archive of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



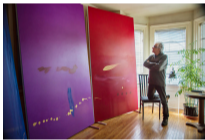
Rebecca Belmore's *Mawu-che-hitoowin: A Gathering of People for Any Purpose*, 1992, at *Land, Spirit, Power*, photograph by Louis Joncas. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



Robert Houle in 2015 with his triptych *Colours of Love*, 2015, photograph by Patti Ross Milne.



Robert Houle at Assiniboia Residential High School, 1967, photographer unknown. Archive of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



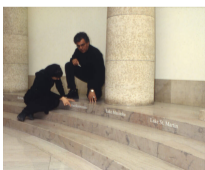
Robert Houle with *Colours of Love*, 2015, photograph by Patti Ross Milne.



Robert Houle at the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development regional office in Winnipeg, 1966, photographer unknown. Archive of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. Courtesy of the artist.



Robert Houle drawing in his Wellesley Street East apartment in Toronto, 1981, photograph by the *Globe and Mail*, Toronto. Archive of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



Robert Houle at the site of *Morningstar*, 1999, with Shirley Madill, photograph by Ernest Mayer. Archive of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



Robert Houle in the doorway of Tom Thomson's shack, 1989, photograph by Greg Staats. Archive of the artist. Courtesy of the artist. © Greg Staats/Visual Arts-CARCC (2018).



Robert Houle painting *Sandy Bay*, 1999, photograph by David Recollet. Archive of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



Robert Houle's parents, 1981, photographer unknown. Archive of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



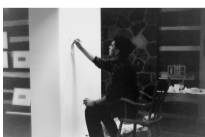
Robert Houle's second-floor apartment on Queen Street West, Toronto, 1990, photograph by Greg Staats. Archive of the artist. Courtesy of the artist. © Greg Staats/Visual Arts-CARCC (2018).



Robert Houle wearing a headdress, 1974, photographer unknown. Archive of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



Robert Houle, with a work by Alex Janvier, at the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development in Ottawa in 1969, photographer unknown. Archive of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



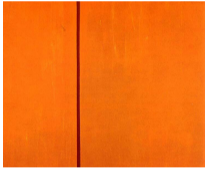
Robert Houle working in the gallery at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 1989, photograph by Linda Morita. McMichael Canadian Art Collection Archives, Kleinburg, Ontario. Courtesy of the artist.



A still from the video *Robert's Paintings*, 2011, directed by Shelley Niro, cinematography by Richard Story. Courtesy of VTape, Toronto. © Shelley Niro.



A spread from the Montreal magazine *Secrets des Artistes* advertising *Colours of Pride: Paintings by Seven Professional Native Artists*, 1975. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, Ottawa.



Tundra, 1950, by Barnett Newman. Private collection. © The Barnett Newman Foundation. Courtesy of Artstack.

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