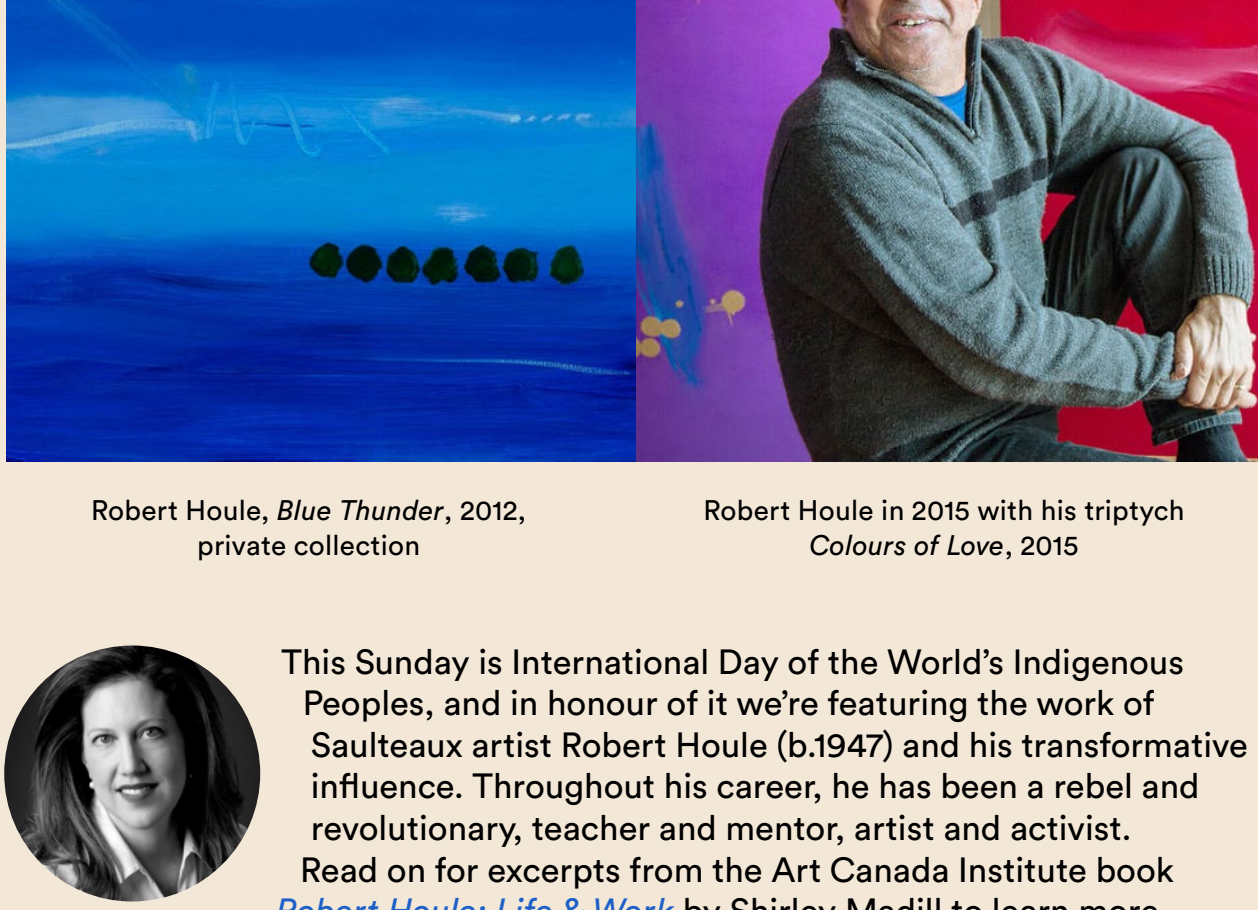
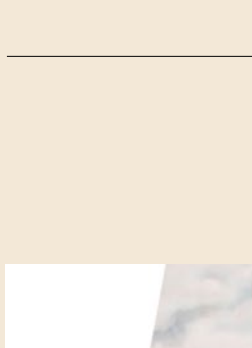


ROBERT HOULE REBEL AND ICONOCLAST



Robert Houle, *Blue Thunder*, 2012, private collection

Robert Houle in 2015 with his triptych *Colours of Love*, 2015

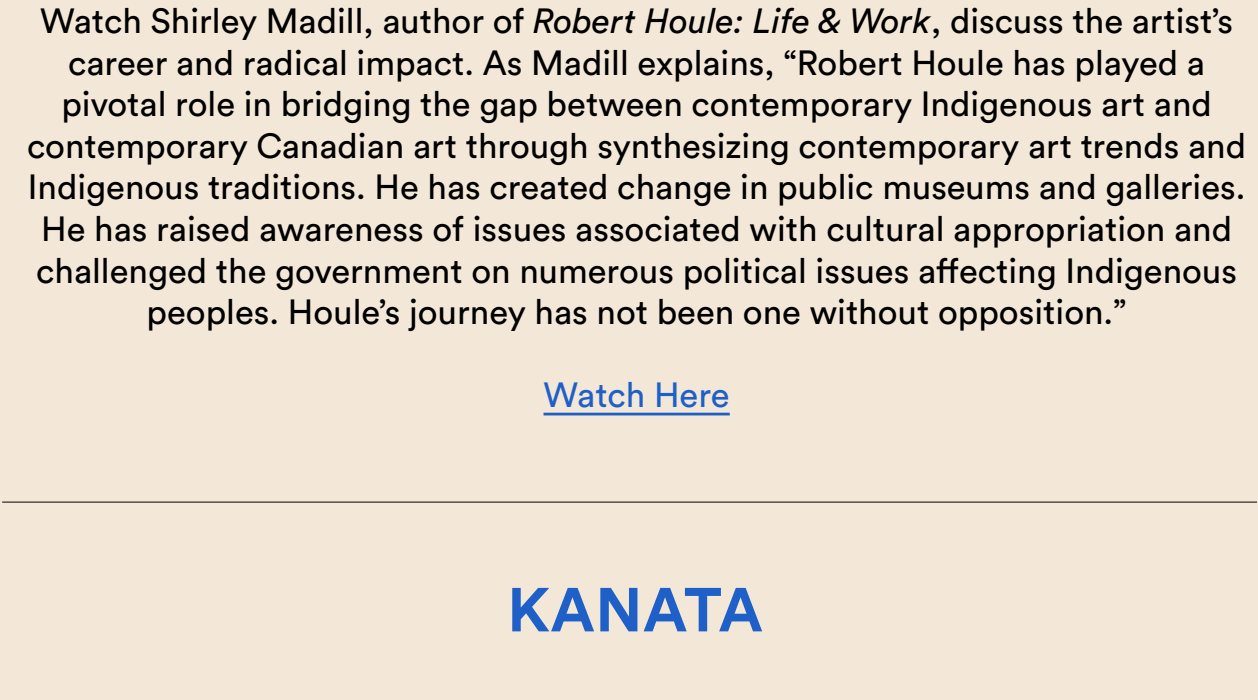


This Sunday is International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, and in honour of it we're featuring the work of Saulteaux artist Robert Houle (b.1947) and his transformative influence. Throughout his career, he has been a rebel and revolutionary, teacher and mentor, artist and activist.

Read on for excerpts from the Art Canada Institute book *Robert Houle: Life & Work* by Shirley Madill to learn more about this artist's extraordinary achievements and how he has played a critical role in First Nations art.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

RADICAL IMPACT



Watch Shirley Madill, author of *Robert Houle: Life & Work*, discuss the artist's career and radical impact. As Madill explains, "Robert Houle has played a pivotal role in bridging the gap between contemporary Indigenous art and contemporary Canadian art through synthesizing contemporary art trends and Indigenous traditions. He has created change in public museums and galleries. He has raised awareness of issues associated with cultural appropriation and challenged the government on numerous political issues affecting Indigenous peoples. Houle's journey has not been one without opposition."

[Watch Here](#)

KANATA

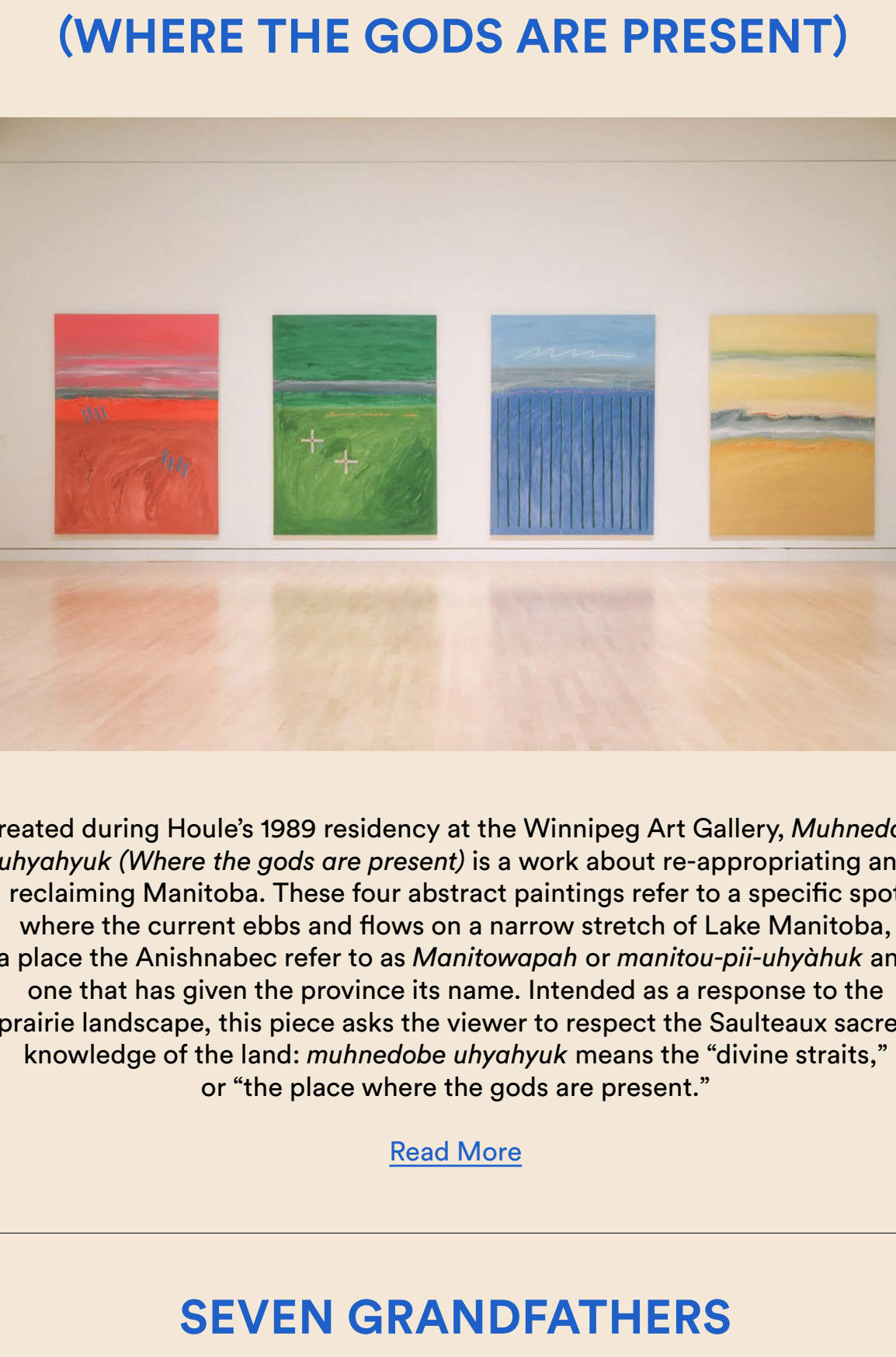


One of Houle's signature works, *Kanata*, 1992, reflects on the place of First Nations peoples in Canadian history. For this monumental work Houle revisits Benjamin West's famed painting *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770, which shows the British commander dying on the battlefield moments after conquering Quebec. In his version, Houle directs our attention to the Delaware warrior near Wolfe's feet by depicting him in colour, forcing viewers to recognize the presence of Indigenous people at this pivotal victory that effectively concluded the British conquest of New France. In doing so, Houle challenges the myth that the founding nations of Canada are England and France—though the giant red and blue panels are meant to symbolize the overwhelming power of these two colonial empires. Today, *Kanata* is recognized as essential to an understanding of historical accuracy in the context of colonialism.

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PARFLECHES FOR THE LAST SUPPER

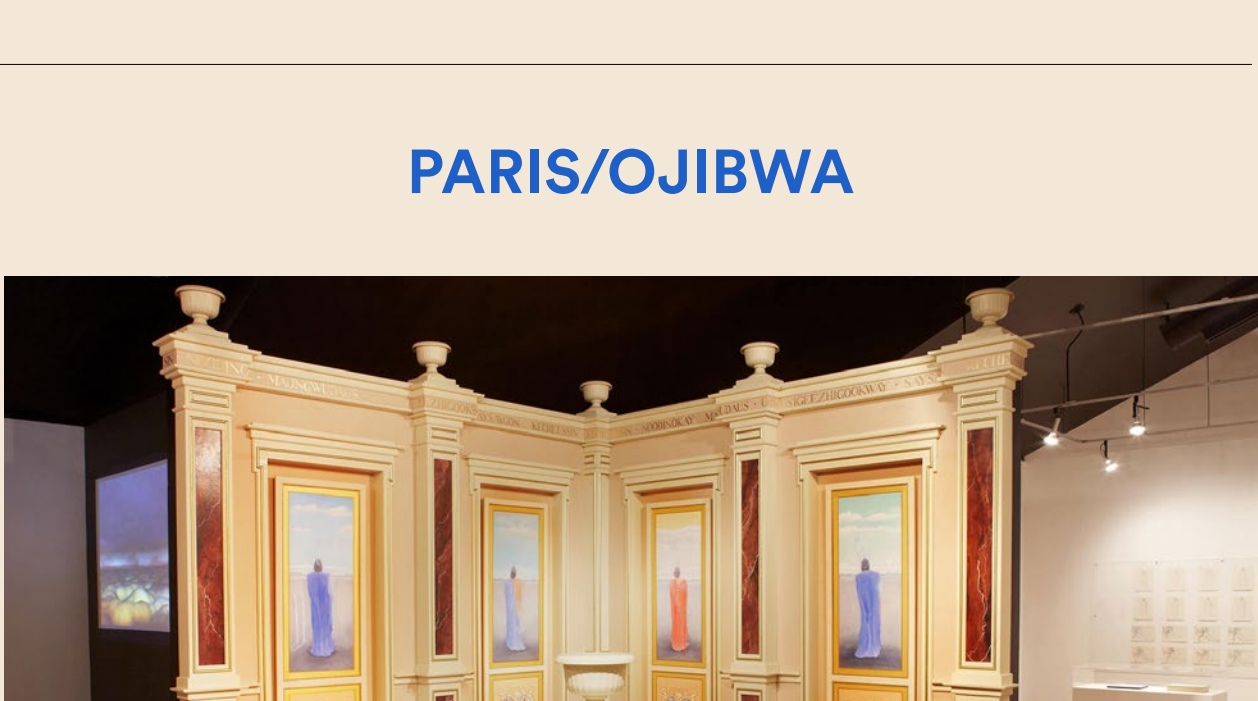
(detail)



Parfleches for the Last Supper, 1983, is one of Houle's most important personal and political statements. In 1980 he was working as a curator at the National Museum of Man (now the Canadian Museum of History), and he witnessed ceremonial objects being treated without reverence. That summer Houle resigned, a decision that marked his refusal to condone the institution's spiritual transgressions against sacred objects and Indigenous knowledge—and one that made national headlines. Three years later Houle created this work to honour Indigenous ceremony and Christian beliefs in the form of parfleches, traditional medicine bags that Houle recalled from his childhood memories of Shamans.

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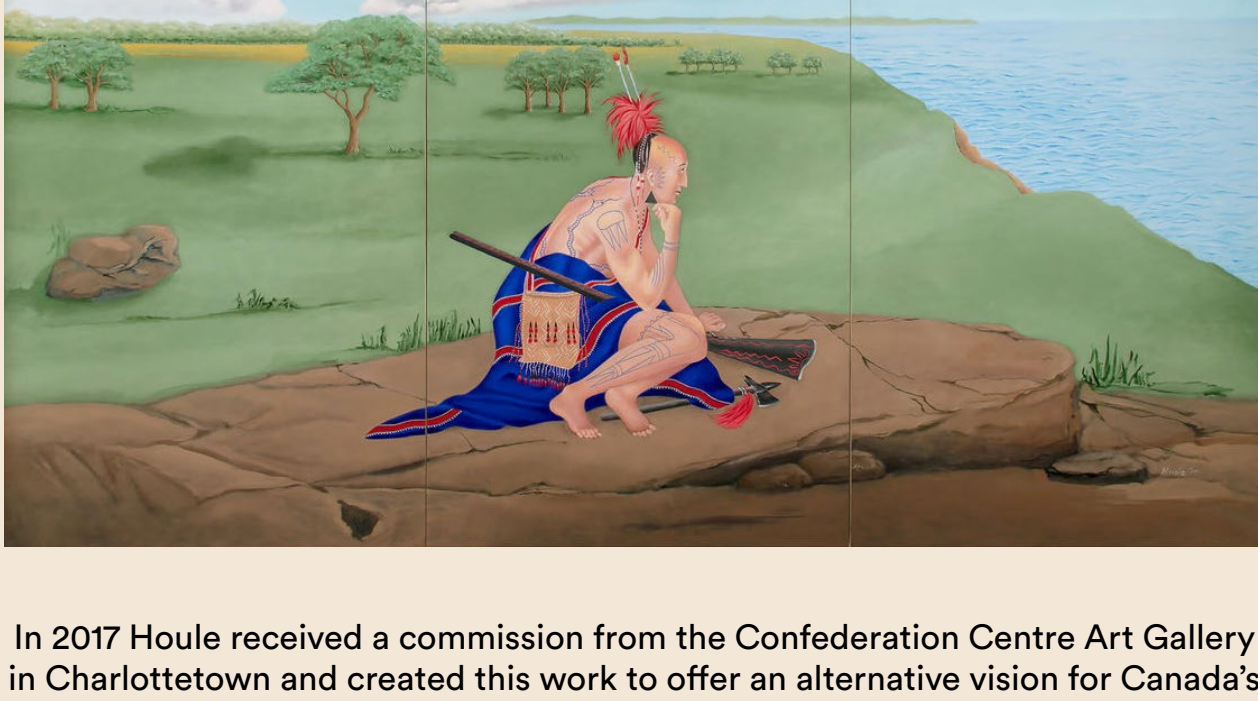
MUHNEDOB UHYAHYUK (WHERE THE GODS ARE PRESENT)



Created during Houle's 1989 residency at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk (Where the gods are present)* is a work about re-appropriating and reclaiming Manitoba. These four abstract paintings refer to a specific spot where the current ebbs and flows on a narrow stretch of Lake Manitoba, a place the Anishnabec refer to as *Manitowap or manitou-pii-uhyahuk* and one that has given the province its name. Inspired as a result to the prairie landscape, this piece asks the viewer to respect the Saulteaux sacred knowledge of the land: *muhnedobe uhyahyuk* means the "divine straits," or "the place where the gods are present."

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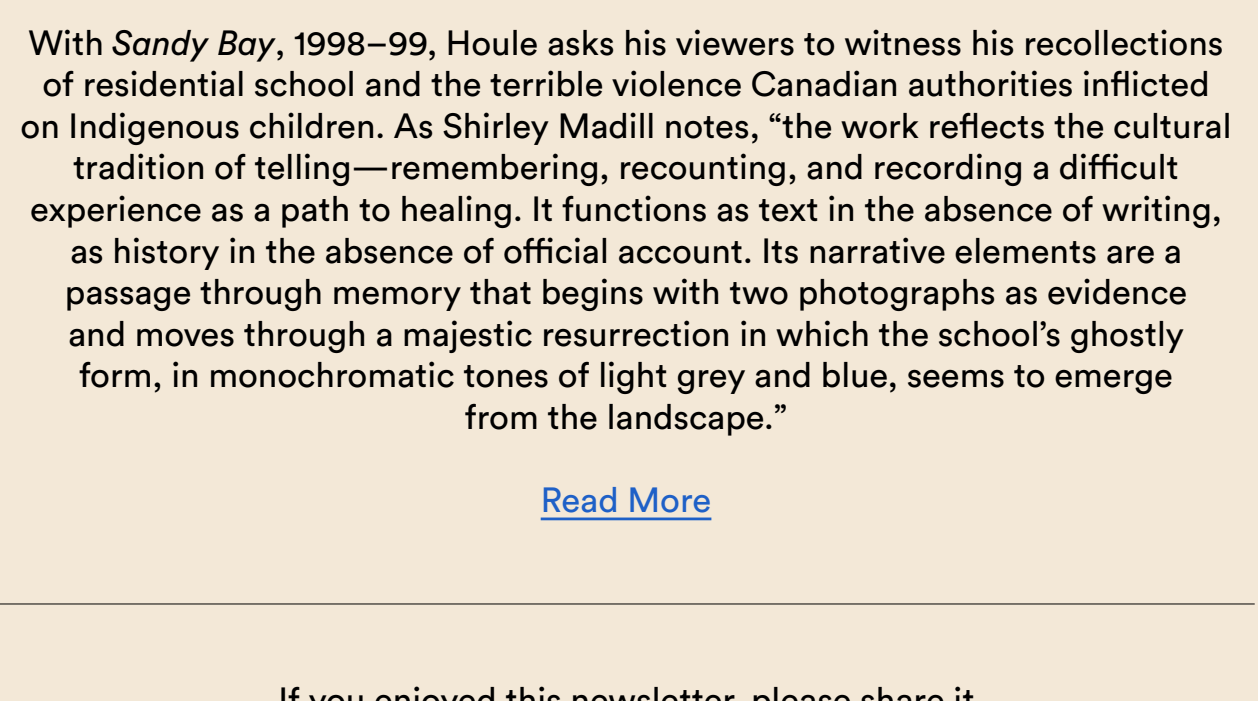
SEVEN GRANDFATHERS



A commission from the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), *Seven Grandfathers*, 2014, consists of seven vibrant abstract paintings that resemble ceremonial drums, installed in the rondels of Walker Court, located at the heart of the gallery. Each reflects one of the traditional seven teachings in Anishnabe culture. Houle had been inspired by *Monument for the Native People of Ontario*, 1984–85, by Lothar Baumgarten (b.1944), an installation at the AGO. Houle was dismayed by that work's appropriation of Indigenous names of nations that Baumgarten clearly did not understand. His creative response reminds museums and other colonial institutions that they are prone to improper memorialization of First Nations heritage.

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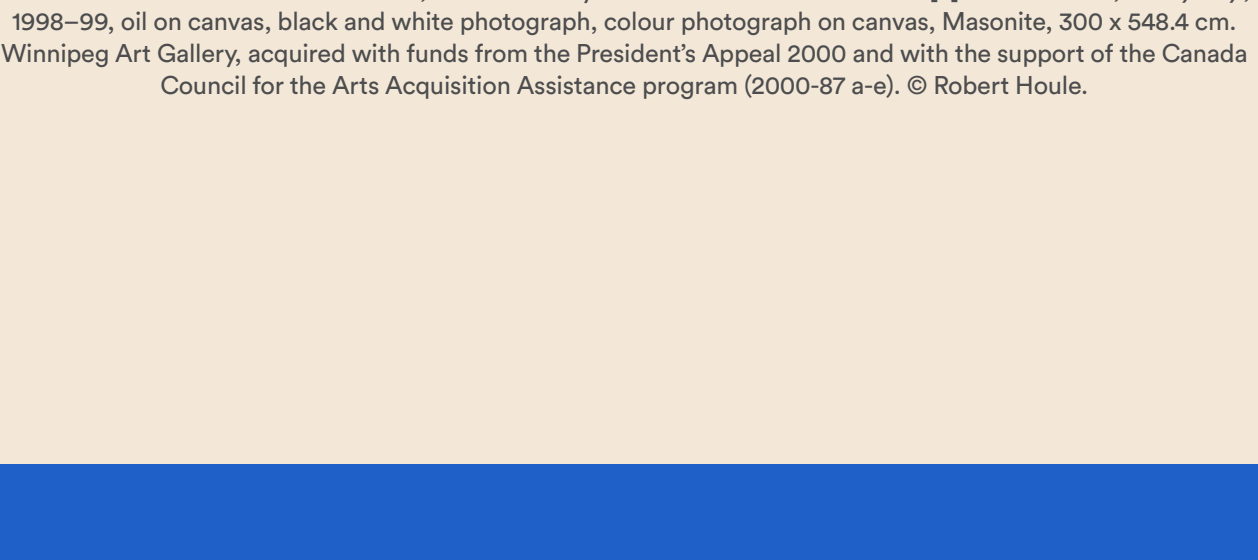
PARIS/OJIBWA



Though most famous as a painter, Houle has created several installations that challenge his viewers to reconsider how they know and understand history. *Paris/Ojibwa*, 2010, was inspired by Houle's research on a group of travelling Ojibwa performers who were taken to France in the mid-nineteenth century. To pay tribute to them he created a space that recalls grand Parisian salons and features oil paintings of the performers, as well as abstract representations of smallpox, a disease that devastated many First Nations.

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O-WEEN DU MUH WAUN (WE WERE TOLD)



In 2017 Houle received a commission from the Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Charlottetown and created this work to offer an alternative vision for Canada's sesquicentennial. He chose to revisit *Kanata*, once more appropriating West's image of a Delaware warrior, who appears in this scene looking out at the land of his people, as if meditating on their presence here since time immemorial. As Houle explains, "My sense of country dates back further than 1867 ... Our friendship and numbered treaties are also preceded by the presence of our ancestors going back millennia."

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SANDY BAY

With *Sandy Bay*, school, 1998–99, Houle asks his viewers to witness his recollections of residential school and the terrible violence Canadian authorities inflicted on Indigenous children. As Shirley Madill notes, "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."

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Image Credits: [1] Robert Houle, *Blue Thunder*, 2012, oil on canvas, 45.7 x 45.7 cm. Private collection. Courtesy of Kinsman Robinson Galleries, Toronto. © Robert Houle. [2] Robert Houle in 2015 with his triptych *Colours of Love*, 2015, photograph by Patti Ross Milne. [3] Robert Houle, *Kanata*, 1992, acrylic and Conté crayon on canvas, 228.7 x 732 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1994 (37479.1-4). Courtesy of the artist. © Robert Houle. [4] 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, gift of Mr. Carl T. Grant, Artvest Inc. (G-86-460 to G-86-472). © Robert Houle. [5] 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, purchased 1992 (36168.1-4). Courtesy of the artist. © Robert Houle. [6] 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, purchased with the assistance of the Martinell Fund, 2016 (2015/38.1-14). Installation photograph by Dean Tomlinson. [7] Robert Houle, *Paris/Ojibwa*, 2010, multimedia installation. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the Peterborough Art Gallery. © Robert Houle. Photo credit: Michael Cullen. [8] 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, commissioned with the A.G. and Eliza Jane Ramsden Endowment Fund, 2017. Courtesy of the artist. © Robert Houle. [9] 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, 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.