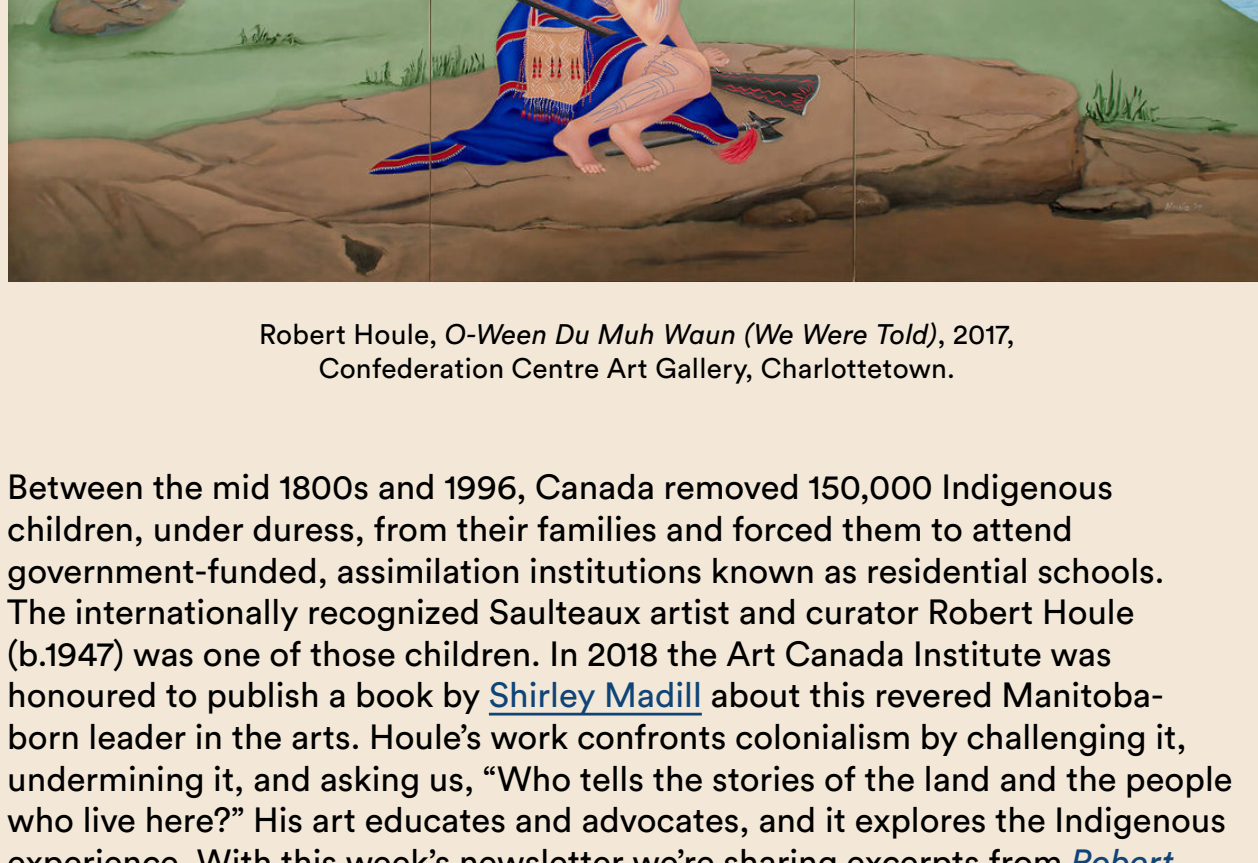


JULY 2, 2021

# ROBERT HOULE ART FOR MOURNING AND A CALL FOR CHANGE

*Saulteaux artist and curator Robert Houle has played a crucial role in initiating discussions about political and cultural issues surrounding First Nations peoples. At a time of mourning and urgent need for change, his art has particular poignance, encouraging a renewed vision of the world.*



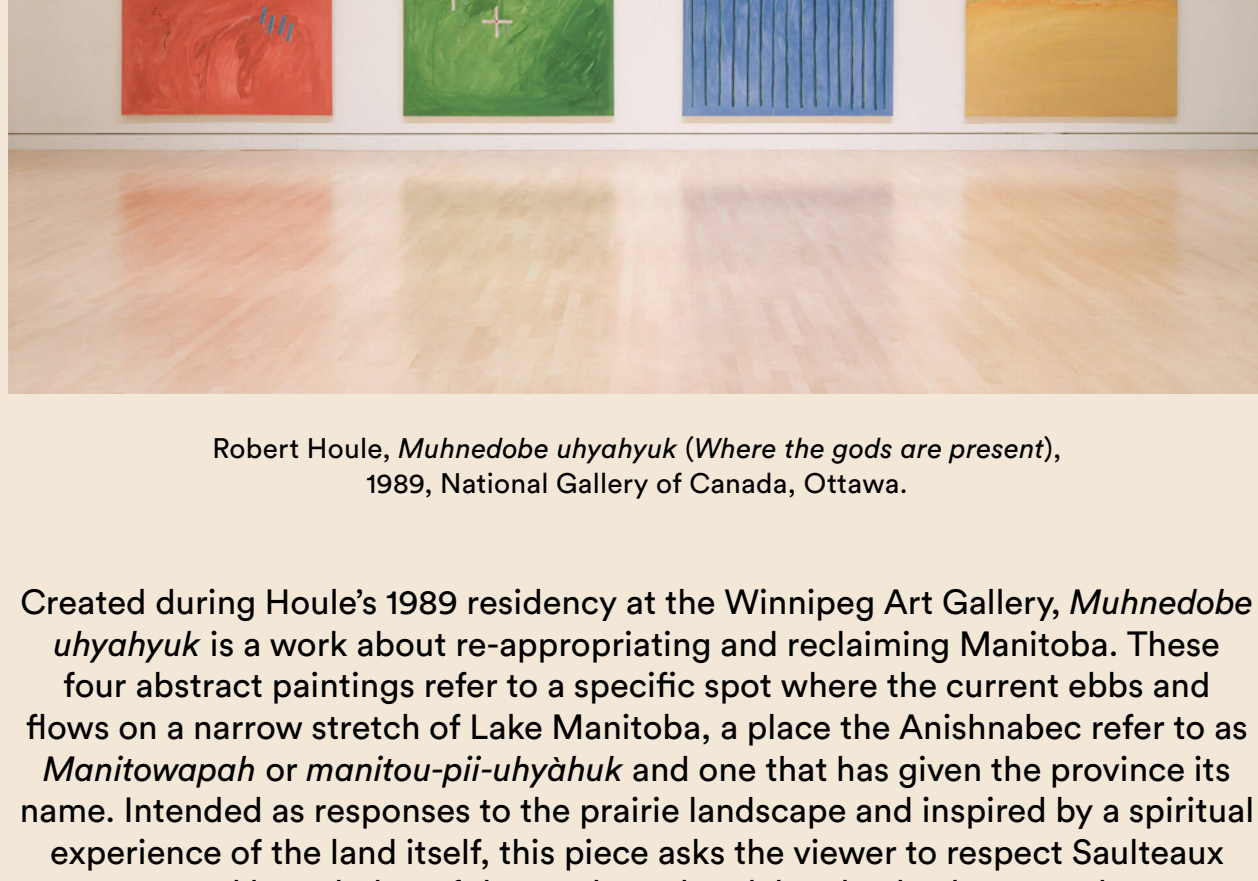
Robert Houle, *O-Ween Du Muh Waun (We Were Told)*, 2017, Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown.

Between the mid 1800s and 1996, Canada removed 150,000 Indigenous children, under duress, from their families and forced them to attend government-funded, assimilation institutions known as residential schools. The internationally recognized Saulteaux artist and curator Robert Houle (b.1947) was one of those children. In 2018 the Art Canada Institute was honoured to publish a book by Shirley Madill about this revered Manitoba-born leader in the arts. Houle's work confronts colonialism by challenging it, undermining it, and asking us, "Who tells the stories of the land and the people who live here?" His art educates and advocates, and it explores the Indigenous experience. With this week's newsletter we're sharing excerpts from [Robert Houle: Life & Work](#) that reveal how the artist asks us to consider fundamental questions about our country, acknowledge the most painful parts of our history, and contemplate what this means for our present and our future.

**Sara Angel**

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

## MUHNEDOBE UHYAHYUK (WHERE THE GODS ARE PRESENT)

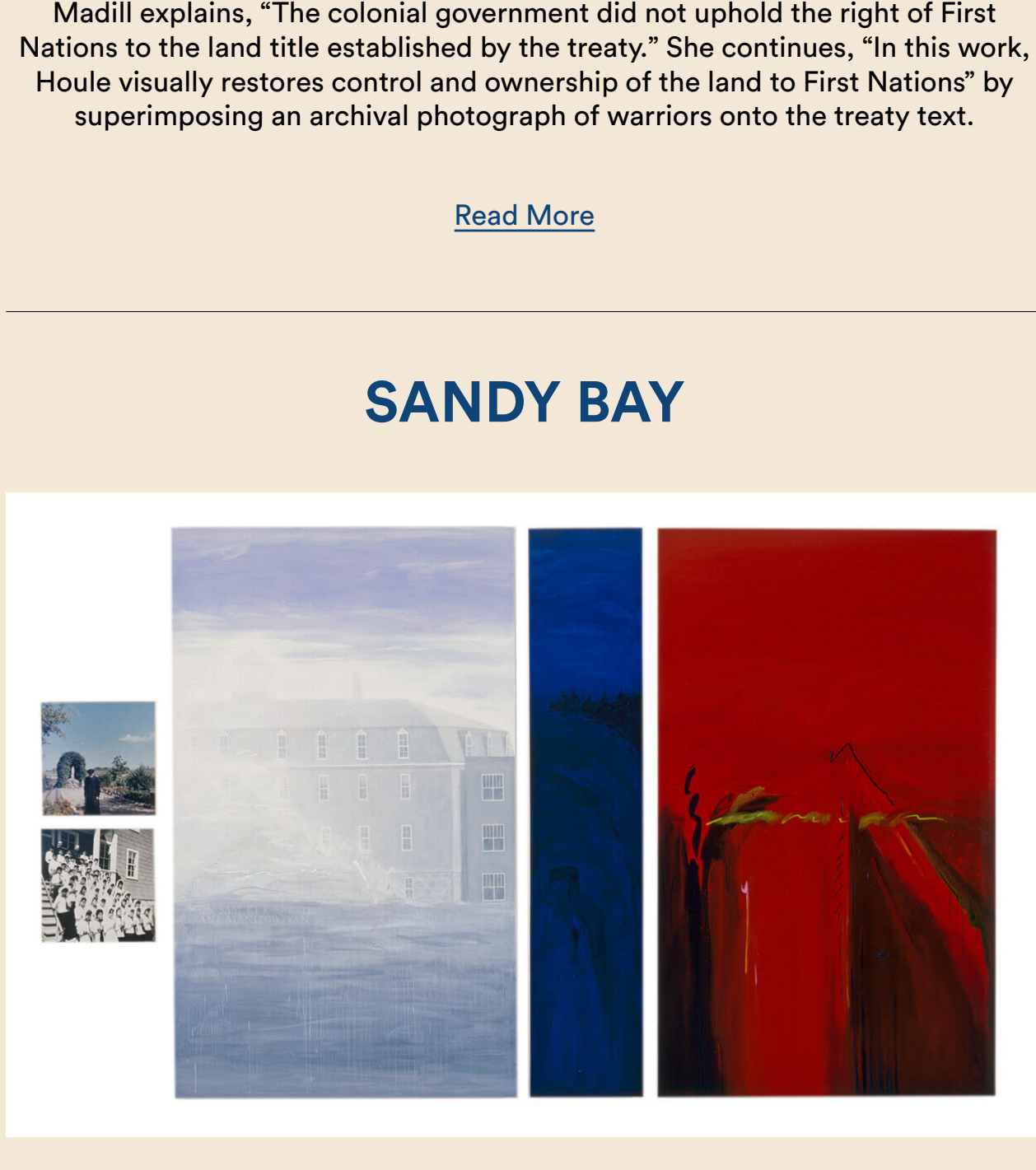


Robert Houle, *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk (Where the gods are present)*, 1989, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Created during Houle's 1989 residency at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, *Muhnedobe uhyahyuk* 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 *Manitowapah* or *manitou-pii-uhyahuk* and one that has given the province its name. Intended as responses to the prairie landscape and inspired by a spiritual experience of the land itself, this piece asks the viewer to respect Saulteaux sacred knowledge of the earth: *muhnedobe uhyahyuk* means the "divine straits," or "the place where the gods are present."

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## PREMISES FOR SELF-RULE: TREATY NO. 1

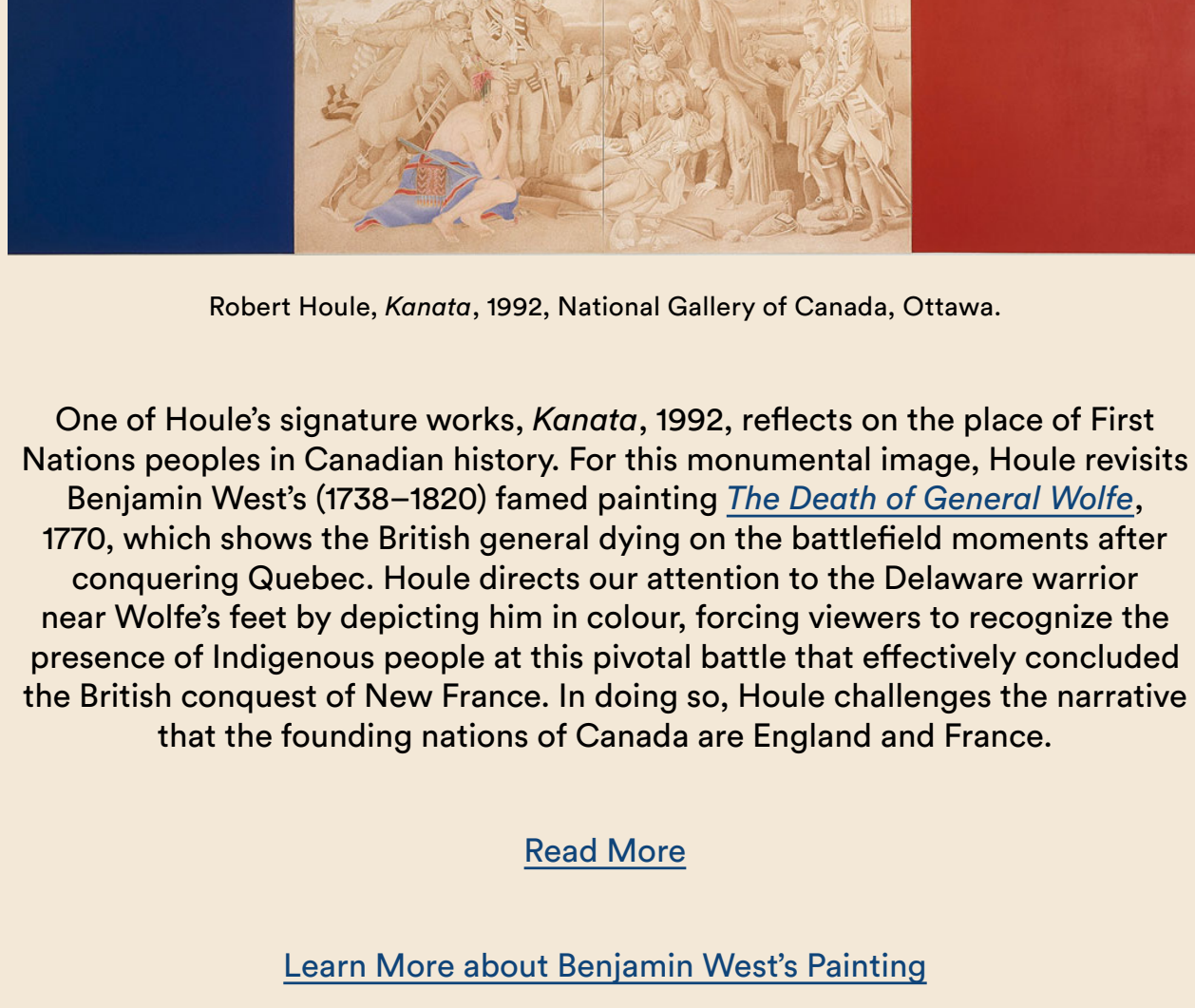


Robert Houle, *Premises for Self-Rule: Treaty No. 1*, 1994, Winnipeg Art Gallery.

This work belongs to a series of five paintings called *Premises for Self-Rule*, 1994, which addresses the Canadian government's failure to respect Indigenous peoples' land rights. On the left is a dark green painting featuring thick, swift brushstrokes and drips of paint. This expressive composition is paired with legal text appropriated from Treaty No. 1, an agreement established in 1871 between the British Crown and the Saulteaux and Cree. However, as Shirley Madill explains, "The colonial government did not uphold the right of First Nations to the land title established by the treaty." She continues, "In this work, Houle visually restores control and ownership of the land to First Nations" by superimposing an archival photograph of warriors onto the treaty text.

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## SANDY BAY

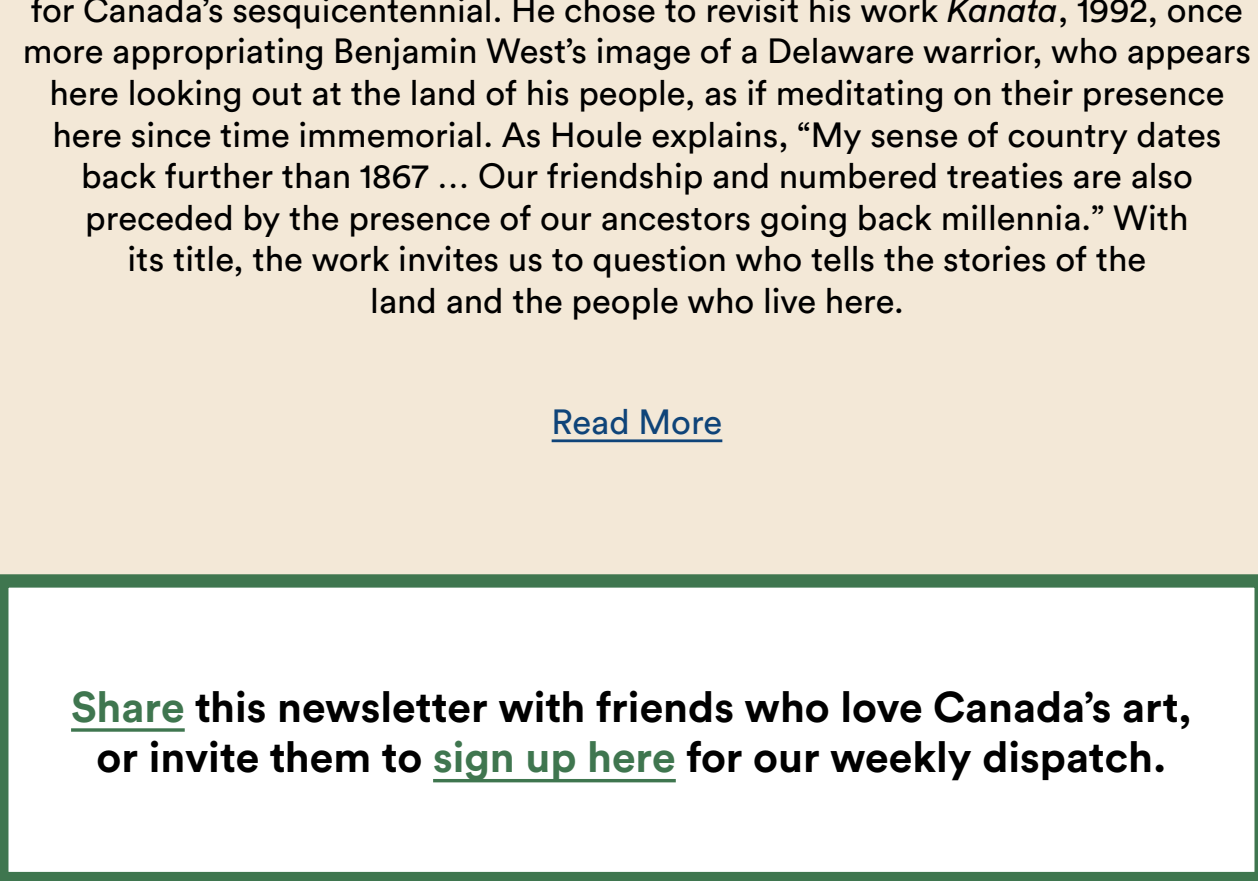


Robert Houle, *Sandy Bay*, 1998-99, Winnipeg Art Gallery.

With *Sandy Bay*, 1998-99, Houle asks viewers to witness his recollections of residential school and the terrible violence Canadian authorities inflicted on Indigenous children. The artist draws on his own experiences of the school at Sandy Bay, where he was not allowed to paint sacred objects, such as warrior staffs, nor speak to his sisters, who also attended the school. From classroom windows he could see his family's house, but he was not permitted to go home after school. Houle regularly joined his relatives during their annual Sun Dance ceremony to mark the summer solstice; however, after he returned to school, the priest would force him to go to confession and repent for worshipping false gods. As Shirley Madill writes of *Sandy Bay*, "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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## KANATA



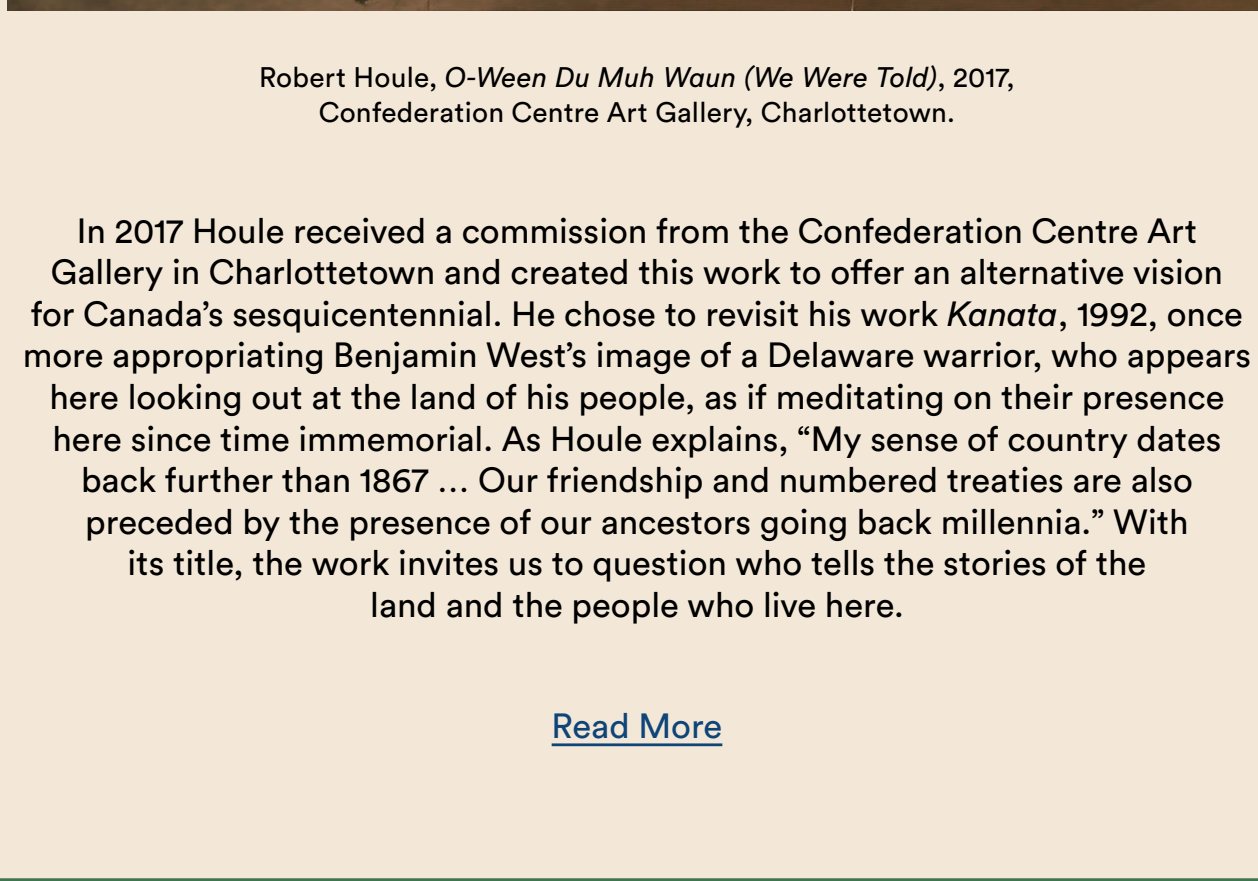
Robert Houle, *Kanata*, 1992, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

One of Houle's signature works, *Kanata*, 1992, reflects on the place of First Nations peoples in Canadian history. For this monumental image, Houle revisits Benjamin West's (1738-1820) famed painting *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770, which shows the British general dying on a Delaware warrior, who appears here 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." With its title, the work invites us to question who tells the stories of the land and the people who live here.

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[Learn More about Benjamin West's Painting](#)

## O-WEEN DU MUH WAUN (WE WERE TOLD)



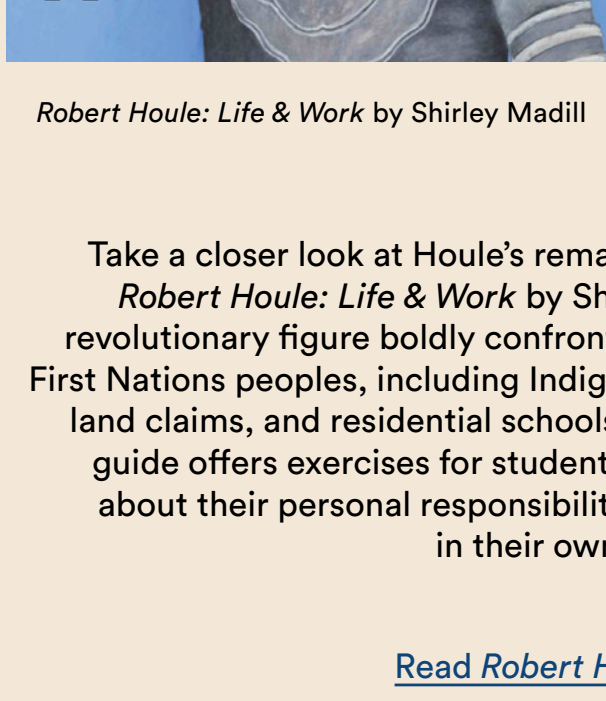
Robert Houle, *O-Ween Du Muh Waun (We Were Told)*, 2017, Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown.

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 his work *Kanata*, 1992, once more appropriating Benjamin West's image of a Delaware warrior, who appears here 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." With its title, the work invites us to question who tells the stories of the land and the people who live here.

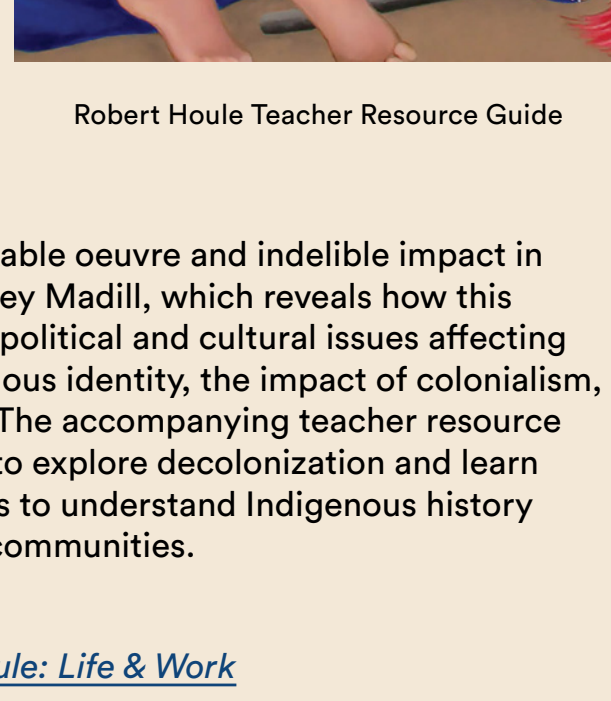
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## LEARN MORE ABOUT ROBERT HOULE



Robert Houle: *Life & Work* by Shirley Madill



Robert Houle Teacher Resource Guide

Take a closer look at Houle's remarkable oeuvre and indelible impact in *Robert Houle: Life & Work* by Shirley Madill, which reveals how this revolutionary figure boldly confronts political and cultural issues affecting First Nations peoples, including Indigenous identity, the impact of colonialism, land claims, and residential schools. The accompanying teacher resource guide offers exercises for students to explore decolonization and learn about their personal responsibilities to understand Indigenous history in their own communities.

[Read Robert Houle: Life & Work](#)

[Download the Teacher Resource Guide](#)

Our entire collection of newsletters can be found on the ACI website, for you to read, share, and enjoy.

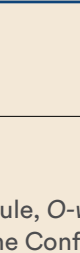
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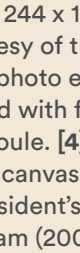
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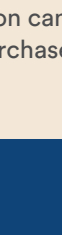


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Image Credits: [1, 6] Robert Houle, *O-ween du muh waun (We Were Told)*, 2017, oil on canvas, triptych, 213.4 x 365.8 cm. Collection of the Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown, commissioned with the A.G. and Eliza Jane Ramsden Endowment Fund, 2017. Courtesy of the artist. © Robert Houle. [2] 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. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1992 (361681-4). Courtesy of the artist. © Robert Houle. [3] 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. Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, acquired with funds from the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program (G-96-11 abc). © Robert Houle. [4] Robert Houle, *Sandy Bay*, 1998-99, oil on canvas, black and white photograph, colour photograph on canvas, Masonite, 300 x 548.4 cm. Collection of the 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. [5] Robert Houle, *Kanata*, 1992, acrylic and Conté crayon on canvas, 228.7 x 732 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1994 (374791-4). Courtesy of the artist. © Robert Houle.