ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

SEPTEMBER 30, 2022

ELEGIES OF SURVIVAL
10 INDIGENOUS ARTISTS
REMEMBER RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

The work of many of this country's most celebrated artists documents one of its darkest moments in history. On National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, take a moment to look at it.

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Indian Residential School, Leaving the Shallow Graves and Going Home*, 2022, private collection.

Imagine being ordered to hand over your children to a state-sanctioned school. Or leaving your parents before adolescence under government duress because your culture was seen as lesser than those who settled on your land. This is what happened to more than 150,000 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children who, from the late 1800s to the 1990s, were forcibly taken from their families and communities and placed in residential schools that sought to eradicate Indigenous cultures and languages through assimilation. Among them were boys and girls who would grow up to document through art the darkness of their pasts in hope for a brighter future. As the Cowichan/Syilx First Nations painter and sculptor Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun has said: “This country has to carry the burden of what it did to us, as a nation. It has to be accountable for what it did.... We can get along—it’s not that difficult to start at some point, to do something together. If we start that way then we can start on the right foot.” On this commemorative occasion, which serves as a reminder that recognizing the history and legacy of the residential school system is an essential part of the reconciliation process, we’re turning to Indigenous artists whose work tells a history that must never be forgotten.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

APPARITION

by Rebecca Belmore

Rebecca Belmore, *Apparition*, 2013, Courtesy of Rebecca Belmore.

Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore (b.1960) addresses the destructive impact of the residential school system on Indigenous languages in her video work *Apparition*, 2013. Kneeling on the floor with a piece of duct tape covering her mouth, the artist gazes somberly at us—a visceral expression of being silenced. "*Apparition* is an artwork that reflects my understanding of the loss of our language," says Belmore. "I do not speak Anishinaabemowin even though I grew up within it and around it. Sadly, I am well aware of the devastating effects of the residential school system, particularly the deliberate role it played in the silencing of our languages. For this reason *Apparition* is an image of myself, a silent portrait of this loss."

Learn more about Rebecca Belmore

AIRPLANE

by David Ruben Piqtoukun

David Ruben Piqtoukun, *Airplane*, 1995, Winnipeg Art Gallery.

In this sculpture, Inuk artist David Ruben Piqtoukun (b.1950) revisits his childhood memory of an airplane landing in his community of Paulatuk, in the Northwest Territories, to take him to a residential school four hundred kilometres away in the town of Inuvik. In the artist's work, the aircraft forms a physical barrier separating his five-year-old self from his home, symbolized by the igloo. At residential school, Piqtoukun was not allowed to speak Inuktitut or to express any Inuit cultural beliefs. He eventually lost touch with his family, whose nomadic lifestyle made them difficult to locate each summer when Piqtoukun would return to Paulatuk. In the 1970s, Piqtoukun began to explore Inuit culture and stories through his art. This year, he received a Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts in recognition of his fifty-year career.

Learn more about David Ruben Piqtoukun

SISTERS

by Faye HeavyShield

Faye HeavyShield, *Sisters*, 1993, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario.

Sisters, 1993, is part of a series of seven sculptures by Faye HeavyShield (b.1953) that addresses the opposing cultural influences that have shaped the artist's identity: her Blackfoot ancestry, and her decade-long Roman Catholic education at St. Mary's Residential School in Cardston, Alberta. This minimalist piece consists of six pairs of high heels whose toes are cloven. Pointing outwards in a circular formation, the footwear suggests solidarity as well as defensiveness. According to HeavyShield, the work symbolizes "the strength and power within women and the empowerment in looking towards ourselves for protection" from the Catholic Church along with other forces that seek to undermine physical and spiritual well-being. The bisected toes of the shoes were inspired by deer, which were a central part of HeavyShield's upbringing on the Blood Reserve in Alberta.

Learn more about Faye HeavyShield

THE SCREAM

by Kent Monkman

Kent Monkman, *The Scream*, 2017, Denver Art Museum.

This heart-wrenching painting by Toronto-based Cree artist Kent Monkman (b.1965)—which derives its title from *The Scream*, 1893, by Norwegian painter Edvard Munch (1863–1944)—references the horrors of the residential school system. Monkman's work viscerally and unflinchingly captures the violence of children being ripped from the arms of their mothers by members of the Catholic clergy and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The painting was included in Monkman's 2017 exhibition *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*. Launched in the same year as Canada's sesquicentennial, the show aimed to disrupt the celebration by looking back on our nation's history from the perspective of the colonized and telling the dark, shameful story of legislated genocide.

Read more in ACI's
Kent Monkman: Life & Work by Shirley Madill

SANDY BAY

by Robert Houle

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

In *Sandy Bay*, 1998–99, Manitoba-born Saulteaux artist Robert Houle (b.1947) draws on his own experiences of attending residential school, where he was not allowed to paint sacred objects, such as warrior staffs, nor speak to his sisters, who also attended the institution. From classroom windows he could see his family's house, but he was not permitted to go home after school. As Shirley Madill, author of *Robert Houle: Life & Work*, 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." *Sandy Bay* includes photographs of Houle's residential school, narrative elements that serve as a passage through memory.

Read more in ACI's
Robert Houle: Life & Work by Shirley Madill

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INDIAN JESUS CHRIST

by Norval Morrisseau

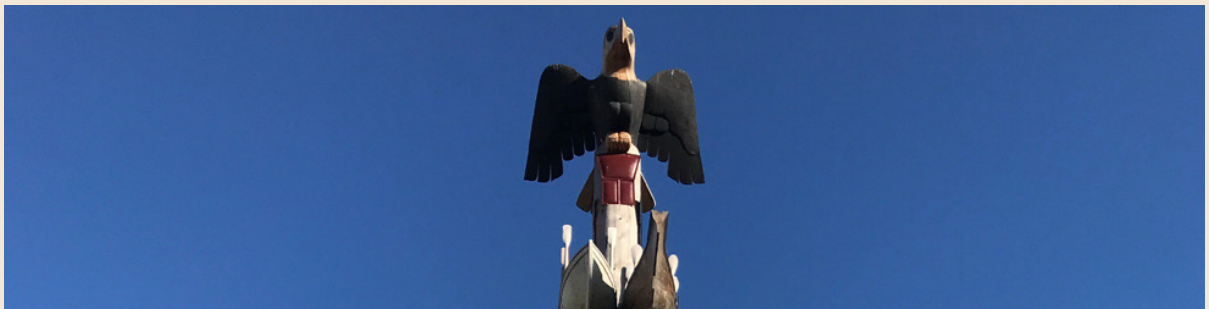
Norval Morrisseau, *Indian Jesus Christ*, 1974, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada Aboriginal Art Collection, Gatineau, Quebec.

With *Indian Jesus Christ*, 1974, Anishinaabe artist Norval Morrisseau (1931–2007) references his conflicted relationship with Christianity, which began in childhood when his aunt, who belonged to the faith, proposed that he attend St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Residential School in Fort William, Ontario. Hundreds of miles away from his family's home on Sand Point Reserve, Morrisseau experienced sexual abuse during the four years he spent at the facility. In the 1960s and 1970s, when the artist was at the height of his career, he depicted a number of Indigenized Christian subjects, including *Indian Jesus Christ*, 1974. The painting became famous after the release of the 1974 National Film Board documentary, *The Paradox of Norval Morrisseau*, in which the artist declared, "Jesus died for the white man, not for Indians."

Read more in ACI's
Norval Morrisseau: Life & Work by Carmen Robertson

RECONCILIATION POLE

by James Hart



James Hart, Reconciliation Pole, 2017, University of British Columbia campus, Vancouver.

Located on the University of British Columbia campus in Vancouver, the 55-foot-tall Reconciliation Pole, 2017, by the renowned Haida master carver and hereditary chief James Hart (b.1952) represents Indigenous history before, during, and after the existence of the residential school system. The pole features salmon, a bear, and a raven in the lower half to symbolize the early period; a building modelled after the residential school Hart's grandfather attended in the centre; and spirits, family, and an eagle in the upper half to signify the future. Reflecting on his work, the artist said, "My hope for the pole is that it moves people to learn more about the history of residential schools and to understand their responsibility to reconciliation." He continued, "The schools were terrible places. We need to pay attention to the past and work together on a brighter future."

Learn more about James Hart

INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL,

LEAVING THE SHALLOW GRAVES AND GOING HOME

by Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Indian Residential School, Leaving the Shallow Graves and Going Home*, 2022, private collection.

Kamloops-born Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun (b.1957) completed this large-scale painting to commemorate the inaugural National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in 2021. According to the artist, who is of Coast Salish and Okanagan Nation ancestry, the work depicts the spirits of children killed in residential schools leaving their shallow graves and returning home in the dark of night. It was commissioned by Dixon Mitchell Investment Counsel Inc. for a charity auction to raise funds for the Orange Shirt Society and the Indian Residential School Survivors Society—organizations that support residential school survivors and aim to raise awareness of the history and impact of these institutions in Canada.

Learn more about Lawrence Paul Yuxpweluptun

LOOKING THROUGH THE INSTITUTION

by Robert Burke

Robert Burke, *Looking through the Institution*, 2013, Courtesy of Robert Burke.

Personal memories of residential school activities overlap in this vivid triptych by Vancouver Island-based artist Robert Burke (b.1944), who was born in Fort Smith, N.W.T., to a Métis woman and a Black American soldier. At the age of four, he was sent to residential school in Fort Resolution, nearly one hundred miles away, and later attended another institution in Alberta. Being biracial made it challenging for Burke to fit in with other students. “Let’s just say that my years at residential school weren’t positive,” says the artist. “I didn’t particularly like it there. But when you are a kid, there are also moments of happiness, which are reflected in my use of bright colours to shed light on some rather dark subject matter.”

Learn more about Robert Burke

GINIIGAANIIMENAANING (LOOKING AHEAD)

by Christi Belcourt

Christi Belcourt, *Giniigaaniimenaaning (Looking Ahead)*, 2012, Centre Block, Parliament Hill, Ottawa.

Métis artist Christi Belcourt's (b.1966) stained glass artwork *Giniigaaniimenaaning (Looking Ahead)*, 2012, installed above the west door of Centre Block on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, commemorates the legacy of residential schools in Canada and Prime Minister Stephen Harper's apology to students and their families in 2008. Describing the design, which is meant to be read clockwise beginning from the bottom left corner, Belcourt says: "It is a story of Aboriginal people, with our ceremonies, languages, and cultural knowledge intact; through the darkness of the residential school era; to an awakening sounded by a drum; an apology that spoke to the heart; hope for reconciliation; transformation and healing through dance, ceremony, language; and resilience into the present day." The title of the piece means "looking ahead" in Anishinaabemowin (Ojibway), referring to the hope represented by future generations.

Learn more about Christi Belcourt

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Image Credits: **[1, 9]** Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Indian Residential School, Leaving the Shallow Graves and Going Home*, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 182.9 x 243.8 cm. Private collection. Courtesy of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun. **[2]** Rebecca Belmore, *Apparition*, 2013, single-channel colour video, 4 minutes, and painted wall treatment. Courtesy of the Artist. **[3]** David Ruben Piqtoukun, *Airplane*, 1995, Brazilian soapstone, African wonderstone, 26 x 36.5 x 27.5 cm. Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, Gift of Rosalie Seidelman (G-97-17 abc). **[4]** Faye HeavyShield, *Sisters*, 1993, shoes altered with plaster, gesso and acrylic paint, outside diameter installed: 105 cm. McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario, purchase 1995 (1995.2.A-.L). **[5]** Kent Monkman, *The Scream*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 213.4 x 335.3 cm. Collection of the Denver Art Museum, Native Arts acquisition funds and funds from Loren G. Lipson, M.D. (2017.93). © Kent Monkman. Photo credit: Denver Art Museum. **[6]** 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. **[7]** Norval Morrisseau, *Indian Jesus Christ*, 1974, acrylic on paper, 134.6 x 68.5 cm. Collection of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, Gatineau, Quebec (151957). Photograph by Lawrence Cook. **[8]** James Hart, Reconciliation Pole, 2017, red cedar, 55 feet, University of British Columbia campus, Vancouver. **[10]** Robert Burke, *Looking through the Institution*, 2013, 228.6 x 142.2 cm. Courtesy of Robert Burke. **[11]** Christi Belcourt, *Giniigaaniimenaaning (Looking Ahead)*, 2012, Centre Block, Parliament Hill, Ottawa. Courtesy of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada.