

Norval Morriseau



2012 RETROSPECTIVE

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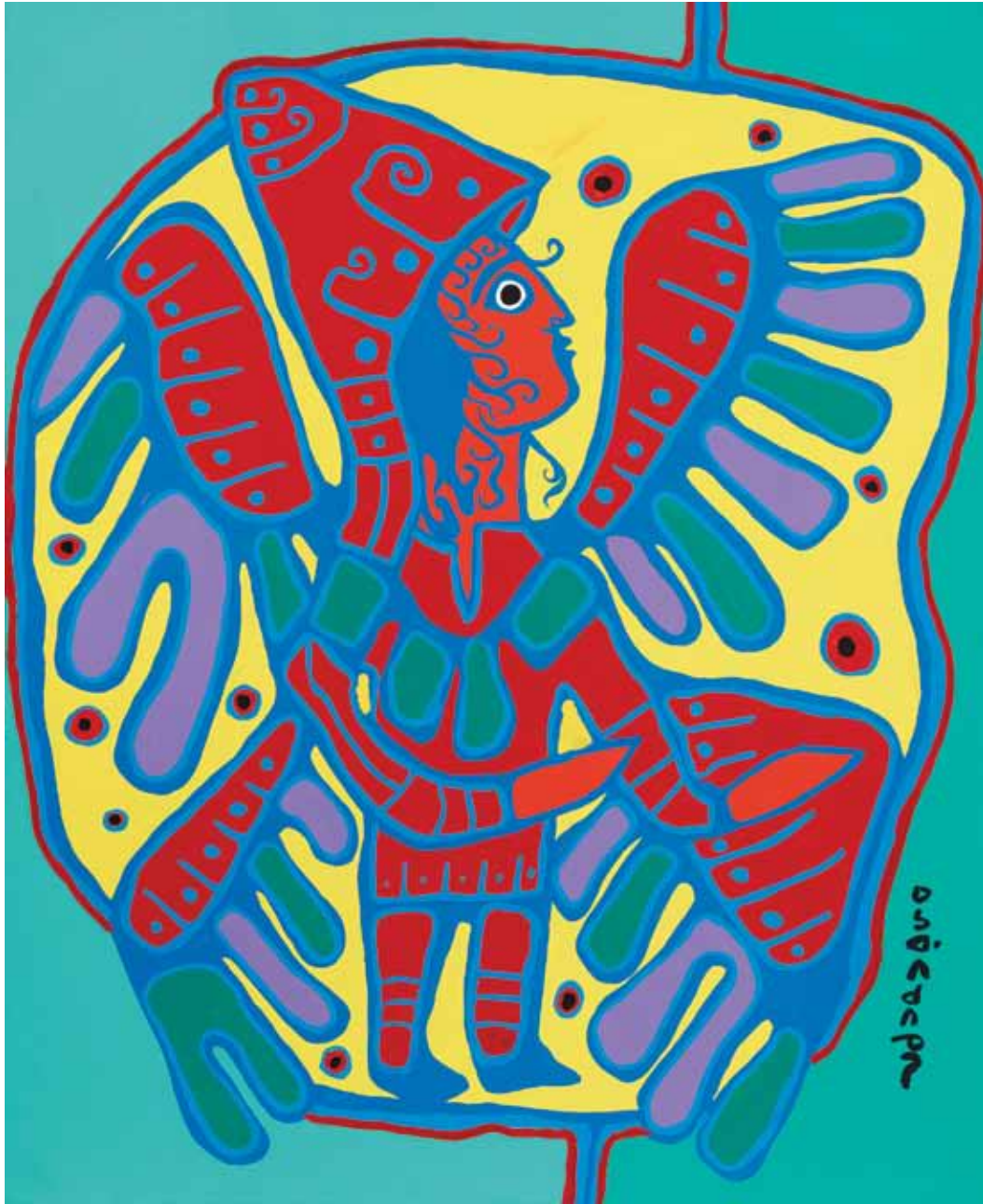
2012 Retrospective

Honouring 50 years of Morrisseau history

Kinsman Robinson Galleries

Toronto, Ontario

September 15 - October 20, 2012



Week-Kuno, Shaman In The Astral Plane, 1993

The Beardmore Garden Party

Robert Houle

On June 25th, 1978, the late, great, legendary shaman artist, Norval Morrisseau, Copper Thunderbird, invited twenty-four guests to his home and studio in Beardmore, a small town north of Lake Superior, for a tea party like no other. It was an experience I've always wanted to write about and this occasion, the exhibition and catalogue publication by Kinsman Robinson Galleries on the fiftieth anniversary of Morrisseau's first sold-out exhibition at the Pollock Gallery in 1962, has given me the opportunity to share what I had witnessed.

The *mise-en-scène* for this tea party was a throwback to that 1962 exhibition, a show of paintings enigmatically illustrating stories that were likely told for generations and the tea party was to celebrate the spiritual and cultural achievements of the artist. Norval came from a family of shamans who could read the images on the birchbark scrolls to perform healing or storytelling. Greatness and humility illuminated the ascendancy of a bicultural sentinel. Morrisseau would eventually be invited to be part of *Magiciens de la terre*, a contemporary art exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, in 1989. In typical Eurocentric manner, his work was framed as an ethnocentric practice within Western art. Was the world ready to embrace this artist as Canada had?

Devoted to the spiritual ancestry of the Ojibwa and fascinated with Roman Catholic ecclesiastical pomp and ceremony, Norval, oblivious to the colliding cultural norms he had brought together, urbanity and woodland, created a unique blending of both without any polemical stratagem of cultural identity at his tea party. It was to be performance art with traditional ceremony; it was to be surrealistic!



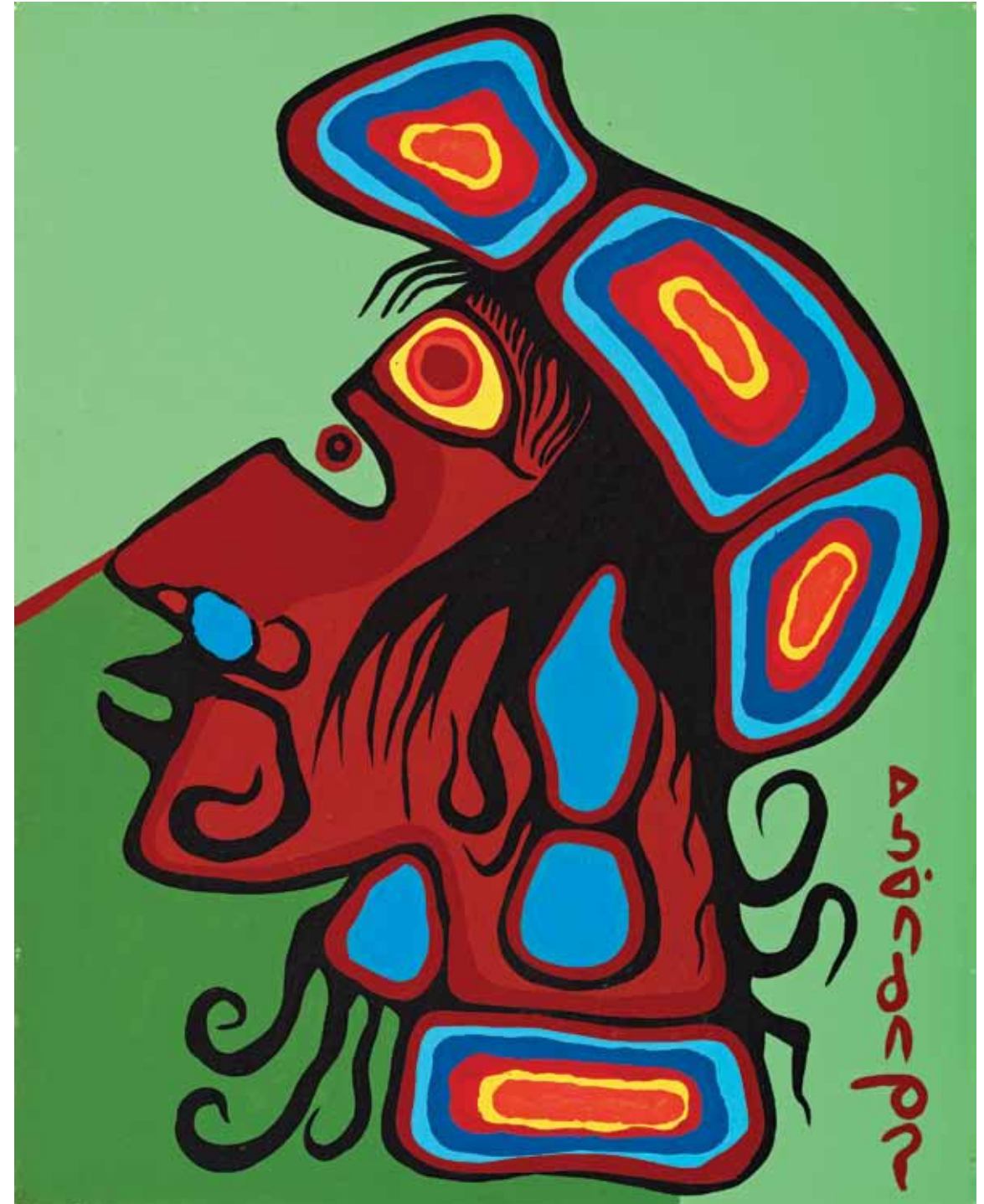
Tea Party at Beardmore, 1978

Having flown from Ottawa the day before the flight to this northern mining town, I attended a party at the Rosedale apartment of Jack Pollock who had already been to Beardmore once before to meet Norval Morrisseau. Most of the invitees would be travelling with him, many for the first time to Beardmore, on this round trip flight that his gallery staff had arranged. During the evening, oranges were filled with vodka using a syringe in preparation for the next day's non-alcoholic flight during which new friends would be shaped by the mutual admiration for this new sensation on the Canadian art scene.

Conversation was focused on the new indigenous painting style inspired by the image bank carved, etched and drawn on the Laurentian Shield, a pictorial language from the Woodland library of legends and stories. Excitement about meeting the artist behind these powerful new primordial images of mythological subjects compelled me to recall a comparison made by Delacroix between the European antiquity of his Greco-Roman heritage and that of the Americas – he used the phrase *les chevaliers de la forêt*.

We had all taken his advice to dress in clothes befitting a royal garden party, ladies in elegant summer dresses, large hats, lacy parasols and long gloves, and men in three-piece suits with cravats, most wearing designer sun glasses. We boarded a DC-3 early the next morning filled with expectations that something very special was going to happen that day in Beardmore.

RIGHT: *Norval And Third Eye*, 1976





Child With Headdress, 1997



Norval laughs with Robert Houle and Jack Pollock, 1978

After arriving from the airfield in a yellow school bus, expectation turned into astonishment! Standing tall, Norval awaited us in the yard of his home and studio dressed in light buckskin pants and vest with a floral print ribbon shirt. Replete with various amulets and medicines in small pouches around his neck and topping off a new coiffure with a traditional Ojibwa headdress, eagle feathers erect, he looked every inch the shaman, Norval Morrisseau becoming Copper Thunderbird. He walked over to the gate carrying a ceremonial staff in one hand and a hand-carved, wooden bowl full of American buffalo nickels for everyone in the other, smiling at us all. A symbolic jester, simple yet polemical, he greeted me in Anishnabe, "Neejee," meaning brother. Even his voice had a more thundering tone, a lower register. I felt privileged to have been invited to a ceremonial feast.

After everyone was welcomed with some chatter and laughter, he showed us into his backyard, which was a mixed arrangement of cultural differences. We could overlook the uncut, two-foot tall grass but not the swirling, biting black-flies. To him, the woodland was a refuge from the mental garbage of urbanity, a place where body and mind, underwater serpent and thunderbird, continue their eternal struggle for dominance. Replenished with the delirium found in nature, he behaved graciously and attentively; he displayed traditional Anishnabe hospitality that is conferred on people invited to a feast, *wéekoonga*. The ceremony involved a protocol that would have him treat us as he would the ancient messengers and the grandfathers all the while bearing the inquisitive

grin of a shapeshifter, or trickster like the Cheshire cat depicted in Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland".

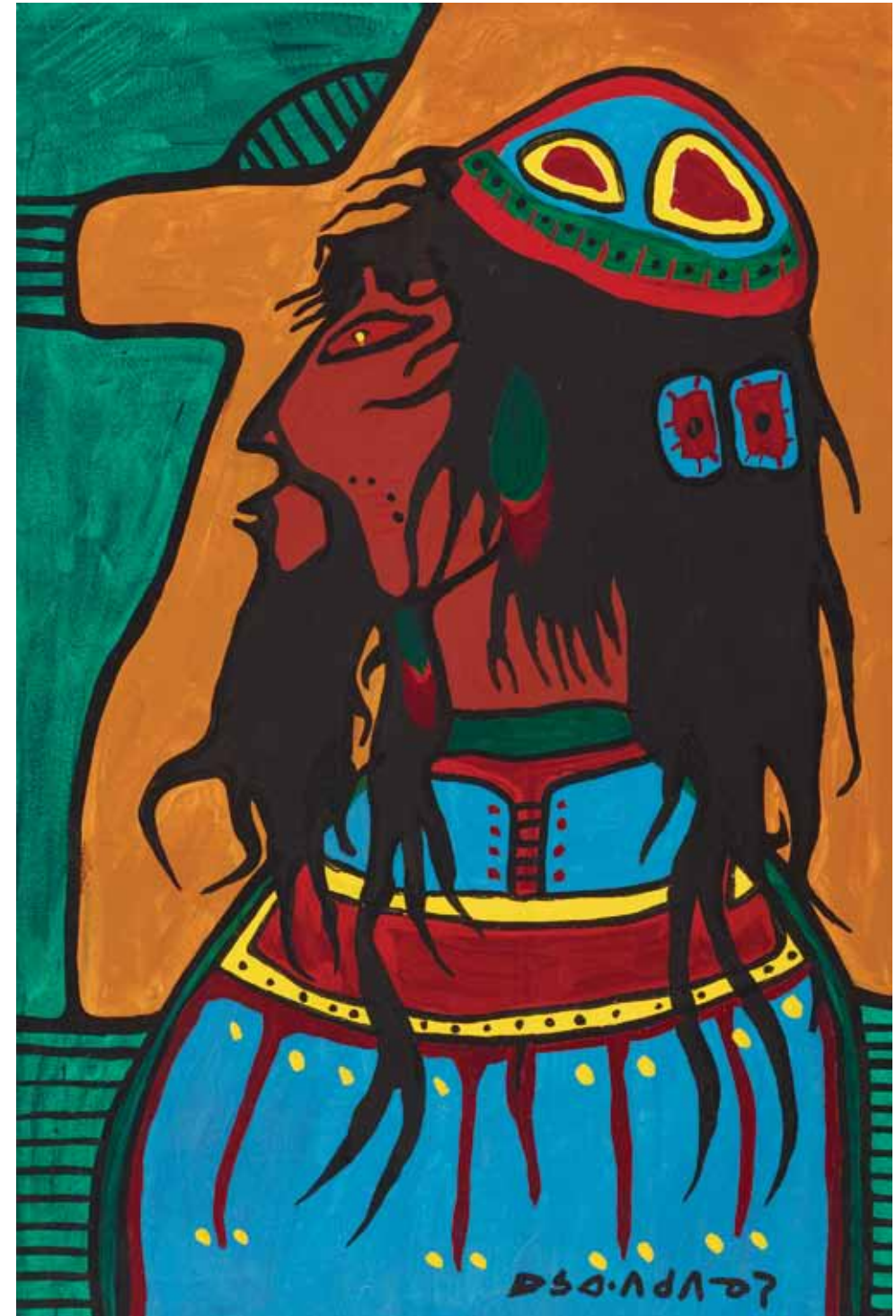
As the afternoon progressed, the host/shaman opened his bundle, a powerful gesture of welcome and humility. Everything was natural of course, raspberry tea, small pieces of fried bannock in carved wooden bowls and wild rice, *muhnoomin*, the food of the grandfathers. The women drank tea poured from a silver teapot into Royal Doulton; the men drank from cups similar to those used in residential schools. The cultural clash was clear as was the creative tension in witnessing an artist using two cultures to create something new.

Cultural conceits can make for stylistic affectation; imagine *petite bourgeoisie* and *autochthon* at a formal tea party in the woodlands of northern Ontario. The combination of colonial times represented by dressing up for tea served by a shaman and the beginning of postcolonial critique on the centrality of shamanism, when looking at his body of work, made me think of the satire of high society in Federico Fellini's, *La Dolce Vita* (1960). The colourful picnic spread on the "lawn" was a wryly ironic *tableaux vivant* of colonial times when the likelihood of such an event ever taking place was rare or never, cultural parody without the polemical rhetorical language of postmodernity.

Lunch/ceremony was placed on several large monochromatic blankets of red and blue with black lines on opposite ends with a special display of bundles: ceremonial pipe, eagle fan, a pair of white and a dark eagle feathers, a turtle rattle, maize, and other medicines and amulets, all symbols of power. Before starting, Norval signaled for help and I obliged. He had been having trouble lighting the kindle and by now his two drummers and protégé were talking in Ojibwa about typical day-to-day things to cover the awkward silence. When I entered the conversation speaking Saulteaux, which Norval understood, he continued to talk giving me the idea that perhaps something was about to begin. As we continued to make the smudge, he turned to me with a slight grin and said "look", nodding at those who didn't understand the languages we were speaking, and whispered "they think that we have started the ceremony".

The guest list included a spiritual leader, a gallery director and assistant, a lawyer, a curator, an art critic, a fashion designer, an editor, a media person, private and corporate collectors, other artists and friends. All had taken their place in chairs against the house where the shade provided relief from the hot afternoon sun. The repeated remarks about the kindle resonated as chanting if one wasn't familiar with the language. The resulting aboriginal humour made light of cultural differences but hunger, Windigo, was making us all think about when we had last eaten.

Finally, with a burning smudge of purification of both the food and the guests, Copper Thunderbird spoke again in the language of this ceremony, Ojibwa, then switched to English to explain the meaning of what he was doing. He



RIGHT: *Wabino-wiin Shaman*, c. 1960-64



LEFT: *Mide-Medicine Woman*, c. 1960-64

asked the grandfathers to be present and to take pity on his request. The rest of what was chanted was barely audible; everything was going to happen as it should. After purifying the food the guests began to serve themselves.

Later, pouring tea, smiling and chuckling, answering questions politely, at times passionately, especially when it was about art, Norval, animated or philosophical but always kind and generous, would cite his astral travels, often setting a Socratic discourse on colour. These discourses consisted of travels to the "House of Invention", a Matisse-like expression. It was around this time that he became interested in Eckankar, a religion founded on the belief that through study and practice of spiritual exercises one can experience inner light and sound.

The afternoon was culturally special but things were to get much better. One by one, we were given an audience during which time the artist created a drawing in his newly minted indigenous allegorical style, each one personal and appropriate pulled from his pantheon of legend characters, creating a significant art historical moment.

When my turn came, I entered the house, speaking both Saulteaux and English, he, Ojibwa and English. Our conversation began with a question about a portrait of Jack Pollock that I had seen the night before at his apartment, "Self-Portrait. Devoured by Demons" (1964, Art Gallery of Ontario) and another similar subject "Man and Snake" (1965, Glenbow Museum). As a museum curator, my interest in this artist and his work required some questioning of both he and Pollock. Jack was amusingly flattered by my observations on the portrait when describing his nose as aquiline. Norval smiled approvingly and commented on serpents as the subject of obsessions and passions. His numerous versions of self-portraits represent sexuality, a Dionysian equation of the fertility of nature and



Child With Eagle Headdress, Shaman's Apprentice With A Branch From The Ojibwa Story Tree, 1991

unrestrained sensuality. His self-doubt and the physical and spiritual trauma that caused it became evident when he wrote: "After all, half my life I have been criticizing myself, feeling guilty, and it's hard to get away from that. But something in there keeps saying, 'Don't give up! Don't give up!' Sometimes I pull the blinds I want to give up but I keep going". (p.49, Sinclair/Pollock).

Smiling and fancying my question and interpretation, he began to draw. I sat there talking, filling the quietness and he encouraged me to continue. Ever intense, his hand began quickly drawing the underwater lynx, starting with its horns, without ever lifting the graphite pencil. Once finished, chuckling, he handed me an exquisite drawing of Misshipeshu, the water spirit who loosens inhibitions and inspires creativity. I did not want this extraordinary moment to end, but the time for another to have a drawing done specifically for her or him had come.

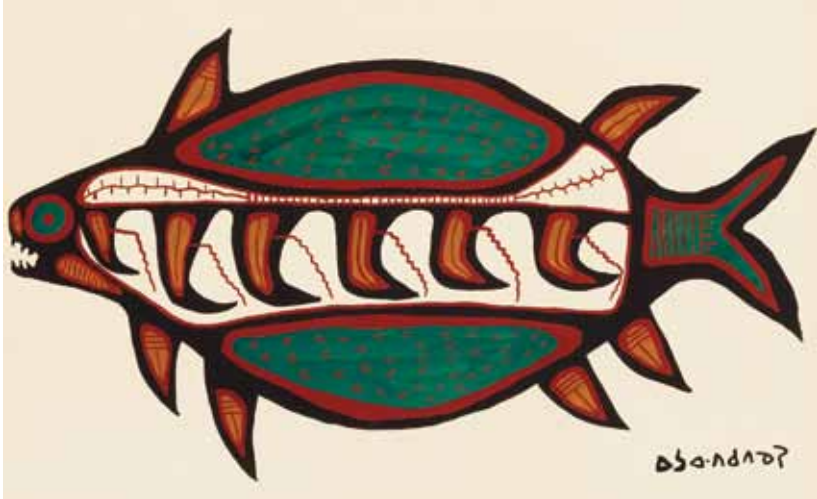
Once outside, the stillness in the air was broken only by the rustling of leaves in the trees. There is an old Saulteaux adage that this sound is the wind whispering that someone who loves you is thinking of you. The idea of such a romantic reading of natural phenomena is something the late Norval Morrisseau would have loved. I miss him now, remembering the edge of the woodland wilderness and the stories of how things in nature can be conceptualized poetically.

Robert Houle
July 2012

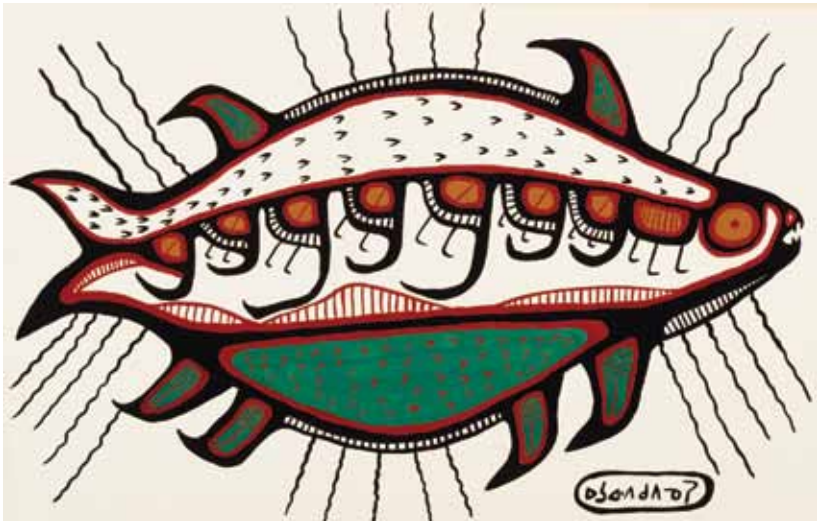
Robert Houle is a member of Sandy Bay First Nation, Manitoba. He is a Toronto-based contemporary Anishnabe Saulteaux artist with international exhibition experience.



Raven And The Sun, c. 1966



Fish-Giver Of Life, c. 1964



Sacred Trout With Power Lines, c. 1960-64



RIGHT: Earth Mother, c. 1960-64



Shaman Preaching To All Things (4-panel), 1992

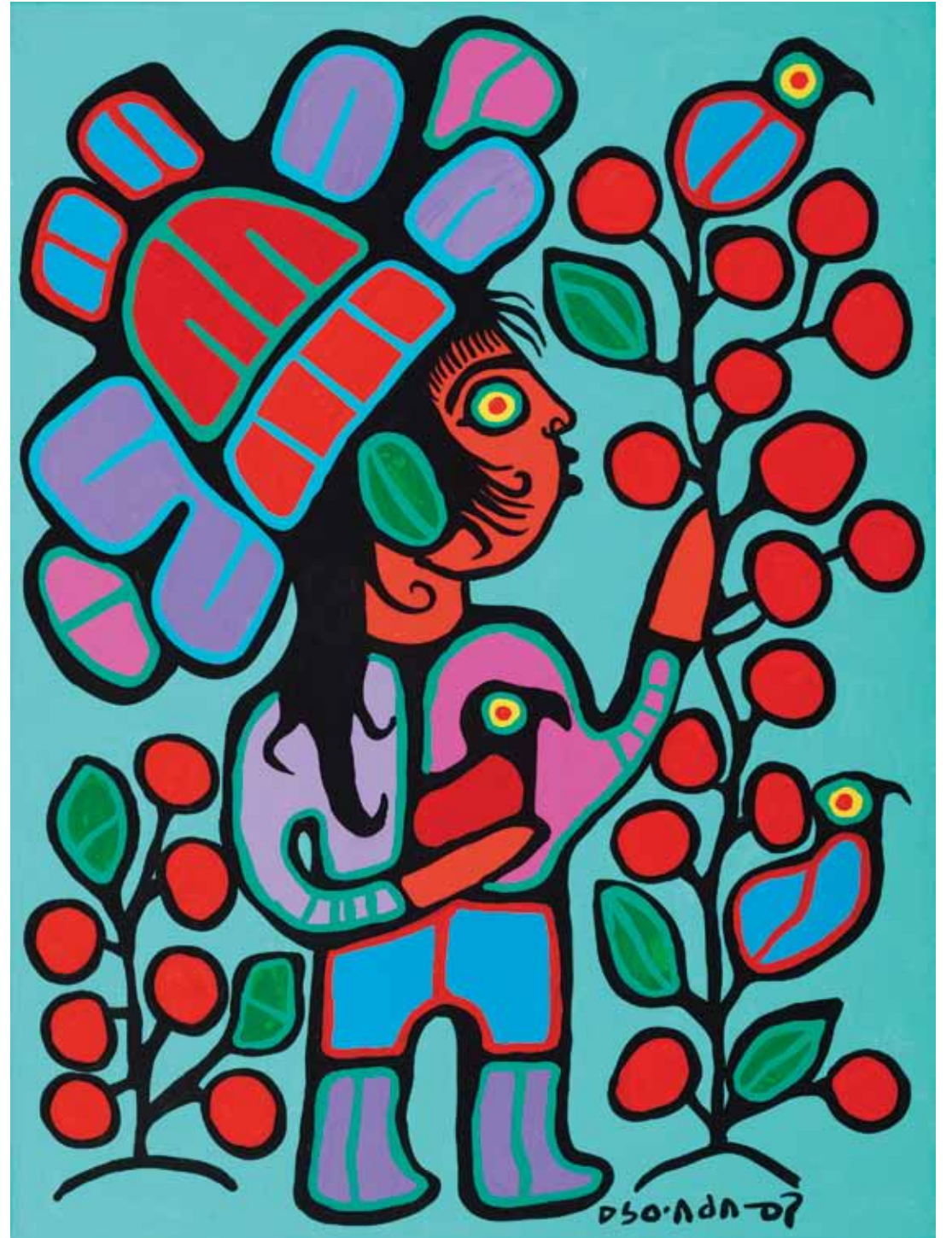


Bear & Fish Harmony, 1978

LEFT: Shaman Bear Transformation, 1993



Crane With Insect, 1962



RIGHT: Learning From The Tree Of Knowledge, c. 1995



Shaman Showing Grandson Some Inlook (sic) At Inner Planes Or Planits (sic), c. 1990

LEFT: Child With Ojibway Story Tree, c. 1985



Mythical Thunderbird, c. 1967



Sacred Owl, 1962

LEFT: Transformation Of Human Into Bear, 1990



Untitled (Fish), 1968



Untitled (Sacred Bear), c. 1969



Mother And Young, c. 1960-64



RIGHT: Boy In Stained Glass, c. 1997

Works in the Exhibition

* *Thunderbird With Ancestral Motifs*, c. 1958-61
Inscribed birch bark on scroll
24 x 34 in, 60.96 x 86.36 cm
Collection of Paul Ziff, Calgary; formerly
Collection of Imperial Oil (Acquired from Jack
Pollock in 1980), Calgary; The Pollock Gallery,
Toronto; Acquired from the artist

* *Earth Mother*, c. 1960-64
Acrylic on kraft board
56 x 30 in, 142.24 x 76.2 cm
By descent- Collection of Linda Ard,
Saskatchewan; Collection of Walter Ard, Red
Lake; Acquired from the artist

* *Mide-Medicine Woman*, c. 1960-64
Acrylic on watercolour paper
30 x 21.75 in, 76.2 x 55.25 cm
By descent- Collection of Linda Ard,
Saskatchewan; Collection of Walter Ard, Red
Lake; Acquired from the artist

* *Mother And Young*, c. 1960-64
Acrylic on watercolour paper
21.75 x 29.75 in, 55.25 x 75.57 cm
By descent- Collection of Linda Ard,
Saskatchewan; Collection of Walter Ard, Red
Lake; Acquired from the artist

Primitive Duck, c. 1960-64
Acrylic on paper
15 x 22 in, 38.1 x 55.88 cm
Private collection, Texas; Kinsman Robinson
Galleries, Toronto; Private Collection, Guelph

* *Sacred Trout With Power Lines*, c. 1960-64
Acrylic/chalk tempera on paper
18.5 x 29.5 in, 46.99 x 74.93 cm
Private collection, Mississauga; Jaguar Canada
Inc.; Acquired from the artist

* *Wabino-wiin Shaman*, c. 1960-64
Acrylic on illustration board
29.75 x 20 in, 75.57 x 50.8 cm
By descent- Collection of Linda Ard,
Saskatchewan; Collection of Walter Ard, Red
Lake; Acquired from the artist

* *Crane With Insect*, 1962
Gouache on paper
22 x 14.5 in, 55.88 x 36.83 cm
By descent - Private collection, Quebec;
Collection of Edna Fulford, Beardmore;
Acquired from the artist

* *Sacred Owl*, 1962
Gouache on paper
22 x 14.5 in, 55.88 x 36.83 cm
By descent - Private collection, Quebec;
Collection of Edna Fulford, Beardmore;
Acquired from the artist

* *Fish-Giver Of Life*, c. 1964
Acrylic on paper
17.5 x 28.5 in, 44.45 x 72.39 cm
The Pollock Gallery, Toronto;
Acquired from the artist

* *Raven and the Sun*, c. 1966
Acrylic on artist board
24 x 45.25 in, 60.96 x 114.94 cm
By descent - Collection of Lorna McConnell,
Ontario; Acquired from the artist

* *Mythical Thunderbird*, 1967
Acrylic on masonite
32.25 x 49.75 in, 81.92 x 126.37 cm
Private collection, Toronto; Collection of Edwin
A. Goodman (Goodmans LLP), Toronto (hung
in the law offices since the early 1970s);
Acquired from the artist

* *Untitled (Fish)*, 1968
Ink on birch bark
3.75 x 7.25 in, 9.53 x 18.42 cm
Private collection, New Hampshire; Acquired
from the artist in Beardmore in 1968

Untitled (Two Birds), 1968
Ink on birch bark
4.5 x 5.75 in, 11.43 x 14.61 cm
Private collection, New Hampshire; Acquired
from the artist in Beardmore in 1968

Family of Birds, 1969
Ink on birch bark
5.75 x 7.75 in, 14.61 x 19.69 cm
Private collection, Whitby; Coghlan Art Studio
& Gallery, Aldergrove, BC; Private collection,
Northern Ontario; Acquired from the artist

Sacred Bear With Ancestral Spirit, c. 1969
Acrylic on paper
14 x 16.5 in, 35.56 x 41.91 cm
Private collection, Texas; Kinsman Robinson
Galleries, Toronto; Private collection, Barrie;

* *Untitled (Sacred Bear)*, 1969
Acrylic on kraft board
30 x 32 in, 76.2 x 81.28 cm
Private collection, Montreal; The Shayne
Gallery, Montreal; Artist's agent working for
Indian and Northern Affairs, Kenora; Acquired
from the artist

Sacred Fish with Power Cycles, 1973
Acrylic on kraft paper
27.5 x 40.5 in, 69.85 x 102.87 cm
Collection of Kenneth Meader, Ontario;
The Pollock Gallery, Toronto; Acquired from
the artist

The Sacred Lake Fish, 1973
Acrylic on kraft paper
23.5 x 36 in, 59.69 x 91.44 cm
The Pollock Gallery, Toronto; Acquired from
the artist

Nature's Balance, 1975
Acrylic on kraft paper
73 x 48 in, 185.42 x 121.92 cm
Collection of Faith Sinclair, Toronto; Collection
of Lister Sinclair, Toronto; Acquired directly
from the artist. Reproduced: p. 114, Sinclair/
Pollock, *The Art of Norval Morrisseau*. Toronto:
Methuen Publications, 1979; p. 55, Carpenter,
Carole, *artmagazine* (Nov/Dec 1979); *Time*
magazine, 1975

* *Norval And Third Eye*, 1976
Acrylic on canvas
30 x 24 in, 76.2 x 60.96 cm
Collection of Robert Houle, Toronto; Wells
Gallery, Ottawa; The Pollock Gallery, Toronto;
Acquired from the artist

Animal Unity, 1978
Acrylic on canvas
50 x 108 in, 127 x 274.32 cm
By decent - Collection of Mr. & Mrs. John
Payne; The Pollock Gallery, Toronto; Acquired
directly from the artist
Reproduced: p. 158, Sinclair/Pollock, *The*
Art of Norval Morrisseau. Toronto: Methuen
Publications, 1979

Astral Thunderbird, 1978
Acrylic on canvas
71 x 41 in, 180.34 x 104.14 cm
By descent - Collection of Kal and Geoffrey
Honey; Collection of Peter Honey; The Pollock
Gallery, Toronto; Acquired from the artist.
Reproduced p. 148, Sinclair/Pollock, *The*
Art Of Norval Morrisseau. Toronto: Methuen
Publications 1979

* *Bear & Fish Harmony*, 1978
Acrylic on paper
17.5 x 23.5 in, 44.45 x 59.69 cm
Private collection, Toronto; The Pollock Gallery,
Toronto; Acquired from the artist

Sacred Trout Through The Portal Of Time, 1978
Acrylic on masonite
23 x 31.5 in, 58.42 x 80 cm
Private collection, Ontario; Collection of Susan
A. Ross, C.M.; The Pollock Gallery, Toronto

* *Child With Ojibway Story Tree*, c. 1985
Acrylic on canvas
35 x 23.75 in, 88.9 x 60.33 cm
By descent - Private collection, Toronto; Private
collection, Thunder Bay; Acquired from the artist

Shaman Transforming With Bears, 1986
Acrylic on canvas
47.5 x 29.5 in, 120.65 x 74.93 cm
Private collection, Maple Ridge, BC; Acquired
from the artist

Shaman Protection, 1990
Acrylic on canvas
80 x 36 in, 203.2 x 91.44 cm
Private collection, Toronto; Kinsman Robinson
Galleries, Toronto; Acquired from the artist

* *Shaman Showing Grandson Some Inlook (sic)*
At Inner Planes Or Planits (sic), c. 1990
Acrylic on canvas
47 x 47 in, 119.38 x 119.38 cm
Private collection, Brazil; Kinsman Robinson
Galleries, Toronto; Acquired from the artist

* *Transformation Of Human Into Bear*, 1990
Acrylic on canvas
48 x 36 in, 121.92 x 91.44 cm
Private collection, Vancouver; Kinsman Robinson
Galleries, Toronto; Acquired from the artist

Please note that the asterisk (*) denotes that the work is illustrated in the catalogue.

Bear, c. 1991

Acrylic on paper
22 x 30 in, 55.88 x 76.2 cm
Private collection, Toronto; Kinsman Robinson
Galleries, Toronto; Acquired from the artist

Bear Cubs Checking It Out, 1991

Acrylic on canvas
25 x 56 in, 63.5 x 142.24 cm
Private collection, Toronto; Kinsman Robinson
Galleries, Toronto; Acquired from the artist

* *Child With Eagle Headdress, Shaman's
Apprentice With A Branch From The Ojibwa
Story Tree*, 1991

Acrylic on canvas
30 x 40 in, 76.2 x 101.6 cm
Private collection, Toronto; Kinsman Robinson
Galleries, Toronto; Acquired from the artist

Grandson Parents, 1991

Acrylic on canvas
90 x 48 in, 228.6 x 121.92 cm
Private collection, Toronto; Kinsman Robinson
Galleries, Toronto; Acquired from the artist.
Reproduced p. 121, *Travels To The House Of
Invention*. Toronto: Key Porter Books 1997

* *Shaman Preaching To All Things (4-panel)*,
1992

Acrylic on canvas
72 X 96 in, 182.88 x 243.84 cm
Private collection, ON; Kinsman Robinson
Galleries, Toronto; Acquired from the artist

* *Migration*, 1993

Black and red ink on mat board
22 x 28 in, 55.88 x 71.12 cm
Private collection, BC; Acquired from the artist

Shaman Bear Transformation, 1993

Acrylic on canvas
32 x 59 in, 81.28 x 149.86 cm
Private collection, Toronto; Kinsman Robinson
Galleries, Toronto; Acquired from the artist

* *Week-Kuno | Shaman In The Astral Plane*, 1993

Acrylic on canvas
59 x 48 in, 149.86 x 121.92 cm
Private collection, Ottawa; Kinsman Robinson
Galleries, Toronto; Collection of Gabe Vadas;
Acquired from the artist

Ojibwa Story Tree With Child, c. 1994

Acrylic on canvas
40 x 30 in, 101.6 x 76.2 cm
Private collection, Toronto; Kinsman Robinson
Galleries, Toronto; Acquired from the artist.
Reproduced p. 103, *Return To The House Of
Invention*. Toronto: Key Porter Books 2005

* *Learning From The Tree Of Knowledge*, c. 1995

Acrylic on canvas
40 x 30 in, 101.6 x 76.2 cm
Private collection, Toronto; Kinsman Robinson
Galleries, Toronto; Acquired from the artist.
Reproduced p. 35, *Return To The House Of
Invention*. Toronto: Key Porter Books 2005

* *Boy In Stained Glass*, 1997

Acrylic on canvas
48 x 36 in, 121.92 x 91.44 cm
Private collection, BC; Acquired from the artist

* *Child With Headdress*, 1997

Acrylic on canvas
46.25 x 36 in, 117.48 x 91.44 cm
Private collection, BC; Acquired from the artist

Sacred Moose, 1997

Acrylic on paper
22 x 30 in, 55.88 x 76.2 cm
Private collection, Toronto; Kinsman Robinson
Galleries, Toronto; Acquired from the artist

* *Owl Life Cycle*, c. 2000

Black and red ink on watercolour paper
15 x 22 in, 38.1 x 55.88 cm
Private collection, BC; Acquired from the artist

Ancestral, 2001

Black ink on watercolour paper
15 x 22 in, 38.1 x 55.88 cm
Private collection, BC; Acquired from the artist

Bird Master, 2001

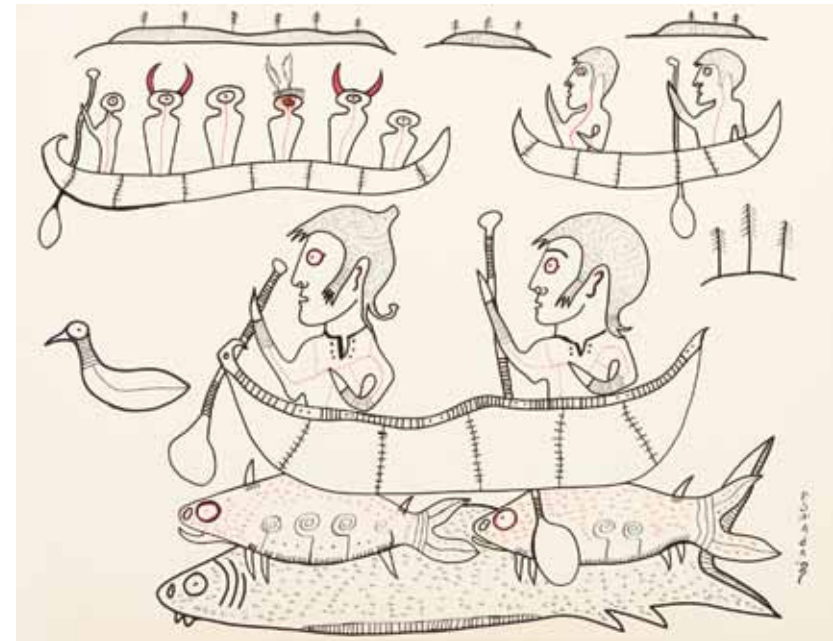
Black ink on watercolour paper
15 x 22 in, 38.1 x 55.88 cm
Private collection, BC; Acquired from the artist

Signature Stamp, 2003

Black marker on watercolour paper
9 x 8.25 in, 22.86 x 20.96 cm
Acquired from the artist



Owl Life Cycle, c. 2000



Migration, 1993



Thunderbird With Ancestral Motifs, c. 1958-61

Cover: *Nature's Balance*, 1975

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KINSMAN ROBINSON GALLERIES

108 Cumberland St., Toronto, ON M5R 1A6
416-964-2374 kinsmanrobinson.com

