

Beyond Recognition: Aboriginal Abstractions
Version II

to

Curator: Michelle McGeough

Western art history would have us believe that abstract expressionist painting as a genre began in the 20th century, as an innovation and truly western North American art form. However, many contemporary Indigenous artists who have and continue to paint in this genre see their art as a continuation of artistic tradition that is inspired by their Indigenous cultures. The works in this exhibition and quotes by the artists embody artist Robert Houle's statement: "I am not an innovator. I have never seen my work as a break with tradition." Even for those artists in this exhibition who have a formal art education and acknowledge the influence of Western art practices and artists have had on their creative development, their work still speaks to a vision inspired by their "indigenous roots." An homage that many Western art historians have failed to recognize and acknowledge, until recently.

This exhibition brings together works from the Indigenous Art Collection that find inspiration in a number of Indigenous traditions. Rick Rivet's painting "Reminder", is inspired by both the spiritual and political traditions. Helen Wasseggijig and Katia KaK'wa Kurtness paintings find inspiration in the artistic tradition of basket making. Susan Point's serigraph "Transitions" illustrates how she integrates traditional Coast Salish design elements into her contemporary artwork. Other paintings in this exhibition refer to the creative process as a desire to express universal truths such as the artist's irrepressible desire to create. A desire which, according to artist Bob Boyer, "ties one artist to the other; past and present." The art work of Benjamin Chee Chee and Kimowan Metchewais reveal what Metchewais refers to as "a radical simplicity," yet there is an emotive quality to these works that makes these paintings more than geometric abstractions.

The intent of this exhibition is to add to the dialogue regarding the need for a new Art History, one that "replaces the notion of a universal 'history of art'," with one that recognizes the existence of a "number of discrete but overlapping 'histories of art'."ⁱ Although these artists' practice is seen as being informed by abstract expressionism, the narrative role this genre takes on in the hands of Indigenous artists transforms it into a truly North American Aboriginal art form that pays homage to its Indigenous roots.

i Phillips, Ruth. What is 'Huron Art'? Native American Art and the New Art History. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* IX, 2(1989): 168.

Michelle McGeough

My art is truly North American ... it has its indigenous roots. I enjoy what I do, I really do. Some of my artwork is healing for myself and for anyone who wants to accept it that way..."

Alex Janvier, 2003

Composition "E" (1963)

pastel on paper

Alex Janvier

Denesuline Saulteaux



“Don’t call me an Indian Artist, I’m not, I think of myself as an Ojibway artist, a member of the Ojibway nation.”

Benjamin Chee Chee, n.d.

Untitled (1973)

acrylic on canvas

Benjamin Chee Chee 1944 - 1977

Anishinaabe



“All art is experimental, and comes from the deepest reaches of one’s psyche. Every experience that has occurred in the artist life is brought forward at the time of creating/working to aid in the expression of the moment.”

“This process is as old as mankind itself and this experience of image making ties one artist to the other; past and present.”

Bob Boyer, 1982

Smoothstone Road (May 1984)

oil on canvas

Bob Boyer 1948 - 2004

Métis



"I just work at random because I believe there is order in random and once I start something at random, I will discover some inner truth, some inner order. Within random I find and discover universal truth which is what I am looking for. I associate randomness with emotion, but within that there is an order. I am not an innovator. I have never seen my work as a break with tradition."

Robert Houle, 1983

Parfleche II (1985)

oil wash on paper

Robert Houle

Saulteaux



"... I remember a tradition of giving gifts to far off travellers or even to a person held in high regard. Usually one of these gifts included a blanket." "... "The Offering" integrates my original idea of using geometric pattern as well as of the idea of offering gifts, a tradition that stems from my Native background."

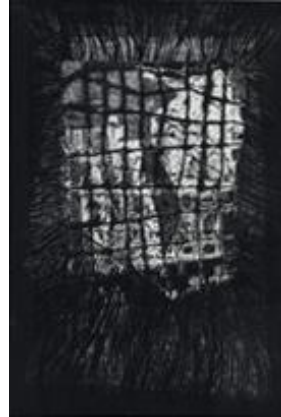
Ann McLean, 1991

The Offering (1990) 1/3

etching on paper

Ann McLean

Cree



“As in many First Nations, crafts are very important. This particular art form is passed on from generation to generation, from mother to daughter. To decorate their clothes or bark baskets, the Innu embroidered or scraped patterns. It is said that each family has its own distinct pattern, which distinguished it from other families. I have reproduced a pattern and decorated it in a contemporary manner with oil and acrylic paints ... “By drawing on this art form, I am paying tribute to the elders of my community and more specially to “nukum” (my grandmother), who passed her knowledge on to my aunt and my sisters, so that our generation may be proud to follow in the same footsteps and so we may recall her patience and skill.”

Katia Kak'wa Kurtness, 2006

Sweet Poetry (2006)

acrylic on canvas

Katia Kak'wa Kurtness

Montagnais Innu



“I try to make art that moves lightly through the world to exemplify qualities of Native North American culture, especially those aspects that often go unnoticed, despite their importance. I believe it is a good time to share essential lessons about the oldest cultures on this continent. My modern studio art practice has helped to me [sic] hone my message – that we can make grand beauty and sincere rhetoric with radical simplicity. I tend to think of art as a form of magic, except, unlike the work of illusionists, the cause for effect is laid bare for the viewer to see and still works; whereas, once the magician’s trick is known, the effect no longer works. I am in search of elegant solutions to challenges of narrative in space. I make objects and work in ways that exemplify tenets of my culture – taking nothing more than needed, while making places and experiences that help people expand their notions of humanity and how it is located within a cosmos.”

Kimowan Metchewais, n.d

Sweetgrass (1988)

watercolour on paper

Kimowan Metchewais 1968 - 2011

Cree



“My use of traditional elements has become second nature to me - like an alphabet - helping me to describe any image I wish. When doing contemporary expressions such as acrylics on canvas, I become much more illustrative, but I always integrate my ancestral Coast Salish elements into the work.”

Susan Point, n.d

Transition (1993) 50/90

serigraph on paper

Susan Point

Coast Salish



“For the past four years, I’ve been travelling around to different tribes all over North America, learning songs, attending ceremonies, learning words from different languages. All this I’ve applied to my painting when I try to capture a feeling or spirit from different places.”

Linus Woods, 2006

Jade Elk to Jade Rabbit (2002)

oil on rag paper

Linus Woods

Dakota-Ojibway



“My work aspires to the spiritual, to the recovery of the main tradition of creativity. The encounter with shamanic ideology and the culture compels the modern artist to admit to the binding ties of a common spiritual heritage. Through the creative experience and its profound link to the unconscious, artists confront the on-going history of the human spirit.”

Rick Rivet, 1995

Reminder (2004)

acrylic on canvas

Rick Rivet

Métis



"These symbols came to me as I remembered the ancient basket makers, I am loyal to my ancestors, loving their works of art and therefore celebrating and sharing my own artistic discoveries."

Helen Wassegijig, 1989

The Healer (1990)

ink on paper

Helen Wassegijig

Odawa Anishinaabe Potawatomi

