

ROBERT HOULE

Looking for the Shaman

- On View at the John B. Aird Gallery: June 12 to July 6, 2018
- Organized/facilitated by Carla Garnet
- With a newly commissioned text by Elwood Jimmy
- Opening Reception: Thursday, June 14, 6 to 8 p.m., with opening remarks by AGO Curator of Canadian and Indigenous Art, Wanda Nanibush and Robert Houle
- Cinq à sept, Art Canada Institute supported, *Robert Houle: Life & Work*, lecture by Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery Executive Director Shirley Madill, Thursday June 21
- Cinq à sept *Looking for the Shaman* conversation with Houle and Musagetes Foundation Arts Program Coordinator, Elwood Jimmy: Thursday, July 5

The John B. Aird Gallery will present a solo survey show of Robert Houle's artwork, titled *Looking for the Shaman*, from June 12 to July 6, 2018.

Now in his seventh decade, Robert Houle is a seminal Canadian artist, whose work engages deeply with contemporary discourse, using strategies of deconstruction by connecting with the politics of recognition and disappearance as a form of reframing. As a member of Saulteaux First Nation, Houle has been an important champion for retaining and defining First Nations identity in Canada, with work exploring the role his language, culture, and history play in defining his response to cultural and institutional histories. His practice draws on Western art conventions to tackle lingering aspects of colonization and its postcolonial aftermath, while remaining deeply informed by the spiritual concepts of respect and sharing that guide his life, offering a mediated space for gallery visitors to experience these concepts.

Looking for the Shaman is self directed by the artist, with Aird Gallery director and curator Carla Garnet acting as the project's facilitator and organizer. The multimedia selection of works in the exhibition reflects the artist's search for the shaman within. The pieces included are united by their exploration of the power of dreaming, a process by which the dreamer becomes familiar with their own symbolic unconscious terrain. Through these works, Houle explores the role that the shaman plays as healer and interpreter of the spirit world.

The narrative of the *Looking for the Shaman* installation hinges not only upon a lifetime of traversing a physical geography of streams, rivers, and lakes that circumnavigate Canada's northern coniferous and birch forests, marked by long, harsh winters and short, mosquito-infested summers, but also upon traversing the terrain of history, extending the threads of the colonial past into the present and looking forward toward the future. The figure of the shaman is central for Houle because shamans, *understood to be capable of separating their spirits from their bodies and thus able to intercede in and control the forces of nature*, have exceptional power to act on behalf of the community. Having risen above the human condition, the shaman is not bound by the flow of history.

Looking for the Shaman includes three ergonomic-scale oil on canvas portraits from Houle's black-and-white *Shaman Dream in Colour* series and three from his blue and rose *Mississauga Portraits* series. The *Mississauga Portraits* depict Maungwudaus and his second wife, Hannah, members of a Mississauga dance troupe that performed for kings and queens of France and Belgium at Saint Cloud, just outside of Paris, in the mid-1800's. These paintings are informed by a

lifetime of dreaming, drawing, and memory, linking these processes to the “out of body” and shape-shifting experiences of the shaman.

The exhibition also includes two works from Houle’s ongoing *parfleche* series (a *parfleche*, which literally translates from the French as “defends against arrows,” is a carrying case traditionally made of buffalo hide, folded over into a pouch to carry valued objects, and is most often painted with abstract imagery intended as a map of the local landscape), along with two installations that include powerful traditional objects from Houle’s personal collection, and a suite of new spiritual water protector works on Mylar. These new drawings and paintings are inspired by the growing destruction of the environment from oil spills and pipelines, now referred to by the Idle No More movement as “black snakes,” referencing a Lakota prophecy about a black snake that, when it goes underground, will bring about environmental destruction.

Anishinabe women are traditionally recognized as water protectors, and the women of Idle No More continue to fulfill this essential role. Like the shaman, the water protector performs an important community function, their deep knowledge of the earth’s water and waterways making them a powerful conduit of spiritualism and healing.

The works included in *Looking for the Shaman*, which span the last decade, are united by the connections Houle draws between the terrain of dreams and the symbolic unconscious and the actual historical and geographic terrain of First Nations people. By focusing on the shaman, a potent figure of mediation and healing, Houle transforms the gallery into a mediated space for viewers to explore this connectivity through the lens of Indigenous spirituality.

To enrich the Looking for the Shaman exhibition, the Aird Gallery presents audience engagement programming in the form of a set of cinq à sept talks featuring: Robert Houle, Shirley Madill, Elwood Jimmy and TDSB Principal of Aboriginal Education Tanya Senk. The gallery has also commissioned a new essay on Houle’s work by Jimmy, which will be featured in an online and print publication alongside an artist statement by Houle.

PARTICIPANTS BIOS:

The Artist:

Robert Houle is a Toronto artist and a member of Sandy Bay First Nation, Treaty One in Manitoba. He graduated from both the University of Manitoba (B.A.) and McGill University (B.Ed.) and studied painting and drawing at the International Summer Academy of Fine Arts in Salzburg, Austria.

Houle has been exhibiting internationally for over 40 years and taught at the Ontario College of Art and Design University for more than 20 years. He has written several essays and monographs on contemporary First Nations and Native American artists. His work is in many institutions including the Art Gallery of Ontario, McMichael Canadian Collection, Museum of Contemporary Art Sydney Australia, National Gallery of Canada, National Museum of the American Indian, Royal Ontario Museum and the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Most recently, Houle was commissioned by the Confederation Centre of the Arts in Charlottetown to create a work for Canada 150.

He has received honorary doctorates from University of Ontario Institute of Technology (2016) and the University of Manitoba (2014), the 2015 Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts, the Canada Council Residency Program for the Visual Arts in Paris (2006), distinguished alumnus, University of Manitoba (2004), Eiteljorg Contemporary Art

Fellowship (2003), Toronto Arts Award (2001), membership in the Royal Canadian Academy (2000), and the Janet Braide Memorial Award for Excellence in Canadian Art History (1993).

The Writer:

Elwood Jimmy (Nêhiyaw/Nakawe) is originally from Thunderchild First Nation in northwestern Saskatchewan. For over a decade, he has played a leadership role in several national and international art projects, collectives and organizations. He is committed to collaborative, experiential learning about our connections to one another and to the land. Through his work, he strives to liquefy barriers around accessing community, culture, wellness, knowledge, language, and the natural world. Since 2015, he has been the program coordinator for Musagetes, a private foundation that supports arts projects around the globe.

The Facilitator:

Carla Garnet is the Director and Curator of the John B. Aird Gallery and the JOUEZ curator for the annual BIG on Bloor Festival of Arts and Culture in Toronto. She has worked as the curator at the Art Gallery of Peterborough (2010-2013), as a guest curator at Gallery Stratford (2009-2010), as an independent curator (1997-2010), and was the founder and director of Garnet Press Gallery (1984-97). Garnet holds an Associate Diploma from the Ontario College of Art and Design and a Masters Degree in Art History from York University. Garnet is interested in the politics of the art exhibition and its potential to function as a *common*—a public space for dialogue. Her curatorial area of interest engages with an exploration of work that presents the possibility of existing simultaneously in many tenses or occupying more than one subject position at once, or both as way to open up a space for greater empathy. For Garnet, an artwork's significance is tied up with an ability to say what otherwise might be unsayable.

About the John B. Aird Gallery

The John B. Aird Gallery opened in 1985. It was named in honour of the 23rd Lieutenant Governor of Ontario to recognize his support of the visual arts in the province and in Canada. Governed by a Board of Directors, the Gallery's mandate is to create awareness and promote the enjoyment of works of art by professional contemporary artists. In order to fulfill its mandate, the Gallery strives to encourage excellence in visual art; present a variety of media, disciplines, and styles; and to provide opportunities for study and education in conjunction with exhibitions.

The John B. Aird Gallery gratefully acknowledges the support of the Ontario Arts Council and the Toronto Arts Council.



For more information, visit: www.airdgallery.org. Hours of operation: Monday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. For hi-res images and other press inquiries, please contact: John B. Aird Gallery Director/Curator, director@airdgallery.org.

airdgallery.org

Macdonald Block, 900 Bay Street (at Wellesley), Toronto, ON, Canada M7A 1C2 | Gallery Hours: Monday to Friday, 10 am - 6 pm
Édifice Macdonald, 900 rue Bay (angle Wellesley), Toronto, ON, Canada M7A 1C2 | Heures d'ouverture : du lundi au vendredi, de 10h à 18h

director@airdgallery.org

