ROBERT HOULE

Shaman Dream in Colour

APRIL 23 - MAY 14, 2016

PREVIOUS PAGE:
Shaman Dream in Colour,
2015, Oil on canvas,
36 x 24 ins.,
91.44 x 60.96 cms.

OPPOSITE:
Shaman Heals by Touching,
2015, Oil on canvas,
36 x 24 ins.,
91.44 x 60.96 cms.
Shaman Never Die.
2015, Oil on canvas,
36 x 24 ins.,
91.44 x 60.96 cms.
Dreaming is perhaps the closest most of us will probably get to a shaman’s travels in the spirit world. At Robert Houle’s childhood home in Kawikwetawankak/Sandy Bay First Nation in Manitoba, both dreaming and shamans were valued as parts of daily life. A shaman was invited by community families to give their newborn children traditional, ceremonial anishnaabek names; in a darkened family home, the shaman entered into a trance to converse with the spirits to then announce that world’s agreement on what the newborn’s name would be. Every morning at breakfast as a young boy, Houle and his siblings would be asked by their mother to tell their dreams of the night before, each one trying to outdo the other with tales of their night visions. As a young man in the 1970s in Ottawa, he encountered a very special shaman, Norval Morrisseau, who gave Houle an amulet that was so powerful and took such a hold over Houle’s life, that he sought help from a shaman at home, who took the amulet away and buried it, saying that the shaman who made it was highly talented but still too undisciplined. Houle and Morrisseau became lifelong friends, with Morrisseau’s continuing discovery of new colours in his spirit world journeys echoed in Houle’s own exploration of colour. And so the underpinnings of Houle’s current exhibition, Shaman Dream in Colour, begin to emerge. Add to this the influence of Arthur Shilling’s poetic musings on sleep, dreams and fending off fear with colour in his book The Ojibway Dream, along with the conceptual grounding of Miró’s enigmatic surrealist poem-painting Photo: This is the Color of my Dreams, and Houle’s rich mix of colours, abstractions, figurations, dreams, daily life on the land and shamanic powers all intersect in the works exhibited here to conjure a transformative vision.

At the centre of this exhibition, which includes 26 works created between 1998 and 2015, sit four new works being exhibited for the first time, all in a more figurative style, each depicting a different shaman and that shaman’s power: touching to heal, taking away pain, passing on traditions to the next generation to never die, dreaming the undreamable. At first glance, these works appear to be done in monochromatic black and white, but on closer study, these works reveal richly evocative and subtle shadings. Shaman Dream In Colour, the painting that gives this show its name, is a part of this grouping of guides in the spirit world.
Another significant set of works, created over the last fifteen years, centres on the morningstar, the last star seen in the night sky, which fades and disappears as the sun rises. In most of these skyscapes, the morningstar is most often depicted as a small plus sign, painted in white with a red centre, floating in skies that range from blue to white to black to orange, as rays of morning light trace across the always changing lightening sky, signalling the return of the sun to Kawikwetawankak. Taken together, these morningstar works are akin to a time-lapse film of the end of night and of dreaming for that night. Counterpointing the morningstar skyscapes is a small series of landscapes, done in warm and sunny yellows, greens and blues, depicting the undisturbed lake and the lakeside marsh at Kawikwetawankak, sacred sites reserved for public ceremonies like the sundance, a celebration of the summer solstice.

There are also two parfleche works in this exhibition, a form with historical resonance that Houle is renowned for. A parfleche, which translates literally from French as “stops arrows”, is a carrying case traditionally made of buffalo skin, folded over into a pouch to carry valued objects, usually made in pairs and most often painted with abstract imagery intended as a map of the local landscape. One of the two works in this form in the exhibition, Parfleche for Alex Janvier, created in 1999, reworks the traditional parfleche pairs in that it is a dyptich and its surface echoes the land to honour Janvier, a celebrated Dene Suline and Saulteaux painter and close colleague of Houle’s.

In addition to these thematic, visual and form groupings within the show, there are crucial, recurring traditional references that appear throughout. The two most notable such references are to groups of markings in sets of seven and of four. The groups of seven markings, which change shape from painting to painting, evoke the seven fires as well as the seven grandfathers: the eagle embodying love, the beaver embodying wisdom, the wolf embodying humility, the buffalo embodying respect, the turtle embodying truth, the bear embodying courage, and a woodland transformational figure embodying honesty. The groups of four markings, which also change shape from painting to painting, recall the four directions, as well as the four sacred medicines: sage, cedar, sweetgrass and tobacco.

Together, the works in Shaman Dream in Colour offer compelling insights into the lived histories and visionary travels of the artist, drawing us into the continued power and inexhaustible depths of a dream.

David McIntosh is Associate Professor, Media Studies, in the Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences/School of Interdisciplinary Studies at OCADU. He is also a visual artist, film producer, scriptwriter and curator in film, video and digital media.
Shaman Takes Away
The Pain, 2015,
Oil on canvas, 36 x 24 ins.,
91.44 x 60.96 cms.
Parfleche for Alex Janvier,
1999, Oil on canvas,
40 x 20 ins.,
101.6 x 50.8 cms.
Shaman, 2011,
Oil on canvas,
36 x 24 ins.,
91.44 x 60.96 cms.
Fleche, 2011,
Oil on canvas,
36 x 24 ins.,
91.44 x 60.96 cms.
Morningstar I, 2014, Oil on canvas, 18 x 18 ins., 45.72 x 45.72 cms.

Fort McLeod, 2001, Oil on canvas, 36 x 36 ins., 91.44 x 91.44 cms.
Light Box, 2011,
Oil on canvas,
36 x 24 ins.,
91.44 x 60.96 cms.
Fetish, 2011,
Oil on canvas,
36 x 24 ins.,
91.44 x 60.96 cms.
ABOVE: *Drum*, 2015,
Oil on canvas,
12 ins., 30.48 cms.

OPPOSITE: *The Morning*,
2012, Oil on canvas,
34 x 17 ins,
86.36 x 43.18 cms.
ABOVE: *Copper Shield*, 2003, Mixed media on canvas, 30 x 30 ins., 76.2 x 76.2 cms.

OPPOSITE: *Morningstar*, 2011, Oil on canvas, 36 x 24 ins., 91.44 x 60.96 cms.
Rowing, 2013, Oil on canvas, 10 x 10 ins., 25.4 x 25.4 cms.

Scorpius, 1998, Oil on canvas, 12 x 12 ins., 30.48 x 30.48 cms.
*Parfleche*, 2011,
Oil on canvas,
36 x 24 ins.,
91.44 x 60.96 cms.
Blue Thunder, 2012,
Oil on canvas,
18 x 18 ins.,
45.72 x 45.72 cms.
Morningstar II, 2014,
Oil on canvas,
18 x 18 ins.,
45.72 x 45.72 cms
LIST OF WORKS

**Drum**, 2015,
Oil on canvas,
12 ins., 30.48 cms. (diameter)

**Shaman Dream in Colour**, 2015,
Oil on canvas,
36 x 24 ins., 91.44 x 60.96 cms.

**Shaman Heals by Touching**, 2015,
Oil on canvas,
36 x 24 ins., 91.44 x 60.96 cms.

**Shaman Never Die**, 2015,
Oil on canvas,
36 x 24 ins., 91.44 x 60.96 cms.

**Shaman Takes Away The Pain**, 2015,
Oil on canvas,
36 x 24 ins., 91.44 x 60.96 cms.

**Cultural Clash**, 2014,
Multimedia on paper,
25.5 x 20 ins., 64.77 x 50.8 cms.

**Morningstar I**, 2014,
Oil on canvas,
18 x 18 ins., 45.72 x 45.72 cms.

**Morningstar II**, 2014,
Oil on canvas,
18 x 18 ins., 45.72 x 45.72 cms.

**Potlatch Copper**, 2013,
Multimedia on paper,
30 x 22 ins., 76.2 x 55.88 cms.

**Rowing**, 2013,
Oil on canvas,
10 x 10 ins., 25.4 x 25.4 cms.

**The Marsh**, 2013,
Oil on canvas,
24 x 36 ins., 60.96 x 91.44 cms.

**Blue Thunder**, 2012,
Oil on canvas,
18 x 18 ins., 45.72 x 45.72 cms.

**The Marsh**, 2012,
Oil on canvas,
54 x 54 ins., 137.16 x 137.16 cms.

**The Morning**, 2012,
Oil on canvas,
34 x 17 ins, 86.36 x 43.18 cms

**Fetish**, 2011,
Oil on canvas,
36 x 24 ins., 91.44 x 60.96 cms.

**Fleche**, 2011,
Oil on canvas,
36 x 24 ins., 91.44 x 60.96 cms.

**Lakeview**, 2011,
Oil on canvas
40 x 30 ins., 101.6 x 76.2 cms.

**Light Box**, 2011,
Oil on canvas,
36 x 24 ins., 91.44 x 60.96 cms.

**Morningstar**, 2011,
Oil on canvas,
36 x 24 ins., 91.44 x 60.96 cms.

**Parfleche**, 2011,
Oil on canvas,
36 x 24 ins., 91.44 x 60.96 cms.

**Shaman**, 2011,
Oil on canvas,
36 x 24 ins., 91.44 x 60.96 cms.

**Copper Shield**, 2003,
Mixed media on canvas,
30 x 30 ins., 76.2 x 76.2 cms.

**Fort McLeod**, 2001,
Oil on canvas,
36 x 36 ins., 91.44 x 91.44 cms.

**Fort McLeod #2**, 2001,
Mixed media on masonite,
24 x 31-3/4 ins., 60.96 x 80.645 cms.

**Parfleche for Alex Janvier**, 1999,
Oil on canvas,
40 x 20 ins., 101.6 x 50.8 cms.

**Scorpius**, 1998,
Oil on canvas,
12 x 12 ins., 30.48 x 30.48 cms.
The Marsh, 2013,
Oil on canvas,
24 x 36 ins.,
60.96 x 91.44 cms.
Cover: *Lakeview* (detail), 2011, Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 ins., 101.6 x 76.2 cms.

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