Robert Houle: Painting the Untold

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Native American artists are an underrepresented group. While their talents are as numerous and varied as artists of any other race, they tend to be defined solely by their ethnicity. Rather than judging their work based on the usual formal and conceptual qualities, Native American artists are critiqued for their authenticity and adherence to “traditional” artistic values, when there is so much more to see in their artwork. Robert Houle is one such artist. A Saulteaux man from Manitoba, he is a Native American painter who explores his identity and cultural past through colorful abstract expressionist-esque interpretations of certain places or events that he or past Native Americans have experienced. While Houle creates artwork of various themes, they are connected in their attempt to relay personal and cultural histories that have not been told accurately or have been entirely left out of history.

Houle is committed to a certain “plastic language” that he created to express his experiences and thoughts as a Native American artist.¹ This plastic language developed into primarily abstract paintings focusing on color coupled with images and text. Like Barnett Newman, the abstract expressionist who most influenced him, Houle uses large fields of expressive color. However, unlike Newman, Houle’s seemingly non-objective pieces are meant to evoke more than just a general emotion or feeling. Instead they tell specific stories set in specific places and times. It would be a mistake to classify Houle as solely an abstract artist because he uses multiple stylistic approaches to accomplish his goals. In order to understand his similar yet diverse conceptual and technical range it is necessary to analyze several of his works of art.

*The Place Where God Lives* from 1989 (fig. 1) is a series of four paintings that reference

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the landscape of Manitoba. They utilize loose sweeping brushstrokes to create an active surface filled with color. The first painting incorporates five horizontal sections, which differ only slightly in paint application, and shades of red with subtle hints of green, purple, and blue. The second painting is also composed of five horizontal color fields of varying greens with blue and yellow, and includes two white crosses in the foreground. The third painting is divided into three horizontal sections with various shades of blue. Unique to this work are the straight vertical lines across the foreground. The fourth painting, like the majority of the others, is divided into five horizontal sections painted in yellow complemented by hints of grey and white.

In *The Place Where God Lives* Houle explores the sacredness of landscape that in some ways connects, ideologically at least, diverse Native American cultures. The title refers specifically to a place that the Saulteaux call Manito-waban. Others call it the Narrows of Lake Manitoba. As Robert Houle explains, it is there that:

> . . . the water beating against the resonant limestone cliff and pounding along the pebbled shore creates the sound "ke-mishomis-na-ug" (literally, "our ancestors") believed to be the voice of Manitou. It was and still is a sacred place, a power place whose hierophantic messages compel Saulteaux who continue to live nearby to offer tobacco; and many travel to it seeking renewal, as a Muslim will travel to Mecca.

While the spirituality of Manito-waban influenced Houle, he derived his color choices

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3 Ibid, 88.

4 Ibid.

from the general hues of the prairie landscape around Manitoba. According to Gerald McMaster, the four paintings are meant to reclaim the area for the Saulteaux and loosely refer to tribal stories Houle heard as a child. Place is so spiritually important to Houle that these works almost become religious paintings.

Equally concerned with place, but not as much in its spiritual context, Houle’s five painting series from 1994 entitled *Premises for Self-Rule* (figs. 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6) focus on the false promises of the Canadian government regarding land rights. All five are rendered and organized very similarly, with a brilliant expressively painted color on a square surface, each mounted with a quote from a land treaty and a photograph of Native American subjects. The first is a saturated mix of blue and black with part of the Royal Proclamation from 1763 beside it and a photograph of a group of tipis. The second is an almost magenta red coupled with a quote from the British North American Act of 1867 and a photograph of Native American men on horseback. The third is a deep green painting with a section from the Treaty No. 1 signed in 1871 and a photograph of presumably Chippewa or Swampy Cree men. The fourth is a more orange red with a part of the Indian Act of 1876 and another photograph of posed Native American men. The fifth and final painting is a beautiful, yellow ochre grouped with a section from the Constitution Act of 1982 and a photograph of Native American women lined up with their backs facing the camera.

Together the paintings present the history of treaties that promised various Native American groups control over their own land. Yet with each agreement the amount of land

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6 Madill, 11.

7 McMaster, 88.

8 Peggy Gale, "Robert Houle: Recording," in Robert Houle: Sovereignty over Subjectivity (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1999), 22.
defined as theirs shrank. As Shirley Madill explains, *Premises for Self Rule*, “emphasizes how places can be socially and politically constructed and that this construction is about power. . . Houle brings power and place back in the present with a reminder of the continued denial of First Nations’ control and ownership of their land.” Houle’s use of color and his organization of painting, photograph, and text provides deeper meaning to the piece. The incorporation of blue, red, and green references European powers, while the more brownish red and yellow ochre are meant to be associated with Native Americans. By placing the photographs of Native subjects over the top of the sections from each treaty, part of their text is obscured and thus creates tension. This visual strain creates frustration on the part of the viewer, which might reference the frustration felt by Native Americans like Houle when their property is taken away.

While Houle focuses on abstraction in *Premises for Self Rule* and the majority of his other paintings, in *Kanata* (fig. 7) from 1992 he incorporates a fully representational painting into his familiar color field works. The painting is composed of a repainting and subtle alteration of Benjamin West’s *The Death of General Wolfe* from 1770, flanked by a blue square on the left and a red square on the right. The battle scene is rendered in a sepia-colored conté crayon with only the regalia of the lone Native American man colored in blue and red. The drawing is

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9 Ibid.

10 Madill, 13.


12 Ibid.

composed almost exactly like the original, except the crowds of soldiers in the background are missing.

*Kanata* is essentially a painting that shows how Native Americans did not make their own histories, but were surrounded by British and French troops making it for them. As Houle explains, “the Indian is in parentheses, the Indian is surrounded by this gigantic red and this gigantic blue and is sandwiched in that environment ... And that is reality because the English and the French are still the major players in the making of this history, history as it was.”  

By using Benjamin West’s painting, Houle is questioning if West had the right to depict the Native American experience, and seems to suggest that should have been left to the Native Americans. This idea is further enhanced by the inclusion of tape recordings of Native Americans talking about their thoughts on history, in order to allow these people to reclaim their own personal histories.

Much more serious than Houle’s depiction of Native Americans caught between European powers is *Palisade II* (fig. 8) from 2007, his second telling of when British troops deliberately attempted to wipe out the Native American population by purposefully exposing them to smallpox. The installation is composed of six abstract paintings in green, orange, yellow ochre, yellow, burnt sepia, and blue, six monochromes with the same color scheme, and one digital photographic print of letters written between General Jeffrey Amherst and Colonel

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15 Rushing III, 27.
Bouquet planning the purposeful spread of smallpox, an article about smallpox still existing in two carefully protected laboratories in the US and in Russia, graphic illustrations of a person suffering from smallpox, and a drawing of the disease itself.

While Houle is quite literal with his intentions in the digital photographic print, it is difficult or impossible for the untrained viewer to interpret the twelve accompanying pieces. According to Mark A. Cheetham they refer to the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee people who worked together to combat the infiltration of the British. Specifically there are two canvases dedicated to the Seneca, Oneida, Onondaga, Tuscarora, Cayuga, and Mohawk.\(^\text{18}\) The six abstract paintings loosely reference the medicine bags utilized by each group.\(^\text{19}\) Perhaps Houle uses Palisade II to criticize smallpox’s continued existence in the present day, while also celebrating the passion of the six nations dedicated to holding onto their land, their culture, and their people.

Through works like *The Place Where God Lives*, *Premises for Self Rule*, *Kanata*, and *Palisade II* Houle expertly uses abstraction, sometimes combined with realistic elements, to reclaim Natives’ complex histories and cultural nuances. Since contact with Europeans, the lives of various Native American tribes have not been easy or fair. Yet through artwork, memories can be retained and Native American identity can be held on to and celebrated.

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\(^{18}\) Ibid, 47-50.

\(^{19}\) Ibid, 47.
Illustrations

Fig. 1. Robert Houle, *The Place Where God Lives*, 1989, oil on canvas, four panels, each 8’ X 6’, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Fig. 2. Robert Houle, *Premises for Self Rule: The Royal Proclamation*, 1763, 1994, oil on canvas, photo emulsion on canvas, laser cut vinyl, Museum of Contemporary Art, North York

Fig. 3. Robert Houle, *Premises for Self Rule: British North American Act*, 1867, 1994, oil on canvas, photomulsion on canvas, laser cut vinyl, Osler Hoskin and Harcourt, Toronto
Fig. 4. Robert Houle, *Premises for Self Rule: Treaty No. 1*, 1871, 1994, oil on canvas, photo emulsion on canvas, laser cut vinyl, Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg

Fig. 5. Robert Houle, *Premises for Self Rule: Indian Act*, 1994, oil on canvas, photo emulsion on canvas, laser cut vinyl, Canada Council for the Arts, Art Bank

Fig. 6. Robert Houle, *Premises for Self Rule: Constitution Act*, 1982, 1994, oil on canvas, photo emulsion on canvas, laser cut vinyl, Genest Murray DesBrisay, Toronto
Fig. 7. Robert Houle, *Kanata*, 1992, acrylic and conté crayon on canvas, 7’6” X 24’, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Fig. 8. Robert Houle, *Palisade II*, 2007, 3 part painting instillation, 6 oil on canvases at 40 X 30 cm, 6 oil on canvases at 45 X 60 cm, and 1 digital photographic print at 163.2 X 121.9 cm, Collection of the Artist
Bibliography


