

THE ETHICAL CHALLENGES OF RECOVERING HISTORICAL MEMORY SEEING LAND: RESITUATING LANDSCAPES THROUGH CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS ART EXHIBITIONS

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Article abstract

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ABSTRACT:

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RÉSUMÉ :

La mise en exposition des paysages canadiens sur les murs des musées sert d'introduction à une compréhension de la nation. Les visiteurs ne peuvent pas aisément échapper à ces paysages accidentés, dont le vide sert intentionnellement à les convaincre visuellement du droit de la nation à une possession coloniale. Si la plupart des visiteurs réagissent positivement à ces jolies images, c'est parce que de telles façons de voir l'histoire de l'art du Canada ont été naturalisées et normalisées et, de ce fait, apparaissent comme politiquement neutres. Les peintures de paysages, omniprésentes au Canada, renforcent également la revendication coloniale du territoire et autorisent l'effacement des relations entre les Autochtones et ce territoire. Comprendre ces paysages notables en dehors du récit national n'a toutefois pas été largement accepté et ce, même si un mandat approuvé d'élargir les récits historiques de l'art a eu pour résultat d'afficher davantage d'art autochtone dans les espaces muséaux. Une analyse qui interroge le récit colonial dominant présent dans les musées d'art canadiens soulève des questions éthiques plus profondes quant aux structures institutionnelles. Cet article interroge si les façons de voir le territoire autrement découlent simplement d'une mise en exposition de l'art autochtone dans les espaces institutionnels, ou si un changement systémique plus profond est nécessaire. L'analyse se concentre sur trois projets menés dans le cadre du programme « Canada 150 », notamment *Honte et Préjugés : une histoire de résilience* (2017-2020, Kent Monkman), la remise en exposition de *Artiste et chaman entre deux mondes* de Norval Morriseau (1980) au Musée des beaux-arts du Canada, et l'exposition *Michael Belmore et AJ Casson : Nkweshkdaadiimgak Miinwaa Bakeziibiisan/Confluents et affluents*, à la Galerie d'art d'Ottawa (2018, Ottawa).

During a trip to Ottawa in the winter of 2017, I took a hushed walk through the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) to experience the recently recurated Canadian and Indigenous galleries. As an Indigenous art historian, I was hopeful but also somewhat wary of what I would encounter. The entry into the newly conceived and expansive first gallery is impressive, with a welcoming range of ancient and contemporary Indigenous works, along with examples of settler artworks, that marked a dramatic change from my last visit. A recent acquisition by Haida/Nisga'a artist Luke Parnell, *A Brief History of Northwest Coast Design* (2007), made up of ten wood panels from a deconstructed bentwood box, providing a story of First Nations history since contact, was especially exciting because it demonstrated a clear effort to integrate the past, present, and future of Indigenous presence in the gallery. I was overwhelmed by what I saw, walking on through the series of spaces that snowy day. After some time, I found myself standing in a small room, looking at a wall filled with beautiful landscape paintings painted by Tom Thomson, part of an homage to the artist who died in 1917. What I was seeing left me limp. Admittedly affectively lulled by the beauty before me, I was equally overwhelmed by the palpable vision of settler colonialism in this space. Reminded of the enduring naturalized discourse of land as possession, I felt my hopes were dashed. I worried that because the ubiquitous representational landscapes pack such a visual wallop in terms of a settler way of seeing art, these works would obfuscate efforts and works chosen to honour Indigenous ways of seeing land as a living relation. Moving through the ensuing gallery spaces, I began to wonder whether the addition of Indigenous arts and changed displays could successfully undo entrenched ways of seeing territory and seeing national heritage at the NGC and other public art institutions in Canada.¹ How might the addition of Indigenous arts into galleries in art museums shift established ethical positions regarding land?

ETHICS OF SEEING

Naturalized settler ways of seeing land in the form of landscape paintings have long comforted Canadians who enter art institutions to view the canon of Canadian art history. Art by the Group of Seven admittedly reinforces narratives of colonial possession that belie the politics behind these works, reinforcing that seeing remains inextricably linked to ways of thinking, a notion asserted by British public thinker John Berger in the 1970s.² Entrenched settler myths of an empty and wild land awaiting civilizing means that the landscape endures in Canadian art museums even with changes in collection policies that have introduced Indigenous arts into the museums in greater numbers than ever before.

Indeed, ways of seeing land through the lens of the landscape painting have enjoyed a privileged systematic tradition in Canadian art museums with, until recently, little opposition. The landscape tradition in the history of western art is a much longer one, tied closely to philosophical ideas that spilled into literature, poetry, and painting across Europe and into North America since the 1700s. Western notions of claiming and concepts of beauty are closely tied in this tradition. Even today there remains in aesthetic expressions of western landscape

paintings a sense of presumed goodness in the landscape, which cultural analyst Marie Hellström Reimer agrees must be further “undone, disclosed, contested.”³ Attempts to unsettle the relationship between ethics and the aesthetics of landscape are not new, and much has been written on the significance of the landscape to ethical positions of settler nations and, more specifically, to Canadian identity.⁴

Narratives surrounding the nation-state were bolstered recently with Canada 150, the public relations branding designed to mark the nation’s sesquicentennial anniversary. Artist-activist Helene Vosters describes the events of 2017 as part of a “steady procession of increasingly spectacular Canadian cultural memory projects.”⁵ The celebrations served not only to reinscribe settler values but, according to Vosters, became a ready but unintended platform for critique and resistance to the celebrated dominant narratives. So, while the then Minister of Culture, Mélanie Joly, announced, “Let’s celebrate!,” many Indigenous and other marginalized groups in Canada were in no mood to party.

Indigenous artists, activists, and scholars raised their voices in resistance against the celebratory narrative of Canada 150, reminding all Canadians of the ongoing colonial violence evinced by the nation. Resistance to an imaginary narrative of national innocence took place across the nation in many forms, but art and art exhibitions played a key role in working to shift this narrative and in providing Canadians with other perspectives from which to “see” the nation. Mi’kmaq legal scholar and activist Pamela Palmater weighed into the controversies surrounding Canada 150 by declaring, “Arguably, every firework, hot dog and piece of birthday cake in Canada’s 150th celebration will be paid for by the genocide of Indigenous peoples and cultures.”⁶

Canada 150 funding supported offerings at art museums across the nation and many institutions inserted diverse exhibitions of Indigenous art into their programming schedules as a critical response to the 150th anniversary of Canadian confederation. These exhibitions had the added force of delivering on the aims of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s 2015 Calls to Action.⁷ Shows included Toronto’s Royal Ontario Museum’s *Anishinaabeg: Art and Power* and Calgary’s Glenbow Museum’s *Romancing the Canoe*. The Art Gallery of Ontario took on the nation by mounting the *Every. Now. Then: Reframing Nationhood* exhibition to more directly articulate growing resistance to dominant narratives with a curated range of works by fifty-five artists. The exhibition invited viewers to see Canada differently by reframing images of the nation from the perspectives of a wide range of artists of different identities.

In this analysis, I will focus on three curated inclusions that situate land in accordance with Indigenous ways of knowing, part of an interrelational whole, mounted during and shortly after the Canada 150 anniversary. The examples range from Kent Monkman’s *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience* to the rehang of Norval Morrisseau’s *Artist and Shaman between Two Worlds* (1980) as part of the *Canadian and Indigenous Art: From Time Immemorial to*

1967 exhibit at the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) to Michael Belmore and A.J. Casson: *Nkweshkdaadiimgak Miinwaa Bakeziibiisan/Confluences and Tributaries* at the Art Gallery of Ottawa in 2018. Each of these displays in public institutions proffers discourses about land beyond one of possession and posits new ways of seeing landscapes.

CANADA'S LANDSCAPES

The purposeful emptiness of the bucolic spaces reinforces the claiming of uninhabited land that began with the Doctrine of Discovery invoked by European monarchies beginning in the fifteenth century to legitimize the colonization of lands beyond their European borders. This concept of *Terra nullius* naturalizes meaning as a common-sense way of understanding land as property, as empty of inhabitants, and as ripe for colonization.⁸ In thinking more deeply about issues of land claiming that occurred as settlers arrived on the banks of the shores of British colonies, Australian Aboriginal scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that “possession and nation are ... constituted symbiotically.”⁹ The purposeful rhetoric of emptiness reinforces settler claiming of land caught up in values tied to western notions of progress and civilization. Advancing a critical concept of “colonial unknowing,” Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein find that structural impediments inherent in colonial institutions continue today to complicate efforts to reveal the “colonial alibi of empty land and vanishing Indians in the colonial present.”¹⁰

“Landscape painting must be the form of settler visual culture that relates most directly to the practical struggle of colonization, which is first and foremost, about the occupation of land and attachment to country,” reminds art historian Nicholas Thomas, who also contends in his pivotal 1999 study on relationships between Indigenous art and colonialism that landscapes paintings are “history paintings, in the sense that they imply stories and destinies that are moralizing and exemplary.”¹¹ While landscape painting reached its peak in Europe much earlier, in Canada, the primacy of landscape painting took hold in earnest when the male, settler-artist Group of Seven based in Toronto in the 1920s successfully formulated a landscape movement considered by many to have helped to visually define Canada—at least English Canada. Curator Nils Ohlsen confirms that Scandinavians “provided the essential impetus behind the foundation of one of Canada’s most important artist groups.”¹² Drawing from Eurocentric traditions, the Group of Seven exploited particular mythological constructions of Canada as wilderness as they formulated a vision of the nation that continues to be reproduced today in art museums galleries such as the NGC and the Art Gallery of Ontario today.

In the noted revisionist reading of Canadian landscape, O’Brian and White utilize the art of the Group of Seven as a starting point for dismantling the myth of identification of Canada with empty wilderness, critically responding to a popular exhibition curated by Charles Hill at the NGC in 1995.¹³ Lawren Harris’s craggy trees and rugged rock outcroppings, for example, claim land in ways that

assure Canadians of the white settler nation's divine providence when they were painted and continue to assuage guilt among viewers to galleries today. Labelling such works of art "wildercentric" in reference to the noted emptiness at play in these landscapes, O'Brian's critique is not aimed exclusively at an absence of Indigenous peoples, because he and other essayists in the collection also question the lack of female, French-Canadian, and immigrant inclusion in the paintings.¹⁴ Still today, standing before landscapes in the gallery, viewers seldom recognize imperialist motivations because the majestic landscapes have seamlessly been knitted to Canadian identity. Canada's enduring landscape tradition provides *after the fact* a common-sense narrative for understanding land that became the nation in the first place (as property, as empty of Indigenous inhabitants, as ripe for colonization).

AFFECTIVE MUSEUM EFFECTS

The long and popular artistic expression of landscape painting in Canada intersects with two issues that impact ways of seeing art in the gallery. Easily accessible to all viewers, the representational form of landscape paintings, firstly, intersect with Canada's imaginary. The weight of the nation's mythical past is continually reproduced in the present through such paintings that authorize a larger discourse of nation-building. Secondly, these same paintings have long been sanctioned by Canadian art institutions as serving as a mainstay of Canada's history of art. In addition to the aesthetic of the picturesque and the sublime as a product, it is the experience of seeing the landscape implied by the representational works that actively reinscribes the potential of the nation.

Landscape paintings reinforce what Australian archaeologist Laurajane Smith refers to as an "authorized heritage discourse." Describing museums as "repositories and manifestations of national identity and cultural achievement," Smith cautions viewers to consider the naturalized assumptions that lurk within the walls of the art museum.¹⁵ Museums, she argues, package authorized heritage discourse through art, but also through policies that tend to follow a top-down assimilationist model and resist change. When faced with challenges from Indigenous community advisory groups, for example, museums, Smith contends, often respond with minor additions that seldom challenge the underlying structural preconceptions about national heritage within the institution.¹⁶ In my experience, Indigenous stakeholders invited to advisory groups are consulted only on a narrow range of issues directly related to specific Indigenous elements so that larger structural issues mostly remain unchanged.

Art within the walls of Canadian art museums takes on importance because of affective benefits accorded from a "museum effect" wherein cultural institutions educate and civilize visitors through a positive emotional experience that engenders a "right way" of looking.¹⁷ Art historian Svetlana Alpers proposes that museums establish their own ways of seeing, using this power to shape meaning given to all that is exhibited within.¹⁸ Landscapes by Canadian artists that hang in Canada's art museums, which have long served as a primer for understanding the

nation, profit from the museum effect. As pretty pictures, their ethical positions are often naturalized through a particular way of seeing. Ethical positioning within institutions has been sanctioned and exploited through the power of aesthetic affect. The political potential of beauty inherent in landscapes such as those by the Group of Seven raises ethical issues that are not easily countered. Philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto, in a book that traces the evolution of the concept of beauty, warns that “beauty might claim the same ontological weight as virtue.”¹⁹ The affective influence of beauty with regard to landscape painting remains a formidable challenge with regard to settler values that further advances the museum effect.

To be sure, works of Indigenous art found in art museums also enjoy greater credibility within the walls of the cultural institutions, following the logic of this concept. However, the “museum effect” accorded to such art in institutions is not easily untangled from a long discourse around primitivism and racism that has typically shaped viewer responses to Indigenous works of art. As long as landscape paintings remain a central aspect of the permanent collections in Canadian art museums, unmarked by the colonial baggage they carry, the significance of the landscape remains undiminished. In a laudable effort to unpack notions of the land as part of Canada’s national heritage, art historians Lynda Jessup, Erin Morton, and Kirsty Robertson interrogate the “uses of the past in the service of the present,” to disrupt naturalized but problematic discourses that shape the study of Canadian art history and visual culture.²⁰ To that end, Indigenous art historian Richard W. Hill, contends that “vacant lots are not really vacant,” in an effort to counter the overwhelming narrative of emptiness that assuages guilt around land seizure and colonial projects inherent in Canadian landscape paintings, but which remains mostly unseen.²¹

UNSETTLED INSTITUTIONAL SPACES

As places of power, Canadian art museums assume an implicit role in packaging dominant narratives as established conventions related directly to ways of seeing and knowing Canada. In 1991 Mohawk curator Lee-Ann Martin, frustrated with a lack of change in art institutions, stated that “Periodic or ‘soft’ inclusion... absolves the institution from a long-term commitment to the serious treatment of works by Native artists” that “almost always guarantees consistent exclusion... and gives the impression that there is no problem of exclusion.”²² Museums are built upon Western structures of power. Art historian Ruth Phillips finds that “critical writings on museums during the past two decades has produced a widely accepted understanding of the ways in which nation-states have historically used these institutions to educate their publics to desired forms of social behaviour and citizenship.”²³ She draws attention to “the naming of the macroclassification of the museum system—art, archaeology, ethnology, history, folk culture, natural science, science”—as structures that require revision.²⁴ “Because museums represent a significant level of cultural authority,” Native American Art scholar Aldona Jonaitis adds that “their version of information is particularly powerful.”²⁵ While Martin notes that “today we have more Indige-

nous curators who are really framing exhibitions in different ways, providing different levels of entry into the thought processes and concepts of Indigenous artists,” she chooses mostly to work outside art institutions. “The other part of me keeps hoping it’s not a blip on the landscape because I have seen that happen before.”²⁶

The National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, Ontario, established in 1913 as an autonomous institution to display and collect art, has struggled to shift directions away from the ritualistic spaces it was originally mandated to attend to. Art historian Leslie Dawn finds that a “mandate to underwrite a unique national art founded in landscape” was part of the vision for the newly formed National Gallery of Canada which was given official status as an autonomous entity in 1913 under Prime Minister Robert Borden.²⁷ The NGC soon began buying works of art by Tom Thomson and members of the Group of Seven to populate the permanent collection, so much so that Dawn characterizes the artists as the “handmaidens of the NGC.”²⁸ This early relationship between the NGC and landscape solidified a clear mandate for understanding landscape as Canadian identity and also for understanding the primacy of this form of painting with the NGC and other art museums in Canada.

Late to collecting and exhibiting Indigenous art, the NGC has in the past two decades made significant overtures to shift the discourse away from the foundational landscape, opening up new ways to consider the nation and art. More than sixteen years ago the NGC overhauled its galleries devoted to historic Canadian art with the permanent installation of *Art of This Land* in 2003 and continued with a larger overhaul of the galleries once again in 2017. Art historian Anne Whitelaw outlines the exhibition history of the NGC as a response to the rehang of the Historical Canadian Galleries in 2003, such that the NGC galleries presented Canadian art history to the public as a “coherent narrative of artistic progress.”²⁹ She adds that with the advent of *Art of This Land*, the insertion of Indigenous historical works into an otherwise western linear exhibition of art demanded that the works “conform to Western ways of seeing.”³⁰ Whitelaw’s critique foregrounds ongoing issues for art museums challenged with inserting Indigenous art objects into an otherwise non-Indigenous permanent art collection.

Prompted by directives such as the noted TRC Calls to Action, this analysis contends with the ethical implications around ways of seeing land in art institutions. The NGC’s most recent changes in 2017 rearticulate a commitment to the inclusion of Indigenous arts within the larger narratives of Canadian art. Still, Phillips notes that public culture in Canada typically organizes major art exhibitions around important historical anniversaries and, while this was more of an unveiling of a new curatorial vision, the sesquicentennial and the TRC Calls to Action fostered the timing of the latest transformation of the galleries.³¹ The NGC’s renamed and recurated displays include a significant range of ancient Indigenous artworks as part of an effort to assemble a ten-century-long timeline of arts of the nation. The NGC borrowed ninety-five Indigenous artworks from

museums and private collectors in order to showcase the impressive range of work done on this land, while the formulation of Indigenous Advisory committees played a key role in providing expertise on selections of works, display protocols, and community engagements. A review in *Canadian Art* concerning the noted galleries by Anishinaabe artist Adrienne Huard in September 2017 was decidedly laudatory.³² Still, while a substantive revision was realized in the rehang, the institution maintains traditional categorizations and organizational structures that reinforce western approaches that undermine work undertaken in the gallery spaces. Viewers encounter displays organized mostly around a linear chronology. The utilization of the timeline confirms the reinforcement of notions of progress and evolutionary changes in art implicit in the western canon of art history. Cyclical notions of time, in accordance with Indigenous ways of knowing that greet viewers who enter the gallery, inscribed by a linear timeline in other spaces. Because of the entrenched cultural assumptions around a linear sense of progress, the overall layout of the galleries preserves the prevailing western paradigm.

SEEING LAND/SEEING RELATIONS

First People conceive of land differently than European settlers. Many Canadians misunderstand this way of knowing because of the skewed tropes reproduced in popular culture, with little tangible knowledge of what this actually means. Art historian Kristina Huneault rigorously takes up the concept of ways of seeing in a comparative art-historical conversation between Emily Carr's landscapes and baskets created by contemporary Sylix artist, Sewinchewet (Sophie Frank). While many Canadians view Carr as an artist who embraced Indigenous ways of knowing land because of her expansive way of seeing landscape, the sacred underpinnings that connect Indigenous peoples with territory in a relational way remain at their roots something different. In her analysis, Huneault concludes that Carr's western understanding of nature as a detached "thing" clashes with Sewinchewet's Sylix way of knowing land as living—as having personhood.³³

Anishinaabe-Kwe scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains that within Anishinaabeg epistemology, *aki* or land expansively involves all complex aspects of creation. Beyond landforms, plants, and animals, Simpson's expansive vision of land also includes "spirits, sounds, thoughts, feelings, energies, and all of the emergent systems, ecologies, and networks that connect these elements."³⁴ In *Dancing on Turtle's Back* Simpson mines Anishinaabeg creation stories as a way of accessing traditional knowledge within the culture. She argues that stories reveal the need to "engage our entire bodies: our physical beings, emotional self, our spiritual energy and our intellect. Our methodologies, our lifeways must reflect those components of our being and the integration of those four components into a whole."³⁵ Learning to live and enact those teaching," shares Simpson, "happens through a "personal embodiment of *mino bimaadiziwin* [living a good life]."³⁶

Many other Indigenous thinkers similarly articulate relationships to the land as holistic, interconnected, and sacred, echoing cultural ways of knowing. Nehiyaw (Cree) theorist Willie Ermine explains epistemological approaches to land through the term *mamatowisin*, or the “capacity to tap the creative life forces of the inner space by the use of all the faculties that constitute our being—it is to exercise inwardness.”³⁷ The conceptual recognition of relationships with all living things upon this land infuses Indigenous artistic output, whether painting, sculpture, dance, song, performance, oratory, or an interconnected expression. At its heart, creativity conceptually operates as a centre point at which story expresses interrelational ways of knowing.

SEEING LAND/MONKMAN

Perhaps the most powerful Indigenous art exhibition of 2017 to address ethical relationships to land was *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*, a travelling exhibition of art by two-spirited Cree artist Kent Monkman, first mounted at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto in 2017 and then installed at the Glenbow in Calgary, before moving to other venues in 2018 through 2020.³⁸ *Shame and Prejudice* [fig. 1] takes on colonial settlement of this land, countering messages in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century landscapes on display in Canadian art museums through a series of contemporary paintings, installations, and performance-artworks that taunt western artistic tropes through the witnessing and performative presence of his alter ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle. This exhibition disarms viewers with thoughtful provocations about established ways of seeing the land and, as importantly, ways of seeing the nation.



Figure 1: Installation Shot, from Murray Whyte. “Kent Monkman Fills in the Blanks in Canadian History,” *Toronto Star*, January 22, 2017. Photo credit & permission: Marcus Oleniuk.

Many Indigenous artists, including Jim Logan, have painted works that insert Indigenous peoples into the European canon of art history. However, Monkman has taken on the task of decolonizing the theory and method of landscape art practiced by settler artists by facing the canon head on. As counterpoints to settler landscapes, such paintings reveal other ways to know the land and eluci-

date a long and systemic process of colonization in Canada. In the foreword to his 2017 exhibition *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*, Monkman outlines his mission for the exhibition:

...to authorize Indigenous experience in the canon of art history that has heretofore erased us from view. From Albert Bierstadt to Paul Kane and Cornelius Krieghoff, museums across the continent hold in their collections countless paintings that depict and celebrate the European settlers' expansion and 'discovery' of the North American landscape, but very few, if any, historical representations show the dispossession and removal of the First Peoples from their lands. This version of history excised Indigenous people from art history, effectively white-washing the truth from Canada's foundational myths and school curriculums.³⁹

Monkman's bold 2017 exhibition *Shame and Prejudice* challenges the complicated national narrative that includes the Euro-Canadian landscape tradition by revisioning and repositioning power within his canvasses, inserting images of colonial violence into the exhibition that he notes are otherwise missing in the history of art hanging in Canadian museums. The exhibition feels, in many ways, like a grand educational project meant to provide all viewers with a new way of seeing and thinking about land and about the nation. His educative focus began almost two decades ago when he left abstraction behind in order to undertake a close study of the western tradition of landscape paintings. Monkman then began in the early 2000s, following a careful reproduction of the techniques of Romantic landscape paintings by Albert Bierstadt, a well-known nineteenth-century German-American artist, to paint works that "conveyed Indigenous experience" in the history of colonialism.⁴⁰ "I draw inspiration from a lot of old master paintings," explains Monkman in a conversation about the works he started painting since leaving abstraction behind.⁴¹ Monkman adds, "European settlers came and basically made documents of their experiences through a very subjective lens."⁴²

Caoimhe Morgan-Feir's review in *Canadian Art* outlines the artist's methodical research process that led to *Shame and Prejudice*. The project got underway in 2014 when curator Barbara Fischer approached Monkman to create a Canada 150 project for the University of Toronto art museum. Reflecting on what Canada's sesquicentennial means for First Peoples, Monkman decided to include a wide range of historic and contemporary issues: "So there's a lot of material in the show that tries to encompass and stitch together this narrative that reflects back on 150 years."⁴³ Examining archives and permanent collections of art and objects across Canada, Monkman thoughtfully added powerful objects such as the moccasins of Píhtokahanapiwiyin (Poundmaker) to the exhibition. By displaying the moccasins nearby *The Subjugation of Truth*, which depicts Píhtokahanapiwiyin and Mishtahimaskwa (Big Bear) in chains in 1885 in Manitoba's Stoney Mountain Penitentiary following charges of treason in relation to the 1885 Rebellion, the reality of this historic event is realized for viewers. Monkman explains, "It was a pretty deliberate effort to have people reflect on

the last 150 years in terms of the Indigenous experience.”⁴⁴ Monkman draws upon his alter ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, inserting her voice into the exhibition textually in the form of a written memoir, as well as into several of the paintings, to “make it real.”⁴⁵ Divided into nine sections or chapters, the exhibition and its companion guide critically uncover genocidal policies in ways that closely align with the thematic organization of the TRC Calls to Action released just two years prior to this exhibition.

Land plays a key role in works in Monkman’s 2017 exhibition (and in Monkman’s art more generally) as an agential presence and observer of the colonial processes at play in each of the sections or chapters of the exhibition. Unlike earlier works by the artist that more closely mimic the Romantic landscape tradition of (re)presenting landscape, this series of works, however, references history paintings from the canon of western art history. Still, the power of land resonates throughout the exhibition. Ties to land severed through the treaty process are articulated in chapter II of the exhibition, “Fathers of Confederation,” when Miss Chief reminisces in the textual accompaniment *Excerpt from the Memoirs of Miss Chief Eagle Testickle*, “My people needed an ally in power, and I had my ways of getting a seat at the table.”⁴⁶ The painting *The Daddies*, a remake of Robert Harris’s 1884 painting *Meeting of the Delegates of British North America to Settle the Terms of Confederation*, includes the naked Miss Chief, who inserts an Indigenous queer presence at the historic event, facing the Fathers of Confederation, including Prime Minister John A. Macdonald, who is positioned in the centre of the paintings, standing with his back to Charlottetown’s harbour with an expansive vista of land, water, and sky.⁴⁷ This painting is as much about power as it is land, as witnessed by Monkman’s deliberate and provocative positioning of Miss Chief, who, seated before this powerful group of male politicians and the ornate mullioned windows within this colonial edifice, sees the land, as she gestures past the bodies and architecture built to obscure its power. Miss Chief’s gesture and positionality resist the possessive overtures made these settler men. While we, like Miss Chief, grapple with the decisions of male egos, Monkman makes clear that the territoriality at issue in this historic scene continues to be a defining issue for Indigenous people.

SEEING LAND/MORRISSEAU

Anishinaabe artist Norval Morrisseau’s *Artist and Shaman between Two Worlds* (1980) [fig. 2], in the Canadian and Indigenous Art: From Time Immemorial to 1967 exhibit at the NGC, is situated in a space near art by his contemporaries, Odawa artist Daphne Odig and Anishinaabe painter Roy Thomas, far from the landscape and entry to the exhibition. The work does not impart dramatic lessons like *Shame and Prejudice*, but Morrisseau’s painting, done thirty-seven years prior to 2017, quietly makes a case for Indigenous epistemological relationships. Mostly seen as part of an Indigenous spiritual discourse, *Artist and Shaman between Two Worlds* does not readily reference land for most non-Indigenous viewers, who view spirituality as something separate from land. Painting land

well beyond the established norms of the western landscape tradition, Morrisseau introduces not just different ways of seeing, but different ways of knowing land through his own visual language.



Figure 2: “Woman Standing before Norval Morrisseau, Artist and Shaman Between Two Worlds” *Globe and Mail*, June 20, 2017. Photo credit & permission: The Canadian Press/Adrian Wyld.

Misinterpretations of seeing the art of Norval Morrisseau have meant that audiences mistake the artist’s paintings as facile representations of stories or “paintings of legends,” when they contain much deeper significance. It is not only this painting by Morrisseau that reads as something other than land; his entire oeuvre, which contains ontological relational ties to land, has been mostly understood as separate from other aspects of reality. However, land for Morrisseau naturally intersects with Anishinaabeg ways of knowing. His paintings and performative actions remain today important teachings that not only disrupt Eurocentric ways of knowing land but have the power to teach viewers to think about land as part of a whole.

Morrisseau never painted representational landscapes but he did create thousands of unique works that articulate his unwavering reverence for the land informed by cultural teachings. Morrisseau’s art, much of it created between the late 1950s and the late 1990s, continues to be confined in an exhibitionary frame with art museums that view spiritual landscapes from a western perspective. When the artist first began exhibiting his contemporary paintings in galleries in the 1960s, critics often situated his art within a Primitivist discourse made popular during the European Modern period. Such a discourse narrowly judged his work within a universalizing matrix that had provided no entry point into his own ways of seeing land. However, since his retrospective exhibition at the NGC in 2006, a greater interest in his art has led to wider understandings and appreciation of his powerful works. Still, without context, meanings of his art remain largely inaccessible to viewers. Though his paintings, including *Artist and Shaman Between Two Worlds*, disrupt settler colonial narratives of erasure, many viewers appreciate his work without fully knowing deeper articulations of balance, relationality, reciprocity, and considerations of future generations central to his paintings.

Land, in this painting, is visually presented by Morriseau expansively, complete with energy and emotion, arranged on the canvas in a visual narrative in much the way Simpson discusses Anishinaabeg storytelling. It is noteworthy that in addition to an Anishinaabeg epistemological relationship to aki, Morriseau widens his expanded vision of land filtered through a range of spiritual teachings. Still, for Morriseau, land remains a living being.

The large-scale painting is bifurcated horizontally by a black horizontal line that divides our world from the sky world. Washes of pink for the upper world and blue for the waters below serve as a backdrop for the radiantly coloured inter-related figures on the canvas. A self-representation of the artist as shaman, Morriseau dons a headdress that morphs into the powerful reigning spirit of the skyworld, Thunderbird. With outstretched serpents that serve as wings that reach across the canvas, Thunderbird offers protection to all. Fish, turtles, and water spirits populate the water in the lower half of the painting. Birds, humans, and spirit figures positioned on unseen land in the foreground round out Morriseau's unified conception of the land. Aesthetically, Morriseau creates this work outside of western conventions of beauty, but the work formulates an expansive understanding of beauty through this storytelling process of painting.

Miskwaabik Animiki or Copper Thunderbird, Morriseau's signature and personal identity, inscribed in Cree syllabics within the body of a water being in the lower left corner of the canvas, signifies his authorized presence within this vision of reality. Land connected with water and sky articulate, for a viewer in the know, an integrated sense of land that has no connection to the possessive impulse described by Moreton-Robinson with regard to Eurocentric understandings of nature. Still, without a contextual understanding of Indigenous conceptions such as those advanced by Morriseau, viewers cannot easily see this as a painting about land. This leaves this work and others by Indigenous artists in the NGC galleries as a commentary about generalized Indigenous issues and cultural knowledge, rather than as ongoing relational discourses about land.

SEEING LAND/BELMORE

Michael Belmore and A.J. Casson: Nkweshkdaadiimgak Miinwaa Bakeziibisan/Confluences and Tributaries [fig. 3], curated as part of the 2018 programming of the newly reopened Ottawa Art Gallery (OAG), directly places the landscapes by one of the members of the Group of Seven in visual conversation with Anishinaabe artist Michael Belmore's latest works done using Great Lakes copper. On display from October 17, 2018, until March 17, 2019, these works introduced audiences to different ways of seeing land in approachable ways that non-Indigenous viewers can more easily access. Mohawk curator Wahsontiio Cross formulates a visual conversation between recent land-based works of contemporary Anishinaabe artist Michael Belmore and a series landscapes by Group of Seven member Alfred Joseph Casson, part of the OAG's permanent collection. The exhibition was the first in a series planned by the OAG in its newly expanded facility that reopened to the public in 2018, titled the *Firestone*

Reverb Series. The planned series was designed to invite contemporary artists to respond to selections of works drawn from the Firestone Collection of Canadian Art, housed at the OAG.



Figure 3: Installation Shot, Michael Belmore and A. J. Casson: *Nkweshkdaadiingak Miinwaa Bakeziibiisan/Confluences and Tributaries*, Ottawa Art Gallery. Photo credit & permission: Julia Martin.

While both Belmore and Casson created work inspired by the power of the land in northwestern Ontario, they engage with land from divergent ontological perspectives. This pairing of artists provides viewers with an opportunity to rethink aesthetics and abstract understandings of land from different ethical positions within a single gallery. Contemporary, three-dimensional, organic, living copper works set next to the more static two-dimensional landscape paintings and drawings hanging on the wall deliver viewers unaware of Indigenous ways of knowing the land an entry point into an expanded vision of appreciating art that honours the land and aesthetic options beyond the landscape tradition. The exhibition does not offer judgement, but it does expand ways of seeing land in approachable ways. Asked about her motivation for this exhibition, Cross states:

The Group of Seven, which make up the bulk of this collection, were notorious for leaving out Indigenous and an overall human presence in their work, making the Canadian landscape seem wide open and there for the taking by European settlers, justifying the colonization process. This is what played out in the back of my mind as I sifted through the collection, thinking of what was lacking and what needed to be said.⁴⁸

Belmore, a contemporary Anishinaabe artist from northwestern Ontario, references the environment, land, water, and his identity through his art-making processes, as Cross explains in the curatorial essay for this exhibition.⁴⁹ A recent graduate of University of Ottawa's Master of Fine Arts program, he has shown his art in a number of pivotal contemporary art exhibitions nationally and internationally. His recent focus on traditional metalsmithing techniques helps him map out waterways.⁵⁰ The four works chosen for this exhibition highlight his ideas about land grounded within Anishinaabeg ways of knowing. Belmore's

Settlement, Landing 1 & 2, Gather, and Watershed No. 1, situated by the curator in the centre of the gallery, symbolically and physically articulate the centrality of copper within expansive Anishinaabeg ways of knowing, which integrate spirituality and relationality into all aspects of life. Each piece hand-forged from Great Lakes copper unveils a power of place.

The spiritual interrelationships revealed by the materiality of Belmore's art works are untapped by Casson, whose notion of universal spirituality has little alignment with an Anishinaabeg worldview. When Casson joined the Group of Seven in 1926, he, like Lawren Harris and other members, embarked on painting trips to the north shore of Lake Superior. Harris painted some of his most iconic works along the north shore of Lake Superior after first visiting the area in 1921. Many of these works display a spirituality that reflects his interest in theosophy. In 1925 Casson joined Harris, and other members of the Group of Seven including A. Y. Jackson, and Carmichael, on a sketching trip back to the North Shore. Casson accompanied Harris, Jackson, and Carmichael again on their final organized trip there in 1928. Art historian Peter Larisey describes how Harris, a follower of theosophy, saw the wilderness as an "infinite unfathomable thing," and that he shared the significance of the wilderness with other members of the group, even though they did not ascribe a sense of the mystical to the paint in their compositions, as he did.⁵¹ Still, in the selection of works by Casson chosen for this display, the modern, idealized vision of the barren land promoted by the Group of Seven that has come to define Canada is present. Limited by Casson's landscapes in the Firestone collection, Cross successfully creates a narrative of place that invites viewers not only to think about aesthetic considerations, but also to think about spiritual understandings of land.

Rather than force facile similarities or contrasts between the two artists, this exhibition fosters a deeper dialogue about place, a narrative directed largely by materiality. Belmore's use of a powerful and ancient material in a contemporary gallery space disrupts the linearity of art-historical discourse in a way that imparts a cyclical realignment of time. In doing so, the work resituates the past in the present. The palpable spirit of the living material directs viewers to its deeper meanings whereas the two-dimensional landscape paintings on canvas merely represent land, represent nature. For Casson, the spiritual context was settler, Christian-based, influenced by theosophy, and, as a result, suggests rugged superficial imaginings of nature. For Belmore, whose family has lived on this land for thousands of years, an intimacy of place, infused by the energy of all living beings, past, present, and future, creates work not about wilderness but about home and about relationships.⁵² The exhibition makes accessible that which is inaccessible to many viewers who stand before Morrisseau's work at the National Gallery.

UNDOING ERASURE/SHIFTING NARRATIVES

The three noted curatorial ventures discussed above contend with ethical relationships to land in recent exhibitions that coincided with the release of the TRC Calls to Action and the occasion of Canada 150. While the affective power of landscape paintings within art museums maintains a decided discourse of erasure within art institutions, its naturalized way of seeing champions traditional landscape paintings and continually reproduces a mythology of pictorial representations of land ripe for taming and civilizing. Classifications, organization of institutions, and entrenched relations to linearity mean that efforts to change systemic practices are more difficult than simply adding Indigenous arts to the exhibitionary mix in order to undo this way of seeing.

While many art museums understand the TRC Calls to Action as an opportunity to contend with the colonial complications of public institutions addressed by Martin as early as 1991, an additive approach that inserts a range of Indigenous art within the established narrative of Canada's art history cannot easily undo the structural impediments that maintain settler ways of seeing and thinking about art and land. Rigid categorizations, linear forms of display, and the long-held power of the museum make the institution itself a cultural artifact of the colonial project, and as such it resists fundamental change. The three curatorial efforts of Indigenous art discussed above demonstrate how ethics and aesthetics impact understandings of land as a concept.

Monkman's *Shame and Prejudice* exhibition takes deliberate and necessary actions to disrupt the erasure of colonialism through the production of works that reposition the landscape within a larger and contemporary narrative. Using western representational ways of seeing, pretty pictures that express a national narrative of possession are Monkman's target. This mode makes Monkman's exhibition effective for viewers accustomed to western ways of seeing. Rather than glossing over the imperialist impulse of the landscape tradition, Monkman uncovers the destruction of Indigenous ways of knowing land. The didactic force of his work questions the ethics of landscape paintings and the ethics of nation building inside and outside the gallery. Monkman orchestrates a mediated conversation about the weight of colonialism by exploiting a language of art privileged by viewers. As a result, *Shame and Prejudice* delivers a clear lesson in colonial histories that exploits western ways of seeing to provide a counter-view. *The Daddies*, as noted, while more easily understood from a political perspective, does not as readily communicate to viewers deeper conversations about Indigenous ontological relationships with land. Though paradigmatic visualizations of Indigenous ways of knowing land are central to Monkman's body of work, settler viewers often lack an understanding of this profound ethical relationship. Norval Morrisseau's *Artist and Shaman between Two Worlds* similarly serves as a teaching about respectful ways of knowing land that remains inaccessible to most viewers.

Morrisseau's painting includes great insights, yet his storytelling discourse about the land remains mostly lost to those unaware of the privileged role of land in relation to Anishinaabeg knowledge. The overt narrative about shamanism tells part of the story of this work, though Morrisseau's interwoven matrix of relational understandings of land remains unseen. As with works by Monkman, Morrisseau's aesthetic interpretation of the land requires a contextual understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing before it can be appreciated as a painting of land as a living relation.

Nkweshkdaadiimgak Miinwaa Bakeziibiisan/Confluences and Tributaries contends with disparate ways of seeing land with regard to the territory of the Anishinaabeg in northwestern Ontario in ways that are more easily expressed because of curatorial decision making. Situating Belmore's contemporary, organic, three-dimensional works forged from local, sacred copper found in the Canadian Shield of the north shore of Lake Superior next to western landscape paintings by Casson invites viewers to affectively experience different relationships to land through a pointed visual dialogue. Both Morrisseau and Belmore situates the sacredness of copper from Anishinaabeg cultural perspectives within their works. Yet, while Morrisseau provides significant insights into an ethical relationship with land, Belmore's art more effectively contextualizes Indigenous way of seeing land for settler viewers because of materiality. As *Copper Thunderbird*, Morrisseau abstractly embodies ontological narratives in his painting while Belmore uses copper in tangible ways to dynamically foster a being-to-being relationship that engages viewers in a sensorial or affective experience.

These three exhibitions generate options for decolonizing galleries. Yet, while such ways of seeing land disrupt established museum frames, on their own they provide only a limited (re)visioning. Shifting ways of seeing within public art institutions requires more than a commitment to an additive process, or, as Martin noted almost thirty years ago, more than "soft inclusion." Transforming ways of seeing histories of Canadian art in public art institutions requires concerted systemic change that includes acquisitions, curatorial commitment, and educational programming.

A paradigm shift around ways of seeing, one that rethinks relationships and makes Indigenous art and ways of knowing more accessible in all public art institutions, would transform the ways in which Canadians think about territory. In 2017 the SBC Gallery in Montreal took steps in this direction by renaming its space the Wood Land School in an exciting, experimental, year-long reimagining of public institutions that was initiated by Indigenous artists and curators Omaskêko Cree artist Duane Linklater, Alutiiq artist Tanya Lukin Linklater, curator cheyanne turions (Indigenous and settler descent), and Kahnawake-born artist Walter Scott.⁵³ Though not conceived as a sustainable model, according to turions, the intervention demonstrates a willingness by a gallery to re-envision its institutional mandate, to cede their curatorial, bureaucratic, and financial budgetary authority for one year, or, as Linklater explains, to "unknow the power they yield."⁵⁴ As the Wood Land School experiment illustrates, conceiving of land as relation rather than as possession must drive ethical revisioning within public institutions. Land, after all, means so much more than what is seen in a pretty picture hanging on a wall.

NOTES

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- ³ Hellström Reimer, Maria, “Whose Goodness? Ethics and Aesthetics in Landscapes of Dissensus,” *Journal of Landscape Architecture*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2012, p. 76-81, DOI: 10.1080/18626033.2012.746092.
- ⁴ See Conrick, Maeve, Munroe Eagles, Jane Koustas, and Caitriona Ni Chasaide, *Landscapes and Landmarks of Canada*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2017; Dawn, Leslie, *National Visions, National Blindness: Canadian Art and Identities in the 1920s*, Vancouver, UBC Press, 2006; Mackey, Eva, “‘Death by Landscape’: Race, Nature, and Gender in Canadian Nationalist Mythology,” *Canadian Woman Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2000, p. 125–130; Manning, Erin, “I AM CANADIAN Identity, Territory and the Canadian National Landscape,” *Theory & Event*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2000. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/32607>; John, White, Peter (eds.), *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007.
- ⁵ Vosters, Helene, *Unbecoming Nationalism: From Commemoration to Redress Canada, Winnipeg*, University of Manitoba Press, 2019, p.7
- ⁶ Ibid, p. 2.
- ⁷ Please note that the Calls to Action specific to Museums and Archives (67–70) target museums rather than contemporary art galleries. See Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action, 2015. Retrieved from http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf.
- ⁸ Canada’s recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Call to Action #45 specifically calls for the repudiation of this concept because it was used to justify European sovereignty. “Repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples such as the Doctrine of Discovery and *terra nullius*.” See *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action*, Winnipeg, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015, 45.i: http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf.
- ⁹ Moreton-Robinson, Aileen, “The House that Jack Built: Britishness and White Possession,” *Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2005, p. 21.
- ¹⁰ Vimalassery, Manu, Juliana Hu Pegues and Alyosha Goldstein, “On Colonial Unknowing,” *Theory & Event*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2016, p. 1045.
- ¹¹ Thomas, Nicholas, *Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1999, p. 54.
- ¹² Ohlsen, Nils, “This Is What We Want to Do with Canada: Reflections of Scandinavian Landscape Painting in the Work of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven,” in *Painting Canada: Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven*, London, Philip Wilson Publishers, 2011, p. 54.
- ¹³ O’Brian, John and Peter White, *Beyond Wilderness*, p. x.
- ¹⁴ O’Brian, John, “Wild Art History,” in O’Brian, John and Peter White (eds.), *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007, p. 21.
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- ²² Martin, Lee-Ann, *The Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion: Contemporary Native Art and Public Art Museums in Canada. A Report Submitted to the Canada Council*, Ottawa, Canada Council, 1991, p. 25.
- ²³ Phillips, Ruth B, *Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011, p. 157.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 95–101.
- ²⁵ Jonaitis, Aldona, "First Nations and Art Museums," in Jessup, Lynda and Shannon Bagg (eds.), *On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery*, Hull, QC, Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2002, p. 19.
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- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Whitelaw, Anne, "Placing Aboriginal Art at the National Gallery of Canada," *Canadian Journal of Communications*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2006, p. 199.
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- ³¹ Phillips, p. 24–26.
- ³² Huard, Adrienne, "An Indigenous Woman's View of the National Gallery of Canada," *Canadian Art*, September 2017. <https://canadianart.ca/reviews/canadian-and-indigenous-galleries/>
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- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 43.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Willie, Ermine, "Aboriginal Epistemology," in Battiste, Marie and Jean Barman (eds.), *First Nations Education in Canada*, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1995, p. 104.
- ³⁸ *Shame and Prejudice* has been touring Canadian art galleries since its debut at University of Toronto, January 26–March 5, 2017. Additional venues include Glenbow Museum, Calgary, AB, June 17–Sept 10, 2017; Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, ON Jan 6–Apr 8, 2018; Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown, PEI, June 24–Sept 15, 2018; Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, NS, Oct. 13–Dec. 16, 2018; McCord Museum, Montreal, PQ, Feb 8–May 5, 2019; Museum London, London, ON, June 1–August 25, 2019; Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, MB, September 27, 2019–February 9, 2020; Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, BC, May–October, 2020.
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- ⁴⁷ See Kent Monkman, *The Daddies*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 152.4 x 285.75 cm, Collection of Christine Armstrong and Arfhan Rawji. <https://150ans150oeuvres.uqam.ca/en/artwork/2016-the-daddies-by-kent-monkman/#description>.
- ⁴⁸ Conversation with Wahsontio Cross. October 15, 2019.
- ⁴⁹ Cross, Wahsontio, “Confluences and Tributaries: Michael Belmore and A. J. Casson,” curatorial essay, Ottawa Art Gallery, October 11, 2018–March 18, 2019. <https://michaelbelmore.com/confluences-and-tributaries-michael-belmore-and-a-j-casson/>
- ⁵⁰ See <https://michaelbelmore.com/bio/>
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- ⁵² Conversation with Wahsontio Cross. October 15, 2019.
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