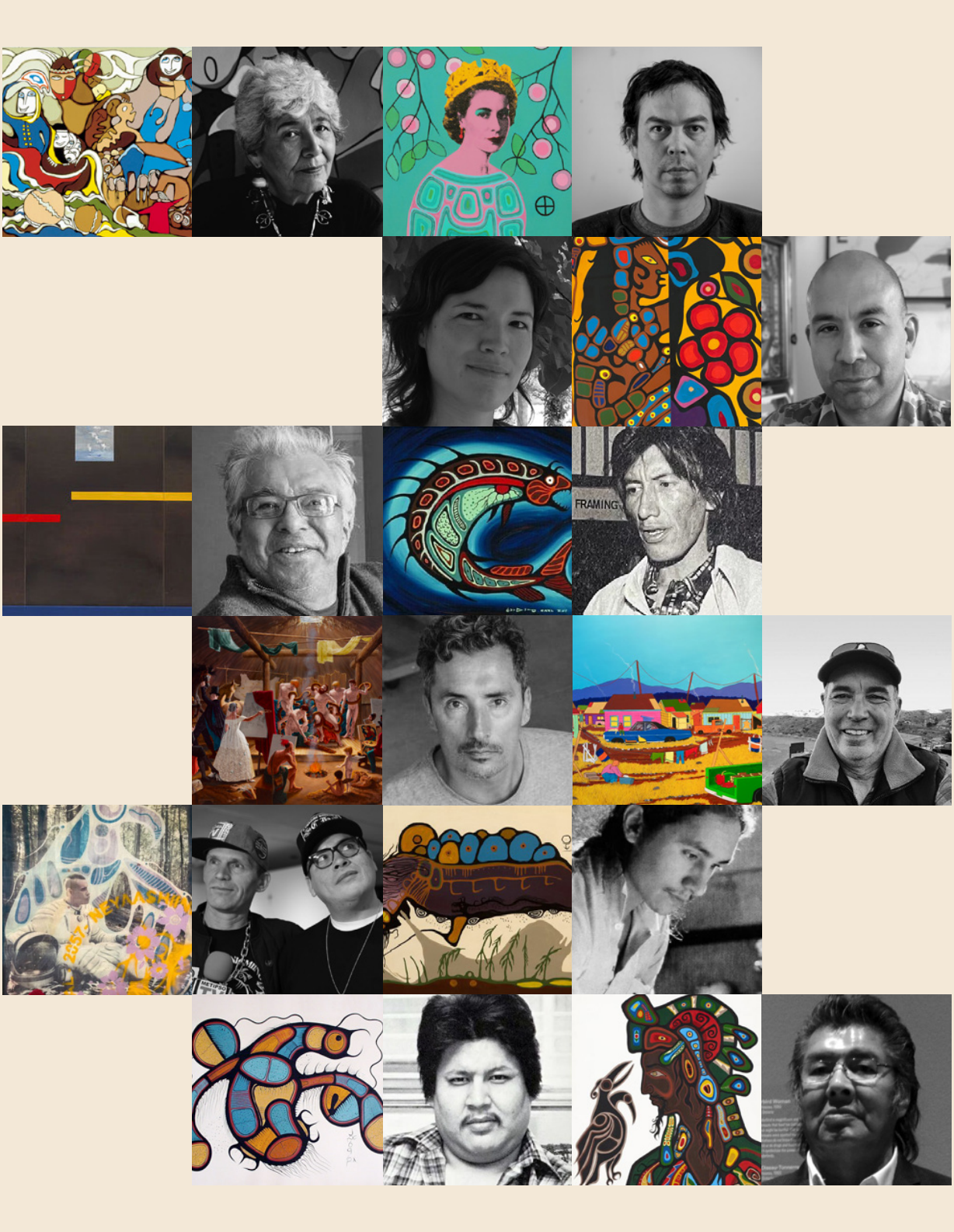
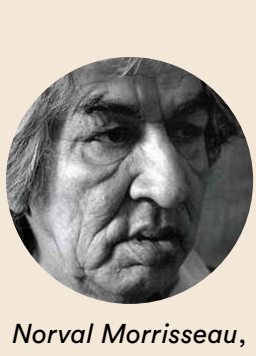
ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

MARCH 14, 2025

INSPIRED BY NORVAL MORRISSEAU
HIS LEGACY FOR 11 CANADIAN ARTISTS

Revered as the Mishomis, *or grandfather, of contemporary Indigenous art in Canada, Norval Morrisseau was born ninety-four years ago today. Here's a look at how and why his legacy burns bright.*





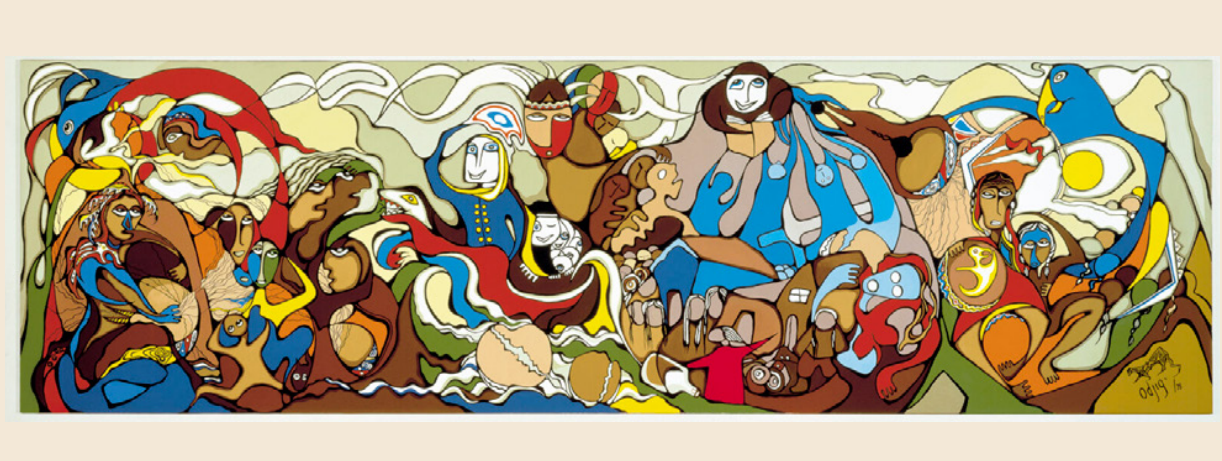
Norval Morrisseau, c.1992, photograph by Louie Palu.

As author Carmen Robertson shares in ACI's *Norval Morrisseau: Life & Work*, Morrisseau became a celebrity and public figure following his 1962 exhibition at Toronto's Pollock Gallery—the first time an Indigenous artist had shown work in a contemporary art gallery in Canada. Morrisseau's oeuvre was deeply rooted in his Anishinaabe identity, worldview, and shamanistic beliefs. His signature style includes bold lines, vibrant colours, and an "X-ray" perspective. By the 1980s, Morrisseau had galvanized a new generation of creators. A 1984 exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario placed his works among pieces created by a group of other artists, including Daphne Odjig (1919–2016) and Carl Ray (1943–1978), who fashioned their own unique expressions inspired by Morrisseau. Today, to mark Morrisseau's birthday, we spotlight eleven artists who continue the legacy of the trailblazing *Mishomis* (grandfather) of contemporary Indigenous art in Canada. Morrisseau's influence extends from the Woodland School painters he mentored to today's Indigenous artists who use their craft as a powerful expression of presence, identity, and resistance.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

THE INDIAN IN TRANSITION, 1978

by Daphne Odjig



Daphne Odjig, *The Indian in Transition*, 1978, Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau.

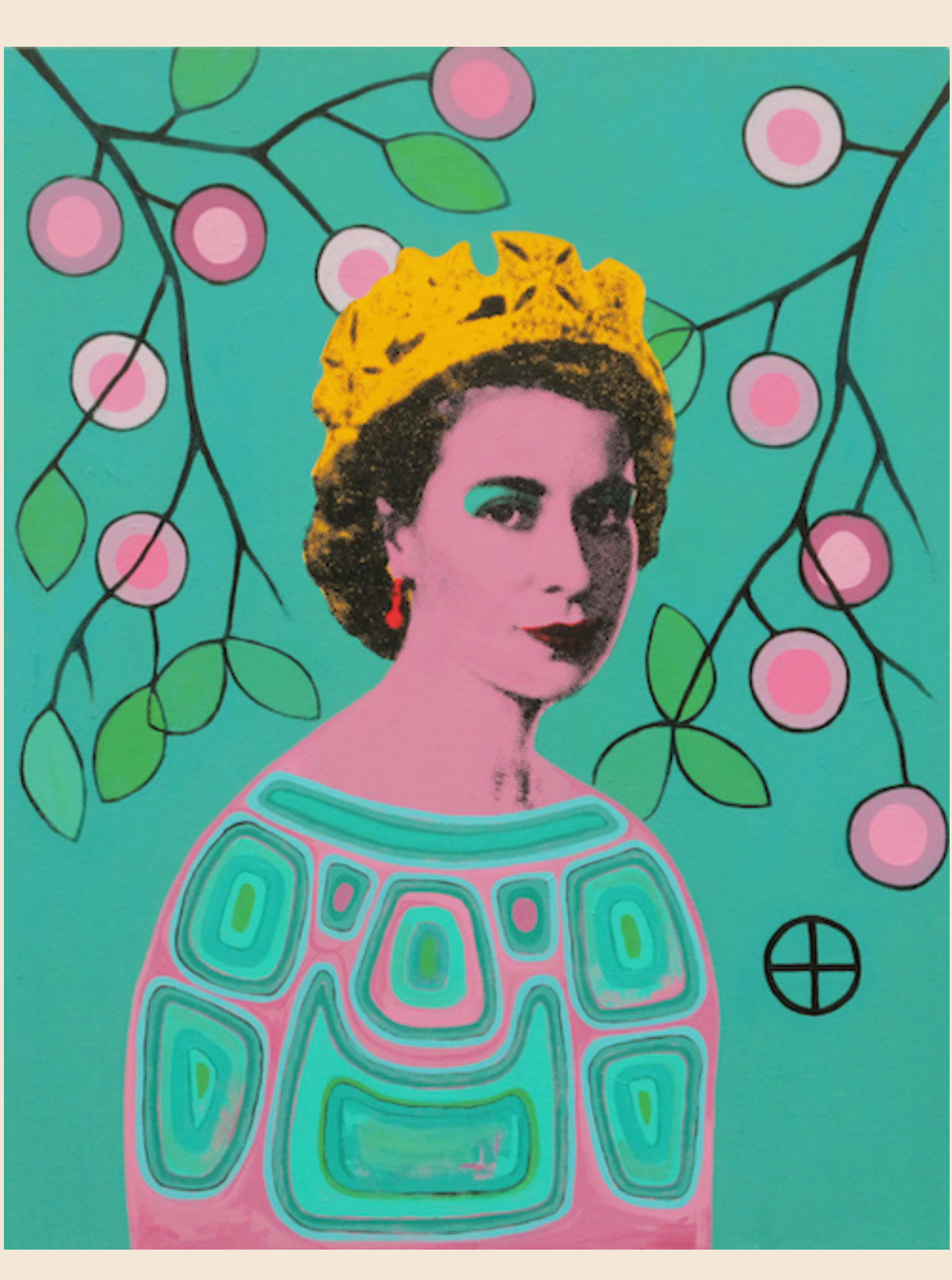
Daphne Odjig

Daphne Odjig (1919–2016) was a pioneering Woodland School artist and a founding member of Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. in 1973. Her work blended abstraction and realism, exploring cultural narratives, spirituality, and the human–nature connection through strong lines and vivid colours. Odjig's artistic approach combined Indigenous aesthetics and storytelling with European art, as seen in works like *The Indian in Transition*, 1978, where she fused European abstraction with Indigenous symbolism to powerfully address the complexities of cultural identity and transformation. Recognizing her trailblazing role in breaking artistic boundaries, Morrisseau affectionately called her "Picasso's mother."

Learn more about Daphne Odjig

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE ANISHINABE PEOPLE, 2013

by Christian Chapman



Christian Chapman, *Past, Present and Future of the Anishinabe People* (detail), 2013, private collection.

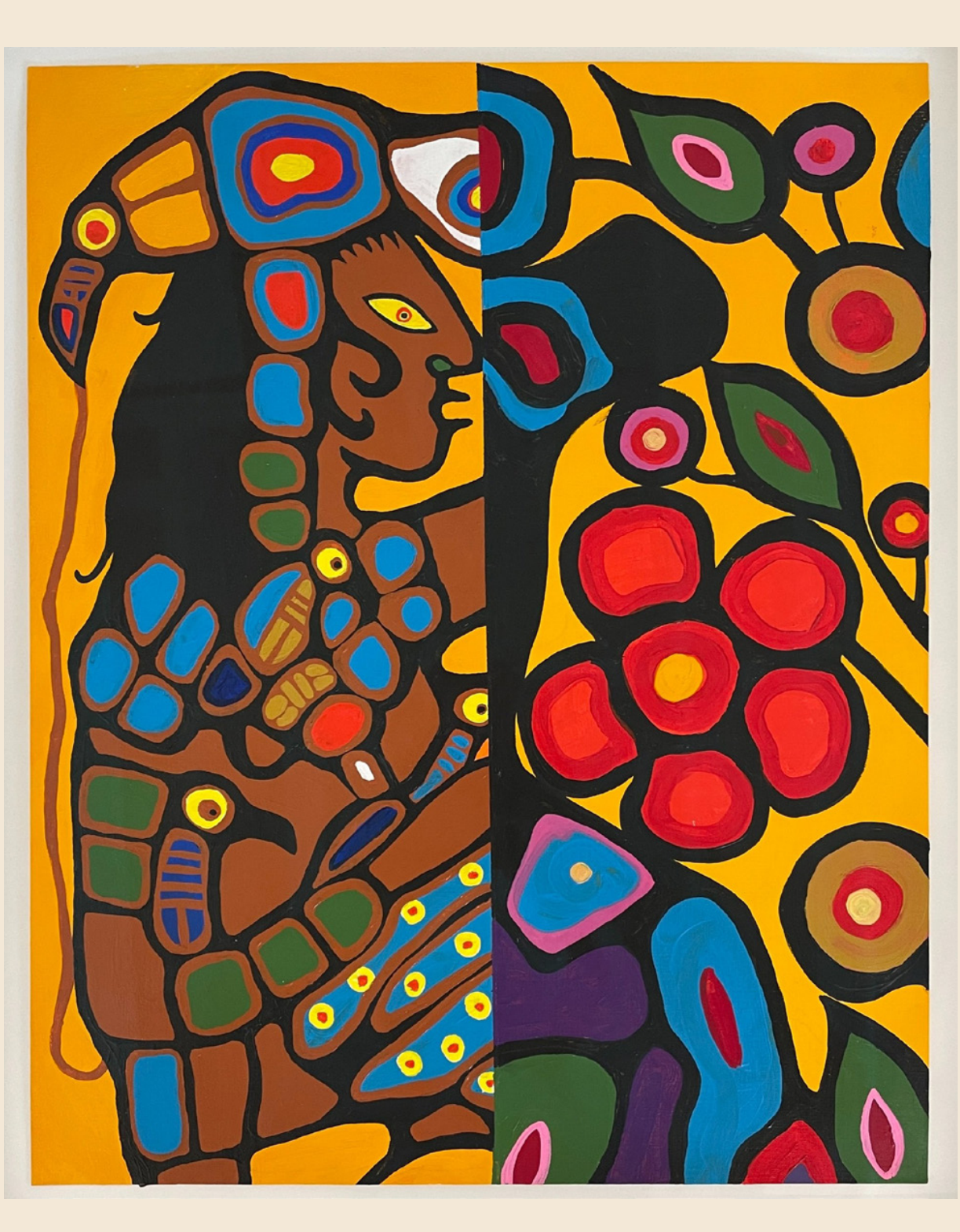
Christian Chapman

Anishinaabe multidisciplinary artist Christian Chapman (b.1975) expands on Morrisseau's iconic Woodland style by incorporating contemporary culture and concerns. He uses humour in his work, challenging stereotypes and colonial narratives about Indigenous Peoples. Chapman's 2013 triptych *Past, Present and Future of the Anishinabe People* explores the Anishinaabe relationship with the British Crown, depicting Queen Elizabeth II at two different life stages, as well as Princess Catherine, in separate panels adorned with Anishinaabe motifs. This playful reimagining of the monarchy as Anishinaabe nobility emphasizes themes of sovereignty, cultural resilience, and the shifting dynamics of power and identity.

Learn more about Christian Chapman

DOUBLE FAKE DOUBLE MORRISSEAU, 2021

by Native Art Department International



Native Art Department International, *Double Fake Double Morrisseau*, 2021, private collection.

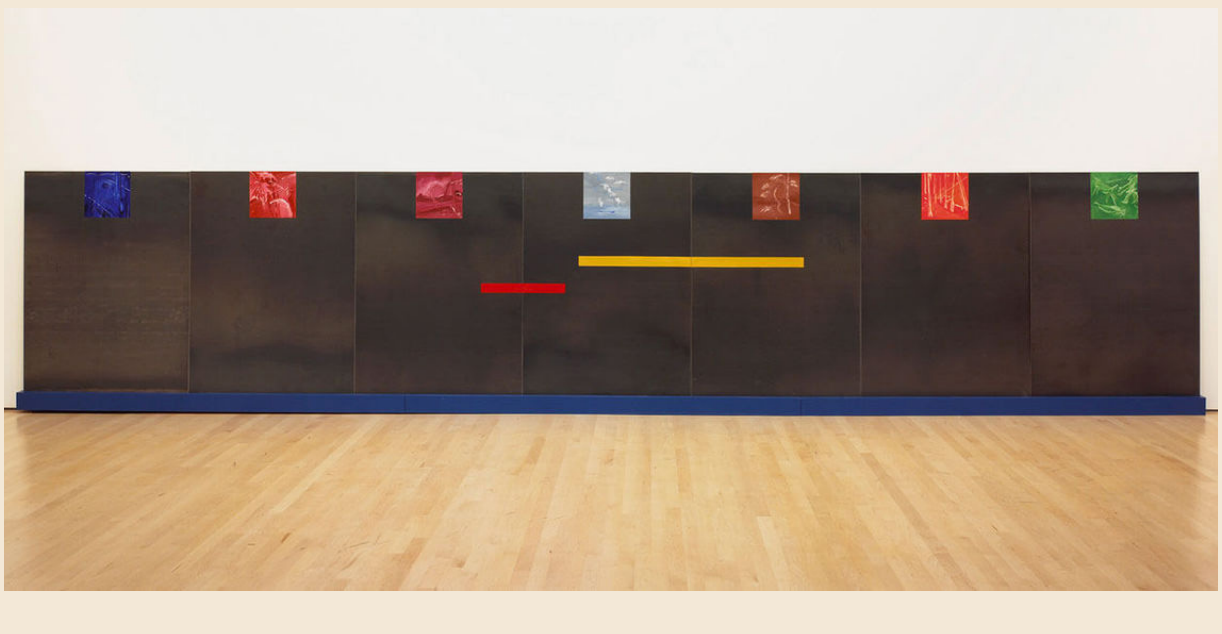
Maria Hupfield *Jason Lujan*

Native Art Department International (NADI) is an Indigenous art collective founded by Anishinaabe artists Maria Hupfield (b.1975) and Jason Lujan (b.1971). Through their multidisciplinary practice, the collective critiques colonial narratives and explores themes of Indigenous identity, sovereignty, and cultural resilience. In *Double Fake Double Morrisseau*, 2021, NADI references the Morrisseau forgery scandals of the mid-2000s by reinterpreting his iconic style and merging two seemingly separate paintings. In doing so, NADI reflects on the value of Indigenous art in the marketplace, critiquing its exploitation and commodification, and questioning how such works are consumed and repackaged by non-Indigenous interests.

Learn more about Native Art Department International

SEVEN IN STEEL, 1989

by Robert Houle



Robert Houle, *Seven in Steel*, 1989, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Robert Houle

As part of the broader legacy of Indigenous contemporary art, the work of Saulteaux artist and curator Robert Houle (b.1947) is informed by the shift that Morrisseau's Woodland School introduced. By breaking away from colonial visual expectations, Morrisseau allowed Indigenous artists to express their cultural identity in new and contemporary ways. Adopting a minimalist and abstracted aesthetic, *Seven in Steel*, 1989, explores the intersection of Indigenous culture and the experience of Western modernity. The choice of steel, a material associated with industrialization and modernity, creates a visual contrast, emphasizing the tension between Indigenous spirituality, cultural reclamation, and the forces of industrialization that continue to shape modern life.

Read more in ACI's *Robert Houle: Life & Work* by Shirley Madill

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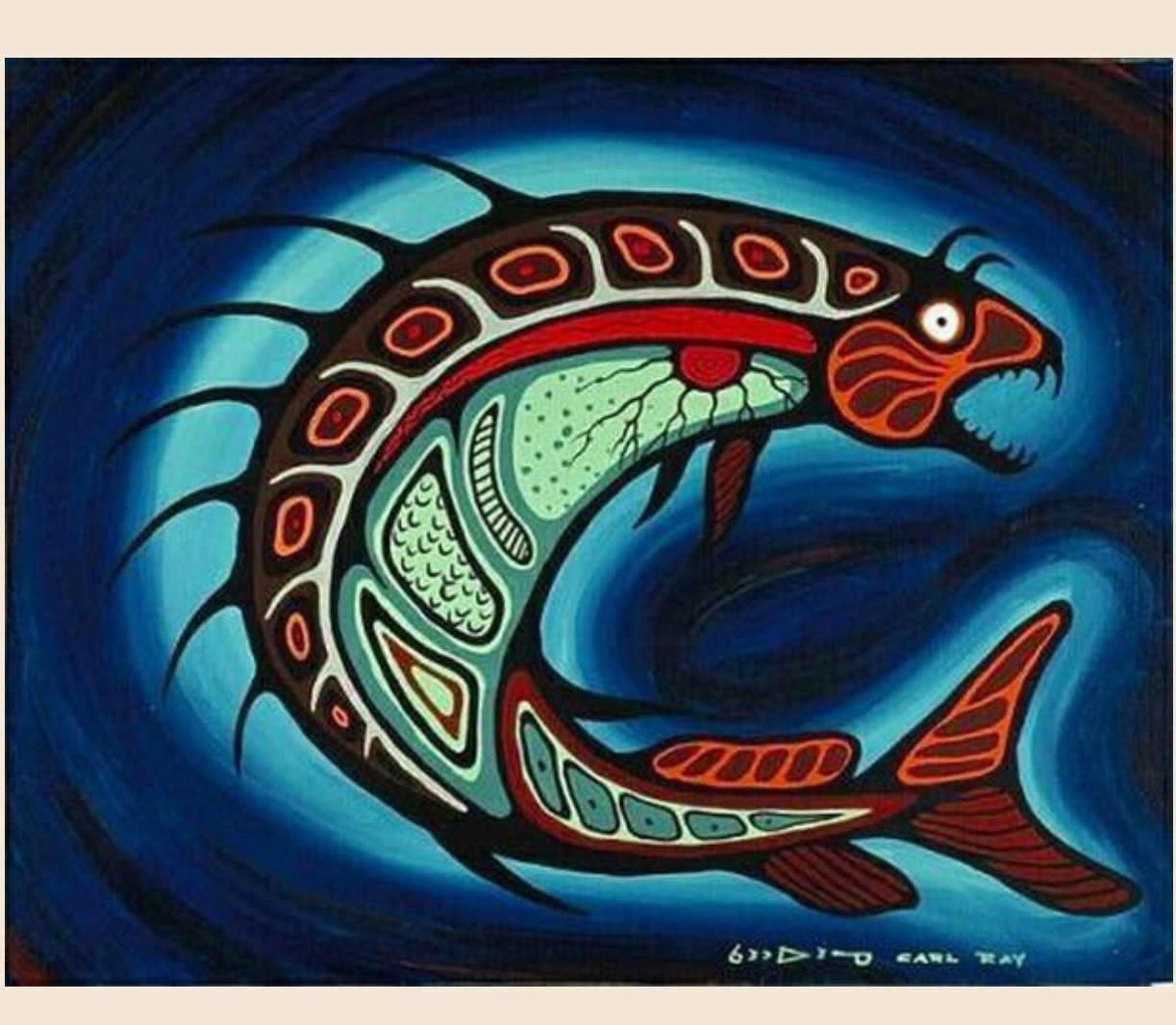
SPIRIT FISH, C.1975

by Carl Ray



Carl Ray, *Spirit Fish*, c.1975, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg.

Carl Ray

Cree artist Carl Ray (1943–1978) was an early member of the Woodland School of art, learning directly from Morrisseau and contributing to his Expo 67 mural. Ray played a key role in advancing the Woodland style, integrating his own artistry while staying true to its foundational focus on spirituality and cultural expression. His distinctive approach featured a dark colour palette, as seen in *Spirit Fish*, c.1975, along with experiments with European techniques, such as shading and atmospheric depth. Through his art, Ray brought Cree legends and oral traditions to life while addressing themes of colonial violence, cultural survival, and resistance.

Learn more about Carl Ray

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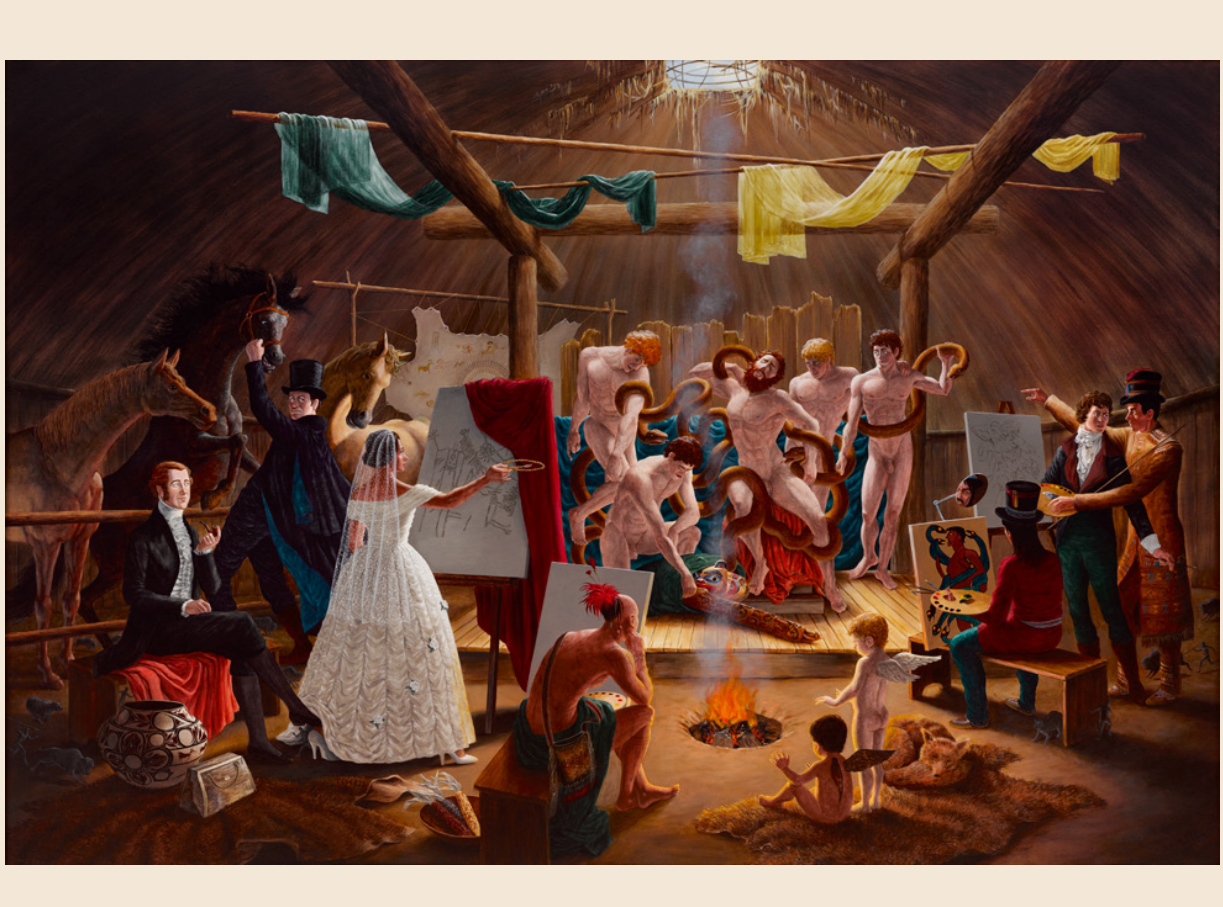
THE ACADEMY, 2008

by Kent Monkman



Kent Monkman, *The Academy*, 2008, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Kent Monkman

In *The Academy*, 2008, Cree multimedia artist Kent Monkman (b.1965) pays homage to Morrisseau. Seated at the right side of the image, an artist is shown working on a painting in the style of Morrisseau. In this piece, Monkman reclaims and reshapes Indigenous representations in the colonial aesthetic language that sought to marginalize Indigenous cultures. Monkman is widely recognized for his provocative, politically charged works that explore Indigenous identity while challenging and reinterpreting historical narratives through a contemporary Indigenous lens.

Read more in ACI's *Kent Monkman: Life & Work* by Shirley Madill

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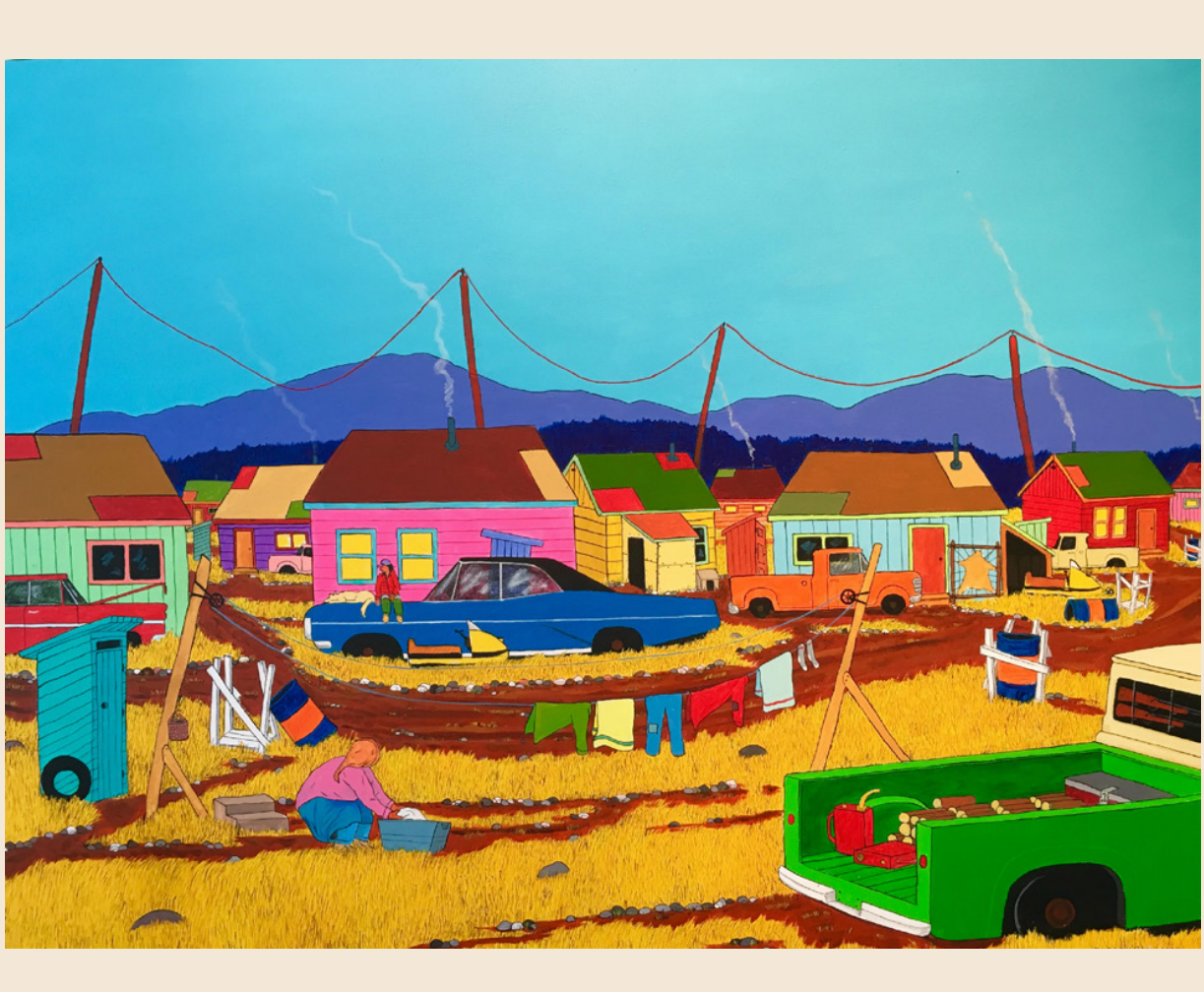
THE ONE THE ELDERS KEPT FROM THE SCHOOL, 2018

by Jim Logan



Jim Logan, *The One the Elders Kept from the School*, 2018, Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa.

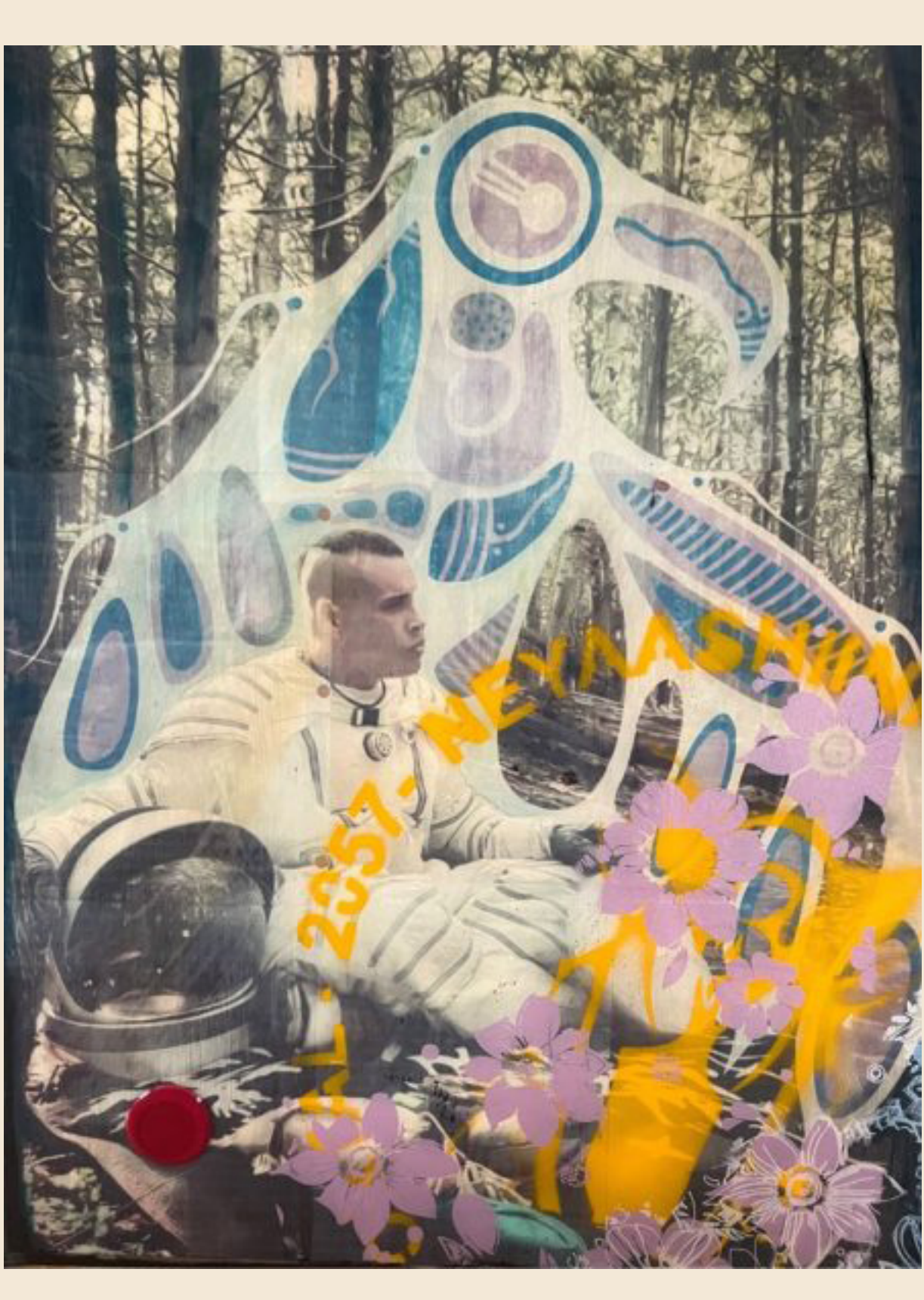
Jim Logan

Métis artist Jim Logan (b.1955) explores the complexities of Indigenous communities, addressing issues of poverty, violence, addiction, and the ongoing challenges of reconciliation. His works, such as *The One the Elders Kept from the School*, 2018, are deeply rooted in personal experience, balancing humour and sensitivity. Influenced by the Woodland School, Logan adopts lively colours, dynamic forms, and black outlines to depict the lived realities of Indigenous people. He emphasizes lived experience in his art, reflecting on the lasting consequences of colonialism, which has removed much of his cultural heritage while shaping contemporary Indigenous identity.

Learn more about Jim Logan

GEORGE & THE EAGLE, 2024

by Joel Richardson and Nyle Miigizi Johnston



Joel Richardson and Nyle Miigizi Johnston, *George & The Eagle*, 2024, courtesy of the artists.

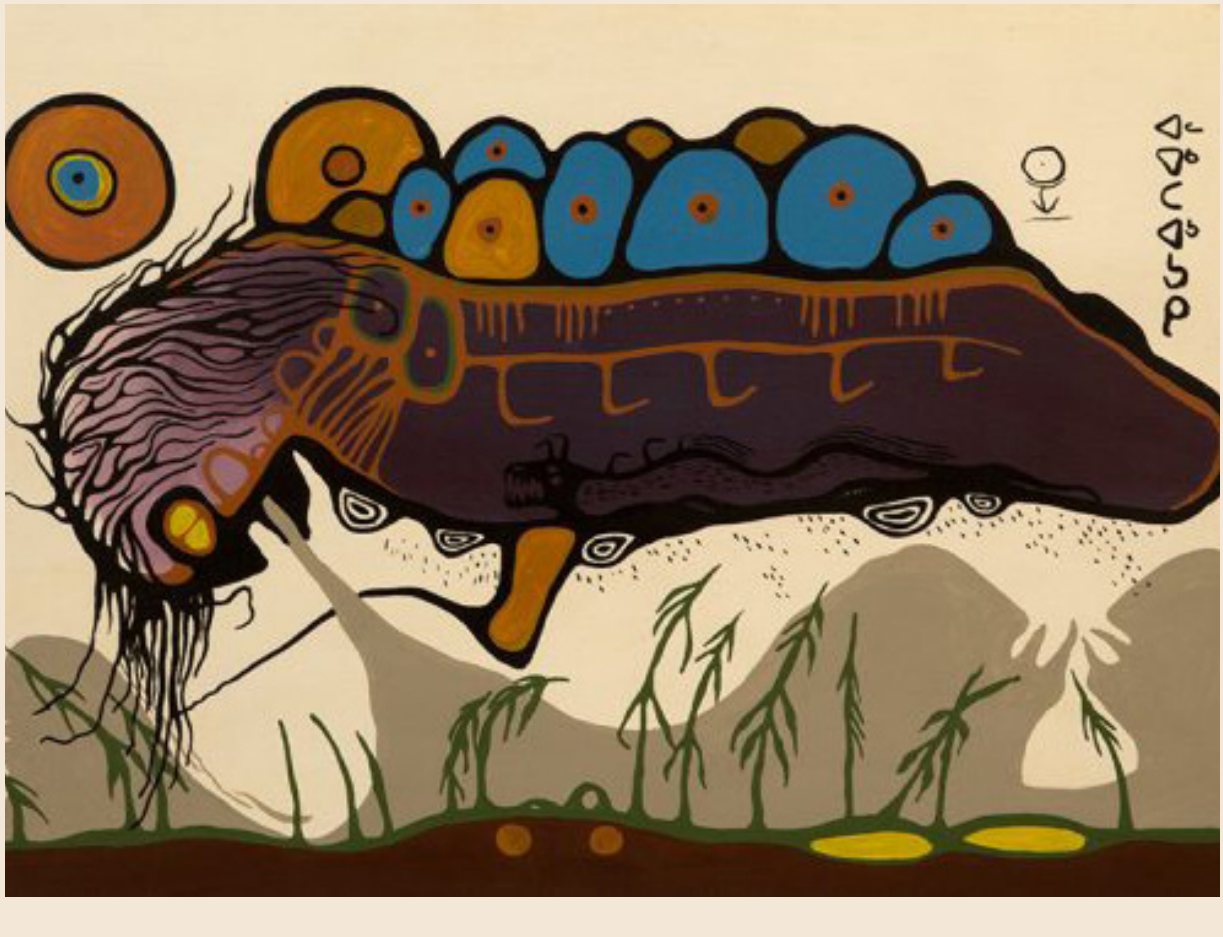
Joel Richardson and Nyle Miigizi Johnston

Anishinaabe artist Nyle Miigizi Johnston (b.1989) and settler artist Joel Richardson (b.1985) have been collaborating since 2014, merging their multimedia practices to explore Indigenous and settler perspectives. *George & The Eagle*, 2024, is part of a broader project that includes mixed media and video, where their alter egos, Captain Jimmy Swann and Commander George Nadjiwon, embark on a time-travel journey to examine reconciliation. The project blends historical facts with imagined narratives, drawing upon the iconic Woodland School style to continue Morrisseau's legacy of merging traditional Anishinaabe stories with contemporary concerns.

Learn more about Richardson and Johnston's current exhibition, *Gaganoonidiwag: They Talk To Each Other*

THE WIND SPIRIT, 1976

by Blake Debassige



Blake Debassige, *The Wind Spirit*, 1976, Thunder Bay Art Gallery.

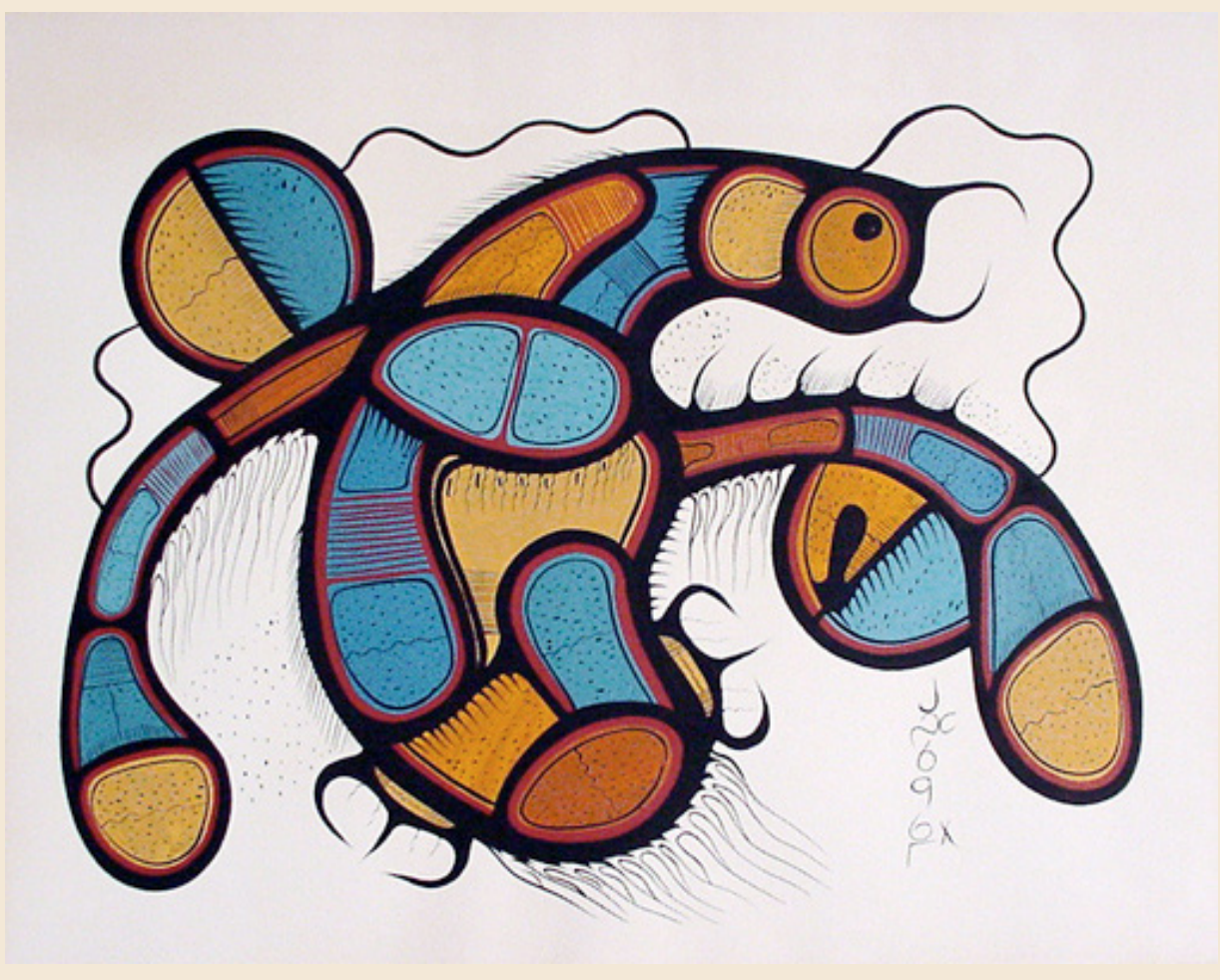
Blake Debassige

Anishinaabe artist Blake Debassige (1956–2022), a member of the second generation of the Woodland School of art alongside artists like Joshim Kakegamic (1952–1993) and Saul Williams (b.1954), is credited with expanding the stylistic elements initiated by Morrisseau. His work explores contemporary political issues such as environmental degradation and language preservation. After meeting and learning from Carl Ray, Debassige's style shifted, incorporating cleaner, more graphic lines and a muted colour palette. Through this evolution, he furthered Morrisseau's legacy, blending traditional Indigenous art with the modern struggles faced by Indigenous communities.

Learn more about Blake Debassige

DRUMMING PARTRIDGE

by Joshim Kakegamic



Joshim Kakegamic, *Drumming Partridge*, n.d., courtesy of Gallery Gevik, Toronto.

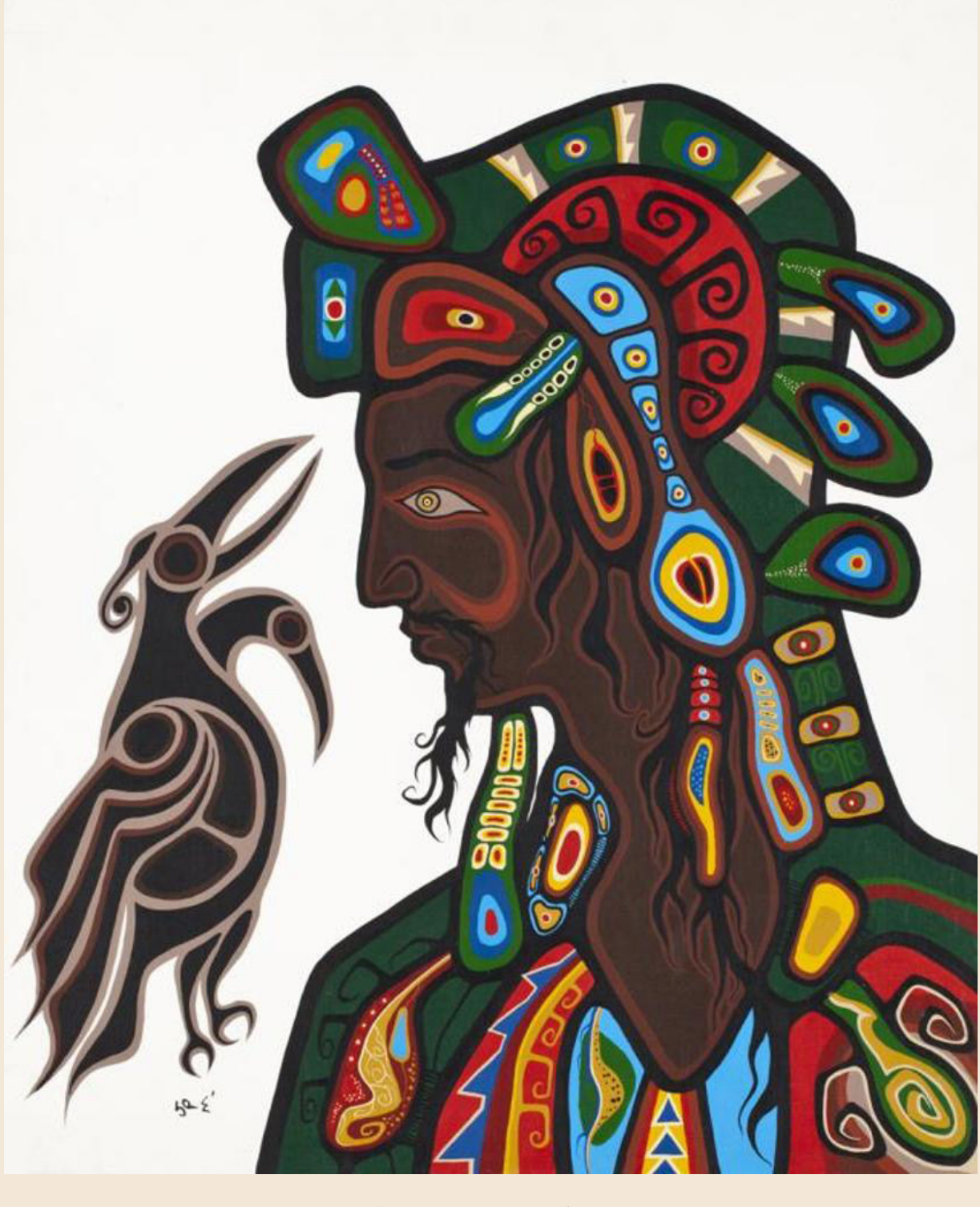
Joshim Kakegamic

Cree artist Joshim Kakegamic (1952–1993) learned directly from his brother-in-law, Morrisseau, and Carl Ray in the 1960s. As a member of the second generation of Woodland School artists, Kakegamic's style evolved to include a fusion of abstraction and representation, using striking colours and dynamic compositions to convey both the spiritual and physical realms of Cree language and symbolism. His artwork often incorporates elements of nature, such as animals and landscapes, asserting both resilience and cultural revitalization of Indigenous Peoples as well as addressing the ongoing struggles for land, language, and sovereignty.

Learn more about Joshim Kakegamic

UNTITLED (SHAMAN AND RAVEN), C.1982

by Saul Williams



Saul Williams, *Untitled (Shaman and Raven)*, c.1982, private collection.

Saul Williams

Anishinaabe artist and educator Saul Williams (b.1954) is a second-generation Woodland School artist known for his forceful, structured compositions. Though largely self-taught, he refined his style at the Elliot Lake Summer School, developing the precise linework and vibrant colour-blocking that define his work. Pieces such as *Untitled (Shaman and Raven)*, c.1982, showcase the signature X-ray perspective of the Woodland School, with an emphasis on balance and clarity. Alongside his artistic practice, Williams has dedicated much of his life to education, advocating for Indigenous inclusion in the curriculum, and now considers painting more of a personal pursuit.

Learn more about Saul Williams

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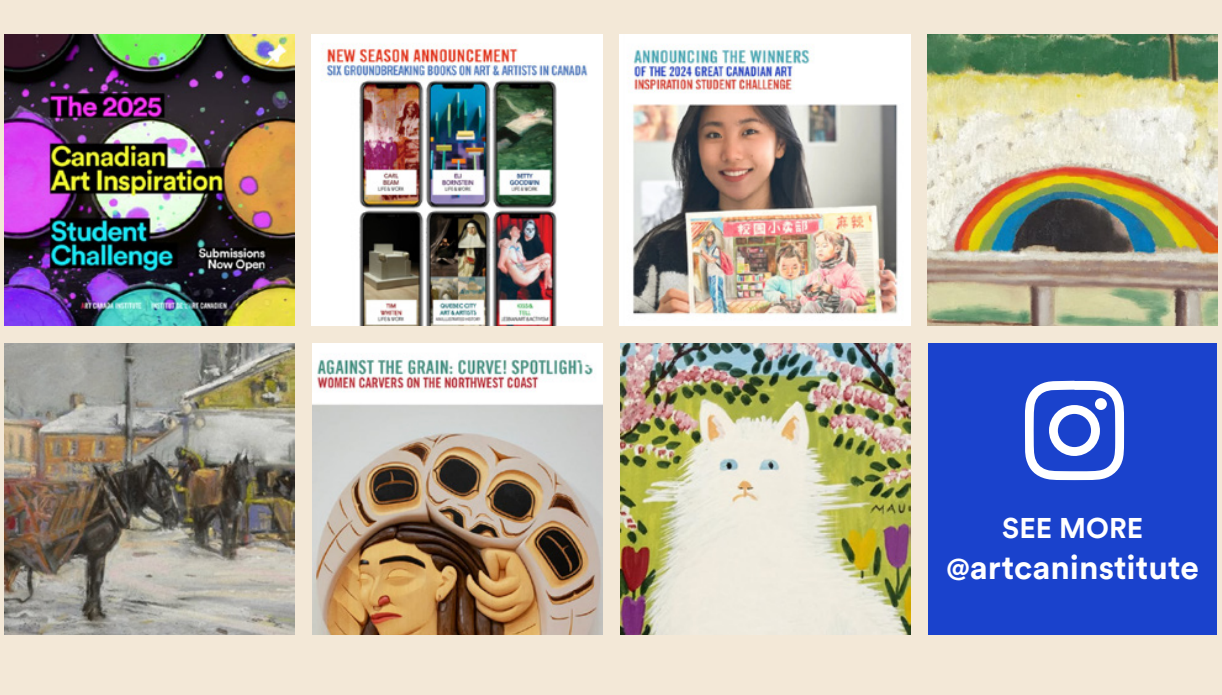
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