

DIGITAL AGNES

Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University
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Entanglements and Teachings in the Art of Norval Morrisseau

Frances K. Smith Lectures on Canadian Art

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SPEAKERS

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TRANSCRIPT

Alicia Boutilier: Welcome to the Agnes Etherington Art Centre. I would like to just begin by acknowledging our presence on unceded traditional lands of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee and Huron-Wendat. To acknowledge this traditional territory is to recognize its longer history, one predating the earliest European settlements that resulted in me being here. It is my understanding that this territory falls within the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, a longstanding agreement between the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Three Fires Confederacy and other allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources in and around the Great Lakes. Knowing the foundation stories of institutions is important for accountability. And I recognize the unclear claims of the Crawford purchase, which resulted in the Loyalist settler land survey on which Agnes Etherington's house and now the Agnes Etherington Art Centre is situated.

In doing the work of an institution, there can be an ethos that finds origins in history and a vision that is the past transformed. In 1968, Agnes published its first and only catalogue of the permanent collection, authored by the remarkable Francis K. Smith, curator emeritus, whose memory is honoured in the naming of these talks, the Francis K. Smith Lectures on Canadian Art. Earlier in this same decade, Norval Morrisseau from Bingwi Neyaashi Anishinaabek entered the contemporary art scene. As our speaker tonight, Dr Carmen Robertson has written, "This entry was a turning point that commenced a rupture in Canadian art." Since then, Agnes's collection has grown to over 17,000 works of art, but it was only in the last decade that the first Morrisseaus were collected. With the Guardian Capital gift presented in the adjacent exhibition, Agnes received 13 works by Morrisseau, including *Sacred Medicine Bear*.

Dr Carmen Robertson holds the Tier 1 Canada Research Chair in North American Indigenous Visual and Material Culture at Carleton University. Of Scots-Lakota descent, Robertson has been researching the art of Norval Morrisseau since the early 2000s and has written two books, numerous chapters, and scholarly essays on the topic of his art and life. These are among other research interests that include theorizing Indigenous aesthetics and studying Indigenous prairie beadwork, about which there is a forthcoming book. You can read Robertson's book *Norval Morrisseau: Life & Work* online through Art Canada Institute (ACI). Robertson co-curated the exhibition *Norval Morrisseau: Medicine Currents* with Anishinaabe curator Danielle Printup, which

just opened on September the 17th at Carleton University Art Gallery and is there until 10th of December. Please join me in welcoming Dr Robertson.

Dr Carmen Robertson: Thank you so much Alicia, and thank you to you all coming out. There's some massive Norval fans here tonight and I'm happy to see that. I want to thank the keepers of this beautiful land we're on tonight. I'm from Treaty Four Territory. Standing Buffalo is the home reserve of my mum's family.

Part of what? Let's see, I want to see how do we do this. Okay, so Anishinaabe artist Norval Morrisseau is, as you all know, one of Canada's foremost figures in Indigenous arts. He's internationally renowned for unique visual language that he created. To study the art of Norval Morrisseau is to become entangled in several narrative threads. This evening, I'll situate Morrisseau's art methodologically within story as a way to help us honour past stories and bring forth teachings for future viewers and researchers. I'm fortunate enough to lead the Morrisseau Project 1955 to 1985 research team. All the names are up on the screen. This is work funded by the Social Science Humanities Research Council of Canada with a group of researchers, curators, members of the Norval Morrisseau Heritage Society, institutional partners, and probably most importantly, a cracker jack group of research assistants. And we work all under the direction of our project manager, Kate Higginson, based at Carleton. This evening we're joined by Kate, Lisa Truong, Stacy Ernst, Jada Gannon-Day and Gabrielle Petrone. A key aim of this project was to gather as many secure works, and we use that word not lightly, by the artist from his life's work and collected data from public institutions, private institutions, private collectors, nationally and internationally to create this database for future users and researchers. And if you have a piece or two or know somebody who does, please let us know. Because part of the way we do this work is a kind of super sleuthing because Morrisseau really operated outside of a conventional art market. So it stretches our methodological practices, our need to importantly work with communities and to seek new directions. It's been difficult to carry out this research project, not only because of COVID but because of forgeries and the people attempting to control the market. Happily, I don't have time to wade into that discussion, but it is the elephant in the room because of the ways that it obfuscates Morrisseau's genius. Collecting stories and archival information creates a more fulsome record of his life as we write about these stories, his style, technique and his influence in deep and thoughtful ways. Interconnections with Anishinaabe ontologies and other influences in his life, including his exploration of the Eckankar, shape our study. Finally, we also posit how the ways he filtered the wide-ranging ideas and events he encountered as part of the colonial terrain Morrisseau traversed from the 30s onward, and as an artist and as an Indigenous, two-spirited person. These narrative threads offer lessons about Canada's cultural landscape, but also, I think, they make us keenly aware of the lessons that Morrisseau offers us and future audiences. Got to take that clip off.

The photo on the far right was taken when the Morrisseau project visited the ROM with knowledge keeper and Woodland artist Saul Williams and team member Al Corbiere. We recorded Saul talking about a series of Morrisseau's art in that collection in Anishinaabemowin that has been now transcribed into syllabics for a language revitalization module that we're working on. And this photo gives an amazing example of the scale of some of Morrisseau's work. From an art historical perspective, Morrisseau's body of work challenges art historical conventions because they shift linear and temporal confines, revealing how central intergenerational knowledge transmission is to

understanding artworks that move back and forth between the past, present, and future. Canadian art historical and museological discourses have made assumptions about how artists work and navigate the art world, and Morriseau has upended all of those. He defies those pathways, and that's central to understanding his work is instead of through the art market, often it's through reciprocity. We continually record oral stories of exchange and gift giving in relation to his art and how it ended up mostly in private collections. I chose this painting to introduce a concept of relationality that resonates through Morriseau's art and through this talk tonight. Morriseau conveys in this self-representation in the womb of Mother Earth, the interconnected concept as our place in the universe. The quote that you see here connects from Morriseau's book that he had published with editor Selwyn Dewdney in 1965. But many of these writings he had prepared in the late 1950s, and we see here him sharing his grandfather's memory about red sky, and I thought it was fitting that connection with mother's womb. Oops, sorry. Done in 1976, Morriseau expressed the significance of his relations in a number of ways in this work. Colour, of course, is so important to understanding this piece, and I want to draw your attention specifically to his use of two shades of blue in the rendering of the womb. In *Legends of My People*, Morriseau explains a medicine dream that he had and in it how he received, as a gift, two colours, one dark blue to represent night and one light blue to represent day. And these spiritual colours are a form of protection for him. So, colour is not decorative. It's not tied to the medicine wheel. And I just want you to remember that two tone blue as we go through this talk. Well, not surprisingly, and I didn't know it was the centerpiece as you walk into the gallery here and here it is. Morriseau painted self-representations, and this is one of the first times that he painted himself as Jesus Christ. He did several such self representations as Christ in the 1960s and the early 1970s. Here we see the artist don a red tunic of the Mide shaman with a hood showing the crescent moon. A halo also surrounds his head as an iconographic link to Christianity. With a medicine bag in both hands, painted in the sacred split blue I mentioned earlier, in the womb of Mother Earth, we see Morriseau balancing his interest in two forms of spiritual teachings here, I think. Lines of energy emitted from both of those bags equally refer to the spiritual teachings he holds.

Less than 10 years after this painting is completed, though, Morriseau turns away from Christianity, replacing it with the spiritual teachings of Eckankar. This important work, painted on craft paper, shows his willingness to explore forms of spirituality in relation to his shamanic teachings that he received from his grandfather. This is really one of my favourite paintings, and it addresses intergenerational knowledge, transmission and relationality, and a willingness to hold and balance forms of spiritual teachings. It also expresses the complex relationship that Morriseau has with story. Created within the context of Eckankar, the spiritual movement that draws extensively from Eastern spiritual teaching. Jack Pollock's gallery assistant, Eva Quan, introduced Morriseau to Eckankar in about 1975. ECKists integrate the soul and the spirit. Morriseau was especially drawn to the concept of astral travel promoted in these teachings. And the connections between Anishinaabe ways of knowing and ECKist understandings continue to shape themes in his art. We see here two separate panels, a diptych, good art historical term, and in the two panels, he's chosen on the left to paint his grandfather, who was so foundational to his life. Moses Nanakonagos is there, and you see that light blue and pink washes in the background, and his grandfather is completely enveloped and almost womb like holder of all living things. So, he lives with those teachings. We see on the right - and Morriseau has chosen two separate panels here and I think that's really significant. So, although he has spent much time with his grandfather, he's learned

those stories, he's also a man living in the 1970s in Canada. And so we see in a separate picture, the backwash back, the background is a wash of red and yellow, intense colours. His arm is held up high, and a strong diagonal from the far-right corner comes into this picture. And this is Eckankar. So, even though Morrisseau is still relationally connected to all living things, we see in this work that energy of a new form of spirituality that's important to him. And we know that specifically because instead of a split circle up in the top left half of that panel, we see H U, and that is the mantra of the ECKists. So, it brings that all together. And so, we see this beautiful example of how intergenerational knowledge transmission is connected with the past and the present, but the future is changing for Morrisseau in this particular work.

I would be remiss if I didn't include this amazing painting, and I have paired it again with something that Morrisseau included in his book, *Legends of My People*, about his grandfather's father, Little Grouse. And he talks about how he has a medicine dream and how this bear comes to him in this medicine dream. And it's an amazing work that celebrates story and relationality through this sacred bear. Morrisseau's not only painted bear medicine, he spoke about the power of the medicine dream, about the bear, and I think that it's important to include it here. And I'm excited. Maybe we'll get to hear Armand's poem as well. Morrisseau lets viewers know it's a powerful work through a number of visual clues. Of course, the main body of this bear is white, and we see all of the sacred colours of the Anishinaabe here. The feet, too, are distinguished in red with yellow dots, and blue and red are used to articulate the internal spiritual strength of this bear, with a red line that runs from his head and eye through to his anus. Around the sacred bear's neck is a medicine bag, again, painted blue with red and black in circles, slightly different from the one we saw in the earlier representation. But both dark and light blues allude to the gifting of sacred colours related to his own spirit dream. And he uses these energy lines here as prominent with the split circles that further denote power and also visually allude to the creation story of Megis or the cowrie shell. I had a very hard time leaving that back gallery because this work just pulls you in with the energy that it exudes.

This is another work that pulls you in with the energy that it exudes. And you can see I left the size at the bottom because it's six metres by three and a half metres. It's massive. *Androgyny*, it's his masterwork from 1983, a real tour de force when we think about relationality, and it's a celebration of sacred connections between all living things in the underworld, water, land and sky world. The focal point here is created with a domelike structure formed by Thunderbird with its wings outstretched. The split blues noted in other works resonate here as well. The Anishinaabe worldview principle of living a good life in balance, or Mino Bimaadizuin, emphasizes that the idea that healing encompassing the restoration of balance within individuals, communities, and the natural environment, is central to the story and to his visual vocabulary. He brings this concept to many works, but in this massive painting, we recognize his fully formed visual vocabulary, using colour, line and story, of course, to coalesce. We see here Morrisseau putting the finishing touches on this mural in the site, which was the Terrasses de la Chaudiere in Hull, at that time in Gatineau, in 1983. And it's an interesting story related to this because Morrisseau gifted this work to all of us. He wrote a letter to then Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau and asked that he accept this painting on behalf of all Canadian people, and he wanted a ceremony to go along with that. Well, nothing quite went as Morrisseau planned, and the concept of gifting or reciprocity within Anishinaabe communities would have been that this would have created a relationship and a pact going forward

but that didn't happen. Pierre Trudeau never showed up for the ceremony, not surprisingly, I guess. And this work sat for almost 20 years in the lobby of Indian Affairs, of all places, until Greg Hill happily freed it from INAC and put it into the retrospective exhibition at the National Gallery in 2006. So, we see here these spiritual teachings, often misunderstood or miscommunicated within narrow ethnographic frames, here on display and singing, really with such energy.

I wanted to show you this particular work because right now, after a summer of fires and flooding and all sorts of weather conditions, I think this painting that Morrisseau did in 1975 has a real important teaching for us. So, this brings together different ways of knowing land. This form of land has nothing to do with landscape. It is a teaching about caring for land and the oppositional use of land by the nation of Canada. In 1975, Time magazine commissioned Morrisseau to paint this work related to Indigenous land claims for the cover of its July 22nd, 1975 publication. And it was really about the ongoing clashes that were taking place with the James Bay Hydro project and the James Bay Cree and Inuit people on that territory at that time. So, Morrisseau painted this really compelling work that in the end, sadly, was bumped from the cover because of more pressing issues, as if there are. But apparently it had something to do with Nixon, I don't know. So, the painting, sadly, was not used on this cover, and so few know this work as a result. Yet, although it was bumped for another news story, Morrisseau's painting demonstrates kinship ties to Aki and Nibi, land and water in the face of encroaching exploitation by mining, logging, and the building of dams. And he shows the importance of thinking about land, water, and all living beings. It is fortuitous that he did an interview with Bob Checkwitsch, who was the owner of Great Grasslands Printery that made many of Morrisseau's excellent prints in the 70s and 80s. And in July, Morrisseau sat down that year with Bob Checkwitsch and explained the organization of the painting. And so, these are Morrisseau's works telling you what this painting means, the dividing in two parts, the world of the red- white man, the construction of the miner- construction worker and the miner white men, the Indian figure, the older generation of today. And I find that that's a reminiscent image from Storyteller and His Grandfather as well. And you see that the Elder is speaking about the old ways, and the baby, according to Morrisseau, represents the new generation, and he can cross his speech into- across that border of the red and the blue. "The centre part", Morrisseau says, "is where I illustrate the land and its ownership." Well, a little later on in that interview, Bob Checkwitsch asked Morrisseau to explain his reasons for making such a politically charged work. And honestly, Morrisseau had done some other charged works, such as *The Gift*. But, he explained, "I realized it was a personal contribution I could make to represent all Indian people. I'm not a militant person, as you know. I believe in peaceful coexistence, but I also respect the feelings of other Indian people who feel they must do things their way." And so, I thought that that was prescient for today as well. Exploitation of resources, tilling of the land, putting up fences, and parceling out acres reflect the systematic process of claiming that contributed to the civilizing space that has become known as our nation. But Morrisseau did an excellent job here and in other paintings we looked at today and far beyond, he's painted several thousand paintings, of delineating the different ways of knowing and caring for land as we see in this painting. It remains prescient today with the ongoing climate change, as I mentioned, and the questionable practices of extractive resourcing of the land. The linear timeline onto which the painting fits situates the work specifically to a modern or postmodern period attendant to universal themes of that period. However, Morrisseau painted this work based in part on knowledge shared with him by his grandfather and his community. He was also aware of what was happening in Canada and the activism taking place in Indigenous

communities and in courtrooms that confronted the exploitation of relations, or, to use a Western term, natural resources. That was 1975 but we all recognize ongoing discourses related to these same themes today, so past, present, and future, Morrisseau's work can't be held on that linear timeline, and there's much work to be done.

But Morrisseau has given us some help in doing that work, and I'll stop there. Thank you.