

*Robert Houle: Red is Beautiful*

1. *In Memoriam*, 1987, oil, feathers, leather, and ribbon on plywood. Overall framed dimensions are 137.2 by 151.9 cm. Gift of Vanessa, Britney and Nelson Niedzielski, 2000. © Robert Houle.

Two differently sized panels of painted plywood are assembled together in this artwork that includes Indigenous community names, leather, ribbons, and eagle feathers. On the left panel, a thin horizontal decorative moulding architecturally crowns the top. Below the moulding, a piece of plywood is cut away in a curve that arcs from the upper right corner down past the left corner of the panel, creating the illusion of an arch. Painted black, the vertical brush strokes are visible on the entire panel. Multicoloured ribbons tied around eagle feathers flow down the centre, dividing the left and right panels of the artwork. Longer than the left panel, the right panel is a rich, deep purple-maroon. The following community names are stenciled onto the panel from top to bottom: Beothuk, Mohican, Natchez, Neutral, Timucua, Tobacco, Yamasee. The names are obscured by the brush strokes, making it hard to read them and alluding to the loss of these communities, and a discourse around representation and naming outside of colonial narratives.

2. *The Pines*, 2002–2004, oil on canvas. Centre panel dimensions are 91.4 by 121.9 cm; side panel dimensions, each of two are 91.4 x 91.4 cm. Gift of Susan Whitney, 2017. © Robert Houle.

Three green and blue paintings hang in a horizontal row. Two monochrome square canvases frame a pine forest on a rectangular canvas in the centre. On the left, a square canvas is painted with horizontal brush strokes in a monochromatic deep green. In the central rectangular canvas, a line of blueish-green tree trunks leads diagonally from the right corner in the foreground into the left background. Past a clearing in the left foreground of the canvas, the tree trunks cast shadows on the ground, leading deeper into the forest where a bright yellow sky peeks through the green foliage. To the right of this canvas, a square canvas is painted with horizontal brush strokes in a monochromatic deep blue. This triptych commemorates the 78 days in the summer of 1990, when Kanien'keha:ka (Mohawk) land defenders set up a blockade to prevent the town of Oka from building a golf course on the pine forest, a sacred burial ground.

3. *Red is Beautiful*, 1970, acrylic on canvas. Dimensions are 45.5 by 61 cm. Canadian Museum of History. © Robert Houle.

Trapezoids, flat shapes that look like upside-down triangles that have their tops sliced off parallel to their bottoms with sloping sides, fill the rectangular canvas in tones of pink and red. Sitting with the longest side on top of the canvas, four trapezoids, increasing in size, are layered one on top of the other. The shapes transition from a small, deep red trapezoid in the centre and radiate out to bright red, warm pink, and light pink as the shapes get bigger, pointing toward the centre of the canvas. Houle mirrors the stacked trapezoids on the top and the bottom of the canvas. The other four layered trapezoids

have their longest side on the bottom of the canvas and radiate out in the same colours, pointing to the centre of the painting. The mirrored images sit on a deep red background, the same tone as the small central trapezoids. R. Houle, the artist's signature, and the date, 1970, are painted in the lower-right corner of the canvas. Robert Houle was very inspired by abstract geometric forms.

4. *Kanata*, 1992, acrylic and conté crayon on canvas. Dimensions are 228.7 by 732 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 1994. © Robert Houle.

A long rectangular canvas is divided into three areas, resembling the French national flag: blue, white, and red. Framed by the bright blue and bright red of the French flag, a bleached copy of a central historical painting by American painter Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*, depicts the Battle of Quebec in 1759. Men, including enlisted soldiers holding up a British flag, settlers, and an Indigenous man gather around the British General Wolfe who lies dying. The Indigenous man is represented thinking, holding his chin and resting his elbow on his knee like the famous Rodin sculpture *The Thinker*. The Indigenous man stands out from the washed-out sepia crowd, painted with a bright blue and red blanket tied around his waist, a brown bandolier bag, and red feathers in his hair. Houle draws attention to the misrepresentation of Indigenous peoples as merely passive observers, pointing instead to their direct stake in the history of Canada and the United States.

5. *Sandy Bay*, 1998–1999, oil on canvas, black-and-white photograph and colour photograph on canvas, Masonite. Dimensions are 300 by 548.4 cm. Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Acquired with funds from the President's Appeal 2000 and with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program. © Robert Houle.

Reading this work from left to right, Houle assembles a black-and-white photograph, a colour photograph, and three vertical rectangle canvases. In the top-left colour photograph, an older white priest stands in a garden in front of an ivy-covered niche with a Virgin Mary icon, surrounded by a bright blue summer sky. This is Father Chion who was widely liked in Sandy Bay First Nation, where the artist is from, because he spoke *Saulteaux* and was kind. Below this is a black-and-white photograph of two priests and a group of young Indigenous children standing in rows on the steps of a brick building. This is an image of a First Communion at which Robert Houle's sister Marilyn is present. We move from the two photographs to the first oil painting of a building, and finally to two abstract colour field paintings. In the first oil painting, the Sandy Bay Residential School appears in a cool blue fog with words from a *Saulteaux* hymn Houle's mother sang to him: "ON SAM KI KISEWATIS ANA MANITOWIYAN" ("Oh, you are so kind and so treasured, although you are god-like"). The second oil painting is a thin, vertical dark blue night scene of a curved shoreline with evergreen trees on Lake Manitoba at Sandy Bay. Finally, on the far right, is a swirling red canvas with black shadows and streaks that suggest the lower half of a figure in a dress-like garment with long bell sleeves. Abstract wavy yellow brush strokes create a horizontal line across the canvas and an orange vertical line with a pink "u" on the top is in the middle of the canvas. The painting is meant to represent Sister Clotilde, who was one of

the most abusive nuns at the school. Houle revisits memories of attending the Sandy Bay Residential School in order to let them go.