

SUGGESTED GRADE LEVELS: Grade 7 – Grade 12
CURRICULUM LINKS: Visual Arts, Science, Geography, Social Studies

ROBERT HOULE THE PINES

2002 – 2004

“The story of Canada is about us as well. From day one. Because we were here first. We settled here first. It’s a tripod, this country. It’s French, English and First Nations. We helped shape this country, you know, and we continue to.” —Robert Houle

Robert Houle, *The Pines*, 2002–2004. Oil on canvas, panel (centre): 91.4 x 121.9 cm., panel (side, each of two): 91.4 x 91.4 cm. © Robert Houle.



GUIDED OBSERVATION

- How would you describe the feeling of this artwork? What makes you say that?
- *The Pines* are made of three separate canvases. Why do you think the artist decided to separate the pieces?
- If you could ask the artist one question about this work, what would it be?

CONTEXT

Robert Houle made this work after visiting the Pines, a burial ground and recreation area in Kanehsata:ke, a Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) settlement near Oka, Quebec. It was the site of an ongoing land dispute. The Kanien'kehá:ka community asserted King Louis XV of France and gave the land to the Sulpician order of priests in the 1700s, for the benefit of the Kanien'kehá:ka and Algonquin communities in the area. The Sulpicians sold off much of that land to European settlers.



CONTEXT

In 1990, the Pines area became the site of a tense 78-day standoff between Canadian armed forces and Mohawk Warriors and Land Defenders from across Canada. The mayor of Oka (Jean Ouellette) approved condo construction and golf course expansion into the Pines, and the Kanehsata:ke community mobilized to block the construction. Quebec's provincial police force, the Sûreté du Québec (SQ), attacked the barricade, letting off tear gas and concussion grenades. The Mohawk Warriors also succeeded in blocking bridges to the Island of Montreal, cutting off southern suburbs from the city. Negotiations eventually brought the bridge barricades down, and the standoff ended on September 26, 1990.

Media coverage of the event was particularly one-sided – against the activists and in support of the Canadian government's response. By constructing a particular narrative around the crisis, the Canadian government presented the Mohawk Warriors and Land Defenders in a negative light. Alanis Obomsawin, an Abenaki documentary filmmaker, chronicled the resistance in her film *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*. She presented the context and stories of the people who were invested in this crisis, and she gave voice to the people whose voices had previously been silenced.

Houle painted *The Pines* for himself as a way of remembering the spiritual energy he felt when he visited the area. The Pines is both a burial ground and a spiritual space. The colours represent the eastern and western doors – with Seneca in the west (blue) and Mohawk in the east (green).

THE LEGACY OF THE RESISTANCE

The Resistance was a significant act of pan-Indigenous solidarity. Indigenous people travelled across Canada to join the defence or raise awareness at home. Some believe the standoff had the direct effect of inspiring other movements including Idle No More. The legacy of the resistance was also instrumental in bringing contemporary Indigenous issues around land sovereignty, residential schools, pipelines and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, into mainstream Canadian media and politics.

The Kanien'kehá:ka community also succeeded in blocking the condo construction and golf course expansion.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Robert Houle (Saulteaux, born 1947) is a curator, educator and artist. He was born in St. Boniface, Manitoba to parents Gladys and Solomon Houle. The eldest of fifteen children, Houle was raised Roman Catholic and Saulteaux. As a child, the Canadian government sent Houle to The Oblates of Mary Immaculate and Sisters of St. Joseph of St. Hyacinth School Residential Schools in Sandy Bay (Kaa-wii-kwe-tawang-kak). He survived 12 years in the residential school system.

From 1977 to 1981, Houle was the first Indigenous Curator of Contemporary Indigenous Art at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (now the Canadian Museum of History) in Ottawa. He resigned in protest after the contemporary Indigenous works he had been collecting were categorized as 'anthropology' by the museum.



Teacher Resource continued

EXTENDED EXPLORATION:

- Most mainstream sources refer to the Kanien'kehá:ka Resistance as the Oka Crisis. Why is there a difference in the way the event is referenced?
- What are the similarity between the Kanien'kehá:ka Resistance and the Indigenous Lands rights with the Wet'suwet'en nation?

JOURNAL ENTRY:

In groups of two or three, discuss a place that is significant to you and your family.

- What makes the place significant?
- What colours would you use to represent that place?
- How do the colours represent the feeling or emotion attached to that place?
- How would you visually represent this place? What media would you choose? Why? How will the media inform the message?

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