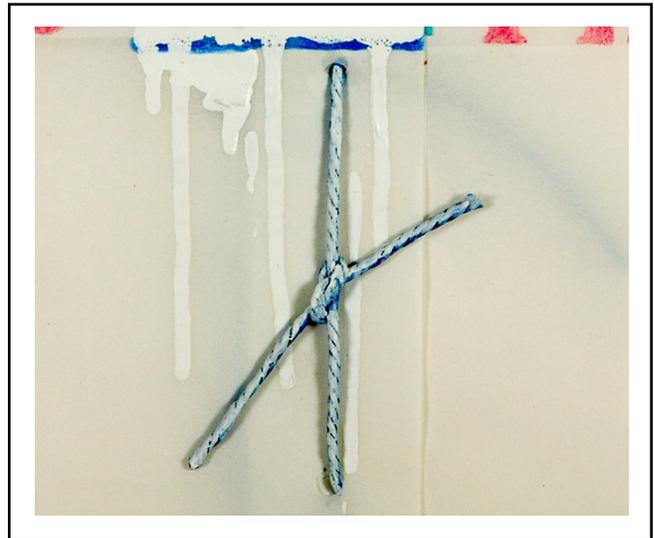


Robert Houle
PARFLÈCHE

Protecting, Carrying, Defending

BY TANIA WILLARD



Protecting, Carrying, Defending

Tania Willard

Robert Houle's work as a curator and artist within Indigenous contemporary arts in Canada is the legacy of an avant-garde of Indigenous thinkers, activists, spiritualists and artists moving from systemic oppression into cultural resurgence and futurity. A period of intense activism and advocacy for Indigenous rights and culture surfaced into more dominant discourse in the early 70s. This period saw a number of Indigenous artists come into prominence in the art world outside of their communities. We can look to histories of the Professional Native Artists Incorporated (PNAI) with members like Daphne Odjig, Alex Janvier, Eddy Cobiness, Joseph Sanchez, Jackson Beardy and Norval Morriseau to witness the trajectory and force of contemporary Indigenous art.

Robert Houle
Parflèche, 1985 (detail)

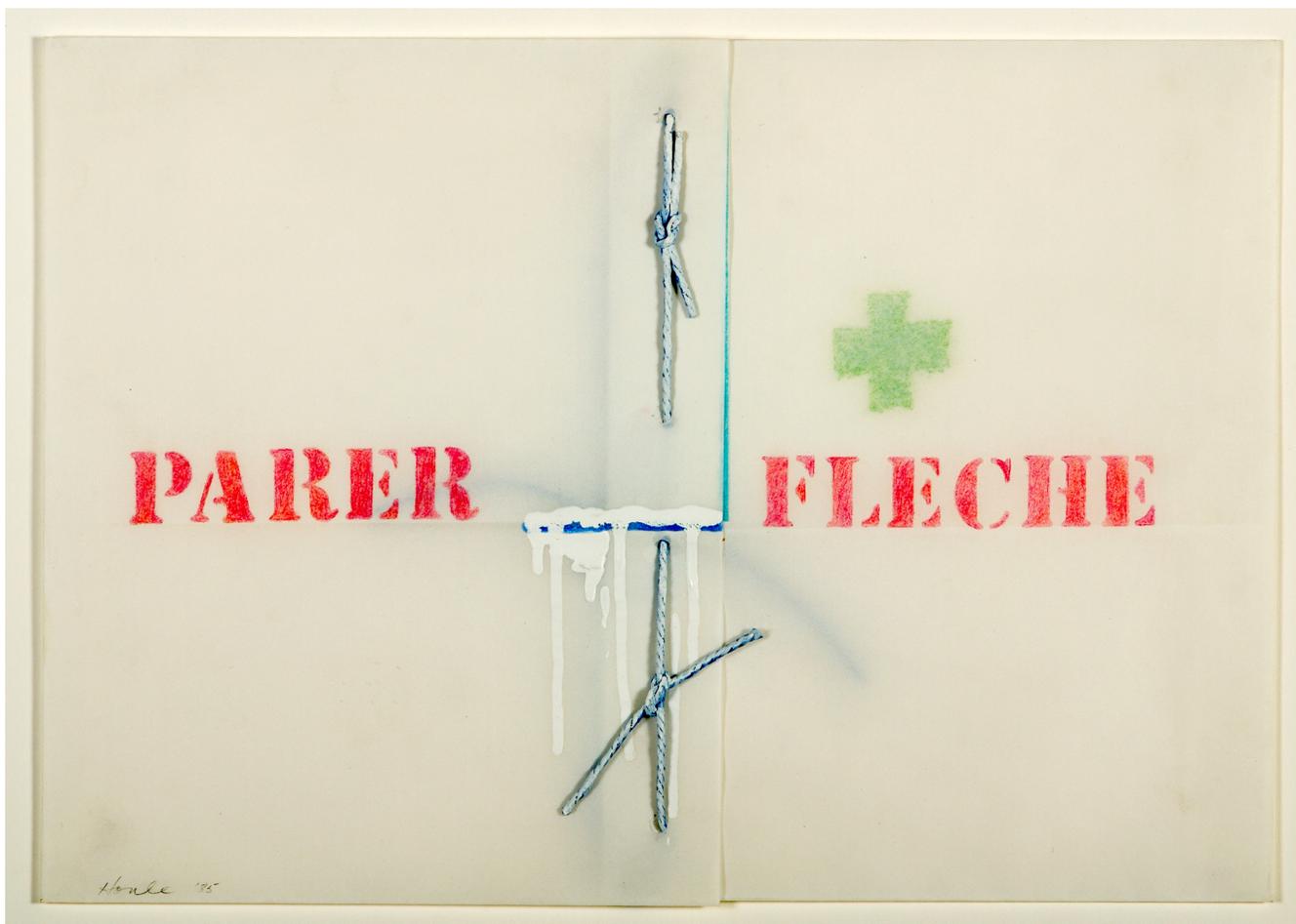
collage
(30.3 x 43.3cm)
SAG 2003.09.02

Photograph by Cameron
Heryet

Houle has curated and written for retrospectives of PNAI members like Alex Janvier and other members of the group, while his own role as a change-maker was cemented with his time as curator of Indian Art at the then National Museum of Man in Ottawa from 1977 to 1980. In 1992 he co-curated the oft-cited exhibition *Land Spirit Power: First Nations at the National Gallery*, exhibited during the Columbus Quincentennial. His critical reframing of museum practices in showing Indigenous art continue to influence and provoke re-examination of collections at museums across Canada and abroad. An artist with work in the National Gallery, Art Gallery of Ontario and many important collections, a curator,

teacher and writer, and a recipient of prestigious awards including the 2015 Governor General's Award for Visual Arts, Robert Houle has contributed generously to the shaping of contemporary art. The context of his biography is an important light in which to consider his artistic practice.

His work *Parflèche*, in the Surrey Art Gallery's permanent collection, is a small collage—but the import of this artist, and his vision in merging his Anishnaabe Saulteux heritage and modernist visual arts traditions, is not contained by its relatively small dimensions. The resonance of this collage piece by Houle is much deeper. One entry into the complexity of the work resides in the stencil text on its surface,



Robert Houle, *Parflèche*, 1985, collage (30.3 x 43.3cm) SAG 2003.09.02. Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

“Parer Fleche”—not parflèche, as in the title of the work. A parflèche is a rawhide container found in Plains Indigenous cultures that can be used to carry pemmican or arrows or other supplies. Often painted with elaborate and vivid designs, parflèche were and still are actively acquired by museums and collectors as aesthetic objects.

The stencilled text separates the two words, the verb *parer*, to adorn or to defend, and *flèche*, arrow or point. This separation leads us into thinking about the etymological origins of the word. How has colonial history functioned to replace the original Salteux word with the French parflèche? The rationale behind this single question could lead us into a re-examination of history, nationhood, and art. That we have come to know a translation of what is an Indigenous artform through the French language and worldview points to the intensity of racial prejudice and colonization during early contact with settlers. The words alone carry with them a rationale that can nourish us through the dissolving of the colonial framework of culture and country. After all, a parflèche is meant to carry supplies, arrows, pemmican, and perhaps other items of survival and beauty.

When Houle’s work is discussed in summary, it is common to identify his fusion of Indigenous and modernist aesthetics. However, what I read is more intimately connected with origins. Parflèche were often adorned with geometric abstraction and colourful interplay of form, and here, Houle points to the origins of abstraction as rooted in Indigeneity. The less-understood histories of the French avant-garde, who looked to Indigenous arts in Africa and North, Central and South America, are important to reflect on. The modernist idea of abstraction is predicated on an idea of social progress and the harbinger of the development of art in America. What an irony,

then, that for so many years Indigenous arts, that avant-garde artists looked to, were relegated to static museum conditions, while their dynamic ideas and form were simultaneously activated and appropriated by artists in the Western and European modernist canon. I suggest that the distinction of *parer/flèche* reaches out to ask us about origin, as does the form Houle works in: an aesthetic tradition of Plains culture in concert with other techniques founded in Western art traditions. In his combination of strategies, Houle subverts the problematic and racist nature of primitivism, which prefaced European superiority over Indigenous practice.

Part of the question of Indigenous abstraction is spiritual resonance. While being careful not to ascribe overly romantic readings, I am compelled to consider the minimalist space of abstraction as activated by the spiritual and the meditative states observed within the space of gratitude and prayer in Indigenous worldviews. This is the state of being that occurs when we look at open space, at colour and shape in a way that is not only formal but also lets our mind wander into those spaces, undistractedly, to consider the essence and the origin of color, form, thought and prayer. I know that the origin of colours and traditions about composition and design exist in a plurality of Indigenous culture and can take radically different directions than the colour wheel—perhaps, through this geometric abstraction, we see windows into stories, beliefs, practices and cosmologies.

Another French term, *trompe l’oeil*, is considered in Houle’s collage. *Trompe l’oeil* is a trick of the eye, creating dimensionality and the illusion of a three-dimensional object on a flat surface. The image of the knotted string, a stitch reminiscent of bookbinding, occupies the central axis of the paper collage. Activating the idea of a manuscript and of European

classic arts, and placing Indigenous arts in equality with European classical and modernist ideas, is a political gesture that subverts the dehumanizing acts of colonization and the relegating of Indigenous arts to the realm of primitivism and ethnographic framing. The tensions between illusion and origin balance the white space and the bold stencil lettering in French. The stencil lettering is evocative of shipping crates emblazoned with bold lettering to communicate their contents, referencing the global exchange of ideas and products. In considering the translation of parflèche as a container, that is adorned with detailed and aesthetically advanced geometric abstraction, we also come to consider that which is lost in translation: the original word and relation of the object to the culture from which it comes.

The connections between Indigenous art and culture with French thinkers and artists were made more evident to Houle at a 2006 residency at La Cité des Arts in Paris. Houle was influenced by the ways in which Ojibwa culture was consumed by French Society. Referencing works by Eugene Delacroix and Charles Baudelaire, Houle said of an encounter with a drawing of Delacroix's: "... seeing Delacroix's sketch, *Cinq études d'Indiens*, [of the Ojibwa dancers] at the Louvre... was like traveling back in time to when Delacroix first drew it." In this drawing

Houle must have found himself within a meta-state, reading through a translation of his own culture's aesthetics, ultimately changing their meaning and thus forcing an interrogation of the translation's truth and origin.

Ultimately Houle's work is to make us reconsider the standardized historical narrative that European arts, culture and society were or are more advanced than the diversity of Indigenous aesthetics, culture and worldviews, then or now. Subtly backwards engineering our belief systems and destabilizing our tethers to colonial histories, Houle opens up fertile ground for the considerations of equality and exchange and the intimate space of connection. A parflèche is a container, meant to carry supplies for survival; in this collage it carries not physical supplies but concepts, ideas and prayers for the survival and transformation of people through the righting of history.

Terms and Conditions

The images, texts, documentation, illustrations, designs, icons and all other content are protected by Canadian and international copyright laws. The content may be covered by other restrictions as well, including copyright and other proprietary rights held by third parties. The Surrey Art Gallery retains all rights, including copyright, in data, images, text and any other information. The Gallery expressly forbids the copying of any protected content, except for purposes of fair dealing, as defined by Canadian copyright law. © Surrey Art Gallery, artists and authors.



An Open Book

a catalogue of artworks from the Surrey Art Gallery's Permanent Collection

ISSN 1910-1392 ISBN 978-1-926573-50-2 Published 2018

surrey
art gallery

13750 88 Avenue
Surrey, BC V3W 3L1
Phone: 604-501-5566
artgallery@surrey.ca
www.surrey.ca/artgallery

engaging
contemporary art



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada

