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Robert Houle: Enuhmo anduhyaun (the road home)

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ROBERT HOULE

enuhmo andúhyaun (the road home)

September 7 to October 12, 2012



School of Art Gallery



UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

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UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

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Cover image credit:
Robert Houle (Saulteaux, b. 1947), (detail) *the road home* from
Sandy Bay Residential School Series, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4
x 76.2 cm

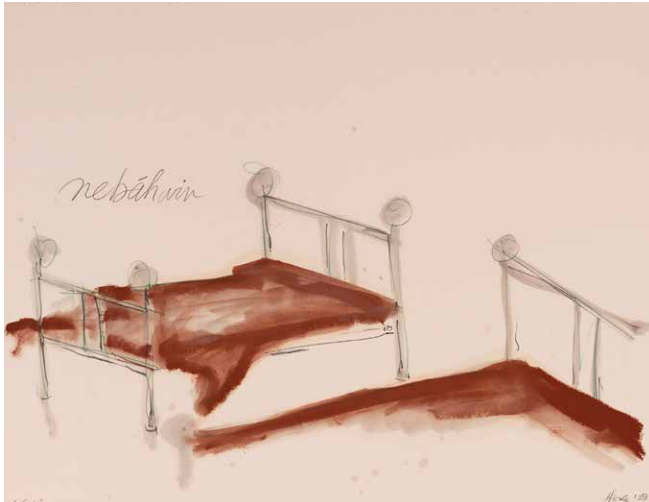
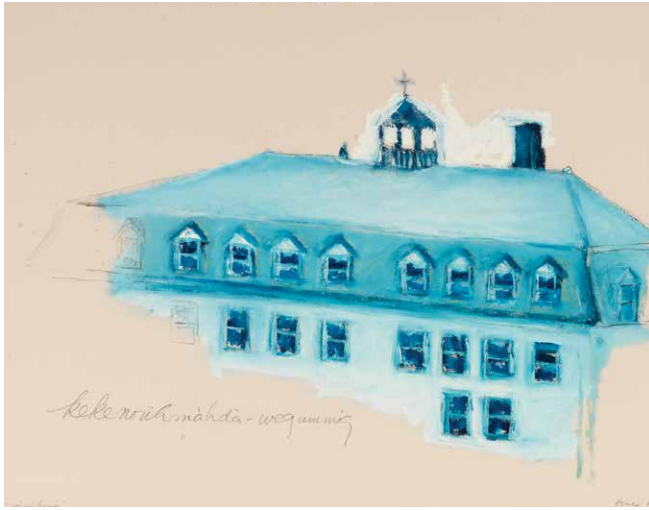
uhpé guhnoodezowan
when I speak to myself

David McIntosh
August 6, 2012

Language, sound and meaning, the natural order, the supernatural, inseparable and indissoluble, a window to memory, is the technique of orally handing down a narrative. Language is the listener's recollection, the history affecting the meaning through association and suggestion. Memory and language, speaking and hearing its specific cognitive conceits codified to represent time and space, its rhythmical and syntactical structure transcending the ways of resolving the opposition between unity and multiplicity, translate the oral to an image, becoming the unifying creative conduit for the human spirit.¹

Almost exactly three years ago, on a typical Toronto August day of blazing sun, searing heat and oppressive humidity, I was sitting in Robert Houle's downtown garden, on one of my regular studio visits to catch up with my old friend and to see his latest work. That afternoon Robert showed me a series of twenty-four new drawings, oilstick on paper, that were unlike any of his previous work. In fact, I was the first person to see these drawings. I remember being overwhelmed by their garish colour palette: gaudy turquoise, muddy

¹ Robert Houle, "Anishnabe Supernova," in *Copper Thunderbird: The Art of Norval Morrisseau* (Toronto: Westerkirk Works of Art, 2012), 101–102.



brown, unrepentant black. The drawing style was equally shocking and uncharacteristic, mixes of slashes and broad renderings, visceral and assured, figurative and gestural simultaneously. And I remember the grotesque amorphous presences in the work made me shiver with fear on that searing hot day. These twenty-four drawings are memories of Robert's residential school experiences from over fifty years ago, depicting three main subjects: the school playground; beds in the dormitory; and religious figures. All have titles in English written in pencil in the lower left corner while some have Anishnabe words written into them: *kekenoühmáhdáwegummig* on a drawing of the residential school titled *schoolhouse*; *nebáwin* on a drawing of a dormitory bed titled *sleep*; and *uhnúhmeahkazoo* on a drawing of a monstrous kneeling priest titled *pretending to pray*.²

I knew that Robert had attended the residential school at Sandy Bay First Nation/*Kawikwetawankak*, but we'd never really talked about his experience and none of his subsequent work, addressed it overtly. But with these drawings he confronted and overcame, in his words, the "fear and shame" of his residential school experience that he had held inside since he was a young boy. That sunny summer day in his garden, Robert

disclosed that he was taken away from his family by the priest who ran the school, and the agent who ran the regional administration for the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs for his reserve, when he was seven years old. He was physically, spiritually and sexually abused during his elementary school years by the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Sainte-Hyacinthe and the lay brothers of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. I remember sharing tears and anger with Robert that afternoon as we looked at the drawings and as he spoke. His courageous drawings and words were for him "recuperated time" and they form the foundation for the exhibition *Robert Houle: enuhmo andúhyaun (the road home)*.

A remarkable feature of this set of drawings is the sense of movement, of transitional spaces. There are six drawings of the school playground depicting almost the same landscape, but there is a change of position and perspective in each one, concluding with *the fear*, in which a black figure, a predator, appears. Similarly, there are eight drawings of beds in the dormitory, each drawn from a different position and perspective, concluding with *night predator*, in which a dark figure crouches behind a bed. Robert explained that as he changed perspective within his memory for each drawing, hidden characters were revealed and increasingly detailed memories of his abuse and his abusers took form. As he drew with his floating eye, he moved through remembered space to peer inside of and behind the visualizations of his memories in each successive drawing, almost like key

² All Anishnabe words and spellings are by Robert Houle based on Rev. Edward F. Wilson's *The Ojebway Language: A Manual for Missionaries and Others Employed Among The Ojebway Indians* (Toronto: Roswell & Hutchison for the Venerable Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1874). <http://www.umich.edu/~ojibwe/resources/Wilson%20Dictionary.pdf>

frames in an animated film, crucial moments in a full-motion version yet to come. And as he moved and drew, he spoke to himself in Anishnabe, his mother tongue, which he was punished for speaking in residential school, but which he and his family fought to continue speaking and now gave him access to even more detailed memories and their expression. Together, language and memory are combined in a process of movement, transition and transformation, a process which underpins all the works in the exhibition, culminating in *Sandy Bay Indian Residential School IV* (2012), a series of six panels, sensually painted and glazed to a shimmering gloss in Robert's preferred palette of reds and magentas, hung on a painted recreation of the old school walls.³ Through the entire series of artworks in this exhibition, Robert proposes a dynamic, shifting process for engaging language, memory and image to assert truth, survival and transformation.

Robert's experience and artistic process inform and extend a larger historical process of dealing with the legacy of residential school abuses that includes varied forms of personal and collective remembering, ranging from the 1998 publication of the book *Flowers on My Grave*,⁴ an account of the suicide of a boy victimized



³ The residential school was burned to the ground in the early 1970s.

⁴ Ruth Teichroeb, *Flowers on My Grave: How an Ojibwa Boy's Death Helped Break the Silence on Child Abuse* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1997).



by multi-generational residential school violence on Robert's reserve and which informs his earlier *Sandy Bay* painting, to the current Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which began taking testimony from residential school survivors across Canada in 2011 and which conceives of "the truth telling and reconciliation process as part of an overall holistic and comprehensive response to the Indian Residential School legacy."⁵ Robert has chosen not to participate in the work of the TRC, largely due to the prominence of the concept of "reconciliation" in the Commission's process, a concept Robert describes as "an imposed Judeo-Christian concept of forgiveness" that elides and excludes indigenous peoples' concepts of memory and transformation. For Robert, a more meaningful concept than forgiveness is *pahgedenaun*, an Anishnabe term that translates roughly to English as "let it go from your mind" and which appears in the painting titled *people in Sandy Bay Residential School I*. *Pahgedenaun* is a self-defining and self-determining act while forgiveness is an act of submission to the will of others. We see the dynamics of *pahgedenaun* at play in the transformations from the grotesqueness of works like *uhnúhmeahkazoo*—*pretending to pray* to the inner strength and resolution of *Sandy Bay Indian Residential School IV*.



⁵ Truth and Reconciliation Commission <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=7>



Another concern with the TRC process relates to justice, a term that is noticeably absent from this and every other TRC's title. Historically, TRCs have been implemented in societies that have experienced mass violence but are undergoing rapid, radical change, transitioning to a new state. The purpose of most TRCs is to enact what has been termed "transitional" or "restorative" justice in situations where abuses are so widespread that it is thought to be difficult to distinguish perpetrator from victim, and to minimize acts of reprisal by newly empowered victims of mass violence. The South African TRC, the original such process, was implemented in 1995 to facilitate the transition from apartheid to democracy and black majority rule, and to avoid furthering social and racial divides and violence while relieving the traditional judicial system of hearing the overwhelming number of crimes committed under the apartheid regime. But paradoxically, "transitional" or "restorative" justice can result in impunity for perpetrators and the deferral of substantive justice.

A recent case of this kind of justice following from a TRC in Peru demonstrates the problematics of this paradoxical approach to justice. Peru suffered a vicious period of suspension of democracy and state terrorism between 1990 and 2000 under President Alberto Fujimori, during which more than 70,000 indigenous people were murdered or disappeared. With the transition back to democracy, the Peruvian TRC launched in 2001 collected testimony from survivors which assisted in the

former president being charged and convicted of crimes against humanity in 2009.⁶ Fujimori is serving several sentences in a Peruvian prison, however, his daughter Keiko ran in the 2010 presidential election on a platform that included a pardon for her father, and she almost won, even though the information was brought out during the campaign that her father's regime had conducted forced sterilization of thousands of indigenous women during his presidency. More recently the Peruvian army has contradicted the findings of the TRC, claiming that there was never a state policy of mass violence and that the massacres were carried out by rogue individuals. The democratic government of Peru continues violent repression of indigenous people fighting international mining operations on their land, notably in the city of Cajamarca, where in recent months anti-mining protests have led to the declaration of a state of emergency, police occupation and repression, and a mounting death toll. While the Peruvian TRC's process of transitional justice documented the truths of many survivors' experiences, it did not resolve core problems; old racial and social divides have continued to widen and violence against the victims of the historical mass violence continues. The right to justice has not been fulfilled. The ominous black predator figures in Robert's drawings are still out there, taking many different forms, appearing in many places in the world.

⁶ The full report can be found at <http://www.cverdad.org.pe/ingles/pagina01.php>.

At the end of this exhibition, Robert offers a powerful drawing which serves as both a coda to the preceding works and a new challenge. Having brought the powers of memory, language, image, *pahgedenaun*, truth and transformation to bear on his residential school experiences, Robert reaches into himself again, revisiting the punishment he received from the residential school priests for attending the Sundance, one of the most sacred Anishnabe rituals, accused of worshipping a “false god.” *sundance distraction* (2012) is a rare depiction of the Sundance lodge which reprises the technique of the earliest drawings in this exhibition, but this time the gestures are exuberant, the crimson colour vibrant, the image offering a new way forward, another road home.



David McIntosh is a Toronto writer, curator, educator and new media artist who has worked extensively in Canada, Peru, Argentina, Mexico and Cuba.



Artist's Biography

Robert Houle is a member of Sandy Bay First Nation, Manitoba and currently lives and works in Toronto. Houle is a contemporary Anishnabe Saulteaux artist with international exhibition experience. His curating, writing and teaching has played a significant role in defining indigenous identity. Drawing from Western art conventions he tackles lingering aspects of colonization and its postcolonial aftermath and relying on the objectivity of modernity and the subjectivity of postmodernity he brings aboriginal history into his work. As a child he was taken from his family and placed in the Sandy Bay Indian Residential School. Houle moved to the Assiniboia Indian Residential School in Winnipeg for High School. He received a B.A. in Art History from the University of Manitoba, and a B.A. in Art Education from McGill University and studied painting and drawing at the International Summer Academy of Fine Arts in Salzburg, Austria.

Houle has been exhibiting since the early 1970's. His most recent exhibition, the multi-media installation *Paris/Ojibwa*, was recently on view at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris and is currently on tour in Canada. He has also participated in several important international group exhibitions, most recently, *My Winnipeg* at La Maison Rouge, Paris and *Changing Hands: Art Without Reservation 3, Contemporary Native North American Art from the Northeast and Southeast* at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York.

Houle was curator of contemporary aboriginal art at the Canadian Museum of Civilization from 1977 to 1981 and has curated or co-curated groundbreaking exhibitions such as *New Work by a New Generation*, in connection with the World Assembly of First Nations at the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery in Regina in 1982; *Land Spirit Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada* in Ottawa in 1992, and *Multiplicities* at the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia in 1993-94. Houle has written extensively on major contemporary First Nations and Native American artists including Rebecca Belmore, Robert Davidson, Norval Morrisseau, Daphne Odjig and Kay WalkingStick. He also taught native studies at the Ontario College of Art and Design University in Toronto for fifteen years.

Houle's considerable influence as an artist, curator, writer, educator and cultural theorist has led to his being awarded the Janet Braide Memorial Award for Excellence in Canadian Art History in 1993; the 2001 Toronto Arts Award for the Visual Arts; the Eiteljorg Fellowship in 2003; membership in the Royal Canadian Academy; distinguished Alumnus, University of Manitoba and the Canada Council International Residency Program for the Visual Arts in Paris.

Houle is represented by Galerie Orenda in Paris; Galerie Nicolas Robert in Montreal; and Kinsman Robinson Galleries in Toronto.

List of Works

Dimensions are listed as height x width

All photos are courtesy of the artist unless otherwise indicated

r = reproduced page

All works by: Robert Houle (Saulteaux b. 1947)

schoolhouse from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm, r 2 top left

père from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 76.2 x 58.4 cm

père chagnon from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm

uhnúhméahkazoooh / pretending to pray from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 76.2 x 58.4 cm, r 2 right

uhnúhméahkazoooh (pretending to pray) from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm

oblates of mary immaculate from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm

church basement from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm

pray to whom from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm

and I prayed from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm

conflict from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm

sleep from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm, r 2 bottom left

noodin is my friend from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm

I'm cornered from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm

the morning from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm

night predator from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm, r 4 bottom

silent shame from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm

outhouse abuse from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm

the black door from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm

and the supervisor knew from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm

the fear from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm, r 4 top

the road home from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm, r cover

drive-in terror from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm

drive-in predator from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm

beach predator from *Sandy Bay Residential School Series*, 2009, oilstick on paper, 58.4 x 76.2 cm

Sister Clothilde, 2009, oil on paper, 111.8 x 76.2 cm, courtesy of Galerie Nicolas Robert, Montreal

Shape Shifter, 2009, oil on paper, 111.8 x 76.2 cm, courtesy of Galerie Nicolas Robert, Montreal

Dark Moses, 2009, oil on paper, 111.8 x 76.2 cm, courtesy of
Galerie Nicolas Robert, Montreal

sundance distraction, 2009, oilstick on paper, 76.2 x 58.4 cm, r 9

*schoolhouse, praying, sleeping, waiting, people, lake, Sandy Bay
Indian Residential School I*, 2010-2011, 9 oil on canvas panels,
watercolour, graphite and vinyl text, each panel 30.5 x 22.9 x 1.9 cm,
overall installation 195.6 x 337.8 cm, *people* r 6; installation photo
credit: Keesic Douglas, r 7

*schoolhouse, praying, sleeping, people, Sandy Bay Indian
Residential School III*, 2012, 4 oil on canvas panels, watercolour,
graphite and vinyl text, each panel 35.6 x 27.9 x 3.8 cm. overall
installation 195.6 x 337.8 cm, r 10, photo credit: Keesic Douglas

*alizarin crimson, cobalt violet, winsor red deep, magenta, cadmium
red light, cadmium red deep, Sandy Bay Indian Residential School
IV*, 2012, 6 oil on canvas panels, watercolour, graphite and vinyl
text, each panel 61 x 30.5 x 1.9 cm, overall installation 195.6 x
337.8 cm, r 5, photo credit: Keesic Douglas

*Robert Houle thanks Paul Gardner, Paul Hess,
David McIntosh and Mary Reid for their efforts and
contributions to this project. The artist dedicates this
exhibition to his mother, Gladys Houle, who never had
the chance to tell her story.*

