

NORVAL MORRISSEAU: RECENT WORK

Curator: Elizabeth McLuhan

Thunder Bay National Exhibition Centre and Centre For Indian Art, Thunder Bay, Ontario.

1983

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The exhibition of recent works by Norval Morrisseau, which currently is on display at the Centre for Indian Art in Thunder Bay is something of a homecoming for the artist. This is Morrisseau's first solo exhibition in the northwest after years of international and national acclaim. One is tempted to speculate that the exhibition is seen by Morrisseau as an opportunity to vindicate himself, to reveal to his home-town admirers the splendour and the depth of his powers as an artist and a shaman.

For Morrisseau, the artist occupies a position in society equivalent to that of a shaman - a mediator between earthly concerns and spiritual realities. The work of art becomes the prime evidence of the artist's ability to tap into his own spiritual power, and the artist, through his work, becomes a teacher and a spiritual guide.

The exhibition consists of three types of work: large, brightly coloured paintings of figures and animal life, smaller paintings of a more experimental nature, and drawings in pencil and ink. The large canvases display the by-now-familiar black outline snaking through the composition, encapsulating pockets of colour, transforming itself from a descriptive contour to a decorative element, from a face to bird to a flower. The vigour and continuity of the line plays against the flat, static brightness of the colour as if to show us how, by remaining open to change of form and definition, we can pass into brighter, more splendidous states of being. The large paintings seem to be a formal statement of the principle that life can only succeed through continuous transformation.

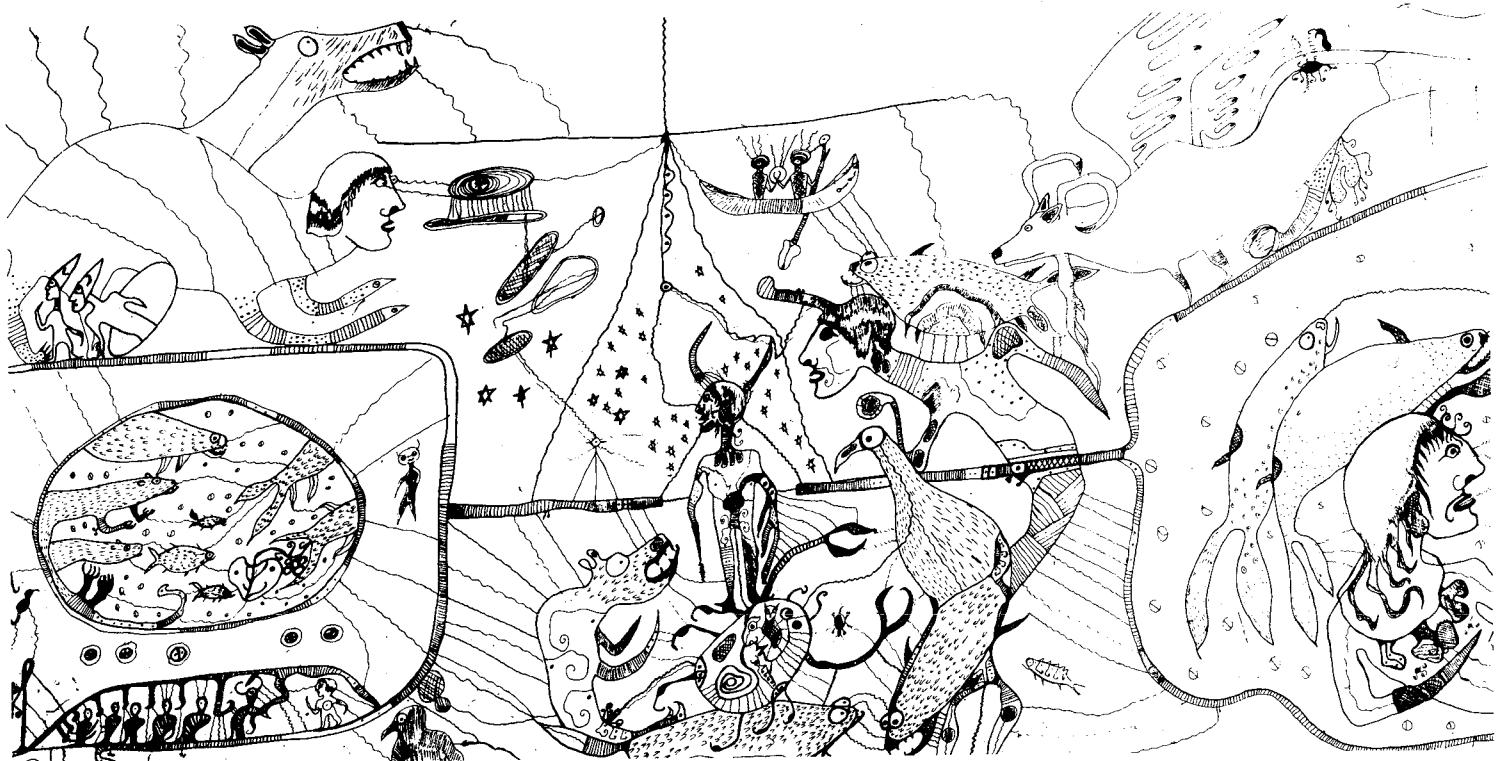
The smaller paintings attempt to bring that principle itself to life by introducing the transformative element more directly into the act of painting itself. Several of the smaller works deal directly with the dream or spirit world and convey an airiness and space which is missing in the larger works. In a piece such as "Crystal Replay", 1983, the sinuous black outline is still present, but there is also a washy stain of colour whose random edges seem to coagulate into a deep landscape. This experiment with acrylic washes signals the artist's willingness to risk having the image transform itself, through the play of loose liquid colour on the canvas. Where this idea works, as in "Crystal Replay", the painting takes on a powerful, other-worldly dimension. Of course, the smaller works do not carry the heroic impact of the larger, but they convey the delicacy, the danger, and the utter strangeness of the spirit world. In this regard they succeed in the shamanistic task of bringing the dream state to waking

consciousness.

Certainly the most astonishing piece of work in this show is the giant scroll entitled "Shaman Teaching His Two Halves Havles in a Dream-state", 1983, which spans one long wall of the Exhibition Centre. In this work, Morrisseau seems to have mapped out his entire inner consciousness. It is an encyclopaedic work, a compendium of all his images and concerns. Because of its size and the displacement of its images it cannot fail to absorb the viewer both retinally and psychically. At the centre of the scroll (see page 227), stands the shaman, like a spark between two electrodes. He is both a transmitter and receiver of energy and images. Above his head are the stars and heavens, criss-crossed with lines of force. At his feet is a giant crab whose back is inscribed with faces and animals. Rushing up from below the shaman, to greet or attack, are birds, fish, bears and men, all connected by radiating lines. As the viewer moves out from the centre he confronts the world as the shaman must see it. The world is composed of things which are completely visible yet transparent, separate and distinct yet interconnected and in a state of transformation. Most of the human figures are enclosed by, or are enclosing something else, or are becoming something else. The human figure becomes a meeting place for the eternally various forms of nature, therefore he must respond and change if he is to live. Throughout the intestinal wriggings and loopings of the drawing we can see the life of a man and a civilization being born in the belly of nature herself.

The large scroll is the most important and most effective work in the exhibition and is a work of the utmost integrity and bravery. Let us hope that this work will serve as a chart for Morrisseau's continued voyages as an artist and shaman.

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SHAMAN TEACHING HIS TWO HALVES IN A DREAM-STATE