

Turtle Island

Turtle Island is the name given to the earth or North America by many Indigenous groups. The name comes from various oral histories which tell stories of a turtle which holds the world on its back. While the actual story of Turtle Island varies among Indigenous communities, the overall story is a creation story that emphasizes the turtle as a symbol of life and earth and demonstrates the interconnections between all creatures.

First Nations peoples have been creating visual imagery for millennia. It was not until the 1960s, however, that their imagery was recognized by the Canadian Art establishment as anything more than cultural artifacts or records. The first First Nations artist to achieve any recognition in Canada was Norval Morrisseau. Born in 1932 near Thunder Bay, Ontario, Morrisseau was an Anishnaabe (Ojibwa) shaman and self-taught artist who developed what became known as the Woodland School of Art. Through this style Morrisseau sought to communicate the spiritual essence and stories of the Anishnaabe (Ojibwe) world to the Anishnabeg peoples themselves. Norval Morrisseau's work was, and continues to be, very successful and three generations of Indigenous artists have followed in his footsteps, producing variations of the Morrisseau style using heavy black outlines to often enclose colourful, flat shapes.

The Woodland style of art making is based on traditional artistic representations used by Indigenous ancestors. The rudiments of this style are expressive and symbolic use of line; a system for transparency; interconnecting lines that determine relationships in terms of spiritual power; the prevalence of images of transformation; and x-ray decoration. For Norval Morrisseau and the many Indigenous artists who have adopted aspects of this style, the manipulation of bright, contrasting colours is also a key resource in the repertory of symbols used.

The Art Gallery of Alberta travelling exhibition **Turtle Island** features the work of Aguenus (Angela Hall), Brandon Atkinson and Jessica Desmoulin, three contemporary Indigenous artists from central Alberta who, to varying degrees, bear witness to the importance of the Woodland style in their work. Whether through drawing or paint on canvas, these artists portray and celebrate the bonds between all forms of life on Turtle Island, the place we all call home.

*This exhibition was curated by Shane Golby, Art Gallery of Alberta, for the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program. The exhibition **Turtle Island** was generously funded by Syncrude Canada Ltd.*

COVER IMAGE:

Aguenus (Angela Hall)
Walking with Creation, 2020
Mixed media on canvas
Collection of the artist

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program

The Art Gallery of Alberta is pleased to present this travelling exhibition to venues throughout Alberta. Currently the Art Gallery of Alberta serves approximately 60 venues in over 40 communities. Exhibitions on tour from the Art Gallery of Alberta easily adapt to space requirements of smaller venues: schools, libraries, museums, health care centres and other community facilities. The exhibitions are organized in such a manner as to make unpacking, packing, hanging and shipping as easy as possible. Along with the exhibition each venue receives an Educational Interpretive Guide. These materials enable teachers to use the exhibition within the school curriculum.

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Collection is the primary source of works featured in the travelling exhibitions. Other sources for exhibitions may include community partners, archives, private collections and loans from artists. Each year we welcome new venues to enrich their community art through the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program.

Our Thanks

The Artists:

Aguenus (Angela Hall), Brandon Atkinson, Jessica Desmoulin

Syncrude Canada Ltd.

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts

and to the many individuals, organizations and communities who contribute to the success of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program each year.

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The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program

Turtle Island

I want to make paintings full of colour, laughter, compassion and love....If I can do that, I can paint for 100 years.
Norval Morrisseau



Jessica Desmoulin
Tranquil Beginning, 2020
 Acrylic on canvas
 Collection of Jessica Desmoulin

Jessica Desmoulin

Jessica Desmoulin is a mixed heritage artist who lives in Sherwood Park. While always interested in art, Desmoulin never thought of it as a 'life-goal' and never studied art in an academic way. It wasn't until she was in her mid-20s that she started taking her painting seriously as a means of mental and emotional release. As she states:

Art lets you have an outlet to make you feel 'better'.

Jessica Desmoulin approaches her artwork in an intuitive fashion, creating whatever appeals to her. Though Desmoulin's approach to art making is intuitive, her work is inspired by actual experiences. An out-doors-person and hunter, she is motivated by the natural world and animals she encounters in her travels. If she sees a moose, for example, she will be inspired to create a painting about a moose. Rather than simply painting the animal, however, she bases her composition on the associations she makes with the animal. She associates swans, for example, with being 'motherly' and so the artwork she creates will reflect this in some way.

While her artwork brings her closer to the natural world, it has also brought her more into contact with her Indigenous heritage. Though she is of mixed heritage (Ojibwe and white), Jessica Desmoulin did not identify as indigenous until her mid-twenties. Also, while her reserve is in Ontario – the birthplace of the Woodland School of Art – she did not know what the Woodland influence was until someone viewing her work made the connection. Since making these discoveries she has been learning about her heritage and has started connecting Ojibwe stories to the animals she encounters and how her thoughts about the animals connect to the traditional stories.

As an artist, Jessica aims to make people feel better and feel something when they view her work. As she states

If something I'm doing can make someone feel better, it makes me feel better. I'm not trying to be 'spiritual'. I'm just trying to be 'connected' and help others relate to the subject in an emotional way. (My aim is) to bring connection between humanity and the natural world/animals we share the planet with.



Brandon Atkinson
Patience of a Fox (Fox), 2020
 Archival ink, graphite on paper
 Collection of the artist

Brandon Atkinson

Brandon Atkinson is a Métis artist from Edmonton whose ancestral roots can be traced back to Wales and western Canada (Manitoba). Born in Edmonton, Atkinson was raised by his grandparents and has lived in the city for most of his life.

Atkinson states that he

...always drew. From 8 years old I knew I could always draw and when I'm drawing time just passes by.

Described as a self-taught artist, Atkinson's work is intuitive in nature: he never knows exactly what will be in a drawing or how it will turn out. As he describes himself

I'm the kind of artist that has to draw what I 'see', what I feel I should draw, not what I actually see or am told to draw. No one has ever taught me how to draw and my granny always told me to just do what I do.

In his drawing Brandon Atkinson focuses on animals and the environments in which they live. While his drawings are unique creations, based on what he feels and sees with his 'inner eye', his work does demonstrate similarities with aspects of the Woodland school of art. This is seen in the emphasis placed on line in his work as well as the use of X-ray decoration where inner structures – environments and narratives – of people and animals are depicted.



Aguenus
Our Ancient Roots, 2019
 Mixed media on canvas
 Collection of the artist

Aguenus (Angela Hall)

Aguenus (Angela Hall) was born and raised in Edmonton. Her mother is of Métis heritage while her father was Lithuanian. Largely a self-taught artist, Aguenus draws upon personal symbols, narratives and a deep spirituality to create her energetic and colourful paintings.

Aguenus' childhood was a difficult one. She and her brothers were in and out of foster care and group homes until she went to live with an aunt on her father's side. With a stable home her childhood improved and she began to draw on her creative side.

After high school Aguenus decided to become a teacher. While studying elementary education, she focused on intercultural studies and began to learn about her Indigenous heritage. This education continued during teacher practicums in Wabasca and Paddle Prairie and while she taught at Ben Calf Robe School in Edmonton. While teaching at Ben Calf Robe she developed programs focusing on art, music and dance and to further her knowledge began taking art courses at Harcourt House Arts Centre in Edmonton.

The subjects of Aguenus' art works are inspired by her visions, feelings, personal symbolism and the things she loves such as turtles, Indigenous pow-wow regalia, Indigenous beading and flowers. Her painting style is linked in many ways to the Woodland School of Art as devised by Norval Morrisseau. She believes, for example, that there are numerous dimensions inside a person or object and strives to express this in her work. One means of doing this, as seen in her imagery, is to create shapes/objects within other shapes/objects. This means of representation is seen in Morrisseau's work. The layers and energy within and between animals and plants seen in Morrisseau's paintings is also something she tries to capture in her own work. Unlike Morrisseau, who accomplished this sense of energy through 'flat' paint, however, Aguenus gives her work a real dimensionality using 3D paint and sparkles.