

One on One

April 12 to June 29, 2014

The Kelowna Art Gallery is pleased to announce a new exhibition series to be installed annually in our Mardell G Reynolds Gallery space. *One on One* will be curated each year by an emerging Aboriginal curator. This individual will select an emerging Canadian Aboriginal artist with whom s/he is interested in working. The resulting exhibition will be accompanied by a web-based publication. It is intended that both the curator and artist will be on hand for the installation and opening of the exhibition.

This year Winnipeg-based independent curator Jenny Western has selected artist Kenneth Lavallee to work with in producing an exhibition here. Lavallee is a painter, also living and working in Winnipeg. Lavallee will be working on a new body of work for this exhibition/installation. He and Western have been speaking together of their Man and Nature exhibition title, using the bygone term “man” ironically, in reference to the culture of the mid-twentieth century.

Please note that the dates of the show will span the annual National Aboriginal Day of June 21. Gallery admission will be free that day.

Opening reception

Friday, April 11, 2014, 7 to 9 pm

The curator and artist will talk at 7 pm

This is a free event, open to members and guests by invitation.

Curatorial Essay

One Man's Nature

By Jenny Western

Kenneth Lavallee is what some folks might be inclined to call an “old soul.” Dapper and polite, he exudes the humour of a kindly, story-telling grandfather, with his gentle, reassuring manner. As a twenty-something artist he is certainly years away from that old rocking chair, yet within his artistic practice there are references to a bygone era. The bold colours and abstracted forms that are the emerging artist's signature style clearly reflect a modernist aesthetic. Think something along the lines of a Jackson Beardy-Winston Leathers' love child for the new millennium. Perhaps not surprisingly then, Lavallee's latest body of work, *Man and Nature*, situates his epoch of interest within the brackets of 1960 and 1975, all while keeping a clear eye on the realities of life as a young Métis man making art in the year 2014.

Like Beardy and Leathers before him, Lavallee is an experienced printmaker and muralist, having worked extensively on various projects around his hometown of Winnipeg as well as in locales further afield. And while these two modes of artistic production continue to affect his practice as a whole, *Man and Nature* focuses on Lavallee's skills as a painter. The exhibition showcases a handful of new paintings that explore the wonders of nature and the human experience through a lens tinted by mid-twentieth century Canadiana. Despite his keen attraction to the styles of modernism, his interrogation of its modes suggests an awareness of being situated in a (post?) post-modern era, while being cognizant of the triumphs and shortcomings of the last century.

To begin with, the exhibition's title *Man and Nature* is a conscious evocation of the way in which the world was displayed during a certain moment in a certain period of time. For the uninitiated, mainly those who were not school children in Winnipeg at some point between the 1970s and early 1990s, “Man and Nature” is the abbreviated name for The Museum of Man and Nature. Opened in 1970, the museum's wafting smell of creosote (a cue that you are just around the corner from the *Nonsuch*, a recreated seventeenth-century tall ship that is the museum's crown jewel) and its requisite dusty dioramas loom large in the civic imaginings of many Gen-X and Millennial Winnipeggers. In 1996 the museum decided to strike a more inclusive tone when its name was officially changed to The Manitoba Museum, a move that aimed to rescind years of entanglement between museological practices and patriarchal language. As with the selective renovations that occurred to the museum space during this period, the name change seemed to highlight the very values it was trying to cover up through its attempted erasure.

Today, still colloquially referred to as “Man and Nature” by many, The Manitoba Museum is a pastiche of 1990s design overlapping 1970s ideals. One of the remaining vestiges of note is Daphne Odjig's celebrated mural, *The Creation of the World*. Commissioned by the museum in 1971, *The Creation of the World* tells a version of the Anishinabe creation story unfolding across a ten-by-twelve-foot wall. Bright, bold, nearly garish colours are outlined with dark black lines, producing forms that are recognizable and yet abstracted. Here we have a vision of nature, simplified by its mid-century vernacular and yet deeply complex in the inferences of its storyline. Odjig's style, which was informed by a knowledge of European art history as well as an understanding of traditional Indigenous aesthetics, became inextricably linked to the Woodlands School, when she helped found the Professional Native Indian Artists Incorporated, or the Indian Group of Seven, out of Winnipeg in 1974. Together with Jackson Beardy, Eddy Cobiness, Alex Janvier, Norval Morrisseau, Carl Ray, and Joseph Sanchez, Odjig assisted in redefining widely held conceptions about Aboriginal artists and Aboriginal art across Canada and beyond.

Seven years earlier at Expo' 67 in Montreal, Morrisseau and Janvier had participated in the groundbreaking *Indians of Canada* pavillion. Set within the celebratory tone of this world's fair event, the *Indians of Canada* pavillion created a stir by plainly intoning some of the complications of modern

Aboriginal life in Canada. A message of this kind, dissatisfaction expressed by an Indigenous voice in a space where Indigenous experience had usually been spoken for, was pivotal, and the role of the participating artists is not to be overlooked. Morrisseau created a mural for the *Indians of Canada* pavilion called *Earth Mother with Her Children*, while Janvier contributed a round panel painting to the building's exterior called *The Unpredictable East*. As scholar Ruth Phillips notes, "... the use of modernist abstract styles by many of the artists sent a message about the readiness of Aboriginal artists to participate in the world of contemporary fine art. In a complementary fashion, the works newly created in traditional idioms countered the still-widespread impression that traditional Indian art – and culture – had disappeared." ¹

Lavallee has taken an interest in Expo '67, particularly the tone and feel of its official theme, *Man and His World*. Design and graphics produced in support of Expo '67 has continued to influence many contemporary Canadian artists today; Brian Jungen's *Habitat 04* infamously made reference to Moshe Safdie's renowned architectural project *Habitat* by turning its cluster of boxes into a play structure for cats. Lavallee is certainly no exception. But the Expo '67 colour palette and geometric forms have not been the only elements to leave a lasting impression on his artistic practice. Despite, or perhaps in the face of, the overarching patriarchal hum of the *Man and His World* theme, Lavallee is intrigued by the simplicity of the perceived relationship between humanity and what we view as the natural world.

At its foundations, the paintings of *Man and Nature* are an exercise in presenting memories and ideas about Lavallee's own relationship to the land around St. Laurent, a town on the eastern shores of Lake Manitoba, which the Lavallee family calls home. St. Laurent is a Metis community with deep roots as a fishing site for Anishinabe and Metis peoples. In 2004, St. Laurent was chosen to represent Metis communities of North America in an exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., and today St. Laurent carries on a variety of cultural activities including the Manipogo Festival which takes place every March at the end of ice-fishing season. For Lavallee, St. Laurent is home to his grandmother, as well as a place of natural wonders and childhood recollections. A flashback to seeing wolves at the edge of the family property while a baby cousin played just yards away might evoke an image of trees, wavy lines, and fresh air in his mind's eye. The artistic outcome in his piece *The Bush* presents itself as a landscape painting, but in Lavallee's head it compromises some of the qualities of classic portraiture in capturing not only a place but the spirit of its people, even if those people are not visibly present in the image.

Lavallee's interest in portraiture also manifests itself in his two works *Man the Producer* and *Twin Lakes*. Making reference to the Expo '67 thematic pavilion of the same name, *Man the Producer* is a simple image of humanity and the potential for nature's abundance. It may also be a sideways glance toward the statue on top of the Manitoba legislature's dome, Winnipeg's iconic Golden Boy, with his armful of wheat. *Twin Lakes* draws its title from the beach located in the St. Laurent community. The beach is situated on a narrow strip of land between Lake Manitoba and Lake Francis, thus the allusion to dualities in its naming. Lavallee's painterly exploration of *Twin Lakes* presents an image of a woman whose profile mirrors the line of the natural landscape of St. Laurent and the surrounding area that she looks upon.

St Laurent was recently the site of one of Lavallee's mural paintings when he took it upon himself to paint his grandmother's shed. The bright colours and rows of vertical lines stand out amid their bushy surroundings. But what appears to be an anomaly is in fact a legacy unfolding itself. Lavallee cites his initial interest in art creation as due in part to his mom's early artistic creation, painting scenes on garages and sheds using shoe polish. A bit later on, Jackson Beardy's *Peace and Harmony* murals on Winnipeg's Selkirk Avenue caught Lavallee's attention as he passed by on his way to school every day. Beardy's aesthetic, with its primary colours, swooping forms, and wavy lines emanating from energy sources, made a discernible impact on Lavallee's style. The outdoor placement of these works also signals a notable relationship to Lavallee's understandings of nature and creativity.

Another Winnipeg landmark with a relationship to Lavallee's work is Winston Leather's 1972 mural on the side of the Walker Theatre (renamed The Burton Cummings Theatre in 2002 – yet another official

civic rename that hasn't quite stuck with the locals). Generations of Winnipeggers have entered the city's Exchange District under the watchful eye of the mural's cosmic circles and dots. Now just down the street from that very spot, situated adjacent to a parking lot, is a Lavallee mural offering its own response. Vertical lines of colour, not dissimilar to the work on Lavallee's grandmother's shed, are rounded at their tops and pop out against a dark background. This is Lavallee's take on the solar system, the old one, of course, that included Pluto. The *Man and Nature* exhibition also includes a nod to celestial bodies with Lavallee's triptych *Milky Way*. Presented as a panoramic portrait of the St. Laurent night sky, his *Milky Way* is brought together with a cautionary tale about whistling and the northern lights as told to Lavallee by his grandmother. The result is eerie, lyrical, and visually arresting.

Lavallee's art, for its semblance of simplicity and the relatively young age of its maker, belies a depth of cultural contexts, historical references, and personal mythologies in its imagery. Centrally intriguing is Lavallee's place within the residual inheritance of mid-century Canadian art traditions. Colours, lines, forms, and shapes collide with an underlying legacy of issues encompassing race, gender, and identity politics. *Man and Nature* offers a quietly resolute glimpse into the life of a (truly) modern Metis man who is equally inspired by design choices from the 1960s as he is by the view from his grandmother's window in St. Laurent. While he looks to the past for inspiration, Lavallee's sense of himself and the world around him is not hemmed in by the lingering modernist connotations put forth by museums and fairs since the last century. As witnessed from this body of work, the artist can take an institutional appellation like *Man and Nature* and turn it back upon itself in a myriad of ways, weaving an alluring tale that is at once tinged with nostalgia while still being fiercely clever. With the launch of Kenneth Lavallee's *Man and Nature* at the Kelowna Art Gallery, the story continues, so let's all gather round.

1. Ruth B. Phillips. *Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), pp. 35-6.

Works in the Exhibition

Kenneth Lavalée



The Bush, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 72 in. (121.9 x 182.8 cm)



Twin Lakes, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 in. (121.9 x 121.9 cm)



Milky Way, 2014, acrylic on canvas, triptych, overall size 48 x 108 in. (121.9 x 274.3 cm)



Man the Producer, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 in. (121.9 x 121.9 cm)

Artist's Biography

Kenneth Lavallee

Born

1984, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Education / Professional Development

2010 Youth Outreach / Inkubator Printmaking program, Martha Street Studios, Winnipeg, Manitoba

2008 Bachelor of Fine Arts, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Solo Exhibitions

2012 *Pennants*, Parlour Coffee, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Print and Poster Exhibition, Le Taudis, Winnipeg, Manitoba

2005 *The Illustrated Workings of Kenneth Lavallee*, Barbershop Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Group Exhibitions

2012 *Semifurnished*, Le Taudis, Winnipeg, Manitoba

2010 *Fixin Vixin*, Bate Building, Winnipeg, Manitoba

2008 *Life Imitates*, The Spot, Winnipeg, Manitoba

What Follows, The Spot, Winnipeg, Manitoba

2007 *Wild Things*, Fortyfive Downstairs Gallery, Melbourne, Australia

Unsung, Thinkspace Gallery, Los Angeles, California

Picks of the Harvest, Chicago Invasion, DvA Gallery, Chicago, Illinois

Untitled Love Project, Thinkspace Gallery, Los Angeles, California

Vicious Delicious, The Syndicate, Edmonton, Alberta

Masters of the Universe, He-Man Art Show for Charity, Magic Pony, Toronto

2006 *Oddica's From Cotton to Canvas*, Thinkspace Gallery, Los Angeles, California

Future Home Life, Receiver Gallery, San Francisco, California

The Insulin Show, The Maverick Room, Edmonton, Alberta

Group Show, Label Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Awards

2006 *Applied Arts Magazine* Photography & Illustration Annual: Winner, Corporate Illustration

Commissions

2012 painting for the Deer and Almond restaurant, City

2010 illustration/design, show poster for *Caribou*

2007 illustration for album *Hideyourdaughters*

illustration, *The Sport of Sumo* for *Novo* magazine

2006 illustration, *Make a Plan*, Labatt Breweries, Ltd
Illustration, *Optometrist*, *The New York Times Magazine*

2005 illustration for annual report for Florida Municipal Power Agency
Album art illustration for *Wide Awake City*

Curator's Biography

Jenny Western

Jenny Western is an independent curator based in Winnipeg. She holds an MFA in art history and curatorial practice from York University in Toronto. Her undergraduate degree is in history and art history, from the University of Winnipeg. In 2009-10 Western was Aboriginal Curator-in-Residence at Winnipeg's Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art and Urban Shaman Contemporary Aboriginal Art Gallery. She currently works as collections coordinator at the University of Manitoba. Some of her recent exhibitions include co-curatorial projects *Hovercraft*, at the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, in Brandon; *The Ephemerals: Trending*, for Gallery 1C03 in Winnipeg; and *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years*, for Plug In ICA.