

ARTS WATCH



SHAMAN RIDER (1972), BY NORVAL MORRISSEAU



CHERRY JAM (2006), BY AMY THOMPSON

THE MANY COLOURS OF TRANCE

It is rare that a painter can transcend reality, find the magic of the living earth and represent it in such a way that it reawakens the spirit of all who witness it.

Norval Morrisseau is such a rare painter.

Despite paralysis by stroke, disablement by Parkinson's disease and visible wreckage from decades of severe boozing and drug abuse, the 74-year-old Anishnaabe (Ojibwa) artist was at the opening of his solo exhibit at the National Gallery last week. As the first major solo exhibit of a First Nations artist, *Norval Morrisseau – Shaman Artist* (to April 30) is long overdue.

Media photographers clamour around the Shaman, a vessel slumped back in his wheelchair. Taking a step back, I see him suspended in an astral state, in 60 works (of thousands produced since the late 1950s) spread out chronologically through four rooms.

The whole of Morrisseau's work draws upon the legends of his grandfather, and Ojibwa pictographic records. After being discovered by Toronto art dealer Jack Pollack in 1962, Morrisseau, then 30, became a controversial figure for bringing native spirituality to the non-native world.

Easily Morrisseau's life history could rival that of artists like Van Gogh or Pollock in its brilliance and lunacy. He spent time in jail, produced work that merged Christianity and aboriginal spirituality (*The Virgin Mary*, 1966; *Indian Jesus Christ*, 1974), and gained international acclaim as one of Canada's best artists.

The exhibition at the National Gallery starts off humbly, with ink-marker images on roofing paper and birchbark. This is because Morrisseau's early palette was restricted to earthy hues.

As he became more famous, better materials fell into his hands. Several "periods" of his work are shown chronologically, and viewers gradually move towards more eye-popping colours and a style that would earn him a reputation as the

"Picasso of the North."

Paintings and murals from the '80s and '90s, including *Androgyny*, *Shaman Traveller to Other Worlds for Blessings* and *Astral Planes With Tree of Life*, exude light like panes of stained glass on the brightest day of the year.

Greg Hill, assistant curator of contemporary art at the National Gallery, says as Morrisseau evolved as an artist he became a "master colourist."

"You get the impression that these are his dream travels... in them are vital traditions and he had a unique drive to re-present them to us in order to keep them alive," Hill tells me during our conversation at the opening.

Morrisseau believes his art has the ability to heal people and widen their perceptions, according to Armand Ruffo, author of the forthcoming creative book *Norval Morrisseau: Man Changing Into Thunderbird*, in a later phone interview.

"When you look at a Morrisseau painting you are communicating with the spiritual world... you realize people can change," he says. "It's within everybody, this potential to see life as more than a linear treadmill: getting born, making a lot of money, exploiting as much as you can and then dying."

A member of the Order of Canada, Morrisseau, whose native name is Copper Thunderbird, will never paint again. But he left behind an art movement (the Anishnaabe school) and a legacy.

The shaman artist created a new visual vocabulary and produced volumes on how we might reconcile with the natural world, and maybe even with one another.

On February 10, curator Greg Hill will conduct an exhibition tour at 12:15 p.m. at the National Gallery.

LAURA MOSES

MY SLEAZY VALENTINE

Not everyone's vision of Valentine's Day is the same. Take Colleen and Danny for instance.

In *Cherry Jam* (6 x 6 inch mixed media on cake board, 2006) the couple seen in the vintage pornographic playing card seem to prefer a one-night stand in some sleazy vintage motel room to a romantic candlelight dinner.

Or do they?

Jam wrappers, cake boards, vintage stamps, glitter and Japanese wallpaper are the only clues to Colleen and Danny's rendezvous in **Amy Thompson's** latest imaginative exercise, *One Night Stand*.

Just in time for Valentine's Day, Thompson's favourite couple – "Colleen" and "Danny" are taken from an etching on the side of a wine bottle that her stepmom and father found at a flea market – are at it again.

"It was kind of a joke around the table, 'Oh, I wonder what Colleen and Danny are doing now,'" says Thompson. Maybe porno?

Throughout the erotic collages – a continuation of an earlier series titled *Smut* – Thompson titillates the viewer by wrapping her fictional couple in sexual iconography such as butterflies, cherries and zeppelins with bright bold colours and playful designs.

And yet, as Thompson points out, unlike contemporary porn, which is often more clinical, there is no evidence that the two are actually having sex.

"You don't see much in the cards, just some titties. I almost think of [the series] like dioramas in nature museums," she said.

As voyeuristic detectives, Thompson leaves the viewer with the imaginative task of unravelling the events of Colleen and Danny's wild tryst while putting a sly, mischievous smile on our faces.

Discover what the couple's up to (and maybe get up to some of it yourself with a new friend) at La Petite Mort Gallery's *One Night Stand*, a one-evening-only exhibition of Amy Thompson's *Smut* series on Friday February 10, from 7 to 10 p.m.

MATTHEW HARRISON

SECRET LOVE CHILD

It is my gallery, La Petite Mort, which has shamefully dared to feature Thompson's new erotic series of work entitled *One Night Stand*. Please forgive me, Tony, for my taste in lewd and unoriginal art. However, I have some dirt for all of you... Amy Thompson is the secret love child of Ron Jeremy and Julie Andrews, which logically explains both the sweetness and sexual tension in this particular body of work. Laura Moses should not have to justify the editorial decision to pair up Thompson and Morrisseau; unusual pairings often result in perfection. Can you imagine a world without Sonny & Cher? I shiver at the thought. My gallery features all ranges of work, from beginner artists to the established, all displayed next to each other, equally sharing the space I offer them. Perhaps we should consider having "unfit" artists sit in the back of the bus, or have their own separate bathrooms too. I invite all, including Tony, to see Amy's work in person, as opposed to just Googling my cute friend and comparing her to a mule. It's time to really take a look at what Ottawa has to offer, with its multitude of incredible and diverse artists of whom we're often judgmental, and lighten up a bit. (Hi Mom!)

Guy Berube, owner and curator,
La Petite Mort