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The Polemics of Autobiography in First Nations Art

by

Victoria Henry B.A.

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of
Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in Canadian Studies

Carleton University

OTTAWA, Ontario

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**submitted by Vicki Henry, B.A. Hons.
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts**

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Ottawa, Ontario

May 1993

Abstract

This thesis addresses the importance of autobiography as a political strategy in contemporary First Nations art. It examines the politics of identity, significance of visual difference, gendered representation and structure; the symbols, place names, rhythms and repetitions in the context of the visual autobiographies of five Native Canadian artists; Carl Beam, Robert Houle, Gerald McMaster, Shelley Niro and Ron Noganosh.

For the argument of this thesis, autobiography in contemporary art is defined as a narrative genre. It relies on the artist admitting that the work is an autobiography. Its importance as a political strategy is made visible in the self-portrait, self-representation, titles and text. The use of autobiography differs from non-Native contemporary art in that in contemporary Native art, it appears as a deliberate strategy of visible difference.

The substantive term, "autobiography" refers to the collective meaning within narrative discourse in Native art. The use of the substantive encompasses the complex structure of narrative - how symbols as metaphor tell the story of the artist's life. Autobiography in Native art makes the collective self visible to those who can read the signs. The self-portrait, self-representation and autobiography are all narratives and culturally expressive. The visual representation of self and of personal symbols contextualizes a life and stands as a metaphor for the collective self.

The thesis challenges the inclusion and appropriation of contemporary Native art within mainstream discourse and describes instead its own significant cultural continuity.

Acknowledgements

Many people have helped during the course of writing this thesis but without the patience and guidance of the five artists whose work is the basis of this thesis topic, I would not have been able to understand its significance. To Carl Beam, Robert Houle, Gerald McMaster, Ron Noganosh and Shelley Niro, I can only say, I hope I have been able to do some of your teachings justice. To Robert in particular, thank you. It took me six years to realize that you have never wavered in your ideas and finally I think I understand them.

Several people, who were interested in what I was trying to do or working in similar areas of critical discourse helped me with documents and book titles, Allan J. Ryan, Parker Duchemin, and Viviane Gray. George MacDonald and the late Jacqueline Fry wrote enough good things about me that I was accepted into the Masters program. My husband David became cook and patient listener while I wrote and finally Dr. Ruth Phillips, who encouraged me to begin this degree six years ago, patiently waited while I focussed my ideas, and helped me complete the final draft.

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Preface

No one is immune from the successive rituals necessary for the realization of a personal identity. At one time, those rituals took place within specific boundaries that rarely changed; social and cultural boundaries that were sanctioned by the family, the group, the geographic area. During the last half century, McLuhan's global village has changed all that; a life culturally distinct from outside intrusions has become inconceivable. Problematic however, are the politics of inclusion and exclusion within the global village, that is, whose culture is included and whose is not. Identity in the form of autobiography challenges the use of a cardboard stereotypical image that excludes those at the margins of the village. The creation of new visible identities forever alters the politics of invisibility.

My personal path from bland predictable white suburban roots to ex-dealer and current scholar on contemporary Native art, was circuitous. After completing an undergraduate degree in Art History from the University of Toronto which included only one course that was not Eurocentric, "Buddhist Art in China, India, and Japan," I went to India.

Identity from within a culture has one set of parameters, but the identity that is created from others looking at you is quite different. In India, separated from my own cultural roots for the first time, I was forced to both consider and reconsider who I was.

Equally bizarre was the position of privilege that I found myself in because of the colour of my skin.

I remember (the day I met my husband) wearing a very beautiful shot silk peach and green sari to a Canadian wedding and being asked by a member of the Canadian diplomatic community if I was "going native"? What he meant I think, was either that it was inappropriate for me to dress in a sari on that occasion or it was inappropriate for me to ever wear "local" dress. (I wore it because it was beautiful and because I didn't want to offend local custom with the only appropriate western dress I had - a mini skirt). I never forgot the episode because of what it represented; an arrogance that refuses to accept anything about another culture as complementary to one's own.

From India, I moved to Lusaka, Zambia where I collected enough material to send two exhibitions to Canada, one in Burlington and one in Hamilton. After that, I had enough traditional objects: baskets, calabash, musical instruments, beads, spears and shields, and the experience (or so I thought) to open a gallery when I returned to Canada in 1975.¹ At the time, I think my primary goal was to show the rich cultures of the rest of the world to an unsophisticated Canadian public. In fact, the objects were so many times removed from their origins that they had become anonymous. It was the

¹ I operated this gallery, the Ufundi Gallery at 541 Sussex Drive until December 24, 1992.

anonymity of what I was doing that finally made me want to work with living artists.

From the beginning of this preview and throughout this thesis on autobiography, I will write in two voices, expressed by the first and third person. The first person voice will speak about dialogue, personal relationships and intuition; it will act as witness to and participant in some of the relevant history that informs this thesis topic.

My personal involvement with the artists whose work will be discussed in this paper has allowed me access to privileged information and a first hand understanding of the chronology of exhibitions and ideas of the last five years. Similarly, my real understanding of the significance of autobiography in First Nations art came not from what anyone said, or whatever I might have read; it came from an intuitive understanding that what I was seeing was far richer than knowing the significance of the symbols would suggest. Writing in the first person voice at appropriate places throughout this thesis, is an important part of sharing that knowledge. Autobiography has a causal effect. A description of the events in one life draws parallels within the life of the reader/viewer; personal relationships and comparisons are inevitable.

I think that the words of Trinh Minh-ha are also appropriate for a discussion of the use of the first person voice in this context. "Remember the minor-ity's voice is always personal", she writes in

a sequence that reconsiders the convention of writing in the third person, and "that of the major-ity impersonal."(1989: 27)

Since I know and have worked closely with the artists, the question of critical distance is also relevant. Except for Joane Cardinal-Schubert, my introduction to Native artists coincided with my enrollment at Carleton University in the Masters program. The first Houle exhibition which I curated for the Ufundi Gallery, was the result of the first essay that I wrote on his work for a seminar on contemporary Indian art given by Dr. Ruth Phillips in 1987. I have subsequently organized other exhibitions of contemporary Native art including a touring exhibition of "Why Do You Call Us Indians...?" to three venues in the United States. By 1992, the Ufundi Gallery represented Native artists Carl Beam, Joane Cardinal-Schubert, Faye Heavyshield, Robert Houle, Gerald McMaster, David Neel, Shelley Niro, Ron Noganosh, and Greg Staats. When I closed the Gallery in December 1992, I did so because selling was personally never more important than learning and writing: finally, I hoped to be able to write instead.

Victoria Henry, April 2, 1993

Chapter One

Introduction

If it's done beautiful, it might as well be a loon, if it's done realistic and people don't want to see, then it's political.
(Shelley Niro 1992a)

Autobiography and personal identity are interchangeable in Native² culture; both are always implicated in the collective self. As Julie Cruikshank has written, autobiography doesn't tell the story of a life; the life contextualizes the story.(1990: x) When Native artists realized the possibilities of a visual autobiography as a political strategy that would challenge indifference, they began to use self-portraits and self-representation to re-create an identity seemingly lost decades before in spools of celluloid and tourist propaganda, the attempted assimilation of residential schools and the storage bins of Canada's museums.

Autobiography as a political strategy is not just about personal identity; it can include the significant issues of self-government and land claims. Autobiography in Native art is thus

² In the context of this thesis, the issue of what name to use: First Nations, Native, native, aboriginal or Indian is important. First Nations is currently the most politically correct; it has been the title of the Woodland Cultural Centre's annual exhibition for the past two years. Native denotes a proper name while native refers to anyone born in a specific country. Shelley Niro thinks the wheel has come full circle and she prefers "Indian". I have chosen to use First Nations in the title as the more formal choice and Native in the text primarily for its brevity.

different from the "identity politics" (Wong 1992, 38) of mainstream protest; while it uses personal identity, it is not about personal identity. It is, instead, a means of expressing a shared social and cultural community while at the same time recognizing the specificity within each community.

For the argument of this thesis and following Lejeune, autobiography is considered to be a specific genre in First Nations art, a specific kind or a type of visual communication that is primarily dialogic and metaphoric.³ It is distinguished from mainstream autobiography in the visual arts in one important way. In Native art, the self-portrait and self-representation are integral to autobiography; both are metaphors for the concept of a collective self and a communal cultural identity. In mainstream art, the self-portrait represents a fragment of an individual life; but it may not provide any further information about that person's life. (Gosselin 1993: 4)

Individual identity and cultural authority are two issues that are addressed in the evolution of western art practice in this century. While modernism is concerned with individual expression and the diminishing use of all objective representations,

³ See Philippe Lejeune's On Autobiography for his argument that autobiography is historically and culturally constructed and is therefore a specific genre; For a definition of genre as a kind or a type see Webster's New Word Dictionary, 1977; See Arnold Krupat's essay "Monologue and Dialogue in Native American Autobiography" in The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon for an acknowledgement of Michael Bakhtin's introduction to the concept of "dialogic"; See Keith Basso's Western Apache Language and Culture, Essays in Linguistic Anthropology.

postmodernism considers the decline in the cultural authority of the eurocentred mainstream. (Owens 1983: 57) Feminism, implicated within the discourse of postmodernism, politically challenges the male power in the dominant culture. (Hutcheon 1989: 160-1) First Nations artists seem to use whichever of these aesthetics they wish, an apparent allegiance to a particular western style that has provided a basis for its inclusion in contemporary art discourse,⁴ but as Robert Houle wrote a decade ago, however the work might appear, it is a reaffirmation of "one of the most important aspects of native cultures, the capacity to harness revolutionary ideas into agents of change, revitalizing tradition." (1982: 5) How individual identity and cultural authority in contemporary Native art is a cultural continuity is the content of this thesis.

Since very little work has been done on autobiography as a genre in art, it is necessary first to consider how autobiography has been addressed in literary criticism, in Native literature and in anthropology through the works of Philippe Lejeune, Paul de Man, Arnold Krupat, Keith Basso and Julie Cruikshank.

Philippe Lejeune and Paul de Man have debated both sides of the question of whether or not autobiography in literature is a genre.

⁴ Dr. Ruth Phillips was the first to acknowledge that contemporary Native artists could and did use whichever artistic "style" suited their purposes at the time. In writing about the "new art history", in "What is 'Huron Art': Native American Art and the New Art History", Phillips calls for a re-assessment of the linear art historical theory that excludes First Nations art entirely. (1989: 161-186)

Lejeune's two decades of writing on autobiography as a genre have contributed to the present acknowledgement of its importance. Lejeune at first argued a single definition of autobiography, as, "the retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life", to support his position that autobiography is a genre. (1989: 4) The definition excludes works that are based on information relating to the author, that is, autobiographical information, and the use of such information in texts other than autobiographies.

In trying to include the autobiographical novel as part of the genre of autobiography, Lejeune defined the difference between implicit and explicit information as information verifiable by the author. His "Autobiographical Pacte" addresses the relationship between the reader and the writer as,

A contract between the author and the reader. . . based on an agreement that one person is telling the other person his story and that he is telling the truth about his life. (Lejeune 1989: ix)

The Pacte allowed a broader range of works to be considered literature on the basis of their new status as autobiographical information verified by the author. This is the basis of its recognition as a literary genre and for the purposes of this thesis, I will use an analogous definition; that autobiography in the visual arts is a genre that includes any visual work of art that the artist says refers to the story of his/her life.

Between 1972 and 1985-6 Lejeune became more aware of the relevance of the cultural and historical context to autobiography. By combining "autobiography - life of an individual written by himself" (Larousse 1866) and "autobiography - literary work, novel, poem, philosophical treatise, etc. whose author intended, secretly or admittedly to recount his life, to expose his thoughts or describe his feelings" (Vapereau 1876), he was able to expand his definition of autobiography to include other kinds of literary genres. (1989: 124) He writes,

Today these two meanings, exact and broad, are still the two poles of the use of the word. The success of the word "autobiography" is undoubtedly linked to the tension between the two poles... to the new strategies of writing that it can designate. (Lejeune 1989: 124)

Paul de Man disagrees, "autobiography is not a literary genre; it doesn't combine an aesthetic and historical basis". (1984: 70) If it was a genre, it could take its place among the "canonical hierarchies of the major literary genres" (1984: 67) which include tragedy and epic or lyric poetry. It has little basis in aesthetics, he thought, since it relies on a momentary understanding between two persons that cannot be historically verified.

It is not my intention to foreground de Man's basically elitist refusal to include autobiography as a genre in literature on the grounds that it lacks both "the monumental dignity of aesthetic values" (1984: 68) and an historical basis. We should note however,

that the year he wrote his critique of Philippe Lejeune's work, Arnold Krupat was studying Native American autobiographies as part of the genre of literary autobiography. Krupat wrote that,

Autobiography is being recognized not only as the West's foremost genre oriented toward the expression of the self, but too, its most deeply dialogic genre in which a conversation between historia and poesis, documentation and creation, let us say, is always in progress. (1989: 161)

Krupat identified the narrative significance of autobiography in general, as well as distinctive characteristics of Native American autobiographies as:

The textual result of specific dialogues (between persons, between cultures, between persons and cultures) which claim to represent an Indian subject who himself or herself, is the human result of specific dialogical or collective sociocultural practices. They are particularly interesting ...as providing images of a collective self and a collective society". (1989: 134)

Julie Cruikshank has further developed a theory of Native autobiography. She wrote "that it is becoming clearer that all autobiography is shaped by narrative convention" (1990: 3) and that the genre of autobiography "may be more closely associated with conventions of oral narrative than with positivistic evidence of the past". (1990: 2) Her important work, Life Lived Like a Story, provided the clue to understanding that autobiography in Native art

is a genre, that autobiography is interpreted through symbol and metaphor and that contemporary Native artists, using autobiography as a political strategy are doing so from their own cultural context. In terms of this thesis, the last two points are particularly important: how image and symbol construct an autobiography and the use of autobiography as a political strategy.

The use of image and symbol to construct an autobiography is important in understanding how the abstract work of Saulteaux artist Robert Houle, is on the one hand, an autobiography and, on the other, rooted in his own set of narrative conventions. The use of autobiography becomes clear with the realization that autobiography is a narrative convention that contextualizes the individual within the culture while at the same time presenting a seemingly aggressive position to cultural outsiders. While apparently reclaiming identity, contemporary First Nations art is speaking from an identity grounded in the traditions of the past. How the voice is understood and what it is actually saying, is the irony in contemporary Native art in Canada.

In the chapters that follow, I will show that autobiography in contemporary Native art includes the use of personal symbols, the more allusive self-referential images and the self-portrait. I will illustrate how autobiography as a Native cultural construct in the work has been identified from within the conventions of modernism, postmodernism and feminism and I will show how those labels have hidden the Native cultural significance. I will also show how that

misunderstanding has been used as an important part of the political strategy.

In this thesis I am arguing that autobiography is always implicit in the Native cultural context and therefore in the work being created by contemporary Native artists. I will not use the descriptive word autobiographical because it defines the nature of something else as relating to the story of a life; autobiography in Native art contextualizes the collective narrative; it doesn't intend to describe the individual except as a metaphor.

The work of Craig Owens, Jimmie Durham and Linda Hutcheon provides the basis for understanding modernism, postmodernism and feminism in mainstream discourse and helps to explain why contemporary Native art has been considered within these intellectual movements.

Ten years ago, Craig Owens noted that however we choose to diagnose the symptoms of western culture's current malaise, "postmodernism is always treated. . .as a crisis of cultural authority".(1983: 57) Six years later, Jimmie Durham identified the vacuum that postmodernism addressed: "There is no western culture but a power structure which pretends to be western culture". (quoted in Ingberman 1989: 8) He failed to understand however, that western cultural practice cannot be inclusive because it is itself under reconsideration. His concern that postmodernism is "another kind of lockout," (1990: 168) that it denies access to mainstream

discourse, ignores the relevance of Native art to its own cultural context.

Todd Gitlin clarifies the cultural helplessness of postmodernism within the dominant context. "Postmodernism", he wrote, "neither embraces nor criticizes, but beholds the world blankly, with a knowingness that dissolves feeling and commitment into irony." (Gitlin 1988: 35-6) While contemporary Native artists use similar techniques, their work does not "behold the world blankly."

Linda Hutcheon's important work on postmodernism and feminism will be considered in the context of representation and the paradox of the photographic medium. Her discussion of the coded nature of all cultural messages (Hutcheon 1989: 123) affirms the existence of autobiography in photography, the possible encoding of self-portraits and self-representation.

Since the role of autobiography in Native culture and the introduction of the relevance of mainstream discourse has been acknowledged, it is important to question whether autobiography in contemporary Native art in Canada is a necessary political strategy. A label in a recent museum exhibition on the founding of the city of Montreal gives evidence of the continuing invisibility of Native Canadians that has necessitated the interventions of Native artists.

May 17, 1642 Pre Vimont celebrated the first mass on the island of Montreal and he left the sacraments exposed all that

day and he asked God to bring his blessings on the settlers.

This day is the first day in the history of Montreal.⁵

Cherokee artist Jimmie Durham also writes about invisibility. His analysis of the need to affirm identity in his introduction to The Decade Show in 1990 is arguably the most direct statement of Native invisibility from a Native American perspective. Based on the premise that the denial of Native existence is essential to the American cultural identity both in film and in the political arena, he writes,

The Master Narrative of the United States proclaims that there are no Indians here, just wilderness. Then that the savages are in need of the United States. Then that the Indians all die, unfortunately. Then that the Indians still alive are (a) basically happy with the situation and (b) not the real Indians. Then, most importantly, that that is the complete story. (1990: 166)

Identity, within Eurocentric culture, according to literary critic, Philippe Lejeune "is the real starting point of autobiography." (1989: 24) In Native culture, identity contextualizes autobiography. The two previous quotes suggest that identity is obviously an issue for First Nations people. One of the ways in which artists address the issue politically is therefore, autobiography.

⁵ In June 1992, while researching sites for a photo-based work on Montreal, Marlene Creates discovered the label at the David M. Stewart Museum, Old Fort, St. Helen's Island.

In this thesis, I will demonstrate the centrality of autobiography in First Nations art by examining the works of five prominent Canadian artists of Native ancestry: Carl Beam, Robert Houle, Gerald McMaster, Ron Noganosh and Shelley Niro. The five artists chosen share similar childhoods. They were raised on reserves in Canada and all return home regularly which was an important consideration for my argument that they contextualize themselves in their work through autobiography. All but Shelley Niro attended residential schools and were forced to learn English and forget their own languages. All five artists currently live and work in cities (although Carl Beam is presently building a house on his reserve on Manitoulin Island). All five have degrees in Art History or the Visual Arts, have worked as curators, writers, and speakers and are clearly aware of the issues of current art practice.

A secondary criterion for selection was accessibility; the artists chosen are all known to me and I felt comfortable asking personal questions and discussing the thesis topic with them. Some of the same issues I examine here arise with relation to the art of other marginalized groups. I argue here however, that the degree of cultural repression and stereotyping suffered by First Nations people is unprecedented in Canada and has created the conditions for particular kinds of autobiographical self-representation in contemporary Native art. Comparisons with other marginalized groups such as those provided by Lucy Lippard (1990), though illuminating, are beyond the scope of this thesis.

Carl Beam, an Ojibway artist from West Bay on Manitoulin Island and Shelley Niro, a Mohawk from Brantford are the two artists for whom the self-portrait has been the most important. Beam has regularly re-created himself as an historical icon and Niro has depicted herself in the guise of a popular culture heroine. Gerald McMaster, a Cree from North Battleford, Saskatchewan uses his own image in his work to portray the "ancients", as he calls them.⁶ The use of personal symbology by Robert Houle, a Saulteaux from Manitoba currently living in Toronto, is essential to his narrative structures. Recently he has added to his repertoire of symbols his own image; an image that he has altered to deny its function as self-portraiture ⁷ . All of this work is layered: it is self-referential, personally affirmative, and at the same time illusory.

Over the past decade, catalogue statements provided by these artists have included references to their use of autobiography and personal information in their work and the reasons for its use. Carl Beam, has written that autobiography is not "an inescapable and perpetually gratifying indulgence in self, but ... a form of resistance." (McLachlin 1990: 11-12)

⁶McMaster's first exhibition at the Ufundi Gallery in 1988 was called The Ancients' Singing.

⁷ Warpaint Portraits, Russell Gallery, Lindsay, Ontario, 1992.

"I use photography as a mirror to myself and also to those around me," Shelley Niro wrote in her artist's statement in the Changers catalogue.⁸

In Native people, I see a lot of happiness and an emerging kind of confidence which glows from the inside with warmth and love. We are very proud and we are using this pride to break through the barrier society has labelled us with, as suffering from inferiority complexes. We have suffered from this tagged-on affliction too long. We are doers not sayers. (Bear 1990)

Three statements by Cree artist Gerald McMaster reflect the changes that have taken place in his own sense of cultural identity and his need to be a participant as a mainstream artist. In 1985, in the catalogue to the exhibition Riel Remembered, he wrote, "We as Canadians have very often practiced a social political cultural aloofness to this period, preferring to call it an uprising or rebellion." (McMaster 1985: 4) In an exhibition catalogue in 1989-90, McMaster considered the topic of labels,

Current rhetoric contends that you be either an artist, or an artist who happens to be Indian ! This argument of homogeneity denies the possibility that an Indian artist can see the world differently. A homogeneity characteristic of modern North

⁸ Changers was curated by Shirley Bear for the Native Indian Arts and Crafts Corporation. It included 10 Native women artists and travelled to several venues in Canada including the lobby of Indian and Northern Affairs.

American (Canada/U.S.A.) life, where all immigrant cultures have become common denominator Canadians and/or Americans. This is the point where indigenous peoples are forced to accept their fate. Thus the severity of maintaining a position as a Nehiyaw becomes ever more increasingly important in a world that attempts conversion, through acculturation or assimilation, for I will always see the world from the perspective of a Nehiyaw. (1989: 8) ⁹

In 1992, McMaster said, "I am the subject of my paintings; a photograph of me has nothing to do with me. It has to do with early photographs so I painted mine." (1992b)

In 1988, Ron Noganosh wrote an autobiography, a deliciously ironic artist's statement that satirized his "official" identity.

I am according to the government of Canada a real INDIAN. The number that has been assigned to me is BO47957 and my band number is 99. This has helped me to find my place in society, for without this information, I would in all probability, not know that I was an Indian says the government.

I spent my youth on the Shawnaga Indian Reservation, attending various and sundry schools, after which I was pronounced CIVILIZED.

⁹ Why Do you Call Us Indians...?, curated by Victoria Henry for the Ufundi Gallery toured to three venues in the United States: Gettysburg College, Pennsylvania, Two Rivers Gallery, Minneapolis, Guilford Native American Art Gallery, Greensboro, North Carolina. There were three catalogues produce, one for each venue. The title for the exhibition Why Do You Call Us Indians...? was taken from a painting by Gerald McMaster included in the exhibition.

Upon completing a Graphic Design course in Toronto in 1980, I was officially declared an ARTIST and let loose upon an unsuspecting world. Thereafter I obtained gainful employment in diverse occupations ranging from car washer to screen washer and discovered that jobs for CIVILIZED INDIAN ARTISTS are not profuse.

During this time caught up in the mystique of being a CIVILIZED INDIAN ARTIST, I began making prints of a realistic nature and this approach continues to this day.

At the University of Ottawa, I began to explore the political, economic, ecological and social issues which confront people in their everyday lives, through the medium of sculpture, using found objects. Perhaps I am becoming a MYSTICAL CIVILIZED INDIAN ARTIST... say the reviewers. Their pronouncements have consequently led to exhibitions in Ottawa, Hull, Brantford, New York, Tokyo and Munich.¹⁰

As described at the beginning of this chapter, autobiography in First Nations art is a genre of visual communication that is primarily dialogic and metaphoric; in addition, with the use of self-portraits and self-representation, it is a political strategy based on visible difference.

The following chapters will discuss works by each of the artists in the context of the definition and how the work is

¹⁰ See Snakes in the Garden, The Council For The Arts in Ottawa, 1988, p.37.

understood by their audiences. In chapter two, I will present a brief overview of the historical context with a chronological examination of catalogue essays, personal statements and works that include autobiography, self-portraits and self-representation in order to show why autobiography as the context is a useful and necessary strategy.

This discussion will show that the concept of self is not foreign to Native art; in Bakhtin's dialogic, the self is the community. Possibly Norval Morrisseau began to use autobiography in the 1960s because he knew that it would be understood in the white community as a link between his spiritual world and the world which respected the accomplishments of the individual before anything else. His use of titles and images that are identified as self-portraits began the autobiographical genre in First Nations art that is the subject of this chapter.

Each of the subsequent chapters will both consider the work of a specific artist in terms of appropriate mainstream theoretical discourse and show how it differs contextually from mainstream work. Chapter three, Autobiography as a Self-Portrait: Carl Beam, will consider the significance of the use of the self-portrait in the work of Carl Beam. His work will be considered as a political strategy of confrontation and contextualization as outlined by the works of Michael Fischer and Craig Owens, and confirmed from his own writings.

Similarly, in the fourth chapter, Photography and Representation, the work on photography by Susan Sontag and John Berger will be the basis of a discussion of gendered representation in photography in the work of Shelley Niro. The writings of Linda Hutcheon and Craig Owens will set the parameters for understanding how Niro's work differs from non-Native artists and photographers who are also addressing issues of identity and autobiography. While Hutcheon argues that "the postmodern may offer art as the site of political struggle . . . but it does not seem to be able to make the move into political agency," (1990: 157) she does not consider visible and cultural difference. I will show that in Shelley Niro's work, the authority of her lens and her confidence combined with an outrageous sense of humor kindles a positive response instead of a guilty or anxious one.

In the fifth chapter, The Male Nude, the gendered works of Gerald McMaster and Ron Noganosh will be compared to the self-portrait of Jimmie Durham, an American Cherokee artist and writer and to John Coplans, an American photographer. Melanie Davis's important analysis of how the male nude is portrayed in photography will form the basis for the discussion of male empowerment.

The last chapter, the abstract and self-representational work of Robert Houle titled Abstraction and the Significance of Silence adapts Keith Basso's work on the significance of storytelling in the Apache culture to show how Houle's painting uses symbols in a

similar narrative manner. Houle paints his life in metaphor to contextualize his story.

Autobiography in First Nations art is about identity through visual representation. From the perspective of an art historian, individual works by each of the artists will provide the context for understanding how autobiography is constructed through the use of narrative, text, symbols, images, and the body to subvert the predetermined ideas of Native and "other" into a significantly different understanding of both First Nations people and the nature of contemporary art.

There are two significant challenges in writing about the reconstruction of personal history for a non-Native student of Native Canadian art history: the inherent difficulty in re-creating another's voice and the position of a cultural outsider. The authority of one person to speak on behalf of another has been successfully challenged by writers of the stature of Trinh Minh-ha. Concerned with mainstream literary discourse that considered non-mainstream work by mainstream canons, she wrote,

Trying to define the other by defining otherness or by explaining the other through laws and generalities, is as Zen says like beating the moon with a pole or scratching an itching boot from the outside of a shoe. (Minh-ha 1989: 76)

Jacqueline Fry was also concerned about the implications of her interjections as 'curator' and reduced her text to a minimum. To accompany the exhibition Hard and Soft, a collaboration between Ron

Noganosh and Viviane Gray, Jacqueline Fry wrote a journal. Her entries were a record of conversations and ideas about the work that she saw being created for the exhibition. In that way, it was also an autobiography of that period of time. She wrote,

Le journal doit être plus court. Il faut par conséquent sélectionner les notes les plus pertinentes d'un projet conçu au départ par les artistes eux-mêmes non pas pour être vendu à un musée mais pour leur propre plaisir. Ainsi d'abord intime le projet s'est épanoui en une exposition possible lorsqu'ils m'ont acceptée comme un troisième larron chargé de trouver une plateforme d'expression protectrice des indépendance et des interrelations; respectueuse d'imaginaires vagabonds et de marginalités obligatoires. Le "curatorship" traditionnel tendait à être exclu.¹¹

Deciding therefore not to be brief and not to give up in despair, I will show that there is one significant reason for a cultural outsider to write about autobiography in Native art and that is that the work is by nature self-reflexive. It demands an audience and expects a response. It needs the viewer to participate in the dialogue and to understand that the work represents a different and parallel cultural narrative that is signalling an affirmation of the cultural identity.

¹¹ This paragraph is from page 1 of the original manuscript for the exhibition Hard and Soft which was given to me by Viviane Gray and is in my possession. A second version was produced by la Galerie d'art du Centre Culturel de l'université de Sherbrooke to accompany the exhibition in November, 1989.

Chapter Two

The Historical Context

Morrisseau is very important but the bad part is that everybody figures that's where it's at.

(Carl Beam 1978)

In order to understand why the exploration of historical context is important to a study of autobiography, I will trace the chronology of the emergence of autobiography in contemporary Native art through the important exhibitions and catalogue essays produced during the period from 1978 to 1992. I will consider the voices of Native and non-Native curators and the works themselves in order to show that autobiography should be considered a distinct genre in First Nations art. This overview begins in 1978 with the Manitoulin Conference and culminates in a 2.74 m. partially clothed self-portrait by Carl Beam, titled "Burying the Ruler" (Fig.1) shown in the National Gallery of Canada in 1992.

The 1978 issue of The Native Perspective, published by the National Association of Friendship Centres, focused on the first National Native Artists Conference held on Manitoulin Island, October 23-25, 1978. Highlights of speeches, short biographies and articles pertinent to the questions raised at the conference were addressed in several short essays. Three writers and critics whose writing forms the basis of critical theory in contemporary Native

art in the early eighties, Tom Hill, Elizabeth McLuhan and Robert Houle contributed to the magazine.

Tom Hill, a Seneca from the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario and currently the Director of the Woodlands Cultural Centre Museum in Brantford, was quoted extensively. Hill's speech at the Conference was reproduced because it quizzically, yet thoughtfully documented the historical background to the Native Arts Movement in Canada. (1978: 34-37) "A retrospect of Indian art", mentioned the significant artists of the forties, fifties and sixties; George Clutesi, Charles Edenshaw, Mungo Martin, Carl Ray, Sarain Stump, Alan Sapp, Guy Sioui, Jackson Beardy, Alex Janvier and Daphne Odjig, and confirmed the opinion that Norval Morrisseau's first exhibition in the Pollock Gallery in Toronto was probably the significant beginning of contemporary Native art.

Hill went on to say that 1967 is arguably the real beginning date for contemporary Native art because the group of artists who worked together on the Expo '67 project began to talk about showing things as they were, "to show what its like to be an Indian on an Indian reserve." (Hill 1978: 35) Hill's understanding of the origins of Indian art are expressed in his comments about art as communication and the value of individual statements separate from the concerns of the White market place.

In "An interview with Tom Hill", in the same publication, Hill described a conversation in 1970 between Clifford Maracle and Arthur Shilling in Toronto in which both artists agreed that they

could no longer 'make it' selling themselves as Indians, "that to sell themselves, they had to be an individual and they could not sell their paintings under some label called Indian art." (1978: 37)

The important published works of Elizabeth McLuhan on Carl Beam begin with the publication of "Fragments; an artist in time" in The Native Perspective. (McLuhan 1978: 49) In response to McLuhan's question, "Doesn't Morrisseau provide one of the few role models acceptable to both Indians and non-Indians; as it refers to the 'noble savage' sentiment?", Beam replied that he was more concerned that the real importance of Morrisseau's art would be misunderstood. He said:

Morrisseau is so important that nobody has really grasped what he has to say, let alone the younger artists. I haven't seen any genuine art in "Indian art" since Morrisseau - myself included because I know the boundaries and I'm trying to get beyond them. (Beam 1978: 49)

After the 1978 conference, the nature of the exhibitions and what was being presented began to change. In 1984, Elizabeth McLuhan published essays that included references to identity and the personal in catalogues for three exhibitions, two of which she curated. In The Image Makers, she began the discussion of self-representation in Native art.¹² She wrote,

¹² Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers was co-curated by Tom Hill and Elizabeth McLuhan for the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1984. It toured to the Thunder Bay Exhibition Centre and Centre for Indian Art, the Chatham Cultural Centre, the Art Gallery of Algoma, Sault St. Marie and the Laurentian University Museum and Arts Centre.

And yet Morrisseau's personal search for identity appealed to the Canadian (non Indian) public of the sixties and to a country in search of a culturally distinctive national identity. (McLuhan 1984: 28)

She understood that Morrisseau's work, while apparently dealing with transformation in the traditional sense, was actually an allusion to himself as Native, himself as shaman and himself as a participant in the non-Native world of the Catholic religion. McLuhan referred to the self-portraits of Morrisseau as "a life-long theme of the self and transformation, of the many levels of human (and therefore spiritual) existence." (1984: 32) His numerous portraits were arguably the earliest expressions of the individual's unique identity in contemporary Native art.

In her essay for the exhibition Altered Egos. The Multimedia Work of Carl Beam,¹³ McLuhan described the cover image "Self Portrait in My Christian Dior Bathing Suit" (Fig.2) as, "an extraordinarily unadorned image of the artist unmasked. It is a humorous counterpoint to the conventions which still constrict Indian artists." (McLuhan 1984: 9) But McLuhan had difficulty with the distance Carl Beam had travelled away from the confines of Ojibway symbolic structure. She described the reference to the

¹³ Altered Egos. The Multi Media Work of Carl Beam was organized and circulated in 1984 by the Thunder Bay National Exhibition Centre and Centre For Indian Art. It toured the McMichael Canadian Collection, The Woodland Indian Cultural Educational Centre and the Laurentian University Museum and Arts Centre.

designer bathing suit on the cover as being "at odds with public preconceptions about Indians" (McLuhan 1984: 9) and qualified her analysis of the significance of Beam's work by stating that,

Beam had obstinately refused to restrict his art to the limitations of "Indian art" categories, although "Indianness" is at the heart of his work. (1984: 9)

Carl Beam's "Indianness" is not at the heart of his work; Carl Beam is at the heart of his work.

While McLuhan instinctively singled out images with an autobiographical content she did not always know she was doing so. In the introduction to "Horses Fly Too", she included "Birth Announcement for Sarah", a 1973 serigraph by Northwest Coast artist, Robert Davidson (Fig.3) and "19thC Innocence 20thC Mores 21stC Verisimilitudes", a 1983 drawing by Gerald McMaster, a Cree from North Battleford, Saskatchewan.(Fig.4) ¹⁴

"Birth Announcement for Sarah", a serigraph on paper produced in 1973 seems, writing 20 years later, to be a humorous play on the traditional form of Westcoast art. But in 1973 when it was produced, it defied the conservative influence of a community that was struggling to recapture its traditional art forms and establish an art market based on its rejuvenation. McLuhan clearly understood the issues when she chose this work and wrote,

¹⁴ See the Introduction to Horses Fly Too, 1984, organized jointly by the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery and the Thunder Bay National Exhibition Centre and Centre for Indian Art, pp.7-16.

The artist meanwhile inevitably wants to grow artistically, and experiment and test the broader market...It is in the new non-traditional commercial media such as printmaking, drawing and jewellery that many artists appear freer to innovate, to personalize their art without community sanction or attacks of selling out their traditions. Robert Davidson's "Birth Announcement for Sarah" is a personal and innovative departure. (1984: 10)

McMaster's "19thC Innocence, 20thC Mores, 21stC Verisimilitudes", 1983, is, according to Alan Ryan,¹⁵ a reworking of an archival photograph entitled "Canadian Patriotic Indian Chiefs" in which the artist "playfully drew himself into the driver's seat." (1991: 9) McLuhan seems not to have known that it included a self-portrait, relying instead on its significance as a reflexion of white attitudes.

Robert Houle also began his curatorial career in the early eighties. A Saulteaux from Manitoba, he attended the Manitoulin Conference in his capacity as Curator of Contemporary Indian Art at the National Museum of Man (now Canadian Museum of Civilization), and wrote "Odjig, an artist's transition" for The Native Perspective.

¹⁵ See Allan Ryan "Gerald McMaster Maintaining the Balance" in The cowboy/Indian Show, organized by the McMichael Canadian Collection, 1991. A smaller version of the exhibition first opened at the Ufundi Gallery in Ottawa in 1990. Jean Blodgett saw the works in progress before the first exhibition and organized the larger version for the McMichael. Allan Ryan, who is completing a dissertation in anthropology on humor, irony and politics in contemporary Native art and who has shared much of his research with me was asked to write the essay.

Since his resignation in 1982, Houle has worked as a freelance curator, artist and writer. He curated New Work by a New Generation, for the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery in 1982, an exhibition that Hill, writing in Beyond History, has since called a "landmark" exhibition in that it was "the first to define the new ideology by separating modernist works from those reflecting the unyielding traditionalism of the popular Woodland and Northwest Coast Schools". (1989: 12) In his essay "The Emergence of a New Aesthetic Tradition", Houle debated the issues of modernity versus tradition. He wrote that, "being modernists, they carry the privilege of appropriating bits of their traditional and contemporary cultures to form an amalgam strictly reflective of their own identity." (1982: 3). What made the exhibition important was not what Houle wrote, but what he did. He left out all the artists whose work referred more to "tribal ritual and symbolism" than "to a commitment to change and personal development." (Houle 1982: 12) By doing so he broadened the boundaries available to Native artists and helped to create a new dialogue which allowed them the freedom to develop personal philosophies and individual artistic expressions.

The individual works and curatorial statements of these early exhibitions mark the beginning of an acknowledgement of the significance of the self-portrait and self-representation in the work of Native Canadian artists; a recognition that the expression of the personal would alter the expected traditional styles and force a

reassessment of Indians and Indian art. There were other exhibitions in the early eighties, and other curators and academics involved in what was happening, but the curators, works, and exhibitions chosen introduce the key people at the time.

From 1985 to 1991, the interest in contemporary Native art in Canada grew; a number of exhibitions were dedicated to placing the work of Native Canadian artists within a broader Canadian and international context in both major public institutions and private galleries. Taking into account what was chosen to be included in these exhibitions by both curators and the artists themselves, we can identify a gradual and significant shift from art more obviously bound by Native symbology incorporating references to traditional techniques, to a greater awareness and reference to the individual that employed photography and collage, postmodern deconstruction, layered meanings, humor, and symbol as metaphor.

The exploration of a new identity through the use of personal and family history by Native curators and writers between 1985 and 1991, is best shown by five important exhibitions: Visions, 1985, Beyond History, 1989, Robert Houle, Indians from A - Z, Changers, A Spiritual Renaissance, 1990 and The cowboy/Indian Show, 1991.¹⁶

¹⁶ Visions was organized by the Native Indian/Inuit Photographers' Association and held in conjunction with the first conference of photography by Native people in Hamilton, Ontario, March 9-10, 1985. Karen Duffek and Tom Hill curated Beyond History for the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1989. Robert Houle, Indians from A - Z, was organized in 1990 by the Winnipeg Art Gallery, (which has the largest collection of Houle's work). It travelled to Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Mackenzie Art Gallery, the Glenbow Museum and the Canadian Museum of Civilization. It included four essays and nine major works.

One exhibition in particular, Visions, organized by the Native Indian/Inuit Photographers' Association, (N.I.I.P.A.) marks the first participation of Native art in the theoretical polemics of representation. In the "Historical Overview" to N.I.I.P.A.'s first exhibition, Rick Hill proclaimed that Visions provided an alternative to "the missing sense of the individual" in photographs of Indians and Inuit. (1985: 9) In her emphatic introduction to the catalogue, Brenda Mitten wrote, "we are here to promote a positive, realistic and contemporary image of Native Indian/Inuit people through the medium of photography." (1985: 3) The exhibition was important not only because the works were photographs of Native people by Native people, but also because it represented the beginnings of an organization dedicated to visual documentation and representation.

The artists and works chosen by Tom Hill and Karen Duffek for Beyond History introduced the use of the specific references to family and self. Joane Cardinal-Schubert's work "Remnant/Birthright - Museum II/Remember Dunbow/Is This My Grandmother's/Remnant/Then There Were None," 1988 and Carl Beam's "New Semiotics", 1987 included their self-portraits.¹⁷

¹⁷ "Remnant/Birthright -Museum II /Remember Dunbow /Is This My/Grandmother's/Remnant /Then There Were None", 1988 consisted of 6 vinyl-wrapped paper dress shapes hung on a wood cross structure. Part of the title was written on the surface of the plastic on each one, 102 x 91cm each. This work was also included in Changers, A Spiritual Renaissance in 1990

"New Semiotics", 1987 is a photo emulsion transfer on canvas, 208 x 162cm. in the collection of the Woodland Cultural Centre, Brantford. There are eight distinct images in the work: his self-portrait, a stoplight, a parking meter, a twin foetus, submarines, a medical drawing, a beached whale and the assassination of Anwar Sadat.

In his catalogue essay for Indians From A - Z, "The Persistence of Land Claims", Gerald McMaster considered the importance of a revised male identity in Robert Houle's work:

The appropriation of symbols, culture, thought and religion is interconnected with authority over the land, self government and self determination. Control over one's destiny includes self expression and individuals like Houle believe in the recovery of aboriginal male symbols. (1990: 35)

The work presented in the exhibition Changers reflects the authority of the female voice; the artists' statements complement the self-reflexive humor and double meanings in both the titles and the works. Shelley Niro in a statement that is as honest and direct as her photographs, wrote, "when we are alone, awake in the middle of the night, by ourselves, we just want to get back to sleep like the rest of the world." (1990: 6)

Gerald McMaster's natural reserve would not allow him the kind of self-referential humour explicit in much of the work in, for example, Changers, but humour is also the basis of the significance of his solo exhibition The cowboy/Indian Show. McMaster's ability to alter text and image to implicate and subvert the viewer's attention is central to his works that rely on old posters of the wild west and advertising cliches. By raising the question of who is the cowboy and who is the Indian, McMaster continues his childhood illusion, and its reality, that he is the cowboy. Identity and

autobiography are the significance of the theme of the "show". In all five of these exhibitions, and in others that I have not mentioned, the sense of self is the most important theme.

Having raised the consciousness of the artists and the public alike about the time-worn plastic image of the Native person, three exhibitions in 1992, INDIGENA at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, New Territories at four venues in Montreal and Land Spirit Power: First Nations Art at the National Gallery of Canada include works that are predominantly autobiographical.¹⁸

Four of the eighteen artists in INDIGENA have created work that they have specifically identified as autobiography. Both Carl Beam and Joane Cardinal-Schubert have used their self-portraits and photographic images of their families extensively in their work: Carl Beam's self-portrait dominates the central panel of "Burying the Ruler," (Fig.5) and the interior walls of the booth in "Preservation of a Species: Deconstructivists (This is the house that Joe built)," are created as black photo album pages covered with Woolworth's snapshots, a 1940s photo of the artist's mother and father, one of

¹⁸ INDIGENA was curated by Gerald McMaster, the Curator for contemporary Indian art at the Museum and co-curator Lee-Ann Martin as a Native response to the 'celebrations' of 1992. The catalogue included six essays and works by eighteen artists. INDIGENA will travel to the Winnipeg Art Gallery and Dalhousie University Art Gallery in 1993 and the Art Gallery of Windsor and the Glenbow Museum in Calgary in 1994. New Territories was a project begun by Pierre Leon Tetrault to commemorate the founding of the City of Montreal. Co-curated by Dana Williams, it included works by 43 Inuit and Indian artists and was shown in four venues in Montreal and again in Quebec City. Three curators, Diana Nemiroff, Charlotte Townsend Galt and Robert Houle organized the exhibition Land Spirit Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada. The exhibition included artists living in both Canada and the United States. It will travel to MacKenzie Art Gallery in 1993 and Nickle Arts Museum in 1994.

her mother and herself and several others.¹⁹ Jim Logan, a Cree/Sioux/Scottish artist from British Columbia created narratives that show the relationship of the Native community, and in particular Native children, to the values of the mainstream. Logans visually seductive paintings which he calls "extensions of his own personal experiences," (Logan 1992: 144) tell a story of the abuse of power forgotten in moments of real pleasure during a game of hockey. Eric Robertson, in his artist's statement, describes a "centring of self, a more personalized expression," in his work. (1992: 178) Although other works in Indigena suggest autobiographical content through the allusions to the Catholic Church that must have a basis in personal history, and through the commitments to the land, the artists themselves do not make an assertion of autobiographical intent.

The work in New Territories 350/500 Years After is less explicitly autobiographical than in INDIGENA and more concerned with the political consequences of the constitutional debates, the environment and Quebec politics. Oka, the flooding of the lands in the North, the role of the Catholic Church and revisionist history are

¹⁹ "Preservation of a Species: Deconstructivists, (This is the house that Joe built)" was first exhibited at the Ottawa School of Art in 1990. Cardinal-Schubert has used the context of a peep show booth and black walls to write a lengthy text that as she says in the artists's statement in Indigena, "visually discusses RACISM" (1992: 132). As in other of her work, she has used her own self image over and over again to reinforce her identity as a Native person living within the dominant culture. Cardinal-Schubert is a Senior artist and writer whose work includes installation, performance, and painting. In her artist's statement in Changers, she refers to herself as an "urban non status Indian." (1990: 34)

subjects of works that are created from a strong personal sense of identity and a cohesiveness in the desire to publish their mistrust of the provincial interests in Quebec. Self in much of the work is symbolic of the social context, not the voice of the individual.

The most recent exhibition, Land Spirit Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada, is an appropriate one with which to end this discussion of the growth of autobiography as a political strategy in First Nations art. The works chosen for Land Spirit Power include "the rhetoric not of confrontation but of seduction" (Phillips 1993: 20) and part of the seduction had everything to do with the size and the majesty of the contemporary galleries in the National Gallery of Canada. That scale was deliberately used by Carl Beam to express a monumental statement in a monumental size, that Indians and Indian art should be in the National Gallery of Canada. He did so by creating four works, each 274.3 x 213.3 cm. - works so large that they (as a quartet) cannot travel with the exhibition to the other venues in Canada.

In her essay "Modernism, Nationalism and Beyond", Diana Nemiroff argues that the position of the National Gallery in terms of its exhibition policy has been the appropriate one. According to Nemiroff, as events, ideology and art practice have changed, so has the ability of national institutions to understand and promote what has essentially caught up with and been altered by mainstream art practice. She wrote,

By analogy, the belated recognition now being given contemporary native art is the result of a similarly favourable conjuncture of circumstances. The first is the crisis of representation associated with postmodernism, which has caused some art historians to attempt to deconstruct the ethnographic assumptions of universality in art discourse. (Nemiroff 1992: 19)

Land Spirit Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada, according to Nemiroff, looks at the land as place, at spirit as memory and the expression of identity, and at power as shared in a new discourse that sustains cultural difference and contests marginality. I will argue in this thesis that the "crisis of representation associated with postmodernism" (Nemiroff 1992:19) is not the reason why this exhibition belongs in the National Gallery; rather, it is because identity in contemporary Native art is not in crisis. Contemporary Native artists using autobiography as a polemic and as a means of making the collective visible have altered the significance of self-representation from a rejection of the stereotypes created by the dominant culture to a powerful expression of the strengths of the parallel cultures of the so-called margins.

The politics of opposition is unduly limiting (Nemiroff 1992:41); changes however, occur for many reasons, including intensive lobbying. It would be a wonderful irony if Beam's "Burying the Ruler" becomes part of the permanent collection, not as

Nemiroff suggests, because the policies of the institutions and present inclusiveness of contemporary art practice have all caught up with each other, but as a result of his and The Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry's, (SCANA) lobbying over the years.

Rebecca Belmore's "Mawu-che-hitoowin: A Gathering of People for Any Purpose" shares the same ironic presence and creates the context for a similar dialogue as "Burying the Ruler." Belmore taped interviews with a number of women which she made available to anyone who wanted to sit in her installation of chairs, linoleum and accompanying headsets and tape recorders and listen. Belmore in her work, like Alanis Obomsawin in "Oka" is the unseen, but nevertheless understood, interviewer who does not simply record, but shares in the experience of creating the works. Both "Mawu-che-hitoowin: A Gathering Place of People for Any Purpose" and "Oka" are part of the artists' personal histories. James Luna's "The Sacred Colours" is more obviously autobiographical since it includes himself as both director and performer in the act of creation.²⁰

There was a power in Land Spirit Power. And while it is inseparable from land and spirit, the authority of the exhibition (except for James Luna's work which wants to shock as much as it

²⁰ As of March 1993, the film "Oka" had not been released by the National Film Board. What Obomsawin showed at the opening of Land Spirit Power were clips from the unfinished movie. "The Sacred Colours", 1992 is a complex work that includes fluorescent light boxes, large format photographs, underwear and toy cars all in groups of four, each set in one of the four sacred colours.

wants to make people laugh), relies on a quiet affirmation of personal confidence. It may have been the size of the galleries or it may have been the sophisticated choices of the three curators but the various works seemed to communicate with each other in a way that inhibited outside interventions or intrusions.

What Land Spirit Power achieved was the strongest presentation of the personal by mature and professional Native American artists yet gathered together. That each of the artists had already achieved an important body of work and prominence in the mainstream does not contradict the fact that their works spoke of relationships to the land, the strength of community, Native roots, however tenuous, within the urban culture, and personal experiences on the margins of the dominant culture. Autobiography was an obvious strategy in Luna's work and the less obvious, but equally significant, integrity of the rest.

From 1962 to 1992 Native art in Canada has transformed itself. In the sixties, artists who had separated themselves from the arts and crafts movement, and who had fought to have their work accepted as art, relied on traditional images as the source of their inspiration. Now, thirty years later, individual artists are visible within the mainstream of Canadian art practice. What that visibility means in terms of autobiography as a political strategy will be the subject of the next four chapters that discuss the works of Carl Beam, Shelley Niro, Gerald McMaster, Ron Noganosh and Robert Houle.

Chapter Three

Autobiography as a Self-Portrait: Carl Beam

I'm also a part of that. Carl Beam, even though he's plastered all around here has made an autobiography for me. (Carl Beam 1984: 13)

The fifteen years, from 1978 to 1992 that were discussed in the previous chapter, parallel the development of autobiography as a genre in literature, the introduction of the significance of the subjective voice and its relationship to the polemics of the margins. Those years also saw the development of postmodern theories of deconstruction, the decline in the cultural authority of the mainstream and the beginnings of revisionist history. Thus the use of autobiography in contemporary Native art parallels the development of representational tools for events surrounding that history.

Central to the discussion of autobiography in literature is the distinction between class and ethnicity; the mainstream and the margins; who writes autobiography and for what reason. Autobiography is usually associated with the grand epic and its heroes and is based on information and events that can be verified. In the past, autobiographies of women or militants or of members of the lower class, including journals, diaries and letters, were considered less significant not only because they could not be

verified but also because literary and social value was judged to be irrelevant. Only the personal histories of members of the elite were considered important enough for publication. Both as information from a relatively small group and as information considered unreliable anyway, autobiography had been excluded as a genre in literature.

For the purposes of this chapter on autobiography as a self-portrait it is important to clarify the distinction between class and ethnicity as it pertains to visible difference. Philippe Lejeune in the chapter entitled Autobiography of those Who Do Not Write, concluded that class distinctions in autobiographical works in literature were an important consideration. Discourse on the lives of the lower classes was contained within the memory of the group; they rarely wrote their own autobiographies except in special cases, one of which was political militants in the mid to late nineteenth century:

The only literary genre that appears and is developed in the second half of the nineteenth century is the autobiography of militants, who lived in 1848 and 1871 and who write not only for other militants but for the general public as well. Only the practice of action, political and trade union commitment, allow a working class life to have an identity, that is to say a structure and a value, which makes it reach the mode of distribution of the printed biography. The life story becomes then the place where class consciousness can be formed and it

is used for the inculcation of more or less revolutionary models and values. (Lejeune 1989: 200)

Lejeune further considered how militant activities which were a part of the history of the dominant society became co-opted by it. "In the eyes of the dominant class," he wrote, "these stories acquire value through the participation of their authors in struggles that are part of history." (Lejeune 1989: 200-01)

The political significance of autobiographies of militants and their value in documenting history may be compared to the use of autobiography as a political strategy by Native Canadian artists. Ethnicity (Native) and social class (members of the lower class) can be equated in terms of their place at the margins of the dominant class. But, if the visible identity is the same as that of the dominant ethnic group and gender - white male, the militants in a class struggle can be co-opted and their visual identity subsumed by the mainstream. It is not the same however, for dissidents of Native Canadian ancestry, persons of colour and, for that matter, women.²¹ Visible difference denies the possibility of being co-opted and allows a distinctive voice. "Identity", according to Lejeune, "is the real starting point of autobiography." (1989: 24) Visible difference is the starting point of the polemics of autobiography in contemporary Native art.

²¹ Lech Walesa, the current President of Poland is a perfect example of a person who was a militant, the leader of the Labour Unions, and has now been co-opted as the head of the government in Poland.

Within the Euro-ethnic society, it is possible for a member of the lower class to presume to become part of the dominant power. The visible identity is the same; the social and cultural identity may be acquired. Similarly, a published document becomes part of history, the history of the dominant culture and its author's life is assimilated. The distinction here for the visual arts is an important one. Published autobiography can speak of identity and difference but in the visual arts, autobiography shows difference. It is the visible difference that is the basis of the use of autobiography as a political strategy in First Nations art.

Michael M. J. Fischer in his discussion of the significance of ethnicity and memory in postmodernism clarified the dynamics of ethnicity as "a deeply rooted emotional component of identity" and its use as a means of "finding a voice or style that does not violate one's several components of identity." (1986: 196) Autobiographical works are not just personally reflexive. According to Fischer they are "revelations of traditions, re-collections of disseminated identities and divine sparks from the breaking of the vessels." (1986: 198) Amerindian²² writers of autobiography use ironic humour as a political strategy. Fischer calls it a "survival skill, a tool for acknowledging complexity, a means of exposing or subverting hegemonic ideologies." (1986: 224) What the Amerindian

²² Amerindian is another option in the naming game probably referring to "Indians" from North and South America.

writers have done with text parallels autobiography in the visual arts.

Autobiography as a genre in art was not considered at all until very recently²³ which allows us to discuss autobiography in Native art separate from the rhetoric of mainstream discourse. As Beam has said, "It's very important to establish a contemporary critical base ourselves - independent of complete adherence to things out of context." (1989: 22) It is possible to consider first the context of autobiography in Beam's work as a cultural construct before comparing it to other autobiographies in order to prove its relevance as a political strategy. The fact that the work of Carl Beam during the last fifteen years parallels the history of the understanding of autobiography as a genre first in literature and now in the visual arts, is arguably not coincidental. Beam's self-portrait and autobiographical text corresponds to that history; the earliest acknowledgement of identity as the starting point of autobiography to the most recent conclusion that autobiography is a genre shaped by a narrative convention, but, Beam's work has not been shaped by this history, rather it has played a significant part in its development.

Carl Beam was born in 1943 in West Bay, Manitoulin Island of an Ojibway mother and non-Native father. He lived on his reserve

²³ See Pieces d'identites, an exhibition held in two locations in Montreal in January 1993. Curated by Gaetan Gosselin, it is the first exhibition that I know of that specifically addresses the issues of autobiography as a genre in the visual arts.

until Grade 5 and then spent the next four years at the Residential School in Espanola. At fourteen he moved to Toronto where he worked on construction until 1965 when he moved to Wawa, took a correspondence course and completed grade 11. During the next ten years, he lived in Western Canada, worked as a logger and iron worker and completed an undergraduate degree from the University of Victoria. In 1978 Beam returned to Ontario, renewed his contacts on Manitoulin Island and began to visit the Medical Sciences building at the University of Toronto where he became aware of some of the images that contribute to his own iconography. (McLachlin 1990: 11)

Since the late seventies Beam has worked consistently as a full time artist. His was the first major work by a Native Canadian artist to be purchased by the National Gallery of Canada. He has had three important solo exhibitions and been included in all the major group exhibitions during the time frame discussed in this thesis.

The description of Beam's work as an autobiography corresponds to Lejeune's Autobiographical Pact mentioned earlier. One does not have to read an accompanying text to know that the work is about his life or a portrait of himself, he writes it right on the work. The use of text provides additional layers of meaning, creates an actual secondary layer to the surface of the work and screens or highlights the images behind. This structure, recombining image and text, functions as a barrier and forces a reconsideration of all of the information that Beam has provided. Beam uses his self-portrait in two structurally different ways;

sometimes framing a central self-representation with text and sometimes creating a composite of fragments that include at least one version of an image of himself.

Carl Beam's long-standing interest in many causes provides the content for works that include his self-portrait. Beam's remark made in 1983 and quoted at the opening of this chapter contradicts the altruistic ideas suggested by the images that he chooses. "Carl Beam, even though he's plastered all around here has made an autobiography for me." (1984: 13) Beam understands semiotics and although he created himself as a signifier, he has actually contextualized his own life story by placing himself within his pictures. He has used the media images to create a subjective voice and an identity.

In 1991, Beam said:

Autobiography appealed to me when I first got into art. I always sensed my contemporaries wanted some big art statement; (they) didn't know how to locate it - tried with the technical and also the formal. They would say, I'm not the big theme...the big theme lies elsewhere. The person was diminished in terms of the larger. All those who say 'The great Canadian novel hasn't been written, are waiting. I said, I'm the big picture too. (Beam 1991)

In Carl Beam's photo-based collages, autobiography is a narrative genre and a political strategy. While Beam's earliest self-portraits confer a relationship between himself and present time, it

is the introduction of the family portraits, the album pages and finally his self-portrait surrounded by Ojibway symbols that confirms his cultural authority.

To date there are three ways in which Beam uses autobiography: the self-portrait, the self-portrait combined with semiotic information through which he expresses his own concerns and the third, his family photographs. During the last fifteen years, he has begun and ended an important body of work that combines photography, ceramics, painting and collage with fully frontal semi-nude self-portraits, the first a water colour (Fig.2) and the most recent, (Fig.1) a photo emulsion photographic transfer.

In 1984, Elizabeth McLuhan curated the first solo exhibition of Beam's work for the Thunder Bay Art Gallery. The front cover of the catalogue for Altered Egos, "Self Portrait in My Christian Dior Bathing Suit", (Fig. 2) was intentionally confrontational. On it, he wrote,

...autobiographical work done in 1980 to validate my presence and to make sure that the work always remains explicitly autobiographical in nature, even if I have to state it in this way. As far as I'm concerned I'm the artist (among other things) as this is my work. This is my work!! I am marking time through my work (if it serves no other function to anyone else) and if I do this I will say tomorrow, " I was around yesterday and here's the fucking proof", "Where's yours!" babble, babble, verbiage, etc.....

Carl Beam, 1980, Toronto.

Carl Beam in "Self Portrait in My Christian Dior Bathing Suit" is semi-nude, aggressive in his posture, intimidating in his staring eyes and unruly hair and yet vulnerable in softly contoured water colour washes, pinks, blues and mauves and in his semi-nudity. It is a portrait of an Indian (possibly) yet along one side are stencilled letters from a child's cardboard set. The evidence of individual identity is in the text. Without it, the figure could be a studio portrait. With it, the work becomes ironic. Is it a designer suit? Can this unruly haired person afford a designer suit? Would he care if it was a designer suit? Are "Indians" for sale?

The pose parodies the commodification inherent in images in women's fashion magazines yet the figure with its heroic stance is clearly not selling bathing suits. He states that he is the artist and he wants everyone to know that it is his portrait. The pertinent question is why he cares to make the viewer aware of his unromanticized image of the Native and the artist. Possibly "this is my work!!" refers to the many images of Native Canadians that are created by non-Native people; people who appropriate the "Indian" as their symbol of travel, adventure and cultural mystique, an argument that will be more fully discussed in Chapter Five. Yet that choice of image would be too ironic; using a semi-nude Indian to sell anything is hardly the marketing ploy that miniature canoes and moccasins are. More likely, Beam is saying that he can create an image that is anti- stereotype and anti-romantic. "Self Portrait in My Christian

Dior Bathing Suit" is a remarkable opening play in the game of identity politics.

Throughout the 80s, Beam included successive self-portraits in composite works that semiotically referenced the world and its history. Images of drawings of parts of a bird, a foetus, a photograph of a traffic light, a submarine, a bee, a Curtis portrait of an Indian chief or elder, a reproduction of Columbus, media images of the assassination of Anwar Sadat, all became fragments of a collage of images one of which was Beam himself. At the end of the decade he began to include his own family history: photographs of his mother and himself as a child, group photographs of his class at the Residential School and photographs of other members of his family.

Similarly, he created as content parallel ways of looking at the world which included his personal history and the personal memories of the audience (assumed to be white). Beam's eyes, which seemed to out-stare the viewer (in a manner considered impolite in Ojibway culture), rejected the viewer's authority over himself as subject. He forced a reconsideration of the meanings of the images. A representative example is "The Artist With Some of His Concerns" (Fig.6) in which Beam included a media image of the death of Anwar Sadat, a series of drawings of horses heads presented as zoological specimens, a self-portrait and an eagle in

flight.²⁴ The last two images are overlaid with a squared white grid. The work signifies Beam's existence as part of the moment in time when Sadat was killed, alludes to the Indian as objectified (the specimen horses) and includes himself in a separate and freer existence of which the bird in flight is a metaphor. It is a complex statement of personal and cultural history.

In the later work, Beam allows more personal information about his own identity. By doing so, the work becomes more confident and compelling in a different way. That conclusion is, however, misleading. The family photos in "Domestic Activities" (Fig.7) are complicitous with a non-Native viewer; everyone has similar family photographs - wearing the same clothes driving the same cars, watching the same movies and playing with the same toys. But these photographs are taken at the time when Indian stereotyping was at its zenith in the form of Hollywood movies and possibly represent family scenes of parting from children who were leaving for residential schools or other problems caused by the disruptions of the reservation system. He also includes amongst the personal references, cultural signifiers like the turtle and the bee.

After more than ten years the series "Burying the Ruler," continued the structure of "Self Portrait in My Christian Dior Bathing Suit," a structure that is based on a fully frontal self-

²⁴ Originally exhibited in Altered Egos, "The Artists With Some of His Concerns", 1983, water colour on paper, 101.6 x 150.7, is now in the Collection of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs.

portrait framed with text and/or painterly techniques and symbolic images. The original photograph, taken as an historical document by Beam's wife Ann in 1990 in the western United States, is a portrait of Beam holding a ruler, wearing a cowboy hat, jeans and Birkenstock sandals, and apparently gazing directly at the viewer. It is however, through her lens that we can see Carl Beam and although he has created other techniques of focussing, it is her perspective that is central to the "Burying the Ruler" series. The viewer therefore, looks at Beam through Ann's eyes and we meet his gaze as Ann would have done.

The "Burying the Ruler" works, which were created in the fall and winter of 1991-2 are not a series in the sense that Carl Beam saw them all as part of a specific project bound by size, material, complexity and number, rather, the works form a series because they include the same self-portrait.

To my knowledge there are at least 10 works that include the photograph of Carl Beam "burying the ruler". I shall discuss five that incorporate texts and images that alter the individual meanings so as to demonstrate my thesis of autobiography as a strategy.

In one version, of "Burying the Ruler #1" (Fig.8), which is I believe, the first, Beam transferred the image by a photo-emulsion transfer process on canvas. He brushed the top with javex that he allowed to run down the surface of the emulsion and controlled the drips to the extent that they do not cover the central figure but act as a frame on both sides. On the left hand he has hand-printed the

words, BURYING THE RULER one above the other. The text is a light cadmium red. the signature dark red and the drips a pale pink/orange. Of all the works in this group, this piece has the least additional textual information.

Another work "A Burying the Ruler Z" (Fig.9) has a border that contains a substantial amount of text. The letters from "a" to "p" down the left hand side of the work include the words

...when and if one can possibly think anymore they should really try to bury their own personal equivalent of a ruler as there are many kinds and many modes...the wonder of it all is that we are not dead yet and this must be some kind of miracle

At the bottom of the work, Beam has printed the title and written below,

...or, in this case, for everyone who ever wanted (or had) a piece of me in whatever form - there are many ways (consider books for example) what should I be, do, etc and after all these many years the marvel is that in a large sense,
I still am (can be) Carl Beam 1991....

Besides the text, Beam has played with the surface of the work in a number of different ways. One set of horizontal parallel bars begins with consecutive Arabic numbers from "a" to "p". Two other lines traverse the work; one a line of crosses and the other a linear graph line. Beam has said that the linear graph line which begins at "c" on the left hand side and falls off the work on the right below the

letter "p" represents the ups and downs of his career.²⁵ The line of crosses begins on the left at "c" which indicates contact and ends at "I" for Indian. There are 15 specific years listed across the top of the work beginning at 200 and ending at 2001; he ignores 1992. The pattern of the drips created by the javex is another aspect of the screening of the central image. This particular version of the image is the most politically strategic of all; Beam puts himself in the five hundred year post-contact history to contextualize it visually.

Another, much smaller version of "Burying the Ruler" (Fig.10) arguably best informs the viewer of Beam's autobiographical intentions.²⁶ At the top of the work, "Notes on Burying the Ruler", he wrote the words,

White area

...the being seemed to be part of the problem although no one ever talked about it to any definable degree not that anyone in a jar can ever see the glass-ness of the jar in that the jar answers to no one in particular if you know what the jar is.

The middle area is lined and numbered down the left hand side from 1 - 9. At the bottom he added,

Notes on "Burying the Ruler"

²⁵ Personal communication on the occasion of the purchase of the work, Ufundi Gallery, Ottawa, September 1991

²⁶ This version, Burying The Ruler, was exhibited in the Ufundi gallery in January 1992 in an exhibition called Autobiography in First Nations Art

....after many years of wandering on various desert floors, it occurred to me that there was a way out of some of peculiar little problems, but I would have to "look" at world differently than the way I had been taught...

Carl Beam

The "glass-ness" of the jar refers to the earlier uses of "Indian-ness" in describing aspects of his work, used by both Tom Hill and Elizabeth McLuhan in the Image Makers. The jar is possibly a metaphor for the need to identify the Indian who is a person. The "being" person writing in the "white area" is anonymous - the third person , but in the "Notes", he makes it clear that it is personal information referring to himself.

Two other versions of "Burying the Ruler" were exhibited in major exhibitions in 1992. One (Fig.5), in INDIGENA at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, was the centre panel of a triptych and the other (Fig.1), was one of four paintings by Beam in the exhibition Land Spirit Power at the National Gallery of Canada.

Beam chose to contextualize himself in the Canadian Museum of Civilization work by placing his self-portrait as the centre of three related works. While his self-image clearly labelled "Burying the Ruler" in red, holds the centre, the two works on either side refer to ritual, the boundaries of linguistics and discourse, and the geometric and mathematical diagrams bound by sacred symbols. Beam's entire artist's statement best sums up its significance,

"After five hundred years, people should realize the world is round."
(Beam 1992a: 120)

This is the most subtle of all the images that he has created using the "Burying the Ruler" iconography. The texture of the hand-made paper and the minimalness of the information rejects the lazy viewer who identifies texture and pattern and ignores or misunderstands the precise information that the artist is actually giving. The obtrusive drips in the centre panel create a screen through which the self-portrait regards the viewer as though from a great distance. The white, brown and purple/grey in the three papers are equally sedate. It is the red crosses that mark the surface of the central work, the red in the letters A and Z and "Burying the Ruler" and the red ties on the feathers that graphically unite both the meaning and the design of the three works. It is the most subtle description of his specific identity; the signifiers surrounding the central photograph are gentle line drawings evocative of both cultural constructs.

The work from the "Burying the Ruler" series in the National Gallery exhibition is the most provocative of all the works, not just because of its size, but because Beam has created a strong focus for himself in several different ways; by surrounding his self-image in an oval frame made by the scratches and drips of the photo-emulsion process, by centring himself as the mid-point of a clock clearly identified by the hour signs: 12, 3, 6 and 9, by the four sacred colours over his head and by a red drawing of the thunderbird and the

cross/star framed on either side. Like an old cameo image in an ornate frame, this work seems to be a reminder of a personal and perhaps heroic relationship.

The comparison of Beam's work to Rauschenberg's montages in "Whose Nation? First Nations Art in the Past and in the Present", a significant article by Scott Watson on Land Spirit Power and INDIGENA in Canadian Art magazine, a comparison that is often made because of the photographic process and the use of media images, is helpful in its recognition of the significance of the monochromatic colouring in "Burying the Ruler". Scott Watson understands the important distinction between silence as a modernist practice, "a refusal to mean very much other than the objecthood of the painting" and the broken silence in Beam's work (1993: 38), but he may not realize the significance of the silence that Beam breaks. Silence as a culturally bound technique of storytelling and language will be discussed in more detail in the chapter on Robert Houle. Silence in Beam's work, an example of which is the monochromatic colouring, is also a non-confrontational cultural practice; the breaking of the silence is caused by a number of interjections - the directional numbers of a clock face, the thunderbirds, the "+" and the four sacred dots that are actually a prayer.

For the sake of argument, the five "Burying the Ruler" works just described suggest a chronology that may not have been intended, but they do show a development from the least complex and most direct statement of identity created with few additional signifiers

to the largest and most explicit "Burying the Ruler" of them all. Unlike "The Artist With Some of His Concerns" (Fig.6) and "Domestic Activities" (Fig.7), which are compilations of many photographically-reproduced images, the works in the "Burying the Ruler" series rely on a single image. I have used chronology as a means of contextualizing what appears to be a development of ideas and personal information in Beam's work. Visually they are more or less complex, larger or smaller, more or less colourful and more or less aggressive, but to remain bound by the visual context, is to miss the significance of the dimension of time and Beam's role as indicator within it.

Beam's real strategy is that he has understood and referred to mainstream theoretical discourse and has included his image within its context while at the same time remaining steadfast to what he has always said, that, "I'm also a part of that. Carl Beam even though he's plastered all around here has made an autobiography for me." The "that" can be read as "mainstream" or his own cultural history. "Carl Beam" is the photographic image. "Me" is the collective self. In other words, the self-portrait contextualizes the autobiography of Carl Beam.

Chapter Four

Photography and Representation: Shelley Niro

Self image has become an important mechanism for contemporary native people. We have to look at ourselves and others around us to appreciate our values and acknowledge the values we place on each other. (Shelley Niro 1991)

While I was trying to find a way to describe how Shelley Niro's photographs alter perceptions, I came to the personal realization that I am including here, just as I wrote it, because I think it constitutes an important response to her work.

As I was skiing today through the forest at Nakkertok near Ottawa, I looked around at the landscape, the crisp and sparse new snow that sparkled in a million tiny crystals, the exposed rocks and the dark silhouettes of the trees against the whiteness of the snow, and as I looked behind to see my elongated shadow following, it occurred to me that the subjective reality of the experience, those few moments in time that I thought about it, could not be re-created visually through photography. Any representation of me in that setting would be culturally loaded; another person would read it as a "winter scene", as a "Christmas image," as a "sports event," as a Wordsworthian view of the "good life".

Who I was, as a person in that moment in time, would be irrelevant because the figure in the landscape would carry with it an assumption of cultural identity. But what if I was a Native Canadian in a patagonia jacket or an Afro-Canadian in a polypropelene fitted ski suit? How would an image in that setting translate?

The culturally biased assumption evoked by a figure in a winter landscape would be challenged. The older cultural reality inherent in such a photograph and the objectivity of the subject is subverted by a more current use of ethnic visibility. The "exotic" has become part of the everyday and the everyday may be an illusion. (Victoria Henry January 10, 1993)

This digression is relevant to the strategic use of self-representation and autobiography in the work of Shelley Niro, a Mohawk artist, sculptor, photographer and film maker from Oshweken, the Six Nations Reserve in Brantford. Niro was born in Niagara Falls, New York, in 1954. She has attended the Algoma School of Landscape Painting, the Banff School of Fine Arts, Durham College, Oshawa and the Ontario College of Art. From 1985-1990, her work was included in most of the Native group photography exhibitions and the yearly group exhibitions at the Woodland Cultural Centre. Since the first exhibition of "Mohawks and Beehives", at the Ufundi Gallery in 1991, those works and others have been included in an increasing number of solo and group exhibitions in Ottawa, Toronto, Brantford and Seattle. On New Year's Eve, 1992, Niro

launched It Starts With a Whisper, a 26 minute film that continues the humour of "Mohawks and Beehives" at the Senior Citizen's Home in Oshweken.²⁷

Shelley Niro's work is funny. Its humour goes beyond the simple use of cultural unmasking of self and family representation. Its irreverence is towards all social and cultural stereotypes: Native and white, of manners, fashion, politics. Niro wrote:

In Native people, I see a lot of happiness and an emerging kind of confidence which glows from the inside with warmth and love. We are very proud and we are using this pride to break through the barrier society has labelled us with, as suffering from inferiority complexes. We have suffered from this tagged-on affliction too long. We are doers, not sayers.

(Niro 1990: 25)

The joy and confidence expressed in her photographs and in her text is further evidence of the significance of identity in autobiography in First Nations art.

Four writers who have considered the significance of photography provide important background to the discussion of Shelley Niro's art; Susan Sontag, John Berger, Linda Hutcheon and Craig Owens. Susan Sontag's ground breaking 1973 essays in On Photography discuss the role of the photographer and the function of the photograph. From a 1992 vantage point, it is apparent how much

²⁷ It Starts With a Whisper, 1993, Bay of Quinte Productions, written, produced and directed by Shelley Niro and Ann Gronau, Toronto.

the world was considered from a white, privileged lens at the time she wrote. As Sontag pointed out, photography is a social rite, a defense against anxiety and a tool of power. (Sontag 1973: 8) It also documents information. She wrote:

Cameras began duplicating the world at that moment when the human landscape started to undergo a vertiginous rate of change: while an untold number of forms of biological and social life are being destroyed in a brief span of time, a device is available to record what is disappearing. (Sontag 1973: 16)

She has also noted:

The photographer is supertourist, an extension of the anthropologist, visiting natives and bringing back news of their exotic doings and strange gear. The photographer is always trying to colonize new experiences or find new ways to look at familiar subjects - to fight against boredom. (Sontag 1973: 42)

Sontag clarifies the significance of a photograph as image (1973: 180), identifies the aggression in the act of taking a picture (1973: 14) and discusses the relationship of photography to the fulfillment of the need to consume. (1973: 179) She understands that what the viewer sees is only one version of a reality and that there are endless other possibilities. But throughout, as she considers the significance of the image over the experience of the actual, she writes as a modernist.(1973: 154) Photography is another form of colonizing, not liberating, information.

Sontag recognizes the inherent dilemma of the use of photography as a socially concerned strategy. Photographers who use the medium of photography as a visual "show and tell",

Assume that their work can convey some kind of stable meaning, can reveal truth. But partly because the photograph is, always, an object in a context, this meaning is bound to drain away; that is, the context which shapes whatever immediate - in particular, political - uses the photograph may have is inevitably succeeded by contexts in which such uses are weakened and become progressively less relevant. (1973: 106)

Both the cultural context in which the photograph was taken and the social context in which it is subsequently exhibited significantly alter its possible didactic value.

In the feminist discussion of representation and the gendered gaze, Sontag's work is particularly important. Women in photographs are, by definition, objects of consumption and lust for, "the possession of a camera can inspire something akin to lust" since photographic possibilities are endless and "self-devouring." (Sontag 1973: 179) The conventional assumption is that the camera is held by a man, and it is the male eye that directs the all consuming gaze of the female form.

Sontag's interest in photography also includes a positive note that becomes important in considering how contemporary Native artists use the camera to their own advantage. She writes that:

The force of photographic images comes from their being material realities in their own right, richly informative deposits left in the wake of whatever emitted them, potent means for turning the tables on reality...images are more real than anyone could have supposed. (1973: 180)

John Berger agrees. In his important essay on how we understand what we see, Berger argues that the art of the past is being reconsidered because its authority is lost. "In its place," he wrote, "is a language of images. What matters now is who uses that language for what purpose." (1972: 33) Both Sontag's and Berger's interest in the autonomy of the image foreshadows the decline in western cultural authority and the significance of the image in postmodern art.

The concept of the photographic image as signifier begun in the work of Sontag and Berger is further developed in the work of Linda Hutcheon. Photography [and fiction], Hutcheon wrote, foregrounds "the awareness of the discursive and signifying nature of cultural knowledge by raising the question of the supposed transparency of representation." (1989: 7) Hutcheon's definition of postmodernist: - "where documentary historical actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody" (1989:7) - forms the more immediate basis for a discussion of the work of Mohawk photographer, Shelley Niro. A study of representation, Hutcheon writes:

Becomes, not a study of mimetic mirroring or subjective projecting, but an exploration of the way in which narratives

and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self, in the present and in the past. (1989: 7)

Similarly, Hutcheon asks another series of important questions raised in conjunction with the strategies of feminisms in postmodern representation: "What constitutes a valid historical narrative? And who decides?". (1989: 160) Since the feminist position that the personal is the political allowed the re-evaluation of writing formerly associated with mass culture instead of high art; journals, letters, confessions, biographies, diaries, autobiographies, and self-portraits, "the result has been the reconsideration of both the context of historical narrative and the politics of representation and self-representation." (Hutcheon 1989: 160-61)

Hutcheon's distinction between postmodern practice and "feminisms," as she calls them, is particularly important in terms of understanding how contemporary Native artists have borrowed their strategies and recontextualized them. Such recontextualization was not considered as a possibility by Hutcheon's Euro-centric lens when she wrote:

But do we have here a very basic problem for the very existence of feminist visual arts (as opposed to feminist critique of male art)? If the mastering gaze which separates the subject from the object of the gaze, projecting desire unto that object, is inherently masculine, as many feminists argue

could there ever be such a thing as women's visual art?
(Hutcheon 1989: 151)

One possibility exists, the parodic mode of installing and subverting conventions, a strategy used by American artist Cindy Sherman whose work will be discussed in relation to that of Shelley Niro in the following pages.

Craig Owens was also concerned with the issues of representation and argued that any representation of women is bound by sexuality and ownership - by the male gaze. He notes that, "few [women artists] have produced new positive images of a revised femininity; to do so would simply supply and thereby prolong the life of the existing representational apparatus." (Owens 1983: 71)

Photography is especially problematic for women artists, he wrote, because,

The photographer inevitably functions as an agent of the system of power that silenced those people in the first place. Thus they are twice victimized: first by society and then by the photographer who presumes the right to speak on their behalf. (Owens 1983: 69)

If the photographer is from within the culture, if the work is a self-portrait and if visible difference is a strategy, the representation of the female body, I will argue is no longer the object of the male gaze. It is not just subverted; it is significantly altered. I will show that the photography of Shelley Niro employs a postmodern strategy of parody and self-reflexion, and that its apparent Euro-centric base

in the transparency of the medium of photography encloses a subjective position of authority.

At the heart of this thesis is the demonstration of the way in which the self-reflexivity of postmodern work from within the Euro-centric cultural base paved the way for the strategic use of self-portraits and autobiography by the "other". In showing how images were symbolic of the cultural base, women, Afro-Canadians and Native Canadians - all the so called "others" - have subverted conventions by refusing to continue to exploit them. By altering the position of outsider, by making members of the dominant culture the "other" through photographs taken from an/other cultural context, contemporary Native photography assumes its own position of cultural authority.

Niro's work as a photographer was not well known when she created a collection of 14 works called Mohawks in Beehives in 1991. It immediately received widespread attention and exposure, and was purchased by the Canadian Museum of Civilization. In January 1992, it was shown in the exhibition "...Sitting With a Killer ...", at the NIIPA Gallery in Hamilton. The Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford featured one of the works on the cover of First Nations '92 held in May 1992, and the collection was subsequently shown as part of Mohawks in Beehives and Other Works at the Mercer Union in Toronto in June 1992. Two of the images were included in the exhibition Portraits of Thayendanegea, Joseph Brant at the Burlington Cultural Centre in January 1993. This listing is

important because it demonstrates the significant impact of this one collection in a year when four major exhibitions of contemporary Native art in Canada in 1992 excluded Niro's work.²⁸

"Mohawks in Beehives" consists of fourteen works, nine of which are photographs of Shelley Niro's sisters, all taken on the same spring day in Brantford, Ontario. Some were taken in front of the Chief Joseph Brant Memorial and the rest in the attic of her home. The other five pictures, including three of her Mother reclining on the hood of a car, under a hair dryer and in front of a mask, one of a friend in downtown Toronto and the last of the staircase of her home completed the set of "family photographs".

For the photographs, Niro and her sisters did their hair in a fifties style of beehive hair-dos and kiss curls and wore extravagant make-up and gaudy jewellery. Throughout the day, Niro photographed them play-fighting, sitting on a bench, acting out the part of pin-up girls and posing as fashion models.²⁹ The fourteen works are sepia-toned photographs, hand-tinted with colour pencils and enclosed in

²⁸Mohawks in Beehives was also reviewed in the Expositor (January 18, 1992), the Ottawa Citizen, (October 28, 1991), Parallelogramme (Vol. 18, No.2, 1992) and Fuse (Fall, 1992). The images were used in advertising in Canadian Art (Summer, 1992) and in Borderlines (Fall/Winter, 1992). Slides of Niro's work were included in two papers presented to the Native Studies Conference in Victoria (November, 1992) by Victoria Henry and Allan Ryan, and Niro spoke at a conference, The Image of the Native Woman, and to exhibit her work in Seattle in March 1993.

²⁹They were so outrageously dressed and had such a good time that when they went out to a restaurant after the sittings, the waitress refused to serve them because they were so rowdy. (Niro 1992)

mattes that have been punched in a decorative pattern of curvilinear motifs derived from Iroquois beadwork and other Native symbols.

"Mohawks in Beehives I" (Fig.11) is the least complex of the images; it is a photograph of Niro's three sisters, heads and shoulders only, in a work that fills the frame almost completely. It is concerned with the issues of lust and desire, the male gaze and fashion. The three women return the viewer's gaze in a "provocative" manner, but the challenge to gender readings which is the essence of this image, is subverted by the fact that the sisters are obviously play-acting. As large, middle-aged, Native women, dressed in out-moded fashions their appearance seems incompatible with the feminine ideal of beauty created by male lust. The "image," however, removed from the family photo album to the gallery wall and the arts column of the newspaper, exists in its own right and has its own authority.

Niro's doubly registered seduction is the irony in her work; an irony that often causes outright laughter from the viewer. Her images, showing woman as object, at first provoke a conditioned response and are then subverted when the ruses in terms of context (1950s dress) and identity (Indian or white) are realized. The object then becomes the subject of the possible deception. Is the woman stuck in a time warp or is it an old family photograph? How can she be neither an Indian princess nor a [white] fashion model? The double irony of unfulfilled expectations is the joke on the viewer, male or female, Native or non Native.

Niro created this body of work in response to her feelings of frustration and futility. As the Oka "standoff" was followed by the Gulf "war," she decided to create a more personal body of work. In a letter dated June 8, 1992, she wrote,

At this point I realized that I must deal with these issues as an artist....My sisters, who are always receptive to an idea that is off the wall, goofy and goes a bit against the grain, agreed instantly to take part in our day of forgetting....By releasing themselves of their personalities, cultural margins, and motherhood and wifedom (kids and husbands weren't around most of the day) the world's problems did not exist. I think the work creates a platform of joy, assertiveness. Too often the image of Native women is stereotyped; the public view is directed in a very narrow way. I want to blow up and explode this image. (Niro 1992b)

The personal image in these works is an effective way to continue the impact of the televised "standoff" in what appeared to be more a matter of Canadians in jeans and t-shirts pitted against Canadians in army uniforms than a war between the Indians and the dominant whites.

The success of these works rests on their ability to raise a smile and sometimes outright laughter from both the Native and the non-Native community. The juxtapositions of Native woman/fashion model, 1950s style/reality, or fiction and sincerity/ruse, challenge the preconceived ideas of both cultures. The secret is their cultural

layering and their honesty, their ability to evoke old memories which are held in common by non-Native viewers and the Native subject. This one layer of complicity, shared histories, is only part of the real difference between postmodern/feminist strategies and the position of presumed authority that Niro installs.

The second layer is based on the photographic process. The cultural layering created by the dress and hair-styles of Niro's sisters is artistically enhanced by the technique of hand-colouring the photographic images. Whether the image is recently hand-coloured, a hand-coloured old document or a new sepia-coloured photograph deliberately hand-coloured, raises the question of the age and authenticity of the photographs. The seemingly old black and white photographs express a reality that recent colour photography does not share; they evoke old memories from any viewer whose family album contains photographs from the fifties and sixties.

The hand-colouring helps to frustrate the implicit significance of the images of the women as the canonical object of the male gaze by adding a secondary and perhaps protective layer. The technique of hand-colouring has its basis in fashion; it was used to enhance black and white images before the advent of inexpensive colour reproductions. It is now used to enhance (usually unsuccessfully) old black and white movies. Both alterations force a reconsideration of the image; a ploy that Niro now uses successfully to alter the stereotypical image of Native women perpetuated in

film and advertising. These women are not submissive and invisible; they are loud and gaudy and they are having fun.

Of the fourteen works in the series Mohawks and Beehives, "Portrait of the Artist, Sitting With a Killer, Surrounded By French Curves", 1991 (Fig.12), is the only one in which Niro includes her own self image. The rest of the works foreground her identity as a Mohawk woman through her relationship to her mother and her sisters. In "Portrait...", Niro, surrounded by her three sisters, holds a cigarette from which the smoke rises as a plume. All four women rest on large pink pillows on the carpeted floor in her attic and regard the camera's lens as a participant in the action, which of course it is. (Niro is holding the cord in her left hand.) Two of the sisters are wearing dark glasses, all have 1950s hair-dos and all are wearing costume jewellery, jeans jackets and additional gaudy accessories. The black matte board which is part of the work has been punched with tiny holes in a pattern to emulate beadwork embroidered by Iroquois women on ceremonial dress. Niro included herself in this work because her sisters convinced her to do it and because she felt she couldn't use them and exclude herself. (Niro 1992a)

In the context of this exploration of autobiography in First Nations art, Niro's next sequence of works is especially important. This Land is Mime Land, consists of twelve works, each measuring 61 x 99 cm. Each of the twelve works is composed of three images matted and framed as a single work: Niro as a cultural icon, an old

family photograph and Niro's self portrait in everyday dress. The mat is punched in patterns that reflect the cultural persona of the dominant (coloured) image on the left.³⁰

"Mohawk Worker," (Fig.13) is ironic in several ways: the female worker in hard hat and boots putting on lipstick plays on the acknowledgement of the special skills of the Mohawk steel rigger, the controversy over woman (any woman) as construction worker and the idea that Native woman is anything but an Indian princess. Like a textile, "Mohawk Worker" weaves in and out of the entrenched cultural viewpoints in both the Native and non-Native world. In addition, the centre image, a 1938 sepia-toned photograph of her father standing before a car, makes visible a different version of the Native person in the 1930s than the one commonly understood from the movies of the period. The third frame is Niro herself, comfortable in the jeans and shirt of the 1990s.

In "Mohawk Worker", Niro uses autobiography to re-situate herself in time. While creating the continuity through her father's image of inclusion within the dominant culture as a person who uses cars and builds big buildings, Niro also acknowledges the authority of woman through her own self-portrait and plays on what already seems to be past history, the inability of women to break into the male dominated work place.

³⁰ This Land is Mime Land was first exhibited in December, 1992 at the Ufundu Gallery, Ottawa, at the Sacred Circle Gallery in Seattle, in March, 1993 and at the London Regional Art Gallery in the Fall, 1993.

A comparison to the work of Cindy Sherman, the American photographer mentioned by both Linda Hutcheon and Craig Owens in their work on postmodernism, is instructive in terms of understanding how ethnicity, (and almost two decades of feminism) alters the political strategy inherent in photographic self-portraits by women. Sherman's self-portrait in "Untitled Film Still," (Fig.14) is a black and white photograph of herself in the guise of a 1950s secretary in tidy hair, suit and hat appropriate to the part. The narrative is, however, controlled by someone other than the "secretary" because of the apparently threatening scene. As Crimp states,

She is surrounded by the office towers of the big city. But those skyscrapers play another role in this picture. They envelope and isolate the woman, reinforcing with their dark shouldered looming facades her obvious anxiety, as her eyes dart over her shoulder . . . at something perhaps lurking outside the frame of the picture. Is she we wonder being pursued? (1984: 180-1)

What is most obvious is the difference in the degree of the confidence expressed by the subjects in the two works. Regina Hackett has written that Niro's series This Land is Mime Land, "follows New York artist Cindy Sherman's now famous method of using herself as a model for myriad personalities and dramatic situations." (1993: C11) But Niro's use of the mythologized self-portrait is nothing like Sherman's. Sherman explores identity, and

Niro already has found hers. No matter what guise Niro assumes, it's clearly she in there cackling at her own ruses." (Hackett 1993:C11)

In literature and in painting, Lejeune considered the self-portrait of secondary importance to the larger body of the artist's work,

Because the self-portrait is first of all intended to be seen among other works by the same painter: this is where it breathes, where it plays, where it really means something, through resemblance and difference, through recall and rupture. (1989:117)

Self-portraits are now the content and frequently the context of an artist's visual imagery. They are no longer, if they ever were, an adjunct to a larger body of work. While Mohawks and Beehives was primarily about identity, when Niro included herself as subject in "Portrait of the Artist With a Killer Surrounded By French Curves," the self-portrait became the means of her involvement with the subject of autobiography. In This Land is Mime Land the combination of her self-portraits and the family photograph become an autobiographical narrative. Niro's ambiguous and humorous titles do not specifically label the work as autobiography, but her artist's statement and the title of the exhibition confirm her centrality in work that includes a cultural context (dominant), an historical/family content (ancestor/child) and a contemporary figure (herself).

Shelley Niro is aware of the possible narcissistic implications of photographing herself and presenting these self-portraits as an image/representation in contemporary society/culture. But as Lejeune also states, "narcissism, always an element in self-portraiture, may transform itself by interconnecting the self image with that of others. (1989: 30) In This Land is Mime Land, Niro creates a connection between herself, her family/community and the dominant culture of which she is also a part. She wrote that her work was not created for narcissistic reasons; she made herself the subject of the work, "for cultural evaluations of myself and how I am directly affected by daily doses of popular culture and historical happenings." (Niro 1992)

Lloyd Wong, writing in Fuse magazine, suggests that "in the context of issue-oriented art and identity politics, Shelley Niro's work is a breath of fresh air." (Wong 1992: 38) That "fresh air" is the release from the dogma of gender politics and Native stereotyping made possible by her humour and her Native identity. The autobiographical content situates her work in "a contemporary reality of what it means to be a First Nations woman." (Wong 1992: 38) Wong suggests that Shelley Niro's "new language with which race and identity are articulated as complex lived experiences," (1992: 38) is the "what" of Berger's conclusions that, "What matters now is who uses that language for what purpose." (1973: 33)

Shelley Niro's self-portraits and the portraits of her family document fragments of the story of her life but the inter-

relationship of the three images in the series This Land is Mime Land is a reconstruction of a social and cultural identity. Autobiography is the context of Shelley Niro's confident, humorous and politically motivated photographs of herself and her sisters.

Chapter Five

Reclaiming Power: Issues of Gender and the Male Nude

I am the subject of my paintings. (Gerald McMaster 1992b)

In the preceding two chapters I have discussed the use of the self-portrait and its relationship to the narrative aspects of autobiography in the work of Carl Beam and Shelley Niro. In Niro's work, the issues of the "female voice", audience and how the self-portrait alters the understanding of representation in mainstream contemporary art has also been considered. This chapter will show how the male self-portrait as represented by the works of three contemporary Native artists recontextualizes the Indian "male voice" within his own story.

Reclaiming Power: Issues of Gender and the Male Nude suggests a comparison to feminist discourse which seeks to claim power within the mainstream political structure. "Reclaiming power" in this case, is about re-establishing a personal identity that has to do with being male and a Native Canadian. First Nations artists are addressing the issue of empowerment within their own communities, power that has been eroded during this century by religious bans, residential schools, the loss of land and dysfunctional family life. Contemporary Native artists are beginning to use the self-portrait and the nude self-portrait in their work to signify a resurgence of male confidence and identity.

Contemporary Native art as a re-affirmation of identity has been addressed earlier but, one important exhibition, Fluffs and Feathers, an Exhibit on the Symbols of Indianness, organized by the Woodland Cultural Centre in 1988 best suggests the extent to which the "Indian" male has been "de-masculated" and replaced by a cardboard existence. Tom Hill, began the exploration of "Indian" images in response to visitors' comments at the Woodlands Cultural Centre that the staff "did not 'look Indian' or wear the typical feather headdress". (Hill 1988: 6) Fluffs and Feathers considers the contradictory "heroic" and "savage" attributes of "Indianness" in a wide variety of media: film, tourist objects, advertising logos, impersonations and "sick" humour, all apparently created to entertain and titillate a White audience who either believed the story or didn't care. Two of the ways in which contemporary native artists are re-claiming their "maleness" are by the presentation of visible identity and the creation of a visual narrative. This chapter will show how the parody of the heroic and savage Indian begins to deconstruct in the 1970's, how contemporary Native artists begin to create an anti-heroic real person stripped of his "fluffs and feathers" and more recently, his clothes.

Why is it that topics that include the male as subject are so controversial, how does the "Indian" male as subject continue the same uneasiness and who is made uncomfortable? Languages like Cree, Saulteaux and Ojibway do not distinguish lexically between male and female. On the other hand, sexual difference (identity) is

clearly accepted and articulated in Native oral traditions and in historical prehistoric visual art from across North America. These examples of early nude images suggest that their current use in contemporary Native art is a continuity from the traditional past. They also show a spirituality and a naturalness that is non-confrontational, in contrast to much Western art.

The Nude Human Figure in American Indian Art was an exhibition of contemporary Native art that reconsidered the use of the nude human figure. In the essay to accompany the exhibition, Rick Hill wrote,

The human figure in Indian art had changed dramatically over the years, both in form and content. Before contact with Europeans, naked male and female figures in Indian art seem to have been associated with some aspect of spiritual power. After contact, representations of the human body have mostly reflected prevailing Western/Christianized attitudes Despite the continuing practice of nakedness in ceremonial contexts and the retention of much oral tradition among Indians about sex and legendary figures with sexual exploits, little expression of this tradition has filtered into contemporary visual arts. (1991: 1)

He also considered how the nude could be recontextualized to become a source for "artistic inspiration," (Hill 1991: 1) and asked, "does the contemporary Indian artist use the nude human figure to make social

and political commentary?" and "are Indian representations of the nude influenced by Indian cultural perspectives?" (1991: 1)

"For solid historical and cultural reasons," Hill wrote, "the general art-viewing public, both Indian and non-Indian, rarely associates the nude with Indian art." (1991: 1) Few contemporary Indian artists do nudes, he contends and those who do generally,

Use the form in a typical western context giving us realistic pretty unchallenging images - quite different from early Indian art...many...can be considered studies, part of the visual journey of a modern art education. (Hill 1991: 2)

The Nude Human Figure in American Indian Art began a reconsideration of how the contemporary Indian artist is using the nude human figure allegorically and in an Indian cultural/spiritual/political" context. (Hill 1991: 2)

It is helpful at this point to consider early examples of the male nude in Native art in order to understand the context of what Hill is saying and to understand how the resurgence of the male nude as the content in contemporary Native art expresses a link with the past and may have a political strategy.

The "Sechelt Image", (Fig. 15) taken from Sechelt about 1921 is a seventy pound stone carving, possibly Kwakiutl or Salish. It is of a man/woman holding with great effort, an enormous phallus. The representation of the vulva immediately below suggests a relationship to transformation or certainly a duality that denies

gender specificity. Strength seems to have an androgynous source in sexuality more than gender.

A second image, a rawhide cut-out from the Northern Plains Sioux collected in 1882, is a silhouette of a man constructed partially frontal (the chest and arms) and partially in profile (the legs, head and phallus). Used as prayers on the Sundance pole, in this case for victory in war, the leather figure with its exaggerated phallus is associated with the power of the "warrior". These two works suggest three attributes valued in traditional society, a link to the spiritual, male prowess in war and fertility, all associated with the ennobling attributes of the human body.

In preparing for his essay, "The Persistence of Land Claims", included in the catalogue to Indians from A - Z, Gerald McMaster interviewed Robert Houle. Much of the conversation was about the need for the male to reclaim his (masculine) position within the community. McMaster quoted Houle, that, "The government understood how to control the tribes, through its men, by many forms of de-masculinization. Now most of our (Native) politicians are absolute eunuchs." (1990: 35) In describing the politicians as emasculated through the state of the phallus, Houle recognizes its function as a signifier of male power. McMaster, on another occasion, said that he painted male images because it was important to re-create the male Indian in First Nations art.³¹ As far as I know

³¹ During several conversations, McMaster expressed his preoccupation with the male symbol, once during the hanging of Ancients' Singing at the Ufundi Gallery in 1988, and on the second occasion at his home, when he was preparing for the Savage Graces

McMaster has only created one image of a male nude, the significance of which I will discuss later.

Several First Nations artists have taken up the re-signification of the male nude and are creating works that re-address the question of how to present the male identity and for whom. The representation of the male and female nude has a recognized position within mainstream art as I discussed earlier in the chapter on Shelley Niro. In contemporary Native art the representation inherent in images of the male nude, the presentation of the phallus and the self-portrait of the Indian have a particular force beyond this. In this chapter these images will be discussed in the context of five works: "Self-Portrait in My Christian Dior Bathing Suit" by Carl Beam (Fig. 2), "Carl I Can't Afford a Christian Dior Bathing Suit" by Ron Noganoosh (Fig. 17), "Warrior" by Gerald McMaster (Fig. 18), "Self-Portrait" by Jimmie Durham (Fig. 19), and "Untitled," by non-Native artist John Coplans (Fig. 20).

Self-Portrait in my Christian Dior Bathing Suit has already been discussed in the Chapter on Carl Beam. Its significance, as one of the first expressions of personal identity is obvious. In the context of this chapter on the male nude, it is important as an initial act in the deconstruction of the heroic and stereotypical image of the male Indian. In its partial nudity, it provides the

exhibition at U.B.C. in August 1992. The second comment was occasioned by the sole female form that he had painted on one of the works for the exhibition.

stimulus for Ron Noganosh's further deconstruction in his nude self-portrait, Carl I Can't afford A Christian Dior Bathing Suit.

Ron Noganosh is an Ojibway/Algonquin, originally from the Magnetawan Reserve. Noganosh's studies include the Graphics Design Program at George Brown College and the Fine Arts Program at the University of Ottawa. Primarily a sculptor, he combines found materials to create objects that are spiritually suggestive, culturally symbolic, elegant, and understated. Identity and autobiography, as obvious political strategies, are inter-related concerns in most of Noganosh's work. The autobiographical nature of his "Autoportrait" of 1983, and "Carl I Can't Afford a Christian Dior Bathing Suit" of 1989, are indicated clearly by their titles. For the purposes of this chapter on the male nude, the latter work is particularly interesting.

Noganosh relates how one night at 3 a.m., while learning to "paint" at the University of Ottawa, he stripped in his studio and painted his own image, thus questioning the issues raised by "nakedness". (Noganosh 1992) Several years later, he titled it "Carl, I Can't Afford a Christian Dior Bathing Suit",³² and exhibited it in a two-person exhibition with Viviane Gray. "Carl I Can't Afford a Christian Dior Bathing Suit", is a portrait of the artist in the traditional sense - artist holding his palette, facing front, staring

³² "Carl I Can't Afford A Christian Dior Bathing Suit", 1989, was first exhibited in Hard and Soft, in 1990 at the Sherbrooke Cultural Centre in Sherbrooke, Quebec and subsequently in Autobiography in First Nations Art at the Ufundi Gallery, January, 1992.

out from the work except that the artist is totally and unabashedly nude, and the skin tones are rendered in brown and red pigment.

The irony in "Carl I Can't Afford a Christian Dior Bathing Suit" derives not just from the reference to Carl Beam's earlier work, "Self-Portrait in My Christian Dior Bathing Suit" (1980), rather, the irony is similar to that produced by the complicitous nature of Niro's family photographs. Noganosh's statement that he can't afford to buy into the culture of Christian Dior is ironic because his image appears as an unlikely participant in that cultural context and is further exaggerated by the fact that he is nude. Niro and her sisters are more likely participants in the charade, for Native women wore the same hairstyles and clothes in the 50s as non-Native women did. The shock value comes from the fact that non-Native women did not think so, if they thought about it at all. Native women in the 50's wore buckskin and braids - Hollywood said so. The real irony in both the works is associated with the candor with which Noganosh and Niro reinscribe themselves and their lives in contemporary Canadian life with their own inimitable senses of humour.

The "Christian" in the title Christian Dior, while referring to the culture of the fashion design industry also suggests the Christian religion. The halo which Noganosh painted around his head was actually created by the glow of the light fixtures in the studio, reflected in the mirror as a halo of light. The frontal, brown, nude, male, Christ-like image is sandwiched between two pieces of plexiglass, a structure associated with displaying artifacts. The

contradictions of the painting - the nude body, the religious piety, the aggressive pose and the plexiglass construction - combine to provoke a bewildering array of responses from the viewer who is at the same time implicated in the joke and repelled by it.

Noganosh's "Carl, I Can't Afford a Christian Dior Bathing Suit", is neither allegorical nor spiritual, it is totally political. It is a male body that exists in present time, an ordinary body that is quite comfortable with itself and its sexuality. Like "Mohawks and Beehives I", discussed in Chapter Four, it is the unselfconsciousness of the representation of self that demands a reconsideration of self, issues of gender and identity from both audiences.

Gerald McMaster, a Cree from North Battleford, Saskatchewan, is a curator, writer, sculptor and painter. His best known works combine a direct painterly style, ironic sense of humor and an understanding of the current issues of cultural representation. A graduate of the Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe and the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, he has worked as the Co-ordinator of the Indian Art Program for the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College in Regina and as Curator for Contemporary Indian Art at the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

"Warrior", a male nude acrylic painting by Gerald McMaster seems at first glance to be a spiritual and allegorical image of the aboriginal hunter "in an Indian/spiritual/political context." (Rick Hill 1991: 1) First presented in the exhibition Ancients' Singing at the Ufundi Gallery in Ottawa in 1988, the primarily yellow nude

figure, cut off above the knees, its arms held behind the body around a horizontal bar that rests between the back and the arms, contrasts with the white (unpainted) background. The head is in profile and the body, totally frontal, is adorned with a simple cord supporting a striped whistle. "Warrior" was the only nude work in an exhibition that included a number of small paintings of heads in profile, a large painting of two Sundancers, three large portraits cut off above the waist, and several three dimensional "postmodern constructions" in plywood.

The cultural significance of the figure is deliberately ambiguous. In her interpretation of the figure, Jacqueline Fry wrote that the "warrior" is at the same time a highly coloured trapeze artist, symbolic of the male gender, and a portrait of a particular person. (Fry 1988: 37) The human image in "Warrior", she thought, seemed to be in a state of being or in the throes of a specific experience.³³ "Warrior" was inspired by a work that McMaster created for the Twinning art auction in 1988, a project through which Native artists in Canada were invited to participate in an exchange program in Africa. "Warrior" is not a painting of a trapeze artist nor is it a romanticized example of western conceit, but a reclamation of the traditional past in the guise of a Masai warrior. (The Masai are often photographed with a bar behind their arms and standing on one leg). Within the context of the exhibition Ancients'

³³ My translation from the original French. (Fry 1988: 37)

Singing, the figure may also be a participant in the Sundance ceremony.

"Warrior" may also be compared to the rawhide cut out (Fig. 16) mentioned earlier. There are similarities in the profile of the head, the frontality of the chest, the interjections at the neck and the nudity. McMaster is also Northern Plains and he has referred to the Sundance in his work. In the same exhibition in which "Warriors" was first shown, there was also a work called "Sundancers". Seeing the continuity with earlier traditional images places "Warriors" in an important Native context. The artist has not painted it as a political strategy; rather it suggests a relationship to an earlier time before the intrusions of the dominant culture which forbade the Sundance and inhibited the representations of male cultural authority.

McMaster has expressed a concern for the role of the male image in Native art and for the Native male identity. He once said he could not paint women because he was more concerned with the representation of the male identity for native men. In his catalogue essay for Robert Houle Indians From A - Z, he wrote:

Control over one's identity includes self expression and individuals like Houle believe in the recovery of aboriginal male symbols . . . colonization proceeds by erasing male symbols. This includes people like tribal chiefs, hunters, artists and medicine men. (McMaster 1990: 35)

"Warrior" is deliberately allusive to self-portraiture and to autobiography. McMaster leaves the question of whether it is a self-portrait, a Masai warrior or an Indian warrior ambiguous.³⁴ What it is, is up to the viewer to decide. The strength of "Warrior" is its referencing, created to raise questions that are deliberately left unanswered.

When we compare the Jimmie Durham nude "Self-Portrait", (Fig.19) to "Carl I Can't Afford A Christian Dior Bathing Suit and "Warrior", the significance of the male nude self-portrait in contemporary Native art becomes more obvious. "Self-Portrait" was part of Jimmie Durham, The Bishop's Moose and the Pinkerton Men exhibited at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in conjunction with Indians From A - Z. Durham, a Cherokee artist and writer, created a larger than life male nude cut-out, which he called "Self-Portrait" and, to make sure that there was no mistake, wrote across the shoulder and arm, "Hello, I'm Jimmie Durham. I want to explain a few basic things about myself." The skin is brown and the braided hair frames a realistically painted face with a red star painted on its forehead. Durham has added a dildo as the phallus and the pubic hair was brightly painted. His nude serves as surface for identity text and political humour; he has written down one thigh, "Indian penises are ...large and colourful."

³⁴ McMaster has also said that he paints himself partly because there is no one else to pose for him.

2 OF 2

PM-1 3 1/2" x 4" PHOTOGRAPHIC MICROCOPY TARGET
NBS 1010a ANSI/ISO #2 EQUIVALENT

Lisa Gabrielle Mark created the context for considering the use of the male nude self-portrait in mainstream art. In "Parallel Meditations on the Male Nude", she suggested that the art-viewing public is uncomfortable with the image of the male nude in any culture (1992: 55), and began her discussion with a brief overview of the visual history of the male nude. Prehistoric and Greco-Roman art included an erect phallus as a symbol of male fertility, identity and power, but more recent proscriptions can probably be traced back to the Edict of the Council of Trent in 1563 which forbade "all lascivious portrayals of unashamed beauty in sacred figures." (Mark 1992: 55) In her conclusion, Mark wrote, "the male nude is ripe for resignification. Bodies speaking their own minds. Bodies speaking the subjective and objective." (1992: 57)

The resignification of the male nude as a subject of representation is problematic because the choice of how to present the phallus upsets the status quo.

The nudity of men comes invested with a great deal more than any one body or group of bodies can offer, since it is the masculine - however we define it - that is the gender of social ideals and privilege. (Davis 1991: 7)

The visual presentation of the phallus, as the embodiment of the masculine is altered by its objectivity. Melody Davis, writing about the male nude in photography suggests that "the metonymic fantasy in an all powerful penis . . . dictates that the penis must be seen as a muscle, representing force and action." (1991: 6) The phallus as a

metaphor of male repositioning is important because, she suggests, the male identity cannot be separated from his libido.

The political strategy in the use of the male nude in the three works is based on the visual representation of identity and its relationship to the cultural base. Gerald McMaster's "Warrior" is the least strategic because it doesn't seem to address the issue of identity politics; it appears to be a spiritually beautiful (yellow) male nude that refrains from challenging the convention of the phallic representation as a power symbol. Yet the title "Warrior" is a humorous one because it (the state of the phallus) defies the concept of the "warrior" as a powerful male symbol. When the understanding of the word "warrior" is read as a western conceit, the nature of the work as a personal narrative within Cree culture is revealed. Noganosh's "Carl I Can't Afford a Christian Dior Bathing Suit", challenges the conventions of painting the nude figure: the phallus is unashamedly large, the painting style unacademic, the framing unconventional, the identity known. Noganosh humourously refers to the work as "Wishful Thinking", a title that places the significance of the work as a personalized expression of "everyman". Jimmie Durham's "Self-Portrait" is the most blatant; it is identity politics at its most obvious. He labels it a self-portrait, he enhances the phallus, and he inscribes the body with text in case the title is missed.

The last work is introduced to further clarify the issues already raised, a group of untitled photographs by the non-Native

artist John Coplans. (Fig.20) Coplans's photographs of his nude body always cut off at the neck and usually at the knees are identified as self-portraits. They address the gendered issues of the representation of the nude body in which he tries to create a nude image, the gender of which might be open to question. His nude self-portrait is particularly important because although he has said that it is a metaphor for his life story, for himself, it works more as an example of the honesty of the naked body than as a politicized object. That in itself is of course a political statement. The naked body is not art - at least Kenneth Clark did not think so. Coplans, however, does not address issues of ethnic or Native identity. He seeks to alter the significance of representation within mainstream discourse.

How these works are politically strategic depends on the knowledge and understanding of the viewer. From within their own context, the works exist as expressions of male identity. The artists contextualize themselves through their bodies but for the cultural outsider, the works may appear to be deliberately challenging. In White society, which has great difficulty with nudity of any kind, almost any expression of male nudity is considered aggressive. Nor is the strategy of visible difference, possible in the photographic works of Carl Beam and Shelley Niro apparent in the two McMaster and Noganosh works. These artists invite the viewer to respond to the work on one level as spiritually beautiful or visually amateurish, while on another level, they reclaim male

sexuality. The question of authorship is the strategic one; the confirmed evidence of self responds to the two closing lines in Lisa Gabrielle Mark's article;

"Question: When is the penis not a phallic symbol?

Answer: When it's attached to a real live human being." (1992: 55)

Taken further:

Question: When does the Native male reclaim his masculine identity?

Question: When can the Native artist use his symbols from the traditional past without their being understood in the White context only?

Question: Will visible difference alter the mainstream canon implicit in representation?

Question: Will cultural difference be recognized as parallel contextualizations with areas of overlap, or will there always be an attempt to co-opt and assimilate?

Chapter Six

Abstraction and the Significance of Silence: Robert Houle

Myself as a Self-Portrait is how I construct a work.

(Robert Houle 1993b)

Thus far I have argued that the self-portrait in the photo-based works of Carl Beam and Shelley Niro and the gendered use of the body as autobiography in the works previously described by Gerald McMaster and Ron Noganosh are self-evident political strategies. In this chapter I will argue that the abstract work of Saulteaux artist Robert Houle, constructs both a political strategy and the story of his life. Autobiography in Houle's work is also "a culturally specific narrative genre" (Cruikshank 1990: x) that combines personal symbols, image and text.³⁵

Houle's autobiography structures his narrative, a narrative that is socially and culturally specific. While Houle has said that his earliest influences were Mondrian and Newman (Henry 1987) and that he is a modernist, at least with modernist roots, he has also said that he can never be a Euro-Canadian. (Houle 1993) His context is Saulteaux, and his modernist idiom is actually a creation from

³⁵ Julie Cruikshank's work Life Lived Like a Story unlocked the mystery in Houle's work. I know that his work tells the story of his life which in turn is signified by his cultural history, but I didn't know how to say it. Intuitively I understood that his symbols were more than surface notes and that the cultural basis was at least as important as its mainstream significance.

Saulteaux storytelling and language skills. I will argue that Houle is not a modernist in the Eurocentric art historical significance of the word. His work is not primarily an attempt to simplify experience. Rather, he uses abstract symbols to create the context for a story.

Houle's work would appear to have little reference to autobiography - to the telling of his life story. He neither titles his works in a self-reflexive manner nor produces representational self-images. Yet this paper will show that Houle does tell his life story in images, with works that are politically motivated and personally symbolic. The relationship of stories to identity, acknowledged in the words of N. Scott Momaday, provided the clue to understanding how Houle's autobiography is visible in his work:

You cannot understand how the Indian thinks of himself in relation to the world around him unless you understand his conception of what is appropriate, particularly what is morally appropriate within the context of that relationship. (1974: 82)

When asked about the relationship of his personal symbology ³⁶ to his collective identity, Houle said,

I am unequivocally rooted in my history and I have always been absolutely open to what is going on. I think the whole thing is

³⁶ Houle often uses the word "symbology" in reference to his own symbols and usually qualified by the word personal. It was this construction of words that makes me reconsider whether Houle's abstract work was also autobiography.

about the way we think, about the way we relate to the world.
(Henry 1993a)

In the same conversation, Houle also stated that, "myself as a self portrait is how I construct a work." The self as a narrative history includes a number of culturally and socially bound techniques of language and communication that, when understood, provide a window into the collective identity that, I will argue, underlies Houle's imagery. His work is not bounded by the western conventions that he appears to co-opt; he uses his own conventions to speak about his "collective self." (Krupat 1989: 134).

The following five attributes of storytelling among the Western Apache, identified by Keith Basso, are relevant to the content of Houle's work: 1) the use of place-names, 2) the symbol as metaphor, 3) his abstract work, 4) the repetitious symbols and 5) his role as political activist.³⁷

Place-names frequently occur as titles in Robert Houle's work. "The Place Where God Lives", "Hochelaga" and "Kanata" are three such named works; each created with a different context.³⁸ "The Place

³⁷ The importance of stories and names in Apache storytelling as a culturally constructed and understood symbology with a social function within the group, may not be totally applicable to the Saulteaux of Manitoba, but the use of several techniques of storytelling seems to correspond to Houle's artistic techniques and are therefore useful here.

³⁸ "Place Where God Lives" was painted while Houle was artist-in-residence at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 1989. It consists of four canvases, each 244 x 182.8. Manitowapah: "Place Where God Lives" was included in "Indians from A - Z", and is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada: Curtis Collins curated the installation "Hochelaga" to coincide with the 350th Birthday celebrations of the City of Montreal in the Spring of 1992 at Galerie Article: the idea for "Kanata" began as a maquette for a commission for the Province of Ontario in 1990. Based on the painting "The Death of

Where God Lives" suggests a spiritual place and a link to the ancestors. It is:

A re-appropriation. The land was given away; it was done legally. Manitoba is named after a sacred place. I reappropriated it to tell a story about that place. "Place Where God Lives" is a historical story about treaties as well as a story of its own history, the place where lovers go to listen to the sound. This is okay. "Hochelaga" and "Kanata" are not okay! "Hochelaga" was destroyed. The people left. They disappeared. (Houle 1993a)

"Hochelaga" and "Kanata" are politically strategic. According to Houle, "Hochelaga", the present city of Montreal, was not legally sold or traded and no treaty exists. "Kanata" if one accepts West's "The Death of Wolfe" as the metaphor, was created by two warring alien groups, the culmination of which was watched by one lone Indian whom Houle has re-created as the focal point. The Indian is the visual personification of Houle. (Bell 1993)

Houle has described the visual imagery that he uses as his personal symbology. (Houle 1991c) Dates, numbers, tribes, squiggles of paint, quills, photocopied feathers, the reference to four are the signifiers in his work. In the context of his identification with the

Wolfe" by Benjamin West, Houle completed the four panels, one red, one ultramarine blue on either side of the double panel of the conte drawing in January 1992. It was first exhibited in Rethinking History at the Mercer Union in Toronto where Michael Bell saw it. He subsequently curated a much more complex statement called Kanata Robert Houle's Histories, exhibited at Carleton University Gallery in 1993.

traditional storyteller, each symbol is a metaphor for his personal and collective identity.

In January 1992, when I first asked Houle if he thought his work was autobiographical, he said he had only used his self-portrait once in a paper *parfleche* as a gift to his mother. At the time, I was preparing an exhibition on autobiography for the Ufundi Gallery and wanted to include his work. In his folders we found a work that came closest to addressing the issues of autobiography, as I understood it at the time; a work, "Untitled", 1985 (Fig. 21) in which he had included a photograph of an Indian in traditional dress with black ink stencilled letters, letraset letters and graphite code bar lines.

The Indian in the photograph in "Untitled" is a *Saulteaux*, possibly an ancestor, the numbers are Houle's treaty, band and S.I.N number. The photograph is one that he took from the Museum of Civilization when he left; a personal reminder of his feelings about his time spent as curator there. "Untitled", 1985, documents Houle's personal and collective family and tribal history in the sense that each of the numbers is historically relevant to his life. "Untitled", 1985, tells the story of subjugation by treaty, by photography and by commodification. It is an autobiography in that it re-creates his identity through the acquisition of personal encoding and materials that he acquired over a period of time. Both the symbols and the materials are metaphors for the details of his life, but in

combination they work as a political strategy that shows tribal continuity through the events of his life.

The third characteristic of storytelling, of telling a story through metaphor and silence to allow audience participation, is pertinent to Houle's preference for abstract painting. Abstraction, arguably the least encumbered and most powerfully allusive means of visual communication comes closest to the significance of silence. "Place Where God Lives" is considered an abstract work, yet in each of the four works a sense of the land, the water and the Narrows is created by the suggestion of a horizon line. The quills, the crosses, the stripes and the squiggles of paint that Houle added are signifiers of a personal relationship to the place, the story, and its history.

Repetition is the key to the exhibition Multiplicity that Houle is co-curating with Karen Duffek for the Vancouver Art Gallery in November 1993. It is also the key to all of his computer-based works and recurring images. Houle almost always works in a series; "Parfleches for the Last Supper", (1983), "Indians from A - Z" (1985), "Faxed Parfleche" (1989), "Lost Tribes" (1991), "Mohawk Summer" (1991), and "Warpaint Portraits" (1992) are based on the repetition of objects and ideas within a given context. Repetition provides a pattern and rhythm in Houle's work not unlike prayer, beadwork and ritual. Repetition allows memories to come to the surface, a concept which is translated in Saulteaux as "manitou-be-na-ci-ke" and it replaces the need for originality; a concept that is

unimportant in traditional narrative. Repetition orchestrates time sequencing in a different way; in a sense it forces time to stand still.

Storytelling has a social message. Through metaphor the storyteller comments on social improprieties and initiates change in unacceptable behavior. Houle's symbology are the metaphors for his politically constructed narrative. "Indians From A -Z" is about stereotypes, "Parfleches for the Last Supper" questions the role of the church, "Lost Tribes" presents tribal genocide and "Mohawk Summer Series" points out the continuing debate over land claims. All of them initiate a dialogue with the hopes of an appropriate resolution.

There is a reason for this lengthy comparison of storytelling to Houle's work. As a visual artist, Houle has interwoven his relationship to the land, his sense of historical continuity and the relationship to the ancestors into his ritualistic paintings and constructions. While stories (and painted stories) "function basically as makers of identity" (Silko 1981: 69) autobiography in contemporary Native art is the painted story of a life. Its context is the autobiography of its creator, the artist. Houle tells a story with the same metaphors and techniques as in traditional storytelling. The cumulative effect of seeing a body of his work is to understand the richness of its social and cultural context.

The signification of Houle's personal symbols is relevant only within his own culture except when he admits the cultural outsider

either through his artist's statement or accompanying text. He therefore allows access to those aspects of his individuality or his community that he chooses to share. The relationship of his work to modern and postmodern structures is in some ways misleading. His symbols exist to the non-Native audience as signature markers on a colour field ground or as self-reflexive fragments in a post-colonial reconstruction. Yet Houle knows that the work portrays a specific meaning within the modern and postmodern dialogue. It suggests a deliberate duality of context that is its political strategy. Houle, however, says that he can never be a Euro-Canadian and that his work is a continuation. Its major responsibility, then, is to his Saulteaux culture and the irony in the narrative is that the cultural outsider must read from its surface while presuming that its idiom is within the mainstream context.

In 1992, in the draft for his essay in Land Spirit Power, Houle wrote,

It is important to use local and temporal narratives, personal identities, in any critical investigation of current thinking, especially if one wants to re-examine the re-integration of man, culture and environment in an intuitive zone that has been lost to western civilization. (1992b: 3)

Houle has never created a work that exists as entirely narcissistic or self-reflexive for its own sake. Even his collaged self-portraits were significantly altered to make himself unrecognizable as the subject. Using the concept of dialogical

anthropology, which denies the existence of any grounded meaning in dialogue and, by inference, in image, the self-reflexivity in Houle's work represents "a collective self and a collective society." (Krupat 1989: 134)

By understanding how the "collective self" is made visible in Houle's personal symbology, it becomes possible to identify the autobiography in Houle's work and its related political strategy. One example, "Warrior Lances for Temagami", 1989, (Fig.22), is an example of the points that have already been discussed. "Warrior Lances for Temagami" is a combination of Plexiglass, paper, and leather, that metaphorically re-create the idea of a lake, of trees and of warriors fighting to stop the clearing of an ancient forest. Houle's description of the process of creating the work as an autobiography covering the years 1978 to 1985 is important. The plastic poles were given to him by a model named Ula who had been the previous tenant in his house in Ottawa. In 1978 and 1979, he used them as mobiles. In 1979 he put the graphite at the top and in 1981, after he had moved to Toronto, he sanded sections to which he added paint in 1985. In 1989 he tied on the feathers with a leather thong after he returned from his residency in Winnipeg in 1989. All the work was done on his lap in a ritualistic manner. (Houle 1992a)

The context for "Warrior Lances for Temagami" was Houle himself. He used the story of the local band's attempt to block the logging in the virgin forests near Temagami as the content in a work that was really about the years during and after he left the

curatorial position at the Museum of Civilization. The circular Plexiglass base was ordered to represent Lake Temagami and to hold the warrior lances that he had so carefully created.

Autobiography in Robert Houle's art is thus a culturally specific visual narrative. There is however, a quite distinct body of representational work that is more explicitly autobiography. Between 1990-92, Houle created three series of representational work based on collage using images borrowed from magazines and newspapers, text and a photographic self-portrait.

For many contemporary Native artists, the events at Oka signalled a need for a personal response. During the summer of 1990, when the standoff between the Canadian Army and the Mohawks began at Kahnawake, Houle remained uninvolved until the day that the Longhouse was attacked. Not only is the Longhouse a sacred place, but it was in that Longhouse that he had taught Mohawk children how to paint in 1970. The attack became for him a personal one and he created four brightly-coloured silk banners to block his windows in his Queen Street studio until the standoff was over. Then he began to work on the "Mohawk Summer Series" ³⁹ which he described recently in a telephone conversation as "part of my personal history. They were about my anger and pain." (Houle 1993a)

³⁹ Mohawk Summer Series, 1991, first exhibited in the Ufundi Gallery, January 1991, actually included three bodies of work: the Banners, the four works based on the Macleans magazine covers and the group of seven works based on the Oka cheese labels and newspaper images of the standoff.

The "Warpaint Portraits", or "The Lindsay show",⁴⁰ as Houle called them, continued the rhetoric of the Mohawk Summer Series in that they were a personal response to the events at Kahnasatake in the summer of 1990. (Houle 1993a) The "Warpaint Portraits" however, were problematic from the beginning for several reasons: Houle was concerned with creating a work that he felt would "offend the viewer" (Houle 1993a) and he found it difficult to photograph himself. He spent several days with his Polaroid camera in the process of creating the self- portraits for the work and he worried that they would not be well received by the Gallery in which they were to be exhibited.

Although Houle says that they corresponded to the Mohawk Summer Series, I think they were partly made in response to our discussions about the relevance of this thesis topic in contemporary Native art. Once he started work on them, he had to resolve the issues (of representation) for himself. The narcissistic representation of self is unacceptable within most Native communities. The first person is rarely used and praise of any kind is suspect. To put oneself forward, so to speak, is to invade another's space.⁴¹ Houle's concern that his self-portrait might

⁴⁰ Warpaint Portraits consisted of twelve collaged works, each 22 1/4 x 30" framed. They were exhibited at the Russell Gallery in Lindsay, Ontario, June 1992.

⁴¹ On at least two occasions I have talked to Mohawk artists Greg Staats and Shelley Niro about the issue of pride and self-promotion. In their culture, it is unacceptable to take or give individual recognition.

offend any viewer suggests the depth of his commitment to the expression and maintenance of the values of his own community.

The "Warpaint Portraits" are collages, each of which incorporates two photographic images in different ways: one depicts the artist photographed before an Indian blanket and juxtaposed with a photograph that he took in 1971 of his students in the Longhouse at Kahnawake. The most direct of these works, "Untitled, (Warpaint Portraits)" (Fig.23), is Houle's autobiography of the years from 1971-1992. Houle's self-portrait appears as eight different fragments, and even when the face is visible, it is masked behind striped make-up. The connection of the adult figure to the group of children is made obvious by the face paints on both, the painterly linkages, the authenticity of the date "92", the blue band across the bottom, and the collage as a reconstruction of various fragments. The work appears as a rhythm of repeated images similar to the frames of a film strip or a series of overlapping mug shots from a Woolworth's portrait machine. While the premise for "Warpaint Portraits" may have originated with the idea of a self-portrait, what Houle created is a homage to the community; a statement of relationships and continuity.

Masking is used for a different purpose in the self-portraits of Shelley Niro and Robert Houle. Niro's self-portrait dressed as a 60s icon in the series, This Land is Mime Land denies the repetitive use of the image of the Indian woman as a cultural stereotype; in Houle's Warpaint Portraits, the masking of his self-portrait invalidates the

uniqueness of the individual. Niro's work repositions the image of the Indian woman to one of confidence and strength within either culture. Houle's work also visually creates a position of social continuity and cultural strength.

I have deliberately chosen not to present Robert Houle's work in a chronological way because a representation of a linear personal history would not have respected what I believe Houle has tried to do with his work. Certain threads have been interwoven throughout his whole career as an artist; the modernist influences of Mondrian and Newman, the continuity of the formal structure of his work, the inter-relationship of cultural signifiers from both his Saulteaux heritage and mainstream society. There are also symbols that have been briefly set aside only to later reappear such as the diamond shape, the cross "+", the porcupine quills and his signature squiggle straight from the tube.

Robert Houle's autobiography constructs a visual discourse that addresses the issue of Native invisibility in the society in which he lives, while at the same time respecting his own cultural traditions. It is less obviously a political strategy of difference than the photographic-based works of Beam and Niro, but its meaning is just as profound. Houle's symbols are like the place-names in a story. They have become signifiers that constantly remind the viewer that even while they are being seduced by the beauty of the visual image, the painterliness and the colour in a work, the primary strategy is to replace the authority of the

mainstream in terms of land, government, the environment and art with a reconsidered position based on "The Spiritual Legacy of the Ancient Ones." 42

42 See Robert Houle's essay in Land Spirit Power, in particular the first paragraph which states, "The title of this essay uses the cultural constraints and parameters created in Momaday's artifice, and operates within limits and signifiers of current Western art discourse." (Houle 1992: 44)

Conclusion

Part of her talent lies in her capacity to understand the kind of context a cultural outsider needs to be taught before that person can actually begin to hear what she is saying. (Julie Cruikshank, of Angela Sidney, 1990: 21)

I remember thinking at one point during the writing of this thesis that a comparison of ikat weaving to this thesis topic was appropriate. Ikat is a very old weaving technique, that, like most traditional weaving, is created with a spiritual guidance of some kind for purposes connected to the rituals of the community. The ikat weaving process includes visualizing an image in the mind while tying and dyeing the individual threads so that, when they are woven together in a straightforward manner, they construct the image. Double ikat weaving is a process in which the threads in both directions are individually tied and dyed so that when woven together the image created appears to bleed in both the horizontal and vertical directions.

The thought processes of ikat are not linear, nor is the subject matter portrayed in the weaving directly representational. The ability to conceptualize an idea in several dimensions at the same time is the mystery of the process. The abstract and representational forms produced can only be understood within their cultural context. In a similar way autobiography is woven through

contemporary Native art. This digression helps to explain why the use of autobiography in contemporary Native art is more significant than its use as a simple political strategy of visible difference.

The polemic of autobiography in First Nations art is a central strategy of reclaiming a cultural identity and ensuring cultural survival. In many works autobiography is both the tool and the structure. As a visual art form it includes self-portraits, self-representations and visual symbols; it allows the creation of a subjective voice that speaks with authority and confidence both within its own cultural context and to a non-Native audience.

Visual difference may not always have been consciously used as a strategy by the artists themselves, but the self-portrait as "other" alters the significance of conventional mainstream gendered images. "Visual difference" challenges the expected representation of "Indian". The strategy also attempts to disarm cardboard and plastic non-Native stereotypes of the Indian and replace them with a real people. The artists discussed here commonly contextualize the image of the person - the self-portrait and the self-representation - within a narrative that includes his or her relationship to the family or group. Photographs and visual symbols provide the context for the narrative of a person's life.

The difference in the political significance of the visual image in Native and non-Native autobiography is related to the issues of cultural authority. For Native artists today, the cultural authority is tightly tied to current struggles to recover a long suppressed

heritage. For non-Native (White/mainstream) artists, the cultural authority is far less specific and often confused. (This may not be as true, however, for other marginalized Canadians whose former cultural allegiance remains an important part of their present identity.) Recently, non-Native autobiography has been part of the challenge to a (mainstream) cultural authority that is now under review. This thesis has argued that Native autobiography as a personal narrative asserts a continuation (sometimes in spite of the words of the artist) of the values of the collective society which it represents.

The analysis of autobiography, the self-portrait and self-representation in a recent exhibition and catalogue by Gaetan Gosselin is helpful in understanding their different relationships in non-Native and Native art.⁴³ In non-Native art, the self-portrait relies on its subjectivity to acknowledge its individual presence within mainstream conventions. It rarely suggests its own social and cultural conventions. In Native art, the self-portrait is also subjective and it speaks of its own community to the cultural outsider who sees both the differences and the similarities. Within its own social and cultural community however, the self-portrait contextualizes the community; the work does not function as a narcissistic self-representation.

⁴³ See Gaetan Gosselin's essay in Pièces d'identités in which he distinguishes between the portrait, the self-portrait, self-representation and autobiography,

Self-representation in non-Native art, according to Gosselin needs a body and relies on a narrative. While the body may be a metaphor for a personal history, an image as a metaphor is more problematic. In Native art, self-representation includes symbols used as metaphor for the self and the community. They - the symbols - also produce a narrative. It is the naming aspect of words mentioned in the chapter on Robert Houle that is significant in this context. In Native art, autobiography seems more likely to include both the self-portrait and more generalized forms of self-representation because the self appears to be connected, visibly and culturally to a specific community.

Two works mentioned earlier will clarify the distinctions just discussed. Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Still", is an example of Gosselin's distinctions between self-portrait, self-representation and autobiography. "Untitled Film Still", is a self-portrait, and it includes the narrative aspects of self-representation but it is clearly not an autobiography. It is a fictional character deliberately created using the self-portrait to suggest the 1950s secretary as victim. The fact that it is a self-portrait underlines the subversiveness of the image, but although it challenges the objectification of the female image, its inherent seductiveness, and in this case apparent vulnerability, are insignificant in changing the nature of a culture whose authority is still dominated by men.

John Coplans's image of his nude body not only suggests androgyny, it denies authorship and community. There are no

signifying details except for the body itself which is a metaphor for humankind. It is socially and culturally uncommitted. It is also strategic politically as it rejuvenates the polemic of the male body in a new debate about representation. Unlike Sherman's representation of herself as a secretary, Coplans's use of his own body is a more compelling re-positioning.

In comparison, three works already mentioned highlight the cultural specificity of the use of autobiography. The culmination of Carl Beam's series "Burying the Ruler" described in Chapter Three, is the large canvas exhibited in Land Spirit Power in which Beam has positioned himself as central to the work, thus creating the allusion that it is a militant self-portrait. Rather the photographic self-portrait contextualizes the cultural narrative. The work is neither his self-portrait nor is it his autobiography. It is a combination of symbols that describe the collective self.

Similarly, Niro's self and family portraits contextualize the story from a feminine perspective. She knows that her battle is from within and from without her own culture. She also knows that she has the power to change attitudes and is using that power in her ironic personalized reflections of a dual cultural identity. Unlike Sherman's attempt to subvert the conventions of representation inherent to mainstream discourse, Niro is free to challenge its tenets through exploring the visible difference and identity of herself and her family.

The relationship of symbols, self-representation and autobiography is clear in the abstract work of Robert Houle. Over the last six years of our acquaintance, Houle has told me the story of the creation of each of his major works, how he incorporates materials that already have their own histories and how he agonizes over the placement of symbols and the use of colour at every stroke. What he does not find difficult is the context of a work. It may begin with a place-name or a title that has a personal or a political significance. In other words, the story that he is re-creating is already in his mind before he begins the work; as is his relationship to that narrative and his inclusion in it. "Being Modernists," Houle wrote in 1982, "they [contemporary Native artists] carry the privilege of appropriating bits of their traditional and contemporary culture to form an amalgam strictly reflective of their own identity." (Houle 1982: 3)

Earlier I suggested that Carl Beam had followed Norval Morrisseau's lead in labelling his work an autobiography. What Beam understood was the ruse that Morrisseau was using. His transformations and self-portraits tied himself as the storyteller to the context of the work. While it appeared to the non-Native audience that he was including himself in his work as a political strategy, it was also a way of documenting himself in relation to private images from Native sources. Houle is also Morrisseau's protégé in the act of creating a personal narrative (using personal symbology) which is the essence of autobiography.

It may seem odd to bring forward an antagonistic critic as an expert witness in the last chapter of this thesis, but a comment of John Bentley Mays' in his review of Land Spirit Power brings the argument I have presented into sharp focus:⁴⁴

But whatever the Museum has or has not intended here, the best work on display is a reminder, if one were needed, of the great powers of visual expression Europeans brought to these shores - a skepticism and irony foreign to the decorative traditions (if not the narrative ones) possessed by Native North Americans in the 15th century, a capacious memory and distrust of received ideas, and an openness to cultural contradiction.

Mays' criticism is misconceived. Although the "skepticism, irony, self-reflexiveness and questioning" of contemporary Native art bear a deceptive similarity to current postmodern trends, they are used to assert continuity with the past. They are used to subvert assertions like Mays' that all that is contemporary and "modern" in Native art comes from the West. Autobiography is the means by which many contemporary artists reassert these continuities and sure cultural identity.

I have argued that autobiography contextualizes the contemporary Native artist. Its content for the cultural outsider - personal images and symbols - is the visible strategy. In contemporary Native art therefore, autobiography, depending on its

⁴⁴ Globe and Mail, October 10, 1992.

audience, may be both its context and its content. Identity is the starting point of any autobiography, but what the identity is, how it is portrayed, and the relationship of the work to its audience is its polemic. That autobiography is a political strategy in contemporary First Nations art depends on the viewer's relationship to the work; from one point of view, it may instead be a cultural continuity.

BURYING
MURDERER

Notes on the Ruler,
 after many years of examining
 various dent floors, it occurred to
 me that there were a many sort of
 some of peculiar little problems,
 but it would never do to look at
 would a different way. The
 would be different.

Illustration Captions

Fig. 1 Carl Beam, "Burying the Ruler", 1992, photo emulsion, acrylic, pencil on canvas, 274.3 x 213.3 cm. Collection of the Artist. Image reproduced from catalogue Land Spirit Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada.

Fig. 2 Carl Beam, "Self-Portrait in My Christian Dior Bathing Suit", 1980, water colour on paper, 106 x 68.5 cm. Private collection. Image reproduced from catalogue Altered Egos: The Multimedia Work of Carl Beam.

Fig. 3 Robert Davidson, "Birth Announcement for Sarah", 1973, serigraph on paper, 36.2 x 14.3 cm. Collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Image reproduced from catalogue Horses Fly Too.

Fig. 4 Gerald McMaster, "19thC Innocence 20thC Mores 21stC Verisimilitudes", 1983, 97 x 127 cm. Private collection. Image reproduced from catalogue Horse Fly Too.

Fig. 5 Carl Beam, "Burying the Ruler", (center panel), 1991, photo emulsion on hand made paper, acrylic, three panels, 122 x 61 cm. Collection of the artist. Image reproduced from Art Journal Fall 1992 (Vol.51 No.3.)

Fig. 6 Carl Beam, "The Artist With Some of His Concerns", 1983, watercolour on paper, 101.6 x 150.7 cm. Collection of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Toronto. Image reproduced from Altered Egos: The Multimedia Work of Carl Beam.

Fig. 7 Carl Beam, "Domestic Activities", 1992, photo emulsion transfer, ink, 74 x 56 cm. Collection of Victoria Henry.

Fig. 8 Carl Beam, "Burying the Ruler #1", 1991, photo emulsion and acrylic on canvas, 214 x 160 cm. Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank. Image from a Fax.

Fig. 9 Carl Beam, "A Burying the Ruler Z", 1991, photo emulsion, acrylic, ink, St. Armand hand-made paper, 68.5 x 104 cm. Collection of Indian and Northern Affairs.

Fig. 10 Carl Beam, "Notes on Burying the Ruler", 1991, photo emulsion transfer, ink, St. Armand hand-made paper, 36 x 27.5 cm. Private collection.

Fig. 11 Shelley Niro, "Mohawks in Beehives I", 1991, sepia photograph, hand-tinted, 20.3 x 25.3 cm. Collection of Victoria Henry

Fig. 12 Shelley Niro, "Portrait of the Artist Sitting With a Killer Surrounded by French Curves", 1991, sepia photograph, hand-tinted, 23 x 33 cm. Collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

Fig. 13 Shelley Niro, "Mohawk Worker", 1992, hand-tinted photograph, sepia photograph, b/w photograph, 62 x 99 cm. Collection of the artist.

Fig. 14 Cindy Sherman, "Untitled Film Still", 1978, black-and-white photograph, 21.3 x 26 cm. Collection of Arthur and Carol Goldberg. Image reproduced from The Politics of Postmodernism

Fig. 15 "The Sechelt Image", possibly Kwakiutl or Salish, found at Sechelt in 1921, 20", stone, 70 lbs. Image reproduced in Images Stone B.C.

Fig. 16 "Man", rawhide cut-out, Northern Plains, Sioux, 33 cm., Collected in 1882. Published in Sacred Circles.

Fig. 17 Ron Noganosh, "Carl I Couldn't Afford a Christian Dior Bathing Suit", 1989, cardboard, acrylic, Plexiglass, 132.8 x 85 cm. Collection of the artist.

Fig. 18 Gerald McMaster, "Warrior", 1988, acrylic on mat board, 117 x 96.5 cm. Collection of Victoria Henry.

Fig. 19 Jimmie Durham, "Self-portrait", 1986, canvas, acrylic, wood, bone, other mixed media 198.1 x 12.7 cm. Collection of Jean

Fisher, London, England. Image reproduced from Land Spirit Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada.

Fig.20 John Coplans, "Untitled", 1984-87, photograph. (Size and collection unknown) Image reproduced from The Male Nude in Contemporary Photography.

Fig, 21 Robert Houle, "Untitled," 1985, photograph, ink, graphite, leterset, 44.5 x 58 cm. Private collection.

Fig. 22 Robert Houle, "Warrior Lances for Temagami", 1989, acrylic, photographs, leather, wool, Plexiglass rods, plexi base, 122 x 68.5 cm. Collection of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs.

Fig. 23 Robert Houle, "Untitled, (Warpaint Portraits)", 1992, mixed media, mylar, photographs, colour zerox, acrylic, 25 x 53 cm. Collection of Bruce and Sally Rapp. Image reproduced from cover of Slate Magazine (July-August 1992)

All the works that do not have a separate reference for "reproduction from" are from photographs that were taken at the Ufundi Gallery and are in the possession of the author.

Appendix 1**Interview with Carl Beam**

October 4, 1991. Telephone interview. Ottawa.

C.B. Autobiography appealed to me when I first got into art. I always sensed my contemporaries wanted the big art statement: (they) didn't know how to locate it - tried with the technical and also the formal. They would say "I'm not the big theme. The big theme lies elsewhere." The person was diminished in terms of the larger.

All those who say "The great Canadian novel hasn't been written" are waiting.

I said, "I'm the big picture too."

Appendix 2

Interviews with Robert Houle

March 11, 1987. Interview by the author. Unpublished Notes. Ufundi Gallery. Ottawa.

R.H. I had 13 pieces of linen that I intended to use for "Parfleches for the Last Supper"; instead cut them in half and then tried to figure out what 26 meant. It became "Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians from A - Z".

V.H. What is the significance of the 4-stroke method of drawing that you use?

R.H. I didn't see Jasper Johns' (use of) cross hatching until 1975; my Mother and the Shamans liked the cross-hatching.

I chose four objects that I wanted to work with when I left the Museum: the parfleche, document envelopes, talking stick, coppers.

The early work was just form.

Some of the works for the parfleche series should actually be seen as containers. I was sending a message to Barbara (Stimpson) in one of them, (a newspaper article on Arthur Shilling). They could also be seen as a protest, as the Catholic Church played such an important part in my early life.

Houle saw the "Treaty Number 674" (a work that I had purchased earlier) on the wall and said, "Did I do that?" and "Its transparent".

Houle had several small works with him, all of which he said were sold; works on paper, oil, with ribbons attached with sealing wax. He was pleased about the sealing wax, mentioned that he knew it was used on documents.

R.H. The colours: blue and purple, have something to do with my Mother's death. Now I am finished with the parfleche and I won't do a folded paper work again.

March 12, 1987. Interview by the author. Ufundi Gallery. Ottawa

R.H. My work is symbolic and pictorial; it's no longer religious. Indian art is colonial; Indian paintings are for the white audience. (The works he sold on that trip to Ottawa were all sold to Indians.)

V.H. Is colour the most important?

R.H. No, form is. Newman, Gaucher and Mondrian are my influences, not Molinari at all. Frank Stella was the inspiration for "Misquah".

V.H. (Houle was in town for the march on the Parliament buildings and I mentioned that Prime Minister Mulroney hadn't addressed them.)

R.H. Indians have long memories.

R.H. "Visual Promises of Indian Self Government" is a political statement. Indians don't want to leave the reserves. They are their home; they want more autonomy. My primary school was on the reserve in a residential school.

V.H. Will reservations end?

R.H. It is up to you.

V.H. Will there be elders to carry on the traditions?

R.H. Yes, I think so.

R.H. The use of a lot of images on a single screen is a cop out and therefore meaningless

August 4, 1989. Interview by the author. Unpublished Notes. Ufundi Gallery. Ottawa

R.H. One of the most fascinating things for me is what things will come through to each separate individual (in my work). Imagistically I have already gone through a lot, in relation to what Jane Ash Poitras was doing with her work at Harbourfront. The present work is not as grandstanding.

"The Warrior Shield for the Lubicon" is also about the environment with its use of scrap iron.

Re: the exhibition in June, Scrap Iron Works, Ufundi Gallery, Ottawa.

R.H. What people (the Native community in Ottawa) have said is that they liked the fact that the eagle feathers were not real. I would personally use the eagle feather but I know its power and to use it would offend. The use of the eagle feather is comparable to using the host or a Torah sanctified by ritual. Perhaps it is the wisdom of age but in fact, I have never offended with the use of sacred material. There is sometimes some very fancy footwork. I have always questioned authority, especially if that authority is stifling to creativity and individuality.

The Globe and Mail and the Citizen used his haiku from "Zero Hour" in two articles.

R.H. "Zero Hour" communicated with everybody. You set yourself up with certain goals; one goal is to try and communicate with as large an audience as possible. I am depriving myself if I only try and communicate with the native community. Work should reach as large an audience as possible.

V.H. Where should native art be?

R.H. It doesn't matter any more. I have already fought those battles. (Houle is curating work for the Museum of Anthropology, Sovereignty Over Subjectivity.)

Appropriation is from inside; not borrowed. Baumgarten in the A.G.O. used real eagle feathers in European Iceberg. The formal aspects of Westcoast art influenced people like Barnett Newman who in turn influenced me. Newman was impressed by the ordered metaphysics and mythology of Westcoast art. I have always responded to Newman's spirituality, but not to Morrisseau's shamanistic or Christian symbolism. I do respond to him aesthetically and visually. Some of those symbols could actually have power. Icons cannot be made now: if power symbols were made now with the understanding of the secularization of society, they might be appropriate. Perhaps that is why I use warning and caution signs; they grab attention in a secular manner.

Native artists should think work through to make a work that more people will respond to (in relation to Ron Noganosh's work in The Shadow of the Sun).

V.H. What is the significance of the numbers?

R.H. There are seven works in "Tribes"; 7 pieces; the Group of Seven. Seven is a spiritual number; I don't know why. "Faxes" are 12 rather than 13.

September 25, 1991. Telephone interview with the author in connection with the purchase by the National Gallery of "Place Where God Lives".

"Place Where God Lives", (Manitowpah), 1989, consists of 4 works in oil, each 6' x 8', with cedar frames.

R.H. Were painted during artist-in-residency, Winnipeg Art Gallery. The compositions were based on four works; Matthew, Philip, Thomas and Bartholemew from "The Last Supper", 1983. "Place Where God Lives" is a homage to Manitoba's original or aboriginal name. According to mythology, it is part of a lake, about an actual place in Northern Manitoba where water ebbs and flows and creates a muffling sound as it hits porous limestone. The story goes that these were the gods playing the drums. Lovers used to go there. The light was important in painting the canvases. I worked in natural light there and mixed the colours out of doors.

On one visit I took the bus for 3 hours, started to ask the Indians about colour. "Snow has colour", I was told.

September 27, 1991. Telephone Interview with the author.

R.H. My symbology is personal; "Parfleches for the Last Supper" is a personal statement. In current discourse, personal is the political; autobiography is personal history.

Sundance pole represents my shamanistic past.

Hatching is a ritualistic act; hatchings are like journeys, hatchings are a repetitious act or rhythm in body and mind to achieve a level of consciousness connected to God activity, to bead work. I've always considered my tribal heritage to be my personal heritage.

The cultural symbols are personal. The Sundance pole is both culturally significant and significant for me as a man.

Interior landscapes are allusions to actual landscapes because of the ambivalent horizon line, the ambivalent rediscovery of light and the prairie horizon.

I have always been an admirer of Barnett Newman - his unrelenting commitment to the abstract idiom, gave (me) the extra push to do the "Parfleche for the Last Supper". Reconnects the "Parfleche for the Last Supper" with "The Place Where God Lives".

"Kanata" is Iroquois, possibly the origin of "Canada".

All work is referential but also referential to the ideas.

The artist's statement from the Oklahoma catalogue "I have always done etc" is important for me.

November 15, 1991. Telephone Interview with the author.

V.H. The conversation was primarily a description of a work in progress; a work that had given Houle a lot of problems. "The First Immigrants" includes quills cooked in gouache, canvas, moose hide diagonals, unbleached canvas and a piece of wood screwed on top. The First Immigrants refers to Columbus and my first ancestors.

R.H. It is the first acrylic since 1987.

In many ways fractured stick is the same colour as the blue board from 1986. Really it got so busy; it was busy like a problem child. The horizontality made it so relaxed, I almost fell asleep so I added the stick.

In terms of personal art history from 1980-1, the cross-hatching represented quills, it is a self-reference to the earlier work.

"Lances" and "Shield" were protective entities, reconstructions of objects that are now imprisoned (in Museums). Modernist interventions create new objects.

"My Grandmother's Parfleche" was because of the floral patterns.

Inside each parfleche is a painting.

I've only made one autobiographical work (for my Mother). It included the eagle feather given to her for my graduation day by the Manitoba chiefs.

December 28, 1991. Unpublished Working Notes by the author based on a trip to Toronto.

"Untitled", 1985, consists of a black and white photograph on a fibre base paper, a stencilled set of numbers which read S.I.N. 616 539 862, 674 in small leterset and TREATY NUMBER ONE 1870, in slightly larger black leterset, as well as a bar code in black ink or graphite. All are on beige card and the work is signed below the bar code Houle '85. The paper measures 17 1/2" x 22 3/4".

The photograph is of a Saulteaux man with two pony tails, a cotton Red River shirt and a vest of four rows of elongated bone beads held together vertically creating a pattern that reaches a V in the centre. The photograph, which Houle acquired in 1980 appears to be old. He felt it might have been an ancestor.

Each of the sets of letters and numbers, though all in black, has been created with different materials and different drawing techniques. The S.I.N. letters and the numbers have been first filled in with crayon or graphite and then the surfaces have been scratched vertically with a sharp instrument to form a pattern of vertical lines all in the same direction from top right to bottom left. The leterset numbers are solid black leterset though each set is a different size of letters. The bar code, originally drawn in graphite, appears to be filled in in a regular vertical stroke with ink. The code itself is flush at the top, but irregular at the bottom and the bars themselves are of irregular widths.

The number, letters and bar code all become a single unit as they overlap onto the photograph which is the focal point of the work. Within the single work however, Houle has identified each facet of his own identity in a different way: scratched crayon, solid ink, two sizes of leterset and a photograph. The distinctions are subtle and deliberate.

The rhythm inherent in the work is created by the pattern on the crayon, the irregularity of the code bars, the horizontal of the 674 forming the top right hand corner of the bar code and the vertical of the TREATY NUMBER ONE that extends the bar code as an extra bar. Graphically the whole forms a rectangle but the eye is forced by the series of verticals and horizontals to absorb the information in relation to a photograph of an Indian.

The paradox of the historical Indian in tribal dress and the stencilled S.I.N. number is one of a displacement in time. He identifies himself in relation to the Canadian government's legal system of numbering within the context of both the Native and non-native communities. By inference (the bar code) he is commenting on the technological world that he now inhabits, but clearly in reference to his own early ancestors.

January 5, 1992. Telephone Interview with the author. Ufundi Gallery. Ottawa.

R.H. The photographs are fun. Its hard to do myself because I have to run to be in position.

The "Portraits" are connected to Kahnawake. The children's photographs are from when I was there, teaching them to paint in 1970. The children went to the Longhouse and sang and danced for me. Some of the children are now Warriors. My Polaroid self-portraits are blown up 40 times on a colour zerox. Used my band number and new status card. I got it this year to avoid the GST. I superimposed the double exposure of the children's drawing on mylar. It includes images from Life Magazine 1967-71.

In all there were 10 photographs in front of my Indian blanket. The warpaint was based on the same paint that the children had on. Stripes on one side of the face and one side completely red. I said, "What's happening to me? I'm using a lot of representation."

February 18, 1993. Telephone interview. Ottawa.

V.H. I called to ask Houle about the Keith Basso book on Western Apache storytelling and the significance of place names and how they might be relevant to his work.

R.H. "The Place Where God Lives" is a re-appropriation. It is done legally. The land was given away. Manitoba is named after a sacred place. I re-appropriated it to tell a story about that place. Treaty One is the legal document. "The Place Where God Lives" is a historical story about treaties, as well as telling about history. It is a love story I think. People would go there and give tobacco. This is okay! Ontario, Quebec and Hochelaga are not okay. "Kanata" too is not okay. Hochelaga was destroyed. The people left; they disappeared.

For the Saulteaux, storytelling doesn't have a specific time, even if it actually happened. The place symbolizes many things, people talk about places as metaphors. "Hochelaga" was more polemical than metaphoric.

An aggressive offense is necessary. I am subversive that way. I think the whole thing is about the way we think, about the way we relate to the world.

Art history as part of the humanities has to stop being a clandestine agent of an empire.

Critical modes of anthropology are paralleled as the shared human project.

"Postmodernism fetishes difference "

The key to Multiplicity is repetition, all the works in the exhibition are works that are repetitions.

Myself as a self-portrait is how I construct a work. Whatever I choose to use is myself in the work. I am in the painting.

The self-portraits from Lindsay were difficult. I had the problem of offending the viewer (with a self-portrait).

I am unequivocally rooted in my history and I have always been absolutely open to what is going on. The only audience is myself. In the end it is a very egotistical process. In the end you don't think about who is going to be looking at it.

The "Divas" are almost caricatures of women as portraits. I didn't want to do that so I chose the moment when they were singing. They are not autobiographical. I didn't want to capture a moment in my life. The "Mohawk Summer Series" is part of my personal history. They were about my anger and my pain. The collages were from Kensington market. The banners in my apartment windows. "The Lindsay show" was part of the "Mohawk Summer Series". The rhetoric corresponded.

April 1, 1993. Artist's Talk. Carleton University in conjunction with Kanata Robert Houle's Histories. Transcribed by the author.

R.H. The Globe and Mail article provided the means of understanding the details of the figures from the Benjamin West's "The Death of Wolf". "Wolf" is foregrounded even today by art historians and anthropologists. Les Magiciens at the George Pompidou was a feeble effort, though a noble attempt.

The history of "Tribes" from 1985, is a continuous work which I have again incorporated, this time as a running line.

In the "Parfleches for the Last Supper", each parfleche has a painting inside. It is a ritual and it includes autobiography. On two occasions I have opened the parfleche to show people what was inside. The paintings were about the alphabet as a European technology; the stories were about ourselves first, as our ancestors had done.

The 1985 work by Baumgarten called the "Monument to the Native People of Ontario" includes the Ojibway name. When I first saw it, I was bewildered. It is eloquent and silent at the same time. I joked about dead Indians. Sheridan won the Indian wars.

Regarding the availability of material evidence; autobiography was the only means available for Native artists to visually express their cultural continuity through metaphor. Many traditional forms of expression were not allowed: feathers, objects, masks.

Autobiography itself is a strategy.

My work is empowered through my dreams; they don't tell me what to paint, but they inspire me.

I purchased the parfleche (included in the exhibition) from Av Isaacs for this work. Dempsey Bob gave me the moccasins. The moccasins belong to the warrior figure in the painting. I left him barefoot.

The circle is not significant, it is only to indicate not to go near the parfleche. The blue cloth is reminiscent of the colour of the Sundance. Every summer while I lived with my grandparents until I was 5 or 6 years old, I participated in the Sundance.

At 7 years old I went to residential school and was kept there until grade 9. I could go home on week-ends so I spoke Saulteaux on week-ends. Residential School is a genocidal program. I was confused and after I went to Rome.

I matched the red and blue grouping on the floor with the wall work. My spirituality has been separate from my public life. My grandfather told me that an Indian would always be present.

I am immersed in the gibberish (of artspeak).

The spiritual aspects will come out. It has taken longer to find my real centre.

We are an inclusive society; I have always been open.

The McMichael is the shrine to Canadian landscape. An older woman asked me "if I had witnessed the spirit yet?" I didn't want to answer, then I came down from the ladder and talked to her. I had to create a landscape (during my artist-in-residency). I put tobacco in all the trees then visited all the landscape, sort of got spooked I

decided "I'm not going to become spooked by Tom Thomson." Tobacco is offered to First Nations in this exhibition.

April 27 is the opening of my exhibition in the A.G.O. "Anishnabec Walker Court".

I used the Walker Court as a site and as a metaphor for the Anishnabec for change and for permanence.

The language tape in Kanata, was a process of self discovery/ personal/ communal. I wanted to do something temporary.

"Red Paper" has a similar relationship in terms of colour, landscape (French) blue/red.

A friend who was a chef found the Oka advertising labels for me.

The fictionalized Indian has to do with the politics of representation

The language is my own voice. Some things shouldn't be done; medicine bundles/false face masks.

I am a Modernist; I will claim that. At least I have Modernist roots. I can never be a Euro-Canadian. I am aboriginal. I am aware of Plato's impact but its relevance is not mine.

Modernist tendencies were to try to separate myself from the traditional crafts and ceremonial objects.

One thing regarding the objects in terms of repatriation; they are aboriginal, they belong here. It doesn't matter where Native people exhibit, But that's not the issue anymore.

The Canadian public is not ready to deal with the issue of appropriation.

The new battleground is exhibitions. Issues in Native art must be dealt with from within the art; the elders/leaders will have a say because its political implications are important. I don't think Canadian Native art is about inclusion and exclusion. Canadian Native art is about equality.

"skuniga"(Saulteaux) I give everything away and I leave something for myself. Spirit Sings was a turning point in the politics of exhibitions.

We are breaking down linear ideologies.

Addendum: During dinner after the talk, Houle read the draft of this thesis and said, "To name is to invent," and "We have to put ourselves in a story to contextualize it."

"When you honour the directions you make an interjection by prayer. It is a form of empowerment."

Appendix 3

Interviews with Gerald McMaster

June 17, 1992. Interview with the author. Ufundi Gallery. Ottawa.

G.M. I am the subject of my paintings. When people ask me for a photograph of myself, I use my image. They become the object. Its obvious because it's a personal image.

People don't want a portrait of other people. They usually commission people they know.

In photography with representation; it probably won't be purchased.

I photograph myself like my warrior. I have three stripes across my face and a looming figure behind. There are six of them.

I took my own photograph in coloured slides and had them reproduced in black and white. I got the idea from Rainer, a German artist, who manipulates his photographs.

(My notes - Gerald McMaster purchased "Mohawks and Beehives", the entire collection of black and white hand-coloured photographs of Shelley Niro's sisters and one including herself, for the Museum of Civilization and another one, "Mohawks and Beehives I", for himself. It is currently on his living room wall.)

G.M. Lucy Lippard asked me for a photograph to accompany an article that I wrote titled "Colonial Alchemy, Boarding School Experience" to be included in Partial Recall a collection of articles by Native writers and artists. A photograph of me has nothing to do with me. It has to do with early photographs so I painted mine.

June 20, 1992. Conversation with the author during a car trip to the opening of Nouvelles Territoires. Montreal.

Gerald said that he sometimes used himself as a model for a painting reference. He wasn't trying to work in a traditional way of copying the model and painting the figure but it was helpful to understand where the light fell. He commented that he hadn't done

women except one of his wife and one in which he re-appropriated the female Indian image from another's work. He didn't want to do female representation.

Appendix 4**Interviews with Shelley Niro**

May 31, 1992. Interview with the author. Ottawa.

S.N. The photographs for "Mohawks and Beehives" were taken the last week-end in March, 1991. The idea came in late November 1990, more a fantasy than a real idea. My sisters were keen to do it. They liked the hair-dos and the dressing-up because it allowed them to be someone else, other than who they were. They could be anyone, an excuse to not have to think about anything else.

I thought they would get tired but they didn't. I had an idea of what I wanted to see but I let them be themselves, in front of the camera. I just recorded them.

If you hired a model, could be specific about what you wanted but with my sisters - could just let it happen.

If someone else had been taking the pictures it would have been different. I was also made up; that was one of the conditions.

People have commented that (the photos) remind other people of their own aunts and sisters.

The works seem funny at first but there is an underlying impact. My sisters liked them when they were done but were somewhat mystified by them.

Recent series 1992 each of three photos - I decided, to be really fair, to really feel how it feels, have to go through the process where I am the subject, to really understand the role of the model have to do it but also used old photographs.

Modern icons ..Snow White, Santa Claus, Marilyn.

Have to go through own history, own cultural history; you become the product of both histories- commercial world, own world, me as the product. Poses are all different. "What you see is what you get...maybe!"

I feel like I look like a lot of people. In a way I represent all those people that I look like. Looking at them, those other people, they

wouldn't see anything but the hardships and struggles. In the end those people become icons about something they see as well.

I am exploring the ordinary, probably why I chose my sisters.

There's a political idea - it makes a triangle. Me, my sisters and the viewer. I am taking it for granted that people have some knowledge of current issues.

"The Iroquois is a Highly Developed Matriarchal Society" - we hear it all the time. Its (my work) is aimed at Native people as well.

In First Nations Art '92, Tom (Hill) blew up "Portrait of the Artists with a Killer Surrounded By French Curves" to almost life size, were put on plywood and cut out. Used a tape as well, CORN radio sounded like a radio station with excerpts from different interviews including "Fever" by Peggy Lee, Oka news clips, and songs by Randy Travis and Buffy St. Marie.

If it's done beautiful, it might as well be a loon, if its done realistic and people don't want to see, then it's political.

We were making fun of the notion of what beauty is. I can think of really pretty people who aren't happy with the way they look; its letting yourself have a certain kind of freedom.

Gilles Henry was calling and calling. He thought I was Viviane Gray. Viviane's children thought my sisters looked like their aunt.

June 8, 1992. Unpublished letter from Shelley Niro to Vicki Henry.

Dear Vicki

I am now going to try to expand on the interview we had.

The idea "Mohawks In Beehives" started formulating in late Fall of 1990. This was first after the emotionally draining effects of OKA. The summer's long events kept the whole country in a perpetual wave of total alienation against the government and the news media. After the people of Kahnasatake had surrendered, given up or run out of spiritual energy needed to keep up such a siege, these effects had lasted until around December. In January (the 15th?) another type of war was filling the TV screen and newspapers. This one was again

brought directly to all of us. I am sure that I am not too different from most people's perceptions of what is happening on a day to day basis. At a certain time, one must deal with their personal psyche of what makes them different with everyone else or why not just give up. At this point I realized that I must deal with these issues as an artist. As a person my efforts would be futile and insignificant. As an artist any statement would be important, if not to myself. My sisters, who are always receptive to an idea that is off the wall, goofy and goes a bit against the grain agreed instantly to take part in our day of forgetting. Could have been another title "Day of forgetting". By releasing themselves of their personalities, cultural margins, and motherhood and wifedom (kids and husbands weren't around most of the day) the world's problems did not exist. I think the work creates a platform of joy, assertiveness. Too often the image of Native women is stereotyped; the public view is directed in a very narrow way. I want to blow up and explode this image, so that a new one will take a long time to create.

I use the images I recorded that final Friday in March of 1991 and juxtapose those with titles I make up. On one hand, Joe Public might not recognize the women on first glance, as being Native women, but I also want Native people to realize how much they are buying into the role that is being offered to them. I want Native people to examine their self-image and ask themselves is this self-image their own invention or is it one that is a Hollywood fragment. Even if people are more comfortable with how things are, then it's the self examination that is important.

After the initial exposure of these images, I asked myself if I was being responsible enough with these images of my sisters. I suddenly felt protective of them and decided to allow myself to be the model in the next series of work that I did. I wanted to know the feeling of being a subject. The initial reaction was embarrassment as one is dealing with one's own image. The eye is always critical and lets nothing get away unnoticed. When I had passed this stage of self examination I started to concentrate on what I wanted to do

with these images. Certainly not for narcissistic reasons for again cultural evaluations of myself and how I am directly affected by daily doses of pop culture and historical happenings in my personal life. I happen to be Native and have certain resources that I can rely on. I also happen to look like many segments of different Native cultures. By putting these two different aspects together a wierd mixture of reality happens. Pop culture and historical culture (which was once pop culture) equals me (contemporary Native woman).

I liked the idea of using the obvious symbols, Marilyn Monroe (I know I would not even come close to a copy of her) Elvis, one of those twentieth century mysteries of fanhood and a fantasy vision of goodness and purity-Snow White. I have not finished this series yet but now that I have passed the initial stage of me being my model - who knows what could happen.

Anyways Vicki, I have run out of steam. I hope this helps a little more. Good luck in your thesis.

See ya! Love Shelley

PS I wanted to explain a little further that in the work of my sisters, they are not embarrassed of themselves in the work I have done (like I was of my own image). They are not shy women and quite extroverted in their surroundings. I think they see themselves in the role that they have created for themselves in front of the camera. They don't worry about composition, dynamics, division of thirds, etc. I think they really see themselves as actors and they are just playing a role they have been dying to play all of their lives, that of a femme fatale. They love the implications that the viewer imagines within the work. These women are aware of issues, media saturation of points of view but are also willing to spin their direction of concentration in a 180 degree turn to go in the opposite direction and fight the up-river flow. I think I'm the most introverted of the bunch but am also aware of the energies and bizarre sparks they create when they are together, in a good mood at the same time (not very often).

I just wanted you to know they like the work "Mohawks in Beehives"
a lot.

Bye again

Appendix 5

Interviews with Ron Noganosh

February 11, 1992. Telephone interview with the author. Ufundi Gallery. Ottawa.

V.H. Tell me about "I Couldn't Afford a Christian Dior Bathing Suit".

R.N. I did the painting while I was taking life drawing classes at the University of Ottawa, 1986-87. Painted it on cardboard after I saw Carl's. Went in early, took my clothes off and painted myself as the model. Found out I wasn't a painter. Half the time I wasn't there, I was out doing something.

It was exhibited in Hard and Soft. Viviane helped me have it framed between two pieces of Plexiglass. It was then I did the writing, 1989.

February 22, 1992. Telephone Interview with the author. Ufundi Gallery. Ottawa. V.H. Tell me about "Pilgrim's Progress" (1991, wood, plastic, found objects, sunglasses, approx. 15"(h). Collection of the artist)

R.N. It had to do with technology, the obvious forked tongue, wanted to show that nothing really had changed; despite technology they (white) think we are still the same.

Ecologically the 'critters' (plastic animals that Ron found at the Sally Ann) are to show that we are killing for the sake of technology. That is why all the critters are in the plastic cone. All the wires and found bits are about technology.

V.H. Notes..the mask portrays Prime Minister Brian Mulroney

April 13, 1992. Interview with the author. Wim's Cafe. Ottawa.

R.N. Houses were crowded on the reserve. Even when we were little, under five, we knew all the words about sex. We respected our own privacy. It was there. Imagine when we went to school. Dick and

Jane. What we understood from "Look, Jane, Look!". "Here comes Dick and Jane". All the kids laughed and the teacher who was probably a spinster didn't have a clue what we were laughing at.

My Mother was a medicine woman. The one thing I was angry at was that they made me not have respect for my Mother because she couldn't speak English. She was so respected that people came from all over to see her. This was the 50s and it was hard to travel distances. You didn't just get in the car and go. When I see plants in the forest now, I remember that she used to use them but I don't know what for. She had one for birth control. It's the rust coloured one on the side of the road in the Fall. When we were in School they went and told our parents not to talk to us in our language. I don't remember what we learned, it didn't seem important.

Many things were absurd. You had to laugh at them or you would go nuts. The humor in my work is based on the absurd. Humor is even in language. Our language is funny. I painted the nude at three in the morning. The halo was from the light coming from behind me. I was in great shape then. I had been working on construction. I thought of the work for the show Hard and Soft because Viviane's work is so different. When I suggested it she said she would do one too but she chickened out. The title came after. Max calls it "Wishful thinking". Because I was looking in a mirror, it looks like I am painting with my left hand.

My father died six months after I was born. I know thirty seven people who died from guns, drowning, accidents. I know people who have only had two deaths. All the Native people know many people who died. My brother is an elder and he is teaching my son, Nick the ceremonies. He is the fire carrier and he is learning. I want him to learn to hunt. I can survive in the woods. I can build a canoe, clean skins and hunt. Last year, we shot a deer.

Maybe I didn't get in the show (Indigena) because I don't have a studio. I work in my garage and my basement. I do posters on the kitchen table. They are good there too. I do junk art.

Appendix 6

Victoria Henry. June 5, 1992. Unpublished Notes on the exhibition Autobiography in First Nations Art at the Ufundi Gallery. January 1992.

In January 1992, I curated an exhibition for the Ufundi Gallery that was directly related to the work on this thesis. It was called Autobiography in First Nations Art and included works by Shelley Niro "In Her Lifetime", Carl Beam "Burying the Ruler", Gerald McMaster "Warrior", Ron Noganosh "Carl, I Can't Afford a Christian Dior Bathing Suit", Joane Cardinal-Schubert "Family Portrait". and Robert Houle "Untitled".

I went to Toronto between Christmas and New Years on the train, stayed for lunch, talked about his work and looked through what he had. The "Untitled" work was for my purposes a good example of the use of personal references and symbols that make an autobiographical statement.

Over lunch we talked about how his concern for personal "symbolology" as he called it, is important to him. The continuity in his work and references back to earlier works are also important. Until that point he said he had only created one work that included a photo of himself and it was on a work that he gave his Mother. Houle was excited about the concept of the exhibition and wanted his work to be included. I was happy to find a work that seemed so appropriate to his concerns and the theme of the exhibition.

In the previous Spring, I had curated an exhibition An(Other) Voice for the Russell Gallery in Lindsay which included works by Carl Beam, Robert Houle, Gerald McMaster and Joane Cardinal-Schubert. The result was that Russell Gallery, invited Robert Houle to do a solo exhibition. Houle had originally intended to do a series of works on paper but in March he called to say that he was going to do portraits of himself. His hair was still long and he thought it would be fun to paint himself and do self-portraits. The title of the exhibition was going to be Warpaint Portraits.

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