

visual arts

Penticton artist going solo at National Gallery

One of Canada's national treasures, Daphne Odjig, has become the first aboriginal woman to have a solo exhibition of her artwork at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa.

The moving story of the Penticton-based artist is being told this fall in a retrospective that includes 56 iconic drawings and paintings — a profound testament to Odjig's creative energy and perseverance.

"Her story is almost mythology," the exhibition's curator, Bonnie Devine, writes in the exhibition catalogue. "Who could fail to be beguiled by its plot twists, its pathos, its inspirational sweep?"

"Often overlooked by an art world dominated by white men, Odjig simply kept painting, giving voice to the stories of her people. Her boldly coloured curvilinear style and strong sense of social justice have led some to compare her to Picasso.

"We come from strong people," Odjig has said. "We had to be strong to survive. And I'm like those women. It's in my blood to strive and work and grow."

Odjig, born in 1919 on Manitoulin Island in Lake Huron, traces her paternal ancestry to the Potawatomi émigrés who fled north to Canada after the War of 1812 as they lost their land in America's westward expansion. She explores this tragic history in two 1971 works, *Genocide* and *Massacre*, powerful portrayals of a battle at Fort Dearborn, near Chicago, in which her great-great-grandfather, Black Partridge, fought.

Odjig has also focused on the legends of her people, and along with Anishnabe painter Norval Morrisseau, is credited as a founder of the Woodland School, which emerged during the aboriginal cultural resurgence of the 1980s.

Although her work is influenced by traditional aesthetics, Odjig,



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The Shaking Tent

who left school due to illness before completing Grade 8, has always experimented independent of conventional structures, says Devine.

"Conscious of her lack of schooling, she combines the vulnerability of someone who is never quite certain of her ground with the genuine poise and determination of a true individual. She has learned how to innovate and adapt and to laugh at herself and — quick as lightning — learn from new experiences."

Odjig makes the point that indigenous cultures are alive and evolving.

"We are a living people and a living culture," she says. "I believe we are bound to move

forward, to experiment with new things and develop new modes of expression as all peoples do. I don't intend to stay in the past. I don't feel like no museum piece."

Odjig's masterpiece is *The Indian in Transition*, a 1978 mural that hung for years in the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, before its relocation to the Museum of Civilization in 2006.

Robert Houle, a leading aboriginal artist and curator, says the work refutes romantic notions and instead recognizes ancient sovereigns and the subsequent journey through political, social and economic domination to a period of renewal and reconciliation.

"It captures the imagination and the social consciousness of the country," he writes in a catalogue essay. "People find resonance in her compassion."

Houle notes that after completing the work, Odjig was given an eagle feather by her reserve chief, an honour granted extraordinary individuals. The feather, he says, recognizes her "stratospheric status as artist-warrior."

The retrospective is a proud moment for a woman who renounced her native identity to escape the harsh prejudice of the 1940s and for a time changed her surname to Fisher — Odjig is the Anishnabe word for fisher, a small fur-bearing carnivore.

At times, she worked three jobs to survive, but continued to sketch while visiting galleries and teaching herself to paint.

A pivotal point was a 1964 powwow on Manitoulin Island, one of the first such celebrations in modern-day Ontario.

Odjig, then 45, recalls reticently joining a dancing circle after having spent half her life trying to forget she was a native woman.

"I began to dance to the drum," she told Devine. "And I became an Indian."

Odjig moved to the Shuswap in 1976 with her second husband to put more energy into her painting



Photo contributed

Daphne Odjig sits in front of her painting *From Mother Earth Flows the River of Life*, 1973 Acrylic on canvas, Canadian Museum of Civilization Collection.

after running Canada's first native-owned print shop and gallery in Winnipeg.

Since then, she has received many honours including the Order of Canada, the country's highest medal of achievement, as well as a Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts.

She moved to Penticton in 1999 and in 2002 was awarded an

honorary doctorate — one of five she has received — by the University of Okanagan University College.

Her exhibition at the National Gallery continues until Jan. 3.

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