**The Many Portraits of Michipeshu: Anishinaabe power, art history, and the stories of my family**

**By Shaylin Allison**

Under the FASS undergraduate summer research internship, I have spent the past four months researching Anishinaabe visual art history, culture, and methodology through a unique Ojibway lens. Incorporating my family’s ancestral and legal ties to the land as direct descendants of Chief Shingwauk; my focus has been on both contemporary and historical art and visual culture of the area. I have been specifically investigating the Agawa pictographs on the north shore of Lake Superior from, some of which were painted by Shingwauk and other members of my community, Garden River First Nation during the past few hundred years. I have also compared the portrayals of the land and pictographs with the work of settler artists including art by members of the Group of Seven to the work of contemporary Anishinaabe artists with cultural ties to Lake Superior. The art of Norval Morrisseau and Michael Belmore, for example, powerfully emphasizes the importance of Anishinaabe worldview, storytelling, and sovereignty.

As noted by Lakota-Scottish scholar Carmen Robertson, settler artists such as the Group of Seven depict the land devoid of its Indigenous caretakers and inhabitants, presenting it as their own discovery and upholding “narratives of colonial possession”.[[1]](#footnote-1) In contrast, Anishinaabe artists Morrisseau and Belmore draw upon sacred stories and materials to express their connections to the land and identity through visual storytelling. Morrisseau and other artists who followed his visual storytelling style used art as a medium to connect to culture and engage in storytelling. Beginning in the 1950s, he painted legends and stories passed down to him from family and community to put oral history onto canvas, and so that others outside of Ojibway culture could understand our histories and worldview in a way that was not done before.[[2]](#footnote-2) Active today, Belmore primarily uses sculpture as the medium for his work, using materials with connections to the land such as copper to tell stories about Indigenous identity, history, and culture. Both artists highlight the importance and rich diversity of Anishinaabe storytelling and worldview, and the ways that Anishinaabe maintain connections to our ancestors and culture as Indigenous peoples in contemporary times. Both pay homage to the Agawa pictographs and ancestors of the land, portraying tales of underwater panther Michipeshu and other stories that have been passed down for time immemorial, including within my own family and community of Garden River First Nation

The importance of Indigenous resurgence and sovereignty in representation of Anishinaabe worldview is furthered by Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. Nishnaabeg resurgence, thought, and methodology have been explored thoroughly by Simpson, who believes that this resurgence must be done “on our own terms, without the sanction, permission or engagement of the state, western theory or the opinions of Canadians.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Her ideas demonstrate the many ways that Anishinaabe worldview and context are inextricably linked to our relationships with the land, our communities, and our families. Simpson’s ideas serve as a powerful base for more fully understanding the intersections and opportunities to perform research in a unique Nishnaabeg context.

1. Carmen Robertson, “The Ethical Challenges of Recovering Historical Memory Seeing Land: Resituating Landscapes Through Contemporary Indigenous Art Exhibitions,” *Les ateliers de l’ethique/The Ethics Forum*14, 2 (2019): 108.  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Legends of My People: the Great Ojibway*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, n.d.  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence*. (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2011): 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)