

# Riel Benn's "Best Man": An Unlikely Successor to Iktomi's Trickster Legacy

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1. *Self-Portrait with Alter Ego*, 2004. Acrylic on canvas. 36" x 48" (91.4 cm x 121.9 cm). Collection of the artist.

*"In this piece, my faith in God and my true self take control. Out of respect, The Best Man removes his hat. My nakedness says that I have nothing to hide from the Creator. The purple suit represents the cunning liar within me, or the mask and attitude I sometimes hide behind. In my nakedness, nothing is hidden, even The Best Man knows God can see through his greatest lie" (Benn 2005).*

In the fall of 2005 the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian in Santa Fe, New Mexico, mounted, for a six-month run, the exhibition *About Face: Self-Portraits by Native American, First Nations and Inuit Artists*. I had the good fortune to be invited by museum director Jonathan Batkin to cocurate the show with my colleague Zena Pearlstone, now Professor Emerita of Art History, California State University, Fullerton. More than four years in the planning, the show featured the works of forty-seven artists from Canada and the United States, working over the last four decades in a variety of media. It remains the only exhibition of contemporary indigenous self-portraits known to us.<sup>1</sup>

In developing the show, we strove to mix the works of established artists with those of lesser-known practitioners and those in the early stages of their careers.<sup>2</sup> We sought to create both a visual and verbal dialog, a conversation between artists and visitors on the nature of personal and communal identities. To that end, artists' statements were displayed alongside each work in the gallery. Judging by the favorable comments recorded in the Visitors Guest Book (Anonymous 2005–2006), this was a much appreciated addition, helping to promote dialog and foster greater cross-cultural understanding.<sup>3</sup>

Undoubtedly, the imaginative way in which the pieces were arranged in the gallery space also contributed to the exhibition's success. By virtue of mere proximity or simple juxtaposition, certain works, and artists, seemed to converse with one another and with the viewers. In some cases, an intriguing synergy seemed to result. For example, the resolute, almost hypnotic gaze of the two figures in Norval Morrisseau's *Self-Portrait with Spiritual Son* was refracted back in Riel Benn's split image, *Self-Portrait with Alter Ego* (Fig. 1). The two artists shared a space, a moment together in the gallery's open stairwell: the elder Morrisseau, Ontario-born Ojibway and arguably Canada's best-known aboriginal artist,<sup>4</sup> and the brash young Sioux painter from Manitoba.<sup>5</sup> What more did they share besides space and a mutual gaze? A passion for painting, for bright colors, for spiritual redemption, for manufacturing mischief? For confounding expectations? Perhaps, in that space, in that moment, Riel Benn might have become Morrisseau's spiritual son. It would have been a tricky transformation for Riel, but not for The Best Man.

So, who is Riel Benn, and who (or what) is The Best Man? And what do we make of the artist's statement at the beginning of this article?

Riel Benn was born in Birtle, Manitoba in 1979, and raised on the nearby Birdtail Sioux Reserve in the farming region of southwestern Manitoba. A largely self-taught artist, he estimates that he has created more than six hundred drawings and paintings in his home studio since leaving school at the age of sixteen. His preferred medium is acrylic on canvas. Over the last decade he



2. *The Blue Angel*, 1998. Acrylic on canvas. 24" x 36" (61 cm x 91.4 cm). Private collection.



3. *Gathering of Beauty*, 2003. Acrylic on canvas. 36" x 48" (91.4 cm x 121.9 cm). Private collection.





4. *Self-Portrait*, 2001. Acrylic on canvas. 20" x 24" (51 cm x 61 cm). Private collection.



5. *Buffalo Back Fat — Rolling Stone*, from *The Magazine Series*, 1999. Acrylic on canvas. 43" x 34" (109.2 cm x 86.4 cm). Collection of the artist.

has worked in a variety of styles, counting Marc Chagall, the cubists and surrealists as major inspirations (Figs. 2, 3). Equally influential have been his love/hate relationship with popular culture, his Indian heritage, his Roman Catholic upbringing, and his need to document the highs and lows of his personal relationships. A poet and painter of disarming candor, he puts his heart on his canvas for all to see.

It is a heart that has been shaken several times. In 1998, at the age of eighteen, Riel lost his older brother Justin to suicide. His death was the last of nine suicides to occur in the community over the previous twelve months. In the wake of this personal tragedy Riel turned to art making for solace, channeling his grief and anger into a series of twelve paintings of historic Indian figures who were transposed onto the covers of popular magazines (Figs. 5, 6).<sup>6</sup>

*The Magazine Series*, completed in 1999, instilled in Riel a new pride in his Native heritage and brought him a great deal of media attention. The series, which toured Saskatchewan from 2004 to 2006, signaled Riel's entry into the broader Canadian art world, where he was promoted as an up-and-coming artist and a youth role model. To honor the memory of his late brother, Riel created a distinctive butterfly symbol from his brother's two initials, J and B, including it on all future paintings beside his signature, which now simply reads "Riel."

I was introduced to Riel Benn through a profile that ran in the Spring 2003 issue of *SAY Magazine* — *SAY* being an acronym for Spirit of Aboriginal Youth. At the time, I was searching for self-portraits to include in the *About Face* exhibition, and Roxann Barker's profile, *Riel Benn: Painting with Passion* (2003), featured a striking image of the artist from 2001 that Zena Pearlstone and I sought to include in the show (Fig.4). We later learned that Riel had created several other self-portraits, rendered in a wide range of styles.

Nothing, however, prepared us for the painting *Self-Portrait of the Artist with Alter Ego* (Fig. 1), which was brought to our attention by curator Catherine Mattes, and which became our final choice for the show.<sup>7</sup> The painting is a split image depicting the artist on the left, devoid of clothing and artifice, and his alter ego, The Best Man, on the right, dressed in lavender formal attire.

The Best Man is a complex and contradictory creation that began appearing in Riel's paintings when he was seventeen. In his artist's statement for *About Face*, Riel describes The Best Man as a trickster, a joker, an ignorant fool, a pessimist and a romantic failure. His look and outlook derive from many sources: from the skinny kid with long hair and glasses that was the teenage Riel; from the character of Simon Templar on the television show *The Saint*, who was a master of many disguises; from Gary Oldman's role as the vampire in the 1992 film *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, and later on, from Johnny Depp's character in the 2005 film *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. And, of course from the Lakota trickster Iktomi,



whose stories Riel heard while growing up (McCoy 2009:60–71). Viewers might also find in *The Best Man*'s demeanor traces of an old-time magician, a silent movie villain, a circus ringmaster and even the surrealist Salvador Dali. Still, *The Best Man* is a uniquely envisioned moral crusader with a sky blue heart, a twist of prayer beads and an avian companion for trustworthy counsel.

Over the last decade Riel and *The Best Man* have collaborated on close to thirty paintings, which document *The Best Man*'s antics and sometimes unsettling observations. So far, none of these works has been offered for sale, a fact that frustrates gallery owners. For the moment, they are pages from a visual diary, to be shared with the general public but not sold to them. Apart from two exhibitions curated by Catherine Mattes at western Canadian galleries, *The Best Man* paintings have had limited exposure. That said, as the series continues to grow, along with *The Best Man*'s reputation, Riel may come under increasing pressure to part with some of the artworks, or at least consider making reproductions.

In the spring of 2006, Riel presented a selection of his paintings at the New Sun Conference on Aboriginal Arts, which I host annually at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario. (He told the audience that he began to paint at sixteen, but had to wait until he was eighteen for his career to take off. They laughed.) Later that year, in early July, I traveled to the artist's home on the Birdtail Reserve to learn more about his trickster alter ego, and to view *The Best Man* paintings in person. I found them vying for space with his many other pieces in the basement of his parents' house.<sup>8</sup> It was an enlightening visit. Since all *The Best Man* paintings reside with Riel, I was able to see the entire series, and discuss each piece with him at length (Benn 2006). In this article, however, I have restricted my discussion to those I found particularly compelling. There is certainly much more to say.

The earliest *Best Man* paintings reflect a critical disenchantment with the mainstream cultural construction of romance and idealized relationships. This is not a theme addressed by many other young male artists, Indian or not. In the first eponymously titled painting from 1997 (Fig. 7), *The Best Man* pops out of a gift box like a surprise wedding guest, a bemused jack-in-the-box, dressed in his finest formal attire, half-heartedly sprinkling confetti on a generic couple gambling on a life of wedded bliss. They stand before a stairway to heaven, immortalized in the classic rock song of the same name by Led Zeppelin.<sup>9</sup> It is a festive occasion, but *The Best Man* is pessimistic about their chances for happiness. His gaze wanders toward the figure of a silhouetted runner in the "painting within a painting," titled *Singular Purpose*, which is based on the cover art of a book with the same title, which promotes celibacy among Christian youth. The book had a profound impact on Riel. From past experience, both Riel and *The Best Man* have decided that pursuing intimate relationships with women is too costly, and not worth the emotional investment.



6. *Young Man Afraid of His Horses* — *Vanity Fair*, from *The Magazine Series*, 1998. Acrylic on canvas. 41" x 29" (104.1 x 73.7 cm). Collection of the artist.



7. *The Best Man*, 1997. Acrylic on canvas. 24" x 36" (61 cm x 91.4 cm). Collection of the artist.





8. *Mr. Right*, 2004. Acrylic on canvas. 30" x 40" (76.2 cm x 101.6 cm). Collection of the artist.



9. *The Romantic Failure*, 2003. Acrylic on canvas. 30" x 40" (76.2 cm x 101.6 cm). Collection of the artist.

Especially when all you want to do is paint. It is (arguably) less stressful to pursue a single life. Clearly, this is a trickster tale with a difference. The Best Man is not the sexual glutton whose ribald adventures helped define an oral tradition. In fact, he is the opposite. Then again, that is the trickster's way.

*The Three Legged Race* portrays an equally discouraging vision of marriage, played out on a colorful landscape lifted from the Hollywood children's classic *The Wizard of Oz*. While a struggling couple of newlyweds limps down the Yellow Brick Road, shackled together for life, The Best Man rests at the finish line, no longer caught up in the race to find a soulmate to complete his life. He is finished with all that, and seemingly at peace. Riel continues to ponder the relationship game in *Checkmate*. In this painting, The Best Man lounges in an easy chair, his gaze directed to a chessboard set up on a pedestal table. The chess pieces resemble members of a bridal party. Having opted out of the game himself, The Best Man is now free to watch the moves and countermoves of the men and women on the board and still in the game, who presume to control their own destiny. On the gameboard of life, they are both players and pawns. Judging from the words written on the balloons The Best Man is holding, the prize package for the winners consists of jealousy, spousal abuse, adultery and divorce. This is one dark balloon bouquet.

In *Lady Picture Show* Riel appropriates the title of a song, along with the sultry image of an exotic dancer, from a music video by the rock group Stone Temple Pilots. Again, interpersonal relationships are cast as a game of chance and competition, this time, a card game with men striving to become Kings of Hearts and women, Queens of Hearts. The Best Man, on the other hand, is happy to play the Joker. It is a much safer role, and less likely to cause heartache. *Trippin' on a Hole in a Paper Heart* is the title of another painting named for a song by the aforementioned band. Here, Riel reproduces some of the song's lyrics alongside ads from the personals columns of print publications to comment on what he perceives to be a sad social climate of desperation where people sell themselves — and sell themselves short — in a rush to find the perfect partner. As in many of his other works, Riel critiques the mass media for its part in creating and perpetuating the fear of being alone and the myth of the ideal soulmate. Juxtaposed with the ads, the song lyrics plead for the recognition of basic human dignity: "turn the page, I'm not for sale." Here, The Best Man stumbles across the canvas, but in the process, turns the page.<sup>10</sup>

In *Mr. Right* (Fig. 8) Riel adapts the children's nursery rhyme "Hey Diddle Diddle, the Cat and the Fiddle" to further explore the myth of the perfect soulmate — in this case the ideal man, the knight in shining armor who will ride up on a white horse and sweep a woman off her feet. How can the average man compete with this, Riel seems to ask, while The Best Man plays a gleeful jig in a starlit cemetery, and a cow jumps over the moon. It is high



melodrama to be sure, as well as a most exasperating youthful vision. Is it not time to bury the notion of Mr. Right once and for all, along with its many unrealistic expectations? Alas, this may be easier said than done, easier to paint than accomplish. Etched on the gravestone are the words, "Mr. Right, forever in the hearts of women." Like the trickster Iktomi and Dracula, Mr. Right may be hard to kill. Some mythic figures display remarkable death-defying resilience.

Not only must the average young man compete for female attention with imaginary suitors from the past, he must also contend with men whose mythic proportions have been sculpted in the present. In *The Puppeteer* (see Mattes 2004) Riel looks at the cult of celebrity male body-builders and their vain pursuit of physical perfection. The fact that his female friends are impressed with these specimens of male pulchritude confirms his worst fears. Once more, he faults the mainstream media — here personified by The Best Man as a grand master puppeteer — for manipulating the minds of the general public, instilling in men a dissatisfaction with self-image, and in women a questionable appreciation for the reconfigured male physique. For Riel, the shallowness and gullibility are galling. After all, a well-toned body comes with no guarantee of happiness. It is no match for the sharp and sensitive mind of an artist and poet. But that is a hard case to make in today's image-conscious world.

When bad luck and bad relationships leave an artist feeling battered and bruised, it is no surprise to find his alter ego portrayed as fragmented and shattered. In *The Romantic Failure* (Fig. 9) Riel turns to cubism once more to convey the competing thoughts and emotions swirling around in his brain. It is an image of The Best Man we have not seen before. Despite the visual tension, Riel says the painting shows that The Best Man has accepted and even embraced his fate as a romantic failure. It is a way of coming to terms with reality and beginning to heal, a way of getting on with his life, a celibate life. The rainbow in the window affirms the promise of a brighter tomorrow. As for the diminutive young woman in the cup, she is no longer Riel's cup of tea.

So how bad were the relationships that led the artist to opt out of the dating game? A clue can be found in the painting *Wrath of the Roses* (Mattes 2004), in which The Best Man appears to be trapped in a bud vase, struggling against floral adversaries intent on choking and smothering him. He is quickly becoming invisible, much like the Invisible Man in the famous Hollywood movie of the same name. Never at a loss for an accessible metaphor, Riel would not be the first person to envision his life as a tragic film.

However, not all women have rushed to smother Riel with affection. In fact, some (and this includes some of my own female students) have serious reservations about his use of cartoon violence, and depictions of women in works such as *Royal Flush* (Fig. 10) and *Barbie Girl* (Fig. 11). His critics tend to read such paint-

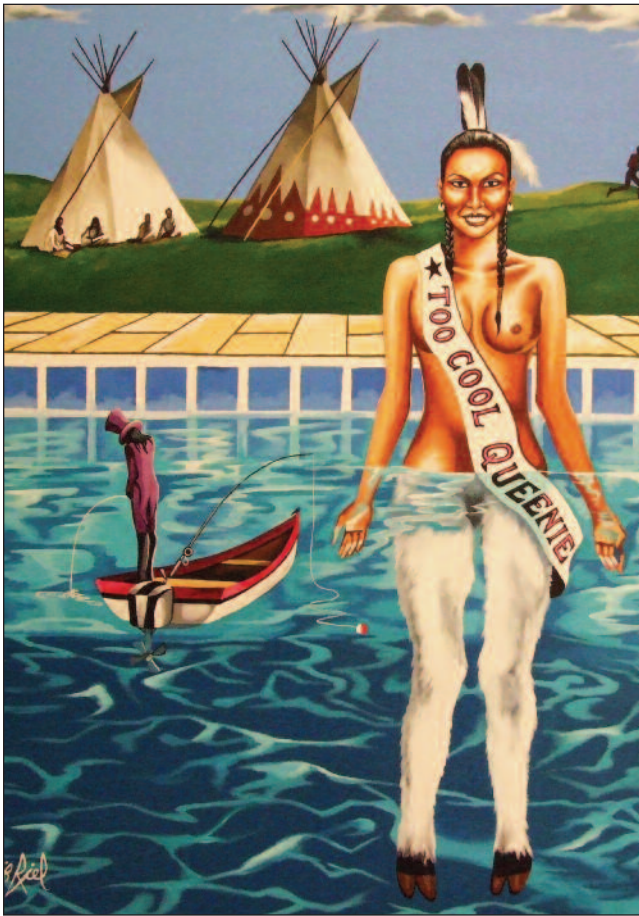


10. *Royal Flush*, 2004. Acrylic on canvas. 30" x 40" (76.2 cm x 101.6 cm). Collection of the artist.



11. *Barbie Girl*, 2005. Acrylic on canvas. 36" x 45" (91.4 cm x 114.3 cm). Collection of the artist.





12. *Too Cool Queenie*, 2004. Acrylic on canvas. 36" x 48" (91.4 cm x 121.9 cm). Collection of the artist.



13. *The Tragic Beauty Contest*, 2007. Acrylic on canvas. 36" x 44" (91.4 cm x 111.8 cm). Collection of the artist.

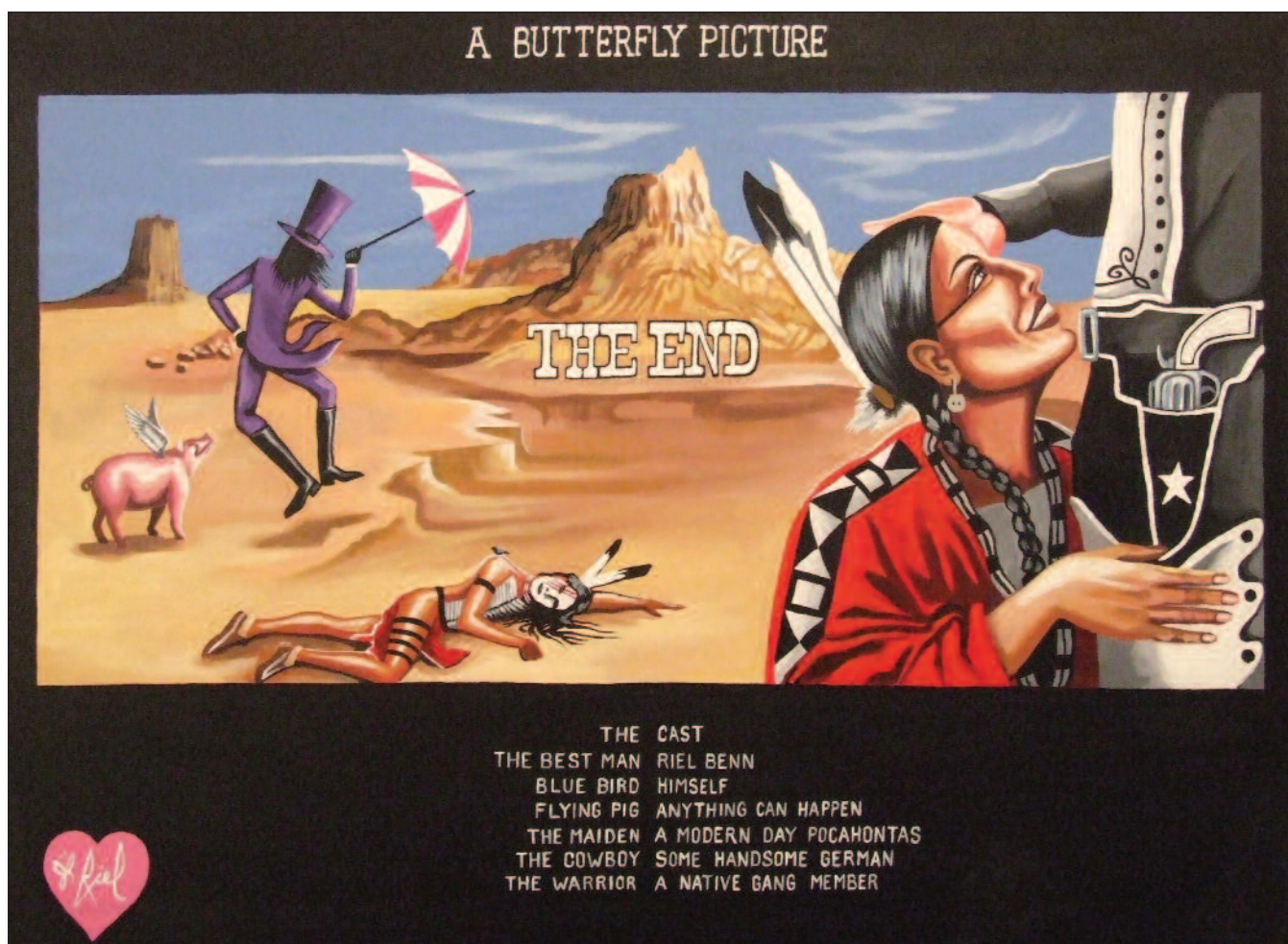
ings literally rather than metaphorically, invariably inverting the artist's original intentions, which he says are not misogynistic. Compounding the problem is the fact that trickster narratives are rarely what they seem at first glance. For example, according to Riel, *Royal Flush* decries the sexualization and exploitation of women in mass media magazines, and advocates flushing them down the toilet — the magazines, that is, not the women. In *Barbie Girl*, The Best Man appears in the guise of a master showman and consummate illusionist. Rather than dismembering his comely assistant, which is a familiar magic trick, he physically deconstructs a shapely doll to reveal its plastic and inhuman qualities. His performance is met with thunderous applause. Still, without the explanation, it is easy to misread both paintings.

Some viewers are not sure what to make of *Too Cool Queenie* (Fig. 12) either. It is a bizarre fusion of traditional tribal and contemporary urban imagery that is more than a little puzzling. Riel's explanation is revealing. The title is taken from another song by the Stone Temple Pilots on their CD *Shangri-La Dee Da* (2001), while the artwork for their CD *Tiny Music...Songs from the Vatican Gift Shop* (1996) has been appropriated and radically refashioned for a hip young Indian audience. The theme of the painting is a slice of modern day tribal youth culture seldom reflected in contemporary Indian art. It marks the time Riel was snubbed by a beautiful powwow dancer who considered him unworthy of inclusion in her social circle. The daughter of a wealthy tribal chief, she is pictured here skinny dipping in the family pool, while off to one side in the background The Best Man urinates into the pool from a fishing boat to register his disgust at both the personal slight and material inequity. In this painting, mutual immaturity is captured in a surreal and beautifully rendered moment.

Riel has continued to explore tribal histories and present-day realities in two more recent pieces. In *The End* (Fig. 14) a painting-cum-movie poster, the artist addresses the cinematic construction of aboriginal experience, casting a Native gang member as a fallen warrior and a modern-day Pocahontas as a submissive maiden to a handsome German cowboy. In this fantasy world, Monument Valley is still the homeland of choice for all tribes. Calling for an end to such big screen fabrications, The Best Man disrupts the scenario, dancing across the set and into a more enlightened future with his trusty sidekick, the flying pig of endless possibility.

In *The Tragic Beauty Contest* (Fig. 13) Riel extends his concern for today's youth beyond the Native community to address the issue of anorexia, an international health problem linked to the image of female perfection produced and promoted by the media — with dire consequences for the many youths who would pursue such perfection. The painting picks up on a theme explored earlier in *Barbie Girl* (Fig. 11). Here, The Best Man swoops down from heaven like a latter-day angel to offer sustenance to an emaciated young woman whose





14. *The End*, 2006. Acrylic on canvas. 30" x 40" (76.2 cm x 101.6 cm). Collection of the artist.

efforts to emulate the beauty pageant contestants have brought her to death's door. The Best Man's heroic and lifesaving gesture transcends race, religion, culture and nationality. Here, we see The Best Man at his best, in the role of a transcultural sacred clown, able to connect with and speak to the experiences of young people in a visual, textual and musical language they both use and understand.

Riel's colorful cautionary tales are no less entertaining nor value laden than those of the trickster Iktomi, whose narrative legacy he inherits and perpetuates through the exploits of his alter ego, The Best Man.

### **An Epilogue...of Sorts**

Fifteen years ago archaeologists discovered evidence of a thousand-year-old Indian camp located between the Birdtail Reserve and the present-day town of Miniota, Manitoba. In early 2008 Riel was commissioned to paint a four-by-eight-foot mural depicting precontact life on the northern prairies, to be displayed on the outdoor deck of the new Miniota Museum, set for completion in 2009. In late 2008, Riel was invited by VANOC, the organizing committee for the 2010 Winter Olympics taking place in Vancouver, British Columbia in February 2010, to join an indigenous artists' collective representing Native peoples from central Canada, Manitoba and the northern Plains.

*Riel Benn continued on page 71*



15. *Nuclear Symphony*, 2009. Acrylic on canvas. 36" x 44" (91.4 cm x 111.8 cm). Collection of the artist.



The collective is one of five groups of Native artists asked to create works for display at the Olympics.<sup>11</sup> After a period of initial brainstorming, Riel's group opted to make a series of sculptures of ravens, with each artist contributing a uniquely designed creation to the final piece. According to Riel, the ravens will be installed together "like a grand opening at a powwow" outside a Vancouver curling rink.

As part of the agreement with VANOC, each artist was asked to produce two additional works to be auctioned at the Olympics, with the proceeds split between the organization and the artist. Unlike many of the other artists, who, according to Riel, did paintings of nature and wildlife in styles so similar you could not tell one from another, Riel engaged the Olympic theme directly, creating the cubist-inspired paintings *Olympic Snowflake* and *Ice Angel*. Capturing the occasion perfectly, both paintings seem to pulse with youthful energy. In the former, a swirl of maple leaves radiates from a central medicine wheel and tumbles across the canvas, while in the latter, a young female skater is an ice crystal blur and pure poetry in motion, recalling the many cubist angels Riel has painted in the past (Fig. 2). The artist also observes that, many times, those figure skaters like to wear some cool costumes (Benn 2009).

Both of the Olympic paintings are included in the album of photographs titled "Riel and his paint brush," posted on his recently created Facebook site, where he is already attracting a lot of new friends. And visitors remain just friends. As he approaches his thirtieth birthday, Riel affirms that he is even more dedicated to living a simple, celibate life where he can focus on his painting. "I'm married to my work," he says (Benn 2009).

Also posted on the Facebook site, for balance perhaps, is the most recent Best Man painting, *Nuclear Symphony* (Fig. 15), a color-drenched Daliesque vision of a post-apocalyptic world where the floor flies away, the music fails to play and a grieving Mother Earth begins to melt. Another cautionary trickster tale. Is anybody listening?

## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> In conjunction with the exhibition, the Wheelwright Museum produced an elegant full-color catalog, with an introduction by Gerald McMaster, and essays by Janet Berlo and Lucy Lippard, among others (Pearlstone and Ryan 2006). I have used it as an Art History text for the last three years.
- <sup>2</sup> Well-known participants included Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Harry Fonseca, Kay WalkingStick, Robert Davidson, Rick Bartow, Joane Cardinal-Schubert, Ron Senungetuk, Melanie Yazzie, Neil David Sr., Roxanne Swentzell, David Bradley and Norval Morrisseau.
- <sup>3</sup> One visitor wrote: "We found some of ourselves in this exhibit, yet it is so individualistic — like this is a silent but crowded room." Other comments: "One realizes that each of us must create our own life and identity — regardless of culture — but Native Americans have a unique attachment to traditions which each person must choose to honor, challenge, disregard or transcend. These works demonstrate all these choices."; "The show is dynamic, beautiful, touching and will stay with me for a long time...It really made an impact!"; "I have never seen so much art that resonates with me. I am an elementary school teacher and so wish my students and community had access to this art. It is meaningful, so relevant, provocative and stunning. Thank you!!!"; "The show enriched my mind and soul."; "An astonishing body of work. I recently attended the new [National] Museum [of the American Indian] at the

Smithsonian and this exhibition captures much of its essence in much less space."; "I am grateful for your sharing and the frankness and openness and grace of these works...You knock me out."; "The artwork speaks of a shared humanity — too bad we have not treated each other with the same equity" (Anonymous 2005–2006).

- <sup>4</sup> Morrisseau was the subject of the first solo exhibition by a Native artist at the National Gallery of Canada in 2006. Curated by Greg Hill, the exhibition *Norval Morrisseau: Shaman Artist* traveled to several other venues thereafter. Morrisseau passed away in 2007 at age seventy-five.
- <sup>5</sup> When shown a photograph of the two paintings hanging together, Riel called the image "golden."
- <sup>6</sup> The other pieces in the series were *Quannah Parker–Rolling Stone*, *Medicine Crow–Vanity Fair*, *Ollokot–SPIN*, *White Belly–SPIN*, *Chief Joseph–US*, *Two Hatchet–US*, *Poundmaker–TIME*, *Naiche–TIME*, *Sitting Bull–People*, *Fast Walker–People*.
- <sup>7</sup> Catherine Mattes curated the show *The Best Man by Riel Benn*, for the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba in Brandon in 2004. Her curatorial essay, "Checkin' in to the Heartbreak Hotel — Riel Benn's 'The Best Man,'" can be found at [www.agsm.ca/pdf/benn.pdf](http://www.agsm.ca/pdf/benn.pdf). In 2006 she curated a second Best Man show *Riel Benn: Alter Ego* at the Red Shift Gallery in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. While Zena Pearlstone and I were limited to one image per artist for *About Face*, we did not abandon Riel's 2001 self-portrait altogether, including it instead in our catalog essay (Pearlstone and Ryan 2006:42). We noted that in the painting Riel "presents himself with bold color in a stance crackling with energy. His hair is a bristly contrast to his calm but determined face, and his piercing eyes look directly at the viewer through his glasses. Although he was still recovering from several personal and family tragedies, Benn seems secure and unintimidated by the world around him" (Pearlstone and Ryan 2006:41; Barker 2003:29).
- <sup>8</sup> Riel has since acquired his own house on the reserve, affording him much more space to paint and store his artwork.
- <sup>9</sup> Strains of popular music weave through many of Riel's Best Man paintings.
- <sup>10</sup> Images of *The Three Legged Race*, *Lady Picture Show* and *Trippin' on a Hole in a Paper Heart* are included in Mattes (2004).
- <sup>11</sup> The other four groups represent the East Coast, the West Coast, the Inuit and the Métis.

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