

Norval Morrisseau art still bowls over
[Ontario Edition]

Toronto Star - Toronto, Ont.

Date: Mar 28, 2002

Start Page: K.07

Section: ENTERTAINMENT

A walk east along Prince Arthur Ave. toward Avenue Rd. was taking me deep into credit card country, where trained packs of Porsches lurk in underground parking lots. Just outside the Maslak-McLeod Gallery, I smelled smoke.

Uh-oh. I reached for my trusty Leatherman tool and rushed in. This wasn't a spray-on designer smoke smell. This was real smoke, from real wood.

Inside, I found no help was needed. The ashes were safely in a hearth, sort of an offering from gallery owner Joseph McLeod to the reason why anyone should be here in the first place: Norval Morrisseau.

My smoke-on-the brain cleared up like a shot. I was clobbered left and right by what I saw- actually by what the artist saw- by Morrisseau's painted moon-round owl's eyes gazing out from the canvases like baleful moon beams.

Over the fireplace is one of the better paintings hanging anywhere in Canada, Morrisseau's Self-Portrait As Copper Thunderbird. Upstairs is Nude, with the figure of a graphic, lusty naked woman, her body seemingly on fire. No dates of the pieces are available for "The Red Lake Years," as the show is called, but most of the pieces go back at least 30 years.

Dates. Time. I found myself playing catch-up really fast. I mean, just where along the way does one forget that Morrisseau's achievement, both on and off the canvas, may be the most singularly remarkable in Canadian art history, despite the misery and pain he's both endured and inflicted?

It's 40 years since his breakthrough show at Toronto's Pollock Gallery made him an international art star. Since then, it feels like Morrisseau's work has always been around, if not as an original then as one of the dozens of Morrisseau wannabes. More than just an influence on the Woodland School of Art, in the Red Lake area, Morrisseau's colours, contours and choice of imagery have become permanently fixed in the Canadian visual plain.

Ill health may be his problem but over-familiarity has become ours. Even the snazzy Prince Arthur address and the five-figure price tags on the walls for his work are part of the familiar, hence easily forgettable, Morrisseau tale.

Maybe he has been impoverished most of his life, but his art has gone upmarket and upscale, making it the archetypal late 20th- century Canadian cultural success story. It's that great liberal story where our rugged wilderness ways finally get the respect we think they deserve in the right, white-bread circles.

Morrisseau himself wasn't around at the gallery, nor was he expected. "He's sort of like the Scarlet Pimpernel," said McLeod. "He's never where anyone can find him. He likes it that way. No one knows where he is."

Actually, a little bit of sleuthing led to family now in Thunder Bay. Now 70, (or 71 or even 72, depending on your source), he's been confined to a wheel chair, suffering from Parkinson's Disease for the past six years. Until family members came to fetch him recently, he'd been in a Nanaimo B.C. nursing home.

Now back in the northwestern Ontario where most of the pieces in the gallery's show first saw the light, he's painting again. He even has an agent, Steve Potosky (Web site: artofthenorth.com).

This doesn't mean the end to Morrisseau's elusive ways. (He loves the trickster image, particularly when it's not on canvas.) For years March 14 has been given as his birthday, about the only fact about Morrisseau to remain unchanged and unchallenged over the years. (His birthplace, for instance, has been listed as Fort William- now Thunder Bay- in some sources, while others point to the Sand Point Reserve, near Beardmore, northeast of Thunder Bay.)

But only recently he received his new status card from the government, giving his birthday as "March 13, 1932."

"So he had two birthdays," said an acquaintance.

The Red Lake Years formally closes Saturday, but will in fact be around for the next few months, or at least as long as there is cash in local pockets to pay for the art on the gallery walls. And from what I hear, there might well be new work from Morrisseau to replace it. WHAT: The Red Lake Years, paintings by Norval Morrisseau

WHERE: Maslak-McLeod Canadian Art, 25 Prince Arthur Ave.

WHEN: Official close March 30

HOURS: Phone 416-944-2577