

# FUSE

## The stars are aligning themselves, in Winnipeg

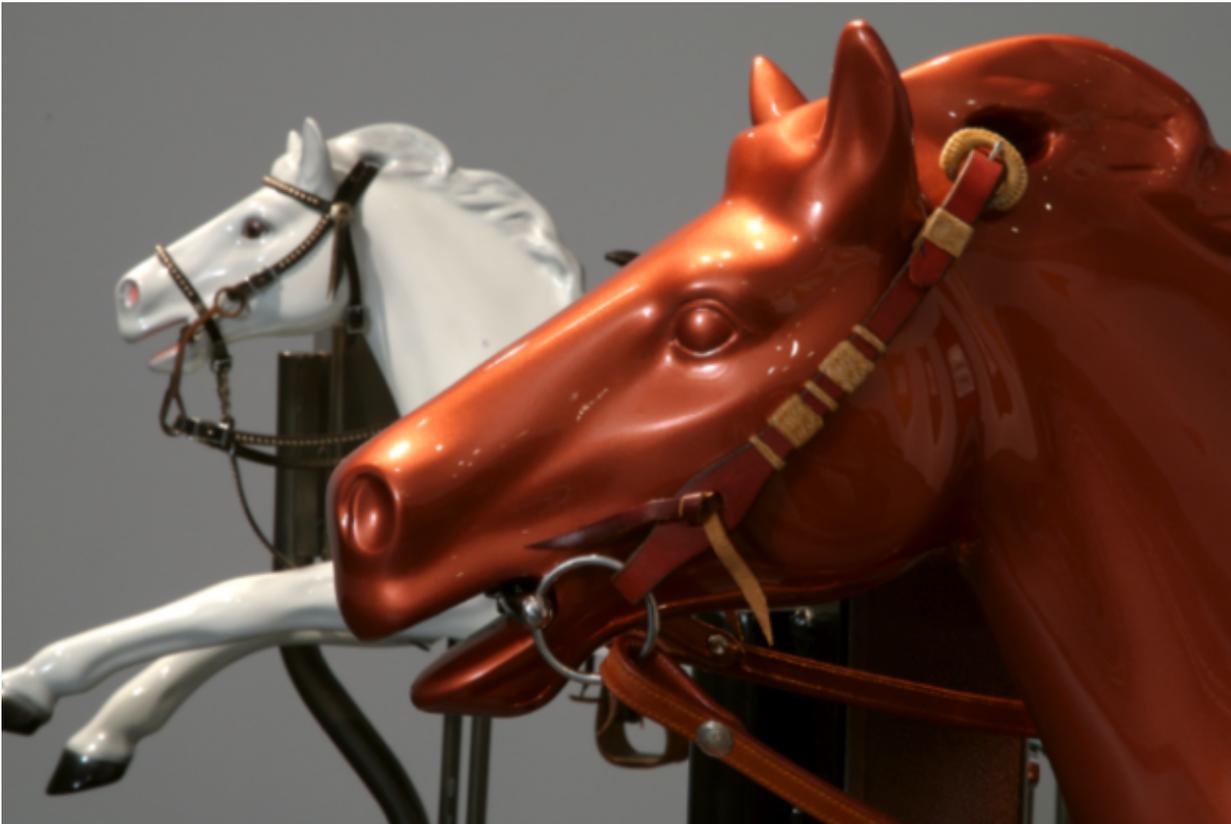


image caption: Mary Anne Barkhouse, *The Four Horses of the Apocalypse and the Donkey of Eternal*

“The world is at a crossroads. Now is the moment to reconfigure our notions of time to reveal alternative ways of thinking and being for the future. In *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years*, Indigenous artists imagine the future within the context of present experiences and past histories.”

— *Close Encounters* Curatorial Collective

The stars are aligning themselves, in Winnipeg. Many key factors have to be considered in the development of a project such as *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years*, a multi-venue exhibition of contemporary art by international Indigenous artists.

First of all, we’re in Winnipeg: the centre of the universe, or at least of North America. Winnipeg is the Cultural Capital of Canada for 2010. The key players in *Close Encounters* are the Winnipeg Arts Council, Plug In Institute for Contemporary Art, and Urban Shaman: Contemporary Aboriginal Art. Under the Directorship of Carol Phillips, the WAC was able to broker a multi-million dollar deal with the federal and municipal governments in support of the year’s activities, of which *Close Encounters* is to be considered the

banner project. Including the commissioning of work, multiple artist's talks, screenings and presentations, and the refurbishing of a new temporary 10,000 square-foot venue, *Close Encounters*, at the invitation of Plug In ICA Director Anthony Kiendl, is co-curated by emerging, established, mid-career, and senior curators: Jenny Western; Candice Hopkins; Steve Loft; and Lee-Ann Martin. It features work by more than 30 artists from across Canada, the United States, South America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, working individually as well as in collectives.

Winnipeg is a labour town. We get together, stick together, work together, love together, we strike together, support one another, especially in the arts. So when an initiative like *Close Encounters* is presented, it's no wonder that additional (parallel) partners are included to round out the venues in different ways. Urban Shaman: Contemporary Aboriginal Art [1], PLATFORM Centre for Photographic and Digital Arts, Gallery 1C03 at the University of Winnipeg, La Maison des artistes visuels francophones, North End Arts Centre and Graffiti Art Programming Inc. are all participating in some component, either as presentation spaces with Aboriginal artists of their own choosing, or as satellites for workshops and other programming opportunities. As one might expect, the official exhibition spans not just Plug In ICA's main and off-site spaces, but also the WAG, Manitoba Hydro's new downtown office and the Manitoba Museum's Planetarium.

Overall this exhibition is successful, but quiet. I mean that not as a slur. I prefer quiet work. Exhibitions of this scale are usually cluttered with overgrown installations and a pissing contest of who's who and what's what, and thankfully that is not the case here. *Close Encounters* is a fabulous amalgamation of contemplative, well-executed, dreamy art that is brought together to postulate what the future might have in store for Indigenous people a full millennium after European-North American contact, with an emphasis on what the current state of affairs allows for in terms of political debates (natural resources, sovereignty and self-identifying/mythologizing, understanding and perpetuating, etc). There's a certain amount of work that calls upon our extra-sensory perceptions: the marvelous and almost camp sculpture by Jeffrey Gibson that he describes as something akin to a battering ram, a phallus, and/or a giant's wand; or the bejeweled painting with accompanying kaleidoscopic black and white video projection by Ruben Patterson; or the ornately and unapologetically sentimental pop-culture-infused video by Rosalie Favell, which documents her family's history on the Red River and was presented in the Planetarium just like a Pink Floyd laser light show. Something else that should be mentioned is that *Close Encounters* marks the Winnipeg debut of work by James Luna and Brian Jungen, among many other international artists of note. How has it taken this long to present work by Jungen in Winnipeg. For the purposes of this text, I am not interested in discussing the work at hand all that much, forgive me; I'm far more interested in the situation into which this project is born for a Winnipeg audience.

Remember, we're in Winnipeg: the murder capital of Canada[2]; a city plagued by poverty, [3] racism, and an amnesia that somehow allows us to forget how disgustingly our citizens are treated by our leaders in city council, which in turn gets reinforced by the police department, and underscored by real estate speculators who keep our downtown unlivable. [4] Winnipeg is muddy water. Which leads me to the major corporate sponsor, in addition to being the most lackluster of venues, for *Close Encounters* — Manitoba Hydro. Right. Right! Right? Does anyone else see the irony in this gesture of partnership? Manitoba Hydro has been responsible for the flooding of many First Nations and Reserves in Manitoba over the last 50 years. Despite compensation packages in the hundreds of millions (yes, millions of dollars!), there is still not adequate drinking water (not to mention access to fresh fruits and vegetables or reliable healthcare facilities) on some Manitoba First Nations. Corporate responsibility should not mean sponsoring your reputation out of the gutter and into the art gallery. What does it mean for Manitoba Hydro to sponsor an exhibition of contemporary Indigenous art? Are they continuing to buy their recovery from bad PR? Such lip service in the context of Hydro's history of gross misconduct might make sense, if the exhibition contained any work either from communities affected by hydroelectric projects expressly or dealing with the situation in any direct way. The work that might approximate an engagement with the iconography of Hydro (Marja

Helander's pastoral photography, where a power station tower looms high above a figure in the landscape, or Jonathan Jones' beautiful but unfulfilling neon light sculpture in the shape of the Métis infinity symbol) ultimately fails to do so. This "miss" is compounded by the reality that these works are not installed in the Hydro building, but instead in the pristine new Plug In ICA gallery, removing the conversation just far enough, thereby elevating the artist's gesture to the aesthetic rather than the political. So might there be censorship underneath the pleasantries?

Speaking of lip service... Of course the WAG is stuck somewhere between being a co-organizer and a parallel presentation partner venue. Never one to have the foresight to come up with a good idea on their own, or to be quick to respond to one handed to them on a silver platter, the WAG's contribution to *Close Encounters*, predictably, is an assortment of Inuit prints and drawings they have held in their vaults and shown off-and-on for decades, coupled with a sporadic (but impressive looking) film series toward the end of the project's four-month stint. This goes hand-in-hand with the shameful reality that the WAG was never able to fulfill its promise to bring a full-time curator of Aboriginal art on staff. A decade since *Rielisms* (2000, curator: Cathy Mattes) the institution is still dragging its feet on committing to the present (let alone future) of contemporary Aboriginal art. [5] It was recently announced that the WAG will be going ahead with its (long overdue) Inuit Art Centre. [6] Housing the largest collection of Inuit art in the world, it would seem obvious for WAG to invest in such a research and presentation space as the Centre will provide, however it is appalling that they can barely facilitate presenting recent work by (living) Inuit artists during *Close Encounters*. Another disappointment is the reality that Winnipeg, an artist-run town by many accounts (with approximately 20 professional presentation venues) was unable to provide more support in terms of venues for display, partnership, or dialogue. There are a handful of great spaces that were either not approached or not used for *Close Encounters* (aceartinc.; Fleet Galleries; Gallery One One One at the University of Manitoba; Martha Street Studio; Semai Gallery; Video Pool Media Arts Centre; the Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque or their newly minted Black Lodge).

**Yes, this year the stars have aligned themselves in Winnipeg**... but will this example of the right people at the right time with the right amount of money compare to past achievements such as The National Gallery's *Land, Spirit, Power* (1992; curators: Dianna Nemiroff, Robert Houle and Charlotte Townsend-Gault) or The Canadian Museum of Civilization's *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives* (1992; curators: Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin) or will it go down in history closer to the Glenbow Museum fiasco *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First People* (1988; curators: Julia D. Harrison, et al), presented in conjunction with the Winter Olympic Games? [7] I suppose I can add the recent Vancouver 2010 debacle to this list, along with the Cultural Olympiad's interest in all things Aboriginal... except, of course, for land rights. Will *Close Encounters* carry with it historical prescience? Will it act as a stepping-stone for more in-depth analysis of the future of Aboriginal art practice internationally?

There is, believe it or not, some talk about *Close Encounters* acting as the debut of a biennial. Agh. *Sigh*. I think I've got a case of the biennial blues. We don't need another biennial, do we? If this train is already too fast to stop (which it likely is), can we at least see this as a roaming two-year project that will be taken across our country, into the States and beyond, not just presented in Winnipeg as something inevitably co-opted by the board of tourism?

J.J. Kegan McFadden is a Winnipeg-based cultural worker.

Notes:

[1] It should be noted that Urban Shaman is presenting two exhibitions as part of *Close Encounters: The*

*Next 500 Years*. Keesic Douglas' solo show, *Trade Me* [28 January - 19 March 2011] opened one week after the initial festivities for *Close Encounters*, followed by the group exhibition *Frontrunners* [28 May - July 17, 2011]. *Frontrunners* traces the contemporary Aboriginal art movement in Manitoba leading to the inception of Urban Shaman in 1996. Artwork featured will include work from the 1970s that reflects the artists' roles as social change agents for that time, including work by Norval Morrisseau, Daphne Odjig, Alex Janvier, Jackson Beardy, Carl Ray, Joseph Sanchez and Eddy Cobiness.

[2] globalwinnipeg.com "Manitoba named murder capital third year in a row", Wednesday, 27 October 2010: "In numbers released by Statistics Canada [...], Manitoba had the highest homicide rate of any province in 2009, topping the list for the third year in a row. Winnipeg also had the highest homicide rate among Canada's ten largest cities with 32 killings last year, for a rate of 4.15 homicides for every 100,000 people."

[3] Winnipeg also holds the dubious title of Child-Poverty Capital of Canada. See: winnipegfreepress.com, "Child poverty capital: 68% of aboriginal kids poor, report card states," 26 November 2010: "Almost three-quarters of aboriginal children aged six and under live in poverty in Manitoba. The depressing figure affecting 68 per cent of aboriginal children six and under is one of the reasons Manitoba is ranked the child-poverty capital of Canada for the second year in a row."

[4] At present, downtown Winnipeg is a cluster of bargain shops, empty storefronts, skywalks, and parking garages. Even The Bay store, once the symbol of prosperity in an otherwise bleak concrete reality, has been forced to make room in its basement space for Zellers. There are few florists, laundrymats, and at most three places to buy groceries for the 13,000 Winnipeggers who live downtown, or for the 72,000 (10% of the city's population) who work there.

[5] Now might be a good time to refresh our memory of the fact that two artist-run centres, *aceartinc.* and Urban Shaman, were the first in the city to present Rebecca Belmore in a post-Venice engagement in 2006. Belmore did show as part of *In the Blink of an Eye* a year later (Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2007; curators: Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan); this was a commissioned experimental film and video program featuring new work by twelve contemporary Canadian artists.

[6] Winnipegfreepress.com: "WAG planning \$30M Inuit Art Centre..." 4 September 2010. In the article, WAG Director, Stephen Borys, is quoted: "During the centennial season, extending from fall 2012 to summer 2013, "There will be Canadian art, European art and American art featured, but rising above them all, there's going to be a truly celebratory approach to the Inuit collection. It must be given its due."

[7] And why is it that there is only interest in contemporary Aboriginal art practice when other countries/outsideers are watching, or when there is a large festival or some kind (Olympics/Cultural Capital Projects/etc)? Are we not reinforcing a post-contact ghettoizing of Aboriginal ideas with these schemes? What would it look like if *Close Encounters* were 80% Indigenous and 20% non-Indigenous?