

*Bob Boyer: His Life's Work*CANADIAN MUSEUM OF
CIVILIZATION

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Winding your way through this tightly-packed exhibition is a gradual process of total immersion into the distinctive symbolic and spatial order of Bob Boyer's art. At its core, that order is defined by the traditions of indigenous Plains abstraction that Boyer embraced, explored and re-energized. His paintings are sometimes – especially early on – a battleground where conflicting symbols maul and maim one another. Later they tend to buzz with affirmative energy or rest in harmonious balance.

The retrospective's curator, Lee-Ann Martin, was a close friend and sometime collaborator with Boyer¹ and her tremendous affection for the artist is evident throughout the exhibition and the impressive catalogue that accompanies it. The show originated with the MacKenzie Art Gallery, where Martin was once curator. This is a fitting starting point given that Boyer was an artist and educator and his influence in Regina runs both wide and deep. Martin has organized the exhibition as a chronological journey through the artist's oeuvre, arranging temporary walls into a snaking journey beginning with juvenilia and ending with works created not long before his death in

2004 at the age of 56. While I find the early political paintings from the 1980s and early 1990s to be the most engaging and directly wired into the zeitgeist of their moment, there are also gems amongst his later more reflective works. As the summary of a life's project, the exhibition provides the sense of an artist who early on established a personal vision that fit him so comfortably that he inhabited it effortlessly for the rest of his career. The occasional weak spots – paintings that refuse to gel into convincing aesthetic statements and are therefore a little bland – are more than balanced by moments of fierce insight or deep contemplation.

Boyer did not set out to be an abstract painter. He arrived in the fine arts program at what is now the University of Regina in 1968, committed to landscape painting. Although the art program had a recent history as a centre of colour field painting, Boyer recalled the faculty as welcoming and open to him following his own path.² The exhibition includes a number of Boyer's early works. Modestly scaled and tightly painted, they are intriguing, but give no warning of the expansive abstractions to come. I was particularly charmed by *Red Kite, Red River (Park)* (1974), a small oil-on-panel with a square bottom and oval top that depicts his wife and child flying a kite in an open grassy area. His wife is squatting down and helping with the string, while the boy gazes out at the viewer. The field is golden and a line of evergreens bisect the composition horizontally in the middle distance. An old junked car sits at the

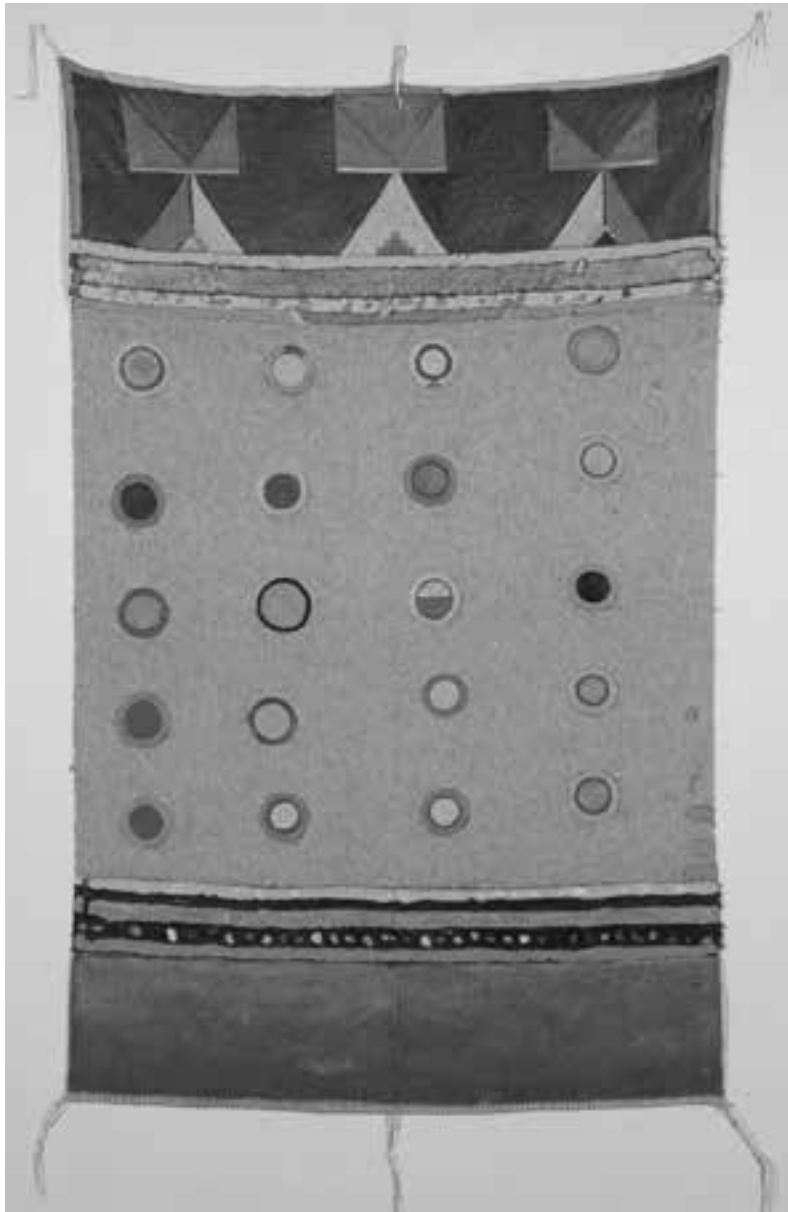
tree line. The kite is a tiny red speck against a profusion of blue-gray clouds. The composition is a little unusual with its centred horizon line and the figures positioned just to the right of the painting's horizontal centre. Convention would either have them centred in the image or positioned definitively off to one side. The different areas of the canvas are highly distinct from one another and the artist fills in each area with dense, repetitive details that create compelling effects of patterning. There seems to be a brushstroke for each blade of grass in the golden field, the pines have their own regularity of colour and composition and the sky is a marvellous pattern of swirling and overlapping shapes. These are all stylistic elements that I tend to associate with semi or self-trained artists, such as the 19th century topographical watercolourist Thomas Davies (1737–1812), or the eccentric William Kurelek (1927–1977). Perhaps, in a department committed to abstraction, a landscape painter was by necessity, an autodidact. Whatever the case, the effect is a little awkward, but focused and idiosyncratic enough to be compelling.

Only a few years after graduation, Boyer's interest in his Métis heritage led him to a different tradition of abstraction. There are stumbles in the early abstract works, places where outlines could be clearer, over-painting more opaque and definitive, and colour relationships more effectively managed. Despite this, the paintings reveal Boyer coming to grips with the compositional and symbolic logic of Plains abstraction and we are able to witness his life-long

commitments to form and content taking shape.

Aside from an early interest in decorated Plains war shields, the primary precedents for Boyer's art are the painted rawhide containers often known as *parfleches* and the beaded powwow regalia he regularly produced. *Parfleches* were traditionally made and decorated by women and at their best they are marvels of geometric abstraction. Many of Boyer's motifs are drawn from *parfleches* and beadwork, including the morning star, abstracted tipi designs, and stepped triangles. Boyer also adopted the *parfleche's* tendency for bilateral symmetry of composition. Because a *parfleche* is a folding object, artists would often play with the changes of shape, for example by painting outward facing triangles on opposite edges that would join together to create a diamond when the *parfleche* was closed. Boyer often uses these triangles in his paintings but the transformative joining must occur in the imagination, based on knowledge of the artist's visual sources.

In 1983 Boyer's work took an explicitly anti-colonial political turn. The support for his paintings changed from canvas to light-gray cotton-flannel blankets and there is new declarative insistence in his technique, with shapes and lines more forcefully rendered. The first blanket painting – actually in this instance a light-gray flannel sheet – was *A Smallpox Issue* (Fig. 1), a work that vibrates with the tension between its stunningly beautiful execution and its disturbing subject. There is controversy about the extent to which blankets were



1 | Bob Boyer, *A Smallpox Issue*, 1983, oil with rawhide on blanket, 190 × 122 cm, Saskatchewan Arts Board Permanent Collection. (Photo: MacKenzie Art Gallery)

deliberately used to spread smallpox in North America, but the limited archival evidence that we do have is bad enough. In 1763 during Pontiac's Rebellion, Henry Bouquet, a colonel in the British Army, wrote to General Amherst:

I will try to inoculate the
Indians by means of Blankets

that may fall in their hands, taking care however not to get the disease myself. As it is pity to oppose good men against them, I wish we could make use of the Spaniard's method, and hunt them with English dogs, supported by Rangers, and some Light Horse, who would I think

effectively extirpate or remove that Vermin.³

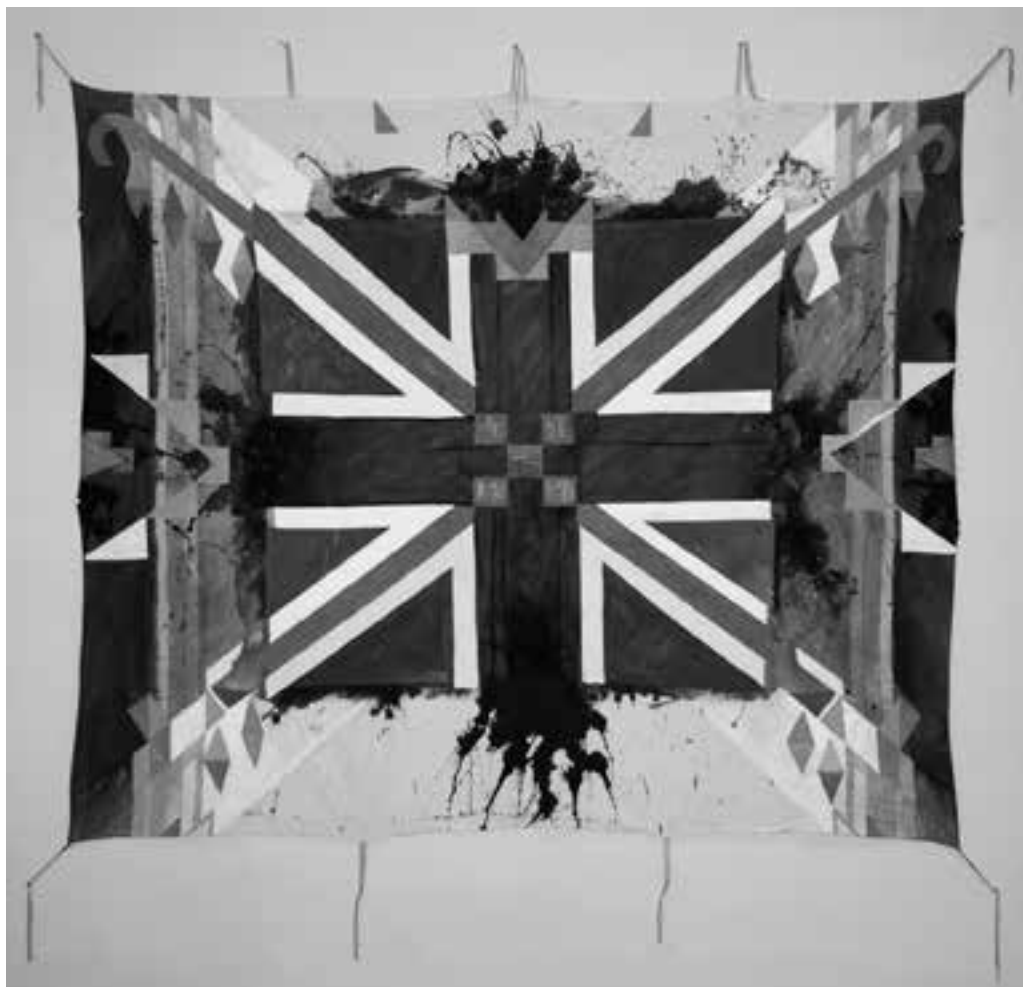
Boyer has oriented the flannel sheet vertically and divided off wide horizontal bands at the top and bottom. The upper band is a dark Prussian blue and decorated with three tipi motifs in light blue and red. The bottom band is a mottled red-orange. The separation of these areas from the centre is further emphasized by rows of horizontal stripes, although in the case of the upper band this barrier appears to be in the process of being traversed by heavily painted dashes of turquoise, green and red.

The large centre area of the composition has a loose grid of “pox” circles set four across and five high on the otherwise unpainted gray flannel. This grid is set slightly off centre to the left. The circles themselves have variations. Most have one or two coloured outer rings for borders and sometimes also a faint border of exposed under-painting. One has the centre circle divided horizontally. The variation in design and the push and pull of the colours creates a vibrant visual play across the flannel surface. The intensely pigmented paint sits up in a confident impasto on the fuzzy surface. Perhaps the most elegant touch is the series of discrete gray marks painted on the gray felt background near the bottom right of the central section: three short dashes right to the edge of the blanket and two dots above these.

Disturbing beauty is not a device Boyer returned to often. The jarring colours and expressionistic splatter

used in *A Minor Sport in Canada* (1985) (Fig. 2), for example, deliberately resist aesthetic pleasure. One presumes that the minor sport is violence toward indigenous peoples and the artist places the conflict out where it can be seen rather than leaving it to gnaw away at us from aesthetic cover. As in a number of works from this period, Boyer treats his painting as an arena of conflict between culturally coded signs in the form of abstracted shapes. These include Plains motifs such as stylized tipis and horses, which are often set against the national flags of colonial powers or settler states. Boyer’s use of flag motifs has a substantial precedent in Plains art, where warrior-artists often adopted them as potentially mobile emblems of power ripe for appropriation rather than as symbols of a particular enemy nation state. However, the flags flying over the Plains during Boyer’s life staked unequivocal claims for the authority of the settler nation states. With them fixed across the landscape in this way, the artist is driven to acts of vandalism and subversion rather than appropriation.

At the centre of *A Minor Sport* is a Union Jack that appears less to have been painted onto a blanket than to have violently impacted with it and stuck there. Dark bloody red paint splatters out from under the flag, especially near the edges of the central red Cross of Saint George. This is the component of the union flag representing England and in Boyer’s design it appears to be the source of much of the sanguinary gore.⁴ Its usual uniform bright red has been darkened into mottled dried and clotted eggplant purple. Plains motifs



2 | Bob Boyer, *A Minor Sport in Canada*, 1985, acrylic and oil on cotton blanket, 188 × 221 cm, Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, no. 29757. (Photo: © National Gallery of Canada)

not only surround the Union Flag, but extend its lines and encroach upon it. There are five squares overlaying the flag's central intersection each worked over energetically with a brush. The red and white X is extended out to terminate in stylized curved eagle staffs on the top and sacred tobacco pipes on the bottom. A Plains stepped triangle design encroaches and overlays the flag from

the top and similar designs cover the bloody spatters on either side. Like his contemporary Carl Beam (1943–2005), Boyer uses the technique of layering his motifs to suggest a sphere of cultural interaction violently disturbed by the exercise of power and the struggles of resistance. The flatness of the imagery creates a sense that each symbol is competing in a claustrophobic two-

dimensional space. We are obliged to ask whose symbols will literally end up on top and whose will be buried from sight.

The sanguinary imagery merits further reflection. Splatters and other expressionistic gestural signs need to be handled with caution. As Hal Foster noted in, “The Expressive Fallacy,” his attack on 1980s neo-expressionism, the gesture has become a codified sign of bodily immediacy and is therefore paradoxical.⁵ It can also, especially when the splatters are blood-red, seem a bit adolescent. The few times he uses it, Boyer is able to make it work precisely because of how odd it is to see abstract geometric shapes and symbols bleeding. It becomes a sign not simply of the body, but of an absent or repressed body, a body lost to trauma, substituted by symbols and then recovered through symbolic exploration.

The red and white stripes of the American flag in *A Government Blanket Policy* (1983), sit up on the surface in confident impasto. The flag is a mirror-reversal travestied into an Anglo-American hybrid. The field of stars representing individual states sits in the upper right, rather than left corner and it has been overlaid with the red crosses of the Union Jack, which themselves seem to be dissolving around the edges. A black X sits at the left edge of a central white stripe, suggesting it might also be the signature line for a treaty. The bottom edge of the flag functions as an inverted ground line for a series of three upside-down tipis, perhaps representing, as curator Lee-Ann Martin suggests, “a world forever turned upside-down”⁶

by colonization. Vertical bands of blue running up the outer edges of the composition are marked in three corners with highly stylized Plains horse motifs, and “U.S.” in the bottom left.

The winding path of this exhibition leads to a central space that features works from the early 1990s. For indigenous artists this was a period of intense lows such as the Oka Crisis and impressive highs: breakthrough exhibitions like *Land, Spirit, Power* at the National Gallery and *Indigena* at the Museum of Civilization. Martin, who co-curated *Indigena* with Gerald McMaster, told me that Boyer’s retrospective is not only in the same gallery, but that his massive triptych, *Trains-N-Boats-N-Plains: The Nina, the Santa Maria and a Pinto* (1991), now hangs in almost exactly the same spot it did during *Indigena*. The work still crackles with the political energy that was mobilized at this time to undermine official celebrations of the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the Americas. In each panel a red cross dominates the centre of a large blanket painted with Plains motifs. Each drips splatters of blood-like red paint, and a red stain saturates the canvas behind the vertical axis of the cross on the centre panel. Right at the bottom of both the left and right panels are pairs of skulls and crossbones. The skulls are upside down, perhaps staring upward at the German word *Verdrängung* that is written across the top of each panel. According to Martin, Boyer encountered the term on a CBC radio program, where he learned that Germans used it to

describe the repression of knowledge of the Holocaust.⁷ It's easy to see the resonance this concept would have had for Boyer, whose canvases had been erupting with repressed colonial trauma for years.

Along the floor in front of the painted panels are little mysterious bundles of various objects wrapped in maps of North America and tied up with string. This gives the work as a whole the quality of a shrine, in which the offerings have been symbolically overwritten through a process of conquest and renaming. In other words, this is more symbolic warfare that Boyer intends to win.

On the facing wall is *F.U.S.Q.-Tanks for the Memories* (1992), Boyer's response to the Oka crisis. This is a work on paper rendered primarily in pastel, a medium that Boyer uses with confidence. It allows him to compose his familiar shapes through a dynamic hatching that threatens to overwhelm their borders, leaving them vibrating with tremendous energy. The work has been drawn on four sheets of equally sized paper. The middle two are framed together to create a wide central panel and the work reads visually as a triptych with the bilaterally symmetrical outer drawings as wing panels. It can also just as easily be read as the edges of a parfleche pouch waiting to be folded together. In the centre is an aerial view of an abstracted tank, guns bristling in all directions and bounded by vertical rows of X shapes on either side. There are also a *fleur-de-lis* motif in each of the outer drawings. The entire background is mottled with clusters of

faint red and white lines that appear to be scribbled and then erased, creating a bruised looking surface. Each page is subtly decorated with the one of the stencilled letters of the title, F on first panel, U on the second and so on. With the knowledge that the Sûreté du Québec, the provincial police force that initially attempted to remove Mohawks from the traditional territory they were defending, are known as the SQ for short, one need only read the title aloud to appreciate the rhyme and Boyer's intention.

Martin reads Boyer's last blanket painting, *Portrait of the Artist as a Storm* (1994) (Fig. 3), as a pivotal point in the artist's practice, a shift from the storm of the explicitly political works to a more reflective and spiritually oriented practice.⁸ The side and bottom edges of this work are cut into long fringes, intensifying its visual relationship to similarly decorated parfleche containers. The bilaterally symmetrical composition is dominated by mirrored horse heads with prominent power-line arrows pointing down toward their bodies. Painted in pastel pinks and white, the horses appear charged with supernatural energy with white and blue circles around one eye and spiky flaming yellow manes. A stylized yellow horse print sits in a blue square over each head. One senses that the power of the storm in the artist's psyche is in the process of being channelled and refined.

Indeed, even a year before, Boyer had already created the confident and serene *Scene/Seen at St. Victor's*. The title refers to the St. Victor Petroglyphs,



3 | Bob Boyer, *Portrait of the Artist as a Storm*, 1994, mixed media on blanket, 119 × 142 cm, private collection. (Photo: MacKenzie Art Gallery)

a sacred site in southern Saskatchewan. The surface is marked with geometric designs bounded on either side by buffalo tracks and on top and bottom with horse tracks. Martin decodes the symbolism:

Four buffalo tracks on each side represent a complete or “whole” number, with the fifth red

buffalo track representing the spiritual role of the buffalo to the Plains people. The “whole” nature of the number four is again suggested by the four blue-green “hills” which are in the “sky” of this diptych, symbolic of Plains cultural beliefs in a spiritual paradise or afterlife. Depicted in darker gray tones,

the fifth “hill” at the upper centre of the diptych depicts the ecological and spiritual imbalance of the Europeans, which brought destruction to Native communities and to the environment.⁹

Like many of Boyer’s paintings, this one does not reproduce well because the subtlety of the worked surface tends to be lost. Standing before the painting, however, the shapes are clearly defined against a pastel pink background with blue undertones, outlined in comparatively thin but strong lines of dark red and blue that seem almost incised rather than brushed on. The work is thickly painted and apparently re-worked while half-dry in places, creating a richly textured surface.

Without the force of the political anger that energized his practice in the eighties and nineties, some of Boyer’s later works drift beyond spiritual serenity towards being a little dull. Others, such as *Walk By the Water Woman* (1995), have a whimsical quality reminiscent of Paul Klee’s more pictographic paintings: simple motifs drawn into paint or plaster with childlike appreciation for simplified design. A few – for example, *Remember That Evening We Discovered Each Other* (1996) – go too far, straying toward cuteness, as though they were painted to illustrate a children’s book. There’s nothing wrong with this in itself, but it sits oddly in what is otherwise a very “grown-up” exhibition.

Bob Boyer: His Life’s Work is one of a number of recent major career-

surveys of established artists of indigenous heritage that began with Norval Morrisseau (1931–2007) at the National Gallery of Canada (NGC). This was followed-up by Daphne Odjig (1919–) and Carl Beam at the NGC, Alex Janvier (1935–) at the Art Gallery of Edmonton and Ruth Cuthand (1954–) at the Mendel Art Gallery. All but the Alex Janvier retrospective have been accompanied by substantial catalogues.

In many ways these monographic exhibitions are traditional canon-forming career surveys. This is particularly evident in their publications, which tend to rely heavily on well-established biographical approaches, either in the form of the career-survey essay or less formal personal reflections by close friends or colleagues. That said, as someone who writes and teaches in this area regularly, I find the laying of these foundations to be helpful on an almost daily basis. We will no doubt revise and further complicate these narratives as we go along but there will now be a substantive record of exhibition and publication to work from.

It should be noted that the trend for monographic exhibitions has been interrupted recently by the National Gallery’s massive pan-Indigenous exhibition *Sakahàn*, which has been promoted as a global indigenous Quinquennial. It will be interesting to see how the National Gallery manages to integrate single artist exhibitions into their ambitious five-year schedule for group shows of international indigenous art.

The *Bob Boyer* catalogue is an impressive 256 page bilingual document

with good quality colour reproductions of all the works in the exhibition. The most substantial essay by far is curator Lee-Ann Martin's thorough, thoughtful and affectionate survey of Boyer's career. It provides a record of the artist's activity along with analysis and contextualization of artworks that simply did not exist prior to this publication. "Bob Boyer and the Society of Canadian Artist of Native Ancestry (SCANA)," by Alfred Young Man is more of a reflection on the history and aims of SCANA in which Boyer is occasionally featured rather than a detailed account of the artist's role in the organization as such. The history of SCANA is an important one and Young Man is a primary source so I am interested to hear his account of it, even when it is largely anecdotal; but, given the venue, I would have liked the link to Boyer and his career to have taken centre-stage.

The two other essays in the catalogue are personal reflections that bookend Boyer's career. Ted Godwin's account, "Pauses on the Pollen Path," begins with his meeting the artist when Boyer was a first year undergraduate (and only indigenous student) in his Art 100 course at the University of Regina in 1969. In "On the Road with Bob," Carmen Robertson discusses her experience of joining the department of Indian Fine Arts at Saskatchewan Indian Federated College in Regina 2001, where Boyer was an established and respected figure who had been instrumental in building and running the studio program. I enjoyed both essays and it would be churlish to object to such warm, thoughtful and deeply felt

portraits, but considering the catalogue as a whole, they tip the document a bit too far in the direction of the anecdotal. It would have been good to balance these perspectives with an essay that was analytical in approach and focused more directly on Boyer's art. This is a minor quibble however; I plan to keep the book on a handy shelf, because I know I will be going back to it regularly for years to come.

Given that, I was disappointed to see how little effort has apparently been made to market and distribute the catalogue. When I visited the CMC to see the exhibition it was not for sale in the gift shop. I asked the sales clerk about this and was told there were no copies available. It is also not listed on the Amazon or Chapters/Indigo websites. I was finally able to get my own copy through the direct intervention of the curator, although I suppose I could have ordered it by telephone directly from the MacKenzie's gift shop. It seems perverse though, to produce such a lavish catalogue without a viable mechanism for actually distributing it to the public. This is mitigated somewhat by the fact that all of the catalogue essays and images, along with additional videos, are available on the exhibition's very thorough website at virtualmuseum.ca.¹⁰

Earlier, I described this exhibition as tightly packed. It is evident that Martin worked hard to effectively squeeze the work into the space after a substantial section of the gallery was unexpectedly lost to make room for *The Queen and Her Country* exhibit. I mention this not only as a cautionary foretaste of the CMC's potentially disturbing new future

as the Museum of Canadian History, but because the territorial appropriation is especially perverse in the context of this particular exhibition. Even worse: because the walls between the exhibits do not reach the ceiling, ambient audio for *The Queen*, intrudes constantly on the Boyer exhibit. The strains of *Rule Britannia* regularly flood the gallery, claiming it aurally on behalf of the crown. To this I say, in the spirit of Bob Boyer, who let no symbolic violence pass without response: “F.U.E.R.”

Travelling through this exhibition and arriving full-circle back at its beginning I was struck by the changes that occurred during Boyer’s all to short lifetime. It is an extraordinary journey from the courageous act of being the first indigenous student in an art program to becoming an artist and educator of such distinction and influence. Boyer and other indigenous artists of his generation left a lot of doors open behind them for the rest of us to walk through. Most of all, however, I am struck by the fact that an angry young man traumatized by the experience of colonization managed not only to transform those experiences into important art but, if that art is any indication, to bring himself a measure of peace and satisfaction in the process. That is encouraging to all of us.

NOTES

The author gratefully acknowledges the Canada Council for the Arts for assistance with travel expenses.

- 1 Bob BOYER and Lee-Ann MARTIN, *The Powwow: An Art History* (Regina, SK: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2000).
- 2 Lee-Ann MARTIN, “Bob Boyer: His Life’s Work,” *Bob Boyer: His Life’s Work* (Regina: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2008), 21.
- 3 The correspondence was first discovered by a research assistant of historian Francis Parkman and this portion of it was included in the 6th edition of Francis PARKMAN, *The Conspiracy of Pontiac and the Indian War after the Conquest of Canada*, Volume II (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1870), 40.
- 4 The Union flag is a composite design meant to symbolize the union of England and its conquests, Scotland and Ireland. The red cross at the centre of the design is the Cross of Saint George, representing England. The red X is drawn from Saint Patrick’s Flag, representing Ireland. Both of these sit overtop of the flag of Scotland, a white X on a blue field. There is no indication that Boyer meant to deploy these symbols at this level of detail, but distinguishing the components is very helpful in describing this work.
- 5 Hal FOSTER, “The Expressive Fallacy,” in *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1985), 58–77.
- 6 MARTIN, “Bob Boyer,” 39.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 66.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 73.
- 10 *Bob Boyer: His Life’s Work*. Accessed 2 June 2014, http://www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/expositions-exhibitions/bob_boyer/en/.