

Pictographs: The Graphic Art of James Simon Mishibinijima

James Simon

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Pictographs: The Graphic Art of James Simon Mishibinijima showcases the intriguing and haunting art of a master who combines the traditions of First Nation spiritual art with a penetrating outlook on modern society and ecology.

Raised in Manitoulin Island's Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve in the Lake Huron area, the artist grew up having two surnames: Simon, which was given to him by missionaries, and Mishibinijima, which is ancestral. Mishibinijima spent his early life surrounded by and fascinated by the pictographs of his culture. Once fluent in their language, he incorporated them into his own artistic endeavors.

At times, the pictographs read like nature-administered Rorschach tests, with one image immediately obvious but several other possible visual interpretations revealing themselves with prolonged analysis. "Serpent Spirits," for example, shows what first appear to be two human/bird chimeras, but hints of the serpents of the title can also be seen, prompting viewers to wonder: Are these forces complementary, or antagonistic? Which, if any, is dominant? These questions prompt longer, and repeated, viewings.

The pictographs' titles are listed on each opposing page, along with an occasional comment by the artist. But given the excellent introduction and primer by Tom Smart, curator and supervisor of the Peel Art Gallery, it's often best to admire and interpret Mishibinijima's drawings without any additional directional guidance.

Mishibinijima's pictographs are full of circled dots—symbols for life, energy, and intelligence that are often shown hidden within the outer contours of the creatures represented. There's an overall theme of environmental consciousness, and the aspiration of harmony with nature, that carries throughout the book. For example, "There's a Bigger Picture to Reliance" shows several animal figures superimposed on each other, sharing a common body part that could be the wing of a bird, the carapace of a turtle, or the shell of a snail. It's a simple yet elegant commentary on the common origins and common needs of living creatures.

Most of Mishibinijima's original pictographs are graphite on paper, losing nothing in translation to the printed black-and-white pages of the book. There are also some examples of a different style he began using in 1974, featuring interwoven branch and leaf lines and devoid of the animal representations depicted in the majority of the book. With these, the artist describes the colors of each piece in its respective commentary, as with "The Forest—Sanctuary":

—Greenish forest

—Brownish hills

—Red and yellow sunset

Or, with "Forest Edge": "Just tones of greens."

Though perhaps not as visually striking as his other pictographs, these works focus on plant life in a way the others don't, and they offer interesting studies in patterns, symmetry, and asymmetry.

Mishibinijima's art utilizes the seemingly primitive approach of pictographs in a sophisticated way while retaining the essence of what made them so effective for so much of human history. Though deeply relevant for contemporary society, *Pictographs: The Graphic Art of James Simon Mishibinijima* taps into a wellspring of creative thought that spans centuries.

PETER DABBENE (August 17, 2018)

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