

MARY ANNE BARKHOUSE

opimihaw

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27 JANUARY - 9 APRIL, 2022

A NOTE FROM THE AGSM:

Thank you for visiting Mary Anne Barkhouse's *opimihaw*. As one artwork suggests, this exhibition is an invitation to play, so it is in that spirit that we welcome you. Imagine rolling in the dirt like a bison, stalking like a wolf, remembering like a raven. Imagine sitting down at the long table, hosted by all the species of the Great Plains. We are grateful and honoured that Barkhouse has laid this table for us.

Some time after her visit to Wanuskewin, but before this exhibition at the AGSM, a bison or two took a dust bath near the Opimihaw Creek. In doing so, they revealed a series of petroglyphs—human-made marks on the stone dating back a millennium¹. The newly re-introduced bison found in a season or two what archeologists had been seeking for decades. Call it what you will—magic, metaphysics, coincidence—but the story is true and so the moral is real.

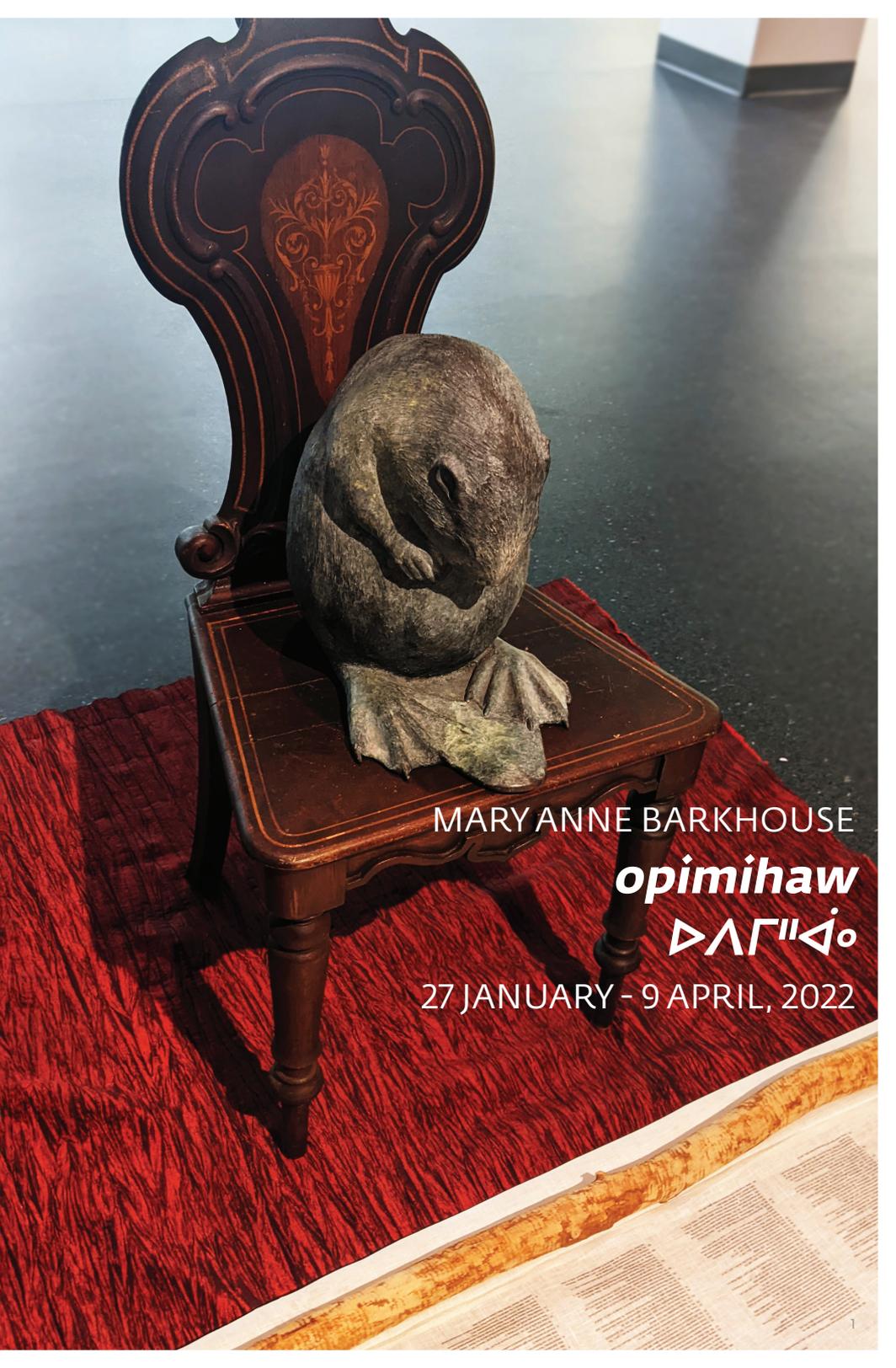
The tongue-in-cheek juxtaposition of Indigenous knowledges and histories onto settler-European media and practices is a familiar theme in Barkhouse's work. I am struck by the scale of this juxtaposition out here in the Prairies. We live in settlements that popped up so recently and so instantly that they trace a perfect cardinal grid, surrounded by fields that do the same, cut at right angles by long roads; while meandering rivers and ancient escarpments insist on organic posturing, affected by physics alone—geology, not geometry. Bison move in accordance with the latter forms. Perhaps the magic of their archeological discovery is actually a human failure, one of forgetting how to move through the landscape in the same way.

We give our thanks to the Canada Council for the Arts, the Manitoba Arts Council, and the City of Brandon, for their continued support. A heartfelt thank-you as well to Olivia Kristoff and the rest of the staff at Wanuskewin for their ongoing stewardship of that land and its history.

Lucie Lederhendler,
Curator, AGSM

The AGSM is located on Treaty 2 Territory, the homeland of the Métis Nation and the shared lands of the Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, Dene, and Anishinaabe peoples.

¹"Rock art found at Wanuskewin Heritage Park as 4 petroglyphs excavated," Pratyush Dayal, *CBC News*, November 19, 2021



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By Mary Anne Barkhouse

The recent re-introduction of bison into traditional territories holds the potential for profound outcomes from both a human and natural history point of view. Inspired by the diversity of life in the prairie landscape, new installations celebrate the restoration of bison to the area as well as acknowledge the importance of the diversity of species to the tapestry of the great northern plains.

Extirpation of species is not a new thing ... many have been exploited to satisfy market demands internationally; others have disappeared as collateral damage. Whether it was the extermination of beaver and bison, or the collapse of coastal fish stocks, the impacts on Indigenous cultures have been intense. Beavers were secretly resilient and in the hidden waterways and pockets of wilderness in our vast country, managing to rebuild their population from the decimation of past centuries. Other beasts, such as bison, have needed a helping hand.

Restoration has been a long time coming. With the concerted efforts of dedicated individuals and communities working with a variety of species at risk, these creatures are once more able to graze, burrow, chew, swim, and fly through their traditional territories. Likewise, there have been concerted efforts to bring the many facets of Canadian Indigenous history to light in order to address past injustices and forge new policies for the way ahead.

PREVIOUS: *Tapestry I* (Detail), 2021. Photo: AGSM.

Inspired by the re-introduction of bison to their historical territories after an absence of over 150 years, the works in this exhibition examine the interconnectedness of species and celebrate the restorative powers of land and the qualities of resilience within ourselves.



ABOVE: *Transect (invitation to play)*, 2021. Photo: Doug Derksen.

The Re-Emergence of Strength in opimihaw

By Olivia Kristoff, Curator, Wanuskewin

In the summer of 2019, Mary Anne Barkhouse made the trip from Minden, Ontario, to Wanuskewin Heritage Park in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, to visit the Opimihaw Valley. She walked the trails with Dr. Ernie Walker, who was instrumental in founding the park as well as the lead archaeologist during the longest running research dig in Canada in the Valley. She spoke with staff about all the components of Wanuskewin that make us special. And there are many things that make us special.

With archaeological evidence dating back at least 6,400 years, Wanuskewin has been recognized as a gathering place for many of the Indigenous peoples of the Great Plains. We have nineteen Pre-Contact sites, the most northerly-documented medicine wheel in the Plains, two buffalo jumps, and a bison pound, to name a few. Prior to European contact, roughly 25-30 million bison roamed the Great Plains, before being brought to near extinction. In the winter of 2019, we welcomed six female bison from Grasslands National Park, the first bison on the land in 150 years. A few weeks later, four pregnant females and one male from South Dakota joined the herd. Two breeding seasons later, we are up to seventeen bison.

The Opimihaw Valley was named after an Elder, Senator Hilliard McNab. His traditional name was opimihaw, which is Cree for “The One Who Flies”. There have been over 100 species of birds and 35 species of animals identified in the valley.

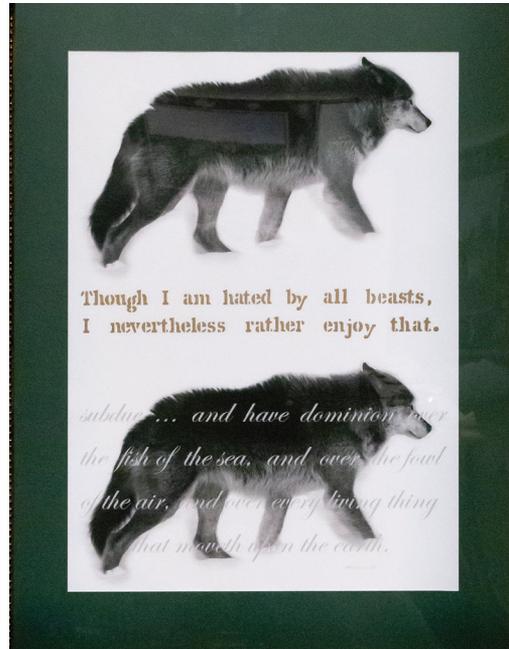
Barkhouse would have heard about all of this while she walked with Dr. Walker. It is hard not to get inspired by the magic that is Wanuskewin. It is a special place that draws visitors from all over the world, just as many Indigenous peoples have been drawn to its land.



Consisting of tapestry works, sculpture, paintings and installation pieces, *opimihaw* rounds out all of Barkhouse's media, bringing together characters from past and present to tell the story of Wanuskewin. Touching on themes of restoration, resilience, reconciliation, and the integrity and strength of human and natural 'ecosystems', this exhibition came at a very relevant time.

The centrepiece, a table titled *opimihaw*, takes centre stage, and welcomes all into the gallery. The tabletop is crafted from maple boards sourced from the Haliburton Highlands, where Barkhouse lives. After routing the path of the valley into the curves of the maple, hot glass was poured into the groove. The wood ignited in the process, and created char marks that cradle the glass. The table is supported on the silhouettes of bison legs, a reference to the significant role bison have in driving the ecosystem of the Great Plains. Stoneware plates decorated with carvings of insects and animal tracks are placed along the tabletop, showing the variety of life that coexists in the valley.

The layout of the table, with serving platters and folded napkins decorated with dried sage, is modelled after aristocratic European dinner parties—a theme that carries over into the portraits. The photos of wolves in *Alpha I*, *Alpha II*, *Omega*, and *Dominion* are set in gilded frames, communicating the respect of a prominent member of a family or clan, and representing nature’s sovereignty. These works tell the story of the wolf’s role in the natural and psychic ecosystem, as careful and calculated hunters and an integral part of the food chain. The titles of the first three portraits reference the hierarchies of power that exist within wolf packs themselves, while *Dominion* features a quote from the Book of Genesis, a question of by whose authority humans received the right to dominion over the earth and all of the animal kingdom. Here, a female wolf becomes the embodiment of the strength and resilience of Indigenous knowledge, worldviews, and relationships with nature.



This begs a question that humanity has yet to answer, as well—who gives one group of people dominion over another? Why did the Europeans believe they were deserving of the land and resources that were already being used by many Indigenous peoples?

ABOVE: *Dominion*, 2011.

OPPOSITE: top to bottom: *Alpha I*, 2011; *Alpha II*, 2011; *Omega*, 2011.

Photos: Carey Shaw.

Images of aristocracy and European contact are seen in the tapestries shown throughout the exhibition, as well. In *Et in Arcadia Ego*, we see images in the Baroque style of art and design history, a time when significant events were unfolding between the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. The title of the piece is Latin, roughly translating to “Even in Paradise, I am here...”, referring to Europeans and bison being confronted with one another, both claiming the land for their own. However, as history has shown, though we might see paradise as an idyllic bliss, it is not without death. While the format of the presentation is at first glance European, the content is from an Indigenous gaze.

The borders of all the tapestries surrounding the central scenarios feature species that are linked to the ecosystem engineered by the bison, proving they are a keystone species that drives the ecosystem of the Great Plains back into a thriving state. The longest tapestry, *Bison/Gate*, features a panorama image of the Opimihaw Valley, with depictions of bison taken from different eras. Surrounding are images of cave paintings from France, native plants in the valley, small creatures you would find walking the trails, and historical imagery. In the left hand corner, the portal from the 1997 film *Stargate* releases the bison back onto the land, with *Wanuskewin* bison manager Craig Thoms and Dr. Walker standing by to





give them guidance. This particular image was inspired by something Dr. Walker said to Barkhouse while they walked together in 2019, that Wanuskewin was truly a portal in time, that once you set foot on the land, you can see the way people would have lived thousands of years before. You feel a connection when you are here, a link to your ancestors, a thread of history woven together with the inhabitants who used to walk and hunt this land.

Yet, the struggles are not all in the past. In *Tapestry I*, Barkhouse featured the entirety of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Executive Summary, 536 pages total. Printed on linen, bird imagery in a vibrant red—commonly used as clan symbols and holding meaning such as good parenting, community protection, and leadership—overlays the text. Poised at the end of the tapestry is a beaver, perched on an antique wooden chair. Commemorated as a worker and builder, beavers are often considered a nuisance, something to deal with, often

ABOVE: LEFT TO RIGHT: *acta sanctorum* (the deeds of the saints) *kā-itōtahkik okīsikowak*; *Et in Arcadia Ego* (Even in Paradise, I am here) *kiyām āta miyonohk, āta nitayān*; *Les vieilles connaissances* (the old acquaintances) *kayāsi wīcīwākanihtowin*, all 2021.

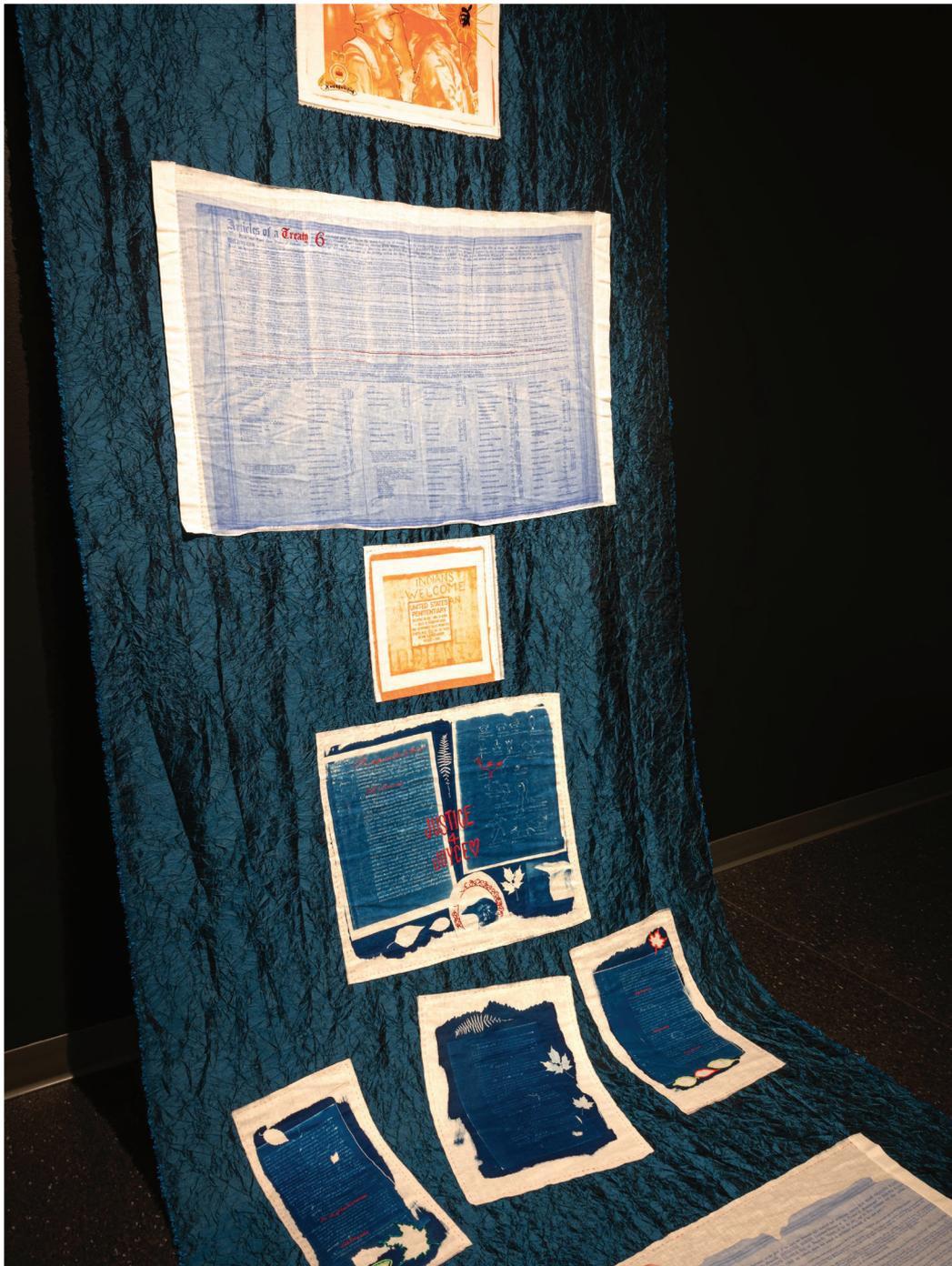
Photo: Doug Derksen.



attempting to destroy them completely, a sentiment Indigenous peoples can relate to, all too well. The Baroque influence of the d'Hondecoeter era and the historic conflict between the “natural” and “civilized” worlds drives Barkhouse’s work.

Indigenous people have been fighting in that war since first contact with settlers. The notion of who is “civilized” versus who is “savage” is still debatable, as the history of what Europeans subjected the first peoples of the land now known as Canada to can easily be seen as the more savage acts. As we saw with the decimation of the bison, the Plains suffered greatly without these important animals to drive the ecosystem. Had anyone considered what we would be without the knowledge and strength of our Indigenous peoples? The foresight of residential schools left a lot to be desired; simply “kill the Indian in the child” and do not consider the basic civil rights that all humans should have, which resulted in much unnecessary death and damage to those who were lucky enough to survive.

ABOVE: *Bison/Gate*, 2021. Photo: Doug Derksen



ABOVE: *Tapestry II (Detail)* 2021. Photo: Doug Derksen.

As we emerge from a global pandemic, we can learn a lot from the Indigenous cultures who have made it part of their daily lives to survive—humor, compassion, acceptance, and perseverance are things we have no choice but to learn, often the hard way. Maybe the rest of the world can take a cue from the animal kingdom, as well as the stewards of the land we are living on: survive through the worst, and emerge stronger.



ABOVE: *Tapestry II (Detail)* 2021. Photo: Doug Derksen.



ABOVE: *I, Corvid*, 2021. Photo: Carey Shaw.

ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Mary Anne Barkhouse was born in Vancouver, BC, but has strong ties to both coasts as her mother is from the Nimpkish band, Kwakiutl First Nation of Alert Bay, BC, and her father is of German and British descent from Nova Scotia. She is a descendant of a long line of internationally-recognized Northwest Coast artists that includes Ellen Neel, Mungo Martin, and Charlie James. She graduated with honours from the Ontario College of Art in Toronto and has exhibited widely across Canada and the United States. As a result of personal and family experience with land and water stewardship, Barkhouse's work examines ecological concerns and intersections of culture through the use of animal imagery. Inspired by issues surrounding empire and survival, Barkhouse creates installations that evoke consideration of the self as a response to history and environment.



The artist would like to thank the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council for their support.

ABOVE: Mary Anne Barkhouse

ABOUT WANUSKEWIN:

Gathering Place.

Over six thousand years ago, Wanuskewin echoed with the thundering hooves of bison and the voices of Indigenous peoples from across the Northern Plains; the land still echoes with these stories that Wanuskewin is proud to share with the people. The nomadic tribes who traveled through the Northern Plains gathered on this site of natural beauty where today visitors can relive the stories of a people who came here to hunt bison, gather food and herbs and escape the winter winds. Walking in their footsteps, you will understand why this site was a place of worship and celebration, of renewal with the natural world and of a deep spirituality, and is still this way today.

The story of Wanuskewin is just beginning to be uncovered. Some archaeological dig sites date back thousands of years making them older than the Egyptian pyramids; these sites provide clues to the daily existence of the early peoples. Tipi rings, stones cairns, pottery fragments, plant seeds, projectile points, egg shell fragments and animal bones all give evidence of active thriving societies. While some sites teach us about life thousands of years ago other sites like the ancient Medicine Wheel still remain shrouded in mystery.

Wanuskewin is located on Treaty Six Territory, the Homeland of the Métis Nation.

Learn more <https://wanuskewin.com/>

UP NEXT:

DRAWN FROM WOOD

Curated by Heather Smith

MAIN GALLERY | MAY 5 - JULY 2, 2022

The AGSM would like to thank



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710 ROSSER AVENUE
UNIT 2
BRANDON, MB

204.727.1036
INFO@AGSM.CA
AGSM.CA

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or call (204) 727-1036
before you organize a visit.

COVER IMAGE: FRONT: *Opimihaw*, 2021; REAR: *Tapestry I (Detail)*, 2021. Photos: Doug Derksen.