

Pictographs: The Graphic Art of James Simon

BY MISHIBINIJIMA

(PORCUPINE'S QUILL, 2017, \$24.95)

THE PETROGLYPHS PAINTED on the rocks north of the Great Lakes by the region's indigenous inhabitants are distinctive and as readily recognised as the work of their counterparts in the Northwest. And, like the indigenous artists of the Northwest Coast, the post-war period saw a revival of creative activity among the indigenous people (some of their story is described in Tania Willard's essay, "Unlimited Editions and Cultural Imprints," *Amphora* 176 [Summer 2017]). This recent volume by Porcupine's Quill offers a retrospective of the work of one such artist, Mishibinijima (James Simon), with an insightful introduction by gallery curator and sometimes *Amphora* contributor Tom Smart.

The introduction is a brief nine pages, leaving the majority of the book—the next 190 pages—to present Mishibinijima's pictographs as well as small texts that are less captions than poems and interpretive keys that guide our reflections on each. (Many lack any text, leaving the reader free to reflect with the assistance of Smart's introduction and explanation of Mishibinijima's style).

The pictographs are stylistically similar in many ways to the work produced by members of the so-called Indian Group of Seven, such as the well-known Daphne Odjig and Norval Morriseau. Mishibinijima has also produced canvases, most typically ones representing the land as a female figure in various postures, but Smart's introduction brings out the individuality of the pictographs against these canvases and the work of other artists. "He saw pictographs as a language in which a deep consciousness and perceptualism could be communicated symbolically," Smart says. While the same might be said of the paintings, the spare, elemental style of the pictographs renders them icons in comparison.

The publisher's blurb on the back cover underscores Mishibinijima's international importance, pointing not only to his local and domestic

significance but the presence of his work in the Vatican. "His uplifting philosophy has found resonance with those who seek solace in the midst of tragedy, and meaning in a world that is often confused and frightening," the publisher writes.

The one quibble with the presentation—and this is personal—is that the titles of works are underlined, rather than identified by some other typographical gesture such as boldface. However, the styling also recalls the notebooks in which the pictographs were originally made. In that light, the decision to underline adds to the reader's experience, bringing it that much closer to the circumstances of creation (the pictographs themselves are reproduced at scale where possible).

Presenting the pictographs in book form makes Mishibinijima's notebooks available to a wider audience. Those interested in the book arts will also find in them a rich visual language, one (Smart says) predating both language and writing. With logos, emojis and other elements of contemporary culture serving as powerful shorthand for destinations, experiences and emotions, there is much to be appreciated from these far older visualisations of human experience.

The book also underscores the ongoing contributions of Porcupine's Quill to Canada's cultural landscape. The lack of guarantees of ongoing funding from the Canada Council nixed its sale to Kenneth Whyte last year, leaving its future in the balance. Works such as this may have a limited audience but are much needed both in their own right and as the country engages in the very long work of reconciliation with its indigenous peoples. Past accomplishments may be no indicator of future performance, but ventures such as this should command the goodwill of government and readers alike.

~ REVIEWED BY PETER MITHAM