

How Arts Camps are Reimagining Programming for the Second Pandemic Summer

She Does the City

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As we approach another COVID summer, the state of Canada's summer camp industry is grim. Camp programming largely came to a halt in 2020, and according to a survey by the Canadian Camping Association, 60 percent of camps said that if they aren't operational for a second consecutive year, they could face permanent closure by the end of 2021.

In Ontario, where the COVID toll has been especially harsh, the summer camp scene continues to be rife with uncertainty. Last summer, overnight camps were not permitted at all in Ontario and this may be the case this summer as well. Meanwhile, looming COVID-19 restrictions have forced many day camps to modify their programming indefinitely.



In spite of the ongoing challenges, Avenue Road Arts School has adapted to stay operational. ARAS caters to children and adults of all experience levels and employs approximately 35 artists. After being forced to cancel two weeks

of March Break camps last spring, the school has pivoted to virtual programming, including online classes and additional resources accessible through their [Virtual Creative Hub](#).

“I am so proud to say that our virtual classes were a hit and we were one of the first art schools to offer online classes over the Zoom platform,” says Liana Del Mastro, the school’s executive director. ARAS offered 18 online classes last year in April. This summer, they will offer more than 120.

“We felt a responsibility to our students. Finding ways to keep them connected to the arts and what they are passionate about was crucial. We also felt a huge responsibility to our staff and faculty,” says Del Mastro. “The arts has been very hard hit through this pandemic. Many organizations were forced to close down or remain in the dark.”



While ARAS has made the digital leap, camps offered through the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Harbourfront Centre are amongst those that have been cancelled completely for 2021. And though the vaccine rollout could increase the odds for reopen in 2022, the pandemic has left both the arts and camp sectors in very fragile states.

Meanwhile, for camps like ARAS that have soldiered on with programming, the pandemic has given rise to a new set of challenges. “The full-day camps for kids that we were very well known for had to be adjusted. Having a child spend a full day in an online camp is not what we wanted to see or offer,” says Del Mastro. ARAS now offers one- to 1.5-hour art experiences for young campers, and parents can choose between one week of daily classes or weekly classes through July and August. ARAS has also hired moderators who take care of any technology-related troubleshooting, so that instructors can focus their time and energy on teaching.



Despite the circumstances, Del Mastro says that students are thriving in the virtual format. “We are constantly checking in with our students for feedback to see how we can make the virtual art experience better,” she says. “We believe in the power of the arts. It has healing and transformative abilities. But most importantly, we know that art is vital to healthy communities.”

To learn more about virtual camp programming through the Avenue Road Arts School, or to [sign up for classes](#), visit their [website](#). Here are other local art camps that will be offering virtual and in-person programming this summer.

Garrison Creek Art Camp

Online art classes (private or group) for children ages 4 to 12 and adults. Registration is taking place on an ongoing basis. [More info here](#).

Canadian Contemporary School of Art

In-person and online, classes for children ages 4 to 12. Classes include painting, drawing, cartooning, fashion design/wearable art, architecture, and drama. [More info here](#).

Great Big Theatre Company

Online theatre camps for children ages 4 to 14. [More info here](#).

Featherstone Music

Online music programming through “Camp Treble” for ages 4+. Classes include rock band, music appreciation, rapping & rhythm, musical theatre, composition, theory, and ukulele, amongst more. [More info here](#).



Art camp at the McMichael Gallery

McMichael Children and Youth Art Camps and Programs

In-person art programming for children ages 5 to 15. Sessions include painting, sculpting, mixed media, and nature art, amongst more. [More info here.](#)

Ross Creek Centre for the Arts

Day camps, overnight camps, and family programs for ages 5+. [More info here.](#)

Randolph Kids

In-person and online performance arts programming for ages 6 to 17. (In-person classes include ballet, jazz, contemporary, tap, acrobatics, break dancing, and hip-hop, amongst more.) [More info here.](#)

Second City

Comedy camps where kids play fun improv games to help access creativity, boost self-confidence and develop spontaneity and playfulness. Online and in-person options available. [More info here.](#)

Zakiya is a writer in Toronto. Her articles have been published in The Globe and Mail, This Magazine, NOW Magazine, and J-Source, amongst others.