

Uptown and Downtown

Letter from Toronto

Despite being on Canadian soil, the generic style of Toronto's architecture has meant that it often doubles as a location for several US cities in television shows and films, allowing producers to take advantage of the province's generous tax breaks. This uncanny similitude of the city's vistas produces a misplaced familiarity when walking along Toronto's streets, folding one's immediate location onto memories from other North American metropolises. This is coupled with a tangible pull from nearby New York's art scene, many of the commercial galleries rubbernecking their way to the US's more lucrative East Coast. However, within this continual effacement of the city's identity is another sprawling - if gridlocked - set of neighbourhoods that offers a cultural depth that holds its own.

Looking out from the Art Gallery of Ontario's (AGO) back staircase, one can see the surrounding Chinatown neighbourhood and the city's grid system of low-rise, low-density housing which rises up at the southern edge along dense rows of modern towers: an indivisible mix of apartments and offices that bisects the riverfront and views of the river beyond. The AGO was redeveloped in the mid 2000s by Frank Gehry, his handywork comprising a lozenge-shaped extension, crowned by a distorted glass wave over the museum's entrance in a style familiar from his global gallery design brand. Gehry not only hails from Toronto but, perhaps surprisingly, his childhood home is visible from the south-facing galleries. A further extension by Two Row Architects is expected to start construction next year, chiefly sponsored by Canada Goose

clothing's CEO Dani Reiss. Brian Porter and Erik Skouris from Two Row Architects have led a consultation with local indigenous leaders and communities, including Chief R Stacey Laforme of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation, who 'are involved through the entire life cycle of projects', long beyond the reopening.

Wolfgang Tillmans's exhibition 'To look without fear', previously on show at MoMA in New York, has been site-specifically altered for the AGO. The forceful use of varying scale and the chaotic spread of everyday and politicised life are pulled into temporal focus through the artist's first chronological hang since his 2003 show at Tate Britain. Recurring motifs and categories reappear - fruit, flesh, parties, sportswear, underwear, buildings and concrete. Many of the images pulse at a satisfyingly absorbent rate of recognition, while others require closer inspection. The hang itself enables clearer insight into the maturation of the photographer and his coterie of queers, artists and other marginalised lives over the past 30 years as they move, dance and exist through largely urban environments. But it also enables the concurrent relations to the changing technologies of image production itself to come to the fore - from camera to scanner, inkjet print and photocopies to digital and so on. From the outset of the exhibition we see how technology has acted like a surfactant on the way in which images are not only captured but also, perhaps most powerfully, distributed; for Tillmans, the physicality of the material processes of production are often the 'image' itself. The exhibition's arrangements widely evoke a consistent pivoting between small, aleatory alignments as exposed or 'caught' on photosensitive papers to the less graspable concepts of deep space, oceans and the machinations of political power itself.



Amartey Golding, 'In the comfort of embers', installation view



McMichael's general collection, installation view

Heading downtown to meet the Power Plant's director Carolyn Vasely and curator Adelina Vlas over a lunch of dim sum on the riverfront, the conversation centred on the way in which the elevated roads and new developments on the riverfront hamper access to the waterway, a problem most acutely felt by the gallery during the winter months. A more delicate topic concerned the problems of how institutions, such as the Power Plant, hope to gain new audiences beyond those that already view contemporary art as a vital part of their lives. Initiatives include efforts to confront the continued failures to address forms of transhistorical racist violence toward black, indigenous people and people of colour, subjects that now shape many public-facing institutions' programming in the city, often with varying degrees of success.

The gallery itself was host to an exhibition of First Nation artist Brenda Draney's 'Drink from the river'. The show brought together a set of paintings in which recurring themes of the injustices and humiliations of indigenous people in Canada were brought into focus through memories of her family life. Motifs, such as the repeated pattern of a sofa across several of the works, lent the paintings an obsessively absorbed charge that ultimately overshadowed some of the broader political points being made. Areas of the canvases are deliberately left unfinished in an attempt to reproduce that which remains unsaid or out of the reach of memory, and the viewer often has to circle back on themselves to 'draw in' missing emblems or subjects, as if forensically constructing a narrative outside each individual work's content.

In the second downstairs gallery was an impressive installation of Amartey Golding's absorbing video works - as well as a human-sized outfit made of densely woven hair that is worn in the films - that incorporated allegorical dimensions of the body as a way of exploring the often lethal fears of blackness and how these are pictured throughout western culture

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Wolfgang Tillmans, "To look without fear", installation view

(the artist was raised as a Rastafarian to an Anglo-Scottish mother and a Ghanian father). The work also suggests further ways to consider 'double' or 'triple' consciousness as one of becoming, in which Golding evokes blackness within European history as spectral and hauntingly otherworldly.

Forty minutes north-west of the city to the leafy suburbs of Vaughan is the McMichael, a collection of exclusively Canadian artists' works started by Robert and Signe McMichael in 1955. The museum, which opened in a set of log cabins in 1966, is now headed by Scottish chief executive Ian DeJardin and chief curator Sarah Milroy, former editor of *Canadian*

Art and chief critic for the *Globe and Mail*. The scholarly research that the McMichael undertakes, largely crafted through a long-term approach to the understanding of Canadian culture, is impressive. Whereas previously the global metric of Canadian art had largely revolved around the Group of Seven (a group of artists that became loosely associated in the 1920s with often heroic landscape imagery), today the work is discussed in the museum in relation to colonial imaginaries such as wilderness and isolation. In addition, by foregrounding the relations between Inuit, First Nation and Northern Communities' artistic practices, the McMichael sets a place for an interesting dialogue to emerge, one that is grounded in issues such as the ways racism and ecology intersect. For example, nearly 100,000 drawings created by Inuit artists from Kinngait (Cape Dorset) are regularly rotated (housed in collaboration with the West Baffin Eskimo Co-Op) alongside invitations by First Nation artists to produce a permanent mural based on Indigenous knowledge.

Kapwani Kiwanga's exhibition 'Remediation' at MOCA was, conversely, somewhat sterile. Selected to represent Canada at next year's Venice Biennale, Kiwanga's exhibition circled around issues of ecological sustainability, specifically examining the exploitative colonial and environmentally extractive costs that continue under the banner of globalised commerce. In the work *Keyhole*, 2023, we encounter a structure that enables would-be gardeners' easy access to plants. Despite the LED lights, an irrigation system and an air pump, the conditions of the gallery have left the assembled flora parched and in a state of decline. Kiwanga's design seeks to help those who are physically unable to move or bend down; the British curator of MOCA, November Paynter, pointed out to me that HIV is prevalent in South Africa where this work was previously installed, but seemingly missed the crucial point that it is access to healthcare that is the overriding problem. A further sense of meaning stripped of any urgency is carried into the work *Residue*, 2023, which comprises a curtain of dried banana leaves across one side of the gallery. The work aims to speak to the destructive forces of the global banana trade, but rather sits as an inertly formal, pleasantly aesthetic arrangement of organic material. Kiwanga's 'vivarium' works are an array of cartoonish empty clear-plastic capsules that seem

similarly shorn of any political inferences of the impact of genetically modified plants on ecosystems, while also empty to the fantastical thought of vegetables grown outside of gravity. More captivating is the early video *Vumbi*, 2012, in which Kiwanga wipes clean the red-brick soil dust that covers a tree along a road in Tanzania. The politically small act of cleaning one leaf at a time elicits a recognisable Sisyphean anxiety drummed up by our bewildering futility against what UN chief Antonio Guterres this summer called the 'era of global boiling', while suggestively playing with societal definitions of dirt.

Extending the hospitality that was typical of my time meeting people in Toronto, I was invited by Milroy to join her and the artist Jin-Me Yoon at her retrospective at The Image Center, part of the Toronto Metropolitan University. The South Korean artist, who has largely been working out of Vancouver for the past three decades (her family moved to the province in 1968), pins together the imperceptible displacements - from biography to broader political histories - that occur from being an outsider to a culture that often subtly erases one's place in it. In one such work, *A Group of Sixty Seven*, 1996, we see her family and friends individually photographed in the exhibition 'Art for a Nation' at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Facing the camera in one gridded arrangement of images and with their backs to the camera in the other, the figures are framed by landscape paintings by the Group of Seven. From confrontation to retreat, the indexicality of this photo work echoes the now tacitly understood racialised ways that technologies are coded to divergently track and surveil types of bodies. By often appearing as a cipher, a trickster or shadow in her work, Yoon implicitly mirrors the distortions created by the hypervisibility of Asian and Indigenous identities in Canada as one obscured on her salient terms.

Chris McCormack is associate editor of *Art Monthly*.



Jin-Me Yoon, *A Group of Sixty Seven*, 1996, detail