

MAGAZINE

Home | Features | Correspondents | Exhibitions | Artists |
Recommendations | Videos

How Toronto Sees Toronto: Form Follows Fiction

By [Tina Reilly](#) on September 06, 2016



Michael Snow, *Authorization* (1969), instant silver prints (Polaroid 47) and adhesive tape on mirror in metal frame, 54.6 x 44.4 x 1.4 cm with integral frame. NGC

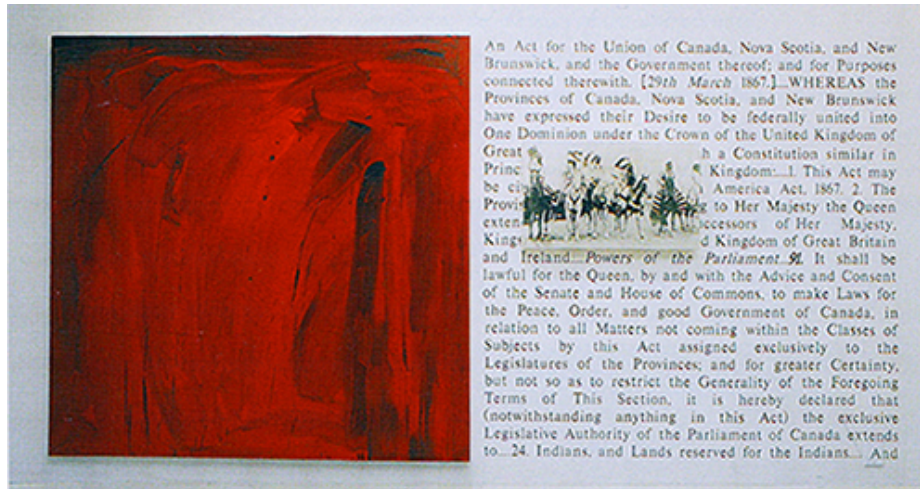
Known colloquially as The Big Smoke, Hogtown and simply T.O., the city of Toronto has been a favourite subject of artists since its founding in the late 1780s. In a new major exhibition at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto, that fascination is on display in 100 works by 86 artists.

As the first-ever in-depth study of how Toronto artists have portrayed their home city, *Form Follows Fiction: Art and Artists in Toronto* explores how Toronto artists visualize their sense of place. In a play on the notion of function following form, the exhibition also examines the many ways in which artists and their work have actually helped shape the city's character.

Artists range from Group of Seven painter Arthur Lismer to video artist Oliver Husain, by way of iconic contemporary artists such as Sandra Meigs and Suzy Lake. Of the works on view — most

from the 1960s to the present day — numerous are on loan from the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) collection.

In an interview with *NGC Magazine*, curator Luis Jacob notes that the exhibition brings out interesting consistencies in how Toronto artists have reflected the city over several decades. “There are remarkable resonances among artists of different generations in how they depict Toronto,” he says. “Certain things about the experience of life in this city keep showing up again and again.”



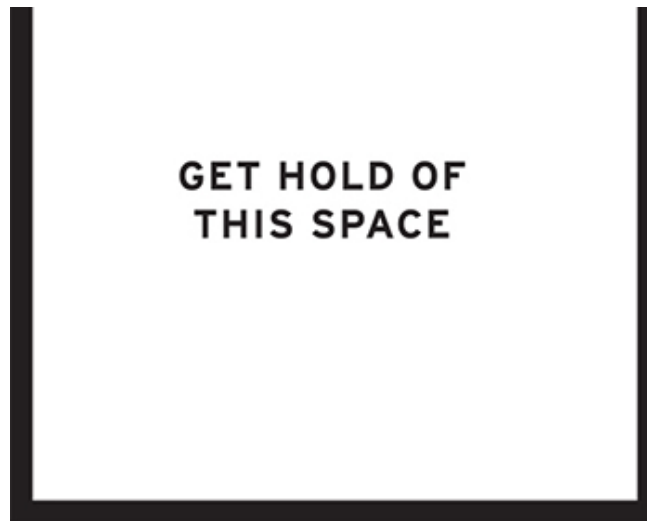
Robert Houle, *Premises for Self-Rule — British North America Act 1867* (1994), oil on canvas/photo emulsion on canvas/laser cut vinyl on plexiglass, 152.4 x 304.8 cm (3 elements). Osler Harcourt and Houle Collection

This consistency has been emphasized in the exhibition’s thematic structure. Rather than taking a chronological approach, it opens with a display of several works providing overviews of Toronto from multiple perspectives, places and timeframes. Camille Turner’s performance piece, *Miss Canadiana’s Heritage and Walking Tour: A Hidden History of the Grange* (2011) explores the histories of African Canadian communities in the Grange neighbourhood in Toronto. The neighbourhood is named for its connection to the Grange House, which was a meeting-place during the 19th century for the city’s ruling Family Compact, and site of Toronto’s first art museum. Robert Houle’s *Premises for Self-Rule* (1994) depicts the four legislative acts that determined the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. Jacob notes that Houle’s background as a Toronto-based historian, curator and teacher are evident in this work.

A second thematic section examines how artists have depicted Toronto as a physical entity. Interestingly, Jacob begins this exploration with an image of the *Toronto Purchase of 1787* (the document that founded Toronto), which delineates the boundaries of the new city but ignores other considerations such as topography and social realities. “The surveyor depicted the land as an empty page waiting to be inscribed at will,” says Jacob.

Jacob further notes that, over several decades, artists have echoed the *Toronto Purchase* by portraying the city in similar ways. Gordon Lebrecht’s wall painting, *Get Hold of This Space* (1974) is just one example, indicated by a simple square. “Today, the city is marked by so much construction,” says Jacob, “demolishing the old and building the new, as if nothing had been there before.”





Gordon Lebrecht, *Get Hold of This Space*, 1974/2010, latex paint and vinyl lettering, dimensions variable

The exhibition also examines how Toronto artists use performance as a means of self-expression. Michael Snow's *Authorization* (1969), on loan from the NGC, is a sequence of mirrored photographs. Each shows a reflection of the artist with his camera, at a moment just before the mirror becomes altered with the addition of the newest photograph. David Buchan's project, *Lamonte Del Monte's Family Tree* (c. 1979), also on loan from the NGC, has been described as a family tree "rife with incest, mixed marriage, bigamy, adoptions, divorce and illegitimate offspring." The work examines the idea of a family, or intentional community, by the unusual relationships among its members.

"Artists in Toronto are especially interested in adopting strategies of what I call 'mediation' in their work — strategies of creating cuts, splits, doubles and mirror images," says Jacob. "They're keen on exposing the non-unitary, fractal aspect of things. Michael Snow's work suggests that happens by mirroring, splitting, revealing and obscuring." In Snow's time-warping work, he adds, the artist's image gets obscured in the act of being exposed. "The title, *Authorization*, seems to ask, 'By what self-defining gesture does an artist become an artist?'"

The exhibition ends by presenting Toronto as a meeting place. Several works, such as Sandra Meigs's series of drawings, *Purgatorio, A Drinking Bout* (1981), portray bars frequented by artists as places of togetherness, alienation or something in-between. Others show Toronto as a place of either corporate dominance or neighbourhood coziness.

As Jacob puts it, *Form Follows Fiction* suggests that Toronto is a verb, not a noun. "This show portrays 'Toronto' as a series of acts performed by artists. Their work strives both to realize and to destabilize the city's maps, models and fictions."

[Form Follows Fiction: Art and Artists in Toronto](#) is on display at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto, from September 6 to December 10, 2016.

About the Author

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