

At the Art Museum, Toronto Art History 101

For a city happy to bury the past, Luis Jacob excavates an artistic character that grows up between the cracks.



Luis Jacob with an iconic work by Gordon Lebrecht at the Art Museum's Form Follows Fiction: Art and Artists in Toronto, opening this week. Jacob has curated an exhaustive show about the history of an artistic culture that has thrived mostly in the margins here. (CARLOS OSORIO / TORONTO STAR) | [ORDER THIS PHOTO](#)

By [MURRAY WHYTE](#) Visual arts
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“Toronto,” said long-ago ex-mayor, ex-Ontario MPP and perpetual political gadfly Alan Lamport, “is a city of the future — and always will be.”

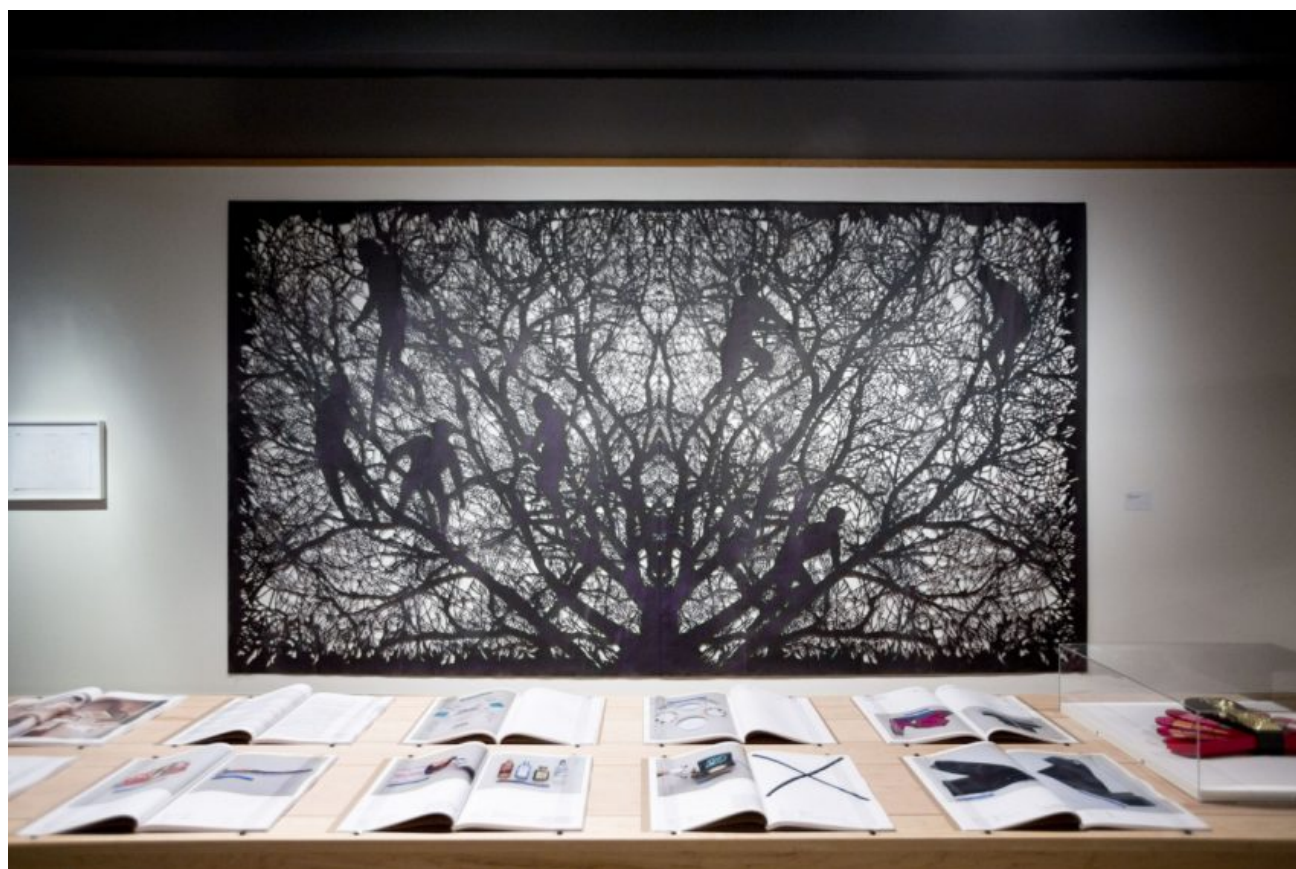
And though a half-century or more has passed since he said it, it remains as true as the day it was spoken. Look around, to the two dozen or so cranes building condo towers to the clouds where parking lots — and before them, Victorian neighbourhoods; and even before them, old-growth forest — once sat. This is a town that looks perpetually forward with the same stubborn resolve with which it resists looking back.

So Form Follows Fiction: Art and Artists in Toronto is a curious indulgence in broad, inclusive — and very, very long — cultural history in a place that has typically worn its amnesia like a badge of honour. Indeed, the exhibition, hosted by the University of Toronto's Art Museum and curated with loving care by [Luis Jacob](#), an artist with an admirably stubborn devotion to our forward-looking hometown, offers a very different view.

Form Follows Fiction is an all-Toronto affair and it reads as part intensely local art history course, part civics lesson; and the intersection between those two things tells you a ton about what makes a place and what a place, ultimately, ends up making in spite of itself.

They are, of course, intertwined, and Lamport's wry observation about a city committed to a state of becoming — never finished, ever married to the belief that what's next is better than what is — nicely mirrors Jacob's long view.

To grasp the present, Jacob reaches back into the city's oldest archives, from which he has plucked the original 1787 drawing of the Toronto Purchase, a neatly inscribed 250,000-acre rectangle that stretches from the shore of the lake up to current day Highway 27.



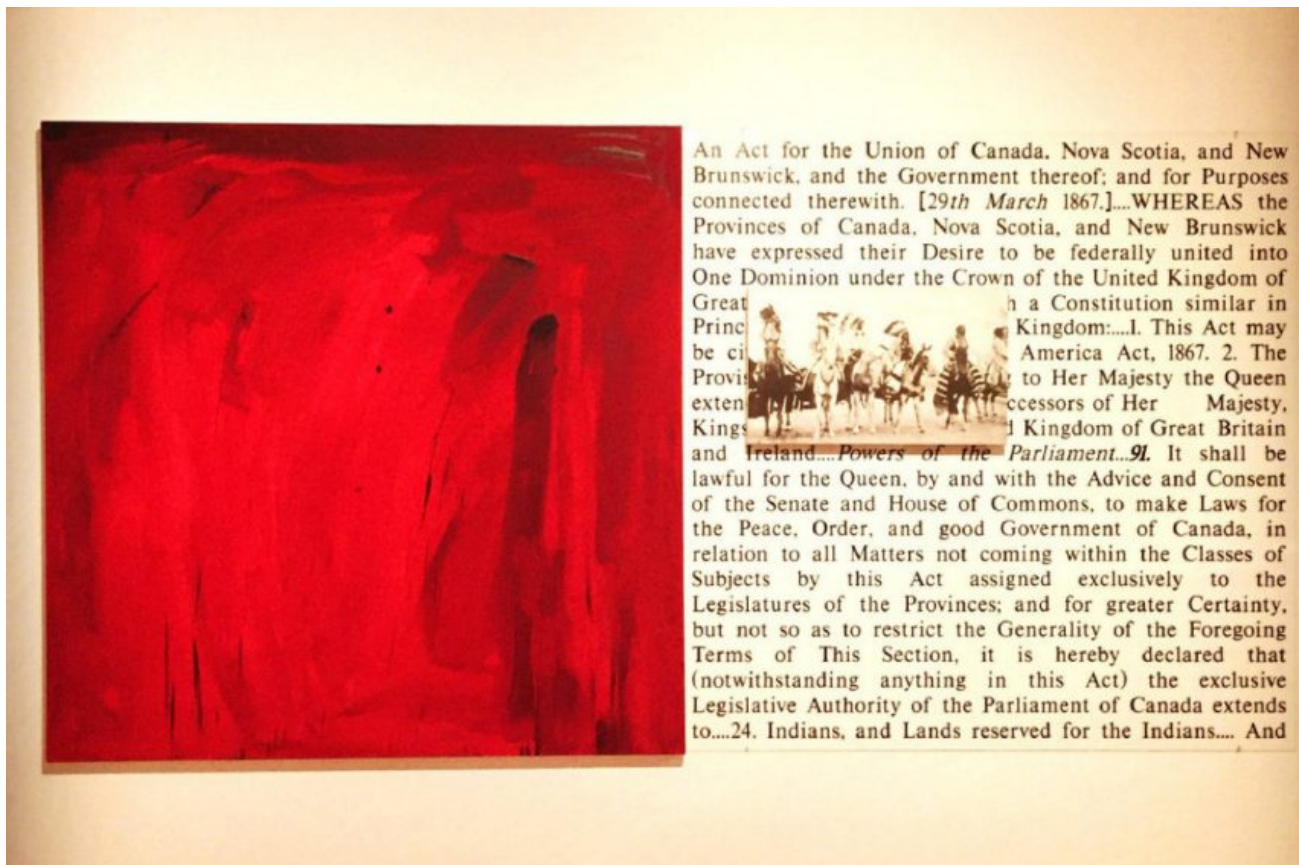
Ed Pien's *Night Gathering*, one of the works Jacob selected for *Form Follows Fiction* as emblematic of the tangled undergrowth in which Toronto's artistic culture has always thrived. (CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR)

Within, it is notably, utterly blank, and significant to Jacob's tale for a variety of reasons. It suggests a clean slate, which of course it wasn't (ask the Mississaugas of New Credit, who were duped into handing it over for 2,000 gun flints, 24 brass kettles and 96 gallons of rum, among other things).

But the intense hubris of that colonial gesture appears to have embedded itself in our civic DNA and Jacob pairs it with telling works: Renee Van Halm's *Anticipating the Eventual Emergence of Form*, a stage set of curtains being pulled back to reveal nothing at all, or Gordon Lebrecht's *GET HOLD OF THIS SPACE*, a conceptual art icon that reads like an early distant warning: to get it before it's gone.

To put a fine point on it, Jacob includes works here by Tom Dean and David Anderson, representing the demolition of historic properties along Yonge St. in the 1970s to make way for the Eaton Centre. Anderson's piece, a heartbreaking video of history being levelled right before your eyes, is called *Teperman's*, after the ubiquitous demolition company still doing brisk business here. Only in Toronto could an art work be so named and need no further explanation.

Erasure, of course, is the violent forerunner of creation and Jacob works that theme in more ways than one. His version of Toronto's art history embraces First Nations artists in a way we haven't seen here before, or at least not enough, and the corrective it represents is both long overdue and fully felt.



Robert Houle, *Premise for Self Rule: British North American Act, 1867 (1994)*, part of Luis Jacob's *Form Follows Fiction: Art and Artists in Toronto* at the Art Museum. (COURTESY THE ART MUSEUM)

Smartly, aboriginal artists aren't lumped together here but sprinkled throughout, though civic space and who has a right to it looms large. Robert Houle's iconic *Premises for Self Rule* is a series of monochrome abstract paintings paired with text from colonial legislation like the British North America Act, which declared all of Canada British sovereign territory; [Jeff Thomas's Seize the Space](#) was a series of interventions the artist staged at the foot of the statue of Champlain in Ottawa. Champlain, holding a surveyor's tool, lays claim to all he surveys; Thomas, by inviting friends, First Nations and not, to occupy the plinth alongside him, suggests all is not so ripe for the taking as he might have assumed.

Form Follows Fiction's breadth can be daunting — there are dozens and dozens of works here — but it's not jam-packed for its own sake. It marries an internal logic of inclusiveness — mostly amid indifference, a long-standing lament of the city's art scenes, generation to

generation — to something elemental to our civic DNA.

That first, empty grid looms large here and as Jacob maps out the city's rapid growth he also makes clear that art here wasn't so much what happened in the tidy squares laid out by our civic forefathers, but between its cracks.

The result, a huddling of artistic masses against the main, is what *Form Follows Fiction* is all about. A 1971 poster from General Idea's *Miss General Idea Pageant* at the AGO tells the tale succinctly: in four images, a field of contestants is whittled down from a couple dozen to half that to a few and, finally, the solitary winner.



Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue's tapestry "We Won't Compete" (left) with a poster from General Idea's "Miss General Idea Pageant" (right) and a two-headed bicycle by Kim Adams. Aspiration and futility have always figured strongly in Toronto's artistic culture. (CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR)

The last image is more lonely than triumphal and anathema to what artmaking in Toronto has always been: a messy, collective affair more rooted in a bootstrapping all-for-oneness than the anointing of stardom. Art made here, over the generations, takes that self-consciously to heart. A pair of tapestries by Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue tell two

sides of that tale: “We Can’t Compete,” reads one, a nod, perhaps, to the city’s artistic invisibility; and “We Won’t Compete,” with each other or anyone else.

It’s a theme that abounds. Throughout the show, you’ll find a sticker made by Michael Buckland, part of the aptly named mid-90s collective Parking Lot. It helps tell part of the tale: “Michael Buckland is a minor artist of the late 20th century,” it reads.

Nearby, Mitch Robertson makes his own point: hockey cards of “art stars” from the Toronto scene of the mid-90s, some still working, many not and none with any claim to such a title. But hope springs eternal and Jacob pairs it with Robertson’s *Untitled*, the name the artist registered for a star near Ursus Major. It’s a gesture of unrequited pathos befitting its Toronto roots; stardom is a bridge too far from this place, but it’s there waiting, just in case.

Stardom, of course, has been a goal to which artists in Toronto have been historically allergic (even [General Idea](#), [bona fide international art stars](#), predicated their being on throwing in with the greater whole). Whether that’s by choice or simple futility is an open question, but Jacob focuses instead on how a lack of industry here (see: New York) begat an organic ecosystem that grows in the cracks and out of the fertile rot of its forebears.

As you move through the show, there’s a sense of an artistic culture ever doubting itself, both wishing it were elsewhere and glad that it’s not: a long-standing metaphor for Toronto more generally if there ever was one.



A detail from Kim Adams' Artists' Colony, which embodies the prevalent theme of collective work in Toronto's art history. Form Follows Fiction, at the Art Museum, looks to unpack the peculiarities of the city's art scene and how it tends to thrive in the margins in clusters, not alone. part of Luis Jacob with his exhibition Form Follows Fiction, an omnibus of Toronto's eclectic art history. (CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR)

Within that anxiety, though, is the collective strength to carry on. One room in particular stands out. It represents a collection of artist's colonies, real and imagined: the Cameron House, on Queen St. W., which became the hub of the city's art scene in the '80s; or Kim Adams' miniature tabletop utopia, which imagines a perfect world for artists outside the cruel realities of things like rent and institutional indifference.

More than these, though, is *Undergrowth*, a painting by Group of Seven stalwart Arthur Lismer, of a brilliant tangle of unchecked flora creeping up from under.

Plugged into Jacob's context here, it almost says it all. "There's been a reluctance to historicize here, I think, because if you do, you build a canon; you kill the weeds," Jacob said. He chooses to see that unchecked tangle, in all its maddeningly undefinable glory, as its strength, not its weakness. For a city that has looked to wipe clean and start fresh from the very beginning — and still does — isn't it time to nurture that life that persists in spite of it?

Form Follows Fiction: Art and Artists in Toronto runs to Dec. 10 at the Art Museum, University of Toronto, with an opening reception Sept. 21 at 6 p.m.