

**Entertainment / Visual Arts****At U of T, one gallery is better than two**

The first show at the brand new Art Museum at the University of Toronto tackles widening gap between have and have-nots.

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A huge photo of a Jesse Harris text piece on a Queen St. W. wall tells both the story of a city in rapid transformation and of a new museum poised to reflect it. Barbara Fischer and Sarah Robayo Sheridan, right, the director and curator of the University of Toronto's Art Museum, brought together two campus galleries under one name to better share both their affection for Toronto and their concern for its future as Showroom, their inaugural exhibition, makes clear.

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By: [Murray Whyte](#) Visual arts, Published on Thu Feb 04 2016

The [Art Museum at the University of Toronto](#) likes to hit the ground running. Right out of the gate, at its inauguration last month, it made the point, and strenuously, that its collection and exhibition space was second in the city only to that megalithic structure the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Among its other distinctions? It's almost surely the only museum in the city where you have to put your coat on and cross the road to get from one side to the other. "It's a bit of an issue," sighed Barbara Fischer, the newly minted institution's director and driving force. "I hope people will be patient with us on that."

If anyone has built enough goodwill in the city's art scene to merit a double coat check, it's Fischer.

To be clear: the Art Museum isn't so much new as reimagined. Last year, Fischer, a stalwart professor and curator at U of T's department of visual studies, marshalled her forces.

She had been director of the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, on campus at Hart House, for more than a decade and built it into perhaps the most vital space for artists working in Toronto. Kitty-corner on the quad, the University of Toronto Art Centre, an expanse of gallery space tucked into the corner of the gothic confines of University College, carried on its own program. Two galleries, two programs and rarely did the twain meet.

Fischer, who's been a curator at such heavyweight institutions as the National Gallery and the Power Plant, saw an opportunity. "I felt like, if we could put the two together, we could really have an impact," she said. "We could do something that was really museum scale."

Those ambitions in place, UTAC and Barnicke began their slow merging last year and the Art Museum was born with Fischer as executive director. It may have barely opened — its first exhibition under the new name was launched Jan. 22 — but it's building on a solid foundation, and its inaugural show reflects Fischer's long-held primary concern.

Called *Showroom*, it's a deliberate take on a perpetual concern in real estate-mad Toronto: the ongoing shuffle of ad hoc artists' colonies from one transitional neighbourhood to the next, chased by a frenzy of property developers like a mail truck with a pack of dogs in pursuit.

"Artists have the ingenuity to find these interstitial spaces; they have no obvious value, but they also have no rules," says Sarah Robayo Sheridan, who curated *Showroom*, filled to the brim with 48 artists, all from Toronto, with a very specific story to tell. "Every time you go to a studio in this city, you wonder: Will this still be here in five years? Or even in two?"

Sheridan is stewarding the program at the Art Museum, and she and Fischer share both an affection for the city and a concern. "There really wasn't a better way of launching this new entity than with Sarah's show," Fischer says. "We're saying to artists — and to the whole city, really — that we value how they understand this place and what they can show us about this current situation."

More than anything, it seems to show how past, present and — more than likely — future are gloomily more alike than different. *Showroom* looks back to 2000 with works like Adrian Blackwell's "Evicted" series: the artist/architect/activist used a pinhole camera to shoot makeshift, not-quite-legal live/work studios on Hanna Ave. in Liberty Village, just as their occupants were turfed, himself included.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. [Spiking rent this month on Sterling Road](#) seems poised to complete the same process Blackwell captured, transposed to a different locale. That it seems to come in anticipation of the arrival of the [Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art to the street](#) crystallizes how little progress we've made.

*Showroom* isn't often a literalists' view. Works here, like a rough, do-it-yourself gym by [VSVSVS](#), or [Jesse Harris's YOU'VE CHANGED](#), a big, ambiguous mural on a Queen West wall, tease out ideas about have and have not without laying specific blame or crying foul. It celebrates artistic ingenuity — who does more with less and less than artists here? — but an undertone of inequity and a widening gap between have and have-not reigns.

As far as Fischer's concerned, that's just telling it like it is and always has been. And ultimately, if that's the story of art in Toronto, then that's the story she'll continue to tell. "I feel like this is the mission we've always been on," she says. "It's important for us to take note of the artistic community here: to focus and show why their work is important to this place."

*Showroom continues at the Art Museum to March 5.*