

Momus

Toronto the Good, in Two Histories

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Sometimes you get the history you want. Sometimes you get the history you deserve. And sometimes you get the history that's good for you.

But it's always best when there's more than one history to choose from. And now two concurrent exhibitions at two major Toronto institutions mark this extraordinary moment when, finally, there is an interest in telling the story of Toronto's history of contemporary art. Finally, I say, because Toronto is famous for not telling this history or putting it in place; indeed, there always has been a resistance, and nowhere stronger than in the art community itself.

At the [Art Gallery of Ontario](#), the task has been delegated to new Assistant Curator of Canadian and Indigenous art, [Wanda Nanibush](#). I wouldn't say hers is the institutional point of view since the AGO has been long absent on the scene supporting Toronto art and documenting its history, when it should be central; nevertheless, the AGO is now celebrating it, and [Toronto: Tributes + Tributaries, 1971–1989](#) is all the more remarkable for that. At University of Toronto's [Art Museum](#), guest curator Luis Jacob, long associated with Barbara Fischer and the [Justina M. Barnicke Gallery](#), has sketched out an ambitious fifty-year history of the city's artists in [Form Follows Fiction: Art and Artists in Toronto](#). It takes him eighty-six artists to do so – while Nanibush employs roughly the same number, of which a good dose are video, film, and performance practitioners.

Of course, exhibitions like these tell us as much about the present as about the past. They are performances, too, not just a telling of facts or outlining of events. They tell us what we want to see and hear, and, maybe, what is good for us. I don't think anybody can disagree with Nanibush's exhibition. It's the image of Toronto we want to see ... what is best for the city. And maybe it *is* the history, too. The right, just one. Believing that it's not enough to insinuate this history by mere inclusion of previously sidelined artists, Nanibush polemically states her case at the entrance where artworks perform as signage: the 7 x 9-foot vinyl blowup of an 8 x 10-inch photograph by "urban-Iroquois" artist Jeff Thomas; the soundtrack of Jamaican-Canadian dub poet Lillian Allen; the canonical *Art is Political* (1975) by Anglo-Saxon Marxist-Leninist artists Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge; and off a bit in the distance, likewise a vinyl blowup, now of a drawing accompanied by a poem by Jamaican-Canadian Ato Seitu. Although not necessarily a correction to Toronto's history (it has been advocated for since the second famous coup at [A Space](#), in late 1982), identity art and politics have tended to exist in parallel to the self-determined progress of Toronto art, the latter merely tolerating the former. Nowhere more central than at the AGO, the margins have moved to the mainstream. And we are better for it.

Into the exhibition we can take two tracks, though one beckons dominantly, to where we see the influence of performance practices on all forms of art; the other takes us into a side room on issues of representation where painting predominates. "The exhibition highlights the era's preoccupation with ideas of performance, the body, the image, self-portraiture, storytelling, and representation," states the gallery's PR, and each theme is given its own gallery. Yet, lacking adequate space to develop themes, these rooms merely summarize, and reveal none of the period's fractures or dissent.

There are some oddball choices, though, such as Tony Urquhart, who to my knowledge never worked or studied in Toronto, and whose work is eccentric to anything else that happened in the city; and you could quibble about others like London regionalist Greg Curnoe; or Suzy Lake, who was still a Montrealer when she made the works exhibited here. Poetry is a strange inclusion, but where, then, are the artists' magazines in their publishing heyday, with their crucial support of experimental writing? The remarkable Norval Morrisseau is a category of his own, but how do you integrate Arthur Shilling and his traditional portraiture? While these Indigenous artists undoubtedly are part of the history of Toronto art, from the point of view of the art community they were not *integral* to the development of the scene – and this is an exhibition where the artist-run system is made out to be the real story. But then, perhaps we have to reconsider the context of belonging that the trajectory of Modernism and the institution of avant-garde scenes seek universally to legitimate, in Toronto as elsewhere. This exhibition is a movement towards a new understanding that the situation of Toronto currently makes possible: that legitimation is not something that is traced to a past (seemingly a history, but whose?), but to the future of how we belong together. Or I hope it is.

In an exhibition about inclusivity, you wonder about what is excluded. While part of the exhibition, abstract painting – "more traditional practices" says signage – is exiled to the collections galleries. (But was the turn to representational practices not a return to tradition, too, at least in painting?) In this weakest part of the exhibition (is this the reason for its separation?) many other artists could be included. But is it fruitful to ask about who is in and out when an exhibition makes sense and holds together (and which is beautifully installed, moreover)? Is this coherence enough to determine a history? Yes, in part, if we are interested in a redistribution of values and in an overall *positive* expression of community, which seems to be the aim here.

Or, at best, is it only a commemoration, a "tribute" as the title states? "Tribute" and "tributaries" can mean many things. At the AGO, the title, "a reference to the city's many buried waterways – serves as a visual metaphor for the diversity of the cities [sic] art scene and its similarly buried histories." However, "tributes" and "tributaries" make me think otherwise: of the singular figures who start traditions and how they continue. But no, this is not possible, indeed allowed, in Toronto; and as this would be a history we would have to decide upon, it won't happen any time soon. It's worth noting, though, that I'm not advocating for elevating individuals but asking for the evaluation of tendencies that are consequential. But perhaps the very fact of bringing Toronto art to view so energetically may also bring the demand for its history in writing. So we start.

At Art Museum, Luis Jacob is only interested in tributaries insofar as the vacant lots that cover them. Although it does not flow, the blank space created by the superimposing grid, nonetheless, is generative. More than a metaphor, according to Jacob, this blank space is the unconscious ground of much of the history of Toronto art. This is one of the many fascinating insights

of *Form Follows Fiction*. What follows speculates on this vacant lot.

Jacob's thesis is elegantly stated, as the exhibition is split over two sites, at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, which can be taken as the beginning of the exhibition that then unravels in the long corridors of the University of Toronto Art Centre (UTAC) (the two amalgamated as the Art Museum). It was the elegance of installation that belied the fact that several themes were being summarized here, especially since Robert Houle's remarkable 1994 series *Premises for Self-Rule* is given major real-estate. This series states the obligation, recorded through four governmental acts, to respect Aboriginal unceded territories. Jacob seems to suggest that the forms of Toronto art express the hidden trauma that proceeds from the Toronto Purchase (Toronto's settlement with the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation), unconsciously repeating the annulling gesture of the originating blank document, itself reproduced in the exhibition. So works by Renée van Halm, Gordon Lebrecht, and Robert Wiens enact various instances of its prefiguration. Fascinatingly, too, Jacob uses the works of David Anderson, Tom Dean, and Peter MacCallum to reveal the erasure at work in demolition's periodic return to the vacant lot as heritage buildings are torn down in the pursuit of abstract capital.

One wonders, though, whether such recent thinking of the city could be operant in works of the past or whether perhaps other art-based (transcendental or materialist) notions of the void/blank, instead, provide the conscious impetus. Or whether the relationship actually is pseudomorphic, as when Harold Town's *Metropolis* (1964), whose abstraction could be likened to an aerial view of Toronto's grid, is displayed next to the graph paper of a General Idea letterhead. Yet, had the exhibition ended here, for it was complete in itself, I would have said "brilliant."

But, as it is the nature of a grid to replicate itself, so the exhibition continued at UTAC through a curatorial principle that was yet to be announced. Of course, blanks always get filled in, so the exhibition purports to be about how Toronto artists "articulate their sense of place" and asks whether there is a particular manner, specific to this place, by which Toronto artists think about the city. You would think that in visualizing place that Toronto itself would be the image – how the city appears in artists' work – but this is seldom the case here; thinking is in methodology. And in this thinking, allied to a curatorial rethinking, Jacob endeavors to produce a new view on the history of Toronto art. This is an endeavor altogether different from that attempted at the AGO. He outlines four procedures, said to be performative and allegorical, where he sees this taking place: mapping, modeling, performing, and congregating. Each could be an exhibition in itself.

And yet the procedures specific to Toronto do not necessarily make them *about* Toronto, the place. We have to distinguish what is merely a theme in Toronto art – tropes shared by many artists elsewhere in the overall development of contemporary art, after all – from what is constitutive of Toronto art specifically. Notions of mirror replication, for instance, are common in art in general, as are those of the performative, but it is the latter, not the former, that is constitutive of an "underground" art that became a mainstream of Toronto history. Moreover, the latter is pertinent to a particular art *scene* rather than to the place itself. The assertion of a history demands nuanced arguments but Jacob's curatorial strategy proceeds, as he says, by "associative resonance" rather than consequential linkage. This, I think, is part of the problem since now the mirror, not the vacant lot, becomes the model, indeed the metaphor – not just for the art exhibited but the curatorial methodology itself. The problem with a mirror, as we know, is that it proliferates.

One begins to wonder whether the "Hand of the Spirit" leads the curator on and whether General Idea (one of whose works titles the exhibition) inspires the themes that unfold. However, it's only with the appearance of the collective's *Showcards* (the "how-to" of performatively enacting the fiction of an art scene) that the exhibition snaps into focus again. From here on Jacob develops his themes of mirroring, doubling, and fictional spacing ("the act of mirroring or splitting enacted for the sake of opening a fictive space of theatricality") that lead to the climax of the exhibition: to the image of the Toronto art community in the making of itself.

Jacob concludes his Toronto thesis with images of this congregating collegiality. He claims three metaphors (or allegories) for the art community's social scene: the art bar, family trees, and tangled gardens. As much as I basically agree with this notion, we need to discriminate: in the first case, depictions of the art scene (as in Rae Johnson's and Tony Wilson's paintings) do not make them necessarily allegorical, while Colin Campbell's fictional video *Bad Girls* (1979-80) actually is one – an allegory of admittance to the art scene. Then again, just because something is allegorical in one instance does not make another appearance of it equally so. For instance, when it comes to family trees, David Buchan's *Roots* (1979) is an allegory of the art community, whereas Sarindar Dhaliwal's *Punjabi Sheets #2: Family Tree* (1989) is not. Nor is Greg Curnoe's (him again) 1962 *List of Names of Boys I Grew Up With* – in London, that is! That artists use the same strategies (as in the examples collected here) does not mean that their works have the same ends; moreover, allegories are intentionally constructed not associated after the fact.

I only point this out, recognizing the serious ambition demonstrated here, because I know Jacob will be writing a book based on this research. But while associative curating can be both evocative *and* provocative, as authored by one who is also a practising artist (as Jacob is; and this is its value to other curators and viewers alike), history-writing demands more exacting proofs. Frankly, Jacob loses me on the tangled garden as a metaphor of the art scene. It's a metaphor if you say it is, but to function historically, a symbol has to have some consensus built up around it. Perhaps the tangled garden was a resonant symbol for the Group of Seven or like artists, whose paintings appear here, but it belongs to a conservative past not a metropolitan present. Perhaps Jacob finds the "garrison mentality" arguments of Canadian literary theorists Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood appealing, the tangled garden being a successor to the colonial bush garden. (The garrison mentality refers to the psychic enclosures historically pitched by the Canadian imagination in response to the threat of nature and the Other.)

That was good enough for the 1970s, but things have changed. Instead of looking so far back for our metaphors, I would rather that the curator conclude his exhibition, which, after all, brings history to the present, with one of those "anticipatory maps" he talks about, those being realized right now, brought about by the unique Toronto situation of mixing cultures stimulated by immigration and life in the suburbs. Here we might find new models and metaphors to articulate the *future* of Toronto art. Because the future of Toronto art may not be implicated by the histories of the past we are suddenly formulating, myself included – a sobering thought that should shatter the assumed privilege of the downtown art scene, as celebrated as

it is right now in these exhibitions. What a fate to be praised precisely the moment the paradigm shifts. But that's history for you!