

Beaver Tales: Canadian Art and Design at the University of Toronto Art Centre

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by Canadian Architect

Organized by the University of Toronto Art Centre (UTAC), *Beaver Tales: Canadian Art and Design* showcases both emerging and established designers and craft-makers, alongside seminal artists who spearheaded the tradition of interpreting and celebrating Canadian countryside and wildlife in their artwork. The exhibition runs from Tuesday, September 16 to Saturday, December 6, 2008.

Guest curators Rachel Gottlieb and Martha Kelleher selected just over 100 pieces to illustrate how artists, designers and craft-makers, working over the last two centuries, have managed to transcend the pitfalls of kitsch and cliché, while creating universal works drawn from and inspired by motifs of Canadian identity.

According to UTAC Director Niamh O'Laoghaire, "the catalogue to the seminal 1920 *Group of Seven* exhibition famously proclaimed that 'an art must grow and flower in the land before the country will be a real home for its people.' Gottlieb and Kelleher seem to have inverted this dictum, as if to say: 'the land, its flora and fauna must flourish in art and design before the country will be a real home for its people.' The objects they bring together demonstrate the extraordinary ways in which nature-based signifiers of Canadianness have managed to endure and despite the enormously diverse ethnic heritage of our by now overwhelmingly urban society. Martha Kelleher believes that, 'Today these now iconic indigent flora and fauna images help to form a rich and diverse heritage that provides us with a greater understanding of our culture.'"

Politics, commerce and culture are the driving forces behind why both artists and designers employ Canadian symbols. Our understanding of these driving forces is deepened by Gottlieb and Kelleher who ask amongst other questions: How did the beaver or the trillium come to be mythologized as regionalist or national imagery? Are globalization and a heightened awareness of environmental issues fuelling the contemporary practitioners' interest in exploring local imagery?

Gottlieb suggests, "We are now witnessing the blossoming of a Canadian Cabin Style. So many contemporary designers and artisans reject 'cookie-cutter' aesthetics in favour of local materials and indigenous motifs. In contrast with their predecessors, however, current makers infuse this traditional iconography with whimsy and innovation."

By bringing together works from art, design and craft, often regarded by scholars and curators as distinct and separate disciplines, the curators also address this low art/high art bias by revealing that Canadian symbolic flora and fauna are vital sources of inspiration and discourse across the craft, art and design communities.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue with essays by Rachel Gottlieb and Martha Kelleher, and a third by Ross Fox of the Department of Western Art and Culture at the Royal Ontario Museum.

Works by the following artists are included in the exhibition: Mauricio Affonso, Mary Ann Barkhouse, Ann Barros, Amy Belanger, Douglas Boyd, Brent Comber, Keith Campbell, Emily Carr, Heather Cooper, E.B. Cox, Robert Davidson, George Emery, Robert Ford, Andrew Fussell, Frank Gehry, Gordon & Keith, Todd Folkowsky, Bud Fujikawa, Michael Fortune, Frdric Guibrune, Emanuel Hahn, Talking Earth, Thor Hansen, Robert Hendery, Reeva Perkins, Bill Reid, Lawren Harris, Arthur Heming, Sabina Hill, Hothouse, Elizabeth Wilkes Hoey, A.Y. Jackson, Virginia Johnson, Arthur Lismer, David Milne, JEH MacDonald, Thoreau MacDonald, Eric Matthews, Earl Muldoe, Laura, McKibbon, Loyal Loot, Charlie Pachter, Ann Pocket, Christopher Pratt, Pierre Poulin, Bill Reddick, Rivertile, Rob Southcott, Thout, Harold Town, Frederick Arthur Verner, Anneke van Bommel, Joyce Wieland, Elizabeth Wyn Wood, and Tristan Zimmerman.

For more information, please visit www.utac.utoronto.ca.