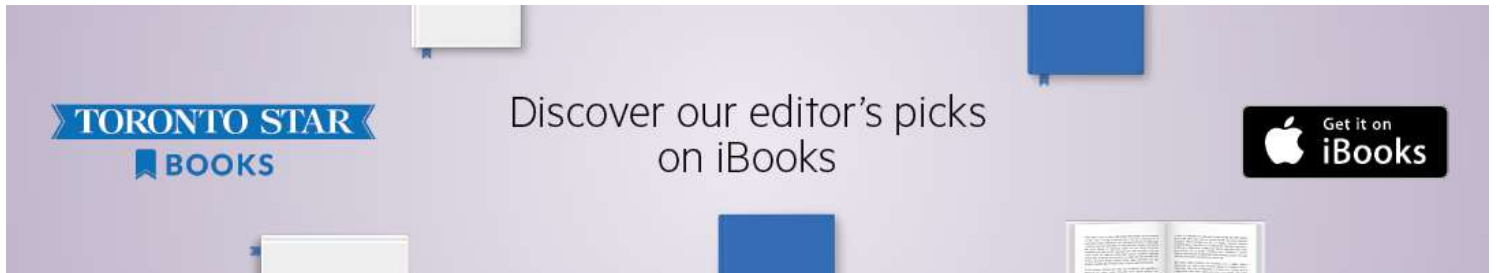




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Suzy Lake reprocesses the gender divide at the Ryerson Image Centre

Also at the galleries, a look at the environmental havoc we've wreaked at the Art Museum at U of T.



From Douglas Coupland's "Slogans for the 21st Century," a special edition made for "It's All Happening So Fast: A Counter-History of the Canadian Environment" at the Art Museum. (MURRAY WHYTE / TORONTO STAR) | [ORDER THIS PHOTO](#)

By **MURRAY WHYTE** Visual arts

Thu., May 18, 2017

Ongoing

Scotiabank Photography Award: Suzy Lake: The introductory text on the wall at the Ryerson Image Centre describes the work of Suzy Lake as being at the fore of “female identity and the aging body,” but that’s hardly the half of it. Lake, who has been working — ceaselessly, consistently — for nearly 50 years, gathers up broad swaths of the gender divide, past and present, and reprocesses it as the frank, absurd, discomfiting and ultimately destructive thing that it is.

A hometown embrace for Toronto-based Lake felt long-coming — in international art circles, she’s an icon of feminism and a pioneer of photo-based art — [until 2012, when the University of Toronto Art Centre convened “Political Poetics,” a broad survey of Lake’s career](#). The Art Gallery of Ontario hurried to match and, [in 2014, gave us “Introducing Suzy Lake,” another omnibus retrospective](#). So, the RIC’s show has the tough task of being the third but does so admirably. *Suzy Lake*, 2017 version, spans the gamut of the artist’s career and inevitably treads familiar paths.

But there are some welcome surprises among the inevitable inclusions: Lake’s *Choreographed Puppet* series, a performance from 1976, of the artist hoisted up with straps and controlled limb by limb by a pair of men, or an excerpt from 1979’s *Are You Talking To Me?* the artist’s recitation of Robert De Niro’s menacing monologue from *Taxi Driver*.



Suzy Lake, *Extended Breathing in Dappled Light*, 2009. (COURTESY OF SUZY LAKE / GEORGIA SCHERMAN PROJECTS)

Ghostly black and white versions of her 2012 series *Extended Breathing*, in which Lake fixes her feet to the ground and, with a long-open shutter, allows the camera to take in her now-aged body's best efforts to stand still. Or *Sweeping Slip*, 1999, a pale flesh-toned garment, its body present in form but invisible, engaged in the so-called women's work it implies. (A personal favourite, *Rhythm of a True Space* from 2008, showed Lake in a slip sweeping up amid haphazard debris; it was pasted to the construction hoarding of the AGO as it underwent its Frank Gehry-led facelift and still stands as a wry critique of prescribed gender roles: the bratty machismo of Gehry's redux versus Lake, quietly, holding it all together).

On this third go-around, it feels like Lake is now firmly installed as one of our best and rightfully so. But given the context of the current moment — U.S. President Donald Trump's outward assault on equality, race, religion and gender all at once; a rising chorus of feminist outrage; the sudden, perverse relevance of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* — could the timing be better (or simultaneously worse)?

I'm reminded of a recent rallying cry, at the confirmation hearing of Attorney General Jeff Sessions, [when Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren refused to be silenced in her condemnation of the nominee](#). Despite all cries for silence, “nevertheless, she persisted.” There has never been any stopping Suzy Lake, a fact for which we can all be grateful.

- At the [Ryerson Image Centre](#), 33 Gould St., until Aug. 13



Contaminated soil bags at Lower Base, Cape Dyer, 2013. Photograph by Margo Pfeiff. Included in "It's All Happening So Fast: A Counter-History of the Canadian

Environment." (MARGO PFEIFF)

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It's All Happening So Fast: A Counter-History of the Canadian Environment: This exhibition bills itself as a "Counter-History," but really, it's a catalogue of more than a century of high-profile environmental ills ganged up to a nearly-overwhelming density.

If the show has any fault, it's tough sledding as you move from one disaster to the next: [mercury contamination at Grassy Narrows](#), contaminated drinking water at Walkerton and [Kashechewan](#), the [tanker train disaster at Lac Megantic](#), oil spills in Vancouver Harbour, overfishing on the East Coast, pipeline protests stretching as far back as the Mackenzie Valley in 1977 (and the native land claim violations it and so many other environmental degradations enacted), the death of the Don River, melting polar ice caps, nuclear meltdowns, acid rain, clear-cutting on the West Coast . . . the list goes on.

At the same time, its near-intolerability is also its strength. We really should feel a nauseating shame for the consistent despoilment we've demanded to make our fast, cheap and out-of-control consumer lifestyle so easy for so long. The news media timeline is one of ever moving forward, from one disaster to the next, leaving the last one in the rear view.

In a dense display of image, text and, yes, even art, this show affirms that, yes, it's winging by us at a pace we can barely appreciate, but yesterday's disasters aren't going away so much as piling up offstage, putting each and every new calamity atop a mound of others, teetering precariously on the edge of collapse. As Douglas Coupland, in a decidedly pointed display here of colourful text aphorisms ("Hi, I'm All That Toxic S--- You Store Beneath Your Kitchen Sink") makes clear, our attitude has long been out of sight, out of mind, but it's not going away and is much, much closer than you think.

- At the [Art Museum](#) at the University of Toronto, 15 King's College Circle, until July 15.

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