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## The 10 best art shows of 2018

Historical legacies and Toronto's changing landscape were major themes in galleries and in public art works this year

BY **ROSEMARY HEATHER**

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*Ibrahim Mahama's Radical Histories, 2012-2018 wrapped City Hall in jute fabric during Nuit Blanche.*

Toronto is growing by the square metre, with buildings popping up everywhere. The city's art scene is also changing and, in some cases, responding.

In 2018, all-night art event Nuit Blanche **extended** to Scarborough and Don Mills. Fighting condo glut, artists are **building spaces** in overlooked corners and **raising voices** against the threat of Toronto becoming homogenized for the rich.

Thinking about the urban landscape is second nature in a profession in which space is a core element. That's one reason arts organizations here and across Canada are drawing attention to the contested status of the land beneath our feet. Land acknowledgments of First Nations territorial rights preceding art events have become common. This year saw Canadian art galleries **cited internationally** for changing the terms under which Indigenous art is exhibited. At the same time, one of the city's leading curators, the AGO's Wanda Nanibush, **started a conversation** to get arts professionals to better understand how to do it right.

With this attention to historical legacy, and commitment to reasoned dialogue, the art world increasingly feels like a realm more thoughtful and separate from wider public spheres. Artist-led dialogue contrasts strikingly with conniving public figures like Premier Doug Ford, who emulate the worst tendencies of our U.S. neighbours. Toronto artists are fighting back in the best way they know how. By making art and putting on shows – some of it **explicitly in protest**.

### **1. Ibrahim Mahama, Radical Histories, 2012-2018, Nathan Phillips Square (September 29)**

For Nuit Blanche, the Ghanaian artist transformed the pedestal ramp of City Hall by wrapping it in a patchwork curtain of jute fabric, previously used in trade of cocoa, coffee and charcoal. A thrilling, instantly readable monument to labour, colonialism and the hard truths of commerce.

### **2. The Work Of Wind: Air, Land, Sea, Blackwood Gallery, Mississauga (September 14-23)**

This massive art project in Mississauga's Southdown Industrial Area featured 13 outdoor installations that visitors could tour using a specially commissioned TTC bus. Many of the works captured the event's theme of stewardship in the face of environmental crisis, while remaining playful. A show highlight was Tomás Saraceno's giant walk-in air balloon made from thousands of plastic bags.

### **3. Rebecca Belmore: Facing The Monumental, Art Gallery of Ontario (July 12-October 21)**

For those who saw Belmore's excellent 2014 show at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, her AGO exhibition was a revelation. This show featured a different but equally compelling range of works. Her monumental stack of shopping carts packed with fresh clay offered a concise statement about Indigenous dispossession. Just one of many works on view that combined critique of social and power structures with strong emotional impact.



Courtesy of Gentrification Tax Action (GTA)

*GTA's billboard in Trinity-Bellwoods Park proposed legislation to curb house flipping and make the city more affordable.*

#### **4. GTA, Gentrification Tax, Trinity Bellwoods Park (February 25); Public Studio (June 1-July 30)**

GTA stands for Gentrification Tax Action, an ad hoc artist group who – in different combinations of people – have made activist art since the 90s. Via a temporary billboard installation in Trinity Bellwoods Park and poster project, GTA proposed a practical solution to Toronto's gentrification problem: a tax on real estate speculation, with the money redirected to affordable housing. Their work added much-needed nuance to the conversation around Toronto's affordable housing crisis.

#### **5. Shannon Bool, Bomb. Shell., Daniel Faria Gallery (November 1-January 12)**

Canada produces a lot of strong artists. Bool is a contender for one of the best. Her stunning photo collages and tapestries in this show combine the work of modernist giants like Le Corbusier with vintage postcards of nude Algerian women, whom the architect also made sketches of in his off hours. A deft expose of Orientalism and the darker underpinnings of modernism.

#### **6. Shelley Niro, Ryerson Image Centre (April 28-August 5)**

This was a welcome survey show for the 2017 Scotiabank Photography Award winner. Niro is skilled at bringing humour to dark subject matter like the decimation of her Indigenous ancestors by white settlers in Canada. The preference for comedy and a light touch on view in this exhibition made clear her connection to the sophisticated craft-based work of artists like General Idea and Allyson Mitchell.

### 7. Believe, Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto Canada (September 22-January 6)

Attendees at the **MOCA's inaugural exhibition** at its new home in the Lower Junction Triangle were probably as curious about the building – five floors in all – as they were the art. This show is multifaceted and sprawling, with textile works sitting next to a playable and wildly decorated pinball machine, adjacent to sculptures and video works. A total experience of art and space results, with highlights that includes work by Dineo Seshee Bopape, Tuan Andrew Nguyen and Rajni Perera.

### 8. I continue to shape, Art Museum, University of Toronto (September 5-December 8)

This group show features mostly First Nations artists taking a non-didactic approach to settler and Indigenous histories. By combining traditional First Nations and contemporary art vocabularies – see Nicholas Galanin's re-carving of a traditional native mask – the artists bring viewers into a fresh dialogue with the subject matter. In a show of great works, Joseph Tisiga's paintings that use Archie comic characters as stand-ins for white obliviousness are standouts.

### 9. Yoko Ono: The Riverbed, Gardiner Museum (February 22 to June 3)

How calming it was to visit the white environ Yoko Ono created in her **three-part, ceramic-based installation**. Ono was part of the first wave of artists making interactive (or instructional) artworks in the late 60s and 70s, and this recent work confirms her preeminence. Made with the help of museum visitors – who reassembled broken china and threaded twine into a room-sized spider web – and probably for that reason, the installations evoked the timeless mark-making of artists like Cy Twombly.

### 10. Diagrams Of Power, OCAD University (July 11-September 30)

This exhibition articulated the forms power takes in the 21st century through works that highlighted how today's geopolitics are networked. We understand we live in a networked world and yet it remains intangible in important ways. The research-based works in this exhibition, such as Bureau d'études' mappings of what they call "the World Government," created a visual lexicon for grasping ideas society has yet to fully grapple with.

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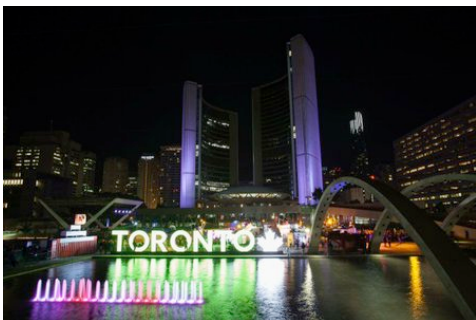
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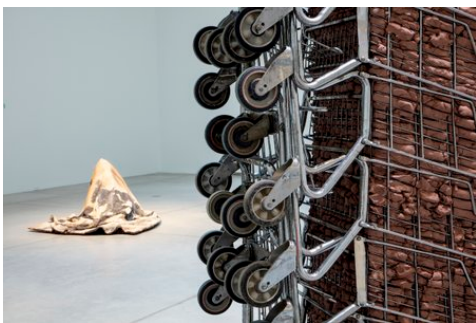
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