

Nations by Artists

February 8–April 2, 2022

Art
Museum

Works by

Ruanne Abou-Rahme & Basel Abbas,
Sadie Barnette, Yael Bartana, Walter
Battiss, Jasmina Cibic, Decolonize
This Place, Shawna Dempsey and Lorri
Millan, Demian DinéYazhi'/R.I.S.E.
(Radical Indigenous Survivance and
Empowerment), Pablo Helguera, Greg Hill,
IRWIN, Iman Issa, Christopher Kulendran
Thomas, Will Kwan, Zoe Leonard, Life of a
Craphead, Divya Mehra, Alan Michelson,
Native Art Department International,
Majdulin Nasrallah, Huong Ngo, Emma
Wolukau-Wanambwa

Curated by Mikinaak Migwans &
Sarah Robayo Sheridan



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Nations by Artists

Cover: NSK, *NSK passport*, 1993. Photo by New Collectivism.

Right: Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, *Lesbian National Parks and Services*, 1997. Photo-documentation from performance. Courtesy of the artists. Photo by Do Lee.



How have artists imagined new forms of nation?

Nations by Artists explores how artists have engaged the trappings of the nation-state as a material for protest, parody, or collective utopian wish, dreaming counter-realities that exceed and resist prevalent paradigms of nationalism. The title builds from the historical precedent of Art Metropole's publishing series exploring the potentialities of artist-led culture and looks at myriad possible political futures proposed by artists.



Left: Jasmina Cibic, *All That Power Melts Into Noise*, 2020. Acrylic on snare drum, 15 in x 15 in x 6 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Middle: Life of a Craphead, *King Edward VII Equestrian Statue Floating Down the Don*, 2017. Video. Production stills: Yuula Benivolski. Acquired by the Hart House Art Committee, 2021.



Top Right: Huong Ngo, *We are here because you were there. Chúng tôi ở đây vì quý vị đã ở đó. Nous sommes ici parce que vous étiez là-bas*, 2016. Installation with series of hectograph prints, hand-cut paper, theatre lights. Installation at VISUAL Carlow, Ireland. Courtesy of the artist.

Bottom Right: Will Kwan, *Flame Test*, 2009. 36 flags (dye sublimation on Duralux fabric, various dimensions according to official national dimensions), interior aluminum flagpoles, interior aluminum flag clips, interior aluminum acorn finials, interior metal wall mounts. Acquired by the Hart House Art Committee with the support of the Canada Council, 2010.



Nations by Artists

What is the “nation” in the hands of artists? Worldbuilders, iconoclasts, and interlopers at once, artists have long held a complex role in both the articulation and the critique of nationhood. Etienne Balibar wrote that “the history of nations . . . is always presented to us in the form of a narrative.”¹ The technologies of the nation—sanctioned languages, centralized currency, controlled borders, and internal systems of control—are equally synthetic, and yet their persistence and force into the present demands our critical (and creative) attention. *Nations by Artists* is an exhibition that explores how artists have engaged the trappings of the nation as a material for protest, parody, or collective utopian wish, dreaming and proposing new political imaginaries in the process.

In 2017, the Slovenian art collective IRWIN burrowed its way into the framework of the Venice Biennale with a pavilion honouring their art project/state apparatus the NSK State in Time. As a movement, NSK first emerged in 1984. Collaborators in art, music, performance, and design saw it as a means of critically examining the art history of “Western Modernism,” which they countered with the fictive notion of an “Eastern Modernism.” By 1992, against the backdrop of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the collective furthered this concept by founding the NSK State in Time as an alternative form of assembly based not on territory but on historical urgency. To that end, their 2017 presence in Venice engaged the urgency of the migrant crisis in Europe, with an installation that presented a highly theatrical version of a passport office turned upside down. Visitors ascended via movable aircraft passenger stairs to an unconventional passport office whose information kiosk was a trampoline, enacting a gravity-defying wish for a state beyond space, territory, and time. Earlier, in 2011, Israeli-born artist Yael Bartana also interceded into the pan-national structure of the Biennale as a way of addressing historical trauma and processes of militarization. She became the first non-national to occupy the Polish national pavilion, with the three-part film series and manifesto *And Europe will be Stunned*, which called for the return of 3,300,000 Jews to Poland in order

to re-establish the community annihilated by the Holocaust. With this speculative fiction, indexed by the takeaway manifesto offered in this exhibition, she held a mirror to the Israeli occupation of Palestine, resituating a troubled history in new terms. *Nations by Artists* places these debates into new orbit, renewing the energy of these projects by linking together different legacies of artists’ engagement with political utopias.

The global intersections of colonial routes are brought into visibility in *King Edward the VII Equestrian Statue Floating Down the Don* by the former Toronto-based collective Life of a Craphead. This work of critical parody took as its starting point the unlikely trajectory of an imperial sculpture shelved after Indian independence from British rule and then resuscitated by the efforts of a wealthy patron group that purchased and re-sited it behind the Ontario Legislature, where it still stands today. Intrigued by the persistence of this imperial symbol carried across time and place, the artists dared to posit a further journey for this work: they built a partial replica of the statue and floated it down the Don River on successive weekends in the fall of 2017. Resting now in pieces on the gallery floor, this performance prop finds new life as a beacon of anti-monumentalism. The sculpture is surrounded by enlarged pages drawn from the *Manual for Decolonial Operations*, written by the action-oriented movement Decolonize This Place. Their DIY instructional “How to Take Down a Monument” offers visitors clear instruction on how to achieve direct change by populist means.

Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan take a lighthearted approach to pointing out the exclusion and paternalism of state authority with their performance work *Lesbian National Parks and Services*. By patrolling as fully uniformed Lesbian Rangers, they challenge notions of the “natural” environment, asserting lesbian visibility in the landscape by conducting “tours-of-duty” across Canada and abroad from parks to city streets to university halls. Similarly, Pablo Helguera’s performance-based work *School of Panamerican Unrest* features an epic journey from Alaska to

Tierra del Fuego, during which his travelling schoolhouse made its way down the Panamerican Highway to engage 30 different communities on topics such as immigration, globalization, and the role of art in society.

Territory and sovereignty are key considerations in this exhibition, building upon the work of Indigenous artists, activists, and scholars who emphasize pre-colonial nationhood as an important strategy in decolonization. Jolene Rickard asserts that “the work of indigenous artists needs to be understood through the clarifying lens of sovereignty and self-determination, not just in terms of assimilation, colonization, and identity politics.”² This strategy finds clear expression in Alan Michelson’s *Blanket Refusal*, which reproduces a letter issued by the chiefs of the Onondaga Nation to U.S. President Calvin Coolidge regarding the passing of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 and its unilateral assignment of U.S. citizenship to all Indigenous people within its borders. Michelson prints the missive across two blankets, testifying to the fact that Six Nations citizens have never relinquished their sovereignty as citizens of their own land. The bands of white and purple invoke the design of the Two Row Wampum Treaty, recording the 1613 agreement between the Five Nations of the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch government (a forceful colonizing agent at the time) to not interfere in each other’s affairs. By holding up this evidence, Michelson compels us to scrutinize how this agreement is being dishonoured today. These questions are furthered in the ardent calls to action in the print works by Demian DinéYazhi’/ R.I.S.E. (Radical Indigenous Survivance and Empowerment), which link forms of colonial violence to gender-based violence. This installation pivots on the statement “A Nation Is a Massacre,” providing a haunting definition with which to reckon.

Critical archival work is a vital artistic strategy enacted by several artists in the show. Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa’s film essay *Promised Lands*, for example, considers censored histories related to late British colonialism in Uganda. Huong Ngo’s work *We Are Here Because You Were There* looks at the structural effects of displacement mapped onto the trajectory of her own Vietnamese-Chinese family taking refuge in the United States. Sadie

Barnette’s *Untitled (Dad, 1966 and 1968)* is also rooted in personal history. Taking the contents of an FBI surveillance file about her father’s participation in the Black Panthers, she speaks back to this archive, regenerating a new form of empowerment and healing.

Throughout the exhibition, we see artists reinvent boundaries both territorial and conceptual. Perhaps the most idiosyncratic of these models is the concept of Fook Island, created by South African artist Walter Battiss and his collaborators. This utopian “island” is in some ways a composite of the many real islands he has visited, including Zanzibar, the Seychelles, Madagascar, Fiji, Hawaii, Samoa, the Greek Isles, and the Comoros. Blending together into an imagined space, Fook Island developed its own visual language replete with its own alphabet, maps, portraits of its inhabitants, taxonomies of local plants, and even currency, stamps, and driver’s licenses and passports. The notion of artists holding their own frontierless forms of intrinsic knowledge of the world is also a feature of two newly commissioned works by Native Art Department International (NADI). In restaging two iconic mid-twentieth-century performances by Saburo Murakami of Japan’s Gutai Group and by Wolfgang Stoerchle, NADI put themselves in conversation with the visionaries of that historical avant-garde, establishing within the gallery a post-national space in which paper, plaster, wood, gesture, and the body become our common language.

Collectively, the works in this show lead us to political imaginaries and modes of critique that could only be envisioned by artists. They hold us accountable to uncomfortable histories, they offer challenges that shake at the tree of knowledge, and they dream new worlds and possibilities into being. Be it IRWIN’s trampoline to stateless citizenship as a departure gate, Alan Michelson’s blankets as an official document of refusal, or the queer flora and fauna of the Lesbian National Park Service as fellow members of the body politic, all these artworks ask the question, What can a nation be?

1. Etienne Balibar, “The Nation Form: History and Ideology,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 13, no. 3 (1990): 338.
2. Jolene Rickard, “Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand,” *Aperture* 139 (Spring 1995): 51.

Online Events

Nations by Artists Podcast

A four-part series inviting artists, activists, and scholars to deliver a state of the nation on nations. Produced by Aliya Pabani and hosted by exhibition curators Mikinaak Migwans & Sarah Robayo Sheridan. All podcast episodes will be available to stream on artmuseum.utoronto.ca

Episode 1: Monuments + Listening Party

Wednesday, February 2, 6:30pm
Join us for an online listening party celebrating the release of the *Nations by Artists* podcast series. Episode 1 will be livestreamed, followed by a live Q&A with the exhibition curators. Free with registration through artmuseum.utoronto.ca/programs

Online Conversations

Listen in as participating artists engage in interdisciplinary conversations to unpack each podcast episode's theme. Complete details at artmuseum.utoronto.ca/exhibition/nations-by-artists/

In-Person Events

Curatorial Tour with Mikinaak Migwans & Sarah Robayo Sheridan

Wednesday, February 9, 5:30pm
University of Toronto Art Centre
Limited enrollment by advanced registration based on event protocols. Free with registration through artmuseum.utoronto.ca/programs

Keynote Lecture with Decolonize This Place

"Under the Museum, Under the University, Under the City, Under the Land"
Wednesday, March 30, 4pm
University College, UC140
Presented in partnership with the Department of Art History. Free with registration through artmuseum.utoronto.ca/programs

Please note that this program schedule is subject to change. For the most up-to-date information, visit artmuseum.utoronto.ca/programs

Virtual Spotlights

"Statues Also Die," a virtual essay by Ameen Ahmed published on artmuseum.utoronto.ca/virtual-spotlights/

Exhibition Tours


The Art Museum offers in-person guided exhibition tours for classes and groups! For more information or to book a tour, email artmuseum@utoronto.ca


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Visiting the Art Museum

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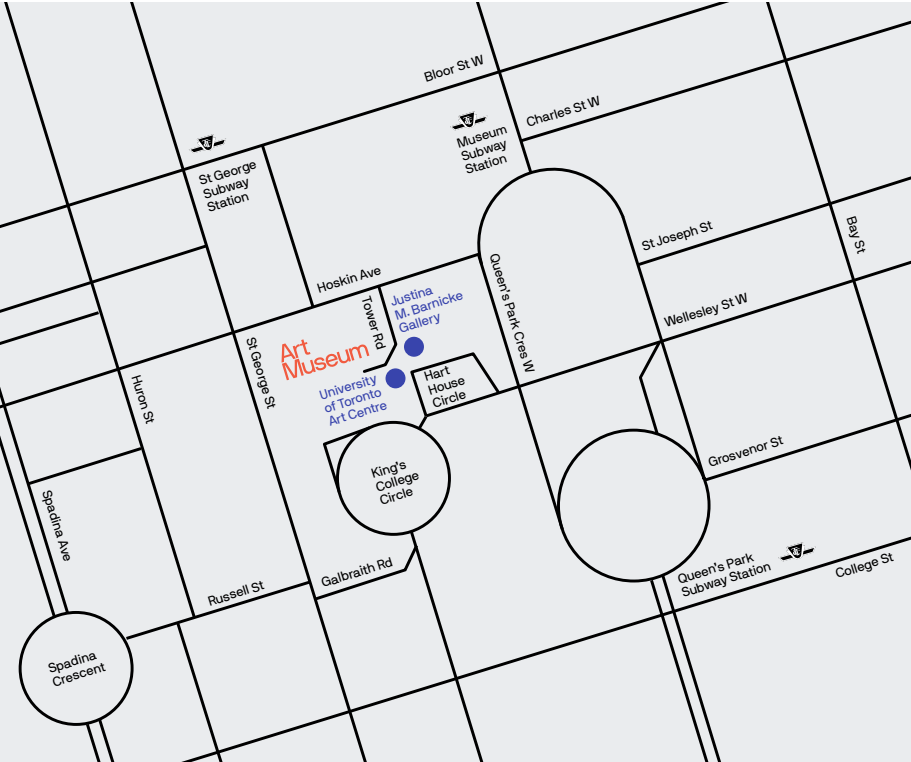
University of Toronto Art Centre 
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Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H7
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Tuesday	12 noon–5pm
Wednesday	12 noon–8pm
Thursday	12 noon–5pm
Friday	12 noon–5pm
Saturday	12 noon–5pm
Sunday	Closed
Monday	Closed

Closed on statutory holidays.
Admission is FREE.

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Access between the University of Toronto Art Centre and the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery has changed due to construction for the University of Toronto Landmark Project. For more information, please contact staff at artmuseum@utoronto.ca or visit artmuseum.utoronto.ca/visiting



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