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
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.


Top Right: Huong Ngo, We are here because you were there. Chúng tôi ở đây vì quí 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.

In the form of a narrative. 1 The technologies of
in both the articulation and the critique of
at once, artists have long held a complex role
Worldbuilders, iconoclasts, and interlopers
What is the “nation” in the hands of artists?
Nations by Artists
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Wish for a state beyond space, territory,
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Nations by Artists is an exhibition that explores
how artists have engaged the trappings of
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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
Crapple. 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." 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 disenchanted 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 Take Down a
Monument” offers visitors clear
instruction on how to achieve direct change
by populist means.
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?

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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

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

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

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