

# Large Text

## Nations by Artists

Curated by Mikinaak Migwans &  
Sarah Robayo Sheridan

February 8–April 2, 2022  
University of Toronto Art Centre

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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, Majdulín Nasrallah, Huong Ngô,  
Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa

Art  
Museum

# Nations by Artists

*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 landmark publishing series that explored the potentialities of artist-led culture. The exhibition looks at critical interventions in the performance of nation/nationalism, and artists' capacities to complicate and make fissures through standing notions of territory, belonging, authenticity, citizenship, and borders. The works included offer possibilities to disrupt colonial power structures, exhume suppressed histories, and create new political scripts. Timely subjects explored in the exhibition include contestations of public monuments, counter-archival research into suppressed historical memory, the assertion of otherwise marginalized knowledge nodes and histories of resistance. Other works place into sharp focus mechanisms of state suppression, bringing into visibility forms of erasure that are structurally persistent to upholding state power. Numerous works also address histories of dispossession and make claims for the return of land and the centering of Indigenous knowledge and cultural survivance. Together, the works assembled in this exhibition point to possible political futures as imagined by artists, offering rich provocations to challenge existing paradigms of nationhood.

## **Our Supporters**

The Art Museum gratefully acknowledges operating support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Toronto Arts Council, and the Ontario Arts Council, with additional project support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

# Exhibition Essay

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.”<sup>1</sup> 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

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1. Etienne Balibar, “The Nation Form: History and Ideology,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 13, no. 3 (1990): 338.

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.”<sup>2</sup> This strategy finds clear expression in

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2. Jolene Rickard, “Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand,” *Aperture* 139 (Spring 1995): 51.

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?



# Public Programming

## **Nations by Artists Podcast Series**

A four-part series inviting artists, activists, and scholars to deliver a state of the nation on nations, interrogating ideas of nationhood, borders, power, and dissent. 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](http://artmuseum.utoronto.ca)

## **Nations by Artists Podcast Release + Online Listening Party**

Wednesday, February 2, 6:30pm–7:30pm ET

## **Curatorial Tour with Mikinaak Migwans and Sarah Robayo Sheridan**

Wednesday, February 9, 5:30pm  
University of Toronto Art Centre

## **Keynote Lecture with Decolonize This Place: “Under the Museum, Under the University, Under the City: the Land”**

Wednesday, March 30, 4pm  
University College, UC140

## **Virtual Spotlights**

“Statues Also Die,” a virtual essay by Ameen Ahmed  
Published on [artmuseum.utoronto.ca/virtual-spotlights/](http://artmuseum.utoronto.ca/virtual-spotlights/)

All programs are free. For more information and to register, visit [artmuseum.utoronto.ca/programs/](http://artmuseum.utoronto.ca/programs/)

# Visiting the Art Museum

## **Justina M. Barnicke Gallery**

7 Hart House Circle  
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H3  
416-978-8398

## **University of Toronto Art Centre**

15 King's College Circle  
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H7  
416-978-1838

### **Hours**

Tuesday	Noon–5pm
Wednesday	Noon–8pm
Thursday	Noon–5pm
Friday	Noon–5pm
Saturday	Noon–5pm
Sunday	Closed
Monday	Closed

Closed on statutory holidays. For information about class tours and group bookings, contact [artmuseum@utoronto.ca](mailto:artmuseum@utoronto.ca)

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