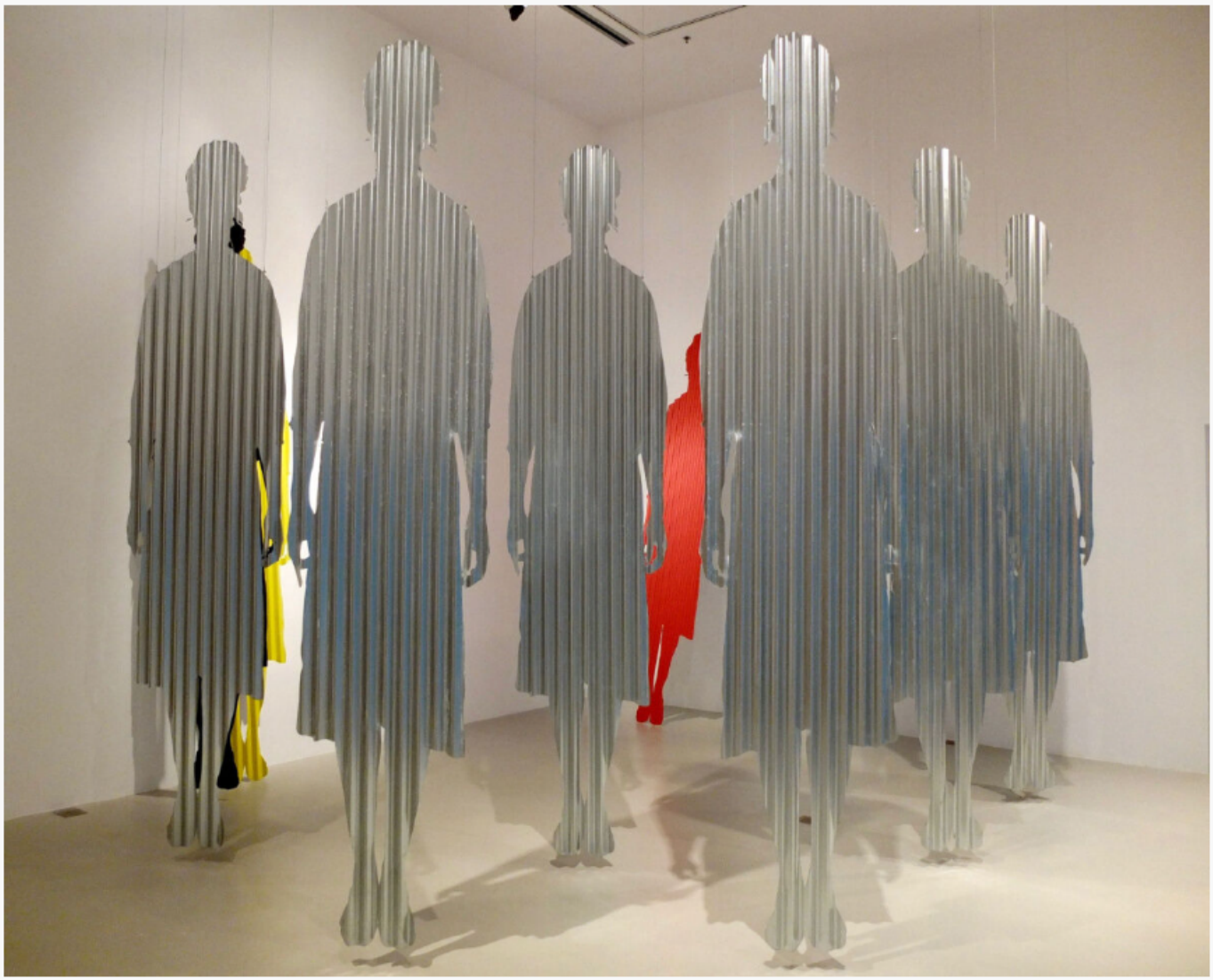
TORONTO STAR

VISUAL ARTS

Bright in the corners: A new art show at York University captures the suburbs' creative force

Migrating the Margins challenges the ruling ethic of art as a downtown thing.

Oct. 8, 2017 | 5 min read



Anique Jordan's creation, armed for clara, at Migrating the Margins at the Art Gallery of York University.

Murray Whyte

What does your Toronto look like? Shimmery green-glass towers hemmed in by an elevated expressway, maybe? Or the hectic outdoor markets of Chinatown and Kensington? Maybe it's the cookie-cutter postwar suburbs of Scarborough, with its low-slung brick-box strip malls, or the tight rows of prefab houses that seem to gobble up more acreage in the city's ballooning exurban hinterlands every day?

Whichever feels most like home to you, the critical point here is that Toronto, like any major international centre, contains multitudes; it has never been any one thing to everyone.

The art world, here and elsewhere, hasn't been overly reflective of this simple fact. Indeed, a ruling downtown ethic is the hallmark of many an art scene the world over; art as an urban feature, to be blunt, has become the stamp of many a civic branding campaign (Nuit Blanche, I'm looking at you).

Such narrowcast views serve an agenda of convenience: difference is messy; breadth, however capacious, can never be broad enough. Tight parameters based on longstanding boundaries keep things both tidy and self-affirming, and the casual exclusions they beget have rarely been a point of concern to anyone on the comfortable side of things.

Aside from being blithely heartless, such notions are also a cheat to audiences who deserve more. Toronto *now* is not Toronto of any recently imaginable *then*. A sky-high real estate market has made the downtown core increasingly unfriendly to cultural activity, let alone a landscape of difference; our city's much-vaunted diversity exists less and less within the boundaries of the city centre, and more and more in the blossoming communities in its far orbit.

The Toronto Foundation, in its 2016 Vital Signs report on the city's rapid evolution, coined the term "ethnoburb" for expanding ethnic communities in places like Brampton, Markham, Scarborough and Mississauga — a panoply of Torontos, growing and thriving well outside the old city walls.

This, of course, is nothing particularly new. What might be, though, is where that evolution is taking cultural endeavour. The idea of downtown, with its sky-high prices and increasing socio-economic sameness, is seen less as a goal than a place of exclusion for an emerging generation of artists (see: Hamilton). At the same time, the occasional nervous glance — what are we missing? — is being cast across the barricades.

Infiltrations occur — see the radical inclusiveness of the Art Gallery of Ontario's *Every. Now. Then.* — but they're outliers, shake-ups, outsiders; their very existence reminds us of the invisible barrier through which few pass.

These are just some of the ideas that *Migrating the Margins,* a new exhibition at the Art Gallery of York University, looks to unpack. To its enduring credit, it's sumptuous, engaging and gorgeous, never scoldy or pedantic. It makes clear at the outset that its margins are more than geographical: the borders between the urban and out there are economic, social and ethnic — divisions of privilege, both in having a voice and the spaces we inhabit.

The artists here embody the theme. They're from suburbs, mostly, from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds and most, at least until recently, functioning outside the sanctioned spaces of art institutions. *Migrating the Margins* declares, and quickly, the falseness of such divisions.

Nep Sidhu, whose work was recently seen in another boundary-busting exhibition at the Aga Khan Museum, starts things off with a pair of ornately clad figures, long trains of rope and fabric trailing behind them.

One, all in black, has a biker-effete esthetic: "No Pigs in Paradise" reads the slogan emblazoned on the back of its black leather jacket, alongside intricate iconography in silver and gold. The other, creamy pale, is emblazoned with Tlingit symbols and the entire piece is a collaboration with Nicholas Galanin, an Indigenous artist from the West Coast.

The notion of cross-cultural communion, here linking Sidhu's Indian heritage and Galanin's Indigenous background, seems an easy alliance, perhaps in response to the common foe of colonial dominance. But the motif, explicitly feminine, is far from violent: the figures symbolize communion and social harmony.

If it seems an impossibility in this fractious moment of nuclear threat and divisions of every imaginable kind, it bears some consideration of who's in charge. Old-guard elites and the dominant ethic of money have never failed to produce histrionic dread; holding on to power is ugly business. For those who have never had it, speaking plainly is only natural, with nothing to lose the ultimate freedom.

Among the most plain-spoken artists I know is Tau Lewis, whose hunter-gatherer approach to portraiture is some of the most compelling work this city has seen in years. A master forager, Lewis (who grew up downtown in Chinatown, it should be noted) makes work that serves as a composite sketch of her identity as a Black Canadian: a cobbled-together DIY approach common to those left out of official histories.

Here, her spectral figures line a wall of pale blue. Some have eyes closed — in repose? or submission? — while some are dully alert. All seem trapped in some kind of stasis; specimens, maybe, in the process of becoming or unravelling. Neither is incorrect for communities on the margins, whether societal or geographic, and the implied precarity is riveting indeed.

I don't think *Migrating the Margins* means to ally its artists and works thematically; such an effort would smack too much of the box-ticking of institutions it seems deliberately to defy. Unity here, if it exists at all, is largely in difference, though a storytelling urge is a strong thread.

An imposing gathering of 12-foot-tall sentinels, their corrugated aluminum shimmering in low light, preside over all here. Their looming presence is an ominous thing. Together, they're called *arming by clara*, explained by their maker, Anique Jordan, as self-portraits, inspired by a snippet of marginalized history.

It wouldn't make a textbook but, for a Black woman like Jordan, it looms large: in 1895, Clara Ford, who was Black, stood trial for the murder of a wealthy white man in Toronto. Ford was known to wear men's clothes and carry a gun; for trial, she wore a dress, imagining femininity as an effective lever towards a not-guilty verdict.

She was right: she went free, the jury imagining such violence not in the province of so

demure and disempowered a person as a Black woman. For Jordan, Ford's freedom having hinged less on fact than perception — societal roles, knowing one's place — continues to haunt her. The figures put her in two minds: one hand is relaxed; the other clenched, as though around a gun.

Ford's rights as a person seemed to hinge on arbitrary social codes, which require no law to change; and her position, on the knife's edge of ruling class whim, is a helplessness Jordan still feels. She co-curated the AGO's *Every. Now. Then.* with **Andrew Hunter, the museum's recently departed curator of Canadian art**. At the time, she remarked on the struggle with bringing typically excluded artists inside institutional walls; in a way, she's still subject to an arbitrary measure, left to hope the wind blows her way.

A final space here brings us to a pair of things: a big, explosively ebullient mural of three shadowy female forms bursting with cosmic energy, from Rajni Perera, and the much quieter *Studies for Gardens*, from Erika DeFreitas.

Beauty is the common thread here: Perera's piece is glorious — mysterious and emphatic, a sensual explosion. DeFreitas, who also presents intimate videos, like one of hands entwining, makes her garden collages with exquisite care; by the dozen, they're intricate, beguiling and, one gets the sense, perpetual.

The counterpoint is well-taken. Difference can be self-declared with a big, loud shout or nurtured to grow with slow insistence. It seems clear enough: an entire universe has been growing out there in the margins for long enough. It's ready to be heard.

*Migrating the Margins, with work by Erika DeFreitas, Anique Jordan, Tau Lewis, Rajni Perera and Nep Sidhu, continues at the Art Gallery of York University until Dec. 3. See theagyuisoutthere.org for more information.***