THE GLOBE AND MAIL

VISUAL ART

AGO exhibition asks where Canada really came from



Rosalie Favell's oil-on-canvas work First Day from From an Early Age – Revisited conveys her upbringing in a Métis family in the 1960s.

GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE

BRAD WHEELER ›

INCLUDES CORRECTION

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Remember the Joe Canadian rant ad from Molson at the turn of the last century? The actor, a Canadian wishing to distance himself from Americans and from stereotypical Canadians, was quite clear on what constituted his nationality and what did not. Among other things, he didn't eat blubber and he didn't own a dog sled. He spoke English and French. And he believed in diversity.

Cheers, Joe: You. Were. Canadian.

Now, a dozen or so years after those TV spots, Molson Canadian is brewed by Molson Coors Brewing Company, based in Denver, Colo. For the Canada sesquicentennial, the company has come out with retro "stubby" bottles of its nationalistic lager.

We've come so far, haven't we?

There's a wooly, vibrant new show at the Art Gallery of Ontario that shows Canadians how far their country has come and how far it has not. The choppily titled Every. Now. Then: Reframing Nationhood is an ambitious contemporary exhibition that collects (often new) works from emerging and established artists. Three questions are asked: Where has Canada come from, what is it now and where is it going?

Andrew Hunter, the gallery's curator of Canadian art, describes the show (which involves 55 artists and 35 projects) as "kind of messy" and a "bit of an experiment." Sounds like a country we know.

When it comes to diversity, the exhibition believes in it with more understanding and inclusiveness than a righteous, suds-happy pitchman-patriot was able to muster. Canada speaks languages beyond English and French – can we drink to that?

The paintings, objects, drawings, photographs, videos and installations of Every. Now. Then: Reframing Nationhood (running to Dec. 10) challenge and expand on the notions of what constitutes the Canadian experience.

Rosalie Favell, a Manitoba-born photo-based artist, contributes *From an Early Age – Revisited*, a project of oil-on-canvas works that conveys her upbringing in a Métis family in the 1960s. They look like wonder-years snapshots from a stereotypical Canadian upbringing. As a child, Favell would try to scrub off her "tan." Her mother told her that because her father had "Indian blood" she also had "Indian blood," and that was why her tan would not come off.

"Culturally ingrained racism affected my upbringing," Favell writes in the note that accompanies her paintings.

Other works zero in on misconceptions and omissions when it comes to the traditional telling of the Canadian story, specifically as to how Canada is seen as the kinder, gentler part of North America. When it comes to the slave trade, Canada's niche involvement is often limited to its role in the Underground Railroad. But, of course, there were slave owners in this country.

The photograph *Bell* by Camal Pirbhai and Camille Turner looks to be a typical glossy fashion ad, with a well-dressed dark-skinned woman making a phone call. Though the photograph wouldn't look out of place in last month's Vogue, it takes its inspiration from an actual advertisement from a Quebec newspaper in 1778, placed by a Canadian slave owner seeking the return of a "Mulatto Negress" named Bell, who wore a striped woollen jacket and petticoat, and had no shoes or stockings on.

That vintage ad informed the appearance of the free and fashionable modern-day model seen in the photograph. Thus, an 18th-century slave's humanity is restored. (A book collects 10 such photographs from the Wanted series by Pirbhai and Turner.)

According to co-curator Anique Jordan, the fugitive slave ads are an omitted part of the Canadian story, one that often paints the country as innocent and benevolent. "The work of Camal Pirbhai and Camille Turner repositions the narrative and forces people to think differently about Canada," she says.

In the same vein, Charmaine Lurch's new large assemblage *A Mobile and Visible Carriage* articulates the story of Thornton and Lucie Blackburn, escaped slaves from the United States who established Toronto's first horse-drawn cab service.

An untitled video from Toronto-based artists Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak looks at the Canadian role in the Vietnam War. In 1968, in the wave of draft dodgers, Kansas City native Steele moved to Canada.

"As a part of our history, what we're comfortable talking about is Canada as a place of sanctuary for those people against the Vietnam Way," the AGO's Hunter says. "But people here, who supported and supplied American businesses, benefited financially from the war."

Maybe Canada isn't so different from the United States of America after all. Say it ain't so, Joe Canadian.

EDITOR'S NOTE In an earlier version of this article, it was stated that the photograph Bell takes its inspiration from an advertisement in the Nova-Scotia Gazette and the Weekly Chronicle in 1772. In fact, it takes its inspiration from a Quebec newspaper in 1778.