# Canada revisited at the Art Gallery of Ontario

The museum pushes back with Canada 150 offering Every.Now.Then, a fiery update to a tight nationalist tale.

July 3, 2017



At the Art Gallery of Ontario's Every.Now.Then: Charmaine Lurch's 'A Mobile and Visible Carriage lies on the floor in front of Xiong Gu's Illuminated Niagara Falls (on the wall) and Bonnie Devine's Anishinaabitude.

Courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario

**By Murray Whyte Visual Arts Critic**

"A century is only a spoke in the wheel of everlasting time" reads a quote on the wall of the Art Gallery of Ontario, attributed to Louis Riel.

It's a poetic statement, but the fiery 19th-century Indigenous civil rights leader might like to refine the metaphor, had he the chance. If "Canada 150" is a spoke and a half, just how many do the wheels of history have here, anyway? Dozens? Hundreds? With an Indigenous presence here dating back at least 15,000 years, we could outfit an entire Tour de France.

The statement is embedded as a touchstone in *Every.Now.Then: Reframing Nationhood*, the museum's response to this blithely nationalistic moment, and it makes clear the show's driving force: to resituate the blip that is Canada in a

gapingly broad continuum of both time and difference, with flag-waving pushed aside.

“We knew right away we weren’t doing a celebratory project,” says Andrew Hunter, the gallery’s curator of Canadian art. “We have a history in Canada of telling the same stories over and over, and ignoring other stories. We wanted to make space in this institution for stories that haven’t been told.”

For the project, Hunter enlisted independent curator and artist Anique Jordan, and their joint mandate is clear from the exhibition’s opening salvo. Michael Belmore, an Anishinaabe artist, offers *Rumble*, a blackened copper sandwich of Trans-Am hoods, with effigies of spiritually significant creatures — a Thunderbird on one side, water panthers on the other — glowing from within.

Nearby looms *Bell (Wanted Series)*, a totem of seductive defiance in her spiked heels, clingy taffeta gown and veil of black netting. The series, a slickly stylized photo-portrait project by Camal Pirbhai and Camille Turner, was drawn from a shocking source: 19th-century Canadian classified ads placed by owners in search of their runaway slaves. Their pictures give human form to people described as property and returns the power to them.

Here, *Every.Now.Then* breaks open the dominant polemic of resistance in this fraught Canada 150 moment, and the complexities of history, privilege and difference yaw open in scope.

Canada is many things, it seems to say, from its brutal colonial origins right on up to the present day, much of it not meriting the rising jingoism of the sesquicentennial moment. It extends to an indictment for the institution itself.

“That’s what’s really different about this show,” Jordan says. “It’s allowing the perspectives of people who are never seen as valuable in spaces like this to lead.” Established First Nations artists like Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun and Robert Houle share space with young Black artists like Esmaa Mohamoud.

In one pocket gallery, Jordan and Hunter go so far as to be hands off, letting a small group of young artists allied through the Younger Than Beyoncé Gallery have their own space. The mini-exhibition is among the most captivating things here (see and hear Britta B’s *Fluke*, a sound installation that will move you in more ways than one).

Artists kept outside museum walls by the convenient categories of activism and community arts are here let in: Charmaine Lurch, with *A Mobile and Visible Carriage*, an evocative sheet of rust-patina’d steel from which is carved the carriage’s neat outline, reanimates the forgotten history of the Blackburns, an entrepreneurial Black couple who escaped slavery to found Toronto’s first taxi company in the 19th century. Powerful, precisely rendered graphite portraits of key activists in Black Lives Matter Toronto are draped on a nearby wall. They’re by one of its core members, Syrus Marcus Ware.

“The impulse was to show a lot of work, to bring a lot of voices together and create an exhibition that was complicated and messy, and had a sense of what it was like to be here now,” Hunter explains.

Time is unstuck at every turn, decoupling “150” from reality in subtly provocative gestures: a 30-million-year-old meteorite borrowed from the Royal Ontario Museum that touched down in Sudbury in the 1930s, or the fossilized form of a giant sea

scorpion, dating back many millions of years.

So how many spokes, Mr. Riel? *Every.Now.Then* declares, clearly, that there's no telling. The wheels of Canadian history have turned mostly on a narrow track, a master narrative followed along a straight line, blindered to the inconvenience of complication. *Every.Now.Then* veers wilfully off course, without apology or explanation. Works are described not in didactic text, but in the words of the artists themselves, sometimes curtly, occasionally with poetry.

Inequity of all kinds rubs up against each other, finding communion: Xiong Gu's monumental wall of portraits of Jamaican and Mexican migrant farm workers in the Niagara Peninsula around the corner from Tyson Wright's handmade instruments based on historic objects from the Jamaican Maroon diaspora. Nearby, Bonnie Devine's *Anishinaabitude*, rough towers of woven seagrass, completes the thesis.

By the time you arrive in a small room with Barry Ace's digitally charged beaded Anishinaabe bandoliers, multi-dimensional is a matter of fact. The poet Shauntay Grant, herself of Maroon descent, intones verse while an image of her wrapped in her grandmother's quilt occupies a wall nearby. Myung-Sun Kim's *time being*, a small collection of sculptural objects, read like memorial runes: for lives lost and replaced, pasts unwillingly left behind and left to haunt the present like ghosts.

There's an echo here, back to a video work by Abedar Kamgari, a young Iranian-Canadian artist who travels back to her parents' hometown in search of her past. She goes so far as to dig in the earth with her bare hands: a quest for roots, finding none.

Amid the official celebrations, it's become easy for those of us on the comfortable side of history to forget how many have come here not by choice but necessity, or been left unrooted by Canada's coming to be. There is no glory in that.

The show doesn't provoke dissent so much as provide an outlet for it, something the long run-up to "Canada 150" has brought to the boil. If it makes for some discomfort, especially in a place like this, then maybe it's about time.

"It's a necessary tension," Jordan says. "If we don't create that then these things are left unspoken. It creates a space for us to connect on difference, as opposed to thinking those differences don't exist." She's right. They do. *Every.Now.Then* is different, in every way it needs to be.

*Every.Now.Then* continues at the Art Gallery of Ontario to Dec. 10, 2017. A public talk with curators Andrew Hunter and Anique Jordan, and exhibiting artists Michael Belmore, Lisa Hirmer, Charmaine Lurch and Syrus Marcus Ware will take place at the gallery Wednesday, July 5 at 7 p.m. See ago.ca for more information.

×



**Murray Whyte** *is the Star's former art critic.*