

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Inaugural Toronto Biennial Focuses on Climate While Dismantling Eurocentric Ideas

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In *The Shoreline Dilemma* curators Candice Hopkins and Tairone Bastien offer a consideration of “climate” that spans the tangible environment to the social. Here are some highlights to catch before the Biennial closes on December 1.



Judy Chicago “Purple Atmosphere” (1969 /2019), archival pigment print, 24 x 36 inches, © Judy Chicago/Artist Rights Society, NY (courtesy Through the Flower Archives, the artist; Salon 94, NY; and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco)

Stretching across the Lake Ontario shoreline, the inaugural Toronto Biennial weaves art through galleries, public parks, and local landmarks, offering visitors a chance to coast along the waterfront and discover contemporary on their own terms. The two galleries that house the majority of the works are the Small Arms Inspection Building in Mississauga, ON, and 259 Lake Shore Blvd E., a converted warehouse near the Harbor front.

Curators Candice Hopkins and Tairone Bastien provocatively named the biennial *The Shoreline Dilemma*, homing in on the pressing issue of climate change. What falls into the definition of “climate,” as far as the exhibitions are concerned, spans from the tangible environment to the social. The selected works illustrate how landscape intersects with social justice, with the most prominent issue manifesting as demands for decolonization in the literal sense – ceding land back to the indigenous people it was ripped away from – and in a metaphorical sense, by dismantling hierarchies that value the customs of European colonizers’ over those of Canada’s indigenous people.

The shows are well curated, with works sometimes meshing together so seamlessly that one might not realize these artists aren’t intentionally collaborating with one another. Some pieces were made specifically for the biennial, such as AA Bronson and Adrian Stimson’s collaboration that brings out ghosts from their family lineages, while others, like archival photographs from Judy Chicago’s *Atmospheres* series, are old signal flares that amplify the curators’ vision. Here’s a look at some highlights to catch before the Biennial closes on December 1. – Renée Reizman

259 Lake Shore Blvd E

AA Bronson and Adrian Stimson, “A Public Apology to Siksika Nation”

In this collaboration, Bronson and Stimson create a call and response to the history of European genocide of the Siksika people. In his most recent iteration of “A Public Apology to Siksika Nation,” Bronson stacks cardboard boxes filled with takeaway copies of the eponymous book he co-wrote with Siksika researcher Ben Miller, which reveals that Bronson’s great-grandfather, Archdeacon J.W. Tims, an Anglican missionary, established the first residential school on the Blackfoot reservation in Alberta. These schools were responsible for ripping indigenous children away from their families, converting them to Christianity, and forcing them to assimilate to European culture. Bronson makes futile attempts to take accountability for his family’s history; in his poetic message, he writes, “how can I apologize for genocide?” and later admits, “I have no apology for genocide: my words make no difference.” In an effort to give words power, Bronson makes space for Stimson, the great-grandson of Chief Old Sun, the Siksika leader who pressured Reverend Tims to leave their reservation.

In Stimson’s response, “lini Sookumapii: Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?” a table is set for reconciliation. With seating for 10, fine china, and bison centerpieces, the elegant place setting reminiscent of a Thanksgiving dinner further centers the dialogue around European colonization. Even the request to negotiate must be in the Anglican tradition, but behind the table hangs a

blown-up photograph of Siksika boys in their residential school classroom, reminding us that their indigenous ways of knowing have been forcefully forgotten over the past century. – RR

Dana Claxton, *Headdress series*

Presented in LED fireboxes, Dana Claxton's "headdresses" are a testament to the beauty and resilience of indigenous women. Reminiscent of billboards, Claxton photographs her friends and colleagues drowned under beaded necklaces, fringed pieces, embroidered bags and badges, all of which belong to the sitters. More than just cultural goods, these belongings are often exchanges and gifts, and being able to see them up close shows the care and labour behind their making. Each photograph names the sitter and although hidden behind their possessions, these beads, bags, and earrings still offer the viewer a way of recognizing and getting to know them. – Eunice Bélidor

The New Red Order (NRO), "Never Settle"

A playful installation, NRO's "Never Settle" stuns with a maximalist, animatronic cult leader and campy recruitment videos. They ask us to join their public-facing secret society, which touts the ideology of "savage philosophy," a nebulous idea that encompasses broad interpretations of indigenous identity, settler-colonialism, white guilt, land acknowledgement, and reparations.

Three screens display NRO propaganda featuring a white-presenting man as he tries to seduce the – presumably – mostly non-indigenous Biennial visitors by letting them feel comfortable with the idea of "playing Indian." Among the words that adorn the gallery is the oft-repeated phrase "never settle," an antagonizing, paradoxical message that flashes onscreen and is also adhered to the red-gelled windows that wash over the room. The NRO asks us not to compromise, to take anything we want – yet, they also demand colonizers abandon modern settlements, evacuate indigenous lands, and restore the world to its pre-colonial condition. – RR

Syrus Marcus Ware, "Antarctica"

A mixed-media installation that combines performance, set design, and video, Ware's "Antarctica," stages a speculative future where people of color have escaped both climate change and white supremacy and have to form a new society on the only habitable place left on Earth: Antarctica. Forced into becoming a colonizer – as the small society needs to establish a colony in the tundra – the new residents of Antarctica draw from their experiences as radical activists to create a community that respects the ravaged planet and upholds social equality.

Set in the year 2045, the installation is activated weekly for a theatrical performance, during which three of the 11 colonizers discuss the failures of capitalism, examine what climate change hath wrought, and wrestle with their responsibility to clear the damage set in motion by the generations before them. Check the Toronto Biennial events calendar for the schedule of live performances.

"Antarctica" is one half of a two-part series. Ware's other contribution to the biennial, "Ancestors, Can You Read Us? (Dispatches from the Future)" is on view at the Ryerson Image Centre. -RR

The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery

Hajra Waheed, "Hold Everything Dear"

Presenting her most ambitious work to date, Hajra Waheed offered precise works on paper, clay sculptures, prints and a video installation – all of which take the spiral form as their starting point. Spiraling patterns can be found in nature, in the day-to-day, as well as in the sociopolitical realm. Waheed's works let you get lost, focus, feel amazed or calm; they bring you closer to the earth, closer to the moon, without the environmental impacts of land art. Additional works on paper by Hajra Waheed are also on view at the Small Arms Inspection Building, where the site-specific installation of "Strata 1-24" – her series of hand-cut collages that are part of her ongoing visual novel *Sea Change* (2011-) – and of her "Untitled (MAP)," a classified map of the largest offshore oil field in the world, also explore material traces of natural elements; a very strong selection for the biennial. – EB

Small Arms Inspection Building

Kapwani Kiwanga, "Soft Measures"

Soft Measures by Kapwani Kiwanga presents two undulating curtains slowly moving in space, a reference to the African tectonic plate which slides forward and above the Eurasian one. The feeling of being in between those curtains is soft and serene, unlike the events that would occur if these plates actually collided. Suggestive of speculative fiction, like many of her works, "Soft Measures" is accompanied by a soundtrack of the artist discussing tectonic plates. Once ensconced in the physical and auditory elements of the work, we are pushed and pulled in a wave of the artist's making. As we stand hypnotized by the stripes of the fabric, the illusion of slowness is almost convincing, but the presence of a stone nestled in the fabric's curves brings us back to the tension of impending catastrophe. – EB



Judy Chicago "Immolation" (1972/2019), archival pigment print, 36 x 36 inches, © Judy Chicago/Artist Rights Society, NY (courtesy Through the Flower Archives, the artist; Salon 94, NY; and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco)

Judy Chicago, *Atmospheres* series

Chicago's works stand out as some of the few that are not direct contemporary responses to the theme of *The Shoreline Dilemma*. Hopkins and Bastien selected a video work and archival photographs from Chicago's series *Atmospheres*, which feature colorful experiments the artist conducted with pyrotechnics in the California desert in the 1960s and 70s.

During that period, Chicago was making art in Los Angeles' male-dominated art world. She decided to "feminize" the landscape, using the chemical properties of fireworks and dry ice to create lavender smoke whirls and pink hazes along beaches and off forested trails. Chicago re-staged and expanded the performances in 2012, eventually making the video *Women and Smoke* (2018).

Though Chicago's work mostly comes from another era, it grounds the Toronto Biennial with historical context, pointing to an interplay between art, body, and the environment that has long been a subject of exploration for artists. – RR

Jumblies Theatre & Arts with Ange Loft, "Talking Treaties"

In *Talking Treaties*, Jumblies Theatre & Arts uses Ange Loft's handmade soft sculptures as the backdrop for a pageant and workshops that teach audiences about the history of treaties in the Toronto region. Viewers who can't make any of the live events scheduled throughout the biennial can look to short films and pin boards displaying documentation from past activities.

Loft directed three short films to create the series "'Purchasing' Toronto," which educates viewers about the Toronto Purchase via a script that incorporates historical text, petition, and oral history, performed by an all-indigenous cast. The films double as site-specific artworks, taking place in the vicinity of the Small Arms Inspection building and referencing nearby Etobicoke Creek, a contested boundary cited in 18th- and 19th-century treaties that remains a subject of dispute.

The workshops, which share local indigenous communities' oral history and concerns regarding the treaties' legal quandaries, encourage participants to respond to this information via hand-beading and embroidery lessons, storytelling sessions, or recording audio. Visitors can participate in these activities and join an open discussion about the installation's message on Saturdays throughout the Biennial. – RR

Jumana Manna, "Cache (Insurance Policy)"

"Cache (Insurance Policy)" is a series of ceramic and tadelakt sculptures inspired by khabyas (vessels used for storing seeds in traditional Levantine architecture). In this space, the containers are estranged from their function. They're empty, and some are turned on their sides; any seeds in these containers have presumably spilled out.

Manna's sculptures have uneven proportions, and the tadelakt ones (a mixture of concrete, lime, and pigment) appear splotchy. These handworked objects offer a striking contrast to the industrial, metal grates upon which they're displayed. Some rest on shelves while others are suspended. Their materials mix clumsily, recalling ideas of new and old world cultures clashing, and pointing to the gentrification that's slowly working its way through the Toronto area. The Small Arms Inspection Building itself is a former rifle manufacturing plant for the Canadian Army, saved from demolition in 2009 and eventually turned into an arts space. Revitalization projects creeping along the waterfront connect the two exhibition spaces to each other, and Manna's work makes it hard to ignore that the first iteration of the Toronto Biennial takes advantage of this new environment. – RR

The Shoreline Dilemma, the inaugural edition of the Toronto Biennial of Art continues through December 1 at various locations around Toronto, Canada. The exhibition was curated by Candice Hopkins and Tairone Bastien.