

# » TORONTO STAR «

"From Jeffrey Gibson's colourful clubhouse to Judy Chicago's smoke sculpture, what to look forward to at the Toronto Biennial of Art"

By Sue Carter

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**This year's event features 23 new commissions from 36 artists at nine sites across the city over 10 weeks, stretching west to Mississauga.**

As spring moves into sandal weather, Torontonians will once again reunite with local beaches for a summer-loving blast. But for the next 10 weeks, artists from around the globe are asking us to look beyond dreams of floaties and barbecues to contemplate a deeper relationship to water and land beyond our city borders.

This year's Toronto Biennial of Art, which runs from March 26 to June 5, moves inland from Lake Ontario under the curatorial vision "What Water Knows, the Land Remembers," tracing the path of tributaries across the city, some of which, like the Laurentian Channel and Taddle Creek, lie deep under our feet. This year's event follows the theme of the inaugural 2019 biennial, "The Shoreline Dilemma," a nod to the city's complicated relationship with its waterfront.

Although the Toronto Biennial has established itself quickly, it's still a new kid on the scene,

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considering that grandpappy Venice has been going since 1895. This year's event features 23 new commissions from 36 artists at nine sites across the city, stretching west to Mississauga. Throughout the 10 weeks, there are free exhibitions, podcasts, programs and storytelling hours, focused around hubs such as Mercer Union, the Textile Museum of Canada, Colborne Lodge and Fort York.

One of the main galleries, 72 Perth, will be razed at some point after the biennial's run to become a midrise residential building. There's something about the impermanence and changing nature of the space that fits with the works on display here, including Ghazaleh Avarzamani's outdoor "Forced Afloat." What I initially thought was a wading pool turned out to be 7,000 square feet of azure rubber mulch created from recycled tires.

Inside, Nadia Belerique's "Holdings" is made up of rows of industrial cargo barrels that her family and others would use to ship various foods and gifts to and from her family in Portugal. Walking around the sculpture, you can see the wear from various voyages and, at certain angles, can peer inside to view remnants of clothing, party decorations and photos. Some of the barrel ends are covered with stained glass, creating a beautifully opaque but obscured view into a personal history. One can't help but think of the mass exodus of Ukrainians and others facing global conflicts, and how relationships are tethered through the exchange of material goods.

New York artist Jeffrey Gibson, a member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and half Cherokee, shows his many talents with a colourful multimedia sculpture at 72 Perth and through his takeover of Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto's first floor, "I Am Your Relative." This almost overwhelming injection of colour and cosiness is a welcome respite from the world and the miserable weather outside.



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Fifteen small movable stages, which double as cubbies, dot the space, each covered with geometric patterns, photos and text. When I visited, a woman was reading to a young child from donated books held under the seats, while two young women were nestled in another space engaged in quiet conversation.

The stages — or “dispersed monuments” as biennial co-curator Candice Hopkins referred to them — and the walls are plastered in bright stickers and posters, solicited from open calls and archives that champion Indigenous, Black, brown and queer voices. As Hopkins points out, this clubhouse space asks serious questions about the fragility of archives and whose histories are deemed worthy of saving.

Part of the attraction of heading to the Mississauga exhibitions (accessible on the 501 Queen streetcar) is also the space itself. Built in 1940, the Small Arms Inspection Building was transformed into a park and arts centre in 2018, after more than 70,000 tonnes of contaminated radioactive soil was removed from the site. There is something very satisfying about a group of contemporary talents, such as performance artist Camille Turner and the late Trinidadian-Canadian painter Denyse Thomasos, interrogating colonial systems within a space that used to produce large munitions for war.

Thomasos, whose work is also represented in New York’s prestigious Whitney Biennial this year, was best known for her massive abstract paintings that use architectural lines to explore themes such as immigration and mass incarceration. It’s the perfect companion to Syrus Marcus Ware’s body of work.

I am very intrigued to watch “MBL: Freedom,” the next chapter in Ware’s futuristic multi-year project that imagines life from 2025 to 2027, during which Antarctica is the only habitable place remaining on Earth. Combining sculptures, videos, performance and drawings, this ambitious project was inspired by the facts behind the 1961 Antarctic Treaty System, a Cold War arms agreement that led to countries sending 11 pregnant couples or scientists to protect their future stake on the land.



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Each Saturday, Ware will be joined by academic Giselle Dias and activist-writer Sandy Hudson for workshops and performances that further explore the abolitionist ideas and social justice principles behind his project.

The biennial itself wraps with a bang. On June 4, Sugar Beach will be filled with massive colourful plumes as American artist Judy Chicago's (non-toxic) smoke sculpture "A Tribute to Toronto" is released from a barge in Lake Ontario. It's the first time the artist has worked on water and not to be missed.

Chicago will always be associated with her iconic "The Dinner Party," a triangular table with 39 vulvic-inspired place settings, honouring historical and mythological female heroes. But since the late 1960s, Chicago has been working to dismantle the old boys' art club, producing site-specific pyrotechnic displays that she originally conceived to counter the macho "bigger is better" ethos of the day. It's a rare opportunity to see an iconic artist blow stuff up.

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