

RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne Canadian Art Review

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Àbadakone/Continuous Fire/Feu continuuel, Ottawa : National
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Megan A. Smetzer

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On peut, par exemple, s'étonner de la très maigre présence d'œuvres d'artistes femmes parmi celles analysées (3 sur 149 images reproduites). Mais l'auteure n'est pas non plus de ces héritières de l'historisme qui raillent d'emblée toute tentative de faire intervenir l'art du passé dans les débats actuels. Au contraire, à plusieurs reprises, et le plus explicitement dans l'épilogue, la question écologique actuelle est évoquée, à travers, notamment, le concept du «milieu», un rôle que le feuillage prend dans ses images les plus évocatrices. Les feuilles constituent dans ces exemples un environnement multi-sensoriel, atmosphérique, dynamique et parfois confus, dans lequel nous sommes plongés; elles indiquent un paradigme «participatif» (p. 264) de notre place dans la nature. Déjà dans les œuvres de Claude Lorrain, pourtant vieilles de quatre siècles, l'auteure décèle un rapport à la nature qui évite de tomber dans «une relation d'objet» et qui s'exprime à travers une écoute et une résonance à tout ce que les humains partagent avec les végétaux (p. 89).

Après quelques belles analyses d'œuvres du cinéma expérimental qui ont comme objet principal les frondaisons (dont une vidéo québécoise, *Parallèle Nord* de Félix Dufour-Laperrière, 2012), *Feuillages* se termine en démontrant le rôle apriori secondaire que jouent les végétaux dans le cinéma narratif. *L'année dernière à Marienbad* d'Alain Resnais y fait l'objet d'une riche lecture, puis Clélia Nau nous montre, à travers *Rashomon* d'Akira Kurosawa et *Blow up* de Michelangelo Antonioni, comment le feuillage peut fournir un formidable «apprentissage du regard» (p. 252) ou «éducation du regard» (p. 261), appliqué, dans ces deux cas, à des enquêtes policières lugubres. Ces passages à la fin du livre, anticipés déjà par l'épisode d'une nouvelle de W. G. Sebald où la contemplation des feuilles est conseillée pour «protéger et améliorer la vue» (p. 119), créent comme une mise en abyme, puisque

c'est justement *Feuillages* tout entier qui est, également, une instructive école du regard. Après l'avoir lu, l'attention que l'on portera aux feuillages, sur toile, sur pellicule ou dans un parc près de chez soi, ne pourrait qu'être intensifiée, sensibilisée, multipliée. Quoi de plus utile, pour un livre d'histoire de l'art, que d'aiguiser le regard de son lectorat à une chose trop souvent ignorée et de lui faire repenser, à travers cette attention, le fonctionnement même des images? ¶

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A powerfully expressive video still from Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory's performance *Ikumagialiit* [*Those that need fire*] (2019) graces the catalogue cover for *Ābadakone/Continuous Fire/Feu continuuel*, the exhibition of international Indigenous art held at the National Gallery of Canada from November 2019 to October 2020. Bathory's face, painted with streaks of black and red to emulate Greenlandic mask dance practices, contorts with strength and determination as she reaches toward the sky with her open right hand, her left stretching behind her body. She is clad entirely in black and situated against a black background, accentuating the power of the gesture. This compelling image, heightened by the bright orange and acid green lettering of the exhibition's title positioned across Bathory's torso,

visually reinforces the centrality of performance and the performative.

Though performance was the focus of *Ābadakone*, the curators—Rachelle Dickenson, Greg A. Hill, and Christine Lalonde—explain in their opening essay that the exhibition hinged on three main ideas. Relatedness (Indigenous relationality with earth, ancestors, and creator beings), Continuity (people and ways of knowing, making, and communicating across place and time), and Activation (artistic practices bringing to life discussions, spaces, and objects as well as the agency of artworks) (19). These interrelated concepts were intended to raise ques-



tions about Indigenous representation within and beyond institutional walls rather than provide answers to these complex and often fraught histories. The ideas themselves were grounded in an ethics of collaboration with the elders and community members of neighboring Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg. Involved from the beginning, the community developed the title and vision for the exhibition and also helped to expand the audience by making the Gallery welcoming to Indigenous people visiting the 100-plus artworks by seventy artists from North and South America, Africa, the South Pacific and beyond.

As one of the key invited consulting curators, settler scholar Carla Taunton frames Bathory's performance and others through the concept of "embodied resurgence," a term

which honours the makers of the tangible and intangible aspects of performance and also recognizes the agency of the objects used within it. Taunton argues for Indigenous performance as a refutation of Eurocentric ways of categorizing and a recognition that “The act of making is performative and that which is produced is a receptacle of embodied (bodily, cultural, land-based and collective) knowledges” (54). Taunton situates contemporary Indigenous performance artists in a continuum that reaches back to the nineteenth century, when individuals such as E. Pauline Johnson (Mohawk) used performance to assert Indigeneity, to pass knowledge to future generations, and to resist assimilation within developing settler colonial nation states (61).

A second essay of note, by Maori curator Megan Tamati-Quennell, provides a moving tribute to the late James Luna (Luiseño). Luna’s ground-breaking 1987 installation and performance *Artifact Piece*, in which he situated himself and some of his belongings in display cases in the Museum of Man in San Diego, California, has served as a touchstone for Indigenous performance in settler spaces since that time. For example, with Luna’s permission, Alaskan artist Erica Lorde (Inupiaq/Athapaskan) performed *The Artifact Piece, Revisited* in the George Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian in New York in 2008. Her homage revealed (among other things) the gender-based biases remaining at the heart of the art world twenty years after Luna’s seminal critique of museum displays of Indigenous peoples. Tamati-Quennell’s essay explores Luna’s live-streamed 2009 performance *Urban (Almost) Rituals* that took place at Te Papa Tongarewa (Museum of New Zealand) to remind us of his profound influence. His inclusion of local participants in different aspects of the performance underlined his collaborative nature; the

multiple costume changes, live music, and video elements revealed his showmanship. Luna grounded his incisive, complicated work in humor and irony, and shared a hopeful vision for the future. Central to this performance, as Tamati-Quennell points out, “was a critical conversation between Indigenous cultures” (82), a significant perspective for *Ābadakone* as well.

In a wide-ranging conversation about curatorial intent, Christine Lalonde indicates that the focus on performance was a deliberate choice, responding to the feedback received from artists and visitors to *Sakahan*, held in 2013—the first in this ongoing series focused on contemporary international Indigenous art—which identified the lack of performance as a significant omission (29). The three *Ābadakone* curators embraced an expansive view of performance, acknowledging that Indigenous artworks are always created within a network of relations—to community, to the land, to other artworks and artists (30). Essays by Greg Hill and Jason Edward Lewis also underline Indigenous relationships to the past and the future. Hill argues for a consideration of time as “an open continuum of connection that allows immediate access to any point in past/present/future” (41), a concept central to global Indigenous worldviews, and the artworks and performances created within it. Lewis speaks to the power of a “future imaginary” as a means to produce work that envisions a sovereign future rather than merely reacting to past and current realities of life in a settler-colonial world (37).

As the complexities and power of performance, as expressed by the curators, cannot be fully grasped via an exhibition catalogue, the Gallery does provide some virtual access to the artists and their work.¹ The diverse performances, some of which included the production or use of installation, took place throughout the Gallery prior to its

closure due to the COVID-19 restrictions imposed in March 2020. The performances of Bathory (Kalaallit Inuit) and her collaborators—Jamie Griffiths (Canadian), Cris Derksen (Cree) and Christine Tootoo (Inuit), as well as Maria Hupfield (Anishinaabe), Dylan Miner (Métis), Peter Morin (Tahltan and French Canadian), and Jeneen Frei Njootli (Vuntut Gwitchin Nation)—are each provided two pages of full-color photographs within the catalogue. These static windows into the performances, in association with brief descriptions in several essays, provide a sense of space, gesture, and concept even though the relationships developed between the audience and the artist(s), so central to performative work, remain unrepresented.

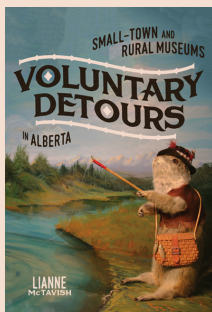
A photo essay, “Sharing Words, Hides and Thoughts About an Archive,” illustrates Sámi artist and architect Joar Nango’s performative installation *Sámi Architectural Library*. This massive construction installed inside the National Gallery’s cathedral-like entrance as well as outside its walls included two significant components, both made from reclaimed wood, hide, tree branches, and other found materials. The interior section housed Nango’s personal library of books and texts. Organized into twenty categories related to Indigenous theory, architecture, and other themes, visitors were encouraged to explore the archive, thus activating the space. The outdoor area became known as “The Maker’s Space.” Both installations “became sites for knowledge transfer, building skills, visiting and feasting” (20) all of which spoke to the central themes of the exhibition.

The activation of gallery spaces through the centering of Indigenous worldviews demonstrates how far the National Gallery has come since its 1986 purchase of Carl Beam’s *The North American Iceberg* (1985). Beam’s large-scale photo-base collage was the first “self-conscious” acquisition of an artwork by an Indigenous artist for the Gallery’s contemporary

collection since the institution's founding in 1880. The shift in perspectives toward contemporary Indigenous art signaled by this purchase have only expanded under the curatorial direction of Kanien'kehá:ka artist Greg A. Hill. Appointed in 2007 as the inaugural Audain Curator of Indigenous Art, Hill is currently the Senior Audain Curator and head of the Department of Indigenous Art. Hill has significantly increased the number of Indigenous artworks in the collection (2200-plus and counting) as well as organized or hosted many solo exhibitions for senior Indigenous artists, beginning with Anishinaabe painter Norval Morrisseau in 2006. The development of *Sakahane*, *Àbadakone*, and future cinquennials of international Indigenous art have also happened under his leadership. Institutionally, the National Gallery of Art, in conversation with Indigenous knowledge keepers, rebranded itself in 2021 with the Algonquin term *Ankósé*, meaning "everything is connected." Sasha Suda, the NGA's Director and CEO appointed in 2019, notes that this conceptualization is central to the strategic plan, which consists of deep re-visioning to create connections with diverse audiences and tell more complex stories. Decades of persistence and hard-fought battles by Indigenous artists, curators, community members, and their allies have shifted the dialogue from inclusion and representation within national narratives to important considerations of how Indigenous art practices and world views can transform settler-colonial places into sovereign spaces.

These ongoing discussions around displacing or replacing "Western art" as the controlling narrative of art history in major art institutions" (114) comprise the final major essay in the catalogue. The essay arose from "Worlding the Global: The Arts in the Age of Decolonization," a conference held in conjunction with the exhibition, which included fifty academics from

four continents. The very nature of the essay is reflective of the exhibition, the catalogue, and the current state of the discipline. Multi-authored, multi-layered, presenting



multiple perspectives, it compels the reader to slow down, to think, to consider the complex concepts presented. As the five authors—Brigit Hopfener, Heather Igloliorte, Ruth Phillips, Carmen Robertson, and Ming Tiampo—note: "The form, process and content of this piece embody our hopes for reimagining a world that both respects local, specific knowledges, temporalities and ways of being, and also appreciates the necessity and complexity of attending to global perspectives" (122).

Though not a substitute for the physical experience of moving through the exhibition spaces of *Àbadakone*, the thoughtful essays and compelling color photographs frame and contextualize the ambitious curatorial vision and provide a glimpse of the global diversity of the artists and their works. The strength of the diversity is perhaps not as well expressed in the catalogue's authorship, as most of the essayists are based in Canada. An understandably imperfect fragment of a powerful exhibition, the catalogue (and virtual elements available online) nonetheless provide an accessible and valuable introduction to the rich array of contemporary Indigenous art practices and their global futures for generalists and specialists alike. ¶

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1. See <https://www.gallery.ca/virtual-ngc/abadakone>.

Lianne McTavish
Voluntary Detours: Small-town and Rural Museums in Alberta
Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021

360 pp. 52 photos, 1 table, colour insert
\$130.00 (cloth) ISBN 9780228008682
\$42.95 (paper) ISBN 9780228008699

Devon Smither

The first book to closely examine small-town and rural museums across Alberta, *Voluntary Detours* is an important contribution to critical museum studies. Indebted to the work of Fiona Candlin on micromuseums in the UK, the book addresses a selection of institutions that have been underexamined in Alberta, an oversight which has contributed to the sense that large urban museums are supposedly superior. Lianne McTavish, Professor of the History of Art, Design, and Visual Culture at the University of Alberta, sets out to challenge this hierarchy by giving serious attention to difficult to reach, quirky, and unexpected sites where she sees ideas of museology being challenged and reshaped as she "aspire[s] to understand the small-town and rural museums in Alberta on their own terms by highlighting their distinctive qualities and recognizing their regional and cultural specificity" (4). McTavish began research in 2012 into small-town and rural museums as lead researcher for the grant-funded Alberta Museums Project, the findings of which are synthesized on an educational and bibliographic website, which hosts an interactive map and a list of more than three hundred museums in operation in Alberta.¹ *Voluntary Detours* is the second phase of the