

YEAR END

In Defence of Art from Small Places

The art world would do well to turn its gaze outward, away from tired conventions and towards the periphery.

by Sarah Swan

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Marcus Jackson, "The End is the Beginning," 2015, digital photograph, 5" x 7" (courtesy the artist / LuckyJackPress.com)

Once upon a pre-pandemic time, it was a joy to be part of the art world – to luxuriate in the various, rich meanings of an excellent exhibition. But how base it felt too – the ‘statusphere,’ the alienating jargon, the imagined importance of it all, the pervasive homogeneity. Art that looks just like art should is proverbial. Remember the pejorative terms – zombie formalism, crapstraction and MFA abstraction – coined back in 2015? Those were names for generic art. “Although the art world reveres the unconventional,” writes Canadian-born cultural

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But, when the coronavirus closed galleries and severed real, person-to-person connections – it felt, for some, like a chance to imagine a new art world. When race riots rocked America and the ripple effects were felt around the globe, a light cracked open the horizon. The art world's complicity in systemic racism was called out. The art world cringed, felt shame, and was pushed into a profound reckoning. It felt raw and urgent, didn't it? It still does. These disruptions should come as relief. When is the last time the art world actually grappled with its failures?

I moved to Yellowknife in 2017. There is no art world here. No post-secondary art programs, no territorial gallery. But there are loads of artists. Heavily informed by place, they paint or make photographs of spruce trees, lichens, musk ox, ravens, sled dogs, houseboats, the northern lights. Traditional Dene art abounds – beaded moccasins, caribou or moose-hair tufting, birch-bark baskets. A case in point: *Covered Ground: Landscapes and Lichen* by Tracey Bryant and Rhonda Harder Epp, the current show at our local museum, the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre.

For the art world, though, this kind of art is bit too homespun and parochial to be of consequence. Attempts to amplify non-settler voices are good, but the fact that a 'backcountry' bias still remains is not. With few exceptions, small communities are seen as unsophisticated. But, in this time of reckoning, of grappling with failures, the art world would do well to turn its gaze outward – away from its tired conventions and towards the periphery. There's so much life, and so much art, way out here. Just follow the gravel road. Art from remote locations, from places with no institutional power, might be the exact antidote a whitewashed, homogenous art world needs.



Pat Kane, "Maryann Mantla, Gameti," 2017, digital print on wood-fibre veneer, 36" x 24" (courtesy of the artist)

Admittedly, it was hard to engage with local art when I first moved north. I didn't understand it, couldn't even see it. I was weary of academic conventions, but still equated good art with its ability to 'interrogate' art history, to 'overlap gestalts,' to 'exist in liminal spaces,' to 'predict futurities.' And while art's use of theory (modernist, post-modernist, whatever) sometimes felt so arbitrary – did MFA programs instruct their students to pick the name of a French or German philosopher from a hat? – theoretical art was what I knew.

By comparison, though, Yellowknife paintings of the northern lights seemed simplistic and schlocky. Wildlife photography? Boring. Traditional Dene beading? Beautiful, but to me it all looked the same.

Reflecting on literature, American author Annie Dillard has observed that the written word is weak, appealing only to our subtlest senses. "Many people prefer life to it," she wrote. "Life gets your blood going, and it smells good." When I could no longer engage with art – of the esoteric, academic variety or the parochial, I wondered if art was weak, too.



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Walt Humphries, "Geophysical Wizardry," 1991, watercolour, 27" x 33" (photo by Bill Braden; collection of Laurie Weir)

Certainly, northern life feels expansive by comparison. Proximity to real wilderness, to animal life and to animal death, was new for me. In the north, there's always a beautiful creature getting its neck wrung, its feathers singed, its foot snared, or its entire shimmering body hauled out of a hole in the ice. It's not sport. It's a way of life.

Before a Dene elder taught my family how to pluck a freshly killed mallard and roast it over a fire, we took turns holding the bird on our laps. We examined its iridescent markings, unfolding its wings to full span. It was a shock to see its body sliced open, the sudden exposure of deep-purple flesh, the strange, slippery jumble of tubes and sacs nestled in a cavity of bone. The elder handled bird and blade deftly, showing us the heart, the stomach, the tight cluster of developing eggs. As we ate, sitting on a great grey slab of Canadian Shield, gusts of wind tossed feathers everywhere.

Staring at a room of clever canvases could certainly not compare to *that*; nor to ice fishing on Great Slave Lake. Standing in a dizzying brightness of sun and snow, we peered down the hole into a dark, murky world. That contrast takes my breath away.

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The blood thrums less when looking at generic paintings. I'd know they were 'good' only because my taste was correct – informed as it was by the mores of art world culture. It didn't matter where the paintings were made (Toronto, Berlin, New York) or who made them. They had little personality yet looked so chic and cool.

Now, birds and fish are not just birds and fish anymore. And paintings of the northern lights no longer seem schlocky. Rather, they are attempts to capture huge cosmic forces, the swirling auroras that make you feel at once insignificant and profoundly – strangely – quieted. There are old, old stories about their spiritual powers, both malevolent and merciful. Sure, the paintings fail miserably. But what else can artists do but try? The real art is our collective, undaunted, efforts.



Sheena Yakeleya's beaded necklace on birchbark. (Sheena Yakeleya/NWT Arts)

After four years in the North, I can now see the idiosyncrasies in each beaded flower. In Dene beadwork, floral patterns are handed down through the generations. Patterns are unique to each family. It is a common practice for beaders to express gratitude and respect for matriarchs who survived residential school and taught them the various techniques of beading. Those matriarchs also showed their daughters and granddaughters how to sit still, how to quiet themselves, how to listen.

There are seed beads, glass beads, faceted beads, steel-cut beads, antique beads, crystal beads. So-called greasy beads have colours that recede when used next to opaque colours, but pop forward when used with transparent ones. Beading tells individual stories, and whole – very

sculptors. Dene grandmothers don't need the art world. But the art world would greatly benefit from them.

In 2016, the art journal *Momus* published an article titled *Regionalism Vs. Provincialism: Agitating Against Critical Neglect in Artworld Peripheries*. The authors' central question concerned how to engage critically with exhibitions produced outside major contemporary art hubs. It felt unfair, the article stated, to review exhibitions from "small" places (like Edmonton!) using the same criteria as exhibitions produced in New York or Berlin. The authors decided against evaluating small-place art "on its own terms" and quoted editor Sky Goodden: "I'm not of the opinion that Canadians should be let off the hook for provincial or sheltered exhibition-making. It's an international artworld, and even if travel isn't always possible, reading is." The article smacks of snobbery. There's a better question now: If we want a less racist art world, one where non-Western voices are heard, why are Western academic criteria still the goldstandard?



Darrell Chocolate, "My Mother's Parents," no date, oil paint, 16" x 20" (courtesy the artist)

Yellowknife artist Darrell Chocolate often paints commissioned portraits of family members and

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articulated and lined with personality. These are individuals who feel beloved. Is the cultural value of honouring elders unsophisticated? Perhaps this young Dene painter should reference Derrida? Semiotic deconstruction?

Recently, a friend of mine purchased a woodblock print from Chris Robson, an artist in Hay River, N.W.T. (population 3,500). My friend bought the moody print, a depiction of a grimy railyard on Vale Island, because it encapsulates that hard working, blue-collar place, and reminds him of some difficult years spent there. Is that kind of character and connection not smart enough?



Chris Robson, "Old Bay Trading Post & CN Rail, Old Town, Hay River," no date, relief wood block print, 11" x 39" (courtesy the artist)

When you take a close look, you discover that regional aesthetics exist for fascinating – and deeply human – reasons. They offer artists something to push against, or into. They are – at once – the life and the death of any local creative scene. Prairie art made a unique impact in 2011, when 70 Winnipeg artists were shown at La Maison Rouge, an art foundation in Paris. That kind of blatant localism caused a stir in Winnipeg, and in France too. It allowed Winnipeg artists to examine the mythologies of their home. And Winnipeg art intrigued French audiences with its humour, the way it merged historical truth with fiction.

Sometimes, it feels like art world art is too familiar. It can look like a uniform, sound like a ubiquitous voice. It can move so stiffly, as with limited choreography. But the varied voices of local art, and the subjective interpretations of place, can help us connect with each other. The art world must push past itself. The opportunities for curatorial research are endless; what are the aesthetics of Thompson, Saskatoon, Telegraph Creek? How do people there translate their real, lived experiences into art? What stories do they tell, what histories do they wrestle with? Art from somewhere has so much more to offer than art from anywhere. Every dot on the map is worthy. ■

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