

...bring a folding chair

Canada is a nation largely built through immigration. Recognizing this, in 1971 Canada became the first country in the world to adopt multiculturalism as an official policy. Through this policy and global perceptions of Canada as a favourable place to settle, more than 250 ethnic groups were identified in the Canadian census of 2016 as compared to only 25 at the beginning of the 20th century. Despite perceptions, however, Canada has not always been – and it is argued by some that it is still not – ‘the Promised Land’, especially for racial minorities. As expressed by Toronto based writer and scholar Yaniya Lee,

...stories, past and present, that stray from conceptualizing Canadian identity as inherently white and European are often omitted from the national cultural discourse.

(FADER magazine, How Canada Forgot Its Black Artists, Yaniya Lee, 2016)

People of African and Caribbean heritage have been in what is now Canada since the earliest days of colonization. Their inclusion in the political, economic and cultural landscapes of the country, however, has been limited. The visual arts have been one realm where Black Canadians have been very under-represented. Though there are some exceptions to this, as indicated by Yaniya Lee

Black artistic achievement has consistently been edited into the margins, leaving Canadian cultural imaginary overwhelmingly white.

Over the past two decades this narrative has slowly begun to change. In 1996 the Federal Government of Canada declared February to be Black History Month. A decade later the province of Alberta became the fourth province in Canada to officially recognize this observance. Providing an opportunity for people to gain insight into the experiences of Black Canadians and Albertans and the vital role they have played throughout history and continue to play today, Black History Month also allows for an examination of the issues people of colour face in Canadian/Albertan communities and invites all citizens to take steps to end racism and create inclusive environments.

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition **...bring a folding chair** is inspired by annual Black History Month celebrations and recognizes the significant contributions Black Canadians, artists or otherwise, make to Alberta. With art works exploring history, heritage, identity and contemporary concerns, the artists in this exhibition ‘bring a folding chair’ to the table of Canadian society and the art scene in Alberta and, in sitting at the table, give voice to our common humanity.

The exhibition ...bring a folding chair was curated by Shane Golby and organized by the Art Gallery of Alberta for the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program. The AFA TREX program is financially supported by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts.

FRONT COVER IMAGE:
Fetsum Teclamariam, *Quit* (detail), 2018
Charcoal on paper
Collection of the artist



The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program

The Art Gallery of Alberta is pleased to present this travelling exhibition to venues throughout Alberta. Currently the Art Gallery of Alberta serves over 60 venues in approximately 35 communities. Exhibitions on tour from the Art Gallery of Alberta easily adapt to space requirements of smaller venues: schools, libraries, museums, health care centres and other community facilities. The exhibitions are organized in such a manner as to make unpacking, packing, hanging and shipping as easy as possible. Along with the exhibition, each venue receives an Educational Interpretive Guide. These materials enable teachers to use the exhibition within the school curriculum.

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts Collection is the primary source of works featured in the travelling exhibitions. Other sources for exhibitions may include community partners, archives, private collections and loans from artists. Each year we welcome new venues to enrich their community art through the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program.

Our Thanks

The artists

The Alberta Foundation for the Arts

and to the many individuals, organizations and communities who contribute to the success of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts Travelling Exhibition Program each year.

Contact

Shane Golby, Curator/Manager
AFA Travelling Exhibition Program
Region 2
Art Gallery of Alberta/CSF
10550-107 Street
Edmonton, AB T5H 2Y6
T: 780.428.3830
F: 780.445.0130
shane.golby@youraga.ca



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...bring a folding chair





Braxton Garneau
Amber Valley, 2021
Oil on canvas
Courtesy of the artist

Braxton Garneau was born and raised in Edmonton and is primarily a 'representational' and figurative artist. As expressed by this artist, his art practice allows for two main things. First, it enables him to share things that he might not be able to do verbally and in sharing, have an effect on peoples' lives. As he states:

I think it's beautiful to share experiences that not everyone has access to. Art provides exposure: the more someone is exposed to people that don't look like them or have the same experiences or ideas, the more a person is able to empathize. Art allows for conversations that may not regularly come up.

Secondly, art allows Garneau to examine his own life:

My art is also a way for me to distill my own experiences and it's through art that I digest information.

Braxton Garneau's interest in figurative art is partly built on his interest in questions of identity. As described by the artist:

...this also relates to my interest in identity. We identify with people first on how they look... and how people interact with us is often based on how we look. It's difficult to discuss identity without taking this into consideration. The older I get the more I'm aware of my 'blackness'...and my identity so it has become a stronger theme in my work.

In his works for this exhibition Garneau aims to share the history and experiences of Black Canadians, specifically in Alberta. Inspired by archival research concerning places like Amber Valley in Alberta, Garneau's portraits will be a 'response' to the archives. As he expresses

I want my work to be telling the story of black people in Alberta; to place myself in their shoes and let them tell their stories through me. Highlighting that history excites me.

Relating to the title of the exhibition the artist states

We've always been at the table, but the story hasn't always been recognized or appreciated and acknowledged. My work is about being heard and being seen and the more we tell these unique stories, the more they become everyone's story.



Elsa Robinson
Coat of Arms, 2021
Mixed media textile
Collection of the artist

Edmonton artist **Elsa Robinson**, influenced by her cultural heritage and the feminist art movement, is engaged in a practice which includes sculpture, fabric art, collage and painting. Her works celebrate the strength of African people in surviving the African diaspora and the strength of women in using simple materials to create.

For Robinson, the TREX exhibition **...bring a folding chair** speaks to the fact that she is seen as a black woman and what it means to be walking in her skin colour in Alberta and whether or not she has been 'invited to the party'.

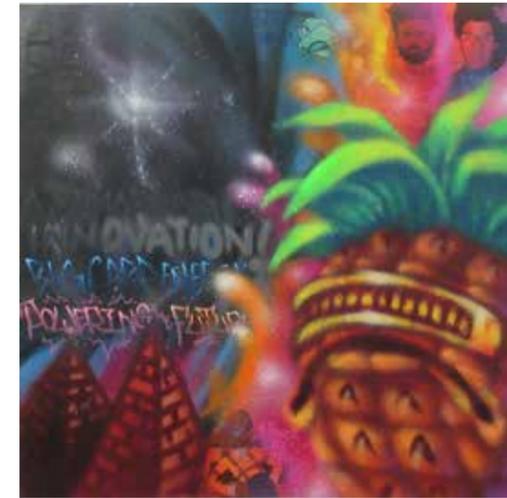
I am in a position where I am constantly analyzing the 'invitation' and am constantly adjusting my thoughts and actions in response to the invitation I perceive in any moment. The title (of the exhibition) says to me 'even though I wasn't invited to the party, come to the party and establish my presence at it'. By making the work and presenting it I am establishing myself in the community: I am at the party.

Colour and shape are integral to the meaning of Robinson's works. For the artist, the colour black in her works represents strength, mystery and creation. Gold, meanwhile, represents purity, value, wealth and richness. In creating her works, which speak to herself as a black woman, she thus decided to pair the two colours. As she describes it:

Being black in Alberta means being who I am and bringing that excellence into who I am and where I am.

The shape of her works is also important. As described by the artist, a square boxes people in and that leads to assumptions and prejudices. A diamond, on the other hand, represents strength and value.

Robinson's works address her skill and strength in successfully staying present at the 'party'. Her artwork also challenges her to become what she wishes for humanity. As she states, at the end of the day there's only one race, the human race, and we have to get it together.



AJA Loudon
Mythmaking 101, 2021
Aerosol/Acrylic
Private Collection

AJA Loudon was born in Calgary and raised outside of Cochrane, Alberta. According to Loudon, his earliest memories have to do with art:

As soon as I could hold a pencil I was scribbling and drawing and as a child I spent a lot of time on my own and used drawing to occupy myself and explore my imagination.

Louden brings a lot of energy to both his art and his pursuit of art as a career. While at University he learned about 'painting' which helped to foster his interest in painting murals. Over the years he has participated in national and international mural festivals and he has completed numerous mural projects in Edmonton, Calgary, and throughout smaller communities in Alberta. In both his commercial work and more personal projects words, letters and phrases are significantly featured. This use of 'word as image' derives from his background in graffiti. More recently he has become more interested in the 'how' of art making and the idea of the painting as an object itself rather than just an image.

For Loudon the title of this TREX exhibition is a useful prompt to what he considers in his work and in his art practice. As he expresses:

(The title) talks about me showing up with my own seat: as a person showing up not expecting or needing a place set for me but showing up with my own seat. People who look like me have been hidden...the Black story has been hidden. Personally, (my way of) finding a way to make a career has been through street art and subverting the stereotypical views of this; converting my passion for a 'subversive' art form into a career is my way of bringing a seat to the table. There is a public perception that graffiti is a criminal activity done by people of colour. (Through my work) I'm reclaiming that narrative and it's a way of bringing a chair to the table. More specific to my own practice, representing faces of people of colour and speaking to the experiences of people of colour - either people in positions of power or as central figures - (is my way) of making sure that our stories as people of colour are seen as part of the public story or narrative. Bringing a seat to the table involves just showing up: being visible and being heard.

Concerning the TREX exhibition and Black Lives Matter protests in North America and elsewhere, Loudon eloquently and forcefully states:

I'm tired of asking for a place as we've asked for years. Now I'm just bringing my chair.