

Oh, Canada: National Dreams

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by Nancy Tousley

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Visitors take in Gisele Amantea's *Democracy* at MASS MoCA / photo MASS MoCA

Denise Markonish, an American-born curator at the acclaimed Massachusetts Museum Contemporary Art of in North Adams, has been where no Canadian curator has been before: on a three-year trek across the country to look at the work of more than 400 contemporary artists. In an art world that chases the exotic along with the new, she was determined to suss out what attracted her to work whose vital stats told her that the artist was from America's easy-to-ignore neighbour to the north. "Oh, Canada," she would think, discovering yet another "secret Canadian": "Why," she wondered, "do I know more artists from China?"

"Oh, Canada," an exhibition of 62 contemporary Canadian artists and collectives that opened at MASS MoCA on May 26, is the result of her marathon, let's-get-acquainted excursions to nearly every province and territory in the nation. Trying to tackle a whole nation was a ridiculous task, she acknowledges, but it could be done. Her essay in the 400-page catalogue, due out in July, is titled "Oh, Canada: Or, How I Learned to Love 3.8 Million Square Miles of Art North of the 49th Parallel." To visit the number of artists she saw, to travel the number of miles she covered, in good and famously bad weather, and to spend the

amount of time she devoted to immersing herself in all things Canadian would appear to be little less than a personal quest, if not an obsession.



Janice Wright Cheney's *Widow* at the entrance to "Oh, Canada"
Photo MASS MoCA

Yes, it was personal, the 36-year-old curator said on the day "Oh, Canada" opened, and the show does offer the take of one curator, "a snapshot that will spark a dialogue continuing well after the exhibition is packed in boxes." The curiosity that led her to undertake the task of enlarging the view on Canadian art south of the border and beyond is matched only by her ambition and courage. Walking into the first event of the opening weekend, a private viewing hosted by the director, Joseph Thompson, and trustees of MASS MoCA and sponsored by the Consulate General of Canada in Boston, could have seemed like tiptoeing into the lion's den. More than 300 discerning and critical denizens of the Canadian art world were on hand—artists, curators, critics, collectors, dealers, funders, gallery directors, patrons—from all over the country to celebrate (and, let's admit it, assess) the results of her odyssey of discovery.

A lot was riding on both sides. For the assembled Canadians, expectations were running high for what has been billed as "the largest survey of contemporary Canadian art ever produced outside Canada," and many would have ideas about how it could have been done differently. Among the more than 120 works on view, few are by Canada's current art stars, while many are by relative unknowns; this is something Markonish did purposefully to give a broader, more catholic experience of art made in the country, one that goes beyond the usual suspects

who have come to dominate the scene internationally. The Cedar Tavern Singers (Mary-Anne McTrowe and Daniel Wong) sang wittily in the lobby about what was on people's minds: Markonish's choices. "What's in store? / Beyond those doors?" they crooned. "What exactly is / Contemporary / Canadian art?" Among the possibilities offered by the ukulele-strumming artists were "an interactive Mountie installation," "relational lacrosse" and "the Queen serving poutine in the gallery." They continued, "In the second largest country / Its art is shrouded in mystery / Is it about hockey? / Maybe post-ironic hockey?"



A view of "Oh, Canada" including works by Janet Werner, Ed Pien, Graeme Patterson and Étienne Zack / photo Richard Rhodes

Maybe it is post-ironic to think of Canada's contemporary art as an unknown quantity. It is arguable that Canadian artists enjoy more exposure and better rapport in Europe, where they increasingly find success. The successful Canadian artists and writers who live and work, or are otherwise recognized, below the 49th parallel seem to be absorbed into the big embrace of American culture. Canadian artists are treated as if they are almost from another state. But Markonish, in her catalogue essay, has a point to make about this, too: "So is this lack of

knowledge a result of the fact that Canadian identity assimilates into the international or American, that once out of Canada they are no longer 'Canadian' artists, but just artists? Or is it the Canadian sense of not really promoting oneself outside the country?" She believes "it is most likely a mixture" of both.

In this case, though, Canada is vigorously promoting itself by supporting MASS MoCA's initiative and its endeavour to start a dialogue about Canadian art: the show is presented by TD Bank and the Canada Council is its lead sponsor. The Canadian art world showed its support by turning out in force. An appreciable level of Canadian excitement and pleasure was palpable at the preview-night party as people who have had long associations, but see each other infrequently, greeted each other. Robert Sirman, director of the Canada Council, put it well at a council-hosted event the morning after the opening. "How rare it is for us in the visual arts to come together in this way," Sirman said. "It almost never happens within the country; it usually happens in some neutral territory far away where we can overcome our territoriality." He remarked that support of the exhibition, whose opening roughly coincides with the beginning of the War of 1812 and MASS MoCA's 13th anniversary, "is an important undertaking for the council at a time when funding is under stress." "Tens and tens of thousands of people will be able to experience the culture of the nation" at MASS MoCA during the year that "Oh, Canada" is on exhibition, he said. The museum, which is a cultural attraction housed in reclaimed red-brick industrial buildings, has an annual attendance of 120,000.



A view of "Oh, Canada" featuring Kim Morgan's *Range Light, Borden-Carleton* / photo Richard Rhodes

Now, what about the art? Although the installation left much to be desired, Markonish achieved her goal of presenting contemporary Canadian art so that it is illuminated by the context of MASS MoCA. It might be difficult to define what is Canadian about Canadian art,

but in many ways the show looks and feels "Canadian." Why is this so, and why is it so tempting to follow the observation with "whatever that is"? Markonish outlines themes that arise from the work she selected for the show: landscape and its powerful hold on the Canadian psyche, the dread and creeping horror of the uncanny, aboriginal histories and the effects of colonialism on First Nations peoples, traditions of storytelling, the idea of North, identity issues and the hyphenated Canadian, a return to craft and making in studio practice, transformation and the grotesque, conceptualism, that much-vaunted Canadian humour and more.



A detail view of Kent Monkman's installation at MASS MoCA / photo Richard Rhodes

To these themes I would add an ever-present awareness of mortality, an aspect of the Canadian experience of landscape and death by climate or wilderness; the magical animal Other; a strong penchant for cultural critique; and, especially in our theory- and tech-savvy country, the mediation of nature and human experience by technology.

But Markonish proves to be a perceptive outsider. She has caught on to something that is going on in the country, especially among its younger artists, who with confidence and awareness of the larger art world seem to find their identities and what they need to sustain themselves in the places where they are, rather than seeking to define themselves in relation to some notion of a dominant centre that is far away and divorced from their immediate experience. Their attention can be focused inward and outward at the same time, showing the possibility for a true cosmopolitanism. Perhaps cosmopolitanism is indeed the essential ingredient of the elusive Canadian identity. In some ways, our visual artists seem to be catching up to our literary writers in their appreciation of vernacular and the cogent particularities of place.

Stack Markonish's themes one upon the other and a complex, multi-dimensional picture, a dense web of associations, begins to emerge, amplified by the conversations that proximity and juxtaposition start up among the works themselves. At times, the threads are as direct as

the flapping curtains seen in works by Michael Snow, David Hoffos and Daniel Barrow, which point to the instability and porosity of borders as well as the anxiety or tension regarding what is unseen or only partially revealed outside the window or the frame. Varieties of ecstatic experience are present in installations by Charles Stankievech, Noam Gonick and Luis Jacob, and Hadley + Maxwell. Death and remembrance are underlying presences in numerous works, which include those by Gisele Amantea, Eric Cameron, Janice Wright Cheney, Ruth Cuthand, Shary Boyle, Patrick Bernatchez, and Shuvina Ashoona, whose coloured-pencil drawing *Carrying Suicidal People* (2008) punctuates the exhibition with a sharp, affecting moment, all the more powerful because of its lack of guile. An account of connections like these among this diverse array of works could go on and on.



A selection of Shuvina Ashoona's drawings at MASS MoCA / photo Richard Rhodes

There isn't space here to get deeply into individual works, but there are many in this show that would reward the endeavour. An informal poll of several Canadian viewers' top-five picks on opening weekend produced a different list each time. The sample was small, and the poll a kind of game, but the responses appear to indicate more than the simple rubric that "there is something for everyone" in Markonish's show. Whether all of the work on view is to everyone's taste seems beside the point. Her exhibition has the right stuff to demand the full attention and absorption of a slow read. She has given the viewers of "Oh, Canada" a rich field for investigation that is full of nuances and complexities which it might take a while to see and comprehend. Our appropriate immediate response as Canadians to her thoughtful and ambitious curatorial work might just be "thank you."

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