

Mammoth sound sculptures, travelling shows and futurists: this is the McMichael?

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Led by a new team, the McMichael Art Collection expands beyond its reputation as a Group of Seven shrine and goes in search of a wider, more diverse Canada.



In a tool shed behind the Severn Street Studio Building in Toronto, Tom Thomson made some of Canada’s best-known paintings. Legend says “The West Wind” was found there, still drying, after the artist drowned in Canoe Lake.

So when Robert and Signe McMichael set out to build a temple to Canadian art, the collectors wanted not only to acquire the works of their favourite artist, but his fabled workshop, too, uprooting the battered wooden shack from its Rosedale ravine and restoring it on their acreage in Kleinburg, Ont.

Toronto sculptor Jen Aitken remembers the shack from visits to the McMichael Canadian Art Collection as a child. Then, it was staged as a sort of diorama, she recalls, with a wood stove in one corner, the artist's bed in the loft and an easel set at the ready.

If Canadian art history has relics, Thomson's shack is surely one of them. And, if it has shrines, the McMichael itself, where six members of the Group of Seven are buried, has long been one, a sanctuary devoted to this small circle of Post-Impressionists who endeavoured to establish a uniquely Canadian art movement and, in the doing, had a profound effect on the way the nation sees itself.



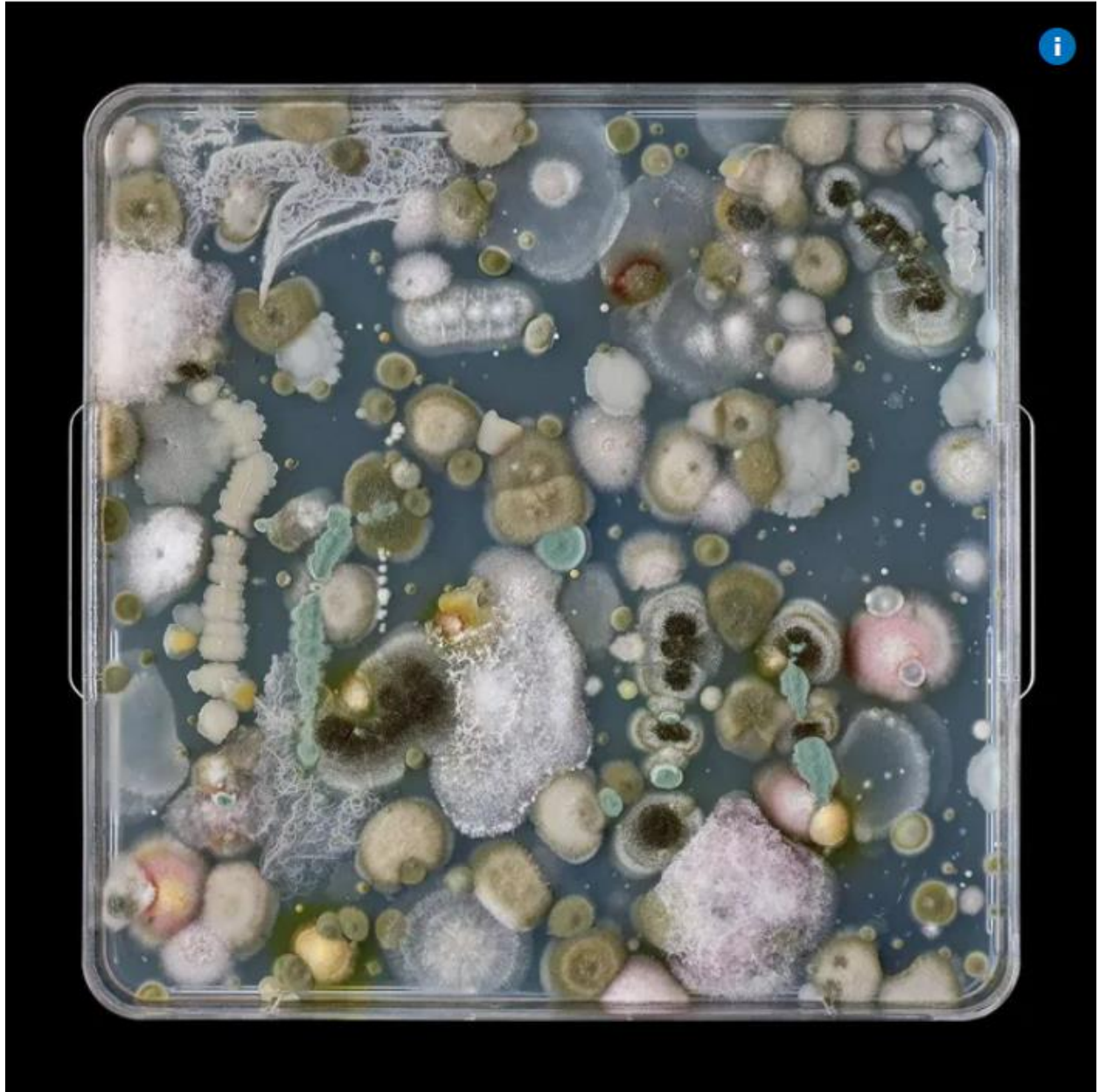
It was a surprise, then, to recently find the sacred shack transfigured by Aitken's contrastingly formalist installation. Her lengths of hardware-store lumber — a relative far removed, she says, from the pine trees of Thomson's Algonquin — dressed in gold leaf and performing large swooping curves and plunging angles through the cabin's interior. Its lines reference the vaults and

archways of church architecture (which might just be a tongue-in-cheek nod to those artists who were worshippers of a more natural landscape).

The artwork is a significant departure from what you'd expect to find at the McMichael; it doesn't depict the land, it doesn't directly concern the legacy of Thomson or the Group, and it doesn't seem to make any pronouncements about the nation or the national identity, except to say: This, too, is Canadian art. It is a sign, among others, that something is shifting in the bedrock at the McMichael.

Since its beginnings in 1965, when passionate and iron-willed art patrons Robert and Signe gifted their modernist log house, their land and their collection of 194 paintings to the province, the McMichael has built its identity as home to the Group of Seven. Of course, cultural institutions must evolve and yet, outgrowing that founding mission is no small feat. Some at the museum who have tried did so at the risk of alienating audiences and losing vital donors. At one time, the museum even found itself on the wrong end of a messy legal battle, when its founders sued the province over efforts to expand the museum's focus.

Today, the McMichael calls itself "home to the art of Canada," and its leaders seem determined to tell a longer and larger story of the country's art. It's critical they get this right, because the museum is, astonishingly, the only major public gallery dedicated solely to the art of Canada. The question is: Can the McMichael successfully expand the canon it has helped define without completely exploding it? And, moreover, can a museum in Kleinburg with a reputation for what its own chief curator, Sarah Milroy, calls "tartan-and-shortbread, quaint Canadiana out in the woods" reflect all the richness and diversity of the art of this land?



Milroy arrived at the museum between milestones; Canada's sesquicentennial year had just concluded and the Group's centenary was then on the horizon. The art-critic-turned-curatorial-head knew the museum's provincial reputation. As the *Globe and Mail's* chief art critic, she had taken aim at it before for unadventurous programming that pandered to popular tastes. But the McMichael also excited her because, historically, it has been an arena for big, impassioned debates about what Canadian art is.

Her mission, she says, is to make it a museum that represents “all parts of Canada.” She began by identifying gaps in the McMichael’s permanent collection. There were many. Denyse Thomasos, for instance, was the first Black artist to enter the collection; the museum acquired a painting by the late Trinidadian Canadian artist just last year.

“It’s a shocking reflection of where this institution was,” Milroy says. The holdings also sorely lacked representation of Indigenous contemporary art from the last 30 years, which she points out has been “a period of gale force growth.” In the years since Milroy and Ian DeJardin, the museum’s executive director, landed at the McMichael, the gallery has been collecting with renewed focus and there’s been a bump in acquisitions.

Another way to fit a wider Canada into Kleinburg is to take Kleinburg out to Canada. Call it the portable McMichael. The museum has significantly ramped up its publications program and, today, you can find its catalogues in gift shops and bookstores across the nation. At the same time, every exhibition is now designed to travel, DeJardin explains.

The show “Uninvited,” for example, on tour in Vancouver, gathers a cross-country snapshot of talented women modernists from the 1920s, ’30s and ’40s, none of whom were welcomed into the ranks of the all-male Seven. It’s one of 10 travelling exhibitions being presented by the McMichael in the next year and a half, the director says.



Back at home base, each of the current exhibitions represents another tent pole in Milroy's mission to show more Canada. One surveys the six-decade-long career of revered B.C. experimentalist Gathie Falk; another is the first ever solo exhibition dedicated to the late Inuit artist Elisapee Ishulutaq; and a third displays a newly acquired series about Jewish life in cities across Canada by the Ukrainian immigrant artist William Kurelek (who was himself a devout Catholic) — a historical show whose spirit of reaching across cultural divides is relevant today and always. Recently opened, a large exhibition titled "Conversations" showcases the surprising breadth of the museum's own holdings by juxtaposing disparate works from the McMichael vault to spark dialogue.

Leading a tour through this latest show, DeJardin arrives at a room full of abstract painting and sculpture: esthetic worlds apart from the artwork that attracted him across the Atlantic.

The Edinburgh native fell in love at first sight with the Group of Seven in the late '80s. He was working as a curatorial assistant in the library of London's Royal Academy of Arts when he found their work by chance. He organized

several hit exhibitions dedicated to the Group and their peers beginning in 2011, when he was director of the Dulwich Picture Gallery, also in London. (Milroy co-curated two of these and their partnership was born.) He did not expect a Canadian adventure this late in his career, he says, but he calls his post at the McMichael “a dream job.”

Wading into the gallery space, past scratchy Abstract Expressionist panels, bronzes inspired by hinges and a striped hard-edge painting that resembles a Life Savers wrapper, the director says: “Of course, this is the straw that broke the camel’s back for Robert McMichael.”



From the early '80s through the mid-'90s, after Robert had resigned as museum director, the McMichael made its first serious foray into collecting and exhibiting newer examples of Canadian art, presenting some landmark contemporary exhibitions, like Gerald McMaster's "The Cowboy/Indian Show" in 1991. But the founders were displeased with the direction. "There was always an undercurrent of discontent from the McMichaels," recalls Joan Goldfarb, who served as board chair at the time. However, it was John

McEwen's sculptural dyad "Babylon (and the Tower of Babel)," industrial-looking and immensely conceptual pieces installed along the McMichael's forested driveway, that would finally set them off.

Robert called them an "eyesore" and sued the province for breach of contract, arguing that "the original purpose of the Collection is becoming eroded beyond recognition." (He singled out McEwen's work because he felt its "avowed purpose" was to "mock the values that gave rise to the Collection.") The suit failed at the Supreme Court but, in 2000, the founders successfully lobbied the Mike Harris government to pass legislation that would reinstate their 1965 agreement. The law installed Robert and Signe as lifetime trustees and gave the couple substantial power over an art advisory board that would decide who, beyond a list of 14 artists pre-approved by the founders, could be exhibited and collected by the McMichael.



Robert went so far as to identify 3,000 works the museum ought to sell because they were incongruous with his and Signe's original conceit. "It became very parochial again," Goldfarb says. "Its vision became very narrow." In the years following, attendance flattened and acquisitions slowed.

Robert died in 2003 and Signe in 2007. By 2011, the museum had a new mandate from the province, intended to "modernize" the institution. Katerina Atanassova, now at the National Gallery of Canada, found change already underway when she took over as chief curator in 2009. Her time welcomed contemporary talents like Terence Koh and Kim Dorland (whom she likened then to "Tom Thomson on acid") and presented a successful doubleheader on the cultural impacts of Marilyn Monroe in Canada, a populist strategy that likely couldn't have happened just a few years before.

But change was not easy. The very structure of the McMichael seemed to limit what was possible there. Atanassova's successor, Sarah Stanners, remembers the difficulty just fitting an exhibition by Jack Bush, known for his large abstract paintings, through the museum's doors. Physically, the



The renewed understanding of people and place that the McMichael is tasked to represent isn't just happening under its roof. It's a story unfolding beneath the museum's footings as well. The Kleinburg property Robert and Signe purchased in 1951 was then a patch of scrubby hills overtop the Humber River. The McMichaels planted thousands of trees to turn that farmland into their own iconic woods. In his autobiography, "One Man's Obsession," Robert wrote about building their country home as well as their budding collection: "We felt we had somehow created a symbolic microcosm of our nation."

His words were truer than he probably knew. The McMichael, like Canada, was not created on blank canvas. Roughly three kilometres downriver, archeologists uncovered a 16th-century Huron-Wendat village, known as Seed-Barker. And, closer still, in Glassco Park, which abuts the McMichael grounds, the remains of more than 500 Huron-Wendat were excavated from the Kleinburg Ossuary by the University of Toronto in 1970, then reburied at the same site in 2013, now known as Thonnakona Ossuary.

The McMichaels did not build their temple to Canadian art on terra nullius — or simply disused farmland — rather, it was built over an area with a deep history of people and culture.

The museum today understands its grounds are situated along the Carrying Place Trail, an important Indigenous trade route between Lake Ontario and Lake Simcoe. A large mural off the McMichael's Grand Hall by artist Bonnie Devine tells the story of the trail and its travellers, alongside a display of clay pipes from the Seed-Barker site. Devine is compiling her research in a book to be called "Land Acknowledgement."

"We want to keep that long view of history very clearly in the forefront," Milroy says. If telling a fuller story of this place is critical to the McMichael's mission, then better picturing its own immediate landscape is a good place to start.

Milroy says hiring a full-time Indigenous curator is a priority in the next fiscal year. "We understand that it's not enough to have a great Indigenous program of exhibitions and public outreach, and that really where change comes in an institution is when there's Indigenous people involved in leadership roles."



So what is the place of Thomson and the Group of Seven today at an evolving McMichael? One can understand those talented and passionate producers of “wild,” unpeopled landscapes as romantic adventurers; patriotic mythmakers; propagandists; agents of colonialism, unwitting or otherwise — or as any and all of these. “I will never not have the Group of Seven on the walls,” Dejardin says, “but, basically, our exhibition program is conducting a major dialogue all the time.” The goal is “to open up discussion” and introduce more perspectives.

Forthcoming exhibitions include solo outings for the Sri Lankan-born, Toronto-based feminist futurist Rajni Perera; photo self-portraitist Meryl McMaster; and Tahltan-Tlingit master carver Dempsey Bob. “The McMichael needs to be that big tent — or maybe that big wooden lodge — where everyone comes together,” Milroy says.

And audiences do seem to be coming: over the last five years, the museum reports that donations have trended up and, before the pandemic, attendance was on the rise.

“I think our work in the years ahead is to build a wider and broader context for the Group of Seven that makes their meanings reverberate even more,” Milroy says. “Maybe they’re the grain of sand and the pearl is being built around them.”

That vision is best seen at work in the final room of “Conversations.” There, the gallery walls are covered with *en plein air* sketches made by Thomson and the Group — arguably, the jewels of its historical holdings — who were marvelling gape-jawed in oil paint at the sublime landscape before them.

Commanding the centre of the gallery, however, rest some more recent jewels. Three of Rebecca Belmore’s “Wave Sound” sculptures, installed by a window, point out over the treetops of the Humber Valley. The metal listening horns are larger than dinosaur bones and cast from some of the same rocky terrain the Group depicted. They appear ancient, as if the gallery sprang up around them.



The craggy sculptures, suggesting deep time, reveal the Group as relative newcomers — some of them immigrants and second-generation Canadians, Milroy notes — giddy to be among the first artists to capture the land in their way. While the sketches are prized for recording their scenes with intensity and immediacy, the “Wave Sound” sculptures suggest listening carefully to the land to hear everything that it’s saying.

The artworks by this group of artists — a powerful regrouping — represent very different ways of telling the story of this place, but they’re all very interested in this place and its story. “(Robert McMichael’s) main point was that Canadian art matters and on that point we agree,” Milroy says. “He might want to argue with me about this or that on the walls, but I think we’d get along just fine.”