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Can Land and Water Be Archives? A Pandemic-Era Toronto Biennial Mines the Histories Beneath Our Feet

BY **MAXIMILIANO DURÓN**

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Syrus Marcus Ware, *MLB: Freedom*, 2021. Video still of Dainty Smith as Jessica, Ravyn Wngz as Sabian, and Yousef Kadoura as Marcus. MBL: Freedom. Dir. Syrus Marcus Ware; DoP Mishann Lau. 2022.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

There are hundreds of biennials in the world, and with each edition, a new curator is picked to take the reins. That makes the **Toronto Biennial of Art** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/toronto-biennial-of-art/>), whose second edition opens on March 26, unlike its colleagues. For the second edition in a row, the same

curatorial team has taken the helm, allowing some artists to create work over the course of four years instead of just two.

At its first edition, in 2019, the Toronto Biennial explored the hidden, buried, and intentionally erased histories of the Greater Toronto Area, in particular those of Indigenous and Black communities. Artist Ange Loft's *Toronto Indigenous Context Brief*, a document that charts some 1,000 years of history along the city's Lake Ontario waterfront, has served as a guiding document for the biennial's curatorial team as well as the artists involved.

While the 2019 edition focused on exploring the histories of the lake's waterfront and shoreline, the 2022 iteration has moved more inland. This year the venues include the Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto, Mercer Union, Arsenal Contemporary, the Fort York National Historic Site, and the Textile Museum of Canada. Its two main venues are at adapted spaces: 72 Perth Avenue in the city's West End and the Small Arms Inspection Building in nearby Mississauga.

Among the artists who will show new work are **Jeffrey Gibson** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/jeffrey-gibson/>), **Judy Chicago** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/judy-chicago/>), Camille Turner, Tanya Lukin Linklater, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Eduardo Navarro, Syrus Marcus Ware, Susan Schuppli, and Eric-Paul Riege. Brian Jungen, Victoria Mamnguqsualuk, and Denyse Thomasos will also be represented by preexisting works.

To learn more about the Biennial and how its planning has changed over the past two and a half years, *ARTnews* spoke with the exhibition's curatorial team—**Candice Hopkins** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/candice-hopkins/>), senior curator; Tairone Bastien, exhibitions curator; and Katie Lawson, curator—by Zoom in February.

ARTnews: The plan for the Toronto Biennial was always that the first two editions would have the same curatorial team, so that artists could develop projects that could be shown at either iteration or both. Why did that feel like an important move?

Tairone Bastien: We saw it as an opportunity to work with artists who had deep research practices, who develop their ideas slowly over time, to allow them the time to experiment, to think about their projects iteratively, and to grow with them. This was the first biennial for the city. It was our first time doing such a show at such a scale in the city, so we were learning a lot about the places that we were working with: the shoreline and the waterways, which are really important to us. A lot of the research we were doing was in parallel with the research that the artists were doing, so we saw it as a way to dialogue with them over the course of these four years.

An example of a project that has stayed with us over the course of these four years is by Syrus Marcus Ware. He was one of the first artists we met with in 2018 ahead of the first edition of the biennial. At the time, he had just finished collaborating on a theater production. He was mostly known for large-scale portraits of fellow activists. At the end of our first studio visit, we asked him, “What are some ideas or projects that you would want to do, but just haven’t been able to because of time or opportunity?” He stopped and said, “Well, I am working on this story about a kind of future world in which this group of QTBIPOC folks set out to develop their own society, their own place of freedom, and abolish the ways of the current world.” We loved the idea, and he just really needed time to think through how he was going to do that. So we stayed with him over the course of the last four years. We presented an iteration of the work called *Antarctica* in 2019, and in this next edition, we’ll be presenting the final chapter in the story, which he calls *MBL: Freedom*. That will be presented as a film and installation.



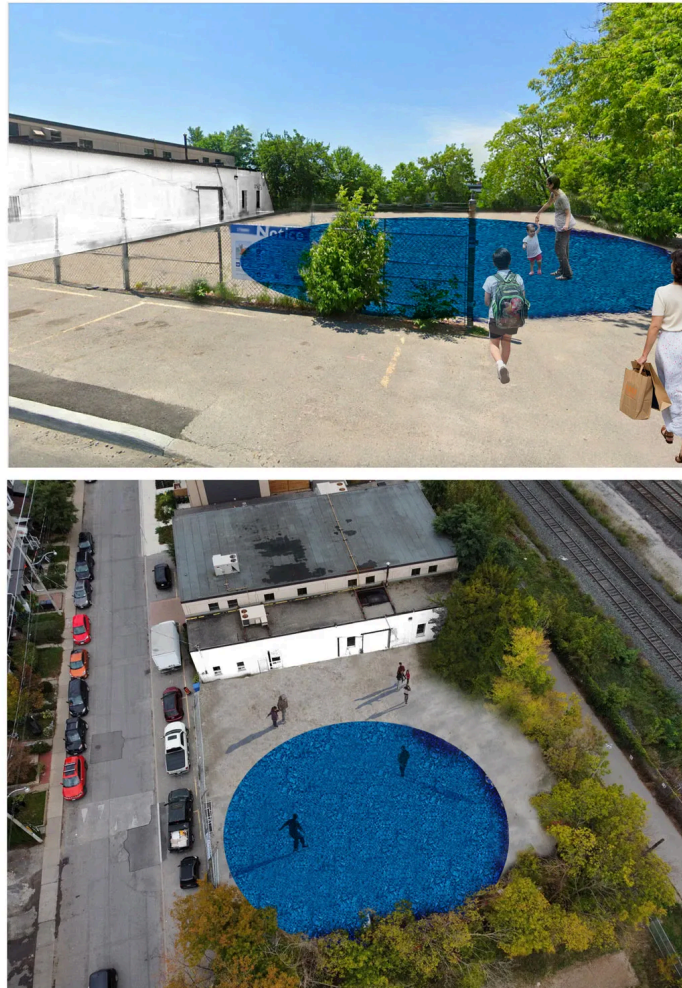
Jeffrey Gibson, *I AM YOUR RELATIVE*, MOCA Toronto, 2022. Co-commissioned by MOCA and the Toronto Biennial of Art.
PHOTO TONI HAFKENSCHIED

You mentioned the research that you that you as a curatorial team were also doing around the Greater Toronto area and how that is very tied to what the Biennial is trying to do. Can you talk about what that research process looked like from a curatorial standpoint in terms of this region’s own history?

Bastien: I had recently moved to Toronto, and I was particularly interested in the immigrant narratives of Toronto. There was an area of Toronto called the Ward, which was really the first racialized immigrant neighborhood in the city, where a lot of the first Italians, the first Chinese, the first Black communities formed. And in the 1950s, this entire area was demolished and basically obliterated off the map, and a lot of those communities had to move to other parts of the city—more marginalized areas of the city. I was fascinated by this idea that you have a city that claims to be very multicultural and very diverse, when, in fact, it has erased a lot of those multicultural histories.

Katie Lawson: Each of us has different points of entry to the different layers that make up the context here in Toronto. For me, that has largely been thinking about geologic scales of time as a way to connect to less human-centered stories of the land and the water. For me, it's been looking at the ways that these stories are hidden in plain sight and that there are constituent elements of our environment that give us clues about those stories which stretch back millions of years. Whether it's the extensive urban ravine system—Toronto has the largest urban ravine system in North America, and it's this topographical remnant of the way that a glacier moved and melted and froze over thousands of years—or the lakes and buried tributaries throughout the city. There are many rivers that have been buried across the city, which have been a real focal point for us in thinking about the ways that we can reconnect to the stories that are held in the water and in the land. This is the idea that we speak to in our curatorial vision in thinking about land and water as archives, as holding histories from time to time.

Candice Hopkins: This idea that the water and the land both hold history—for me, what I was interested in was this colonial gesture of burying the waterways. I consider it a form of settler sublimation and a way to try to dominate the landscape. Even with those efforts of domination, they're never fully successful. There are underground rivers, the lost river system of Toronto. We wanted to think of those fugitive waterways as a metaphor for how we can move through spaces, even if there are barriers that are put up. I think for the artists, it also became a metaphor for working for resistance, and thinking about the view of an entire ecosystem. That's really evident in works like what Ange Loft did. When we started to speak with her about the first edition of the biennial, she said, "Well, the geographic boundaries"—the two main venues of the biennial—"also mimic the boundaries of the original Toronto Purchase." So, there was a kind of a further uncovering of what this Agreement was, the way that it was deliberately mistranslated with regard to Indigenous people at the time, and thinking about how much the decolonial process necessitates a kind of fuller understanding of history. So we see the biennial as one of the venues in which to do that.



Installation drawing for Ghazaleh Avarzamani's commission for the Toronto Biennial of Art venue at 72 Perth parking lot.
COURTESY THE ARTIST

Katie, you mentioned viewing land and water as an archive. Can you expand on that a bit?

Lawson: I'll give two examples of artist projects that take up that idea in different ways, whether it's thinking about that more literally or in a more kind of expanded, poetic, or metaphorical way. In a more literal way, I think of artists like Susan Schuppli and her long-term project, *Learning from Ice*, which is one of the commissions that stretches over the two editions of the biennial. She did circumpolar research with the Ice Core archives in 2019. That work looks at the ways in which frozen water, especially as it melts in a warming world, reveals to us on a molecular level certain things about our planet that were previously unknown, or gives a broader view to this aspect of geologic time and allows us to look back in order to look forward to imagine what this path that we're on with climate change could lead us.

For 2022, we're working with Camille Turner. I feel like we've had such generative conversations with her over the last few years, particularly as she is an artist researcher who focuses on Canada's often hidden histories and ties to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. When we started doing studio visits with her, she had spent time in Newfoundland looking into the building of slave ships on the eastern coast of Canada. But what was so

fascinating, for us, was that Camille was thinking about the ways in which the trees that had been taken down to build those slave ships carried certain histories with them. The stones that act as ballast in the slave ships hold histories with them that are lost from other archives. The ocean itself is a kind of archive which holds the stories that otherwise are not captured in terms of that period of history. And so that's perhaps a more poetic way of thinking about how the very materials around us have been witness to certain events and should be considered as part of an expanded archive.



Jumbly Theatre & Arts with Ange Loft's installation *Talking Treaties*, 2019, presents the objects that British gave to the Mississauga of the Credit to buy their ancestral lands in the so-called Toronto Purchase. The Mississauga understood it as simply a gift, not a payment. The work was featured in the 2019 edition of the Toronto Biennial.

TONI HAFKENSCHIED/COURTESY TORONTO BIENNIAL OF ART

Several works in the biennial look at Canada's history of involvement with the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Many people might wrongfully assume that Canada has no real connection to it. Why did that become a focus?

Bastien: We'd always seen Ange's *Toronto Indigenous Context Brief* as something that would be added to. Thinking about the interlacing of different narratives, it's not just the Indigenous histories that have been buried, it's also Black histories. Adding to that, with this edition, we've invited writer Yaniya Lee and Camille Turner to together create another layer to this context. They are bringing up stories of different Black experiences within Toronto that are very under-recognized and that need to be re-revived to rethink our relationships to this place.

We recognize that this is something that is an ongoing process. A number of artists that are here in Toronto are deeply engaged in this work and deeply engaged in rethinking histories and art histories have elided the Black experience as well as Black artists. Adding someone like Denyse Thomasos to the exhibition is really important because here's an artist who is Trinidadian-Canadian, who died sadly very young, but who left a really big impact on the arts community here. Her paintings, which are of the bellies of

slave ships and immense architectures, still hold a lot of psychic energy and residual impact on the people who work here.

A lot of these histories are really critical to rethinking and decolonizing our understanding of Toronto, but also of Canada and its relationships. We know more and more through historical research that there were slaves in Toronto, that a number of the founding fathers of this country owned slaves, that they had plantations in the Caribbean from which they were drawing their wealth. When slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire, it wasn't for another 20 to 30 years that it was actually outlawed completely in Canada. And so, all of the nuances of what really happened need to be uncovered and told.

Hopkins: One thing that Camille shared when she started doing this research is that the information was right there. She started working in archives in Newfoundland initially to gather an accurate number of the ships that were made, for example. But one thing she said—and Yaniya also spoke to this—is that if the information is there, why is it still not known? What I think is smart about their project for this edition of the biennial is that it also puts the onus on the reader or the participant in part to think about that responsibility we all have as individuals to know this history if we don't know already intimately. Through their work as well, they're pointing to all of these other archives that exist, of which there are multiple. It's fascinating that even if these histories and these narratives are there, gathered, and known, the bigger question is: Why isn't it mainstream knowledge, and why aren't people paying attention?

Lawson: These cycles of amnesia, even if they're right in front of us, came up in conversation with artists about the context of Toronto. Something happens where they become buried again and again, so there's this perpetual cycle of uncovering.



Nadia Belerique, *HOLDINGS*, 2020-ongoing. Installation view "2021 Triennial: Soft Water Hard Stone," 2021, New Museum, New York.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DANIEL FARIA GALLERY.

Why was it important not only for Ange Loft and Camille Turner to contribute to the context documents but also be commissioned to create new work as artists for the biennial?

Hopkins: Ange's *Brief* was commissioned by the biennial almost as a foundational document for us. It was foundational not only for us as curators, but also for artists. That document was shared with all of the artists in the 2019 biennial. We also shared it with some of our partners, including the City of Toronto. Nothing like it had existed before. One of the concerns that Ange had is that she didn't want to fix history. In the original *Brief*, she also traced things like rumors or, in some cases, speculation, because that's how oral history is sometimes passed down. She was interested in gaps in the historical record as well, making them known.

From there, her project grew into a book that will be published as part of the Biennial called the *Treaty Guide for Torontonians*. When Ange and her colleagues were working on this, they called it—and I love this—“A Game of Colonial Pursuit.” They’ve created narrative arcs through history in an incredibly exciting way. What it’s trying to do is talk about the jurisdictions, the legal responsibility of treaties, and essentially the founding of the City of Toronto in an entirely different way. That’s an example of how exhibitions like this can contribute to public knowledge and how artists contribute to public knowledge. We wanted to support them in that, and that was also the thinking behind the commissioning of Camille and Yaniya, which took an entirely different role and form. It’s not a book. It’s a way to continue that contribution, which is definitely a resource. But we didn’t want to replicate extractive methods of putting knowledge out

into the world, but instead creating spaces of agency for people to learn alongside these works.

Lawson: Camille and Yaniya's work also differs from Ange's because the project exists as a series of cards they coauthored. Each card offers of a glimpse into a particular site, person, or part of the Black experience in Toronto. They are working with our Public Programing and Learning team to develop that as a part of this program called the Mobile Arts Curriculum, which is a set of tools that are co-created with artists and intended to be intergenerational arts education tools. They solicit or invite a sense of curiosity and a furthering of engaging with the stories that that are already in front of us.

In the 2019 edition, Ange Loft collaborated with her Jumblies Theatre & Arts troupe to create *Talking Treaties*, an installation and series of three videos about the various broken and one-sided treaties that stole Indigenous lands to create Toronto. Can you preview her contribution for this new edition?

Lawson: Working with artists across both editions has been very generative for us. It's special way of working with artists in a more iterative way. The *Toronto Indigenous Context Brief* came out of work that Ange had already been doing with Jumblies Theatre & Arts around ideas of governance and sustainability of the land, with the lighthearted theatrical production *Talking Treaties*. For 2022, Ange has made a new video work called *Dish Dances*, which will be at Historic Fort York. It's a way of focusing on this concept of the dish with one spoon, which is the fundamental idea of taking only what is required and making sure that all living beings are able to sustain their own lives. This is a teaching in the Great Lakes region from Indigenous communities that have been here for time immemorial. The work is a way animate this concept and to, as Candice said, contribute to a sense of public knowledge about these ideas.

It was seems as though it was important to focus on the local histories, both known and unknown, where this biennial is sited, as opposed to just bringing a range of contemporary artists to Toronto, as other biennials often do.

Hopkins: From the beginning, we knew we wanted to create an exhibition that was site-specific, first starting from the shoreline and then, as we've mentioned, moving up the various tributaries inland into the city. One of the ways to do that is to invite artists to come and see the spaces in person and to support the production of new work. We do consider the biennial to be a commissioning one, which is different than some other models based on existing work. It's also broadly international. The majority of our audience is, of course, people from Toronto and people from Canada, but we work with artists from all over the world, in part because having their perspectives on this place is important to support. We also wanted an exhibition that reflected Toronto. We didn't want replicate some of the already well-known issues of biennials since their proliferation in the '90s, when artists and even curators who wouldn't spend much time in a particular place.

We've spoken about starting at the shoreline and moving inland. How did you decide on the titles for the two editions: "The Shoreline Dilemma" for 2019 and "What Water Knows, the Land Remembers" for 2022?

Hopkins: The "shoreline dilemma" is a term that we came upon. It comes out of the fact that shorelines—and even mountain ranges, for example—can't be easily quantified. They can't be easily measured because they're always constantly changing. For us, that was inspiring because they're resisting any kind of conventional methods of inquiry. The focus on the shoreline was also because it's a part of Toronto that hadn't been paid too much attention. The city itself, in a way, feels like it's turned its back to the water. The title "What Water Knows, the Land Remembers" is inspired by our research into water and land as archives. One thing that we learned over the course of our research is that soil quite literally is an archive, too. Soil slowly moves upward over hundreds or thousands of years, so in a way, it's always revealing its past to us—but only if we pay attention. I thought that was an amazing idea: it's constantly shifting and fluid. It's not fixed. For me, that represents a kind of sublimation of colonial history, bringing forward stories that governed the land before. This idea of remembering is part of the ethos of what we're trying to do and what many artists are trying to do. That is this question of what we pay attention to and why.

The [curatorial statement \(https://torontobiennial.org/curatorial-vision/\)](https://torontobiennial.org/curatorial-vision/) for this edition explores kinship, relationships, ancestors, and inheritance. Why these focuses?

Bastien: Thinking deeply about our relationship to this place means that kinship has really seeped into all of our thinking. It stemmed from our conversations with artists and looking at the work they're making, which are drawing on expansive notions of kinship and relationality. Some works bring our attention to other ways of knowing and being in the world: perceiving land, water, and animal as kin rather than as objects or as resources to be extracted or turned into capital. Other works still are by artists who are reconsidering their own stories, which are often ignored by official narratives or stories that may have been broken or ruptured as you trace them back in time, like Indigenous communities who have had their histories and families torn apart by colonization. These artists are reviving traditions, renewing their connection to place and to communities, and re-narrating their own stories. Some are even creating new mythologies. Others are interrogating colonial systems of private property, borders and nations that divide people and places in these very inhumane and terrifying ways. Kinship really did stand out for us as one of the main ideas in this thinking.

Hopkins: It was also a response to the alienation that has emerged from the pandemic, but even before that, we were thinking about how things like capital produces certain forms of alienation. One of the questions that we posed to artists in 2019 was: What does it mean to be in relation? They interpreted that in various ways, even as a way to

critique the fact that we aren't [in relation]. Kinship is also relational, whether it's familial or not. What is the relationship between the human and more-than-human, let's say? We were inspired by artists who are thinking about: What does it mean for water to be kin? What does it mean for water to have agency? Susan Schuppli's *Learning from Ice* project thinks how ice is evidence and is now used as evidence in the court of law to show how climate is changing. So in a way, it's a kind of material witness. With kinship, there is also a question of various forms of agency.

Lawson: With agency, there's also a number of artists who are taking up this question of kinship and thinking about chosen artistic lineages. Aki Onda is presenting a work that grew out of a séance to connect with Nam June Paik.



Judy Chicago in collaboration with Pyro Spectaculars by Souza, *Diamonds in the Sky*, 2021, fireworks performance in Belen, New Mexico.

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One of this edition's major commissions is a new fireworks piece by Judy Chicago. Previously, there has been controversy surrounding the presentations of these works, including the cancelation of one as part of Desert X in 2021. What ecological measures have been taken for the presentation of this work? Why did it feel important to present this work within the context of the exhibition?

Hopkins: We showed her series of "Atmosphere" photographs in the first edition, and we have been talking with Judy for quite some time about the possibility of having a smoke sculpture for Toronto. This will be the first smoke sculpture commissioned for Canada. It was made specifically for the waterfront, so the palette she's been working with is reflective of the water itself. The smoke bombs are safe for people. They're technically a pigment and they disperse within about 15 minutes. We've been working closely with Judy and her pyro team to mitigate any risk and to ensure that there is no

residue that's left on the water. One of the concerns with her prior work for Desert X was also the sound, so there are no sonic pyrotechnics that are part of this. This piece for Toronto is simply smoke that dissipates. It's important to or recall the history of these works. When Judy started making them, they were really in response to a very male-dominated history of Land art, like Michael Heizer's monuments, which were literally moving earth and created long term change in really sensitive environments, often deserts. Judy wanted to do something that had the lightest touch possible. It'll be out on a barge that's 100 feet from the shoreline. There's the possibility, then, to see it at more of a distance than the one she did at the de Young museum [in San Francisco as part of her career retrospective there]. For Judy, what's important is the way that the different colors start to merge with one another.

Can you talk about the education and public programs components of the biennial? How do you want to connect with the visitors rather than simply having them come to see the work on view?

Lawson: This time around, because of the pandemic, there's a slightly different model from 2019. Our public programming team is working on programs that can be hybrid and live online, to reach a broader audience. Also a large number of programs are going to be outdoors. There's a series of programs that are all based on walks, thinking about them as an embodied way of experiencing the land. There's also food-based programming in connection with Derya Akay's project, *Queer Dowry*, which will offer food to a number of existing community groups in the Greater Toronto Area as a means of enacting reciprocal hospitality. One of the groups that Derya is intending to invite to share this moment of having food together is Salaam Canada, which is an existing community for queer and trans Muslim youth. Derya identified this opportunity to give back and offer them space together, especially after being isolated during the pandemic. There are so many other things: podcasts, on-site libraries that give visitors an opportunity to have an entry point to the deep thinking that we've been doing over the last few years. Also, there is the Mobile Arts Curriculum, which focuses on how a biennial can contribute to art education.

Another important aspect is partnerships with funders like the Women Leading Initiative, which helped co-commission several new works, as well as local organizations.

Hopkins: Right from the beginning, we wanted to respond to a tendency of biennials to come to a place, take over, and take resources from museums, galleries, and other spaces that have existed for a long time. We see ourselves as further supporting and working alongside and in partnership with institutions that are in the city already. Examples include parallel exhibitions that are happening at the same time, like one by Tanya Lukin Linklater at Oakville Galleries or working alongside an organization like Fort York in Toronto, which is a historic site where Ange's work will be situated and

whom we've worked with to develop her presentation. Biennials are their own economies, so we thought about we co-commissioning. One example of that is, with the Front International triennial [in Cleveland], we've co-commissioned Andrea Carlson's new work. Sometimes there's this anxiety of ownership or newness with biennials, but we did not want to kind of fall into that.



https://www.artnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Andrea_Carlson_Cast_a_Shadow_2021

Andrea Carlson, *Cast a Shadow*, 2021. (Click to enlarge.)

PHOTO: RIK SFERRA/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND BOCKLEY GALLERY

From both a logistical and curatorial standpoint, how has the pandemic impacted the biennial?

Hopkins: One thing we've been thinking about is accessibility. If it is hard for larger groups to gather, whether indoors or outdoors, can we possibly stream that work so it's also available online? Instead of putting as much emphasis as we did previously to an audience from outside Toronto, we're thinking about the neighborhoods that are around each of the venues, understanding that the majority of our audience this time will likely be highly local, which is a good thing. It's about galvanizing those forms of relationships at this moment. One of the commitments that we've made for the biennial is that it's free and publicly accessible. That's has definitely required a lot of pivoting when making a biennial.

Absolutely the context of the pandemic will shift the way that the biennial is viewed as well. Certain works, like Brian Jungen's "Plague Masks," became important to include because they point not just to the present moment, but also to the ways in which infectious disease has affected different populations of over different points in time. We can't forget that. Even though we're living through this now, different populations, particularly Indigenous ones, have lived through this the past. Another point of inspiration, brought to us by our former colleague Clare Butcher, is to consider what it actually means to breathe together when doing so is incredibly risky. This meant shifting in some cases to support artists completely remotely because there wasn't the possibility of travel.



Brian Jungen, *Plague Mask 3 (fever dream)*, detail, 2020.

PHOTO: RACHEL TOPHAM PHOTOGRAPHY. COURTESY CATRIONA JEFFRIES, VANCOUVER

Bastien: The pandemic definitely did hinder things a bit, like not being able to bring artists to Toronto to do site visits, which was an important part of 2019. But we did find creative ways of working with artists and working with each other. One artist whose project that really gestated within this moment is Eduardo Navarro. The idea for the *Wind Oracle* came from him being isolated at home in Buenos Aires and then for some time in Uruguay. He's thinking about this idea of breathing together or sharing air, and how there is a lot of anxiety built around it. His work is already very much about bringing people into relationship with the natural environment. He wanted to create something that was also Covid-proof, like an outdoor sculpture. Even before the pandemic, artists were already thinking about ways they could make work without having to travel, to not have as big of an ecological or environmental impact. So he came up with a way that he can produce the work here, and to not have to produce there and have it travel or necessarily return [to his studio]. We're thinking about how the materials of the work can be then donated or reused.

Hopkins: When we started this journey, we understood that biennials are also economies of means, so we were thinking about how we could have a lighter ecological or environmental footprint. I think that artists are often the best innovators, and they started thinking about this almost right away. For many artists, the focus went right to our immediate surroundings. It's not just in response to the pandemic, which definitely had this way of highlighting inequity right away. I think maybe we've stopped paying attention to that as much as we did at the beginning of the pandemic. We thought carefully about what we invest in, what we produce, how we can produce a biennial that

is less wasteful. We were thinking more deeply about what's absolutely necessary and what's not.

What do you hope viewers will take away from seeing this exhibition?

Bastien: I hope people leave with a new—or possibly renewed—appreciation for the diverse stories of this place that are often buried or under-recognized.

Hopkins: I've always hoped that it offers the opportunity to see a place that you think that you might know differently.

Lawson: Part of what drives me to curatorial work is that you can work in such a way that you're facilitating or building curiosity for a public, to think about different ways of being or relating to their surroundings or to others.



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