



The future of Canadian art history and visual culture at York University

BY ANNA HUDSON

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When I arrived at York University in 2004, art history faculty and students hardly reflected the diversity of the university-wide student population. Over the last 20 years, however, the Masters in Art History, the combined Masters/Masters of Fine Arts/Master of Business Administration, and the Curatorial Studies Diploma—established under Professor Emerita Joyce Zemans’s leadership in 1981, 1998, and 2001 respectively—increasingly drew a wider spectrum of students seeking careers in the arts (Zemans, 2022, pp. 15, 20, 21). With the subsequent expansion of our graduate studies to include a doctorate in 2008, we are today a lively if modest group of curators, art critics, scholars, and students steeped in issues of cultural identity and sovereignty, activism and affect, art criticism, curation and museology, and the multiplicity of roles artists play in society.

THE DEPARTMENT OF VISUAL ARTS

In 1975, when Zemans became chair of what is now York’s Visual Art and Art History department, she “found an exciting and creative ambience” (Zemans, 2022, p. 2). Fine Arts interdepartmental and team-teaching links with film, theatre, music, and dance encouraged interdisciplinarity, as did ties to other faculties created by general education courses required for undergraduate degrees. York’s educational philosophy, argues Zemans, is strongly underpinned by its foundational pan-university connections across the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. “From the beginning,” she recalls, “the Art History program was designed to be inclusive and culturally diverse,” albeit problematic if viewed from the perspective of York’s current strategy for decolonizing, equity, diversity, and inclusion (see York University, n.d.).

Today, what binds our mixed faculty complement is our collective consciousness of the colonial legacy of privilege and exclusion of the Western canon of art history. During the 1960s, feminist interrogations of access and equity challenged the canon. Over the last decade, its implosion has been accelerated by Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Idle No More, and Black Lives Matter. Efforts to pull it down completely, in the spirit of the fall of Egerton Ryerson’s statue at what is now Toronto Metropolitan University in 2021 (see CityNews, 2021), continue. But its legacy persists, baked deeply into the “discipline” of art history and the pride of privilege that Paris and subsequently New York historically took in being imperial art centres. The history of Canadian art within the Western canon is marginalized, frustratingly unable to claim originality or innovation as a colonial backwater.

I am a (white settler) Canadianist. My specialization in historical and modern art in Canada, curation, and Indigenous cultural expression is why I was hired by the university in 2004. In 2002, Joyce Zemans moved from the Department of Visual Art (as it was then known) to take on the directorship of the MBA program in Arts, Media, and Entertainment Management at York’s Schulich School of

Business. It took two of us, myself and my colleague Dr. Jennifer Fisher—a contemporary art and curation scholar—to fill Zemans’s shoes. Since then, our faculty complement and courses have continued to diversify in the spirit of Zemans, who encouraged multicultural interdisciplinarity during her tenure, beginning in the 1970s. Her championing of Canada, however, has been lost. Twenty years later, we barely teach Canadian art history.

CANADIAN ART HISTORY/PROBLEMATIC “HOT POTATO”

At our September 2023 faculty retreat, we talked about the fact that our graduate program originally focused, as Zemans recalls, on “works produced in Canada or in a Canadian collection” (Zemans, 2022, p. 16). We no longer offer graduate seminars on Canada, and our one undergraduate course, “Twentieth Century Canadian Art,” is irregularly offered, having become a problematic “hot potato.” The canon of Western art emerged in tandem with imperialism and the rise of nation-states in the industrial era. In the Americas, the creation of “countries” along imposed nation-state lines egregiously sliced up Indigenous homelands. Colonialism and nation-states locked step to establish “pretend” nations, in the words of the Blackfoot scholar LeRoy Little Bear (2016). “Canadian” art history has since served the Western canon as a simplifying categorization of otherwise increasingly disparate, disjointed, and colonized Indigenous, settler, and diaspora populations. We ask ourselves: How do we decolonize research and teaching about our geographic locus without reinventing Canada? We are well past Hugh MacLennan’s persuasive 1945 “landmark of nationalist fiction,” *Two Solitudes*, but are we still circling the question, “Where is here?” posed by Canadian literary scholar Northrop Frye in 1965? Or did Fred Wilson, an American artist and curator, rephrase it more aptly as, “Where am I here?” (Hudson, 2010, p. 29).

York University’s graduate program in Art History and Visual Culture still identifies four areas of specialization, the first of which is Canadian and Indigenous Art. (The other three draw on professional or temporal categories: Curatorial and Museological Studies; Architectural Studies; and Modern and Contemporary Art.) Could we replace the construct of Canada and its genealogies with Turtle Island, Inuit Nunangat, or the global/hemispheric contexts of Indigenous homelands? Do we abandon place as an identifier, and the shared location of Indigenous peoples, settlers, and diaspora? Maybe we should introduce, as my colleagues Professors Natasha Bissonauth and Tammer El-Sheikh did in the 2023 Art History and Visual Culture Goldfarb Summer Institute, a study of borders, human movement, fringe entities, and identities (Goldfarb Summer Institute, 2023). Might this embrace a decolonizing program of study of alliances, narrative sovereignty, and retribution while holding in precious balance locality, worldview, and the reality of the lessons of the Two Row Wampum, Gaswéñdah—living together respectfully and sustainably as separate nations (Onondaga Nation, n.d.)? Or are we still desperate for a “common bond,” “something to say to one another . . . as Canadians,” to bridge the breaks, gaps, and overlaps among our communities (Hudson, 2010, pp. 25–27)?

THE FUTURE

My colleagues and I are embarking on a quest to revisit the future of Canadian Art History and Visual Culture at York University by reinstating the kind of year-long, team-taught courses that Joyce Zemans remembers as being so productive in the early years of our department. Our planning will include consideration of the nation-state as the executor of cultural policy, heritage management, and funding agencies like the Canada Council for the Arts and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) that support and amplify multiple voices. The path “Towards a New Consciousness,” as Chicana author and cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa wrote more than 40 years ago, is a pluralistic mode, and pluralism, argues Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, is a productively decentred universalism (Hudson, 2010, pp. 32–33). As Kalaaleq artist and curator Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory reminds us all, “This whole thing about reckoning, and listening, and taking into account how colonial aggression takes place is actually based on personal relationships. . . . And

so it is through the building of relationships and the continuous dedication to those relationships that we get to new places” (Hudson et al., 2022, p. 205). The first place to start is among our faculty. ■

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