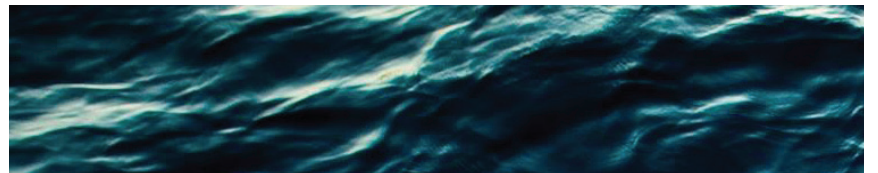


Canada In Venice

AN ESSAY BY GENEVIEVE FARRELL



First held in 1895, La Biennale di Venezia was organized in an effort to rebrand the decaying city of Venice. Emphasizing the country's active contemporary art scene, the event aimed to fuel tourism (the city's only remaining industry) while propelling Italian art and artists into the 20th century. Drawing in over 200,000 visitors, the overwhelmingly popular and commercial success of this exhibition propelled the city to establish foreign country pavilions within their "Padiglione Italia" (or "Giardini" / "Central Pavilion"). The Venice Biennale has continued to grow, to become a much larger event where countries exhibit the best of their nations' contemporary cultural production. After surviving two world wars and much political upheaval, the biennale is now a foundation that not only runs a bi-annual contemporary art exhibition, but also the Architecture Biennale, the Venice Film Festival, and manifestations in music, dance and theatre.

The Venice Biennale serves not only to exhibit works of contemporary art, but to facilitate cultural diplomacy as well as the creation and reinforcement of international cultural narratives. As the only visual arts exhibition to which many countries send official representation, the event is often referred to as the "Olympics of the Art World." Indeed, ownership of a pavilion at the Venice Biennale is a symbolic marker of a nation's cultural development and clout within the international scene. And while the Venice Biennale is certainly a global affair, the event remains markedly skewed toward the imperial and colonial geographic centers of the world and could perhaps be more accurately described as pan-European. With European and North American countries established within the biennale's central pavilions early on, developing countries, (and in some cases government agencies and private foundations) wishing to participate in the event nowadays must resort to renting churches, warehouses, and palazzi in the city in order to showcase their artists. This, however, has not deterred participation, and the number of represented countries continues to grow. China, for example, exhibited the first time in 2005, followed by the African and Mexican Pavilions in 2007, the United Arab Emirates in 2009, India in 2011, and most recently Antigua and Barbuda, Kiribati, and Nigeria in 2017.

Canada's first official presentation in the Venice Biennale occurred in 1952. Responding to the potential for international exposure, the National Gallery of Canada began building plans for a Canadian Pavilion. To pinpoint where Canada was in its development as a nation, the Canadian flag was still the Red Ensign, a British flag with Canadian coat of arms. Securing a pavilion within the now coveted Gardini space fulfilled the young country's post-war ambitions to present a strong national identity to the international community. Canada's modestly sized pavilion, located between the much larger German and British pavilions, launched with paintings and sculptures by a group of artists including Jean Paul Riopelle, a French-Canadian artist known for his abstract impasto paintings. The diversity of artistic mediums installed within the Canadian Pavilion has since evolved, but the origins of the artists have remained predominantly centred in Quebec and Ontario. Michael Snow, for example, a Toronto-born artist whose works explore innovative ways of representing time and space through film, photography and photo montage, showed a series of still photographs at the Venice Art Biennale in 1970. It wasn't until 2001 when Winnipeg's Plug In ICA won a nationally sponsored competition that a Manitoba-based arts organization acted as Canada's official representative at the Biennale. Curated by then director Wayne Baerwaldt, Canada's Pavillion premiered the video installation, *The Paradise Institute* by Janet Cardiff (b. 1957, Brussels, Ontario) and George Bures Miller (b. 1960, Vegreville, Alberta).

While Canada's representation at the Venice Biennale has played a major role in launching the international careers of many celebrated Canadian artists, the selection of exhibitors reveals the country's hegemonic cultural, political and diplomatic orders. As evident in the School of Art Gallery's exhibition, *Canada in Venice*, (a selection

of works from its permanent collection by artists who have represented Canada at the Venice Biennale) the exhibitors have been predominantly white males hailing from Ontario or Quebec. Of the 65 artists who have represented the nation thus far, only 10 have been women. Rebecca Belmore remains the only female Indigenous artist to represent the nation (2005), and while no woman of color has exhibited in the Canadian Pavilion, the choreographer Dana Michel became the first Canadian to win a Silver Lion (life time achievement award) at the Venice Dance Biennale in 2017. While these statistics are not atypical when one looks at the history of Biennale exhibitors from other participating nations, the information should provoke serious reflection on the historic political and cultural values of western nations.

Considering how the utilization and manipulation of visual culture has been used to develop national and diplomatic ends, participation in the Venice Biennale is no insignificant matter. The National Gallery of Canada oversees Canada's participation, thereby reinforcing current cultural values. As an exhibition, *Canada in Venice* provides a snapshot of the technical skill, styles, and ideas put forth by many accomplished Canadian artists as represented in our collection. But perhaps more importantly, the exhibition can be used as a platform to stimulate conversation and reflection regarding the ways in which we would like to see Canadian cultural achievements presented on the world stage.

With the next installment of the Venice Biennale slotted to take place in May 2019, the National Gallery has chosen the Inuit art collective, Isuma, to represent Canada. Challenging stereotypes about life in the North, Isuma has been creating independent videos since the mid-1990s. The collective's work poignantly encapsulates a turn in the current visual-cultural climate. Isuma means "to think, or a state of thoughtfulness" in Inuktitut, and as the various political and artistic players continue to suss out the complex relationships between visual culture, national culture and cultural diplomacy, sincere and intentional thoughtfulness is precisely what will be needed to reconcile past wrongs as we move towards goals of constructing more inclusive, loving, and equitable cultural norms.

ENDNOTES

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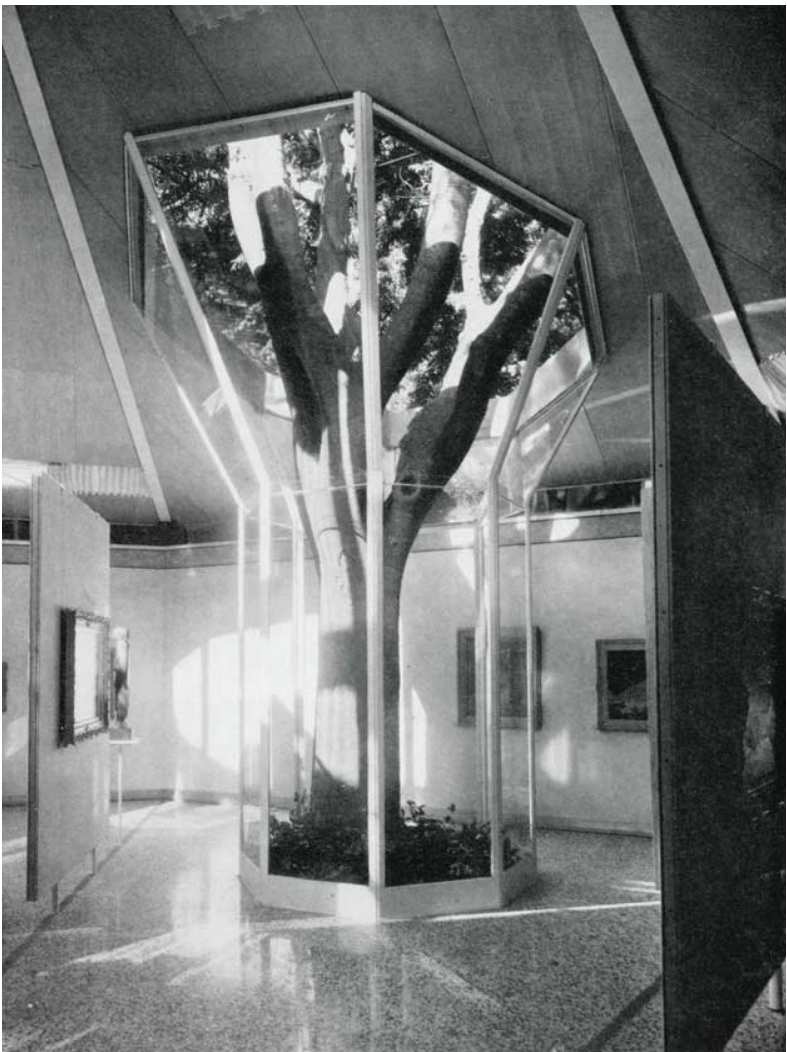
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See: CBC documentary series *In the Making* – Episode 4.



A view of the Canada Pavilion in Venice, originally published in the article “The New Pavilion in Venice” in *Canadian Art* Autumn 1958.

Image via: David Michon. “The Canadian Pavilion, One of the Venice Biennale’s Most Intriguing Artworks”. *CanadianArt.ca* (www.canadianart.ca/features/our-pavilion/).

VENICE BIENNALE QUICK FACTS

- The gardens, or “Giardini”, upon which the Biennale’s most established pavilions are found, were created in 1807 by Napoleon Bonaparte, who demolished two monasteries to create the green space.
- The Biennale’s “Arsenale” exhibition space is built upon Venice’s old shipping yards. This space welcomed centuries of eminent visitors including the author Dante Alighieri, who compares the red-hot flames of hell, in his book *The Divine Comedy*, to the hot tar used to caulk and repair damaged ships in Venetian workshops.
- The next Venice Art Biennale will take place from May 11 – November 24, 2019. The members of the video art collective Isuma, will be the first Inuit artists to represent Canada in the main pavillion.
- In 2017, over 615,000 people visited the Venice Art Biennale.
- Of the 120 participating artists and collectives at the 2017 Biennale, only 35% were female, and only one single female was black: Senga Nengudi.
- No major international exhibition of contemporary art has achieved gender parity.

ENDNOTES

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4. “Biennale Arte 2017.” La Biennale Di Venezia. January 26, 2018. Accessed November 19, 2018. www.labiennale.org/en/news/biennale-arte-2017-over-615000-visitors.
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History of Exhibitors in the Canadian Pavilion

1952 — Emily Carr, David Milne , Goodridge Roberts, Alfred Pellán	1986 — Melvin Charney, Krzysztof Wodiczko
1954 — Bertram Charles Binning , Paul-Émile Borduas, Jean-Paul Riopelle	1988 — Roland Brener, Michel Goulet
1956 — Jack Shadbolt , Louis Archambault, Harold Town	1990 — Geneviève Cadieux
1958 — James Wilson Morrice, Jacques de Tonnancour, Anne Kahane, Jack Nichols	1993 — Robin Collyer
1960 — Edmund Alleyn, Graham Coughtry , Jean Paul Lemieux, Frances Loring, Albert Dumouchel	1995 — Edward Poitras
1962 — Jean-Paul Riopelle	1997 — Rodney Graham (Curator: Loretta Yarlow)
1964 — Harold Town , Elza Mayhew	1999 — Tom Dean
1966 — Alex Colville , Yves Gaucher, Sorel Etrog	2001 — Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller (Curator: Wayne Baerwaldt)
1968 — Ulysse Comtois, Guido Molinari	2003 — Jana Sterbak (Curator: Gilles Godmer)
1970 — Michael Snow	2005 — Rebecca Belmore
1972 — Gershon Iskowitz, Walter Redinger	2007 — David Altmejd (Curator: Louise Déry)
1976 — Greg Curnoe	2009 — Mark Lewis (Curator: Barbara Fischer)
1978 — Ron Martin, Henry Saxe	2011 — Steven Shearer (Curator: Josée Drouin-Brisebois)
1980 — Collin Campbell, Pierre Falardeau, Julien Poulin, General Idea , Tom Sherman, Lisa Steele	2013 — Shary Boyle (Curator: Josée Drouin-Brisebois)
1982 — Paterson Ewen	2015 — BGL (Curator: Marie Fraser)
1984 — Ian Carr-Harris, Liz Magor	2017 — Geoffrey Farmer (Curator: Kitty Scott)
	2019 — Isuma

*Highlighted artists found in the School of Art Gallery’s Permeant Collection.



Canada in Venice

SCHOOL OF ART GALLERY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS GALLERY

From the Permanent Collection

David Milne & Alfred Pellán (1952)
BC Binning & Jean-Paul Riopelle (1954)
Jack Shadbolt & Harold Town (1956)
Graham Coughtry (1960)
Alex Colville & Yves Gaucher (1966)
Guido Molinari (1968)
Michael Snow (1970)
Greg Curnoe (1976)
Tom Dean (1999)
Janet Cardiff & George B. Miller (2001)

Organized
by
Jamie
Wright

November 20 - December 10, 2018

