



Detail of *Hiking Black Creek* by Sandra Brewster.

HERE WE ARE HERE

HOW TO SEE IT

Opens January 27, 2018.
Third Floor, Centre Block.

presented by



BLACK CANADIAN CONTEMPORARY ART

presented by TD Bank Group

The ROM's newest exhibition explores contemporary art, race, and historical identity in Canada. *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art* features original works from nine African Canadian artists. *ROM* magazine spoke to four of the artists to discuss how they approach the subject of Canadian identity and capture the sense of belonging (or lack thereof) in their works.





NAME: SANDRA BREWSTER
LOCATION: TORONTO
ARTWORK AT THE ROM: *HIKING BLACK CREEK*

“I explore the effect of migration on one’s identity and those of subsequent generations”

Using contemporary photography and gel medium transfers as a metaphor for movement, I explore themes of identity and representation and the effect of migration on one’s identity and those of subsequent generations.

The photo-based transfers take on an aged appearance, which allows me to play with time, manipulating them to appear weathered. The result is a comment on the importance of preservation and documentation of history.

Hiking Black Creek references an old photograph of my parents during their very early years in Canada—city folk exploring the actual land of the country where they would live for the rest of their lives.

I EXPLORE THE EFFECT OF MIGRATION ON ONE’S IDENTITY AND THOSE OF SUBSEQUENT GENERATIONS



NAME: CHANTAL GIBSON
LOCATION: VANCOUVER
ARTWORK AT THE ROM: *SOUVENIR*

“My job as an artist is not to solve a problem, but to make the problem visible”

Troping Blackness—the escaped slave, the Loyalist, the immigrant, the refugee—has long been a part of our national, historical mythmaking. I was raised on it. *Souvenir* is inspired by a September moment from my undergraduate days at UBC many years ago. In a Canadian Lit class, I was assigned Thomas McCulloch’s *The Stepsure Letters*, first published in *The Acadian Recorder* from 1821 to 1823. That’s where I met “the black wench”—a nameless, voiceless Black figure, lazy and gossipy, wrestling a giant pig on the kitchen floor, in a Nova Scotia where white women feared being carried off by “Hottentots.” The same Nova Scotia where my mother was born in 1950. Back then, I was too self-conscious, too embarrassed to put up my hand in class and ask about the nameless, voiceless Black presence in this Canadian literary imagination. I mean, who was I to challenge the father of Canadian satire? I hadn’t read Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*, and Post-Colonial Studies wasn’t offered until the spring.

Here now, my work is an active, creative response to the wilful, critical blindness that continues to feed persistent, historic misrepresentations of Blackness and Otherness that strangle our textbooks and our computer screens, our international news feeds and our individual comment pages. My job as an artist is not to solve a problem, but to make the problem visible—to reference the past to highlight a complex history of struggle—to be seen, recognized, inscribed, and humanized.

Here now, the challenge for me is to create challenging, intelligent, contemporary work that makes viewers ask, “Why?”

“It is important for citizens to challenge the stereotypes made every day about Other people”

Souvenir is a multi-media installation that uses 2000 blackened souvenir spoons to illustrate the reproduction of ideas. It explores how ideas become degraded, yet entrenched in our culture over time, asking viewers to consider their own thinking—about Black people in Canada, about people of different cultures. It begs the question, What do I know and how did I learn this?

In the current political and social climate, nationally and globally, it is important for citizens to recognize and to challenge the stereotypes and sweeping generalizations made every day about Other people—the images in our daily conversations, news and social media—and to consider where they came from. *Souvenir* asks the viewer to engage, to look closely at the spoons and the degrading effects of misrepresentation—to consider the individual and the characteristics, details, and nuances that make us human.

Photo of Chantal Gibson by Chen et al. SIAT 2017. Photo of Sandra Brewster courtesy of the artist.



NAME: MICHÈLE PEARSON CLARKE
LOCATION: TORONTO
ARTWORK AT THE ROM: *SUCK TEETH COMPOSITIONS (AFTER RASHAAD NEWSOME)*

“My work deals with moments of ambiguity, melancholy, and discomfort related to longing and loss”

Given that the Black/queer body is always already understood to be in mourning due to racial trauma, social exclusion, and violence, my work in film, video, and photography is concerned with representing other forms of Black/queer pain as a practice of resistance. While there is a long wretched history in Western visual culture of parading Black suffering as a spectacle for public consumption, my work deals largely with the everyday moments of ambiguity, melancholy, and discomfort present in narratives related to longing and loss. By using archival, performative, and process-oriented strategies, my work investigates the personal and political possibilities afforded by sharing these experiences and the negative emotions that they produce like disappointment, loneliness, shame, and grief.

Informed by my background in psychology and social work, I am interested in the tremendous vulnerability present in these affects and what this vulnerability has to offer us when we are transparent about these difficult and often stigmatized psychological and emotional states.

“I want visitors to walk away thinking about the presence of anti-Black racism in Canada”

While many Canadians know the names and stories of African-Americans Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner, very few would recognize the names Jermaine Carby, Andrew Loku, Abdirahman Abdi, or Pierre Coriolan—all Black men who were killed by Canadian police forces in the last few years. This issue of police violence is just one of many that reflect our national invisibility and the fact that when it comes to anti-Black racism, most white Canadians are allowed to feel comfortable, and are supported in their comfort by the historical and ongoing narratives of “not me,” “not us,” “only them, down there.”

This is partly due to the Black silence that often greets racist acts both here and elsewhere. Black people have long suppressed and concealed our anger, rage, and pain for fear of suffering the very real consequences of being perceived as “angry.” White supremacy’s punishments have run the gamut from violence to job loss to being shunned by the neighbours. As a survival strategy, then, Black people’s responses to racism are frequently designed to avoid making white people too uncomfortable.

Given that sucking your teeth is used to signify a wide range of feelings, including irritation, disapproval, disgust, disrespect, anger, and frustration, I want visitors to walk away thinking about the presence of anti-Black racism in Canada and questioning their own emotional responses to Black people’s anger and frustration.

Photo of Michèle Pearson Clarke by Zahra Siddiqui. Photo of Sylvia Hamilton courtesy of the artist.



NAME: SYLVIA D. HAMILTON
LOCATION: GRAND PRÉ & HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA
ARTWORK AT THE ROM: *HERE WE ARE HERE*

“My work is underpinned by ideas of Black resistance, resilience, and defiance”

I am a student of the real, of the archive, of memory, and of the imagination, and their role in our lives and the lives of our African ancestors. Had they not been able to imagine something different for themselves and their children, and their children’s children, I would not be here.

Had they not used their imagination to transcend the real, to move beyond and outside of the real, the horror of the real, they would not have survived the Middle Passage. They would never have survived the rocky, sickness-inducing, weeks-long sea voyage across the Middle Passage, and then from New York, north to Canada, as enslaved people in Canada, or as free Black Loyalists or free Black Refugees who liberated themselves to come to Canada.

Black people were enslaved in this land, were treated as property—sold at auctions, itemized, and left in wills to heirs along with other property forever.

Yet, they were futurists and resisters. My work is underpinned by ideas of Black resistance, resilience, and defiance as evidenced in the lives of African-descended people.

“I intend to create visceral moments for the viewer that will resonate long after the visit”

By creating and presenting work that concretizes the memory and experiences of African-descended people in Canada, I intend to create visceral moments for the viewer, ones that will linger, be remembered, raise questions, and resonate long after the visit, and the close of the exhibition. An echo of the past in the present. ■