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Yaniya Lee, "How Canada Forgot Its Black Artists," *The Fader*, August 31, 2016.

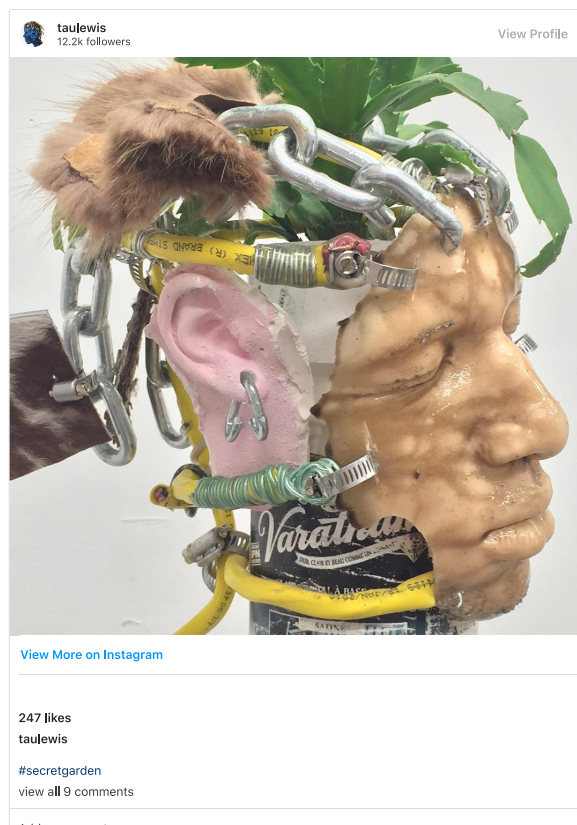
FADER

CULTURE / ART

How Canada Forgot Its Black Artists

Many black Canadians, past and present, have made art and contributed to our culture — but they're often pushed to the margins.

By **YANIYA LEE**
August 31, 2016



In Canada, black artists are an anomaly — at least in the cultural imagination. If you ask the average person on the street to name a ‘great Canadian artist’ they might cite early 20th century painters like Emily Carr or the Group of Seven. Find an art school kid and they’d probably mention contemporists like Jon Rafman, or the General Idea collective. But when would you come across the names of Stan Douglas, an art world veteran, or Deanna Bowen, recipient of this year’s prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship? What about Curtis “Talwst” Santiago, Marvin Luvualu Antonio, or Esmaa Mohamoud? Black Canadian artists exist, but we seem to have difficulty placing them.

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Take 22-year-old Tau Lewis, a talented Torontonion sculptor building steady acclaim. Her pastel-colored resin casts of bodies and plant life examine the political boundaries of nature, identity, and authenticity. Within the past year she's participated in nearly 10 exhibitions, including the Art Gallery of Ontario's prestigious Massive Party fundraiser, Younger Than Beyoncé Gallery's FUTURE 33, and even a mid-winter guerrilla showcase in an abandoned parking lot in the city's north end. Still, it's not unusual that at her own shows people refuse to believe she's the artist. "There's always this second guessing. [First], because of the work I'm making: it's heavy, it's sculptural, it's large, and I think people don't expect that from a black female artist. They're always looking for someone else, and it's completely about the way that I look. Me being the artist that I am is not a part of whatever story or narrative is cast on me largely by white society."

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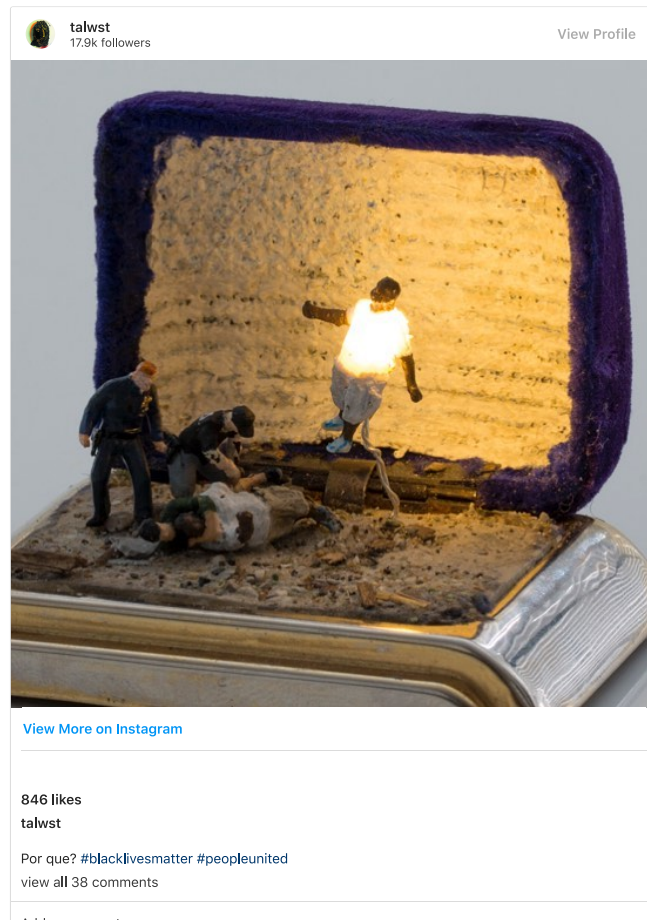
In mid-July, the Art Gallery of Ontario — Toronto's major contemporary art institution — opened a show by Chicago's Theaster Gates. In *How To Build a House Museum* Gates recreates the concept of house museums: exhibition spaces, usually preserved houses, seen as authentic remains of the lives of important historical figures. He uses the idea of the house museum to platform black folks whose achievements have been underrepresented in a history that privileges people of European descent. Gates's subjects include legendary North Carolina brick maker George Black, who was one generation removed from slavery, famed musician and the 'father' of Chicago blues Muddy Waters, and Detroit DJ Frankie Knuckles, who became known as the 'godfather of house music.' His floor to ceiling lamé curtains, brick sculptures, tar paintings, minimalist, painted interpretations of century-old statistics about black life, and the blaring house music evoke entertainment, performance, labor, dance, and data: key aspects of black history. The work forces a break in the repetitive cycles of history by pushing audiences to question who and how we remember. It's an alternative way that culture can be memorialized.

In recent years, several major art institutions in Toronto have demonstrated a clear shift in their mandate to be more inclusive of racialized artists. Timed to Black History Month 2015, the AGO opened a major Jean-Michel Basquiat retrospective, and the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery hosted a show premised on the influential work of Jamaican cultural theorist Stuart Hall. But these arts spaces have still prompted criticism for showing black art works from *outside* of Canada. (The Royal Ontario Museum's *Of Africa* project is a notable exception). Independent curator and Ontario College of Art and Design professor Andrea Fatona elaborated on this critique: "[for] anything having to do with blackness, and particularly the negative aspects of black life and the dehumanization of black folks, we tend to import black artists and discourses from elsewhere. And so then we end up with a kind of innocence in Canada. We continue to replicate this notion of our benevolent space."

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Stories, past and present, that stray from conceptualizing Canadian identity as inherently white and European are often omitted from the national cultural discourse. “If you’re a POC going to school in a predominantly white society, the focus is never going to be on you or your history,” Lewis said. And this absence extends to the work that’s presented in art galleries, on TV — it’s even obvious in the way Drake, arguably the most famous black Canadian ever, is constantly interrogated for the way he expresses his Canadian-ness, or ‘lack’ thereof. Canadian blackness is constantly seen as recent and uniform, and this fails to incorporate the rich and subtle diversity of black communities across the country.

Beyond art, black history in particular, has been excluded from the Canadian story. How many are familiar with communities like Halifax’s razed Africville or Vancouver’s Hogan’s Alley, or know of Marie Joseph Angelique’s blazing attempt to escape from slavery in 1734, which left the entire old port of Montreal in flames? Earlier this year the remnants of a Black church built in 1845 were unearthed in downtown Toronto, and the debate on how to memorialize the site is being framed through the popular vision of Canada as a ‘sanctuary’ for runaway slaves. Last year in Quebec, a petition was circulated to rename a section of the Gatineau River known as “Rapides des Nègres” (N**ger Rapids), named as such because a black couple had drowned there in 1912. Though the name is offensive, it also documents the denigrating social reality experienced by black folks in Quebec’s past. What’s at stake in these recent news stories is an erasure of distinct evidence of the historical presence of blacks in Canada. If black history isn’t openly present elsewhere, is it possible to rename a river without enabling erasure?

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Efforts are being taken to make visible black Canadian histories, and their contribution to national culture. Earlier this summer Torontonians educator and lawyer Anthony Morgan created the hashtag #BlackLivesCDNSyllabus in response to media criticism of the local Black Lives Matter chapter. It prompted a grassroots list of required reading about blackness and anti-black racism in Canada. A wide range of books, magazine, artists, writers, musicians, scholars, and filmmakers — work spanning decades — is included in the crowd-sourced syllabus. It’s proof that black Canadian cultural institutions, and a diversity of experience (including those of women and queer blacks), has existed since before confederation but is often overlooked in the official history, which relegates all visible minorities to new immigrant status. New media activism is a way to counter this. Writing in Canadian Art magazine, Merray Gerges described the syllabus as an act of resistance: “Circulating collective knowledge online can assert and centre marginalized histories—within spaces and narratives that continue to brush their existence aside.” Digital activism has great potential to affect IRL institutions that shape national discourse.

#BlackLivesCDNSyllabus does point to the fact that no formal archive on black Canadian art exists, despite the many artists that have, and continue to make work here. For his show, Gates pulled several pieces from the AGO’s permanent collection including three 19th century paintings by the black landscape artist Robert Carrison, who lived in Quebec in the 1860s. This gesture is significant because it resurrects a specific artistic presence from our past. “Those histories exist in fragments in different people’s heads, under their beds, all over,” said Fatona. “We don’t have an archival presence that creates a space, or number of spaces that are centralized [so] that we can actively engage with [black] histories.”

The act of forgetting is also the act of nation-making, Fatona told me, paraphrasing the theorist Homi Bhabha: “so it’s not just about memory, it’s about *erasing* memories as well.” She explained that government arts funding ensured Canadian culture stayed white. In trying to create a national cultural identity distinct from the United States and from England, “[Canada] was really concerned with elevating the highest forms of European culture in this new settler colony. So funding really went to things like the opera, visual arts, theatre and the symphony—European cultural forms, [but] done by white Canadians.”

What has this meant for black Canadian artists? Toronto multimedia artist Sandra Brewster has seen many practices languish in the shadows: “I see people who are a little bit older than me who should be superstars. There are a few artists I used to look up to when I was young and they’re just not practicing in the same way anymore. They get bitter, you know? Angry and bitter.” These artists have no visible disciplinary legacy — no slot in the canon — in which they can exist. Black artistic achievement has consistently been edited into the margins, leaving the Canadian cultural imaginary overwhelmingly white. When more significant space is made for embracing a strong lineage of accomplished black Canadians, the hope is that we’ll see more young artists like Lewis flourish.