

Three Metro Toronto unsung art galleries that deserve a hallelujah chorus

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From the point of view of the Queen West, getting out to the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU) in the northern wilds of Jane and Finch can seem an onerous chore. Not only are there no hip bars or restaurants there (not known to downtowners, anyway), but you have to schlep on the subway all the way to Downsview and then endure a crowded express bus through suburban and industrial wastelands.

But the idea that Toronto's cultural life takes place entirely a stone's throw from the Drake Hotel is absurd, limiting, and simply out of touch. Some of our region's most compelling and cutting edge exhibitions take place away from the city's core, including at the AGYU, the Blackwood Gallery at the University of Toronto's Mississauga campus, and at the MacLaren Art Centre in Barrie.

These are, if you will, Metro Toronto's unsung galleries, and this story is an ode to them:

The AGYU

The AGYU's 2013 season, for instance, opens Jan. 16 with a solo exhibition of the work of Toronto based interdisciplinary artist Deanna Bowen, "Invisible Empires," which focuses on the Ku Klux Klan and its migration into Canada.

"It's just a prejudice that the AGYU is not in Toronto," says Philip Monk, the gallery's director and chief curator. "We're actually closer to the center of where people live in (Metro) Toronto than other institutions — we just have a different demographic. And since we serve different audiences, we have had to create a different kind of institution that serves both social and aesthetic concerns. In the process, we've transformed the institution itself so that artists are part of the process at every level, including the marketing of the show, and in that way the institution itself has become part of the art."

One of the ways the AGYU has overcome the problem of getting people downtown to come up to York University is the AGYU Performance Bus. Featured artists turn the old school bus into a mobile art work that ferries people from the Art Gallery of Ontario and back for openings. "We've always wanted artists to be our advocates, and for artists to be the hosts of the exhibitions," says Emelie Chhangur, who works with Monk as assistant director and curator. "The Performance Bus provides the opportunity for an artist to spend 45 minutes in a school bus with his or her community, and what happens in there is always a surprise!"

The Blackwood Gallery

Located on the campus of the University of Toronto Mississauga, the Blackwood Gallery is if anything more geographically challenged than the AGYU, but under the direction of artist and curator Christof Migone, the gallery has thrived, mounting consistently challenging exhibitions and events. "Volume: Hear Here," an exploration of the experience of sound that includes well-known Canadian artists like John Oswald, Charles Stankieveh, Marla Hlady, and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, will open on January 16. Montreal based Lozano-Hemmer's contribution will be from his remarkable *Lost Breath* project, a device that stores a single breath and circulates it over and over some 10,000 times a day. The breath that will be used in "Volume: Hear Here" will be that of renowned American composer and accordionist Pauline Oliveros.

"The mandate of the gallery is contemporary Canadian and international art," says Migone, "but I'm still trying to find ways of engaging with and responding to the community of the city we're located in. I really think of myself as a populist, and I want the work be accessible, I want the gallery to be a platform equally for artists, students, and the community. We've had an ongoing project called Door to Door that started in 2011 in which artists literally go out into the local community. For the first one, Camilla Singh went to local businesses and did a cheerleading routine for the workers!"



Artist Camilla Sing with official time keeper Jose Talavera taking her art to the workers as part of the Blackwood Gallery philosophy: if you don't go to them, they'll go to you!

“Sometimes we don’t have huge audiences,” Migone admitted, “but my attitude is, if you don’t come to us, we’ll come to you!”

The MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie

Both the Art Gallery of York University and the Blackwood Gallery are university galleries, so it should come as no surprise that their programming tends to be edgy, experimental, and often cerebral. Set in a beautiful old Carnegie Library and with an award-winning addition designed by Siamak Hariri of Hariri Pontanini Architects, the MacLaren Art Centre in Barrie has a slightly different mandate: they exhibit artists who work in and around the County of Simcoe, works that are in their extensive permanent collections, and also mount shows by contemporary Canadian artists. Currently on view is “Hue and Cry,” a survey of figurative works by influential Montreal based artist Leopold Plotek, as well as the stunning “Workingman’s Dead: Lives of the Artists,” curated by Plotek and MacLaren curator Ben Portis, which features black and white photographs of often doomed artists during the 1930s, the height of Stalin’s terror, culled from the gallery’s remarkable Sovfoto archive.

“There’s a different kind of audience here,” Portis observes. “It’s a very insular community that has not had a longstanding relationship to the arts — many of the families have been here for generations. But that is changing because the community is rapidly growing, with many people now commuting to Toronto for work, and the MacLaren is trying to provide cultural leadership. A lot of what I do is to provide visibility for our holdings in late modern and contemporary Canadian art, but we also do shows with a regional focus, like our recent show about painter John Hartman’s life on Georgian Bay. And we do very cutting edge shows too: at the end of February we will be opening a retrospective of the work of Kristan Horton,” winner of the coveted [Grange Prize](#) in 2010.

There is, as Philip Monk points out, a prejudice against galleries not located in downtown Toronto. There might have been some truth in that prejudice 20 or 30 years ago, but both the art world and the greater Toronto area have changed a lot in the meantime. Today some of the finest, most illuminating, and most challenging exhibitions take place up near Jane and Finch or in Mississauga or in Barrie. It’s important to get out and see them. And really, they aren’t all that far.