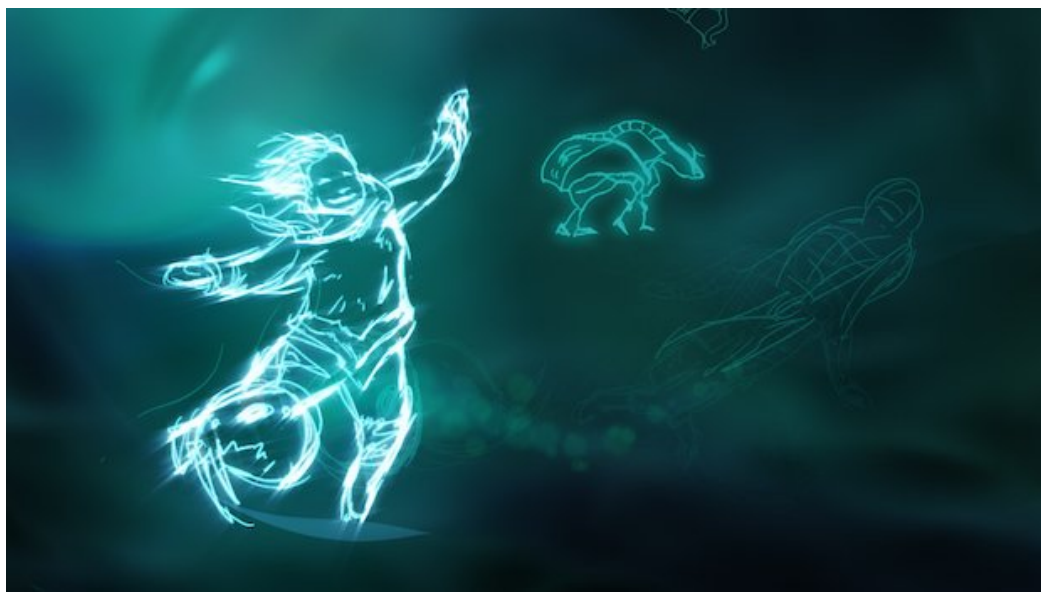


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#CanadaGoesDigital: Shimmering Horizons

- [Deborah Chu](#)
- 28 January 2021



Asinnajaq, *Three Thousand* (video still), 2017, Video with sound, 14 min 04 s, produced by the National Film Board of Canada. / Courtesy of the Artist and National Film Board of Canada.



The High Commission of Canada in the UK and the Or Gallery present an online exhibition of contemporary artworks exploring visions of ecological collapse and resilient futures

For many of us on this planet, the current state of perpetual emergency remains a relatively recent phenomenon. The pandemic looms large in our daily lives, while the climate crisis disrupts our seasons, collapses our ecosystems and destabilises our societies. These challenges have often begun to feel too overwhelming to ever surmount. But, as the online exhibition *Shimmering Horizons* seeks to remind us, not all history is experienced the same way, and the future remains very much undecided. The catalyst shall be our creative will to re-imagine what this future may look like.

'The apocalypse has already happened in some ways,' says Laurie White, the curator of [Shimmering Horizons](#). 'For Indigenous people, that reality has already taken place, rather than [it being] a fear that is in the future.'

White first explored critiques of history's so-called 'grand narratives' in the course of her Master's research at the University of British Columbia, in which she focused on post-humanism and feminist criticism. Now the Program Coordinator at Vancouver's Or Gallery – an artist-run centre that has remained a focal point of the city's cultural life since opening its doors in 1983 – she leapt at the chance to answer Canada House's call for proposals, sensing the opportunity to follow the threads of her personal and professional curiosity in interrogating those master narratives which shape our sense of the world around us.



Marina Roy, *Dirty Clouds*, 2017, bitumen, oil and acrylic on wood, dimensions variable / Courtesy of the Artist.

She wrote the proposal while on vacation in Hawaii, having just attended the Honolulu Biennial and seen futurist works by Polynesian artists. 'Some of the things I saw in that exhibition really crystallised this desire to do something about Indigenous Futurism, which was a concept I'd encountered the previous year at a conference for the Initiative for Indigenous Futures,' White says. Broadly speaking, Indigenous Futurism calls for a re-visioning of the future – one that eschews idealisations of a technological future off-earth, which are steeped in Anglo-American narratives around manifest destiny, patriarchy and colonisation. Her essay accompanying the exhibition takes particular aim at 2014's *Interstellar*, as a po-faced Matthew McConaughey's character argues, 'It's like we've forgotten who we are. Explorers, pioneers, not caretakers... We're not meant to save the world. We're meant to leave it.'

'That conference introduced me to what Indigenous Futurism is and the different approach that it takes to envisioning the future, the role of different cultures in the future and the grand, popular mainstream narratives you get in a lot of science fiction,' says White. 'One of the things I was most inspired by was the resistance towards the dystopian, apocalyptic narratives that you frequently see in movies, and problematising that narrative.'

Instead of taking McConaughey's film's grim line, Indigenous Futurism calls for us to focus on reparations in the present: prioritising relationships, accountability and traditional ecological knowledge. 'The response is usually a very positive one, to say "we're resilient, we're still here, how are we going to craft our futures and take hold of those futures?'" White cites Meagan Musseau's series *Intergalactic L'nu Baskets* as a particular example, which combines traditional Mi'kmaq basket-making practices with contemporary synthetic materials.



Meagan Musseau, *time travelers*, 2017, Vinyl, flagging tape, and sweetgrass, 11 x 17 x 17 cm. / Courtesy of the Artist.

'The works have a very positive and resilient tone to them,' says White. 'Musseau is continuing [these] practices even though access to land and the traditional materials, like ashwood and sweetgrass, aren't easily accessible anymore. She didn't know how to go out and gather those materials or where to get them, but she decided that that wasn't her fault – government regulation and industrial practices have severed those ties. The process of learning the techniques was important and she was going to continue doing that.' Asinnajaq's film, *Three Thousand*, similarly captures that sense of vibrant resilience – 'We're still here, we're still living in the North, on our lands and we're in place.'

But White was keen to not exclusively showcase Indigenous artists in [Shimmering Horizons](#) – not only because ecological disaster will have a profound impact on us all, if not equally – but also to challenge prevailing assumptions that Indigenous art and settler art operate as siloed categories. Of the five artists whose works are featured in *Shimmering Horizons* – Asinnajaq, Musseau, Marina Roy, Tania Willard and Elizabeth Zvonar – Roy and Zvonar are of settler background. 'These artists are living people having conversations [with each other], and we share similar goals, even though we're coming from very different places,' she says.

However, White was also sensitive to the fact that she, as a white, non-Indigenous curator, was responsible for showcasing and framing works by Indigenous artists, and thus invited artist and curator Whess Harman, a member of Carrier Wit'at First Nation, to create a response to the work. Their resulting zine *cataclysm(s)*, which is also available alongside the exhibition, provides a critical emotional context.



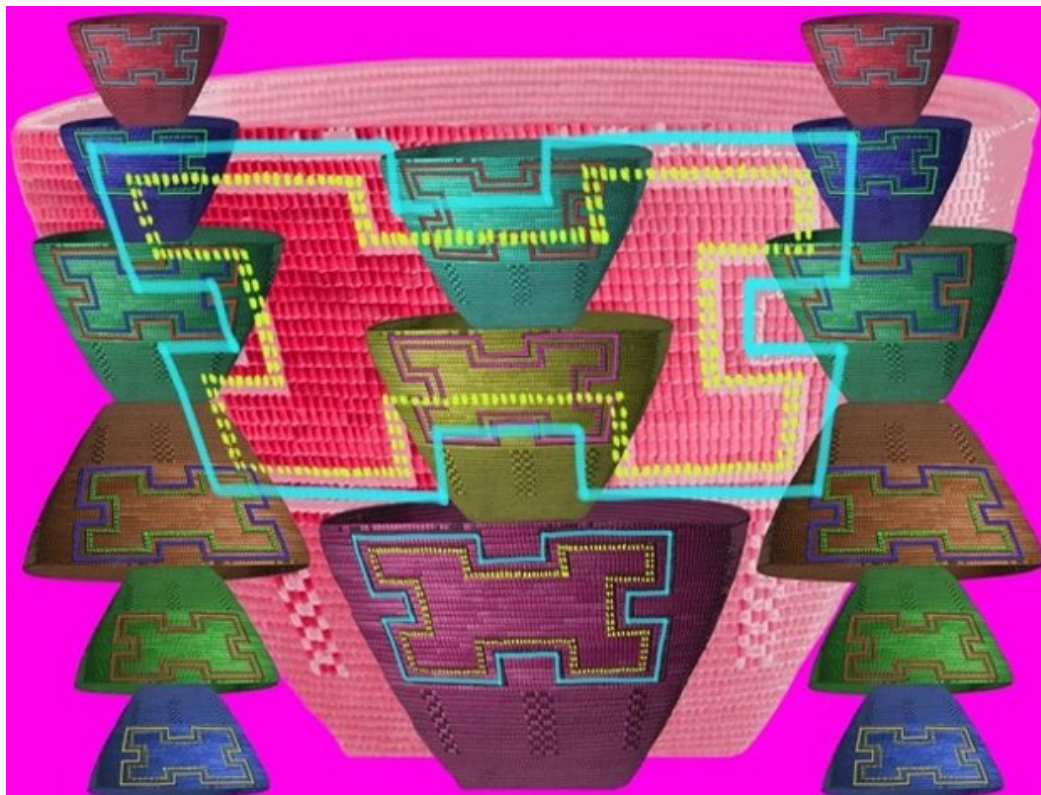
Elizabeth Zvonar, *The Universe Is Mental*, 2014, Digital print of hand-cut collage, 16 x 24 inches / 40.5 x 51 cm. / Courtesy of the Artist and Daniel Faria Gallery.

'Whess' response is really powerful and reinscribes the political urgency of the project in a way that is not available to me,' says White. '[It] lights the fire under what is at stake with some of these works and Indigenous Futurism. There is an urgency and desperate need to correct what's being done, and allow Indigenous nations to have sovereignty over their lands and waters, and manage them in ways that they previously have done that were a lot more ecologically sound.' Though Indigenous Futurism has become a buzzword within contemporary art circles, Harman's personal response in *cataclysm(s)* underlines how it cannot remain just a concept – it must become a reality, which requires political action.

The plan to showcase *Shimmering Horizons* at London's Canada House brought up questions around how a British audience may receive works that overtly tackle the legacy of colonialism in Canada, when the UK so rarely reckons with its own imperial past. Although she's lived in Canada for a decade now, White was born in Oxford and raised in Sheffield. 'It's important to say that I don't think British people have a good grasp of colonisation around the world,' she says bluntly. 'I've done a lot of learning about this since getting [to Canada].' But she believes that the joy, colour and resilience that can be found in the diverse works can draw audiences in nonetheless, '[and] hopefully allow them to stay with the problems and difficulties that these works tap into.'

But then, of course, the pandemic happened. When it became clear that the physical exhibition could not take place as planned, White and the Public Diplomacy team at the High Commission of Canada began exploring the possibilities of showcasing the works in a digital space, as they had previously done with the [Meryl McMaster](#) and [Position as Desired](#) shows. When we do briefly discuss White's original plans for the physical exhibition – the plinths she would have painted, how the murals would have been displayed in a fixed space – she does so without a sense of regret, focussing instead on her happy collaboration with Sylvana d'Angelo on the website, which foregrounds the works against a cascading gradient of colour, evoking the eponymous horizon and the vibrant colours of *The Xenofeminist Manifesto*.

There are subtler tweaks too, like animating the eyes to blink on Zvonar's collage *The Universe in Mental*, or the visor to gleam on *Visionary Feminist, after Jill Soloway and bell hooks*. The digital platform also allows White to embed video interviews with the artists, allowing them to represent their practices in their own words to the virtual gallery-goer. 'The works hold their own [in a digital space],' says White, and they do. 'The web exhibition isn't just an imprint of what it would have been in real life. This is a different way of presenting those works, and for a lot of people who wouldn't have been able to visit the physical exhibition, they would have only ever seen them on Instagram posts and the like. So to really take hold of that digital representation and harness it, have it contribute to the meaning of the work, was very fun.'



Tania Willard, *Gut Instincts*, 2018, Digital mural. / Courtesy of the Artist.

The [exhibition](#) will remain live online for a year, but its themes and questions will resonate far beyond its duration and platform. When asked what she hopes people will take away from the exhibition, White pauses for a moment before speaking. 'Tania Willard put it so well in her artist interview. She said, "I don't want to think about the dystopian future, I

don't want to give more time and energy to that vision", White recalls. 'It seems inevitable that the world is going to end, but the more time we devote to it, the more it becomes real. An interesting thing about science fiction and futurism is that the way we think about the future actually shapes the way we act in the present. If we're anxious about something happening in the future, we might be more conservative with our choices or less likely to build relationships. [Whereas] when you have a positive vision about the future, you might be excited about it and put a lot of energy into developing these other ways of relating to people.'

'How do we want to live, instead of just what is it going to be like? How can we make that happen? That really begins with re-dreaming and re-visioning and representation. So artists have a really important role to play – and always have done – in creating other futures and other prompts for dreaming about the future in different ways.'

HE Janice Charette, High Commissioner for Canada in the UK, said: "*Shimmering Horizons* is the latest in our series of extraordinary online exhibitions at the Virtual Canada Gallery under the #CanadaGoesDigital banner. We are proud to host this exhibition in partnership with Vancouver's Or Gallery as part of our activities to celebrate this year's International Women's Day. *Shimmering Horizons* highlights the work of five women Canadian artists from both Indigenous and settler background as they imagine wildly different visions of the future, exploring how we engage with our environment, our political and cultural histories, and the knowledge of our ancestors in order to build a better world. While moving the physical exhibition online has meant reassessing how we can bring Canadian art to UK audiences during a global pandemic, we think visitors to the Virtual Canada Gallery will be both moved and deeply inspired by its hopeful message."

Shimmering Horizons is available to view online at shimmeringhorizons.org/galleryprojects.org.

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