

# Duane Linklater's ruins of Toronto history on the banks of the Don River

The Cree artist's take on the slippery idea of monuments turns the city's own haphazard growth back on itself.



Duane Linklater, an Omaskeko Cree artist, amid his project 'Monsters for Beauty, Permanence and Individuality' on the Lower Don River Trail. Linklater conceived it as questioning of the city's indifference to history. (NICK KOZAK / TORONTO STAR)

By **MURRAY WHYTE** Visual arts  
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On a sticky recent afternoon, Duane Linklater cut an imposing figure amid the scrubby brush and weed forests of the Lower Don Trail. What even he, at 6-foot-4, with a black ball cap and waist-length braid, couldn't overshadow, though, was what he had brought here.

All around, an array of stone figures lay scattered on the grass, as though sprinkled haphazardly by a giant hand. "There's a feeling of a ruin about it, I think," Linklater said, satisfied. "I like that."

It's a notion that feels a little premature, if not impossible. Figures here are cast copies from well-known buildings all over the city: a hooded woman, bending to play a stringed instrument, rests atop a column at the Royal Ontario Museum; a hunched, bearded figure has been loosed from the Front Street façade of the Hockey Hall of Fame.

Those buildings are still standing; their permanence seems assured. But is anything permanent, in a city whose primary legacy is erasure? It's a question Linklater, who is Omaskeko Cree from the Moose Cree First Nation near North Bay, has spent a lot of time contemplating.

Permanence, for him, stretches back thousands of years, well before European first contact with Indigenous people in Canada, and it was ruptured with ruthless efficiency by aggressive colonial forces. From Linklater's point of view, that aggression has never really abated. Old buildings in Toronto are routinely wiped away, to make way for glowing glass towers; history is buried by an avalanche of the new.

“It’s really the mode that Toronto has always been in,” Linklater shrugs. “But I find it really interesting that settlers would do this even to themselves, to their own history.”

It’s an idea the artist seems to take on board himself: for all its stony significance, the installation isn’t intended to be permanent. It will be removed in five years. Standing here, on a slice of apparent nature, the looming presence of the Don Valley Parkway and the Bloor viaduct produce an uncomfortable collision. Linklater notes that the Don River, snaking along the highway nearby, has been straightened twice in the past century to better serve industrial purposes. A short walk up the trail takes you to the Evergreen Brick Works, a beacon of enviro-friendly sustainability that once, not so long ago, provided much of the building materials to construct a city on lands dubiously acquired from Linklater’s forebears.

Here, on the trail, the occasional bike whizzes past, though for a sunny Saturday, it’s surprisingly still, an offcut in the city’s retailoring of ancestral lands to better suit its purposes.



“It’s an overlooked space,” Linklater says, encapsulating, perhaps, how little the past resonates with the present here. “But for me it marks a precise point where colonization of these areas really started to happen. That’s what drew me into it: How the valley has been used for resource extraction, and abused, and neglected over time.”

The valley, of course, has been the subject of persistent clean-up efforts over the past decade, with Evergreen at its hub. Linklater’s project, in fact, has its opening reception on Saturday as [part of the city’s celebration](#) to mark the grand reopening of the trail after months of rehabilitative efforts.

Rehabilitating a broken relationship between peoples, though, will take more work. Linklater’s title, “Monsters for Beauty, Permanence and Individuality,” is oblique, but also telling. In the United States, at least one person has died amid conflict over the removal of Confederate monuments from civic squares. The clash is a crucible of the idea of permanence itself: History may not change, but social mores do, and monuments to the guardians of slavery, many argue, have no place in the

contemporary world. The response, sometimes violent, has been that such ideas violate American heritage, and so the schism widens.

Here, we've had our own moral tangle with [John A. MacDonald](#), the first prime minister but also the progenitor of the catastrophic residential school program, which resulted by its end in the death of thousands of Indigenous children and countless broken families. We are no more immune than any to the slippery notion of "heritage" as it ages badly.

Linklater, wisely, chose no such provocative figures for his own project, opting instead for anonymous forms embedded in the cityscape, rarely noticed in the everyday. They stand as silent sentinels to our civic indifference to history, and its blithe erasures hang heavy here as they lie scattered in the scrub. Have they been abandoned, cast aside in the city's endless churn towards the new? Or are they awaiting a new home, as history slides to more a convenient position, somewhere out of sight?

Linklater knows the politics of convenience and the selectiveness of history first hand. Slowly, the record is being corrected, as efforts towards reconciliation inch forward far too gradually. In the meantime, Linklater does what he can to keep momentum.

"I'm very careful, as an Indigenous person, in what it is I'm articulating, and how, because these conversations are a component of moving ahead," he says. "Whatever that will come to mean, I'm not sure, but I do know talking about these histories honestly are a big part of it."

**Duane Linklater: Monsters for Beauty, Permanence and Individuality** opens Saturday on the Lower Don Trail starting at 10 a.m. For more information see [donrivervalleypark.ca](http://donrivervalleypark.ca)

