

FEATURES

Canada's Newest Contemporary Art Museum Opens in Saskatoon

A new museum hopes to connect this small Canadian city to the world through a rich program that will include indigenous and international contemporary art.

Claire Voon November 13, 2017



Exterior of the Remai Modern in Saskatoon, designed by architect Bruce Kuwabara (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

SASKATOON, Saskatchewan — Some have called it the “Paris of the Prairies.” It’s a nickname that now seems even more apt for the fast-growing city of Saskatoon, which last month celebrated the opening of Canada’s newest modern and contemporary art museum. The Remai Modern houses works by renowned Canadian and international artists as well as the largest collection of Picasso linocuts, and it aspires to be a world-class attraction that draws tourists to this urban center of Saskatchewan.

For out-of-town art lovers, the new museum will be a major draw to visit

Saskatoon and see works by the likes of [William Perehudoff](#), [Stan Douglas](#), and [Tanya Lukin Linklater](#) in a striking steel building designed by architect [Bruce Kuwabara](#). It's been less easy, though, for the local population to immediately embrace. For many of Saskatoon's nearly 271,000 residents — about 10% of whom are indigenous — the arrival of a museum larger than any its ever had has brought excitement, but also feelings of uncertainty and apprehension.



Pae White, "<L3U~.>C≈K¥◇CHARMS#"
(2014/2017)

Saskatoon hasn't had a public art gallery since 2015, when its beloved, 51-year-old [Mendel Art Gallery](#), shuttered. The [Remai Modern](#) was set to open that same year, but construction was delayed over two years due to mounting costs. In a sense, the [Remai Modern](#) is replacing the [Mendel](#): it acquired the gallery's entire collection of nearly 8,000 artworks, and its development on a new site by the South Saskatchewan River was led by the [Mendel's](#) executive director of two years, [Gregory Burke](#), who maintains that same position at the new museum.

Yet, the [Remai Modern](#) represents a wholly different institution, operating with a much bigger vision to cater to a much larger audience. At 130,000-square-feet, it's five times the size of the [Mendel](#), and it has the donor-

backed resources to fill this space with lavish art. (Cost of admission, though, is not free, as it was at the [Mendel](#): \$12, for adults.)

Its inaugural exhibition, [Field Guide](#) — which presents collection pieces, loans, and new commissions to “animate the entire museum with a spirit of active engagement, curiosity, and disruption” — has four massive, modular sculptures by [Haegue Yang](#) hanging from the atrium's ceiling, like [Sol Lewitt](#)-inspired chandeliers. Hallways on the second floor, with grand views of the river, are generous stages for wall text by [Laurence Weiner](#) and a transparent iteration of [Philippe Parreno's](#) “Speech Bubbles.” A more inspiring use of interstitial space is the illumination of a stairwell by [Pae White's](#) zany constellation of colorful, neon symbols, which also serve as light therapy — according to the artist — to counteract seasonal affective disorder.

White's work is one of the [Remai Modern's](#) new acquisitions, purchased with funds from its namesake, Saskatoon philanthropist [Ellen Remai](#). Her total contributions to the new museum amount to CAD 103 million (~USD 81 million)

with CAD 25 million (~USD 20 million) earmarked for acquisitions alone over the next 25 years. It's one of the largest donations to the arts in Canada's history.



Haegue Yang, "Four Times Sol LeWitt Upside Down, Version Point to Point" (2016-2017)



How a global museum with an international leadership team will use these endowments from Remai and other private donors to support Saskatoon's tight-knit community is a primary concern for locals. There is some institutional carryover from the Mendel, which established a strong relationship of trust with the community over decades. Some curators who have worked with the old museum have joined the Remai Modern's team; Burke, who hails from New Zealand, also brought on Portuguese curator Sandra Guimarães as its new Programs & Chief Curator. Most significantly, the museum does not currently employ an indigenous curator. This is a major oversight, and it leaves one wondering how the Remai Modern will promote indigenous contemporary art, respond to Saskatchewan's colonial history, and consider its own potentials as a site of decolonization as it sits on [Treaty 6 territory](#).

Its stated mission sounds promising. "Our mandate is to enable transformative experiences by connecting art with local and global communities," is the [wording found on its website](#), and that is accompanied by a [land acknowledgement](#) — a common practice in Canada that recognizes the indigenous inhabitants of the region. It also notes that a primary principle of the museum is to be "a leading center for contemporary indigenous art and discourse." This is visible in the museum's brand identity: Cree syllabics for "Saskatchewan" accompany the museum's English name on the building's facade, and gallery signs incorporate Métis and First Nations languages.



Interior of the Remai Modern, featuring Philippe Parreno's "Speech Bubbles (Transparent)" (2017)

I didn't get a strong sense of this vision, however, after viewing *Field Guide* — which was intended less as a thematic display and more as an introduction to the museum's program philosophy and direction. Co-curated by Burke and Guimarães, the show puts on view the talents of nearly 80 international artists spread across the building's three floors.

I expected the curators to foreground contemporary indigenous artists, but doing their job are artists Tanya Lukin Linklater, who is Alutiiq, and [Duane Linklater](#), who is Omaskêko Cree. The pair contribute a temporary, site-specific installation that is one of the first works visitors see. Occupying the ground floor's only gallery, "Determined by the river" resembles a giant, white raft that displays small artworks the artists created, alongside those by other First Nations, Inuit, and Métis artists including Lori Blondeau, Ruth Cuthand, Jessie Oonark, and Robert James Boyer. These pieces are all drawn from the Remai Modern's permanent collection and come together in a powerful statement that simultaneously celebrates indigenous voice and considers the relationship between indigenous peoples and museums.



Tanya Lukin Linklater & Duane Linklater, "Determined by the river" (2017), featuring work by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis artists



Tanya Lukin Linklater & Duane Linklater, "Determined by the river" (2017), featuring work by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis artists

"Determined by the river" is made even more striking by the fact that there are more indigenous artists represented in this room than in the rest of the galleries combined. Aside from the Linklaters, the curators present only one other contemporary indigenous artist, the Saskatchewan-based, Métis artist Edward Poitras. His installation, "Vita Brevis" (1992), is a delicate but unsettling tableau that brings together a skeletal coyote, radio transmitters, and human-shaped shooting target made of rawhide. Poitras is known as the first indigenous artist to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale, which was in 1995; the inclusion of his work is significant but still insufficient. It's as if Burke and Guimarães checked a box then transferred the labor of diversifying their show to other indigenous artists.

"Determined by the river" is one chief component of *Field Guide*, the other being a project curated by Ryan Gander. *Faces of Picasso: the collection selected by Ryan Gander* is exactly what it sounds like: portraits from the museum's 406 Picasso linocuts that Gander curated and arranged. The result is an uninspiring configuration of Picassos that wrap around the room, hanging at different heights. Gander also replicated the linocuts in black Sharpie, and the drawings are included in a new catalogue. This seems like an unnecessary use of resources: speaking at a press conference, Gander himself described this task as "a really boring project," and the outcome is indeed humdrum. Aside from being available in the museum's new gift shop, a copy — stabbed with a spike — has been added to his installation, "Fieldwork," which greets visitors upon entry to the Picasso gallery. Forming a smaller, walled-off room, the piece consists of an inventory of personal objects

that glide on a mostly hidden conveyor belt, which reveal themselves to viewers one-by-one through a window, serving as a self-portrait of sorts.



Installation view of "Faces of Picasso: The collection selected by Ryan Gander"



Installation view of "Faces of Picasso: The collection selected by Ryan Gander"

The Picasso display is literally designed around this installation, accommodating and foregrounding Gander's work, which seems like a strange way to debut this prized collection. After hearing Gander speak at the press conference, I wasn't surprised that his project feels spiritless as well as self-centered — distant from both the Remai Modern's collection and its community. In response to journalists' queries about how the museum will balance local and international artists, he argued that its priority should be on promoting the latter.

“I think that's really important, that artists from here show elsewhere, and artists who aren't from here show here,” Gander said, describing how museums in Manchester didn't present local artists when he lived there; they were invited to show outside of the United Kingdom. “I don't like it when people get hung up on, *Where's the local?* The most important thing is that world-class art is shown, otherwise people won't come here. People are only going to come here to see the art, so it has to be the best art.”

It is, of course, easy for a prominent and established white, male artist who has exhibited overseas to defend a museum that has invited him to exhibit overseas. But aside from depoliticizing issues of representation, Gander's remarks are also an unfortunate affront to his host city that dismisses its history and culture while ignoring an arts community that has existed long before the Remai Modern came to town.

Until four years ago, Saskatchewan was home to the [Emma Lake Artists' Workshops](#), where figures including Clement Greenberg and Donald Judd came to lead classes because they cared about fostering a local arts community. It was also home to the [Indian Art Program](#), started by Cree-Shoshone artist Sarain Stump in 1972. And the Saskatoon arts scene continues to be vibrant to this day. In addition to those already mentioned, there is the new media-focused center [PAVED Arts](#), and 46-year-old gallery [AKA Artist-Run](#), and [Tribe Inc.](#), a center for aboriginal art that was co-founded by Lori Blondeau.



Edward Poitras, "Vita Brevis" (1992)

Perhaps Gander should visit [Wanuskewin Heritage Park](#), a cultural center with breathtaking views of the Opimihaw Valley and a highly active program to educate visitors on Métis and First Nations history. A large part of its mission is to showcase indigenous art, and since 2014, Wanuskewin has focused increasingly on indigenous contemporary art, as curator Felicia Gay, who is Swampy Cree, explained. My own recent visit there made this mission clear: concurrent to a [solo exhibition](#) of paintings by Cree Métist artist [Jason Baerg](#), which thoughtfully consider the connection between language and land, is a [group exhibition](#) of works that imagine what the relationship between Canada and indigenous people would be like in the next 150 years. On view are banners by water protectors [Christi Belcourt](#) and [Isaac Murdoch](#), which I could easily envision hanging in the hallways of the Remai Modern. They certainly address the “urgencies of the contemporary moment,” which is what *Field Guide* intends to do.

Yet, “it is very difficult to get indigenous contemporary artists into large institutions,” Gay told *Hyperallergic*. Her words emphasize the Remai Modern’s need for an indigenous curator and the vital role it can play in promoting artists to an international audience. The museum can privilege these artists while participating in a global art discourse; the two gestures are not — and should not be — at odds. One way it could do so could be to devote specific galleries to contemporary indigenous art, as Wanuskewin does. The Remai Modern’s collection is clearly not devoid of examples, as “Determined by the River” illustrates, but the question now is whether its curators will actively bring more of these pieces out of storage and also focus on enriching this trove.



Paintings by Kenneth Noland, Robert Christie, William Perhudoff, and Jack Goldstein

Field Guide has some shortcomings, but it does make international contemporary art more accessible to the museum's surrounding community. Saskatchewan visitors might be proud to see artists from their region, including Neil Campbell, [Tammi Campbell](#), and [Robert Christie](#), in dialogue with paintings by Kenneth Noland, John Baldessari, and Gabriel Orozco; to see an installation by Kara Uzelman (about Saskatchewan's little-known role in LSD research) alongside digital media works by Hito Steyerl and Raqs Media Collective. These conversations are also refreshing for those who are less familiar with the Canadian names. I was also happy to see works on view by emerging artists including [Alexine McLeod](#) and [Luke Willis Thompson](#), whose black-and-white video presents a silent, moving testimony to police brutality.

Another not-to-be-missed work is a series of colorful murals by William Perhudoff, originally painted for a room outside the office of Fred Mendel, who established the Mendel Art Gallery with the city. Salvaged from destruction in 2010 then conserved and reconstructed within a larger room in the Remai Modern, the four walls panels depict musicians and their audience in freeform line. Invigorated with blocks of color, the scenes are vivid, and the figures seemingly on the edge of animation. All that is missing is an archival photograph of the [original room](#) to give viewers a better sense of how these murals lit up a small, personal space.



William Pehudoff, "Intercontinental Packers Reception Room Murals" (1953-1977), originally decorating a reception room



William Pehudoff, "Intercontinental Packers Reception Room Murals" (1953-1977), originally decorating a reception room

Perehudoff's murals are one of the works that give a nod to the Mendel's legacy. More examples are found in a neighboring gallery, which displays 13 paintings from the Mendel Gift. This was a groundbreaking donation Frank Mendel made to his namesake gallery in 1965, and it included works by the renowned Canadian Group of Seven artist group and their contemporaries. Their standalone display makes it clear that the Remai Modern wants to respect its predecessor as its director moves forward with a new mission and pursues greater goals.

Burke is well-aware of his museum's commitment to build a relationship between indigenous and non-native communities. In fact, this is not his first time leading a major museum in a small city with a large indigenous population. The New Zealander has directed the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth — a coastal town with a population smaller than Saskatoon's — between 1998 and 2005. The institution remains New Zealand's only contemporary art museum and has exhibited Māori artists for decades while bringing in renowned, international names.



Paintings by members of the Group of Seven and their contemporaries

Burke worked closely with Māori elders while in New Zealand, and he's doing the same in Canada. He consulted with 16 indigenous Elders while developing the Remai Modern, "which went very well," he told *Hyperallergic*, and plans to continue meeting with them. The museum also has two indigenous individuals on its board, and it employs an Indigenous Relations Advisor.

How this team will work together to address indigenous issues will certainly be tested next May, when the Remai Modern will open its first solo exhibition, which will be Jimmie Durham's traveling retrospective, *At the Center of the World*. As [Hyperallergic](#) previously reported, the show was highly controversial, reigniting debates over Durham's claim of Native American ancestry and, more broadly, revealing how disconnected institutions are from Native communities.

The Remai Modern [issued a statement](#) in July, following the debates, to acknowledge "that Durham does not belong to any of the federally recognized and historical Cherokee Tribes in the United States, which as sovereign nations determine their own citizenship." But it will be interesting to see how a museum without an indigenous curator frames the exhibition and facilitates discussion around its complex issues of identity. Saskatchewan is home to one of the highest percentages of indigenous peoples of any Canadian province (roughly 15% of the total population), and the museum would do well to listen to their perspectives as it prepares to host this retrospective. Better yet, it should bring individuals on board and work continuously with Native experts to truly begin building longstanding relationships with its community.

As Gay, the curator at Wanuskewin, put it, "True reconciliation can only happen when you hire indigenous people in positions of power. Otherwise, nothing's going to really change."



Eli Bornstein, "Quadrplane Structurist Relief, No. 15 II" (2016-2017)