



Left: The installation *Homing* is a three-level aluminum table in the shape of some fantastical beast by Toronto artists Nadia Belerique and Tony Romano. PHOTOGRAPHY BY VIO INGELEWIS AND RYAN WALKER

Below: Colourful fabric fish streamers flutter in the wind atop flagpoles overlooking the mouth of the Don River.

Bottom: On the trail, *Stories of Relics* by Ryan Gander features four small sculptures of historic time-keeping devices



Above: Alexandre Arreches's *Orange Functional* features multiple functional basketball hoops arranged in a tree-like form.



Public art done right at new Toronto park

The Lassonde Art Trail is a curated assembly of roughly two dozen works by international and Canadian artists

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A school of colourful fabric fish flutter in the wind on top of flagpoles overlooking the mouth of the Don River. Inspired by the familiar *koinobori*, carp streamers that celebrate Children's Day in Japan, the windsocks feature novel patterns, including images of more fish printed directly on their bellies. Here on the Lassonde Art Trail in the new Bidaasige Park on Toronto's east waterfront, the streamers celebrate the return of fish to the renaturalized river mouth.

If you read the signage nearby you will learn that Toronto artist Alexa Kumiko Hatanaka based the streamers on two local species, pickerel and pumpkinseed, that have come back to the Don, as well as the invasive carp. As planes from the island airport fly overhead, you might also think of orange safety windsocks and be reminded of the Port Lands' links to transportation and industry. Or, on a windy day, you can simply enjoy the cheerful display.

This is successful public art. It is highly visible, but not intrusive, speaks to its environment but also meets the viewer at whatever level they choose to engage. Outdoor public art can be a tough assignment — ignored at best; vilified at worst. In a summer in which somebody decided it was a nifty idea to scatter 52 cartoonish beaver statues downtown to recognize the World Cup, art can be forgiven for wondering if Toronto can ever get it right.

Enter the Lassonde Art Trail, the city's answer to New York's High Line or The Line in East London. It is a curated assembly of about two dozen contemporary works by international and Canadian artists, dotted around Bidaasige, the City of Toronto park on Oakwemin Minising, the island that was created as part of Water-

front Toronto's project to restore the mouth of the Don and reclaim the Keating Channel from infill and industry.

The city, in the midst of a 10-year strategic plan for public art, is trying to get more pieces to underserved, outlying neighbourhoods — and Oakwemin Minising, where the first housing won't be complete until the early 2030s, is certainly outlying. But, in fact, the Lassonde Art Trail is independent from the city's public art program. The trail was part of the original Waterfront Toronto plan for the site and when philanthropist Pierre Lassonde visited, he was so impressed with the idea, he contributed \$25-million. That has set up the art trail as its own charitable organization.

It has worked extensively with the city, which owns the park, and Waterfront Toronto, which landscaped it, but its independence from the bureaucracy might explain its ability to keep focused on the vision and deploy an impressive selection of both new commissions and loans. The art has to compete with a massive industrial relic: Restored as a landmark, the 270-tonne decommissioned Atlas crane is itself a mighty sculpture, 40 metres high. Instead, with smaller statements and hidden treasures, the Lassonde Art Trail offers playfulness in place of monumentality.

The trail is set up as a sort of outdoor gallery where some pieces are permanent installations commissioned for the park: *The Colony*, a work by Cree artist Kent Monkman about Indigenous presence, will be unveiled in September, followed by a huge ceramic tree by Portuguese artist Joana Vasconcelos in 2027. Other works are more movable and will be shown temporarily: Monira Al Qadiri's *First Sun*, an oversized human head with a giant scarab beetle for a face that spent the summer in New York's Central Park, will also arrive in September.

The sites for the sculptures feature permanent concrete bases with underground infrastructure so that new art can be an-

chored without any further disruption. A few also include wiring and plumbing so that art using light, sound or water could be included. Although the fish streamers, which are made of ripstop, may have to come down rather than face winter winds, most of the sculptures are built to withstand the weather, and protected from graffiti by a "sacrificial" layer of finish that can be cleaned off if necessary. Staff check the art daily, and the sculptures will be cleared of snow, although the park's walkways already features signs warning there is no winter maintenance in sections.

Curator November Paynter, who selected the 14 pieces that will complete the first iteration of the trail by September, hopes would-be vandals will be deterred by the atmosphere of the place, where the art mingles with extensive plantings and a restored wetland that has re-established bird life. One piece already features polite warning signs: "Please help preserve this artwork by being respectful around it. Do not climb on it."

The work in question is *Stories of Relics*, by the British artist Ryan Gander, a four-part series of bright yellow metal sculptures representing timepieces: a candle, an hourglass, an alarm clock and a digital clock. The pieces are anchored to rocks but are small enough they might look temptingly movable. They certainly deserve some respect because of how cleverly they meet the viewer with their reflection on time and history, offering a serendipitous encounter with something out of place, the eye-catching yellow calling out from the rocks, or perhaps the invitation to a four-part scavenger hunt.

There's humour and whimsy here, which are smart qualities for public art. Similarly, *Homing*, a three-level aluminum table in the shape of some fantastical beast, by Toronto artists Nadia Belerique and Tony Romano, may draw in passersby with the odd assortment of objects — plates, food, stuffed animals — with which it achieves its effect.

Not far away, you may spot a very small

bird perched on a very tall pole and eventually realize that it's not moving: *Roman Standard*, on loan from the National Gallery of Canada, is a 2015 work by the British artist Tracey Emin, a pacifist reinterpretation of the eagles on top of ancient Roman banners.

The danger is that humour can produce one-liners, witty visual gags that will look great on social media but don't go much further. Out on Commissioners Street, the trail introduces itself with Cuban artist Alexandre Arreches's *Orange Functional*, featuring multiple functional basketball hoops arranged as a tree-like form. The trail ends at its western edge with two pieces by U.S. artist Hank Willis Thomas that feature a pink speech bubble and an orange thought bubble, large enough to sit in for your selfie with the Toronto skyline as your backdrop.

On the other hand, the complex or the earnest can be hard to pull off in a setting where the viewer's attention may be totally coincidental: A cyclist breezes by; a family saunters. One quietly powerful example is a loan from the City of Toronto's public art collection, now reinstalled at Bidaasige: At the far eastern end of the site, *Travjet* by Caroline Monnet and Dean Baldwin Lew is a bronze cast of footprints provided by contemporary Indigenous people, set at the shoreline as a marker of Indigenous presence at the site for millenniums. (It was inspired by sketches of ancient footprints found in clay on the floor of Lake Ontario during watersheds construction in 1908.)

Subtly integrated into its special setting, where sometimes it will be exposed by receding water and sometimes half-covered by floods, the poignant work beckons gently to those ready to walk for their art.

The Lassonde Art Trail is free and open 24/7 all year round. It starts outside Old Firehall 30, 39 Commissioners St. in Toronto, where maps can be downloaded from the signage. The trail measures about four kilometres and takes one or two hours to complete.



Above: Lisa Hirmer's *Lodestar* on the west-facing esplanade at Bidaasige Park offers a poetic statement about the history and rehabilitation of the site.