



Why Toronto is fast becoming unmissable for art

As the Toronto Biennial opens, cultural leader Devyani Saltzman returns to her hometown to discover the artists, spaces, and communities driving its transformation

By Devyani Saltzman | Sep 25, 2026 | 5 min read



'In Toronto there's a shared sensibility between many second-generation people – whether Asian, South Asian, or Black – for a hybrid identity,' says Kenneth Montague, the Toronto-based collector and founder of The Wedge Collection, one of Canada's largest, privately owned contemporary art collections focusing on African diasporic culture. 'It's what I now see as the foundation of Canadian art, particularly in Toronto – the original bastion of multiculturalism.'

Growing up in 1980s Toronto as a mixed Punjabi-Jewish Ukrainian kid, I took such hybridity for granted. My friends were second-generation children of immigrants from Greece, India, and Vietnam. That one could be from multiple places at once, and be Canadian, was something outlined in federal policy, and evident in countless celebrations, from August's Caribana, North America's largest carnival outside of the Caribbean, to November's Diwali parties.

Today, Toronto boasts a rare majority immigrant population, outdoing New York and London, with 51% of its citizens born abroad. Its cultural hybridity was evident at the Venice Biennale this summer, where the late Koyo Kouoh's exhibition included a number of artists who have all called Toronto home: Alexa Kumiko Hatanaka, Rajni Perera, Abbas Akhavan, and Manuel Mathieu. This diverse artistic talent powers the city's expanding arts scene, where long-established grassroots pioneers have been bolstered by both a younger DIY scene and largescale ventures.



Kenneth Montague, Toronto-based collector and founder of The Wedge Collection. Photograph by Tory Ho for Art Basel.



St. Clair Street, in St. Clair West, a neighborhood of historically Italian and Portuguese immigrants dating back to the 1950s. Photograph by Tory Ho for Art Basel.

Cultural gateways on the Great Lakes

Founded in 2019 as a platform for artist communities to connect more deeply both nationally and internationally, this month's Toronto Biennial is a key part of that ecosystem. Allison Glenn, curator of its fourth edition, 'Things Fall Apart', explains that the biennial presents 'the shared geographies of the Great Lakes [which border Canada and the US] as a place of departure, a dialog that emerges between global waterways, voyages, and trade networks.' Ilana Shamooin, Deputy Director and Director of Programs at the Biennial, points out that Ontario has Canada's largest Indigenous population, and contemporary Indigenous art is key to

Toronto, or Tkaronto in its original Mohawk. Underscoring cross-global and cultural dialog, the biennial's artist list includes the Bogotá-born, Vienna-based Andrés Ramírez Gaviria, Cuban-American New York-based artist and writer Coco Fusco, Toronto-based artists like Nirbhai (Nep) Singh Sidhu, and leading Indigenous Canadians like Serpent River Ojibwa installation artist Bonnie Devine and the Fisher River Cree Nation painter Kent Monkman. Its venues range from a Sikh Gurdwara in the Scarborough district to the commuter hub, the St George Subway Station, and the Aga Khan Museum, dedicated to Islamic art and furthering intercultural dialog.



Allison Glenn, curator of the fourth Toronto Biennial. Photograph by Tori Mumtaz.



Ilana Shamoon, Deputy Director and Director of Programs at the Toronto Biennial. Photograph by Theresa Slater.



Painter Kent Monkman. Photograph by Tory Ho for Art Basel.

The 25-million-dollar art trail

Toronto's landscape is transforming, with enormous development in progress, particularly along the waterfront. One success story, when it comes to addressing the need for growth to support artistic opportunity, is the downtown Port Lands neighborhood, currently undergoing one of the largest urban revitalization projects in the world. As a longtime resident of this former industrial area in the city's East End, I grew up avoiding the Don River, which has now been cleaned and rewilded, with walking trails and launches for kayakers. Here, along the edge of Lake Ontario, is the Lassonde Art Trail. Funded by CAD 25 million seed money from philanthropist Pierre Lassonde, it boasts 17 new commissions by Canadian and international artists.

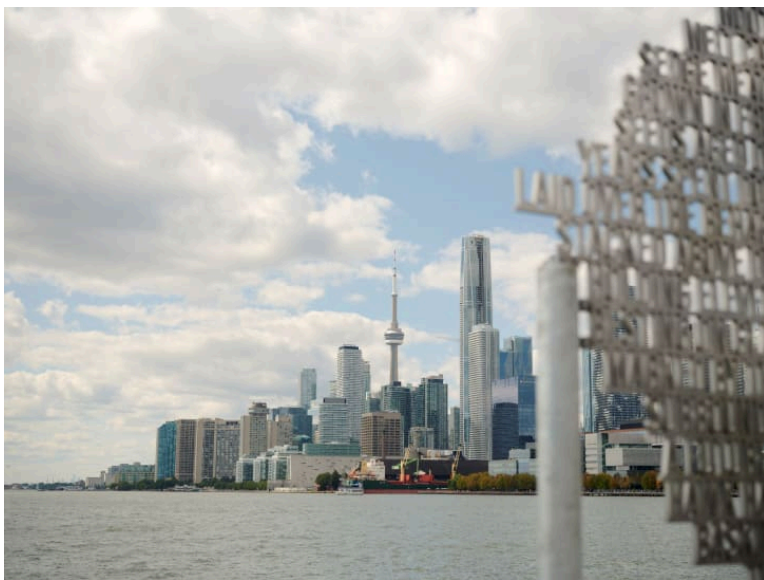
Its lush paths wind through the new naturalized landscape of Biidaasige Park to the harbor, along which sits art by stellar names, including Monkman's first public work, which will be unveiled this month: a huge bronze sculpture featuring one of his signature motifs, *amiskwak* or beavers – creatures of land and shore with spiritual significance in a Cree worldview.

Monkman works between Toronto and New York, where he made waves in 2019 with his commission for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Great Hall, *mistikôsiwak: Wooden Boat People*. Now, the city he moved to as an art student in the 1980s is finding itself at an important juncture. 'It's a great moment for Toronto following [the] Venice [Biennale],' he tells me, 'but commercial infrastructure for the art scene is hanging in the balance. It's such a critical component of the ecosystem. Cities doing exciting work in visual arts need risk-taking and ambitious vision.'

For the Lassonde Art Trail's Executive Director Chloë Catán, its civic impact is crucial. 'Philanthropists are excited about the art, but it's the city building aspect they are really on fire about. They want to see the city grow.' The trail's Artistic Director and Chief Curator, November Paynter, also sees private investment as essential to the expansion of art in Toronto. 'For a city on this scale there could be a lot more of these private/public moments. It's burgeoning.'



November Paynter, Lassonde Art Trail's Artistic Director and Chief Curator (left) and Chloë Catán, Lassonde Art Trail's Executive Director (right). They are standing in front of Alexa Kumiko Hatanaka's, *against the wind, with the wind*, 2026. Photograph by Tory Ho for Art Basel.



View of Toronto with Lisa Hirmer's sculpture, *Lodestar* (2026), on the foreground, part of Lassonde Art Trail. Photograph by Tory Ho for Art Basel.



Kara Hamilton, *Delicate Matter (for the birds)* (2026), part of the Lassonde Art Trail. Photograph by Tory Ho for Art Basel.

It's a DIY thing

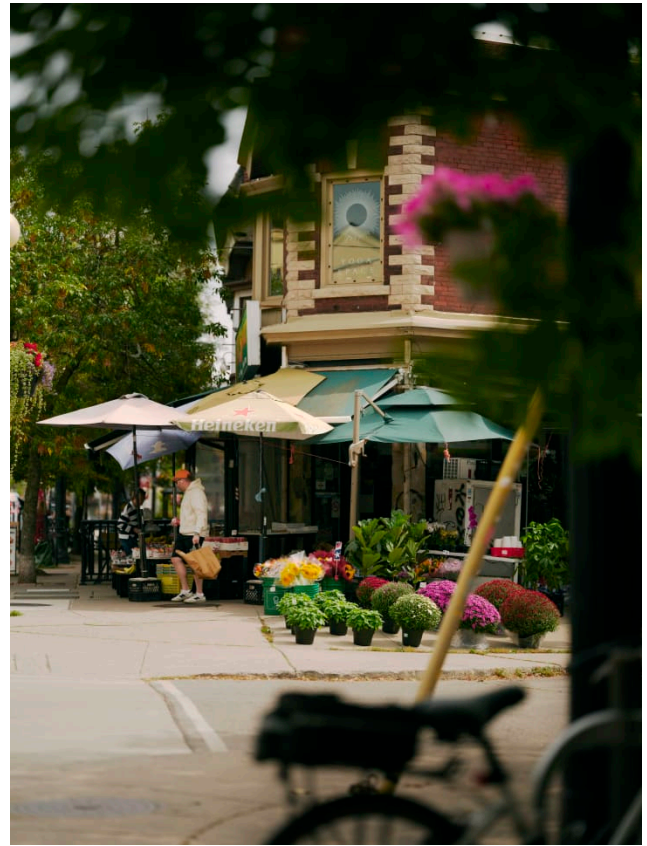
Blair Swann, the Executive Director of Toronto art scene lodestar, Art Metropole, thinks the pace of change is accelerating. Founded in 1974 by the artists' collective, General Idea, Art Metropole is one of the oldest artist-run centers in Canada. For the past four years, it has

operated out of a renovated storefront in the city's Little Italy on College Street, with artist books and multiples lining sleek architect-designed shelves.

'Toronto feels pretty dynamic,' says Swann. 'During COVID-19 [we saw] the growth of artist-run spaces. Because of the city's proximity to New York, but a lack of infrastructure, there's a do-it-yourself mentality.' Swann is also a founding member of the plumb, an artist-run space in a basement near St. Clair West, a neighborhood of historically Italian and Portuguese immigrants dating back to the 1950s, where I went to high school. Swann describes it as 'offering a surplus of space in a city where space is at a premium – particularly for artists, community organizers, and marginalized groups.'



Blair Swann, Executive Director of Art Metropole. In the background, a work by Nour Bishouty. Photograph by Tory Ho for Art Basel.



St. Clair Street, in St. Clair West, a neighborhood of historically Italian and Portuguese immigrants dating back to the 1950s. Photograph by Tory Ho for Art Basel.

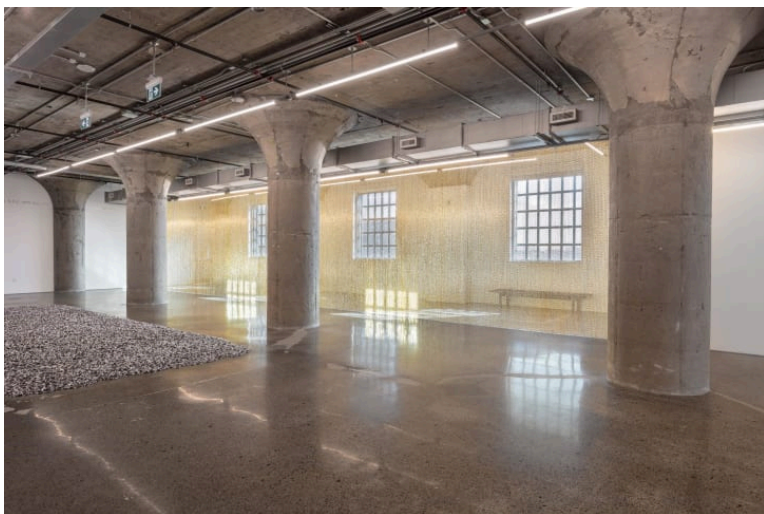


Art Metropole. Photograph by Tory Ho for Art Basel.

New galleries, bigger museums

Galleries like Cooper Cole and Patel Brown, in the west of the city, in the historically industrial corridor near Dupont and Lansdowne, are broadening the understanding of Toronto artists with international audiences. New openings include a Toronto space for Vancouver-based gallery macaulay + co. this fall, off Queen West – the original shopping destination for independent designers and restaurants – with a focus on contemporary Indigenous artists.

The city's institutions are also expanding. The Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) will open its new Dani Reiss Modern and Contemporary Gallery in 2027; Toronto's Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), which moved into its current multi-floor location in the striking Tower Automotive Building in the Junction Triangle in 2018, commences its fall program with Bharti Kher; and The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery at the foot of Toronto Harbour, is turning 40 this year. 'People want] more MOCAs, more Power Plants,' says Swann. 'As long as Toronto is creating new spaces, its artists won't have to leave.'



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Summer, installation view, MOCA Toronto, 2022. © Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Courtesy of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation. Photo: LF Documentation.



The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery. Photo: Hyerim Han.

A ton of potential

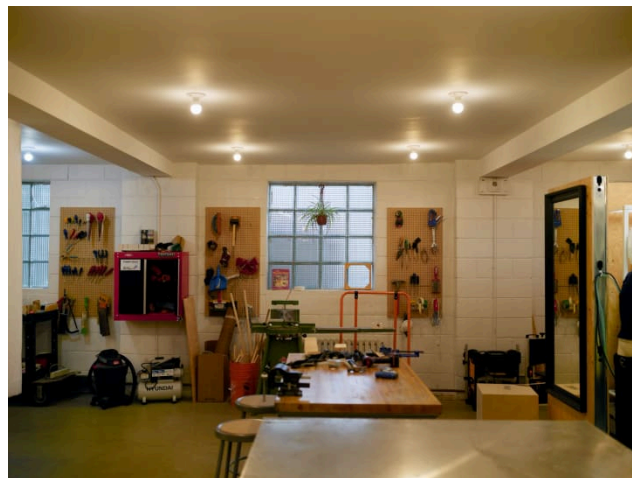
The need for space includes places where art is made and was one motivation behind this January's launch of Sri Lankan-Canadian artist Rajni Perera's Capsules Artist Resources – ten affordable artist studios downtown. Its exhibition space will be hosting the upcoming biennial official parallel project by Nirbhai (Nep) Singh Sidhu. 'It's now full and has a waitlist,' says Perera, who adds that she was lucky to find a 'building owner who loves art. It may not have worked with a traditional developer.' She also points out the need to establish a confident collector base. 'Toronto's collector scene is small, but it has a ton of potential.'

Kenneth Montague is one of the city's most high-profile patrons. He started The Wedge Collection in 1997, focusing on photography by African and diasporic artists, and recently expanding into painting, video, and new media. It's installed in his home, a beautiful 1919 Arts and Crafts house, whose interiors were remodeled for living with art; it's also available to the public online and through touring exhibitions. A long-time supporter of both international and Canadian emerging artists, he's currently excited about the Zimbabwean-Canadian sculptor Chiedza Pasipanodya's work, which is featured in the upcoming biennial. '[Thinking about] intersectionality and marginalized communities was the major turning point for me as a collector,' he says.

As someone raised on Toronto's internationalism, I know it's a key part of the city's strength. Now, as it reorients itself toward its waterfront, the rapid growth presents a transitional moment for its arts scene, offering both challenges and opportunities to develop its infrastructure and build a collector base that can keep up with its incredible artists.



Artist Rajni Perera. Photograph by Tory Ho for Art Basel.



Capsules Artist Resources, ten affordable artist studios downtown Toronto, founded by artist Rajni Perera. Photograph by Tory Ho for Art Basel.

Credits and captions

Devyani Saltzman is an international cultural leader who has held roles in major institutions across two continents. Recognized as having shaped the future of multidisciplinary practice internationally, she most recently served as Director for Arts at the Barbican Centre, London and Director of Public Programming at the Art Gallery of Ontario, North America's fourth largest museum. She is a founding curator at Luminato, Toronto's international arts festival, past President of the Toronto Arts Council, and currently an Artistic Associate of The Royal Court in London.

Caption for header image: View of Toronto, with Hank Willis Thomas, *Saverio and Daisy (Navel)*, 2022, part of Lassonde Art Trail. Photograph by Tory Ho for Art Basel.

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