

ARTS

Toronto's Lassonde Art Trail Reimagines Public Art as Part of a Healthier Urban Ecosystem

The trail embeds 17 sculptures and installations into Toronto's newly regenerated waterfront, situating public art within a larger ecology of nature, history and urban life.

By [Elisa Carollo](#) · 09/30/26 1:05pm



Alexa Kumiko Hatanaka, *against the wind, with the wind*, 2026. Photo Vid Ingelevics and Ryan Walker. Courtesy the artist and Lassonde Art Trail

During the opening weekend of the Toronto Biennial of Art, Observer visited the Lassonde Art Trail (LAT) by stretching a morning run into a longer, more artful route. Unveiled in early June and seamlessly woven into an ecosystem now flourishing across what was once a wasteland, the trail reimagines public art both as a tool of urban regeneration and as a way to test and contemplate how human making might integrate, respectfully and purposefully, with nature.

Spanning more than four kilometers through Biidaasige Park, a City of Toronto park on the newly created island of Ookwemin Minising, LAT offers a free, year-round scavenger hunt through 17 sculptures and installations, 11 of them commissioned specifically for the site. Many were produced with the collaboration or support of local and international institutions, weaving a rich network of relationships around the project.

“The relationship between art, site and nature is a holistic vision. The art trail is fully integrated into the park system,” LAT’s executive director, Chloë Catán, told Observer after our visit. The idea of incorporating art came very early, she explains, as part of the park’s public art master plan and of the broader effort to provide flood protection, reroute the river and build a new island on land that had long lain derelict.

“The idea was that art would form an essential part of the public realm. It was not an afterthought; it was considered just as important as recreation and nature,” she said. “From the beginning, the idea was also that artists could tell the many stories of this incredible project: cleaning up an industrial wasteland, building a new river mouth, creating flood protection, bringing back nature and reconnecting the waterfront to the city. There are also the Indigenous contexts and many other histories embedded in the land. With a rotating program, you can tell many stories across time.”

That vision demanded specific engineering from the outset: “We integrated infrastructure beneath the park system—concrete pads, electrical hookups, water hookups—so that programming art in the public realm would be easier and more flexible.”



Monira Al Qadiri, *First Sun*, 2025. Co-commissioned by Lassonde Art Trail and Public Art Fund, New York. Photo Vid Ingelevics and Ryan Walker. Courtesy the artist and Lassonde Art Trail

Greeting visitors at one of the trail's two starting points is *First Sun*, a sculpture by Monira Al Qadiri that evokes a syncretic, mythological, androgynous figure whose almost totemic, sacral presence reflects and amplifies sunlight as it merges with its surroundings. It addresses through its archetypal form the relationship between humans and nature, and between humans and the wider cosmos, much like the monuments of the ancient world. Floating gently nearby are the light ink-on-nylon fish sculptures of Japanese Canadian artist Alexa Kumiko Hatanaka. Hanging from flagpoles along the shore of the Don River, these delicate forms draw on koinobori, the traditional Japanese carp streamers, but take the shape of species from the local ecosystem: pickerel and pumpkinseed, recently returned to the river, as well as carp, an invasive species found in Lake Ontario and its wetlands. The installation speaks to the fragility of an ecosystem of interdependent human-environment relations and to the role of embodied knowledge and traditional crafts, bound to the land and to survival, in sustaining it.

Other works take on the role of the traditional monument. Hank Willis Thomas's *Saverio and Daisy (Navel)* and *Ernest and Ruth (Exuberant Pink)* celebrate local figures while situating them within their surroundings: seen from the shore, their comic-style speech bubbles frame the city's iconic skyline. Nearby, Lisa Hirmer's *Lodestar* honors the site's past, present and future through a polished chrome text sculpture that reads almost as a short poem, tracing the land's history from the formation of the Don Valley and lakeshore through glacial melt and its industrial chapter to today's revitalization. This section of the park is devoted to sculptures that engage with the city, the urban context and questions of society.

LAT's curator, November Paynter, told Observer that the curatorial process began while the park was still under construction. The team researched the site's engineering, ecology and history, then conducted extensive studio visits with artists whose practices could respond to those conditions: "We did a lot of studio visits and engaged with artists who had different levels of experience working in the public realm. We wanted a real variety of materialities and a real variety of artists in terms of their backgrounds and the kinds of works they were producing, so that when you're walking through the trail, you're encountering very different kinds of pieces. They're all integrated, but they speak in different ways and have very different physicalities."



The park falls loosely into three thematic zones. At the opposite end from the city-facing works, near the playground, the emphasis shifts to participation and play, as Alexandre Arrechea's basketball tree makes immediately clear. Adding to the playful character of this art treasure hunt is a ruin-like sculpture series by Ryan Gander. Spread across three points on the trail are four clocks from different moments in the history of timekeeping—an alarm clock, a digital clock, a sand timer and a candle timer. Together, these methods reveal humanity's growing distance from nature in how it measures time, moving from a close relationship with natural and cosmic phenomena toward pure ratio and the human logic of a constructed, arbitrary system of counting and accounting, as time came to equal capital and life became structured around labor.

Along the river's wilder south side and its wetlands, the focus turns to ecology and sustainability. Among the most meaningful interventions here is Caroline Monnet and Dean Baldwin Lew's *Traject*, a bronze platform near the shore that honors the ancestors who crossed this land. It evokes the footprints of Indigenous ancestors uncovered in blue clay on the floor of Lake Ontario in 1908 and erased that same year by the construction of a waterworks tunnel, an act of aggressive anthropogenic disruption. Working from a sketch made before the footprints were destroyed, the artists invited Indigenous community members to reaffirm this 11,000-year-old presence. In a collective ceremony led by the late Elder Pauline Shirt, descendants from Toronto's Anishinaabe, Cree, Dene and Haudenosaunee communities pressed their footprints into clay, creating a monument in real time that was later cast in bronze and permanently set into the landscape to honor its erased ancestral past.

The trail expands on the \$1.4 billion tri-government investment reshaping Toronto's waterfront through flood protection, ecological restoration and new public spaces. Here, the sculptures blend with a playground built largely of wood and other organic materials, as well as with a vast reforestation project that is recreating an entire ecosystem across the area.



Ryan Gander, *Stories of relics*, 2026. Photo Vid Ingelevics and Ryan Walker. Courtesy the artist and Lassonde Art Trail

The Lassonde Art Trail is made possible by several founding donors, led by a transformational \$25 million gift from philanthropist Pierre Lassonde to support two permanent landmark commissions and a long-term program of rotating artworks. Structured in part as a matching fund, the gift is designed to draw additional donations that will allow LAT to sustain its programming for generations. “We’re raising funds, and have been from the very beginning, to ensure that the project is sustainable in the long run,” Catán said. “Lassonde wanted many people from Toronto and beyond to see the value in the project and come on board to support the vision.”

The program has works rotating on different schedules, with two or three changing each year, while borrowed works and larger installations stay longer. According to Catán, this flexibility is central to the idea of the trail as a living, evolving public experience. The roster balances Toronto and Canadian voices with international practices, a balance that is partly intuitive and partly intentional. Indigenous artists are especially important, as their histories are inseparable from the land itself. A work by Kent Monkman was being installed as we spoke, where the river meets the lake, creating a counterpoint across the park to Monnet and Baldwin Lew's piece.

Gender balance was another explicit consideration, Paynter noted, since public art collections, including Toronto's, have historically been male-dominated. "We wanted to expand that narrative, so the program is quite balanced."

New commissions remain the property of the artists, and the organizers are developing partnerships to extend the life of commissioned works beyond Toronto, following models such as that of collaborating organization the Public Art Fund in New York. "Part of the motivation was sharing resources and expertise, but also making sure that a work already has more than one venue where it can be exhibited," Catán said.

Sustainability has shaped both the design of the park and the production of individual works. The site imposes its own demands, as well, since pieces must withstand Toronto's waterfront climate, particularly in winter, when the park sees visitors snowshoeing and cross-country skiing the trail.

"What's so beautiful about this project is that the combination of art and nature is spectacular, but it's also an incredibly positive and huge project for Toronto," Catán said, recalling a tour she gave that morning to people who grew up nearby. Just 10 years ago, the site was full of huge oil drums leaching contamination into the land. "It was an industrial wasteland. Now there is this incredible green space and the river, and people are seeing a view of the city that is very new to most Torontonians. People are excited to support the art because they love the idea of museum-quality art being accessible to everyone, and because it's part of this larger, really exciting city-building and sustainability project."



Alexandre Arrechea, *Orange Functional*, 2022. Photo Vid Ingelevics and Ryan Walker. Courtesy the artist and Lassonde Art Trail