

BUZZ || VISUAL ARTS

Art galleries province-wide are taking part in a festival to mark the 85th anniversary of the Group's first exhibition, and challenging the sacrosanct mythology of the artists as the definers of our identity is no easy task, writes **Murray Whyte**

Dare we reinterpret the GROUP OF SEVEN?

When she saw the Ontario-wide exhibition list, with her show at the Ottawa Art Gallery tucked between a polite venture at Carleton University and an equally innocuous enterprise at the Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery in Owen Sound, Emily Falvey knew she had done something a little different.

"We do sort of stick out, don't we?" said Falvey, a faint hint of mischief in her voice. "But that's okay. I wish there had been more, in fact. It was something I was really adamant about, actually, because it didn't make sense to me to celebrate the Group of Seven — again — without at least trying to think about them in a contemporary context, or a critical way."

Falvey, the curator of contemporary art in at the OAG, has certainly done that. The Group, those much-lionized artistic purveyors of the pristine majesty of the Canadian wilderness, are sharing space in her gallery with the work of Colwyn Griffiths, for one, a contemporary artist who renders those same heroic landscapes in such mass-consumed materials as candy or pretzels (Tom Thomson's iconic wilderness shack is recreated in the crunchy snack food, for example).

Alongside Lawren Harris, he of the multi-million dollar grandiose mountainscapes, Falvey has put the work of Kent Monkman, a Cree artist. His offering? Cheeky recreations of several of Harris' pieces in watercolour, overlaid with text, and an addition or two — a cowboy and Indian, say, in a particular kind of romantic entanglement.

It's called "Hot Mush and the Cold North," and it's the OAG's entry in the province-wide Group of Seven bonanza coaxed forth by the Art Gallery of Ontario. It's not the sort of Group show we're used to, but there's been plenty of those over the years: Every few years, the Group are dusted off and placed on their familiar pedestal, high above scrutiny, contemporary context and critical thought, recast in their role as the artistic craftsman of a national identity.

This year, as the AGO lends out large quantities of its Group collection to institutions across the province in a de facto celebration of the 85th anniversary of their first exhibition, there is no shortage of just that: At Carleton, the sedately titled "Group Dynamics: Works by the Group of Seven from the Collection," or Owen Sound's "Wilderness Tips: Paintings by Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven." At Museum London, the collection of Group booster and art critic Frederick Housser is simply being re-mounted. In Whitby, the show is "The Great Canadian Landscape." Durham offers a look at Thomson's family history. The list goes on. 29 in total. Exceptions like Ottawa are few.

For the project, the AGO itself has mounted a tidy, polite offering of the works of Arthur Lismer, who founded the gallery's school. On a recent stroll through the small gallery space where the Lismer pieces are installed, chief curator Dennis Reid, who co-ordinated the province-wide effort, allowed that he could understand the impulse.

"I like the idea of bringing in contemporary art as well, as a counterpoint," said Reid, soft-spoken and thoughtful, his greying hair bound in a tidy ponytail. "But with the Group, there's always that sense that somehow, some direction of thinking might be disrespectiveful."

2000 that allowed it to purify its mandate to the Group and its contemporaries alone.

"By the end, that's what they wanted: 'These are the giants of Canadian art. We need to worship them, and create a shrine for them,'" said Andrew Hunter, an independent curator. He created the McMichael's entry for the 85th anniversary, "All That We Can't Leave Behind," a critical view of the Group as urbanites caught up in an exercise of portraits of nature as fantasy wish-fulfillment.

"They've become these sacred cows, and that's frustrating. There's this assumption that, if you take the Group and do a project that isn't just worshipful

Gu Xiong, a renowned Vancouver artist originally from China. Hunter conceived the show as a reinterpretation of iconography and stereotype, one culture to the other: Xiong had been taught about the Group of Seven in school in China — the only images of Canada he was permitted to see.

Xiong's installations — tectonic and large-scale, using rock and earth and dozens of tiny sculptures — weren't a universal hit. "There was the predictable conservative reaction: 'How dare you take these masterpieces of Canadian art and put them next to this?' I come across that a lot," Hunter said.

Challenging the

ship as well as ticket buyers.

"If you want to go out and do a homage to the Group of Seven, you'd get the funding without lifting up the phone," said David Liss, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art. "They're huge. It's important. But to do nothing other than celebrate them just freezes them in time. It negates any relevance they could have for current and future generations outside of being relics."

For Falvey, there's no question they'll remain pervasive. But their future presence in the pantheon should be more open to interpretation.

"If we're going to keep talking

country they lionized. It's rarely pointed out that Tom Thomson's work in Algonquin Park — the iconic windswept lone pine, the stands of birch trees — were not pristine wilderness at all, but the remnants of a clear cut.

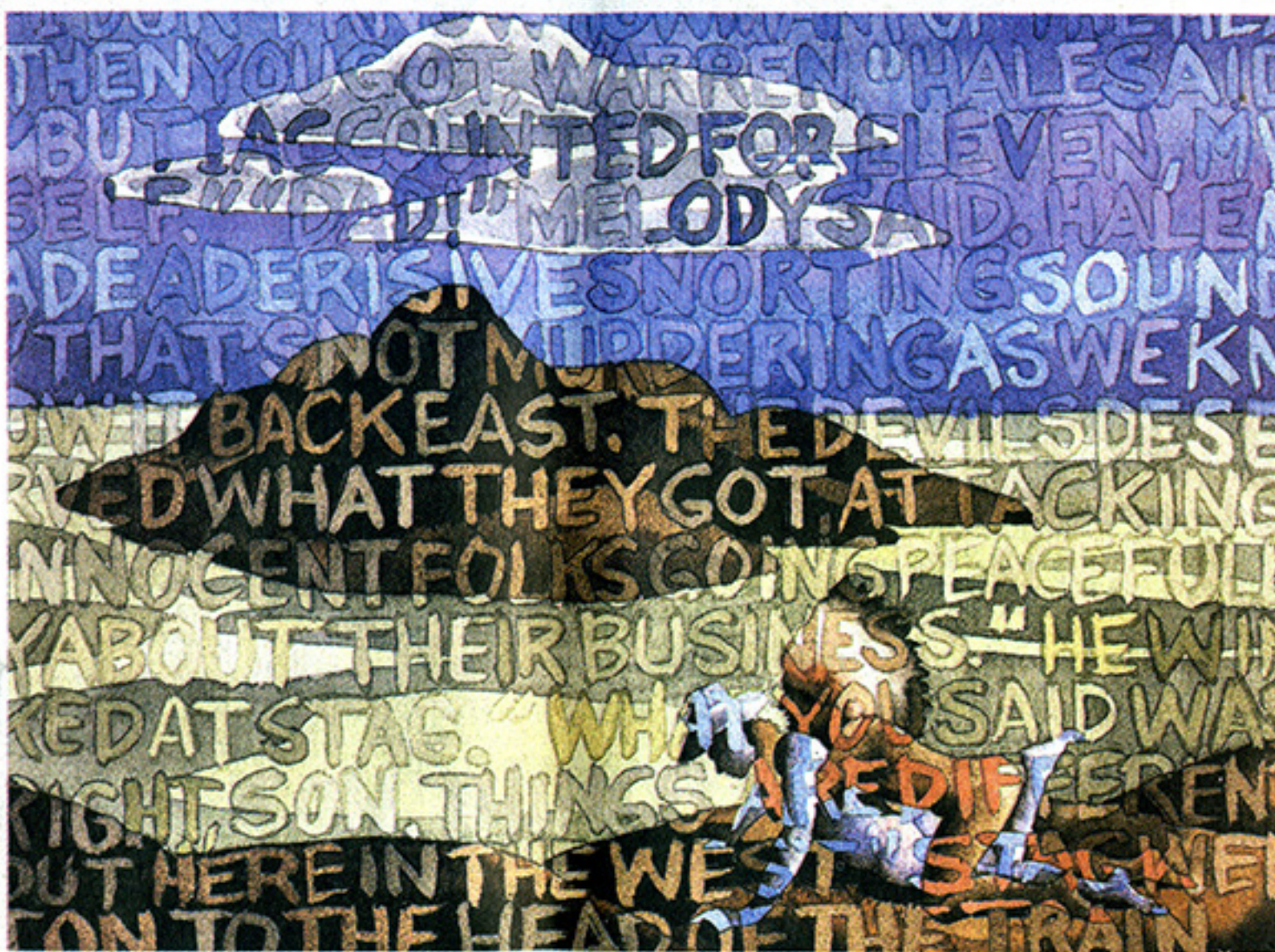
Thomson and friends, mythologized as rough outdoorsmen, took the train from Toronto into Algonquin, alongside throngs of tourists. Their landscape was heavily worked, post-industrial and far from immaculate.

"They've been used to tell us about Canada, but the people telling that story don't tell you the whole story," said Scott Watson, the director of Vancouver's Belkin Art Gallery, which took

they want. But I don't think that actually is what the people want. People are getting bored. That reshaping of a traditional, conservative narrative is starting to wear out. Anyone who thinks that sort of show will draw (crowds) forever and ever is in for a shock."

At the AGO, an elderly couple peruses a glassed-in case of smaller Lismer works. "Oh, they're just great, aren't they?" the older woman says, turning to Reid, her eyes near welling. "I sometimes think we wouldn't be hanging together as a country if we didn't have these."

Reid nods. "They're an important glue, aren't they?" he says.



As part of "Hot Mush and the Cold North," the Ottawa Art Gallery's entry in the province-wide Group of Seven bonanza coaxed forth by the Art Gallery of Ontario, one can see Cree artist Kent Monkman's *Prick Island*, above, alongside Lawren S. Harris' *Mount Thule, Bylot Island*. "It didn't make sense to me to celebrate the Group of Seven — again — without at least trying to think about them in a contemporary context, or a critical way," said Emily Falvey, the museum's curator of contemporary art.

Listen up, kids, today we visit Group of Seven Funhouse

Four curators uninvolved in the Group of Seven shows across Ontario were asked what they'd do with the opportunity if the invitation were extended:

David Liss, MOCCA:

"I'd definitely avoid doing something that would freeze them in time and see them as relics, because I don't think they are. Later this year, there's a touring exhibition from the National Gallery collection that I'm curating. It's called "The Invisible Landscape." It spans the 20th century and has works by the Group of Seven and their colleagues, along with Gerhard Richter, Bill Viola, Roland Poulin, Betty Goodwin, Emily Carr."

Gregory Elstrand, YYZ

Artist's Outlet: "An idea comes to mind, given a recent trip to Niagara Falls: I'd curate a Group of Seven Funhouse, where visitors would take a dioramic tour in canoe-shaped cars across the Canadian landscape and through the personal and painterly lives of the Group. Anecdotes from G7 actors along the way would punctuate the displays of a few choice works. Keep your hands inside the car at all times and watch out for the thrilling Canoe Lake finale."

Clint Roenisch, Clint

Roenisch Gallery: "I'd propose a show of Tom Thomson and the Japanese-American conceptual artist On Kawara. The lives of both are minor mysteries, for instance, and Thomson's landscapes, so obsessive and rooted in place, share traits with Kawara's now-famous 'I am still alive' telegrams sent to the art world. Also, Thomson's paintings seem to many people to be timeless while Kawara's 'Date Paintings' only foreground the impossibility of stopping its passing. I'd call the show 'Tom Kawara On Thomson.'"

Sasha Pierce, Loop

Gallery: "If the AGO were to lend us a few G7 paintings, I'd paint the walls in fluorescent, uneven vertical stripes and hang the work at different heights, like leaves on a tree."

Murray Whyte