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Before and After the Horizon: Anishinaabe Artists of the Great Lakes

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“BEFORE AND AFTER THE HORIZON: ANISHINAABE ARTISTS OF THE GREAT LAKES”

by Matthew Ryan Smith

Yes, the Art Gallery of Ontario has presided over an increase in the volume of artwork and visual material on display from Indigenous artists. This consciousness of inclusion is evidenced in “Before and after the Horizon: Anishinaabe Artists of the Great Lakes,” a joint project—undertaken before Andrew Hunter’s appointment as curator of Canadian art—between the National Museum of the American Indian and the AGO. The term Anishinaabe loosely describes Indigenous peoples in the extensive tracts of land surrounding the Great Lakes. The AGO and city of Toronto exist at the centre of that territory.

Space in the exhibition was divided into sections that included “Cosmos,” “Place” and “Church.” Each offered socio-historical context, albeit indirectly. However, this heavy categorization suggested that the work was innately spiritual, connected to the earth and the traditional; pigeonholed a strikingly complex and expanding contemporary art practice; and glossed over the individual concerns of the artists, be they political or personal. Part of the problem stemmed from distilling a cultural history apart from the rest of the world.

Included alongside the contemporary works were several glass display cases with 3,000-year-old axeheads and various pipes and beadwork. The colliding visual relationships between, for example, digital photography and Norwood chert were difficult to reconcile. They reinforced an idea that contemporary Indigenous artists exist outside of the macrocosm of contemporary art practice, something that the Professional Native Indian Artists Incorporated collective sought to overthrow as early as 1973. The addition of several of its members’ work in the exhibition, including Norval Morrisseau, Daphne Odjig and Carl Ray—literally beside such objects—read as suspect, if not flippant.

That said, the beautifully executed hammered-copper work by Michael Belmore and the baroque flora of Christi Belcourt, paired with evocative commentaries on contemporary Indigenous life by Frank Shebegaget, Wally Dion and Keesic Douglas, not only held the potential to rouse and incite viewers, but also to underscore the frequency of truly exceptional artworks being produced by contemporary artists working in Canada today. Ultimately, the issues that “Before and after the Horizon” raises do not represent an impasse. Rather they suggest an opportunity to revamp how we approach Indigenous art exhibitions encompassing thousands of years, especially since so much has changed in the last 50.