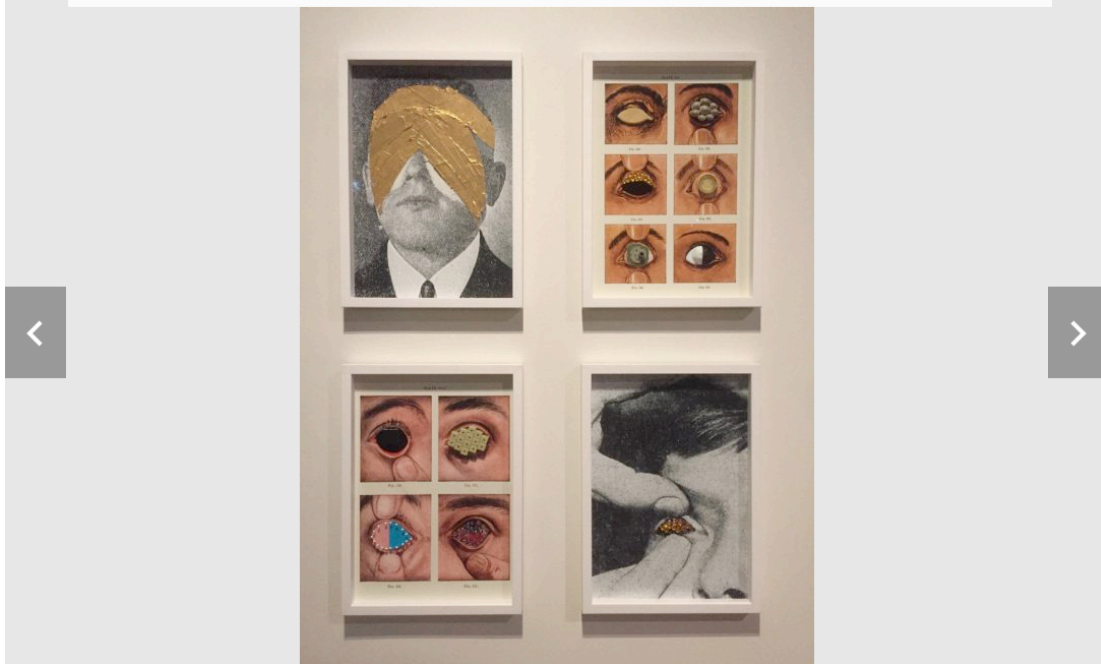




Entertainment · Visual Arts

## Another take on Canada at the Aga Khan Museum

The museum's sesquicentennial offering departs from conventional Canadian ideas to take in its evolving breadth



Jaret Vadera's Diseases of the Eye series, which uses medical illustrations as a metaphor for the removal of "foreign bodies." (COURTESY AGA KHAN MUSEUM)

By [MURRAY WHYTE](#) Visual arts

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It's a touchy thing, this ongoing Canada 150 moment; given the ugly evolution of a country too long enthralled with its skin-deep decency, that seems only apt. Institutions have gone to great length to amend convention and include Indigenous voices typically kept to the margins, or integrate a breadth of diversity into the bipolar Canadianness we typically take for granted.

How much of this turns out to be a permanent shift or merely of-the-moment, only time will tell. But for now, another voice has joined the chorus of Canadian cultural annotation, and it's a welcome one.

*Here* opened at the Aga Khan Museum just a week ago, well after the din of the official sesquicentennial markers, with a view of Canadian nationhood from a unique remove. The Aga Khan, its patron and the leader of a global community of Ismaili Muslims, put the museum here in 2014 for the express purpose of gently nudging western notions of Islam away from the ravages of extremism and closer to the complex beauty of a culture both ancient and contemporary.

*Here* stands true to form: It presents a pan-cultural array of artists, all of them Canadian, with roots in Iran, Lebanon, Ethiopia, India, Korea and Iraq to name a few, intermingled with First Nations and European-descended Canadian artists.

At its core is an ancient funeral stele, carved from marble, bathed in white light. It serves as a central conceit, resituating this country from its European colonial beginnings to a global, everyone-in-the-pool here and now.

It also makes for a crowded swim of Canadianness, which only makes sense. Generations of diasporas from every inch of the globe have put us among the most pluralistic societies on earth, though our institutions, with a traditionally stubborn devotion to a narrow notion of Canadian culture bound to its colonial roots have been historically remiss in reflecting it. In the watershed of the sesquicentennial, the need to engage with actual reality has become both urgent and heeded, and the AKM's role is key in adding its own suite of marginalized views to the panoply.

It is, though, a tall order, and *Here* contributes more to a rising cacophony than it does a harmonizing of priorities. Its subtitle — “Locating Contemporary Canadian Artists” — seems almost like a surrender to the weight of its task: This is less a show with something to say than a set of propositions, vaguely linked, bound together by a hazy notion of nationhood becoming less distinct by the moment. This is, of course, only the truth; an influx of difference isn't something to make sense of and order into neat little boxes — as though it were even possible — so much as something to learn to respect and to luxuriate in its irresolvabilities. That's a tough road for a museum to travel, with a built-in mandate of making sense, but the jumble here is faithful to the confusion of a nation warily embracing its messy evolution.

The show lives, spiritedly, in moments: Zadie Xa's *YZilla the Witch of Flyness in Green Jade City*, a cloak crafted of taffeta, fur, black ceramic hands and at least one eyeball, itself a reflection of the struggle to craft identity in a fractured reality; or Jamelie Hassan's *Souvenir of Lebanon Made in Canada*, cross-sections of cedar log into which are carved effigies of a cedar tree, a symbol of her Lebanese ancestry, inscribed in among the most common of Canadian trees.

The notion of hybridity here is one of the show's few clarifying moments. Babak Golkar offers two works that operate as time capsules, one a stone tomb inscribed with the phrase “NOTHING IS WORTH DYING/KILLING FOR,” and another in the form of a taxidermied fox, standing impassively on its hind legs holding a silver serving tray. Each holds in them an artwork not to be extracted until 2117, though for what reason I'm not sure.

As a cynical gesture, I'd guess it's a bare-minimum measure for a new community to emerge with its Canadianness — whatever that is — fully formed, and Golkar's acid wit seems in step with the sesquicentennial moment. Riding alongside him, and more clear-eyed, if you'll pardon the pun, is Jaret Vadera, whose *Diseases of the Eye* series use enlarged medical procedural illustrations as a metaphor for the removal of “foreign bodies” — an increasingly popular notion, as U.S. President Donald Trump's aggressively evolving immigration policy makes clear.

Indeed, if there's a subtext to be gleaned here, it's surely one of belonging: Who has a right to it, and who decides? Nep Sidhu, with a trio of spectacular tapestries strung high above the museum's main floor galleries, asks that question with an invocation of a revolutionary: The works, in their graphic abstraction, refer to Malcolm X, and one of them his condemnation of Indigenous oppression in America. Nearby, in a small vitrine, Anishinaabe artist Nadia Myre's intricate

beaded pieces from her *Scarscapes* series sit under glass, a quiet embodiment of the trauma X decried.

There are links: Brette Gabel's *Blanket*, from this year, dangles in the museum's atrium, its angular patchwork echoing across cultural divides. The eight-sided star motif is a traditional pattern in Indigenous and Islamic design both. A curiosity of technique, here it reads as a quiet indictment of a dominant culture presiding over an array of difference that finds communion in its exclusion.

Back in the exhibition, another piece by Hassan leaps out. An enlarged 2004 Canadian \$20 bill fitted with a green neon maple leaf brings the quote by Gabrielle Roy, emblazoned right on it, to the fore: "Could we ever know each other in the slightest without the arts?" Sitting right next to an image of Haida artist Bill Reid's iconic "Spirit of Haida Gwaii," which we all carried around in our wallets for years only to arrive at this profound moment of disconnection, the question remains a loaded one indeed.

Prompted by the 150 marker, institutional responses have started to trickle in, many of them with a sudden, belated urgency; and while *Here* can offer no solutions, it reboots the question with previously unconsidered breadth.

Roy, a Manitoba-born francophone who died in 1983, was tied up in the traditional "two solitudes" dilemma of English and French, a polarity that feels less relevant to questions of Canadianness by the moment. Hassan and the museum do well to repeat it here with fresh urgency, amid an array of difference growing broader with each passing generation. The query, now, is less Roy's hopeful "Could we?" than it is the more dubious "Can we?" One way or another, we'll find out.

*Here: Locating Contemporary Canadian Artists continues at the Aga Khan to Jan. 1. For more information please see [www.agakhanmuseum.org/here](http://www.agakhanmuseum.org/here)*