



A detail view of the 1973 Cadillac Eldorado from John Haney's *THNATOS* — currently on display at the Art Gallery of Hamilton. Courtesy of the artist © John Haney

## Hamilton Then & Now

MELISSA BENNETT'S NEW EXHIBITS PUT THE CITY'S BOOMING ART SCENE IN THE SPOTLIGHT.

BY STEPHANIE VEGH

Creating a definitive exhibition reflecting the state of visual arts in Hamilton today is no small task. But Art Gallery of Hamilton curator Melissa Bennett is determined to do just that by extending her reach across two consecutive exhibitions.

This effort far outstrips the scope of 2014's *Painting Hamilton*, Bennett's ambitious group exhibition featuring 10 local painters that aimed to convey the energy of a rapidly growing arts community. Today, that growth is "completely out of control," says Bennett with visible delight. As more artists remain in and relocate to Hamilton, their cross-pollinations have encouraged a greater diversity of practice that transcends the field of painting.

By putting aside the discipline-specific focus of *Painting Hamilton*, these two exhibitions give artists space to assert distinct visual voices and put forward ideas of toothy intellectual and material substance. *Hamilton Now: Subject* opens this summer and runs through to November, while its sequel, *Hamilton Now: Object*, will be on view from December to May 2019.

Even with two exhibitions to fill, Bennett needed strict parameters to narrow down an overwhelming field of options. While her definition of a Hamilton artist avoids knee-jerk parochialism with respect to some recent relocations for educational and professional purposes, Bennett's more progressive move was to rule out any artist who has previously exhibited at the AGH.

The result is a truly refreshing roster of artists, some of whom are long overdue for wider recognition while others represent a new, forward-looking generation of creators. *Hamilton Now: Subject* in particular offers up a pluralistic view of Hamilton through works that explore generational identity, religion and racial and queer politics from cultural perspectives that are as diverse as the city itself.

John Haney connects an eerily self-fulfilling chain of personal history and geopolitical coincidences to inform what promises to be one of the exhibition's biggest draws — *THNATOS*, a 1973 Cadillac Eldorado cloaked in gold leaf. The back seat is suggestively heaped with an unlikely family heirloom: a gold-embroidered parlour coat gifted by King Faisal to his concubine, the sister of John's Lebanese stepmother. Contained in this display are allusions to the OPEC oil crisis, European conquests for gold, the Baby Boomer drive for material wealth and the harsh environmental consequences that haunt their descendants. "So this car, which symbolizes all these things," explains Haney, "becomes a dead duck, a white elephant, a golden goose, a sacrificial lamb."

That generational divide resonates in Lesley Loksi Chan's film, *Laps*, which stitches together evasive footage of the everyday and delicate cardboard props to weave a fictionalized account of a woman returning to the maternity home where she resided as a pregnant teenager. Through text fragments that cast aside the clichés of teen-mom narratives with heart-stopping poignancy, the unseen narrator recalls the secrecy of fake wedding rings and allusions to ears burning at the unheard gossip of others. By contrast, the present-day generation of girls found by the narrator on

her return to the home claim that "we have burned our own ears" by laying their lives bare through social media posts.

Kiera Boulton sets her own world on fire through a performance-based practice that plays out in Instagram GIFs that level searing institutional critiques from a defiantly biracial perspective while sharpening their ruthless edges with blinding glitter and wry comedy. David Trautrimas plays within a similar online realm with colourful plexiglass icons that recall the earliest era of home computing and the peculiar memories of a pre-millennial generation that transitioned from analogue childhoods to today's all-consuming digital afterlife.

For each of these razor-bright assertions of provocative identities, others explore the politics of invisibility with muted gestures, like Leslie Sasaki's Scotch tape portraits on transparent plexiglass that cast fleeting shadows of the individuals depicted through accompanying quotes. Becky Katz's intricate printmaking and Masoud Eskandari's video projection both deploy a meditative layering of spiritual texts and iconographies to heal a conflicted psyche within a wounded world and carefully bury their hearts in signs and symbols.

Nedda Baba is among the youngest artists included in *Subject*, alongside fellow York University MFA candidate Amber Müller St. Thomas, with whom she collaborated on *12*, a series of photographs documenting actions that claim a quiet yet powerful queer voice in public space. Their gestures are as pointed as inscribing the names of Orlando's Pulse nightclub shooting victims in chalk on a brick wall and as understated as preparing food in a humble demonstration of survival.

Baba's queer identity exists in a constellation of tensions that come of being raised in an ethno-religious tradition carried forward in her Iranian-Canadian family since they immigrated in the 1960s. Despite a familiar legacy of labouring in Hamilton's steel factories, "I don't have that same access to a pride in or connection to Hamilton heritage that other folks do," she admits. "We do love Hamilton, but loving our life in Hamilton had some implied limits because the idea of belonging was generally complicated and largely absent. There was a lot of racism faced by my family and I that reinforced this."

That uncomfortable truth is not the only one brought to light in *Hamilton Now: Subject*, which does the necessary work of complicating our art community's civic identity, the better to recognize the depths of intelligence that thrive beneath its surface. If art has too often been miscast as a lure for economic investment, these artists respond with piercing calls for social change and political possibility.