

INDUSTRY NEWS

A retrospective of Canadian indie comics reveals a deep interest in personal storytelling



The Art Gallery of Hamilton's indie comic exhibit, which runs until January 5, 2020.

Independent comics have made significant strides over the past decade. They are taken seriously as a visual art form – no longer always associated with the funny papers – and yet there hadn't been a significant museum exhibition examining their legacy and impact across Canada until now.

The Art Gallery of Hamilton's *This Is Serious: Canadian Indie Comics*, running until Jan. 5, 2020, presents the country's first major retrospective dedicated to the discipline. More than 45 comic artists are featured, including stalwarts like Seth, Chester Brown, Fiona Smyth, and Julie Doucet, alongside a new generation of talents such as Kate Beaton, Michael DeForge, Jillian Tamaki, and Aminder Dhaliwal. The show provides a behind-the-page look at the artists' processes, as well as a local historical context thanks to the inclusion of pioneers like Doug Wright.

This Is Serious co-curators – Alana Traficante, AGH's adjunct curator of contemporary art, and cartoonist Joe Ollmann (*The Abominable Mr. Seabrook*) – share their thoughts on the show's origins.

Did the show start off as a major undertaking?

Alana Traficante: The AGH received a donation of artwork by Marc Bell, which – at our curatorial meeting – spurred a conversation about cartoonists and comic art, specifically in Hamilton, and how there was a growing community of cartoonists within the local region. And that grew into realizing there was this potential to do a national survey exhibition.

We knew it had to be big, but in terms of what that would look like, I don't think that started to take shape until we engaged Joe, who is so passionate about Canadian comics.

Joe Ollmann: When Alana walked me through the gallery and showed me the amount of room dedicated to the exhibit, I thought, "Holy crap. It's a lot of space!" We came in with a giant list of more than 200 artists and had to realistically whittle it down. But it wasn't until we were doing the install that I realized, "Wow, this is really a big, impressive show."



Fiona Smyth's Pavor Nocturnus

Was the storytelling theme that runs throughout apparent from the onset?

AF: I think it came up about midway through. Joe and I realized we had this shared interest in personal storytelling, whether that be biography or autobiography. It became a way of finding a through line with all these practices and artists. It certainly wasn't the be-all determination of whether or not an artist was in the show, but it definitely allowed us to find different thematic and aesthetic approaches to group together.

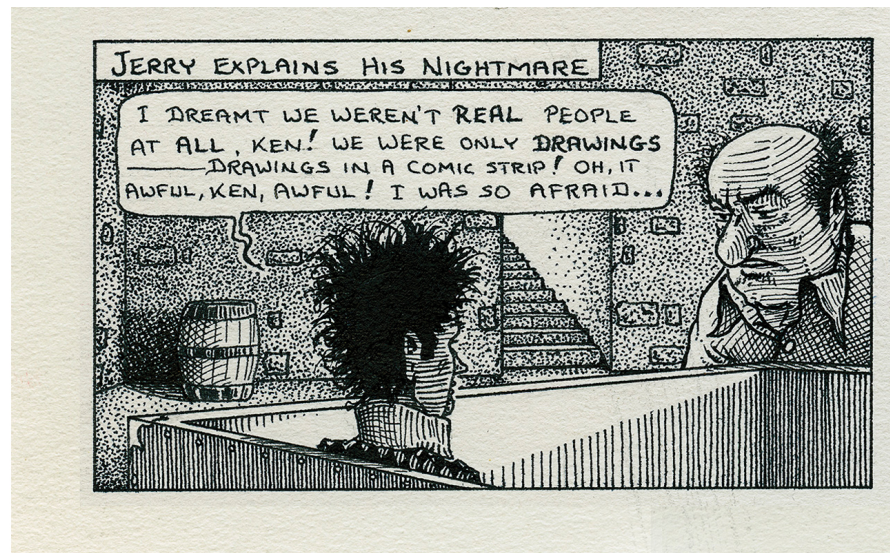
How did you decide on the final roster?

JO: We literally handwrote a list. I went through my bookshelves and looked at basically any Canadian cartoonist that I could think of. There were some that right from the

beginning I knew we would want. My dream was Carel Moiseiwitsch, a cartoonist from Vancouver in the '80s and one of my heroes. My thinking was to get people whose work you would love to see up close.

We were also trying to show different approaches. Sometimes we picked cartoonists because of their very unique methodologies – like Marta Chudolinska, a traditional woodcut artist who trained under George Walker – who started doing this incredibly intricate paper-cutting.

AF: One of the greatest challenges was knowing there are so many cartoonists and artists working under the tent of indie comics and having to narrow that list down for pragmatic reasons. We wanted to make sure that we were being equitable from a geographical perspective and trying to have gender and cultural parity in the representation.



David Boswell's Reid Fleming #1: Monday Morning

How did you select the works?

JO: When we started asking people during our studio visits, it became apparent they had things they really were proud of. Like Julie Doucet wanted to show her current collage work and she had a very specific way she wanted it hung. It was collaborative in some ways, finding out what was important to them.

Do visitors need an understanding of comics to appreciate the exhibition?

JO: I think we've structured it in such a way that is easy and accessible. I think it will appeal to people who are not familiar with comics. It can stand multiple viewings – there's a lot in

there. You could look at it just visually. But we tried to pick sections of work where people can actually read and get a sense of the artists' writing styles.

AF: I really feel like it's one of those things you have to see to believe.

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