

Making Spaces for Art

A Case Study : Art Gallery of Mississauga

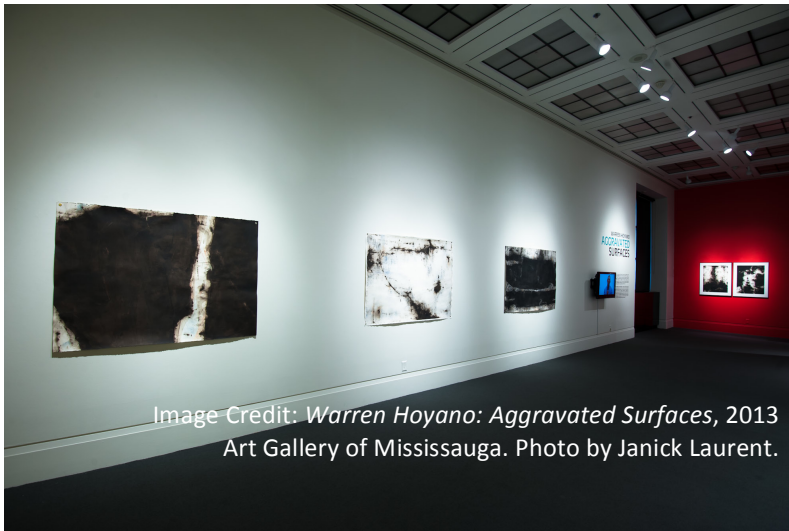


Image Credit: Warren Hoyano: *Aggravated Surfaces*, 2013
Art Gallery of Mississauga. Photo by Janick Laurent.

“I call it the best kept secret of Mississauga.”
Stuart Keeler, Director-Curator

Everyone loves a hidden gem. That restaurant a friend told you about, that film you didn’t think you would love that much or that bottle of wine you tried on a lark. However, when it comes to an art gallery, this

shouldn’t be the case. Art needs appreciation and therefore appreciators. Stuart Keeler, Director and Curator of the Art Gallery of Mississauga (AGM), is tackling the multi-faceted problem of being such a secret. Focusing on visibility, connection to the community, and relevancy, the Art Gallery of Mississauga is re-inventing itself.

For twenty-five years, the Art Gallery of Mississauga has occupied a cozy nook in a corner of the City Centre building. All that is about to change. In a forward thinking and dynamic move, the AGM hired Lord Cultural Resources to complete a feasibility study. The results are turning into resolutions. The Board of Directors voted in favour of the recommendation to relocate the gallery to its own space at an approximate cost of fifty million dollars. A capital campaign will begin in the next few years to facilitate moving within the next ten to fifteen years. But it doesn’t stop there. A complete revamp of the organization is underway from HR practices to outreach approach and programming. In fact, you might barely recognize the AGM from when Keeler started two years ago.

Stuart Keeler is a man with a vision who says, “The gallery doesn’t have to be here.” That might seem like an odd thing for a director to say but it tells you all you need to know about the fulsome approach he is taking towards the reinvention of the AGM. Keeler believes the Gallery should be a reflection of the community it serves. He wants to heighten accessibility in a Mississauga context through engagement and education.

Mississauga boasts a population that has more than doubled in the last twenty-five years, making it Canada’s sixth largest city. And it continues to grow exponentially. It is a highly educated population with over 19% holding a bachelor degree or higher.



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Beyond that, its social fabric comprises both established and new Canadians with 49% being a visible minority. Keeler believes for art to be relevant, it needs to speak to its audience. It must reflect the multiplicity of the community it serves by responding to diversity and adapting to its audience. “I want to redefine what the word *accessibility* means to Mississauga. How does an organization become more flexible and adapt to a changing population?”

Given the proximity to the AGO and many other galleries, Keeler believes that developing its own niche will be a key to future success for the AGM. He would also like to see the Gallery become more contemporary and inclusive. “The Gallery should be a backdrop for ideas.” The AGM is looking to reanimate its membership base. The goal is to triple membership by the end of 2013. Looking inwardly, human resource policy is in the process of review and revision as well.

There are 563 works in the permanent collection at the AGM. There has been a five-year moratorium on collecting as the Gallery goes about developing policies in this area. Some special considerations have been around digital works. With constant advances in technology, investing in digital works poses unique challenges.

Engagement Officer Tina Chu is the face of the Gallery in the community. Her job is to make the AGM available for a multitude of purposes to a multitude of people. Tina forges lasting partnerships that are mutually beneficial, socially responsible and expand people’s idea of the utility of art. “It will take time to catch fire, but there is a spark.” The goal therein is to make the AGM a more accessible, more diverse community resource.

Rather than being daunted by the enormity of this change, Keeler, the Board of Directors and Chu are invigorated. Stuart considers this a once in a lifetime moment where all axis points have aligned. “We are in a one of a kind period of time to ramp things up and experiment. This is the opportunity to galvanize and move forward with a one of a kind transition. My Board has told me to **do more**,” says Keeler. That “**do more**” attitude is evident everywhere at the AGM.

By embracing experimentation, the Art Gallery of Mississauga is modeling a new process of what a public art gallery can be. Keeler’s bold new vision is working. Their audience has tripled in the last year. Hurry over; the AGM won’t be a secret for long!