

Vancouver

Negotiating Space and Race

BY GODFRE LEUNG

In Vancouver, virtually every conversation is about space in one way or another. The ongoing housing affordability crisis casts a perpetual cloud of precarity and anxiety that rivals the city's notoriously gray skies. In the art community, the omnipresent specters of rent hikes and "renovictions" threaten not only the homes of the city's art workers, but also their studios, galleries, and performance spaces.

Race underlies many of these conversations. In 2016, British Columbia passed a foreign buyer's tax—aimed at real and imaginary overseas Chinese speculators, the scapegoats of the housing crisis—to help calm the real-estate market. A mostly unspoken civic antipathy toward Asian settler-immigrants hangs uneasily over increasingly common public acknowledgment that Vancouver rests on the unceded ancestral territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations.

As the city went into quarantine in March, the second round of large protests in two years was underway in solidarity with the Wet'suwet'en First Nation's blockade in Northern BC, aimed at halting illegal pipeline construction in Wet'suwet'en territory. Days before the city began to formally reopen in June, Black Lives Matter activists and allies occupied a major traffic artery running through downtown in response to the police killing of

George Floyd in Minneapolis, as well as the deaths of Regis Korchinski-Paquet, a Black woman in Toronto; and Chantel Moore, an Indigenous woman in Edmundston, New Brunswick, both involving Canadian law enforcement. The protests took place on what was formerly Hogan's Alley, where a substantial portion of Vancouver's Black community lived before the neighborhood was demolished in 1967 for a freeway project—later aborted due to protests led by Chinatown residents.

A spate of recent programming devoted to the performativity of the Black body paralleled these concerns. In 2018, Audain Gallery organized dance artist taisha paggett's exhibition "i believe in echoes." This was followed by "Breathing Room," a public-facing residency by choreographer and dancer Ligia Lewis at Or Gallery in 2019, and the pairing at Western Front of Black Quantum Futurism's artists' talk on DIY time-travel with a presentation by Adam Rudder of the Hogan's Alley Society on its work with Vancouver's Black community. Most directly germane to Vancouver geopolitics was interdisciplinary artist Deanna Bowen's 2019 solo exhibition "A Harlem Nocturne" at Contemporary Art Gallery, highlighted by the visual rhyme of a map showing a defunct low-income housing project with graphic scores notating archival footage of Black Canadian



DEANNA BOWEN, *Rupert Lanes (after Wall)*, 2019, chromogenic print on dibond, 67.3 × 101.6 cm. Photo by SITE Photography. Courtesy the artist and Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver.

dancer Leonard Gibson, who was active in Vancouver from the late 1940s to the '60s before policing and rezoning resulted in the disappearance of the city's Black nightlife hubs.

These programs join Vancouver's more established commitment to Indigenous art. Virtually every institution and commercial gallery has regularly staged exhibitions featuring Indigenous artists for at least the last half decade. It is an open question, however, whether the visibility of Indigenous art, especially in its utility for the city's branding and tourism, gives Indigenous cultural producers equal agency in Vancouver's art ecology.

More broadly, the pursuit of meaningful representation remains a work in progress. Three of Vancouver's oldest artist-run centers, all established in the 1980s, are led by women or non-binary people of color: Bopha Chhay and Denise Ryner occupy the dual director-curator positions at Artspeak and Or Gallery, respectively, while Vanessa Kwan helms grunt gallery as its director of programming. Conversely, in June, criticism from the public prompted Vancouver Art Gallery—the city's largest art platform—to post a statement on Instagram defending its appointment of a white man, Anthony Kiendl, as its new director and CEO.

Last summer, a performance by wen yau at grunt gallery and Hotam Press Bookshop/

Gallery's exhibition "Freedom-Hi!: Zines from Hong Kong's Civil Movements" highlighted Hong Kong's autonomy as a key issue, not only because of Vancouver's significant Hong Kong expatriate population but because the city as we now know it is unimaginable without the immigration wave bookended by the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 and the 1997 handover of Hong Kong. At Centre A, a nonprofit devoted to Asian art established in 1999, Samson Young's exhibition "It's a heaven over there" (2019) wrote post-1989 immigration into a speculative fiction of Vancouver Chinatown's early history (full disclosure: I co-curated this exhibition).

Currently, Vancouver Art Gallery is preparing a long overdue retrospective for local veteran artist Jin-me Yoon, whose *Souvenirs of the Self* (1991) came at a time when depictions of the Asian immigration-real estate nexus by at least one of her celebrated peers in Vancouver's photography scene were considered tantamount to a racist dog whistle. Ironically assembled as a book of postcards, Yoon's photographs of herself at Banff National Park mimicked tourists' snapshots, holding a mirror to prevailing Asian settler-parasite tropes. The ongoing rewriting of Vancouver's difficult geohistory may finally be catching up to its celebrated diversity.