

## Murray Gerges // Major Feature

The first African Nova Scotian student to attend NSCAD graduated in 1951 and returned 47 years later to see her work in the opening of *In This Place: Black Art in Nova Scotia*. That brisk Tuesday night in February 1998, Audrey Dear-Hesson was among throngs that streamed into NSCAD's Anna Leonowens Gallery to witness history in the making.

It was the first time anyone had attempted to show evidence of the tradition of African Nova Scotian art in the Maritime mosaic.

Before then, it seemed like “these folks had not done anything at all, that no real black art existed. So it wasn't just an opening. It was a shattering of that whole high, high art thing,” David Woods says today.

The artist, curator and community organizer set on a mission to mine two centuries of African Nova Scotian art he says had been omitted from local historical narratives. The show brought together 50 black artists' work and spanned everything from the traditional quilts of 19th-century folk artists to the contemporary paintings of fresh NSCAD grads.

It opened to universal acclaim and afforded Woods some leeway in the future.

But watershed moments like these are a flash in the pan for black artists. In the 16 years since *In This Place*, fair-weather institutional support has made it unfeasible for enduring change to take root.

Woods is still frustrated today. One step forward is almost always offset by two steps back.

“I never thought I’d get consistent funding,” he says. “Not in this place.”

But if African Nova Scotians have roots that date to the arrival of the Black Loyalists as American Revolution refugees 230 years ago, why have their voices and cultural production been swept under the carpet?

“We were born in Canada,” says Pamela Edmonds, a collaborator of Woods’s and a critic who wrote about *In This Place*.

“We’ve been here for centuries but we have no real sense of, ‘We belong here. We built this.’ It’s especially problematic to be living for generations in a country where your stories are erased and you’re told that you don’t belong,” she says.

What’s more, the scarcity of resources for archiving has left much of this history unreported.

But the records are there, says Edmonds, in the cultural memory of community members. Woods’s earnest bonds enabled him to plow undocumented history to draw connections and piece the story of *In This Place* together. They trusted him to bring African Nova Scotian art to life in that show.

In 1995 the House of Commons tried to remedy this erasure with African Heritage Month (AHM). Since then, the shortest month of the year has been officially designated to celebrate the contributions of people of African descent in Canada.

But this “flavor of the month” approach to AHM equates to disingenuous public and institutional engagement, says Edmonds. The work on display is not treated like real art and the genuine local stories are ditched in favour of saccharine celebration.

“You just sold a package,” Edmonds says. “You sold Martin and Malcolm and Harriet Tubman. It’s just a marketing thing just like Valentine’s Day.”

AHM might be an opportunity for exposure, but when it’s the only venue for black artists it bears a “special interest” tag that precludes the general public from taking sincere interest.

The few claims of interest are lip service, says Woods. They’re hollow wordplay and mere performance.

“Go to a board meeting and let ‘em show you how much interest is reflected in their budget. Everybody says that stuff,” he says. “It’s just a game for them.”

Despite progress made by equity initiatives undertaken in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Buseje Bailey says that minority artists and initiatives lack sustainable support from society at large and the support of art institutions at deep-rooted levels.

Bailey was a master of fine arts student at NSCAD in 1996 and partook in *In This Place*. Like Woods, her decades in community organizing and advocacy for black artists have been dispiriting.

“This culture is not an avid supporter of the arts; and the arts that that have government support are typically Euro-centric or mainstream,” she says.

So when the opportunity arose in 1998, Woods decided to give the token AHM tag a run for its money and applied for grants he had joked he could never get for a show as ambitious as “In This Place.”

To his surprise, “we got ‘em all! A hundred and something thousand. It was rock and roll then.” He picked up the ball and ran with it, and “[got] all the folks involved. I know everybody in Scotia who’s black. So I just knocked on doors. I knew it was gonna be my rare opportunity to have money to do anything.”

In This Place drew critical acclaim from national press and Woods’s eclectic historical discoveries blew audiences away.

“That was the most black people I had ever seen in a gallery to this day,” says Edmonds.

If it hadn’t been for that recognition, Woods says he wouldn’t have qualified for equity grants to sustain the Black Artists Network of Nova Scotia (BANNS) with Edmonds and Bailey. They founded it in 1991 to support the careers of African Nova Scotian artists and promoting their work, but it wasn’t until 2000 that it received substantial enough support from Canada Council for the Arts (CCA) to be able to deliver its mandate year-round.

From 2000 to 2005, Canada’s national arts funding agency gave BANNS between \$30,000 and \$55,000 on an annual basis. BANNS could finally maintain a permanent gallery space with enough left over for major AHM programming.

During that period, the Preston Cultural Festival, a celebration of Preston communities, flourished with multidisciplinary exhibitions, storytelling programs

and concerts for youth. Depending on grant allowances, Woods was able to coordinate an AHM show on varying scales every year since then, “primarily because of that [In This Place] beginning,” he says.

Last year, AHM celebrated African Nova Scotian pioneers. This year, it celebrated the artistic production of young folks.

Shifting government tides over the years, however, have shuffled funding for the arts on the priority list. While everyone suffers, claims of interest in multiculturalism and artists of colour are not supported with proof.

“We went from always getting grants to getting zero,” Woods says. “Next time we got a grant was when they started this new equity thing last year. That just shows ya.”

Nova Scotia lags behind most provinces: until the creation of the Arts Equity Funding Program in 2013, initiatives designated to cater to underrepresented artists were few and far between.

Bailey says that the changes that need to happen are structural, not mere add-ons during time of plenty. But the only way to develop diverse communities through year-round support and structural alterations is to resort to corporate patronage.

Karen Carter, chair and co-founder of Toronto-based Black Artists’ Networks in Dialogue (BAND), has been working in the arts and culture sector for over 20 years and has witnessed both federal and provincial public funding dry up. As many arts organizations are run by a limited number of hands, investing

time and effort into writing tedious grant applications without guaranteed payoff makes corporate patronage the only viable option for survival.

So she had few reservations when TD Bank approached her in 2013 to set up “Then & Now,” a joint initiative to bring black arts and culture programming to six major Canadian cities, including Halifax.

The benefit is mutual: TD’s sponsorship means that BAND can make year-round programming a reality. In exchange, BAND connects TD to a new market and portrays TD’s brand as supportive of diversity.

So in 2014, Woods turned to “Then & Now” to sponsor BANNS’s AHM programming.

“I like people who give you money and let you do your thing,” Woods says.

“They don’t interfere?” I ask.

“No,” he says. “They want their PR and you get to do your show. They give you enough to actually do something.”

With TD’s \$20,000 contribution, Woods was able to set up workshops for young writers, artists and performers to hone their craft with professional mentors in advance of a \$2,000-prize contest.

While dipping into corporate sponsorship ensures a bigger bang for the buck, NSCAD critical studies professor Karin Cope warns of a potential compromise.

“When you lose the value of public sponsorship, art becomes limited to the elite. It risks being lost in public conversation,” she says.

Since *In This Place* made a splash 16 years ago, progress has yo-yoed. Today, it's up to artists and cultural workers to be strategic about their own representation.

"Those systems are set up to tokenize you," Edmonds says. Sixteen years later, it's in artists' hands to resist reductive labels and challenge racist stereotypes.

"It's important to reach diverse communities but vital to reach the art world too to say, 'I'm sorry, but you're gonna have to give up some of your power,'" she insists.