

Limitations of the Internet: How *Art of Evolution* Fails the Online Viewer

In my review, I will examine *Art of Evolution* curated by Gerta Moray.¹ This exhibition is an online exhibition that is posted to the Art Canada Institute website and features nine works from Canadian artist, Harold Town. I will use the exhibition as a case study of the strengths and weaknesses of an online gallery format. Online art galleries are an accepted way to view art from anywhere in the world according to the public.² They provide an adequate substitute for brick-and-mortar museums that most people will never see. However, it is my thought that strictly viewing art online is not a sufficient substitute for the real thing: recreations and placeholders fail to capture the aura of a work. Although Gerta Moray's *Art of Evolution* claims to showcase how "Town's art creates a dynamic dialogue between traditional artistic modes and the contemporary urban, technological environment,"³ the limitations of the online gallery prevent the viewer from seeing these implications. All to prove, that one cannot get to know an artist like Town or his work through an online gallery.

To begin, it is essential that I describe the layout of this online exhibition. The webpage that *Art of Evolution* is laid out on, begins with a small text blurb: starting with a background on Town, followed by Moray's credentials. Scrolling past this text leads the viewer to a series of small images—which are *identical* in size—of the works in the exhibition. Upon clicking on one of these images, the viewer is able to see the work up close. The zoomed-in view has arrows on the left and right of the screen to switch between all nine works in the exhibition. Furthermore, the up-close view also provides the viewer with a small blurb about the work being displayed. It should be noted, that even in the zoomed-in view, while the dimensions of each work are slightly different, they *do not* all show the full work. For instance, the oil painting *Day Neon*, as posted to the online gallery, does not appear in its entirety. Instead, the entire bottom half of the painting is missing. Not only is this upsetting, but it also makes it hard to analyze the work for Town's use of traditional modes like colour, texture, and technique as the curator intends. Other works' dimensions like *Inoutscape* were also limited by the format of the online exhibition. To provide an example, the text about *Inoutscape* reads that the painting is "one of a series of large canvases, more than [two] metres high."⁴ Despite this description, the painting is shown in the same-sized box in the online gallery as *Toy Horse*—an ink and acrylic painting that is nearly half the size of *Inoutscape*. However, sizing isn't the only issue prevalent within *Art of Evolution*: the online format chosen by the Art Canada Institute to portray an artist like Town's work, is ill-fitting at best.

¹ Moray Gerta, "Harold Town: Art of Evolution," Art Canada Institute, December 12, 2022, <https://www.aci-iac.ca/online-exhibitions/harold-town-art-of-evolution/>.

² Art Business, "Advantages of Viewing Art: Online vs In Person," December 9, 2022, <https://www.artbusiness.com/looking-at-art-online-vs-in-person.html>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

According to the Art Canada Institute’s About Page, their intentions are to “promote the study of an inclusive multi-vocal Canadian art history to as broad an audience as possible, in both English and French, within Canada and internationally.”⁵ The Institute also mentions that they want the galleries to be accessible, and allow viewers to join the conversation about Canadian art history. The online format certainly succeeds in the Institute’s goals for accessibility—especially considering that 96.5% of Canadians and 63% of people worldwide have access to the Internet.⁶ However, this does not account for the lacklustre portrayal of works from artists like Town where texture, dimension, and scale are integral in getting to know the artist and their work. For example, the collage *Music Behind* uses a range of household materials like a music sheet, labels, thread, string, waxed paper straws, the hardboard backing of a TV set with a plastic cone, and a cardboard package for paint tubes, all attached to hardboard. Evidently, these materials are not two-dimensional. In fact, many of these items like the plastic cone, packaging and straws would jut out of the collage. Unfortunately, it is impossible to get a sense of the three-dimensional reality of this work without viewing it in person.

However, it isn’t just Town’s work that is being snubbed due to the online format chosen by the Art Canada Institute. Another artist, Karen Tam who creates three-dimensional works like installations and sculptures, was part of an online exhibition that poorly displayed her work.⁷ One example of this is Tam’s 金山夢 *Gold Mountain Dreams (Flag)*. This work is a triangular flag with zesty oranges and turquoise blues that was made in reference to Gold Mountain, the name Chinese immigrants attributed to North America. As one can imagine, a flag has multiple sides. However, in the exhibition, the viewer only gets to see one side of the triangular flag attached to a white wall. Other works from Tam like *C.S. Wing Studio* and *Coin-Suit* are both three-dimensional installations with only one photo to represent them.

Artists like Town and Tam who produce works with three-dimensional elements are not well-represented within this format. This begs the question: how many Internet users are getting the wrong idea about an artist from viewing online exhibitions?

During the peak of the pandemic, many cultural hotspots like art galleries and museums were forced to place works of several different mediums in an online space. While some succeeded more than others, all digitized versions of traditional art (paintings, sculptures,

⁵ Art Canada Institute, “About,” Accessed October 16, 2022, <https://www.aci-iac.ca/about/>.

⁶ Statista, “Percentage of Population Using the Internet in Canada from 2000 to 2022,” December 6, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/209104/number-of-internet-users-per-100-inhabitants-in-canada-since-2000/>; Datareportal, “Digital Around the World,” December 6, 2022, <https://datareportal.com/global-digital-overview>.

⁷ Art Canada Institute, “Autumn Tigers,” December 10, 2022, <https://www.aci-iac.ca/online-exhibitions/autumn-tigers-an-exhibition-by-karen-tam-celebrating-chinese-culture-in-british-columbia/>.

drawings) were missing one element: their aura. In the peer-reviewed journal article, *Art in the Digital during and after Covid: Aura and Apparatus of Online Exhibitions* by Ph.D. candidate and visual artist João Pedro Amorim, the theory of an artworks aura is explored.⁸ This article was published in 2020 when the world was experiencing the brunt of COVID-19. Within the journal article, Amorim argues that a work's aura is changed in the transference of an analogue work to a digital setting. This theory can easily be applied to *Art of Evolution* in the sense that viewers cannot gather the full experience of viewing a work when it is shown outside of the space it was intended to be seen within. In fact, by doing so, "[t]he work of art becomes independent of what it inherits from its ritual and cultural lineage."⁹ Evidently, extracting a work of art from its intended viewing space removes the history and culture behind viewing a work of art in a gallery setting. Furthermore, Walter Benjamin, an acclaimed German philosopher, explained this theory by saying, "[e]ven the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."¹⁰ In other words, even when an artwork is recreated online (like *Art of Evolution*), it is still missing its link to the place it was supposed to be viewed. Thus, removing an element of authenticity from the viewer's experience.

While *Art of Evolution* is successful in its regard for accessibility, the online format chosen by the Art Canada Institute could use further improvements. Especially when dealing with artists like Town who frequently use scale and three-dimensional elements in their works. It should be noted that, the current format does not make room for curatorial statements like Moray's. Instead, the intentions of the exhibition are lost in the online format. This makes it difficult for viewers to understand the works on display and get to know Canadian artists like Harold Town for who they really are. As the world adopts more digital ways of conducting traditional cultural practices, such as art, it is vital that works intended to be viewed in person are captured in a way that reflects their true form.

⁸ Amorim, João Pedro, "Art in the Digital during and after Covid: Aura and Apparatus of Online Exhibitions," *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 12, no. 5 (2022): 1–8, 10.21659/rupkatha.v12n5.rioc1s1n2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 2.

¹⁰ Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Marxists, December 12, 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>.

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