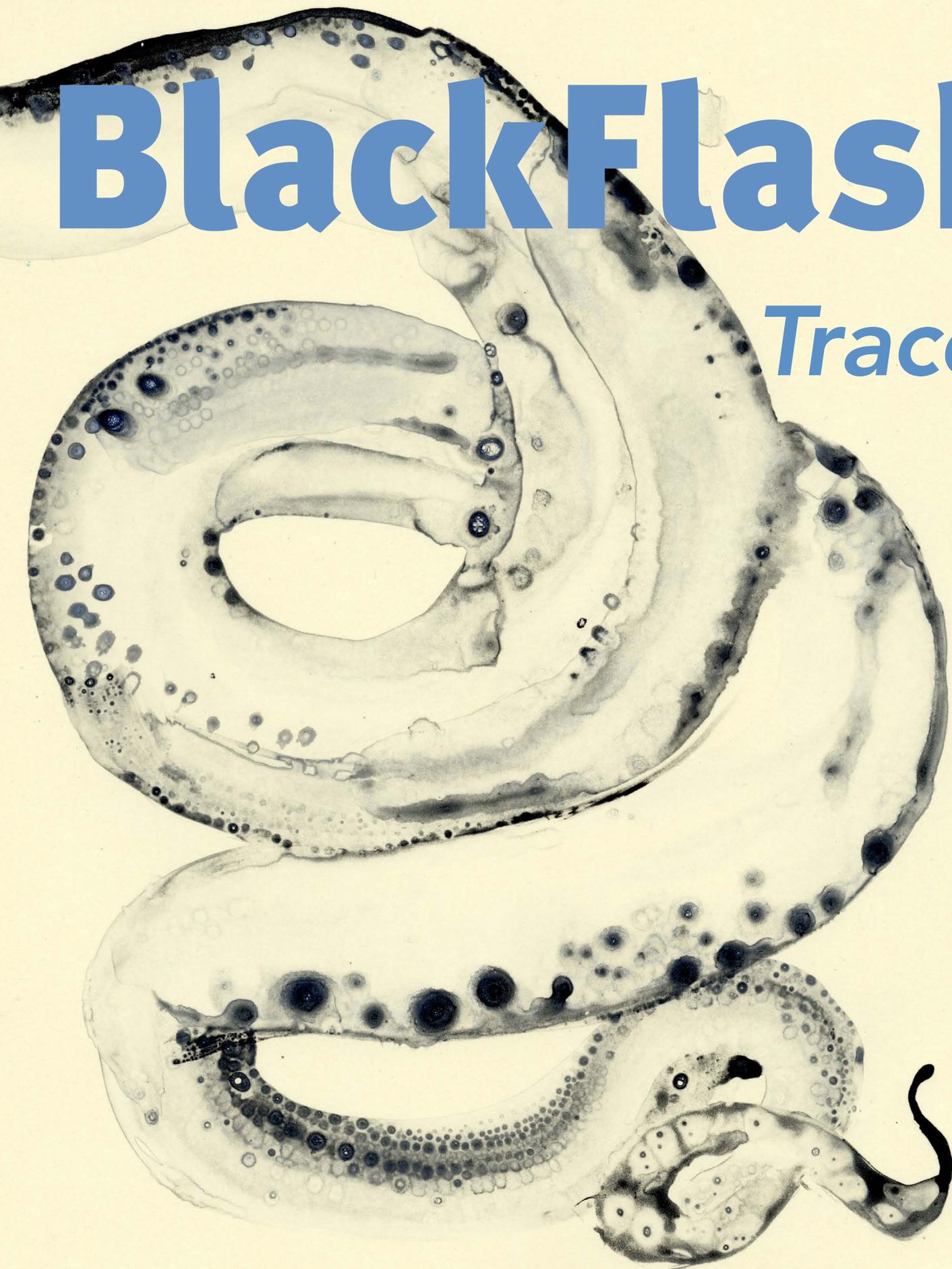


Zoe Cinel & AO Roberts | Jaime Black-Morsette | Luis Jacob

Black Flash

Traces





Luis Jacob, *The Riddle*, 2018. Epoxy resin and marble dust. 61 x 30.5 x 10.2 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

TO SPEAK & SPELL WHEN YOU'RE UP AGAINST THE WALL

By Luis Jacob

"Ghosts! There are no ghosts in Canada! The country is too new for ghosts..."

This striking statement (cryptically attributed to a certain "Mr. D_____") appears in Susanna Moodie's book, *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852). The book documents her experience as an English settler in the colonial Province of Upper Canada.

Moodie names this land, still new to her, "the unpeopled wastes of Canada." She is, of course, referring to the local territories of Michi Saagiig and Chippewa people that, since 1818, were subject to the Rice Lake Treaty. But such realities do not figure much in Moodie's fantasy of new countries and unpeopled wastes.

Instead, she imagines her presence on Turtle Island as akin to that of Adam and Eve's after their expulsion from the Garden, Eden clearly being an analogue for Moodie's distant England. In accordance with the Biblical template serving as her frame of reference, Moodie describes this experience of postlapsarian life in the colony in terms of sin, bad spirits, and departed evil.

Rather than inhering in their adopted homes, she locates such attributes of culpability in the persons of the settlers themselves. "Bad spirits," she writes, "cannot be supposed to linger near a place where crime has never been committed. The belief in ghosts, so prevalent in old countries, must first have had its foundation in the consciousness of guilt."

A fascinating dynamic emerges. Negation—the denial of ghosts, of human occupation preceding the arrival of settlers—is bound with a peculiar type of affirmation. A crime scene, a tacit "consciousness of guilt", appears at the moment a crime is claimed not to have been committed.

This is something that Sigmund Freud had observed in the analytical situation with his own patients. The example he provides in 1925 is that of a patient who says: "You ask who this person in the dream can be. It's *not* my mother."

What is the significance of this "not," this negation whose function is to draw attention to the mother in the very act of disavowing her? As Freud puts it, "Negation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed.... Its 'no' is the hall-mark of repression, a certificate of origin...."¹

The disavowal serves as a certificate of origin—like a stamp bearing MADE IN CANADA—announcing that the utterance has one foot in the repressed. The negation affirms what it attempts to negate.

Louis Althusser observed a similar dynamic in ideology. For Althusser, ideology refers to the process by which subjects are recruited from among individuals, emphasizing that ideology succeeds in recruiting us all. As a subject—identifying as a colonial settler, for example—I invest in colonial ideology because it is the very thing that grants me this status as the subject that I take myself to be. Ideology is the ordering process that binds me together and organizes me as an identifiable "self."

Althusser noticed something peculiar. It is much easier to ascribe ideology in other people than it is to notice it in oneself. Put differently, subjects tend to disavow the ideological dimensions of their own self-formation.

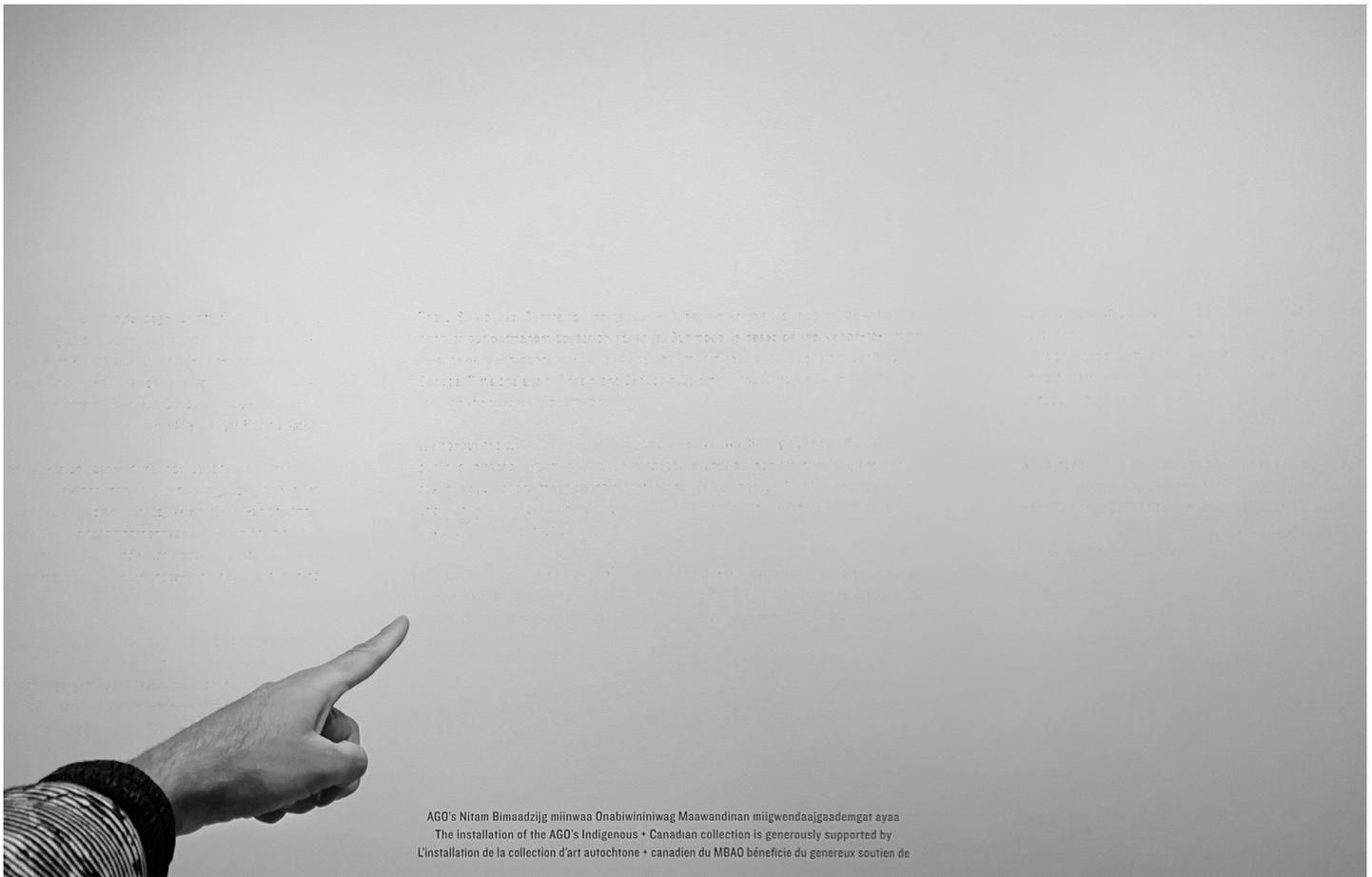
"What really takes place in ideology," writes Althusser, "seems therefore to take place outside it. That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, 'I am ideological.'"²

It is tempting to approach such disavowal by the route of simple inversion: where "no" is uttered, "yes" shall be understood to hide within. But my point here is not so straightforward.



Luis Jacob, *The Ward*, 2016. Silkscreen on Somerset Satin paper, published by Portrait & Landscape, Toronto. 90.8 x 90.2 cm. Photo by Toni Hafkensheid. Image courtesy of the artist.

Pgs 7-9: Luis Jacob, *Moving the Museum (What Then Remainz)*, 2024. From a series of 5 b/w chromogenic prints. 30.5 x 45.7 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



AGO's Nitam Bimaadzijg miinwaa Onabiwiniwag Maawandinan miigwendaajgaademat ayaa
The installation of the AGO's Indigenous • Canadian collection is generously supported by
L'installation de la collection d'art autochtone • canadien du MBOA bénéficie du généreux soutien de

What I'm trying to disclose in the composition of these three instances—Moodie, Freud, and Althusser—is the idea that each utterance secretly attests to the presence of dissenting voices. The repudiation of ghosts generates its own forms of haunting. The disavowal authenticates itself as the bearer of repressed content. The denegation of ideology is the alarm bell alerting us to the operations of ideology. Over and above simple inversions, these instances testify to the “other voices” that echo within each utterance.

I live in Toronto, a place marked by constant repudiation, recurrent disavowal, and endless denegation of itself. As Wanda Nanibush recognizes, “This city tends to bury things—histories, neighbourhoods, waterways.”³ Histories are buried in the name of innovation, neighbourhoods dismantled in the name of revitalization, and waterways canalized in the name of real estate development.

The city, in other words, provides fertile terrain for the development of a linguistics of *double entendre*—a highly literate attunement to a locally determined dialect of dissenting echoes, of haunting voices resonating in utterances made in a place without ghosts.

Toronto is filled with cryptic traces. Each buried history, each dismantled neighbourhood, each waterway that is canalized leaves discernible traces of itself. What is a trace but the persistence of something in the context of its own erasure? A trace is an echo: a vocal recurrence at the moment when the

voice has ceased to speak. And a trace is a certificate of origin: a tell-tale signal that an act of silencing has taken place.

The case of Wanda Nanibush at the Art Gallery of Ontario provides an instructive example. Having joined the institution in 2016, she became the AGO's inaugural curator of Indigenous art.

Wanda's presence there was powerful, like a force of nature. In a short time, she curated three major retrospective exhibitions of Indigenous artists, in an institution that had never previously done so. In 2017, she presented the exhibition “Rita Letendre: Fire & Light,” co-curated with Georgiana Uhlyarik. In 2018, she presented “Rebecca Belmore: Facing the Monumental,” which toured to the Remai Modern in Saskatoon and the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. And in 2022, she presented “Robert Houle: Red is Beautiful,” which toured to Calgary Contemporary, the Winnipeg Art Gallery, and the Smithsonian Museum of American Indian Art. The exhibitions were accompanied by catalogues documenting these important artists' careers.

Her work did not end there. In 2018, Wanda launched *aabaakwad* (*it clears after a storm*), an annual conference bringing together Indigenous artists, curators and scholars from around the world. Over the years, the groundbreaking conference has taken place in Sydney (2020), Venice (2022), and Toronto (2018, 2021, and 2024).



Also in 2018, the AGO announced that the Department of Canadian Art—for decades, a keystone of the museum—was being renamed as The J.S. McLean Centre for Indigenous + Canadian Art. This was due to Wanda's tireless advocacy for structural change within the institution

In an essay titled *Performing Sovereignty in the Museum*, Wanda spoke about this decision to restructure the Department of Canadian Art:

Instead of creating [a separate] Indigenous art department, we decided to use a Nation-to-Nation model for a joint department where we shared power.

It seems so simple, but [the sequence] of Indigenous and Canadian was extremely important. [The AGO] said Canadian and Indigenous: I had to work to get that switched. Because we're first; we should always be first. It means that the land that we stand on, the sovereignty of that land is First Nations sovereignty. Canadian sovereignty derives its existence from ours.... I think museums never talk about sovereignty—we try to avoid it—because they are usually nationalist institutions meant to serve the nation state, that is a colonial state.⁴

On October 10, 2023, Wanda Nanibush and Georgiana Uhlyarik were awarded the 2023 Toronto Book Award for their catalogue, *Moving the Museum*. Documenting six years of activity by the new Centre for Indigenous + Canadian Art, the jury stated that the publication "kicks the colonial gaze to the curb."⁵

But the colonial gaze kicked back. Barely a month later, on November 16th, the AGO announced the sudden "departure" (this is the museum's preferred euphemism) of Wanda Nanibush after seven years on the job.

On November 20th, an email was leaked that linked her departure to attacks by people (including Sara Angel, then a member of the AGO's Committee of Indigenous + Canadian Art) who represented themselves as affiliates to something called the Israel Museums and Arts, Canada (IMAAC).⁶ The leaked IMAAC email was addressed to AGO Director Stephan Jost, Wanda's boss, threatening her employment and livelihood

This rapid turn of events came as a seismic shock, the repercussions of which continue to be felt across the country and beyond. What followed is a matter of public record.⁷ For my purposes here, I would like to consider what this episode tells us about the nature of traces, dissenting voices, and a linguistics of *double entendre*.



On November 22nd, I began making daily visits to the wall at the entrance of the AGO's Centre for Indigenous + Canadian Art. The wall had once contained a text—in Anishinaabemowin, English and French—that outlined its nation-to-nation mandate. This text was removed following Wanda's departure—an act of erasure that is also a gesture of protest.

I made drawings, shot videos and took photographs in front of the blank wall, all in an attempt to discern what remained of the words that it had once contained. What persisted were fragments of letters, broken bits of words, the shadows of indecipherable hieroglyphs.

Such traces demand a special kind of attunement. Can we ever "see" erasure? How could we "hear" silencing? What languages do these voices use to speak?

To be sure, the idea of traces evokes something forensic, like clues left at the scene of a crime. It is thus tempting to treat these hieroglyphs as *things*—proofs of institutional racism, for example, or evidence of the museum as a prime site of donor influence and class warfare. Of course, the hieroglyphs do lend themselves to being treated in this way.

In my photographs of the museum wall, however, these traces do not simply possess the status of a thing—a stand-alone artefact left over from a time now past. The trace, rather, becomes an *act of composition*—a laying-upon-a-table of various elements in a gesture of setting-in-motion.

Take a finger and a wall. Considered in the frame of the image, the finger renders the blank wall as a matter of attention. And the wall renders the pointing finger as the gesture of an accusation. The sheer whiteness and laconic innocence of the wall even endows this gesture with a desperate, Cassandra-like quality. Two points—two distinct elements—are set in motion together, each becoming a trace or reverberating echo to the other.

Considered together, what they set in motion is the before-and-after of the attentive accusation: the wall prior to its now discernible erasure, coupled with that discernment itself.

Or: take a blank wall and a group of passers-by. Two points are set in motion within the picture frame. The prominent but empty wall renders the innocent act of walking past as a matter of concern, the significance of which demands evaluation. The innocence of the gallery visitors renders the wall a site of struggle for those able to realize that there is more than meets the eye.

Considered together, what they set in motion is the institutional use of crisis-management techniques—strategies of white-washing and non-disclosure agreements as a means to "close the books" on the power struggles taking place within the institution—coupled with the foreclosure (or the persistence) of that struggle itself.

Kintsugi is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery without restoring it. Lacquer is used to mend the broken pieces; precious powdered metal is laid on the lacquer in order to enhance the mended parts.⁸

If restoration seeks to erase the signs of damage as neatly as possible, then kintsugi seeks to set both the damage and the repair together in motion.

A trace is not simply a thing; it is also an act of composition. This is precisely what the McLean Centre's nation-to-nation mandate had originally promised to do: two sovereignties—one Indigenous, one Canadian—sembled and set in motion in one institutional frame of reference. This model had accomplished so much in such a brief window of time.

And this act of composition is precisely what the directorship of the AGO promptly decided to dismantle, just as it was getting started.

Considered as a thing, the hieroglyphs on the museum wall may well serve as guarantees of forensic certainty. As an act of composition, however, the hieroglyphs do something quite different. They generate uncertainty—*zones of undecidability* where things remain in motion, where the dice have been cast and are now shuffling in the air, where the dust has not yet been permitted to settle.

The destiny of this motion is up for grabs.

It can be foreclosed by whitewashing—reassuring statements about “rebuilding of trust” and new institutional policies outlining “the rights and limits of political and artistic expression.”⁹ It can be captured by business-as-usual—arresting the motion, immobilizing it, settling the matter—creating the illusion that things will always remain the same because there shall be no tables and no frames permitted to serve as sites of composition. No voices shall henceforth be set in motion together—no dissenting echoes—leaving only fantasies of new countries and unpeopled wastes, the same as it ever was.

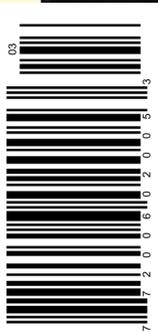
Or the elements can be put back into circulation. What linguistics does this require of us? What forms of attunement does this necessitate in the face of constant repudiation, recurrent disavowal, and endless denegation?

Whitewashing permits no traces and no echoes. If “rebuilding trust” rings hollow, it is because such statements are designed to restore order, not to repair the damage. Such utterances are meant to sound *exactly as they sound*. **BF**

Luis Jacob is a Peruvian-born, Toronto-based artist and curator. Since participating in *documenta 12* in 2007, he has achieved an international reputation — with exhibitions at Museum der Moderne Salzburg, the Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, and the Toronto Biennial of Art (2019); *La Biennale de Montréal* (2016); Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York (2015); *Taipei Biennial* (2012); Generali Foundation, Vienna (2011); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2010); Hamburg Kunstverein and the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery (both 2008). In 2016 he curated the exhibition “Form Follows Fiction: Art and Artists in Toronto” at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto, with a catalogue co-published with Black Dog Press in 2020.

Notes

1. Sigmund Freud, “Negation,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 19, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 235–241.
2. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 172.
3. Wanda Nanibush, wall text for *Toronto: Tributes + Tributaries*, Art Gallery of Ontario, September 29, 2016–May 22, 2017.
4. Wanda Nanibush, “Performing Sovereignty in the Museum,” in *The Uneven Bodies Reader*, ed. Ruth Buchanan, Aileen Burns, Johan Lundh, and Hanahiva Rose (Aotearoa, New Zealand: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 2021), 104–105.
5. Zoie Karagiannis, “Wanda Nanibush, Georgiana Uhlyarik win \$10K Toronto Book Award,” CBC Books, Oct 19, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/books/wanda-nanibush-georgiana-uhlyarik-2023-toronto-book-award-1.6998956>.
6. IMAAC is the re-brand of a previous organization called Canadian Friends of the Israel Museum, an organization that had its charitable status revoked by the Canadian Revenue Agency in 2022, for providing funds to donors who are not qualified as charities and due to issues of oversight.
7. See Jason McBride, “Why Did Canada’s Top Art Gallery Push Out a Visionary Curator?” *The Walrus*, August 28, 2024, <https://thewalrus.ca/why-did-canadas-top-art-gallery-push-out-a-visionary-curator/>.
8. See *Beauty of Mending: Kintsugi and Beyond*, curated by Dr. Heng Wu, Curator of Asian Art at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria: <https://aggv.ca/exhibits/beauty-of-mending/>.
9. Stephan Jost, “An Open Letter from Stephan Jost, Director and CEO,” *Art Gallery of Ontario*, November 30, 2023, <https://ago.ca/press-release/open-letter-stephan-jost-director-and-ceo>.



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