

Learning Through Digital & Interactive Art about the Land at Surrey Art Gallery: Towards Deepening Responsibilities, Relationships, and Commitments

Alison Rajah, Surrey Art Gallery Director

Surrey Art Gallery | Surrey, BC Canada

Surrey Art Gallery is situated on the unceded territories of the Salish Peoples, including the ȷíçəý (Katzie), ǵʷa:n̓l̓ən̓ (Kwantlen), and Semiahma (Semiahmoo) nations.

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Abstract

Since the late 1990s, Surrey Art Gallery has been a leading public art museum in Canada with a commitment to the production and presentation of digital art, and to working with local, national, and international Indigenous artists through this stream, more broadly within other media, and art education. The Gallery collaborates with artists to proactively respond to new developments in art and provide communities where situated with opportunities to learn about and experience contemporary art using technology. Moving toward its 50th anniversary in 2025, the Gallery readies for its transition into the Interactive Art Museum, a new facility at three times its current size in Surrey City Centre. This is informed by working with extraordinary local and international artists and community stakeholders through 20 years of operating its TechLab, a purpose-built facility supporting the production and presentation of digital art, followed by 6 years an experimental art lab pilot; 21 years of its Media Gallery, an interactive screen installation space; 20 years of its Open Sound, an ongoing program of commissioning, presenting, and discussing digital audio art and related symposia; and over 10 years of its UrbanScreen, an offsite projection venue presenting leading edge digital and interactive art.

Keywords

learning about the land, relationships to place, ecologies of place, shifting temporalities, cultural memory, resilient stories

Introduction & Context

Surrey Art Gallery was founded in 1975 at the initiative of local citizens, and mandated to be the experimental space for leading artists in Western Canada. The Gallery is locally, regionally, and nationally valued as an important contemporary art museum because it is responsive to the needs of contemporary art, artists, and communities where situated.

Surrey is located 40km east of Vancouver, and is rapidly growing to become BC's largest City. With a diverse, multi-ethnic population of over 500,000 (40% under the age of 30) and the province's largest school district, Surrey is an

increasingly important urban centre. 1000 new residents arrive in Surrey each month, many of whom are new Canadians, and some of whom may be refugees and/or living in a democratic country for the first time. Technology has proven to be an access point for engagement. Since the 1990s, research demonstrates new Canadians were among the first to use technology to connect globally with family and commerce, and the Gallery has similarly found technology to be a way to connect Surrey's growing population with art and artists, offering life changing experiences.

In the spring and summer of 2020, the Gallery's team collaboratively developed a living Anti-Racism and Systemic Change Commitment, and is currently investing in access and decolonizing commitment processes to inform all areas of the Gallery's work – from exhibitions, collections, publications, art education and engagement, to labour.



Figure 1. Lawrence Paul Yuweluptun and Paisley Smith speaking about their *Unceded Territories* (2019) VR video installation, inviting engagement in an Indigenous spirit world and our role in global climate crisis, with music by A Tribe Called Red. Courtesy of the Artists and Macauley & Co Art. Photo: Jon McRae

TechLab

In 1999, Surrey Art Gallery premiered the prototype of a digital media lab to support artists in residence. At a time when the purchase of projectors and high-powered computers were prohibitive to many artists, the Gallery constructed and equipped this temporary lab within its main exhibition hall using 2"x4" lumber and sheets of Plexiglas. It was expected that the lab facility, together with a digital media artist in residence, would enable the Gallery to anticipate and serve the needs of digital art exhibitions, its artists and audiences. Due to its success, TechLab became a dedicated, purpose-built facility 2002, and its original mandate modified with feedback from digital artists continues in its present operation. See [TechLab: Experiments in Media Art 1999-2019](#).

As the Gallery readies for its transition into the [Interactive Art Museum](#), a new facility at three times its current size in City Centre, the lab has transitioned to pilot a wider range of practices to inform planning for this capital project.

Artists in Residence

Artists are commissioned to work in the lab, dividing their work into three equal parts: the creation of new artwork using technology; interacting with the public and enabling visitors to experience the process of digital art creation; and advising the Gallery in its planning for future art exhibitions and programs using digital media. Artists in residence are invited to use this opportunity to research and develop the technology used in their artwork, without the pressure of an exhibition expectation at the end of their residency. They are welcomed as experts within the community of the Gallery's staff team, and have the opportunity to influence the operation of the Gallery. Projects have ranged from tele-robotic sculpture, virtual environments, through to projects engaging with the jacquard loom (the original computer) to create contemporary weavings, computer controlled ceramic kinetic sculpture, and artificial intelligence research.

Media Gallery Screens, Open Sound, and Sound Thinking

Working with artists in TechLab residencies led to the development of an onsite venue that has supported screen-based digital art since 2005, as well as in 2008 the advent of the audio art program called Open Sound. The commissioning and presenting digital audio art for Open Sound, and accompanying symposium Sound Thinking, followed by a Media Arts Symposium since 2019, was a direct response to the Gallery's research and consultation with artists using audio as their medium on the evolving forms of sound art practice, particularly as it is informed by digital technology. Open Sound draws inspiration from open source by

recognizing that any sound, once created, becomes part of a collective conscience of ideas.

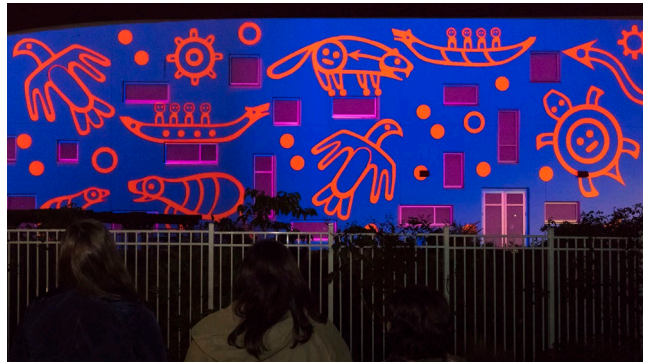


Figure 2. Marianne Nicolson's *The Way In Which It Was Given To Us* (2017) at UrbanScreen. This animation with sound references pictographs as a way of recording stories on the land, and speaks to the seizure of Indigenous territories. Photo: Brian Giebelhaus

UrbanScreen

Imagined by artists during a residency in the TechLab, and built by a City inspired by their vision, UrbanScreen used high-powered data projectors to illuminate the entire west wall of the Chuck Bailey Recreation Centre with artworks. Since its launch, as the public art feature of this recreation centre in Surrey's City Centre, the Gallery curated and partnered to present a rotating program of exhibitions, events, and community screening at UrbanScreen, during an annual season that ran from September to May.

This offsite venue stimulated the imaginations and creativity of artists, encouraging them to create artworks using newly-developed technology, and projects propelled by the intentions of the venue and its context. Artworks have featured technology as diverse as the virtual piano, gaming engines, unmanned aerial video copters, and generative image and video databases, with interactive works using text messages to change projected language, the gyroscope and accelerometer of mobile devices to create movement, the motion of SkyTrains and the tidal levels of the Fraser River to trigger content generation, and sensors and cameras to capture onsite gestures and movements.

This award-winning, art-dedicated venue presented digital and interactive art after dark outdoors from 2010 to 2022. See [webpage](#) and compendium publication [Art After Dark: 10 Years of UrbanScreen](#). With the expansion of the recreation centre, the site was decommissioned in 2022, and this fall the Gallery looks forward to launching its relocation in Surrey Civic Plaza, as new iteration of a largescale, more robust interactive projection venue, informed by artists and the longstanding advisory committee.

Author Biography

Alison Rajah was appointed Surrey Art Gallery's Director in 2019. Rajah has been a member of the Gallery's staff since 2009 and has contributed to all areas of its operations, including as Curator of Education and Engagement. Her curatorial leadership with digital art exhibitions and programs at UrbanScreen, and in the Gallery's

Indigenous contemporary art education programming, has been recognized nationally. She studied in the Critical and Curatorial Studies graduate program at the University of British Columbia (UBC), completed a Master's degree in Museum Education at UBC in 2022, and has taught in UBC's Faculty of Arts Humanities 101 program since 2008.