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The Toronto Biennial Sets Ancient Wisdom Against Modern Collapse

Curator Allison Glenn's "Things Fall Apart" mythmaking and ancestral epistemologies to rethink how art might respond to ecological, political and technological rupture and steer us toward a future that is enriched by the past.

By [Elisa Carollo](#) • 10/06/26 10:05am

This year's Toronto Biennial of Art is dispersed without sprawling, articulating itself through a limited number of interventions conceived specifically for the sites where they are shown and forming a narrative constellation woven across the city and extended through the wider Great Lakes region. As in [other recent biennials](#), water is a key thematic anchor—and, more specifically, waterways as both channels of human connection and carriers of the global complications that trade, exchange and warfare have wrought.

In the catalog, [curator Allison Glenn](#) recalls encountering a maritime map of the Great Loop, a continuous 9,700-kilometer waterway linking the Mississippi River to the Intracoastal Waterway of the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, the Hudson River, the Erie Canal and the Great Lakes, connecting North America through a web of estuaries, canals, rivers and freshwater and saltwater bodies. The map became both framework and inspiration for the Biennial, tying Toronto to a broader geography of ecological, sociological and political disruption.

The Great Loop is an active network in [Céline Semaan](#) and [Jean-Marc Bullet](#)'s *Notebook of Return / Carnet de Retour* (2026), which connects artist gardens and land stewards across multiple sites. Through the circulation of seeds and cultivation practices, gardening becomes an archive and a connective thread across geographies, carrying ecological knowledge and memory from one community to the next. [Brendan Fernandes](#)'s performance *The Calls* (2023), adapted to take place aboard a boat on Lake Ontario, extends the notion of the embodied journey, foregrounding solidarity among places that share histories and ecological and social concerns.

As the Toronto Biennial's title, "Things Fall Apart," suggests, the exhibition confronts the collapse of an entire epistemological and cosmological system that gave rise to today's socioeconomic structures. It acknowledges the impact of imperialism, climate change and unchecked industrial development while turning toward ancestral knowledge and wisdom that, across geographies, can teach us once more the vital bond of respect with the land.

The exhibition draws on Glenn's multiyear investigation into artists who use rupture as an ontological tool to reimagine or revive alternative worldviews. "I have been looking for about a decade now at artists who use rupture as an ontology, as a way of understanding," she told Observer in an interview ahead of the opening. "It becomes a kind of throughline through which they understand their work." That inquiry first took shape in her essay "Notes on Rupture," which considered a group of Caribbean artists and the ways they employed rupture conceptually, formally and materially, and which later became the curatorial proposal she submitted for the Biennial. The notion has only grown more urgent. As Glenn notes in the catalog, Canadian Prime Minister [Mark Carney](#) spoke at the World Economic Forum of political and economic violence as "a rupture in the world order." Shortly after, [Janna Wale](#) and Michaela McGuire-Jaad Gudgihliwah published "[Reflections on Rupture: Mark Carney's New World Order & an Indigenous Response](#)," asking rupture of what, and by whom, and calling for renewed recognition of the epistemologies and ontological systems Indigenous to the land as forms of knowledge that might guide us through it.

This fourth edition of the Biennial officially opened on Sept. 26, with [Rebecca Belmore's](#) performance *Gichigami* (2026), which drew the audience into a procession and collective ritual from Queen's Park to the University of Toronto Art Museum. Leading it was a group of young girls in coats covered with plastic water bottles, their movements producing a sound like waves breaking against the shore. Along the way, they paused to honor an old tree in the park, gathering around it in a circle. At the university, they brought everyone together and closed the performance with a final movement before a monument commemorating the ancestors. The work was inspired by the Nishnaabeg creation story of a flood that left all the animals stranded on the water. "We are in a sea of waste of our own making, and the creation story reminds us that we all need land," the artist writes in an accompanying statement. The performance set the tone at once, operating as both action and collective ritual aimed at restoring an ancient bond with the ancestors and the land.

That impulse sits at the heart of many of the practices on view, approached from different perspectives and embracing a necessarily fluid syncretism that reflects today's global history of exchange and contamination. Artists from the Caribbean are especially attuned to this, since their region, as Édouard Glissant observed—and as Glenn quotes in the catalog—became an early and expansive field in which the results of ongoing creolization could be seen and tested.

Following Belmore's procession, [Raphaël Barontini's](#) performance brought the rhythms of Caribbean Carnival, with all its symbolism of death and renewal, to the front of the University of Toronto's Hart House. His monumental tapestry at the Royal Ontario Museum, staged against the skeleton of a Futabasaurus, pushes this cross-contamination further, becoming an exercise in fluid

mythmaking in which archetypal symbols from different cultures—and from human and animal worlds—merge into a new, hybrid and more syncopated narrative of human evolution.

While the University of Toronto Art Museum and Hart House host most of the works, one of the Biennial's great strengths is how meaningfully it engages its partner sites. A single installation often gains new resonance within its particular context while drawing visitors into the rest of the building and its collections, highlighting perspectives those institutions have themselves increasingly begun to acknowledge.

At the ROM, for instance, one is encouraged to wander through the First Peoples galleries afterward. The dialogue becomes more direct at the Art Gallery of Ontario, where [Dawoud Bey](#) presents photographs and a film from three of his landscape-based projects on the history of slavery in North America, set in conversation with African sculptures and ritual objects from the museum's collection. This encounter across centuries and spaces allows viewers to trace threads between West Africa and the Black diaspora in the U.S. and Canada and to confront the historical rupture of the Middle Passage, the transatlantic crossing at the core of the slave trade.

Cross-cultural and interspecies hybridity also lies at the core of the contemporary mythopoiesis of Martinique-born French Caribbean artist [Julien Creuzet](#), whose digital animations and layered, situated environments imagine an ancestral—or future—posthuman existence underwater. Drawing on symbolic and archival references from both historical and fictional worlds, his video, screened nightly at 10 p.m. through December at Toronto's Sankofa Square and New York's Times Square, becomes a mythological poem in itself, one that encompasses countless further references within its elaborately layered title: *Nos diables rouges, nos derives commotions: De Leau du large, ivrogne, de leau en étendue, pour se laisser dévorer, Gorgone, une surface pour s'étendre, de l'eau une face, se défendre, miroir. Ne pas croiser nos yeux, nos états vitreux, bien-heureux, nos yeux et nos corps pierres. Être tranchée, reflet lâche, où ruisselle, sang hideux. Princesse éthiopienne dit à l'aide. Voir, le jour, noir de pénombre. Nous nous sommes sentis bleuir, liberté des palabres molaires des paléontologues. Analogue, larmes coagulées dans les rigoles, vieux coquillages. Ciel, la mer est jumelle. Comment croire les deep fake, vigie quand nos langues sont des peer-to-peer, à n'en plus finir. Louange sous ciel noir, méduse n'est plus dans le rhizome des météores. (Antiquités orientales, divination et algorithme, danse papillon)*® (2025).*

This kind of epic mythopoiesis, anchored in an ancestral dimension, recurs throughout the show as a way of reimagining both past and future. Especially strong in this respect—and in its use of the imaginative space opened by digital animation—is the speculative science-fiction mythmaking of Lindsay Katsitsakatste Delaronde, staged through Indigenous lenses. Blending Indigenous symbols and epistemologies with a hyper-contemporary aesthetic drawn from video games and augmented reality, the artist envisions a future beyond present-day humanity and the dystopian trajectory of posthumanism. In this post-nuclear aftermath, with human beings driven underground and into the mountains, the only survivors are ancestral beings still aligned with nature. Soul-Hex is an androgynous creature, half human and half cyborg, whose skin bears tattoos of Iroquoian symbols evoking ancient Haudenosaunee agricultural practices of land stewardship, grounded in principles of interconnection, reciprocity and responsibility toward all

living beings. As the “first awakened,” this ancient yet almost alien posthuman being is entrusted with a regenerative ritual meant to initiate a new cycle of life after capitalist collapse. The work exemplifies today’s broader effort to “re-enchant” the machine, as more artists turn to digital technologies to open new spaces for mythmaking, imagine alternative scenarios and reconnect us with ancestral truths embedded in the human subconscious.

[Julianknxx](#)’s *What Colors Can We Dream In This Night Filled With Salt* (2025), screened at Hart House, likewise uses video to revive and renew ancestral bonds. Here, bodies become stages set against the immensity of nature, carriers of time and politics as much as of heritage and tradition. As often in the artist’s work, sound is central, with salt and lullabies serving as conduits for memories and transgenerational bonds that defy space and time. Rather than treating remembrance as something fixed or archival, Julianknxx approaches it as a living, collective ritual that sound can continually renew. Bodies, voices and gestures become vessels through which memory is transmitted and kept in circulation, resisting the invisibility that sets in when too much history, violence and pain accumulate beneath the surface. Light itself performs the same process over the course of the video, emerging gradually from the darkness of generational trauma toward renewed illumination.

Other videos in the Toronto Biennial confront more explicitly the collapse of the grand narratives that have long guided Western civilization, retracing their path toward decline and exposing the ruins that now surround us. [Carolina Fusilier](#)’s *Corrientes Mercuriales* (2023) brilliantly revisits the aftermath of Argentina’s 1990 financial crisis through a more psychological, human lens, interweaving documentary and personal storytelling. Automated mechanical voices and impersonal news reports collide with the emotional, candid account of her father, a stockbroker who lived through that moment. The video lays bare the deeply abstract and inherently arbitrary nature of a financial system that nonetheless determines people’s lives and the fate of an entire country.

Equally powerful and timely in this register of historical unveiling is the work of [Rouzbeh Akhbari](#), an artist, filmmaker and geographer working across exhibition and cinema contexts. Developed over five years of fieldwork and archival research, *Of Wool and Diesel* examines border landscapes and their entanglement with the seafaring histories of the Strait of Hormuz.

The video opens almost as a signal, with pastoral scenes and lights appearing along the shore, before shifting to a shaman who lights a fire and sings of light against hate with almost operatic intensity. Archival materials then enter the narrative, tracing the history of this place, once known as the Beach of Hermuz. In the second chapter, *The Fall*, an old document recounts the loss of Hormuz. *The Letters* focuses on communication between people and the human side of this history, through a wife and a missing sailor. The fourth chapter, *The Risk*, adopts an underwater perspective to reveal the shipwreck, until even the archival materials housed inside the palace are submerged.

As the work unfolds, it becomes a meditation on people caught in wars over resources and on the victims of centuries of trade and commerce. “I can adjust for a premium,” a Chinese-speaking

voice says toward the end. “Any voyage without a trace cannot be recorded later.” It is a logic that persists regardless of the lives that disappear with it. The piece closes by leaving the viewer suspended, as if on a boat or on the shore, for a few minutes of pure contemplation before dissolving into white. With the Strait of Hormuz once again at the center of global attention, the work retraces its longer history, revealing how successive empires have tried and failed to control this waterway so vital to global trade. Iran and the U.S. today, like Portugal and Britain before them, must reckon with the impossibility of ever fully mastering it.

Some text-based works address the arbitrariness and fragility of the ideological systems we are left to inhabit even more directly. At Harbourfront Centre, [Simranpreet Anand](#)’s neon LED signs offer tongue-in-cheek versions of the displays used by shops selling religious goods or spiritual objects. Stylized diamonds accompany the promise of “enlightenment,” exposing how contemporary spirituality has been commodified and reduced to the visual codes of commerce.

Outside in the square, [Coco Fusco](#)’s three murals register the erosion of democracy, civil liberties, peace and environmental justice even more bluntly, through lists of names. Presented across three billboards as contemporary mausoleums or memorials, they list, respectively, artists imprisoned for their creative work, journalists killed on the job in 2024 and environmental activists assassinated that same year.

Other practices in the Biennial return attention to materiality and corporeality—to the physicality of experience and memory as forms of knowledge grounded in the environment, placing body and space back in relation against the digital disembodiment we increasingly experience. Especially relevant here are [Naotaka Hiro](#) and [Cameron Harvey](#), who both engage deeply with material and painting to channel an awareness of the body, of process and of the interplay between material and psychic worlds that shapes our encounter with the world around us. For Hiro, abstraction becomes a vehicle of bodily awareness, blurring the boundaries between internal motion and external expression. Harvey approaches this exchange through ecological change, drawing on the resilience of chaparral after the Malibu fires and connecting environmental transformation to her own experience of displacement and adaptation.

The same attention to the reciprocity of body, matter and landscape is central to [James Perkins](#) and [Solange Pessoa](#), who each rethink what an earthwork can be through direct engagement with natural materials and processes. Perkins buries silk-stretched wooden frames along the shoreline of Fire Island, letting marine and atmospheric conditions shape the work, while Pessoa uses clay, natural pigments and organic matter to create paintings and sculptures in which body and earth remain materially intertwined.

Extending this dialogue, [Wen Liu](#) turns to herbal medicine as both material and metaphor. Her *In Light, Where Edges Yield* (2025) is a human-scale sculpture built around a central spinal column, with Chinese herbs and medicines suspended in tinted resin to form apertures resembling stained glass. Liu began incorporating herbal medicine after her father’s death, turning the work into a kind of altar of healing and mending where bodily vulnerability, transgenerational knowledge and material transformation converge.

Across sites, the Toronto Biennial delivers a clear message: an invitation to reconsider our sense of humanity amid the collapse of century-old grand narratives, drawing on ancestral epistemes to reground existence in the deeper, primordial truths of the land, while underscoring the need for new mythologies and narratives—and proving that, even in times of rupture, artists have never stopped imagining them.

Especially resonant in this sense is Glenn's decision to bring into the exhibition the imaginative world-building of Underground Resistance (UR), the Detroit collective founded by "Mad" [Mike Banks](#) and [Jeff Mills](#) in 1989. Conceived as a movement for "sonic revolution," UR drew in part on the organizing principles of labor unions and turned techno into a tool for collective ritual, shared world-building and mythmaking. This vision expanded through Drexciya, the duo of [Gerald Donald](#) and [James Stinson](#), whose music and visual language opened a kind of sonic third space, building an entire Afrofuturist aquatic mythology around a water-breathing nation descended from pregnant, enslaved African women thrown overboard during the Middle Passage. Across album art, liner notes and related visual work, that mythology grew into a fully articulated sonic and visual cosmology, proving that the speculative imagination of art can serve historical reclamation as much as future-making.

[Taqralik Partridge's](#) *umiakkut (by boat)* (2026) moves in a similar register. At Hart House, it recreates an immersive oceanscape of whispering voices, reflections, shadows and light, revisiting the journey her grandmother and siblings made by umiaq across the Hudson Strait. Moving through the installation, one feels as if crossing the ice and water itself, while the ancestral vessel becomes a means of recovering maritime knowledge and collective memory for Inuit living in a world radically different from that of their parents. It is a hard-to-forget, symbolically powerful installation that crystallizes the Toronto Biennial of Art's larger proposition: that against the rupture produced by the relentless Promethean anxiety of a technology-led horizon, artists continue to pursue forms of mythmaking that resurface ancestral knowledge, helping reorient the human journey toward a better future by turning our attention back to the earth and to our ancestral bond with it.