

CANADIAN BLACK ARTISTS UNITED: JUNE 26, 2022

HON PATRICIA BOVEY

Minister Squires, Minister Smith, Elders, Artists, Guests, and importantly, Yisa Akinbolaji.

In bringing greetings from my Senate colleagues, I congratulate you, Yisa and all involved for organizing Canadian Black Artists United and this inaugural event and exhibition. I applaud you! And, the timing of this transformational organization is serendipitous, as I mentioned in the Senate last week.

I think this is a very important step in recognizing Canada's Black artists, in stemming racism, and in honestly spreading your histories to the rest of Canada and Canadians. With this inauguration, the stars really are aligned, converging with a number of national and international events. It is more than fitting. So, thank you from the bottom of my heart, and thank you from Canadians who are hungry to know about you, your artistic traditions, your dreams and your vision. Yisa, you know I am here to help in the best way I can. My late husband, John Harvard, used to say, "We are all better off when we are all better off". ***You are making us better off!***

What else is going on in this constellation of Black art and black recognition?

Canada has been given a signature opportunity to present the voices of Black Canadians in an international forum -- the Pan African Heritage Museum, due to open in Ghana in late 2023. We are also in the second half of the UN's International Decade for Peoples of African Descent, 2015 to 2024. And, I am now organizing the Senate's third Honouring Canada's Black artists installation.

Let me briefly explain why these connect to Canadian Black Artists United. One of the goals of the UN Decade, as reported to the UN General Assembly in 2015, is to "promote a greater knowledge of and respect for the diverse heritage, culture and contribution of people of African descent to the development of societies... and greater knowledge of and respect for the culture, history and heritage of people of African descent and take all necessary measures to give full effect to the rights of people of African descent." ***You are doing this proactively and with commitment.***

I thank Yisa, too, for his part in the discussions and goal setting for Canada's real and virtual participation in the Pan African Heritage Museum. I am Canada's sole member of the Museum's International Curatorial Council, and can attest to its highlighting the African diaspora's history, cultures and national and global contributions. The museum's theme is *The Sovereign Museum*; their Virtual Museum's title is *The African Knowledge Project*.

Canada's focus, through art from all disciplines, is the past, present and a platform for the future. Enabling young Black Canadians is paramount. The world will learn about the significance of Canada's Black artists' contributions.

Canadians will learn a part of our history which has been ignored. That ignorance has led to enhanced racism and contributed to many societal concerns, including greater poverty in Black communities. Showing the real place of Black art in Canada's fabric will be a gateway for general public and education programs at every level. This IS legacy work.

Canada has many internationally acclaimed Black dancers and choreographers (e.g. Henry Daniels, Lua Shayenne), musicians (e.g. Drake, The Weekend, Meesha Brueggergosman, Oscar Peterson) , artists (e.g. Stan Douglas, Yisa Akinbolaji, Denise Thomosos, Tim Whiten, Karin Jones), writers (e.g. Lawrence Hill, Esi Edugyan), poets (Chantal Gibson, George Elliott Clarke), film makers (e.g. Sylvia Hamilton), to name only a few. Many are thought of as Americans. Canada should be proud of them and honour them.

At the same time, the Senate has been drawing attention to the importance of the work of Black artists in its *Honouring Canada's Black Artists* series. The first, included BC's Chantal Gibson and Manitoba's Yisa Akinbolaji. The second featured Ontario's Denise Thomosos and Tim Whiten. The third is underway!

I hope Canadian Black Artists United and these concurrent endeavours will reverse the marginalization of Black peoples and open doors for established and emerging Black artists in the production and presentation of their work.

Education as noted in the UN report is an "enabling right". These projects are important contributors to education, of and about Black history and realities.

Your work coupled with these projects will present facts, realities, and wider cultural understandings, thus increasing accessibility and opportunities. All this has been mirrored by UBC's Museum of Anthropology's, recent, excellent exhibition, *Sankofa*, a milestone in Canada's recognition of Black history and the creativity of Canadian Black artists.

The work of Canadian Black Artists United also ties into my Declaration Respecting the Essential Role of Artists and Creative Expression in Canada, currently before the Senate. It has received unanimous support from the Senate's Social Affairs, Science and Technology Committee. Among its ten principles, it talks about freedom of expression and association to be accorded to all citizens, including artists; the right to know and participate in the artistic memory, collections, and material and built heritage of all cultural diversities which define our histories, experiences, and traditions; and it underlines that people of all cultural diversities and backgrounds have the right to take part in the arts, with access to attendance at artistic events including music, literature, drama, visual arts, film, dance, and theatre.

The Netherlands and Mexico highlighted the role of museums in their UN Decade projects, and the five UN General Assembly reports since 2015, discuss the need "to promote pride in people's self-identification as Afro-descendent" and "awareness-raising about the principles of equality and non-discrimination and the rights of people of African descent." ***Canadian Black Artists United is doing that!***

Sharna Jackson's book *Black Artists Shaping the World*, showcases international Black artists. No Canadians are represented. ***Canadian Black Artists United may well change that in the next edition.***

Embracing these projects, as part of Canada's actions, will have many worthwhile outcomes, those for Canada's international profile, for citizens at home, and with and in the arts. Throughout wider society, I hope, these important steps will address access for Black Canadians to education, our stages and galleries, and rail against racism and poverty. These are truly meaningful Value Propositions for Canada and Canadians.

The leadership of Canada's Black artists working in all disciplines, and with whom I have been engaged these past many years, has been stellar. ***So too is Canadian Black Artists United.*** Your work is exciting, honest, challenging, and innovative, and looks to the past, while building on the present to secure a good future.

Thank you!