

COVID-19 masks make meaningful, whimsical debuts at art galleries in Vancouver and Banff

[Marsha Lederman](#) Published October 4, 2020



Métis artist Audie Murray created Four-Point Ply, 2019, made of toilet paper and seed beads.

Handout

Great art can come from great challenges. COVID-19 has been a scourge and a torment, but it has also been an inspiration for some artists. Two galleries in the West have installed exhibitions featuring some of this work, much of it

made by Indigenous artists. The work is meaningful, beautiful and often whimsical. It injects some beauty, even humour, into the pandemic experience.

Breathe, an exhibition at the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies in Banff, Alta., features dozens of intricately beaded masks. And in Vancouver, the Living Room exhibition at the Fazakas Gallery, brings together COVID-inspired work – masks and more – by five Canadian artists.

Both shows are installed in gallery spaces, but also have detailed online components, as that is how most people will see them.

I saw [Living Room](#) in person on a sunny fall day, the two works featured in the tiny Downtown Eastside gallery's display windows drawing me in. One, Métis artist Audie Murray's *Four-Point Ply*, 2019, is a roll of toilet paper beaded with Hudson's Bay Co.-inspired stripes, bringing to mind both domestic décor and the blankets that delivered earlier deadly epidemics to Indigenous people on this land. In the other window is Métis artist Marcy Friesen's *Last Breaths*, 2020, a spectacular otter fur mask with beaded straps and adornments.



Marcy Friesen's *Last Breaths*, 2020, is a mask constructed of otter fur, pellon, seed beads, cut beads, beading thread, rope, felt and leather thread.

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It was Ms. Friesen's work that initially gave gallery owner LaTiesha Fazakas the idea for the show – which speaks not just to COVID-19, but the effect the pandemic has had on domestic life.

"So much of our time has now been spent at home. We all have this just surreal experience with that. And I think that there's just so many ways to examine the experience," Ms. Fazakas says. "I also liked the idea of the word 'living.' And having that contrast to the precarious threat to our living – financially, economically, physically."

Inside, the gallery has been set up to resemble a cozy living room, with a blue couch, coffee table and shoe rack Ms. Fazakas brought from home. On the shoe rack sit several pairs of Ms. Friesen's beaded moccasins – more utilitarian (and affordable) versions of her fine art moccasins elsewhere in the gallery on plinths.

Haida artist Trace Yeomans offers another ode to toilet paper, with her playful – but also critical and beautiful – installation, *Eagles & Ravens*, 2020. The 3.7-metre-long ultrasuede “roll” with Haida appliqué is partly unspooled along a white plinth.

Victoria-based artist Carollyne Yardley's take on COVID-19 is an oil painting in a gilded frame. *Zoonetics*, 2020, is a surreal portrait: some sort of animal dressed in an elegant pink jacket with a triple-strand of pearls. Its face is covered in fur and hair braids, and coronavirus-like spikes. The creature's talons poke out of a blue plastic glove.



Zoonetics, 2020, by Carollyne Yardley, sells for \$4,900.

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Ms. Friesen has also made a series of delicate gloves for the show.

Ms. Fazakas was excited by Ms. Friesen's work, which Ms. Fazakas saw as part of [Breathe](#), an extraordinary grassroots effort led by two Métis artists, Ontario-based Nathalie

Bertin and Lisa Shepherd, who is based in British Columbia.



A creation by Lisa Shepherd of Maple Ridge, B.C., entitled Be Well, 2020,

Nathalie Bertin/Handout

A couple of weeks into the pandemic in the spring, Ms. Bertin asked on Facebook: Where are all the beaded masks?

"I was wondering: 'Why am I not seeing artistic creations, especially by Métis people? Because we tend to use these times of upheaval, if you will, to create,' " Ms. Bertin says.



Mask entitled *Pandemic Vogue*, by artist Nathalie Bertin of Newmarket, Ont.

Nathalie Bertin/Handout

Ms. Shepherd, a friend, was having the same thought. The two women connected and put out a call on Facebook. They received some beautiful photos, but also heard from many artists who hadn't been creating because they had felt blocked.

"I think the shock of seeing what was happening around the world just completely overtook them and they just couldn't move forward," Ms. Bertin says. The process of making the masks helped. "It's been amazingly healing for a lot of people, even for me." mur

The mask photos started coming in – not just from Canada but also around the world.

“We realized what was happening through this group is that we were creating artifacts that were depicting a very specific moment in time that not only speaks to Métis or Inuit, or First Nations but also anyone around the world,” Ms. Bertin says. “We’re all going through this together. And at that point we had an idea: Wouldn’t it be great if we saw these masks in exhibition and we sort of put it out there not really thinking it would actually happen. And then it did.”

In late September, Breathe opened at the Whyte Museum, with 45 masks (which are not actual personal protective equipment, organizers explain). They include works by both curators, as well as other artists from across Canada.

As a result of Breathe, some of these works have been acquired by museums as prestigious as the Smithsonian Institution and the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture in Seattle. After Banff, the show is headed for several other stops.

There is also an educational component, available to schools. And the organizers are now working on Breathe: The Second Wave. According to the call for submission, it will be exhibited at Ontario’s Art Gallery of Guelph in 2021, with a strong possibility of travelling elsewhere in Canada.

"It's been a wild, fulfilling, sometimes overwhelming incredible roller-coaster ride," says Ms. Bertin. "It's been incredible to have something so positive come out of such a terrible situation."

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