

## Tree Protection Zone, Hart House Commons, Toronto

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Numéro 104, hiver 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/97765ac>

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Éditeur(s)

Les éditions Esse

ISSN

0831-859X (imprimé)

1929-3577 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Lauder, A. (2022). Compte rendu de [Tree Protection Zone, Hart House Commons, Toronto]. *Esse arts + opinions*, (104), 99–99.



## Tree Protection Zone

Construction work associated with a transformative revitalization of the University of Toronto's St. George campus is the backdrop for *Tree Protection Zone*, a year-long occupation of the green space south of historic Hart House. The ambitious public art project asserts Indigenous presence through the tactics of street art. Inspired by tree-protection hoardings installed in preparation for the forthcoming Indigenous Landscape Project, co-curators Mik Migwans and Maria Hupfield invited an impressive roster of contemporary Indigenous artists, aided by a team of student assistants, to engage with the politics of land and water protection unintentionally conjured by the hoardings.

The banner images by Christi Belcourt and Isaac Murdoch (Onaman Collective), renowned for their visibility at Standing Rock, are direct engagements with this activist imaginary. Belcourt's *Mother Earth Revolution* is a stirring declaration of global Indigenous solidarity. Meanwhile, Murdoch's iconic *Thunderbird Woman* and *Ojibway Said So* proclaim the sacredness of water and soil. Murdoch attributes his visionary iconography to more-than-human inspiration. Freely downloadable from the collective's website for use in land- and water-protection actions, these powerful banners embody an alternative economy of the image untethered by settler constructions of authorship, commodification, and visibility.

A more understated but conceptually charged intervention is Susan Blight's *6 kilometres and 8,000 years long*, which pays tribute to the now submerged Taddle Creek that once flowed through Hart House Commons but has been diverted through culverts and storm sewers to make way for urban development. Blight's pulsing checkerboard of biodegradable stickers alternates between simplified maps retracing the creek's former course and a pledge of remembrance in Anishinaabemowin. Subterranean cavities are

likewise intimated by the prominent orifice bared by one of the tentacled beings populating Shuvina Ashoona's adjacent mural, *Composition (Octopus Transformation)*. Sited adjacent to a colonial cannon, Ashoona's work suggestively threatens to devour such trappings of empire. Like Blight, Carrie Hill engages with the specificities of site. A white pine—the symbol of Haudenosaunee unity and one of the few indigenous tree species to be found at Hart House Commons—is the focal point of *Tewarontanohna (We guard the tree)*, which resourcefully rescues traditional basket-weaving techniques using consumer building materials.

Que Rock's *Every Child is Sacred* is a cathartic memorial to the victims of residential schools painted in a lyrical graffiti style that nods to Woodlands School forebears. International Indigenous wife-and-husband duo Taqralik Partridge and Nils Ailo Utsi also address the theme of missing children through haunting photo-text invocations.

Although the commanding figures of Onaman Collective maintain their original vibrancy, more ephemeral components of *Tree Protection Zone* that gesture towards guerrilla posterizing actions have already begun to weather, unfolding a rare and rewarding temporality of seasonal flux in a city dominated by monotonous glass.

Adam Lauder

**Shuvina Ashoona**  
*Composition (Octopus Transformation)*,  
installation view, 2021.

**Onaman Collective (Isaac Murdoch)**  
*Thunderbird Woman*,  
installation view, 2021.

**Onaman Collective (Christi Belcourt)**  
*Mother Earth Revolution*,  
installation view, 2021.

**Que Rock**  
*Every Child is Sacred*,  
installation view, 2021.

*Tree Protection Zone*,  
exhibition view, 2021.  
Photos : Mikinaak Migwans

**Hart House Commons, Toronto**  
September 8, 2021—August 31, 2022