

## Seen It Say It

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Alisdair MacRae

The African-American Spiritual,  
2007

Mixed media installation

Photo Credit: David Barbour, courtesy of The Banff Centre

Monday, January 26, 2009

### ANTHEM: Perspectives on Home and Native Land

This week Seen it Say it takes a road trip to the blue-collar town of Kitchener, or “KW” as it is affectionately known, to go to the [Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery \(KWAG\)](#). The impetus of the excursion; Anthem: Perspectives on Home and Native Land (on view until March 22) curated by Ryan Rice. Rice has accumulated an impressive CV over the past thirteen years working in every imaginable capacity from technician to chief curator in institutions ranging from the Walter Phillips Gallery to the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Rice, coupled with the subject matter of Canada perked my interest, so into the car we got and made our way to KW.

Anthem brings together seven artists from across Canada to reflect on “home and native land”, words we all know as part of the national anthem. But as Rice points out in his curatorial statement, the anthem is a part of the colonial process, intended to stir pride and reinforce the culturally constructed narrative of the story of Canada. But the idyllic unified Canada our anthem speaks of is far from a reality. We are a group of diverse people, in our daily lives we connect with and resist communities, social and political views are divergent, religion and lifestyle choices are critiqued, we live in a world of both tolerance and bias. So what is your relation to the song and the concept and reality of Canada?

It is no surprise that fisheries officer turned visual artist [Eric Robertson](#) would find inspiration for his work from the finned members of the Canadian community. His contribution, Untitled, 2007 recreates the memorizing spectacle of spawning season in a ceiling suspended installation of red aluminum miniature fish. Employing repetition (there must be over a hundred of those little fish) and motion, the installation sways

slightly as you walk around it, Robertson creates a simply beautiful piece. It is actually quite meditative when you look at for a period of time. Aesthetically this work is highly successful, but that is only half of the equation. Like the beaver, fish have played an integral role in the formation and economy of Canada and before there was Canada, the salmon was the most important source of food for the North West Coast First Nations people. Fishing, and the rights for who gets to fish when and where, remain a contentious issue in British Columbia. Robertson's piece brings all of those issues to the forefront.

The African American Spiritual, 2007 by Alisdair MacRae is simple yet poignant. MacRae takes up religion, specifically how Christianity, the religion of the ruling group, was re-appropriated and adapted by the slaves to meet their needs. Constructing a chapel-like space out of veneer panels, the viewer is invited to sit in a chair and listen to a recording of [Joe Carter](#) on the interdenominational radio program, Speaking of Faith. What is so great about work is that to listen, and you have to listen for a while. Listening is something we don't do enough of. The work slows you down and gets you thinking. It makes one remember that things are never static, life, culture, religion, countries, traditions, etc. are always changing. Nothing is forever. Things have to be able to change to be able to remain viable, and what happens when they do evolve is something new and beautiful. In addressing the theme of an anthem, MacRae's choice of gospel music is excellent. Gospel unified and unifies a people who faced adversity and struggle, it gave them strength and power when they had none.

I've had the good fortune to see [KC Adams](#)'s Hybrid Cyborgs on other occasions and in the context of this exhibition, they are particularly well suited. Adams's images, address racism, stereotyping, and narrative. Yet at the same time, by including the names and vocations of the people in the photos on the wall, she combats all of these things and creates a new narrative. We are compelled to see First Nations people as individuals and not as stereotypes.

I'm not sure that Rice was entirely successful in his aim. While each of the artists provide voice to divergent cultural groups in Canada, I think the works when taken together as a whole are more about the narratives we tell about ourselves and challenging the narratives that other people tell about ourselves, as in the case of Adams' photographs, than they are about Canada and notions of sovereignty. What made this exhibition about Canada is that the artists were all from Canada, not that they addressed Canada specifically. The show could have been called The Stories We Tell and it would have been the same show. But perhaps that is what makes Canada Canada. We are a country made up of stories, lots of different stories from lots of different perspectives, so maybe Rice has achieved his goal. I wonder, what would the song sound like if it did in fact encompass the various narratives that make up the story of Canada, I'd sing it.