

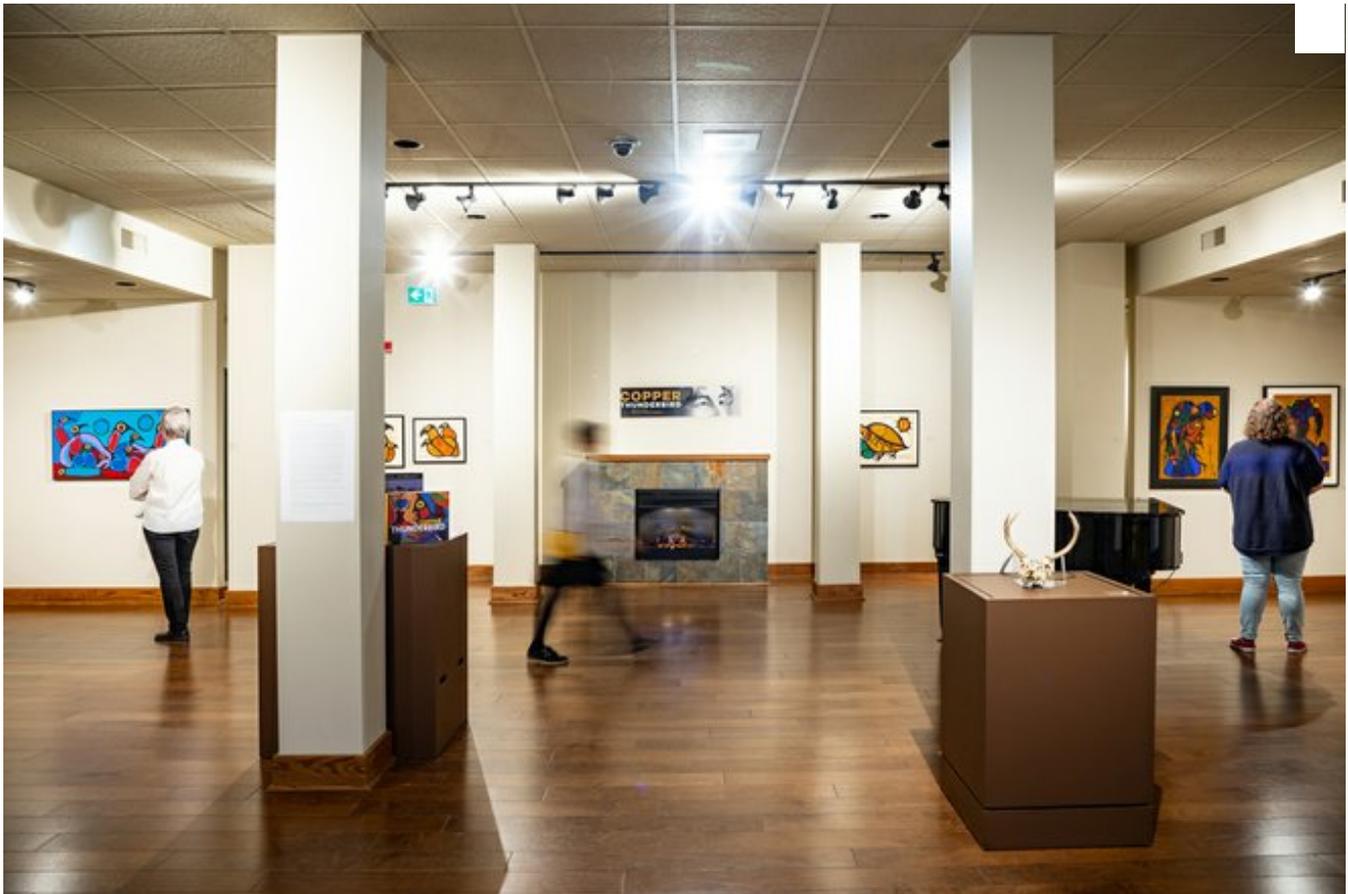
SERIES

Art & Healing: Part 1

Galleries at two Western Canadian hospitals offer respite and rejuvenation during trying times.

by Paul Gessell

November 2, 2020 6:00 PM



Norval Morrisseau, "Miskwaabik Animiiki / Copper Thunderbird" 2020, Buhler Gallery in Winnipeg's St. Boniface Hospital. (photo by Leif Norman)

There's a chapel one floor above the Buhler Gallery in Winnipeg's St. Boniface Hospital. Some people go to the chapel for spiritual reflection and rejuvenation. Many others opt for the gallery.

"The gallery is a very spiritual place," says director, Leona Herzog. "A chapel isn't everybody's choice. People can come to a spiritual place that is not a chapel but serves the same purpose.

"There are so many beautiful notes people have left us in our guestbook about how they came in here and it was a break from pathology, from the sights and sounds and smells and things

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The Buhler is showing *Copper Thunderbird: The Art of Norval Morrisseau* until Jan. 16, in conjunction with a partner show at Urban Shaman, an artist-run centre in Winnipeg. The 32 works at the Buhler highlight the spiritual side of the late Indigenous artist – particularly shamanism and the linkages between the natural and spiritual worlds.

Herzog's favourite painting, *Mother Earth*, made around 1985, shows a female figure surrounded by plants and animals. Half the background is blue and half yellow, pointing to the coexistence of the physical and the metaphysical.



Leona Herzog (left), the director of the Buhler Gallery, poses with Daina Warren, the director of Urban Shaman Contemporary Aboriginal Art, in front of Anishinaabe artist Norval Morrisseau's painting, "Mother Earth," circa 1985, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 48" (collection of Westerkirk Works of Art; photo by Leif Norman)

Many Canadian hospitals exhibit art in hallways and waiting rooms and offer various forms of art therapy. But few have dedicated galleries. The Buhler is one. Another is the McMullen Gallery at the University of Alberta Hospital in Edmonton. There, the gallery is just part of the hospital's

In Toronto, the Mount Sinai Hospital has the Hennick Family Wellness Gallery. In Montreal, at the sprawling McGill University Health Centre, several dedicated exhibition spaces show professional contemporary art, community art and works from the so-called super-hospital's collection of art and heritage objects.



A patient views "Freedom (Walter always has a sense of freedom while wearing his hospital gown)" a fired clay and acrylic work made in 2001 by Edmonton sculptor Ritchie Velthuis. (courtesy the McMullen Gallery)

These are tough times to be running a gallery, especially within a hospital. The Buhler was temporarily closed to external visitors after a recent COVID-19 outbreak in the hospital. But the gallery was staying open for patients and staff, Wednesday through Saturday, from noon to 4 p.m. Any changes will be posted on the gallery's [website](#).

"This is a difficult time for all galleries and being situated in a hospital is adding an entirely new layer of considerations," says Herzog. "The Buhler Gallery is stepping up to address these with creative thinking and new ways to address the needs of visitors."

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"I received a great deal of feedback about how wonderful it was to have the clinic in a space that provided a sense of peace and calm for the 20 to 30 minutes individuals spent there before returning to their busy wards," says Herzog.



A visitor admires Winnipeg artist Shelly Vanderbyl's "pocket paintings" – small oils on canvas displayed in vintage medicine tins – at the 2018 opening of a three-person show, "Hope Healing & Contemplation" at the Buhler Gallery. (photo by Leif Norman)

The Buhler opened in 2007, after Pat Bovey, a former director of Winnipeg Art Gallery, now a Canadian senator, championed it. Funding came from Winnipeg's John and Bonnie Buhler.

Some exhibitions, but not all, have medical themes. Next spring, will see *Dura Mater: Reflections on Neurofeminism*, a joint project between MAWA (Mentoring Artists for Women's Art) and the Manitoba Neuroscience Network. Six Manitoba artists paired with six neuroscientists and will create works based on, or influenced by, research into things like Alzheimer's and fetal alcohol syndrome.

The 2,000-square-foot gallery is located in a century-old building. Herzog treats several of its alcoves as mini-galleries. They have seating, which allows patients who lack mobility or have difficulties concentrating to rest and see a few paintings at a time.

At one time, it was thought that hospitals should exhibit “calming landscapes.” But studies suggest that more challenging art, including abstract paintings, can be beneficial, especially to patients with psychological problems, because they can provoke ideas and conversations.



Brad Necyk, “Mania,” 2017, oil on canvas, 3.5’ x 7’ (courtesy of the artist)

The University of Alberta Hospital is increasingly engaged in placing art beyond the McMullen Gallery. An example is in the psychiatry ward, where works illustrate various human emotions.

Two doctors on that ward, Brian Stonehocker and Andy Greenshaw, donated a 2017 painting, *Mania*, by Brad Necyk, an artist with bipolar disorder. The painting shows Necyk, who recently completed a research-creation PhD in psychiatry at the University of Alberta, amidst a manic episode. His head seems to dissolve before a background of pointillist dots.

Tyler Sherard, the McMullen’s executive director, says art can help patients feel seen.

“Putting a giant artwork on the wall is like putting a plaque of acknowledgement into the world,” says Sherard. “You’re using visual real estate to tell this story and it just happened to be their story. So, they see that and think: ‘That’s exactly what that feels like.’”

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Installation view of Kelsey Stephenson's exhibition "Embodied" at the McMullen Gallery in Edmonton in 2016. (courtesy McMullen Gallery)

The McMullen, which opened in 1986, was incorporated into the original design of the building where it's located. Its name comes from Bill McMullen, a prominent art enthusiast then a member of the hospital's board.

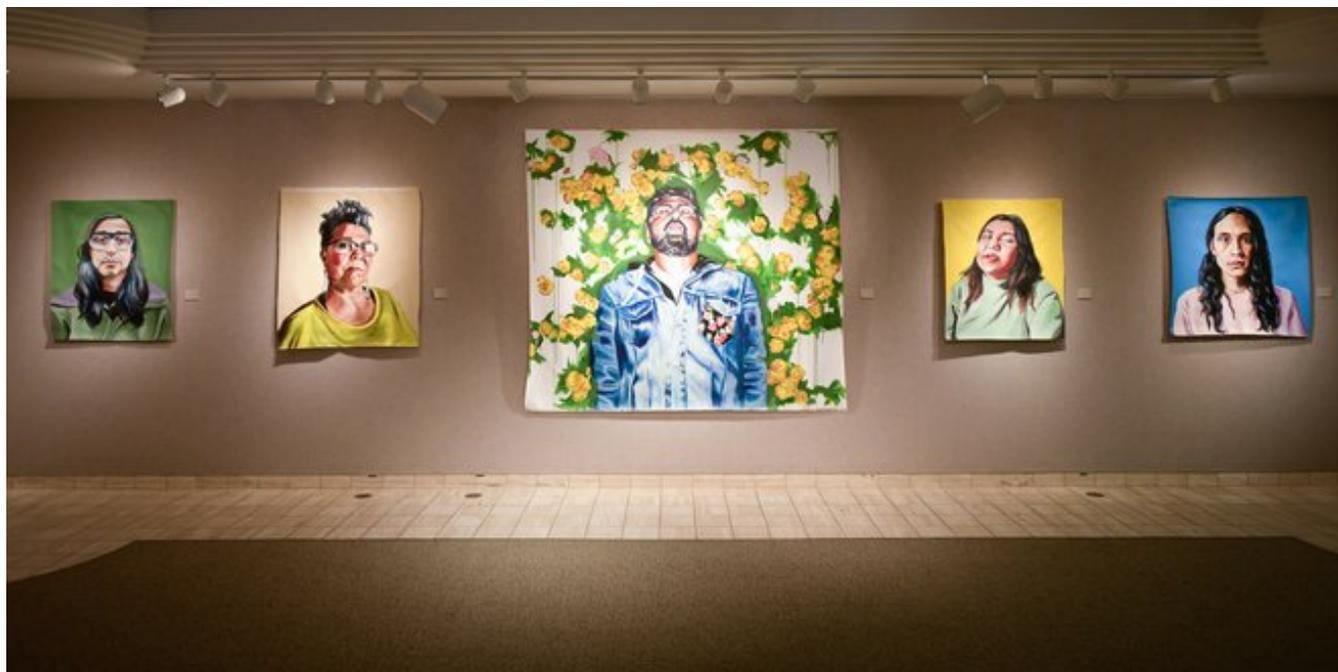
The gallery prioritizes art with medical themes. But it has become more diverse in what it shows, introducing visitors to different media and artists from different backgrounds. The gallery wants to inspire visitors, not just offer a "meditative, calming respite" for people, says Sherard.

The first wave of the coronavirus pandemic interrupted programming at both galleries. The McMullen was getting back in action with *The Living Valley - An Illustrated Study of Lichen*, an exhibition by Edmonton's Amanda Schutz and artists at the Nina Haggerty Centre for the Arts, which supports a collective of artists with developmental disabilities. While it's not open to the public, patients and hospital staff are welcome to view it. Sherard says a virtual reality version is underway and will be posted to the gallery's website.



Tyler Sherard poses with "The Logician," a 1984 oil on canvas by Edmonton artist Hudson Wong. (courtesy McMullen Gallery, Edmonton)

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An installation view of Lauren Crazybull's 2019 exhibition, "The Future All At Once," at the McMullen Gallery in Edmonton. (courtesy McMullen Gallery)

The hospital's artists-in-the-wards program, which matches artists with patients to create art, music or literature, has been temporarily suspended because of funding issues related to the pandemic. Patients have told the hospital that the experience reduces the stress caused by medical treatments.

All art is not appropriate in hospitals. The Buhler, for example, avoids overtly sexual and violent works, while the McMullen eschews art that shows severed body parts.

The University of Ottawa Heart Institute learned about the appropriateness of art almost two decades ago after realizing that blood pressure readings increased when people were tested in one room. The reason: Five paintings by Shirley Brown, *The Queens*, in a nearby waiting room featured malevolent monarchs.

"*The Queens* were creeping them out," a hospital spokesman said at the time.

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Shirley Brown, "The Queens," 1993, acrylic and mixed media on paper, 29" x 23" (courtesy the Canada Council Art Bank)

Those paintings were on loan from the Canada Council Art Bank, which has supplied art to medical establishments for years. In 2007, as part of the Art Bank's 50th anniversary celebrations, it donated scores of prints from its collection to hospitals, schools and galleries.

The Vancouver General Hospital, for example, received 18 prints by such artists as David Thauberger, Bill Lobchuk, Irene Whittome and Claude Tousignant. Forty-four prints were sent to the Kamloops Art Gallery, which used them to start an art-in-hospitals program.

Creepy queens aside, various scientific studies in North America and Europe suggest art helps patients by uplifting spirits, stimulating the imagination, offering spiritual solace and aiding self-awareness.

"Just being exposed to art can be intrinsically healing," says Sherard. ■

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Paul Gessell

Saskatchewan-born Paul Gessell has worked as a journalist across Canada for The Canadian Press, Maclean’s and The Ottawa Citizen, earning two National Newspaper Awards and other honours. He currently focuses on the collision of art and politics.

November 2, 2020 6:00 PM

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