

## Arts scene veterans finally get their due

Recipients of this year's Governor-General's visual arts awards have a decidedly conceptual bent -- and legions of students

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The Canada Council yesterday announced the recipients of this year's Governor-General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts: visual artists Iain Baxter, Eric Cameron, Garry Neill Kennedy and Ian Wallace; sound and performance artists John Osvick and Peter Dinklage; and director and First Nations cultural

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If this list tends toward the highly reflection of what has been most contemporary art over the past several a majority the recipients were born Hungary, Cameron, Wallace and Canada, and Canadian art, absorbed our own.

Several of the artists on the list have their respective realms, and are thus celebrated not just for their own work as artists but also for their contribution to the community.

Garry Neill Kennedy, for example, took over the reins of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design at the age of 32, transforming it into a dynamic international weigh-station for new ideas about art, strategically exploiting Halifax's location between New York and Europe. He ran NSCAD for 23 years, transforming it into arguably Canada's leading centre for art education.

Kennedy is one of Canada's foremost practitioners of conceptual art, and his wall paintings critique everything from consumer decor to the U.S. military. He was honoured in 2000 with a retrospective at the National Gallery of Canada.

Ian Wallace is another great educator from Canadian art's near history. Teaching at the University of British Columbia from 1970 to 1987, and at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design from 1972 until 1998, he has lent a very significant shaping hand to several generations of Vancouver artists. With his deep grasp of critical theory and passionate engagement with art history, he helped to lay the foundations for the photo-conceptual flavour of Vancouver art, a phenomenon that has brought Canada glory on the international stage.

Iain Baxter is another legend from Vancouver's past. Now teaching at the University of Windsor, he came on the art scene in the sixties as part of the collective N.E. Thing Co., a creative coupling with his then-wife Ingrid Baxter. The pair produced an extraordinary range of work in performance, photography, electronic communication and sculpture, creating a richly imagined mock-bureaucracy with themselves as administrative heads. Following the dissolution of N.E. Thing Co. in 1978, Baxter has continued to make art independently. One characteristically creative recent series involved preserving immersed stuffed animals in glass jars.

Eric Cameron is another educator/artist. Having taught art history and critical theory at University of Leeds, University of Guelph and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, he, too, has influenced several generations of artists with his exacting and scrupulous approach. (He now teaches at the University of Calgary.)

His own work is disciplined to an extreme point that few artists have matched, with his best known project being the Thick Paintings begun in 1979 and continuing today. These works involve dipping various found objects repeatedly in white paint, often hundreds of times, until the originating forms are entirely obscured in voluptuous and sinuous abstract form.

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From the realm of performance and sound, the prizes to multi-disciplinary Toronto artists John Oswald and Istvan Kantor should help to grow larger audience for two intriguing practitioners.

Oswald is the self-described master of "plunderphonics." He borrows music, whether it be classical or popular, and subjects it to a sensitive and sophisticated series of edits and digital manipulations. Last year (with Susan Hood), he presented a solo dance opera called *Spinolver* in Berlin. Recently, he presented a new work at Avatar artist-run space in Quebec City, a visual and sound work that presents a cast of gradually morphing, interchanging characters.

Kantor's art tends toward the extremes of human experience. Earlier important works involved the use of his own blood in performance, and he waged a series of "surprise blood gifts" in museums, in which he painted with his own blood on gallery walls. Rebellious and anti-authoritarian by inclination, Kantor (a.k.a. Monty Cantsin) represents a neo-Dada stream in contemporary art, using video, performance, robotics, installation and sound to critique technology and humankind's place within it.

Tom Hill, who is the director of the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ont., is another rebel spirit. A talented curator and agent provocateur, Hill has spent his career finding ways to create expression for aboriginal people in Canada, fostering an appreciation of a misunderstood and neglected legacy. Leading the Woodland Cultural Centre since 1982, he was responsible for the seminal show Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers (with Elizabeth McLuhan), as well as the 1988 Vancouver Art Gallery project titled Beyond History (with Karen Duffek), which brought together the work of 10 First Nations contemporary artists.

Each recipient will receive a cash prize of \$15,000. The awards will be presented at Rideau Hall in Ottawa on March. 10

This year's jurors were artists Micheline Beauchemin, Evergon, Edward Poitras, Tom Sherman, and Takao Tanabe, as well as arts consultant Ian Lumsden.



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