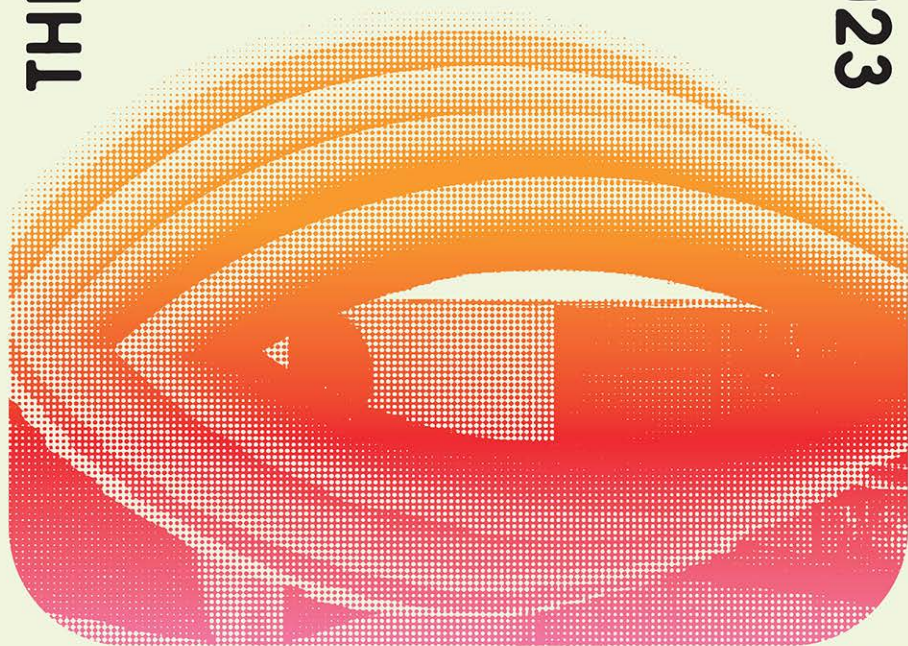


THE UNCONTAINABLE COLLECTIONS RESEARCH PROJECT 2023

PERMANENCE/
IMPERMANENCE

Allison Glenn

Interview Transcript



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Hugh LeRoy, *Rainbow Piece*, 1972, York University

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Art Gallery of York University

Uncontainable Collections Research Project 2023
Permanence/Impermanence: The Life of Public Art

Interview with Allison Glenn by AGYU (Allyson Adley & Jenifer Papararo)

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The following interview with with US-based curator and writer Allison Glenn is part of the Art Gallery of York University's Uncontainable Collections Research Project, an annual workshop series initiated in 2022 as part of our drive to make York University's art collection more accessible for research purposes and to the public. It is a program in which we are learning in public, wanting to make our process of research and knowledge-gathering transparent and in the present with our audiences and colleagues.

This second edition is developed under the theme *Permanence/Impermanence: The Life of Public Art*, which aims to learn from involved arts practitioners the challenges and importance of public art, addressing the very concept of 'public' and 'publicness' and re-evaluating how to engage with communities and record histories. Time is a key motif we draw through this interview — time as it relates to histories, particularly who and what gets represented and the power structures that control these decisions. The following conversation re-orienting our understanding of how public art can function and exist as an alternative to traditional practices. Most notably, it turns away from historic and commemorative monuments and grand formalist gestures that demand space and define time as permanent.

This interview is one of four engagements with curators and artists who conceive of and present counter-models to the conventions of public art. We engaged a series of practitioners who understand public art as a form that emerges with an acknowledgement of the time in which it was produced, and with an understanding of the possibility of accepting impermanence: **Allison Glenn** (US), **Vanessa Kwan** (Canada), **Mohammed Laouli** (France, Germany, and Morocco), and **Raqs Media Collective** (India).

These interviews were conducted in preparation for an online panel discussion, addressing the principles and ideals of democracy in how public space is inhabited; how decolonial acts of resistance de-centre monuments that glorify settler-colonial histories; what role communities can play in the commissioning of public art; and the limitations and risks of working in public spaces.

Six interview questions form the basis of these conversations. Each participant received them in advance of a virtual meeting, which is transcribed below. Preliminary questions were workshopped with York University graduate class ARTH 6000, led by professor Anna Hudson including Abbey Humphreys-Morris, Kimberley Rush-Duyguluer, Jamie Cameron, Zachary Scola-Allison, Bahareh Rostakiani, Isabelle Segui, Julia De Kwant, and Rana Khattab.

AGYU: *We thought we should begin this workshop series by unpacking some of the vocabulary that surrounds public art. With this in mind, we highlight the word public, and ask, what is your understanding of publicness as it relates to public art, the public sphere, and public space? How does your understanding of public inform your approach to curating and producing within this realm?*

Allison Glenn: This question is really exciting, and a great place to start. By making it plural, the word public starts to be an idea: *publics*. Because there are multiple intersecting publics engaging with any particular site or space at any given time. I would say that one of the most important publics is the largely accidental multi-generational public: somebody who did not necessarily have the intention to visit a work in a public space or to experience an artist's response to a monument or a site.

When entering museums, we all can understand that there are so many barriers to entry. Sometimes that means understanding where the front door is. Or if, for example, you have accessibility needs and cannot ascend a staircase.

Is there a cost of admission?
What is this place?
How am I supposed to behave here?
What am I going to see?

All of these are major questions which we take for granted as practitioners. When someone elects to walk into a sculpture park, public art installation, or other artworks on view, what is going to encourage and entice them to engage further? Will it be interpretive elements? Or the relationship that an artwork has to their body? Scale, of course, always comes into play. How accessible is the language used? Is it translated?

I have a great example from my own experience working at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. During my time there, I was responsible for the outdoor sculpture collection, on the museum grounds. A former colleague's research into visitorship and attendance highlighted that a large Spanish-speaking population was engaging with the grounds. At that time, Crystal Bridges was rolling out bilingual wall text across the campus, including labels for all works in the collection and temporary exhibitions. From this colleague's research, it became clear that our priority should be translating the outdoor sculpture labels into Spanish.

This experience is one of many that informs how thinking about publics

guides my approach to curating. This and other experiences, including working on *Prospect.4* Triennial, have taught me to think broadly about both communities and collaborators. All of these people are stakeholders. As curators working in the public realm, it's integral that we make sure to think critically about how we're communicating and engaging with all of these various stakeholders, which requires a different kind of curatorial and interpretative methodology than the traditional white wall or black box gallery space.

AGYU: *Public art has often been associated with principles and ideals of democracy in how public space is inhabited. When art is placed in civic spaces can it reveal, interrogate, and disrupt the takeover and monopoly of public space by private capitalist interests. What role can public art play in expanding and amplifying our claim to public spaces?*

AG: I am going to talk about a recent commission that I am working on with David Adjaye for Counterpublic. When Counterpublic invited me to think about the St. Louis Place neighborhood, that invitation included two potential venue partners: The Griot Museum of Black History and the George B. Vashon Museum of African American History. Lois Conley is Executive Director of The Griot Museum, which is housed in a building originally constructed to house a Catholic school, and Calvin Riley is Executive Director of the Vashon Museum, housed in a historic mansion built in the late-nineteenth century for prominent businessman James Meagher. Both museums are founder-run, and both directors also have curatorial roles within their institutions. Both institutions are located on a street in St. Louis that used to be called Millionaires Row in a neighbourhood plotted and developed by John O'Fallon, who, at the time, was one of the wealthiest and largest slave owners in Missouri.

When Lois acquired the building that houses The Griot, she also acquired a few plots of land around it with the vision for a sculpture park. When we spoke about her organization's mission, she was excited about The Griot's role as a Black history museum. Standing in present-day St. Louis, on land "acquired" by the United States as part of the Louisiana Purchase made possible only after Haiti's successful independence movement, I began to notice connections to larger diasporic African traditions, notably that a griot is a storyteller, and that griot is also the national dish of Haiti.

I was already thinking about David's work— namely, about *Asaase*, a large conical maze-like sculpture that takes its name from the Twi word that means "earth." He realized his first rammed earth sculpture for Antwaun Sargent's Social Works exhibition in Gagosian in New York in 2021, and I was really curious about what that work might look like in

public space. The idea for the *Asaase* sculpture developed when David visited his ancestral village in Akwapim, Ghana, to build a country home for his family. The *Asaase* sculptures are always created from material from the site that they're located at. So, in this particular instance, it would be the opportunity for David to realize his first autonomous public sculpture in a distributed form across a couple of plots of land. It would also provide an opportunity for the Griot to anchor their larger mission, and vision for the sculpture park, to a conversation of the influence of West African architectural forms.

St. Louis Place neighbourhood has dealt with a lot of the same challenges of distribution and redistribution of wealth, redlining, and the relocation of largely underserved populations seen in many cities in United States, including Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. The Griot is located about a mile from the former site of Pruitt-Igoue, a mid-twentieth century housing development designed by Minoru Yamasaki, and across the street from the future site of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency's (NGA) main campus. The NGA is a US intelligence and combat support agency, who acquired land by eminent domain.

As I understand it, there are a few developers that have similarly been buying up the lots around The Griot in anticipation of the completion of the NGA's campus and the capital it could bring to the neighborhood; increasing property values and more. However, this future projection creates a sense of uncertainty not only for the community that currently lives there but also for The Griot. In this regard, the opportunity to feature David Adjaye's sculpture is significant, since he is (truly) a globally renowned architect. *Asaase III* further anchors The Griot to this neighborhood and community, and provides additional opportunities to engage new visitorship to The Griot—including the communities and publics in St. Louis who would not think to visit The Griot or had not been aware of the work of The Griot. Adjaye's sculpture anchors this conversation, affirming that The Griot is an anchor in this community, so as to not face potentially being pushed out, or other challenges that smaller organizations face in gentrifying and changing neighborhoods.

It also will provide an opportunity to engage people outside of the Museum.

A crucial piece of my proposal for this work included a two-year fellowship, with the goal to hire a BIPOC fellow to care for and program the sculpture. The vision for the fellowship was to offer a pipeline into the field, whether it's for conservation of outdoor sculpture, as an art handler, or in museum education. Through a collaboration between the The

Griot, St. Louis Art Museum (SLAM), and Counterpublic, the Growing Griot Fellow will program the sculpture for two years, receiving mentorship support from SLAM for the conservation of the work. I can't believe Counterpublic was able support this proposal, because it was a massive ask. But they were able to fully fund it.

The Mellon Foundation funded the 2-year Growing Griot Fellowship. It really is an opportunity to think about the long-term engagement and how to embed the work within the mission and activities of The Griot. After this conversation, I have my first call with the team to think about the programming, so it's kind of exciting.

AGYU: That is exciting. It's opening so soon. Will it open with the opening of Counterpublic as well?

AG: The footings have been poured, and the earth will be rammed over the first half of the triennial. The intention is to really show the process—to show how it is being constructed, with earth and soil that is sourced from St. Louis and from that site. During the excavation, before the footings were poured, the team found a few building foundations in brick, the red brick that St. Louis is very well known for. It was really kind of exciting to unearth that brick and to incorporate it into the work. It will either be incorporated into the sculpture itself or in the seating. At the July 15 closing, the work will be officially donated and on view.

AGYU: *In recent years, we have witnessed a global public reckoning centring around monuments that represent and glorify settler-colonial histories. Decolonial acts of resistance have in part focused on the defacing and dismantling of these signifiers of imperial domination. How have these recent developments impacted understandings and attitudes towards public art and how has it impacted the field? Does the backlash speak to the obsolescence and futility of monuments or can new monuments be reimagined through a decolonial lens? Who and how do we decide who or what gets commemorated?*

AG: I actually looked at two examples to answer this, because I think sometimes tangible outcomes are the best examples to use. I think there are two recent examples that are important. One is Simone Leigh's *Sentinel (Mami Wata)*, 2020–21. It was featured as part of *Prospect.5*, which was co-curated by Diana Nawi and Naima Keith. This sculpture is particularly resonant for me, as I was living in New Orleans, and working for *Prospect.4*, when the monument to Confederate General Robert E. Lee was removed. So to see Simone's work unveiled on January 22, 2022, about five years later, in the same space is one of those remarkable moments, and a great example of how curators, art-

ists, and arts organizations engaging in public space are able to respond to this time we are living in.

The circle that held the towering, columnar plinth used to be called Lee Circle, and, in 2021, it was renamed Egalité Circle. The sculpture [Leigh's *Sentinel (Mami Wata)*] is a snake wrapped around a slender, elongated female body, whose form also kind of resembles a spoon. The form is not a traditional Greco-Roman sculpture; the iconography is derived from different sources. The design is inspired by an amalgam of references to the African diaspora that are very present in the city. *Sentinel (Mami Wata)* represents a water spirit shared by many African cultures, and the spoon shape is an important symbol of status in the Zulu culture. The placement of the sculpture itself evades the hierarchies established by the Lee monument—it's in a traffic circle at the end of the central business district as you are moving from the arts district to what would be considered uptown. The plinth on which the Lee statue had been is monumental—you have to crane your neck to see it. Leading up to this towering columnar plinth is a smaller stepped concrete platform, and it was on this that Leigh's sculpture was placed. There is much more of a relationship to a human scale. In placement alone, it really subverted a lot of these hierarchies.

I think another great example is Kehinde Wiley's *Rumors of War*, which was created in 2019 and unveiled in Times Square before being permanently installed at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. This was commissioned by curator Valerie Cassel Oliver. I'm actually going to read a bit of the artist statement because it is really wonderful.

The inspiration for *Rumors of War* is war—is an engagement with violence. Art and violence have for an eternity held a strong narrative grip with each other. *Rumors of War* attempts to use the language of equestrian portraiture to both embrace and subsume the fetishization of state violence. New York and Times Square in particular sit at the crossroads of human movement on a global scale. To have the *Rumors of War* sculpture presented in such a context lays bare the scope and scale of the project in its conceit to expose the beautiful and terrible potentiality of art to sculpt the language of domination.

The work was thematically tied to a series of paintings he'd made in the past, also called *Rumors of War*, where he was replacing traditional white subjects on horseback with young black men wearing contemporary fashion. Both *Sentinel (Mami Wata)* and *Rumors of War* have had a presence in major cities, but also in exhibition contexts. A version of *Sentinel (Mami Wata)* was on view at the Venice Biennial last year, and

I believe it will travel to Boston for the ICA (Institute of Contemporary Art) presentation of Simone's work.

These works represent how sculpture can engage with a site and have perhaps many simultaneous readings. Or how differently a work may be received from one location to another, how the site really determines the context, which we totally understand as curators, you know, but thinking about it in a way that relates to public art. Both Simone Leigh and Kehinde Wiley's works were shown in multiple contexts, and each have a different kind of reception and power, but both speak to the larger asks that this global public reckoning is presenting.

There's a third work that I should mention that has not yet happened. My colleagues at Counterpublic, including New Red Order, Risa Puleo, and James McAnally, are working on the repatriation of the last [Indigenous] mound in St. Louis. I think it's really remarkable. It demonstrates a very different kind of engagement, the repatriation of Sugarloaf Mound back to the Osage nation.

The Osage Nation purchased part of Sugarloaf Mound in 2007, and the sacred site was reabsorbed into the nation through property, extending Osage territory from the site of their displacement in Oklahoma back to their ancestral homeland. For their contribution to Counterpublic, curated by Risa Puleo, Anita Fields and her son Nokosee Fields have constructed an installation—*Way Back* is the name of the work—that is going to include 40 wooden platforms, painted and embellished with ribbons and tile, with a sound component. *Way Back* will invite visitors to gather in physical relation to each other, to Sugarloaf Mound, and to Osage ancestors, history, and legacy. It is an anti-monument, in a sense. Each platform is embellished with ribbons that reference Osage cosmologies of balance between sky, water, and earth, and Nokosee is making a composition for wind instruments. After the exhibition, the platforms will travel to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where they will be distributed to Osage community members, completing the link between the current home of the Osage nation and its ancestral homelands.

I have been talking with Risa a lot about the monumentality and permanence of David Adjaye's work in comparison to the subtle gestures that are happening at Sugarloaf Mound; permanence versus a kind of impermanent activation.

AGYU: This draws very different responses to replacing monuments in public, but also how to engage with time, with a sense of permanence. What gets commemorated, how long does it get commemorated, how do we allow for histories to change and reveal themselves?

I am going to move on to the fourth question: *What role can community members play in the commissioning of public art? Should they be part of the consultation process with artists and what can meaningful community input and engagement consist of and look like? Do the processes of community involvement and the integration of community voices matter as much or more than the resulting artwork?*

I have read about your exhibition on Breonna Taylor and the extent to which you consulted with and worked with her mother. It may not be completely tied to public art, but it is an interesting precedent in terms of looking at how communities—and in this case, family members—of someone who is being commemorated get consulted.

AG: Absolutely. *Promise, Witness, Remembrance* was a departure from traditional curatorial methodologies that inform museological approaches to developing exhibitions.

A great example of this is Cherry Groce Memorial Pavilion in London, which was commissioned by the Cherry Groce Foundation, to create awareness and understanding of the life of Cherry Groce and her family; realized by Adjaye and his team. Groce was shot in her home, in front of her own children, by the Metropolitan police on September 28, 1985. She lived but was paralyzed and eventually died from her injuries.

Adjaye's team worked really closely with the family and the community, and the pavilion was designed to incorporate the existing features of Windrush Square, which is where the work is positioned, engaging the angular forms of the landscaping and lawn areas and the neighboring memorial to African and Caribbean soldiers. Formal decisions, such as the use of a single column to represent Cherry's strength, and the roof intended to provide protection and shelter for the Brixton community, are driven by the intention to engage with the surrounding community.

That is one example that predates our work in St. Louis: An architect creating a memorial in public space that engages with family, community, and histories.

To speak directly to your question about the exhibition at the Speed Art Museum, I'd like to return to our earlier conversation about a non-traditional definition of public art—*art for publics*. It was really important for me to work in concert with Tamika Palmer (Breonna Taylor's mother), the Louisville Steering Committee, and the National Panel of Advisors, while also considering what a first-time visitor to the Speed Art Museum might experience. The architecture of the Museum includes the original building, constructed in 1927, and a new wing where the

entrance is located. The original building has an ascending staircase, a very traditional, grand museum entrance that sits on a major street but no longer admits visitors. To go inside, you actually have to walk around the building and enter in the back, which opens up onto the University of Louisville campus, and an adjacent parking garage. For a first time visitor, there's already a question of "where is the front door?"

In light of this, we made sure that Amy Sherald's portrait of Breonna Taylor was on your sight line the minute you walked into the museum, visible from the entrance. Even if there were questions of "do I have to pay to get in here, what am I supposed to be wearing? Can I be here?" you at least had an anchor, and knew where you were going. Calling people into a space can be informed by seeing something familiar, followed by a sigh of relief: "oh, this is what I'm here for." The painting acted as an anchor to the experience of being in the museum.

I think community members can play an incredible part. Turning back to Counterpublic, I had the opportunity to learn from the Counterpublic Community Report, which is very in-depth. There was also a community listening session, in response to *Asaase III*, and I received general feedback about the sculpture that we did integrate into the arrangement of the fragments across space.

The *Asaase* sculpture is a contained form, a maze-like structure that has an entrance, and culminating exit, but broken up across public space it becomes a series of fragments that are almost like rooms, to be programmed or for gathering. The fragments are also of various heights and lengths, though they're all relatively the same depth. There was some feedback from the community that we should create more space in between a few of the pieces, with questions about safety, questions about visibility. In listening to that feedback, we pivoted part of the layout so that there was more space given to the tail of the sculpture, more space between those fragments.

The question that remains for me is, *How can an exhibition engage systems of power?* The sculpture is just the beginning, and there are so many other opportunities, through the programming of this work, for it to be a convener of communities.

I've talked to a lot of people in St. Louis who have not been to The Griot. And it's exciting, knowing that there are many different kinds of publics who may now have an opportunity to understand a museum and collection that they did not necessarily know before. This is not just those who aren't necessarily museum-goers who hadn't attended; it was actually many people who are very involved in the field—very involved

as collectors, as board members of various organizations, as curators, you know, colleagues—who shared they hadn't been to The Griot. Either they didn't know about it, or they perhaps didn't prioritize it. I can't speculate. Sometimes the publics we're looking to engage are in our own backyards, right? I think I'm getting a little tangential. But the idea is that museums always need to attract and appeal to those who aren't going to museums. Sometimes those who go to museums need to really think about where and how they're visiting these different kinds of sites of knowledge. And I do believe that public art can impact that.

AGYU: Yes, and you just brought us to the next question: *do you see limitations to working in the public realm, from all sides, not just simply in terms of audience engagement but also, in terms of material? We use the term platitudes of accessibility and inferences of permanence. Maybe it would be better to turn that, after listening to your responses to drawing out the risks involved in public art; the public can be an unsafe space. When you are putting work out into this realm, how do you mitigate the risks of harm, not just to the audience who is potentially encountering a work without their consent? So it's more like a happenstance, encounter or harm to the artist and subject, while also kind of challenging conventions, norms and presumptions.*

AG: Yes, that's a great question. I mean, there's so much we engage with without our consent on a daily basis, just ambling through a city. So, I think a lot about consent, when it comes to advertising and other kinds of forms of communication, but I haven't quite resolved the idea of consent as it relates to public art. I don't have a resolved position on that yet. I am learning and growing, but need to think about that question more. Some of the risks involved with *Asaase III* are ones that you've mentioned, and the decisions in lighting, benches, facilities, and programming work to address them. Knowing that The Griot has an elevator and a ramp is very helpful because that means that the building's facilities are accessible.

Another risk is public reception. You can never imagine or anticipate responses. In public space like this (even though it is on private property, the sculpture is on a corner next to two bus stops) there is no way you can miss it. There's a lot of risk around perception and acceptance. Hopefully, with the Growing Griot Fellow Ousmane Gaye thinking critically about programming the sculpture, we can work to learn and listen, and to mitigate and respond well to community concerns.

I want to mention one of the limitations that I think is really important to note, and it's something that I've observed while working with various facets of public art: and that is funding. How artists are supported, and

whether they are provided adequate resources is a larger challenge that I've observed. The cost and budgetary implications for site-specific and new public commissions can far exceed that of traditional museum or gallery exhibitions, and often a reliance on external funding is necessary to realize projects of scale. Artists who are represented by galleries that are able to support production costs can be placed in a position to more readily engage in the creation of public works, which results in an inherent imbalance in opportunities for artists at various skill levels and stages of their career. It's a big red flag for me in the field right now.

AGYU: Yes, I agree with you. It's part of who gets to choose what to commemorate, even going back to the question of who gets to make the decision, and who gets selected to do that?

The last question: *how does the body or organization that commissions and/or owns a public work of art affect the public's perception of the work and/or their investment in maintaining it and seeing its value?*

AG: I think intention and intentionality are core considerations. The example of Counterpublic's work with David Adjaye's sculpture is a great one—really thinking about the commitment to situating the work in the collection appropriately and in the community, and building the fellowship into the commission so that there are resources and external funding to support the success of the work in this small-scale, founder-run museum. It's really about intention and building in a structure that maintains consistent engagement with the work, including the care and conservation of it.

Allison Glenn is a curator and writer deeply invested in working closely

with artists to develop ideas, artworks, and exhibitions that respond to and transform our understanding of the world. Glenn's curatorial work focuses on the intersection of art and publics, through public art, biennials, special projects, and major new commissions by a wide range of contemporary artists. She is one of the curators for the Counterpublic 2023 triennial, running April 15 to July 15, 2023 in St. Louis, presenting the work of Sir David Adjaye OM OBE, Matthew Angelo Harrison, Mendi + Keith Obadike, and Maya Stovall, in collaboration with The Griot Museum of Black History and the George B. Vashon Museum. Glenn received substantial critical and community praise for her curatorial work in the 2021 groundbreaking exhibition at the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky titled Promise, Witness, Remembrance an exhibition that reflected on the life of Breonna Taylor and centered on her portrait painted by Amy Sherald. The New York Times selected the exhibition as one of the Best Art Exhibitions of 2021. Her writing has been featured in catalogs published by The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Prospect New Orleans, Princeton Architectural Press, Studio Museum in Harlem, California African American Museum, Kemper Art Museum, Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, and she has contributed to Artforum, ART PAPERS, Hyperallergic, Fresh Art International, ART21 Magazine, and Gulf Coast Quarterly, amongst others. She was listed on the 2022 ArtNews Deciders list and the 2021 Observer Arts Power 50 List.

The Uncontainable Collections Research Project presented by the Art Gallery of York University is a series which aims to serve as a pedagogical tool for faculty, students and arts practitioners while also informing the development of collection policies that promote ethical and current practices of collections care as our gallery expands and transitions into the Goldfarb Gallery of York University. This transformation will include the renovation of our current spaces into a Visible Vault for the University's art collection which includes over 1700 works. Each workshop in the Uncontainable Collections series is anchored by a small selection of works from connected streams through the collection, as well as topics pertaining to contemporary strategies for collections management such as: acquisitions, community engagement, conservation, education, interpretative planning, repatriation, and the ethics of museological care.

This iteration *Permanence/Impermanence: The Life of Public Art* of the Uncontainable Collections series was conceived and produced collaboratively by AGYU staff Allyson Adley, Liz Ikiriko, and Jenifer Pappararo.