

McMullen Gallery (on behalf of Friends of University Hospitals) nominates *No Place* by artist Emmanuel Osahor for the 2020 Eldon + Anne Foote Visual Art Prize.

*No Place* was an installation featured at McMullen Gallery in the University of Alberta Hospital, from January 6 to March 7, 2020. The installation was comprised of six recent paintings of real and imagined landscapes within Edmonton, a 30-foot by 8-foot living wall of tropical plants, and a soundscape of the Edmonton River Valley. This installation explored the tension of failure and impossibility within utopic desire, while also conveying the persistence of hope that is at the core of the human experience.

When Emmanuel Osahor emigrated from Nigeria to Canada, what he expected was a utopia. Unaware of Canada's similar colonial legacy, and the consistent mirage of capitalist visions of paradise, Canada was placed on a pedestal since it was labelled "developed", and Nigeria "developing". After witnessing the realities in both countries, and with a growing awareness of current ecological, social and political turmoil, Osahor understands now that even as utopic visions of progress and development are created and pursued across the world, poverty, marginalization and separation continue to exist. *No Place* is a sensitive, smart, and subtle challenge to systems of colonialism and capitalism.

McMullen Gallery showed *No Place* in the early part of 2020, and no one at that time would know what was to follow that year. *No Place* discretely rallies the viewer to concern themselves with equity and justice for the most vulnerable populations in our communities. It's as if this installation was prescient of the primary challenges that our world would face as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The houseless have been among the most vulnerable to the virus and their challenges in Edmonton came to the fore with the establishment of Camp Pekiwevin, a solidarity-driven, multi-cultural coalition to uplift the marginalized and the broader community.

Further, Black and First Nations populations are at the greatest risk of contracting the disease and becoming seriously ill. Black Lives Matter became one of the most significant movements of the past century. "Black and Indigenous solidarity in Pekiwevin and the world over is a rebuke to capitalism and colonialism – A project that relies on dividing us by race and class to prevent our collective liberation."<sup>1</sup> *No Place* created an oasis that gave visitors an opportunity to challenge their own perceptions of society, home, and equity.

With *No Place*, Osahor draws on a number of artistic traditions. He embraces his foundations as a painter yet is constantly subverting that by using non-traditional substrates (concrete, plastic tarp), and impermanent materials that allows for change or deterioration to take place. These subversive devices contribute to the decolonization of art history – embracing materials that have an impermanent quality and low material value and highlighting the story of diaspora and displacement through them. The ephemeral nature of the media in *No Place*

reflects the reality for so many in Canadian society: that the utopian life of comfort and security can be fleeting or eternally unattainable.

With *No Place*, Osahor builds on the tradition of installation art by drawing on everyday materials and new media to create an immersive experience. He brilliantly engages all of the senses in this installation – the sounds of the birds, and traffic of the urban river valley, the smell of the soil and vegetation, the tactility of the plastic tarps, smooth plant leaves, and rough concrete. One's entire being is consumed by the experience of this installation, bringing the viewer into a moment and a feeling that connects directly to their own lives and their own associations with the senses that are engaged. Further, the myriad senses that are engaged create an accessibility to this exhibition that is unique. Individuals with visual impairment, for example, may experience the sounds of the river valley and the scent of the fresh foliage.

By using an assemblage of media, Osahor skillfully uses a strategy of appealing to the viewer's emotions. The vivid greens of verdant plants, the luscious and alluring landscapes in the paintings draw you in. Then once the viewer is physically and emotionally engaged within and among this scene, the work delivers challenging messages. Commonly found materials ground the work in familiarity, immediately connecting with the viewer's experiences and knowledge. These symbols of home, domesticity, shelter, and health are encoded in the experience of the artwork.

Emmanuel Osahor's *No Place* invited visitors to take care of their own wellness through the physical experience of the installation. Once engaged, the visitor is asked to contemplate the accessibility of basic comforts and human rights for all. Home and shelter are not a given in this society, particularly over the past year with the presence of a global pandemic and overwhelming economic uncertainties that have threatened basic human needs. The social movements that have dominated over the past year demonstrate a shift in society towards community care. *No Place* celebrated the need to care for our communities while caring for ourselves.

<sup>1</sup>[www.theprogressreport.ca/collective-liberation-through-occupation-camp-pekiwewin-is-the-world](http://www.theprogressreport.ca/collective-liberation-through-occupation-camp-pekiwewin-is-the-world)