

The Mitchell Art Gallery is nominating Preston Pavlis and his work, *when the jig is up, when the act is finished, when the curtain descends*, for The 2021 Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize. This oil painting, fibre and mixed media work on unstretched canvas was chosen above all others because of Pavlis' nuanced and powerful, monumentally-scaled depiction of a Black dancer's dilemma: whether to dance for the audience, or for herself.

This piece was commissioned for *It's About Time: Dancing Black in Canada 1900-1970 and Now*, curated by Seika Boye, and was exhibited at the Mitchell Art Gallery in fall 2020. Boye invited contemporary performing and visual artists — either from or currently based in Alberta — to respond to the archive and consider what the history of Black people dancing in Canada reveals about our contemporary moment. During a virtual conversation with fellow Edmonton artist Braxton Garneau and exhibition curator, Seika Boye, Pavlis explained his approach to the work was not to focus on the act of dance itself but on why a dancer chooses to dance.

*when the jig is up, when the act is finished, when the curtain descends* spans 8' x 10', and offers viewers a look backstage, where a dancer sits at a vanity. She is wearing an opalescent leotard and red, shiny heeled shoes adorned with red bows. There are three-dimensional components in the painting: a bouquet of dried flowers, which the artist sourced from his mother, rests next to the artist on the vanity; and thick, red theatre pleated curtains trace the perimeter of the unstretched canvas, their texture hand-stitched by the artist. The dancer's gaze is cast downward, where more dance shoes rest, and her blue reflection captures a sorrowful expression directed out through the mirror, directly at the viewer.

At close to even scale, the dancer's body and gaze confront yours. The figure offers a tentative provocation, apparently focussed on her own thoughts in her embodied experience while the mirrored gaze watches over the vulnerable moment, observing the observers. Pavlis describes choosing to position the dancer's watchful gaze in the mirror as a way to beckon the viewer in to reflect further on their own multidimensional self. In a 2019 interview with Danny Dunson for *ArtX*, Pavlis explains this is the goal of his artistic work — to foster a sense of reconciling discordant aspects of one's self for viewers, helping them to understand and accept the joys that come from difference.

While the red curtains that frame the dancer in the painting remain stationary, there is a sense, confirmed by the title of the work, that they will ascend to a waiting theatre audience soon and, as Pavlis told Boye during their virtual discussion, the dancer will

be forced to make a decision when that moment arrives — will she dance for herself or the audience? The artist explains that the dancer’s answer is in her reflection: she has chosen herself.

The dancer’s red shiny shoes were inspired by a famous 15 minute dance sequence in the 1948 film, *The Red Shoes*, written and directed by Michael Powell. As the artist notes,

I don't know if this is the right interpretation of that sequence, but my understanding of it was that the person who puts on the red shoes will dance until they die. I wanted [the woman in my painting] to pick out the best shoes that she has to wear, and that's sort of another signal saying that she's gonna dance her best for herself, but also thinking about [it as a] lifelong commitment [—] something that is so important...that it's something [she] will carry with [herself] forever.

Pavlis has depicted a dancer with resolve, visible in her reflected gaze: by choosing to dance for herself, she is demonstrating her agency and right to movement-based expression. The depth of meaning in this decision-making references the sociopolitical context revealed in the archival elements that surround the painting in *It's About Time: Dancing Black in Canada 1900-1970 and Now*. The exhibition both honours the history of both professional and social dance by Black artists and communities, and makes note of the ways in which that cultural vibrance endures despite the legacies of regulating Black bodies through legislation, police violence, and other forms of systemic racism in Canada, then and now. In Pavlis’ dancer, we see a complex engagement with the circumstances that position the dancer in the world, indicative of his artistic excellence and areas of inquiry at the core of his artistic practice.

As with Pavlis’ ongoing artistic exploration, *when the jig is up, when the act is finished, when the curtain descends* showcases an intimate, tender moment of contemplation, resolve, and resistance. Toronto-based painter Sandra Brewster notes how the “quiet energy” of each work Pavlis creates “reflect[s]... an inner self through a visual narrative that, using gesture and the gaze, reveals his own demeanour.” As exhibition curator, Boye has reflected, the experiences of Black dancers reveal something critical about lived Black embodied experience in Canada itself. And in Pavlis’ work, we are granted a glimpse into the artists’ own processing about who he creates his own work for, and the complexities of his own embodied performance of self.

Though early in his career, Pavlis' work demonstrates a deep and refined knowledge of his chosen materials and complex exploration of self through a practice that is more than worthy of critical acclaim. His success in exhibiting his work nationally and internationally at this stage clearly demonstrates exactly how exceptional he is as an artist. He has already established a strong exhibition record, and is currently represented by Bradley Ertaskiran in Montreal, where he will have a solo exhibition later this year. As we see him getting the attention his practice is due beyond the city, the artwork being nominated shows why he is deserving of being celebrated at home too.