

Nomination Letter for AJA Louden Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize

The Alberta Craft Council is honored to nominate AJA Louden for the Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize for his work ***Daughter with Elm, Birch, Piney***, shown in his exhibition *Prairie Star Deck* in Spring 2024. This prestigious award celebrates the brilliance of Edmonton's visual artists, and AJA's innovative and boundary-pushing artistic practice makes him a worthy and inspiring candidate. AJA Louden has demonstrated an extraordinary commitment to his craft, producing work that not only enriches the artistic landscape but also fosters deep connections within the community. His dedication to advancing discourse through art, mentorship, and socially engaged projects highlights his transformative role in Edmonton's arts ecosystem.

As reflected in his exhibition *Prairie Star Deck* at the Alberta Craft Council, AJA's practice embodies a remarkable fusion of visual storytelling and craft. His ability to weave personal, cultural, and historical narratives into his work reflects his commitment to the arts and his desire to connect and empower others through creative expression. AJA has inspired many through his thoughtful mentorships, inclusive projects, and his passion for strengthening Edmonton's artistic community. He has a gift for bringing people together and inviting diverse audiences to experience the vibrancy of the visual arts and craft.

AJA Louden is a Jamaican-Canadian artist living and working in amiskwaciwâskahikan (Edmonton, Canada). Through rigorous mark making, constructions and installations, AJA builds stories and worlds that are firmly rooted in both galleries and public spaces, infused by his experience of growing up Black in the prairies.

Prairie Star Deck was AJA Louden's first public exhibition of his large-scale tapestries. These life-sized textile works are grounded in ideas of Afrofuturism, a cultural aesthetic that combines science-fiction, history and fantasy to explore the African-American experience and aims to connect those from the Black diaspora with their forgotten African ancestry. An artist known largely for his street-based work in spray paint, over the past 3 years, AJA has been focused on building his own artistic language working in craft.

In 2022, AJA was invited by Fern Facette to spend 3 months as part of the inaugural Artist in Residence program at Fern's School of Craft in Edmonton, AB. It was here that AJA learned how to use cut and loop pile tufting guns and was struck by the similarities between how

one handles a tufting gun and a can of spray paint. From here, he began thinking more deeply about the role of craft in Black communities, and the use of textiles to consider the history of craft in rural Alberta in particular.

Growing up in Southern Alberta, AJA's mother had a sewing room where she would produce work for herself and for others. For AJA, this interest in using craft as a medium is a reconnection with his personal history, and building upon his familial memories of domestic craft, he incorporated his mother's crocheted work into one of the tapestries in the show.

Prairie Star Deck introduces us to the matriarchal society Loudén has built. Here, two of the main characters are established as time travelling spacewomen through their life sized portraits. These characters will be familiar faces to those who have seen Loudén's recent mural works in Lethbridge and Edmonton.

The work ***Daughter with Elm, Birch, Piney*** depicts the character of Daughter, alongside Piney P, an anthropomorphic pineapple seen throughout AJA's work, searching through a forest of elm and birch flanked by inorganic circuitry.

Here, AJA uses handcarved textile to build an Afrofuturist landscape—a future Prairie where a pineapple, a diasporic symbol connecting the Prairie landscape to the Caribbean, can find belonging and seek a sense of self. Placing this work in the realm of magical realism, the audience is asked to suspend disbelief and be open to new possibilities.

The elm and birch trees are both drawn from photo references AJA took near his house. The weeping birch is in the front yard at AJA's house in Edmonton, and the elm trees (specifically elm-lined streets) are a symbol of this city where he's cobbled together a sense of belonging.

Through this work and the exhibition *Prairie Star Deck*, AJA not only expanded his personal artistic vocabulary by embracing craft as a medium but also contributed meaningfully to the dialogue on identity, history, and belonging in the Black Prairie experience. His generosity, positivity, and professionalism—both as an artist and a community builder—have left a profound impression on Alberta Craft Council staff, gallery visitors, and the broader community.

In recognition of his exceptional artistry, his inspiring mentorship, and his sustained contributions to the Edmonton arts community, we strongly support AJA Loudén's nomination for the Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize. AJA's work and leadership exemplify the spirit of this award, and his impactful career in the arts deserves celebration and recognition at the highest level.

Sincerely,

Jenna Stanton
Executive Director

Alberta Craft Council