

soheila esfahani

*Are you buying these  
with loonies or toonies?*



**Exhibition Guide**



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# Exhibition Statement

Soheila Esfahani, who grew up in Tehran, Iran and moved to Canada in 1992, draws on her experience as an immigrant to navigate the terrains of cultural identity through her practice, including questioning how certain images, icons, symbols, and stereotypes associated with nationality are constructed and the way they are disseminated, reinforced, commodified, displaced, and reinserted in society. Her work aims to disrupt this discourse by moving away from the absolutism of national identity and offering a space of in-betweenness where locations of cultures can be negotiated, and new narratives adapted and hybridized. This concept of cultural translation is what critical theorist Homi Bhabha describes as the third space—a postcolonial sociolinguistic theory of identity that emerges from the interweaving elements of different cultures, positioning each person as a unique, hybrid being.

In this exhibition, Esfahani is responding to the question “*where are you from?*”, that many immigrants are often asked, by exploring Tom Thomson’s legacy as a national icon and other symbols traditionally associated with Canadian identity from a diasporic lens. Through various multimedia works that layer stereotypical Canadian references with Iranian cultural motifs, interventions with found objects, and multiple painted and 3D printed replicas of Thomson paintings and artefacts, Esfahani transforms the gallery into a physical third space that dissolves the boundaries between both Iranian and Canadian cultures and destabilizes any priority placed on the original through the act of cultural translation.



## About the Artist

Soheila Esfahani grew up in Tehran, Iran, and moved to Canada in 1992. She holds a BA in Fine Arts from University of Waterloo and a Master of Fine Arts from Western University. Esfahani is an award-winning visual artist and recipient of numerous grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Region of Waterloo Arts Fund. She is a recipient of 2016 Waterloo Region Arts Awards and was nominated for the Jameel Prize at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, UK in 2015. Her work has been exhibited across Canada and internationally including at the Aga Khan Museum, Canadian Cultural Centre Paris, Doris McCarthy Gallery, Cambridge Art Galleries among others, and has been collected by various public and private institutions, including the Canada Council's Art Bank. Recently, Esfahani has designed a limited mintage coin for the Royal Canadian Mint's *Celebrating Canada's Diversity Collection*. She is an Assistant Professor at Western University in London, Ontario and is a member of the Red Head Gallery in Toronto.





# On Colour, Movement, and Connection: Replicating the Work of Tom Thomson

by Jessica Joyce

## On Colour

In the early 2000s, my father purchased a Tom Thomson print from the National Gallery of Canada, and had it professionally framed. It hung in the living room of every house in which we lived as a family, and to this day, it occupies a place of honour in his bachelor apartment. The print is a reproduction of *Northern River* (1914-15), a finished painting of the view of the river between silhouettes of dying trees whose branches are mostly broken off. In the print, the colours are muted, being mostly chromatic blacks and greys with minimal accents of ochres and warm oranges. Before undertaking this project, I did not think of Thomson as an accomplished colourist, and I attribute that largely to the ongoing presence of this bleak reproduction in my life.

The process of creating the replicas shown in this exhibition taught me to respect the complexity of Thomson's colour mixing. His black paint, like the one used to render the tree trunks in *Canoe Lake* (Spring 1914), are *chromatic*, meaning that they are combinations of vibrant hues, lending themselves to the formation of colour harmonies and the illusion of depth, which straight black pigments cannot achieve. To replicate his chromatic blacks, I combined Viridian (cool dark green), Alizarin Crimson







(cool dark red), and Burnt Sienna (warm medium brown). Other colours that initially seemed to be simple mixes, often required at least one, if not two or three, more pigments than I expected, sometimes in ratios that could be considered negligible, but which proved necessary to 'get it right'. Often, the final colours would be combinations of multiple mixed colours.

Thomson produced the studies that I replicated more than a century ago, and in a text recommended to me by the team at TOM,<sup>1</sup> I read that he frequently relied on two pigments that are no longer commonly accessible, due to their capacities to be harmful to human health: Vermilion (orange red) and Freeman's White.

The first contains mercury, and the latter, lead. Aside from hue, pigments possess material properties, including how they reflect or absorb light, and how much oil they require to form strong but flexible bonds in the drying process, that lead to variables throughout the process of painting. I have worked with oil paint throughout my career as an artist, so I possess experiential knowledge that enabled me to make informed decisions about how to substitute these pigments. Their hues were relatively simple to mix using less harmful alternatives, but the substitutes possess different material properties, which impacted small details that might normally only be visible to experts, but which I highlight here so that everyone may notice. My failure to exactly replicate Thomson's work may be seen by looking very closely at the bottom leaves of the title tree in *Red Sumac* (Fall 1916). In the original, the pigments Thomson used for the red leaves formed less flexible bonds than those throughout the rest of the painting, creating a fragile pattern of cracks which interrupted the direction of his brushstrokes. Replicating these isolated cracks would have required the use of the exact same pigments and oil as Thomson, so although my replicas will darken with age, and in time the colours will become closer to the originals, small details like those cracks will always betray the truth.

## On Movement

Painting with someone else's brush strokes is akin to wearing someone else's old boots. Technically and intellectually, one understands how to walk while wearing them, but the practice feels more challenging and uncomfortable than anticipated. Brush strokes, like boots, are worn-in over time. I do not know what Thomson's shoe size was, but I imagine that if I wore his boots to walk around Canoe Lake, they might be too tight on my toes and too loose for my heels, and so I would walk with an awkward gait.

Attempting to recreate his brush strokes felt physically similar. My dominant right hand and all its tiny muscles are trained to make marks in a way that I have developed over time, which now feels natural and personal to me. I may attempt to describe the mechanics using language but the most accurate thing I can articulate about the way I paint is that it *feels right* to me. Trying to paint like Tom Thomson heightened my awareness of what it feels like to paint like Jessica Joyce.

Thomson's brush strokes are short and thick. Due to the simplicity of the composition of a painting like *Morning* (Summer 1915), I can imagine him having easily completed it within an hour. For him, the brushstrokes were fast, because they were his. While working on the replica, I could zoom in on the high-resolution scans of his original painting on my laptop screen, and see the little threads of sticky paint that stretched out, snapped and folded back onto themselves as he pulled his brush quickly away from the panel. He likely spent one second completing an individual brush stroke in the colour of the sky reflected on the water, one that for me would require anywhere between thirty seconds to five minutes. Unlike Thomson, I could not paint quickly in reaction to what I observed, because my hand was not allowed to do what it has trained to do so often that it feels natural. I had to hold it back when it wanted to rush in. It could not speed up, because the brush strokes would have become mine, and no longer his. I had to work in a meticulous, studious way, measuring each brush stroke relative to those placed around it, planning the speed, length and pressure. My mind enjoyed the technical challenge, and my hand felt restricted and restrained. Like a cramp, but painless: stiff, disciplined. Sometimes, returning to paint it over if it did not look right, or scraping it off and trying again. I wanted to replicate his process as closely as I could from the confines of my studio: look, mix colour, load brush, look again, measure, paint.



# On Connection

Practicing this unfamiliar choreography of painting allowed me to make connections between myself and a painter who worked more than one hundred years ago. Looking closely at Thomson's work and thinking about his process of production led to imaginary conversations about the daily practice of painting. I pretended to engage in 'shop talk' with Thomson's ghost, and jokingly criticized sections of the originals where I thought he might have become frustrated or impatient with himself. Like drawing from life, the practice of representational painting teaches the artist to look and learn about their subjects intimately. Having completed this project, I feel deeper empathy for the human that left such a monumental impact on the history of Canadian Art.

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1. Corbeil, Marie-Claude, Elizabeth A. Moffatt, P. Jane Sirois, and Kris M. Legate. "The Materials and Techniques of Tom Thomson." *Journal of the Canadian Association for Conservation* 25 (2000): 3–10.





# Credits

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Cover - Soheila Esfahani, *The Canadians*, 2024. Collected ceramic ducks, mallards, and loons. Courtesy of the artist.

Page 4 - Soheila Esfahani, *Who Slipped the Slide in Your Carousel?*, 2024. Slide projection. Courtesy of the artist.

Page 6 - Photograph of the artist, Soheila Esfahani, by Christopher Kindratsky. Courtesy of the artist.

Page 8, 9, 12, 14 - Process images of Jessica Joyce replicating *Canoe Lake*, *Red Sumac*, and *Morning* by Tom Thomson from the Gallery's Collection. Courtesy of Jessica Joyce.



**| TOM |**