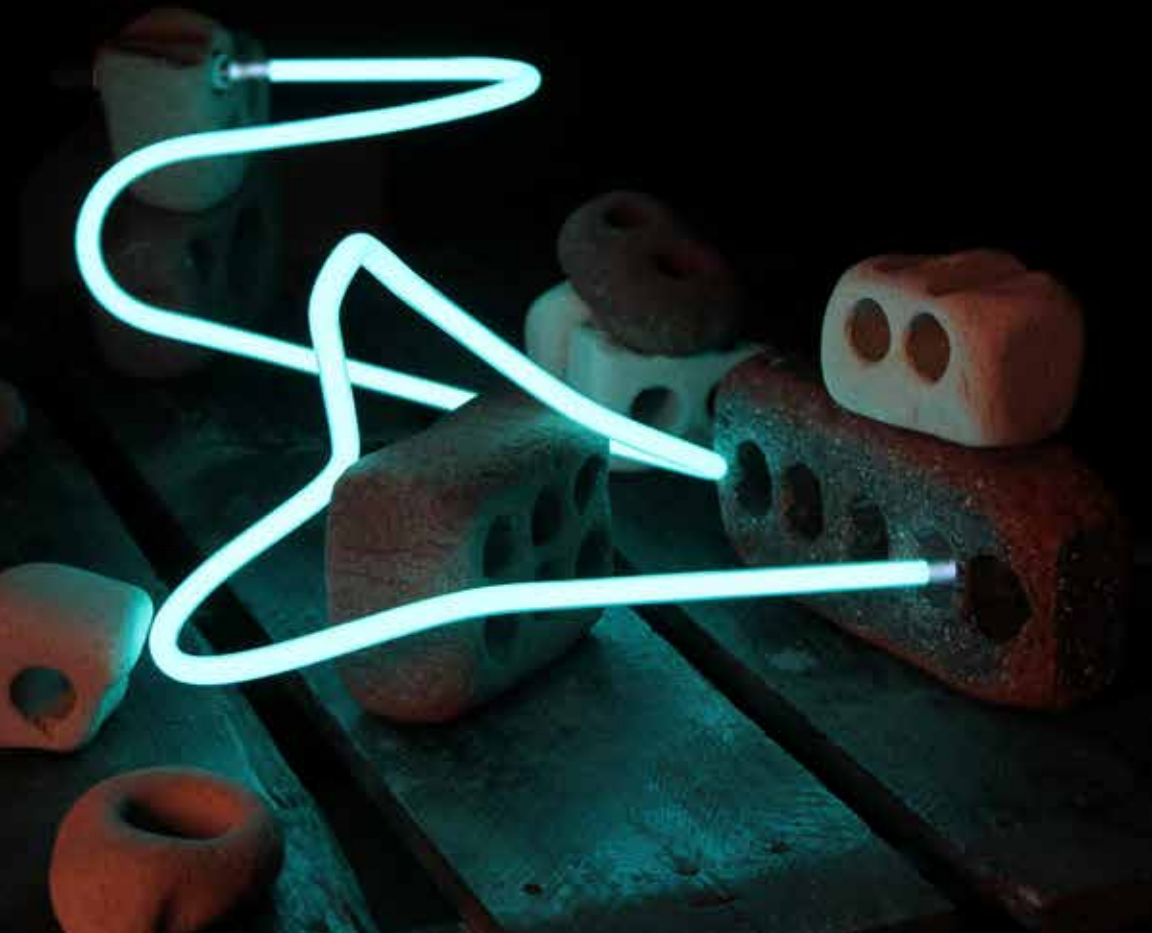


NEON Canada

THE ART OF ELECTRIFIED GLASS

Dick Aaverns, Robin Clason, Coley, Thrush Holmes,
Kelly Mark, Roda Medhat, Will Munro & Orest Tataryn





Will Munro

No Tears for the Creatures of the Night, 2005

Neon, plexiglass

122 x 43cm

Collection of Lex Vaughn

NEON Canada

THE ART OF ELECTRIFIED GLASS

For more than sixty years, artists have been working with neon. Known initially for its use in commercial signage that lit cityscapes in rainbow-coloured hues, artists began to adapt the nearly infinite possibilities of neon lights for their own messages. Ranging from text-based works that declare anti-capitalist and socially engaged messages to innovative sculptural and mixed-media uses, neon art has captured the attention of artists and viewers alike.

Since the end of the twentieth century, neon faced a decline as fluorescent and LED lighting became more affordable and easier to fabricate. Slowly, neon signs were replaced by cheaper alternatives that provided similar aesthetics, but they have been unable to truly capture the distinctive elements of neon. With vibrant colours, unique forms, and the subtle hum and flicker of electricity, hand-bent neon signs produce an unmatched sensory experience. More recently, artists have been re-engaging with traditional neon for these sensory experiences, and for its long commercial and artistic history. Hand-bending glass tubes and working with fabricators, artists are increasingly using the medium of neon to explore contemporary issues and themes that draw upon and expand this history.

The process of making neon begins with bending glass tubes into desired shapes, before using a vacuum pump to remove the air from the tubes. A process called 'bombarding' uses thousands of volts of electricity to remove any remaining impurities from the tubes before they are filled with gas. Although the element neon, a noble gas, was first used to create neon lights in the year 1910, a wide range of gases have been used, including mercury, helium, carbon dioxide, along with other coatings that alter the colours and light properties of the tubes. Despite using other gases, the term neon is often used to describe all lighting made using this process. Once the tubes have been filled with gas, electrodes are inserted into each end of the tubes, and then connected to transformers that electrify the tubes, producing the powerful light and colour of neon. Artists engage with the neon process in different ways, making some or

all components themselves, or working with specialized fabricators to complete other components according to their designs.

Some of the most recognizable neon works are composed of text, like those by Dick Avern's, Kelly Mark, and Will Munro. Borrowing from the earlier commercial nature of neon to compose conceptual works, these artists develop works that tend to convey messages that challenge our understandings of our world. Through short phrases, they can spark emotions or an immediate response through tongue-in-cheek humour.

Dick Avern's *Exercising/Exorcising Desire* uses one of neon's common effects, turning portions of the text on and off—in this case the "O" and "E" that results in a message that simultaneously urges us to follow-through on and avoid our own desires. Through this wordplay, our response to Avern's work is immediate, as we battle internally with how we are meant to interpret this instruction.

Kelly Mark (1967–2025) is well-known for her conceptual, often text-based works that sometimes take the form of neon, as with *Nothing is so important that it needs be made in six foot neon*. Drawing upon Joseph Kosuth's series of neon-based works that visually represented their titles, such as *Five Words in Green Neon*, Mark uses a phrase that inherently contradicts itself. As viewers, we are left interpreting the subtle wit of Mark's phrase. Known for her works engaging with the everyday and poetic contemplation. A commentary on life and the large-scale commercial nature of neon in cityscapes, this work produces a message that is at once easy to understand, yet offering existential questions that far surpass its simplicity.

No Tears for the Creatures of the Night, by Will Munro also uses neon text to spark a response within us. Borrowing the title of the 1978 song "No Tears" by American post-punk, new wave band Tuxedomoon, this work uses both text and the colour pink to evoke concepts of marginalized and queer communities. Both an artist and community organizer, Munro was recognized for the queer references in his work as well as his ability to build queer community in Toronto through club nights and events. Although most well-known for his textile and photography-based works, he also created several neon works which directly connect his visual artistic practice to the nightlife he helped to build.

In each of these text-based works, viewers feel a particular spark; wherein the words formed by the neon are merely a starting point rather than a complete statement. By experiencing these works and the visual experience that they create, we are urged to think more deeply about the world around us. Our thoughts wander, both with our own memories and ideas of people and communities around us. More than a statement, they are events, that when witnessed build within each of us.

Artists also use neon for works more closely related to painting or sculpture, sometimes combining neon with other materials. Orest Tataryn is a light sculptor, often working with neon, and is most well-known for his Color Field series. Using combinations of neon tubes in different colours—and often altering sections of colour within a single tube—he creates wall sculptures that play with colour, line, and shapes like Color Field paintings. *Primary Color Field #1* is an example of this series, wherein many vertical neon tubes glow in shades of red, yellow, and blue to create a single visual experience of blending colour and forms. In doing so, Tataryn creates visual experiences that work within the space and surface of the installation. Through the interactions and experience of his works, visceral responses are provoked and the balance between harmony and dissonance is explored.

Thrush Holmes, a Toronto-based painter, frequently incorporates neon within his works. Painting canvases with bold still life subjects, human forms, and landscapes, neon is used to cast a striking glow across the surface of his paintings, thus colour and form is layered upon the images. In some works, like *Recognized by the Moon*, the neon is mounted beneath the canvas. By masking the raw canvas in front of the neon, the painting is completed around the neon, allowing a subtle glow to shine through the canvas itself. In each of his works, the neon and paint work in conversation with one another. Neither is stronger than the other, as the forms, colours, and light blend together in a visual experience of a moment captured.



Robin Clason
Rock Clock, 2026
Argon and mercury, clear neon glass tube,
rocks collected from the countryside and
the city of Toronto
45 x 45cm
Collection of the artist



NOTHING IS
SO IMPORTANT
THAT IT NEEDS
TO BE MADE IN
SIX FOOT NEON

Kelly Mark

Nothing is so important that it needs to be made in six foot neon, 2009

Neon and transformers. 30 x 183 x 7 cm

University of Toronto Collection. Gift of the artist, 2019



EXERCISING
DESIRE

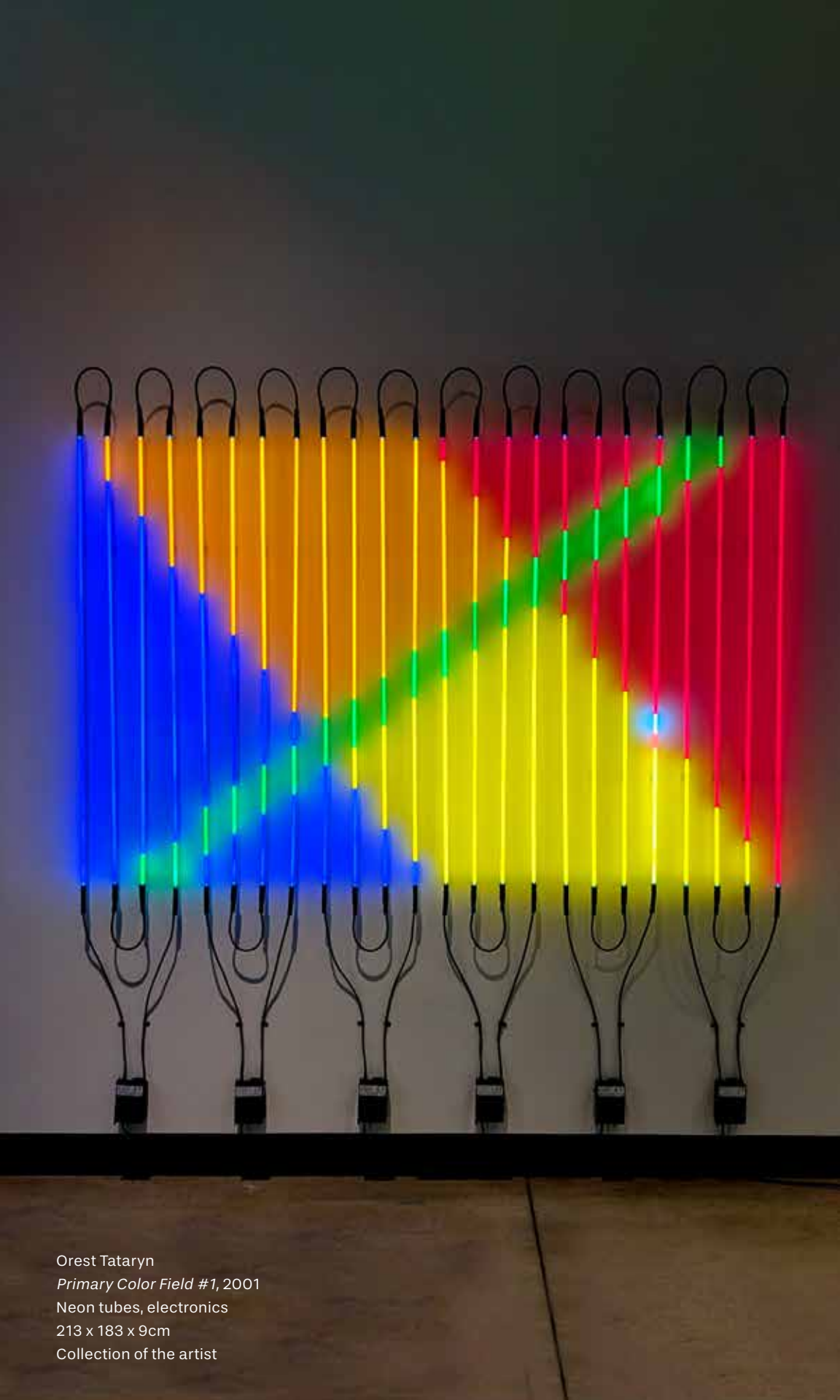
Dick Avern

Exercising/Exorcising Desire, 2000

Neon, aluminum. 58 x 119 x 20 cm

Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery Permanent Collection

Purchased with funds from the Elizabeth L. Gordon Art Programme, the Royal Canadian Academy of Art and a matching grant from the Canadian Council for the Arts. 2006.012.001



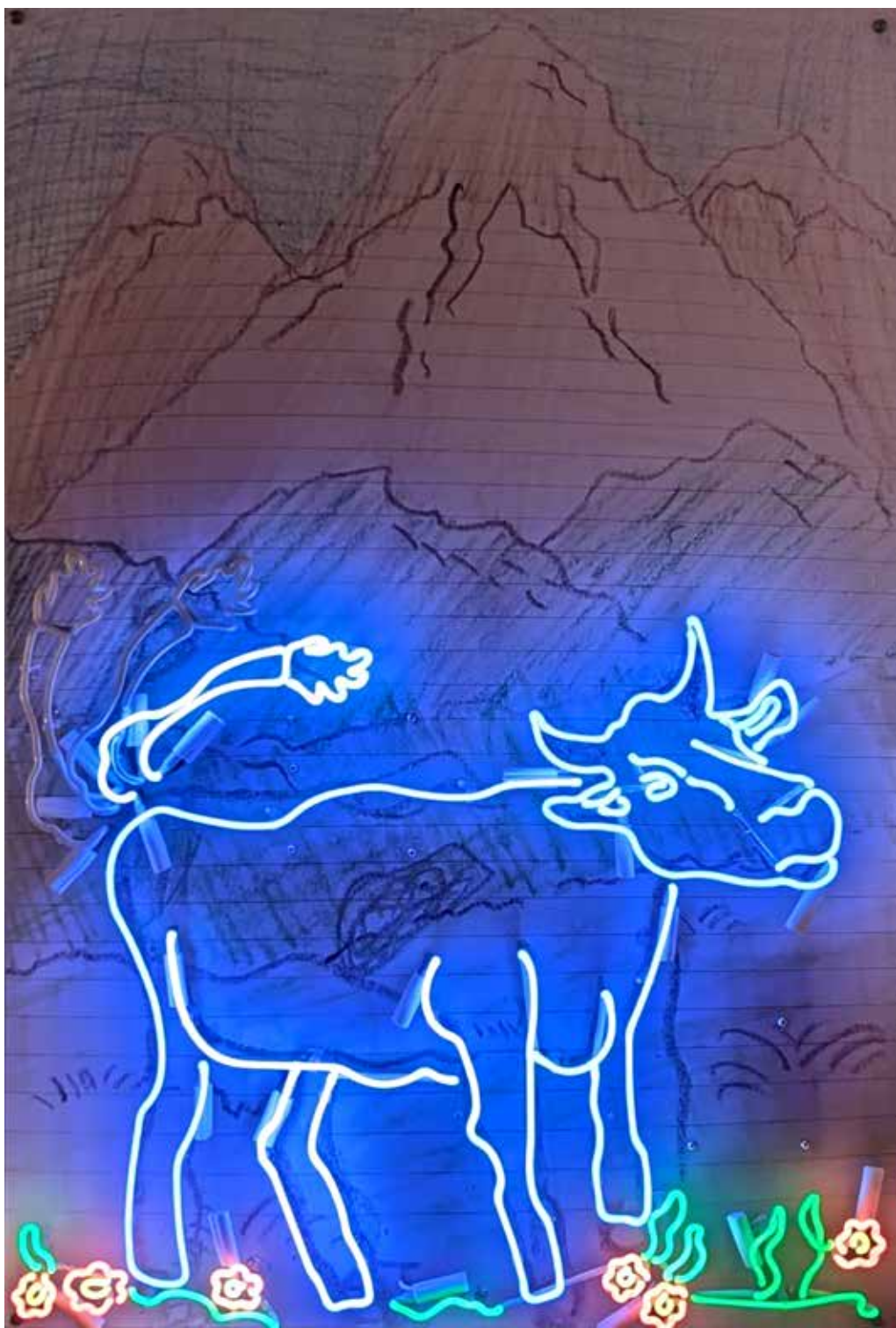
Orest Tataryn
Primary Color Field #1, 2001
Neon tubes, electronics
213 x 183 x 9cm
Collection of the artist

Using neon for sculptural and installation-based works inspired by place and memory, Coley is a multidisciplinary artist based in Toronto. In their works, neon is used in combination with found objects, photographs, and other materials that are drawn from their personal experiences with places they visit. As neon bends around and through these assemblages of objects, Coley simultaneously creates and responds to landscapes. The human and natural ecological processes are reflected in the combinations of light, brick, wood, and rock. By navigating these works ourselves, we are encouraged to think about the ways that we construct places and how the places we occupy shape us as well.

Engaging with the material properties of neon, Robin Clason's works often use abstracted forms and mixed media to share emotions and ideas through the glowing forms. Inspired by the astral origins of the gases used to fill neon tubes, Clason balances the human and otherworldly in her works. A multi-sensory experience is central to her practice, as the glow of the neon combines with smooth wood panels and rough rocks for diverse textures and uses of the light. *Rock Clock* presents a whimsical representation of time both current and celestial. In this work, we find ourselves at once experiencing the passage of time, while also being drawn to the millennia that have passed in the formation of our world, and the generations yet to come.

Combining neon with traditional textile patterns and cultural materials, Roda Medhat alters our experience of these images. Drawing upon his Kurdish heritage, Medhat's neon works often incorporate movement and provide new ways of connecting to rug patterns and childhood images that glow in bright colours. A *Rug Falls in Four Frames*, is composed of four separate neon rug patterns hanging from the ceiling, each lighting one at a time from the ceiling to the floor, as if watching the rug fall and crumple at our feet in slow motion. In this context, the traditional patterns are presented in a way that calls to mind both the nostalgia of moving neon signs as well as a futuristic experience of the forms. Crossing boundaries of time and place, Medhat's neon works generate new perspectives. Across each of these works, it is the multisensory nature of neon that inspires a complete experience. From the glow of the lights, to the ways in which the tubes bend and flow throughout a work, to the hum and gentle flicker of electricity—it is the neon that deepens the experience of these works. Through diverse approaches and innovative combinations of materials, the emotive responses and ideas provoked by these neon artworks push us to think about our world and our place within it in a new light.

Peter Flannery, MA
Senior Curator & Collections Manager



Roda Medhat, *Cow in the Pasture*, 2026. Neon, acrylic. 120 x 79 cm. Collection of the artist.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

DICK AVERNS

As an internationally exhibited sculptor and award-winning artist, Dick Aaverns has established a vibrant, socially engaged art practice. The content of his multi-disciplinary oeuvre recalibrates the commodification of space: probing how mental and physical spaces are valued, bought, sold, exchanged, and contested. Since being deployed as an official war artist to the Middle East with Canadian troops, Aaverns' work has toured nationally and been featured in numerous publications. In addition to his studio practice, Aaverns has taught at both the University of Calgary and the Alberta University of the Arts. Aaverns trained at Parsons School of Design in New York and the Wimbledon School of Art in London, before receiving his Master of Fine Arts from the University of British Columbia.

ROBIN CLASON

Robin Clason is a Canadian artist and neon sign maker whose work explores the intersection of light, nostalgia, and contemporary visual culture. Working primarily with hand-bent neon, Clason transforms familiar symbols, playful imagery, and everyday objects into glowing works that invite connection and curiosity. Her practice embraces the craft and imperfections of handmade neon while pushing the medium beyond traditional signage. Through bold colour, humour, and unexpected forms, Clason creates work that feels both nostalgic and distinctly her own.

COLEY

Coley is a multidisciplinary artist based in Tkaronto, driven by curiosity and community. Their practice is experimental and process-based, exploring the space between

dualities and the intersection of essence, identity and place. Coley's approach to glass is shaped by their ongoing engagement with collage, drawing and performance. They combine these personal methodologies with diverse glass working processes to create mixed media sculpture and installation grounded in play, movement and experience. Drawn to its dynamic and gestural nature, Coley has most recently undertaken a passionate quest to learn and grow the endangered craft of neon bending. This evolving body of work reflects their continued exploration of embodied research, perception and material gesture.

THRUSH HOLMES

Thrush Byron Keats Holmes is a Toronto-based, self-taught painter who approaches traditional artistic themes with an aggressive, unapologetically contemporary punk sensibility. Romantic and idealistic, his naive forms—nudes, rainbows, and floral still lifes—draw from modernists such as Picasso and Matisse, transforming into raw, dripping gestures through oil stick and neon light. Holmes' ambitious process reflects his uncompromising vision, with paintings reaching 20 feet and often completed in a single sitting. His evolving practice explores mythology, archetypes, ego, nostalgia, and introspection. Holmes' work is held in permanent collections worldwide, including the Elton John AIDS Foundation, Sony Music, DreamWorks Studios, Detroit Art Collection, and Def Jam Records.

KELLY MARK

Kelly Mark (1967–2025) was a conceptual artist who lived and worked in Toronto. She was known for isolating moments of the everyday in ways that were unpretentious

and unglamorous but full of warmth, ritual, and wit. Time, duration, measurement, and process are essential focal points in Mark's multidisciplinary practice. Time's governance of our reality, especially its undeniable grasp over working-class experiences, is a central concern in her oeuvre. Mark's practice is embodied in a variety of media such as sculpture, video, installation, drawing, photography, sound, multiples, performance and public interventions.

Her work has been exhibited in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Canada and abroad, including the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa), Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto), The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery (Toronto), Contemporary Art Gallery (Vancouver). Mark represented Canada at the Liverpool Biennale in 2006 and the Sydney Biennale in 1998. She was also a recipient of the K.M. Hunter Artist Award in 2002. She is a graduate of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.

RODA MEDHAT

Roda Medhat is a Kurdish-born artist based in Ontario, Canada working across sculpture, installation, public art, and moving image. His practice rebuilds cultural source material into structures made from light, metal, acrylic, and air. In 2024 he received the CIBC C2 Art Prize. Roda holds a BFA from OCAD University. Studied film production at FAMU Film and Television School of Prague. MFA from the University of Guelph.

WILL MUNRO

Will Munro (1975–2010) was a Toronto artist, club promoter, and community organizer. His work has a queer punk DIY aesthetic, and his influences included artists such as General Idea and the queercore movement.

Munro attended OCAD University, graduating in 2000. As a club promoter, he was best known for his long-running, punk-rock Toronto queer club, Vazaleen, often creating silkscreen posters to advertise the venue. Munro was also the co-owner, alongside Lynn McNeill, of the queer bar The Beaver, which closed in 2020 after 14 years of business. Inspired by performers he admired such as Leigh Bowery and Klaus Nomi, as a visual artist, Munro is known for creating artistic works out of underwear. Munro was also a skilled organizer who brought diverse communities together across the city.

OREST TATARYN

Orest Tataryn is a light sculptor known for his work with neon. When he started his own neon company, Neonisoros, in 1989, his mandate was centered on elevating neon light from the depths of commercialism. Drawing from his professional career and social interests, while conceptually exploring the relationships between light, color, and shadow, Tataryn optically and perceptually experiments with neon in relation to space and surface. His signature Color Field series, in which he alters sections of color with a single tube or multiple tubes to create patterns, explores the emotional aspects of harmony and dissonance.

Tataryn is a founding member of the guerrilla art collective "Skunkworks / Outlaw Neon." After his early retirement as a fire captain in the city of Toronto in 2003, Tataryn committed to expanding the experimental boundaries of his practice through numerous solo and group exhibitions. He is also known for his contributions to the fabrication and installation of neon artworks for many contemporary artists.



Thrush Holmes, *RECOGNIZED BY THE MOON*, 2023. Acrylic, oil, spray paint and neon behind canvas mounted on panel. 213 x 366 cm. Collection of the artist. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Front Cover: Coley, *A path emerges when things come apart: turquoise*, 2025. Neon, found bricks, salvaged wood. 40 x 78 x 46 cm. Collection of the artist. Photo courtesy of the artist.

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