

Due North

The Yukon's thriving contemporary-art scene is taking centre stage with a new award honouring its visual artists.

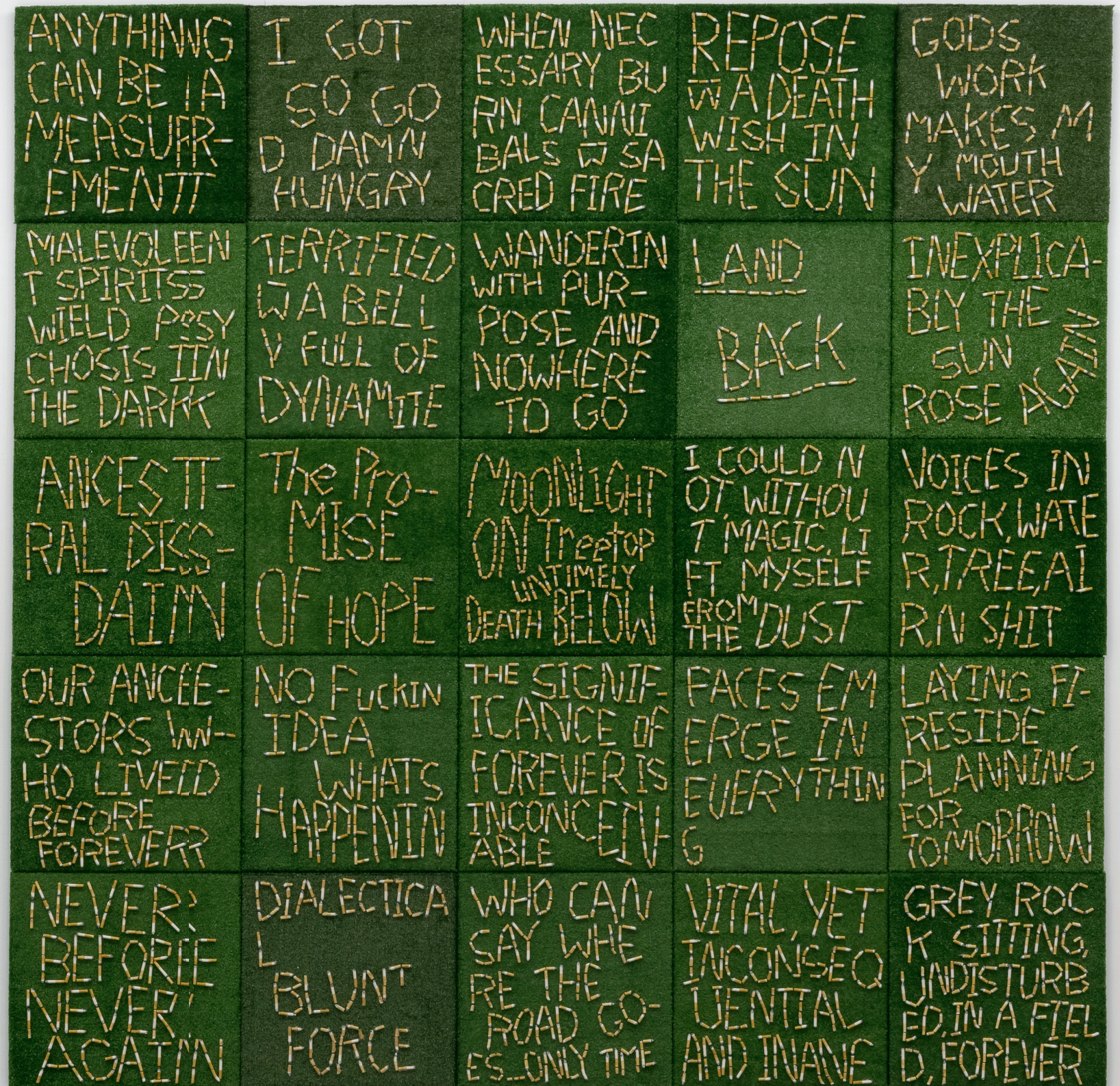
By JOANNA FOX

LATE LAST YEAR, Joseph Tisiga made his way to Whitehorse, his first time back home since he left for Montreal in 2019. His return wasn't all leisure, though; he was there to compete along with five other finalists for the first Yukon Prize for Visual Arts. Thrilled just to be included, he never thought he would actually be the one to walk away with the top honour and its accompanying \$20,000 purse. This new biannual event was founded by Yukon residents Julie Jai and husband David Trick to help bring attention to the incredible—and relatively unknown—thriving contemporary-art scene in the territory.

Jai, a lawyer, moved to Whitehorse from Toronto 25 years ago to support comprehensive land-claim and self-government negotiations in the Yukon. “We actually settled 11 out of 14 claims, which is pretty amazing,” Jai told me over Zoom shortly after the prize ceremony. “The majority of First Nations are self-governing, and that has actually led to a huge cultural revival and greater confidence and ability among First Nations to create art.”

Outside the community, not many Canadians are aware of the vibrant and slowly growing creative scene in Whitehorse. Including Tisiga and the other finalists—multidisciplinary artists Amy Ball and Krystle Silverfox, Tlingit carver Ken Anderson, fashion designer Sho Sho “Belelige” Esquiro and sculptor Veronica Verkley—there were 107 entries from a territory of about 43,000 people. “That’s one of the interesting things about the Yukon,” says Jai. “It has the highest percentage of visual artists of any jurisdiction in Canada. That’s the untold story.” ▶

PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL LITHERLAND, JOSEPH TISIGA, UNTITLED (2020), PLASTER, WATERCOLOUR AND SYNTHETIC TURF OVER WOOD PANEL, 25 PANELS, 61 X 61 CM EACH



Untitled (2020) by Joseph Tisiga, courtesy of the Bradley Ertaskiran gallery



Dream Catcher (2020) by Joseph Tisiga, courtesy of the Bradley Ertaskiran gallery

an entirely different context,” says Tisiga.

When it came to choosing a winner, Jai and Trick formed a committee to help them select three independent jurors who had the right skills and experience as well as recognition and expertise in their field. They assembled an impressive group of people who are shaping Canada’s art world—Gaëtane Verna, director of The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto, Ryan Doherty, senior curator of Contemporary Calgary, and

While going back and forth between Toronto and Whitehorse, Jai and Trick began to realize that art in the Yukon was of exceptional quality and needed to be shared. “The artist often knows the land well,” says Jai. “You see landscapes, animal life, elements of First Nations spirituality and sometimes combinations of all of these. But the other striking thing is the diversity and quality. Yukon artists aren’t afraid to experiment and innovate, and the artistic community here is very supportive and encouraging. Being so far away from easy access to supplies encourages resourcefulness and often the use of found materials and upcycled or recycled materials.”

Part of the couple’s intention was to figure out a way to help support individual Yukon artists as well as make them better known across the country; offering a prize was a way to accomplish both of these goals. They decided to make a personal and financial commitment to see this project—which was three years in the making—come to fruition. While there was some contribution from the Yukon Arts Foundation, the Yukon Arts Centre and the Yukon government, Jai and Trick personally donated the grand-prize money, an additional \$2,000 for each of the remaining five finalists and the funds to organize everything associated with the award, including the catalogue and website.

“Having this kind of support through the prize and bringing attention to collectors wanting to get behind it are crucial to keep [the art] evolving,” says Tisiga over Zoom from his studio in Montreal. A member of the Kaska Dene Nation, Tisiga was born in Edmonton and raised in the Yukon, a place that serves as a constant source of inspiration for his work. His multidisciplinary practice centres on themes of identity, culture and Indigenous and colonial history and plays with non-linear, supernatural narratives. He’s been exhibited across Canada and the U.S., and his works are currently part of institutional, private and corporate collections, including the National Gallery of Canada. But for the rising 37-year-old contemporary artist, there’s something exceptional about receiving such an honour in a place he considers home and being part of the finalist exhibit at the Yukon Arts Centre. “When you see Yukon artists’ work, that’s one thing, but when you go there and see how they are living and how the community is formed, it offers

Candice Hopkins, a Carcross/Tagish First Nation independent curator who is originally from Whitehorse and currently leads the curatorial direction of the Toronto Biennial of Art—to bring a national perspective to this little-known scene. “Being the first year [of the prize], there was a really strong jury with a knowledge of contemporary art, so that’s very exciting,” says Tisiga. “There are a lot of artists in Yukon, there’s a lot of art and the community is really strong, but it’s also super insular for the most part and it’s hard for people to connect to the outside world—or ‘the south,’ as we say. This prize creates a platform so that more people can see what’s happening.”

It’s hard to pin down exactly why this remote city not only fosters homegrown talent but also attracts other artists from across the country. “A lot of people go up there seeking adventure and wind up in this pretty magical place,” says Tisiga. “So you have all these artists from all over the place who went [to visit] and then established long-term roots there.” Time has a way of stretching out differently there too. The winters are long and there’s not as much to do compared to bigger cities, so creation and collaboration help keep people busy. “There are such kind and skilful people who want to share and encourage each other to experiment and create,” says Tisiga. “But the long, dark winters definitely help.”

Tisiga, who had a few shows earlier this year, both in Canada and the U.S., is represented by Montreal’s Bradley Ertaskiran gallery, which also represents some of Canada’s most recognized contemporary artists, including Kim Dorland, Janet Werner and Rick Leog. He firmly believes that it’s important to take breaks from Whitehorse, go to other places, get inspired and bring that inspiration back home. “I will always keep my connection to Yukon and go back and do projects and spend time there,” he says. “My community is always going to be in the North.”

Not only has this award served as a catalyst for the promotion of an entire artistic community but it has also done exactly what Jai and Trick were hoping for: It has allowed an artist like Tisiga to be able to focus, grow and share. “I think one of the really great things about making art is that you can do it until you die,” says Tisiga. “So, hopefully, I have some staying power.” ■