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Winter 2020

Reflecting on That #GalleryLife

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December 21, 2019

AH 4490F/G - 4493F/G

Reflecting on That #GalleryLife

It has been four and a half months since the end of my internship and looking back now I can appreciate the experience despite my initial fears of the placement. I was concerned that I would be stuck in a repetitive and tedious internship and would eventually lose interest in it altogether. These same fears cling to the ideas of my future career path. However, I hope that, like the internship, these fears are only a momentary hurdle which do not come to fruition. These fears were also present nearly a year ago during my meeting with Patrick, the head of the program for the School for Advanced Studies in Arts and Humanities (SASAH), and its coordinator for internships, Barbara.

“What are you thinking of doing for your internship? Do you have an idea or a direction in mind?” he asked me.

“Uh . . .” I trailed off with the same response when someone asks me the daunting question, “What is SASAH?” I then mentioned my hometown art gallery, Judith and Norman Alix Art Gallery (JNAAG), where I had been a volunteer, when suddenly Patrick’s eyes lit up with an idea. “I’m familiar with that gallery. The director, Lisa Daniels, is getting a doctorate degree here. I’m sure I can set up a meeting.”

With hope in my heart, I left the meeting with a warning from Barbara about the possibility of this opportunity falling through. With days turning into weeks, I prepared myself

for the real possibility that I wouldn't get the internship. My heavy heart turned hopeful when Patrick emailed me with a time and place for a meeting with Lisa.

The meeting was at Museum London and with the buses diverted by construction, I was running late. *What a terrible first impression.* I tried composing myself as I walked into the meeting at the small cafeteria where I met Patrick and Lisa sitting and discussing something or other. I rambled out a hurried apology with an image of repeatedly smacking myself in the head with a pan. Lisa waved it off with an understanding expression and slowly stood up. A few expletives echoed in my mind as my worst fears became a reality.

"We are just going to move over to the couches as the shop is closing," Patrick explained. I let out a breath as we moved to the seating area near the stairs. After settling in, we got right into the discussion.

"Is there any area you are particularly interested in? I know you mentioned exhibition design," Lisa said. I then went on to explain the exhibition proposal I had drafted for a museum studies class, to which she responded by saying she had been a teaching assistant in the class previously. "I'm really open to anything. I would hate to limit myself to the vast opportunities at a gallery," I replied.

"That would be perfect," she responded. "As a small gallery, everyone has their hands in a little of everything as things can change at a moment's notice." I eagerly nodded in agreement, and she continued, "I want to make sure you get real and useful experience that can help you in the future." The meeting soon wrapped up, and she left to go to a student exhibition stating she would email me in a few days with a plan for the internship.

We met again on May seventh and went over all sorts of details from the length and weekly schedule of the internship to what would be expected of me for the first month. Like the

first day on any job, she showed me to the desk where I would be working and introduced me to the health and safety manual as well as gallery mandate, dress code, etc.

The following day was a Wednesday, when the staff holds short weekly meetings at 10:30, known as huddles. In the first meeting, Lisa introduced me to the other employees who welcomed me with friendly faces. My reaction, of course, was smiling awkwardly and sinking into my chair while quietly begging for the spotlight to switch to someone else. To my relief, we quickly moved on and the meeting proceeded like most huddles as I would soon realize. Going down the table one by one, each person would share their hours of availability per week as well as mention any activities or events at the gallery that week. Within twenty minutes the meeting was done, and I made my way back to the Research Library where I worked. Karen followed in behind me and introduced herself as the person who kept the building operational as she liked to joke: the janitor.

Karen would become one of the people I was closest to during my internship. Every day she would be the first to say hello and ask about my hectic life and would be the first to say goodbye while wishing me a nice night. She was the one who sat across from me in huddles with an ever-present smile and the person I would sit next to at a rare meeting. She was also the one who taught me how to open the weirdest looking file cabinet I have ever seen as well as help me in my ongoing battles with the printer/copier. These struggles with learning the equipment and the facility lasted about the first month, which was the same amount of time it took me to get through the lists of articles Lisa had given me to read and take notes on.

In our May meeting, Lisa told me, “As a public art gallery, we try to keep up to date with current articles on the issues facing museums and galleries and how better to connect to and accommodate the community.” An important part of what I learned resided in the information

from those articles. I learned that the institution could transform the way an object is perceived; for example, trash could become a reflection of environmental issues facing our world ([Alpers](#)). This transformative power is something art is often criticized for because we try to break down barriers and accept all forms of art and all people, quicker than the rest of the world, at times. I can now recognize the strength in art's acceptance of diversity and reflect on my courses from my arts major. I can recall the history of art movements and the artists that have been instrumental in its embracing arms of today. Marcel Duchamp comes to mind with his female alter ego, Mademoiselle Rose Sélavy. Through her, he acknowledged the art of contradiction as well as the tradition of gender bending in portraiture ([Hawkins](#)). It reminds me of the transgender community which, at the time, was stigmatized and, even today, must fight through that stigma but is more accepted. With this background, I can reflect on the foundations of our society and art itself and by criticizing these foundations, which were indicative of their times, I then grow and develop as an artist and citizen. Other articles mention this criticism in art and reflect on the critique of institutions as well as how to unravel and acknowledge the underlying bias in our practice ([Fraser](#)). These articles impacted on me as I would gaze into the vast records of our gallery and discover past exhibitions and the numerous artists in our collection.

The most intimidating task of my internship was reviewing the past exhibitions and the artist files. With hundreds of works in our collection, there are hundreds of files and countless exhibition booklets from 1960 to present: it seemed an impossible task, even with the three months I had for the internship. Lisa told me to take detailed notes since an idea could spark at a moment's notice which could relate to a previous catalogue. I can say I did not get through the entirety of the artist's files or the previous exhibitions. I got from 1960 to 1980 with these [detailed notes](#) which then turned to brief point form midway into June as the Artistic Planning

Meeting approached. My greatest fear was that, if I didn't look through all of the previous exhibitions, I would unknowingly present an idea for an exhibit that had already occurred. "I think we all have that fear," my other supervisor, Sonya, told me near the end of my internship. "At some point, it will eventually happen where we repeat an exhibition, but I know they would never be the same. Each person brings a fresh perspective to a project and presents it in a unique way personal to them and their experience." I could understand this since each idea I presented had a unique personal connection to me and my own experiences.

I read other articles in preparation for a meeting with Lisa and the other interns about a yearlong environmental exhibition. These articles opened my eyes to the effects of [plastic in our oceans](#) and the [unknown results of microplastics](#), such as [glitter](#). I was so passionate in my response to the articles that I wrote up a [brief commentary](#) which I shared at the meeting. The energy was electric in our discussion, with some more hopeful and inspired by the articles and others less so, mainly me in the latter category. This meaningful experience would be the last I would have with Lisa during my internship.

A week after the environmental exhibition meeting and a couple days before the Artistic Planning Meeting, there was a change in management and Lisa was no longer the director. It was a shock to me that someone who had been there for decades could just be out of a job. I had come upon her letters and handwriting in the artist files as the artist or their family member wrote in gratitude for her hard work. I still remember being told she was gone; I still can't say fired or terminated or almost any other word as it just doesn't seem right. Kristi came in asking for a moment of my time and sat in Karen's chair, as she had already left for the day. I was trying to quickly finish up a sentence in the presentation for the upcoming meeting. After finishing the sentence, I turned to Kristi thinking it would be something small and

inconsequential. She was stumbling over her words at first when suddenly she just said, “Lisa is no longer with the gallery.” The buzz of the electricity in the lightbulbs above filled the silence.

“I . . . I don’t understand,” I replied.

“I know . . . We’re all a bit shaken,” she said. She went on to say the city was restructuring, but I tuned her out after that. Lisa is the kind of person who is determined and passionate about the gallery and the community. It wouldn’t surprise me if speaking her mind offended someone and led to her eventual termination. I wouldn’t tell anyone this, of course, except my family or another intern, Vivian, whom I had gotten close to during my internship.

“Can you believe it? I can’t believe it . . . I just don’t understand,” Vivian told me the next day. I remember telling her that “restructuring” usually meant employers were trying to buy time to come up with a reasonable excuse. Then again, I was biased in the situation. She nodded along still deep in thought. That experience really connected the real world to me. Sometimes the best people are let go without a real reason, even if they had done nothing wrong. An internship is about getting real-world experience, and in the real world, we can’t stop what we are doing: we have to take a breath and continue, which is what I did in preparation for the meeting.

The Artistic Planning Meeting was a conference to present proposals of exhibitions from Blair, another intern, and me. With encouragement from Vivian, I made my way down to the art studio. Upon entering, I was somewhat confident in my ideas, but this would change during Blair’s presentation. Blair presented an exhibition in which the gallery would display the most well-known painting in our collection, [Spring on the Oxtongue River by Lawren Harris](#) of the Group of Seven. The unique way in which it was presented was the key factor in the idea because the lighting of the painting could change to any colour with an interactive device the visitor could control. While the idea was simple, he presented with quotes from famous authors

and artists as well as sketches of the proposed exhibit with other interactive elements. Having heard and seen his presentation, as well as participated in the discussion around it, I was much more shaken in the delivery of my ideas.

Borrowing Blair's laptop and fiddling with it until my [Google Slides presentation](#) appeared, I then took a deep breath and presented my ideas. Using the permanent collection, I had developed three ideas. One focused on Italy as the iconic travel destination. The exhibit could be extended to all of Europe if more artworks were needed to fill the space. This extension could then dive into the Eurocentric views of western civilization and how that has shaped our perspective as a society. The idea for this came as a result of my Italian roots which gave rationale to the exhibit, as there is a large Italian community in Sarnia, of which I myself am a part. Another idea was about youth with colourful works that I felt captured the feeling of youth in its hope, rebelliousness, and vibrancy. The last idea was called "The March Towards Abstraction." I proposed to display earlier realist works directly beside later abstracted works by the same artist. This exhibit aimed to show the development as well as internal conflict each artist faced on their road to abstraction. Each idea was met by fascination with interruptions from Sonya or Anna, another curator, turning to each other and asking if the work on the screen was in our collection, which it was. After the initial introduction of each idea, I was mostly quiet except when I would interject with interesting details of the displayed work which would spark a discussion in the room. In the end each idea was considered strong but, unanimously, the curators and interns voted for "The March Towards Abstraction" as they found it the most intriguing idea among the three. From there, Sonya encouraged me to focus on the idea and take it further. *But to where?* I thought to myself after the meeting.

I was back at my desk staring at an empty screen wondering what to do, since previously, I was in a mad rush to finish the presentation. I was begging to do almost anything else than get back into developing the exhibit. The next day, Sonya asked me to work on research of works in our collection to share with the public, as it is in our mandate. This research and the image of the artwork would be posted on social media, particularly [Instagram](#) and Facebook. In a whirlwind of excitement, I got caught up in the research and development of these captions which Sonya would edit afterwards. Then, Kathleen, who oversaw media and community outreach, would lead me to the vault where we would take behind-the-scenes shots to post. In a similar way, I would develop the Featured Friday Artists posts which aim to promote the current exhibition: Photography in Canada, 1960-2000 from the National Gallery of Canada and the Canadian Photography Institute. For these [posts](#), I worked closely with Sonya on the captions, Kathleen with the images, and Vivian in deciding images and hashtags.

The experiences in my internship positively influenced the slideshow that I would present to my program. For one, I discovered the impact of a good presentation through the Artistic Planning Meeting. While I was prepared for the meeting, I did not write a script or a list of points to cover. I mostly just read the slides with a few in the moment additions. I saw the good execution of Blair's presentation compared to my own and wanted to do the same in the future. For another, I understood the importance of capturing on-site photos from looking at the example presentations and requirements on OWL. I took the opportunity to start early and, in the rare moments between projects, take photos. After walking through the gallery and thoroughly inspecting areas, I wrote up a list of pictures to suit my presentation. Vivian and I would take these photos throughout the internship with both her and Isabelle, a co-op student, giving suggestions. These pictures varied from me on the job, me and my coworkers, to me at sites

unique to the JNAAG. I also included images of my deliverables through the Instagram and exhibition snapshots. The images show my enthusiastic engagement with the gallery in the slideshow.

Looking back now, the presentation itself portrayed a summary of my time there. It showed my collaboration with Vivian through the photos she took of me as well as in the similar slide theme. Vivian used the same website, [SlidesCarnival](#), for her own presentation of social media usage at the gallery. She later showed me how to pick and apply my chosen theme. I picked the theme as it shows a brushstroke, which best suits a presentation about an art gallery, and I used red to connect to the gallery's logo. This special attention showed my new skills in the consideration of colour, layout, and captions, which I developed in creating my exhibition. The order of my slides showed my post-secondary education as it was inspired by the examples from other SASAH students and the stated requirements. This shows the collaboration within the presentation between my university and my internship experiences.

I gave my presentation three months later. A few hours before I presented, I met with Barbara. I was anxiously criticizing my prepared presentation and did what I always did, met with the professor for their opinion. I made sure to get there early, as I had been late to our previous meeting and the guilt had been eating away at me. After a few minutes, Jennifer, the program coordinator, came over and told me Barbara was going to be a little late. A few minutes after that, my anxiety grew to a near panic. Before I could start pulling out my hair, Barbara arrived and somehow gave me the ability to breathe again. While I pulled out my laptop, I told her about some of my concerns, mostly that I hadn't had much time to memorize the presentation and asked if she could print out my speaker notes which she luckily agreed to. My leg bounced as my head filled with critical thoughts which were interrupted by Barbara's approving

comments. She complimented me on the presentation and only critiqued a few lines, encouraging me to take credit for my initiative in organizing the internship placement. I included her suggestions, although not quite believing them since my mother was the one truly deserving of praise. My mother pushed me to ask Patrick and Lisa about the possible internship and to keep communicating to insure the possibility became reality. I then pushed those memories aside and asked Barbara for any advice. She stated the importance of a quick intro and said, "Talk about how you got there. Make sure you mention how you developed the project and how you worked to get it up and running." She went on to say that it wasn't just important to give the presentation, it was also important to respond to the questions afterwards in a quick and insightful manner. I would see Barbara again a few hours later at the presentation.

As I waited for my turn to present, I became more anxious with each minute. First, by waiting in line to download my slideshow into the computer system, and then, by the announcement and delivery of each presentation. I tried desperately to tune out their words and memorize the black words on the white pages as they shook in my hands. With each presentation, the speakers confidently delivered their presentations without a script. Chantelle helped settle my nerves as she consulted her notes throughout her speech. After Chantelle there was a short break with just enough time to hurriedly eat a few cookies and say a few prayers. Soon after Barbara walked to the front of the room and called the audience to attention. She called my name as I stood from my seat and carefully walked to the stairs. With each step I imagined one of my heeled boots catching on a step and then falling face first into the carpet flooring. A perfect analogy to describe my wayward emotions in that moment. I luckily survived the stairs only to be met with the seemingly impatient crowd. I took a breath and began.

As Barbara had suggested, I started with a quick anecdote about meeting with Patrick and creating the internship. I mentioned my goals first so that when my deliverables were presented, they would clearly align with my stated goals. My goals were to understand the challenges facing public institutions, and to familiarize myself with the permanent collection and the artists of those works. From there I talked about my deliverables: my exhibition (“The March Towards Abstraction”) explaining the evolution from representative to abstract imagery, my Instagram posts documenting works in the permanent collection, and my Featured Friday Artists posts advertising the travelling exhibition from the National Gallery of Canada and the Canadian Photography Institute. I discussed each of these outcomes by describing the development and importance of each in connection to the gallery’s mandate. I then showed a photo of myself in the vault in front of a wall of works by the famed Group of Seven and beside works by Alex Cameron displayed in my exhibition. This photo demonstrated my interaction with works by treasured Canadian artists who I learned about throughout my post-secondary education. This showed the connection between my university education with real-world experiences in the internship. I then described the daunting challenge of my internship: reviewing and taking notes on the gallery’s vast archives. I went on to show a slide full of my coworkers smiling faces. This expressed my appreciation in being in such an encouraging environment and shows the power of art as a connective tool. I used the next few slides to describe the value of the internship and the power of art.

One slide in particular showed a quote from York Wilson, a well-known artist I had learned about through the internship, in front of one of his works. This work, *Corner of Venice*, was my favourite piece in the collection and the inspiration behind the Italian/European themed idea I presented at the Artistic Planning Meeting. This work also reminded me of my heritage, as

my father and his family hail from Venice, and it reminds me of beloved childhood memories. Through this work and a quote from its author, I aimed to speak to the heart of art. I remember this moment vividly as I looked to my speaker notes - one of the few times I had done so in the presentation - and repeated the words I had so eloquently written that I didn't want to mess up by trying to summarize. "I believe that art is for everyone. It should not be judged as elite for only the privileged few. Art is all about breaking barriers and being more open and accepting of all people and all kinds of art." I looked to the audience, having known the next line by heart, and described the fond memory of an argument with my brother on whether physics or art was a universal language. "I'm sure you can guess which side I took." The crowd chuckled in response. I looked back to the paper as I nervously looked for the next words and knew my time was running out. "Art is a march towards the unknown while discovering personal truths along the way." The words rang true to my own life and, despite the seconds going by like the quick succession of numbers on a speed clock, it was important to me to say those words. Having been given the one-minute warning, I turned and read off the screen the skills I had acquired and improved as a result of my internship and, soon enough, my presentation was over, and the questions had begun.

As I knew no amount of notes could prepare me for what was about to happen, I was nervous. Patrick began the line of questioning by asking, "What took you by surprise during your internship?" I could have said a number of things looking back on it now - the articles about the climate crisis or the experience of being told Lisa was fired to name a few - but what I said was the first to come to mind. Lisa had said it was one thing most people came away with: "The thing that probably took me most by surprise was the need to acknowledge our own privilege in a gallery setting." I couldn't remember the name of the organization that had visited the gallery

during the presentation, but it seems clear now, Circles. This organization works to feed, to offer no-interest loans, and to develop professional skills for those in poverty, all free of charge. Circles works with Sarnia's municipal government to educate its employees by having a member of the organization travel to local public institutions, such as the JNAAG. "In the gallery we ask that large items like bags and backpacks be taken and stored away while visitors explore the exhibits, but to someone homeless that is all they have. Through our policies, we are restricting those community members from entering and enjoying our space, so it is important to address our privilege and change these policies to better accommodate our community." My own response surprised me as it was not prepared in advance and was more intelligent and meaningful than I expected.

Jamelie Hassan asked the next question. "What percentage of Indigenous artworks would you say is in the gallery's permanent collection?" I remembered an Indigenous artwork, called *Thunderbird*, included in the youth/colour idea I had presented at the Artistic Planning Meeting. "I am not sure of the percentage," I said to Jamelie, "but I do remember including [an image of a thunderbird](#) in one of the other ideas I presented during the meeting. The image of the thunderbird is very important to the Indigenous population as it is a main figure in their legends. The painting also included the symbol of the all-seeing-eye, which is also important to the community." I also couldn't remember the name of the artist, Norval Morrisseau, during the presentation but persisted despite of it. "As I said, I am not sure of the exact percentage of Indigenous works in the collection, but I am sure it is low and that the gallery is hoping to acquire more." This response was also a shock to me as I was able to connect to the question on a personal level, answer the question to the best of my knowledge, and incorporate the gallery as an evolving institution striving for inclusivity as I knew it to be. I felt energized after answering

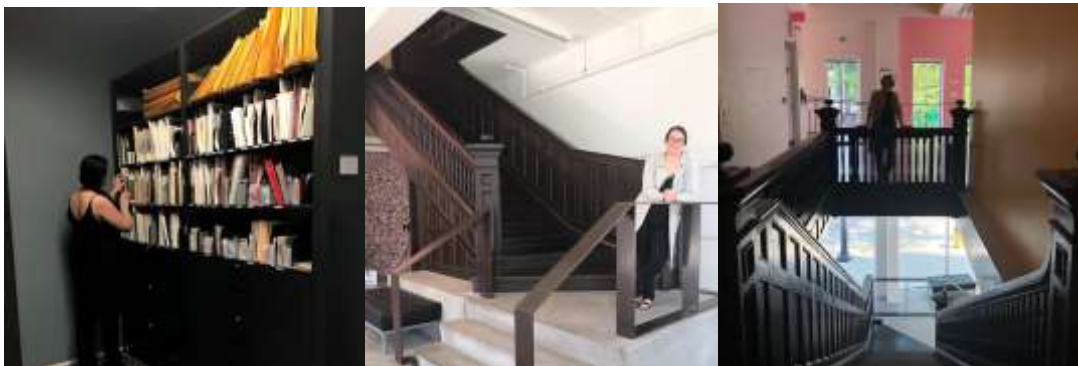
the questions in a somewhat sophisticated manner and turned to the person asking the last question.

I found the Dean of the Arts and Humanities, Michael Milde, and immediately all my earlier worries came back to me as I tried to breath and listen to his question at the same time - which was somehow proving difficult. He asked, "As an artist, what did you take away from your experience?" I stared blankly for a few seconds and then tried to come up with a coherent answer. I stumbled over my wording until I finally said, "I began to recognize and appreciate the little things like color schemes, captions, and lighting. The aspects that aren't thought about when creating the works but are essential to their display." *Come on think! Think and breath! It shouldn't be too hard; you have only been doing it for your whole life!* I mentally lectured myself until suddenly an answer came to me. "As an artist with no idea if my work will ever end up in gallery space, the internship really opened up my eyes to things I would not have known or thought about otherwise." Barbara then quickly interjected about moving onto the next speaker and soon enough the clapping of the audience rang in my ears as I stood nervously. I awkwardly put the clicker down and walked back up the stairs to my seat as Barbara called the next victim. I remember the exhaustion rushing back from earlier in the day and slouched in my chair upon realizing that the worst was over.

It wasn't until after my internship that I began to realize the important skills SASAH has taught me. These skills range from presentations and research to writing. I was able to use research skills from SASAH's introductory class where I would read a book a week and quickly pick out the interesting tidbits to mention later in a class discussion. I used this ability while creating notes for the exhibition catalogues and artist files. I also used writing skills from SASAH classes in second and third years. This helped develop my personal essay-writing skills

and my creative approach to delivering a story, which can be seen throughout my reflections. Not only did I use these skills from my major, but I also developed them, as well as my presentation skills. My presentation skills grew through my Artistic Planning Meeting and internship presentations. SASAH gave me the ability to learn how to work in a group setting which transferred over to my internship. In the Artistic Planning Meeting, along with the huddles and other meetings, I used and expanded on this ability. Skills I developed unique to the internship would be community-outreach experience and knowledge of exhibition development which can be used in my upcoming SASAH community project. This upcoming project builds on my experience at the internship because the project is an exhibition addressing the colonialism in Eldon House.

This internship gave me a direct way to harness my abilities while gaining real world experience. I can put this experience on my resume which will help in my endeavors towards my master's degree and future career. I see my future as something combining the artistic and research process. I will have to research how this can be translated into a job opportunity, but if there is one thing I learned during the internship it was to always keep the door open for possibilities. I learned this from the beginning in my meeting at Museum London with Lisa to accepting the opportunity to craft and create the social-media posts that would be seen by the world outside our gallery's doors. I learned to always be open to possibilities and that sometimes, just sometimes, the world will be in your favour.



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