HOLD FAST

CONTEMPORARY ARTS FESTIVAL

AUGUST 12-15, 2026 ST. JOHN'S, NL





ABOUT THE FESTIVAL

Eastern Edge operates on the unceded and ancestral homelands of the Beothuk, whose culture faced mass destruction by colonization. Ktaqmkuk, is the traditional homeland of the Mi'kmaq and Beothuk. Labrador is the traditional homeland of the Innu of Nitassinan, the Inuit of Nunatsiavut, and the Inuit of NunatuKavut.

Indigenous cultures are alive. We believe the arts can contribute to the healing and decolonizing journey, and offer us the chance to reflect on how we can work towards resistance rather than complicity. We are committed to challenging the historical and continued oppression of lands, people, and culture.

HOLD FAST is a four day celebration of contemporary art practice in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, an evolution of the previous 24 Hour Art Marathon. HOLD FAST is St. John's only festival dedicated to contemporary art and is the longest running festival in the province. HOLD FAST delivers accessible, meaningful and critically-relevant contemporary art programming across an array of media including: installation, performance, screenings, artist talks, dance, community events and artist-led workshops for people of all ages.

ASHLEY HEMMINGS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

SHIREEN MERCHANT
FESTIVAL COORDINATOR

THREE CREATIVE PERSPECTIVES

This report brings together three distinct creative interpretations of HOLD FAST Contemporary Arts Festival. This year, we invited three creatives to experience, observe, and respond to HOLD FAST in their own ways.

Writer Than Brown, cartoonist Dylan Dixon, and photographer Ritche Perez each offer a unique perspective on the festival, its artists, audiences, projects, and moments. Their contributions reflect the different ways a festival can be experienced and remembered through words, images, and illustration.



Dylan Dixon, Memories.

While most of the following passages are fictional narratives, they are intended to accurately describe and explore the featured works of HOLD FAST 2026 as experienced by myself, Than Brown, the festival writer.

CHELSEA DAB HILKE & FRED SCHMIDT-ARENALES: "SOMETHING'S HAPPENING IN THE BATTERY (AND THERE'S NOTHING YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT)."

"...Automated screech-in kiosks!" The phrase jolted Amy to attention. She had been plodding along Duckworth Street, lost in thought and cradling an iced coffee as if it were the only thing between her and and a doomed world. Now she found herself amidst a large crowd across from Caine's Grocery. They were clustered around a tour guide in a wide brimmed hat, holding a guitar.



Photo, Ritche Perez

"*What's going on?*" Amy muttered, taken aback.

"*Oh so like, this is a tour of downtown St. John's, but it's taking place in the 2040s,*" offered the man next to her. "*There's development companies trying to build in The Battery, but they would have to destroy parts of the neighbourhood, including natural spaces. Just for some expensive tasteless buildings that don't help the community.*"

"Oh, fuck that," replied Amy. The group progressed down the street, and began to sing: *"It wasn't God who made downtown St. John's, boys / Though he sure made the hill that it's on / But he sure didn't build all the houses / 'Cause they seem to be all falling down."*

The group continued to The Battery. It started to feel less like a tour and more like a parade, or protest. There were totems in the form of animal heads and blueberries being held high, and folks dressed in mournful black, exclaiming about how the neighbourhood used to be in the old days of the 2020s. The crowd finally gathered at the small park at the entrance to The Battery where the "tour" reached its climax as the group was accosted by a three-headed creature. By the time the bizarre and impressive puppet, representing the entities developing The Battery, was defeated, Amy found herself in much better spirits. Tossing her empty coffee cup into a garbage can, she found herself joining the throng moving further into the neighbourhood, as the HOLD FAST event merged into the monthly march for The Battery.

About an hour later, the HOLD FAST festival writer looked up, having been engrossed in tying knots at the Admiralty House Museum table. The Battery and Signal Hill had been encompassed in such a dense fog that a newcomer to the city would never know they were there to begin with. Had the artists and protestors successfully conjured protective mists around that end of St. John's?



"SOMETHING'S HAPPENING IN THE BATTERY (and there's nothing you can do about it)." Photo: Daniel Gryphon



"SOMETHING'S HAPPENING IN THE BATTERY (and there's nothing you can do about it)." Illustration, Dylan Dixon

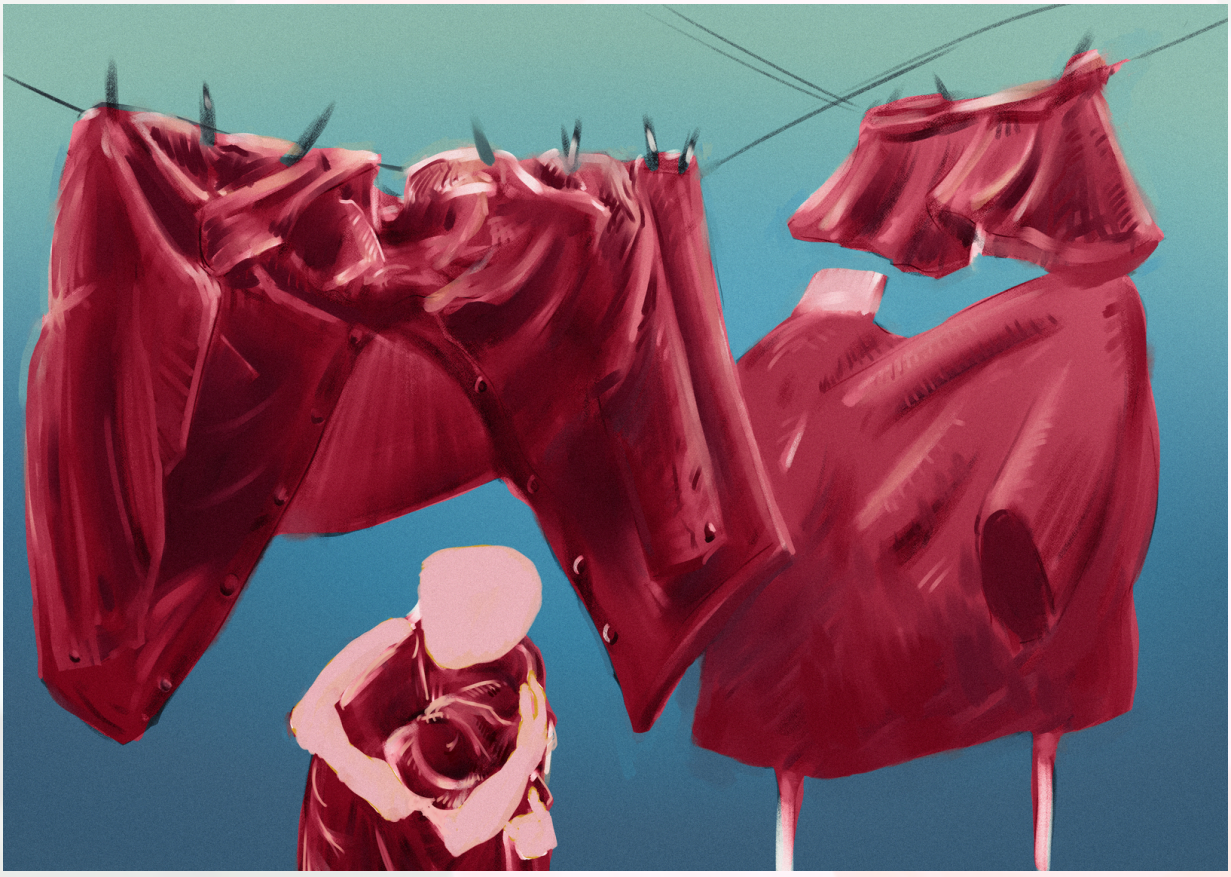
NORA DE MARIAFFI, “CLOSE TO YOU”



Close to you. Photo, Ritche Perez

“Ok, now put your arm through the sleeve there - no, the other sleeve, silly!” Little Paul giggled, squirming around in the jacket that his aunt Cara was holding out. The jacket had a couple of standout features. Firstly, it was bright pink - so vividly so that it seemed to be fending off the dense fog that had swallowed up the entire downtown area. Secondly, the jacket had an unusual number of sleeves, which fiercely entertained the laughing child. He finally got into his portion of the jacket, and Cara dropped down to her knees, and started to wriggle into the remaining sleeves.

“No no no, the other sleeve!” Paul exclaimed, delighted at the opportunity to echo his aunt’s words back to her. Soon woman and child were both wearing the unusual garment, which was constructed in such a way that Aunt Cara and Little Paul were held close in a half-hug. They wobbled a little, fused together as they were, steadying themselves long enough for a nearby volunteer to take a picture for them. Cara gave her nephew a fond squeeze, and Paul gave another happy giggle. The photo of the two of them would go on to live on Paul’s family fridge for many years to come.



Close to you. Illustration, Dylan Dixon

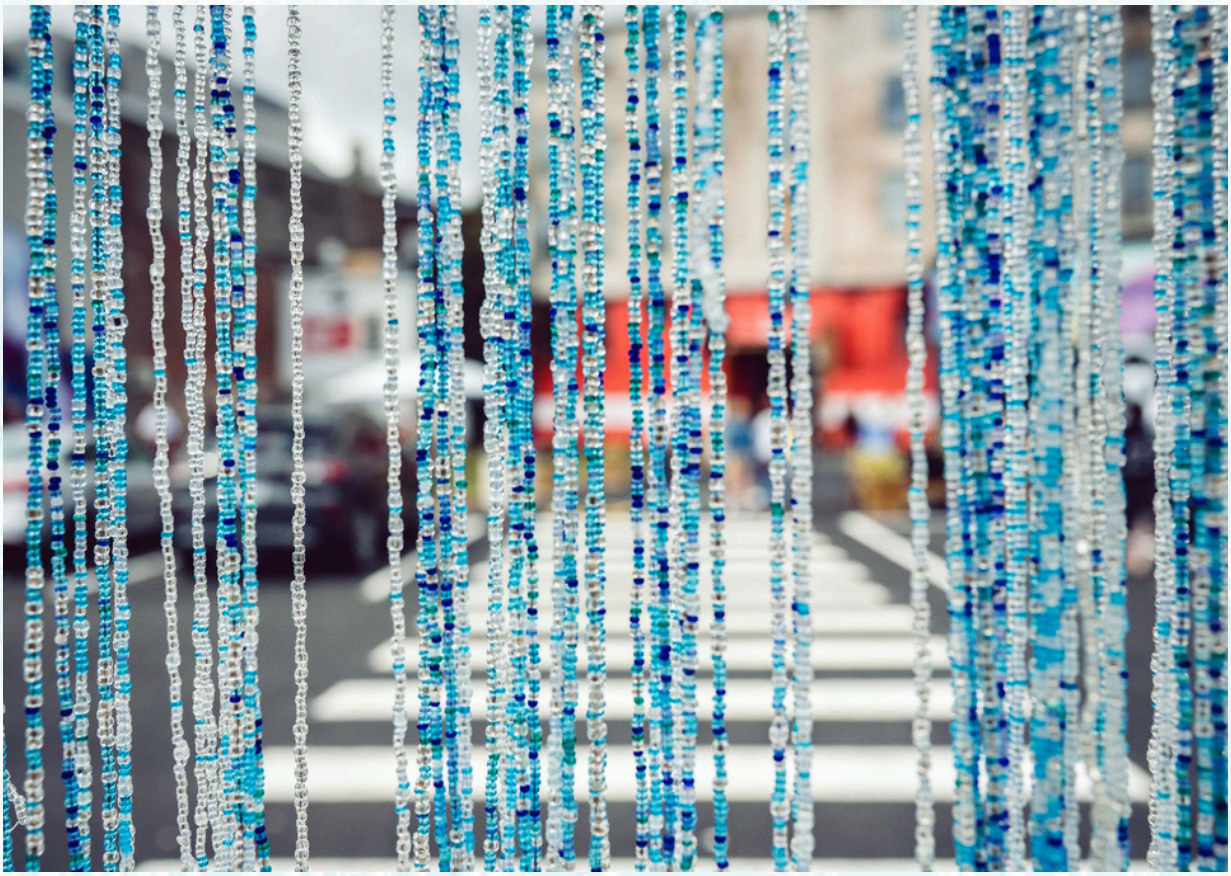
SHANELLE ST. HILAIRE, “WATERFALL”



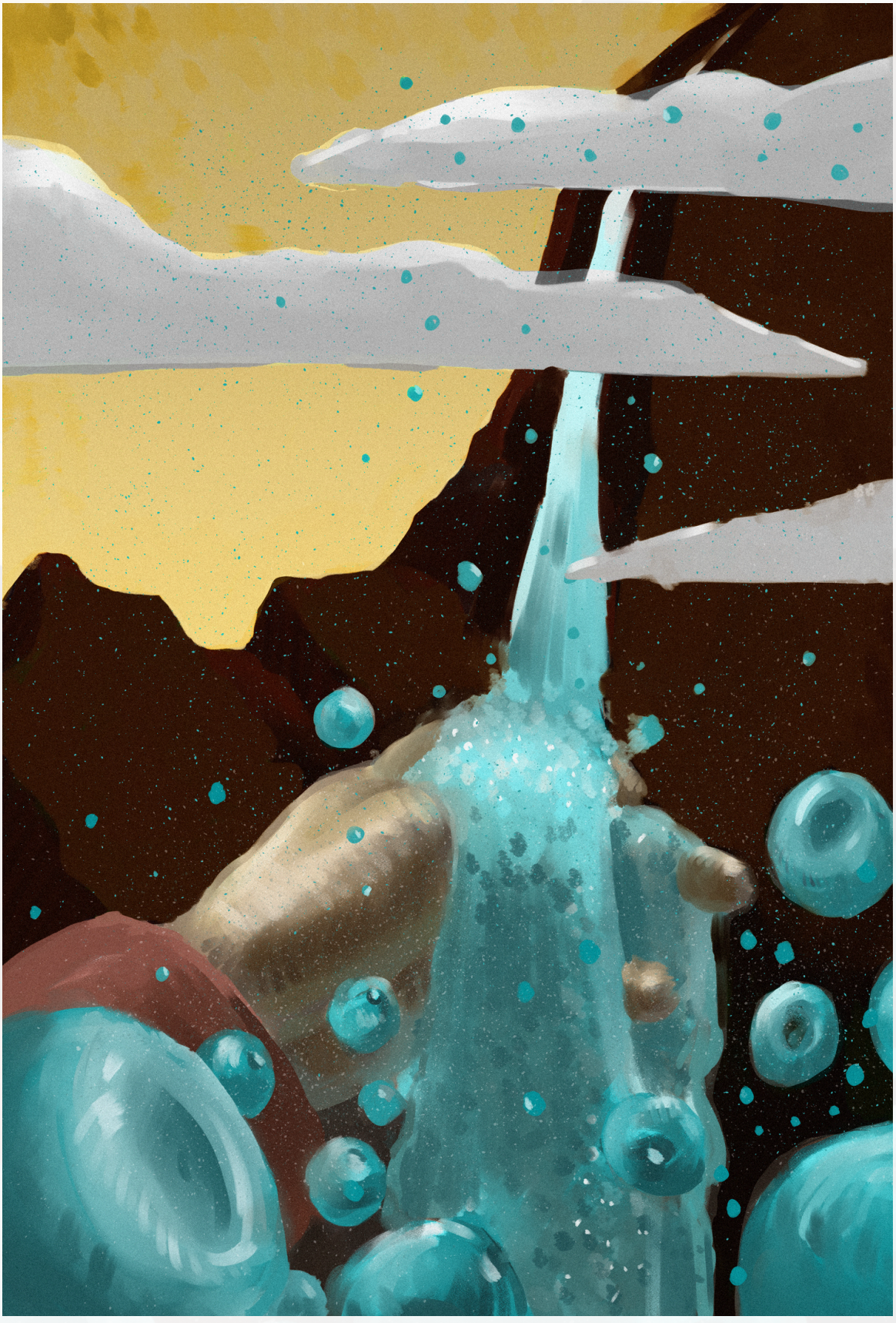
Waterfall. Photo, Daniel Griffin

Quinn was getting the most out of the HOLD FAST art crawl. He had heard live music, seen videos, learned to tie knots, and helped paint a bus. At the same time, he was a little disappointed. He was supposed to be swimming that afternoon, but at the last moment, his friend’s car broke down, leaving him stuck in town for the weekend.

He continued to explore downtown, passing a group of people spinning yarn, and a person singing while wearing bright colours, a rainbow cape, and a globe on their head. Looking up, he saw a final work of art, hanging just ahead of him. It was sort of like a beaded curtain, but longer and more grand. Made of clear and blue glass beads, its swayed in the breeze and shimmered in the sun, like a waterfall on a bright day. He dove in, letting the smooth, cool beads brush against his bare face and arms, the strands musically clinking and clacking against each other. He watched as the strands swayed, and chuckled to himself. “I guess I got a swim in after all!”



Waterfall. Photo, Ritche Perez



Waterfall. Illustration, Dylan Dixon

MELISSA TREMBLETT, “300 YEARS”

My approach in writing about HOLD FAST has largely been to describe it through narrative, however I never quite felt I came up with something that would do justice to Melissa Tremblett’s work. Besides, Tremblett’s work at HOLD FAST was specifically standing against a narrative that settlers have spun about the Innu people. Based on the archeological record, the government of Newfoundland and Labrador has claimed that the Innu of Labrador have only been on their land for 300 years – less than white settlers have been there. Tremblett is among many voices challenging this timeline. The Innu may have simply gone through a change in their material culture 300 years ago, complicating the archeological record, meaning the Innu would not have been on their land up to 300 years ago, but for at least 300 years.



300 Years. Photo, Ritche Perez

This claim is also based strictly on known archeological finds, disregarding indigenous oral history. The provincial government is currently using this 300 year timeline to prevent the Innu people telling their own story and formally establishing their history with the land.

In a defiant display of living Innu heritage, Melissa Tremblett donned a plaid dress and pitched a tent in the pedestrian mall near the courthouse. This was her home for the afternoon, a refuge of canvas and aromatic spruce branches against the sun-heated pavement, stone, and brick of Water Street. The tent had signs reading, “sometimes you just need to put up a tent,” and “we’ve been here the whole time.” She was also accompanied by traditional Innu tea dolls, made by herself and family members.



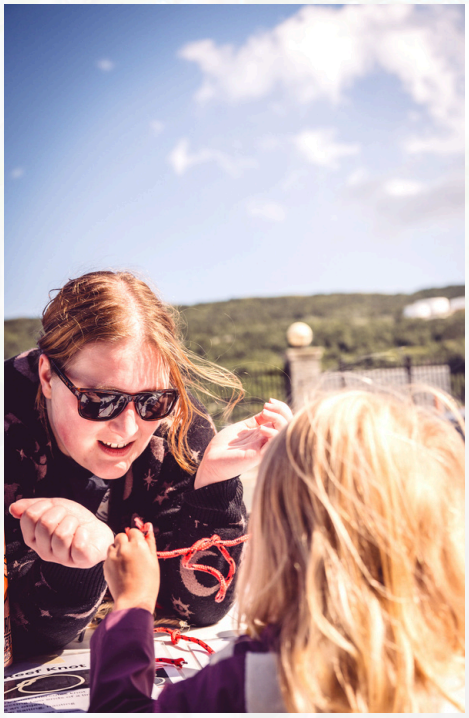
300 years. Photo, Kailey Ikkusek-Rogers

One thing that struck me about Melissa Tremblett's work was how settler culture uses red tape to excuse restrictions on indigenous life. If there's an institutional ruling that shortens the timeline of Innu presence, then a whole industry is given an excuse to ignore oral histories that say otherwise. In the past when Tremblett put up her tent on a school campus, she had to push back against people who were allegedly not worried about her ability to practice culture, but rather concerned with insurance, passing the blame onto the system. Surely, there are ways white settlers (such as myself) can resist these bureaucratic traps.



300 Years. Illustration, Dylan Dixon

SPECIAL MOMENTS - ART CRAWL













Photos, Ritche Perez

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Photos, Ritche Perez

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

HOLD FAST EXTENDS WARM THANKS TO ALL THE ARTISTS, PERFORMERS, VOLUNTEERS, COMMUNITY PARTNERS, SPONSORS & FRIENDS WHOSE SUPPORT MADE THIS FESTIVAL POSSIBLE

Admiralty House Museum
Alt Hotel
Amanda Penney
Anhelina Shevchenko
Ashley Hemmings
Atlas Acidosis
Audrey Parnell
Bri
Brianna Browning
Business and Arts NL
Carrisa Cooper
Chelsea Dab Hilke
Cory Haller
Craft Council NL
Dana Christie
Daniel Griffin
Downtown Comics
Downtown St. John's
Dylan Dixon
East Coast Quilt Co.
Fataneh Rahaghi
Faye Joseph
First Light
Fishers' Loft Inn
Fred Schmidt-Arnales
Gill Aylward
Gillian Petten
Hadiza Bello
Hanushika Thurairajah
Ian Vogt
Johnny Ruth
Jordan Smith
Kailey Ikkusek-Rogers
Katheryn Cochrane
Kelly Lewis
Kenney Purchase
Kevin Melanson
Kiana Rezaeinejad
Kimia Rezaeinejad
Laura Dawe
Laura Sbrizzi
Lex Michael
Mariana Castro Carvajal
Matilda Carr
Melissa Tremblett
Melissa Samms
Mickeelie Molloy
Mikiki
Nasim Makaremi Nia
Neighbours United
Nickle Film Fest
Nicole Bataller
Nicole White
NL Pipe Band
Nora De Marriaffi
Poyo + the Sprout
Print Three
NL Queer Research Initiative
Quidi Vidi Brewery
Raine Klassen
Reihaneh Sepehr
Rhyder Evans
Riddle Fence
Ritche Perez
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St. Michael's Printshop
Taryn Stone
Than Brown
Theatre Hill Cafe
Arts and Aging Network
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ARTIST-RUN CENTRE