

Exhibition Review: *Grotto: The Bill Staubi Collection*

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Abstract

Grotto: The Bill Staubi Collection was an exhibition held at the Ottawa Art Gallery (OAG) that showcased a selection of artworks donated by Bill Staubi, a prolific Ottawa-based art collector. According to the OAG website, *Grotto* aims to highlight “Staubi’s unwavering support for queer artists and his deep-rooted commitment to Ottawa’s vibrant contemporary art scene.” However, in an exhibit that seeks to represent and celebrate marginalized artists and communities, it is vital that galleries like the OAG employ ethical practices that build public trust and foster connection with its diverse communities. In this review, I analyze the curatorial approach to this exhibit, paying special attention to the ways in which the OAG has implemented the ethics of care, community inclusion, and sensitivity through *Grotto*.

Biography

Heather Macnab (she/her) is currently completing a Master’s degree in Art and Architectural History at Carleton University, on the unceded territories of the Algonquin Nation. She received her Bachelor’s degrees in History and in Art History & Visual Studies from the University of Victoria. Her research focuses primarily on the interactions among gender, race, and colonialism in the historical Canadian context and explores how these interactions can foster decolonial public storytelling in galleries and museums.

Exhibition Review: *Grotto: The Bill Staubi Collection*

I like to visit museums and galleries to learn about culture. These institutions convey local histories and cultural values through what is present and absent in collections and curatorial texts. Having recently moved to Ottawa, I am very interested in how the city defines itself. As a queer woman, I was excited to explore *Grotto: The Bill Staubi Collection* held at the Ottawa Art Gallery (OAG), an exhibit showcasing a selection of artworks donated by Bill Staubi, a prolific, Ottawa-based art collector. According to the OAG website, *Grotto* aims to highlight “Staubi’s unwavering support for queer artists and his deep-rooted commitment to Ottawa’s vibrant contemporary art scene.”¹ However, in an exhibit that seeks to represent and celebrate marginalized artists and communities, it is vital that the museum employs ethical practices that build public trust and foster connection with its diverse communities. In “The Contingent Nature of the New Museum Ethics,” scholar Janet Marstine suggests that contemporary museum ethics standards require the merging of feminist and queer theories to challenge the “othering” predominant in museological practice.² Upon entering this exhibit, I was optimistic that this approach had informed its curation.

The title *Grotto* evokes images of a cave filled with relics and sacred art. This image echoes that of the “cabinet of curiosities,” a Western, 16th-century style of collecting that helped to inform traditional museological practice. The description of the exhibit on the OAG website states that the title was derived from “Staubi’s iconic, cluttered half-bath installation, a personal grotto assembled from gifts, relics, and symbols of relationships.”³ I wondered whether this idea would be reflected in the exhibit’s curation.

The OAG is located in downtown Ottawa but is separated from the visual landscape of the national capital buildings, distinguishing the gallery as a municipal project rather than a national one. In the late 1980s, a group of local artists founded the OAG to represent the city of Ottawa. It was originally housed in the Arts Court, an 1870 Italianate courthouse, and in 2018, the new building opened as an expansion of this original structure.⁴ The new building is a five-storey white cube, with a glass lobby. The design evokes the white-cube method of display, which has largely become the default for contemporary art institutions. As identified by museum scholar Sara Pastore, the white cube functions as a sterile and austere environment, meant to

¹ Ottawa Art Gallery, “Grotto,” Ottawa Art Gallery, 2025, <https://oaggao.ca/whats-on/exhibitions/grotto/>.

² Janet Marstine, “The Contingent Nature of the New Museum Ethics,” in *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics*, ed. Janet Marstine (London: Routledge, 2011), 9.

³ Ottawa Art Gallery, “Grotto,” <https://oaggao.ca/whats-on/exhibitions/grotto/>.

⁴ Alexandra Badzak, “History and Vision,” Ottawa Art Gallery, accessed January 3, 2026, <https://oaggao.ca/about-us/history-and-vision/>.

detach artworks from their context and assert the gallery space as both neutral and rational.⁵ I wonder to what extent this purported neutrality will be reflected inside the gallery spaces. Marstine asserts the importance of cultural institutions to recognize their moral agency and dismantle ideas of objectivity and institutional authority.⁶ I believe this deconstruction is necessary to present Ottawa's queer art scene with ethics and care.

Upon entering *Grotto*, I see that, in some ways, the exhibit challenges the white cube style its architecture alludes to. Instead, the walls are brightly coloured. Centred on the wall is an interactive bookshelf, with books about and written by the 2SLGBTQQIA+ community. The gallery models a traditional art display style, with paintings and other framed pieces spaced out along the wall and object-based artworks placed on pedestals covered by glass vitrines. While the colourful walls and interactive elements may not echo the white cube architecture, this display style does.

The first room of *Grotto* is painted bright blue, with a large screen at the back playing footage of Bill Staubi introducing himself and his collection, which makes clear the exhibit's focus on the collector over the artworks. It is also in this room where I encountered the first text panel, titled "Rainbow Flag," which describes the historic significance of the Pride flag. Beside the text, the flag colours stretch from the floor to the ceiling, emphasizing the connection between Staubi, his art collection, and the 2SLGBTQQIA+ community.

It is only in the short hallway leading to the rest of the exhibit where visitors are introduced to the exhibition as a collection of artworks donated by Staubi. There is also a further explanation of the story behind the exhibit's title, and a list of the artists featured. Some of the artists included in the exhibit are credited as co-curators of the space, indicating that the OAG worked to provide opportunities for queer curation. Much of the text panels throughout the exhibit are written by Staubi himself, drawn from captions in his Facebook albums or from his personal notebooks. Many artwork labels include the social media handles of artists along with these descriptions, allowing working artists to grow their audiences through their participation in the exhibit. I am relieved to see the extent to which care and critical museum ethics inform the curation of this exhibit. As scholar Erica Robenalt explains, many queer museum scholars emphasize the responsibility of museums to include diverse communities in their work, consulting and empowering local queer communities to participate in and take ownership of shared histories.⁷ Blurring the boundaries between artist and curator ensures that multiple

⁵ Sara Pastore, "The Right to the Museum: From the White Cube to the Critical Museum," *Sociologica* 19, no. 1 (2025): 69.

⁶ Pastore, "The Right to the Museum," 5.

⁷ Erica Robenalt, *The Queer Museum: Radical Inclusion and Western Museology* (Routledge, 2024), 21, 53.

2SLGBTQQIA+ perspectives are voiced within the exhibit. Interestingly, however, I noticed that the exhibit does not include any discussion of the queer identities of the participating artists or their pronouns, and I wondered about the discussions and consultations that led to that decision.

The collection itself consists of a range of mediums, including needlepoint works, handkerchiefs, and stained glass. The artworks address a wide range of queer identities and experiences, from legal repression to global resistance against persecution and erasure. I was glad to see artworks that centred trans and non-binary people, a group which has increasingly become a target of political persecution in North America (Figure 1). However, through these depictions, there was little focus on how aspects of race and class have affected the lived experiences of queer people locally. This oversight is common in institutional 2SLGBTQQIA+ representation,⁸ where white, middle-class perspectives are often presented as *the* queer experience.



Figure 1. Saivani Sanassy, *Blooming Together*, 2024, mixed media. Ottawa Art Gallery, Ottawa, ON. Photo courtesy Sam Monastero.

My favourite part of the exhibition was the “Confessional” room. Separated from the exhibit by a frosted glass door, this room provides visitors with space for reflection and poses the question, “What do you desire?” For decades, homosexuality and other queer identities have been flattened as only an expression of sexual desire. This question provided me, as a queer visitor, the opportunity to reflect on all that I desire and how those desires inform my identity. This room serves as an important space to bring queer visitors into direct conversation with the exhibit and creates valuable connections from the past and present.⁹

The OAG has worked hard to ensure the implementation of new museological practice. The gallery’s vision is underpinned by the belief that art and culture are essential parts of belonging and “a means by which we come together to celebrate [...] shared experiences.”¹⁰ This vision lends itself well to the creation and curation of an exhibition like *Grotto*, which requires

⁸ Robenalt, *The Queer Museum*, 44.

⁹ Robenalt, *The Queer Museum*, 23.

¹⁰ Ottawa Art Gallery, “Grotto,” <https://oaggao.ca/whats-on/exhibitions/grotto/>.

special attention to practices of care, community inclusion, and sensitivity to ensure it is valuable to its queer audience. While the exhibition largely overlooks queer experiences at the intersection of race and class, I was impressed by *Grotto's* ability to avoid grand narratives of oppression, which are common in discussions of queer history and culture.

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