

TRACES

Expo 2020 Dubai

In times of change, we turn to our artists and our storytellers for insight and inspiration. What is happening? What lies ahead? What can we do? How can we see a way forward?

Climate change and its presence in our lives as a meta-issue, one that dominates discussion and impedes optimism, has been documented and dissected in seemingly every possible fashion. Often literal, journalistic, hectoring or depressing, the story of what we are doing to our planet isn't unknown to us. Its telling is often overly familiar.

Premiering at Canada's strikingly original pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai, the new National Film Board production *TRACES* uses new artistic tools, fresh voices and our innate affection for birds to enchant us and challenge us to think about climate change as something deeply personal.

Five decades of world's fair productions by the NFB have revealed the evolution of the institution itself and an extraordinary expansion of possibilities, technologies and formats. From film to the web, and virtual reality to artificial intelligence, all have helped to fulfill the NFB's mandate to "interpret Canada to Canadians and people in other nations."

So it's actually not entirely surprising that *TRACES* has distinct echoes of the NFB's groundbreaking *Labyrinth*, a multi-screen, multi-space immersive production for Expo 67 that used myth as a frame to explore what it means to be human. Both employ architecture as part of their creative palettes, and both connect audiences with global and personal themes.

This creative evolution of NFB works has also seen the inclusion of artists who haven't emerged from the traditional linear filmmaking tradition, instead bringing unique talents and perspectives from a range of artistic forms and backgrounds, to deconstruct and reassemble what an NFB production could be. This year, at Expo 2020 Dubai, it's not a film at all.

TRACES is an intimate spectacle, an installation series of eight "boxes," all at human scale, which invite visitors to enter, engage with and contemplate the imminent demise of so much of our environment. It will carry on after Dubai, on a five-year international exhibition tour.

The "experiential strategy" for *TRACES* is to appeal to each visitor's curiosity. For one of its creators, artist and architect Rami Bebawi, *TRACES* is an art installation built around the connection between the senses and the mind—"you need to touch the heart, you need to educate the head, and promote change through the hand, you need to have an emotional attachment. And I think you can do that with objects of beauty."

The creators of *TRACES*, KANVA, are a collective of architects whose work has gained acclaim for its excellence and sensitivity to public space and cultural meaning, and awards including the prestigious Professional Prix de Rome in Architecture from the Canada Council for the Arts.

As Bebawi puts it, *TRACES* will present visitors with species "fossilized in mid-flight" within amber-coloured blocks, lit from within, beautiful but profoundly sorrowful, as if their near-extinction had been frozen in the present. *TRACES* is, he says, "an architectural response to an over-regimented world." The *TRACES* boxes, some located outside, some inside, are in a physical conversation with the Canada Pavilion's wooden structure, which is itself an abstracted representation of the nation's landscapes. Its circular shape is "a universal symbol of unity, evoking the relationships humans have between each other and with the land."

Each box, populated by exquisitely crafted birds, sits within its own small “pavilion,” each approachable, inviting visitors to engage with it, a few people at a time, in a way that spurs discourse and a feeling of community.

Unlike a linear film or a traditional exhibit, **TRACES** allows visitors to explore it in any sequence, encouraging discovery and dialogue.

If past NFB expo productions were able to celebrate the Canadian landscape in spectacular fashion, **TRACES** takes a more contemplative view, hastened by the urgency of the moment, the fading of landscapes and the disappearance of species. But it does so not in a prescriptive or direct fashion, instead engaging the visitor in a physical experience that draws from art, architecture and documentary.

TRACES takes murmuration as its inspiration and central visual element—that astonishing, fleeting, organic and unpredictable movement of a flock of starlings, thousands in concert, moving as one yet seemingly at random. You can’t look away when you see it, and its beauty brings to some viewers an unease, as it’s natural but unexpected. **TRACES** fixes this murmuration in place so that we can apprehend what we might not be noticing.

This fossilization, or suspended movement, is an interpretation, an artistic gesture, according to the creators, “to reveal vulnerability, to bring awareness, to emphasize urgency, to preserve a trace.”

TRACES seeks not simply to “freeze” a reality, an environmental tragedy, but to trigger a response for the present and the future, by “reviving the fossil,” “awakening a memory,” “freeing life” and revitalizing it through a dialogue between humanity and nature.

Each of the boxes draws one into a suspended narrative. The first, “The Jewel,” speaks to the beauty of the entire exhibit, the light within an amber fossil that glows like a fire drawing people together.

The next three, “The Nearness,” “The Memorial” and “The Forgotten,” invite observation, reflection, memory and a sense of responsibility for our role in the demise of such natural beauty.

“The Seat” and “The Gathering” add intimacy, turning viewers into participants. The former is occupied by a single chair and an antique desk, which when opened, triggers a soundscape and reveals a single fossilized bird, an unavoidable messenger. The latter has room for four, suggesting the site of a family gathering to consider something troubling that can no longer be ignored.

“The Sanctuary” is a closed box, an aviary enlivened with the whispered sounds of birds, and with a design that recalls cave paintings, shadow play and early cinema screens, its mystery evoking curiosity.

The final box, “The Awareness,” contains a delicate empty birdcage, its open door suggesting escape, and white noise signaling that something tragic has happened. But as visitors occupy the four chairs, their presence activates bird songs, sparking what the project’s designers hope will be feelings of empathy and raised awareness.

The visitors’ experience of **TRACES** is enhanced by a massive mural at the pavilion’s entry point. It depicts, in an evocative and ethereal way, the variety of Canadian landscapes, across all seasons and regions, populated by birds in movement (some photographed, some hand-drawn), anticipating the eight boxes beyond. The mural is accompanied by a textured, natural soundscape, easing visitors into a contemplative mindset as they consider the environmental meaning of what they are about to see.

TRACES had to exist first and foremost in the context of the Canadian Pavilion in Dubai but be modular enough to be transported around the world. The team had to consider thematic elements that were both local and universal, and to allow for different configurations of the boxes depending on installation conditions in each

city. They also had to allow for the use of the artwork as “urban furniture,” materials that “instigate curiosity” and, given its premiere location in Dubai, to ensure it would function day and night, enduring sporadic heavy rainfall as well as intense heat and sunlight.

The beauty of the installation speaks to KANVA’s intention to appeal to the viewer’s conscience and emotions. “I don’t want to dismiss intellect. But at first, it is so beautiful it creates an attachment. Because I think sometimes humans need to feel good about themselves to do better things. That you can bring the Earth back to life. And that’s the whole interactive nature of it. The human actually has a role to play as a participant, as an actor. You’re not just there for contemplation,” says Bebawi.

Echoing KANVA’s ongoing architectural processes, Bebawi cites the individual collaborative contributions of his team on *TRACES*, with KANVA architect and partner Tudor Radulescu working on its high-level conceptual approach along with architect and project manager Olga Karpova, who was engaged in its artistic direction, from concept to fabrication and detailing (including the production of the fossils), and architectural intern Félix Roy, who was responsible for drawing execution and prototyping.

In his role as an NFB collaborator, Bebawi imported his ethos from his architectural practice: “I think sometimes I’m not sure if we’re architects or storytellers, I really haven’t figured it out yet. And I’m not sure I need to figure it out. But we always need to have a deep and grounded narrative in everything we do.”

Discussing his relationship on this project with the NFB, from when he was first approached by André Picard, the organization’s Senior Director, Partnerships and Business Development, Bebawi speaks to the NFB’s creative history: “The NFB understands the role of artists, and the NFB also represented an enormous reference during the entire project. For a creator it’s as if the NFB has always existed. You have this living encyclopedia that is so educated in so many fields. So it keeps challenging you. That is very rare, and really precious.”

Multi-media designer and art director Étienne Paquette was part of the creative development of *TRACES* right from its conception stage, contributing elements of audio, touch and engagement that deepen the experience. His previous work for the NFB included a living ice installation at the Canadian Museum of Nature, and *MEGAPHONE*, a “unique, interactive installation to express oneself... to reclaim the art of public speaking” and celebrate democracy. His creative philosophy made him a superb fit for the *TRACES* team: “I explore the avenues of immersive and interactive storytelling in a physical context—without a tablet, glasses or other virtual interface. The themes of ‘memory’ and ‘imprint’ run through my approach.”

The task, in this instance, is not simply like adding a sound to an image, as in a film, especially as the path through *TRACES* is not linear: visitors can walk from cube to cube at their own pace and in an order they choose. But Paquette has designed “sonic resonances” that express *TRACES*’s emotional strands. One of the most extraordinary examples came from the team’s research into the aural qualities of birds. When alarmed, pigeons generate distinctive but subtle sounds with their feathers! Paquette acquired recordings of the wings flapping and, for “The Gathering” cube, wove them together with music to create a soundscape that moves with the visitor’s experience “from chaos to harmony,” a kind of “drama on the table,” as he puts it. When all four chairs are occupied, the environment is peaceful, but becomes less so as each person leaves, an element of interactivity that underlines the larger themes of *TRACES*.

For André Picard, the effectiveness and artistic power of *TRACES* was apparent from the start. “I knew we had something great when I saw Rami’s first rendering of the murmuration, drawn with an amber-coloured felt-tip pen. It doesn’t often happen that a project’s creative potential is so obvious so early. I knew this was going to be something quite different, and that its originality would fit very well within the NFB’s history of artistic risk-taking.”

“At the NFB we are used to connecting storytellers and craftspeople whose talents are complementary but not immediately—or obviously—artistically adjacent,” says Picard. “The wide array of talents the NFB has

brought together for Expo Dubai re-affirm the NFB's long-standing role as a creative laboratory that not only produces new work, but new ways of working together."

With its expertise in creating online interactive productions that draw visitors into new experiences, the NFB paired the **TRACES** team with web designer and digital artist Bruno Choinière for what he calls "second-level storytelling," an artistic expression of the installation. Presented online as part of the "poetic side" of the virtual Canadian Pavilion commissioned by Global Affairs Canada (under its theme "The Future in Mind"), the **TRACES** web project mirrors the cubes created by KANVA, but in a way that empowers the online visitor to explore it in a uniquely tactile fashion, free of gravity. Online, "The Jewel" levitates off its pedestal. One can fly through "The Nearness," or bring back to life—and light—the fading cubes in "The Forgotten." The web project will connect global audiences to the vital themes and moving artistry of **TRACES**, in a way that previous, pre-internet NFB expo projects couldn't—and with an eye to future possibilities for digital and real-world expo creations.

The meeting of the impossible with the possible is where Creos Experts-Conseils Inc. came in. One of the world's leading agencies for the fabrication and touring of interactive installations, the Montreal firm behind the production management of **TRACES** ensured that it will be resilient enough to travel the world after Dubai and last for seven years. Benoît Lemieux, Creos' CEO, starts every project, no matter how unconventional, with a "Let's try it!" attitude. The company's collaboration with KANVA was enhanced by their previous work together on the remarkable *Entre les Rangs*, an installation described as "a sensory stroll through an urban field" of shimmering and interactive "stems" that mimic and celebrate the beauty of a planting of wheat.

The unique nature of **TRACES** demanded rigorous prototyping and testing in all the possible elements that its artistically delicate—but materially sturdy—cubes will likely have to endure, from the unforgiving heat of Dubai or Arizona to the bitter cold of Montreal or Niagara Falls. Lemieux emphasizes the environmental responsibility of this approach as well, citing the merits of creating an installation that will not only stand the test of time in a creative sense but also won't be discarded after one exhibition.

Since Expo 67, the NFB, while advancing the linear documentary and animated film forms, has also embraced new technologies as storytelling tools and platforms, from some of the world's first interactive web-based productions to immersive installations and co-creation-based apps, virtual reality and artificial intelligence programs. **TRACES** sits well in this evolving tradition of change.

The NFB continues to challenge itself, as it takes, alters and creates technologies that explode the possibilities to tell stories in new ways. Looking beyond 2021 and Dubai, its creators and producers are building future-looking projects, including ones that will use AI to visualize thoughts and emotions generated by the pandemic, and reshape VR tools to spur society to consider our role in stories of social injustice. Other forthcoming projects will hack social media tech to critically examine their societal impact, and design an interaction through the human voice with an AI entity to probe the beauty of human intelligence.

We can't know the future, but the future knows us when we get there. The thoughts of *Labyrinth* co-creator, NFB filmmaker Roman Kroitor, describing his project in 1967, ring true as the NFB introduces **TRACES**: "It's an attempt to restore a sense of community in a fragmenting world, and to show that things that unite us are infinitely more worthwhile than those that divide us."