

## **Appointment of City of Toronto Photo Laureate**

**Date:** February 02, 2023

**To:** Economic and Community Development Committee

**From:** General Manager, Economic Development and Culture

**Wards:** All

### **SUMMARY**

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The purpose of this report is to appoint Nadya Kwandibens as the third City of Toronto Photo Laureate.

The position of the City of Toronto Photo Laureate honours a photographer who is recognized by their peers for artistic excellence and for making a major contribution to photography through their work. Toronto's Photo Laureate serves as an advocate for visual culture, art photography, and photojournalism, and uses their unique perspective to create a dialogue on contemporary issues.

Nadya Kwandibens is Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) from the Animakee Wa Zhing #37 First Nation in northwestern Ontario. She is an award-winning portrait and events photographer, and a Canon Ambassador. In 2008, she founded Red Works Photography, a dynamic photography company empowering contemporary Indigenous lifestyles and cultures through photographic essays, features, and portraits. Nadya's photography has been exhibited in group and solo shows across Canada and the United States.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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The General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, recommends that:

1. City Council appoint Nadya Kwandibens to the position of City of Toronto Photo Laureate for a term beginning April 1, 2023, until December 31, 2026, or until a successor is appointed.

## FINANCIAL IMPACT

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The Photo Laureate receives an annual honorarium of \$10,000. Base funding of \$10,000 for the annual honorarium is included in the 2023 Council Approved Operating Budget for Economic Development and Culture as well as in future year budget submissions.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

## DECISION HISTORY

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In May 2014, recognizing the great success of Toronto's Poet Laureate program, Council created a complementary position of Photo Laureate, to celebrate the craft of photography, the leaders in the field of photography in this city, and the contributions of photographers and photography in telling Toronto's story.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2014.MM51.1>

In October 2015, City Council approved the terms of reference for the Photo Laureate, which were developed based on the advice of a panel of leaders in the field of photography.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2015.ED6.5>

In April 2016, City Council appointed Geoffrey James as Toronto's first Photo Laureate.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2016.ED10.1>

In April 2019, City Council appointed Michele Pearson Clarke as Toronto's second Photo Laureate.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2019.EC3.1>

## COMMENTS

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Toronto is recognized as a leading global centre for photography, home to internationally renowned artists and institutions like the Contact Photography Festival and The Image Centre, among many others. The position of Photo Laureate is the first and only of its kind in Canada, and combines the tradition of arts laureates with a form of artistic practice and storytelling which is evolving with new digital technology and increased global connectivity.

In 2016, City Council appointed Geoffrey James as the first Toronto Photo Laureate. During his three-year term, Geoffrey James photographed and curated two exhibitions for Doors Open Toronto, including a spotlight on Yonge/Dundas Square (2017) and a celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Prince Edward Viaduct and the photographic work of Arthur Goss (2018). He delivered a series of public talks at Toronto Camera

clubs, the McLuhan Centre, and the Aird Gallery, as part of a show celebrating "An Enduring Wilderness". He also worked with Poet Laureate Anne Michaels on a book project that mixes photos and fiction that will serve as a legacy project for both Laureates.

In 2019, City Council appointed Michele Pearson Clarke as the second Toronto Photo Laureate. During her three-year term Michele Pearson Clarke gave artist talks at The Image Centre, the Bentway, and the Art Gallery of Ontario. She curated a group show at the Toronto Photographers' Workshop and she spearheaded Scarborough's New View Photo Contest. She also partnered with BIPOC Photo Mentorship Program in 2022 to present a show of new work at Nathan Phillips Square as part of Doors Open Toronto.

In keeping with the notion that the position of the Photo Laureate is an honour bestowed rather than a position of employment, photographers are not invited to apply for the position. Rather, an expert selection committee is assembled from the local visual arts/photographic community to select a candidate. The selection committee included:

- Michele Pearson Clarke (Toronto Photo Laureate 2019-2022)
- Sophie Hackett (Curator of Photography, Art Gallery of Ontario)
- Ryan Rice (Executive Director and Curator, Indigenous Art at OCAD University's Onsite Gallery)
- Alana Traficante (Executive Director, Gallery 44)
- Darcy Killeen (CEO, Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival)

By continuing the honorary position of City of Toronto Photo Laureate, Council reinforces support for the photographic arts and the city's cultural community as a whole.

### **Recommended Appointment of Toronto's Third Photo Laureate**

Nadya Kwandibens is Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) from the Animakee Wa Zhing #37 First Nation in northwestern Ontario. She is an award-winning portrait and events photographer, a Canon Ambassador, and has travelled extensively across Canada for over 15 years. In 2008 she founded Red Works Photography, a dynamic photography company whose vision empowers contemporary Indigenous lifestyles and cultures. Red Works specializes in natural light portraiture, headshots, events and concert photography. Nadya's work has been exhibited in group and solo shows across Canada and the United States.

Her artistic practice builds upon three ongoing bodies of work: *Concrete Indians*, an open-call series that explores Indigenous identity and decolonial assertions of resistance and cultural resurgence; *Red Works Outtakes*, an uplifting portraiture series created to combat the "stoic indian" stereotype; and *The Red Chair Sessions*, which places importance on the reclamation of Indigenous lands and languages. She is also currently in the research and development phase for a new multimedia series titled *The Kitchen Table Talks* that will bring together Indigenous women and the two-spirited community to round-table perspectives on matrilineal leadership and nationhood with a focus on addressing urgent local and regional Indigenous matters.

Nadya was also a member of the Indigenous Laws + The Arts Collective, the founding body of *Testify*, a travelling multimedia group exhibition. *Testify* paired artists and legal thinkers to work in conversation with each other to create art pieces that explore facets of Indigenous law. Her work in this dynamic exhibition is titled *RE:Turning Home* and focused on child-welfare law and the foster care system.

In 2018, Nadya won the Ontario Arts Council's Indigenous Arts Award. Jurors stated, "Nadya is an intrepid, ground-breaking and influential artist. She has brought an Indigenous voice to portrait photography that recontextualizes images and shows us our true selves."

In addition to commissioned works, Nadya delivers empowering photography workshops and presentations for youth, universities, and community groups. She currently resides in Tkarón:to on Wendat, Haudenosaunee, Mississauga of the Credit River & Dish With One Spoon Territory.

## **CONTACT**

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## **SIGNATURE**

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Patrick Tobin  
General Manager, Economic Development and Culture