

# **Anong Migwans Beam** **at Campbell House**

Curated by Elka Weinstein

Exhibit opening November 3, 2020

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# Introduction

In this exhibition of Anong Beam's works at Campbell House Museum, a historic house set in a small garden near Toronto's City Hall, we hoped that the art would resonate within the timeless classical building. Although Anong is a contemporary artist, her perception and vision are not separated from her own past, and the history of that past is also present in her paintings.

Anong's work draws on both social and natural history, and on her own history as a child of artists – Ann and Carl Beam. The paint that she uses is made from natural materials found on the island that is her home, often from minerals that have taken millennia to form in the ground.

Campbell House is an important example of Georgian architecture in Upper Canada (now Ontario). Although today Campbell House is a thoroughly modern museum in terms of the kinds of programs and events it hosts and the sensibility of art exhibitions that take place in it, it is also worthwhile to consider the current exhibition as a new way into history.

Landscapes depicted by early English and Scottish settlers drew on the tradition of the European picturesque and Romanticism, and they demonstrate how those painters (many of them

anonymous) thought and felt about their newly adopted home. Some of these nineteenth-century art works are hung in the same space as Anong's paintings and are intended to be used to draw comparisons as well as to create contrast.

Natural themes that are present in Anong's paintings are evident in the nineteenth-century art works that hang in the two rooms on the ground floor of the house – the themes of water in the Withdrawing Room and flowers in the Dining Room.

The theme of water in the Withdrawing Room's earlier art reflects and refracts water in its many forms. Water as a source of life is important to all Anishnaabe people, but it is particularly important on Manitoulin Island – the biggest freshwater island in the world – where Anong lives and paints. Anong writes: "I have been painting memories, my practice has always centered around water and how it holds and contains us and is a silent witness again and again to all events, constantly renewed and present in us, as it was for our ancestors." Two important Indigenous women from Wikwemikong First Nation on Manitoulin Island are Water Walkers and Protectors. Josephine Mandamin, a water activist who walked 17,000 miles around the Great Lakes over 10 years carrying a bucket of water to



bring attention to pollution in the lakes died in early 2019. Her great-niece, Autumn Peltier, carries on the tradition. In 2018, Autumn told the United Nations General Assembly, “It’s time to ‘warrior up,’ stop polluting the planet and give water the same rights and protections as human beings ... Many people don’t think water is alive or has a spirit. My people believe this to be true.”

In the Dining Room, the formal nineteenth-century prints of flowers (painted and lithographed by another female artist, Agnes Fitzgibbon) look thoroughly at home, but they also seem perfectly at ease with Anong’s watercolours beside them. Anong’s contemporary flower portraits are just as closely observed and accurately rendered as the historic studies, but they are painted from a completely different point of view. Her flowers are not produced as scientific illustrations or pretty renderings, but as part of a whole – they are themselves, just as a tree or a stream, an animal or a human being, is an entirely natural being.

Anong’s paintings also demonstrate a romanticism, a nostalgia for the not-so-distant past. The paintings at the top and bottom of the staircase (*Camp Cadillac* and *Ghost Moose*) have cars and houses in them, but they also include animals that might appear in dreams. These animal forms interact in surprising ways with the birds and floral motifs in the Chinoiserie wallpaper behind them.

The paintings in the Ballroom are large, but the grand space with a high ceiling is ample enough to accommodate them. The focal point of the show is *Spring Bay, Mennonite Barn*, Anong’s most recent painting to date. With its showy pheasant bird and Mustang car, this painting blends industrial and natural sensibilities, as well as a present sense of both the tamed and wild landscapes.

Similar themes are found in other paintings in the Ballroom – *Red Mangrove* and *Mountain Lake* – where rockets and space modules are blended with landscapes that shelter birds and animals. Both have subtle elements that might not appear at first glance. Although the references to Carl Beam’s *Various Ways to Travel in North America* in the space shuttle and the dye-transfer techniques are there, the stillness of the water in the foreground draws you in to a scene that is very nearly a dreamscape.

The largest and most complex of the paintings in the exhibition is *Deluge*. *Deluge* was created in 2019, and Anong produced all the paint for this

work. This is a painting about her life. The bears represent abundance – they are grizzly bears fishing for salmon. The dye-transfer birds swoop upwards into the sky and the painting includes the space shuttle, connected to the birds overhead. Unusually, Anong is present in the painting, as a tiny shadowy figure in the foreground. There are teepee-like structures, plants, flowing water and much more to explore in this allegorical painting.

This exhibition of Anong Beam’s work was conceived before the onset of the pandemic in 2020, at a time when it was inconceivable that the public would be unable to view her paintings in person at the museum for most of the scheduled run. We hope that this catalogue of the exhibition gives the viewer some small sense of these enchanting and delightful works of art.

## About Campbell House Museum

Campbell House Museum is a vibrant public space where members of Toronto’s diverse communities gather to discuss, to create, to perform and to socialize, giving life to the words “freedom of expression.”

Built in 1822, Campbell House is the oldest surviving building from the Town of York and an outstanding example of Georgian architecture. Saved by The Advocates’ Society from demolition and moved to its current location in 1972, Campbell House was home to Chief Justice William Campbell, who in 1826 presided over the trial of the rioters who destroyed William Lyon Mackenzie’s printing press, a significant early test for freedom of the press in Canada.

### Campbell House Museum

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## Artist's Statement

For this exhibition I have created 6 large format oil on canvas paintings, and a small series of water colour studies. In these works, I will be developing from a theme that has emerged in the past two years in my work. Looking at my life, and with my mother entering Alzheimer's, I have been painting memories, my practice has always centered around water and how it holds and contains us, and is a silent witness again and again to all events, constantly renewed and present in us, as it was for our ancestors.

But now I am looking back and I feel like I am reclaiming histories for myself. I am inspired by images from other histories of place, like *Camp Forestia* by Peter Doig. It is a classic camp from the Ontario north, there are many all around me, and they are completely other, I have memories of seeing people go to them. They are the settler camps, even though they are so familiar, they are a visual image of privilege and isolation.

All around my home, even on reserve the waterfront belongs through long term lease to non-native families, who have held them for years. These paintings are emerging to reclaim images of where I live, and to relate them back to me. It's strange to live somewhere and be of a place so fundamentally, but seeing it depicted only in a way that isolates my culture.

It is this medium and genre of oil on canvas. Sections of Tom Thomson's *West Wind*, and *Jack Pine*, appear with Doig's *Camp Forestia*, alongside a ghost moose, myself swimming in the lake, my boat in Swallow Lake at first snow. My father's recurring

image of a rocket launch, birds, and birds and birds! An old Cadillac, fireworks, lakes, birds, bears, and the stars. It is just immensely pleasurable to rectify this even if it is just in my paint-world. I love these painters as well and hold them to no ill will! Peter Doig, Tom Thomson, Kim Dorland, these men are painting their lives, and I am grateful to live in a time and place where I can do the same.

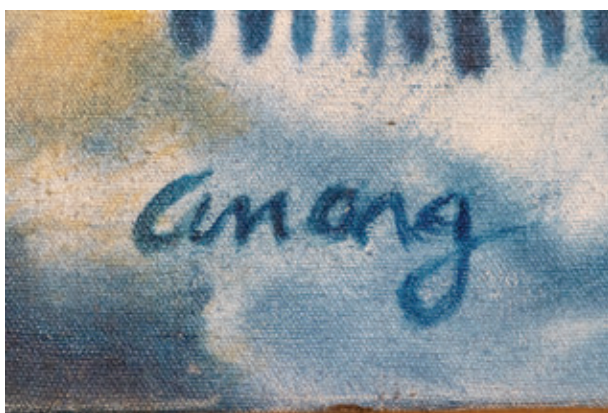
Also reaching deeper into art history, I'm happy to explore painting devices from Matisse (table with pansies, the joy of life) Botticelli Birth of Venus,

Rothko's colour pairings, Georgia O'Keefe's skulls, and Agnes Martin's grids which influenced my father, back into me, into dancing elk herds. It's really something to be the child of a famous artist, it's intense, and I've seen so much of the art world that is unkind, and unhealthy, I've seen my mother's pain inside that she was not recognized

like her husband. But all that pales in the joy that I feel creating these landscapes, internal, wishful, desirous, wanton, exploding! In some real ways they are ecstatic love stories to paint.

Being the first series where I have made all of my own oil paints, there is an incredible circuitry to making paint from rocks from Bay Fine near Killarney, then painting that same scene with those rocks that are now paint! Each image that I make I feel and I fall immersed in the history of painting, learning devices from those who have already travelled this path.

Miigwetch.





## Main Hall



## Camp Cadillac, 2018

*Camp Cadillac* is a romantic painting in the sense of a romantic nostalgia for the way things might have been in the past. The “camp” in Anong’s paintings is an homage to *Camp Forestia*, a painting by Peter Doig. Anong is a great admirer of Doig and this painting and several others feature this little building with lighted windows in the forest.



*Camp Cadillac* includes many small birds, referencing Anong’s middle name, Migwans, which was her father’s traditional surname – he was born Carl Edward Migwans in 1943 on M’chigeeng First Nation. Migwans means “little feather or bird.”



Details of *Camp Cadillac*, 2018



## Withdrawing Room

This room displays several historic prints and paintings related to water, a key theme in Anong's work. Water as a source of life is important to all Anishnaabe people, but it is particularly important on Manitoulin Island – the biggest freshwater island in the world – where Anong lives and paints.

Anong writes:

*I have been painting memories,  
my practice has always centered  
around water and how it holds and  
contains us and is a silent witness  
again and again to all events,  
constantly renewed and present in us,  
as it was for our ancestors.*





## Beaver Dam Overflowing, 2018



*Beaver Dam Overflowing* started life as a depiction of an iceberg. It is a triumph of water overflowing a beaver dam in the middle of the woods. The flowing water swirls into the space between the canvas and the viewer, leaving the darkness behind it as it moves through the air. Compared with the nineteenth-century print *Falls at Niagara* (see page 10), *Beaver Dam* celebrates the wilderness, without us unnecessary humans.

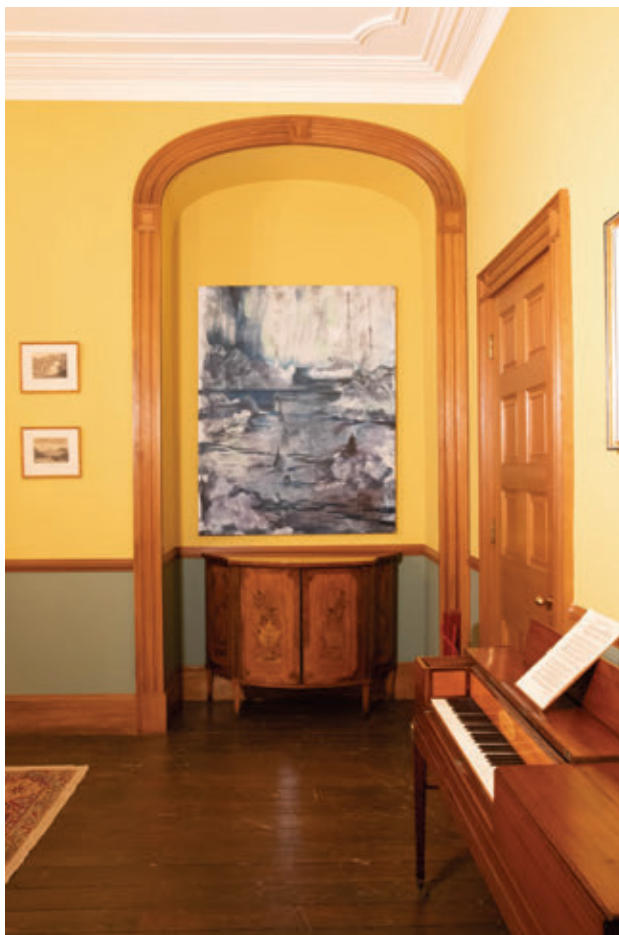


Details of *Beaver Dam Overflowing*, 2018

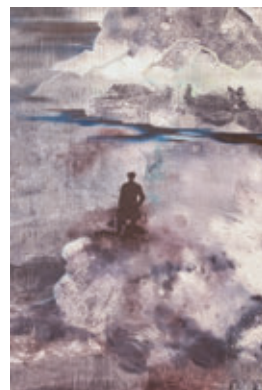
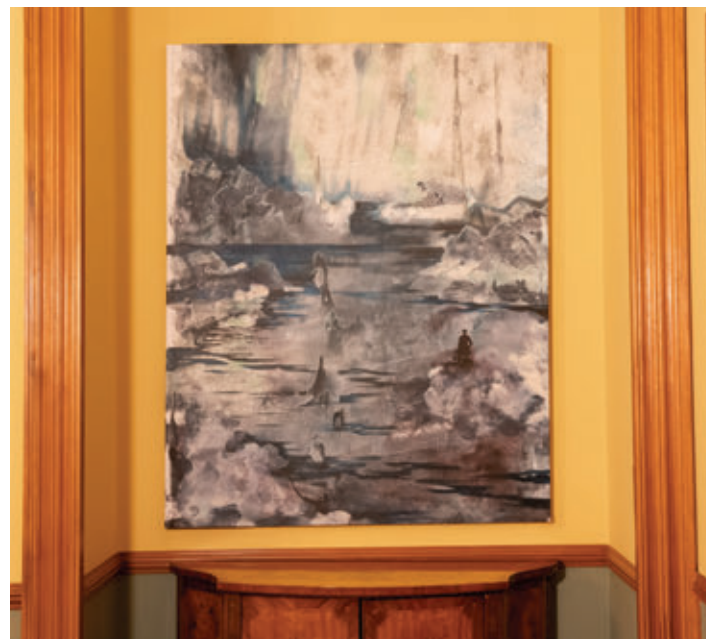
To the left of *Beaver Dam Overflowing* is an early print called *Falls at Niagara* by James Pattison Cockburn, a Lieutenant Colonel in Upper Canada (1779-1847). James Cockburn was taught to produce topographical maps, but extended his studies to include watercolour landscape painting, such as this charming depiction of a formally dressed group of people at Niagara Falls (detail below, at right).



*Wanderer, North Sea* is after *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*, an oil painting, c.1818, by the German Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich. This nineteenth-century work has been considered one of the masterpieces of Romanticism and one of the movement's most representative works.



*Wanderer, North Sea*, 2017



Details of *Wanderer, North Sea*, 2017





*Elk*, 2017, in alcove and detail of *Elk* at right;  
*The American Brig Sloop Vixen* by Thomas Luny,  
 c. 1812, above fireplace; small landscape prints by  
 George Heriot, c. 1807, at left of fireplace.



*Shallow Lake*, 2018 (left);  
*The Storm*, 2019 (right)



*Shallow Lake*, 2018 (detail)



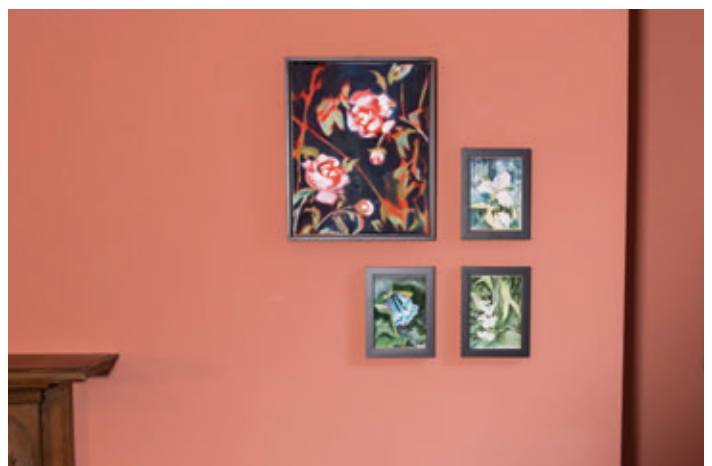
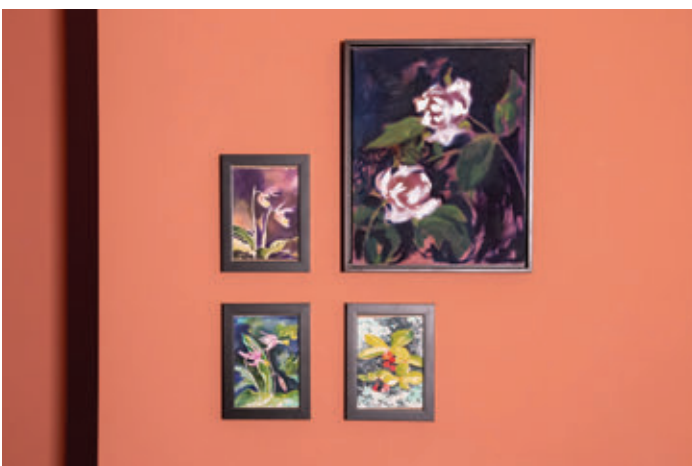
*The Storm*, 2019 (detail)



## Dining Room



Among's flower paintings are the focal point of the Dining Room.



### Each side of fireplace:

Two larger oil paintings of *Peonies*, 2020

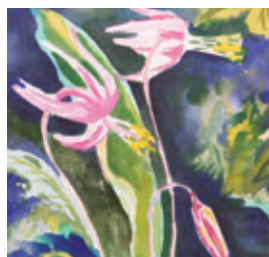
Six small flower watercolours, 2020



Catherine Parr Traill's *Canadian Wildflowers* was one of several books that she wrote about Canadian botany. The book is illustrated by her niece, Agnes Dunbar Moodie Fitzgibbon, daughter of Susanna Moodie. These prints are reproductions from the 1868 edition. The prints are on loan to Campbell House from Lambton House, an historic inn in west Toronto that is cared for by Heritage York.

## Details of flower watercolours, 2020

Anong's flowers are just as closely observed as Catherine Parr Traill's, but they are not meant as botanical studies. *Trillium* (top right), for example, is a natural entity, meant to be appreciated for itself.





## Upper Hall





## Ghost Moose and Camp, 2019



The people associated with the moose *dodem* or Ojibwe clan are craftsmen and artists, and therefore the moose in this context is very appropriate. Albino moose are rare, so this could be considered a spirit animal.

Like *Camp Cadillac*, this painting pays tribute to Doig's *Camp Forestia*, but here the forest is darker and more mysterious, adding to the ghostly appearance of a white moose. Animals appear more often than people in Anong's paintings, adding to the sense of attachment to the land and forest.

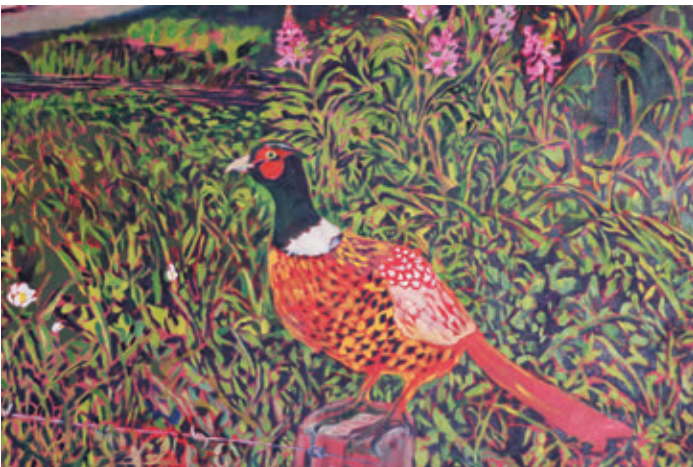


Details of *Ghost Moose and Camp*, 2019

# Ballroom



*Spring Bay, Mennonite Barn* (over fireplace) is Anong's most recent work. The elements of the painting are layered over a red background, the colour of the barn. As with *Camp Cadillac*, the vintage Mustang car is a piece of nostalgia.



Details of *Spring Bay, Mennonite Barn*, 2020

The ringnecked pheasant is a very striking bird. It was once native to Manitoulin, but has been recently reintroduced. Pheasant, like Migwans, is an Anishnaabe name.

The appearance of the pheasant in this painting isn't a coincidence. Anong collects stamps from all over the world and the pheasant is painted in the style of a British stamp bearing a William Morris pattern called "The Strawberry Thief"- one of Anong's favourite stamps.





North view of Ballroom



## Red Mangrove, 2016

*Red Mangrove* is a geographic anomaly. Although the usual elements of Anong's paintings are all there – the red sky reflecting the blue water, birds and eggs, mysterious mountains in the background – mangroves are not found on Manitoulin Island.

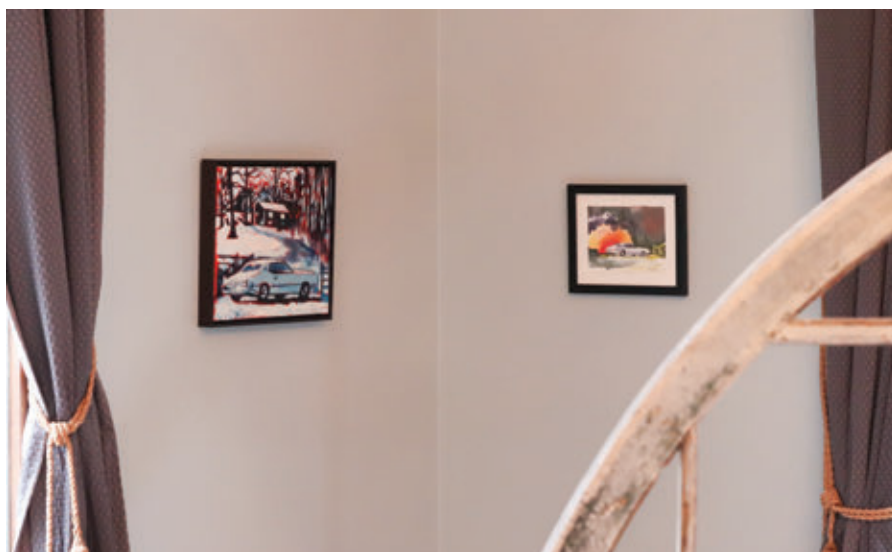
So, why mangroves, and what do they mean? Are they a stand-in for endangered species? Are we meant to long for tropical climates, or are they a reference to Peter Doig's Trinidad paintings?



Details of *Red Mangrove*, 2016

## *Sugar Camp, 2020*

Anong was playing with the idea of the traditional maple syrup can illustration in *Sugar Camp*.



*Sugar Camp, 2020* (left) and *Spring Bay Car, 2019* (right) in southeast corner of Ballroom.





**West wall of Ballroom**

*Deluge, 2019 (left)*

*Mountain Lake, 2018 (right)*



## Mountain Lake, 2018

*Mountain Lake* has some very subtle elements that might not appear obvious at first glance. The stillness of the water in the foreground draws you into a scene that is very nearly a dreamscape.



Details of *Mountain Lake*, 2018



## *Deluge*, 2019

*Deluge* is the largest and most complex of the paintings in the exhibit. For this work, Anong made all of the paints herself. *Deluge* is a painting referential to Anong's life.

The grizzly bears fishing for salmon represent abundance. The birds swoop upwards in the sky, and unusually, Anong herself is present as a tiny figure in the foreground. There are teepee-like structures, and the painting includes a space shuttle again, connected to the birds overhead. There is lots to explore in this painting, with symbolism hidden among the details.







Details of *Deluge*, 2019

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