

Hugo Canoilas

Hold Your Breath

04 October 2025–07 February 2026

Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square

Exhibition Text by Séamus Kealy,
Executive Director and Curator, Oakville Galleries

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OAKVILLE GALLERIES

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Centennial Square | 120 Navy Street, Oakville ON L6J 2Z4

GALLERY HOURS

Tuesday – Saturday: 10:00 AM – 5:00 PM
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Oakville Galleries presents solo exhibitions by Hugo Canoilas and Andreia Santana. The artists are both 2025 artists in residence at Oakville Galleries. Please visit Andreia Santana's concurrent exhibition at our Gairloch Gardens location. *The Ship of Tolerance* by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov also remains lakeside at Gairloch Gardens until September 2026.

Hold Your Breath is Hugo Canoilas' first solo exhibition in Canada. The exhibition presents an enormous, amorphous painting covering the entire Centennial Gallery space. Visitors are guided by the artist's gestures throughout this installation, encouraged to explore and walk over the artwork. The material, arrangement and mise-en-scène of *Hold Your Breath* was initially developed as an operatic set for Kunsthhaus Bregenz and the Bregenzer Festspielhaus in Austria. This new presentation and re-staging of this artwork at Oakville Galleries reflects Canoilas's practice of revising and recontextualizing large-scale works to adapt to the context and architecture of different exhibition spaces. In fact, from time to time on this large, gallery-filling work, we see the scars on the canvas revealing its operatic staging—markings from the actual production itself.

In this case as a work of expanded painting, Canoilas' immersive work features deep-sea imagery, including a microscopic view of an octopus's skin, a seashell, and a large siphonophore, symbolizing symbiosis and mutualism. The painting installation also consciously contrasts the celestial light of historical painting with the pure white of modern art. Images emerge from the darkness, evoking the mystery of nature, especially that under the deep sea, where we would be faced

ourselves with holding our breath.

The title also suggests the notion of waiting or awaiting something, as in the expression “don’t hold your breath,” meaning to not count on something arising as one expects or hopes. In this case, the artist blends the idea of holding one’s breath under water with that of not fearing a greater unknown that has not yet passed. This idea will be returned below.

We might see the artist’s use of a kind of *expanded painting* as an extension of the traditional forms of painting, breaking free from flat surfaces, becoming sculptural and three-dimensional. Ultimately, expanded painting blurs the lines between two and three dimensional spaces but also radically alters the relationship between the work of art—in this case, painting, which is normally stood before—and the audience or viewer—who in this case, are invited to roam within the work of art. This has implications not only for a bodily experience, but also for the nature of perception itself. Where painting has often been about transferring sensory and visual experience via colour onto the parameters of its physical framing (on canvas, in a rectangle, most usually), here painting breaks free from these parameters. What this means for the visitor is actually a different form of freedom and while having allusions or references to operatic or theatrical sets in this case, the installation speaks to our world-at-large and its current geopolitical crises.

Firstly, there is also an exploration of the ontology of painting in this installation. There has long been such an exploration in modern and contemporary painting, so the intention by the artist is not first and foremost to bring up some of these more conventional forms of

ontological questioning. It is rather, to situate the viewer within a setting —akin to being within the belly of a whale or even having an association with Niki de Saint Phalle's infamous 1966 sculpture, *Hon* (She). This was an enormous sculpture of a pregnant woman, laying on her back with knees raised and heels planted as if about to give birth. Visitors could enter the sculpture through a door-sized vagina. Inside they found themselves within a warm, dark female space that functioned as an amusement park with a love-seat sofa, a gallery with questionable artworks, a multi-seat cinema playing a Greta Garbo film, an aquarium, a milk-bar inside one of the breasts, a planetarium in the other, a fish pond, a coin telephone, a vending machine serving sandwiches, a brain with mechanical parts and a playground for children. With this artwork, we might perceive that Nikki de Saint Phalle reclaimed the woman's body as a site of tactile pleasure but also of possibility, festivity and joy. The work also challenged the idea of being a viewer of an artwork, where the audiences are invited deep within that very artwork.

Standing within Hugo Canoilas' installation presents a similar gesture for audiences. Previous works he has made have also done so, such as his *The Grotto project* (2018–2021) in Lisbon, a set of multi-layered interventions with other artists, where people were invited into the space and were invited to have a more active role in looking and editing the surroundings. His wish was also here to create an unimposing means for the visitor to transform into an active viewer. His multi-site project *Under The Volcano* (2016–2022), realized in different institutions (including the Salzburger Kunstverein, for a 2021–2022 exhibition called *Film as Muse* that I co-curated with Bernardo de Souza and Adam Budak) also enacted different, noncontiguous elements of this artwork through several floors and multiple spaces of the museum. In this case, the artwork was an homage to the book and

film *Under The Volcano*, and its territorialization of the gallery/museum and public spaces was a form of “expanded cinema,” which I had then associated with the thinking of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and his ideas of meta-cinema, where the universe itself is proposed as a kind of expanded cinema in his writings.

Visitors in Hugo Canoilas’ installations are thus not passively outside, rather they are actively within the artwork and are offered a sense of agency and of ownership of the space, of what they perceive and what they bring to the exhibition. Modes of perspectives vary here naturally, we might sense one that is more cultural, or another that Hugo Canoilas very deliberately connects to maps of the deep sea. Altogether, there are a multitude of perspectives, colliding gently in the fabric and imagery of this installation. In addition to this being therefore a free space of discovery, where we are invited inside to leave the world outside behind, there is also a sense of navigation for the visitor. Hugo speaks of the Disney film *Honey, I Shrank The Kids* with a smile when referring to this exhibition: “You are in a huge painting, whether it is a landscape or abstract, that is up to you, but one can let the senses drive you.” Everything is very present and enlarged in its very surrounding and immersion of the visitor.

This is especially the case in the enlarged references we see to the deep sea. There is imagery of octopi, sea shells and other sea life, a portion of the magnificent multitude existing well away from our usual perception. As microbiology has shown us multitudes that were previously invisible, the artist says, so do ongoing deep sea explorations. Seeing new forms of mutuality and symbiosis in nature is highly suggestive to Canoilas when pondering our future. Deep sea exploration, he says poetically, is equivalent to a collective,

mental space. It is not immediately mapped nor controlled through previously collected information and is thus an open field to consider new possibilities.

Canoilas suggests that we should be taking nature's agency and multitude and interconnectedness seriously when we consider, collectively, how we as a people make this world and make our future. There are clear associations here with political theory, especially the book *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, by autonomous Marxist philosophers Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt. This book was published in 2004 but remains highly relevant today. It is the second installment of a trilogy, also comprising *Empire* (2000) and *Commonwealth* (2009). *Multitude* is divided into three sections: "War," which addresses the current "global civil war"; including international injustice and attacks on human rights. The section "Multitude" elucidates the "multitude"—that is the collection of differences in a vast, global society as being a commonality and a strength—as an "active social subject, which acts on the basis of what the singularities share in common." The third section "Democracy" critiques traditional forms of political representation and gestures toward alternatives. In summary, *Multitude* asserts that: "The creative forces of the multitude that sustain Empire (*ie. the structure of global, political hegemonic power*) are also capable of autonomously constructing a counter-Empire, an alternative political organization of global flows and exchanges." Negri and Hardt assert, essentially, that the potential for radical, global change is in the hands of individuals everywhere when they find and act upon their commonality with others world-wide.

Essentially, within the space of this installation, there is an expression of Hugo Canoilas' concern for the world and an affirmation of what we

might do. Firstly, the work itself, in its immersive emphasis on multitude and symbiosis, embodies a counter argument to current ideologies of hate, tribalism and purism—those exposed by contemporary political forces that act with rhetoric, violence and impunity upon citizens. The extreme of these ideologies is now resulting in a genocide in Palestine, and the artist's deep concern and solidarity with the people of Gaza is not absent from his current art production, albeit not in a representational manner. Here, instead our bodies are invited, as they are in the world at large, to act as a vessel within a greater set of operations that places empathy and compassion first. The artist speaks of a current reduced political imaginary, where a perception today of people's fear of engagement with political topics such as a documented and verified genocide—including fear of reprisals, or political and community isolation—or indeed the denial of climate change, are barriers to collective transformation. A testing of perception, a sliding out of the constructed reality around us, he seems to argue, may open up possible pathways towards a better world. The undertone to this installation is thus a transgression against how the world is represented to us, where the sensuality of this exhibition, in itself, acts in solidarity with humanity and its aspirations.

Hugo Canoilas' inspiration from the discovery of new forms of life in the deep sea and a slowly unravelling mystery therein demonstrates that trepidation and fear before mystery and the unknown can and should be triumphed over. The endless possibility of discovery is also in itself a reflection upon us all, collectively. This immersive artwork, referencing teleological and non-teleological space, and arising from the machinations of an opera, brings together reflections on the known, charted territory that we take comfort in combined with a greater unknown - the vast amounts of uncharted territory—akin to a

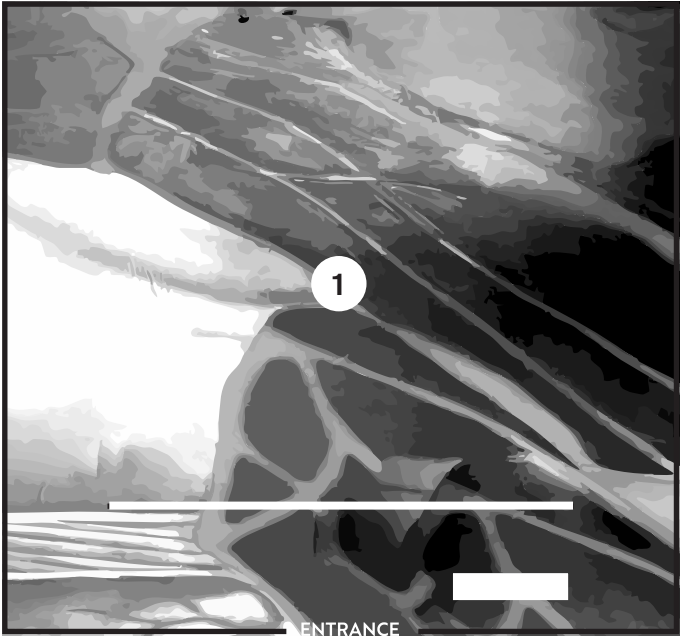
kind of dark matter—and asserts that we need not fear it as illumination comes when it comes. Living with greater unknowns can mean having peace with mystery, even recognizing and enjoying its beauty, while enabling another perspective on our world today.

This exhibition is generously supported by the Federal Chancellery of Austria.

About The Artist

Hugo Canoilas (Lisbon, 1977) lives and works in Vienna. Recent solo exhibitions include CAV, Coimbra; the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon; Mumok, Vienna; and the Serralves Museum, Porto. Recent institutional exhibitions include Manifesta 15, Barcelona; Kunstverein in Hamburg; De Appel, Amsterdam; Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna; Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg; and the 30th São Paulo Biennial, São Paulo. He initiated and co-edited the OEI Publication #80-81 *The Zero Alternative: Ernesto de Sousa: Portuguese Art and other aesthetic operators in Portuguese Art and Poetry from 1960's onwards*. His work has been reviewed in The Guardian, Público, Expresso, Der Standard, Mousse Magazine, Art Review, Artforum, Flash Art, Revista Contemporanea, and Umbigo. Canoilas has published in institutional catalogs and in printed and online magazines. In 2020 he received the Kapschmumok Prize in Vienna. From 2018 to 2021, he organized the collective project *A Gruta* at Galeria Quadrado Azul in Lisbon. In 2024, Canoilas presented *Hold Your Breath*, an opera produced in collaboration with Éna Brennan and David Pountney, organized by Kunsthau Bregenz and Bregenzer Festspielehaus.

Hugo Canoilas: *Hold Your Breath*
In Centennial Square



1 *Hold Your Breath*, Installation, 2024/2025.

Related Exhibition

Andreia Santana: *A Door Handle A Handshake*

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Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens



Sepecial Program

Ilya and Emilia Kabakov: *The Ship of Tolerance*

Until September 2026

Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens



About Oakville Galleries

Oakville Galleries is a contemporary art museum in two locations presenting international and Canadian artists. Housed in a unique lakeside mansion in the magnificent Gairloch Gardens and a white cube gallery downtown, Oakville Galleries is one of Canada's leading contemporary art institutions. Supported by The Town of Oakville, Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council, sponsors, patrons and members. All curatorial programming is by Séamus Kealy, Executive Director.

