ART

CREATIVE TERRITORY

Aubyn O'Grady (above) is the winner of the 2025 Yukon Prize for Visual Arts. The works of Jane Isakson (top) and Randi Nelson (above left) were part of a show of shortlisted nominees at the Yukon Arts Centre in Whitehorse.

During this fall's Yukon Art Prize weekend, the North's concentration of artistic talent comes into focus

The Yukon has one of the highest number of artists per capita in Canada. If that statistic doesn't confirm the territory's abundance of creative expression, then the scope of work included on the longlist for this year's Yukon Prize for Visual Arts will. Co-founded by wife-and-husband Julie Jai and David Trick, the award was first given out in 2021 and has continued biennially. In October, the programming in Whitehorse around the 2025 initiative included an exhibition of the six shortlisted artists at the Yukon Arts Centre, a lively art crawl and open studios, and a reverential and heartfelt awards ceremony. A show featuring the remaining longlisted artists continues at Arts Underground until Nov. 29.

Dawson City's Aubyn O'Grady won the $20,000 award for her community-centric, interdisciplinary work focused on wrestling. But the contributions of the rest of the shortlisted nominees – Jane Isakson, Meshell Melvin, Randi Nelson, Jeneen Frei Njootli and Jackie Olson – were just as compelling and reflective of the dynamic breadth and remarkable energy of the territory.

"There's a gap between the talented artists who deserve to be known and art lovers in bigger city centres who don't know anything about Yukon art," says Jai about why she and Trick, both dedicated cultural philanthropists originally from Toronto, founded the prize. For the 2025 deliberations, the jury was composed of Jonathan Shaughnessy, the director of curatorial initiatives at the National Gallery of Canada, Sarah Moore Fillmore, CEO of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, and Dr. Heather Igloliorte, professor in the visual arts department at the University of Victoria.

In a panel discussion during the prize weekend, Jai touched on why the jurors come from outside of the region, noting how close-knit a community it is, which could make things a bit awkward. "We've been very lucky, because every time we've run the prize, we've asked what we considered to be the top people in the field – our dream team – and they've always said 'yes,'" she says of assembling the jury. "We're so fortunate, because I think the Yukon has its own kind of mystique and draw." **– ODESSA PALOMA PARKER**