



ARTISTS IN
RESIDENCE
IN GOVERNMENT



ARTS OTTAWA



BUILDING A STRONG COLLECTIVE FUTURE IN OTTAWA

One Artist at a Time



Artists are a catalyst for expanding civic literacy in our communities, strengthening bonds, and facilitating the development of transformative models of community engagement that can and do challenge the status quo.

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Olivia Onuk

Artist in Residence in Government 2024

This notion lies at the heart of **In Bloom**, a community-rooted exhibition by artist and organizer **Olivia Onuk**. Through artwork and interactive storytelling, Olivia invites us to consider how joy and social connection, especially in times of displacement, can become powerful determinants of health and healing.

In Bloom is just one of many outcomes from her 12-month placement with the City of Ottawa's Integrated Neighbourhood Services Team (INST). **Her residency is the first in the new Artist in Residence in Government (AIRG) program, delivered in partnership by Arts Ottawa, Public Art at the City of Ottawa, and Third Way Creative.** Olivia's placement within INST focuses on transitional housing and overflow shelter systems across Ottawa's 13 priority neighbourhoods, and has culminated in her presentation of **In Bloom**, a solo exhibition that travelled from the Shenkman Arts Centre to the Richelieu-Vanier Community Centre and Art Engine at Arts Court.

AIRG embeds artists into local government departments to explore how creative practices can support civic systems change.

The goal is not just to beautify, but to disrupt and reimagine — to integrate artistic insight into processes like policy development, service delivery, and community engagement. It's a growing movement across cities in North America, rooted in the belief that art can be both method and message in building more equitable public systems.

Artists can be: Leaders of future-focused change. Critical thinkers. Creative problem solvers. Role models. Facilitators. Storytellers who invite others to share collective experiences. Fearless dreamers of the unknown. Nurturers. Experimenters. Inspirational motivators. Listeners. Relationship builders. Hosts welcoming and elevating community voices. Artists can build places to gather, write policy that is poetry, and create tools for conversation - they are not afraid of the challenge and collaboration necessary to bring governments towards change.

CairLab
AIRG partner



Frempon Bafi-Yebo, Section Manager for the Integrated Neighbourhood Services Team (INST), shared this about Olivia's work:

"I wanted to share my thoughts on working with Olivia, which has been a very fulfilling experience. While we initially weren't sure what direction the project would take, her adaptability and ability to pivot made it a success. Olivia's compassion and her background in social services greatly contributed to her ability to connect with residents in the shelter and transitional housing/offsite locations. The concept of community conversations was a fantastic way to engage residents with dignity, allowing their concerns, ideas, and aspirations to be channeled positively. While the INST is renowned for its work across all City departments through the Interdepartmental Task Force (IDTF), the AIRG program transcended multiple departments. It demonstrated the collective impact we can achieve in providing place-based services, ensuring that our most valuable residents receive equitable access to programs that set them up for future success, despite their current situations."

"This residency presents a unique opportunity to combine my artistic practice with my passion for community organizing, social change, justice, and wellbeing. It enables me to work at the intersection of art, policy, and community engagement, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and equitable policies within the City." Said Olivia

Creative Practice and Community Impact: The Emergence of *In Bloom*

Olivia's artistic and professional background makes her particularly well-suited for this kind of civic collaboration. With a degree in family violence and conflict resolution, and experience as a community event planner and facilitator, she has long worked at the intersection of care, creativity, and systems change.

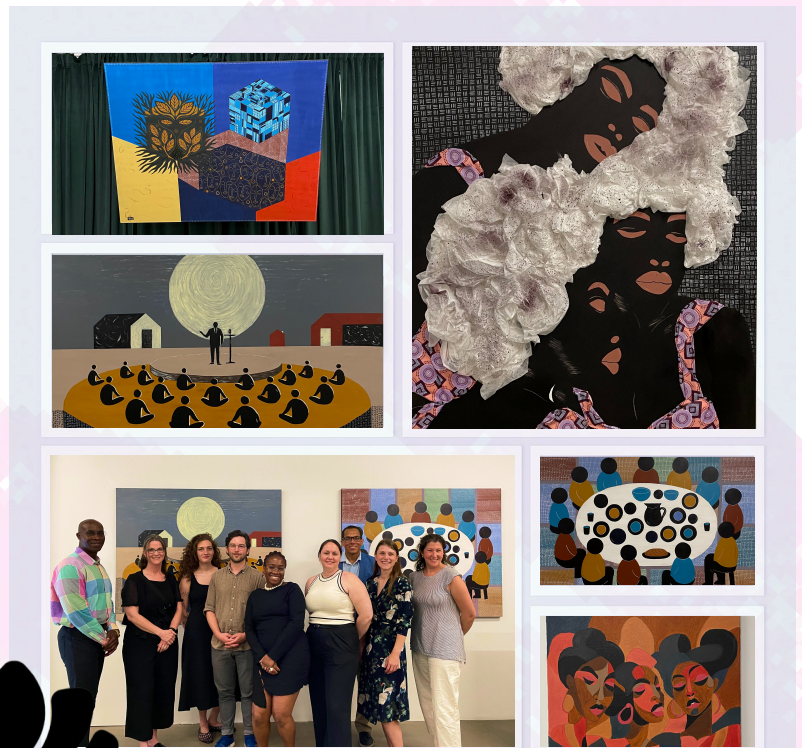
"My work really is rooted in this truth and concept of art as therapy," she says. "We create because it helps us heal, it helps us process our own experiences and more so helps us make sense of trauma. I often start with what I want people to feel or what message I want to get across and then I go backwards a bit in terms of asking myself what is the most effective medium"

Through her AIRG residency, Olivia engaged directly with shelter residents, hotel staff, housing workers, and city departments. Using artistic methods like journey mapping and collaborative art-making, she gathered stories that revealed a deeper emotional reality behind city services — experiences that traditional data collection might miss.

"This residency enables me to work at the intersection of art, policy, and community engagement, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and equitable policies within the City," said Olivia. Olivia's research surfaced several areas for improvement: communication gaps between departments, the need for multilingual supports, and a desire for regular community-building activities in shelter spaces. Her recommendations, shared with the Interdepartmental Task Force (IDTF), emphasized human-centered design and were grounded in the voices of those with lived experience.

But Olivia didn't stop there.

She began developing *In Bloom*, an immersive exhibition built from her residency work. Through visual art and interactive experiences, the show reflects on care, connection, and the small moments of grace that shape our lives even in unstable circumstances.



in bloom

As part of this artistic response, **Olivia also launched Mapping Joy**, an interactive digital platform inviting people to share short stories or audio reflections about joy, resilience, and belonging. These submissions are mapped by neighbourhood, creating a collective archive of healing moments across the city.



MAPPING JOY

This project aims to highlight the everyday moments that often go unnoticed and the fleeting experiences that make us feel connected, grounded, and well.

Olivia Onuk

Centretown

Alex

My daughter's first live music event at 2 years old. Formative and life-changing for us both.

2025-04-23

Byward Market

Anonymous

Met new coworkers at my first job in the arts :)

2025-04-23

CentrepoinTE

Matt

I met somebody very special here. I'll carry them with me always.

2025-04-22

Visit the project
→ **MappingJoy.com**

The site, alongside the In Bloom exhibition, becomes a living record of how residents imagine better futures—and what it takes to get there.

Looking Forward ➤

Programs like AIRG challenge governments to lead with empathy, creativity, and humility. Olivia's work is a testament to what's possible when artists are trusted not only as creators, but as collaborators, facilitators, and system-shapers.

Her residency may be wrapping up, but the ripple effects of her work—in community, in art, and in policy — are just beginning.

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