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### Growing trend of art for social change reflection of a world in crisis: Artist

Painter and activist Ilene Sova says more artists feel called upon by movements like Occupy, Idle No More and Black Lives Matter to apply their critical skills and participate in social justice.

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LANCE MCMILLAN / FOR METRO

Toronto painter Ilene Sova has always used her art for activism regarding violence against women. She says the Trump era has brought many of social injustice issues to the fore, and artists are responding the only way they know how.

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**By: Gilbert Ngabo** Metro, Published on Wed Nov 08 2017

Of all the words that could describe Ilene Sova, artist and activist are near the top of her list.

As a painter who is passionate about community building through social change, Sova has produced numerous works portraying systemic violence against women. But the Toronto-based artist says a new trend is quickly developing, one that's taking people back to the root of art as a form of expression.

"There's a shift away from viewing art as a commercial product and more as something that's reflective of society and people," she said. "People are thinking about a bigger ecosystem than just their pieces being shown and sold at art galleries."

She's seen that trend over the past five years while organizing the annual Feminist Art Conference, a platform for artists to push agendas on equality, innovation and the environment. She saw the same trend at the recent Nuit Blanche festival, which was organized under the banner of arts and revolution.

It's a reaction to a general sense of a world in crisis, said Sova, pointing to rampant stories of war, terrorism, refugees and oppression. Artists feel called upon by movements like Occupy, Idle No More and Black Lives Matter to apply their critical skills and participate in social justice.

"Now the rise of Trump and other right-wing movements all over the world have brought at the forefront things that we thought were hidden," she said, citing increases in racial discrimination, Islamophobia, sexual violence and anti-immigration sentiment. "The general public is realizing these things are still a problem, and artists have to make these issues visually engaging."

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The education sector is also catching up. OCAD University has been offering a minor in arts and social change for the past three years, and by 2020 the program will be expanded into a full-time undergraduate degree — the first in Canada.

The California College of Arts in San Francisco was the first to establish an academic program on arts and activism back in 2005, according to The New York Times. Such programs now exist at 10 other institutions in the United States.

B.H. Yael, OCAD's professor of integrated media and one of the people spearheading the project, said current American politics helped spur the discussion about arts and critical thinking even further.

"What's evident is that the education systems have failed to produce critical citizens," she said, noting the hope is to eventually offer the program even at the graduate level. "One of the questions I have is: Why do people vote in leaders who do not represent their own interests? Where's the disconnect?"

Establishing a specific program on arts and social activism is "absolutely necessary" in order to effectively challenge how power is used and mobilized, Yael added.