

Leave it to the dead, of course. Not that anyone's noses would've gone out of joint, but just as well to put the emphasis on the often eccentric claims of relevance among the no longer with us.

And so, partly rendered in a spirit of resignation to the absurd, Bryce Kanbara's playful title for the numerically challenged Hamilton Artists Inc.'s anniversary show — 45th on the 48th — is "The Group of Seven: RIP (Remembering INC. Pioneers)." Kanbara is co-curator of the show with Brian Johnston.

It's a requiem to the jump wire personalities who got the Inc. going in its early days, and the beauty of it is that it's so very ... lively, and alive. Kanbara and Johnston have selected seven people who did more than help shape one of this city's most important and durable art "organisms," if I can use that word. They absolutely fired character and personal colour into it, unpredictability and peculiarity.

"I thought about a group show to honour the 45th," says Kanbara, but so many decades; so many artists. "I kept coming back to these real characters, all gone now," who were such a part of the formation of the Inc. (The Inc., formed in 1975, was originally Hamilton Artists' Co-Op and has always been an artist-run centre, now at James North and Cannon, committed to presentation, spreading and advocacy of contemporary art.)



A tribute to Gordon White at Hamilton Artist Inc as one of the creators of the HAI includes photos and samples of his work.
Cathie Coward/The Hamilton Spectator

Gord White, for instance.

“He just showed up one day and volunteered,” remembers Kanbara. No one really knew where he came from, but he exuded charm, dressed like a dandy, was always there and worked indefatigably to organize and promote.

Says Kanbara, “He used to say, ‘Stick with me, boys, and you’ll be farting through silk.’”

Jackie Kay was another. Hard to pin down — dancer, performer, all-around entertainer who was constantly pranking and joking, often in challenging ways, a fixture at the Inc. drop-in space and get-togethers, breaking shirtlessly into dance with his shock of white hair.



Tributes to Jackie Kay and Jewel Foster at Hamilton Artist Inc as two of the creators of the HAI includes photos and samples of his work.

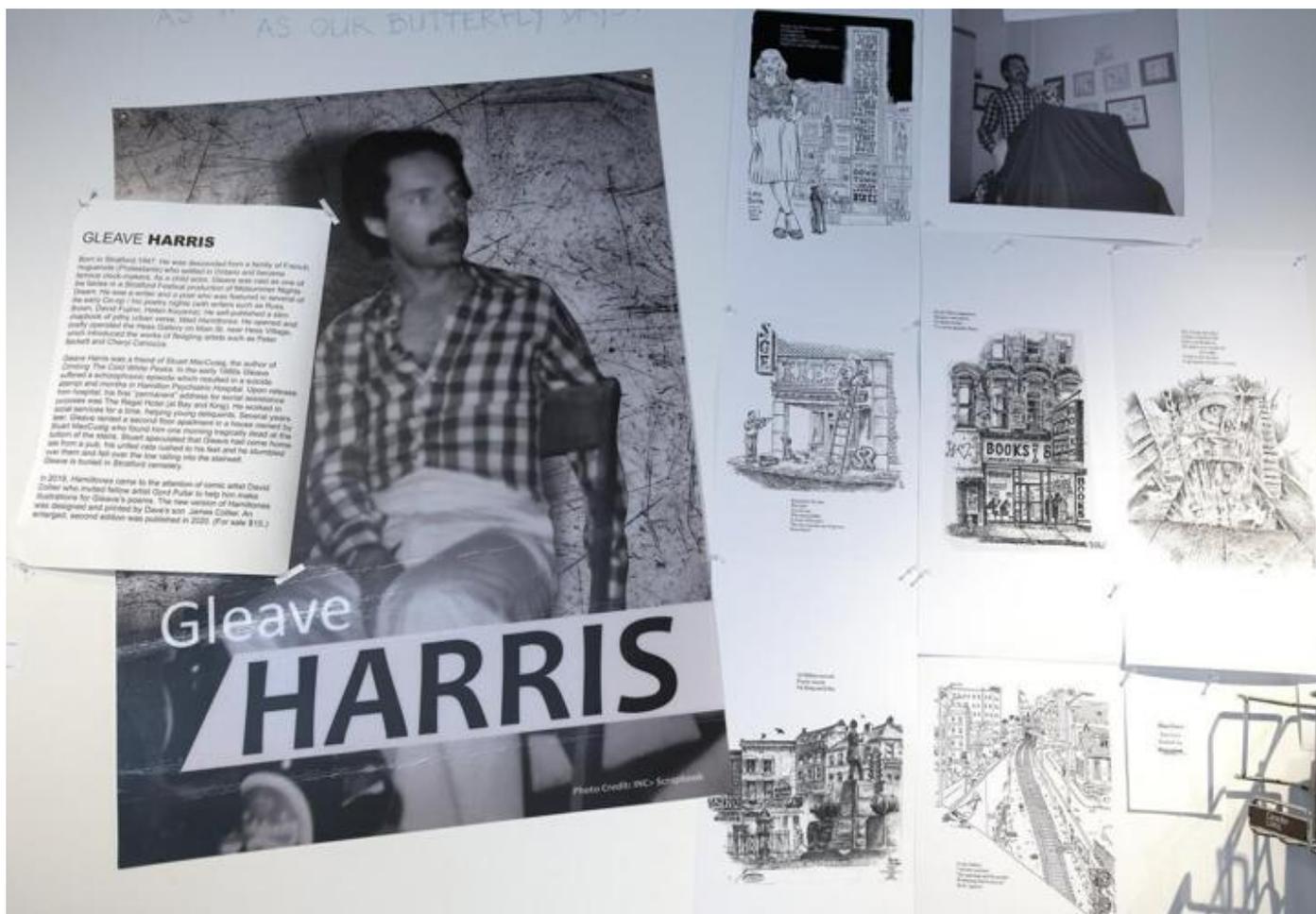
Cathie Coward/The Hamilton Spectator

The other five are David Avon, Gleave Harris, Jewel Foster, Bob Mason and George Wallace.

If the seven were larger than life, in this show they seem larger than death, thanks largely to the intimacy, detail and care that Kanbara has brought to the challenge of representing them and their art here, and allowing them and their art to represent Inc. history.

Of course, he knew them all. It shows, not only in the words he’s written and the art of theirs he has chosen to include but also in the living artists he and Johnston invited to provide a contemporary artistic and visually interpretive gloss on their legacy.

For instance, the renowned Hamilton graphic artists David Collier and Gord Pullar put together a stunning book to illustrate Gleave Harris's remarkable urban poetry, with its vivid flashes of Hamilton downtown life at the time. The Tivoli. Barton Street. Book Villa. The carp in Cootes Paradise.



A tribute to Gleave Harris at Hamilton Artist Inc as one of the creators of the HAI includes photos and samples of his work. Cathie Coward/The Hamilton Spectator

Harris back then produced a chapbook called *Hamiltones*, and that's the name of the anthology volume featured — and for sale — in the show. Collier and Pullar bring different but complementary styles to the task and their art, in league with Harris's poetry, makes for a wildly sensory passage through time and our streets that, though rooted in a bygone era (one that is in some ways always with us), has much to tell us by implication about our own.

Harris freezes the strange ooze of one generation and one mindset seeping into another perfectly in: “On Balsam Avenue/ The young girl is/ Putting up Shaun Cassidy/ Over a mismatch/ In the climbing ivy wallpaper/ Her old brother has forsaken/ KISS/ For Dan Hill/ And my secretary/ Is looking confused/ When I mention Bob Dylan.”

Or this, on Barton Street (“church alley”) and its mix of sacred and profane: “Down Barton Street/ Only yellow buses/ Groaning and moving/ like old toothpaste/ Outnumber the bars/ And skirt twelve masses/ In half an hour.”

And does this resonate? “McMaster University Medical Centre/ ... Is too hard-edged bright/ For those with lungs/ Burned soft-edged dull.” And “A freckled athletic boy/ Rode a skateboard/ Into my coffee cup.”

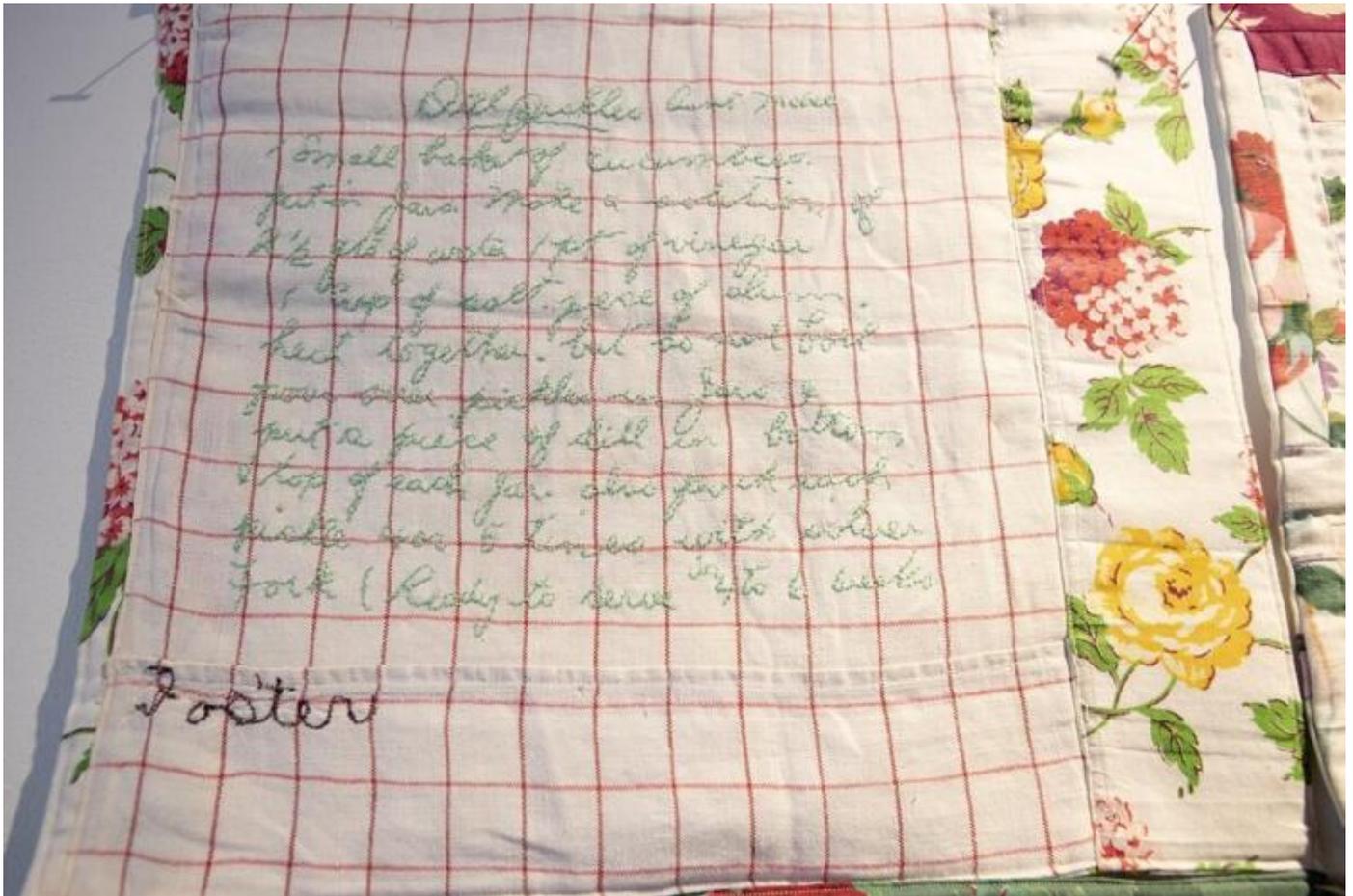
Plus ca change.



A tribute to David Avon at Hamilton Artist Inc as one of the creators of the HAI includes photos and samples of his work. Cathie Coward/The Hamilton Spectator

Perhaps no one so richly embodies the mad and madcap, often impractical but always provocative, energy of those frontier times as David Avon. A gifted artist, product of Chicago Art Institute, he'd pontificate for hours — and fill notebooks — on the subject of something so particular as a single word.

In the show a TV has been set up, playing a tape of “Calling Avon” (a play on Avon Calling), a show Avon had on Cable 14 back then. He and Stephen Arthurs hilariously take phone calls, usually set up, from people with questions about art. Avon answers. In one bit he discusses what purports to be some priceless modern art from New York City, which he then promptly stumbles into, destroying, but finding as much value in it ruined as intact.



A tribute to Jewel Foster at Hamilton Artist Inc as one of the creators of the HAI includes photos and samples of his work.
Cathie Coward/The Hamilton Spectator

Jewel Foster was another titan of support throughout much of the Inc.'s history. She founded zone cinema, a forum for experimental film, helped organize Days of Resistance and hosted some of the best parties. Her daughter Thea Haines later became a board member of the Inc. and here contributes art to go with the display.

The other two of the seven — Bob Mason and George Wallace — are two giants of Hamilton art, and the curators have represented their broad and illustrious careers and contributions well in their elliptical but pithy choices.



A tribute to Bob Mason at Hamilton Artist Inc as one of the creators of the HAI includes photos and samples of his work.

Cathie Coward/The Hamilton Spectator

This is an intriguingly, touchingly quirky/funny nostalgic (in the best way) show. If you want to understand this city, go see it.

On at Hamilton Artists Inc., 155 James St. North, until Aug. 12.

Jeff Mahoney is a Hamilton-based reporter and columnist covering culture and lifestyle stories, commentary and humour for The [Spectator.jmahoney@thespec.com](mailto:jmahoney@thespec.com)



[Jeff Mahoney](#)

Jeff Mahoney has been a reporter and columnist with The Spectator for 30 years, writing culture and lifestyle stories, commentary and humour. Now his column focuses on human interest, from personalities to twists in the social fabric and colourful echoes of local history. His passion is to capture this city's flavour through its people and places; his conviction is their stories, opened forth in the right way, will wake up your hearts.

