

ON WILLIAM KURELEK PAINTER AND PROPHET

*While Popularizing Prairie Life,
He Esponded Humanity's Limitations*



William Kurelek, *Not Going Back to Pick Up a Cloak; If They Are in the Fields after the Bomb Has Dropped*, 1971, private collection

William Kurelek with a painting in the Isaacs Gallery framing workshop, date unknown

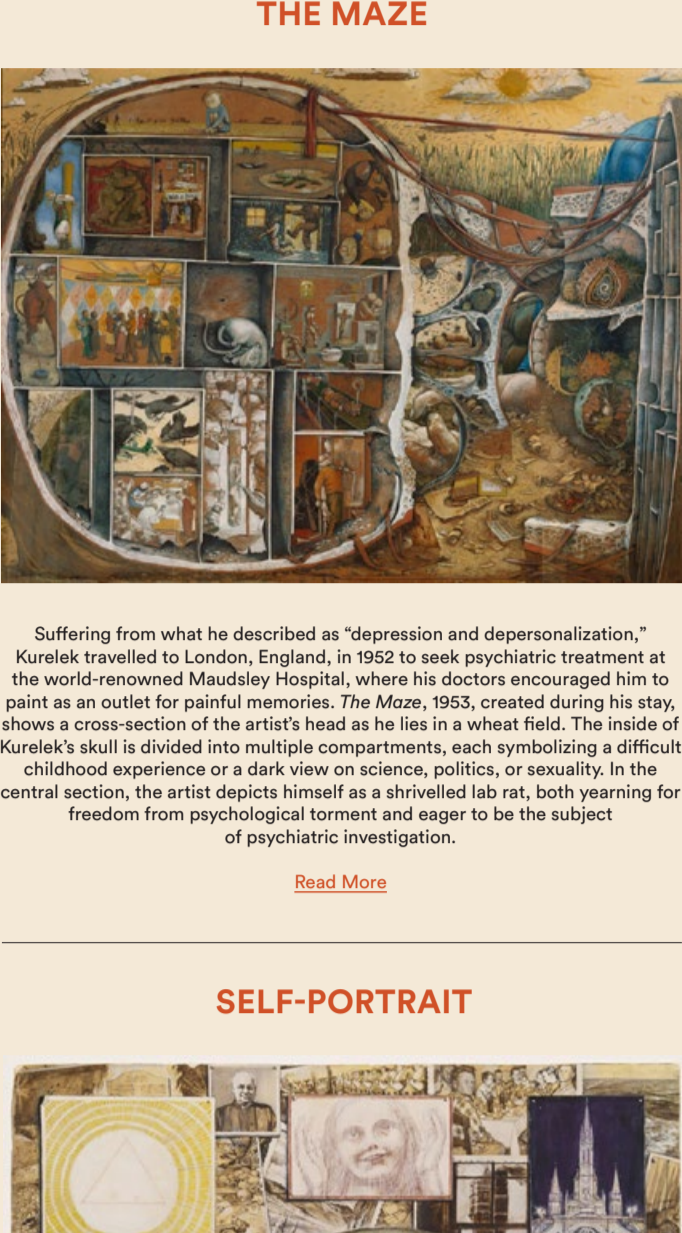


Fifty-six years ago today, William Kurelek's (1927–1977) exhibition *An Immigrant Farms in Canada* opened at Toronto's Isaacs Gallery (on September 18, 1964), a show that led the Ukrainian-Canadian painter to become one of the country's most esteemed artists. Famous for his diverse and seemingly contradictory bodies of work, Kurelek's subject matters ranged from nostalgic, endearing scenes of his upbringing in rural Western Canada to topics that drew the ire of critics, including mental health challenges, the gravitas of Catholicism, and forecasts of nuclear destruction. In the works and texts below, drawn from ACI's book *William Kurelek: Life & Work* by Andrew Kear, we highlight the artists' themes interwoven with defining moments in the creation of his singular works—paintings that have an eerie resonance in our current world.

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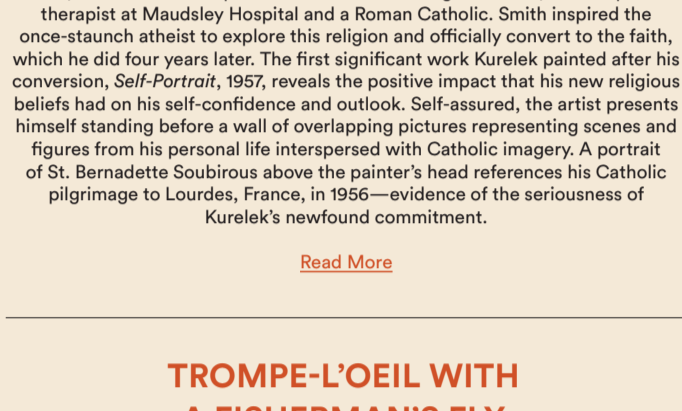
KING OF THE CASTLE



William Kurelek grew up anxious and timid, largely as a result of his father's bullying. At school, he feared the aggressive antics of other children. The painter's difficult childhood had significant repercussions on his adult life and artistic production, including *King of the Castle*, 1958–59, which presents children playing this well-known game. The boy standing at the top of the hill smugly observes the others wrestling below in a bid to reach and knock him down. Although Kurelek abhorred real-life violence, as a child he was fascinated by artistic representations of it and created his own fantastical scenes of brutality—much to the delight of his classmates.

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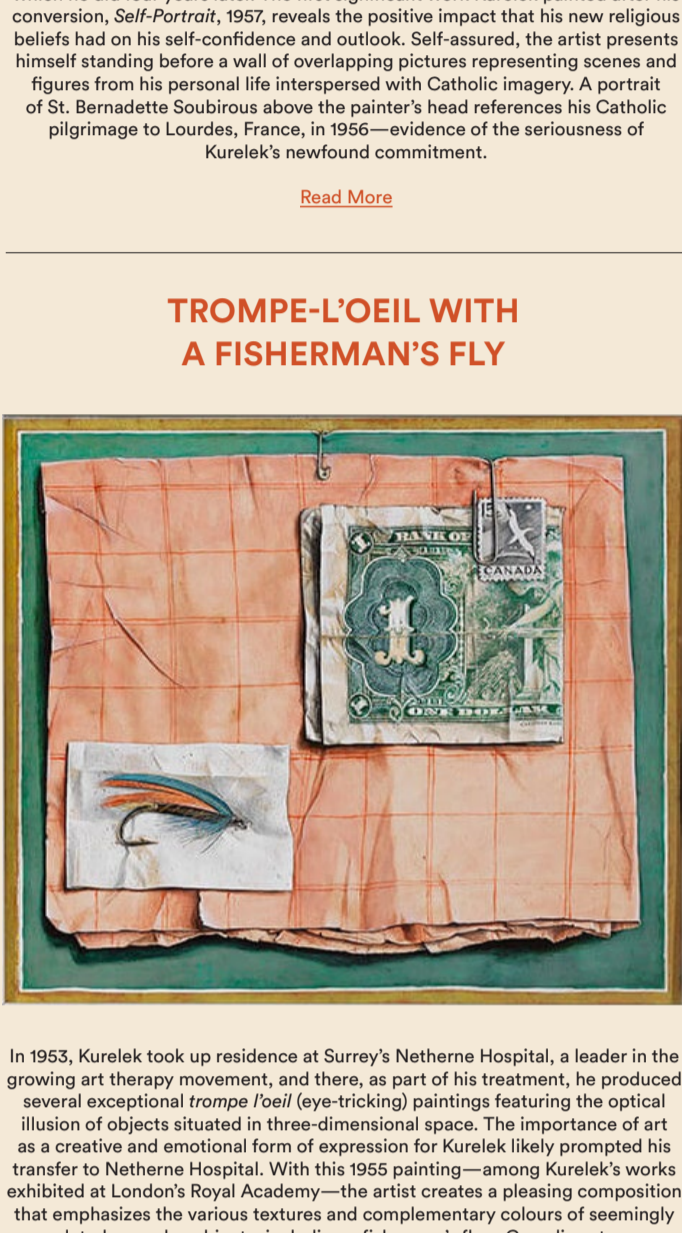
THE MAZE



Suffering from what he described as “depression and depersonalization,” Kurelek travelled to London, England, in 1952 to seek psychiatric treatment at the world-renowned Maudsley Hospital, where his doctors encouraged him to paint as an outlet for painful memories. *The Maze*, 1953, created during his stay, shows a cross-section of the artist's head as he lies in a wheat field. The inside of Kurelek's skull is divided into multiple compartments, each symbolizing a difficult childhood experience or a dark view on science, politics, or sexuality. In the central section, the artist depicts himself as a shrivelled larva, both yearning for freedom from psychological torment and eager to be the subject of psychiatric investigation.

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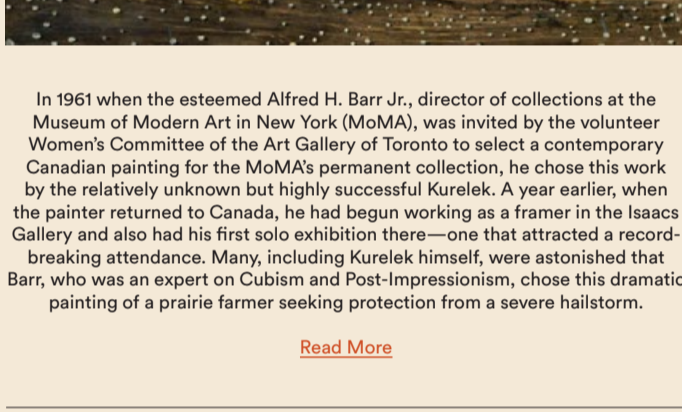
SELF-PORTRAIT



In 1953, Kurelek found inspiration when he met Margaret Smith, an occupational therapist at Maudsley Hospital and a Roman Catholic. Smith inspired the once-staunch atheist to explore this religion and officially convert to the faith, which he did four years later. The first significant work Kurelek painted after his conversion, *Self-Portrait*, 1957, reveals the positive impact that his new religious beliefs had on his self-confidence and outlook. Self-assured, the artist preeminent standing before a wall of overlapping pictures representing scenes and figures from his personal life interspersed with Catholic imagery. A portrait of St. Bernadette Soubirous above the painter's head references his Catholic pilgrimage to Lourdes, France, in 1956—evidence of the seriousness of Kurelek's newfound commitment.

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TROMPE-L'OEIL WITH A FISHERMAN'S FLY



In 1953, Kurelek took up residence at Surrey's Netherne Hospital, a leader in the growing art therapy movement, and there, as part of his treatment, he produced several exceptional *trompe l'oeil* (eye-tricking) paintings featuring the optical illusion of objects situated in three-dimensional space. The importance of art as a creative and emotional form of expression for Kurelek likely prompted his transfer to Netherne Hospital. With this 1955 painting—among Kurelek's works exhibited at London's Royal Academy—the artist creates a pleasing composition that emphasizes the various textures and complementary colours of seemingly unrelated everyday objects, including a fisherman's fly, a Canadian stamp, a dollar bill, and a folded piece of gridded paper.

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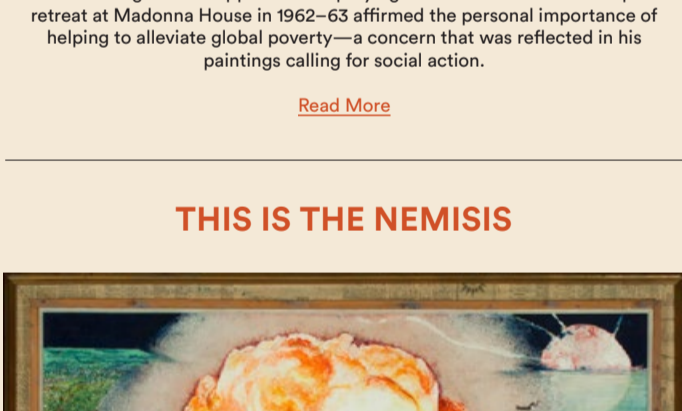
HAILSTORM IN ALBERTA



In 1961 when the esteemed Alfred H. Barr Jr., director of collections at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), was invited by the volunteer Women's Committee of the Art Gallery of Toronto to select a contemporary Canadian painting for the MoMA's permanent collection, he chose this work by the relatively unknown but highly successful Kurelek. A year earlier, when the painter returned to Canada, he had begun working as a framer in the Isaacs Gallery and also had his first solo exhibition there—one that attracted a record-breaking attendance. Many, including Kurelek himself, were astonished that Barr, who was an expert on Cubism and Post-Impressionism, chose this dramatic painting of a former farmer seeking protection from a severe hailstorm.

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MANITOBA PARTY



Manitoba Party, painted in 1964 and displayed in Kurelek's solo exhibition *An Immigrant Farms in Canada* at the Isaacs Gallery that year, presents a large outdoor Ukrainian celebration, the kind often organized for special occasions like a wedding or an anniversary. The work is part of a series that chronicles the life of Kurelek's father, who was part of the second major wave of Ukrainian immigrants to settle in Western Canada after the First World War. This painting illustrates the profound sense of belonging that Kurelek's family and other Ukrainian-Canadians experienced in the Prairies and the joy of the immigrant community coming together to socialize and carry on cultural traditions.

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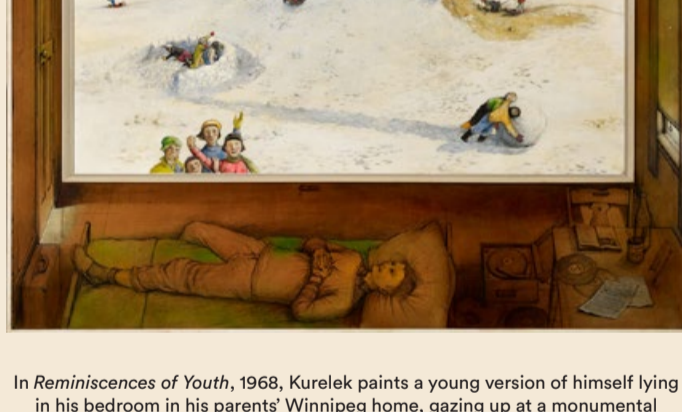
THE HOPE OF THE WORLD



Following his 1960 return to Canada, Kurelek continued to strengthen his faith—his spiritual anchor in an ever-changing world—by connecting with members of the local Catholic community. *The Hope of the World*, 1965, depicts Madonna House, an apostolic Roman Catholic training centre located in St. Mary's, Ontario, that was established in 1947 by a Russian émigré named Catherine de Hueck Doherty. Visible through the window of the worn but sturdy wooden structure is a figure who appears to be praying before a cross. Kurelek's spiritual retreat at Madonna House in 1962–63 affirmed the personal importance of helping to alleviate global poverty—a concern that was reflected in his paintings calling for social action.

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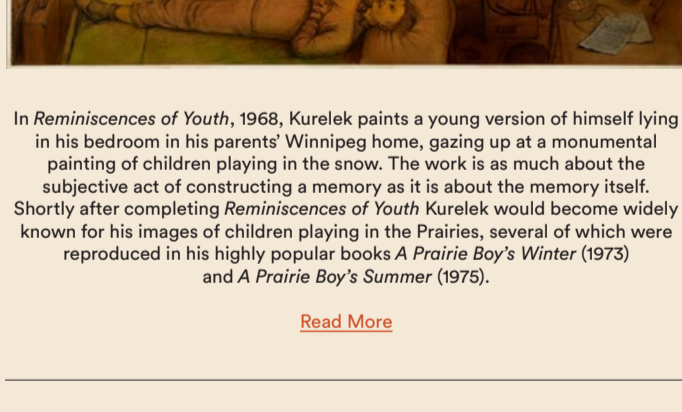
THIS IS THE NEMESIS



While Kurelek's references to religion could be joyful—as with *The Hope of the World*—many of his paintings were bleak, including this work, in which Kurelek imagines the horrifying destruction of Hamilton, Ontario, by a nuclear explosion. Another eruption in the fast-rising atomic age signals the similar fate of Toronto. The painter's fixation on an impending nuclear apocalypse stemmed from the writings of the conservative English Roman Catholic theologian Edward Holloway and grew within the tense atmosphere of the Cold War era. *This Is the Nemesis*, 1965, is part of Kurelek's second series of diatomic paintings, entitled *Gloria to Man in the Highest*, which provoked strong reactions among art critics, some disapproving of the heavy-handedness and others praising Kurelek for his bold social commentary.

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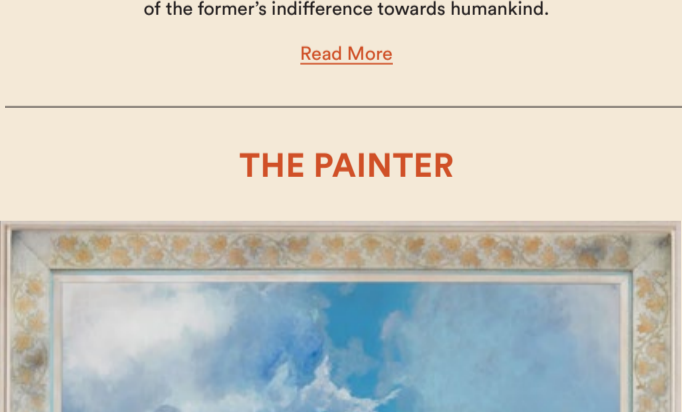
REMINISCENCES OF YOUTH



In *Reminiscences of Youth*, 1968, Kurelek paints a young version of himself lying in his bedroom in his parents' Winnipeg home, gazing up at a monumental painting of children playing in the snow. The work is as much about the subjective act of constructing a memory as it is about the memory itself. Shortly after completing *Reminiscences of Youth* Kurelek would become widely known for his images of children playing in the Prairies, several of which were reproduced in his highly popular books *A Prairie Boy's Winter* (1973) and *A Prairie Boy's Summer* (1975).

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GLIMMERING TAPERS 'ROUND THE DAY'S DEAD SANCTITIES



In 1970 Kurelek created a series called *Nature, Poor Stepdame* that features a number of quiet evening landscapes, including this one, a reflection on the relationship between nature and the divine. In his immersive painting captures the breathtaking beauty of the northern lights during an arctic winter in Ilbert—a phenomenon farm workers would occasionally have the chance to witness while threshing into the night. Kurelek borrowed the titles of the *Nature, Poor Stepdame* series from the Catholic poet Francis Thompson's 1893 verse “The Hound of Heaven,” which declares that nature and God are separate on the basis of the former's indifference towards humankind.

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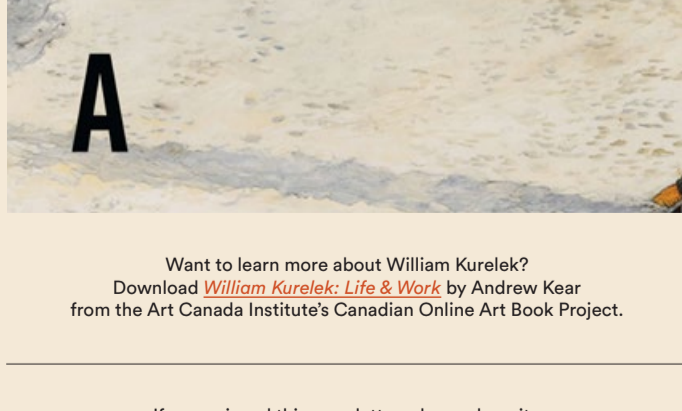
THE PAINTER



Beginning in 1963, Kurelek made nearly annual summer painting trips to Western Canada. This self-portrait shows the artist contentedly working in his Volkswagen Beetle, parked next to a vast stretch of farmland, on a beautiful, sunny day. Completed three years before Kurelek's death in 1977, *The Painter* is an unusually blissful portrayal of life, art, and nature, absent of the characteristic moral or prophetic undertones that often appeared in his work. The image captures Kurelek's fondness for the pictured setting, the Oak Hammock Marsh in Manitoba, where he found peace and solace as a child growing up nearby in the town of Stonewall.

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