

An aerial photograph of a multi-lane highway interchange. A semi-truck is driving away from the viewer on the main road. The landscape is green with some trees and a few buildings in the distance under a blue sky with white clouds.

JACK CHAMBERS

Life & Work

By Mark A. Cheetham

ART
CANADA
INSTITUTE
INSTITUT
DE L'ART
CANADIEN



Contents

03

Biography

09

Key Works

28

Significance & Critical Issues

33

Style & Technique

39

Where to See

44

Notes

45

Glossary

48

Sources & Resources

54

About the Author

55

Copyright & Credits

A black and white photograph of a man, Jack Chambers, in a workshop or studio. He is wearing a plaid shirt and is focused on painting a large mural on a wall. He holds a paintbrush in his right hand, applying paint to the wall. The mural appears to be a classical-style figure. The background shows various art supplies and the structure of the studio.

BIOGRAPHY

Critically and financially, Jack Chambers was one of the most successful Canadian artists of his time. Born in London, Ontario, in 1931, he had an insatiable desire to travel and to become a professional artist. Chambers trained in Madrid in the 1950s, learning the classical traditions of Spain and Europe. He returned to London in 1961 and was integral to the city's regionalist art movement. Chambers was diagnosed with leukemia in 1969 and died in 1978.

EARLY YEARS

John Richard Chambers was born in Victoria Hospital, London, Ontario, on March 25, 1931. (He signed his name "John" until around 1970, and he is often referred to as John Chambers.) His parents, Frank R. and Beatrice (McIntyre) Chambers, came from the area. His mother's family farmed nearby; his father was a local welder. He had one sister, Shirley, less than a year older than he was. Chambers vividly related memories of his very happy childhood in his autobiography.¹



Chambers's mother, Beatrice (née McIntyre), and his father, Frank R. Chambers.

Chambers's art education started early and well. In 1944 at Sir Adam Beck Collegiate Institute in London, he was taught by the painter Selwyn Dewdney (1909–1979), who encouraged Chambers to exhibit his early paintings. "Selwyn and his wife, Irene, became lifelong friends," Chambers recalls.² In the fall of 1946 he moved to London's H.B. Beal Technical School. His main teacher was Herb Ariss (1916–2009), "who brought a much more professional attitude to work and discipline" than was typical of high school.³ At this time Chambers also pored through art books at the London Public Library. He graduated from Beal in June 1949.

Hungry for more experience as an artist, he travelled to Quebec City and Mexico in the following fall and winter. In 1952 he attended the University of Western Ontario, where he took an English literature course given by professor of English and art expert Ross Woodman. Chambers and



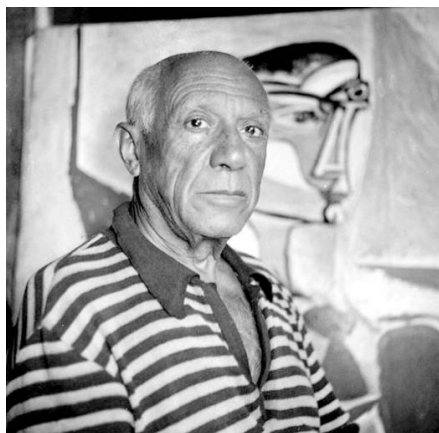
Jack Chambers, *Portrait of Marion and Ross Woodman*, 1961, oil on wood, 78.7 x 91.4 cm, Collection of Marion and Ross Woodman.

Woodman shared a passion for the spiritual dimensions of existence and for art's power to explore these realms. Woodman and his wife, the noted Jungian psychoanalyst Marion Woodman, became lifelong friends and mentors of Chambers. Still searching for a way to become a serious artist, however, Chambers left Western and sailed to Europe from New York in September 1953.

AN EDUCATION IN SPAIN

For a time Chambers wandered: Rome, Austria, and then the south of France. Never shy about going after what he wanted, and keen on learning to be an artist, by his own account he turned up unannounced at the home of Pablo Picasso (1881–1973). Finding the gate locked, he scaled the wall and managed to gain an audience. Picasso advised him to study in Barcelona.

Instead he ended up attending art school in Madrid. Though his route to admission was circuitous, in May 1954 Chambers was accepted to the prestigious, if highly traditional, Escuela Central de Bellas Artes de San Fernando. He began classes in October 1954, excelling in his studies and graduating five years later, in the spring of 1959.



LEFT: Pablo Picasso at home in Cannes, in front of one of his paintings, 1955.



RIGHT: Antonio López García, *My Parents*, 1956, oil on canvas, mounted to board, 87.6 x 104.1 cm, Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris.

Chambers embraced Spain, learning the language, converting to Catholicism in 1957 (he was raised as a Baptist), and meeting his future wife, Olga Sanchez Bustos, in 1959. In 1960 he bought a flat in the village of Chinchón, near Madrid, planning to stay. He had his first solo exhibition, at the Lorca Gallery in Madrid, in 1961.

Chambers was close to fellow students in Madrid, particularly to Antonio López García (b. 1936) who, with others from the Escuela Central with whom Chambers worked closely, went on to form a notable group called the New Spanish Realists.

Chambers kept in loose touch with these artists throughout his life. Parallels to the realism characteristic of this group can be found in Chambers's work by 1968. In Spain, by contrast, his canvases were technically proficient but dark in mood and subject matter—reflections of his own poverty, of the contemporary conditions in Spain under Francisco Franco's fascist rule, and of his contact with Surrealism.

RETURN TO CANADA

In March 1961 Chambers received a letter telling him that his mother was gravely ill, news that would change his life dramatically. He returned to London, where he was amazed by the burgeoning art scene, led by his soon-

to-be close friend Greg Curnoe (1936–1992). After reconnecting with Ross Woodman and other artist friends, Chambers eventually decided to stay in Canada.



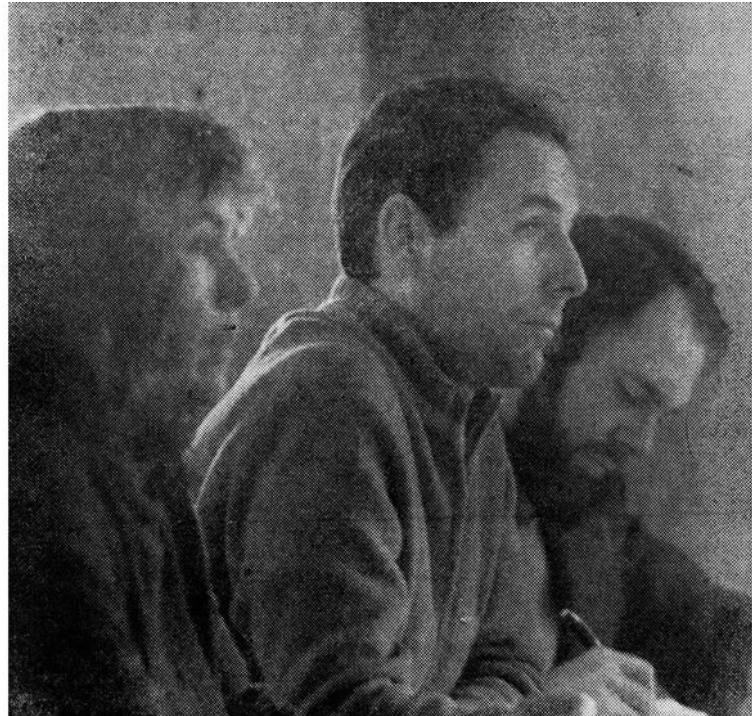
Greg Curnoe, *The Great Canadian*, 1965, collage and acrylic on board, 65.4 x 92.7 cm, Thielsen Gallery, London, ON, Collection of Sheila Curnoe, © SODRAC.

He also began to catch up on developments in international art, and in 1961 he secured representation at the Forum Gallery in New York, where he was part of two group exhibits and had a solo show in 1965. Chambers's mother died in August 1962. In June 1963 he was in Spain to sell his flat. He and Olga decided to marry and return to Canada; the ceremony was held in August 1963 at St. Peter's Catholic Church, London. Jack and Olga had two children, John (b. 1964) and Diego (b. 1965).

A CANADIAN MASTER

Chambers subsequently became a leader in the artistic communities of London and Toronto, where he was first represented by the vibrant Isaacs Gallery. He taught at the University of Toronto in 1966. Through the mid-1960s Chambers experimented with film, aluminum paint, and various plastics. In 1968 he won first prize for both painting and film at the Art Gallery of Ontario's exhibition *Canadian Artists '68* (for *Regatta No. 1*, 1968, and his film *R34*, 1967, about his friend the artist Greg Curnoe).

In the late 1960s Chambers evolved his theory of perceptual realism—a fully articulated position that detailed art’s profound and spiritual relationship with primary sensory experience—and produced what remain his most notable films and paintings.

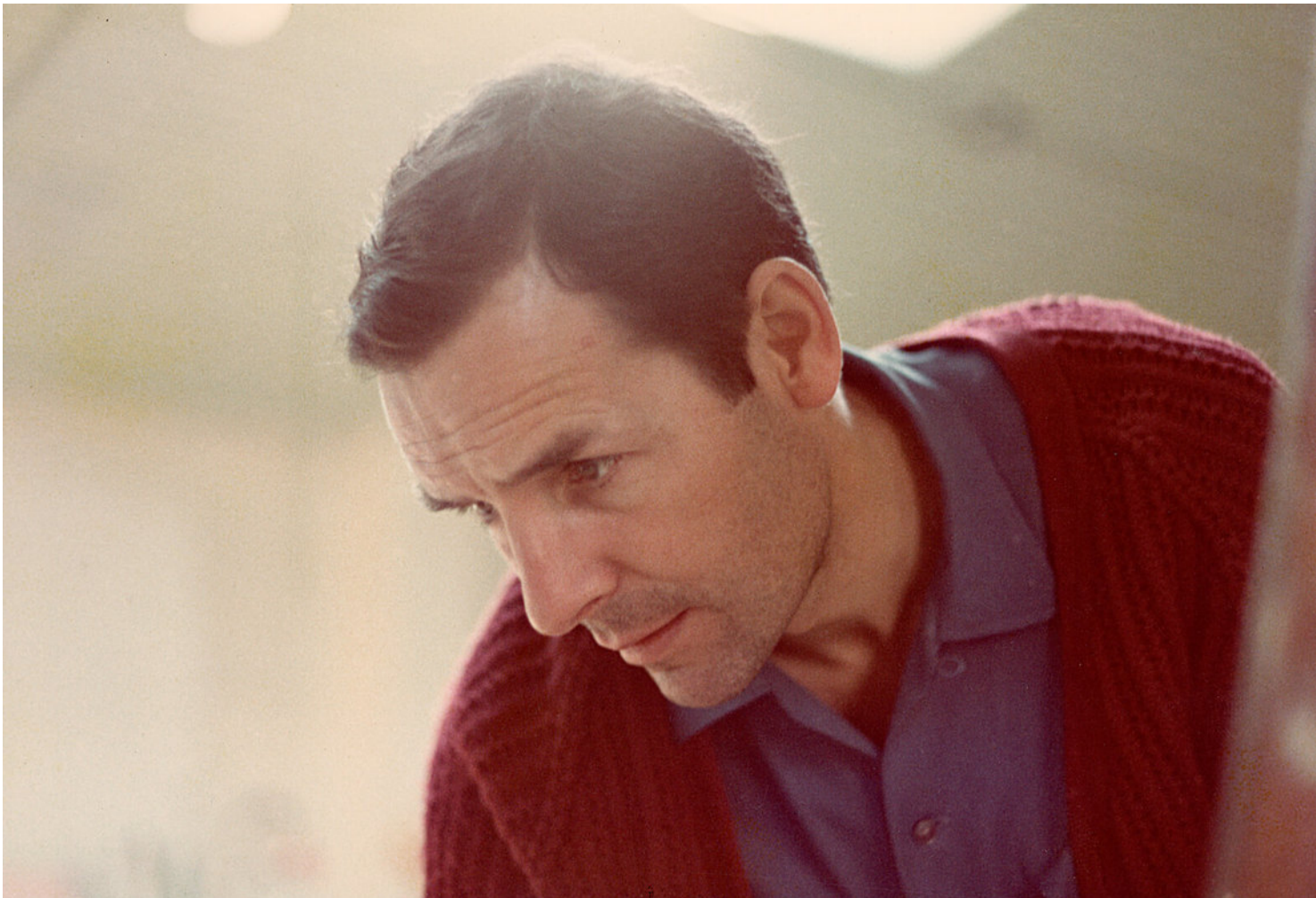


LEFT: Jack Chambers, *Regatta No. 1*, 1968, oil and graphite on paper, mounted on Plexiglas, 129.5 x 122.5 cm, Museum London.
RIGHT: Kim Ondaatje, Jack Chambers, and Tony Urquhart at the second National Conference of CARFAC, 1973.

In 1967–68, he and fellow London artists Tony Urquhart (b. 1934), Kim Ondaatje (b. 1928), Greg Curnoe, and Ron Martin (b. 1943) forged Canadian Artists’ Representation (CAR, later CARFAC, with the addition of the French counterpart, Le Front des artistes canadiens), a pioneering venture that established a system of artists’ fees in Canada and worldwide; it remains active today.

A CAREER FORESHORTENED

In July 1969 Chambers was hospitalized in London and diagnosed with acute myeloblastic leukemia. He was thirty-eight. For the rest of his life he travelled extensively—to the United States, Mexico, England, and India—in search of a cure. He also worked relentlessly on paintings, prints, and films, securing public recognition and financial success rare for a Canadian artist.



Jack Chambers in his studio in the late 1960s, photographed by Michael Ondaatje.

Chambers's illness led him to focus on the miraculousness of life and the significance of the everyday; he often depicted domestic scenes, such as his renowned *Sunday Morning No. 2*, 1968–70. His diagnosis also made him keenly aware of the need to provide financially for his family, with the result that he turned away from filmmaking and concentrated on the more commercially viable medium of painting.

In 1970 he made fellow Londoner and art dealer Nancy Poole his commercial representative. His painting *401 Towards London No. 1*, 1968–69, had sold for \$5,000. Chambers insisted that his work was worth much more than current market values, five times as much. Poole's efforts with collectors led in 1970 to his setting two record prices for work by a living Canadian artist: \$25,000 for *Sunday Morning No. 2* and \$35,000 for *Victoria Hospital*, 1969–70.

Also in 1970, the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Vancouver Art Gallery mounted a retrospective of his work. Chambers continued to make remarkable paintings, drawings, and films until his death at age forty-seven in April 1978.



Nancy Poole, Chambers's art dealer, in London, Ontario.



The extraordinary quality, scope, and challenges of Chambers's art can be seen in the following essential works, chosen to represent the range and experimental nature of his art as a whole.

MCGILVARY COUNTY 1962



Jack Chambers, *McGilvary County*, 1962
Oil and mixed media on wood, 132.9 x 120 cm
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

Painted in the year after Chambers returned to Canada from the village of Chinchón, Spain, this highly coloured and apparently celebratory painting contrasts dramatically with the dark and intense work of his Spanish period. In an explosion of colour and detail, he records a vision of dead relatives' faces floating above a fantasy landscape and an overladen table set for a holiday celebration. The painting's frame (not shown in most reproductions) is an integral part of the image and in its detail possibly reflects an interest in local folk art. In his autobiography, Chambers writes:

At some time in 1961, I became aware of de Kooning and Pollock and Klee and Kandinsky. I had never seen their works before and that included whatever had happened in painting since Juan Gris and Picasso. I began to texturize the surfaces of my panels with a mixture of rabbit glue and marble dust. Once dry, I could adjust the topography with sandpaper. These surfaces were covered with gesso and then I spilled various colours of house enamels on the gesso surface and sprinkled it with turps to get it running. I then tilted the board this way and that till some interesting effects appeared, and then I laid it flat and let it dry or added more paint and turps.¹

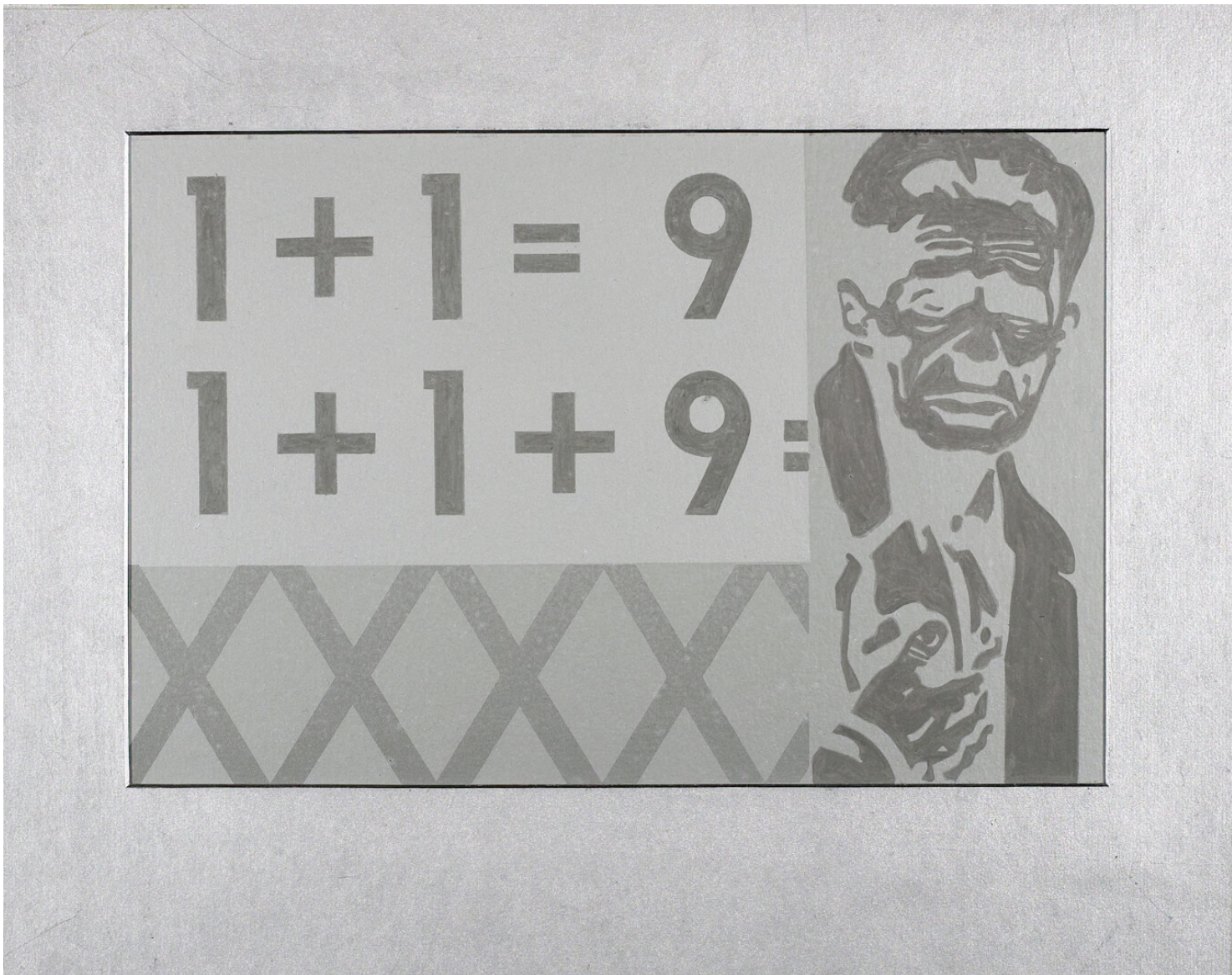
Chambers reveals his growing knowledge of recent international art while focusing, in part through photographs of relatives, on his own heritage and the local context. *McGilvary County* is not so much a bridge from his Spanish work but rather a leap into a new creative environment.

OLGA AND MARY VISITING 1964–65



Jack Chambers, *Olga and Mary Visiting*, 1964–65
Oil and mixed media on Douglas fir plywood, 125 x 193.7 cm
Museum London

Chambers uses a radically fragmented visual presentation to convey the dynamism of a casual domestic conversation between his wife, Olga, on the left, and her friend Mary. The image is highly coloured like his London paintings from the previous three years, yet also muted as if we are looking through layers of atmosphere; its fascination stems from Chambers's distribution and repetition of crucial forms—the cup, Mary's head—across the flattened, homogenized surface. Chambers describes the painting in terms that underline his interest in film: "A painting gets put together just like an experience—in particles. [This work] isn't the description of a visual moment; it's the accumulation of experienced interiors brought into focus." He continues evocatively, "You are in a room, then in another room where you see an object being held this way, then you see it in motion, a week later a cup is tilting ... a woman rests one leg over the other, pink ... the thick rug is buff orange." He concludes, "Sense combinations complement one another to enrich perception."¹ As always, Chambers seeks to understand and convey perception in the deepest sense.

PLUS NINE 1966

Jack Chambers, *Plus Nine*, 1966

Silkscreen with hand painting on illustration board, 25.1 x 37.8 cm

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

In 1966 and 1967 Chambers devoted himself exclusively to filmmaking and to a series of so-called silver paintings, radical works in aluminum paint that use the positive/negative visual effects of the paint to convey movement. These surfaces instill optical movement, a dynamism that is magnified here by the three number sequences that we cannot help but read as incomplete. Chambers makes these numbers move by leaving their mathematical formulas unresolved in the Arabic sequence in the top left and by truncating the series of Roman numerals that run beneath. Rows of Xs are highly connotative, suggesting numbers, poison, porn, and even a primitive signature. We are transported from the integer zone to that of less abstract, worldly imagery on the right by the equals sign that points, as it were, to the half-length male portrait. We are fixed by the bold visage of this man. He is not a member of the Chambers clan; the source photo is from the magazine *Saturday Night*.



Such borrowing from public visual culture was, by 1966, an established practice: Chambers said that he used photographs from a magazine from New Zealand for the figures in *All Things Fall*, 1963. Was he simply scanning for engaging imagery in magazines, a common practice in the era of Andy Warhol (1928-1987), or should we read more from the context in which this picture of poverty appears, an article on urban indigence called "The Salvation Army's First Hundred Years," by Jeannine Locke? Chambers had experienced poverty in Spain; its effects were part of his keen social conscience, but he was not one to preach.

REGATTA NO. 1 1968



Jack Chambers, *Regatta No. 1*, 1968

Oil and graphite on paper, mounted on Plexiglas, 129.5 x 122.5 cm

Museum London

Chambers reported that he “painted [himself] out”¹ in 1966 and 1967 through the intensely experimental and demanding silver paintings, but he kept making films and he played productively with contemporary plastics, using vacuum forming and Plexiglas. *Regatta No. 1* is a richly and literally layered work. Chambers made a number of detailed drawings from newsreel images of the family of a boy lost in a boating accident and sandwiched them between layers

of brightly coloured, rigid plastic. While this piece and related works in plastic are not often discussed in the Chambers literature, we should remember that *Regatta No. 1* won the painting prize at *Canadian Artists '68*, an exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario. (Chambers's film from 1967 about his friend the artist Greg Curnoe, *R 34*, was awarded the prize for film at the same time.)

We may well ask whether this plastic "painting" is better thought of as collage, thereby emphasizing its collection of static elements—the photographic images reproduced by Chambers—or as montage, a related technique applied to the moving image. Is the ghostly trace of a boy's head at the right a segment of film best read as a photo booth strip or a school portrait, or is it purposefully reminiscent of both? At the same time and with a complexity typical of Chambers's work, *Regatta No. 1* is inescapably material in a way that film—depending as it does on light—never is. In an unpublished interview with the author Avis Lang, Chambers reported that at this time he felt a "hunger ... to feel the dimension of things." The work's highly tactile three-dimensionality can be appreciated only when seen in the original.

401 TOWARDS LONDON NO. 1 1968–69

Jack Chambers, *401 Towards London No. 1*, 1968–69
Oil on wood, 183 x 244 cm
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

No painting better encapsulates Chambers's perceptual realism—the term he coined in his 1969 essay of the same name to describe his aspirations and methods. The genesis of the image has become legend: Chambers was driving eastbound on Highway 401 from London. In his rear-view mirror he saw the expansive and perfectly harmonious landscape captured here. It was for him an epiphany, a “wow moment” that inspired him to resume painting after a significant break during which he was dissatisfied with the medium. He later photographed and then transferred the image to the large-scale panel.

Perceptual realism is Chambers's term for what art should be—that is, a profound reflection on primary sensory experience, not simply a reproduction of it (Chambers largely disdained contemporary American Photorealism). As he states in a 1973 grant application, “Painting is a calculated response to Perception.” As if to show that he was not simply copying what the eye and camera could see, Chambers changed many details during the long inception of this work, not least the signposting on the highway. For him, photography supplied the detailed and stable “description” of perception, but this



technology alone was insufficient. "Our experience of photography and its off-shoots will inevitably lucidate all its particular qualities and its spectacular limitations," he declares in his essay "Perceptual Realism." Chambers took photographs constantly and made their information integral to his paintings and films, yet he never considered himself a photographer. He maintained a distance from the mechanical precision of the photograph, resulting in a sublime unreality that emanates from this image.

CIRCLE 1968–69



Jack Chambers, *Circle*, 1968–69

16mm black and white and colour film, sound, 28 min.

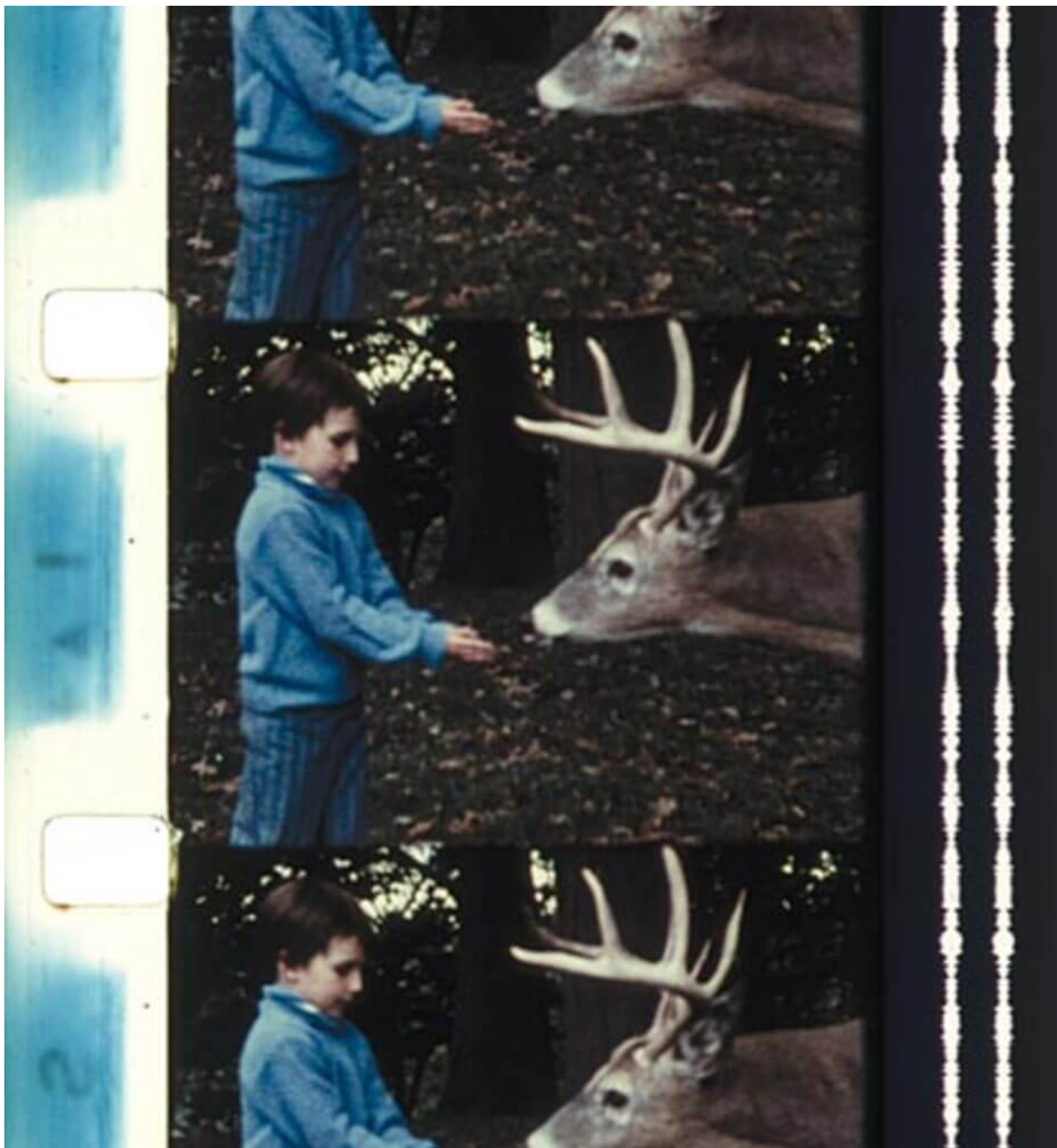
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto



A profoundly meditative film, *Circle* explores many of Chambers's central themes: the life cycle, the effects of light, domesticity, and transcendence through everyday experience. For this film Chambers, fiercely single-minded about his art, knocked a hole through the back wall of his home on Lombard Avenue in London and mounted a movie camera. Each day for a year, he would turn it on for a few seconds, recording "blindly" whatever the lens saw. The result is a mesmerizing sequence of diurnal change, seasonal shifts, and the ephemera of family life. As its title suggests, *Circle* is complete and perfect in its form.

The middle section of the film is a 24-minute chronicle of Chambers's backyard and of time's progress. So hypnotic is this sequence that we can easily forget that the artist framed it with footage of himself filming inside the home at the beginning, and with found newsreel clips of London at different times and in no obvious order at the end. Yet Chambers always embeds probing questions: Who made the film? Was it the artist, the camera, or the anonymous hands and eyes behind the found footage? He never lets us forget that we are watching something material, a film with all its illusory effects, and not looking through a window at life itself.

THE HART OF LONDON 1968–70



Jack Chambers, *The Hart of London*, 1968–70
16mm black and white and colour film, sound, 79 min.
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

Chambers's films provided the temporal dimension that he could never fully achieve in painting. *Olga and Mary Visiting*, 1964–65, and his silver paintings of 1966–67 could only point in this direction. While film inevitably moves ahead in our "real" time of viewing, Chambers is never content with a simple, linear narrative. *The Hart of London*, his longest and most ambitious completed film, plays with time in myriad ways.

For the chase and eventual capture of the deer that gives the film its punning title, he employed found news footage from 1954, liberally borrowed from the archives of CFPL-TV in London. He also deploys film he shot in Spain for the pivotal abattoir scene. In London he shot footage for the delicate sequence near the conclusion in which his sons feed domesticated deer while their mother, Olga, whispers, "You have to be very careful"; and for the transcendent closing sequences of water and sky. Olga's voice-over is not only poignant, given the fragility of the young children and the deer, but also surprising, as most of the sound in *The Hart of London* refuses to advance or even connect with the narrative.

Hart is an endlessly layered tour de force. It explores life and death, the sense of place and personal displacement, and the intricate aesthetics of representation. It is a personal and spiritual film, marked inevitably by Chambers's knowledge that he had leukemia. The late American avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage said of *Hart*, "If I named the five greatest films [ever made], this has got to be one of them."¹ Even this high praise falls short of hyperbole. *The Hart of London* is at the centre of Chambers's extraordinary achievement.

SUNDAY MORNING NO. 2 1968–70



Jack Chambers, *Sunday Morning No. 2*, 1968-70
Oil on wood, 121.9 x 121.9 cm
Loch Gallery, Toronto

A remarkable painting in many ways, *Sunday Morning No. 2* was executed during the same period as *Circle*, *The Hart of London*, and *401 Towards London No. 1*. It and *401* were used as illustrations in Chambers's crucial 1969 manifesto, "Perceptual Realism." The image presents an important moment for Chambers, a flash of insight when he saw his sons and the Chambers family's domestic life together in a heightened, spiritual way. Though he worked painstakingly from photographs taken some time after the initial inspiration, Chambers did not try to reproduce this moment but rather tried to render the depth of his perception in terms available to his audience. This is the goal and genius of perceptual realism.

Again the question arises: To what extent and how did Chambers's illness affect his artmaking? Chambers was diagnosed with leukemia in July 1969 and not given long to live. He was thirty-eight. He had nearly finished *401* at this time but not *Sunday Morning No. 2*. He did not choose this image because he was sick, but one of the many effects of this grave news was to make Chambers an even keener business person. Chambers did not consider the financial side of art as base, and nor should we in assessing the impact of his disease. In his 1978 autobiography he writes: "As long as I was healthy and producing there was no need to consider any other value than that of creating Now that my capacity to produce was in jeopardy, I was forced to turn my attention to a more practical value: the amount of money the work was really worth." To provide for his family and also achieve a sale price commensurate with how he valued his work, Chambers set the price for this piece high, five times that paid for *401*. *Sunday Morning No. 2* sold for \$25,000 in 1970, the highest price ever paid for a work by a living Canadian artist.

LUNCH 1969 (UNFINISHED)



Jack Chambers, *Lunch*, 1969 (unfinished)
Oil and synthetic paint on wood, 197.9 x 182.9 cm
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

Chambers began this painting in July 1969, just before he learned he had leukemia. The painting remained unfinished at his death in 1978, though he had worked on it steadily and even showed it as a work in progress in his 1970 retrospective exhibition, where it was called "Sunday Noon." In this domestic scene with heightened meaning, Chambers presides at the head of the family

table, a rare self-portrait and his only family portrait that includes all four members. It is an image of anticipation: the table is set but the meal has not yet begun; there is an empty chair to the artist's right.

As so often happens in Chambers's work, the everyday is transcended. Given his Catholicism—to which he converted while a student in Madrid—echoes of *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci are hard to deny. We should not therefore assume that Chambers casts himself as Christ. *Lunch*—initially titled "Sunday Lunch"—is in theme and execution akin to his Sunday Morning pictures, in each of which his family's relationship to the divine is broached.

Lunch provided another challenge for the artist: his wife, Olga, asked that he give it to her. Chambers, however, was set on providing as good a financial legacy for his family as possible. That it remained unfinished meant that he did not have to choose between these family priorities.

VICTORIA HOSPITAL 1969–70

Jack Chambers, *Victoria Hospital*, 1969-70
Oil on wood, 121.9 x 243.8 cm
Private collection

Chambers's courageous nine-year battle with leukemia and his premature death tend to dominate the understanding of his work. It is thus salutary to recall that this painting of Victoria Hospital, where he was born and died, was begun before his diagnosis. The painting is horizontal and includes a broad, detailed landscape of the city as well as the hospital. Looked at in terms of his responses to nature—especially his late paintings of Lake Huron and of Gibbons Park in London—the hospital does not dominate the work in any morbid sense. The winter scene is subdued, calm. It is a scene of his London, its places—the view was taken from the roof of the studio of fellow artist Greg Curnoe (1936–1992)—its light, its familiarity. Yet the work also reminds us of Chambers's practicality. With it he achieved his financial goals: the painting sold in 1970 for a record-setting price, \$35,000.



SIGNIFICANCE & CRITICAL ISSUES

Jack Chambers's work is as challenging and controversial today as it was when he made it. He achieved prominence as both a painter and a filmmaker and was vigorous in organizing Canadian visual artists' rights. His theory of "perceptual realism" challenges parochial notions of regionalism.

SIGNIFICANCE

Chambers's reputation as a painter and filmmaker is unsurpassed in Canada, where he is rightly revered as a professional of the highest calibre and an uncompromising technical and thematic experimenter. His film *The Hart of London*, 1968–70, is widely regarded internationally as one of the most significant avant-garde films ever made. Paintings such as *401 Towards London No. 1*, 1968–69, and *Sunday Morning No. 2*, 1968–70, are both icons of Canadian art. His theoretical essay "Perceptual Realism," 1969, is still a touchstone in debates about regionalism, perception, and the spiritual in art.

While Chambers did teach briefly at the University of Toronto and gave public lectures, he led by example more than as a teacher or mentor. A private and complex person, he was also a natural leader whose profile as a committed and productive artist, rather than the style of his work, inspired others in London and well beyond. He did not have followers, but his influence can be seen in the work of Toronto painter Sheila Ayearst (b. 1951) in her series *Highway 401*, 1995, and in the recent work by London painter Sky Glabush (b. 1970).

Ironically, given Chambers's devotion to artmaking, perhaps his greatest legacy was his central role in founding Canadian Artists' Representation (CAR, later CARFAC, with the addition of the French counterpart, *Le Front des artistes canadiens*) in 1968, a national body that ensures the fair recognition of artists' copyright. Thanks initially to Chambers and fellow London artists Tony Urquhart (b. 1934) and Kim Ondaatje (b. 1928), by 1975 Canada became the first country to pay exhibition fees to artists.



Jack Chambers painting, photographed by Michael Ondaatje.



Sheila Ayearst, *The 401 Towards London: Median*, 1992, oil, acrylic on linen, 228.6 x 182.9 cm, courtesy of the artist.

CRITICAL ISSUES

Regular exhibitions of Chambers's work have been held since his death in 1978. Increasing attention has been paid to the importance of his films and to the integration of this part of his work with his better-known output as a painter. Chambers's experimentation across a range of media remains a topic for further investigation.

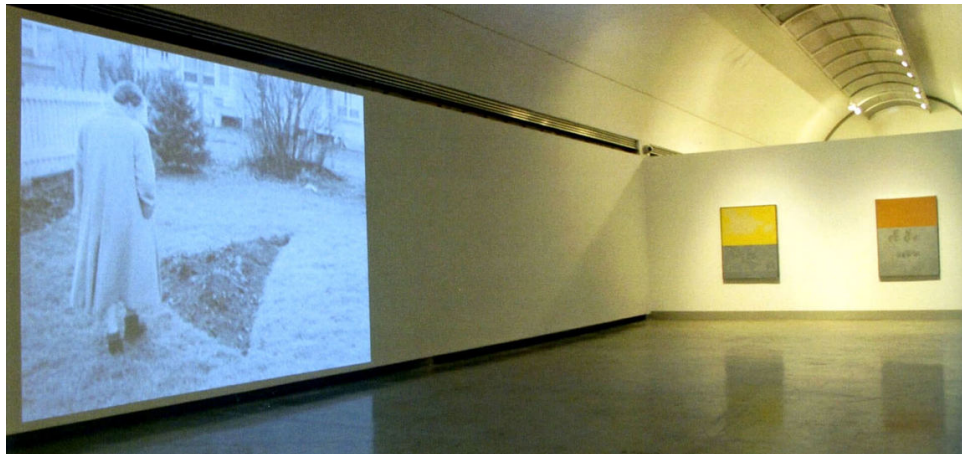
Catholicism was central to Chambers's life after his conversion in Spain in 1957. While he was subtle in his references to the religious—for example, the references to Christmas or Easter in the Sunday Morning paintings—its presence is pervasive and important. Religious and spiritual matters tend to be downplayed in the creation and reception of contemporary art. If we are to think of Chambers as quintessentially and significantly modern as an artist and man, what do we make of the religious dimensions of his work?

To what extent should we consider biographical details when interpreting works of art? Biography is often treated as central in Chambers's case because of his fatal illness. Yet the assumption that his illness directly affected details of his artworks can be misleading. For example, he began *Victoria Hospital*, 1969–70, which depicts where he was born and died, before his leukemia diagnosis in 1969.



Jack Chambers in front of his painting *Lunch*.

Was Jack Chambers ultimately a regionalist? On the one hand, he was closely involved with the London art scene and with outspokenly regionalist artists there, especially Greg Curnoe (1936–1992). He depicted the environs of the city and region. On the other hand, Chambers was trained in Spain and kept his eye on the work of friends there. His reputation as an avant-garde filmmaker was international, and his constant technical experimentation was in line with developments in the United States.



Installation view of *Jack Chambers: The light from the darkness, silver paintings and film work* at Museum London, January 15–April 3, 2011 (left to right: *The Hart of London*, 1968–70; *Renaissance Still-Life*, 1966, National Gallery of Canada; *Peaches*, 1966, Art Gallery of Hamilton).

The two large Chambers exhibitions mounted in 2011 (at Museum London and Art Gallery of Ontario) gave people the opportunity to rethink his art as a whole and speculate further on particular works. An especially intriguing case is the unfinished status of his large painting *Lunch*, begun in 1969 and exhibited in 1970 but apparently never completed to his satisfaction. An account of this mystery, by Sara Angel, was published in *The Walrus* (January/February 2012).

PERCEPTUAL REALISM

Chambers's central stylistic and technical contribution to artmaking was his practice of perceptual realism, which he later called simply perceptualism. A significant if difficult to read art theorist, Chambers expounded his ideas in a landmark 1969 article, "Perceptual Realism." He wrote the essay because he believed that distinctions needed to be made among types of realism and because he felt his own approach was unique. The fruit of years of intense reading in phenomenology (that of twentieth-century French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty especially) and hard thinking, the essay ranges over technical, philosophical, historical, and spiritual ground.

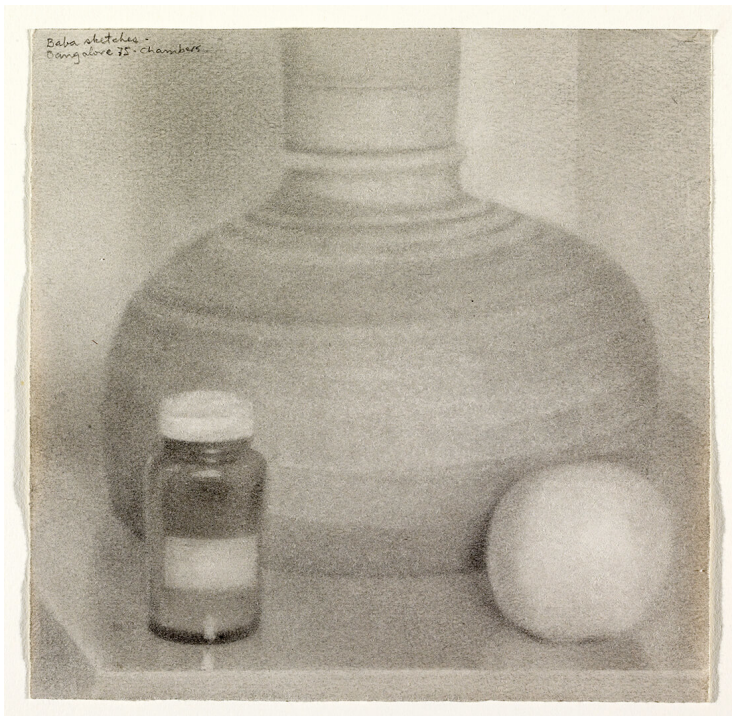


Jack Chambers, photographic studies for *401 Towards London No. 2*, 1968 (unfinished), and *401 Towards London No. 1*, 1968–69, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Perceptual realism is a profound reflection on primary sensory experience, not simply a reproduction of it (Chambers largely disdained contemporary American Photorealism). His examples in the 1969 article were *401 Towards*

London No. 1 and *Sunday Morning No. 2*, both begun in 1968 though completed, as the essay was, after Chambers learned of his dire health situation. Perceptual realism was for Chambers a new type of realism, one that went to the essence of matter through light and material.

His descriptions of it could tend to the poetic: perceptualism is “a faculty of inner vision where the object appears in the splendour of its essential namelessness.”¹ At the same time, it was material and visible, dependent on his own amateur photography to get the details of perception right and to allow him the time to produce his large paintings. Perceptualism was in his view far superior to photography in its realism and truth to experience. Photography was a tool; painting and film were the vehicles of spiritual enlightenment.



Jack Chambers, *Indian Drawing No. 12*, 1975, graphite on paper, 22.2 x 22.4 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



Jack Chambers, *Lake Huron No. 1*, 1970–71, oil on wood, 186 x 185 cm, Museum London.

Chambers refined his perceptualism up to his death in 1978; the late Lake Huron works are prime examples. He also worked on films, especially the unfinished (but privately screened) *C.C.C.I.*, 1970. He travelled often and widely during the 1970s, in search of a cure for his disease and for spiritual solace as well as for his work for Canadian Artists' Representation. In Bangalore, India, in 1975, where he followed the teachings of the Indian guru Sai Baba for some months, he worked with materials that were at hand: pencil, chalk, and paper.

As delicate and evanescent as his health at this time, these and related drawings from the final years of Chambers's life mark a new, unbidden style, one that nonetheless harmonizes with his earlier, more robust instantiations of light, movement, and intimacy.

A painting of a winter landscape. In the background, a large, multi-story brick building with many windows stands against a pale, overcast sky. The foreground is a snowy field with some bare trees and a small, dark evergreen tree in the center-right. The overall style is soft and painterly, with visible brushstrokes and a muted color palette.

STYLE & TECHNIQUE

Chambers constantly experimented with techniques. He was trained in the traditional methods and motifs of drawing and painting in Spain yet forged his own type of art in both film and painting. He called it perceptual realism.

CLASSICAL TRAINING IN EUROPE

The range of artistic techniques that Jack Chambers learned and practised adds to the paradoxical tension that ran through his life, both as an artist and as a family man. As an artist, he was a “radical classicist,” both a perfectionist and an inveterate experimenter. The foundations of his masterly abilities as a draftsman and painter were laid during five years of study at the highly traditional Escuela Central de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid. His drawings at this time tended toward detail, and his paintings were tightly controlled. He became expert in depicting both the human figure and landscape. Many of his paintings from Spain are dark in mood and lean toward a surrealistic juxtaposition of forms (for example, *Man and Dog*, 1959).



The Escuela Central de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid.

EXPERIMENTATION IN LONDON

After his return to Canada in 1961, Chambers became aware of both European and American art after Cubism. He experimented with paint application and vibrant colour in works such as *McGilvary County*, 1962, and *The Unravished Bride*, 1961. Chambers later writes:

At some time in 1961, I became aware of de Kooning and Pollock and Klee and Kandinsky. I had never seen their works before and that included whatever had happened in painting since Juan Gris and Picasso. I began to texturize the surfaces of my panels with a mixture of rabbit glue and marble dust. Once dry, I could adjust the topography with sandpaper. These surfaces were covered with gesso and then I spilled various colours of house enamels on the gesso surface and sprinkled it with turps to get it running. I then tilted the board this way and that till some interesting effects appeared, and then I laid it flat and let it dry or added more paint and turps.¹



LEFT: Jack Chambers, *McGilvary County*, 1962, oil and mixed media on wood, 132.9 x 120 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

RIGHT: Jack Chambers, *Olga and Mary Visiting*, 1964-65, oil and mixed media on Douglas fir plywood, 125 x 193.7 cm, Museum London.

The look of his paintings changed again in the mid-1960s. In works such as *Antonio and Miguel in the USA*, 1964, and *Olga and Mary Visiting*, 1964-65, we can note three innovations. As in his paintings from 1961-62, the frames are carefully constructed and painted to become full parts of the overall image; colour is subdued, and forms appear as if through an opaque wash, unifying

but also clouding the entire painted surface; and most radically, forms are fragmented in an attempt to add a sense of temporal movement to the images. Chambers described this aspect of *Olga and Mary Visiting* in terms that underline his concomitant interest in film: "A painting gets put together just like an experience—in particles. [This work] isn't the description of a visual moment; it's the accumulation of experienced interiors brought into focus."²

"PERSONAL" FILMS

Chambers began to experiment with filmmaking in the early 1960s and called the result "personal" films. This medium offered freedom from the strictures of painting and the demands of European high culture that he admired and internalized in Spain. By 1964 he had prepared storyboards and was inquiring about distribution for the film later known as *Mosaic*, completed in 1966. Fellow artist Greg Curnoe (1936–1992) reported that Chambers began the film with a borrowed 16mm Cine Kodak camera and soon bought a Bolex camera. Other records suggest that he bought the Bolex in 1966. To edit his films, he seems to have used a Zeiss Moviscop, which could not handle sound. Chambers consulted sound engineers in London and Toronto for his non-descriptive soundtracks.

Chambers made ten to twelve films (completed, planned, lost, or incomplete). *Mosaic* is a 9-minute black and white 16mm film with sound. The film is a non-linear montage of images as disparate as those of Olga Chambers, a doctor's waiting room, bus and car rides in London, and a dead raccoon, evoking the themes of motherhood, place, and death. In subsequent films—especially *The Hart of London*, 1968–70, on which Chambers's sterling reputation as an avant-gardist largely rests internationally—he increasingly combined found film footage with his own and experimented with techniques such as solarization and reversing the direction of the film overlays. Colour figures prominently in many of Chambers's films. He also used many still photographs, either his own or others' (for example, *Hybrid*, 1967). After his leukemia diagnosis in 1969, he devoted most of his work time to media that could secure his family's financial future.

SILVER PAINTINGS

In the mid-1960s Chambers focused his painting on a narrow and radical series in aluminum pigment, which he called silver paintings. Other artists played with this unusual metallic colour at the time, most notably Andy Warhol (1928–1987), some of whose work Chambers knew from trips to New York. The silver paintings provided the illusion of movement in an otherwise still image. As he said at the time in an interview with friend and scholar Ross Woodman, their positive/negative shift (as the viewer moved across them laterally or the light changed) made them "instant movies." These works tend toward simple, bold imagery, much of it taken from magazines (for example, *Plus Nine*, 1966; and *Three Pages in Time*, 1966, where the reference to temporality is also to *Time* magazine, from which Chambers lifted his imagery).



Jack Chambers, *Mosaic*, 1964–66, 16mm black and white film, sound, 9 min., Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Chambers writes in detail about the making of these and related paintings:

During the years from 1961 up to 1966, when the silver paintings appeared, I used only plywood panels and modified their surfaces with additional pieces of wood that left them structured in a slight relief. These surfaces were further textured by a glue-and-marble-dust mixture that could be modelled with sandpaper. [Beginning with] *All Things Fall*, 1963, ... I began to spray my surfaces [and] much experimenting was required to learn [how] to use it effectively. Not much spraying to a painting's surface can be done at one time when it is in a vertical position. Sometimes [a panel] had to be laid flat ... or, alternatively, the coats of spray are built up gradually ... in a succession of thin applications. Although the surface build-up was there, there was an absence of brush marks. [With] *All Things Fall* ... I first masked out the outlines of larger figures with masking tape to get a clear edge.

My technique changed only a little with the first silver paintings. In preparing the panel the relief build-ups of wood and the marble-dust texture were eliminated. The surfaces of the panels were kept smoother. The figures in ... *Three Pages in Time* and *Tulips with Colour Options* were masked out as before. [In earlier work, forms] would be painted a specific colour and sprayed while wet with a darker one to be used in the shadows of the cloth. While the paint was still wet, I took a clean brush and moved it over the paint in the light areas of cloth [to] where the shadows were. Working with silver paint, I followed essentially the same steps The light areas and shadow areas of an object ... were not modelled as in [a] colour painting, but were reduced to outlined shapes, which I then treated in different ways. I would mix a bit of dark paint, an umber or a black with white, to arrive at the tone of darkness I wanted for the shadows. The background was painted in by large brush with silver paint or silver mixed with a bit of pigment for tone. When it dried I masked out



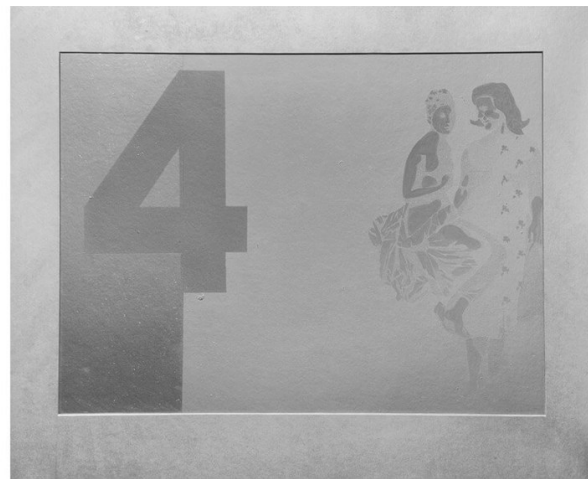
Jack Chambers, *Three Pages in Time*, 1966, synthetic medium on canvas, 243.7 x 183.4 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

my figures using a white chalk outline [and covered the areas beyond the outline with newspaper]. [I then] painted in the shadows [and] sprayed silver paint spiked with varnish over the whole figure [and used] a clean brush [to work] into the sprayed shadow areas [creating] a darker disturbed surface in contrast to the smooth, shiny sprayed-silver surface that had not been touched by a brush. The difference between both surfaces and the surface of the background was ... apparent when looking ... straight on. When seen from an angle or in a strong lateral light, the allover effect becomes more dramatic. The shiny silver areas become brilliant [and when] viewed from the opposite angle, or lit from the opposite side, the reverse becomes true [dominant]. The areas of the shadow now reflect the shine. The silver paint that was mixed with umber or black catches the light and becomes brilliant. The light silver area fades. This effect has been referred to as ... positive-negative ... much like the positive/negative terms used in photography.³

The spray technique used by Chambers for the silver paintings produced a highly toxic airborne mixture, one that Ross Woodman has speculated was at least partly responsible for Chambers's leukemia. Chambers's silver paintings are simple, dramatic, and even aggressive in their manipulation of light and juxtapositions of imagery. They are more closely related to his films than to most of his other paintings.

MULTIPLES

Keen to make smaller work that was more affordable, in 1966 and 1967 Chambers made what he called "multiples" of four of his major silver paintings. Neither serigraphs nor silkscreens, these small works were handmade replicas of the larger paintings (*Tulips with Colour Options*, *Plus Nine*, *Middle 1*, and *4 Gerard*). Although Chambers states that he made the multiples after these paintings, a large-scale oil of *4 Gerard* has not been located.



LEFT: François Gérard, *Psyche and Cupid*, 1798, oil on canvas, 186 x 132 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris. RIGHT: Jack Chambers, *4 Gerard*, 1966, aluminum and mixed media paint on board, 45 x 60.5 cm (sight), 63.5 x 76 cm (frame), Museum London.

Chambers incorporated Neoclassical imagery in *4 Gerard*. One of the two figures in the image is based on that of Psyche from a painting by François Gérard (1770–1837), *Psyche and Cupid*, 1798 (Louvre), giving the work its enigmatic title. Here, not only does Chambers astutely combine a famous couple from European mythology and art history with a reworked contemporary photograph of his wife, Olga, but he also demonstrates that photography was for him in part a sampling technology.

As he said to the author Avis Lang in a 1972 interview, "Photography got paintings ... onto postcards and into everyday use. They became available as objects. The museum world became light and reappeared as newsprint An Ingres nude can become a contemporary something." Or in this case, *4 Gerard* is also *for Olga*, in the present.

Chambers also made some conventional print works, the colour photo lithograph *Grass Box No. 3*, 1970 (45 produced), the lithograph *Diego Drawing*, 1971 (70 produced), and the lithograph included in the three hundred copies of his autobiography, published by Nancy Poole in 1978.

PLEXIGLAS DRAWINGS

In 1968, finished with his experiments in silver and actively making films, yet still concerned with painting in the broadest sense, Chambers made a remarkably beautiful and intriguing set of works that enclose carefully wrought drawings in highly coloured Plexiglas. The bold imagery of the Regatta works and the exquisite subtlety of the Madrid Windows, all from 1968, are dramatically heightened by this commercial product. One of Chambers's interests at this time was in three-dimensionality, though not sculpture. The plastic drawings gave him this extra dimension, as did his closely related vacuum-formed pieces from the same time.



LEFT: Jack Chambers, *Regatta No. 1*, 1968, oil and graphite on paper, mounted on Plexiglas, 129.5 x 122.5 cm, Museum London.

RIGHT: Jack Chambers, *Regatta No. 5*, 1968-69, vacuum-formed plastic, paper acrylic, 77 x 100 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



WHERE TO SEE

The Art Gallery of Ontario and Museum London have by far the largest holdings of works by Jack Chambers, but his work can be found in public and private collections across Canada. Although the works listed below are held by the following institutions, they may not always be on view.

ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO

317 Dundas Street West
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
1-877-225-4246 or 416-979-6648
ago.net



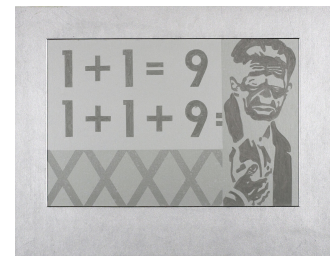
Jack Chambers, *Portrait of Marion and Ross Woodman*, 1961
Oil on wood 78.7 x 91.4 cm
Collection of Marion and Ross Woodman



Jack Chambers, *McGilvary County*, 1962
Oil and mixed media on wood
132.9 x 120 cm



Jack Chambers, *Mosaic*, 1964-66
16mm black and white film, sound, 9 min.



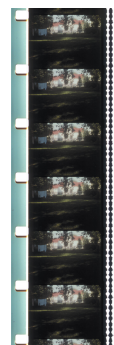
Jack Chambers, *Plus Nine*, 1966
Silkscreen with hand painting on illustration board
25.1 x 37.8 cm



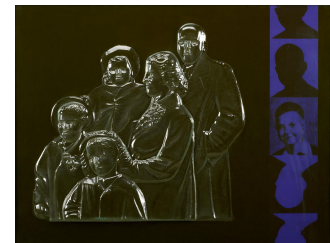
Jack Chambers, *Three Pages in Time*, 1966
Synthetic medium on canvas
243.7 x 183.4 cm



Jack Chambers, *401 Towards London No. 1*, 1968-69
Oil on wood
183 x 244 cm



Jack Chambers, *Circle*, 1968-69
16mm black and white and colour film, sound, 28 min.



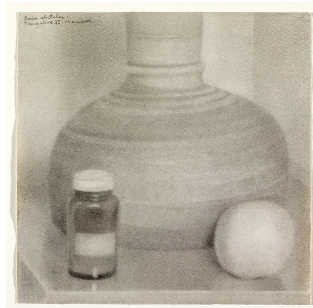
Jack Chambers, *Regatta No. 5*, 1968-69
Vacuum-formed plastic, paper acrylic
77 x 100 cm



Jack Chambers, *The Hart of London*, 1968-70
16mm black and white and colour film, sound, 79 min.



Jack Chambers, *Lunch*, 1969 (unfinished)
Oil and synthetic paint on wood
197.9 x 182.9 cm



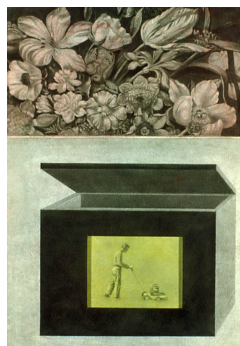
Jack Chambers, *Indian Drawing No. 12*, 1975
Graphite on paper
22.2 x 22.4 cm

CANADA COUNCIL ART BANK

150 Elgin Street
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
1-800-263-5588
artbank.ca



Jack Chambers, *Untitled*, 1956
Oil on canvas
59.5 x 72 cm



Jack Chambers, *Grass Box No. 1*, 1968
Oil and graphite on Plexiglas
69.9 x 50.8 cm

MUSEUM LONDON

421 Ridout Street North
London, Ontario, Canada
519-661-0333
museumlondon.ca



Jack Chambers, *Olga and Mary Visiting*, 1964-65
Oil and mixed media on Douglas fir plywood
125 x 193.7 cm



Jack Chambers, *4 Gerard*, 1966
Aluminum and mixed media paint on board
45 x 60.5 cm (sight),
63.5 x 76 cm (frame)



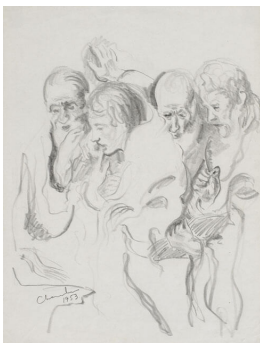
Jack Chambers, *Regatta No. 1*, 1968
Oil and graphite on paper, mounted on Plexiglas
129.5 x 122.5 cm



Jack Chambers, *Lake Huron No. 1*, 1970-71
Oil on wood
186 x 185 cm

NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA

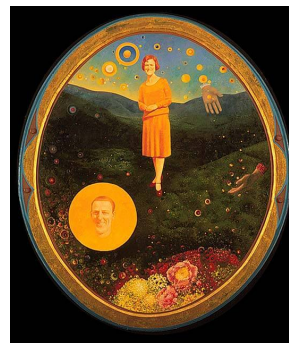
380 Sussex Drive
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
613-990-1985
gallery.ca



Jack Chambers, *The Four Evangelists*, 1953
Graphite on wove paper
27.6 x 21.2 cm



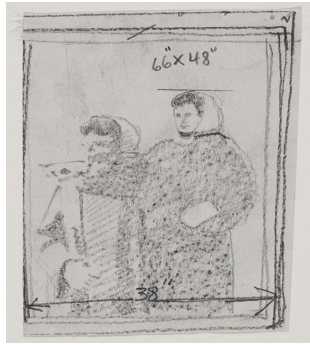
Jack Chambers, *The Medici Madonna*, 1953
Graphite on wove paper
27.6 x 21.2 cm



Jack Chambers, *The Messenger Juggling Seeds*, 1962
Oil on plywood
163.8 x 141 cm oval;
image: 137.5 x 115 cm



Jack Chambers, *Plus Nine*, 1966
Aluminum paint and oil on plywood
129.4 x 190.5 x 2.3 cm



Jack Chambers, Study for "The Hart of London" No. 1, 1968

Graphite on wove paper
10.3 x 8.5 cm



Jack Chambers, Study for "The Hart of London" No. 2, 1968

Graphite on wove paper
10.3 x 5.5 cm



NOTES

BIOGRAPHY

1. Jack Chambers, *Jack Chambers* (London, ON: Nancy Poole, 1978).
2. Jack Chambers, *Jack Chambers* (London, ON: Nancy Poole, 1978), 36.
3. Jack Chambers, *Jack Chambers* (London, ON: Nancy Poole, 1978), 40.

KEY WORKS: MCGILVARY COUNTY

1. Jack Chambers, *Jack Chambers* (London, ON: Nancy Poole, 1978), 93-94.

KEY WORKS: OLGA AND MARY VISITING

1. Ross Woodman, *Chambers: John Chambers Interviewed by Ross G. Woodman* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1967), 11, 13.

KEY WORKS: REGATTA NO. 1

1. Avis Lang, "The Hart of London: A Film by Jack Chambers," in *The Films of Jack Chambers*, ed. Kathryn Elder (Toronto: Cinematheque Ontario, 2002), 125-32.

KEY WORKS: THE HART OF LONDON

1. Stan Brakhage, "The Hart of London: A Document of the City," in *The Films of Jack Chambers*, ed. Kathryn Elder (Toronto: Cinematheque Ontario, 2002), 117-23.

SIGNIFICANCE & CRITICAL ISSUES

1. Jack Chambers, *Jack Chambers* (London, ON: Nancy Poole, 1978), 122.

STYLE & TECHNIQUE

1. Jack Chambers, *Jack Chambers* (London, ON: Nancy Poole, 1978), 93-94.
2. Ross Woodman, *Chambers: John Chambers Interviewed by Ross G. Woodman* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1967), 11.
3. Excerpted and edited from Jack Chambers, *Jack Chambers* (London, ON: Nancy Poole, 1978).

GLOSSARY

Ayearst, Sheila (Canadian, b. 1951)

A Toronto-based artist whose paintings—often based on photographs—express concerns about differing versions of reality and the sometimes frightening aspects of “normal” spaces. Since 1977 Ayearst’s work has been exhibited in solo and group shows in Ontario, in Quebec, and internationally.

Brakhage, Stan (American, 1933–2003)

An experimental, non-narrative filmmaker interested in the act of seeing and in encouraging people to see differently. His film *Dog Star Man*, 1961–64, is considered a pivotal work of the 1960s American avant-garde. Following twenty years as a film history professor in Colorado, he retired to Canada in 2002.

Canadian Artists ’68

A juried exhibition of Canadian art held at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto in 1968. Prizes were adjudicated by a panel of internationally renowned artists in several categories, including painting and film.

Curnoe, Greg (Canadian, 1936–1992)

A central figure in London regionalism from the 1960s to the early 1990s, Curnoe was a painter, printmaker, and graphic artist who found inspiration in his life and his Southwestern Ontario surroundings. His wide-ranging art interests included Surrealism, Dada, Cubism, and the work of many individual artists, both historical and contemporary. (See *Greg Curnoe: Life & Work* by Judith Rodger.)

Dewdney, Selwyn (Canadian, 1909–1979)

An artist, teacher, and writer based in London, Ontario, active in the development of the local arts scene at mid-century. One the first Canadians to produce abstract paintings, he was also a scholar of Indigenous art and the co-developer of the country’s first psychiatric art therapy program.

Gérard, François (French, 1770–1837)

An academic painter and favourite pupil of Jacques-Louis David, Gérard found success at the 1796 Paris Salon with his picture of Jean-Baptiste Isabey and his daughter; he subsequently became the most sought-after society portraitist in France.

García, Antonio López (Spanish, b. 1936)

A realist painter and sculptor known for his painstaking process; a single small canvas can take him years to complete. His work is held by major art institutions around the world and was the subject of a retrospective exhibition in 2008 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Glabush, Sky (Canadian, b. 1970)

An artist and teacher of studio art at the University of Western Ontario, London. Glabush’s work is concerned with questions of the spiritual in art; it has been exhibited in solo and group shows across the country and internationally.

Isaacs Gallery

A Toronto art gallery opened in 1955 by Avrom Isaacs. Originally called the Greenwich Gallery, it supported emerging Canadian artists—including Michael Snow, Graham Coughtry, Joyce Wieland, and Robert Markle—and hosted poetry readings, experimental music performances, and film screenings.

Last Supper, The

A mural painting by Leonardo da Vinci depicting Jesus's last supper, with his apostles, as described in the Gospel of John. Dating from 1495–98 and measuring 460 by 880 centimetres, *The Last Supper* covers a wall in part of the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan.

Leonardo da Vinci (Italian, 1452–1519)

The patriarch of the Italian High Renaissance and the creator of the *Mona Lisa*, 1503. Leonardo da Vinci's paintings, sculptures, and architectural and decorative designs altered ideas of what Western art could be, and his writings influenced the concepts of ideal artistic representation and expression through the modern era.

London Regionalism

From the 1960s to the early 1990s, the arts community in London, Ontario, was exceptionally productive and dynamic, centred on the artists Greg Curnoe and Jack Chambers. Like-minded local artists, writers, and musicians rejected the notion of the metropolis as the necessary location and subject of artistic production, preferring to look for inspiration in their own lives and region.

Martin, Ron (Canadian, b. 1943)

An abstract painter, Martin is concerned with the process and performance of artmaking. Since 1965 his paintings have been shown globally in solo and group exhibitions, including at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, and the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

New Spanish Realists

Members of a national art movement predicated on detailed realism and the objective revelation of emotion. Its American counterpart was Photorealism. The movement began in Madrid in the early 1960s, developed by Antonio López García, Julio Hernández, Francisco López, and Isabel Quintanilla.

Ondaatje, Kim (Canadian, b. 1928)

A painter, photographer, filmmaker, and teacher, whose work is held by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Ondaatje was an important advocate for the rights of professional artists through her association with Jack Chambers's initiative CAR (later CARFAC).

Photorealism

An art style that reached its peak in the United States in the 1970s, in which paintings—often large-format acrylics—imitate or even duplicate photographs. Also called Hyperrealism and Superrealism, Photorealism has been most famously practised by Chuck Close, Malcolm Morley, and Richard Estes.

Picasso, Pablo (Spanish, 1881–1973)

One of the most famous and influential artists of his time, Picasso was a prominent member of the Parisian avant-garde circle that included Henri Matisse and Georges Braque. His painting *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1906–7, is considered by many to be the most important of the twentieth century.

Poole, Nancy (Canadian, b. 1930)

A writer, gallerist, educator, museum director, and leading member of the arts community of London, Ontario, from the late 1960s to the 1990s. Through Nancy Poole's Studio—her gallery in London and another in Toronto with the same name—she supported and promoted emerging artists, including Jack Chambers and Tony Urquhart.

Surrealism

An early twentieth-century literary and artistic movement that began in Paris. Surrealism aimed to express the workings of the unconscious, free of convention and reason, and was characterized by fantastic images and incongruous juxtapositions. The movement spread globally, influencing film, theatre, and music.

Urquhart, Tony (Canadian, b. 1934)

A painter, sculptor, and curator, and a pioneer of abstract art in Canada. For a time a member of the London circle that included Jack Chambers and Greg Curnoe, Urquhart was an important advocate for the rights of professional artists through his association with Chambers's initiative CAR (later CARFAC).

Warhol, Andy (American, 1928–1987)

One of the most important artists of the twentieth century and a central figure in Pop art. With his serial screen prints of commercial items like Campbell's Soup cans and portraits of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis, Warhol defied the notion of the artwork as a singular, handcrafted object.



SOURCES & RESOURCES

Chambers's wide-ranging interests and early success leave us with an especially rich array of sources and resources about his work. From his own pivotal writings to an extensive archive, documentary films, and two full-scale exhibitions in 2011, Chambers's legacy is well served.

KEY EXHIBITIONS

Chambers's work gained far more recognition during his lifetime than was the norm for Canadian artists. Many of the crucial insights into his art are to be found in accompanying exhibition catalogues (noted below).



Installation view of *Jack Chambers: A Retrospective*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, November 7-December 6, 1970.

-
- 1961** (Month not known), *John Chambers*, Galería Lorca, Madrid.
- October-November 1961, *Opening Group Exhibition*, Forum Gallery, New York. Subsequent exhibitions at this gallery in 1964 and 1965.
-
- 1962** November 1962, Inaugural exhibition, Region Gallery, London, Ontario.
-
- 1963** October-November 1963, *Chambers*, Isaacs Gallery, Toronto (first solo exhibition in Canada).
-
- 1968** September 1968, *The Heart of London*, London Public Library and Art Museum, subsequent national tour, 1968-69. Organized by National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Catalogue.
- November-December 1968, *Canadian Artists '68*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (Chambers wins first prize for film, *R 34*, 1967; and for painting, *Regatta No. 1*, 1968).
-
- 1970** Fall 1970, *Jack Chambers: A Retrospective*, Vancouver Art Gallery; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Catalogue.

-
- 1980–81** November 1980–January 1981, *Jack Chambers: The Last Decade*, London Regional Art Gallery. Catalogue.
-
- 1988** September–October 1988, *Jack Chambers Retrospective*, London Regional Art Gallery, subsequent national tour, 1988–89. Catalogue.
- October 1988, *Jack Chambers Film Retrospective*, London Regional Art Gallery.
-
- 1992** May–June 1992, *Jack Chambers: Indian Drawings*, Gairloch Gallery, Oakville Galleries, Ontario.
-
- 2001** March 2001, *The Jack Chambers Film Project*, London Regional Art and Historical Museums.
-
- 2011** January–April 2011, *Jack Chambers: The light from the darkness, silver paintings and film work*, Museum London. Travelled to McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario, October 2011–January 2012. Catalogue.
- November 2011–May 2012, *Jack Chambers: Light, Spirit, Time, Place, and Life*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Catalogue.

SELECTED WRITINGS BY CHAMBERS

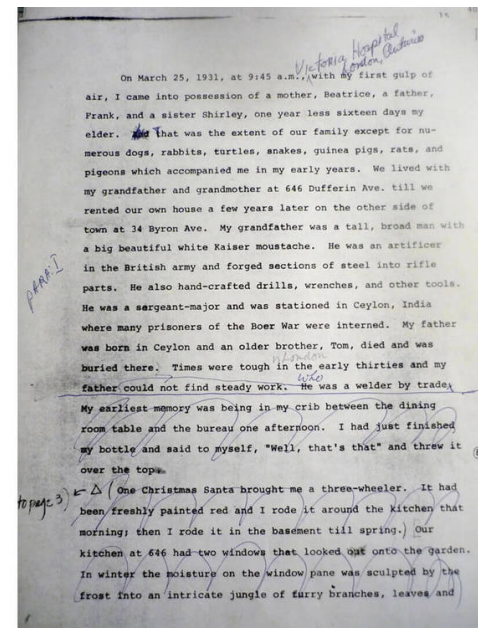
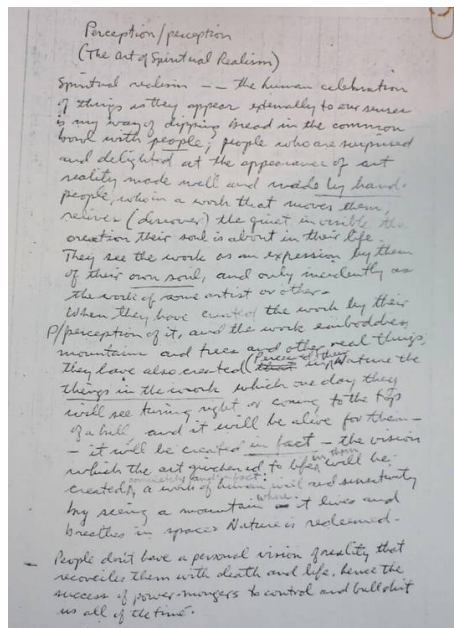
Chambers was a profound art theorist. His often difficult writings repay close attention.

"Perceptual Realism."

artscanada 26, nos. 136–37

(October 1969): 7–13.

This difficult essay by Chambers remains his essential statement about his goals and his approach to art, which he calls perceptual realism. He covers most of the topics central to his art: the difference between the classical culture of Europe and the technological society of North America; the importance of photography and film; the nature of perception itself; and his views on avant-garde art, including that of Marcel Duchamp.



LEFT: Jack Chambers's manuscript. RIGHT: Jack Chambers's manuscript.

"Perceptualism, Painting, and Cinema." *Art and Artists* 7, no. 9 (December 1972): 29-33.

Chambers was constantly revising his theoretical understanding of perception and its role in artmaking. By 1972 he had simplified the term "perceptual realism" to "perceptualism," but the theory remains the same as in 1969. This essay includes a fuller discussion of Chambers's films, including *C.C.I.*, 1970, which he never released publicly.

Red and Green: A Journal

Red and Green is a lengthy and elaborate collection of ideas, articles, and sources that Chambers put together in his quest to understand perception, art, and the human spirit. It is often difficult to tell who wrote which sections; most are quotations from Chambers's research. Excerpts from the journal were published in *artscanada*, October/November 1978, 25-29.

Jack Chambers. London, ON: Nancy Poole, 1978.

This limited edition autobiography was planned by Nancy Poole, Chambers's friend and, latterly, art dealer. It was published soon after his death in 1978. It is the most complete source for the artist's account of his life, goals, and working methods.

FILM, AUDIO, VIDEO

Chambers's art has been particularly well served by two documentary films.

Walker, John, and Christopher Lowry. *Chambers: Tracks & Gestures*. Toronto: Atlantis Films, 1982. 16mm film, 56:50 min.

This film by John Walker and Christopher Lowry is an award-winning full-length account of Chambers's life and the dominant tenets of his art practice.

Doty, Chris. *The Jack Chambers Film Project*. London, ON: Doty Docs / Museum London, 2004. Videorecording, 48 min.

Using material from the 2001 symposium of the same title, this DVD brings together clips of Chambers's films and an important panel discussion about the work.

CRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Chambers's art has enjoyed extensive and wide-ranging critical attention in exhibitions and films, as well as popular and scholarly articles.

Overview

Reid, Dennis, ed. *Jack Chambers: Light, Spirit, Time, Place, and Life*. Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions; Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2011. Reid's lead essay supplies the fullest biography of Chambers. This work gives a broad and fully illustrated account of Chambers's life and work.



Jack Chambers, photographed by Michael Ondaatje.

Ross Woodman

The single most significant commentator on Chambers is Ross Woodman, professor emeritus of English literature at Western University and a close friend and mentor of the artist.

Chambers: John Chambers Interviewed by Ross G. Woodman. Edited by Dennis Reid. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1967.

This early interview remains one of the most important texts on Chambers.

Conducted in 1966, the conversation reveals much about Chambers's interests in photography, film, and perception.

"The Realism of John Chambers." *Arts International* 14, no. 9 (November 1970): 37-41.

This extensive article sets Chambers's work in an international context.

"Place." In *Jack Chambers: Light, Spirit, Time, Place and Life*, edited by Dennis Reid, 107-27. Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions; Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2011.

This piece provides a full account of Chambers's dedication to his southwestern Ontario heritage.

Interviews

Rosenberg, Avis Lang. "A Correspondence with Jack Chambers." *Vanguard* 11, no. 4 (May 1982): 15-20.

In addition to the interview by Woodman above, this is one of the most useful published sources. The correspondence took place in 1972.

Film Criticism

Chambers began making what he called "personal" films in 1964. While many consider them to be the most important aspect of his varied work, the films have to some extent been considered apart from the rest of his art. The recent upsurge in critical attention to Chambers may finally change this bias and make it more likely that his films, paintings, and drawings will be considered together.

The importance of Chambers's films has been re-established since his death, most notably by the following: Ross Woodman's essay "Jack Chambers as Film-Maker," for the London Regional Art Gallery's 1980 exhibition and catalogue *Jack Chambers: The Last Decade*; the special issue of the *Capilano Review* (no. 33, 1984) devoted to Chambers's film work, edited by Tom Graff; Bruce Elder's attention to Chambers in his book *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture* (1989); the 2001 documentary *The Jack Chambers Film Project* by Chris Doty; and *The Films of Jack Chambers* (2002), edited by Kathryn Elder. In *Jack Chambers: The light from the darkness, silver paintings and film work* (exhibition and catalogue, Museum London, 2011), curators Mark A. Cheetham and Ihor Holubizky argue that the films and silver paintings of the mid-1960s can productively be seen as one nuanced body of work.

Further Reading

In addition to the sources already noted, readers might find the following titles useful:

Elder, Bruce. *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989.

Elder, Kathryn, ed. *The Films of Jack Chambers*. Toronto: Cinematheque Ontario, 2002.

McInnes, Val Ambrose. *To Rise with the Light: The Spiritual Odyssey of Jack Chambers*. Toronto: Ontario College of Art, 1989.

Meisel, Louis K. *Photorealism*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1980.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARK A. CHEETHAM

Mark A. Cheetham is professor of art history and a Senior Fellow at Massey College, University of Toronto. He was the principal investigator for CACHET (Canadian Art Commons for History of Art Education and Training), funded by a three-year Partnership Development Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), 2013–16.

Cheetham holds a PhD in the history of art, University College London, and an MA in philosophy, University of Toronto. He was a professor at McGill University and the University of Western Ontario (now Western University) before coming to the University of Toronto in 2000. He became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 2008.

Cheetham has published extensively on Canadian, European, and American art theory, art, and visual culture from 1700 to the present and is active as a curator of Canadian art. He is the recipient of a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, a Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute Fellowship, a Connaught Research Fellowship, and a Chancellor Jackman Research Fellowship in the Humanities from the University of Toronto, as well as several SSHRC research grants, the Edward G. Pleva Award for Excellence in Teaching (University of Western Ontario), and the Northrop Frye Award for teaching (University of Toronto). In 2006 he received the Art Journal Award from the College Art Association of America. He has received two awards from the Ontario Association of Art Galleries for curatorial work: in 2008 the long essay award and in 2011 the exhibition of the year award for his co-curated exhibition *Jack Chambers: The light from the darkness, silver paintings and film work*.

Cheetham's recent books include *Abstract Art against Autonomy: Infection, Resistance, and Cure Since the 60s* (Cambridge University Press, 2006); *Artwriting, Nation, and Cosmopolitanism in Britain: The "Englishness" of English Art Theory since the Eighteenth Century* (Ashgate, 2012); a second edition of *Remembering Postmodernism: Trends in Canadian Art, 1970–1990* (Oxford University Press, 2012); and *Landscape into Eco Art: Articulations of Nature Since the '60s* (Penn State University Press, 2018).



"Jack Chambers's art was a strong presence for me when I taught at Western University (1985–2000). He was a legend. I knew people who knew him, and many of his best works are in London, Ontario. I explored what I call his 'radical classicism' in the context of two Chambers exhibitions in 2011, one in London and one in Toronto. The more you know about his work and ideas, the more there is to see and to think about."



COPYRIGHT & CREDITS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

From the Author

Many thanks to my research assistant, Kristin Stoesz, to Amy Furness at the AGO library and archive, and to my editor, Rick Archbold. For many exhilarating discussions of Jack Chambers's art, I would like to thank Ihor Holubizky, Andy Patton, Ross Woodman, and the students with whom I explored Chambers's art in a graduate seminar at the University of Toronto in 2009.

From the Art Canada Institute

This online art book was made possible thanks to the generosity of its Title Sponsor, Rosamond Ivey, and the Lead Sponsor, BMO Financial Group, as well as the Online Art Book Sponsors for the 2013-14 Season: The Hal Jackman Foundation; Aimia; Gluskin Sheff + Associates Inc.; The McLean Foundation; TD Bank Group; Partners in Art; and Rosenthal Zaretsky Niman & Co., LLP.

Thanks also to the Art Canada Institute Founding Patrons: Sara and Michael Angel, Jalynn H. Bennett, The Butterfield Family Foundation, David and Vivian Campbell, Albert E. Cummings, Kiki and Ian Delaney, The Fleck Family, Roger and Kevin Garland, Michelle Koerner and Kevin Doyle, Phil Lind, Sarah and Tom Milroy, Charles Pachter, Gerald Sheff and Shanitha Kachan, Sandra L. Simpson, and Robin and David Young; as well as its Founding Partner Patrons: The Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation and Partners in Art.

The ACI gratefully acknowledges the support and assistance of the Art Gallery of Ontario with this project, in particular Jim Shedden, Manager of Publishing, and Matthew Teitelbaum, the Michael and Sonja Koerner Director, and CEO.

The Art Canada Institute gratefully acknowledges the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and the Canadian Art Commons for History of Art Education and Training (CACHET) for their contribution toward the translation of this online art book.

SPONSOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

LEAD SPONSOR



TITLE SPONSOR

Rosamond Ivey

INSTITUTIONAL PARTNER



2013-2014 SPONSORS OF THE CANADIAN ONLINE ART BOOK PROJECT

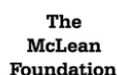


IMAGE SOURCES

Every effort has been made to secure permissions for all copyrighted material.
The Art Canada Institute will gladly correct any errors or omissions.

Credit for Cover Image



Jack Chambers, *401 Towards London No. 1*, 1968–69. (See below for details.)

Credits for Banner Images



Biography: Photo of Jack Chambers. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Courtesy of Chris Lowry. Photographer Unknown.



Key Works: Jack Chambers, *The Hart of London*, 1968–70. (See below for details.)



Significance & Critical Issues: Jack Chambers in his studio in the late 1960s, photographed by Michael Ondaatje. (See below for details.)



Style & Technique: Jack Chambers, *Victoria Hospital*, 1969–70. (See below for details.)



Sources & Resources: Chambers during a 1972 photographing expedition in the countryside outside London, Ontario. Jack Chambers fonds, E.P. Taylor Research Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



Where to See: Jack Chambers, photographed by Michael Ondaatje. (See below for details.)

Credits for Works by Jack Chambers



Circle, 1968-69. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Jack Chambers Estate.



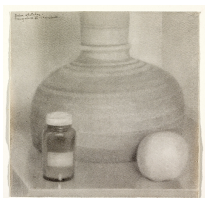
4 Gerard, 1966. Museum London. Jack Chambers Estate.



401 Towards London No. 1, 1968-69. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of Norcen Energy Resources Limited, 1986 (86/47). Jack Chambers Estate.



The Hart of London, 1968-70. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



Indian Drawing No. 12, 1975. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, purchased with the assistance of the Judith Rachel Harris Foundation and Ethel Harris, 2007 (2007/87). Jack Chambers Estate.



Lake Huron No. 1, 1970-71. Museum London. Jack Chambers Estate.



Lunch, 1969 (unfinished). Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, purchased with the assistance of the Judith Rachel Harris Foundation and Ethel Harris, 2007 (2007 /80). Jack Chambers Estate.



McGilvary County, 1962. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, purchased with the assistance of the Judith Rachel Harris Foundation and Ethel Harris, 2007 (2007/77). Jack Chambers Estate.



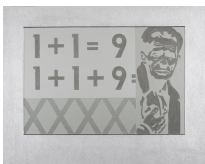
Mosaic, 1964–66. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



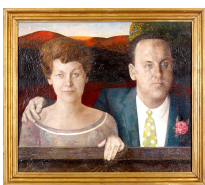
Olga and Mary Visiting, 1964–65. Museum London, Art Fund purchase, 1965. Jack Chambers Estate.



Photographic studies for *401 Towards London No. 2*, 1968 (unfinished), and *401 Towards London No. 1*, 1968–69. Art Gallery of Ontario.



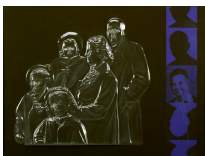
Plus Nine, 1966. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, purchased 1968 (67/25). Jack Chambers Estate.



Portrait of Marion and Ross Woodman, 1961. Collection of Marion and Ross Woodman. Jack Chambers Estate.



Regatta No. 1, 1968. Museum London, gift of the Women's Committee, 1968. Jack Chambers Estate.



Regatta No. 5, 1968–69. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, gift of the Estate of Jack Chambers, 2007 (2007/693). Jack Chambers Estate.



Sunday Morning No. 2, 1968-70. Loch Gallery, Toronto. Jack Chambers Estate.



Three Pages in Time, 1966. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, purchased with the assistance of the Judith Rachel Harris Foundation and Ethel Harris, 2007 (2007/78). Jack Chambers Estate.



Victoria Hospital, 1969-70. Private collection, Toronto. Jack Chambers Estate.

Credits for Photographs and Works by Other Artists



Chambers's mother, Beatrice (née McIntyre), and his father, Frank R. Chambers. Jack Chambers fonds, E.P. Taylor Research Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Photographer unknown.



The Escuela Central de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid. Photographer unknown.



The 401 Towards London: Median, 1992, by Sheila Ayeart. Courtesy of Sheila Ayeart.



The Great Canadian, 1965, by Greg Curnoe. Thielsen Gallery, London, ON, Collection of Sheila Curnoe. © SODRAC.



JACK CHAMBERS

Life & Work by Mark A. Cheetham



Installation view of *Jack Chambers: A Retrospective*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, November 7-December 6, 1970. Photograph unknown.



Installation view of *Jack Chambers: The light from the darkness, silver paintings and film work* at Museum London, January 15- April 3, 2011. (left to right: *The Hart of London*, 1968-70; *Renaissance Still-Life*, 1966, National Gallery of Canada; *Peaches*, 1966, Art Gallery of Hamilton). Photograph by Ihor Holubizky.



Jack Chambers in front of his painting *Lunch*. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Photograph unknown.



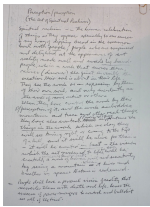
Jack Chambers in his studio in the late 1960s, photographed by Michael Ondaatje. Art Gallery of Ontario / Michael Ondaatje.



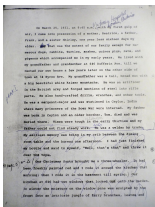
Jack Chambers painting, photographed by Michael Ondaatje. Art Gallery of Ontario / Michael Ondaatje.



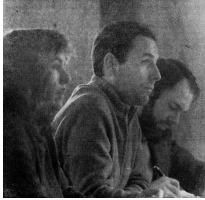
Jack Chambers, photographed by Michael Ondaatje. Art Gallery of Ontario / Michael Ondaatje.



Jack Chambers's manuscript [1]. Jack Chambers fonds, E.P. Taylor Research Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Photograph by Sara Angel.



Jack Chambers's manuscript [2]. Jack Chambers fonds, E.P. Taylor Research Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Photograph by Sara Angel.



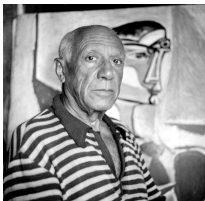
Kim Ondaatje, Jack Chambers, and Tony Urquhart at the second National Conference of CARFAC, 1973. Photographer unknown.



My Parents, 1956, by Antonio López García. Centre Georges Pompidou. Musée national d'art moderne / Centre de création industrielle, Paris. © Adagp, Paris.



Nancy Poole, Chambers's art dealer, in London, Ontario. Courtesy of Nancy Poole.



Pablo Picasso at home in Cannes, in front of one of his paintings, 1955. Photograph by George Stroud. Getty Images, Hulton Archive.



Psyche and Cupid, 1798, by François Gérard. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

BOOK CREDITS

Publisher

Sara Angel

Editorial Director

Meg Taylor

Web Director and Layout

Avery Swartz

Chief Copy Editor

Ruth Gaskill

**Image Research**

Angelica Demetriou

Editor

Rick Archbold

Copy Editor

Ruth Gaskill

Translator and French Editor

Françoise Charron

Administrative Assistant

Mary-Rose Sutton

Design Template

Studio Blackwell

COPYRIGHT

© 2013 Art Canada Institute. All rights reserved.

ISBN 978-0-9921483-0-0

Art Canada Institute
Massey College, University of Toronto
4 Devonshire Place
Toronto, ON M5S 2E1

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Cheetham, Mark A. (Mark Arthur), 1954- author
Jack Chambers : life & work / by Mark Cheetham.

Includes bibliographical references.

Contents: Biography – Key works – Significance & critical issues – Style & technique – Where to see – Notes – Glossary – Sources & resources – About the author – Credits.

Electronic monograph.

ISBN 978-0-9921483-2-4 (pdf).–ISBN 978-0-9921483-4-8 (epub)

1. Chambers, Jack, 1931-1978. 2. Chambers, Jack, 1931-1978–Criticism and interpretation. 3. Painters–Canada–Biography. I. Art Canada Institute, issuing body II. Title.

ND249.C38C44 2013

759.11

C2014-900823-6