ART FOR SOCIAL CHANGE:
ELEVEN TRANSFORMATIVE WORKS

Canadian artists throughout history have created works that challenge the status quo. Striving for equality and social justice, these pieces present meaningful change in the face of challenge.

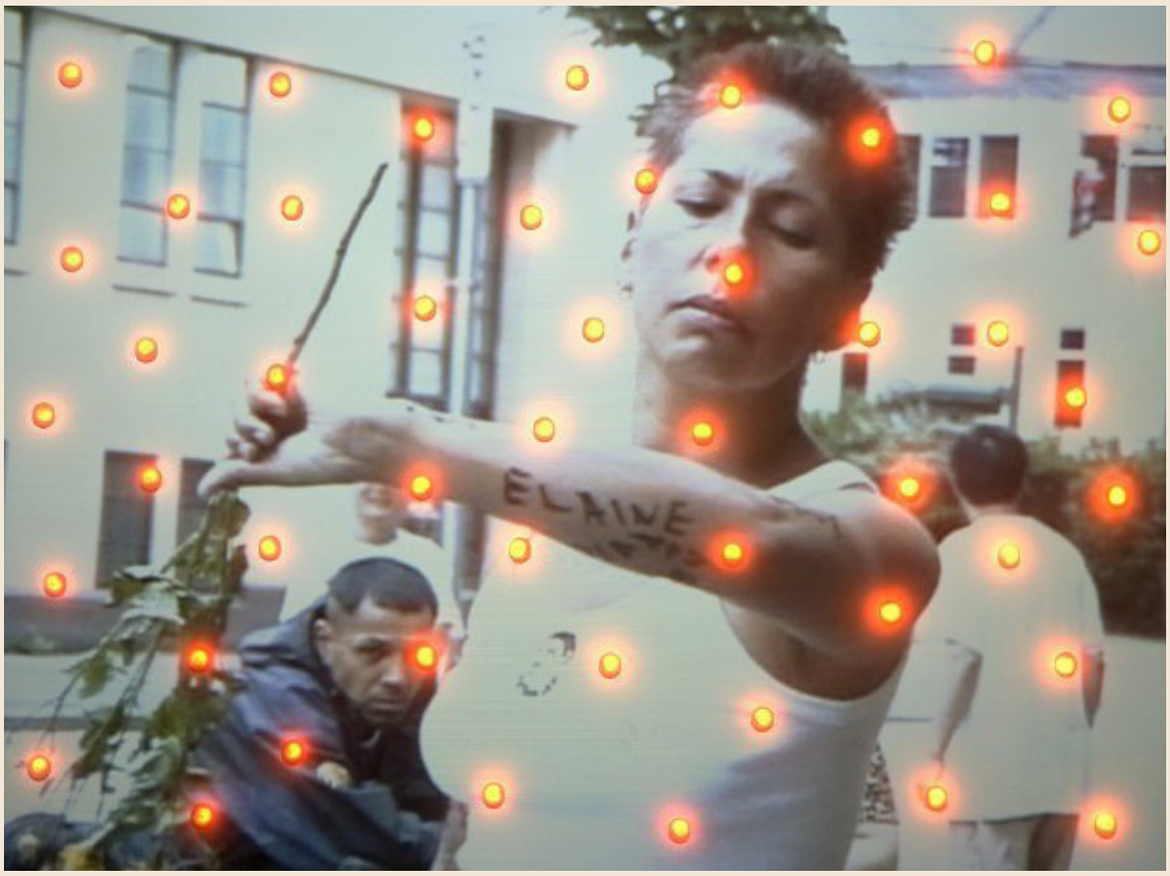
Black Wimmin Artist, *The Feast*, 2019

Every day, the news reminds us of the remarkable power to drive change by participating in protests, boycotts, and other forms of political expression. In the spirit of this era of activism and social responsibility, we're looking to Canadian artists who have devoted their lives and works to creating a more equal and just world by critically examining contemporary culture, transforming popular attitudes and preconceptions, and empowering people from marginalized communities. Confronting the most pressing concerns of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the artworks featured below demonstrate the important role of Canadian artists in envisioning a better world for future generations.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

THE NAMED AND THE UNNAMED

by Rebecca Belmore



This still from *The Named and the Unnamed*, 2002, a video installation by interdisciplinary Anishinaabekwe artist Rebecca Belmore (b.1960), commemorates the lives of missing and murdered Indigenous women. It documents a performance in which Belmore stood on a street corner in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, calling out names of missing women written on her arms. After stating each name, the artist tore flowers apart with her teeth, acknowledging how her subjects' lives had been ruthlessly destroyed. In *The Named and the Unnamed*, the video of Belmore's performance is projected on a screen embedded with approximately fifty lightbulbs. One of the most important contemporary artists in Canada, since the late 1980s Belmore has conceived deeply political and poetic artworks examining issues of social justice and the realities of Indigenous peoples.

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ABSTRACT IN BLUE

by Paul-Émile Borduas

This arresting abstract painting, composed of a vertical blue "V" on top of horizontal black brushstrokes, was created by the Quebec artist Paul-Émile Borduas (1905–1960) during his self-imposed exile in Paris following the incendiary 1948 publication of his co-authored *Refus global* (Total Refusal). As François-Marc Gagnon wrote in his Art Canada Institute book on Borduas, the painter "launched a frontal attack on the parochialism (*esprit de clocher*, as it was called) in Quebec, the stifling dominance of Catholicism, and the narrow nationalism of the provincial government under Premier Maurice Duplessis," which laid the groundwork for the province's Quiet Revolution. Although the manifesto was signed by the Automatistes—a group of artists led by Borduas—he was the one to experience immediate, life-changing repercussions, including losing his job.

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CHRISTY CLARK AND THE KINDER MORGAN GO-GO GIRLS

by Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun

In this boldly coloured painting by Vancouver-based Cowichan/Syilx First Nations artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun (b.1957), three women in business suits wear masks loosely rendered in a traditional Northwest Coast style. Jutting out of the central figure's mouth is a forked tongue, a snake-like feature symbolizing her duplicitous character. Painted in 2015, the work expresses the artist's denunciation of Christy Clark, the then-premier of British Columbia, and her support of the proposed tripling of the capacity of Kinder Morgan's Trans Mountain pipeline. For over thirty years, Yuxweluptun has created unapologetically critical paintings about pressing issues such as oil spills, climate change, systemic racism, and the legacies of colonialism and residential schools.

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AIDS

by General Idea

In 1987, the Toronto art collective General Idea (active 1969–1994) developed their iconic AIDS logo—a riff on the American Pop artist Robert Indiana's famous *LOVE* motif—after being invited by the Koury Wingate Gallery in New York to participate in an exhibition in support of the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR). While Indiana's piece celebrated the spirit of free love in the 1960s, General Idea (whose members included Felix Partz [1945–1994], Jorge Zontal [1944–1994], and AA Bronson [b.1946]) sought to mark how AIDS had radically transformed the 1980s. Mimicking the rapid spread of the virus, General Idea replicated and disseminated its AIDS logo in a variety of media, including painting—as seen here—as well as wallpapers, sculptures, stamps, multiples, and animated videos. In doing so, the group challenged the intense stigma and fear around AIDS through art.

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THE EXECUTION OF UNARMED BLACK MEN

by Curtis Talwst Santiago

This tiny sculpture by Edmonton-born, New York City-based artist Curtis Talwst Santiago (b.1979) references the fatal shooting of Michael Brown Jr., an African American teenager, by a white policeman in the city of Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014. The miniature diorama, which depicts officers engaged in a gunfight while a Black man lies on the ground, was modelled after preeminent Spanish painter Francisco Goya's *The Third of May, 1808*, 1814—a work that documents the assassination of Spanish freedom fighters by the French during the Peninsular War (1807–1814). Santiago's commemorative sculpture is part of his ongoing Infinity Series (2008–present), which consists of intricate dioramas within reclaimed jewellery boxes that compel us to look closely at contemporary tragedies and consider how these events spark demands for social justice.

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BURIAL AT OSHAWA (PART 6)

by Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge

The composition of this work by the Toronto art partners Carole Condé (b.1940) and Karl Beveridge (b.1945) is based on the famed Gustave Courbet painting *A Burial at Ornans*, 1849–50, in which the rural townspeople at a funeral are treated as subjects of an important history painting. In this staged photograph, Condé and Beveridge mirror the format of Courbet's work and feature a group of contemporary protestors outside a manufacturing plant. The demonstrators confront men in suits carrying a funeral casket adorned with a wreath and sash that reads "JOBS." The piece was created in response to General Motors' decision to close their Oshawa plant in 2019. Collaborating with trade unions on creating staged photographic works since the mid-1970s, Condé and Beveridge included members of UNIFOR Local 222, which represents the GM workers, here.

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WATER SONG

by Christi Belcourt

In this four-metre-long painting, Michif (Métis) artist Christi Belcourt (b.1966) draws on her knowledge of Métis history and beadwork traditions to depict an impressive variety of medicinal plants, along with birds, insects, raindrops, and dew. Composed of approximately 150,000 to 250,000 bead-like dots of paint on a black background, this remarkable work expresses the necessity of clean water in maintaining healthy ecosystems. Based in Espanola, in Northern Ontario, Belcourt is a prominent community activist for whom water protection is among the most urgent environmental concerns. The Onaman Collective, which Belcourt co-founded and connects youth to traditional knowledge and art skills, produced a series of free, downloadable banners for protesters to use during water and land protection events.

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LESBIAN NATIONAL PARKS AND SERVICES

by Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan

Among Canada's best-known performance artists, the Winnipeg duo Shawna Dempsey (b.1963) and Lorri Millan (b.1965) are the creators of the famous feminist performance piece *Lesbian National Parks and Services*, 1997–present. Dressed in uniform as Lesbian Rangers, Dempsey and Millan have toured national parklands across Canada, Australia, and the United States, exerting a self-described "visible homosexual presence" and unsettling normative ideas of tourism, recreation, and the natural landscape. Creating humorous, provocative, and feminist works as collaborators since 1989, Dempsey and Millan believe there is still more to be done. "It would be great if our work wasn't still sort of on-point somehow, that we felt dated, but I think some of the concerns are so present still," says Millan.

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OH MY GOODNESS

by Shuvinai Ashoona

werewolf bear caribou
flyoff Ducks Metis

In this powerful drawing, Kinngait (Cape Dorset) Inuk artist Shuvinai Ashoona (b.1961) draws connections between tragedy in her community, particularly as a result of high suicide rates, and the 2011 tsunami in Japan, which had a profound effect on her. In the foreground, an otherworldly figure carries the lifeless, mangled body of a youth in its arms. Texts on the figures' clothing in English and Inuktitut reference the tsunami. The word tsunami resembles the Inuktitut word *sunamii*, meaning "what else." Nancy G. Campbell, author of *Shuvinai Ashoona: Life & Work*, elaborates, "The wordplay of *tsunami* and *sunamii* refer to the cycles of tragedy. The prefab dwelling in the background signals the setting as Cape Dorset, not the torn coast of Japan."

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PETROUSHKA

by Paraskeva Clark

Among the first Canadian painters to explore political subject matter in the 1930s, Paraskeva Clark (1898–1986) expressed support for striking Chicago steelworkers in her most significant work, *Petroushka*, 1937. In this painting, the Russian-born Toronto artist depicts a crowd of people on the street watching a puppet show in which Petroushka, a stock character, is portrayed as a worker being exploited and subjugated by capitalism (the banker) and law enforcement (the police officer). Christine Boyanoski, author of *Paraskeva Clark: Life & Work*, writes, “The crowd responds to the performance with catcalls and clenched fists—an anti-fascist symbol of unity, strength, and resistance used here to indicate [Clark's] support for their cause."

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THE FEAST

by Black Wimmin Artist

In January 2019, over one hundred Canadian Black women and gender non-binary artists and arts workers gathered in the Art Gallery of Ontario's Walker Court for *The Feast*, a performative dining exchange in which members of the virtual collective Black Wimmin Artist met in person for the first time. Founded in 2016 by Toronto artist and curator Anique Jordan, the organization is named after the first Canadian exhibition exclusively dedicated to the work of Black women artists. *The Feast* marked the thirtieth anniversary of this exhibition, which was organized by the Diasporic African Womyn Art (DAWA) collective. Jordan states, "I started Black Wimmin Artist as a resource-sharing network … to support the work of Black wimmin and gender non-conforming artists. I always felt that the artists I grew up around were not visible. It was important for me to create a platform that encouraged each of us to claim our space as artists."

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