

CREATIVITY IN THE TIME OF COVID

WORK BY ELEVEN CANADIAN ARTISTS

Commenting on fear, comfort, healing, and change, artists are marking history with these works

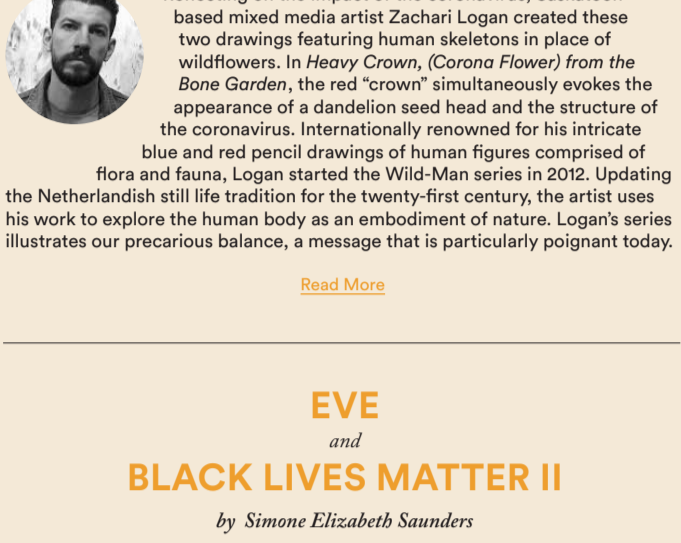


This week Banff's Whyte Museum opened *Breathe*, the first Canadian exhibition exclusively devoted to art created during COVID-19. The idea for the show took root when curators Nathalie Bertin and Lisa Shepherd opened a call for masks that reflected pandemic-era emotions and culture. *Breathe* marks the start of months, years, and decades ahead of reflecting upon how, amidst this time of challenge, Canadian artists are creating deeply thoughtful works that respond to unprecedented uncertainty and all its complexity. Exploring the small and significant ways in which COVID has impacted contemporary life, the art highlighted below offers insights into our current reality and collective future.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

THE BREATHE PROJECT

by Lisa Shepherd and Nathalie Bertin



Towanna Miller-Johnson, *Corona Covid*, 2020

Lisa Shepherd, *Be Well*, 2020

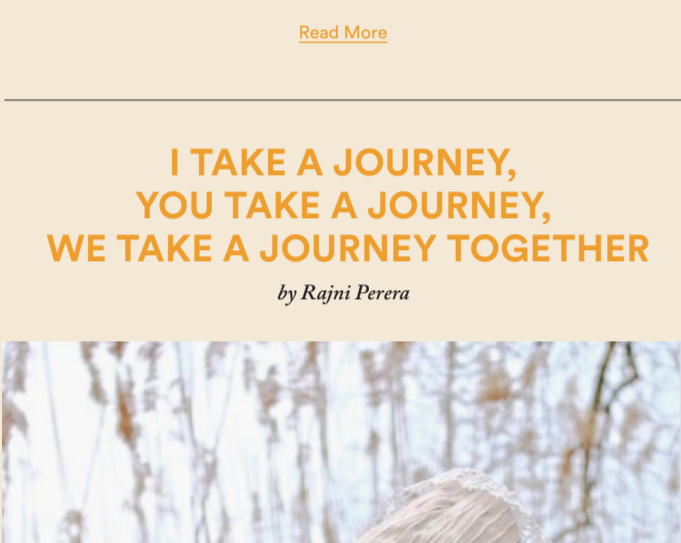


These two masks are among the forty-five featured in the exhibition *Breathe*. The show's co-curators explain, "People need to know that these works are not PPE, they are works of art, begun at the outbreak of the pandemic, in the form of a mask that reflect our current reality." Mohawk artist Towanna Miller-Johnson's *Corona Covid* (left) is a delicately embellished mask that was inspired by the beak-shaped face concealers worn by seventeenth-century physicians who treated the bubonic plague. Métis artist Lisa Shepherd uses her mask *Be Well* (right) to convey her story to future generations—a story of mutual regard for community health and well-being.

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WILD-MAN SERIES

by Zachari Logan



Zachari Logan, *Heavy Crown, (Corona Flower)* from the *Bone Garden*, 2020

Zachari Logan, *Two Flowers from the Bone Garden*, 2020



Reflecting on the impact of the coronavirus, Saskatoon-based mixed media artist Zachari Logan created these two drawings featuring human skeletons in place of wildflowers. In *Heavy Crown, (Corona Flower)* from the *Bone Garden*, the red "crown" simultaneously evokes the appearance of a dandelion seed head and the structure of the coronavirus. Internationally renowned for his intricate blue and red pencil drawings of human figures comprised of flora and fauna, Logan started the *Wild-Man* series in 2012. Updating the Netherlands still life tradition for the twenty-first century, the artist uses his work to explore the human body as an embodiment of nature. Logan's series illustrates our precarious balance, a message that is particularly poignant today.

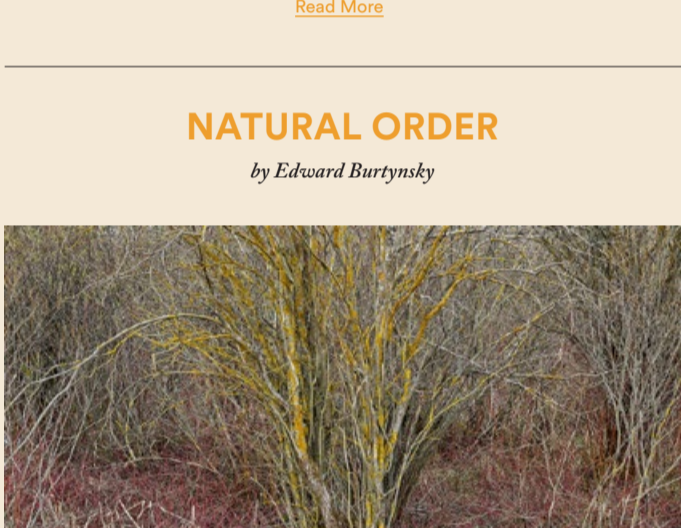
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EVE

and

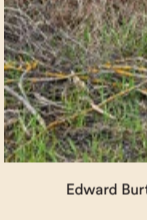
BLACK LIVES MATTER II

by Simone Elizabeth Saunders



Simone Elizabeth Saunders, *Eve*, 2020

Simone Elizabeth Saunders, *Black Lives Matter II*, 2020

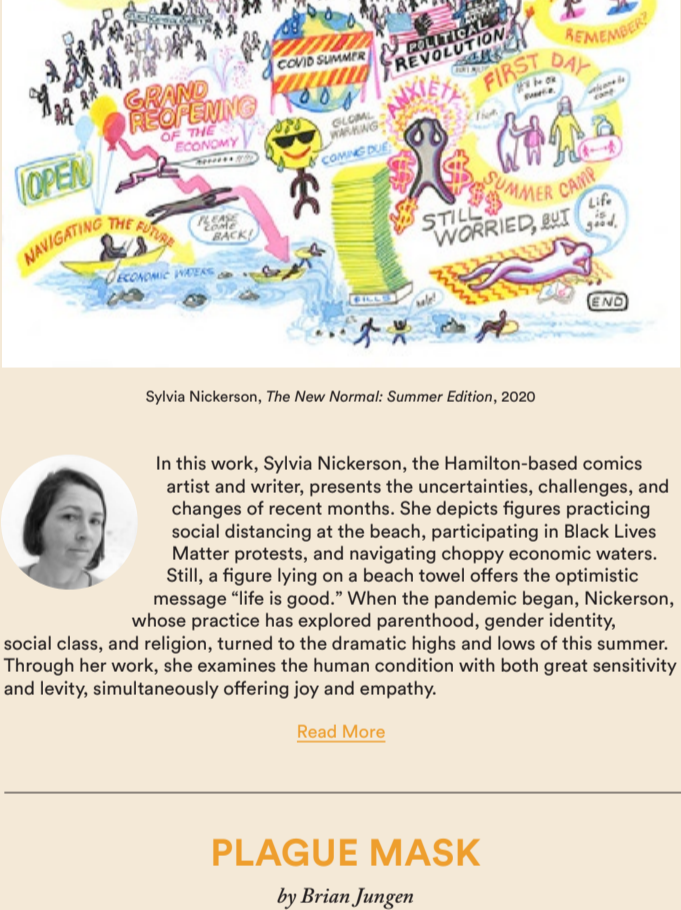


Eve (left) and *Black Lives Matter II* (right) are portraits of Black women wearing patterned masks created by the Calgary-based artist Simone Elizabeth Saunders. Of Jamaican and European descent, Saunders explains, "Black bodies throughout history have been oppressed and it is important to highlight that this continues in the pandemic." The artist created these works to explore the Black female body, personal identities, and Black history. Highlighting exuberant colours to balance the darker undertones in her work, Saunders created these textiles with a tufting gun to weave yarn through monk's cloth.

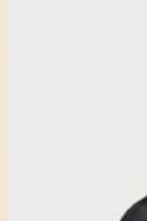
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I TAKE A JOURNEY, YOU TAKE A JOURNEY, WE TAKE A JOURNEY TOGETHER

by Rajni Perera



Rajni Perera, *I take a journey, you take a journey, we take a journey together*, 2020



Before the outbreak of the coronavirus, the Sri Lankan-born, Toronto-based artist Rajni Perera had begun a body of work—her *Traveller Series*—that uses the lens of science fiction to explore the experiences of immigrant and displaced peoples and to give warning of environmental collapse. With the start of the pandemic, Perera's art took on an uncanny resonance. In this image, made in early 2020, Perera shows herself (photographed by her collaborator Nep Sidhu) wearing an ornately decorated rubber gas mask of her creation, appearing as a resilient and powerful figure existing in the hostile world of the present and future. Perera and her art exemplify the perennial ability of humans to adapt to adverse environments.

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NATURAL ORDER

by Edward Burtynsky



Edward Burtynsky, *Natural Order* #27, Grey County, Ontario, Canada, Spring 2020

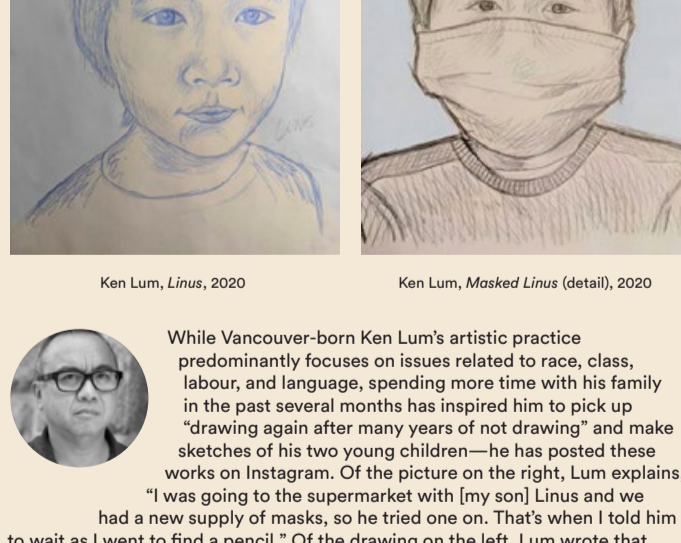


This image, by the internationally celebrated Toronto-based photographer Edward Burtynsky, is "from a place in my mind that aspires to wrest order out of chaos and to act as a salve in these uncertain times." Famous for his large-scale photographs of human-altered landscapes around the world, Burtynsky created this composition—of springtime tree branches fanning outwards in rare symmetry—as part of the series *Natural Order* in Grey County, Ontario, during the mandated COVID lockdown. In support of the Canadian photography community during the pandemic, Burtynsky and the Metivier Gallery will be donating proceeds from the sale of a limited edition *Natural Order* portfolio to the Art Gallery of Ontario and Ryerson Art Centre.

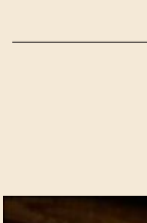
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THE NEW NORMAL: SUMMER EDITION

by Sylvia Nickerson



Sylvia Nickerson, *The New Normal: Summer Edition*, 2020

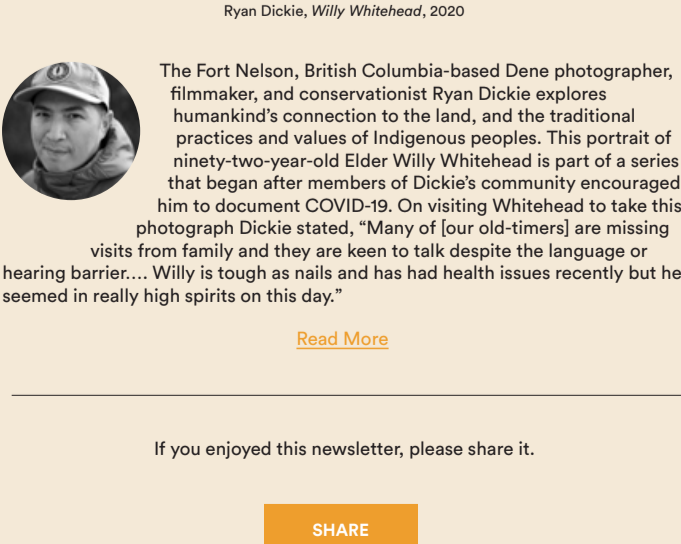


In this work, Sylvia Nickerson, the Hamilton-based comics artist and writer, presents the uncertainties, challenges, and changes of recent months. She depicts figures practicing social distancing at the beach, participating in Black Lives Matter protests, and navigating choppy economic waters. Still, a figure lying on a beach towel offers the optimistic message "life is good." When the pandemic began, Nickerson, whose practice has explored parenthood, gender identity, social class, and religion, turned to the dramatic highs and lows of this summer. Through her work, she examines the human condition with both great sensitivity and levity, simultaneously offering joy and empathy.

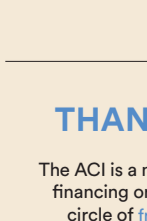
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PLAGUE MASK

by Brian Jungen



Brian Jungen, *Plague Mask*, 2020



Similar to Towanna Miller-Johnson's work (*Corona Covid*, part of *The Breathe Project* (pictured above)), *Plague Mask* by the internationally admired, North Okanagan-based artist Brian Jungen, of Dane-Zaa and Swiss ancestry, recalls the masks worn by doctors in Europe almost five hundred years ago. However, Jungen's choice of Nike Air Jordans as his medium results in a dramatically different object, one that bridges Indigenous and mass cultures. It was in 1998 that Jungen first experimented with deconstructing athletic shoes, reassembling them into sculptures inspired by West Coast ceremonial masks. In doing so, he transformed everyday materials into extraordinary sculptures and installations that reference the visual iconography of Northwest Coast First Nations. As the first new work produced after a major solo survey at the Art Gallery of Ontario, *Plague Mask* is Jungen's first reference to a historical mask outside of Indigenous culture, and the aspirations, athleticism, and authority embodied in the Air Jordans is here complicated by proximity to illness and protection.

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THE DAYS ARE LONG / THE PLAGUE IS SHORT

by Douglas Coupland

Douglas Coupland, *The Days Are Long / The Plague Is Short*, 2020

The Days Are Long / The Plague Is Short is part of Douglas Coupland's ongoing and extensive series, *Slogans for the 21st Century*. Internationally recognized for his critical investigations into popular culture and technology, in 2011 the Vancouver-based artist and novelist began to create succinct statements or questions about contemporary life set against an eye-catching array of solid colour backgrounds. Various infused with humour, irony, ennui, longing, and pessimism, Coupland's slogans are instantly relatable, yet also urge us to pause and reflect on the significance and implications of our common human experiences. This reassuring slogan even if the pandemic is perspective, reminding us that it won't last forever—plus it might feel that way now.

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MASKED LINUS

by Ken Lum

Ken Lum, *Linus*, 2020

Ken Lum, *Masked Linus* (detail), 2020

While Vancouver-born Ken Lum's artistic practice predominantly focuses on issues related to race, class, labour, and language, spending more time with his family in the past several months has inspired him to pick up "drawing again after many years of not drawing" and make sketches of his two young children—he has posted these works on Instagram. Of the picture on the right, Lum explains, "I was going to the supermarket with my son Linus and I had a new supply of masks, so he tried one on. The way when I told him to wait as I went to find a pencil." Of the drawing on the left, Lum wrote that Linus, now being home-schooled, "is not the type to move through the day in compartmentalized timeslots. If he is interested in something, he will keep at it."

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WILLY WHITEHEAD

by Ryan Dickie

Ryan Dickie, *Willy Whitehead*, 2020

The Fort Nelson, British Columbia-based Denver photographer, filmmaker, and conservationist Ryan Dickie explores humankind's connection to the land, and the traditional practices and values of Indigenous peoples. This portrait of ninety-two-year-old Elder Willy Whitehead is part of a series that began after members of Dickie's community encouraged him to document COVID-19. On our visit Whitehead to take this photograph Dickie stated, "Many of [our old-timers] are missing visits from family and they are keen to talk despite the language or hearing barrier... Willy is tough as nails and has had health issues recently but he seemed in really high spirits on this day."

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Image Credits: [1] Towanna Miller-Johnson, *Corona Covid*, 2020, 38 x 15 x 17.8 cm. Photo credit: Nathalie Bertin. [2] Lisa Shepherd, *Be Well*, 2020, 25.4 x 22.86 x 7.62 cm. Photo credit: Nathalie Bertin. [3] Zachari Logan, *Heavy Crown, (Corona Flower)* from the *Bone Garden*, 2020, red, blue and turquoise pencil on Mylar, 22.8 x 27.9cm. Courtesy of New Art Projects, London. [4] Zachari Logan, *Two Flowers from the Bone Garden*, 2020, red and blue pencil on Mylar, 15.2 x 25.4 cm. Courtesy of New Art Projects, London. [5] Simone Elizabeth Saunders, *Eve*, 2020, hand-tufted textile, 60.96 x 86.36 cm. Courtesy the artist. [6] Simone Elizabeth Saunders, *Black Lives Matter II*, 2020, hand-tufted textile, 58.42 x 81.28 cm. Courtesy the artist. [7] Rajni Perera, *I take a journey, you take a journey, we take a journey together*, 2020, leather, trim, cotton, beads, metallic thread, beerula lace and rubber gas mask, 25.4 x 22.9 x 17.8 cm. Photo: Nep Sidhu. [8] Edward Burtynsky, *Natural Order* #27, Grey County, Ontario, Canada, Spring 2020, pigment inkjet print on Kodak Professional Photo Paper. Courtesy the artist. [9] Sylvia Nickerson, *The New Normal: Summer Edition*, 2020. Courtesy the artist. [10] Brian Jungen, *Plague Mask*, 2020, Nike Air Jordans, 34 x 69 x 41 cm. Courtesy Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver. Photo credit: Rachel Topham Photography. [11] Douglas Coupland, *The Days Are Long / The Plague Is Short*, 2020. Courtesy Daniel Faria Gallery. [12] Ken Lum, *Linus*, 2020, blue pencil on paper. Courtesy the artist. [13] Ken Lum, *Masked Linus*, 2020, mechanical pencil on paper. Courtesy the artist. [14] Ryan Dickie, *Willy Whitehead*, 2020, digital photograph. Courtesy the artist.