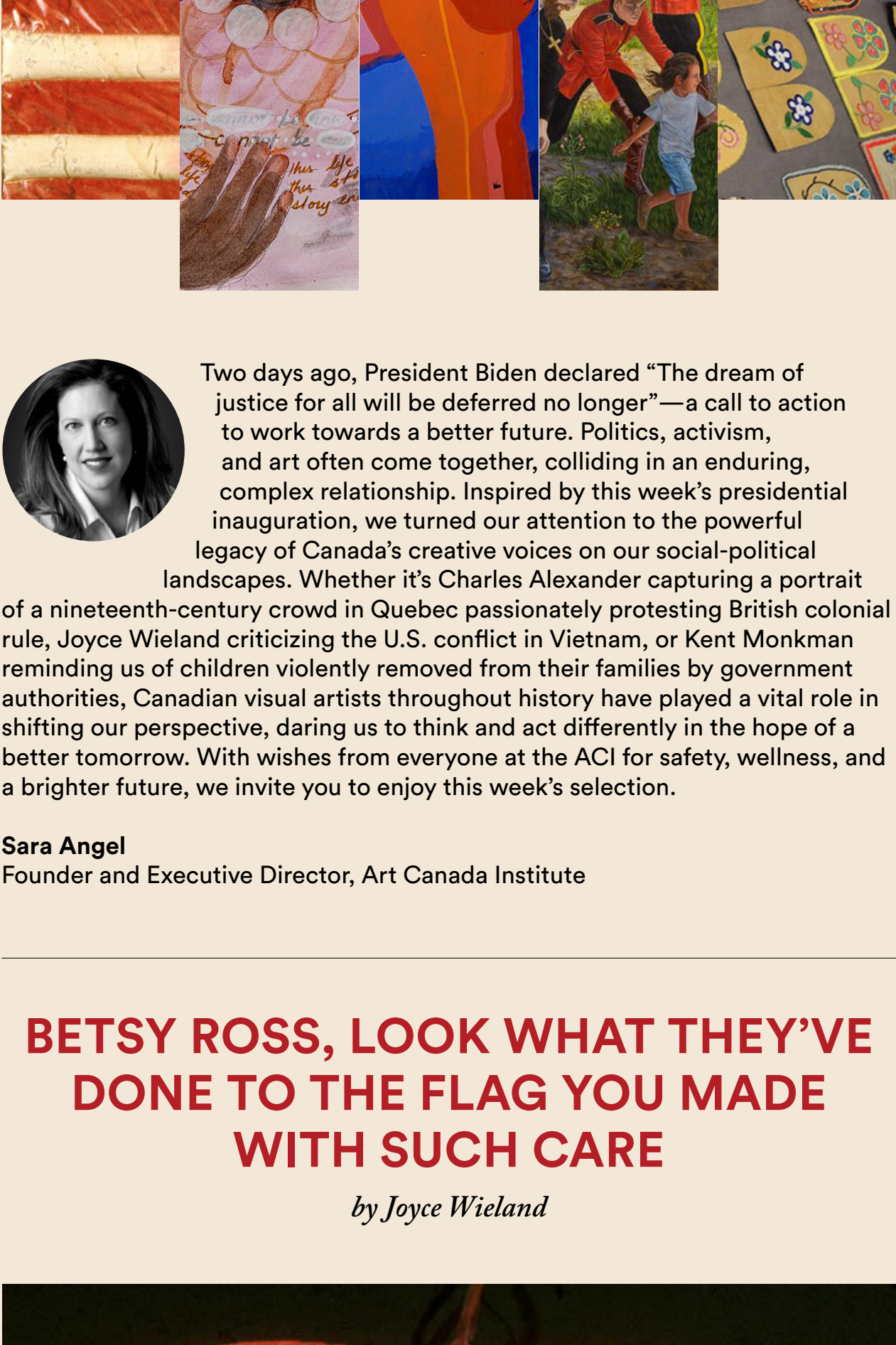


ART, ACTIVISM, POLITICS A CANADIAN COMMENTARY

*Works by those who have waded into the sociopolitical discourse,
using their creativity as a force for change.*



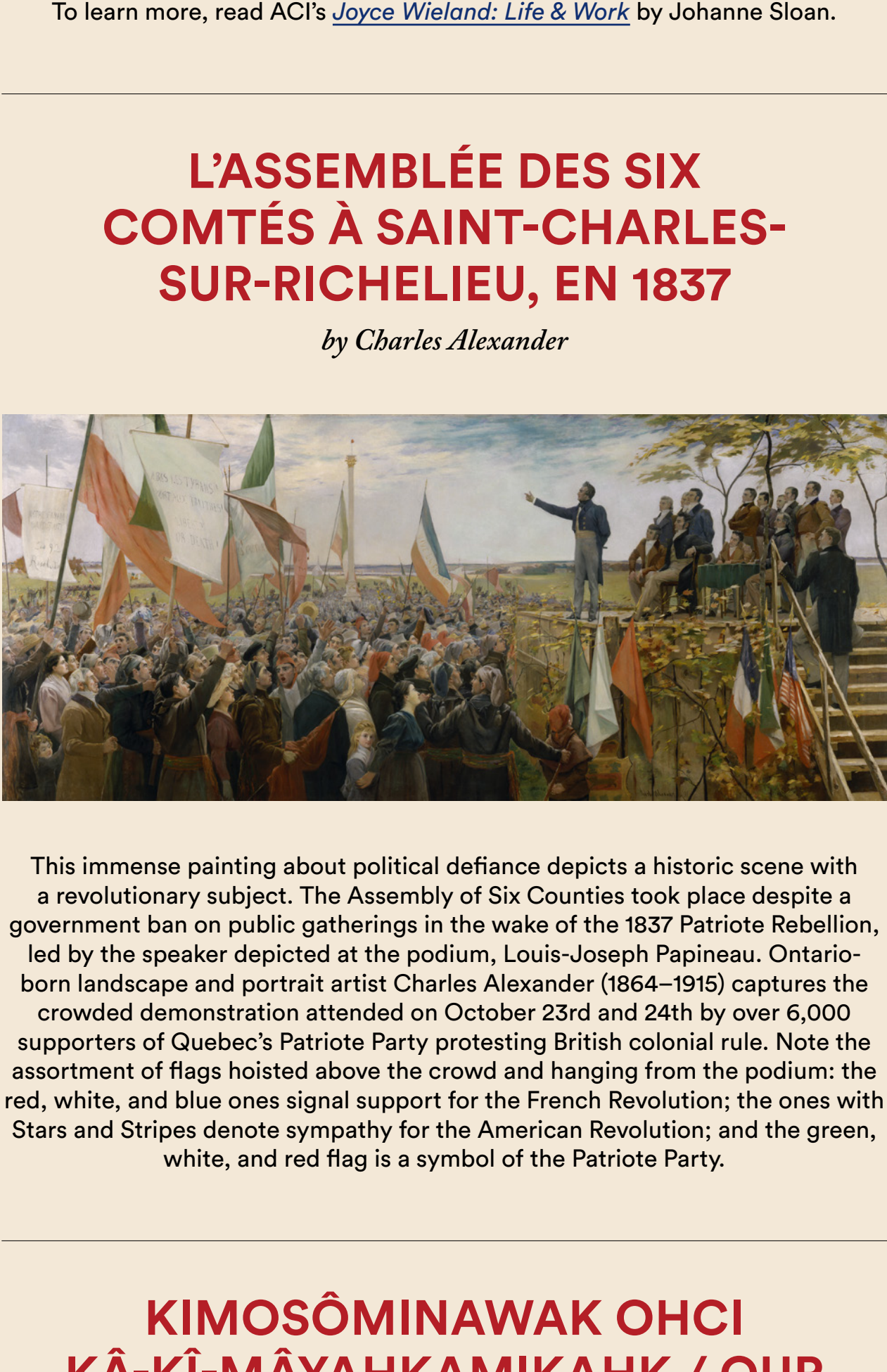
Two days ago, President Biden declared “The dream of justice for all will be deferred no longer”—a call to action to work towards a better future. Politics, activism, and art often come together, colliding in an enduring, complex relationship. Inspired by this week’s presidential inauguration, we turned our attention to the powerful legacy of Canada’s creative voices on our social-political landscapes. Whether it’s Charles Alexander capturing a portrait of a nineteenth-century crowd in Quebec passionately protesting British colonial rule, Joyce Wieland criticizing the U.S. conflict in Vietnam, or Kent Monkman reminding us of children violently removed from their families by government authorities, Canadian visual artists throughout history have played a vital role in shifting our perspective, daring us to think and act differently in the hope of a better tomorrow. With wishes from everyone at the ACI for safety, wellness, and a brighter future, we invite you to enjoy this week’s selection.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

BETSY ROSS, LOOK WHAT THEY’VE DONE TO THE FLAG YOU MADE WITH SUCH CARE

by Joyce Wieland



Fifty-one years before Trump’s inauguration, Canadian artist Joyce Wieland (1930–1998) created *Betsy Ross, Look What They’ve Done to the Flag You Made with Such Care*, 1966. The piece by Toronto-born Wieland is a lament for the United States during the Vietnam-protest era, and references the woman credited with making the first American flag, Betsy Ross (1752–1836). In this stinging work we see large, red lips disgorge a tongue-like American flag, on which a circle of anti-war imagery is revealed—like a canker sore. Wieland, living in New York when the work was made, was joining the ranks of artists who treated the American flag as a symbol contaminated by a shameful conflict. The artist does leave room for optimism, however, suggesting that Americans recall the spirit of careful hope embedded in Ross’s first material incarnation of the Stars and Stripes.

To learn more, read ACI’s [Joyce Wieland: Life & Work](#) by Johanne Sloan.

L’ASSEMBLÉE DES SIX COMTÉS À SAINT-CHARLES- SUR-RICHELIEU, EN 1837

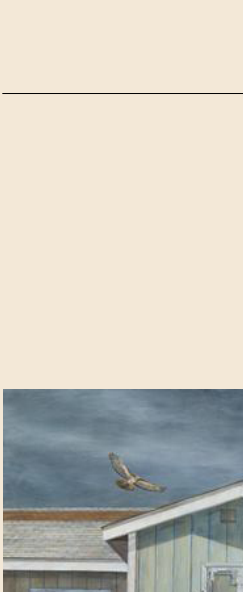
by Charles Alexander



This immense painting about political defiance depicts a historic scene with a revolutionary subject. The Assembly of Six Counties took place despite a government ban on public gatherings in the wake of the 1837 Patriote Rebellion, led by the speaker depicted at the podium, Louis-Joseph Papineau. Ontario-born landscape and portrait artist Charles Alexander (1864–1915) captures the crowded demonstration attended on October 23rd and 24th by over 6,000 supporters of Quebec’s Patriote Party protesting British colonial rule. Note the assortment of flags hoisted above the crowd and hanging from the podium: the red, white, and blue ones signal support for the French Revolution; the ones with Stars and Stripes denote sympathy for the American Revolution; and the green, white, and red flag is a symbol of the Patriote Party.

KIMOSÔMINAWAK OHCI KĀ-KĪ-MĀYAHKAMIKAHK / OUR GRANDFATHERS FROM 1885

by Neal McLeod



In this painting, made at the time of Canada’s sesquicentennial, Saskatoon-born Cree-Swedish artist and poet Neal McLeod represents diverse Indigenous narratives examining the past and future of Canada. Featuring his family’s patriarchal history in combat, including the North-West Uprising in 1885, in which Louis Riel led armed resistance against the Canadian government, McLeod commented on the work, “While I have been painting, I have been thinking about the poems which I wrote about this period of time (1885) and the way the events after it have had such a profound effect on my ancestors and myself. I thought about the dislocation and the trauma that many Cree and Métis men experienced.” The artist’s grandfather was a combatant in the Second and First World Wars, but his Indigenous ancestors, he points out, fought against the Canadian Army in the 1885 Uprising.

FOR BEN BELLA

by Greg Curnoe

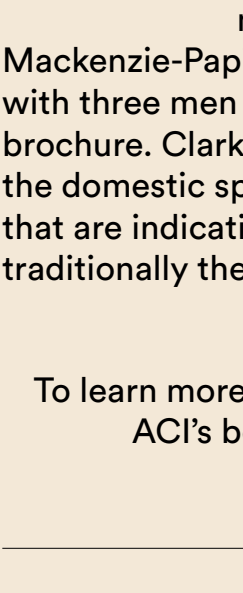


Created in 1964, this provocative and irreverent portrait of former Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King by the great London, Ontario-based artist Greg Curnoe (1936–1992) that exhibits the artist’s political stance, irony, and social commentary. In this painting, King is depicted as a figure of power, surrounded by a crowd of people. The work is a critique of the Prime Minister’s role in the 1960s, particularly his support for the Vietnam War. The painting is a powerful statement on the role of the Prime Minister in Canadian history.

To learn more about Curnoe’s attitude towards politics and art, read “[The Patriotic Painter](#),” an excerpt from ACI’s [Greg Curnoe: Life & Work](#) by Judith Rodger.

VANITAS: FLESH DRESS FOR AN ALBINO ANORECTIC

by Jana Sterbak



When Czech-Canadian artist Jana Sterbak’s (b.1955) *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1987, was exhibited at the National Gallery of Canada, it sparked political controversy and received global media attention. For this work, Sterbak created a hand-sewn dress made from raw flank steak, sewing thread, salt, metal and model, variable dimensions. Centre Pompidou, Paris, purchased in 1996 (AM 1996-624). © Jana Sterbak. Photo credit: Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI. [10] *Suzzy Lake, Cautioned Homes and Gardens: Barb and Janie*, 1991, triptych, gelatin silver fibre-based prints, photo montage; 151.8 x 58.4 cm, 151.8 x 103.5 cm, 151.8 x 58.4 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1993 EX-93-1981-3. Courtesy of Suzzy Lake and the National Gallery of Canada. In *Presente from Madrid*, 1937, watercolour over graphite on wove paper, 63.5 x 62 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased, 1980 (23666). © Clive and Benedict Clark. Photo credit: National Gallery of Canada.

To deliver a critical commentary on power relations and the art world, but was met with protest by federal politicians and food activists for its use of perishable food, which was considered wasteful by some. Despite its fierce critics, *Vanitas* is now in the permanent collection of both the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and Sterbak was the recipient of the Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts in 2012. The piece defies genre, but “*vanitas*” is a category of art depicting transience, decay, and death.

THE SCREAM

by Kent Monkman



Toronto-based Cree artist Kent Monkman’s (b.1965) powerful work *The Scream*, 2017, references the stark fact that for over one hundred years, Indigenous children in Canada were stolen from their parents. Though the residential school system was ostensibly created for the betterment of Indigenous children, it is now acknowledged that it was part of a systematic method to disrupt families and communities; destroy language, tradition, and knowledge; and erase cultural identity. Monkman’s monumental painting of RCMP officers, nuns, and priests tearing children from their mothers’ arms vividly bears witness to Indigenous families literally being pulled apart. *The Scream* belongs to Monkman’s series *Shame and Prejudice*, in which the artist sought to “walk us back through time” and “stitch together a counter-narrative that reflected on Indigenous experience.”

To learn more about Monkman’s politically-charged work, read the essay “[A Practice of Recovery](#)” by National Gallery of Canada Director and CEO Sasha Suda, an excerpt from ACI’s landmark book [Revision and Resistance](#).

CAUTIONED HOMES AND GARDENS: BARB AND JANIE

by Suzy Lake

Cautioned Homes and Gardens: Barb and Janie, 1991, was part of an installation focused on stakeholders in a dramatic and prolonged land-claim dispute between the Temagami Anishnabai of Bear Island, in the Temagami region. Created by the American-Canadian performance, video, and photography artist Suzy Lake (b.1947), the work addresses the Ontario government’s encroachment on land where First Nations have hunted and trapped for thousands of years. Lake was involved in a decade-long exploration of art and social activism in Canada and abroad, including this project, launched after it was asked by the Temagami Anishnabai of Bear Island to create a visual element that could capture their struggle over land claims.

On February 26, ACI is launching [Suzy Lake: Life & Work](#) by Erin Silver.

I CAN’T BREATHE

by Natalie Wood

Born and raised in Trinidad, Natalie Wood is a contemporary Canadian multimedia artist and curator who creates artwork that exhibits the artist’s political stance, irony, and social commentary. In this painting, Wood depicts a figure of power, surrounded by a crowd of people. The work is a critique of the Prime Minister’s role in the 1960s, particularly his support for the Vietnam War. The painting is a powerful statement on the role of the Prime Minister in Canadian history.

PRESENTS FROM MADRID

by Paraskeva Clark

Paraskeva Clark (1898–1986) was twice an immigrant, having been born in Russia, then moving to France for a decade, and ultimately settling in Canada. In *Presente from Madrid*, 1937, the painter demonstrates her sympathy for the Spanish Republican cause by depicting the mementoes that Norman Bethune sent her from Spain: the first issue of the magazine *Nova Iberia* (January 1937); a cap from the Canadian Mackenzie-Papineau Brigade; a medieval Spanish missal; and a red scarf decorated with three men who represent the Spanish Popular Front; and a Republican brochure. Clark chose to create a still life, a genre traditionally associated with the domestic sphere and the feminine arts, but through her choice of objects that are indicative of her political beliefs. Clark moved her work into what was traditionally the male sphere of the public and the political.

To learn more about this work, read “[A Passion for Activism](#),” an excerpt from ACI’s book [Paraskeva Clark: Life & Work](#) by Christine Boyanowski.

WALKING WITH OUR SISTERS

by Christi Belcourt

Walking With Our Sisters, 2013, was Christi Belcourt’s (b.1966) commemorative art installation to honour the lives of hundreds of Indigenous women in Canada and the United States who went missing or were murdered between 1980 and 2012. The work acknowledges the grief and torment of the families of the women, who continue to suffer, and it raised awareness and facilitated opportunities for broad, community-based dialogue on the issue. The installation included 1810 pairs of moccasins (sometimes called tops) plus 118 pairs of children’s moccasins, created and donated by hundreds of people. Each pair of moccasins are intentionally not sewn into moccasins, representing the unfinished lives of the women and girls. This politically poignant work went on a seven-year tour across Canada and the United States.

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Image Credits: [1, 6] Joyce Wieland, *Betsy Ross, Look What They’ve Done to the Flag You Made with Such Care*, 1966, mixed media, 56 x 34.3 cm, private collection. © National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. [2, 13] Natalie Wood, *I Can’t Breathe*, 2019, watercolour, acrylic, and ink on paper, 24 x 18 in. Courtesy of Paul Petro Contemporary Art, Toronto. [3, 9] Greg Curnoe, *For Ben Bella*, 1964, oil on plywood construction, plastic, metal, and mixed media, 259 x 157.7 x 98.4 cm, Collection of Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, purchased in 1968 with Canadian Council, Director’s Choice Funds (68.7). © Estate of Greg Curnoe/SODRAC (2016). [4, 11] Kent Monkman, *The Scream*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 126 in. Collection of The Denver Art Museum, Native Arts acquisition fund. Purchased with funds from Loren G. Lipson, M.D. (2017-20). [5, 16] Christi Belcourt, *Walking With Our Sisters*, 2013, mixed-media moccasin vamps, various dimensions. [7] Charles Alexander, *L’Assemblée des six comtés à Saint-Charles-sur-Richelieu, en 1837* (The Assembly of the Six Counties of Saint-Charles-sur-Richelieu, in 1837), 1890–91, oil on canvas, 200 x 690 cm. Collection of Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, purchase about 1930, transfer from the Legislative Assembly 1937 (1937-54). Photo credit: Jean-Guy Kérouac, MNBAQ. [8] Neal McLeod, *kimosôminawak ohci kâ-kî-mâyahkamikahk / our grandfathers from 1885*, 2017, acrylic on canvas (unstretched), 207 x 143 cm. Collection of the artist. [10] Jana Sterbak, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1987, 23 kilos of salt-cured raw flank steak, sewing thread, salt, metal and model, variable dimensions. Centre Pompidou, Paris, purchased in 1996 (AM 1996-624). © Jana Sterbak. Photo credit: Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI. [12] Suzy Lake, *Cautioned Homes and Gardens: Barb and Janie*, 1991, triptych, gelatin silver fibre-based prints, photo montage; 151.8 x 58.4 cm, 151.8 x 103.5 cm, 151.8 x 58.4 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1993 EX-93-1981-3. Courtesy of Suzzy Lake and the National Gallery of Canada. In *Presente from Madrid*, 1937, watercolour over graphite on wove paper, 63.5 x 62 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased, 1980 (23666). © Clive and Benedict Clark. Photo credit: National Gallery of Canada.