ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

CHOOSE TO CHALLENGE
TWELVE VISIONARY WOMEN ARTISTS

Forging their own paths in a male-dominated art world, these distinguished women have transformed Canadian art through their unique vision, talent, and leadership.

In honour of International Women's Day next Monday, we are highlighting Canadian women artists across the country who have achieved outstanding accomplishments in their careers and paved the way for others to succeed in the art world. Taking a cue from this year's IWD hashtag and theme—#ChoosetoChallenge—which celebrates women's successes, promotes awareness against bias, and calls for action for equality, we are looking at works that show women reflecting on their place in the arts and in society and boldly confronting gender imparity. Although there is still much progress to be made, the selection below reveals how far women from diverse communities have come. It also highlights the crucial role of artists in imagining and shaping a more equitable world, one where we celebrate women's independence, strength, and ambition.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

UNTITLED (KENOJUAK AND ANNIE WITH GOVERNOR GENERAL MICHAËLLE JEAN)

by Annie Pootoogook

This drawing by internationally acclaimed Kinngait (Cape Dorset) artist Annie Pootoogook (1969–2016) documents the momentous occasion in 2009 when she and iconic modern Inuit artist Kenojuak Ashevak (1927–2013) met Governor General Michaëlle Jean—the first Black woman to hold that position—in her office at Rideau Hall. In 2006, Pootoogook became the first Inuit artist to be considered for and to win the Sobey Art Award; in 2008, Kenojuak became the first Inuit artist to receive a Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts. Held when Jean was serving as the patron of the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative for its fiftieth anniversary, this joyous meeting celebrated the contributions of these two groundbreaking artists who sparked monumental shifts in art history.

To learn more about this artist, read the ACI's book *Annie Pootoogook: Life & Work* by Nancy G. Campbell.

AT THE THEATRE

by Prudence Heward

In *At the Theatre*, 1928, Montreal artist Prudence Heward (1896–1947) paints a close-up view of two seated young women waiting for the performance on stage to begin. That they are not accompanied by men indicates the growing independence of women in the 1920s. Although the elegantly dressed pair engage in separate activities, their similar attire, smooth brown hair, and sloping shoulders, along with their slightly overlapping bodies, suggest a close bond between them. As a matter of fact, according to art historian Barbara Meadowcroft, the models for this painting were the sisters of Beaver Hall Group artist Sarah Robertson (1891–1948). Described by A.Y. Jackson (1882–1974) as "the very best painter we ever had in Canada," Heward is celebrated for her portraits of strong and defiant women.

To learn more about this artist, read the ACI's book *Prudence Heward: Life & Work* by Julia Skelly.

THE SIXTH COMPANY BATTALION

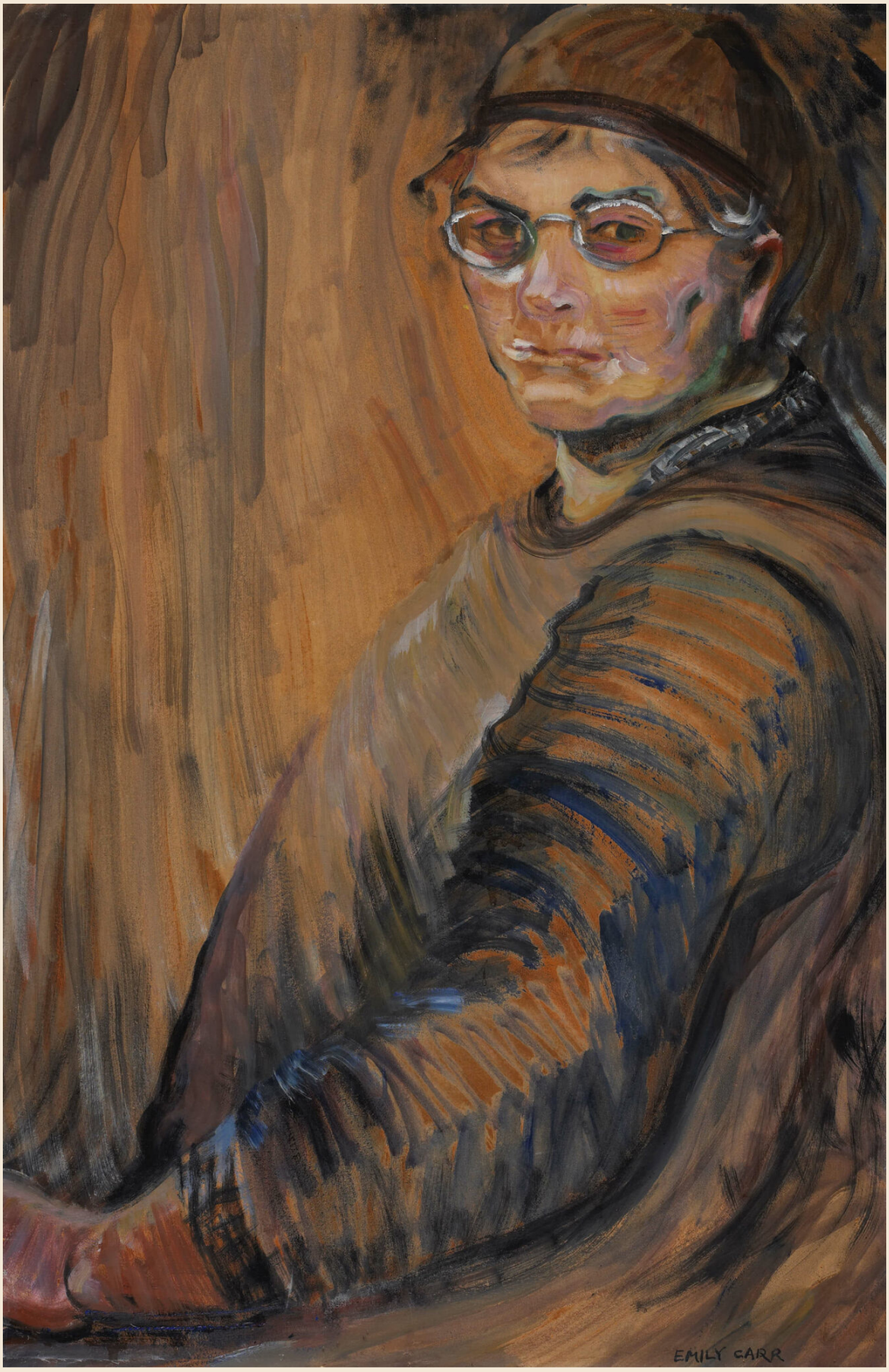
by Anique Jordan

In the series The Sixth Company Battalion, 2016, Toronto-based artist Anique Jordan (b.1987) photographs her mother and her mother's two sisters as soldiers in the War of 1812. She describes her portrayal of these women as war heroes as an "impossible image," because women were not allowed to serve in the army at the time. Jordan's fictionalized portrait recognizes that her female ancestors fought, resisted, and sacrificed in their own wars, and creates space for them within existing historical narratives. The Sixth Company Battalion was also inspired by the history of a troop of Black Loyalists in Trinidad & Tobago—where Jordan's ancestors lived. The unit gained their freedom and became one of six British marine troops composed of former enslaved people who fought in the War of 1812 in support of the British Crown against the United States. Last year Jordan was the recipient of the Toronto Friends of the Visual Arts Artist Prize.

Learn More About This Artist Here

SELF-PORTRAIT

by Emily Carr



In this rare self-portrait, iconic West Coast artist Emily Carr (1871–1945) employs vigorous brushstrokes to portray herself as a mature artist with intense focus and authority. Gazing directly at the viewer, the stern figure fills most of the space in the composition, heightening her powerful presence. Although the sixty-seven-year-old painter suffered a heart attack the previous year, there is no hint of frailty in this image. In December 1940, Carr commented, “I hate painting portraits…. The better a portrait, the more indecent and naked the sitter must feel. An artist who portrays flesh and clothes but nothing else, no matter how magnificently he does it, is quite harmless." With this masterful, expressive work Carr taps into her vulnerability in order to capture her inner strength and resilience in paint.

To learn more about this artist, read the ACI's book *Emily Carr: Life & Work* by Lisa Baldissera.

SKIN DEEP

by Chun Hua Catherine Dong

In Chinese culture, the concept of shame, or losing face, is a powerful form of social control that dissuades individuals—particularly women—from behaving in ways that might disturb the status quo. Chinese-born, Montreal-based artist Chun Hua Catherine Dong explores this concept in these works, part of her series Skin Deep, 2014–20. In self-portraits modelled after government identification photos, Dong wraps her entire head in colourful traditional Chinese silk fabrics that also comprise the background. The works expose "the deeply embedded feelings of shame that can cause women to hold back and stay silent," says Dong, whose portraits reflect her longstanding investigations into themes of gender, cultural identity, and diaspora, for which she was awarded the 2020 Cultural Diversity in Visual Arts Award by the Conseil des arts de Montréal.

Learn More About This Artist Here

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THE LUTE PLAYER

by Shary Boyle

The Lute Player, 2010, presents an adolescent girl playing an electric guitar in a natural setting. Her red hair hangs over her face as she loses herself in her music. Although her black instrument and long locks conjure up images of male rock musicians, her delicate features, unabashed nakedness, and natural environment challenge these dominant representations. Defying gender stereotypes, Boyle's self-possessed figure also represents a contemporary response to the art historical tradition of depicting prostitutes as lute players to signify their sexual prowess. Since 2006, internationally acclaimed artist Shary Boyle (b.1972) has created several porcelain figurines that subvert the delicate femininity often associated with the medium while exploring alternative expressions of female subjectivity.

Learn More About This Artist Here

SELF-PORTRAIT

by Hannah Maynard

In this surreal and lighthearted photograph by Victoria-based Hannah Maynard (1834–1918), two figures in her likeness are enjoying cups of tea, while a third leans outward from a picture frame on the wall, appearing to accidentally spill tea on one of the figures below. Not only did Maynard produce exceptionally innovative photographs using techniques such as multiple exposures and photomontage, but she was also the first woman to open a photographic studio in Victoria, establishing her business in 1862. She went on to produce countless portraits of the city's residents and landscape photographs which serve as important documents of British Columbia's history.

Hannah Maynard: Life & Work by Elizabeth Anne Cavaliere is one of the Art Canada Institute's upcoming titles.

WHITE THREAD

by Rebecca Belmore

In the striking photograph *White Thread*, 2003, by Toronto-based Anishinaabekwe artist Rebecca Belmore (b.1960), a woman's entire body is bound in a long piece of bright red fabric as she bends downward to grab her ankles. For viewers initially drawn to the bold colour of the material, the subject's grave physical discomfort is not noticeable on a first glance. The figure in the image is Belmore's sister—a frequent collaborator—who remained in the same position for forty-five minutes. With this piece Belmore was reflecting on the war in the Middle East and "women's suffering, strength, and will to endure and survive." Confronting issues of injustice, racism, and violence in her work since the late 1980s, in 2005 Belmore became the first Indigenous women to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale.

Learn More About This Artist Here

CULTURAL BELONGINGS

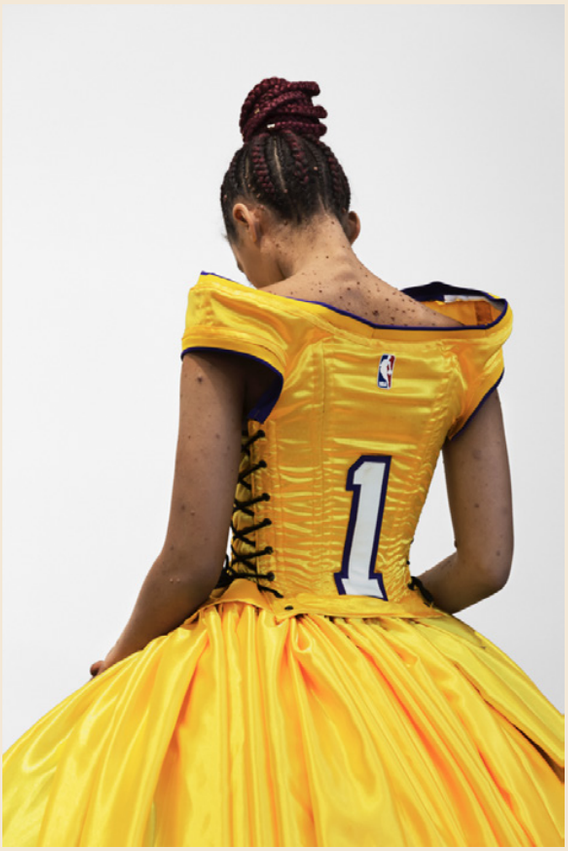
by Dana Claxton

In *Cultural Belongings*, 2016, Vancouver-based artist Dana Claxton (b.1959), who is of Hunkpapa Lakota (Sioux) heritage, explores the significance of Lakota cultural objects to Indigenous womanhood and sovereignty. The large-scale, backlit colour transparency presents a woman wearing a sleeveless dress, high heels, a colourful beaded veil that conceals her face, and a floor-length deerskin robe. Stepping forward, she carries a horse-head dance stick in front of her, while behind her lies a trail of quilled, beaded, embroidered, and woven items. *Cultural Belongings* underscores Indigenous women's creation and use of these objects while exposing how their collection by museums tends to deny obscure facts. Critically acclaimed for her multidisciplinary practice, Claxton received the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts in 2020.

Learn More About This Artist Here

ONE OF THE BOYS

by Esmaa Mohamoud



These images from African Canadian artist Esmaa Mohamoud's (b.1988) provocative photographic series One of the Boys challenge gender norms within the male-dominated world of professional sports. Produced in collaboration with New York-based artist Qendrim Hoti (b.1990), the portraits present Black figures in costumes that incorporate basketball jerseys into ball gowns reminiscent of those worn by Disney princesses. The series was inspired by the Toronto-based artist's childhood memories of growing up as a passionate fan of basketball and idolizing NBA players but not seeing herself represented in the sport. Said Mohamoud, "I was just a little girl who wanted to be Vince Carter and didn't know how to be." Her work envisions more fluid conceptions of gender as well as greater gender inclusivity in sports. Mohamoud was awarded the Toronto Friends of the Visual Arts Artist Prize in 2019.

Learn More About This Artist Here

Watch for her show opening this spring at the Art Gallery of Hamilton.

THE COLLECTOR/THE ARTIST IN HER MUSEUM

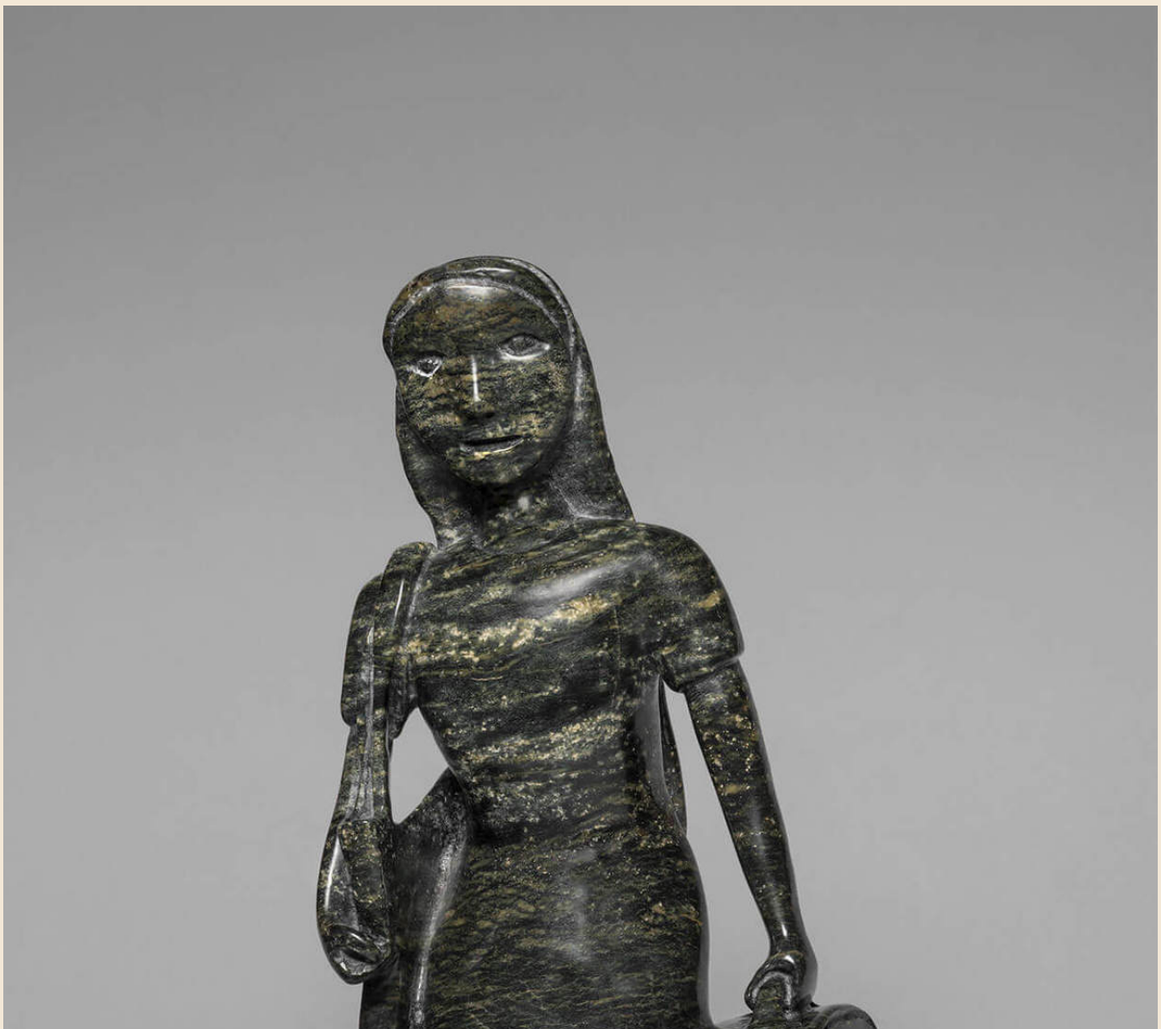
by Rosalie Favell

Using digital manipulation, Winnipeg-born Métis artist Rosalie Favell (b.1958) inserts herself into Charles Willson Peale's (1741–1827) *The Artist in His Museum*, 1822, in which the American painter—who in 1784 founded the United States's first museum, the Philadelphia Museum—is depicted lifting a curtain to reveal his large collection of natural history specimens on display for the public. In response to the colonial practices of collecting and exhibiting natural history specimens alongside Indigenous artifacts, Favell has replaced Peale's face with her own, and substituted the objects on view with snapshots from personal family albums. The Ottawa-based artist says, "As an Indigenous artist, I am inviting the viewer into my world where Indigenous peoples claim the right to exhibit their own culture and history."

Learn More About This Artist Here

SELF-PORTRAIT (ARRIVING IN TORONTO)

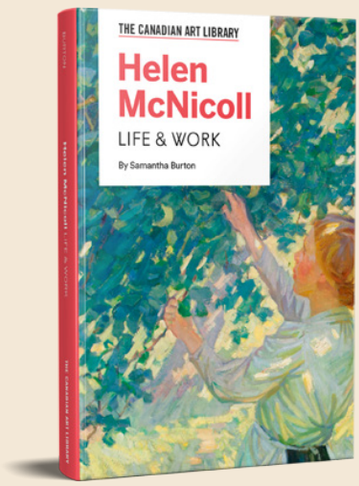
by Oviloo Tunnillie

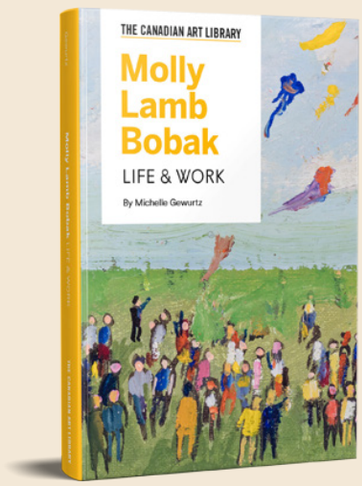


Kangia-born and Kinngait-based artist Oviloo Tunnillie (1949–2014) was one of the first Inuit women artists to gain national recognition as a stone carver in Canada—*Self-Portrait (Arriving in Toronto)*, 2002, shows the artist at Pearson International Airport. While many women took up carving in Inuit communities, it was mainly the work of male carvers who gained widespread attention in the art world. As Tunnillie stated, “women are homemakers and mothers, but also women are carvers now. I want women to be strong, to try and use their talents.” A major critical success, Tunnillie’s sculptures were exhibited across Canada and internationally.

To learn more about this artist, read the ACI’s book *Oviloo Tunnillie: Life & Work* by Darlene Coward Wight.

THREE BOOKS ON TRAILBLAZING WOMEN ARTISTS





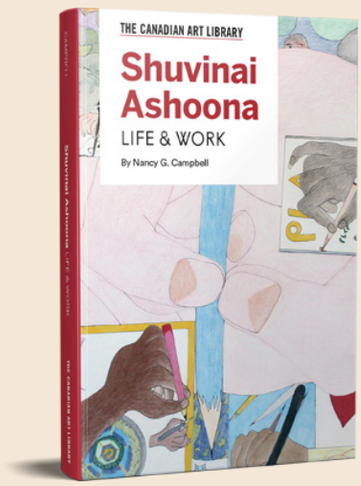


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Image Credits: **[1,10]** Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *Skin Deep* (detail), 2014–20, photograph, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. **[2,6]** Annie Pootoogook, *Untitled (Kenojuak and Annie with Governor General Michaëlle Jean)*, 2010, coloured pencil on paper, 51 x 66 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 2010 (43064). Reproduced with the permission of Dorset Fine Arts. **[3,17]** Esmaa Mohamoud, *One of the Boys* (detail), 2017–19, photograph. Courtesy of the artist. **[4,7]** Prudence Heward, *At the Theatre*, 1928, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 101.6 cm. Collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1964.1479. **[5,12]** Shary Boyle, *The Lute Player*, 2010, porcelain, china paint, lustre, 24 x 24 x 26 cm. Collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. **[8]** Anique Jordan, *The Sixth Company Battalion* (detail), 2016, photograph. Courtesy of the artist. **[9]** Emily Carr, *Self-Portrait*, 1938–39, oil on wove paper, mounted on plywood, 85.5 x 57.7 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, gift of Peter Bronfman, 1990. **[11]** Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *Skin Deep* (detail), 2014–20, photograph, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. **[13]** Hannah Maynard, *Hannah Maynard self-portrait; trick photograph, multiple exposure*, c.1893–97, photograph. Collection of the BC Archives, Victoria. **[14]** Rebecca Belmore, *White Thread*, 2003, photograph, ink jet on watercolour paper. Courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Donna Hagerman. **[15]** Dana Claxton, *Cultural Belongings*, 2016, LED firebox with transmounted chromogenic transparency. Collection of Rosalind and Amir Adnani. Courtesy of the artist. **[16]** Esmaa Mohamoud, *One of the Boys* (detail), 2017–19, photograph. Courtesy of the artist. **[18]** Rosalie Favell, *The Artist in Her Museum/The Collector*, 2005, ink jet on rag paper, 119 x 86.5 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. **[19]** Oviloo Tunnillie, *Self-Portrait (Arriving in Toronto)*, 2002, serpentinite (Kangiqsuqutaq/Korok Inlet), 35.6 x 17.8 x 14 cm, signed with syllabics and dated 2002. Collection of Andrea Ziegler. Courtesy of the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Photo credit: Ernest Mayer. © Dorset Fine Arts.