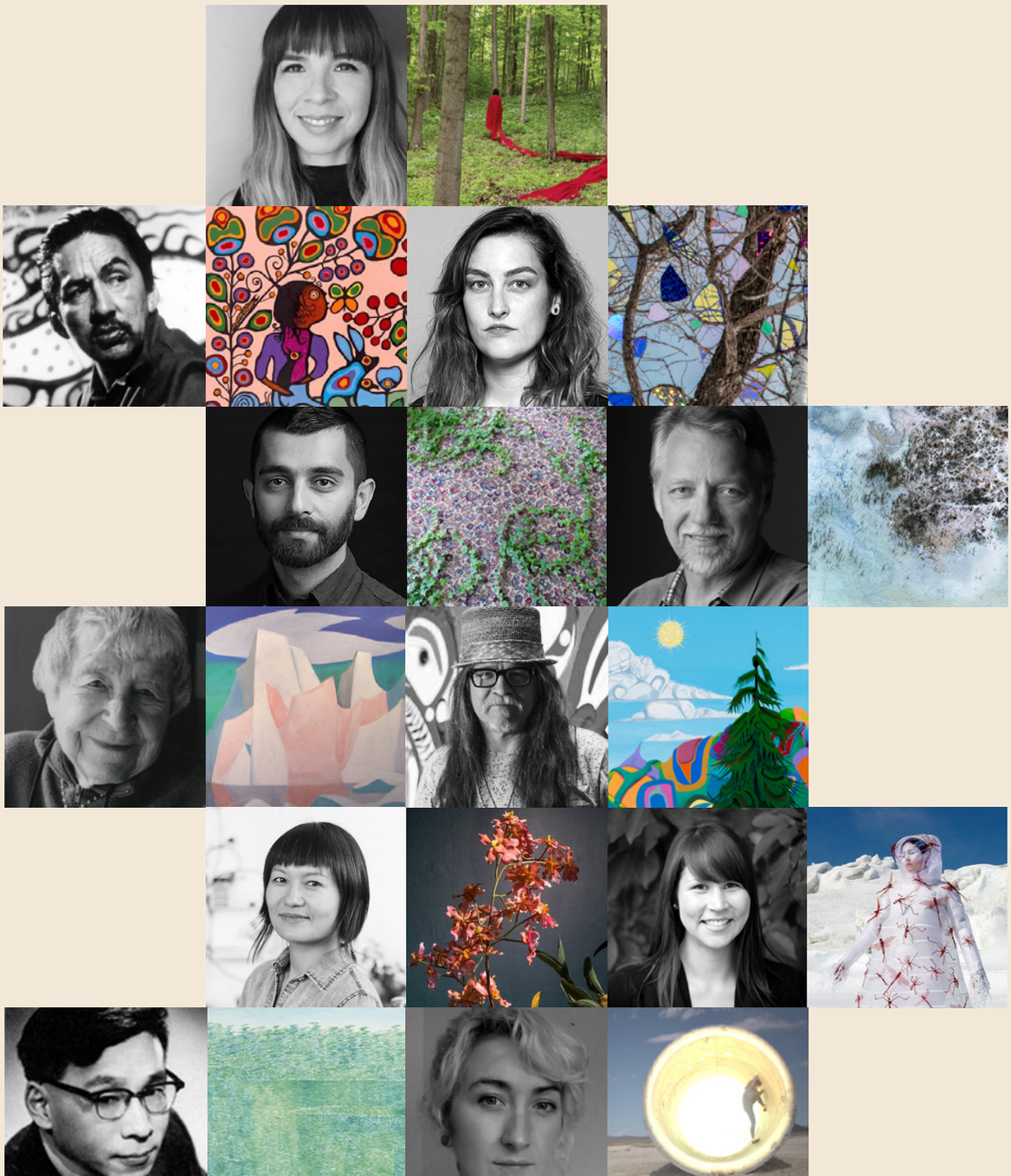
ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

APRIL 23, 2021

OUR EARTH, OUR ART
ELEVEN CANADIAN WORKS

In recognition of this week's Earth Day, we're looking at artists who highlight not only the planet's beauty but also its role as the very foundation of life and culture



Inspired by Earth Day, an annual event on April 22 dedicated to environmental protection, we are exploring works by artists in Canada who reflect on nature and offer original and thought-provoking views of our world. Through their art, we can appreciate the grandeur of our country's diverse natural landscapes, from Doris McCarthy's depictions of Arctic icebergs to Norval Morrisseau's representations of plants and animals native to the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg. Protecting the health of our planet is one of the most salient concerns of our time. In recent decades, artists such as Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun and Edward Burtynsky have focused on the wide-ranging consequences of environmental degradation. We hope the works below inspire new perspectives on our relationship with nature and what it means to be stewards of the earth.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

THE MOTHER EARTH

by Norval Morrisseau

Legendary Anishinaabe artist Norval Morrisseau (1931–2007) often explored the spiritual interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. In this vibrant painting, *The Mother Earth*, n.d., two Anishinaabe children are surrounded by plants, birds, and other animals, illustrating Morrisseau's comment, "My people believe the earth to be their mother and that we are children of the earth. We are all one spirit." In the late 1970s, Morrisseau began creating paintings that emphasize the importance of passing on traditional teachings to younger generations. As Anishinaabe scholar Lawrence W. Gross explains, "While growing up, children were encouraged to spend time alone in the woods, [where they would] maintain silence, pray, meditate on their lives, and observe the world around them."

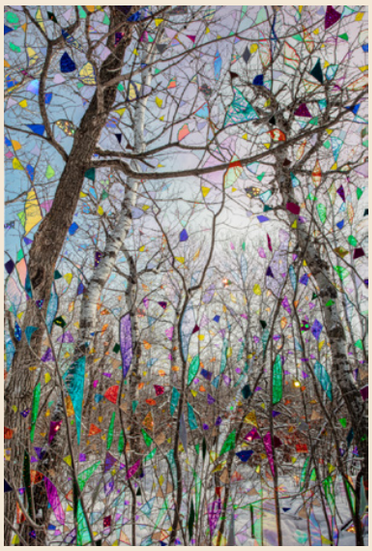
To learn more about this artist, read ACI's *Norval Morrisseau: Life & Work* by Carmen Robertson.

PMMP2, WWSOSR,

and

WLSPO

by Sarah Anne Johnson



According to Winnipeg-based multidisciplinary artist Sarah Anne Johnson (b.1976), whose creations express her personal experience of the places depicted, this work "is informed by scientific research on the ability of trees to communicate intelligently, traditional indigenous knowledge about nature and the influence of ancient trees on sacred architecture." To make these effervescent images of winter trees, part of Johnson's Woodland series, 2020, she shot photographs of forests around her home and then manipulated her images using a variety of techniques. In the works shown here, Johnson filled shapes formed by intersecting tree branches with acrylic paint and oil, producing the impression of colourful stained-glass fragments decorating the trees.

Learn more about this artist

STUDY FOR A GARDEN

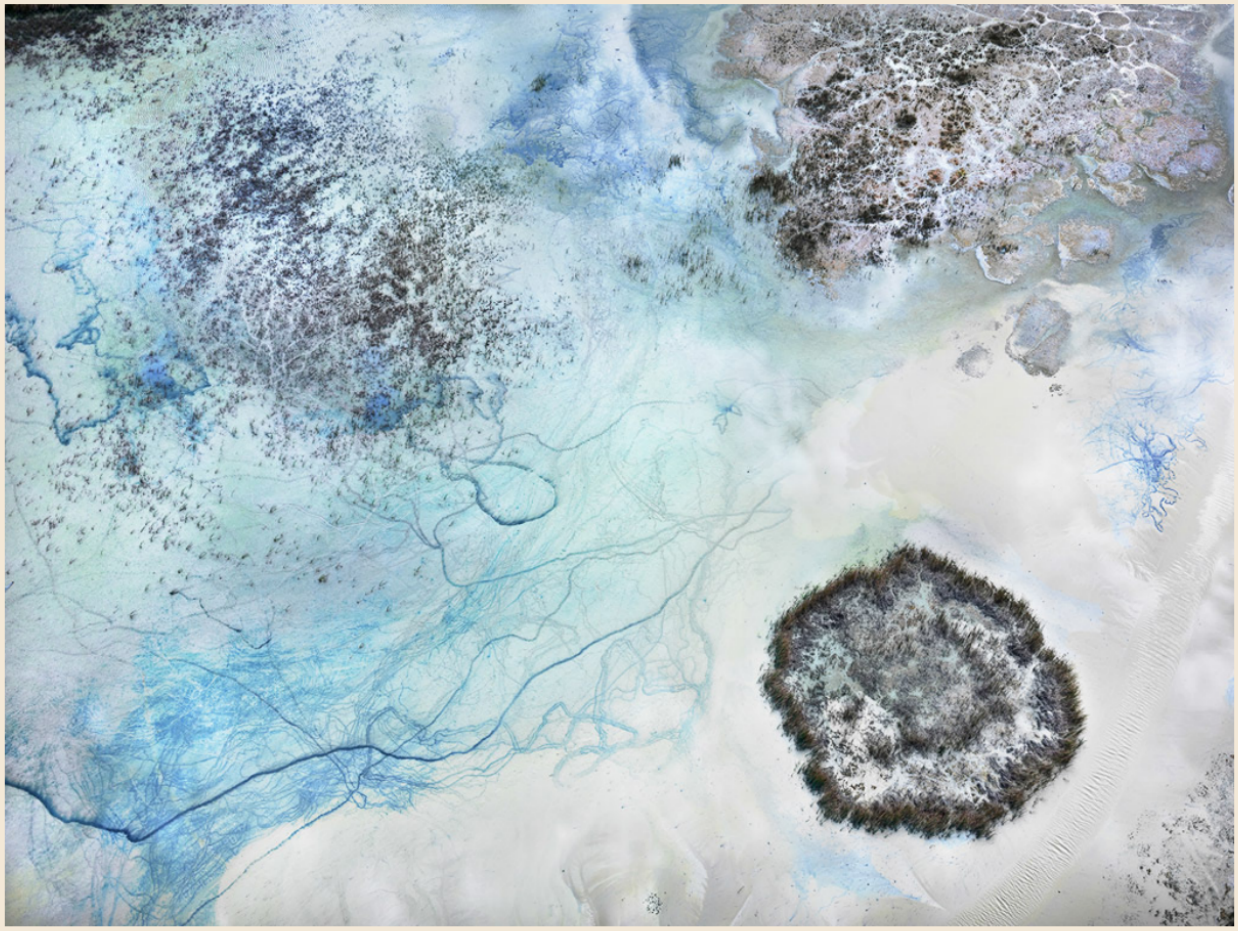
by Abbas Akhavan

Blurring the lines between interior and exterior, *Study for a Garden*, 2012, by Toronto-based Iranian artist Abbas Akhavan (b.1977), explores the intrusion of nature—in the form of a garden—into a period townhouse in London, England. Within the building's hallways and rooms, viewers confront slithering plants, which emerge from the carpet, the floorboards, and an oscillating sprinkler that leaves a pool of water in the third-floor bedroom. The injection of plants and water into various rooms of the house reflects Akhavan's research into the relationship between domestic and wild, foreign and familiar. Working with drawing, sculpture, and installation, Akhavan often categorizes his works as "studies" to focus on ideas and themes of speculation, reflection, and open-ended thinking.

Learn more about this artist

PHOSPHOR TAILINGS POND #2

by Edward Burtynsky



Resembling an abstract painting, this aerial photograph by internationally renowned Toronto-based artist Edward Burtynsky (b.1955) offers a glimpse of the phosphor tailings ponds that span 1.3 million acres across Polk County in Florida. The freshwater pond seen here is filled with waste from the production of synthetic phosphate fertilizers. Burtynsky explains, “Should these tailings ponds be breached, the phosphorus in the runoff would result in large-scale growth of algae blooms. These would quickly overwhelm and suffocate the bodies of water in which they form, creating dead zones where no other life forms can thrive.” This disconcerting image of water pollution belongs to Burtynsky’s extensive Water series, 2009–13, which explores how this vital substance is used and misused around the world.

Learn more about this artist and series

PINK ICEBERG WITH FLOES

by Doris McCarthy

During a trip to Resolute, Nunavut in 1972, the distinguished Toronto landscape painter Doris McCarthy (1910–2010) witnessed the enthralling beauty of the icebergs—an experience that inspired a series of over sixty paintings dedicated to them, including the majestic *Pink Iceberg with Floes*, 2005. Employing the simplified, hard-edged style that she developed in the mid-1960s, McCarthy emphasizes the smooth, multifaceted forms of the towering mass of ice, which can be seen extending far below the surface of the clear water. Her palette of soft pinks, blues, and greens imbues the stark Arctic landscape with warmth and vivid colour.

Learn more about this artist

NEW CLIMATE LANDSCAPE (NORTHWEST COAST CLIMATE CHANGE)

by Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun

Long recognized for his socio-politically engaged artistic practice, Okanagan and Coast Salish artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun (b.1957) has made environmental degradation a subject of his trenchant work. In this surreal painting, Yuxweluptun features Northwest Coast imagery, including brightly coloured ovoids and masks that take the form of mountains and clouds. The artist envisions a utopian after-world, in which resource extraction has subsided and the earth has healed. Depicting nature from an Indigenous perspective, the Vancouver-based artist articulates the vital relationship between Northwest Coast First Nations and their traditional territory.

Learn more about this artist

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THE WORLD IS BOUND BY SECRET KNOTS

by Emily Jan

According to Edmonton-based artist Emily Jan (b.1977), in this age of mass extinctions and climate change, it is important "to envision places we may never personally see" and "hold space for them in our minds and in our hearts." In 2015 Jan travelled to the Peruvian Amazon, which inspired her body of work *The World Is Bound by Secret Knots*, 2018, a series of life-sized sculptural representations of the flora and fauna that she encountered during her three-week visit. Jan's remarkably realistic and elaborate creations, presented here, are composed of textiles, found objects, and second-hand silk flowers and greenery. For her exhibition at the Klondike Institute of Art in Dawson City (top), Jan combined her tropical sculptures with domestic objects from the Parks Canada collection, drawing connections between the familiar and the unknown.

Learn more about this artist

WHAT WILL I SAY TO THE SKY AND THE EARTH II

by Meryl McMaster

Wearing a full-length white dress embellished with red insects, Ottawa-based artist Meryl McMaster (b.1988) stands against a dramatic landscape of snow and ice on Lake Erie in Crystal Beach, Ontario. Transforming her appearance using costumes, makeup, and props, McMaster presents herself as a supernatural protector of the mayflies and water striders that have declined in population in recent years in this region but serve as important sources of food for birds, fish, and other creatures. This work is part of the series As Immense as the Sky, 2019, in which McMaster, who is of *nêhiyaw* (Plains Cree), British, and Dutch descent, visits sites of ancestral significance to gain the knowledge and wisdom necessary to face the precarious health of our planet.

Learn more about this artist

Read an ACI Spotlight on McMaster's Work

LAKESIDE, SUMMER MORNING

by Kazuo Nakamura

Composed of meticulous horizontal and vertical brushstrokes in subdued blues and greens, *Lakeside, Summer Morning*, 1961, exemplifies Japanese Canadian artist Kazuo Nakamura's (1926–2002) signature landscape paintings of the 1950s and 1960s. Fascinated by the intersections of nature, science, and mathematics, Nakamura sought to express the underlying order of the natural world in his meticulously rendered canvases, which are deliberately poised between representation and abstraction. As a member of the Toronto group of abstract artists Painters Eleven (1954–60), Nakamura approached abstraction in a way that radically differed from the gestural abstract expressionist works of other members, such as Oscar Cahén (1916–1956) and Harold Town (1924–1990).

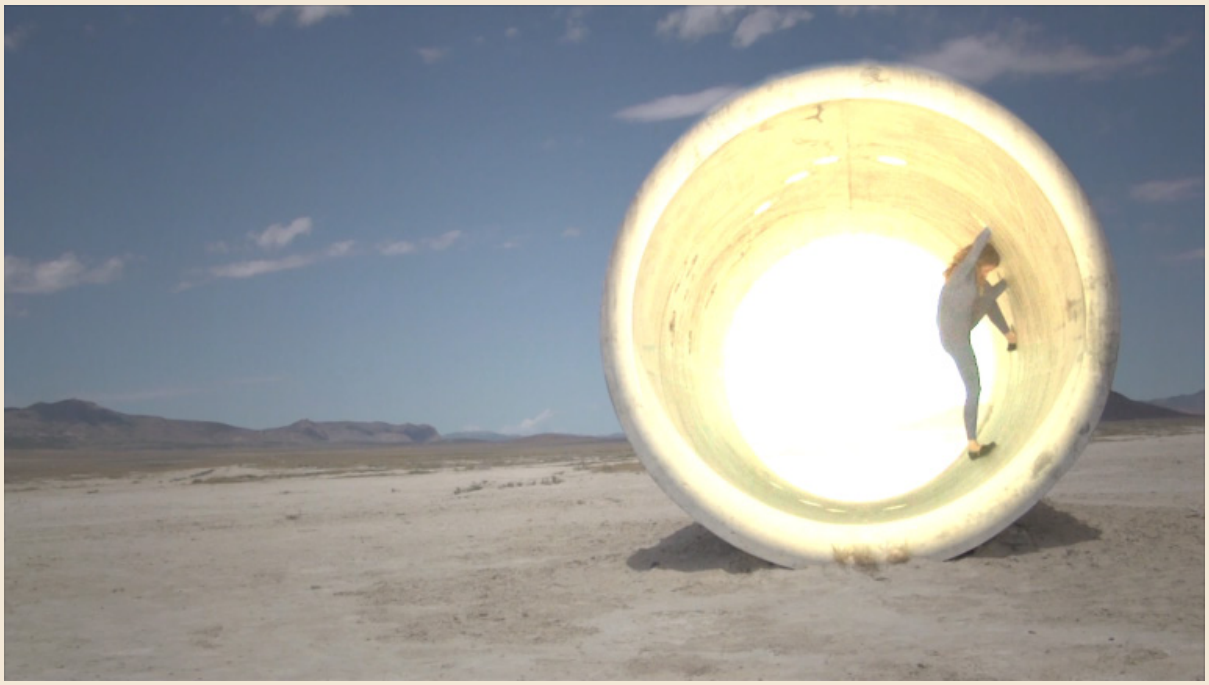
Kazuo Nakamura: Life & Work by John G. Hatch will be published by the Art Canada Institute in June.

To learn more about Oscar Cahén, read ACI's *Oscar Cahén: Life & Work* by Jaleen Grove.

To learn more about Harold Town, read ACI's *Harold Town: Life & Work* by Gerta Moray.

DISPATCHES FROM THE FEMINIST UTOPIAN FUTURE (TELEPORTER II)

by Gillian Dykeman

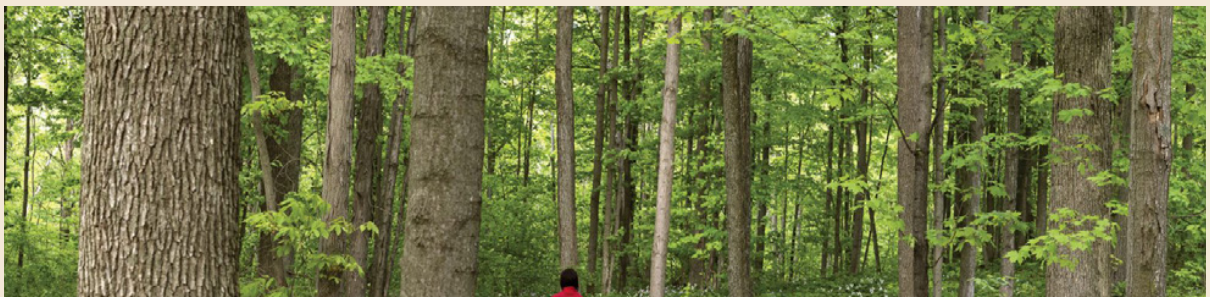


As part of her 2016 master's thesis exhibition with the University of Toronto, Fredericton-based artist Gillian Dykeman presented the video *Dispatches from the Feminist Utopian Future (teleporter II)*. This work was placed within a larger installation of sculptures and watercolour drawings that imagined the earth in the future. The moon narrates the video, where feminists artistically use the earth's elements and abandoned alien technology to create a feminist paradise. With this video, Dykeman hopes spectators feel a sense of connection with the natural landscape and become compelled to learn more about feminism. Dykeman's interdisciplinary work is known for its celebration of feminism, as well as its depictions of the relationships between bodies, labour, capitalism, land, and politics.

Learn more about this artist

NITEWAKÉ:NON

by Melissa General



In *Nitewaké:non*, 2015, Mohawk artist Melissa General wraps herself in red cloth and stands on the land of her ancestors. As she feels, smells, and sees the Six Nations territory surrounding her, General attempts to honour the memory and history of this land she once called home. It is through this exploration on and with the land that General acknowledges her desire to return home, referenced in the artwork's title, which means "the place where I come from." As a multidisciplinary artist working in photography, video, audio, and installation, General focuses on Six Nations and Haudenosaunee territory, and the concepts of language, land, and memory.

Learn more about this artist

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PAST NEWSLETTERS

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