ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

MAY 7, 2021

MOTHER AND MUSE
ELEVEN CANADIAN WORKS

Reflecting on the theme of motherhood, artists from across the country capture the joys, struggles, and wide-ranging experiences of being a mother

To celebrate Mother's Day this Sunday, we're highlighting remarkably diverse representations of mothers. Although the subject is one of the most popular themes in art history, the artists featured here share unique insights into the extraordinary experiences of being a mother and the inimitable bond between parent and child. From Rajni Perera's mural depicting a woman and her baby journeying across a drought-stricken landscape to Shelley Niro's iconic image of her mother posing on the trunk of a car to Thelma Pepper's documentation of motherhood on the Prairies, this week's selections reveal an infinite source of artistic inspiration in the happiness, challenges, and complexities of being a mother.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

THE REBEL

by Shelley Niro

This early photograph by the acclaimed Brantford, Ontario-based artist Shelley Niro (b.1954), who is a member of the Six Nations Reserve, Turtle Clan, Bay of Quinte Mohawk, depicts her mother, June Chiquita Doxtater, posing with joy and confidence on the trunk of the family car. The nameplate embedded on the trunk's surface reads "Rebel." Embodying this persona with humour and assurance, Niro's mother "was proud of the way she looked and took every opportunity to celebrate her femininity," the artist notes. *The Rebel*, 1982/89, parodies female bodies in advertising while also challenging stereotypical images of Indigenous women as being passive or existing solely in the past. Niro, who frequently incorporates her mother and other family members into her art, presents Indigenous identity and representation in personal yet deeply relatable ways.

Learn more about Shelley Niro

THE WATCHER

by Laura Muntz Lyall

Painted in 1894, this solemn scene by the British-born, Toronto-based Impressionist painter Laura Muntz Lyall (1860–1930) shows a devoted mother watching over her sleeping daughter. One of the first Canadian women artists to achieve success in Europe in the late nineteenth century, Lyall was an avid painter of women and children, influenced by the immense popularity of depictions of motherhood during the Victorian era. By employing a *chiaroscuro* effect—contrasting areas of dark and light—to enhance the drama and intimacy of the moment, Lyall captures the inner worlds of the figures. The bottle of medicine resting on the nightstand indicates that the girl is unwell. While the darkness enshrouding the mother symbolizes her worried mind, the ethereal light shining on her daughter highlights her youth, innocence, and vulnerability.

Learn more about Laura Muntz Lyall

COMPOSITION (MOTHER AND CHILD)

by Annie Pootoogook

Kinngait (Cape Dorset) artist Annie Pootoogook (1969–2016) rose to fame in the early 2000s with her drawings of contemporary daily life in the North, including this endearing portrayal of a mother and child walking outdoors in a snowy landscape. Gazing directly at the viewer, the smiling Inuk woman pulls aside her large hood to reveal an infant cocooned in the back pouch (*amaut*) of her *amauti* (parka). The movement of the mother's hair and the fur on her hood suggests that it is a windy day, yet her content baby appears impervious to the unforgiving weather. Although the theme of mother and child is a traditional one in Inuit art, Pootoogook marks this as a contemporary image by including a utility pole in the background.

Lean more about this artist in ACI's
Annie Pootoogook: Life & Work by Nancy G. Campbell

BETSY SAW BISOU
BISOU SAW BETSY

by Kali Spitzer

This tintype photograph of an Indigenous mother and child embracing was part of Vancouver-based Indigenous (Kaska Dena) and Jewish artist Kali Spitzer's (b.1987) 2019 exhibition *An Exploration of Resilience and Resistance* at Vancouver's Grunt Gallery, which featured large-scale portraits of Indigenous women and queer, trans, and non-binary individuals from her community. *Betsy saw Bisou Bisou saw Betsy*, 2018, highlights the inimitable bond between Indigenous parent and child—a bond that residential schools and, more recently, foster care have sought to undermine. Spitzer was drawn to tintype photography because of its historical associations with colonial representations of Indigenous people. Collaborating closely with her subjects, Spitzer created portraits that explore "how we can become more empathic, empowered people despite the hardships that we have endured."

Learn more about Kali Spitzer

Read the New York Times article featuring the artist

IN THE SHADOW OF THE TREE

by Helen McNicoll

Although modern female figures and children were among the favourite subjects of accomplished Impressionist artist Helen McNicoll (1879–1915), with the exception of *In the Shadow of the Tree*, c.1914, she rarely painted portrayals of motherhood. In this scene of bourgeois leisure, a young woman, comfortably seated in the shade, reads a book while her baby sleeps in a carriage. Rather than focusing on the relationship between mother and child, McNicoll depicts the woman lost in her own world while absentmindedly resting her hand on the side of the baby carriage. This painting belongs to a long artistic tradition of representing women reading or sewing in domestic spaces, although some contemporary scholars have argued that in the nineteenth century, these activities may have served as subversive, albeit temporary, modes of escape from domestic duties.

Learn more about this artist in ACI's
Helen McNicoll: Life & Work by Samantha Burton

This title is also avilable in a print edition

JOURNEY/DROUGHT

by Rajni Perera

In this mural created by Sri-Lankan born, Toronto-based artist Rajni Perera (b.1985) for the 13th Gwangju Biennale, 2021, in South Korea, a mother carrying her baby on her back is one of several figures walking through a swirling, drought-stricken landscape. A few are waving at each other, signalling a sense of community and comradery, yet their masks and layered clothing reveal a hazardous physical environment. During the pandemic, Perera created this work alongside other pieces "like masks, costumes, and props that signal a transformation of selfhood and innovate protocols of defense, convergence, and protection," says the Gwangju Biennale's artistic director Natasha Ginwala. This week Perera was longlisted for the Sobey Art Award—we are delighted to be sharing her work and offer her our congratulations!

Read more about Rajni Perera's work at the Gwangju Biennale

Watch a video of Rajni Perera in conversation
with Sara Angel and Shary Boyle

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NELLIE AT HOME (NELLIE SCHNELL)

by Thelma Pepper

Embarking on a career in photography at sixty, Saskatoon-based Thelma Pepper (1920–2020) dedicated much of her time to interviewing and taking pictures of elderly women in long-term facilities and remote communities in Saskatchewan. This composite work from 1989 shows Pepper's close friend Nellie Schnell posing in different areas of the same room in her home, creating the impression of the passage of time as she reflects on her life and in particular on memories of her mother. Schnell noted, "My father, I would say was not really a good farmer or an aggressive person; my mother was, aggressive for her children. She was determined that her children were going to have things better than they had. And I think that was the object of her life, really. And I think that was the objective of many, particularly women who came to the prairies during those times."

Learn more about Thelma Pepper

ALEX GONZALEZ LOVES HIS MOTHER AND FATHER

by Ken Lum

This work is part of Vancouver-born, Philadelphia-based artist Ken Lum's (b.1956) Portrait-Logo series from the 1980s, in which he paired photographic portraits with fabricated logos, texts, and names. On the left side of this diptych, the phrase "Alex Gonzalez loves his mother and father" is presented in a bold font typically seen in corporate advertising. The affectionate nature of the statement is incongruous with the aloof young man on the right, whose arms are folded over his naked chest. With this piece and the Portrait-Logo series more broadly, Lum plays with the visual codes of advertising to create ambiguous images that expose the disparity between appearance and meaning and frustrate viewers' perceptions and expectations.

Learn more about Ken Lum

MOTHER SERIES

(detail)

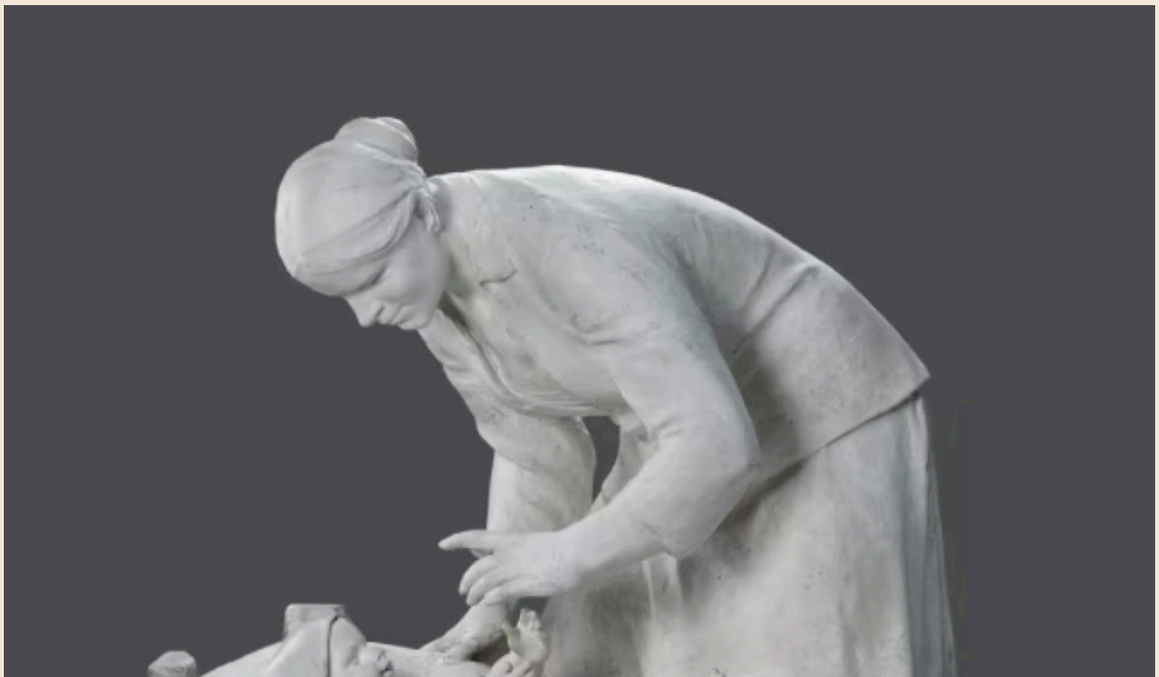
by Chun Hua Catherine Dong

This work belongs to Montreal artist Chun Hua Catherine Dong's Mother series, 2017, in which she photographed herself with fourteen of her late mother's friends in the artist's hometown in China. Dong gifted each woman embroidered traditional Chinese shoes, which her mother loved, dressed herself in their clothing, and took formal portraits with them in their homes. In this photograph, Dong and her mother's friend are seated on opposite sides of a table, both wearing patterned jackets and dark pants and similarly posed. On the elderly woman's feet are the traditional shoes given to her by the artist. By re-enacting the past experiences of her mother meeting her childhood friends, Dong bridges the past and present and powerfully addresses the role of absence as a positive force that can lead to new relationships and narratives.

Learn more about Chun Hua Catherine Dong's Mother series

THE CRADLE

by Alfred Laliberté

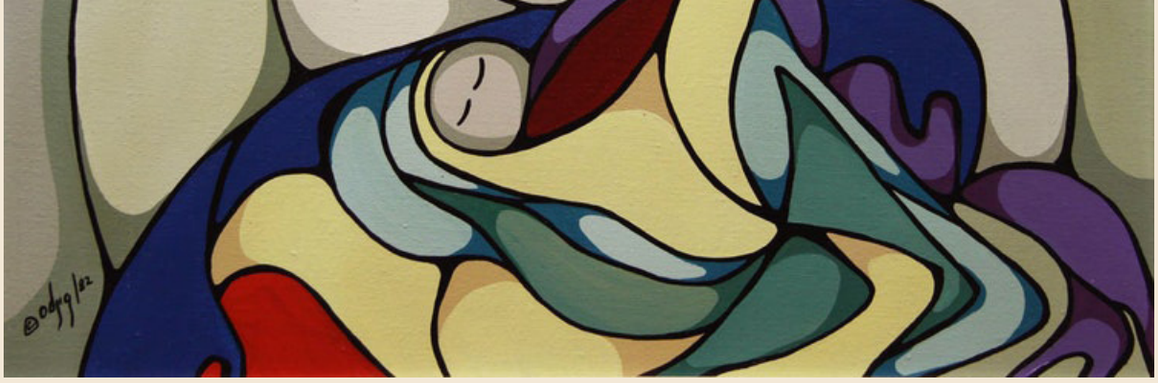


Created by the renowned Quebec sculptor Alfred Laliberté (1878–1953) c.1916, this plaster figure shows an infant engaged in a tender moment with his mother. Born into a farming family in southern Quebec, Laliberté often explored rural Quebec life, legends, and customs in the smaller sculptures he made alongside his large-scale public monuments. This personal piece not only recalls his own early life, but also reflects his prolific work in self-portraiture. Laliberté's relationship with his mother and rural upbringing may be seen as formative influences on his identity. The artist kept this sculpture in the drawing classroom of the Council of Arts and Manufactures in Montreal, where he taught for many years.

Learn more about Alfred Laliberté

UNTITLED MOTHER AND CHILD

by Daphne Odjig



Revered Indigenous artist Daphne Odjig (1919–2016), who was of mixed Odawa, Potawatomi, and English heritage, often focused on themes of family and womanhood in her works, including this dynamic painting of a mother lovingly cradling her infant child. Existing between representation and abstraction, the composition is composed of curving black lines enclosing broad areas of bold colour. Odjig developed her distinctive style by merging elements of Cubism and Surrealism with traditional Indigenous subject matter. Her works alter our perceptions of three-dimensional space and reality in order to express an Indigenous perspective—one that she hoped would reflect Indigenous viewers' own experiences and understanding of the world.

Learn more about Daphne Odjig

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PAST NEWSLETTERS

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Image Credits: **[1,10]** Kali Spitzer, *Betsy saw Bisou Bisou saw Betsy*, 2018, archival C print of scanned tintype, 76.2 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy Grunt Gallery, Vancouver. **[2,11]** Helen McNicoll, *In the Shadow of the Tree*, c.1914, oil on canvas, 100.3 x 81.7 cm. Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City (1951.140). **[3,15]** Chun Hua Catherine Dong, *Mother Series* (detail), 2019, digital print. Courtesy of the artist. **[4,8]** Laura Muntz Lyall, *The Watcher*, 1894, oil on canvas, 71.1 x 91.4 cm. Private collection. **[5,16]** Alfred Laliberté, *The Cradle*, c.1916, plaster, 132 cm (h). Collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Mrs. Paul-Émile Lafontaine in memory of her husband, inv. 1970.1651. **[6,9]** Annie Pootoogook, *Composition* (*Mother and Child*), 2006, coloured pencil and ink on paper, 38.1 x 50.8 cm. Collection of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario, purchased with the generous support of The Dr. Michael Braudo Fund of the McMichael Canadian Art Foundation (2017.1.3). Courtesy of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario. Reproduced with the permission of Dorset Fine Arts. **[7]** Shelley Niro, *The Rebel*, 1982/89, hand-tinted photograph, 28 x 35.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist. **[12]** Rajni Perera, *JOURNEY/DROUGHT* (detail), 2021, mixed media on hand-pulled marbled kozo paper, 116.8 x 243.8 cm. Courtesy of Minds Rising, Spirits Tuning, The 13th Gwangju Biennale. Photo Credit: Sang Tae Kim. **[13]** Thelma Pepper, *Nellie At Home (Nellie Schnell)*, 1989, giclee print on rag paper, 20.3 x 20.3 cm each. **[14]** Ken Lum, *Alex Gonzalez Loves his Mother and Father*, 1989, chromogenic print on sintra, mounted on acrylic sheet with screen printed ink text, 116.5 x 203.3 x 5.5 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 2005 (2005.86). Courtesy of the artist. **[17]** Daphne Odjig, *Untitled Mother and Child*, n.d. acrylic, 17 x 23.5 cm. Courtesy of Cowley Abbott Fine Art and Auction House, Toronto.