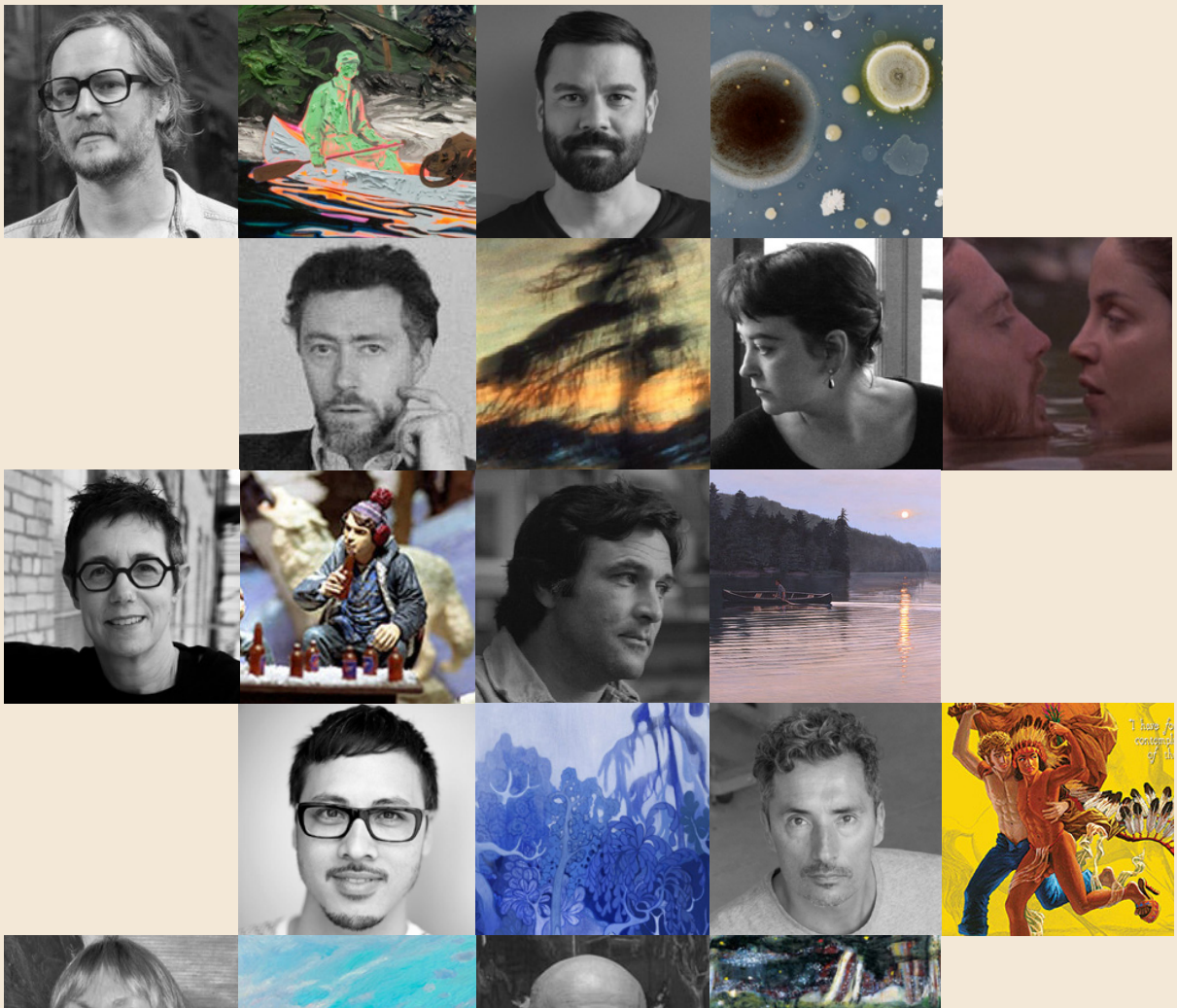
ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

AUGUST 6, 2021

INSPIRED BY TOM THOMSON
12 CANADIAN ARTISTS RESPOND

This week, on August 5, 1877, in Claremont, Ontario, one of the country's most famed artists was born. Both loved and contested, arguably no other painter has had as indelible an impact on the country's cultural landscape as he did. To mark the anniversary of Thomson's birth, we're looking at contemporary works that address his extraordinary achievement.



Poets, playwrights, novelists, filmmakers, musicians, and visual artists are among the countless individuals who have been motivated by Tom Thomson's quintessentially Canadian landscapes as well as his life, which was shrouded in mystery after his sudden death in 1917. In 2015, the Art Canada Institute published *Tom Thomson: Life & Work* by the much-admired art historian David Silcox, who noted that the painter continues to awe us with his extraordinarily vivid, fresh, and spirited depictions of wilderness that preoccupy Canadian artists of all disciplines because of how they came to embody an ideal of this country's cultural identity. Through Thomson's depictions of the Canadian forests, fields, water, and weather, explains Silcox, he "gave Canada a galvanizing set of icons that largely define the Canadian visual identity, as many people like to think of it." In honour of the date that Thomson entered art history 144 years ago, we're featuring works by contemporary creators who confirm his enduring influence through their artworks—which address an array of topics, including the documentation of landscape, the materiality of paint, and troubling colonial narratives—and underscore the painter's unwavering legacy.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

UNTITLED (PAINTER IN A CANOE)

by Kim Dorland

Kim Dorland, *Untitled (Painter in a Canoe)*, 2013, The Bailey Collection.

For Vancouver-based Kim Dorland (b.1974), Tom Thomson has been a pivotal influence: since discovering his paintings as a teenager Thomson has remained his favourite artist (and is the namesake of one of his sons). In 2013, Dorland held a residency at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, where he explored Thomson's work in depth, and created *Untitled (Painter in a Canoe)*, 2013, a canvas based on a photograph of the iconic artist, among other works. Dorland explains that Thomson was "a brilliant colourist and the way he used material is just perfect." Here the contemporary artist pays tribute to his hero's virtuosity but with a handling of bold brushwork and paint that reveals Dorland's own unique style, known for its fluorescent hues, abstracted forms, and sculptural textures.

Learn more about Kim Dorland's residency and exhibition at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection

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MICROBES SWABBED FROM A PALETTE THOUGHT TO HAVE BEEN USED BY TOM THOMSON

by Jon Sasaki

Jon Sasaki, *Microbes Swabbed from a Palette Thought to Have Been Used by Tom Thomson,* 2020, Courtesy of the artist and Clint Roenisch Gallery, Toronto.

This work is part of Homage, 2020, a series of large-scale photographs of petri dishes that the Toronto-based multidisciplinary Japanese Canadian artist Jon Sasaki (b.1973) filled with bacterial cultures transferred from paint palettes and brushes used by Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven. Working in the vein of what he describes as "romantic conceptualism," Sasaki came up with the idea of creating photographs of the flowering bacterial cultures that he swabbed from historic artistic tools held in the archives of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection. In Sasaki's photographs, he captures specks of white, orange, yellow, and black set against a dark blue background to suggest a landscape or a starry night sky—an ingenious and inspired tribute to the genre that Thomson and the Group of Seven pioneered. This series is currently on view in the exhibition *Jon Sasaki: Homage* at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario.

Learn more about *Jon Sasaki: Homage* at the McMichael, June 14–September 26, 2021

PLUS TARD #20

by Michael Snow

Michael Snow, *Plus Tard #20*, 1977, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

With *Plus Tard #20*, 1977, legendary artist Michael Snow (b.1928) represents Tom Thomson's *The Jack Pine*, 1916–17, in a shimmering, elusive image. The work is one of twenty-five prints in a series that Snow created at the National Gallery of Canada, taking photographs in a room that was devoted to Thomson and the Group of Seven. These artists were good friends who painted together—Thomson died before the Group of Seven was formed, but he was a key influence on their art. Snow was drawn to these works because of their material qualities—the pure colours, distinctive brushstrokes, and interesting surfaces—and the possibilities of trying to capture these characteristics with a camera. The Plus Tard series brings together details of paintings, all framed with dark, black rectangles that highlight the colourful power of the historic works.

Read more in ACI's
Michael Snow: Life & Work by Martha Langford

This book was made possible thanks to the Title Sponsorship of Partners in Art.

FILM STILL FROM THE FAR SHORE

by Joyce Wieland

Joyce Wieland, film still from *The Far Shore*, 1976, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Joyce Wieland (1930–1998), one of Canada's most innovative artists, was fascinated with Tom Thomson, and he became a central inspiration for her feature film *The Far Shore*, 1976, set at a lake in northern Ontario. As shown in this still from the movie, its fictional heroine Eulalie de Chicoutimi becomes disillusioned with her marriage and falls in love with a painter, Tom McLeod, who was modelled on Thomson. Like many of Wieland's earlier works, *The Far Shore* is an exploration of how Canadians mythologize the environment. As Concordia Professor and Art Canada Institute author Johanne Sloan wrote about the film in her book, *Joyce Wieland: Life & Work*, it "features landscape as background, plot device, and object of desire. All the main characters want something from the land, and the film shows how their desires coincide or clash."

Read more in ACI's
Joyce Wieland: Life & Work by Johanne Sloan

This book was made possible thanks to the Title Sponsorship of Phyllis Lambert and the Toronto Friends of the Visual Arts.

GROUP OF SEVEN AWKWARD MOMENTS (EARLY SNOW WITH BOB AND DOUG)

by Diana Thorneycroft

Diana Thorneycroft, *Group of Seven Awkward Moments (Early Snow with Bob and Doug)*, 2005, Courtesy of the artist.

A humorous diorama by Winnipeg artist Diana Thorneycroft (b.1956), *Early Snow with Bob and Doug*, 2005, brings together Tom Thomson's painting *Early Snow*, 1916–17, with miniature figures of Bob and Doug McKenzie, main characters in an SCTV sketch comedy "Great White North," about a pair of fictional Canadian brothers. In Thorneycroft's work, the McKenzie brothers are drinking beer in the woods, about to be eaten by wolves. The piece brings the historic landscape into dialogue with the present, making us laugh while encouraging us to reflect on our country's culture. It was a critical success for Thorneycroft and led her to create other works in the series Group of Seven Awkward Moments, dioramas in which she juxtaposes iconic and historic landscape paintings with contemporary figures related to technology, consumerism, and popular culture, creating provocative statements about Canada today.

Learn more about Diana Thorneycroft

ALGONQUIN (HOMAGE TO TOM THOMSON)

by Ken Danby

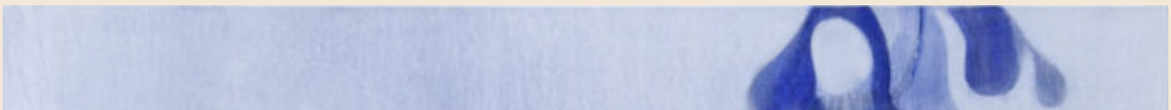
Ken Danby, *Algonquin (Homage to Tom Thomson)*, 1997, private collection.

Among Canada's most popular realist artists, Ontario-based Ken Danby (1940–2007) painted *Algonquin (Homage to Tom Thomson)*, 1997, a decade before he himself passed away from a heart attack during a canoe trip in Algonquin Park. In this large-scale work, a lone figure paddles across the lake at sunset, his movements casting ripples across the water's surface. Similar to Thomson, "Danby had his own path and vision," says curator Ihor Holubizky. Capturing the quiet solitude of nature that Thomson enjoyed during his extensive sketching trips, Danby reveals his own careful observations and artistic interpretations.

Learn more about Ken Danby

WILD WILLOW

by Rick Leong



Rick Leong, *Wild Willow*, 2019, Courtesy of the artist and Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal.

As contemporary Chinese Canadian artist Rick Leong (b.1973) states of his work, “right from the beginning, I had this sense of wanting to [...] incorporate place and landscape in the formation of my own sense of identity, and working through what that means.” In *Wild Willow*, 2019, Leong washes the Canadian landscape in blue and white, bringing together references to classical Chinese painting and ceramics, and the tradition of landscape painting in Canada. In the upper right-hand corner of his work we see the droopy foliage of Tom Thomson’s famous *The Jack Pine*, 1916–17—a touchstone of Canadian art history that garners new significance in the context of Leong’s visionary re-imagining.

Learn more about Rick Leong

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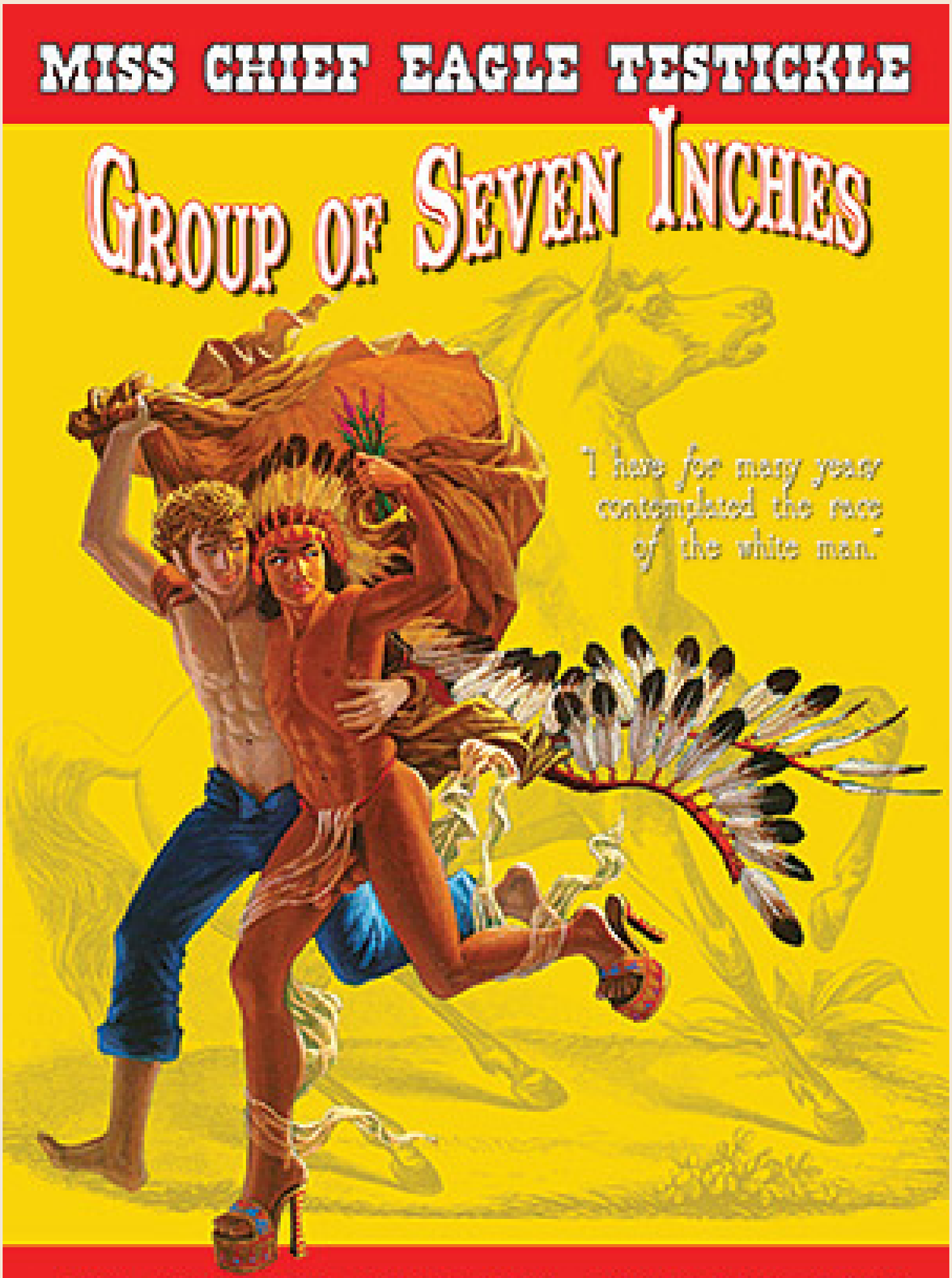
POSTER FOR GROUP OF SEVEN INCHES

by Kent Monkman



Kent Monkman, Poster for *Group of Seven Inches*, 2004, performance and film, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario.

In 2004, Toronto-based Cree artist Kent Monkman (b.1965) accepted an invitation for a weekend residency at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario, and there he created a performance and film, both titled *Group of Seven Inches* (a promotional poster is shown above). In this work, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle—Monkman's famed trickster alter ego—overturns the colonial stereotyping processes ubiquitous in the Western film genre by focusing on the question of "authenticity" as related to the white male body. Shot in the McMichael's grounds, it deliberately undermines the narrative authority of nineteenth-century "frontier" painters like George Catlin (1796–1872) and Paul Kane (1810–1871). With a nod to the landscape legacy of the Group of Seven—and a signature pun inviting us to contemplate the masculinist nature of their legacy—Miss Chief succeeds in unsettling the settler colonial narratives still present in Canadian art history.

Kent Monkman: Life & Work by Shirley Madill
will be published by ACI in 2022.

Read an essay about Miss Chief Eagle Testickle by Shirley Madill

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SELKIRK / FURROWS

by Rae Johnson

Rae Johnson, *Selkirk / Furrows*, 2008, Courtesy of Christopher Cutts Gallery, Toronto.

Winnipeg-born artist Rae Johnson (1953–2020), a founding member of the influential Toronto-based ChromaZone gallery, is best known for her 1970s and 1980s figurative works that explore dreams and imaginary scenes. But after relocating from Toronto to northern Ontario in 1987, she began producing large-scale landscape paintings such as *Selkirk / Furrows*, 2008, that were inspired by Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven. Johnson similarly made *plein air* sketches that recorded her direct observations of nature; however, once in her studio, she reworked the sketches into large-scale paintings that reflect her inner experience of nature—a departure from the objective depictions of Thomson and the Group of Seven. While the bold colour palette of *Selkirk / Furrows* is reminiscent of Thomson's work, the painting's smooth surface departs from his characteristic thick application of paint and reflects Johnson's preoccupation with inner rather than material realities.

Learn more about Rae Johnson

WHITE CANOE

by Peter Doig

Peter Doig, *White Canoe*, 1990–91, painting, private collection.

Internationally renowned British artist Peter Doig (b.1959) evokes memories of his Canadian childhood and the myth of Tom Thomson in this richly detailed, shimmering depiction of a white canoe floating on the water. Doig based his painting on the iconic 1914 photograph of Thomson sketching from his boat, except here the canoe is empty, conjuring a sense of mystery and foreboding. *White Canoe*, 1990–91, belongs to a series of canoe paintings that Doig produced in the early 1990s at the start of his artistic career. Blurring the boundaries between reality, imagination, and dreams, these magical realist paintings were partly inspired by a scene from the American horror film *Friday the 13th* (1980).

Read more in ACI's
Tom Thomson: Life & Work by David P. Silcox

This book was made possible thanks to the Title Sponsorship of Consignor Canadian Fine Art.

POLYCHROME IV

by Ben Walmsley

Ben Walmsley, *POLYCHROME IV*, 2020, private collection, Courtesy of the artist and Birch Contemporary, Toronto.

The turquoise sky of Tom Thomson's famous painting *Northern Lights*, 1917, is re-imagined in this work by contemporary Toronto-based artist Ben Walmsley (b.1960), which is part of his Polychrome series. The term "polychrome" makes reference to the use of a variety of colours on a given surface—often architectural or sculptural. Thomson is famous for his depictions of the natural phenomena he encountered during numerous trips to Algonquin Park—including his exquisite renderings of the northern lights. Walmsley explores the same subject matter here, taking the creative potential of colour to new heights, and evoking the pantone colour matching system in the strip of blue, green, and pink hues that come alive in his luminous landscape.

Learn more about Ben Walmsley

TOM THOMSON: THE SILENCE AND THE STORM

by Harold Town

Harold Town, *Tom Thomson: The Silence and The Storm*, 1977, private collection.

This playful illustrative portrait of Tom Thomson was created by modern Canadian artist Harold Town (1924–1990). Himself a member of the famed Painters Eleven group, Town was also a prolific author and journalist, and together with David P. Silcox authored the 1977 commemorative classic *Tom Thomson: The Silence and the Storm*—a book published to commemorate the 100th year of Thomson's birth, and the 60th anniversary of his mysterious death in his beloved Algonquin Park. This lithograph was included in the 1977 edition of the book, which is today celebrated as an authoritative text on the artist's life.

Read more in ACI's
Harold Town: Life & Work by Gerta Moray

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PAST NEWSLETTERS

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Image Credits: **[1]** Kim Dorland, *Untitled (Painter in a Canoe)*, 2013, oil and acrylic on jute over wood panel, 182.9 x 243.8 cm. The Bailey Collection. **[2]** Jon Sasaki, *Microbes Swabbed from a Palette Thought to Have Been Used by Tom Thomson,* 2020, archival print, 91.44 x 91.44 cm, Image courtesy of the artist and Clint Roenisch Gallery, Toronto. **[3]** Michael Snow, *Plus Tard #20*, 1977, 1 of 25 framed dye coupler prints, each 86.4 x 107.2 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. **[4]** Joyce Wieland, *The Far Shore*, 1976, 35mm film, colour, sound, 105 min. Collection of Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa. **[5]** Diana Thorneycroft, *Group of Seven Awkward Moments (Early Snow with Bob and Doug)*, 2005, C-Print, 30 × 24 in. Courtesy of the artist. **[6]** Ken Danby, *Algonquin (Homage to Tom Thomson)*, 1997, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 127 cm. Private collection. **[7]** Rick Leong, *Wild Willow*, 2019, oil on canvas, 243.8 × 182.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal. **[8]** Kent Monkman, *Group of Seven Inches*, 2004, performance and film, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario. **[9]** Rae Johnson, *Selkirk / Furrows*, 2008, oil on panel, 72 × 86 in, 182.9 × 218.4 cm. Courtesy of Christopher Cutts Gallery, Toronto. **[10]** Peter Doig, *White Canoe*, 1990–91, oil on canvas, 200.5 x 243 cm. Private collection. **[11]** Ben Walmsley, *POLYCHROME IV*, 2020, mixed media on wood, 14 in × 14 in. Private collection. Courtesy of the artist and Birch Contemporary, Toronto. Photograph by Toni Hafkenscheid. **[12]** Harold Town, *Tom Thomson: The Silence and The Storm*, 1977, lithograph, 38.1 x 46.4 x 7 cm.