ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

AUGUST 20, 2021

PHOTOGRAPHY PIONEERS
TWELVE CANADIAN ARTISTS

In honour of this week's World Photography Day, we're looking at some of this country's innovators who have helped define the medium since its mid-nineteenth-century creation.

Many of Canada's best-known artists are photographers. Yet it wasn't until the 1960s—over a century after the medium's birth in 1839—that most public institutions saw it as a genre worthy of a department of its own. That decade marked a pivotal period in the growth of photography when the camera became an important tool to respond to emerging social movements, as well as questions of identity, the self, and community. Yesterday (August 19) marked World Photography Day and a celebration of the art, science, and craft of the camera. At the Art Canada Institute, the dramatic impact of photography will be explored in our forthcoming 2023 publication *Photography in Canada: The First 150 Years, 1839–1989* by Dr. Sarah Bassnett and Dr. Sarah Parsons. In the meantime, here's a selection of photographic masterpieces by creators who pushed the medium—and Canadian art—in new and important directions.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

AROUND THE CAMP FIRE

by William Notman

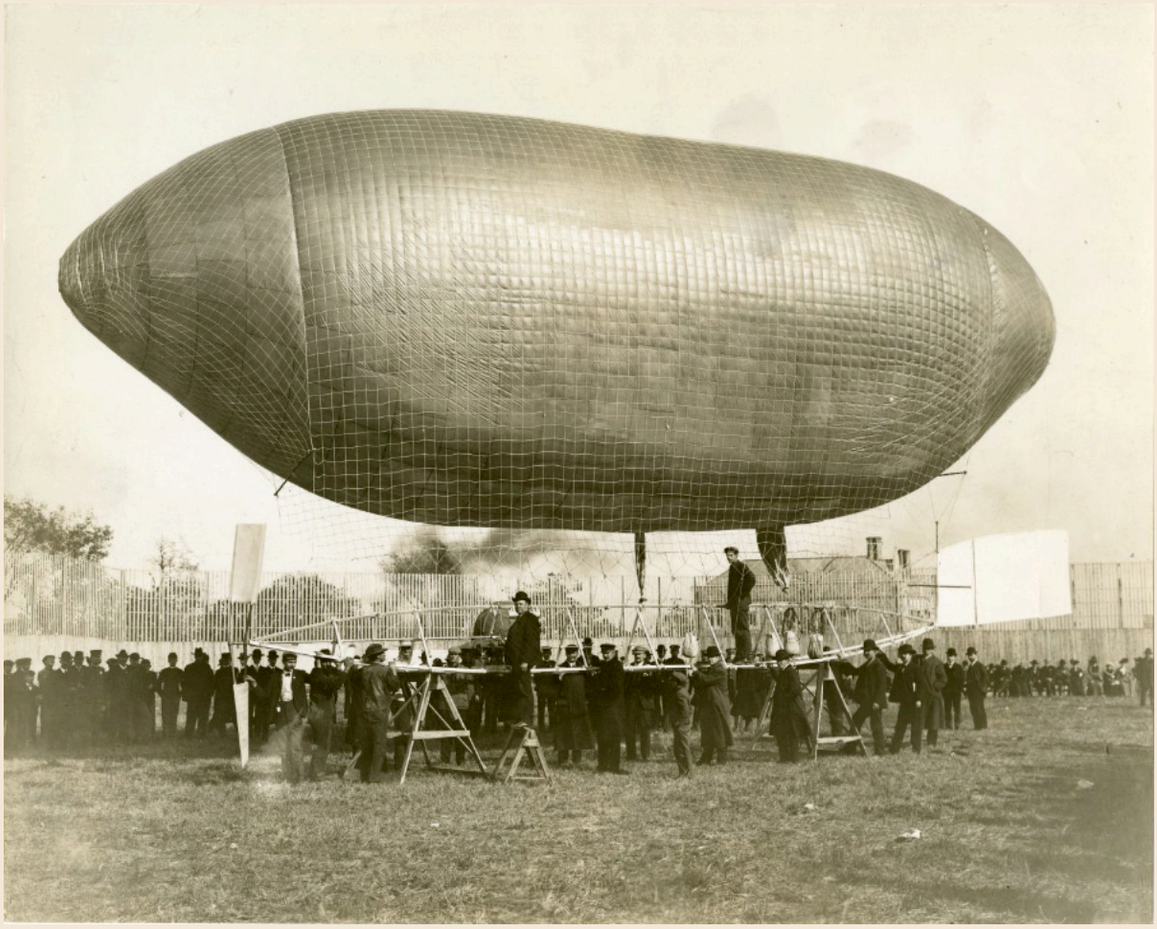
William Notman, *Around the Camp Fire*, Caribou Hunting series, Montreal, 1866, McCord Museum, Montreal.

Scottish-born, Montreal-based William Notman (1826–1891) was the first Canadian photographer to achieve an international reputation. Long before the technology of Photoshop, he was famous for his elaborate composite pictures and meticulously staged outdoor scenes—such as *Around the Camp Fire*, 1866—that were created inside his studio. In this photograph, part of Notman's Caribou Hunting series, a group of men are sitting on the ground next to their tent within a staged forest nighttime setting. The fire illuminating the figures' faces was created by a magnesium flare—one of the countless devices the ingenious photographer experimented with to create his singular images. Notman developed technical innovations that advanced the field of photography while also producing an unparalleled visual archive of nineteenth-century Canadian social and cultural history.

Read more in ACI's *William Notman: Life & Work*
by Sarah Parsons

CAPT. TOM BALDWIN ONE OF THE PIONEERS

by Jessie Tarbox Beals



Jessie Tarbox Beals, *Capt. Tom Baldwin one of the pioneers*, 1904, New-York Historical Society.

In 1902 Hamilton, Ontario-born Jessie Tarbox Beals (1870–1942) became the first female news photographer in North America when she was hired as a staff photographer at the *Buffalo Inquirer* and *Courier*. Two years later, Beals created this remarkable image of the renowned American inventor Thomas Scott Baldwin's *California Arrow* airship at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1904. At this event, Roy Knabenshue, who is standing on the gondola of the dirigible in this photograph, would become the first aeronaut to fly an airship in the United States. To create this image and other pioneering works, Beals carried an 8 x 10 view camera and other equipment weighing nearly fifty pounds. Despite her heavy load, the tenacious photographer never shied from climbing ladders and ascending in hot air balloons to make photographic history.

Learn more about Jessie Tarbox Beals

DOMESTIC SYMPHONY

by Margaret Watkins

Margaret Watkins, *Domestic Symphony*, 1919, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Another trailblazing photographer from Hamilton, Ontario, was Margaret Watkins (1884–1969), one of the first women to work in the field of advertising photography after she moved to New York City in 1915. Known for introducing a modernistic aesthetic into commercial photography, Watkins produced images such as her masterpiece *Domestic Symphony*, 1919, that blend nineteenth-century Pictorialism, an approach to photography that emulated painting. Watkins delighted in the lyrical interplay between the contours and shapes of kitchen items. In 1921 *Domestic Symphony* graced the pages of *Vanity Fair* magazine in an article about Watkins's work titled "Photography Comes into the Kitchen."

Learn more about Margaret Watkins

PETER PITSEOLAK HOLDING A CAMERA WITH HOMEMADE FILTER

by Peter Pitseolak

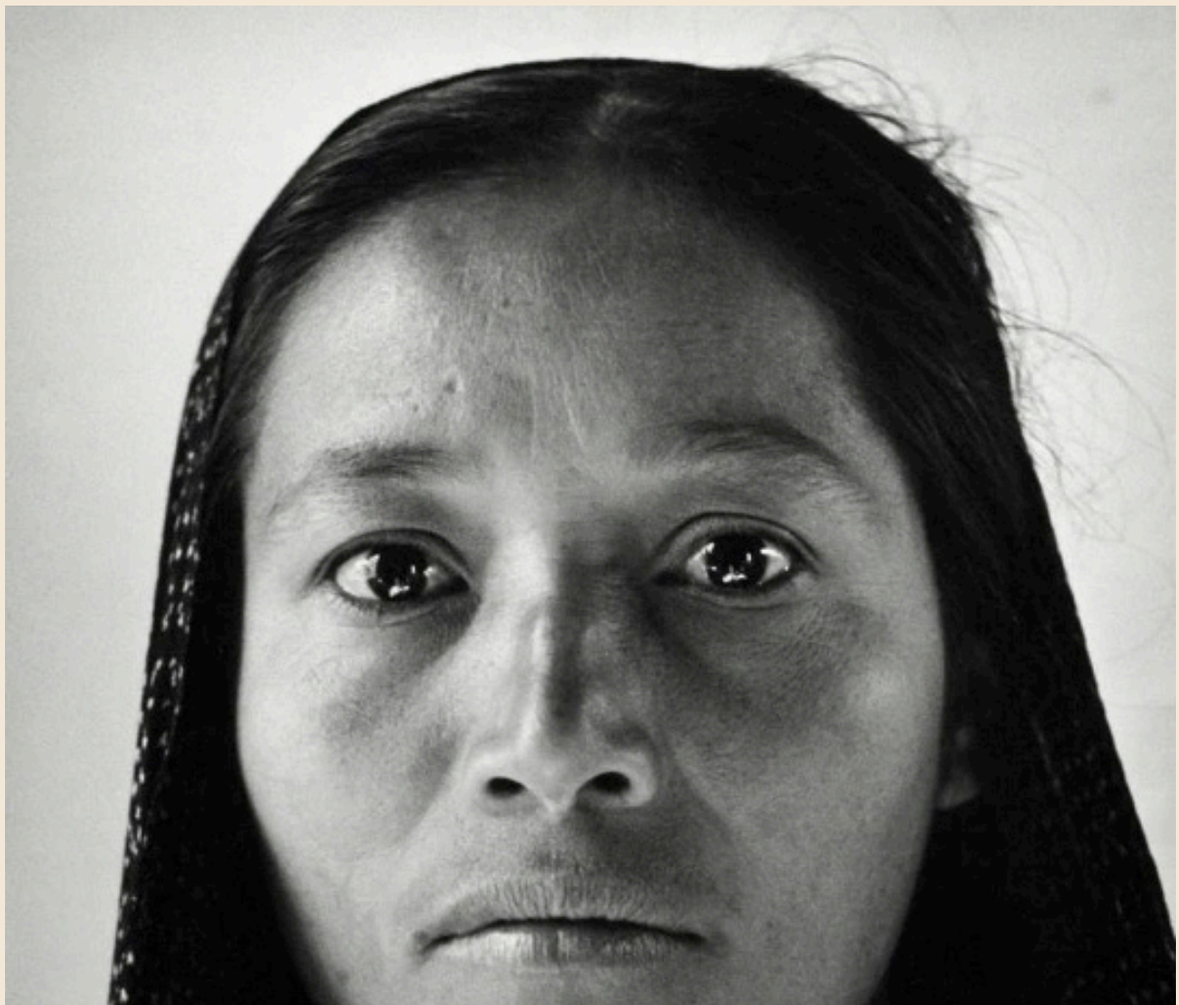
Peter Pitseolak, *Peter Pitseolak holding a camera with homemade filter*, c.1940–60, Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau.

Peter Pitseolak (1902–1973), pictured here holding a camera in this self-portrait, was the earliest Inuk photographer. He began taking photographs in the 1930s, and for more than twenty years produced over 1,500 negatives documenting family, friends, and events in and around the community of Kinngait. The cold climate and remoteness of the region presented unique challenges in processing film, but Pitseolak and his wife, Aggeok, discovered inventive solutions, such as converting an old pair of sunglasses into a lens filter and developing photographs using a flashlight covered with a red cloth. Pitseolak's valuable photographic archive, created to provide future generations with knowledge of the traditional Inuit way of life from an insider's perspective, is now housed in the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec.

Learn more about Peter Pitseolak

CONFRONTACION (ELODIA) (CONFRONTATION)

by Reva Brooks



Reva Brooks, *Confrontacion (Elodia) (Confrontation)*, 1948, Courtesy of the Estate of Reva Brooks and Stephen Bulger Gallery, Toronto.

Named one of the top fifty female photographers in history by the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1975, Toronto-born Reva Brooks (1913–2004) spent most of her career in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, where she captured the daily lives of its citizens, including their customs, traditions, and spiritual practices. Brooks's arresting image *Confrontacion (Elodia) (Confrontation)*, 1948, depicts a mother grieving the loss of her child. The woman, named Elodia, posed for this portrait after imploring Brooks, who was then her neighbour, to photograph her son in his casket. *Confrontation* was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York and included in *The Family of Man* in 1955, the most highly attended photography exhibition in history.

Learn more about Reva Brooks

MISS CHATELAINE

by Suzy Lake

Suzy Lake, *Miss Chatelaine*, 1973, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

In the photographic performance *Miss Chatelaine*, 1973, Scotiabank Photography Award winner Suzy Lake (b.1947) took on an iconic Canadian magazine to challenge and question how women are represented in the mass media. Presenting a grid of twelve images of herself, she collaged a variety of fashionable hairstyles onto her head to investigate the portrayal of women in consumerism and magazine culture. In each component of the work Lake wears whiteface makeup, originally used in theatre to erase an actor's personal characteristics—a fact that playfully highlights the point that gender identity is performative. Lake's bold photo-performance pieces thrust her into the foreground of feminist art and also strongly influenced the internationally renowned artist Cindy Sherman (b.1954).

Read more in ACI's *Suzy Lake: Life & Work*
by Erin Silver

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GO

by Fred Herzog

Fred Herzog, *Go*, 1985, Courtesy of the Estate of Fred Herzog and Equinox Gallery, Vancouver.

German-born, Vancouver-based Fred Herzog (1930–2019) was a pioneer of colour street photography in the 1950s, when only black and white photographs were considered fine art examples of the medium. *Go*, 1985, exemplifies not only Herzog's extraordinary eye for colour, but also his ability to capture fleeting encounters between unrelated objects or people that give rise to unexpected formal and narrative connections in his photographs. Settling in Vancouver in 1953, the artist regularly traversed the city streets with his camera in hand, snapping photos of "the docks, the airport, the street, the people." Adds Herzog, "I loved the city for its grittiness"—a quality he captured in vivid colour using Kodachrome slide film.

Learn more about Fred Herzog

A SUDDEN GUST OF WIND (AFTER HOKUSAI)

by Jeff Wall

Jeff Wall, *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*, 1993, Tate, London.

With works such as *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*, 1993, celebrated Vancouver artist Jeff Wall (b.1946) disrupted the conventions of photography by presenting large-scale transparencies mounted in lightboxes. In this composition, blowing sheets of white paper intermingle with the dead leaves of two spindly trees as four figures are caught in a gust of wind raging across a rural industrial landscape. The woman on the far left, whose vision is obstructed by her billowing scarf, struggles to hold onto a file folder as her papers fly away. The work demonstrates Wall's ground-breaking practice, beginning in the late 1970s, of bringing together famous works of art (in this case *Travellers Caught in a Sudden Breeze at Ejiri*, c.1832, by Japanese painter and printmaker Katsushika Hokusai) and contemporary technology in the form of constructed photographic tableaux.

Learn more about Jeff Wall

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST, SITTING WITH A KILLER, SURROUNDED BY FRENCH CURVES

by Shelley Niro

Shelley Niro, *Portrait of the Artist, Sitting with a Killer, Surrounded by French Curves*, 1991, Courtesy of the artist.

This playful depiction of 2017 Scotiabank Photography Award winner Shelley Niro (b.1954) with her sisters is part of her photographic series Mohawks in Beehives, in which Niro's siblings transformed themselves with makeup, jewellery, and bouffant hairdos before venturing out into the streets of downtown Brantford. The artist explains that the series was her way of fighting the depression caused by the Oka Crisis and other troubling current events. She adds, "It was just kind of a day of letting go. I felt at the time that it was really risqué—we didn't care what anybody thought of us." A member of the Six Nations Reserve, Bay of Quinte Mohawk, Turtle Clan, Niro has since the 1980s created representations of herself, family, and friends that challenge Indigenous stereotypes and forge new directions in photography by incorporating Mohawk imagery and traditional stories.

Learn more about Shelley Niro

NICKEL TAILINGS #34

by Edward Burtynsky

Edward Burtynsky, *Nickel Tailings #34*, Sudbury, Ontario, 1996, Cleveland Museum of Art.

The surreal *Nickel Tailings #34*, 1996, is one of Toronto photographer Edward Burtynsky's (b.1955) most recognizable images of landscapes altered by industry—a theme that has dominated his practice for the past forty years. Shot in Sudbury, Ontario, the photograph shows a bright orange stream amidst a black, barren landscape. The painterly beauty of the image draws us in before we realize the disconcerting fact that it is a picture of a polluted environment. The alarming colour of the water is caused by the oxidation of iron left behind when separating nickel from ore. Burtynsky's extensive series on mines, quarries, dams, factories, and water depict scenes from around the world of humankind's nefarious impacts on the earth. The internationally renowned photographer's works will be featured in a new piece entitled *In the Wake of Progress* at Luminato Festival this October.

Learn more about Edward Burtynsky

ABBOTT & CORDOVA, 7 AUGUST 1971

by Stan Douglas

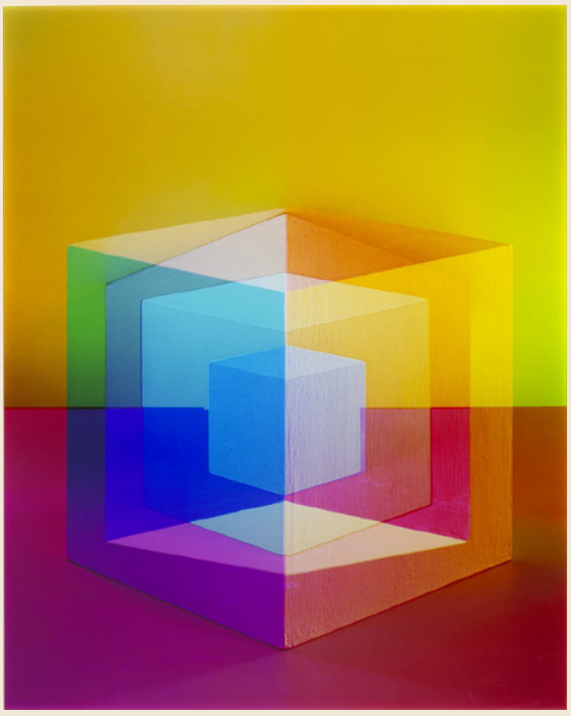
Stan Douglas, *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971*, 2008, Minneapolis Institute of Art.

Through his ambitious photographs and installations, acclaimed Vancouver artist Stan Douglas (b.1960)—who will be representing Canada in the 2022 Venice Biennale—revisits transitional moments in history that have been overlooked or misinterpreted but are crucial to understanding our present. *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971*, 2008, explores the Gastown Riot in Vancouver that "was critical in changing the Downtown Eastside from what it was to what it is today," says Douglas. He recreated the violent encounter between peaceful protestors—who were upset about marijuana laws and the gentrification of the neighbourhood—and riot police, mounted police, and undercover cops by fabricating a life-size stage set and hiring over one hundred actors. The resulting large-scale photograph is a composite of fifty images informed by extensive archival research and interviews with witnesses and participants.

Learn more about Stan Douglas

CFAAL 346 AND CFAAL 340

by Jessica Eaton



Jessica Eaton, *cfaal 346*, 2013,
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Jessica Eaton, *cfaal 340*, 2013,
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Part of Regina-born, Montreal-based Jessica Eaton's (b.1977) series Cubes for Albers and LeWitt, 2010–ongoing, these vibrant abstractions push the limits of analogue photography. Using grey wooden cubes as her subjects, she relies on colour separation filters, multiple exposures, and in-camera masking to transform them into complex, sumptuously hued photographic compositions. Eaton's series was inspired by the geometric abstraction of Josef Albers (1888–1976) and writings of Conceptual artist Sol LeWitt (1928–2007)—particularly his interest in working with purely abstract ideas. Says Eaton, "What interests me about photography is much less replicating my experience of reality and much more the ambitions we would normally associate with painting: to show something beyond my experience."

Learn more about Jessica Eaton

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PAST NEWSLETTERS

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