ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

JANUARY 28, 2022

LIVES LOST AND REMEMBERED

REFLECTING ON THE HOLOCAUST

To mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27, we are featuring Canadian works that honour the victims of the Holocaust and reflect on its enduring legacy.

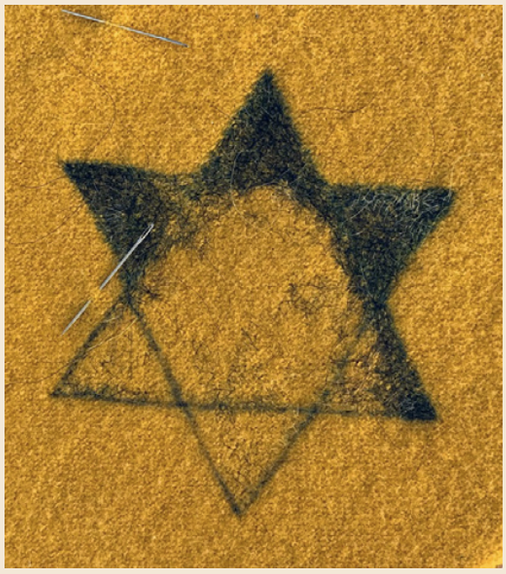
Yesterday was International Holocaust Remembrance Day, marking the seventy-seventh anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. In honour of this annual day of commemoration, we are sharing Canadian works that reflect on the crimes that the Nazi regime inflicted upon millions of European Jews and other minorities. The art in this week's newsletter calls attention to those whose identities were lost as well as names we can inscribe and remember. It spans decades, from the time of the Nazi regime to the near present. It includes Gershon Iskowitz recalling the pogroms in his hometown of Kielce, Poland, at the beginning of the Second World War, Bernice Eisenstein looking back on her life as a child of survivors, and Edward Burtynsky documenting landscapes in Eastern Europe scarred by traces of violence. Through the creativity of these artists and the others below and the wisdom and poignancy of their work, we are reminded of the hope for a world of tolerance, justice, and peace.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

SIX MILLION STITCHES: VIENNA 66,000

by Mindy Yan Miller

Sharon Yan witnesses and counts Mindy Yan Miller's stitches in a tally book as part of *Six Million Stitches: Vienna 66,000*, Vienna, 2017.



Human hair pricked into a yellow cloth Star of David as part of *Six Million Stitches: Vienna 66,000*, Vienna, 2017.

With her memorial *Six Million Stitches: Vienna 66,000*, 2017, Montreal artist Mindy Yan Miller (b.1959) set out to commemorate the 66,000 Viennese Jews who died in the Holocaust. For each life lost she made one stitch with human hair into a yellow cloth Star of David (right) that resembles the identifying badge that Jews were forced to wear in public under Nazi rule. *Six Million Stitches* was performed at various sites in Vienna from June 29 to July 8, 2017, beginning with the artist-run gallery 12-14 contemporary (left). Sitting across from the artist, her sister, Sharon Yan, witnessed and recorded the completion of each stitch in a tally book (left). Meanwhile, Marcus Miller, the artist's husband, talked with people passing by, sharing with them information about the project and pamphlets containing the stories of Holocaust survivors.

Learn more about Mindy Yan Miller

FORMER RAILWAY PATH, TREBLINKA, POLAND, 2014

by Edward Burtynsky

Edward Burtynsky, *Former Railway Path, Treblinka, Poland, 2014*, 2014, Courtesy of Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto.

In this photograph by Toronto artist Edward Burtynsky (b.1955), a path cutting through a forest marks the train route that carried Jews to the Treblinka extermination camp near Warsaw, Poland, where over 750,000 people were killed. This image is one of six by Burtynsky that can be found on the walls of the National Holocaust Monument in Ottawa, which was unveiled in 2017. The photographs belong to a collection of over 250 images that Burtynsky took of Holocaust sites during a trip that took him 4,000 km across Eastern Europe in 2014. A selection of the works appears in the limited-edition book *Chai* (2017), which reflects on the legacy of the Holocaust and its fading traces within contemporary landscapes.

Learn more about Edward Burtynsky's project in ACI's *War Art in Canada: A Critical History* by Laura Brandon

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DOG AMONG THE RUINS

by Jack Shadbolt

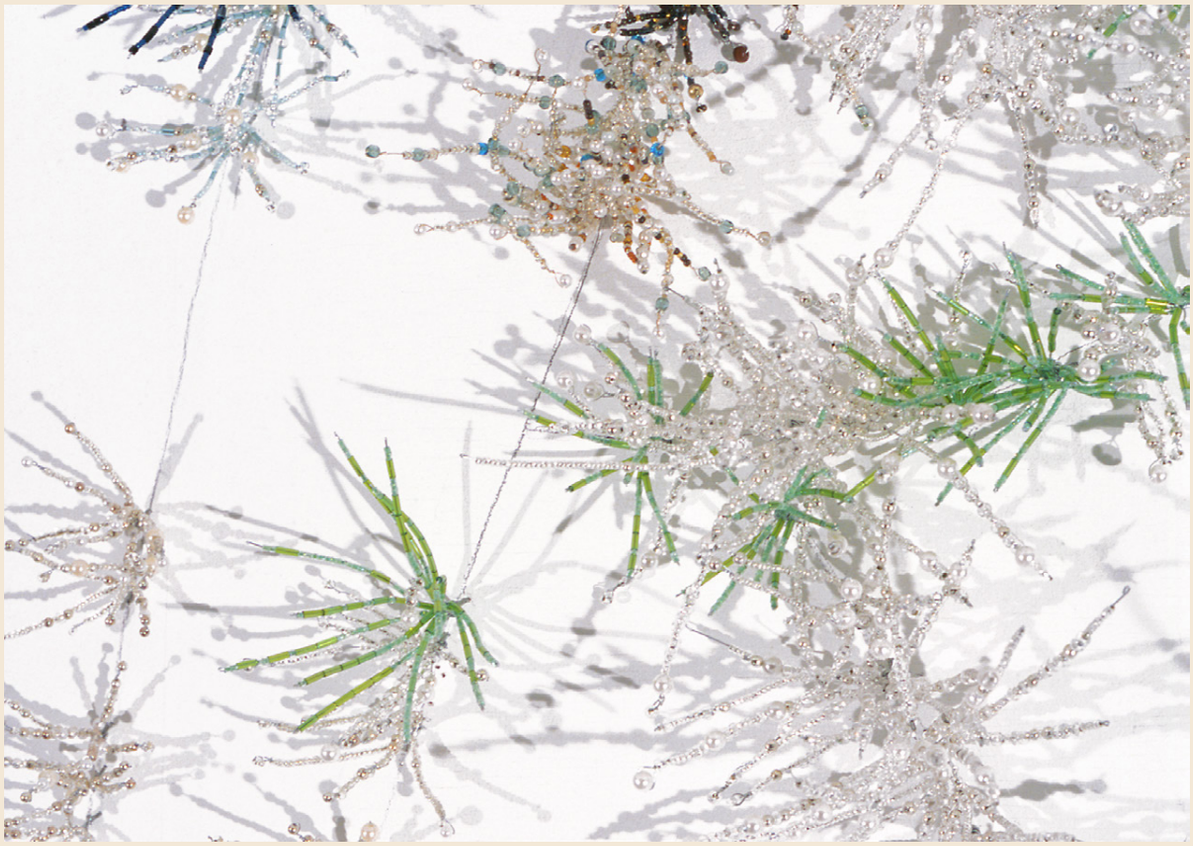
Jack Shadbolt, *Dog Among the Ruins*, 1947, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

While serving at the Canadian Military Headquarters in London, England, Jack Shadbolt (1909–1998) was responsible for cataloguing photographs taken by the Army Signal Corps at the Nazi concentration camps of Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald. The effect of this horrific exposure emerged in a series of gut-wrenching paintings begun in 1946 after the artist's return to Vancouver. In this dramatic composition, a dog turns its head upward to unleash a heart-rending howl as it stands alone amidst ruins. Smoke billowing over the site indicates that its destruction has just occurred. Positioned in proximity to the viewer, the pained animal powerfully communicates the emotional devastation of loss. One of Canada's most innovative and important painters, Shadbolt found his wartime experiences strongly influenced his subsequent work, which explored the human condition and the disturbing aspects of our modern age.

Learn more about Jack Shadbolt

ANNE FRANK II

by David Altmejd



David Altmejd, *Anne Frank II*, 1999. Courtesy of David Altmejd and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels.

When developing installations like *Anne Frank II*, 1999, the Montreal-born, Los Angeles-based artist David Altmejd (b.1974) works to create something vital and connected to larger narratives. Commenting on this project, he explains, "Anne Frank came with a very dramatic idea of life and death, so I wrote Anne Frank on a large board and then created glass-beaded structures that seemed to be growing along with the name. I was taking Anne Frank, a name loaded with grave connotations, and pushing it in this optimistic direction. It was as if the energy contained in her name was making the glass structures grow."

Learn more about David Altmejd

IT BURNS

by Gershon Iskowitz

Gershon Iskowitz, *It Burns*, c.1950–52, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

In the summer of 1939, Gershon Iskowitz (1920 or 1921–1988) was about to commence his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, Poland, when the German Army invaded. He returned to his hometown of Kielce, where the persecution of Polish Jews quickly began. His painting *It Burns*, c.1950–52, depicts the horrors of this period: several figures have run out onto the street as raging fires annihilate their homes. Iskowitz began producing memory works after being liberated from Buchenwald in 1945, and he continued to make them following his arrival in

Canada in 1948, until about 1954. Importantly, these images portray the events of the Holocaust from the perspective of a victim and survivor.

Read more in ACI's
Gershon Iskowitz: Life & Work by Ihor Holubizky

AND THEY MADE US MARCH...

by Caroline Dukes

Caroline Dukes, *And They Made Us March...*, from the Remember...Relate...Retell series, 1991, Courtesy of the CCCA Canadian Art Database.

In *And They Made Us March...*, 1991, Hungarian-born Winnipeg artist Caroline Dukes (1929–2003) recalls her childhood experience of the Holocaust. A black and white photograph of her smiling mother as a young woman belies the traumatic memory that is revealed in the incised text, which reads: "...and they made us march to an undisclosed destination in a group of hundreds of people. Mother had an amulette which hung from a small chain around her neck. She said we will take each a pill from it if something horrible happens to us..." Dukes has adhered a chain containing pills to her mother's image, making the harrowing narrative startlingly real for the viewer. This work is part of her deeply personal multimedia creation Remember . . . Relate . . . Retell, 1992, which explores her early life in Hungary.

Learn more about Caroline Dukes

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I WAS A CHILD OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS

by Bernice Eisenstein

Illustrations from Bernice Eisenstein's book *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (2006).

In her poignant illustrated memoir *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (2006), artist and writer Bernice Eisenstein (b.1949) recalls growing up in Toronto in the 1950s with her Yiddish-speaking parents and their friends, survivors of the war who were forever bonded by their common experience. In the upper image, Eisenstein imagines her father as a sheriff arriving at the "Arbeit Macht Frei" ("Work Will Free You") gate in Auschwitz to liberate the prisoners—a big fan of Westerns, he loved to watch them on television. Eisenstein's fantasy of her father as a cowboy hero is a wish fulfillment that stands in stark contrast to the tragic reality of all those who were lost, including his parents and two sisters. In the lower image, Eisenstein presents her mother, grandmother, and aunt, their arms tattooed with their Auschwitz concentration camp prisoner numbers. This portrait, explains Eisenstein, "brings to mind the present, their survival, their presence, while now almost all the survivors are gone. It is as if they look to us for remembrance."

Learn more about Bernice Eisenstein

Watch Ann Marie Fleming's animated adaptation of
I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors

SWAN SONG (BENJAMIN) – CROSS-BORDER ROUTE, FRANCE/SPAIN

by Fiona Annis

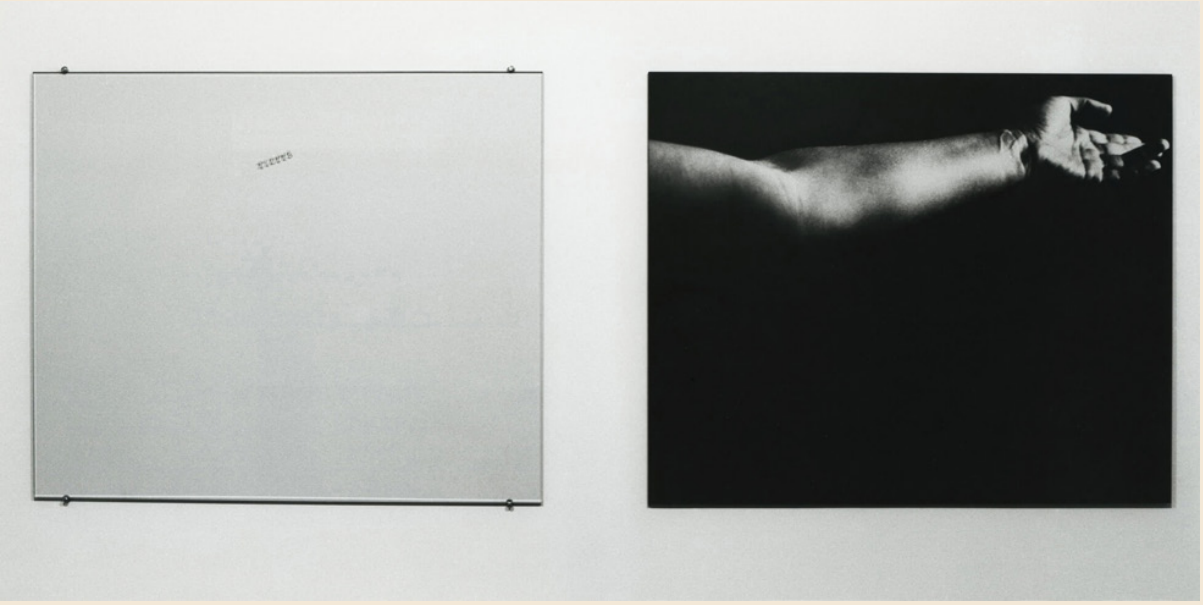
Fiona Annis, *Swan Song (Benjamin) – Cross-border route, France/Spain*, 2010, Courtesy of Fiona Annis.

This photograph depicts the cross-border route between France and Spain that Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), a renowned Jewish German philosopher and cultural theorist, took in his attempt to evade capture by the Nazis. One of his best-known essays is "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," which he composed during his exile in France. His final essay, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," was written in January 1940. That September, after crossing the border to Spain and being threatened with deportation back to France, Benjamin died of suicide. In her photographic series The After-Image (Swan Songs), Montrealer Fiona Annis (b.1983) pays tribute to the swan songs of eminent artists and intellectuals—the remarkable final works closely intertwined with their deaths—by documenting the landscapes associated with them.

Learn more about Fiona Annis

OF A PLACE, SOLITARY OF A SOUND, MUTE

by Barbara Steinman



Barbara Steinman, *Of a Place, Solitary Of a Sound, Mute*, 1989, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

The elegiac diptych *Of a Place, Solitary Of a Sound, Mute*, 1989, by Montreal artist Barbara Steinman (b.1950) consists of a glass panel on the left with a six-number sequence etched into its surface, which only becomes legible when the viewer stands in front of the photograph of an outstretched arm on the right. At once evoking the image of the crucified Christ and the tattooing of prisoners in Auschwitz concentration camp, this work reflects on the legacy of the Holocaust and its enduring meaning both for those who directly experienced it and subsequent generations. Often addressing themes of disenfranchisement, Steinman has examined the effects of the genocide in other works that draw on archival images and her visits to major Holocaust sites.

Read more in ACI's
War Art in Canada: A Critical History by Laura Brandon

UNTITLED

by Oscar Cahén

Oscar Cahén, *Untitled*, c.1943, The Cahén Archives, Toronto.

Before he co-founded the celebrated artists' collective Painters Eleven (1953–60) in Toronto, Oscar Cahén (1916–1956) was a young illustrator who fled Nazi Germany and went to England with his family. There he was detained as a suspected German spy and then placed on a prison ship headed to Canada, where he was held in an internment camp. Produced around 1943, shortly after Cahén's two-year imprisonment in Quebec, these cartoon portraits of Japan's Emperor Hirohito, Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini, German Chancellor Adolf Hitler, and SS leader Heinrich Himmler emulate the style of Arthur Szyk, a Polish-Jewish artist whose satirical cartoons were widely popular during the Second World War. Cahén's early work attracted the attention of major magazines, soon making him one of the most highly sought-after illustrators in North America.

Read more in ACI's

Oscar Cahén: Life & Work by Jaleen Grove

UNTITLED

by Claire Wilks

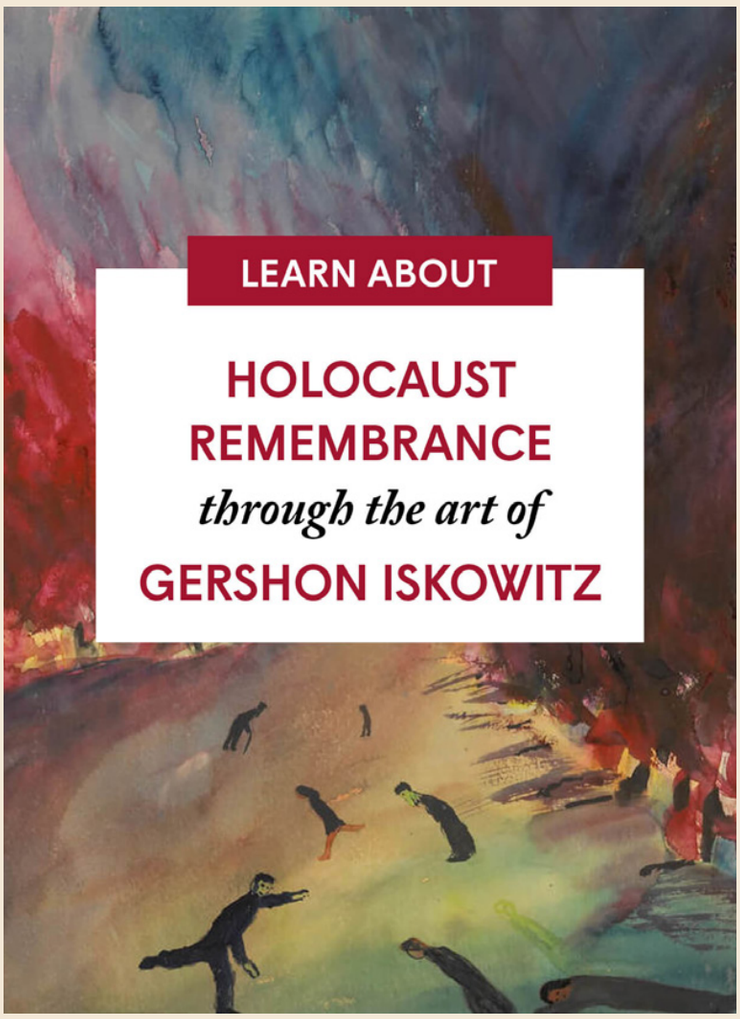
Claire Wilks, *Untitled*, 1993–94, Estate of Claire Wilks.

This haunting image of naked women and children huddled together in a dark, claustrophobic space is part of a major body of work that Toronto artist Claire Wilks (1933–2017) produced after reading *The Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum*, 1941–1943. Hillesum was a young Dutch Jewish woman who documented the Nazi persecution of Jews in her diaries before she was sent to Auschwitz and murdered in 1943. Her writings about the Westerbork transit camp in northeastern Netherlands, where she briefly worked before becoming an internee herself in 1942, profoundly affected Wilks. In renderings of the women and children imprisoned there, the artist imagines the intimacy and love that existed between them in the midst of death. Begun in the 1980s, these powerful drawings are among Wilks's best-known works today.

Learn more about Claire Wilks

TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT

THE HOLOCAUST THROUGH ART



Teacher resource guide published by the Art Canada Institute.

The Art Canada Institute student art education program regularly publishes teacher resource guides—available free of charge on our website—that explore a wide range of topics through art. Our guide on Gershon Iskowitz examines why the Polish-born Canadian artist was compelled to produce work about the Holocaust, and addresses the importance of its remembrance to commemorate this tragic moment of history.

Download the Teacher Resource Guide here

Our entire collection of newsletters can be found on the ACI website, for you to read, share, and enjoy.

PAST NEWSLETTERS

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Image Credits: **[1]** Sharon Yan witnesses and counts Mindy Yan Miller's stitches in a tally book as part of *Six Million Stitches: Vienna 66,000, Vienna*, 2017. Photo credit: Marcus Miller. **[2]** Human hair pricked into a yellow cloth Star of David as part of *Six Million Stitches: Vienna 66,000, Vienna*, 2017. Photo credit: Sharon Yan. **[3]** Edward Burtynsky, *Former Railway Path, Treblinka, Poland*, 2014. Courtesy of Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto. © Edward Burtynsky. **[4]** Jack Shadbolt, *Dog Among the Ruins*, 1947, watercolour, carbon pencil, 78.2 x 56.9 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria (1980.069.001). © Jack Shadbolt Estate. **[5]** David Altmejd, *Anne Frank II*, 1999, wire, glass beads, paint, wood, pencil, 182.88 x 304.8 x 774.92 cm. Courtesy of David Altmejd and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels. **[6]** Gershon Iskowitz, *It Burns*, c.1950–52, coloured ink and gouache on illustration board, 50.9 x 63.4 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Gift of Joey, Toby, and Alan Tanenbaum, Toronto, 1998 (39917). Photo credit: NGC. © Gershon Iskowitz Foundation. **[7]** Caroline Dukes, *And They Made Us March…*, from the Remember…Relate…Retell series, 1991, acrylic, pastel, incised text and metal locket, pills on black & white photograph, 188 x 122 cm. Courtesy of the CCCA Canadian Art Database. **[8]** Illustrations from Bernice Eisenstein's *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (McClelland & Stewart, 2006). Courtesy of Bernice Eisenstein. **[9]** Fiona Annis, *Swan Song (Benjamin) – Cross-border route, France/Spain*, 2010, C-type print, 100 x 100 cm. Courtesy of Fiona Annis. **[10]** Barbara Steinman, *Of a Place, Solitary Of a Sound, Mute*, 1989, gelatin silver print and etched glass (122 x 101.5 x 1.4 cm each). Detail: multimedia installation, Art Gallery of Ontario. **[11]** Oscar Cahén, *Untitled*, c.1943, clippings of published work, publication unknown, approx. 9 x 6 and 10 x 7 cm. Collection of The Cahén Archives. © The Cahén Archives. **[12]** Claire Wilks, *Untitled*, 1993–94, touche ink, 89.6 x 62.8 cm. Courtesy of the Estate of Claire Wilks.