ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

FEBRUARY 18, 2022

OUR FAMILIES, OUR ART
12 CANADIAN WORKS

How families in Canada look and are defined has evolved and expanded over the centuries. These artists reflect on what family means to them and the importance of preserving and passing on traditions, stories, and values through the generations.

This past Wednesday, short track speed skating champion Charles Hamelin earned his sixth Olympic gold medal, becoming the co-record holder for most medals won by a Canadian at the Olympic Winter Games. It's an extraordinary achievement for the athlete and for the Hamelin family, who are regarded as Canada's "first family of short track speed skating." This Family Day weekend, we are celebrating our loved ones and all that is possible with their support by sharing a selection of works that explore the diversity of families in Canada and their rich stories. Each image is moving, thoughtful, and insightful in its own way, from William Berczy's famed painting of Quebec's Woolsey family to Mary Pratt's portrait of her newborn granddaughter to Stephanie Noritz's prize-winning photograph of her family during lockdown in 2020. We hope you enjoy these selections and wish you a safe and happy weekend with your loved ones.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

THE MUSTANG SUITE: BABY GIRLZ GOTTA MUSTANG

by Dana Claxton

Dana Claxton, *The Mustang Suite: Baby Girlz Gotta Mustang*, 2008, Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax.

Indigenous twin girls in red dresses and mukluks ride mustang bicycles in this photograph from Vancouver-based Hunkpapa Lakota (Sioux) artist Dana Claxton's (b.1959) *The Mustang Suite*, 2008. Drawing on conventions of family portraiture, this piece—both a video- and photo-based installation—explores the enduring relationship between the Lakota people and horses, animals revered and regarded as sacred companions. As well, the colour red, prominent in this work, holds special significance within Lakota Sioux culture. *The Mustang Suite* was inspired by a ceremony created by nineteenth-century Lakota spiritual leader Black Elk in which human dancers are joined by four horses representing the cardinal directions.

Learn more about Dana Claxton

LUNCH

by Jack Chambers

Jack Chambers, *Lunch*, 1969, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

In London, Ontario artist Jack Chambers's (1931–1978) unfinished painting *Lunch*, 1969, a family meal on a Sunday afternoon is suffused with heightened spiritual meaning. Seated around the kitchen table, Chambers and his wife converse while their two young boys peer in our direction, inviting us into this intimate domestic scene. The artist began this work shortly before he was diagnosed with leukemia. His illness, combined with his Catholic faith, made him acutely conscious of the significance and miraculousness of everyday life, which he sought to express in his domestic tableaux. Reminiscent of *The Last Supper*, c.1495–98, by Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), *Lunch* is one of several creations by Chambers that reflects on his family's relationship to the divine.

Read more in ACI's
Jack Chambers: Life & Work by Mark A. Cheetham

NORITZ-REYES FAMILY, TORONTO

by Stephanie Noritz

Stephanie Noritz, *Noritz-Reyes Family*, Toronto, 2021, Courtesy of Stephanie Noritz.

Ecuadorian Canadian Stephanie Noritz documented her loved ones at home in Toronto during lockdown in April 2021 in this masterfully shot image, which received a 2021 Female in Focus photography award. Within this softly lit refuge, the artist's aunt preoccupies herself with sewing, while one of Noritz's cousins rests on a bed. Another cousin peers out the window, seemingly longing to be outside. Noritz took the picture using an iPhone while she herself was at home in Los Angeles. Like so many of us, she was physically separated from her family during this time and resorted to spending time with them virtually. Despite the vast geographical distance, this picture situates Noritz (and the viewer) within a familial space—a powerful source of comfort in uncertain times.

Learn more about Stephanie Noritz

THE WOOLSEY FAMILY

by William Berczy

William Berczy, *The Woolsey Family*, 1809, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Regarded as one of the great works of early Canadian art, this lively painting by German-born artist and Upper Canada pioneer William Berczy (1744–1813) (who became one of the founders of York) depicts the bourgeoisie Woolsey family at their home in Quebec. The prominent businessman John William Woolsey commissioned this conversation piece—a type of informal group portrait in which figures interact with each other or with pets and engage in leisure activities, such as reading or playing games. Departing from the traditional single-figure compositions that dominate this period in Canadian art, this skillfully rendered family portrait reflects Berczy's training and early career in Europe. He made studies of each of the eight figures before transposing them onto canvas, arranging them in a half circle such that they share glances, creating a sense of intimacy. Woolsey himself stands at the rear, looking over his family protectively.

Learn more about William Berczy

OWEN, ZOË, AND GALEN

by Greg Curnoe

LEFT: Greg Curnoe, *Owen*, June 21, 1983–February 15, 1984, Museum London.
CENTRE: Greg Curnoe, *Zoë*, December 6, 1984–May 12, 1986, Museum London.
RIGHT: Greg Curnoe, *Galen*, February 12–November 26, 1984, Museum London.

A prominent advocate of regionalist culture, London, Ontario artist Greg Curnoe (1936–1992) frequently drew inspiration from his surroundings, family, and friends in his vibrant works. In these life-sized individual portraits of his adolescent children, Owen, Zoë, and Galen, Curnoe conveys a sense of their distinctive personalities through their sartorial choices and poses. Barely fitting within the frames of the compositions, the monumental figures are each situated against vividly coloured, painterly backgrounds overlaid with stencilled words. Curnoe was interested in interactions between images and texts, using words without regard to the conventions of language. The artist painted these portraits at a time when he was reconsidering the direction of his career, yet it is clear that his family as a source of artistic inspiration never waned.

Read more in ACI's
Greg Curnoe: Life & Work by Judith Rodger

MOTHER AND CHILD

WITH PULLED TOOTH

by Karoo Ashevak

Karoo Ashevak, *Mother and Child with Pulled Tooth*, c.1972, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Based in Taloyoak, Nunavut, renowned sculptor Karoo Ashevak (1940–1974) possessed a remarkable gift for carving animated figures that simultaneously elicit fear and laughter. This sculpture portrays a mother who has just pulled out her child's tooth with a piece of string. With her wide eyes and mouth agape, she appears startled by the boy's screams of agony. Yet the work is humorous because it is deeply relatable: we have all had to endure the painful experience of losing our baby teeth as children, often with the help of our parents. Bringing levity to frightening childhood experiences and tales, Ashevak's unforgettable sculptures testify to his singular talent and style. His career was tragically cut short when he and his family died in a house fire in 1974.

Learn more about Karoo Ashevak

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CHILD WITH TWO ADULTS

by Mary Pratt

Mary Pratt, *Child with Two Adults*, 1983, private collection.

In this tender image by Mary Pratt (1935–2018) the New Brunswick realist painter depicts her first grandchild being bathed in a china bowl. The artist and her eldest daughter are the two women partially shown in the picture, carefully washing the baby, whose warm glow evokes the miracle of new life. The scene captures an intimate family memory, "as three generations of females interact, a private moment made public in the painting," writes ACI author Ray Cronin. *Child with Two Adults*, 1983 (which Pratt often referred to as one of her favourite paintings), draws on the tradition of portraits of children and babies, yet Cronin notes that "there is a thorn in this family scene, a sharp prick of discomfort": a crack in the bowl (near the baby's left arm) alludes to the fragility of this precious newborn, and to the uncertainties that accompany the joys of motherhood.

Read more in ACI's
Mary Pratt: Life & Work by Ray Cronin

THE REBEL

by Shelley Niro

Shelley Niro, *The Rebel*, 1982, Courtesy of 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 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, 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

PARENT CHILD

by Jeff Wall

Jeff Wall, *Parent Child*, 2018, Courtesy of Jeff Wall and Gagosian.

A child throwing a tantrum in public is dreaded by every parent—yet all is not as it seems in this photograph by influential Vancouver artist Jeff Wall (b.1946). Known for restaging observed moments of everyday life that are freighted with deeper meaning, Wall based *Parent Child*, 2018, on a candid photograph depicting a friend in a similar scenario. What intrigued Wall about the image was that it did not show the typical exasperated parent dealing with a disobedient child, but rather revealed a more ambiguous relationship. In *Parent Child*, a girl is curled up on the ground as if she is sleeping, while her father patiently watches over her. Nevertheless, an older boy walking by with his own father glances back, curious to see how this familial drama will unfold.

Watch a video of Jeff Wall discussing this work

Learn more about Jeff Wall

PITALOOSIE AND AQSATUNNGUAQ

by Pitaloosie Saila

Pitaloosie Saila, *Pitaloosie and Aqsatunnguaq*, n.d.,
Collection of the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative Ltd.

Part of the first generation of contemporary Inuit artists, Pitaloosie Saila (1942–2021) created this endearing watercolour portrait of herself and her sister Aqsatunnguaq as children. One affectionately rests her head on the other's shoulder, and, in addition to sharing a strong physical resemblance, the similarities in their clothing and hairstyle signify their deep kinship. When Saila was a child, she spent seven years in the South away from her family to recover from tuberculosis and a back injury. When she returned home to Kinngait (then known as Cape Dorset), she learned that Aqsatunnguaq had passed away. In this sentimental portrait, Saila commemorates the relationship she shared with her sister and joyful childhood memories spent together.

Learn more about Pitaloosie Saila

UNTITLED (NYABEL & NEVINE)

by Jorian Charlton

Jorian Charlton, *Untitled (Nyabel & Nevine)*, 2021, Courtesy of Jorian Charlton.

Toronto-based artist Jorian Charlton puts a contemporary spin on the family photo album in her project Out of Many, 2021, in which she borrows elements of fashion photography to capture her Jamaican Canadian sitters. *Untitled (Nyabel & Nevine)*, 2021, presents two women in stylish knitted dresses embracing against a plain white backdrop. In the series, Charlton's portraits are situated alongside 35mm slides taken by her father in Jamaica, New York, and Toronto during the 1970s and 1980s. Blending private worlds with commercial imagery, Charlton's work invites new ways of representing and thinking about Jamaican Canadian identity, culture, and familial narratives.

Learn more about Jorian Charlton

Explore the online exhibition *Out of Many*

CORA-ALLEN WICKLIFFE AND SON CHASKE-WASTE KAITIAKI TWISS

by Kali Spitzer

Kali Spitzer, *Cora-Allen Wickliffe and Son Chaske-Waste Kaitiaki Twiss*, 2017, Courtesy of Kali Spitzer.

This tintype photograph of an Indigenous mother with her young son was part of 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. Spitzer's work honours the inimitable bond between Indigenous parent and child—a bond that residential schools and, more recently, foster care, have sought to undermine. Drawn to tintype photography because of its historical associations with colonial representations of Indigenous people, Spitzer collaborated closely with her subjects and created empowering portraits that defy colonial definitions of race, gender, and sexuality.

Learn more about Kali Spitzer

THE CANADIAN ART INSPIRATION STUDENT CONTEST

The Art Canada Institute Education Program is proud to launch the 2022 edition of its flagship art education challenge, the Canadian Art Inspiration Student Contest. We invite students from Grade 7 through Grade 12 to submit original artworks inspired by historical and contemporary Canadian and Indigenous art by March 31, 2022.

Learn more about the Canadian Art Inspiration Student Contest

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PAST NEWSLETTERS

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Image Credits: **[1]** Dana Claxton, *The Mustang Suite: Baby Girlz Gotta Mustang*, 2008, lightjet c-print, 122.2 x 152.7 cm. Collection of the Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax, Purchased with financial contributions from Dalhousie University, Alumni members of Dalhousie University's Schulich School of Law, and support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisitions Grants program, 2016. Courtesy of Dalhousie Art Gallery. **[2]** Jack Chambers, *Lunch*, 1969, oil and synthetic paint on wood, 197.9 x 182.9 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, purchased with the assistance of the Judith Rachel Harris Foundation and Ethel Harris, 2007 (2007/80). © Jack Chambers Estate. **[3]** Stephanie Noritz, *Noritz-Reyes Family, Toronto*, 2021, digital photograph. Courtesy of Stephanie Noritz. **[4]** William Berczy, *The Woolsey Family*, 1809, oil on canvas, 59.9 x 86.5 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Gift of Major Edgar C. Woolsey, Ottawa, 1952 (5875). Photo: NGC. **[5]** Greg Curnoe, *Owen*, June 21, 1983–February 15, 1984, watercolour and pencil on paper, 183 x 108.5 cm. Collection of Museum London, gift of Mr. and Mrs. John H. Moore, London, Ontario, 1990 (90.A.01). Courtesy of Museum London. © Estate of Greg Curnoe/SODRAC (2016). **[6]** Greg Curnoe, *Zoë*, December 6, 1984–May 12, 1986, pastel and pencil on paper, 194 x 90 cm. Collection of Museum London, gift of Mr. and Mrs. John H. Moore, London, Ontario, 1990 (90.A.03). © Estate of Greg Curnoe/SODRAC (2016). **[7]** Greg Curnoe, *Galen*, February 12–November 26, 1984, watercolour and pencil on paper, 201 x 110 cm. Collection of Museum London, gift of Mr. and Mrs. John H. Moore, London, Ontario, 1990 (90.A.02). © Estate of Greg Curnoe/SODRAC (2016). **[8]** Karoo Ashevak, *Mother and Child with Pulled Tooth*, c.1972, whalebone, antler, grey stone, ivory, sinew, 50.9 × 40.7 × 33.6 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Gift of Samuel and Esther Sarick, 1996. © Public Trustee for Nunavut, Estate of Karoo Ashevak 96/745. **[9]** Mary Pratt, *Child with Two Adults*, 1983, oil on Masonite, 53.7 x 53.7 cm. Private collection. Courtesy of The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery, St. John's. © Estate of Mary Pratt. **[10]** Shelley Niro, *The Rebel*, 1982, hand-tinted photograph, 28 x 35.6 cm. Courtesy of Shelley Niro. **[11]** Jeff Wall, *Parent Child*, 2018, inkjet print, 224 x 253 cm. Courtesy of Jeff Wall and Gagosian. **[12]** Pitaloosie Saila, *Pitaloosie and Aqsatunnguaq*, n.d., watercolour on paper. Collection of the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative Ltd. **[13]** Jorian Charlton, *Untitled (Nyabel & Nevine)*, 2021, inkjet print, overall: 76.2 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy of Jorian Charlton. © Jorian Charlton. **[14]** Kali Spitzer, *Cora-Allen Wickliffe and Son Chaske-Waste Kaitiaki Twiss*, 2017, digital scan of tintype. Courtesy of Kali Spitzer.