ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

MARCH 11, 2022

# BREAKING THE BIAS
# TEN WOMEN ARTISTS
# SHATTERING STEREOTYPES

*Combating gender inequality and discrimination in its many forms, these artists have created thought-provoking works that expose destructive societal biases while shedding light on disregarded experiences and histories.*

Tuesday, March 8 was International Women's Day, an occasion to spotlight the social, economic, cultural, and political achievements of women worldwide. This year's theme is #BreaktheBias, a call for all of us to reject stereotypes, to mobilize against gender discrimination, and to celebrate women working to build a gender-equal society. The following works by groundbreaking Canadian women artists present feminist perspectives on art movements and spheres of society traditionally associated with men, such as patriotism, war, and professional sports. At the Art Canada Institute we strive to listen to and amplify marginalized voices, and we pledge to continue our promotion of those historically excluded from Canadian art history.

**Sara Angel**
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

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# PRIVATE ROY, CANADIAN WOMEN'S ARMY CORPS

*by Molly Lamb Bobak*

Molly Lamb Bobak, *Private Roy, Canadian Women's Army Corps*, 1946, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

Vancouver-born Molly Lamb Bobak (1920–2014) was the only woman to be appointed an official war artist in Canada during the Second World War. With this work Lamb Bobak chose to depict a figure whose racial group was largely absent from the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC). Twenty-nine-year-old Sergeant—not Private—Eva May Roy was a CWAC canteen assistant, cook, and waitress. Lamb Bobak captures her in a way that the art historian Charmaine A. Nelson describes as a subtle critique of the distance between the military's "ideal" CWAC member and the real women who served in the war effort. "She was a warm wonderful person full of compassion and understanding about life," Lamb Bobak later recalled of Roy. "Whenever I think about her I remember an engaging laugh and the best hugs."

Read more in ACI's
*Molly Lamb Bobak: Life & Work* by Michelle Gewurtz

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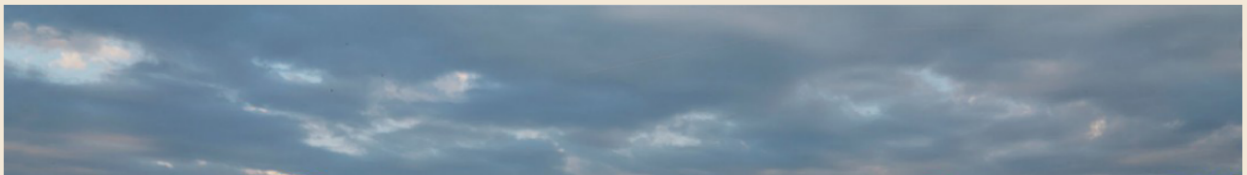
# DEEPER THE WOUNDED, DEEPER THE ROOTS II

*by Esmaa Mohamoud*



Esmaa Mohamoud, *Deeper the Wounded, Deeper the Roots II*, 2019, Courtesy of Esmaa Mohamoud.

The Toronto-based African Canadian artist Esmaa Mohamoud (b.1992) is interested in looking past stereotypes, especially in regards to Black masculinity, gender, and class in professional sports. In this work, she has positioned two figures with their backs to each other in a field. They wear football uniforms crafted from African wax-print textiles and are connected by a cape made of chains. In football, such chains are used to measure a team's progress on the field, but they also serve as reminders of how prisoners or enslaved people were shackled together. With this powerful visual metaphor, Mohamoud critiques the ways in which Black bodies are still being exploited by big business for profit.

Learn more about Esmaa Mohamoud

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# A GROUP OF SIXTY-SEVEN

*by Jin-me Yoon*

Jin-me Yoon, *A Group of Sixty-Seven* (detail), 1996, Courtesy of Jin-me Yoon.

In the early twentieth century, the landscape paintings of the Group of Seven promoted a profoundly influential vision of our nation as uninhabited wilderness, waiting to be explored by Euro-Canadian (male) settlers. Seoul-born Canadian artist Jin-me Yoon (b.1960) responded to this exclusionary vision by photographing sixty-seven members of Vancouver's Korean community in front of Lawren S. Harris's (1885–1970) painting *Maligne Lake, Jasper Park*, 1924—as shown here—and *Old Time Coast Village* (1929–30) by West Coast artist Emily Carr (1871–1945). Yoon's installation directly questions who belongs in these imagined landscapes. Entitled *A Group of Sixty-Seven*, 1996, the work references the year of Canadian Confederation, as well as its centennial year, when the government amended anti-Asian restrictions in the Immigration Act, allowing Yoon's family to move to Canada.

Learn more about Jin-me Yoon

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# THIS PAINTING IS A MIRROR

*by Christi Belcourt*

Christi Belcourt, *This Painting is a Mirror*, 2012, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Gatineau.

"This painting is called *This Painting is a Mirror* because it reflects back to the viewer all the beauty that is already within them," says Scarborough, Ontario-born Métis artist Christi Belcourt (b.1966). "We are not separate from anything, we are born connected to the earth, with the capacity to love, to be kind, to be generous, to be gentle." With its colourful network of flora and fauna, the artist mimics the aesthetics of Métis beadwork, developed by women in the mid-1800s. They combined the Indigenous tradition of quillwork—the use of dyed porcupine quills to decorate objects and clothing—with the floral designs in French silk embroidery introduced to them by the Grey Nuns. Belcourt honours this historically under-recognized and gendered art form, drawing inspiration from it in her paintings to represent her ancestral lineage as well as her personal artistic journey.

Learn more about Christi Belcourt

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# O CANADA

*by Joyce Wieland*

Joyce Wieland, *O Canada*, 1970, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

To create this work, experimental filmmaker and visual artist Joyce Wieland (1930–1998) applied red lipstick and sang the words to “O Canada,” placing her lips against a lithographic stone and opening and closing them in sync with the song’s lyrics. In making a deliberately gendered version of the song, Wieland infused a patriotic artifact, typically associated with chauvinism and masculinity, with a coy eroticism that feels distinctly feminine. Wieland conceived this piece in response to the federal government’s official unveiling of its new maple leaf flag and the adoption of “O Canada” as its new national anthem. Wieland often distorted traditional national symbols to make political art. She was invested in addressing and exploring themes of nationalism, feminism, and ecology.

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

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# VANITAS: FLESH DRESS FOR AN ALBINO ANORECTIC

*by Jana Sterbak*

Jana Sterbak, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1987, Centre Pompidou, Paris.

Composed of fifty pounds of cured raw flank steak handsewn together, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1987, by Czech-born Canadian artist Jana Sterbak (b.1955) caused a nation-wide uproar when it was featured in the 1991 exhibition *Jana Sterbak: States of Being* at the National Gallery of Canada. Created to intentionally decompose over time, this provocative work poignantly reflects on vanity and mortality while also speaking to the objectification and mass-consumption of female bodies—yet it was denigrated by critics as a flagrant waste of food. The title, *Vanitas*, refers to a type of seventeenth-century still-life painting from northern Europe in which items that evoke feelings of mortality—such as skulls, flowers, fruit, and hourglasses—are arranged together as a statement on the brevity of human life, the futility of worldly possessions, and the imminence of death.

Learn more about Jana Sterbak

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# IT MATTERS I

*by Simone Elizabeth Saunders*

Simone Elizabeth Saunders, *It Matters I*, 2020, private collection.

The vibrant, jubilant colours in this hand-tufted portrait of a Black Lives Matter activist wearing a patterned face mask, made by Calgary-based Simone Elizabeth Saunders, are in contrast with the dark and serious nature of its subject matter. There are also layers of meaning embedded in the work's medium and its method of production. The artist's act of weaving the textile fabric evokes the collective efforts and interconnectedness of community activists. The tool she uses, a handheld sewing machine called a tufting gun, carries associations of police violence, which disproportionately affects people of colour. There is no sense of vulnerability or victimhood in this portrait, however, as the Black woman depicted is clearly strong, empowered, and resilient.

Learn more about Simone Elizabeth Saunders

# MYCOPLASMA ALTAR

*by Sharona Franklin*

Sharona Franklin, *Mycoplasma Altar*, 2020, Courtesy of Sharona Franklin and Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal.

The striking gelatin sculptures of Vancouver-based multidisciplinary artist and disability advocate Sharona Franklin (b.1987) challenge common perceptions of chronic illness and disability. In *Mycoplasma Altar*, 2020, the gelatin structure, representing the artist's body, contains an array of flowers, kidney beans, pills, and syringe vials filled with antibodies. The piece displays the medications and treatments Franklin needs to stay alive. "For a long time I thought that I had to not take medicine or to get better in order to be an artist or a person or a friend," says Franklin, who lives with Still's disease, a form of inflammatory arthritis. Choosing to make visible her authentic experience, Franklin creates works that aim to dismantle both the stigma of disability and the notion that living with a disability is at odds with being an artist.

Learn more about Sharona Franklin

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# SPRING

*by Marion Nicoll*

Marion Nicoll, *Spring*, 1959, Glenbow Museum, Calgary.

In the mid-twentieth century, Marion Nicoll (1909–1985) defied deeply entrenched gender norms within Calgary's conservative artistic community by ushering in a modernist revolution with innovative hard-edge abstractions like *Spring*, 1959—a painting style often associated with male artists. The warm colour palette, symbolic designs, and stacked, block-like shapes of this work may have been inspired by the archaeological remains of the ancient civilizations that Nicoll visited while travelling through Europe in 1959. Despite her prodigious talent as a painter, Nicoll was never offered the opportunity to teach painting at the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art (now Alberta University of the Arts), where she was the first woman to hold a permanent teaching position, in crafts and design.

Learn more about Marion Nicoll

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# SOBEY AWARD 2006

*by Annie Pootoogook*

Annie Pootoogook, *Sobey Award 2006*, 2007, Collection of Paul and Mary Desmarais.

In 2006, Annie Pootoogook (1969–2016) became the first Inuk artist to be nominated for the prestigious Sobey Art Award. This self-portrait captures her overwhelming joy after receiving the prize for her frank drawings of everyday life in the North. Prior to Pootoogook's unprecedented win, the Sobey Art Foundation did not recognize Nunavut and the North as regions in Canada where contemporary art was being produced. This reflected problematic perceptions in the mainstream art world that Inuit art was not contemporary. "There were so many people on the jury at that time who were resistant to Annie winning," recalls curator Wayne Baerwaldt. Presenting Pootoogook with the Sobey Art Award marked a pivotal shift in the definition of contemporary art and prevailing expectations of Inuit art.

Read more in ACI's
*Annie Pootoogook: Life & Work* by Nancy G. Campbell

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**PAST NEWSLETTERS**

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**Image Credits:** **[1]** Molly Lamb Bobak, *Private Roy, Canadian Women's Army Corps*, 1946, oil on canvas, 76.4 x 60.8 cm. Transferred from National Gallery of Canada, 1971, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, 19710261-1626. © Estate of Molly Lamb Bobak. Photo: Canadian War Museum. **[2]** Esmaa Mohamoud, *Deeper the Wounded, Deeper the Roots II*, 2019, inkjet photo. Courtesy of Esmaa Mohamoud. **[3]** Jin-me Yoon, *A Group of Sixty-Seven*, 1996 (detail), two grids of 67 framed c-prints, for a total of 135 c-prints, 47.5 x 60.5 cm each. Courtesy of Jin-me Yoon. **[4]** Christi Belcourt, *This Painting is a Mirror*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 206 x 256 cm. Collection of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Gatineau. Courtesy of Christi Belcourt. **[5]** Joyce Wieland, *O Canada*, 1970, lithograph in red on wove paper, 57.4 x 76.4 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1971 (16901). Photo © NGC. **[6]** Jana Sterbak, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1987, 23 kilos of salt-cured raw flank steak, sewing thread, salt, metal and model, variable dimensions. Collection of Centre Pompidou, Paris, purchased in 1996, AM 1996-524. © Jana Sterbak. Photo: Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI. **[7]** Simone Elizabeth Saunders, I*t Matters I*, 2020, hand-tufted velvet and acrylic yarn on rug warp, 81.28 x 58.42 x 1.5 cm. Private collection. Courtesy of the artist. **[8]** Sharona Franklin, *Mycoplasma Altar*, 2020, gelatin powder, daisies, foraged rose thorns sourced by Wretched Flowers, baby's breath, juniper berry, metal nuts, kidney beans, amoxicillin pills, hyrdochloriquine pills, methotrexate pills, antibodies in glass syringe vials, tapioca pearls, sunflower seeds, metal button, almond extract, papier mâché, wood, acrylic, and plaster, 84 x 43 x 43 cm. Courtesy of Sharona Franklin and Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal. **[9]** Marion Nicoll, *Spring*, 1959, oil on canvas, 91.8 x 71.7 cm. Collection of the Glenbow Museum, Calgary. **[10]** Annie Pootoogook, *Sobey Award 2006*, 2007, coloured pencil and ink on paper, 50.1 x 66 cm. Collection of Paul and Mary Desmarais. Courtesy of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario. Reproduced with the permission of Dorset Fine Arts.