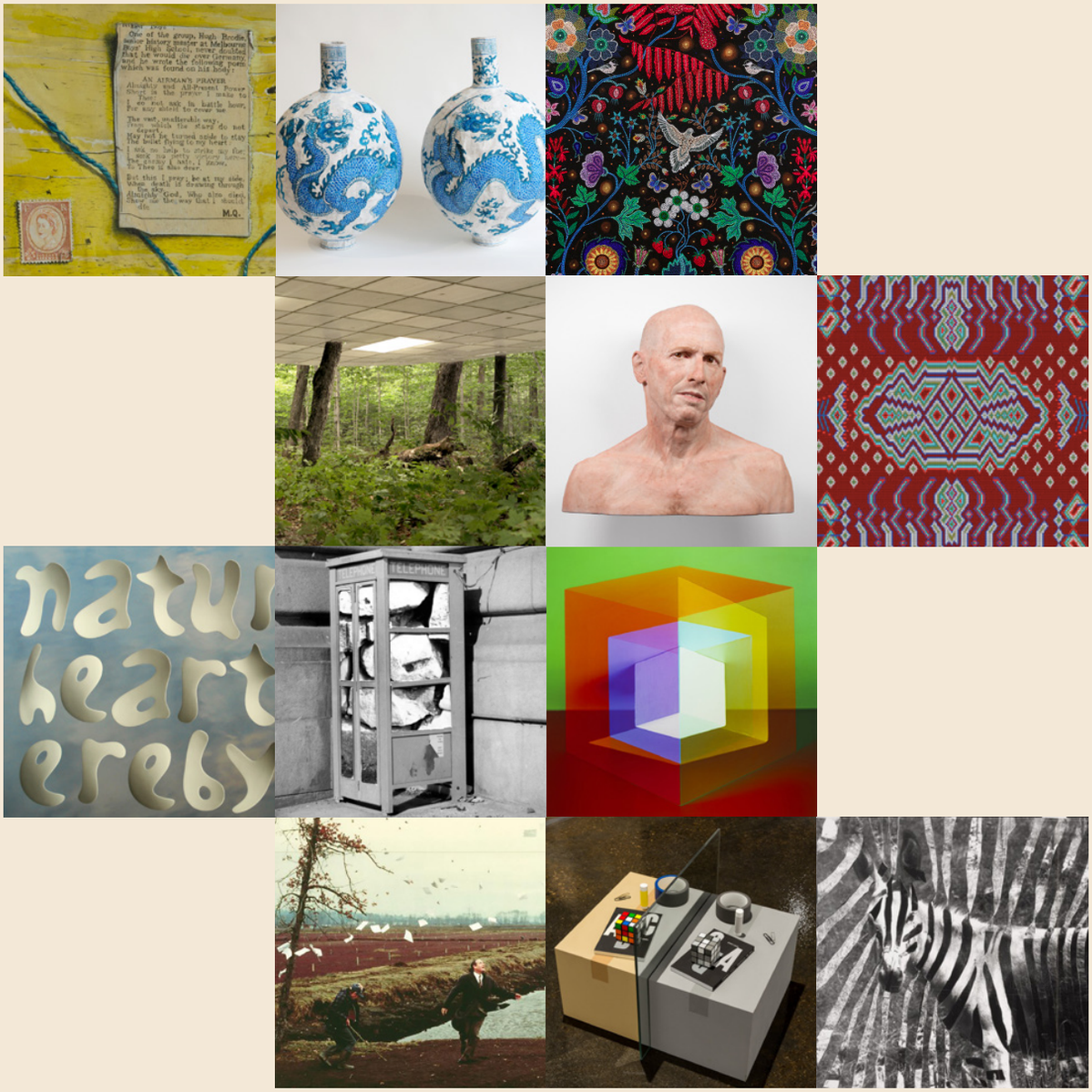
ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

APRIL 1, 2022

THE ART OF ILLUSION
TWELVE CANADIAN WORKS

Playing with perception, these mesmerizing pieces challenge our understandings of the familiar, demonstrate the technical skills of their creators, and stimulate new ways of seeing our world.



Today on April Fool's Day, we enter a hall of mirrors, letting our sense of reality become altered by twelve Canadian artists whose works focus on the element of surprise. Illusions can be amusing or profound, playful or critical, and these paintings, sculptures, and photographs take advantage of how tricks of the eye can manipulate, muddle, and deceive the mind. Some pieces provide tongue-in-cheek commentary on how notions of value are often associated with originality and precious materials. Others present special effects and replicas that are deceptively ordinary at first glance, but they gradually become more complex as the careful and laborious processes behind their construction are revealed. All remind us that appearance and reality are not always in alignment. With these works, we celebrate how in art as in life, there is always more than meets the eye, if we only open our minds and take the time to look.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

THE AIRMAN'S PRAYER

by William Kurelek

William Kurelek, *The Airman's Prayer*, c.1959, private collection.

A key, folded banknote, stamp, coin, burnt match, and newspaper clipping—the items in this painting by Ukrainian Canadian artist William Kurelek (1927–1997) are so convincingly rendered that a viewer might be tricked into believing they are real. The work exemplifies the artistic tradition known as *trompe l'oeil*—French for "deceives the eye"—which Kurelek, who was plagued by a lifetime of mental anguish, turned to as a form of art therapy. In doing so, he shifted away from reproducing the grim images that filled his mind, and instead found solace by creating objective and insightful studies of the simple things found in his immediate surroundings.

Read more in ACI's

William Kurelek: Life & Work by Andrew Kear

THE SPORTING LIFE: FOOTBALL AND THE SPORTING LIFE: GOLF

by Karen Tam

Karen Tam, *The Sporting Life: Football,* 2015, and *The Sporting Life: Golf*, 2015, Courtesy of Karen Tam and Galerie Hugues Charbonneau, Montreal.

In *The Sporting Life: Football,* 2015, and *The Sporting Life: Golf*, 2015, Montreal artist Karen Tam (b.1977) reproduces decorative vases with a humorous twist. Notice how the two painted dragons in these sculptures are wielding a football and a golf club in their respective claws. These cardboard clones of Ming vases are made of papier-mâché sourced from Chinese newspapers. The works demonstrate Tam's questioning of notions of authenticity and representation through recreating "ethnic" objects and spaces commonly seen in North America. The idea for these particular pieces came when Tam flipped through auction catalogues and was struck by how the antique porcelain vessels looked as though they were made of painted cardboard and decorated with markers. In 2012, she decided to turn her perception into reality in the ongoing series The Porcelain Collection.

Learn more about Karen Tam

THE WISDOM OF THE UNIVERSE

by Christi Belcourt

Christi Belcourt, *The Wisdom of the Universe*, 2014, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Although *The Wisdom of the Universe*, 2014, by Christi Belcourt (b.1966) appears to be a textile work created with beads, its textured surface is made of paint. In a 2017 interview with CBC, the Ontario-based Métis artist stated, "My people beaded all of our clothing, we beaded our shoes, we beaded our bags, we did quillwork, and so it was all this beautiful floral. Métis people were called at one time 'the flower beadwork people.'" Ecological concerns were the catalyst for this intricate work, which references threatened, endangered, or extinct plants and animals in Ontario. For Belcourt, all living things are connected by lines symbolizing heritage, and the viewer is included and implicated in this network.

Learn more about Christi Belcourt

DOMAINE DE L'ANGLE I

by BGL

BGL, *Domaine de l'angle I*, 2006, Saint-Charles-de-Bellechasse, Quebec.

The organic and the artificial are in conflict in this unlikely depiction of a Canadian landscape, which causes the viewer to question what is real—is an office ceiling installed in the middle of the woods, or have trees and logs been brought inside? Such an incongruous sight could only spring from the imagination of Quebec City collective BGL, formed by members Jasmin Bilodeau (b.1973), Sébastien Giguère (b.1972), and Nicolas Laverdière (b.1972), whose installations are celebrated for being provocative, critical, and daring. Working together for twenty-five years (1996–2021), the trio is known for its interventions into existing sites and playful takes on consumer culture and the art world.

Learn more about BGL

SELF-PORTRAIT, VARIATION #3

by Evan Penny

Evan Penny, *Self-Portrait, Variation #3*, n.d., Courtesy of Evan Penny.

Keep your eyes open when taking in this eerily realistic sculpture that faithfully resembles its creator, Toronto-based artist Evan Penny (b.1953). Made of silicone, pigment, and hair, the three-dimensional bust can momentarily fool viewers into thinking they're seeing an actual person. Penny, who has a background in movie special effects, has said that he is fascinated by the "discrepancies between the way we might experience each other in real time and space and the way we might imagine the equivalent in an image." His hyperreal figures are a perfect example of "the uncanny valley," a term that describes the unsettling feeling produced when encountering an artificial human that's almost lifelike.

Learn more about Evan Penny

LEVIATHAN #1

by Robert Fones

Robert Fones, *Leviathan #1*, 2008, from the Leviathan Series,
Courtesy of Robert Fones and Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto.

Floating forms appear to hover in space in this photographic work by Toronto-based artist Robert Fones (b.1949). The image (a single panel from a series of eight) contains words from the first two lines of the introduction to political philosopher Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), the influential book that addresses the distinction between nature and artifice. Fones carved the letterforms from clay, then flattened and photographed them digitally. Using Photoshop, he assembled the text against a background image of clouds reflected in water. Blurring the boundaries between nature and pretense in his art, Fones explains that he wanted the writing to seem alive, to look "as animated as the natural forms … that Hobbes talks about [in his book]."

Learn more about Robert Fones

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UNTITLED - CARPET 1

by Shaheer Zazai

Shaheer Zazai, *Untitled - Carpet 1*, 2017, Courtesy of Shaheer Zazai and Patel Brown Gallery, Toronto.

Zoom in on one of the carefully constructed carpets by Toronto-based Afghan Canadian artist Shaheer Zazai and you might be startled to find keystrokes in place of intertwined knots. Inspired by traditional Afghan designs, these digital rugs are improvised and "woven" by the artist using the drawing tool and highlighter in Microsoft Word. Zazai's process is meditative—he types each character one by one, not relying on shortcuts such as cut and paste—and it can take him forty hours to produce a single carpet. Although the technique for Zazai's composition relies on his masterful sleight of hand, its meaning is poignantly clear: *Untitled - Carpet 1*, 2017, and other works in this series evoke a sense of connection, reminding him of the carpets that travelled with his family after they were displaced from their home in Kabul with the rise of the Taliban.

Learn more about Shaheer Zazai

BLOCKED PHONE BOOTH (CABINE TÉLÉPHONIQUE BLOQUÉE)

by Françoise Sullivan

Françoise Sullivan, *Blocked Phone Booth* (*Cabine téléphonique bloquée*), 1978–79, collection of the artist.

The pioneering Québécoise performance artist Françoise Sullivan (b.1948) once had an unsettling dream about a woman who could not get into her own house. Her keys did not fit in the locks; the windows could not be reached or were otherwise obstructed. The dream prompted a series of works and performances including *Blocked Phone Booth*, 1978–79. In this photomontage, we encounter an old telephone booth that is packed full of large boulders. Not only do the flimsy glass doors manage to hold them all in but, if we look closely, the rocks also appear to be floating off the ground. Here Sullivan cleverly balances notions of reality and fiction, heaviness and weightlessness, accessibility and closed spaces in a vision that plays with perception and brings an imaginary scene to life.

Read more in ACI's
Françoise Sullivan: Life & Work by Annie Gérin

CFAAL 340

by Jessica Eaton

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

The shimmering prism in this photograph by Montreal-based artist Jessica Eaton (b.1977) is deceptive in its beauty. Although the work—an homage to the painter Josef Albers (1888–1976)—appears to be brightly coloured, it is in fact a photograph of wooden boxes that have been painted grey. To achieve the optical illusion, Eaton arranged the cubes and photographed them repeatedly on the same sheet of film. She applied a complicated technical process using analog photography, finely adjusting filters and exposures to create the rainbow effect. There is no digital manipulation involved in the production of the image, yet it offers a sense of warmth and depth.

Learn more about Jessica Eaton

A SUDDEN GUST OF WIND (AFTER HOKUSAI)

by Jeff Wall

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

This photograph by renowned Vancouver-based artist Jeff Wall (b.1946) presents a dramatic scene of four figures caught in a gust of wind that has scattered a pile of white papers across the landscape. While the work appears to capture a remarkable moment in time, it was created by combining more than one hundred individual photographs that the artist carefully crafted as a single tableau. Wall based his composition on a woodblock print by the master Japanese painter and printmaker Katsushika Hokusai, *Travellers Caught in a Sudden Breeze at Ejiri,* c.1832, which features the same dramatic instant in a very different time, place, and medium. In this magisterially composed image, Wall both harnesses and undermines the enduring illusion that photography reflects reality.

Learn more about Jeff Wall

DOUBLEHEADER

by Roula Partheniou

Roula Partheniou, *Doubleheader*, 2015, Courtesy of Roula Partheniou.

Toronto artist Roula Partheniou's (b.1977) work explores what she calls "the doubled double take." In this disorienting sculpture, she has precisely arranged a selection of ordinary office supplies, including paperclips, glue sticks, and Rubik's cubes, on plinths resembling cardboard boxes, and separated the nearly identical displays—one in colour, the other in shades of grey—with a double-sided mirror. The resulting effect is a momentary confusion between what the eye sees and what the mind knows to be real. This is further complicated by the delightful discovery that the objects presented are in fact crafty replicas made of painted wood.

Learn more about Roula Partheniou

GAZA ZEBRAS

by Shannon Bool

Shannon Bool, *Gaza Zebras*, 2012, Courtesy of Shannon Bool and Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto.

A strange but true incident inspired this oversized pair of photographs by British Columbia-born, Berlin-based artist Shannon Bool (b.1972), whose art often explores how decorations and surfaces can affect emotional and psychological states. In 2009, two zebras at Gaza City's Marah Land Zoo died of hunger during the Israel-Hamas War. A resourceful zookeeper got to work with some hair dye and masking tape and replaced the zebras with donkeys in disguise. Bool's rendering of the animals extends their false stripes to the very edges of the frame, creating lines that emphasize and call attention to the deception.

Learn more about Shannon Bool

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PAST NEWSLETTERS

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Image Credits: **[1]** William Kurelek, *The Airman's Prayer*, c.1959, gouache on paper, 15.2 x 30.5 cm. Private collection. © Estate of William Kurelek, courtesy of the Wynick/Tuck Gallery, Toronto. **[2]** Karen Tam, *The Sporting Life: Football, 2015, and The Sporting Life: Golf*, 2015, Papier-mâché (Chinese newspaper, wallpaper paste w/ fungicide and moisture protection), pigmented India ink/encre de Chine, gesso, UV archival varnish. 40 x 25 x 25 cm each. Courtesy of Karen Tam and Galerie Hugues Charbonneau, Montreal. **[3]** Christi Belcourt, *The Wisdom of the Universe*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 171 x 282 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Purchased with funds donated by Greg Latremoille, 2014, 2014/6. © Christi Belcourt. **[4]** BGL, *Domaine de l'angle I*, 2006, outdoor installation, Saint-Charles-de-Bellechasse, Quebec. Courtesy of BGL. **[5]** Evan Penny, *Self-Portrait, Variation #3*, n.d., silicone, pigment, hair, aluminum. Courtesy of Evan Penny. **[6]** Robert Fones, *Leviathan #1*, 2008, from the Leviathan Series, dye coupler print mounted on aluminum, 116.8 x 173.7 cm. Courtesy of Robert Fones and Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto. **[7]** Shaheer Zazai, *Untitled - Carpet 1*, 2017, digital print on watercolour paper, produced in Microsoft Word, Edition of 3, 64.77 x 101.14 cm. Courtesy of Shaheer Zazai. **[8]** Françoise Sullivan, *Blocked Phone Booth (Cabine téléphonique bloquée), 1978–79, black and white silver print and collage, 50.8 x 33 cm. Collection of the artist*. Courtesy of Galerie Simon Blais, Montreal. © Françoise Sullivan/SODRAC (2018). **[9]** Jessica Eaton, *cfaal 340*, 2013, inkjet print, 127 x 101.5 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © Jessica Eaton. Photo: NGC. **[10]** Jeff Wall, *A Sudden Gust of Wind* (after Hokusai), 1993, transparency on lightbox, 2500 x 3970 x 340 cm. Collection of the Tate, London, Purchased with assistance from the Patrons of New Art through the Tate Gallery Foundation and from the Art Fund 1995, T06951. Courtesy of the Tate. **[11]** Roula Partheniou, *Doubleheader*, 2015, acrylic on wood and MDF, altered Rubik's Cube, two-sided mirror. Courtesy of Roula Partheniou. **[12]** Shannon Bool, *Gaza Zebras*, 2012, photogram, in two parts, each: 148.5 x 211 cm. Courtesy of Shannon Bool and Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto.