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GATHIE FALK & HER APPETITE FOR ART

For more than six decades, artist Gathie Falk has crafted surreal and dreamlike works that recast everyday items like fruit, shoes, and sofas as objects of wonder. Today the Art Canada Institute celebrates the publication of Gathie Falk: Life & Work *by Michelle Jacques, which explores the incredible diversity of a pivotal practice grounded in what the artist calls the "veneration of the ordinary."*

Gathie Falk, *196 Apples*, 1969–70, Vancouver Art Gallery.

Gathie Falk in 2019, photographed by Tom Gould.

From playful performances and large-scale paintings to pyramids of apples and cabinets of ceramic shoes, Gathie Falk (b.1928) has an endless fascination with the world around her. One of the country's most captivating artists and a stalwart figure in the Vancouver art scene, Falk was a pioneer of installation and performance in the 1960s and 1970s. Inspired in part by the Pop Art movement, the repetition characteristic of Minimalism, and the concerns over women's rights and freedoms in feminist art, Falk developed a singular style as well as a boundless and idiosyncratic body of work. Her sculptures in ceramic and papier mâché range from intimate pieces to monumental displays. Her paintings include abstract and figurative compositions both in brilliant colours and black and white. Falk scrutinizes simple things like cement sidewalks, piles of fruit, and patches of landscape, which she presents to us as handmade marvels. Here we highlight twelve works that demonstrate the ninety-four-year-old artist's enduring and insatiable appetite for art.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

THE STAIRCASE

Gathie Falk, *The Staircase*, 1962, Courtesy of Michael Gibson Gallery, London.

This brightly coloured early painting by Falk is all angles and awkward perspectives. A somewhat ominous and unsettling domestic scene, we see the silhouette of a figure at the bottom of a staircase, long red runners that guide our eyes to open doors, and Falk's fearless and furious brushwork over every inch of the composition. At the outset of her career in the 1960s, she was drawn to the bold colours and gestures of German Expressionist painting. The distortions of space and exaggerated palettes of this early twentieth-century movement appealed to the young artist, who was attempting to find her own way to represent the world around her. Born to German-speaking Russian Mennonites in southern Manitoba, Falk had an itinerant early life with her mother and two brothers after her father died when she was still an infant. While her family struggled financially, Falk studied music, worked in factories, and had a short-lived teaching career before settling in Vancouver to pursue her love of art full-time.

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HOME ENVIRONMENT

Gathie Falk, *Home Environment*, 1968, Vancouver Art Gallery.

The time that Falk spent working in a factory allowed her to refine her skills in detailed handiwork, which can be seen in this 1968 installation—the artist's first. In the mid-1960s, she broadened her forms of expression, claiming, "My ideas for paintings became sculptures instead." As in *Home Environment*, 1968, Falk sometimes assembled three-dimensional objects into full-scale immersive spaces. The installation features several found and hand-sculpted items like the large pale pink armchair, rotary phone, radio, and glossy TV dinner of meat, peas, and potatoes. The inviting room is full of surprises: the arms of the chair are occupied by two slimy-looking ceramic fish and the dainty birdcage houses a plucked chicken. In a move characteristic of Falk's visual wit, things are both familiar and uncanny. The 1968 exhibition of this work at the Douglas Gallery in Vancouver effectively launched her career.

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196 APPLES

Gathie Falk, *196 Apples*, 1969–70, Vancouver Art Gallery.

In this iconic sculpture, Falk arranged exactly 196 individually crafted ceramic apples into a glistening red pyramid. As in the real world, each item is unique, with variations in shape, colour, and markings that indicate differing degrees of ripeness. With *196 Apples*, 1969–70, Falk reminds us of how we walk by stacked arrangements of produce and other objects in grocery stores and fruit stands almost every day without considering their artfulness or the careful labour behind such displays. From the late 1960s, she began a series called Fruit Piles, which included smaller assemblages of rotten apples, juicy-looking grapefruits, and blood oranges. These simple, serial, and striking sculptures exemplify Falk's commitment to what she calls the "veneration of the ordinary."

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RED ANGEL

Gathie Falk, *Red Angel*, 1972, performance at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1975, photograph by Nomi Kaplan.

Gathie Falk, *Red Angel* (performance props), 1972, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

From 1968 to 1972, Falk created numerous works of performance art, but *Red Angel*, 1972, would be one of her last. First presented at the Vancouver Art Gallery, it opened with Falk wearing a white dress and large wings as she sat atop a sideboard. Five red parrots were in front of her, each one perched on an apple at the centre of raised turntables. In sequence, each record player broadcast a different voice singing "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" while the parrots rotated. Falk then joined them, completing the musical round. At the end of the song, she stood up, removed her dress, and revealed a grey one underneath. Another woman, Elizabeth Klassen, the artist's dear friend and collaborator, then ran the white garment through a wringer washing machine. The meaning behind the work remains elusive, but the imagery is evocative and mysteriously symbolic.

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SINGLE RIGHT MEN'S SHOES: BOOTCASE WITH 6 ORANGE BROGUES

Gathie Falk, *Single Right Men's Shoes: Bootcase with 6 Orange Brogues*, 1973, collection of Equinox Gallery, Vancouver.

In addition to fruit, shoes are among Falk's favourite items to celebrate through her art. She values their unpretentious “homely power, their ability to symbolize human presence and also human enterprise.” In this work she presents six nearly identical men’s brogues on three shelves in a double-doored cabinet, all painted bright orange. The glazing compels us to notice details including stitching, perforations, laces, and signs of wear. From 1970 to 1973, Falk made twenty some works like this one, a series called Bootcases that features different types of footwear in a variety of colours, all neatly arranged and likewise encased. While there’s a reverence bestowed upon the shoes, they are not new and pristine. Falk wants us to appreciate and imagine the lives they have lived.

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PICNIC WITH BIRTHDAY CAKE AND BLUE SKY

Gathie Falk, *Picnic with Birthday Cake and Blue Sky*, 1976, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Commenting on this sculpture of vibrant colour and lustrously glazed and textured surfaces, Falk recounted the story of a birthday cake that caught on fire, its candles turning the dessert into flames. Like early to mid-twentieth-century works of Dada and Surrealist art, in this piece Falk transforms an ordinary object into a startling vision. *Picnic with Birthday Cake and Blue Sky*, 1976, is one of a series of sculptures that were inspired by Falk's performance from 1970 titled *Picnics*, in which two people appeared at various locations around Vancouver, along with props that included a roll of vinyl grass and a picnic basket. At each site the pair left an unexpected still life arrangement, including such objects as clocks, eggs, fruit, and fish. In this body of work created in 1976–77, sculpted forms are placed on small patches of textured grass, scenes that the curator Ann Rosenberg describes as "a perfect marriage of technical competence and visual force."

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BEAUTIFUL BRITISH COLUMBIA MULTIPLE PURPOSE THERMAL BLANKET

Gathie Falk, *Beautiful British Columbia Multiple Purpose Thermal Blanket* (detail), 1979, Kamloops Art Gallery.

In 1978, Falk was commissioned to create a monumental work for the lobby of Vancouver's central credit union. She produced a massive painted quilt made up of fifty-six squares and titled it *Beautiful British Columbia Multiple Purpose Thermal Blanket*. The patch-work composition features twenty images of gardens in full bloom. Over the next three years, Falk went on to create eight more "blankets" in this series. Each work commemorates a friendship and is named in honour of an individual, such as *Beautiful B.C. Thermal Blanket – Gloria*, 1980. As with other large-scale installations and performances, the biggest and most public quilt was a collective effort by Falk and many of her helpful friends. In the 1960s and 1970s, feminist artists such as Joyce Wieland (1930–1998) often relied upon collaborative work as they incorporated traditional craft techniques into their avant-garde artistic practices.

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SOFT COUCH WITH SUIT

Gathie Falk, *Soft Couch with Suit*, 1986, private collection.

In 1986, Falk began a series of paintings called Soft Chairs, a collection that was exhibited at New York's 49th Parallel Gallery and Toronto's Isaacs Gallery in 1987. Like other canvases in this body of work, *Soft Couch with Suit*, 1986, brings together disparate items from everyday life—in this instance, a patterned pink couch, pinstriped men's suit, and blossoming shrub. Similar to Falk's Picnics series (1976–77), the relationship between the represented objects is unclear, but intriguing. The work contrasts heavy but soft-contoured living room furniture with men's clothing. For Falk, who grew up in the 1930s and 1940s, this central space in the family home was a place of pride and a symbol that there was a father in the house. As Michelle Jacques writes, Falk describes her Soft Chairs series as embodying the “narrative of the working-class aspiration to own furniture emblematic of comfort and financial stability.” An artist who says that she “sees the world as sculpture,” Falk depicts the sofa with great sculptural weight.

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DRESS WITH INSECT BOX

Gathie Falk, *Dress with Insect Box*, 1998, Vancouver Art Gallery.

Since 1968, men's suits and fashions have pervaded Falk's works in painting, sculpture, performance, and installation. In 1998, after painting almost exclusively for eighteen years, she began a series of dresses sculptured in papier mâché. Like the men's shoes, these three-dimensional objects keenly register the absence of a human figure. Falk imagined that they symbolized the "traces of women's lives." In each of these dresses she included other items positioned on a shelf at the bottom of the skirt—here a box featuring six handcrafted moths. As Falk explains, the two seemingly unrelated articles are intended to live in "meaningful tension." She envisaged the insects to represent "what has died to make it more palatable—a more lovely thing."

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DREAMING OF FLYING, CANOE

Gathie Falk, *Dreaming of Flying, Canoe*, 2007, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Made to scale, *Dreaming of Flying, Canoe*, 2007, measures 4.5 metres in length. Constructed from papier mâché, the boat took two years to complete and is simultaneously commanding and fragile. In person the work is highly textured and painted intricately so that it appears almost iridescent. The concept for the sculpture came to Falk when she saw her nephew with his canoe. The artist has recounted that when she was young, she regularly dreamt of flying, but that the dreams stopped when she started making art. Falk speculated that they may have ended because art affords "another kind of flying."

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THE PROBLEM WITH WEDDING VEILS

Gathie Falk, *The Problem with Wedding Veils*, 2010–11, collection of the artist.

The Problem with Wedding Veils, 2010–11, is a sublimely haunting sculpture. Once again Falk has forgone with the figure, leaving us with the vestiges of what a mysterious person once wore. Almost six feet tall and made of papier mâché that is painted white, the long, pleated veil and crown appear to be trying to float away, while the two heavy rocks hold them back. In a culture that idolizes

brides, it's a poignant, if elusive, metaphor for the many issues that might arise in marriages. In her memoir, *Apples, etc*. (2018), Falk has written candidly about the challenges she encountered during her own five-year marriage to a career criminal twenty years her junior.

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MY WORK SHIRT

Gathie Falk, *My Work Shirt*, 2016, private collection.

In this charming and restrained recent painting, Falk calls our attention to two ordinary objects: a simple wooden chair and a red plaid shirt that hangs unceremoniously on one side. The work blurs the genres of still life and self-portraiture, as the title indicates that the item of clothing is the artist's own. Not only is it Falk's shirt, but more specifically it is her *work shirt*—what she wears when she paints. The simplicity suddenly becomes self-referential and symbolic of Falk's astounding industriousness. Well into her ninth decade, her remarkable career in art continues as she encourages us to discover the extraordinary in the everyday.

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About the Author of *Gathie Falk: Life & Work*

Michelle Jacques is the Head of Exhibitions and Collections/ Chief Curator at Remai Modern, Saskatoon. Previously, she was Chief Curator at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria (AGGV), where she was responsible for guiding a curatorial and education program linking contemporary practices, ideas, and issues to the gallery's historical collections and legacies. Commenting on this book, Jacques notes, "Whether Gathie Falk is working in painting, ceramic, performance, sculpture, or installation, there is a drive, an allusion, a substance to the work that renders her work irresistible. Falk's work is almost always recognizable through the open way she reveals her hand and shares her seminal pictorial inventory. Yet, she has excelled in such a multitude of mediums that her practice almost defies definition."

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