

JULY 15, 2022

THE SHAPE OF WATER 11 CANADIAN WORKS

With its offer of clarity, purity, refreshment, and mystery, summer has long brought water's transfixing qualities and sublime beauty into the focus of artists.



Kara Springer, *The Earth & All Its Inhabitants*, 2019, Courtesy of Kara Springer.



In the eleven selections below, we lounge on sandy beaches; splash through swimming holes, rivers, and coves; and stand at the edges of harbours and oceans, marvelling at the unfathomable depths that lie beneath. Water has the ability to reflect and contain, to destroy and sustain—no wonder it is a subject of deep interest for Canadian artists. Some of the featured paintings, drawings, photographs, and mixed-media works highlight the simple pleasures of spending time by its side and engaging in revitalizing and restorative leisurely activities. Others acknowledge the importance of the essential substance as a source of the spiritual, presenting it as a symbol of rebirth and change. As the summer heat puts us all in the mood for a dip, we invite you to take the plunge and dive into our selection, which explores the beauty of water in its many forms.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

EBB AND FLOWS

by *Anthony Gebrehiwot*



Anthony Gebrehiwot, *Ebb and Flows*, 2019, Courtesy of Anthony Gebrehiwot.



Scarborough-based photographer Anthony Gebrehiwot's portrait of a man meditating in water—his ears submerged and eyes closed—captures water's healing power to block out noise and still racing thoughts. The figure's body acts as a partition between two pools, each refracting light and presenting different colours. Gebrehiwot, who created this work as part of a series that challenges stereotypes of Black masculinity by showing men in poses that are intimate and sometimes vulnerable, stated that he hopes his images will encourage "people to think about what tools they are using to unpack their own trauma."

[Learn more about Anthony Gebrehiwot](#)

BACK RIVER LANDSCAPE

by *Janet Kigisiuq*



Janet Kigisiuq, *Back River Landscape*, 2003, Courtesy of Waddington's.



In this abstract drawing, Inuk artist Janet Kigisiuq (1926–2005) uses bold hues not typically found in the ice-filled region of the Arctic tundra to depict the water and land in the Back River region of Nunavut, where she was born. Colours flow into each other in undulating, amorphous bands, creating an imaginative interpretation of water's vital life-giving properties and spiritual presence. For Kigisiuq—the daughter of Jessie Oonark (1906–1985), a revered pioneer of modern Inuit art—the river seems to reveal a life and personality of its own, made visible by her observant eyes and skilled hands.

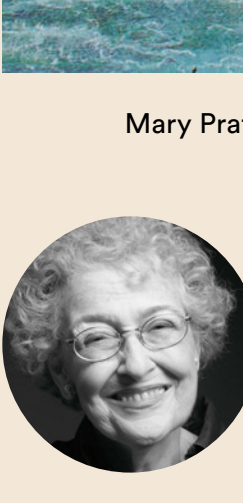
[Learn more about Janet Kigisiuq](#)

COUPLE ON BEACH

by *Alex Colville*



Alex Colville, *Couple on Beach*, 1957, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

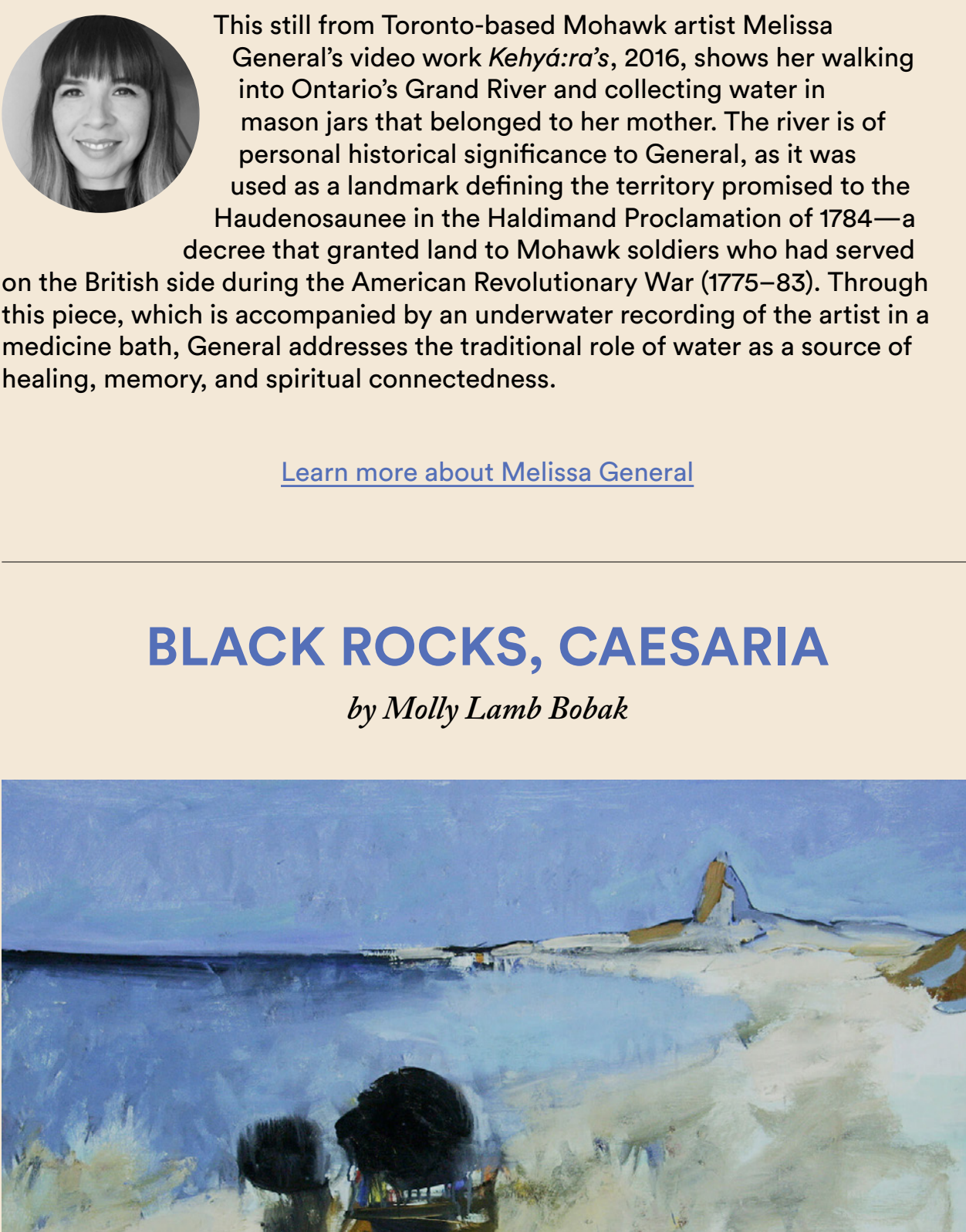


Alex Colville's (1920–2013) iconic outdoor scenes of Maritime life include the enigmatic *Couple on Beach*, 1957, which shows the artist and his wife, Rhoda, in a quiet moment, relaxing in the sun before the ocean's endless expanse. Despite the pair's obvious intimacy, a serene scene of tubboats and steamships in a harbour. The water is rendered in calm blue waves and gentle turquoise ripples. In 1992, this painting was used on a stamp commemorating 125 years of Canadian Confederation. Hughes was a student of Group of Seven member Frederick Horsman Varley (1881–1969), and served as an official Canadian war artist during the Second World War. Hughes described his paintings of the landscape as "a form of worship" of nature, and along with Emily Carr (1871–1945), he is credited with creating a visual compendium of British Columbia.

[Learn more about E.J. Hughes](#)

CHRISTIE PASSAGE, HURST ISLAND, B.C.

by *E.J. Hughes*



E.J. Hughes, *Christie Passage, Hurst Island, B.C.*, 1962, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



Revered for his coastal landscapes and seascapes, Vancouver-based realist E.J. Hughes (1904–1990), his wife, Madeleine Des Rosiers, shapes and flat, bright colours to depict a serene scene of tubboats and steamships in a harbour. The water is rendered in calm blue waves and gentle turquoise ripples. In 1992, this painting was used on a stamp commemorating 125 years of Canadian Confederation. Hughes was a student of Group of Seven member Frederick Horsman Varley (1881–1969), and served as an official Canadian war artist during the Second World War. Hughes described his paintings of the landscape as "a form of worship" of nature, and along with Emily Carr (1871–1945), he is credited with creating a visual compendium of British Columbia.

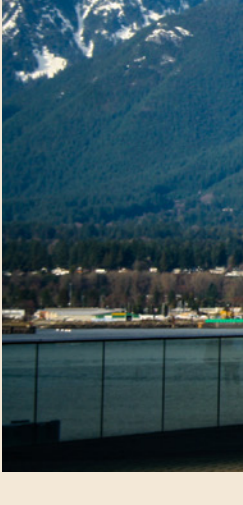
[Learn more about E.J. Hughes](#)

THOSE BEAUTIFUL DAYS (LES BEAUX JOURS)

by *Jean Paul Lemieux*



Jean Paul Lemieux, *Those Beautiful Days (Les beaux jours)*, 1937, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Québec City.



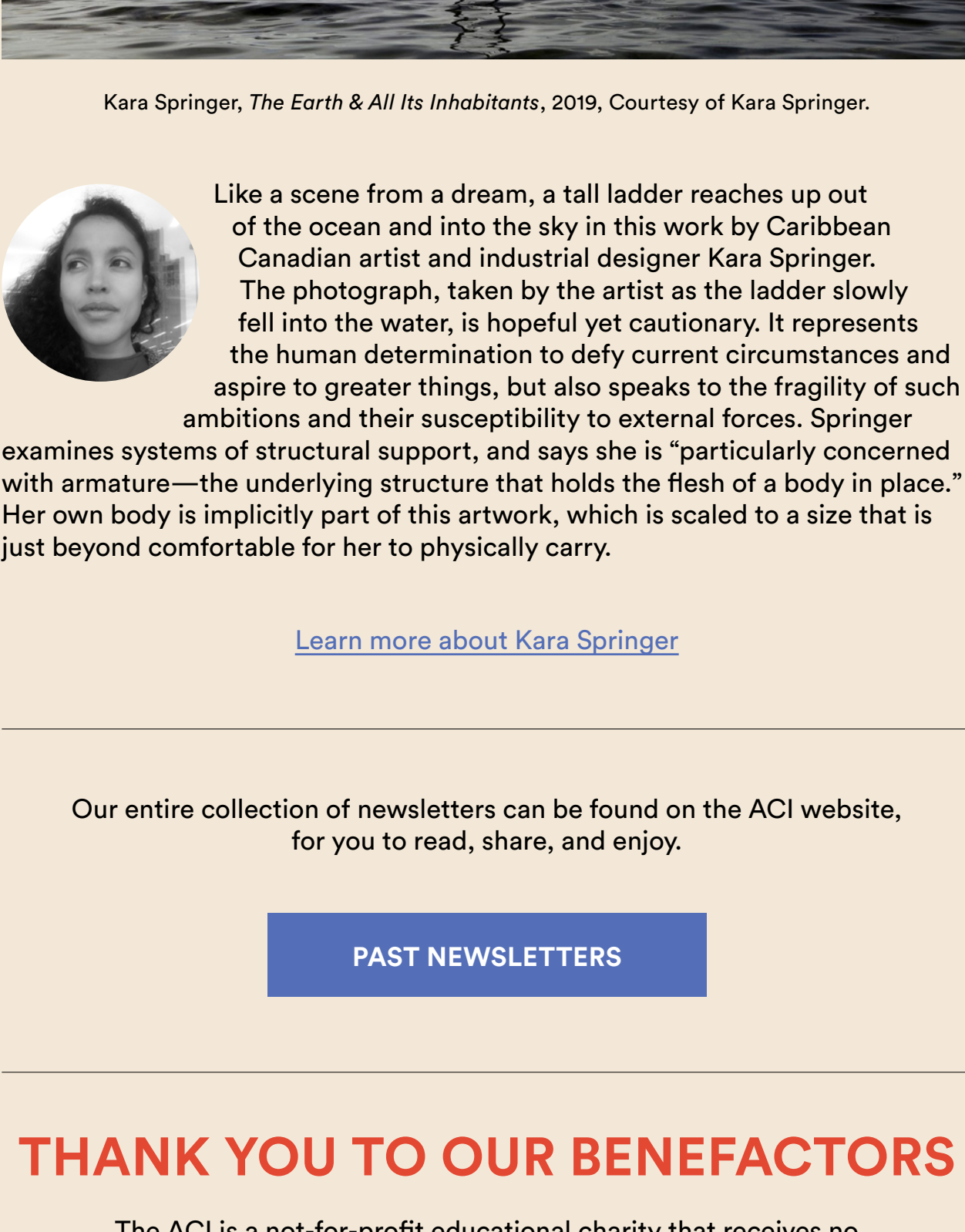
In this painting by Quebec City-based modernist Jean Paul Lemieux (1904–1990), his wife, Madeleine Des Rosiers, appears deep in thought as she gazes out onto the swirling waters below. Quiet and contemplative, the picture is rendered in blues and greens, with the rolling fields and sliver of sky blending with the figure induces a feeling of vertigo that speaks to Lemieux's stance on the authority of nature, which he often rendered as bleak, desolate, and formidable. Not so in this warm summer vista, which depicts the secluded cove of Port-au-Persil, where the artist and his wife lived and worked in the months after they were married in 1937.

[Read more in ACI's *Jean Paul Lemieux: Life & Work* by Michèle Grandbois](#)

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BIG SPRAY AT LUMSDEN

by *Mary Pratt*



Mary Pratt, *Big Spray at Lumsden*, 1996, Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce.



A wave crashes forcefully against the rocks, sending up a spray of frothy water in this high-drama, mixed-media piece by East Coast artist Mary Pratt (1935–2018), known for her hyperrealistic style. Pratt took inspiration from the raging swells found along the shores of Israel's Mediterranean coast, when creating this composition. To produce the effect of sea spray suspended in the air—a moment that would last for only a fraction of a second in reality—Pratt layered watercolour, chalk pastel, oil pastel, and more watercolour. Though her subject matter is often grounded in everyday scenes from her life, Pratt's paintings are charged with an undeniable current of violence and eroticism.

[Read more in ACI's *Mary Pratt: Life & Work* by Ray Cronin](#)

KEHYÁ:RA'S

by *Melissa General*



Melissa General, *Kehyá:ra's*, 2016, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery.

This still from Toronto-based Mohawk artist Melissa General's video work *Kehyá:ra's*, 2016, shows her walking into Ontario's Grand River and collecting water in a mason jars that belonged to her mother. The river is of personal historical significance to General, as it was used as a landmark defining the territory promised to the Haudenosaunee in the Haldimand Proclamation of 1784—a decree that granted land to Mohawk soldiers who had served on the British side during the American Revolutionary War (1775–83). Through this piece, which is accompanied by an underwater recording of the artist in a medicine bath, General addresses the traditional role of water as a source of healing, memory, and spiritual connectedness.

[Learn more about Melissa General](#)

BLACK ROCKS, CAESARIA

by *Molly Lamb Bobak*

Molly Lamb Bobak, *Black Rocks, Caesaria*, 1985, private collection.

In Molly Lamb Bobak's (1920–2014) expressive painting *Black Rocks, Caesaria*, 1985, the Fredericton-based artist records the mesmerizing colours of Israel's Mediterranean coast in a style that hovers between representation and abstraction. The sea ranges from pale blue near the shore to a dramatic royal blue on the horizon, while the dark rocks along the shoreline are rendered with black brushstrokes. In a letter to her mentor Jack Shadbolt (1909–1998), Bobak, who was in the mature phase of her career, recounted the creative excitement she felt while she was producing this work: "I rushed at the canvas with the security of knowing exactly what was in my eye—and there it was—a painting! I really know was terrific; still a subject, but so much a part of the paint, all wedded, all alive."

[Read more in ACI's *Molly Lamb Bobak: Life & Work* by Michelle Gewurtz](#)

EN PLEINE MER

by *James Wilson Morrice*

James Wilson Morrice, *En pleine mer*, 1903–04, Courtesy of Alan Klinkhoff Gallery.

Montreal-born Scot James Wilson Morrice (1865–1924), one of Canada's foremost modernists, created this sunny image of first-class passengers lounging on the deck of an Atlantic liner in the same year that a great influence of his, the American painter James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), died. When Morrice arrived in Montreal after getting off this ship, he is said to have burst into his friend's studio and declared, "Whistler's dead—let's get drunk." The slightly off-kilter composition in the work conjures the feeling of rolling over gentle ocean waves. We can imagine Morrice, perhaps with a whisky in hand, toasting his hero as he looked out onto the open sea and sketched the scene that was to become this painting.

[Learn more about James Wilson Morrice](#)

DIGITAL ORCA

by *Douglas Coupland*

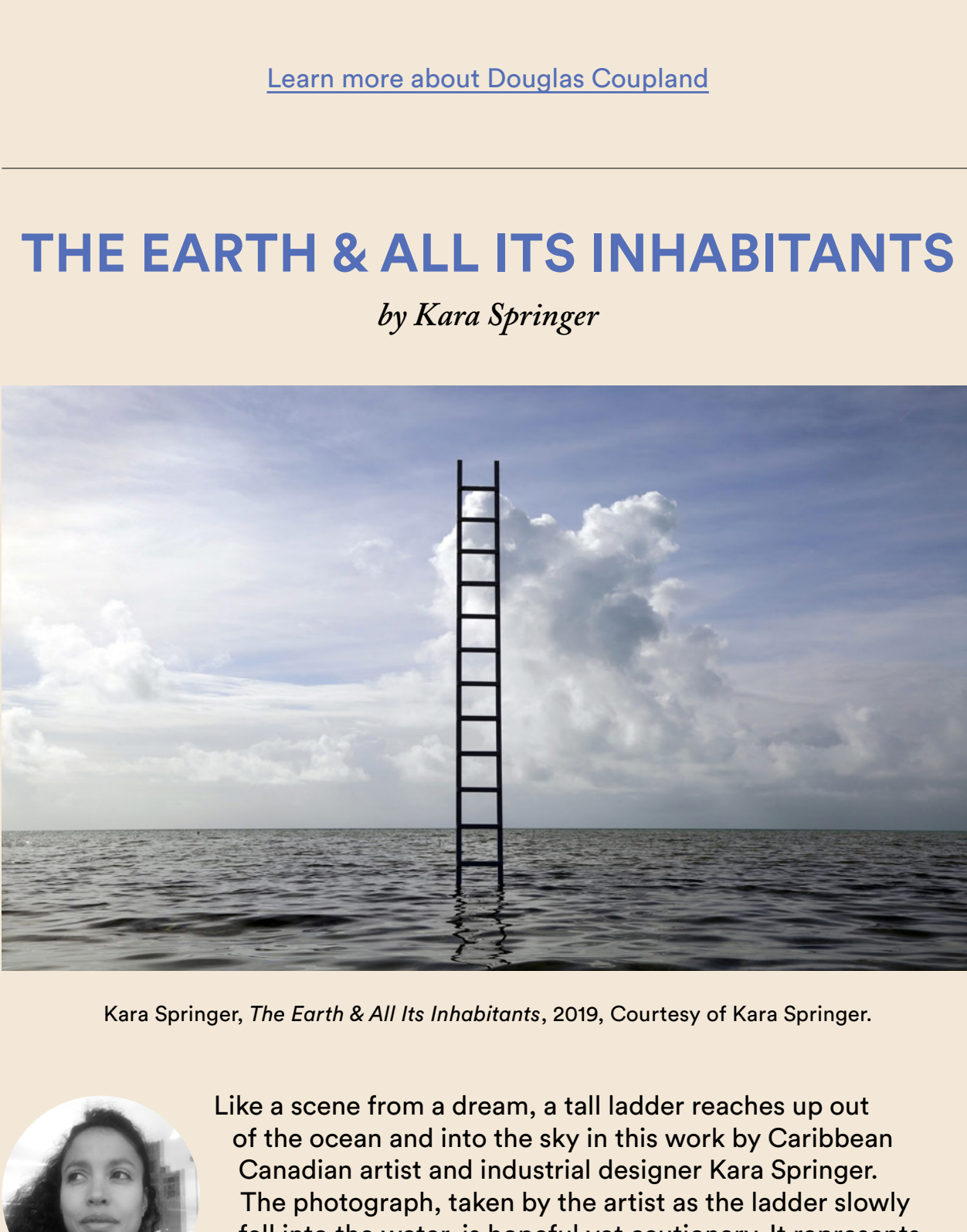
Douglas Coupland, *Digital Orca*, 2009, Vancouver Convention Centre.

Like a giant stack of Lego bricks or video-game graphic, a pixelated Orca whale seems to leap into the air in this whimsical waterfront sculpture by British Columbia-based artist Douglas Coupland (b.1961), which is permanently installed on Vancouver's harbour. Coupland's irreverent take on a souvenir animal presents a beloved local symbol of the region in a non-cliché way. From a distance, the sculpture might appear to be a real whale jumping out of the water, but the optical illusion is revealed as the viewer gets closer. The majestic sea creature is regarded as a protector of people in Haida culture, and pods can occasionally be spotted hunting and playing close to the shore.

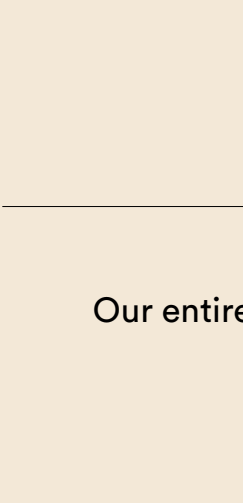
[Learn more about Douglas Coupland](#)

THE EARTH & ALL ITS INHABITANTS

by *Kara Springer*



Kara Springer, *The Earth & All Its Inhabitants*, 2019, Courtesy of Kara Springer.



Like a scene from a dream, a tall ladder reaches up out of the ocean and into the sky in this work by Caribbean Canadian artist and industrial designer Kara Springer. The photograph, taken by the artist as the ladder slowly fell into the water, is hopeful yet cautionary. It represents the human determination to defy current circumstances and aspire to greater things, but also speaks to the fragility of such ambitions and their susceptibility to external forces. Springer examines systems of structural support, and says she is "particularly concerned with armature—the underlying structure that holds the flesh of a body in place." Her own body is implicitly part of this artwork, which is scaled to a size that is just beyond comfortable for her to physically carry.

[Learn more about Kara Springer](#)

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