ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

SEPTEMBER 2, 2022

THE WAY WE WORK
10 CANADIAN LOOKS AT LABOUR

Heading into Monday's holiday, we're showcasing artists who celebrate, challenge, and, in some cases, hope to change the way we think about work.

Frances Anne Hopkins, *Canoe Manned by Voyageurs Passing a Waterfall* (detail), 1869, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

In 1872 the Toronto Typographical Union went on strike, demanding a nine-hour work day—a reduction from the then standard twelve-hour shift. Their “fight for fairness” led to the legalization of unions in Canada and paved the way for Labour Day, the national celebration of work, advocacy, and rest, which has been a statutory holiday since 1894. In the last few years, the pandemic has radically altered how we are employed, and artists like Ken Lum (see below) have responded to such shifts. However, art has long offered compelling commentary on the rewarding yet complicated role that labour plays in our lives. In the nineteenth century, Frances Anne Hopkins made work (above) that, among other things, commented on changes to industry, while the painter Robert Harris offered a prescient image of female empowerment on the job. With these examples and others in mind, we’ve gathered ten captivating creations that invite us to reflect, while we rest, upon the mutable meaning of work.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

WORK

by Angela Grossmann

Angela Grossmann, *WORK*, 2021, Courtesy of Angela Grossmann and Poïesis Contemporary, Vancouver.

With *WORK*, 2021, U.K.-born, Vancouver-based Angela Grossmann (b.1955) explores how we are often defined by what we do, and how workers are regularly given uniforms so that their roles are instantly recognized. An artist who has built an international reputation around mixed-media series that call attention to marginalized subjects including orphaned children, the incarcerated, and vulnerable teen girls, Grossmann presents a waiter's vest, an apron, and a porter's bag, which are layered and conflated, hinting at the many trades that people might take on throughout their lifetimes. Using collaged old photographs, *WORK* is a compelling composition that unsettles our all-too-easy assumptions and consumption of images of historical labourers to offer us insight into today's growing job precarity.

Learn more about Angela Grossmann

A MEETING OF THE SCHOOL TRUSTEES

by Robert Harris

Robert Harris, *A Meeting of the School Trustees*, 1885, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Robert Harris (1849–1919) is best known as the artist behind the patriotic and patriarchal group portrait *The Fathers of Confederation*, 1884, but in this more quotidian scene he presciently celebrates female empowerment in the workplace. *A Meeting of the School Trustees*, 1885, shows a young teacher in rural Prince Edward Island who is determined to stand up for herself among the group of old and doubting men to whom she reports. The 1992 Heritage Minute inspired by this painting reminds us that, "throughout most of our history, millions of Canadians have owed their education to young women who taught in one-room schoolhouses, much like this one."

Learn more about Robert Harris

WAITRESS

by Shelley Niro

Shelley Niro, *Waitress*, 1986, Courtesy of Shelley Niro.

As in many of the works created by Shelley Niro (b.1954), humour and politics converge in this painting, in which the celebrated Mohawk artist has cast herself as a waitress in a Chinese restaurant in Brantford, Ontario. She calmly serves and casually spills red wine on a very alarmed customer while Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and his wife Mila dance with abandon in the background. The brazen scene, which contrasts labour and leisure and confronts prejudice, was crafted in response to Mulroney's dismissive treatment of First Nations leaders.

Learn more about Shelley Niro

GOW CRAPPER

by Yousuf Karsh

Yousuf Karsh, *Gow Crapper*, 1951, from Ford of Canada series, Courtesy of the Estate of Yousuf Karsh.

In 1951 the renowned Armenian Canadian photographer Yousuf Karsh (1908–2002) spent two weeks at Ford of Canada's Windsor manufacturing plant, where he captured some of his finest industrial images. This striking portrait of factory worker Gow Crapper features Karsh's characteristic dramatic lighting and eye-catching composition. The subject looks seductively out at us as he performs the routine task of securing trim-cord on the car's rear window. Historian Maria Tippett calls the image a classic because it "predates the working-class counterculture heroes that actors like James Dean and Marlon Brando would come to exemplify a few years later."

Learn more about Yousuf Karsh

WOMEN'S WORK

by Elizabeth Zvonar

Elizabeth Zvonar, *Women's Work*, 2020, Courtesy of Elizabeth Zvonar and Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto.

In the digital collage *Women's Work*, 2020, Vancouver artist Elizabeth Zvonar (b.1972) appropriates iconic pieces of Western art to draw our attention to what she describes as the "long history of hellish labour conditions in the chaotic city." She has combined reproductions of Édouard Manet's (1832–1883) famous painting *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1882, which features a melancholic barmaid on full display, and Fernand Léger's (1881–1955) *The City*, 1919, showing a metropolis in full Cubist fragmentation. The cut-up segments of these French paintings are arranged over the Netherlandish artist Jan van Eyck's (1390–1441) scene of hell from *The Last Judgment*, c.1440–41, producing a layered study of labour, gender, and urban malaise, both past and present.

Learn more about Elizabeth Zvonar

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RANGERS

by Tim Pitsiulak

Tim Pitsiulak, *Rangers*, 2010, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

Prominent Kinngait (Cape Dorset) artist Tim Pitsiulak (1967–2016) was a member of the Canadian Rangers—a dedicated group of Army Reservists who patrol our country's remote coastlines. In this meticulous drawing, a special commission by the Canadian Forces Artists Program (CFAP), he shows Rangers in their matching red caps and hooded sweatshirts busily unloading boats. Knowledge of the land and survival skills are essential to the group's missions, which include search and rescue operations. Pitsiulak, a hunter born and raised in the Arctic, was not only a vivid chronicler of the Rangers' activities, but also a valuable part of the team.

Read more in ACI's
War Art in Canada: A Critical History by Laura Brandon

TRAVAIL DES ENFANTS DANS L'INDUSTRIE: LES ÉTIQUETTES

by Arnaud Maggs

Arnaud Maggs, *Travail des enfants dans l'industrie: Les étiquettes*, 1994, installed at Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto, photograph by Isaac Applebaum.

Arnaud Maggs, *Travail des enfants dans l'industrie: Les étiquettes* (detail), 1994, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Early twentieth-century labels recording the work of child labourers in the French textile trade are arranged into a monumental grid in this composition by Toronto artist Arnaud Maggs (1926–2012). He found the old tags—whose shapes are reminiscent of gravestones—at a French flea market and transformed them into a "public memorial" to the young workers, according to curator Philip Monk. The piece also serves as a reminder of and admonition against the ongoing exploitative labour practices in the fashion industry. Maggs was a consummate collector and often combined the items he acquired into large-scale artworks structured in a grid formation.

Read more in ACI's
Arnaud Maggs: Life & Work by Anne Cibola

THE WIG SHOP (1090 BATHURST ST.), 4 JUNE 1976

by June Clark

June Clark, *The Wig Shop (1090 Bathurst St.), 4 June 1976*, 1976, from *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021). Courtesy the artist and Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto.

This crisp and symmetrically composed black and white photograph of a Toronto storefront was captured by June Clark (b.1941) shortly after she immigrated to Canada from Harlem, New York. When she left the United States, she was employed as a secretary at Columbia University and had no sense that she might one day become a celebrated interdisciplinary artist. In her newfound home Clark felt adrift and missed the feeling of belonging she had in Harlem. A camera, gifted to her, became the means through which she found her footing professionally and personally in Toronto. She explored the city, documenting its small businesses, like this Bathurst Street wig shop, which provide meaningful jobs and create a sense of community in the vast and often alienating urban landscape.

Learn more about June Clark

HOW AM I TO TAKE CARE OF MY CHILDREN?

by Ken Lum

Ken Lum, *How Am I To Take Care of My Children?*, 2021, Courtesy of Ken Lum.

Ken Lum (b.1956), the Philadelphia-based, Vancouver-born conceptual artist, has long been fascinated by our relationships to our jobs. Here Lum uses his distinctive text-image pairings to probe the inner life of a young man who wonders and worries again and again about what he will do with his kids while he works. Part of a series that Lum created when COVID-19 upturned nearly every type of work around the world, *How Am I To Take Care of My Children?*, 2021, responds to the anxieties that the pandemic brought to the fore as parents struggled to balance their jobs and responsibilities towards children forced to stay home. Lum's art is a reminder that while we depend on our jobs for our livelihoods, they often weigh heavily upon us.

Explore the current exhibition
Ken Lum: Death and Furniture at the Art Gallery of Ontario

CANOE MANNED BY VOYAGEURS PASSING A WATERFALL

by Frances Anne Hopkins

Frances Anne Hopkins, *Canoe Manned by Voyageurs Passing a Waterfall*, 1869, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

In this iconic painting, British artist Frances Anne Hopkins (1838–1919) depicts herself and her husband in the centre of a group of voyageurs guiding a Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) freight canoe along a trading route through the Great Lakes. Hopkins spent twelve years in Canada from 1858 until around 1870, accompanying her husband, Edward Hopkins, an HBC official, on trading trips and documenting them in captivating works such as this one. During this period, canoes were being replaced by steamboats and trains as primary modes of transport in the fur trade. Hopkins's remarkable scenes vividly record the waning days of this long-essential means of industry.

Learn more about Frances Anne Hopkins

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Image Credits: **[1, 12]** Frances Anne Hopkins, *Canoe Manned by Voyageurs Passing a Waterfall*, 1869, oil on canvas, 152.4 x 73.7 cm. Collection of Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa (00001 1989-401 X DAP). Photo credit: Library and Archives Canada. **[2]** Angela Grossmann, *WORK*, 2021, mixed media collage, 165.1 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy of Angela Grossmann and Poïesis Contemporary, Vancouver. **[3]** Robert Harris, *A Meeting of the School Trustees*, 1885, oil on canvas, 102.2 x 126.5 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1886 (6). Photo credit: NGC. **[4]** Shelley Niro, *Waitress*, 1986, oil on canvas, 91.4 x 121.9 cm. Courtesy of Shelley Niro. **[5]** Yousuf Karsh, *Gow Crapper*, 1951, from Ford of Canada series. Courtesy of the Estate of Yousuf Karsh. **[6]** Elizabeth Zvonar, *Women's Work*, 2020, digital collage. Courtesy of Elizabeth Zvonar and Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto. **[7]** Tim Pitsiulak, *Rangers*, 2010, coloured pencil on rag paper, 115.5 x 110.7 cm. Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa (CWM 20180366-001). Courtesy of the Canadian War Museum. Reproduced with the permission of Dorset Fine Arts. **[8]** Arnaud Maggs, *Travail des enfants dans l'industrie: Les étiquettes*, 1994, chromogenic prints, 50.8 x 40 cm (each), 304.8 x 1320.8 cm (installation), installed at Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto. Courtesy of The Estate of Arnaud Maggs. © The Estate of Arnaud Maggs / Courtesy Stephen Bulger Gallery. Photo credit: Isaac Applebaum. **[9]** Arnaud Maggs, *Travail des enfants dans l'industrie: Les étiquettes* (detail), 1994, chromogenic print, 50.8 x 40 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, purchased 1995 (37822.1-198). © The Estate of Arnaud Maggs. **[10]** June Clark, *The Wig Shop (1090 Bathurst St.), 4 June 1976*, 1976, from *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021). Courtesy the artist and Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto. **[11]** Ken Lum, *How Am I To Take Care of My Children?*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.