

MARCH 10, 2023

CANADIAN ART AT THE OSCARS

HOW LARRY TOWELL'S PHOTOGRAPHS INFLUENCED SARAH POLLEY'S *WOMEN TALKING*

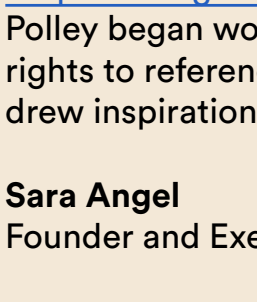
*This Sunday, March 12, marks the 95th Academy Awards ceremony, and *Women Talking* (2022), written and directed by Canada's Sarah Polley, is nominated for two Oscars. As Polley has explained, the work of renowned Canadian photographer Larry Towell was a key influence on her acclaimed film. Here's a closer look.*



Sarah Polley, photograph by Chantal Anderson for *The New York Times*.



Larry Towell, © Jerome Sessini / Magnum Photos.



Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

Canadian film and photography will be in the spotlight at this Sunday's Academy Awards. *Women Talking*, by Toronto writer and director Sarah Polley (b.1979), is up for both Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay. The movie—based on Canadian writer Miriam Toews's bestselling novel—is set in an ultra-conservative religious community, whose female members must confront how to move forward in the aftermath of rampant sexual assaults and betrayals.

Despite its harrowing subject matter, the film is lush, poignant, and visually striking; Polley has credited the Lambton County, Ontario-based Larry Towell (b.1953) with inspiring the look and feel of *Women Talking*. The filmmaker was first taken by the lauded [Magnum](#) photojournalist's work nearly two decades ago when she saw his black and white images of Mennonites at Toronto's [Stephen Bulger Gallery](#) (Bulger continues to represent Towell today). When Polley began working on this project, she approached Towell to purchase the rights to reference his work. Below, we explore how one great Canadian artist drew inspiration from another.

DUST STORM



Film still from *Women Talking* (2022). Courtesy of ORION PICTURES © 2023 Orion Releasing LLC.



Larry Towell, *Dust Storm, Durango Colony, Durango, Mexico, 1994*, from the series *The Mennonites*. © Larry Towell / Magnum Photos.

In this still from *Women Talking* (top), several women hold on to their hats as they make their way across a windswept landscape. The image evokes Larry Towell's widely reproduced 1994 photograph (bottom) of Mennonites caught in a dust storm in Durango, Mexico—a dramatic representation of everyday life in a harsh natural environment. This scene takes place near the beginning of the film, when the colony's women head to a barn to vote on how to respond to the crimes that have been committed against them: 1) do nothing; 2) stay and fight; or 3) leave the community.

BREAKING IN A HORSE



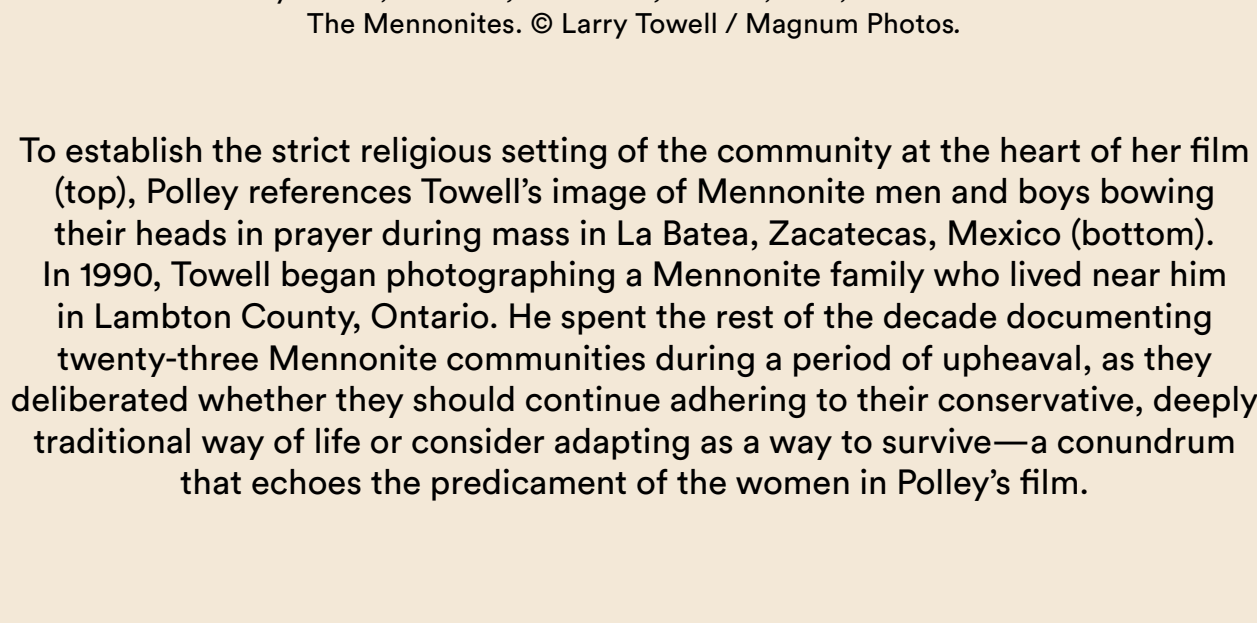
Film still from *Women Talking* (2022). Courtesy of ORION PICTURES © 2023 Orion Releasing LLC.



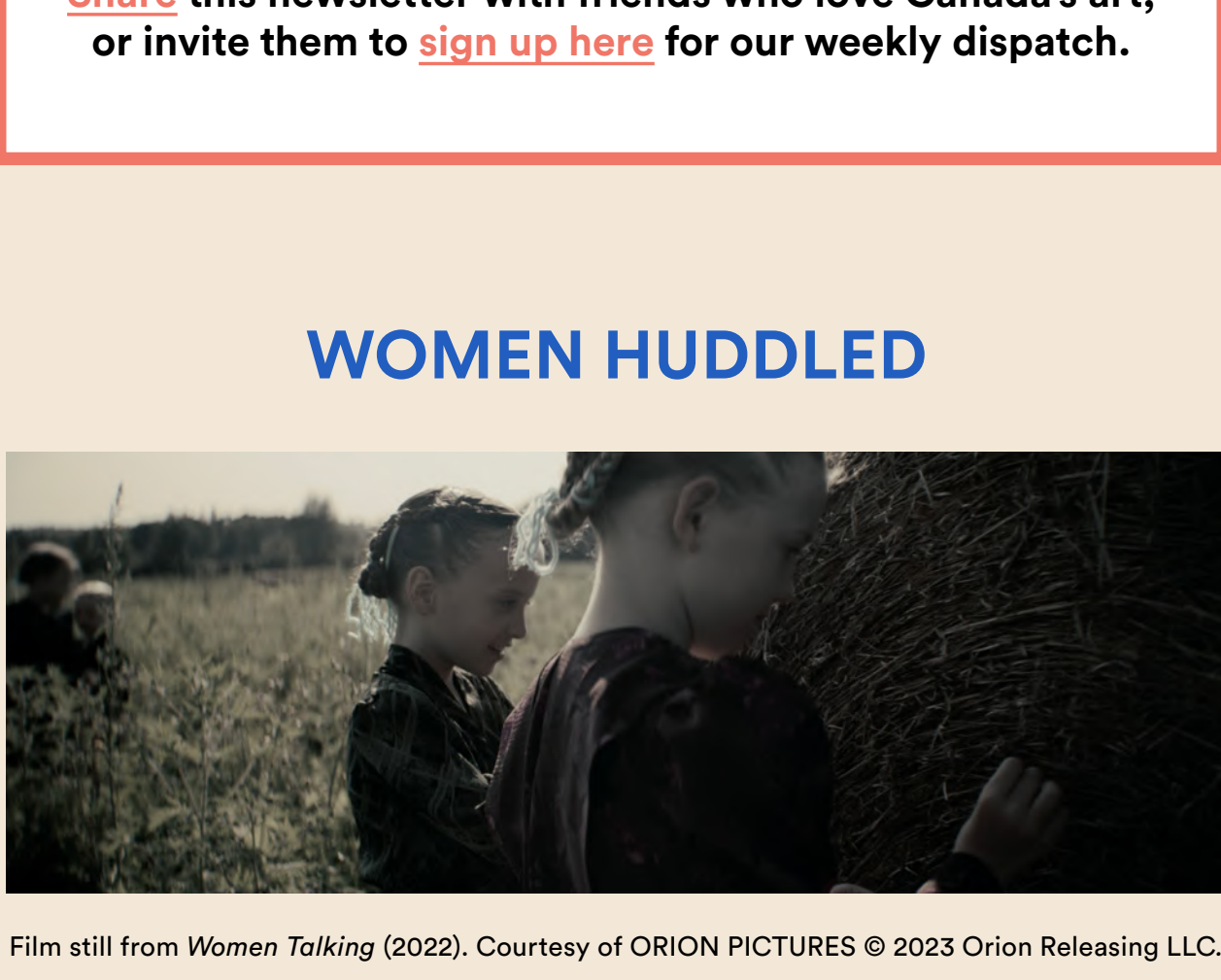
Larry Towell, *Breaking in a horse for the buggy, Zacatecas, La Batea, Mexico, 1996*, from the series *The Mennonites*. © Larry Towell / Magnum Photos.

As the women of the colony weigh the pros and cons of various options, Greta Loewen (Sheila McCarthy), a community elder, shares an allegorical anecdote about her two horses, Ruth and Cheryl. The image at top offers a glimpse of this story: shot from Greta's perspective as she holds the reins while perched in a buggy, the scene pays homage to Towell's photograph of two Mennonites breaking in a horse in Zacatecas, La Batea, Mexico (bottom). In the film, Greta explains that whenever Ruth and Cheryl are frightened by the colony's dogs on the road leading to the church, "their initial instinct is to bolt." "But Greta, we are not animals," says Agata Friesen (Judith Levy), another community elder. "We have been preyed upon like animals," Greta replies. "Maybe we should respond like animals."

HEADS BOWING



Film still from *Women Talking* (2022). Courtesy of ORION PICTURES © 2023 Orion Releasing LLC.



Larry Towell, *La Batea, Zacatecas, Mexico, 1994*, from the series *The Mennonites*. © Larry Towell / Magnum Photos.

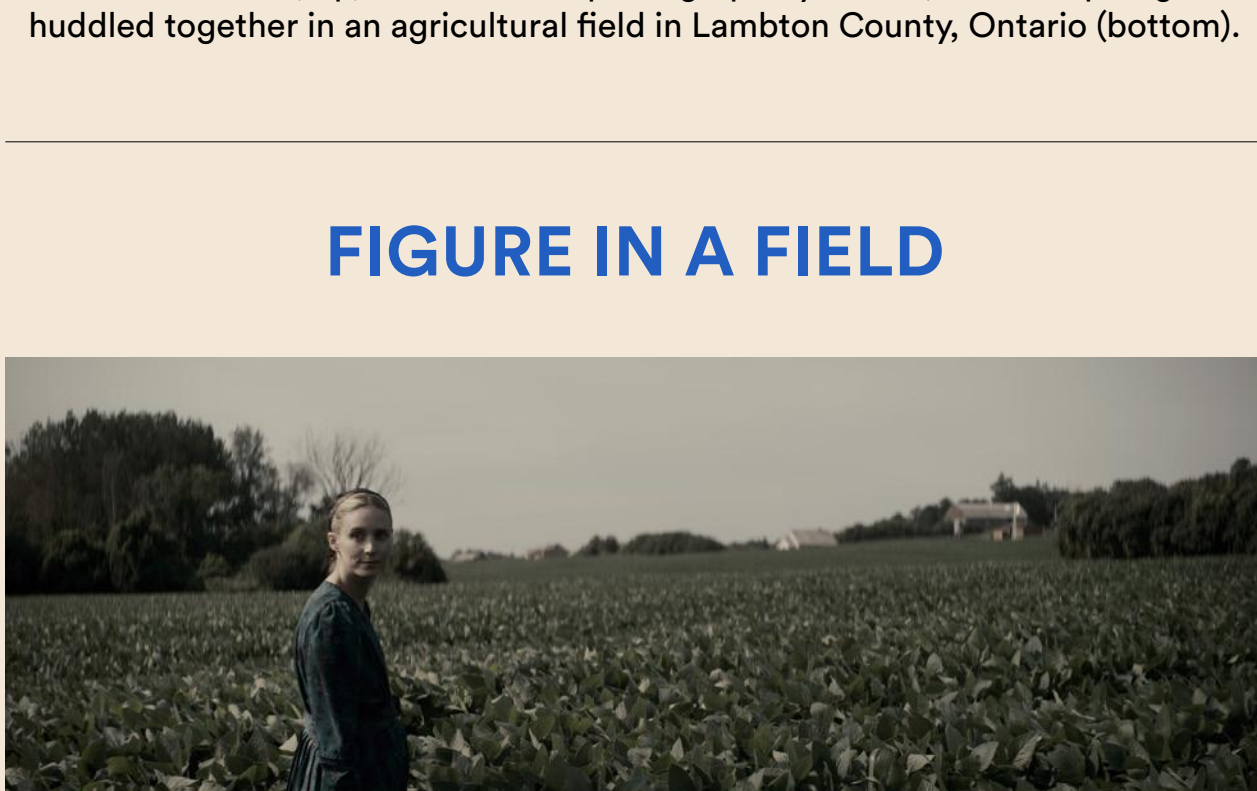
To establish the strict religious setting of the community at the heart of her film (top), Polley references Towell's image of Mennonite men and boys bowing their heads in prayer during mass in La Batea, Zacatecas, Mexico (bottom). In 1990, Towell began photographing a Mennonite family who lived near him in Lambton County, Ontario. He spent the rest of the decade documenting twenty-three Mennonite communities during a period of upheaval, as they deliberated whether they should continue adhering to their conservative, deeply traditional way of life or consider adapting as a way to survive—a conundrum that echoes the predicament of the women in Polley's film.

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WOMEN HUDDLED



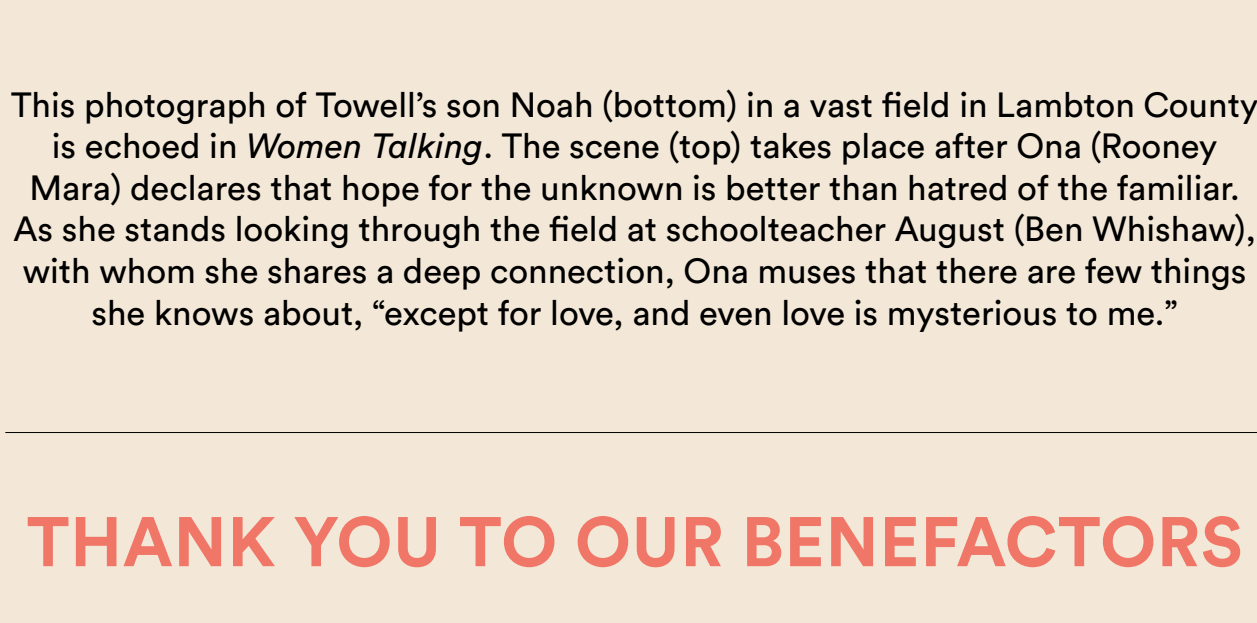
Film still from *Women Talking* (2022). Courtesy of ORION PICTURES © 2023 Orion Releasing LLC.



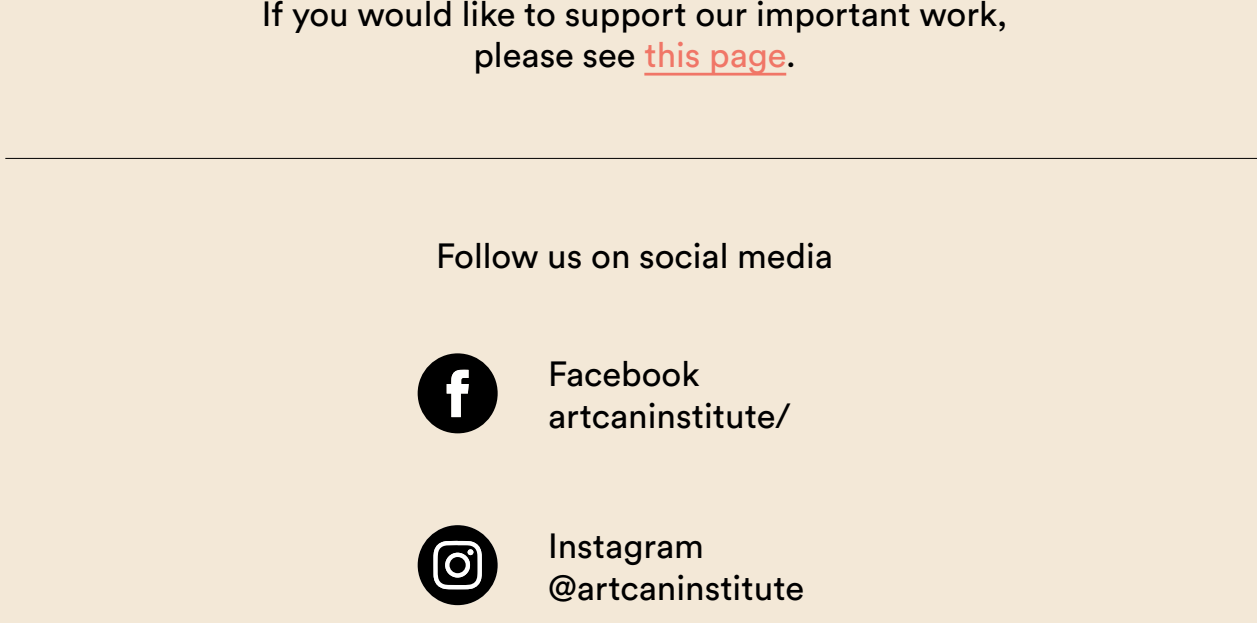
Larry Towell, *Lambton County, Ontario, Canada, 1990*, from the series *The Mennonites*. © Larry Towell / Magnum Photos.

Early on in *Women Talking*, the young narrator Autje (Kate Hallett), reflects on how violence has affected the community's women and girls. The film has a desaturated colour palette because Polley and Canadian cinematographer Luc Montpellier "wanted to trick you into wondering what time period this was," as the latter told the *Hollywood Reporter*. "We didn't want to disconnect the audience from the idea that it could be happening right now." Here, Montpellier frames a scene (top) that riffs on a photograph by Towell, a close-up of girls huddled together in an agricultural field in Lambton County, Ontario (bottom).

FIGURE IN A FIELD



Film still from *Women Talking* (2022). Courtesy of ORION PICTURES © 2023 Orion Releasing LLC.



Larry Towell, *Lambton County, Ontario, 1993*. © Larry Towell / Magnum Photos.

This photograph of Towell's son Noah (bottom) in a vast field in Lambton County is echoed in *Women Talking*. The scene (top) takes place after Ona (Rooney Mara) declares that hope for the unknown is better than hatred of the familiar. As she stands looking through the field at schoolteacher August (Ben Whishaw), with whom she shares a deep connection, Ona muses that there are few things she knows about, "except for love, and even love is mysterious to me."

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