ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

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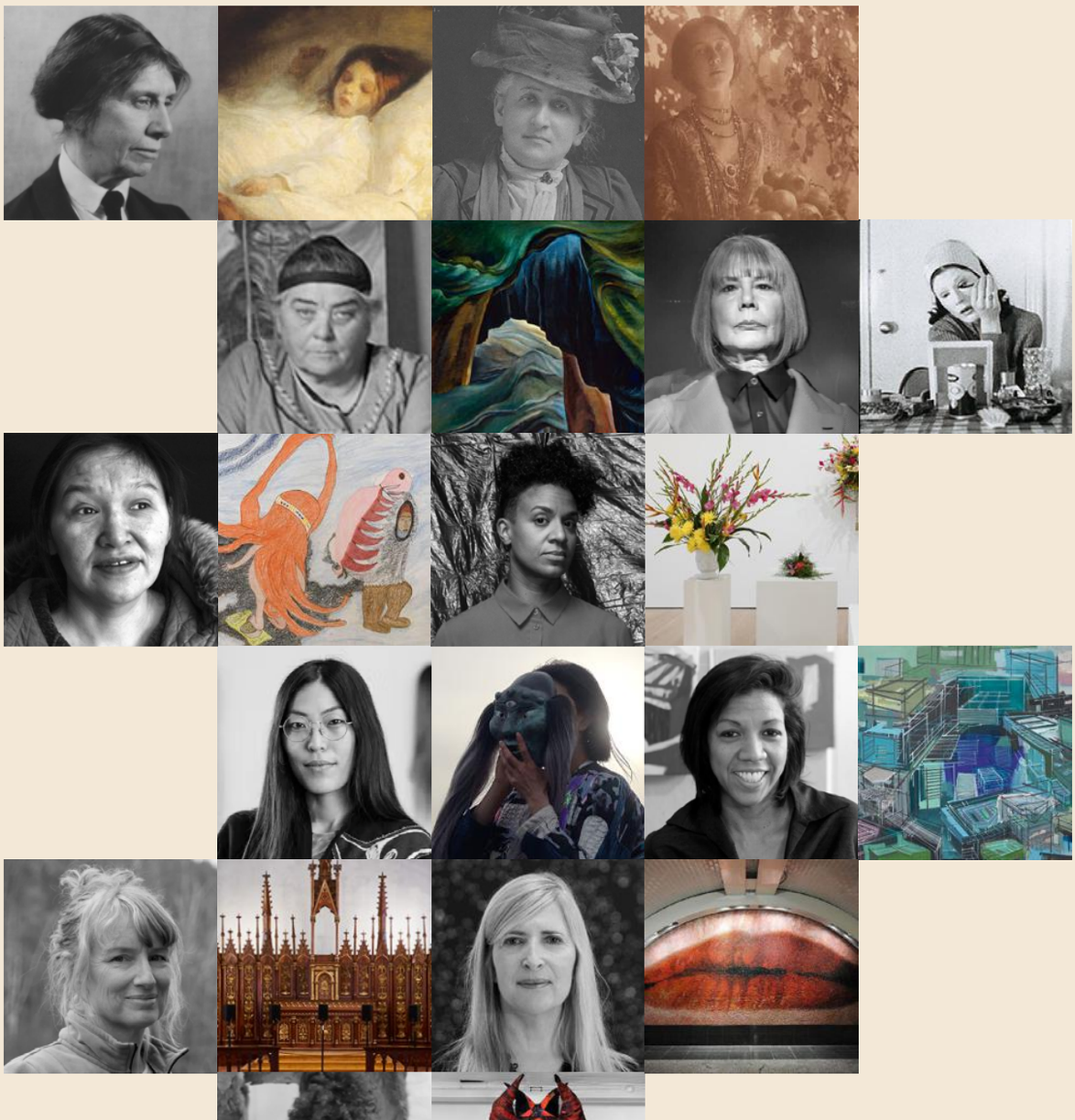
KNOW HER NAME
CANADIAN WOMEN ARTISTS ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE

In honour of International Women's Day, we're looking at women whose art transcends borders.



International Women's Day is next Wednesday, March 8th. To mark it, we're celebrating the achievements of Canadian women artists, past and present, who burnished their reputations on the world stage. The historical artists highlighted here pushed boundaries in their lifetimes and are recognized today for clearing many of the paths taken by their successors. Able to enjoy certain freedoms, the present-day artists remain keenly aware of the efforts still to be made to attain equity for women—in art and elsewhere. While each of the women featured below has ties to Canada, they all built careers of global significance by boldly transcending borders and boundaries. We hope you find their work as inspiring as we do.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

THE WATCHER

by Laura Muntz

Laura Muntz, *The Watcher*, 1894, private collection.

A woman watches over her sleeping child in this painting by Impressionist Laura Muntz (1860–1930), an artist known for her realistic depictions of two popular Victorian subjects: motherhood and childhood. A teacher, Muntz used her earnings to complete formal artistic training in England and in France, where, in 1894, *The Watcher* appeared at the Paris Salon. The following year, Toronto-based Muntz became the first Canadian to receive the exhibition's Honourable Mention. A renowned and successful artist in her own time, Muntz was described by National Gallery of Canada senior curator Katerina Atanassova as someone who served as a "defiant example of achievement in a male-dominated field and as a champion of womanhood within the confines of an era."

Learn more about Laura Muntz

POMEGRANATES

by Minna Keene

Minna Keene, *Pomegranates*, c.1910, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Framed in dappled sunlight, a young woman in bohemian attire holds a bowl full of pomegranates. Inspired by an earlier work—Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 1874 painting *Proserpine*—she is posed as the Greek goddess Persephone, but in this 1910 photograph her gaze is defiant rather than passive, and the fruit is a symbol of youth, not captivity. The model, a young woman named Violet, is the daughter of the artist Minna Keene (1861–1943). A pictorialist (an early term for fine art photographer) and commercial photographer working out of Toronto and Montreal, Keene defied the expectations of her time. While photography was largely considered a male profession during the Victorian era, she successfully ran studios in England, South Africa, and Canada.

Learn more about Minna Keene

FOREST, BRITISH COLUMBIA

by Emily Carr

Emily Carr, *Forest, British Columbia*, 1931–32, Vancouver Art Gallery.

After decades of rejection, the now-legendary West Coast artist Emily Carr (1871–1945) only received national recognition in her fifties, thanks to large-scale works like *Forest, British Columbia*, 1931–32. During this period, Carr developed a more abstract painting style, one that powerfully captured the spiritual energy of Canada's wilderness. Her international reputation was solidified when her work was shown posthumously at the Venice Biennale in 1952, and, more recently, at Documenta 13 in Kassel, Germany, in 2012. In 2014 the exhibition *From the Forest to the Sea: Emily Carr in British Columbia* at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London, England, garnered widespread acclaim, with *The Observer* calling Carr "Canada's Van Gogh."

Read more in ACI's
Emily Carr: Life & Work by Lisa Baldissera

ON STAGE

by Suzy Lake

Suzy Lake, *On Stage*, 1972 (reprinted 1996), Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Taking a page—or pages—out of a women's magazine, Toronto-based artist Suzy Lake (b.1947) posed as a fashion model in her breakthrough 1972 work, *On Stage*, to explore questions of identity from a feminist perspective. Art historian Erin Silver writes that it "marks the beginning of Lake's preoccupation with questions of perception and formation of the self—by the self, by others, and within broader society." Lake continued to manipulate and distort her own body in later work, including using whiteface as a way of turning herself into a blank slate. Her foray into self-investigation via roleplaying greatly impacted contemporary American artist Cindy Sherman (b.1954), who cites *On Stage* as a major inspiration for her own character-driven self-portraiture.

Read more in ACI's
Suzy Lake: Life & Work by Erin Silver

UNTITLED

by Shuvinai Ashoona

Shuvinai Ashoona, *Untitled*, 2021, courtesy of West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative.

Fantastical creatures rendered in vivid coloured pencil wander down a snowy street in this untitled work by Kinngait-based artist Shuvinai Ashoona (b.1961). The large-scale drawing was one of six works Ashoona exhibited in the Central Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2022, earning a Special Mention in the process. The first woman artist from Kinngait to be invited to participate in the biennial, Ashoona's depictions of contemporary Inuit life blend the ordinary, the abject, the monstrous, and the dreamlike. In a 2022 *New York Times* profile, Ashoona refers to the three-headed monster holding hands with a family at the top-right corner of the composition and jokes, "They didn't mention where they were going."

Read more in ACI's
Shuvinai Ashoona: Life & Work by Nancy G. Campbell

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FLOWERS FOR AFRICA

by Kapwani Kiwanga

Kapwani Kiwanga, *Flowers for Africa* (installation view, *Stories of Almost Everyone* at Hammer Museum, Los Angeles), 2018, courtesy of the artist, Galerie Jérôme Poggi-Paris, Galerie Tanja Wagner Berlin, Goodman Gallery SA.

In 2020 artist Kapwani Kiwanga (b.1978) received the Prix Marcel Duchamp, one of France's highest art honours, for *Flowers for Africa*, two years after winning the Sobey Art Award. In 2024, she will represent Canada at the Venice Biennale—the first Black woman to take on the task, and only the second Black artist (after Stan Douglas in 2022). Born in Hamilton, Ontario, and based in Paris, Kiwanga grounds her work in historical research around power, resistance, and postcolonialism. This colourful installation, made of cut flowers, is a nod to bouquets featured at events commemorating the independence of African countries. Kiwanga created the arrangements based on archival photographs of diplomatic gatherings. The blooms wilt and decay over time, symbolizing the fragility and impermanence of history, art, and political alliances.

Learn more about Kapwani Kiwanga

CHILD OF MAGOHALMI AND THE ECHOES OF CREATION

by Zadie Xa

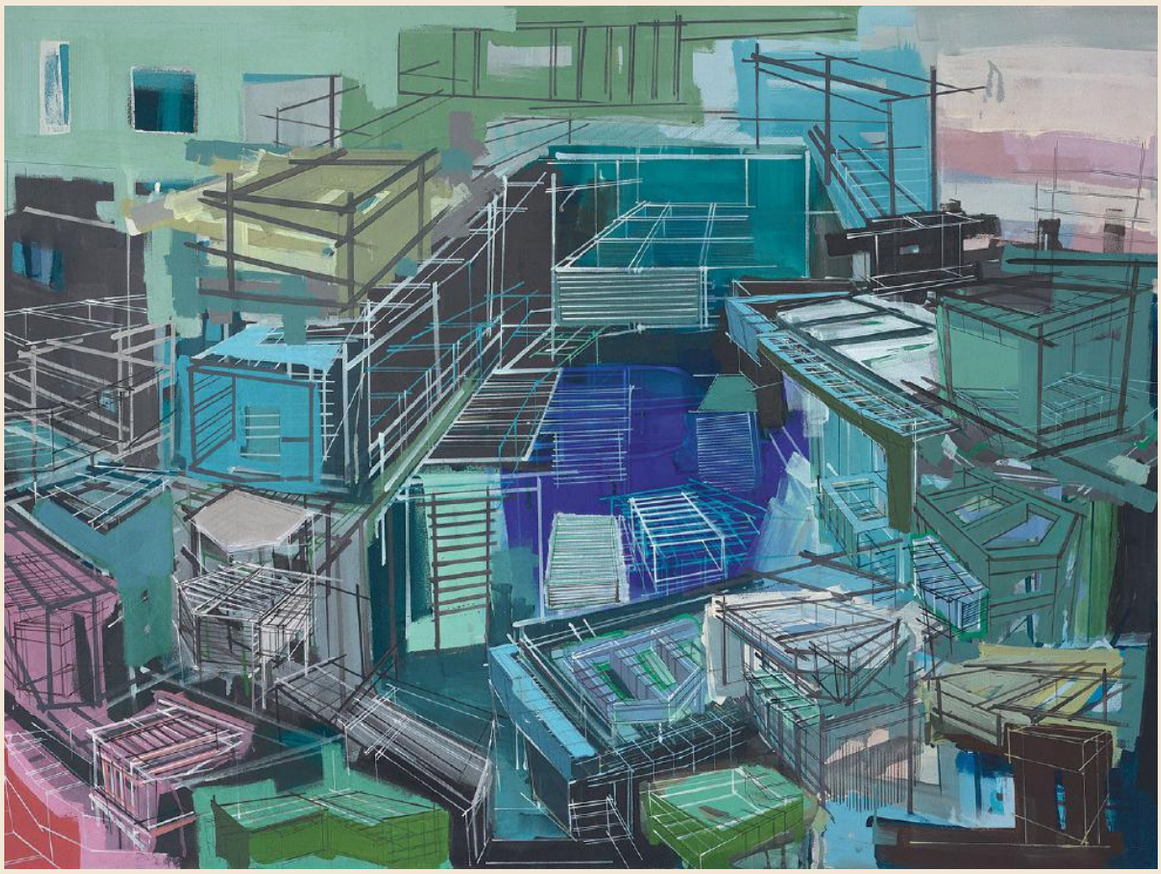
Zadie Xa, *Child of Magohalmi and the Echoes of Creation* (still) , 2019, courtesy of Zadie Xa.

Seeking to reinstate female-centred folklore as an important part of contemporary cultural narratives, artist Zadie Xa (b.1983) started with a mask. As part of her 2019 multimedia theatrical installation, the Vancouver-born, London, England-based Xa shared the story of the Korean creator-goddess Magohalmi, a.k.a. Grandmother Mago, who formed mountains, islands, rivers, and rocks out of her own urine and excrement. The myth was written out of the official historical record by male authorities but was passed down through matrilineal social structures; Xa's version shifts the focus back to women and their role in creation.

Learn more about Zadie Xa

EXCAVATIONS: JODHPUR ROOFTOPS

by Denyse Thomasos



Denyse Thomasos, *Excavations: Jodhpur Rooftops*, 2007, Collection of Robin & David Young.

With this large-scale, semi-abstract work, the late Trinidadian Canadian painter Denyse Thomasos (1964–2012) conjures visceral feelings of claustrophobia and confinement. Here, the blue hues, densely overlapping lines, scaffolding, and stacked boxes evoke the architecture of the so-called Blue City in Jodhpur, India, but Thomasos used this formalist technique in other works to explore topics such as forced incarceration, the industrial prison complex, and the transatlantic slave trade. “One of the stars of the 2022 Whitney Biennial,” according to the *Art Newspaper*, and the subject of a recent career retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Thomasos intended her interweaving lines to stand for “the complex weave of interdependence between the poor underclass and larger social and economic issues.”

Learn more about Denyse Thomasos

FORTY-PART MOTET

by Janet Cardiff

Janet Cardiff, *Forty-Part Motet*, 2001, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, installed at the National Gallery of Canada, Rideau Chapel.

A reworking of the musical composition *Spem in Alium* by sixteenth-century English composer Thomas Tallis, *Forty-Part Motet* consists of forty separately recorded choir voices played back through forty speakers positioned around a room. This immersive sound sculpture by British Columbia–based artist Janet Cardiff (b.1957), who represented Canada at the 2001 Venice Biennale, gives visitors the opportunity to ascend from their place in the audience and inhabit the vantage point of a choral singer. Depending on where one chooses to stand or move, interactions can happen in intimate isolation or dramatic unison. Since its creation in 2001, the work has been shown in many different locations, including a cathedral in Paris, a wine cellar in Sweden, the Cloisters at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York—and, pictured here, the Rideau Chapel at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa.

Learn more about Janet Cardiff

LA VOIX LACTÉE

by Geneviève Cadieux

Geneviève Cadieux, *La Voix lactée*, 2011, Saint-Lazare station, Paris.

La Voie lactée (French for "the Milky Way"), a key piece of public art in Geneviève Cadieux's home city of Montreal, has been perched atop the Musée d'art contemporain since 1992. The lightbox installation depicts an arresting close-up photograph of a heavily lipsticked mouth, belonging to the artist's mother. As Jasmine Stuart writes in *Concordia University News*, Cadieux (b.1955) "primarily explores the body as a landscape and an interface between public and private realms. She is also concerned with the way art integrates into urban environments." After representing Canada at the Venice Biennale in 1990, Cadieux exhibited at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1995, and presented a video in Times Square in 2002. Almost a decade later, *La Voix lactée* (a mosaic version of *La Voie lactée*) was installed at the end of a tunnel in the Paris metro, giving fans of the original work a chance to get up close and personal with an icon that had until then been out of reach.

Learn more about Geneviève Cadieux

VENA CAVA

by Tau Lewis

Tau Lewis, *Vena Cava*, 2021, courtesy of Tau Lewis.

At three metres tall, the textile masks created by Toronto-born, Brooklyn-based artist Tau Lewis (b.1993) make a striking first impression. Inspired by the ceremonial masks of the Yoruba and the writings of Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka, the works are made from upcycled materials (including fabric scraps, seashells, found photographs, and paint cans) that are then dyed and stitched together. Lewis sees her works as talismanic vessels for carrying memories, making them a perfect fit for the 2022 Venice Biennale exhibition, *The Milk of Dreams*, which was themed on an "imaginary journey through the metamorphoses of bodies and definitions of the human."

Learn more about Tau Lewis

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Image Credits: **[1]** Laura Muntz, *The Watcher*, 1894, oil on canvas. Private collection. Courtesy of Sothebys, Toronto. **[2]** Minna Keene, *Pomegranates*, c.1910, carbon print, 49.6 x 33.9 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (48989). Photo: NGC. **[3]** Emily Carr, *Forest, British Columbia*, 1931–32, oil on canvas, 130 x 86.8 cm. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust, VAG 42.3.9. Photograph by Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery. **[4]** Suzy Lake, *On Stage*, 1972 (reprinted 1996), gelatin silver print, selenium toned, 40.1 x 91.3 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Gift of Carol and Morton Rapp, 2009 (2009/290). Courtesy of Suzy Lake and Georgia Scherman Projects. © Suzy Lake. **[5]** Shuvinai Ashoona, *Untitled*, 2021, graphite, coloured, pencil, and ink on paper, 127 x 244.5 cm. Reproduced with the permission of Dorset Fine Arts. Courtesy of West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative. **[6]** Kapwani Kiwanga, *Flowers for Africa* (installation view, *Stories of Almost Everyone* at Hammer Museum, Los Angeles), 2018, protocol to guide the reconstruction of floral arrangement with the use of iconographic documentation, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Jérôme Poggi-Paris, Galerie Tanja Wagner Berlin, Goodman Gallery SA. Photo: Brian Forrest. Image source: Sobey Art Award / National Gallery of Canada. **[7]** Zadie Xa, *Child of Magohalmi and the Echos of Creation* (still), 2019, HD video. Courtesy of Zadie Xa. **[8]** Denyse Thomasos, *Excavations: Jodhpur Rooftops*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 106.7 x 152.4 cm. Collection of Robin & David Young. Courtesy of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg. **[9]** Janet Cardiff, *Forty-Part Motet*, 2001, 40-track audio installation, installation dimensions variable. Collection of National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. 40634.1-40. Installed at the National Gallery of Canada, Rideau Chapel. © Janet Cardiff. Photo: NGC. **[10]** Geneviève Cadieux, *La Voix lactée*, 2011, Saint-Lazare station, Paris. Photo credit: RATP, Bruno Margeurite. Courtesy of Radio-Canada. **[11]** Tau Lewis, *Vena Cava*, 2021, recycled leather, acrylic paint, coated nylon, steel armature, 308.6 x 213.4 x 109.2 cm. Courtesy of the artist. © Tau Lewis.