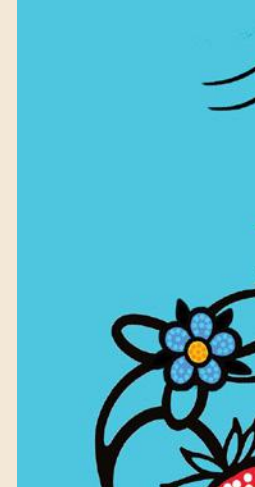


MARCH 24, 2023

# MAKING WAVES

## 9 ARTISTS ON THE POLITICS OF WATER

Over the last week, leaders from around the globe have attended the UN 2023 Water Conference to focus on how the resource is a dealmaker for both sustainable development goals and our planet's health. Here's a look at how Canadian artists have examined our relationship to the earth's most precious resource.



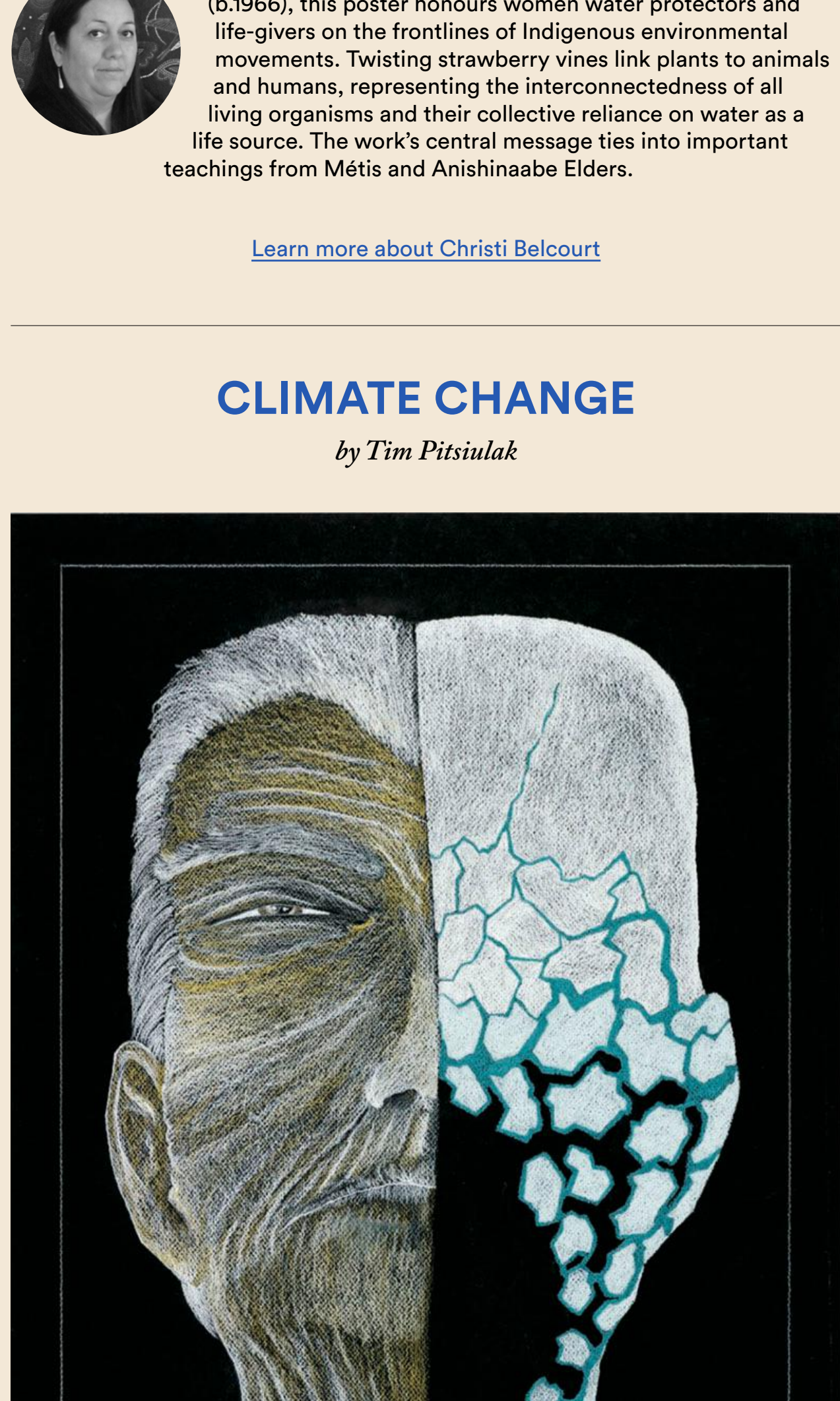
Today marks the final day of the [United Nations 2023 Water Conference](#) in New York, which is devoted to combatting the global water crisis and increasing the protection of clean freshwater. To mark the occasion, we're featuring Canadian works that explore the politics of water and how they intersect with community, identity, and individual and collective life. As Michif (Métis) artist Christi Belcourt reminds us (see image below), reflecting on important teachings from Métis and Anishinaabe elders [in an interview with Châtelaine magazine](#): "We believe that the water is alive, and we believe that the water has rights, and that it holds life."

**Sara Angel**

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

### WATER IS LIFE POSTER

artwork by Christi Belcourt,  
graphic design by Sarah LittleRedfeather Kalmanson



Water Is Life poster, 2020, artwork by Christi Belcourt, graphic design by Sarah LittleRedfeather Kalmanson.

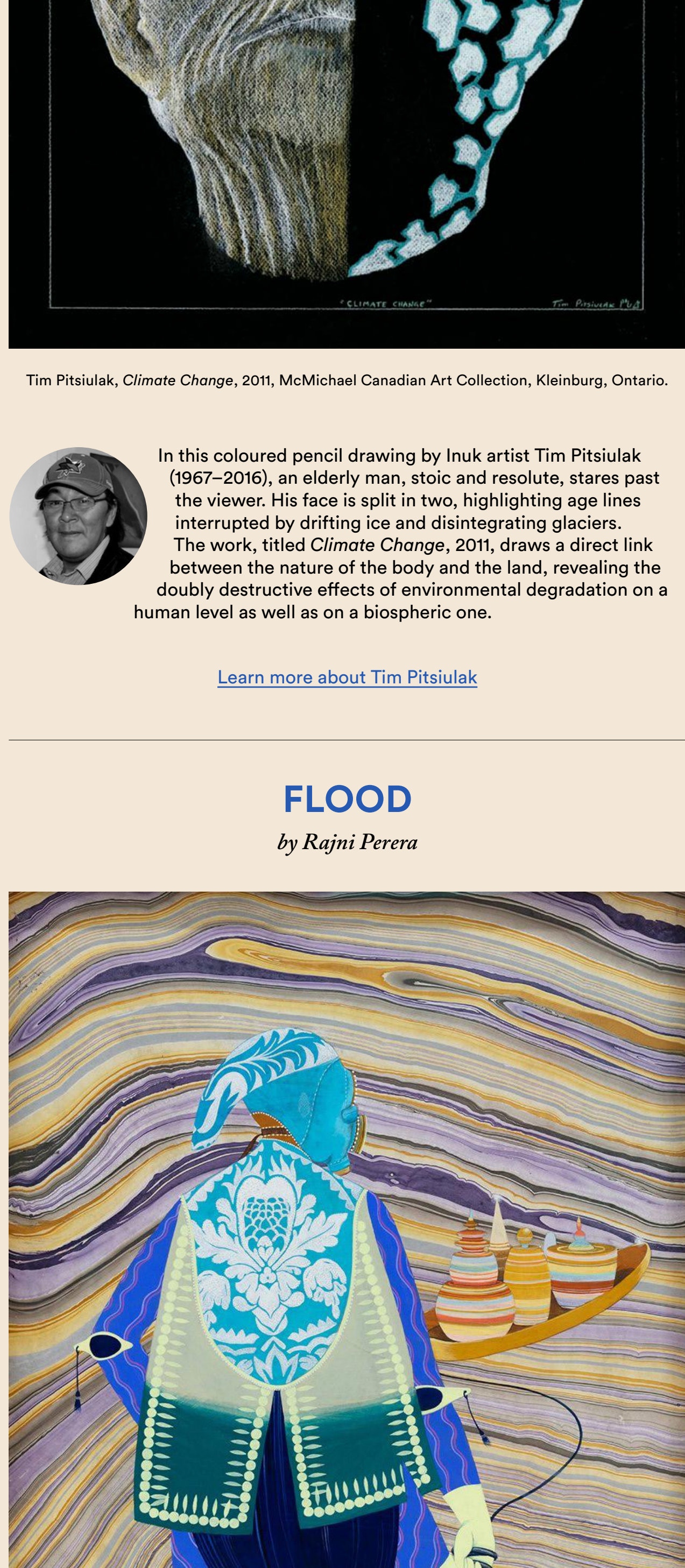


Created by Ontario-based Michif artist Christi Belcourt (b.1966), this poster honours women water protectors and life-givers on the frontlines of Indigenous environmental movements. Twisting strawberry vines link plants to animals and humans, representing the interconnectedness of all living organisms and their collective reliance on water as a life source. The work's central message ties into important teachings from Métis and Anishinaabe Elders.

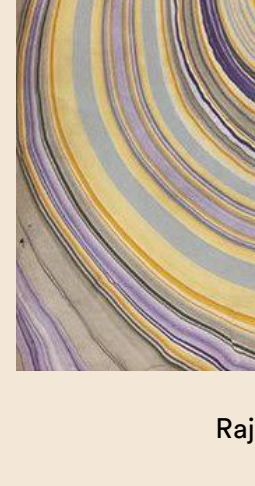
[Learn more about Christi Belcourt](#)

### CLIMATE CHANGE

by Tim Pitsiulak



Tim Pitsiulak, *Climate Change*, 2011, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario.



In this coloured pencil drawing by Inuk artist Tim Pitsiulak (1967–2016), an elderly man, stoic and resolute, stares past the viewer. His face is split in two, highlighting the age lines interrupted by drifting ice and disintegrating glaciers. The work, titled *Climate Change*, 2011, draws a direct link between the nature of the body and the land, revealing the doubly destructive effects of environmental degradation on a human level as well as on a biospheric one.

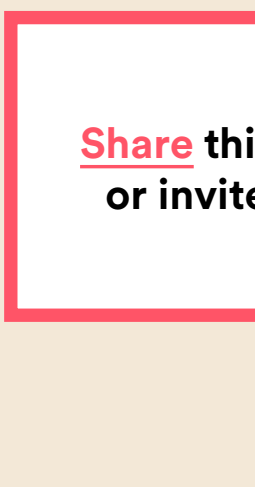
[Learn more about Tim Pitsiulak](#)

### FLOOD

by Rajni Perera



Rajni Perera, *Flood*, 2020, courtesy of Patel Brown Gallery, Toronto.



In *Flood*, 2020, by Rajni Perera (b.1985), a lone figure emerges from within layers of marbled colour that evoke the rippling movement of waves. The Toronto-based, Sri Lankan-born artist combines her interests in science fiction and sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mughal painting traditions to examine the effects of accelerated climate change on immigrants and displaced peoples. She envisions her figures as resilient survivors of the Anthropocene. "They're a hardened, interbred nation of immigrants who are better adapted by way of adversity—better adapted to the changing planet," she explains [in an interview with CBC](#).

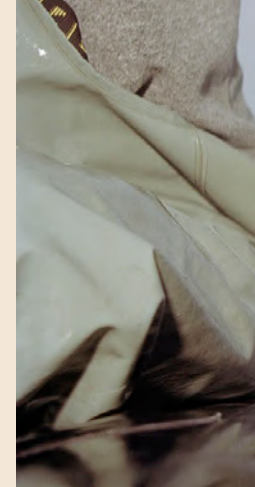
[Learn more about Rajni Perera](#)

### WHAT WILL I SAY TO THE SKY AND THE EARTH II

by Meryl McMaster



Meryl McMaster, *What Will I Say to the Sky and the Earth II*, from the series *As Immense as the Sky*, 2019, Art Gallery of Hamilton.



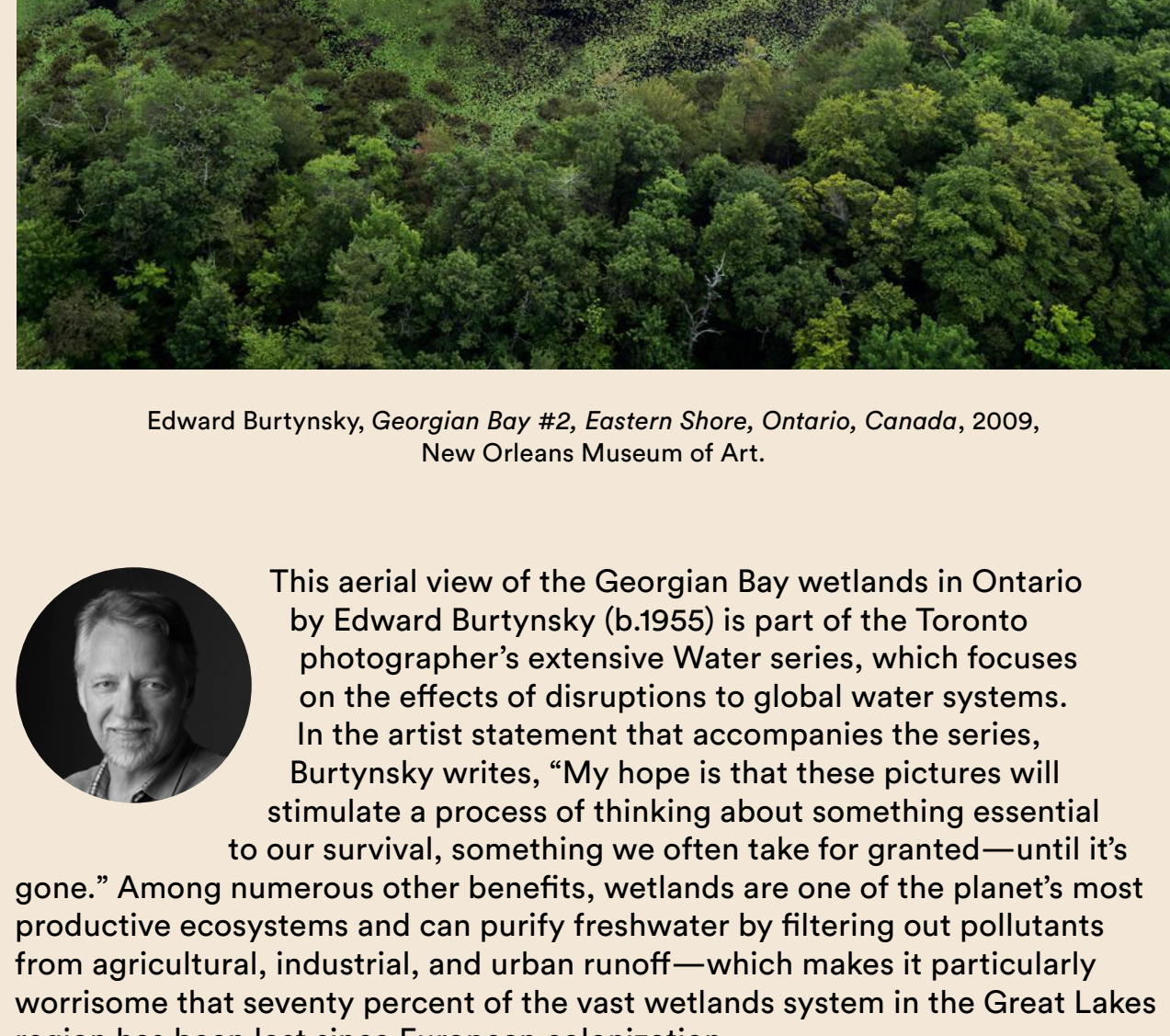
On the snowy banks of Lake Erie, Meryl McMaster (b.1988) poses meditatively in a diaphanous dress emblazoned with crimson mayflies and water striders. The Ottawa-born artist of mixed néhiyaw (Plains Cree), British, and Dutch ancestry created the work to draw attention to the effects of global warming and pollution on these insects, which serve as important food sources for the Great Lake's birds, fish, and other animals.

[Learn more about Meryl McMaster](#)

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### GEORGIAN BAY #2, EASTERN SHORE, ONTARIO, CANADA

by Edward Burtynsky



Edward Burtynsky, *Georgian Bay #2, Eastern Shore, Ontario, Canada*, 2009, New Orleans Museum of Art.

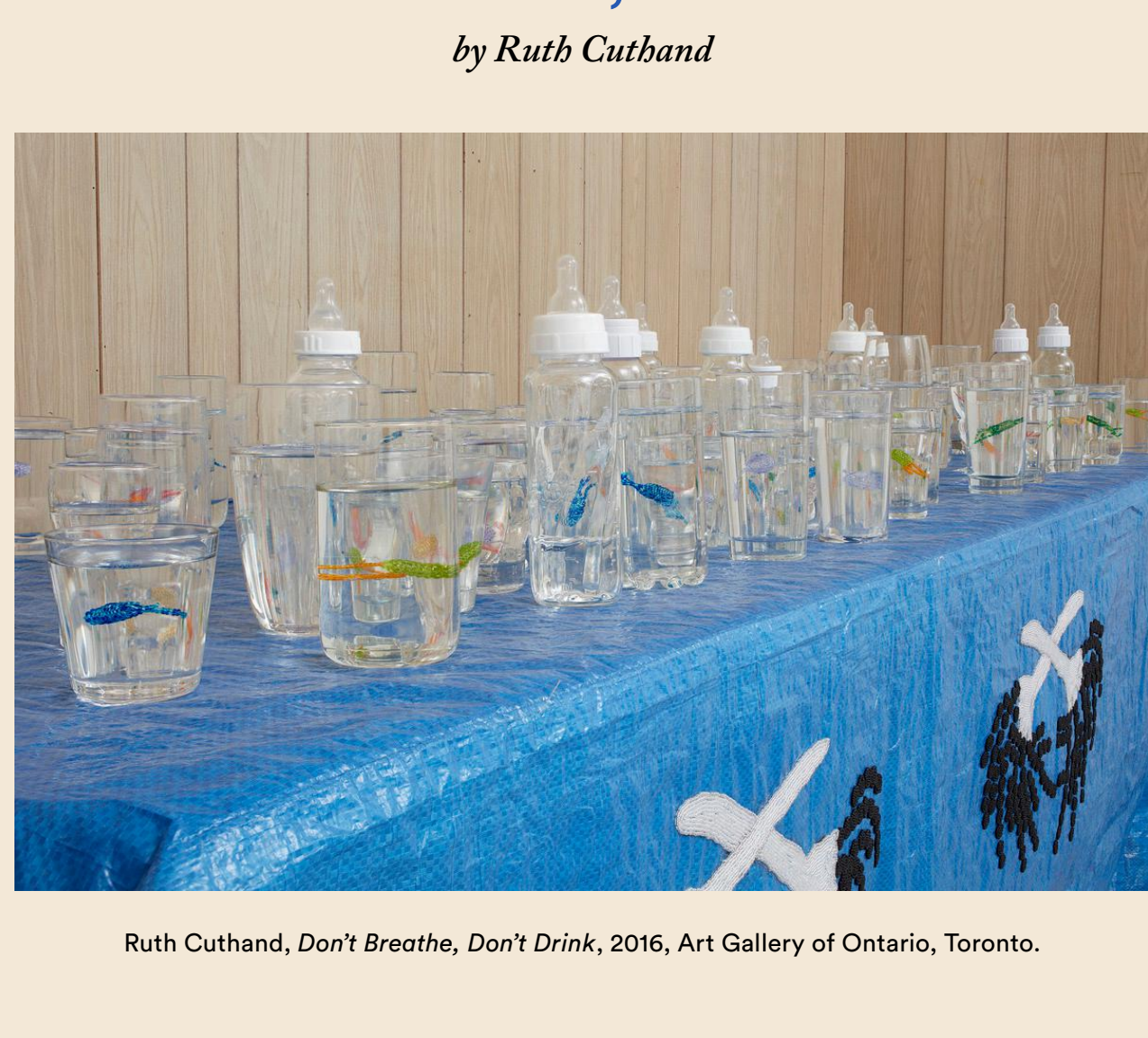


This aerial view of the Georgian Bay wetlands in Ontario by Edward Burtynsky (b.1955) is part of the Toronto photographer's extensive *Water* series, which focuses on the effects of disruptions to global water systems. In the artist statement that accompanies the series, Burtynsky writes, "My hope is that these pictures will stimulate a process of thinking about something essential to our survival, something we often take for granted—until it's gone." Among numerous other benefits, wetlands are one of the planet's most productive ecosystems and can purify freshwater by filtering out pollutants from agricultural, industrial, and urban runoff—which makes it particularly worrisome that seventy percent of the vast wetlands system in the Great Lakes region has been lost since European colonization.

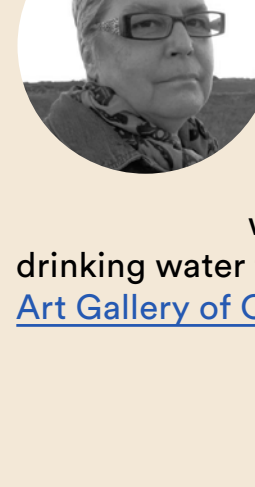
[Learn more about Edward Burtynsky](#)

### GUTLESS

by Ethan Murphy



Ethan Murphy, *Gutless*, 2018, courtesy of Ethan Murphy and Christina Parker Gallery, St. John's.

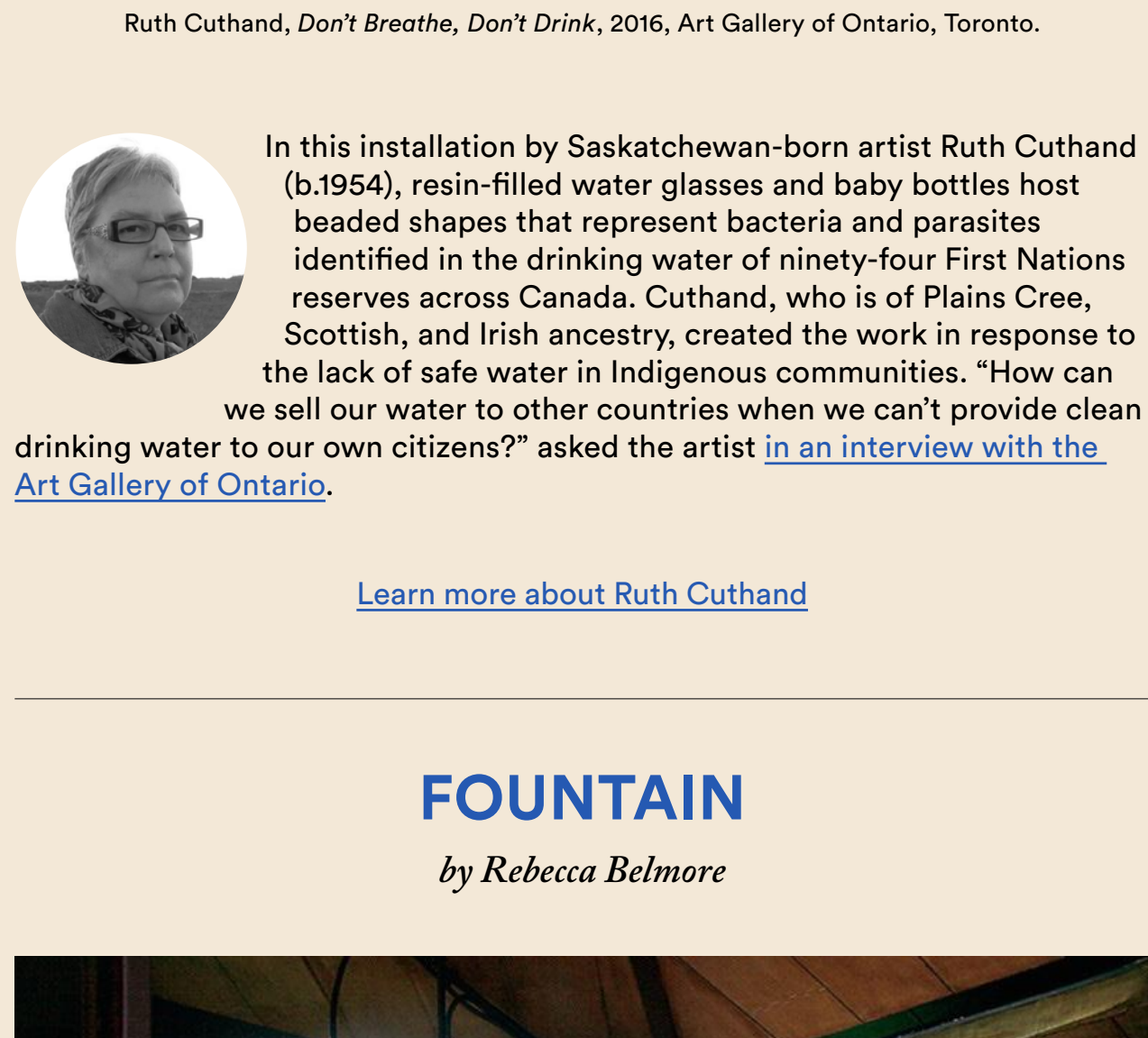


In 1992, following decades of overfishing, northern cod populations fell to historic lows off Canada's eastern coasts. This triggered a federal moratorium on cod fishing, which had been Newfoundland and Labrador's primary economic activity for more than 500 years. St. John's-born photographer Ethan Murphy delves into the psychological and social effects of the moratorium on Newfoundland identity with works such as *Gutless*, 2018, portraying a gutted fish held above the ocean by the arm of an out-of-frame fisherman.

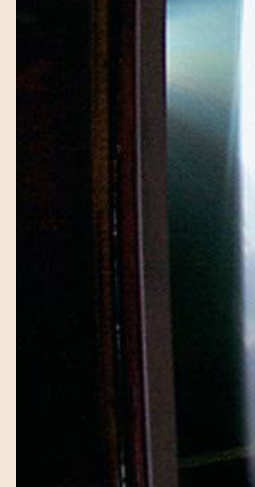
[Learn more about Ethan Murphy](#)

### DON'T BREATHE, DON'T DRINK

by Ruth Cuthand



Ruth Cuthand, *Don't Breathe, Don't Drink*, 2016, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



In this installation by Saskatchewan-born artist Ruth Cuthand (b.1954), resin-filled water glasses and baby bottles host beaded shapes that represent bacteria and parasites identified in the drinking water of ninety-four First Nations reserves across Canada. Cuthand, who is of Plains Cree, Scottish, and Irish ancestry, created the work in response to the lack of safe water in Indigenous communities. "How can we sell our water to other countries when we can't provide clean drinking water to our own citizens?" asked the artist [in an interview with the Art Gallery of Ontario](#).

[Learn more about Ruth Cuthand](#)

### FOUNTAIN

by Rebecca Belmore



Rebecca Belmore, *Fountain*, 2005, installed at the Canada Pavilion, 2005 Venice Biennale, photograph by José Ramón Gonzales.

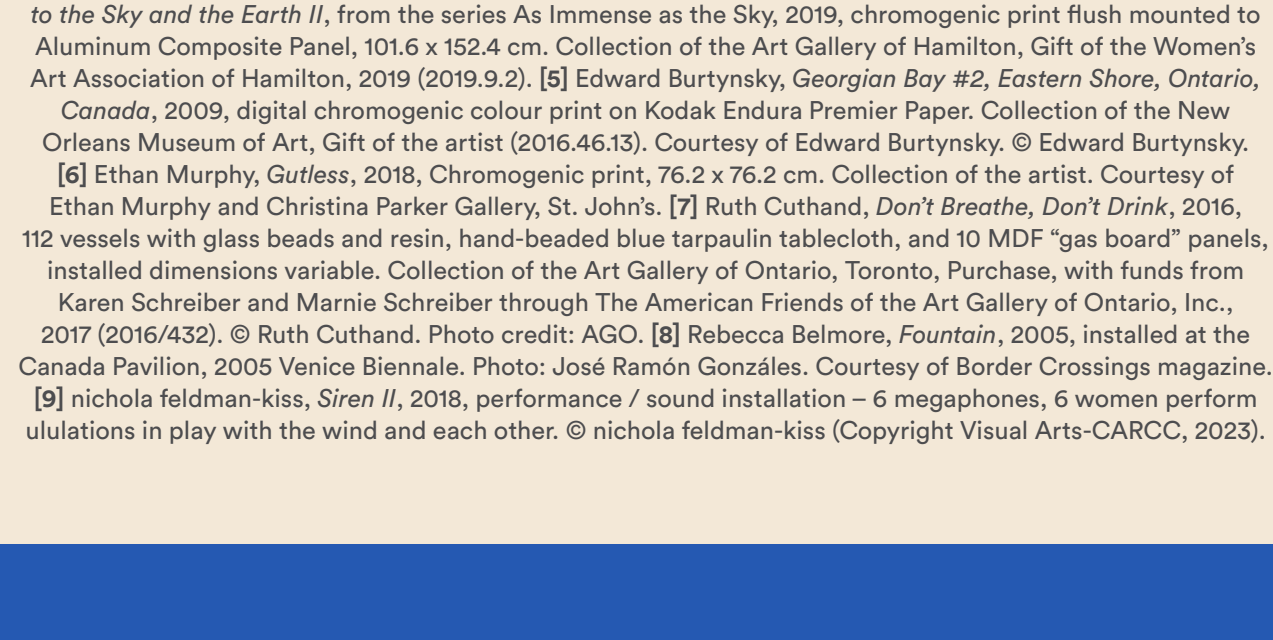


Created by Rebecca Belmore (b.1960) for the Canadian Pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale, *Fountain*, 2005, points to the social and political issues surrounding water and resource extraction in Canada. In the video, the Anishinaabe artist struggles to fill buckets with ocean water at an industrial beach in Vancouver; when she approaches the camera and tosses the contents of the bucket towards the lens, we see that the water has turned to blood.

[Learn more about Rebecca Belmore](#)

### SIREN II

by nichola feldman-kiss



nichola feldman-kiss, *Siren II*, 2018, © nichola feldman-kiss (Copyright Visual Arts-CARCC, 2023).



*Siren II*, 2018, in which nichola feldman-kiss worked with eight women who performed ullulations from a pier on Toronto Island, is part of a larger video and sound installation. The project draws on vocal traditions from across Africa and the Levant, and was inspired by mythologies positioning sirens as seductive, feminine creatures who lured seafaring men to their deaths with mesmerizing songs. More broadly, it serves as an exploration of border crossings, displacement, and involuntary migration.

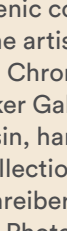
[Learn more about nichola feldman-kiss](#)

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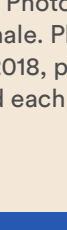
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