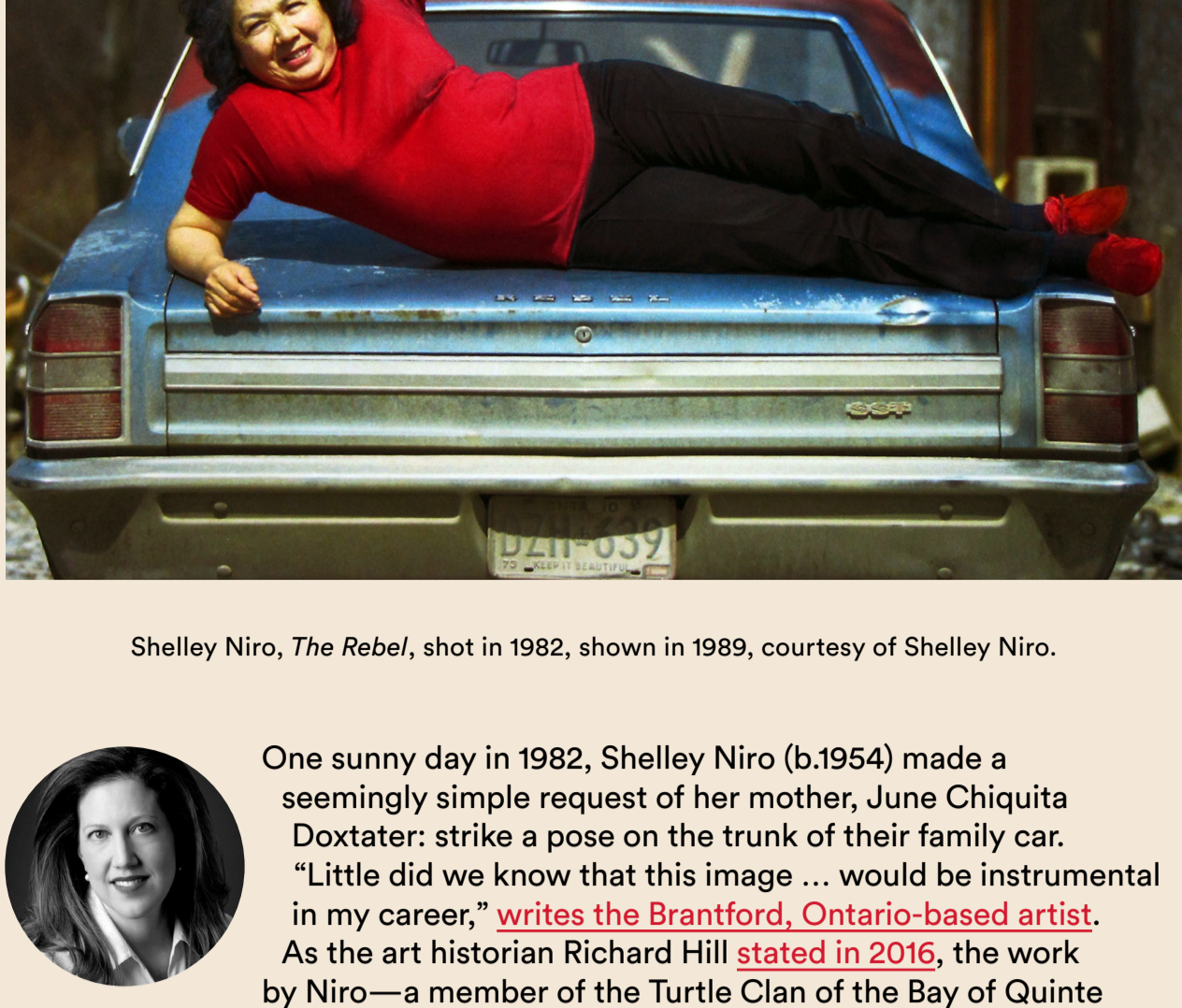


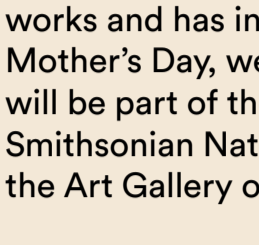
MAY 12, 2023

# MY MOTHER, MY MUSE SHELLEY NIRO'S *THE REBEL*

*In honour of Mother's Day on May 14, we're taking a long look at one of the most iconic images in Canadian art.*



Shelley Niro, *The Rebel*, 1982, shown in 1989, courtesy of Shelley Niro.



One sunny day in 1982, Shelley Niro (b.1954) made a seemingly simple request of her mother, June Chiquita Doxtater: strike a pose on the trunk of their family car. "Little did we know that this image ... would be instrumental in my career," [writes the Brantford, Ontario-based artist](#). As the art historian Richard Hill [stated in 2016](#), the work by Niro—a member of the Turtle Clan of the Bay of Quinte Kanien'kehaka (Mohawk) Nation is "a timely reminder of the power Indigenous women could exercise by seizing control of their own representation and harnessing the plays of desire that drive pop-cultural tropes to new and delightful ends." Today, *The Rebel*, 1982/1989, is one of Canadian art's best-known works and has influenced generations of Indigenous artists. In celebration of Mother's Day, we're delving into this playful and provocative photograph, which will be part of the major retrospective [Shelley Niro: 500 Year Itch](#), opening at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian on May 27 and travelling to the Art Gallery of Hamilton and the National Gallery of Canada in 2024.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

## THE DRIVING INSPIRATION



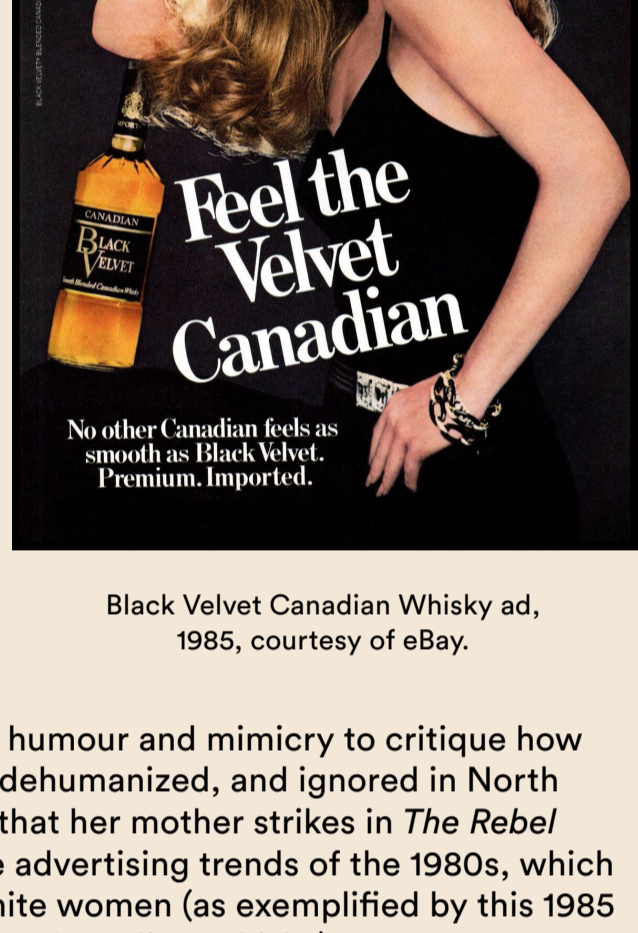
Shelley Niro, *The Rebel*, 1991, courtesy of Shelley Niro.

The photograph, which was originally shot in black and white and later hand-coloured by Niro, portrays the artist's mother lounging regally atop a vintage muscle car embossed with the vehicle model's name: "Rebel." Niro has revisited the image on numerous occasions, producing five original hand-tinted versions in 1991 and one-off iterations in subsequent years. Recalling how the famous photograph came about, [Niro explained](#) that her mother "was always willing to participate in any project I was working on.... Spontaneously she got on the car and stretched out provocatively. This was all done in fun. She was proud of the way she looked and took every opportunity to celebrate her femininity."

## SUBVERTING STEREOTYPES



Detail of June Chiquita Doxtater in *The Rebel*, courtesy of Shelley Niro.



Black Velvet Canadian Whisky ad, 1985, courtesy of eBay.

Niro has long used tongue-in-cheek humour and mimicry to critique how Indigenous women are fetishized, dehumanized, and ignored in North American society. The coy stance that her mother strikes in *The Rebel* references, reclaims, and subverts the advertising trends of the 1980s, which largely relied on seductively posed white women (as exemplified by this 1985 poster for Black Velvet Canadian Whisky).

## THE REBEL'S INFLUENCE



Top: Rebecca Belmore, *Coyote Woman*, 1991, reproduced with the permission of Rebecca Belmore. Bottom: Dana Claxton, *The Mustang Suite: Daddy's Gotta New Ride*, 2008, Dalhousie University Art Gallery.

The art historical influence of Niro's *The Rebel* is undeniable. *Coyote Woman*, 1991 (top), by Toronto-based Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore (b.1960), features a feminized trickster figure in the nude, striking the familiar *Rebel* pose. In 2015, [The Rebel Yells: Dress and Political Re-dress in Contemporary Indigenous Art](#), an exhibition held at Concordia University's FOFA Gallery, showcased pieces by Indigenous artists from across Canada who were influenced by Niro's photograph.

The featured series *The Mustang Suite*, 2008 (bottom), by Vancouver-based, Hunkpapa Lakota artist Dana Claxton (b.1959) includes this portrait of an Indigenous father posing with a red muscle car.

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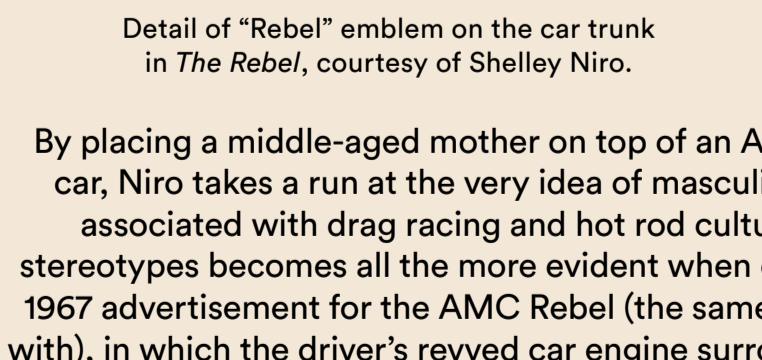
## MOTHER AS MUSE



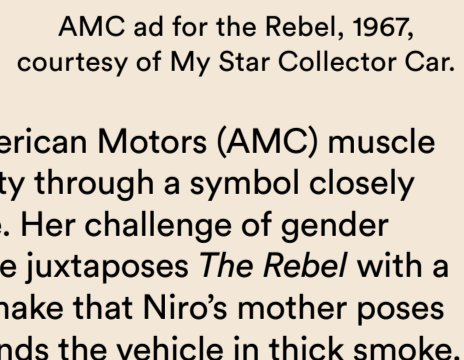
Shelley Niro, *Chiquita 1*, 2021, courtesy of Shelley Niro.

Since the making of *The Rebel*, Niro's mother has appeared in many of the artist's works, including the exquisite *Chiquita 1*, 2021. A photo of her as a shy, fifteen-year-old girl in a white dress is superimposed on a giant red rose. "My mother could have been a successful artist in her own right," Niro says [in an interview with the National Gallery of Canada](#). "But mostly the things she made at the kitchen table were meant to be sold at pow-wows and tourist shops. Her hands were always doing something." Niro displays her tenderness toward her mother by cocooning Chiquita in the flower's petals.

## REIMAGINING THE REBEL



Detail of "Rebel" emblem on the car trunk in *The Rebel*, courtesy of Shelley Niro.



AMC ad for the Rebel, 1967, courtesy of My Star Collector Car.

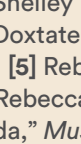
By placing a middle-aged mother on top of an American Motors (AMC) muscle car, Niro takes a run at the very idea of masculinity through a symbol closely associated with drag racing and hot rod culture. Her challenge of gender stereotypes becomes all the more evident when one juxtaposes *The Rebel* with a 1967 advertisement for the AMC Rebel (the same take that Niro's mother poses with), in which the driver's revved car engine surrounds the vehicle in thick smoke.

## THANK YOU TO OUR BENEFACTORS

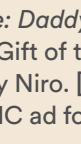
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Image Credits: [1] Shelley Niro, *The Rebel*, shot in 1982, shown in 1989, hand-tinted photograph, 28 x 35.6 cm. Courtesy of Shelley Niro. [2] Shelley Niro, *The Rebel*, 1991, hand-tinted photograph. Courtesy of Shelley Niro. [3] Detail of June Chiquita Doxtater in *The Rebel*. Courtesy of Shelley Niro. [4] Black Velvet Canadian Whisky ad, 1985. Courtesy of eBay. [5] Rebecca Belmore, *Coyote Woman*, 1991, graphite on paper, 33 x 50 cm. Reproduced with the permission of Rebecca Belmore. Source: Jean-Philippe Uzel, "Les Objets trickster dans l'art contemporain autochtone au Canada," *Musée du quai Branly*, 1 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.4000/actesbranly.241>. [6] Dana Claxton, *The Mustang Suite: Daddy's Gotta New Ride*, 2008, lightjet c-print, 122.2 x 152.7 cm. Collection of Dalhousie University Art Gallery, Gift of the artist, 2016. [7] Shelley Niro, *Chiquita 1*, 2021, digital photography, 101.6 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy of Shelley Niro. [8] Detail of "Rebel" embedded in car trunk in *The Rebel*. Courtesy of Shelley Niro. [9] AMC ad for the Rebel, 1967. Courtesy of My Star Collector Car.