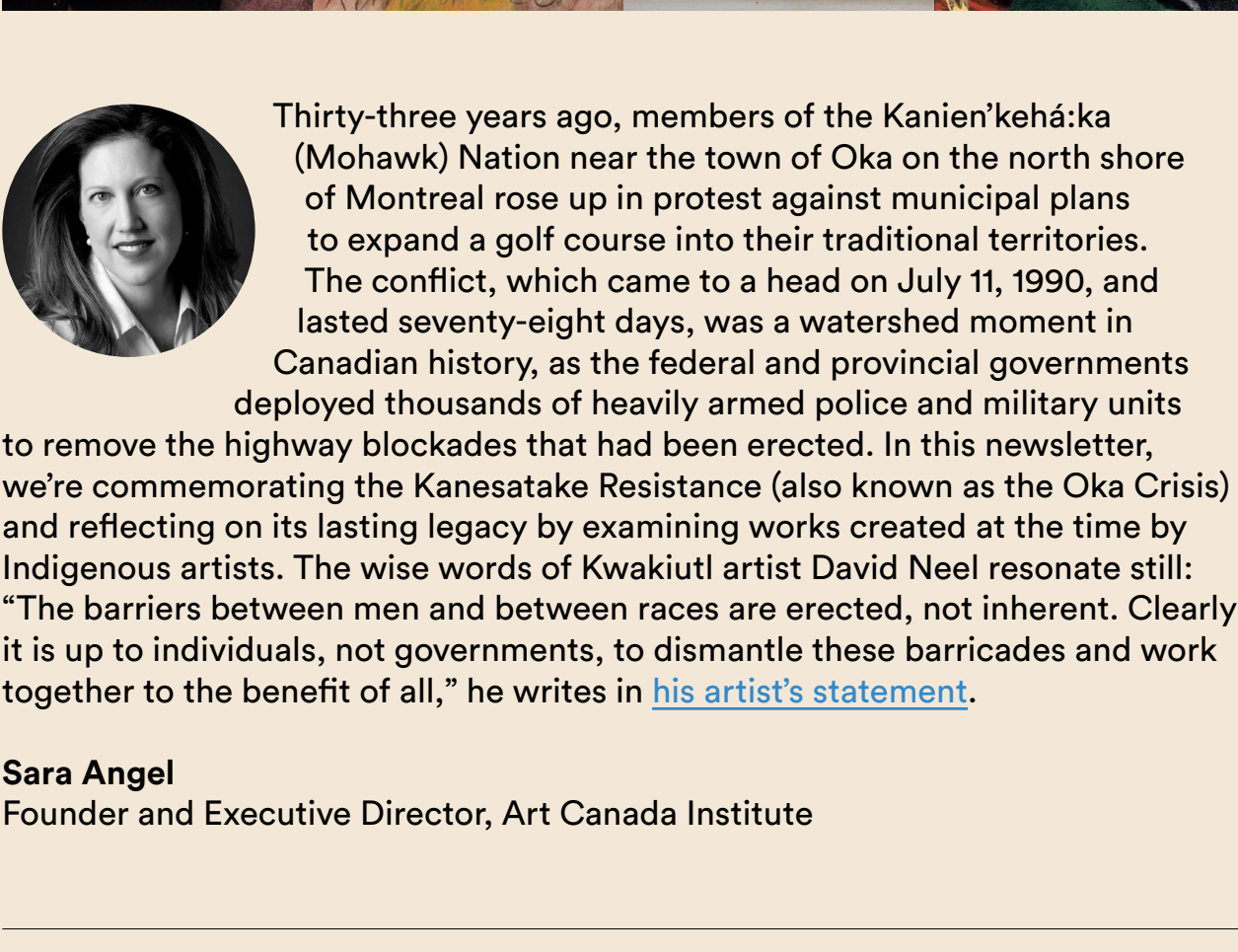


JULY 7, 2023

# KANESATAKE RESISTANCE SEVEN ARTISTS WEIGH IN

*To mark the 33rd anniversary of the standoff that garnered headlines around the world, we take a close look at Indigenous art made in response to the Kanesatake Resistance, the resulting military response, and the complicated nature of reconciliation.*

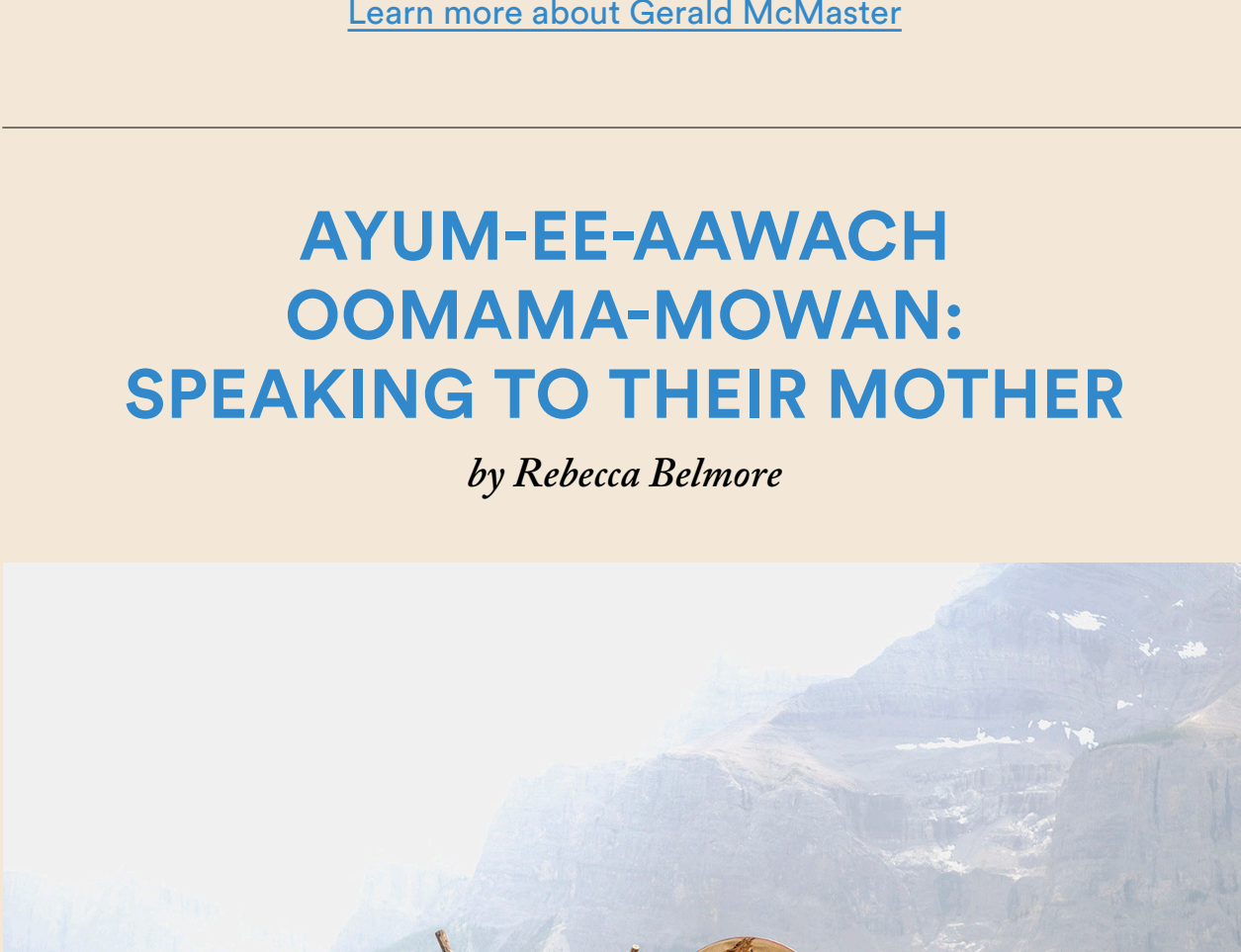


Thirty-three years ago, members of the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) Nation near the town of Oka on the north shore of Montreal rose up in protest against municipal plans to expand a golf course into their traditional territories. The conflict, which came to a head on July 11, 1990, and lasted seventy-eight days, was a watershed moment in Canadian history, as the federal and provincial governments deployed thousands of heavily armed police and military units to remove the highway blockades that had been erected. In this newsletter, we're commemorating the Kanesatake Resistance (also known as the Oka Crisis) and reflecting on its lasting legacy by examining works created at the time by Indigenous artists. The wise words of Kwakiutl artist David Neel resonate still: "The barriers between men and between races are erected, not inherent. Clearly it is up to individuals, not governments, to dismantle these barricades and work together to the benefit of all," he writes in [his artist's statement](#).

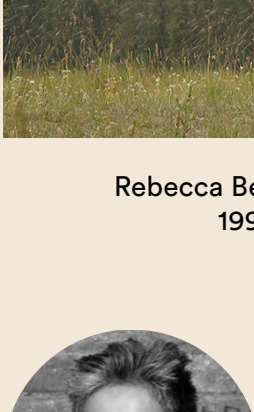
**Sara Angel**  
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

## OKA-BOY/OH! KOWBOY

by Gerald McMaster



Gerald McMaster, *Oka-boy/Oh! Kowboy*, 1990, courtesy of Gerald McMaster.

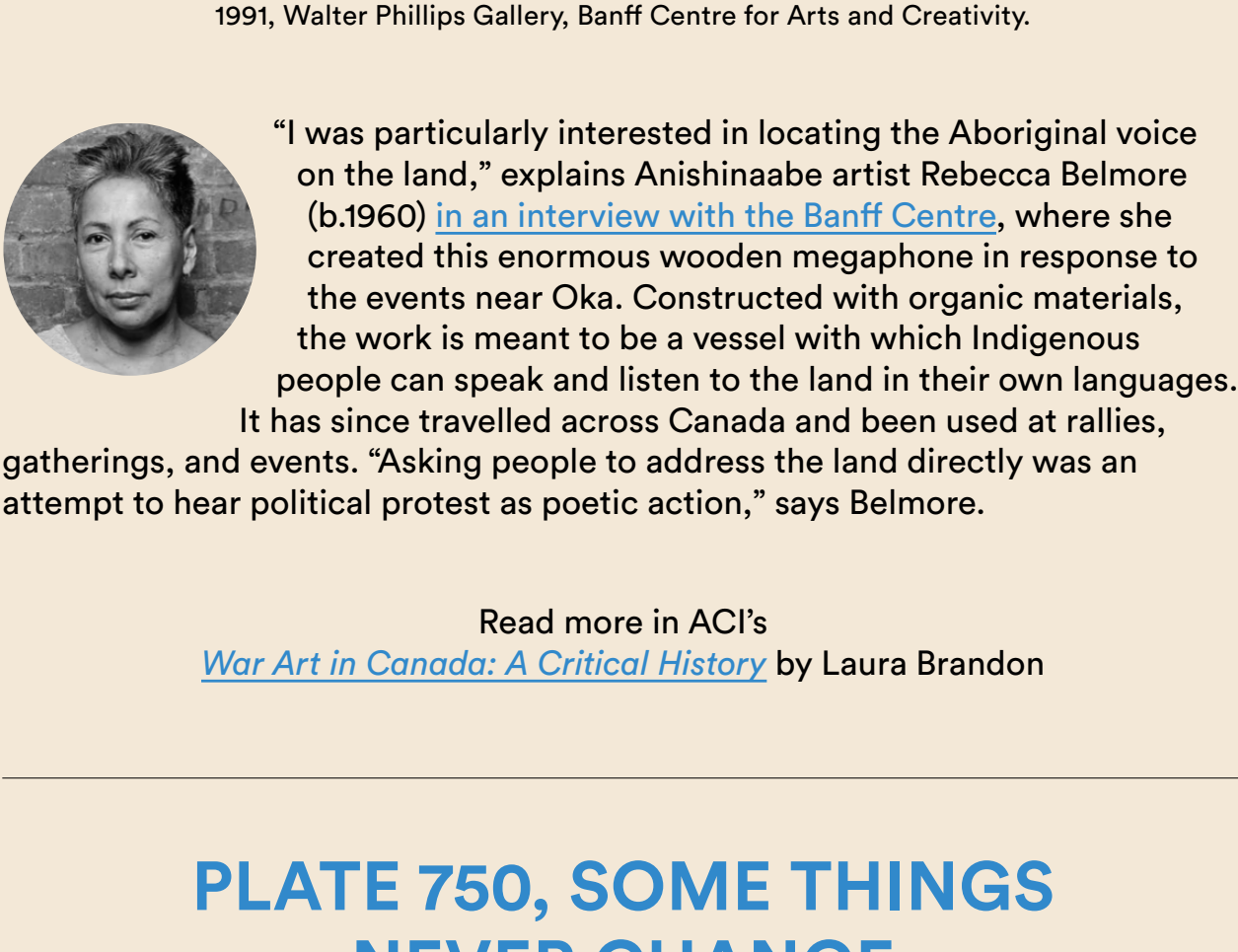


In *Oka-boy/Oh! Kowboy*, 1990, by Gerald McMaster (b.1953), word games and layered symbols explore the history of policing against Indigenous people. A yellow silhouette with horns, standing in for the outnumbered Mohawk warriors, is marked with a bullseye and surrounded by shadowy figures in cowboy hats—a reference to the Western "cowboys and Indians" trope. Meanwhile, in the background, scribbled text is transformed: an innocuous "Okay" becomes "Oka," then "Oka-boy," "O Kanada," and eventually, "O kant you see."

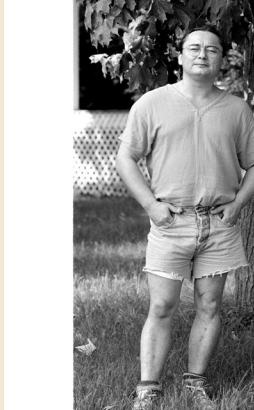
[Learn more about Gerald McMaster](#)

## AYUM-EE-AAWACH OOMAMA-MOWAN: SPEAKING TO THEIR MOTHER

by Rebecca Belmore



Rebecca Belmore, *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother*, 1991, Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity.

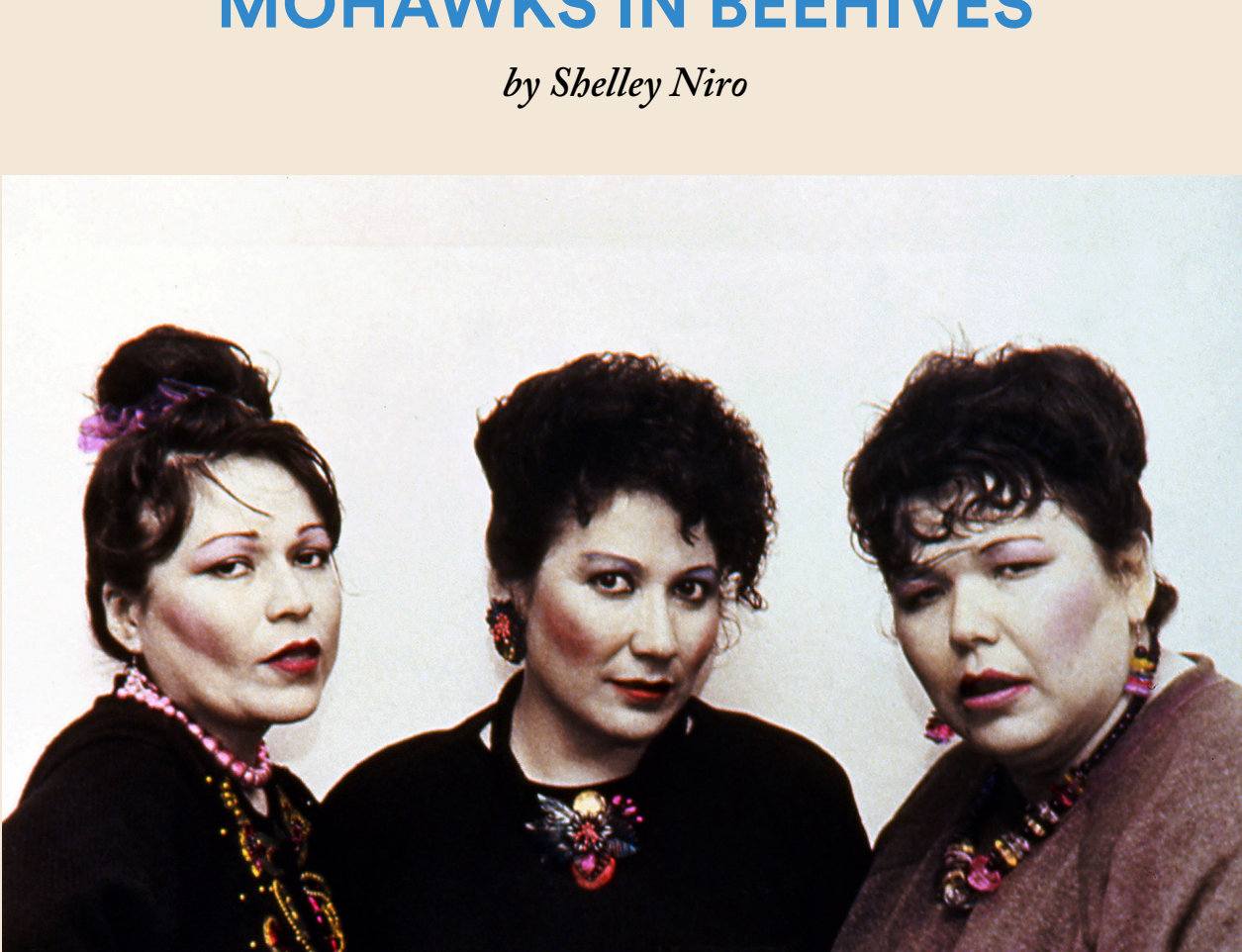


"I was particularly interested in locating the Aboriginal voice on the land," explains Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore (b.1960) [in an interview with the Banff Centre](#), where she created this enormous wooden megaphone in response to the events near Oka. Constructed with organic materials, the work is meant to be a vessel with which Indigenous people can speak and listen to the land in their own languages. It has since travelled across Canada and been used at rallies, gatherings, and events. "Asking people to address the land directly was an attempt to hear political protest as poetic action," says Belmore.

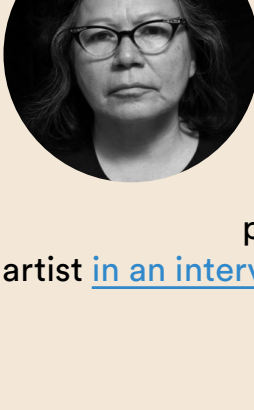
Read more in ACI's  
[War Art in Canada: A Critical History](#) by Laura Brandon

## PLATE 750, SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE

by Jeff Thomas



Jeff Thomas, *Plate 750, Some Things Never Change*, 2007 (updated 2015), courtesy of Jeff Thomas.



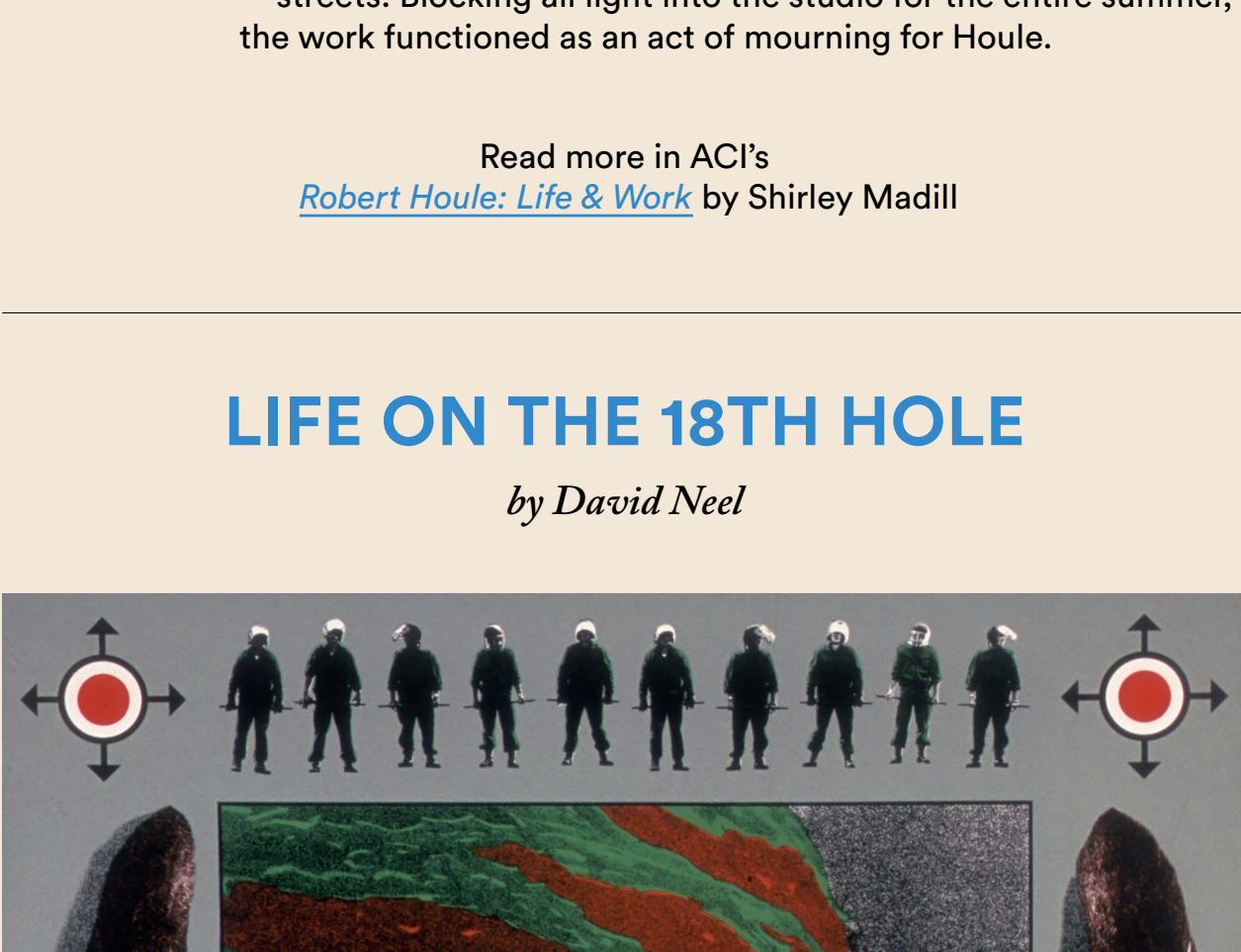
In this print, photographer Jeff Thomas (b.1956) pays homage to his Iroquois culture and history by bringing together three striking images of Haudenosaunee individuals. On the left, Mohawk artist and Kanesatake Resistance protester Joe David poses in front of a sign marked "private property," while on the right, Bear Thomas, the artist's son and co-founder of the hip-hop group The Halluci Nation (formerly A Tribe Called Red), sits with a statue of Samuel de Champlain. Between them is a portrait of Mohawk chief Ho Nee Yeath Taw No Row, painted in 1710 by Dutch artist John Verelst during the chief's visit to London.

[Learn more about Jeff Thomas](#)

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## MOHAWKS IN BEEHIVES

by Shelley Niro



Shelley Niro, *Mohawks in Beehives*, 1991, courtesy of Shelley Niro.



As tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities flared, Mohawk artist Shelley Niro (b.1954) created a series of portraits with her sisters that rejected the narrative of Indigenous victimhood. The three women donned heavy makeup, accessories, and beehive hairstyles and went to downtown Brantford, Ontario, where they took over the streets by staging tongue-in-cheek performances and poses. "We didn't care what anybody thought of us," says the artist [in an interview with the Mercer Union gallery](#).

[Learn more about Shelley Niro](#)

## MOHAWK SUMMER

by Robert Houle



Robert Houle's second-floor apartment on Queen Street West, Toronto, with *Mohawk Summer*, 1990, hanging in the windows during the Kanesatake Resistance, 1990, photograph by Greg Staats.

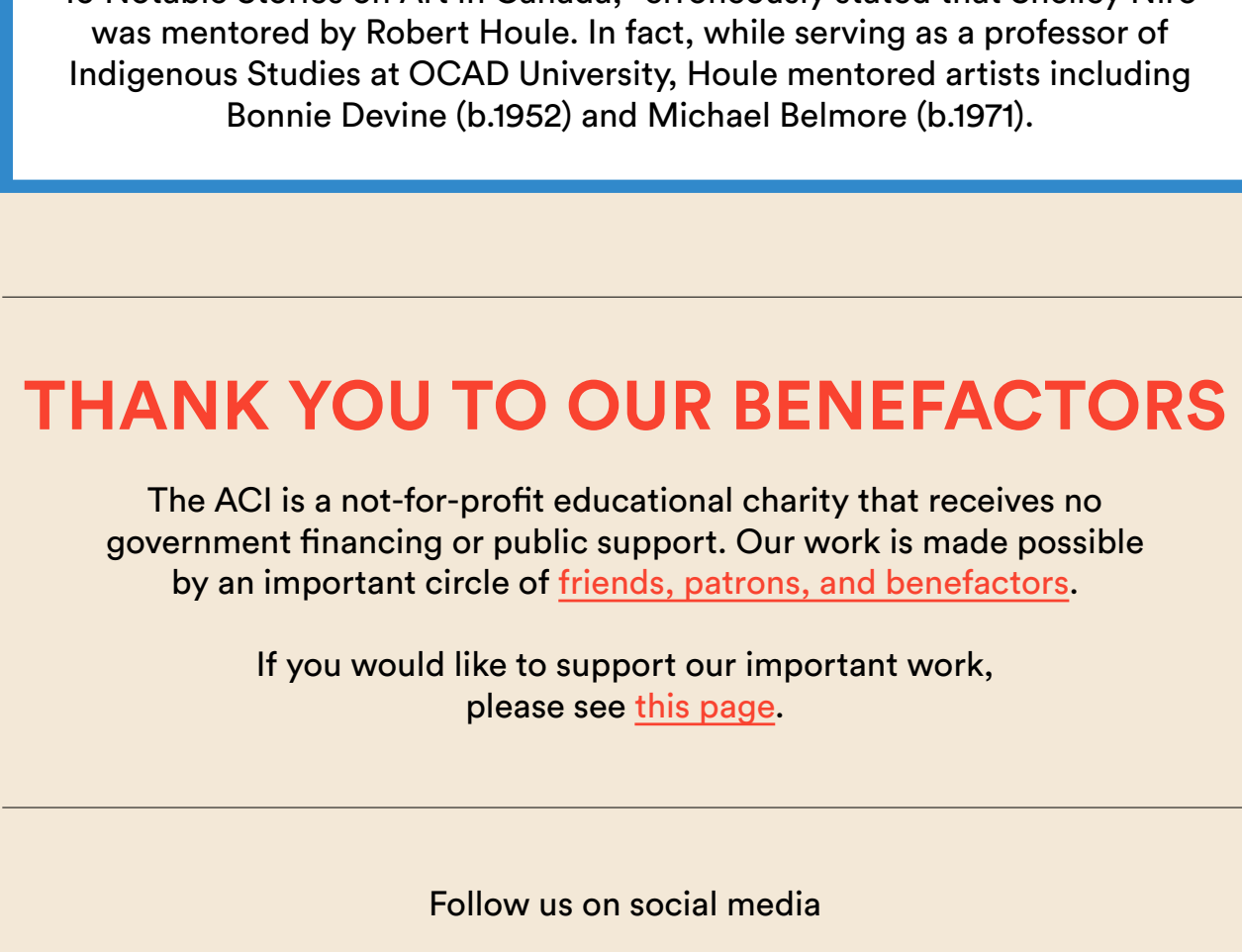


To express his solidarity with the individuals fighting to protect Mohawk land, Saulteaux artist Robert Houle (b.1947) created this installation in his Toronto apartment, painting the facade of his building and blacking out the studio with window banners that projected the words "Landclaim," "Longhouse," "Sovereign," and "Falseface," toward the city streets. Blocking all light into the studio for the entire summer, the work functioned as an act of mourning for Houle.

Read more in ACI's  
[Robert Houle: Life & Work](#) by Shirley Madill

## LIFE ON THE 18TH HOLE

by David Neel



David Neel, *Life on the 18th Hole*, 1990, courtesy of David Neel.



Using an image of a Mohawk warrior that had appeared on the front page of the *Globe and Mail*, Kwakiutl artist David Neel (b.1960) created this photomontage. He surrounded his resolute subject with eagle feathers and the Four Sacred Directions symbol to indicate reinforced strength and righteousness. A row of police border the work, emblematic of the violence committed by the Canadian state. *Life on the 18th Hole* was inspired by Picasso's *Guernica*, 1937, which was painted in reaction to aerial bombing campaigns during the Spanish Civil War.

[Learn more about David Neel](#)

## KANEHSATAKE: 270 YEARS OF RESISTANCE

by Alanis Obomsawin



Alanis Obomsawin, *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (still), 1993, courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada, Montreal, photograph by Shaney Komulainen.



After spending seventy-eight days capturing footage of the confrontations between Mohawk land protectors and the police and army, Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin (b.1932) produced *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, 1993. The internationally acclaimed documentary provided an unvarnished look at the shocking conditions behind the frontlines of the standoff—where access to food and medical supplies had been blocked by the Canadian government—and presented an empathetic view of the Mohawk perspective. As Obomsawin states [in an interview with CBC](#), "I think it's a mirror for this country to look at."

[Watch Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance](#)

[Learn more about Alanis Obomsawin](#)

## Correction

Last Friday's edition of the Art Canada Institute newsletter, "In the Know: 10 Notable Stories on Art in Canada," erroneously stated that Shelley Niro was mentored by Robert Houle. In fact, while serving as a professor of Indigenous Studies at OCAD University, Houle mentored artists including Bonnie Devine (b.1952) and Michael Belmore (b.1971).

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Image Credits: [1] Gerald McMaster, *Oka-boy/Oh! Kowboy*, 1990, acrylic and oil pastel on matt board. Reproduced with the permission of Gerald McMaster. [2] Rebecca Belmore, *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother*, 1991, sound installation with wood and megaphone, 182.9 x 213.4 cm. Collection of the Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity. Courtesy of the Walter Phillips Gallery. [3] Jeff Thomas, *Plate 750, Some Things Never Change*, 2007 (updated 2015), pigment print on archival paper. Courtesy of Jeff Thomas. [4] Shelley Niro, *Mohawks in Beehives*, 1991, hand-tinted black and white photograph, 20.3 x 25.4 cm. Courtesy of the artist. [5] Shelley Niro, [6] Robert Houle's second-floor apartment on Queen Street West, Toronto, with *Mohawk Summer*, 1990, hanging in the windows during the Kanesatake Resistance, 1990. Photograph by Greg Staats. Archive of the artist. Courtesy of the artist. [7] Alanis Obomsawin, *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, 1993, film, 1h 59 min. Courtesy of David Neel. [8] David Neel, *Life on the 18th Hole*, 1990, serigraph. Photo credit: Shaney Komulainen.