

FEBRUARY 9, 2024

# SURREALISM IN CANADA

## MYSTERIES OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

In February 1955, Alfred Pellán became the first Canadian to have a solo show at the Musée national d'art moderne, where he exhibited a series of Surrealist works. To commemorate this moment, we're highlighting Canadian artists whose surreal works have unlocked imaginations and subconscious minds.



Sixty-nine years ago this week, Quebec City-born artist **Alfred Pellán** (1906–1988) launched a solo exhibition in Paris at one of the world's most renowned museums of modern art. Arriving in the French capital to study in 1926, he encountered Surrealism through pioneering figures of the cultural movement, including the French poet André Breton and the German painter Max Ernst. Emerging from the trauma of the First World War, Surrealism drew on the logic and imagery of dreams and tapped into the unconscious mind for inspiration. For Pellán, the movement represented freedom above all: "the creation of a poetic, boundless, never-seen world." Influenced by what he had absorbed in Paris, Pellán helped usher Canadian art into the modern era in the mid-twentieth century. Since then, artists have continued to subvert our expectations and captivate our imaginations with surreal, dreamlike, and uncanny works that linger in our minds, from Alex Colville's iconic painting of a horse galloping toward a train to Shuvina Ashoona's fantastical depictions of hybrid creatures.

Sara Angel  
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

## HORSE AND TRAIN

by Alex Colville



Alex Colville, *Horse and Train*, 1954, Art Gallery of Hamilton.

Railroad tracks slash across a field, setting the stage for an ominous encounter between two powerful forces—a galloping horse and a hurtling steam engine—in this painting by celebrated Maritime painter Alex Colville (1920–2013). The dreamlike, iconic scene in *Horse and Train*, 1954, cries out for a Surrealist reading: A stark confrontation between the natural world and technology is filled with foreboding, due not only to the impending impact but to its austere, atmospheric rendering. Colville drew inspiration for the imagery from a poem by South African writer Roy Campbell (1901–1957): "Against a regiment I oppose a brain / And a dark horse against an armoured train."

Read more in ACI's [Alex Colville: Life & Work](#) by Ray Cronin

## MASCULIN-FÉMININE

by Mimi Parent



Mimi Parent, *Masculin-féminine*, 1959, courtesy of WikiArt.

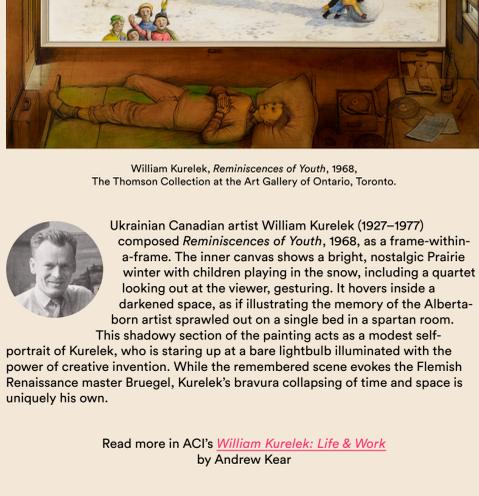
Poster for the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* (1959), featuring *Masculin-féminine*, 1959, by Mimi Parent, courtesy of Burlington Contemporary.

Influenced by Alfred Pellán, who was her teacher, Montreal-born artist Mimi Parent (1924–2005) is celebrated for her three-dimensional tableaux boxes, as in *Masculin-féminine*, 1959 (above left). In this sculpture, a long, thick lock of the artist's own hair is pinned to a white men's shirt and knotted, taking the place of a necktie. In the same year it was created, Parent's work appeared on the poster for the *International Surrealist Exhibition* in Paris (above right). The Surrealists were fascinated by the erotic and by fetishism—1959's exhibition theme was "Eros"—and hair and fur were popular tactile motifs. Parent's uncanny juxtaposition plays with gender (signaled by the work's title), animating the Surrealist theme of an object out of place.

Learn more about Mimi Parent

## UTOPIA

by Marion Nicoll



Marion Nicoll, *Utopia*, 1947, University of Regina President's Art Collection.

In this painting by Calgary-born artist Marion Nicoll (1909–1985), swirling forms bring together disparate landscapes that include a farmer's field, lines of rock pinnacles (which are echoed by the roadside fence stretching into the distance), and clouds. The work's title, *Utopia*, 1947, suggests that this world is not ours, but located in the imagination or the future. Nicoll was introduced to the Surrealist practice of automatism in 1946 by Jack Macdonald (1897–1960), a fellow teacher at the Banff Summer School. She enthusiastically experimented with this method, which seeks to tap into the subconscious mind to gain a more direct form of expression, for years afterwards, also drawing on the theories of analytic psychologist Carl Jung (1875–1961).

Read more in ACI's [Marion Nicoll: Life & Work](#) by Catharine Mastin

## REMINISCENCES OF YOUTH

by William Kurelek



William Kurelek, *Reminiscences of Youth*, 1968, The Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Ukrainian Canadian artist William Kurelek (1927–1977) composed *Reminiscences of Youth*, 1968, as a frame-within-a-frame. The inner canvas shows a bright, nostalgic Prairie winter with children playing in the snow, including a quartet looking out at the viewer, gesturing. It hovers inside a darkened space, as if illustrating the memory of the Alberta-born artist sprawled out on a single bed in a spartan room.

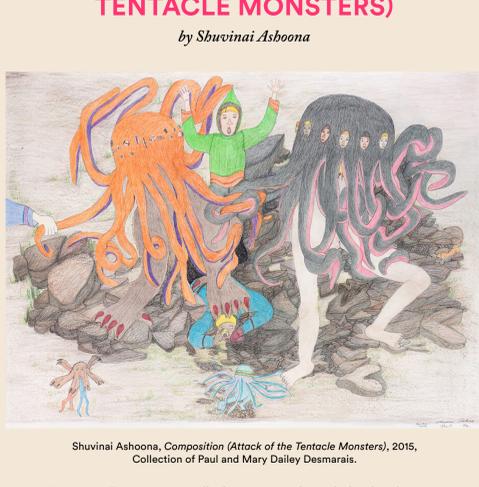
This shadowy section of the painting acts as a modest self-portrait of Kurelek, who is starting up at a bare lightbulb illuminated with the power of creative invention. While the remembered scene evokes the Flemish Renaissance master Bruegel, Kurelek's bravura collapsing of time and space is uniquely his own.

Read more in ACI's [William Kurelek: Life & Work](#) by Andrew Kear

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## ACADEMIC SURPRISE AND SATELLITES

by Alfred Pellán



Alfred Pellán, *Surprise académique* (*Academic Surprise*), c.1943, private collection, Montreal, © Estate of Alfred Pellán / CARCC Ottawa 2024.

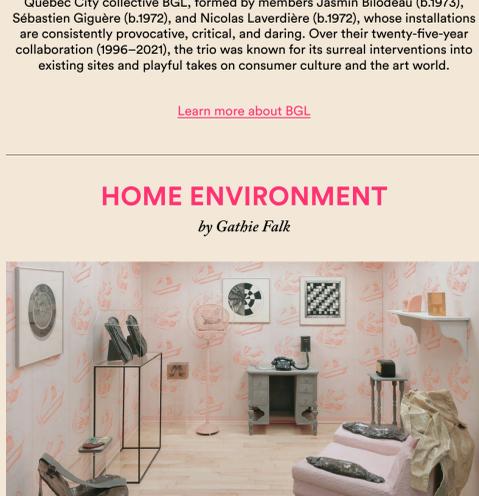
Alfred Pellán, *Satellites* (*Satellites*), 1979, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Québec City, © Estate of Alfred Pellán / CARCC Ottawa 2024.

These two works showcase the diversity of Pellán's own approach to Surrealism, a movement he encountered while living in Paris between 1926 and 1940. The painting *Academic Surprise*, c.1943 (above left), renders a set of painting tools and harlequin in a topsy-turvy environment using dazzling, colourful shapes. It represents an incident where Charles Maillard, director of the Ecole des beaux-arts de Montréal, attempted to censor two works by Pellán's students. By contrast, *Satellites*, 1979 (above right), is one of a series of circular mobiles, each made from objects—in this case a plastic banana and a circular-saw blade—cobbed together and coated in silver paint.

Read more in ACI's [Alfred Pellán: Life & Work](#) by Maria Rosa Lehmann

## REMEMBRANCE

by Maureen Faith O'Connor



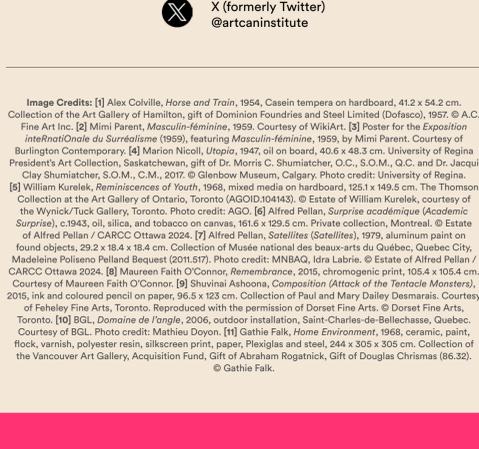
Maureen Faith O'Connor, *Remembrance*, 2015, courtesy of Maureen Faith O'Connor.

In this photograph by Toronto-based artist Maureen Faith O'Connor, a deer gazes out of a house window toward an outdoors flooded with light—it's clear that the wild animal does not belong here. *Remembrance*, 2015, is from a series called Threshold that stages surreal encounters between nature and the built environment, examining the line between them and emphasizing their shared fragility. A once-stately room is decaying—the paint peeling due to water damage, the floor covered in a thick layer of dust—offering a reflection on the passage of time and urging the viewer to contemplate what was on this land before.

Learn more about Maureen Faith O'Connor

## COMPOSITION (ATTACK OF THE TENTACLE MONSTERS)

by Shuvina Ashoona



Shuvina Ashoona, *Composition (Attack of the Tentacle Monsters)*, 2015, Collection of Paul and Mary Dailey Desmarais.

Four mutant mollusks rampage through the drawing *Composition (Attack of the Tentacle Monsters)*, 2015, by Kinnigait (Cape Dorset) artist Shuvina Ashoona (b.1961). "Like the Surrealists before her, Shuvina uses her imagination and free association to produce surprising, unexpected imagery," writes author Nancy G. Campbell in *Shuvina Ashoona: Life & Work*. The Inuk artist's fantastical scenes of human and non-human animals, monsters, and surreal motifs like proliferating planets—examples of her dizzying play with scale—have only become more marvelous. Different elements of Shuvina's unruly composition often fuse together as the creatures merge species, while waking and dream life become similarly inseparable.

Read more in ACI's [Shuvina Ashoona: Life & Work](#) by Nancy G. Campbell

## DOMAINE DE L'ANGLE

by BGL



BGL, *Domaine de l'angle*, 2006, Saint-Charles-de-Bellechasse, Québec.

The organic and the artificial are in conflict in this unlikely depiction of a Canadian landscape, prompting the viewer to question what is real: Is an office ceiling installed in the middle of the woods, or have trees and logs been brought inside? Such an incongruous sight could only spring from the imagination of Quebec City collective BGL, formed by members Jasmin Bilodeau (b.1973), Sébastien Giguère (b.1972), and Nicolas Laverdière (b.1972), whose installations are consistently provocative, critical, and daring. Over their twenty-five-year collaboration (1996–2021), the trio was known for its surreal interventions into existing sites and playful takes on consumer culture and the world.

Learn more about BGL

## HOME ENVIRONMENT

by Gathie Falk



Gathie Falk, *Home Environment*, 1968, Vancouver Art Gallery.

Messing around with domestic spaces is a longstanding Surrealist theme. In *Home Environment*, 1968, by the singular Vancouver-based artist Gathie Falk (b.1928), the familiarity of the home is transformed into the uncanny through ceramic fish lying on armchairs; wallpaper with a dinner-plate motif; and found furniture that has been flopped or painted strange colours. Falk's installation was inspired by the iconic Surrealist furled teacup *Objet*, 1936, by Swiss artist Meret Oppenheim (1913–1985), and by the Pop art movement that epitomized the 1960s.

Read more in ACI's [Gathie Falk: Life & Work](#) by Michelle Jacques

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