ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

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AMERICAN BEAUTY

CANADIAN ARTISTS IN THE U.S.A.

With the U.S. election on the horizon, we look at Canadian artists who relocated to and drew inspiration from our southern neighbour.

In the twentieth century, the American art world was becoming internationally recognized, and artists from around the globe travelled there to immerse themselves in the growing art scene. As their neighbours to the north, Canadian artists saw exciting opportunities to expand their practices in the U.S.A. Some Canadians moved to take up permanent residence, making it their second home, while others lived and worked there temporarily. Whether these artists engaged with the social and political landscape, creating works that spoke to histories and current events relevant to American viewers, or they were interested in the flourishing abstract art world, their experiences in America proved transformative and left a lasting impact on their work and careers. This week, we look at ten Canadian creators who have made an indelible mark on American art with works that transcend geographical borders.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

UNTITLED

by Agnes Martin

Agnes Martin, *Untitled*, 1974, Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills. © Agnes Martin Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / CARCC Ottawa 2024.

Born in Saskatchewan, Agnes Martin (1912–2004) became an American citizen in 1936 because she "was attracted to the American understanding of freedom and liberty." She moved around a lot, settling in New Mexico later in life. *Untitled*, 1974, is characteristic of Martin's creative vision between 1974 and 2004. In it, she constructs horizontal lines that guide viewers' eyes across the canvas with the repetitive separation of soft pink and blue. Christopher Régimbal, author of *Agnes Martin: Life & Work*, explains that her work explored how abstract, albeit simple, structures can illicit unique emotional viewing experiences.

Read more in ACI's *Agnes Martin: Life & Work*
by Christopher Régimbal

MAIN STREET U.S.A.

by Ken Lum

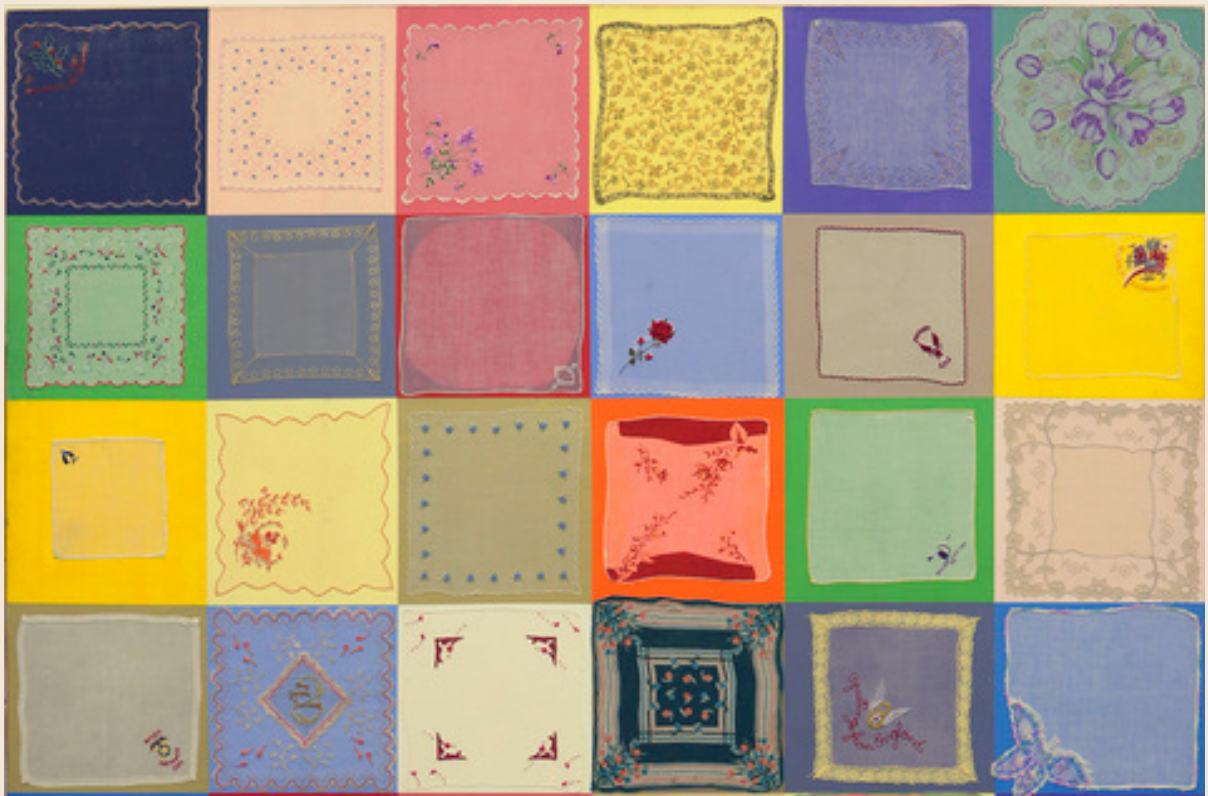
Ken Lum, *Main Street U.S.A.*, 2021, Collection of Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden, Courtesy of the artist.

Ken Lum (b.1967) is a multidisciplinary artist from Vancouver. He has lived in Philadelphia since 2012, where he is a professor of Fine Art at the University of Pennsylvania. Lum is known for his evocative, frequently satirical, photographs that often reflect the Canadian and American social and political landscapes. In 2021, he began his Photo-Mirrors II series, prompting viewers to reflect on biases that shape their identities. In *Main Street U.S.A.*, 2021, recognizable Disney characters are placed on a white background. A playful image on the surface is made poignant by the title, forcing viewers to reevaluate the figures through an unexpected lens—who are Donald Duck and Pinocchio in this context?

Learn more about the series *Photo-Mirrors II*

CONNECTION

by Miriam Schapiro



Miriam Schapiro, *Connection*, 1978, Stanley Museum of Art, Iowa City.

In this quilted collage, Miriam Schapiro (1923–2015) combines textiles and paint to create a canvas of different colours, textures, and patterns. Born in Toronto, Schapiro spent most of her life in the United States, where she was a leading figure in the emerging feminist art movement and helped establish the feminist art scene in Los Angeles and later in New York. *Connection*, 1978, is an example of her quintessential "femmages," which, like most of her works since the 1970s, are often autobiographical. But, at their core, her "femmages" questioned the division between fine arts and craft-based arts, a form of labour directly linked to women's history.

Learn more about *Connection*, 1978

BETSY ROSS, LOOK WHAT THEY'VE DONE TO THE FLAG YOU MADE WITH SUCH CARE

by Joyce Wieland

Joyce Wieland, *Betsy Ross, Look What They've Done to the Flag You Made with Such Care*, 1966, private collection.

A tattered American flag falls from red lips like it is being spit out. Joyce Wieland (1930–1998) was born in Toronto but moved to New York in 1962, hoping to expand her career. During her time living in Manhattan, Wieland established a multidisciplinary practice informed by politics, feminism, nationalism, and environmentalism. *Betsy Ross, Look What They've Done to the Flag You Made with Such Care*, 1966, exemplifies her activism and opposition to America's involvement in the Vietnam War. She prompted viewers to question their patriotism and the flag's symbolism in the face of injustices. Wieland returned to Canada in the 1970s due to the unrest in America, which she could not reconcile with. Yet, she continued to create politically motivated works.

Read more in ACI's *Joyce Wieland: Life & Work*
by Johanne Sloan

TRACY (CHANEL)

by Sara Cwynar

Sara Cwynar, *Tracy (Chanel)*, 2017, courtesy of the artist.

Sara Cwynar (b.1985) is a Canadian contemporary artist living in Brooklyn. She works in photography, collage, and installation, and some of her best-known pieces explore consumerism, juxtaposing different objects such as makeup, clothing, perfume, and other recognizable, sometimes vintage, products. This is illustrated in *Tracy (Chanel)*, 2017, one in a series of works where Cwynar photographs her friend Tracy and collages different brand-name objects around the figure. In a 2018 interview, Cwynar explains how this series explores consumerism's role in shaping societal beauty standards and its control of people's (largely women's) self-image on both the surface and subconscious levels.

Learn more about *Tracy (Chanel), 2017*

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STORE FRONTS (NEW YORK)

by David Milne

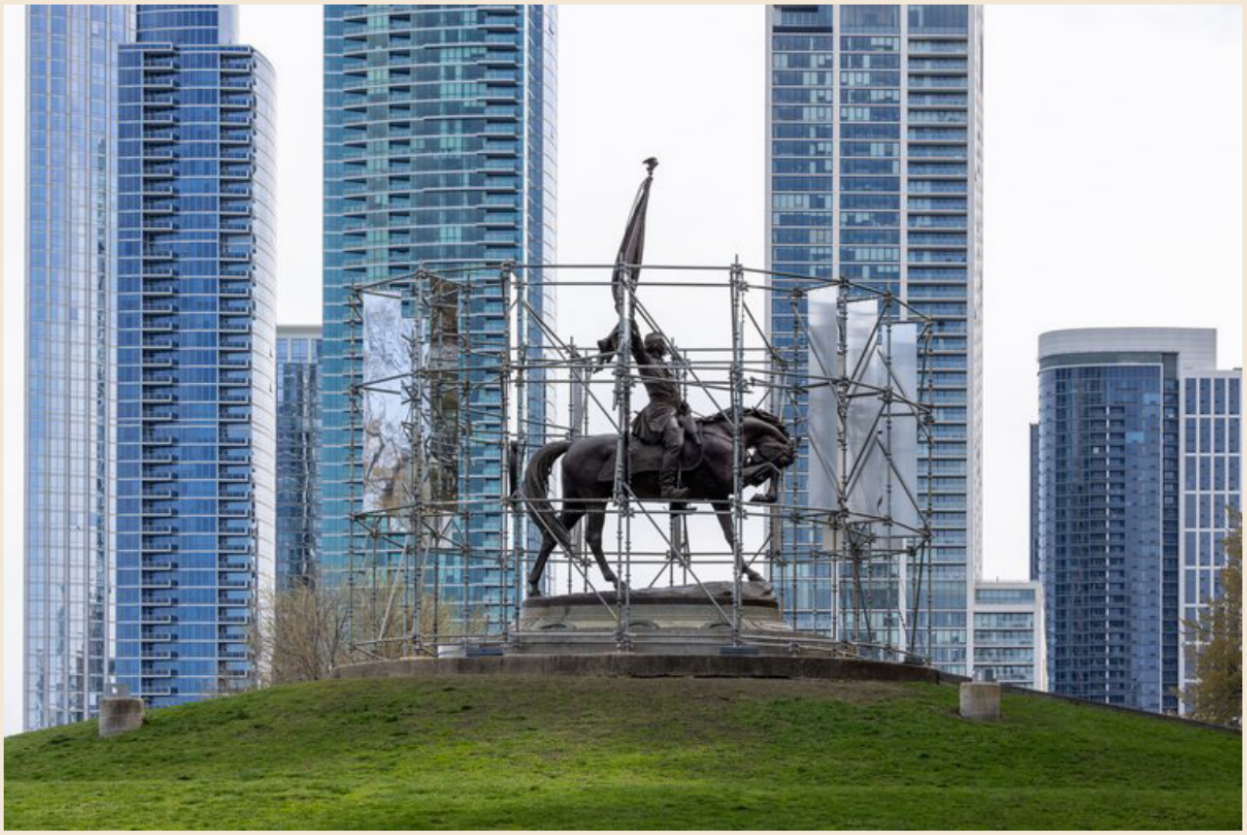
David Milne, *Store Fronts (New York)*, 1914–15, courtesy of Alan Klinkhoff Gallery, Montreal.

David Milne (1882–1953) was a Canadian artist who travelled to the United States in 1902, where the early years of his artistic career were spent establishing himself in New York and Boston Corners. Canadian art historian Mark Cheetham states that the work Milne created while in New York "is at once bold and exquisitely subtle." Milne composed landscapes with bright colours and loose visual brush strokes. *Store Fronts (New York)*, 1914–15, is a wintery scene exemplary of his distinct visual language. The windows and detailing across the surface of these vibrant buildings create a structured pattern that contrasts the fluid movement of the dark, organic trees.

Learn more about *Store Fronts (New York)*, 1914–15

NEW MONUMENTS | CHICAGO

by Brendan Fernandes



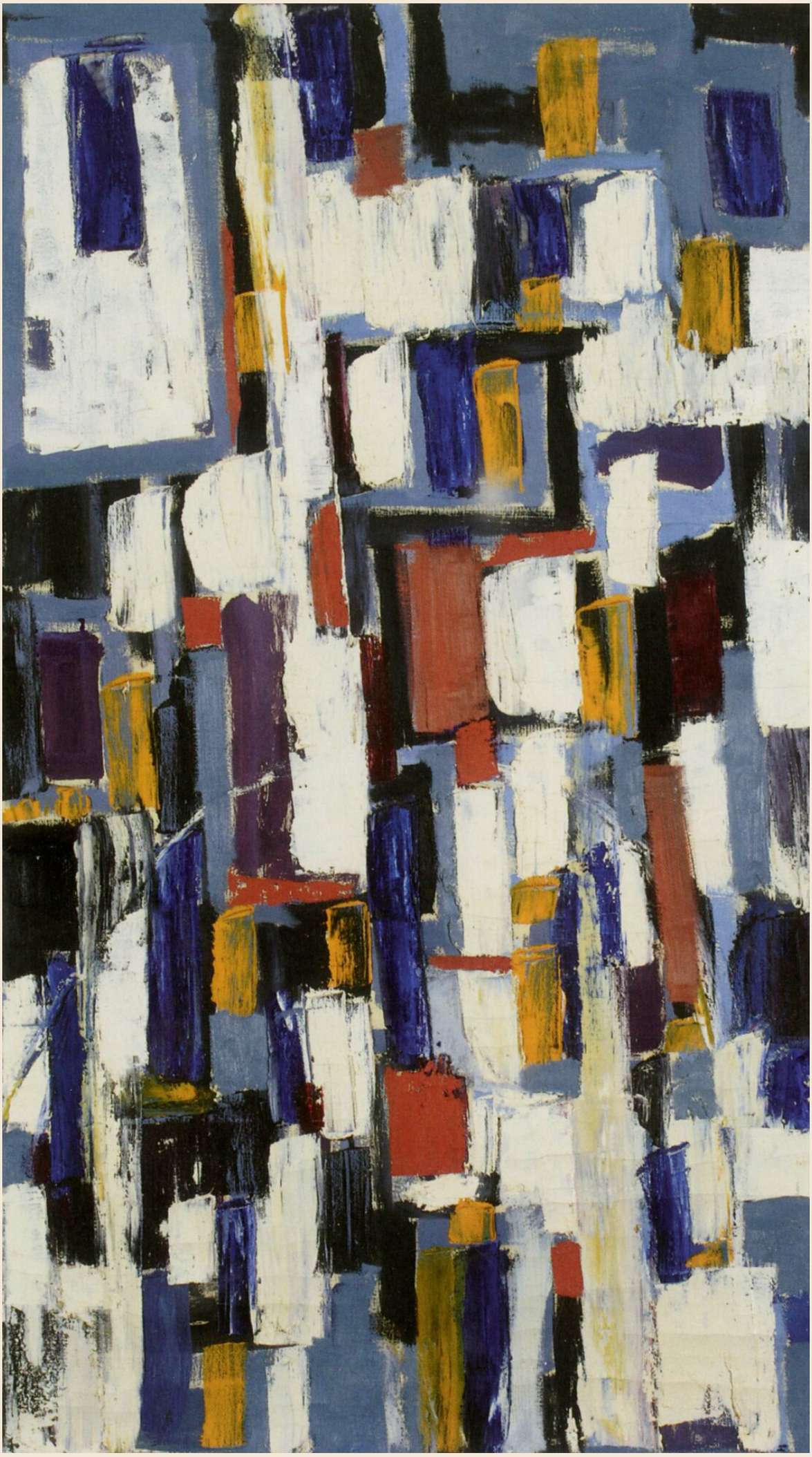
Brendan Fernandes, *New Monuments | Chicago*, 2024, Grant Park, Chicago.

Brendan Fernandes (b.1979) is a Kenyan Canadian contemporary artist based in Chicago. In his first public intervention, scaffolding surrounds General John Alexander Logan Monument in Grant Park. Scaffolding, usually seen on a building that is under construction, is suggestive of a change or transition—typically, improvements are being made to the structure. However, rather than renovating or restoring the statue, Fernandes prompts the viewer to reconsider the history associated with the figure who has been memorialized. His practice intersects visual arts and dance and explores various issues related to migration, race, gender, and sexuality.

Learn more about *New Monuments | Chicago*, 2024

FRAGMENT 41

by Takao Tanabe



Takao Tanabe, *Fragment 41*, 1951, private collection,
courtesy Takao Tanabe and Mira Godard Gallery.

Takao Tanabe (b.1926) is a Japanese Canadian artist, and *Fragment 41*, 1951, is representative of a formative time in his career, as it illustrates his early engagement with Abstract Expressionism. In the 1950s, he became immersed in New York's modern art scene. His nonrepresentational work, including *Fragment 41*—in which, layer upon layer, blocks of colour overlap to create a gestural, grid-like sequence—like his time in New York, marks a brief period in his career. He left New York in 1952 and continued to evolve his style, eventually focusing on his surroundings, reimagining the Canadian terrain through abstraction.

Read more in ACI's *Takao Tanabe: Life & Work*
by Ian Thom

COPPERHEAD GRID

by Moyra Davey

Moyra Davey, *Copperhead Grid*, 1990, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

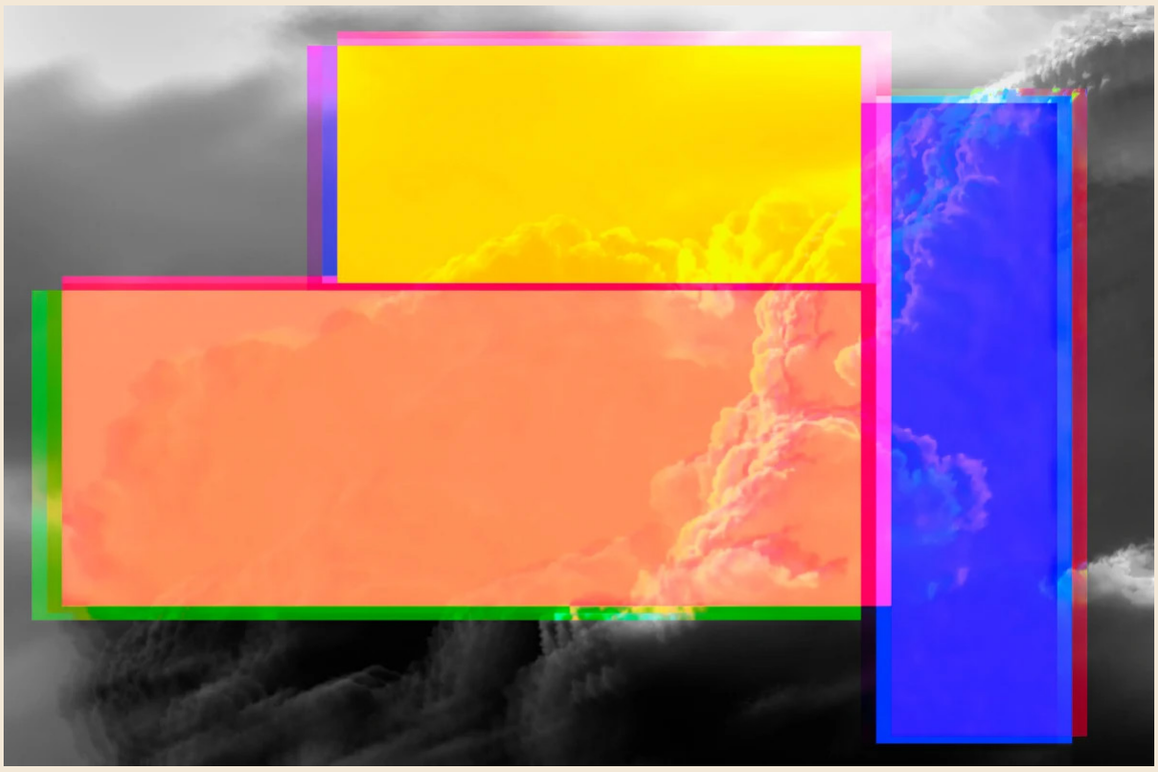
Moyra Davey, *Copperhead Grid*, 1990 (detail), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

In 1990, Moyra Davey (b.1958) collected pennies from the streets of New York. She photographed one hundred of them, focusing on the portrait of Abraham Lincoln and the wear and erosion that affected the surface of each coin and its image of Lincoln. Davey, born in Toronto but currently living in New York, gained prominence for her documentary-style photography. Through this series, entitled Copperheads, Davey prompts viewers to reflect on the power of imagery and symbols and what it means when representations are so ubiquitous and ingrained in our lives that we hardly notice them at all.

Learn more about *Copperhead Grid*, 1990

GLITCHED CLOUDS (VARIATION)

by Christian Eckart



Christian Eckart, *Glitched Clouds (Variation)*, 2020,
courtesy of Wilding Cran Gallery, Los Angeles.

Translucent colours overlap the monochromatic background, creating a haunting, sublime effect. The blocks of neon colours are reminiscent of mid-century abstraction, except that Christian Eckart (b.1959) puts a contemporary spin on it, switching out the gestural, expressive strokes of paint with digitally manufactured shapes. Born in Calgary, Eckart lived and worked in New York but moved to Houston, Texas, where he currently resides. Eckart's work often incorporates vibrant colours and combines traditional media with industrial materials. Like much of his recent work, this piece reflects on issues related to the climate crisis.

Learn more about Christian Eckart

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