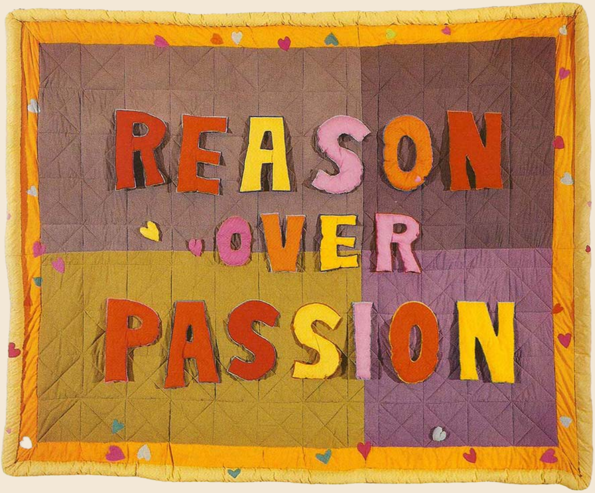
ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L’ART CANADIEN

NOVEMBER 21, 2025

WITH A SOFT TOUCH
FABRICS IN CANADIAN ART

A new exhibition highlights the role of textiles in art making.



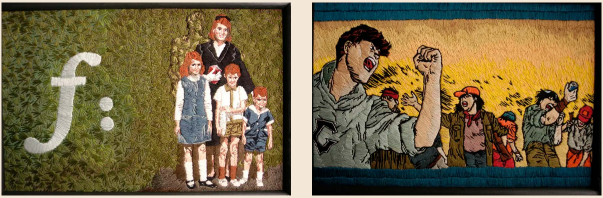
Joyce Wieland, *Reason over Passion*, 1968, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

In 1968, Joyce Wieland stitched the phrase “Reason over Passion” into a quilt, turning a political slogan into a feminist statement. Her work redefined the possibilities of fabric as an artistic medium. Textiles have long been associated with comfort and care, but as Wieland demonstrated, in the hands of artists, they were a powerful artistic medium.

Currently on view in the Canada Council for the Arts’s Âjagemô Exhibition Space in Ottawa is *Resistant Fibres*, an exhibition drawn from the Canada Council Art Bank textile collection that showcases how fibre art can challenge, connect, and reimagine the world around us. As Curator Julie Graff observes, tapestry offers artists remarkable flexibility—a way to tap into untold stories and reimagine shared histories. Through tactile materials, artists find both comfort and confrontation, challenging patriarchal and colonial structures while celebrating community and joy. The physical acts of weaving and stitching evoke alternative narratives and reclaim the value of “women’s work.” This week’s newsletter spotlights artists from the exhibition (on view until May 19, 2026), as well as others working in textiles across Canada, who transform a traditionally domestic practice into one of agency and expression.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

MICHÈLE PROVOST

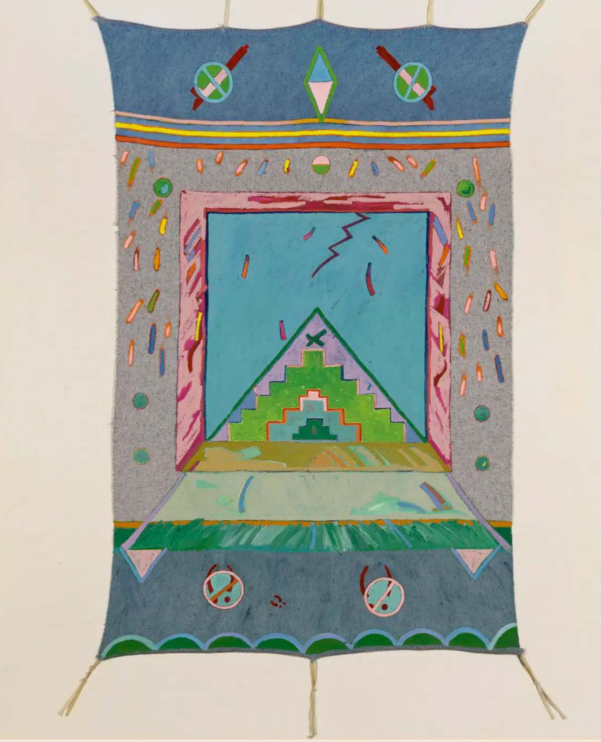

Michèle Provost, *The sampler: une histoire urbaine*, 2002, courtesy of the artist.

Michèle Provost

This series of embroidered scenes by Quebec artist Michèle Provost (b.1957) depicts different parts of society, offering an “updated reality” that weaves together feminist themes and urban culture. The scenes follow the alphabet—*F is for Family* (above left), *G is for Gang* (above right), and so on—a format inspired by Victorian samplers used to teach girls literacy and needlework. While, historically, samplers promoted literacy, this work reflects a world overflowing with knowledge yet less inclined to read. Across her practice, Provost merges text, images, and pop culture references to examine themes of communication, memory, and cultural consumption.

Learn more about Michèle Provost

BOB BOYER



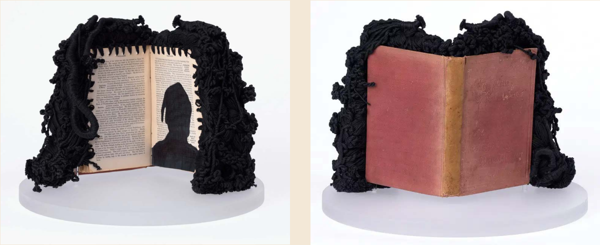
Bob Boyer, *Let the Acid Queen Rain: The White Goop Devours All!*, 1985.

Bob Boyer

Saskatchewan-born Métis artist Bob Boyer (1948–2004) was renowned for his bold, abstract paintings on blankets that drew from Indigenous traditions and challenged colonial narratives. In *Let the Acid Queen Rain: The White Goop Devours All!*, 1985, the blanket becomes a warning against environmental destruction: the ozone layer is shown breaking apart under human pollution, while a central pyramid symbolizes Indigenous spiritual and cultural life at risk of being washed away by acid rain. Created during a decade of growing awareness of the environmental crisis, this work reflects Boyer's broader interest in the relationship between environmental, spiritual, and cultural survival.

Learn more about Bob Boyer

CHANTAL GIBSON



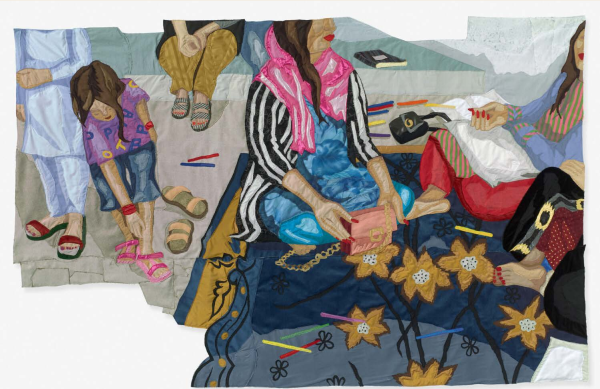
Chantal Gibson, *Outlines of British History: a/Historical In(ter)vention*, 2019–22.

Chantal Gibson

In *Outlines of British History: a/Historical In(ter)vention*, 2019–22, Vancouver-based artist Chantal Gibson transforms a vintage history book into a sculptural object wrapped in dense black cotton threads—the knotted, braided material spilling from its pages. The threads confront the idea that books hold “fixed truths,” prompting questions about who is heard and who is silenced. Through this intervention, Gibson challenges the authority of the written word and opens new ways to read and write history through a Black feminist lens. “If you took away the white space,” Gibson asks, “what would the black text do?
What would it say?”

Learn more about Chantal Gibson

HANGAMA AMIRI



Hangama Amiri, *Women Chatting*, 2023, courtesy of RBC.

Hangama Amiri

In this large-scale textile collage, Afghan Canadian artist Hangama Amiri (b.1989) depicts a group of women seated on patterned fabric as they talk, share, and care for one another. Her textile collages form an ongoing body of work that reflects on home, belonging, and how domestic materials can speak to broader questions of gender and cultural norms in Afghanistan and the diaspora. Amiri fled Kabul with her family in 1996 following the rise of Taliban, later living in Pakistan, Iran, and Tajikistan. She collects fabrics from these and other places to tell stories of migration and refuge. Amiri describes how “the materialistic potentials of fabrics closely remind how memory functions: they are fragmented glimpses of reality collaged together.”

Learn more about Hangama Amiri

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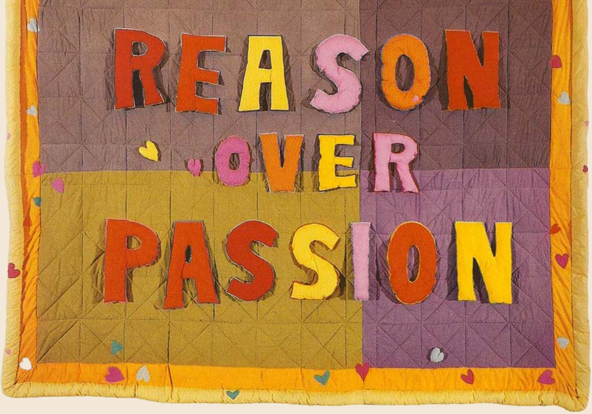
JOYCE WIELAND



Joyce Wieland, *Reason over Passion*, 1968, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Joyce Wieland

In 1968, Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau declared, “Reason over passion—that is the theme of all my writing,” a statement that inspired Toronto-born artist Joyce Wieland (1930–1998) to realize the work shown here. By rendering Trudeau’s motto in soft, hand-stitched fabric, Wieland reclaims a symbol of rational authority through the language of women’s craft. Quilting—a medium long associated with domestic labour and emotional care—becomes a site for political and feminist commentary. A year after creating *Reason over Passion*, 1968, she pushed this exploration further with a feature-length film of the same title, for which she gained widespread recognition as an experimental filmmaker.

Read more about *Reason over Passion* in ACI’s *Joyce Wieland: Life & Work* by Johanne Sloan

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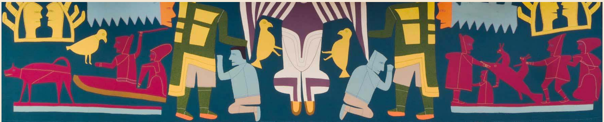
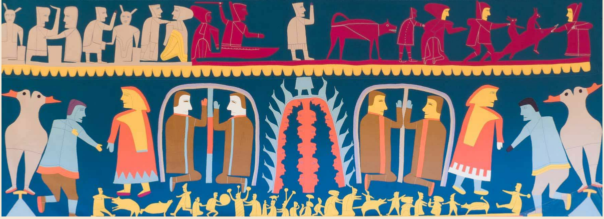
JESSIE OONARK





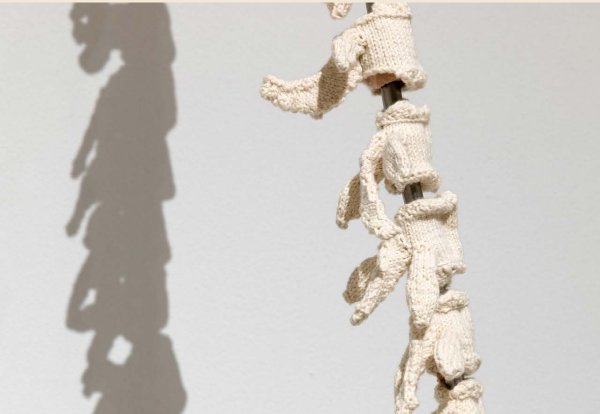
Jessie Oonark, *Untitled*, 1972, courtesy of the National Arts Centre, Ottawa.

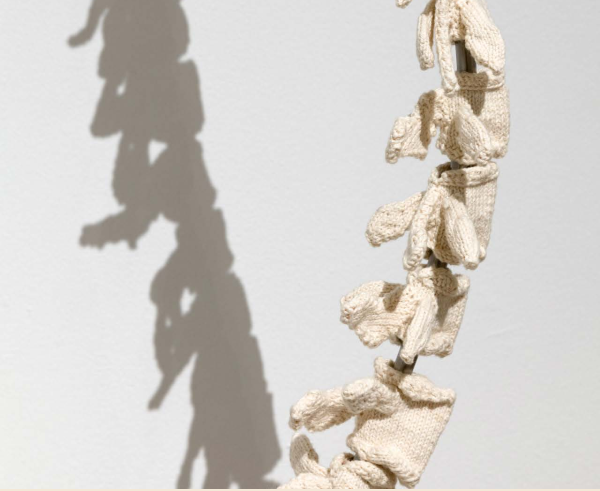
Jessie Oonark

This tapestry by influential Inuk artist Jessie Oonark (1906–1985) tells a story of the cultural shifts brought by the arrival in the North of southern settlers, intertwining traditional scenes of hunting and community with symbols of settlement and Christianity. Esteemed for her wall hangings and prints that depict Inuit life, stories, and spirituality, Oonark was born in Chantrey Inlet, Northwest Territories (now Nunavut), and lived a nomadic life until the 1950s. In 1958, she was relocated by government officials to Baker Lake, where she began creating drawings and textile works that drew upon her lifelong needlework skills. A pioneering artist of her generation, Oonark helped establish Baker Lake as a major centre for Inuit art.

Learn more about Jessie Oonark

SARAH MALONEY





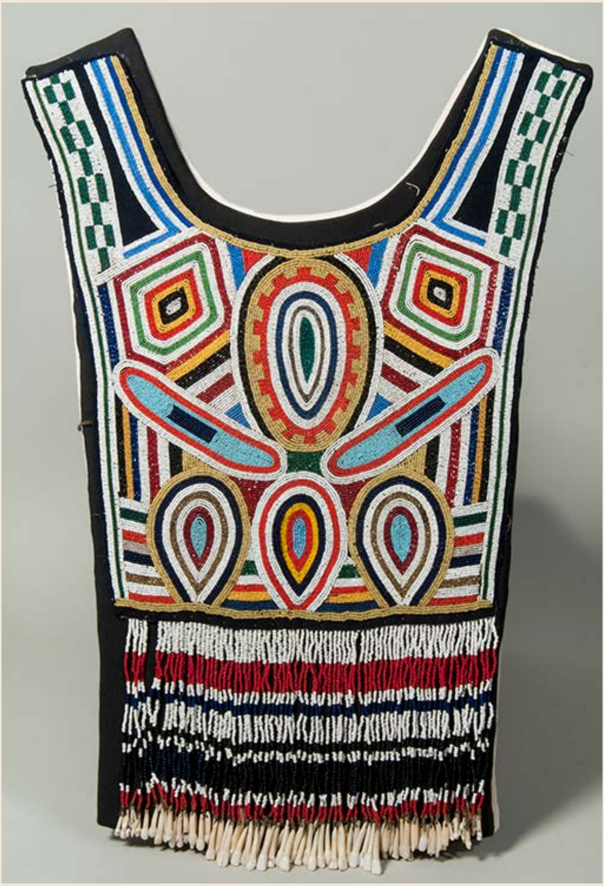
Sarah Maloney, *Vertebrae, Sacrum, Coccyx* (detail), 1998–99, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax.

Sarah Maloney

In this work that is both fragile and structural, Fredericton-based artist Sarah Maloney (b.1965) recreates the vertebral column through meticulous knitting. This piece belongs to a series in which Maloney recreates parts of the human body using fibre-based techniques such as knitting, crochet, embroidery, quilting, and needlepoint. Working with materials traditionally associated with "women's work," she challenges ideas of gendered craft and labour. Although Maloney works across various media, she was originally trained in metal and stone sculpture. When she became pregnant while preparing for her graduate thesis show and was unable to pour bronze, she turned to fibre—a shift that would profoundly redefine her sculptural practice.

Learn more about Sarah Maloney

ATTATSIAQ



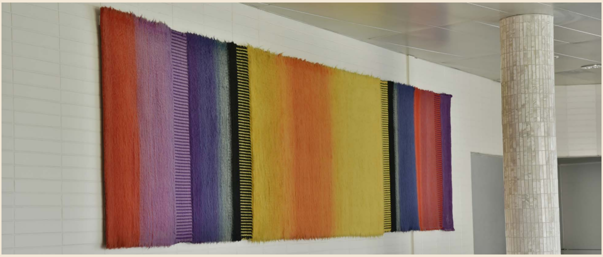
Attatsiaq, *Tuilik (woman's parka) panel*, 1926–37, Manitoba Museum, Winnipeg.

Attatsiaq

This radiant panel was made by Attatsiaq (1910–c.1955), a Padlirmiut Inuk beader—one of the few historic Inuit beaders whose names are remembered today. A beaded panel such as this one would adorn the back of a tuilik, a woman's parka made of caribou skin or cloth. Among Padlirmiut women, beadwork was a cherished form of self-expression and beauty, often showcased during community gatherings. The beads in Attatsiaq's panel were acquired from a Hudson's Bay Company trading post that she and her family visited each spring in the 1930s to exchange fox furs. This intricate piece is recognized for its artistic detail and was included in the exhibition *Uninvited: Canadian Women Artists in the Modern Moment*, which travelled nationwide between 2021 and 2023.

Learn more about Attatsiaq and *Uninvited*

MARIETTE ROUSSEAU-VERMETTE



Mariette Rousseau-Vermette, *Untitled*, 1973, courtesy of Collège Ahuntsic, Montreal.

Mariette Rousseau-Vermette

This large-scale work was created by Quebec artist Mariette Rousseau-Vermette (1926–2006), a leading figure in the international New Tapestry movement that emerged in the mid-1960s. Taking inspiration from the colour-field paintings of abstract painter Mark Rothko (1903–1970), she used weaving as a means to explore abstraction through geometry and colour. Early in her career, Rousseau-Vermette collaborated with Quebec weavers to produce works with wool, but over time, she expanded her practice to incorporate industrial threads, metallic fibres, and large-scale architectural commissions. Her works have helped to assert textiles as an autonomous art form rather than a decorative craft.

Learn more about Mariette Rousseau-Vermette

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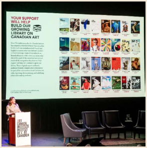
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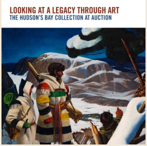
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Image Credits: **[1, 6]** Joyce Wieland, *Reason over Passion*, 1968, quilted cotton, 256.5 x 302.3 x 8 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Purchased 1970. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada. © NGC. Photo credit: NGC. **[2]** Michèle Provost, *The sampler: une histoire urbaine* (details, left: *F comme dans famille*, right: *G is for "gang"*), 2002, cotton thread, each: 35.6 x 49.5 x 8.9 cm, overall: 58 x 1,400 x 8.9 cm. Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa. Courtesy of the artist. **[3]** Bob Boyer, *Let the Acid Queen Rain: The White Goop Devours All!*, 1985, oil and acrylic on blanket, 185 x 127 cm. Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa. Photo credit: Brandon Clarida Image Services. **[4]** Chantal Gibson, *Outlines in British History: a/Historical In(ter)vention*, 2019–2022, cotton thread, ink, and vintage book, 22 x 30.5 x 18 cm. Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa. **[5]** Hangama Amiri, *Women Chatting*, 2023, muslin, cotton, chiffon, silk, polyester, velvet, suede, leather, denim, 188 x 227.3 cm. Collection of the Royal Bank of Canada, Toronto. Courtesy of RBC. Photo credit: LFdocumentation. **[7]** Jessie Oonark, *Untitled*, 1972, stroud with felt appliqué and embroidery floss, 380 x 600 cm. Collection of the National Arts Centre, Ottawa, Donated by the Teron family, 1972. Courtesy of the National Arts Centre. Photo credit: Justin Wonnacott. **[8]** Sarah Maloney, *Vertebrae, Sacrum, Coccyx* (detail), 1998–99, knitted cotton, stainless steel armature, 189 x 35.5 x 35.5 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, Gift of the Artist, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2002. Courtesy of Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) Art Gallery, Halifax. Photo credit: Keely Hopkins. **[9]** Attatsiaq, *Tuilik (woman's parka) panel*, 1926–37, wool flannel cloth (stroud), glass beads, tooth (musk ox, caribou incisor), cotton thread, sinew thread, caribou skin, 65 × 38.5 cm. Collection of Winnifred Petchey Marsh and Bishop Donald Marsh, Manitoba Museum, Winnipeg (H4-2-290). Photo credit: ©Manitoba Museum. **[10]** Mariette Rousseau-Vermette, *Untitled*, 1973, wool and cotton, 123 x 490 cm. Collection of the Collège Ahuntsic, Montreal, gift of the architects Angers & Perron.