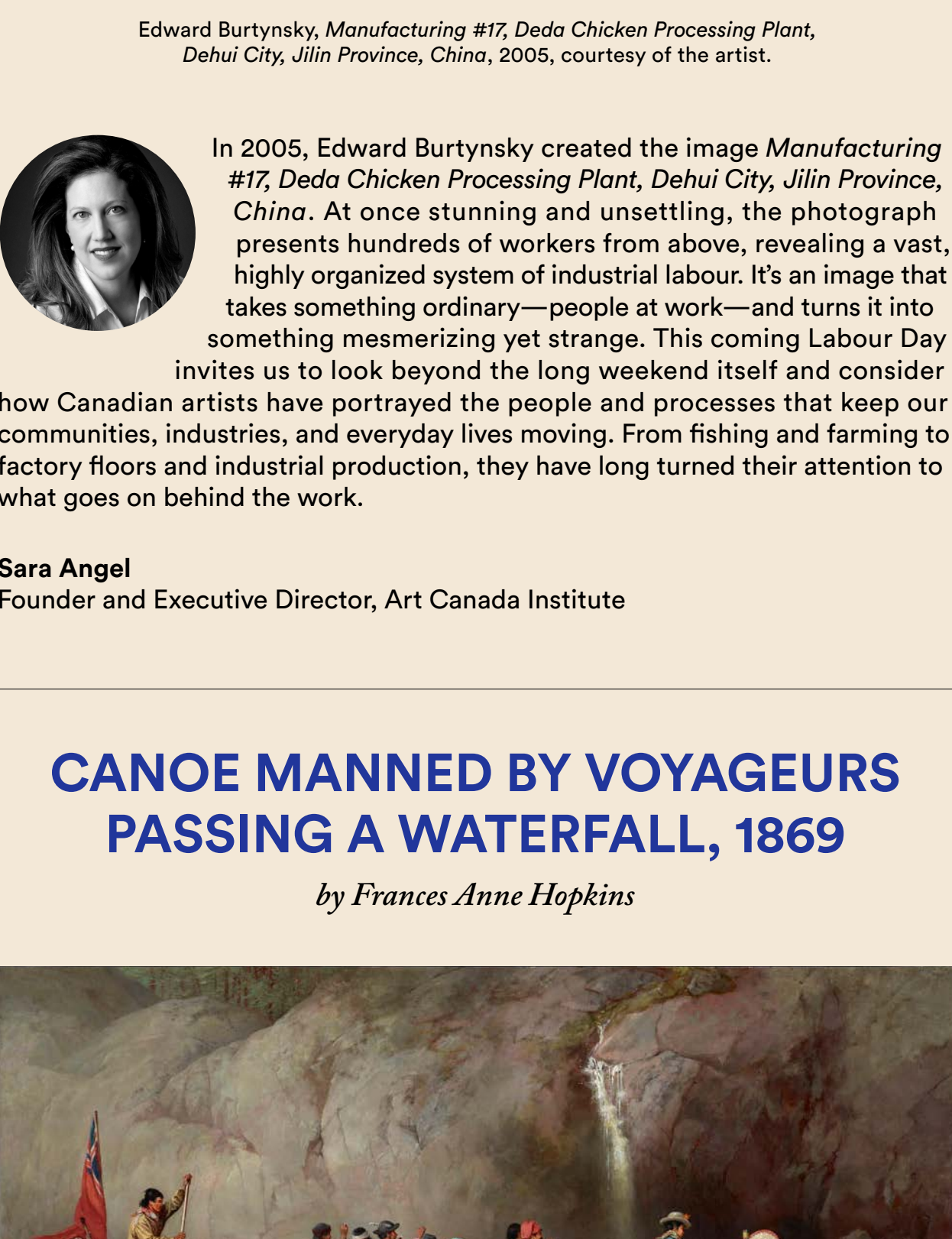


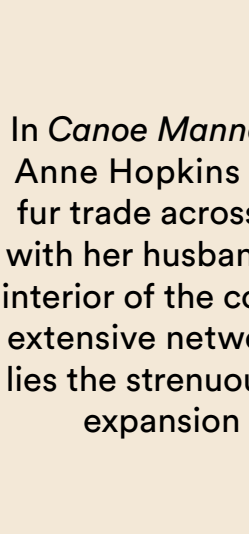
SEPTEMBER 4, 2026

ART OF WORK LOOKING AT LABOUR

This Labour Day weekend, we take a look at art that puts work—and the people who do it—front and centre.



Edward Burtynsky, *Manufacturing #17, Deda Chicken Processing Plant, Dehui City, Jilin Province, China*, 2005, courtesy of the artist.



In 2005, Edward Burtynsky created the image *Manufacturing #17, Deda Chicken Processing Plant, Dehui City, Jilin Province, China*. At once stunning and unsettling, the photograph presents hundreds of workers from above, revealing a vast, highly organized system of industrial labour. It's an image that takes something ordinary—people at work—and turns it into something mesmerizing yet strange. This coming Labour Day invites us to look beyond the low weekend itself and consider how Canadian artists have portrayed the people and processes that keep our communities, industries, and everyday lives moving. From fishing and farming to factory floors and industrial production, they have long turned their attention to what goes on behind the work.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

CANOE MANNED BY VOYAGEURS PASSING A WATERFALL, 1869

by Frances Anne Hopkins



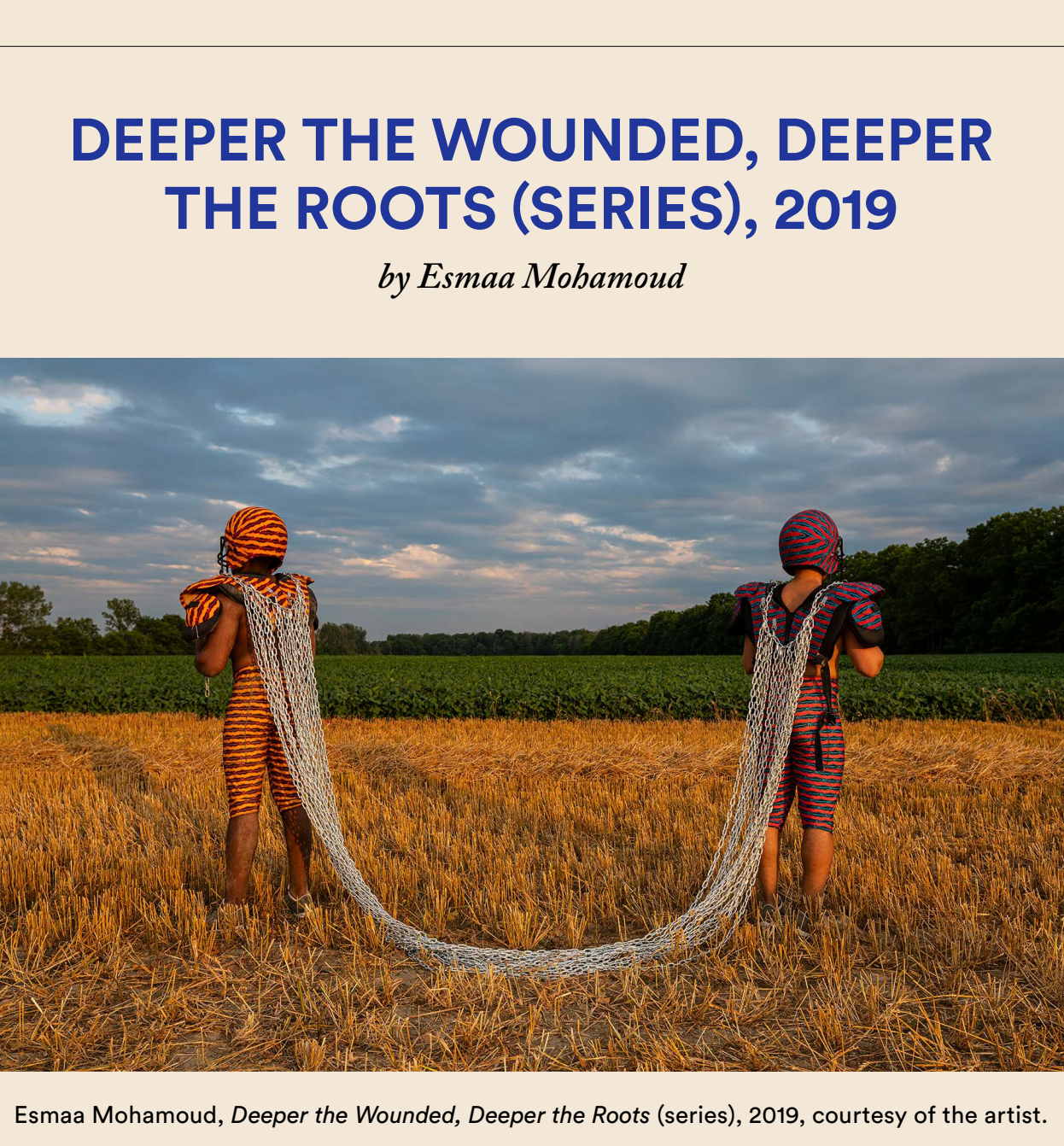
Frances Anne Hopkins, *Canoe Manned by Voyageurs Passing a Waterfall*, 1869, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.

In *Canoe Manned by Voyageurs Passing a Waterfall*, 1869, British artist Frances Anne Hopkins (1838–1919) depicts the demanding labour that sustained the fur trade across what is now Canada. No armchair observer, Hopkins travelled with her husband, a Hudson's Bay Company official, on expeditions through the interior of the country, where voyageurs transported people and goods along an extensive network of waterways. Behind the painting's picturesque landscape lies the strenuous work that supported the colonial economy and facilitated the expansion of European trade and settlement across Indigenous lands.

[Learn more](#)

WAITRESS, 1987

by Shelley Niro



Shelley Niro, *Waitress*, 1987, Art Gallery of Hamilton.

Waitress, 1987, by Mohawk artist Shelley Niro (b.1954) depicts a woman balancing the demands of service work as a glass of red wine spills onto a customer. Behind them dance then—Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and his wife, Mila, seemingly oblivious to the mask-like Indigenous faces in the background. Blending humour with political critique, Niro made the painting in response to Mulroney's dismissive treatment of Indigenous Peoples during his time as prime minister. She draws on her own working life to challenge portrayals of First Nations as dependent on the state.

[Learn more](#)

FORD OF CANADA, 1951

by Yousuf Karsh



Yousuf Karsh, *Ford of Canada*, 1951, Estate of Yousuf Karsh.

Yousuf Karsh (1908–2002) photographed factory workers in Windsor, Ontario, as part of a series commissioned by Ford to document its employees and domestic production. In *Ford of Canada*, 1951, he captures two spray painters in protective clothing, their focused collaboration transforming a manufacturing task into something almost ceremonial. Known for his portraits of prominent figures, Karsh gives centre stage here to the skill and concentration of industrial labourers. He [described](#) their “intense momentary involvement” as something like that of “two surgeons consulting... in the operating room.”

[Learn more in ACI's Yousuf Karsh: Life & Work](#)

DEEPER THE WOUNDED, DEEPER THE ROOTS (SERIES), 2019

by Esmaa Mohamoud



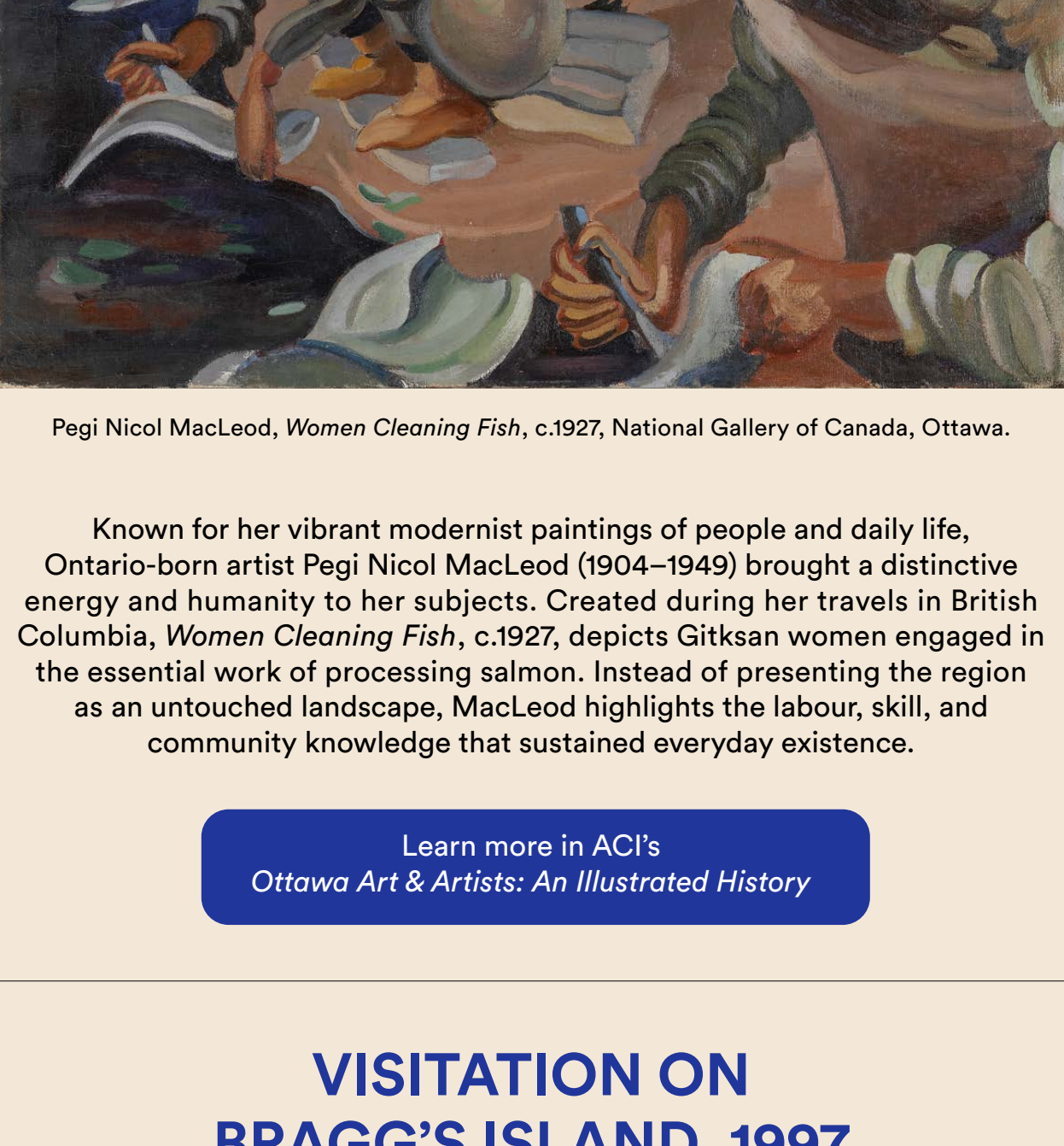
Esmaa Mohamoud, *Deeper the Wounded, Deeper the Roots* (series), 2019, courtesy of the artist.

In *Deeper the Wounded, Deeper the Roots*, 2019, Toronto-based multidisciplinary artist Esmaa Mohamoud (b.1992) examines the labour, sacrifice, and expectations placed on Black athletes. Through staged photography, she considers how athletic bodies are celebrated for their strength and performance while also being treated as commodities. The three images in this series explore the complex relationship between physical achievement, identity, and the often-unseen work required to maintain athletic success.

[Learn more](#)

THE CALL TO DINNER, 1886–87

by George Agnew Reid



George Agnew Reid, *The Call to Dinner*, 1886–87, McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton.

The Call to Dinner, 1886–87, by Wingham-born artist George Agnew Reid (1860–1947) depicts his sister Susan standing at the edge of a rural field. Although the title suggests she is calling workers in for a meal, their labour remains almost out of sight. Reid's composition emphasizes this separation: Susan occupies the foreground while the expansive meadows and distant figures recede into the background. Drawing on Reid's memories of rural Ontario, the painting evokes the rhythms of agricultural work through absence as much as presence.

[Learn more in ACI's George Agnew Reid: Life & Work](#)

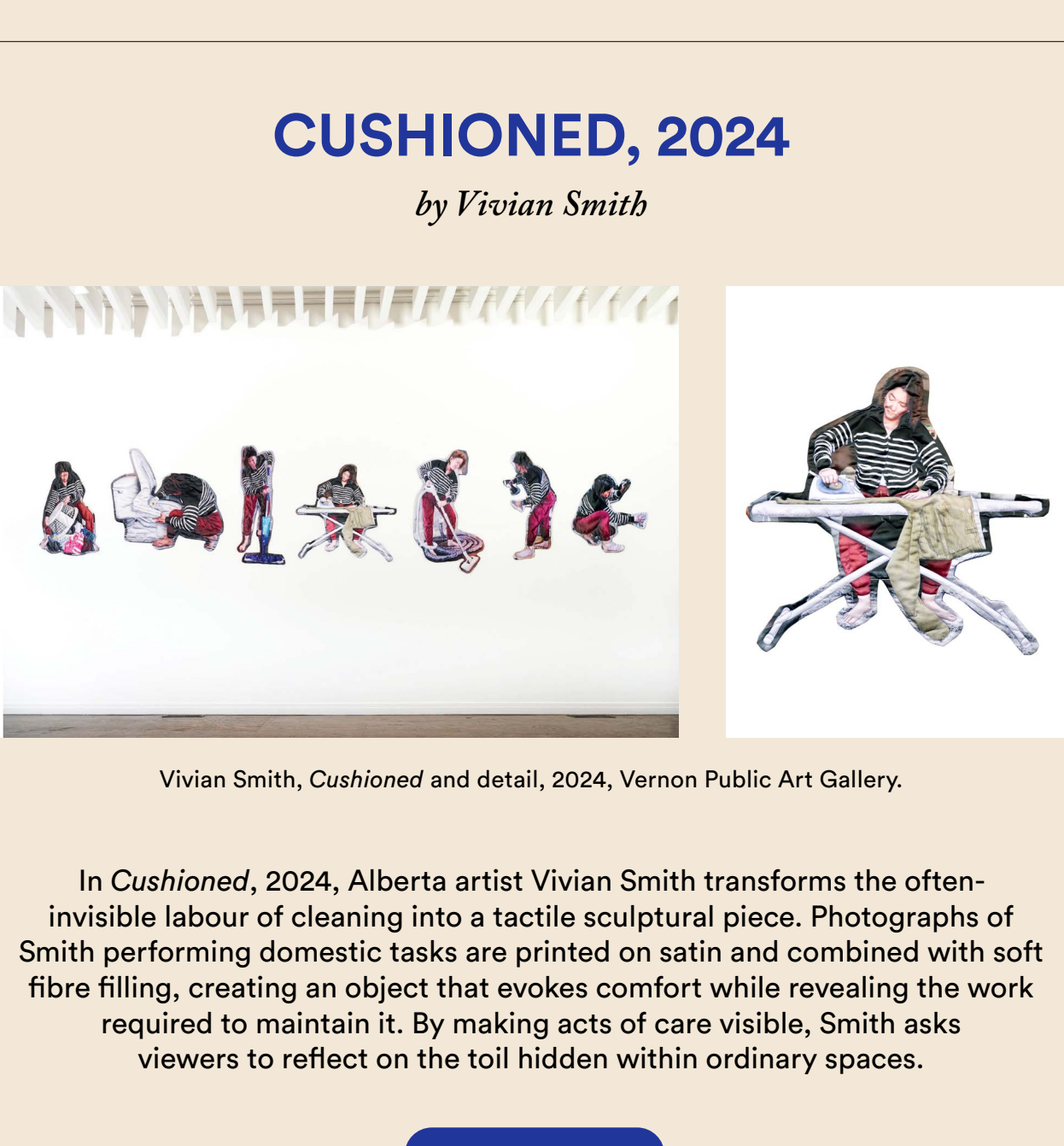
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CONVERSATION, 1980

by William McElcheran



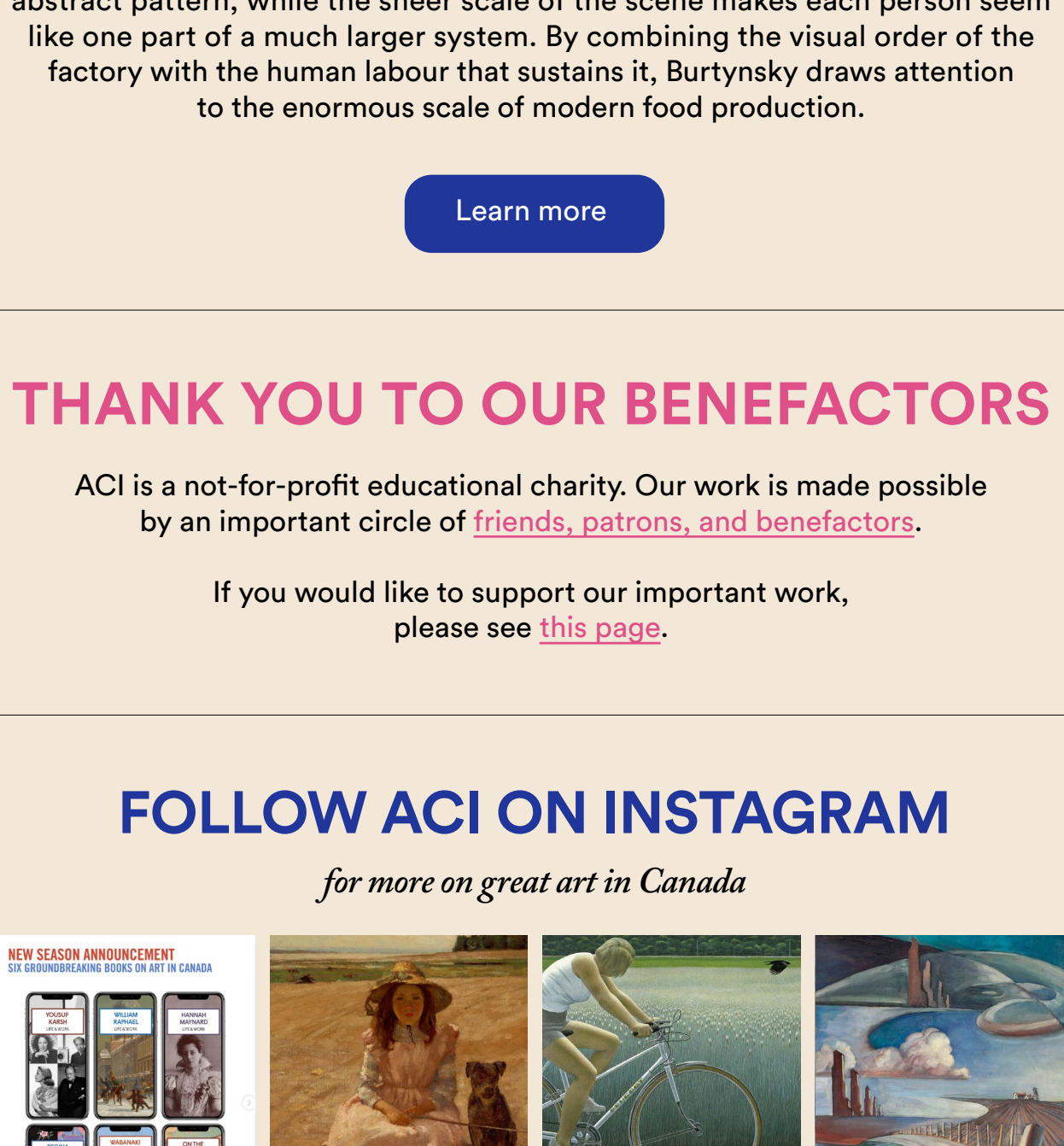
William McElcheran, *Conversation*, 1980, Rumi Galleries, Oakville, and the Estate of William McElcheran.

Instead of celebrating kings, warriors, or cultural heroes, Hamilton sculptor and designer William McElcheran (1927–1999) created monuments to the modern office worker. *Conversation*, 1980, installed in Calgary, shows two men posed mid-conversation, their identical appearances transforming a casual street encounter into a meditation on the anonymity and repetition of contemporary professional life. McElcheran's businessman figures—found in cities across the country—are typically portly, dressed in trench coats and hats, and carrying briefcases. He described them as anti-heroes, representing the ubiquitous Everyman of corporate life.

[Learn more](#)

MELLY SHUM HATES HER JOB, 1989

by Ken Lum



Ken Lum, *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, 1989, courtesy of the artist.

The Rotterdam billboard installation *Melly Shum Hates Her Job*, 1989, by Vancouver-born photo-based artist Ken Lum (b.1956) remains as popular today as it was when it was installed three decades ago. In fact, in 2021, the home of the billboard, the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, adopted the name Kunstinstituut Melly in its honour. Pairing a portrait of one of Lum's former students with the blunt declaration of employee dissatisfaction, the piece has become an enduring symbol of the everyday realities of modern work.

[Learn more](#)

WOMEN CLEANING FISH, C.1927

by Pegi Nicol MacLeod

Pegi Nicol MacLeod, *Women Cleaning Fish*, c.1927, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Known for his vibrant modernist paintings of people and daily life, Ontario-born artist Pegi Nicol MacLeod (1904–1949) brought a distinctive energy and humanity to her subjects. Created during her travels in British Columbia, *Women Cleaning Fish*, c.1927, depicts Gitksan women engaged in the essential work of processing salmon. Instead of presenting the region as an untouched landscape, MacLeod highlights the labour, skill, and community knowledge that sustained everyday existence.

[Learn more in ACI's Ottawa Art & Artists: An Illustrated History](#)

VISITATION ON BRAGG'S ISLAND, 1997

by David Blackwood

David Blackwood, *Visitation on Bragg's Island*, 1997, courtesy of the Estate of David Blackwood.

Fishing was once at the heart of Newfoundland's outport communities, connecting the work of the cod fishery with daily life. In *Visitation on Bragg's Island*, 1997, artist David Blackwood (1941–2022), who was born in the coastal town of Westville, captures a moment of arrival as a boat approaches the wooden wharf. Viewed from above, the scene reveals the platforms, walkways, and fish-drying racks that made up the working landscape of the outport, highlighting the structures that supported both the cod fishery and the communities built around it.

[Learn more](#)

CUSHIONED, 2024

by Vivian Smith

Vivian Smith, *Cushioned* and detail, 2024, Vernon Public Art Gallery.

In *Cushioned*, 2024, Alberta artist Vivian Smith transforms the often-invisible labour of cleaning into a tactile sculptural piece. The photographs of Smith performing domestic tasks are printed on satin and combined with soft fibre filling, creating an object that evokes comfort while revealing the work required to maintain it. By making acts of care visible, Smith asks viewers to reflect on the toil hidden within ordinary spaces.

[Learn more](#)

MANUFACTURING #17, DEDA CHICKEN PROCESSING PLANT, DEHUI CITY, JILIN PROVINCE, CHINA, 2005

by Edward Burtynsky

Edward Burtynsky, *Manufacturing #17, Deda Chicken Processing Plant, Dehui City, Jilin Province, China*, 2005, courtesy of the artist.

Mass production depends on the coordination of countless individual workers. In *Manufacturing #17, Deda Chicken Processing Plant, Dehui City, Jilin Province, China*, 2005, Toronto-based photographer Edward Burtynsky (b.1955) looks down on rows of workers in a vast chicken-processing facility. Their identical clothing and repetitive arrangement transform the factory floor into an almost abstract pattern, while the sheer scale of the scene makes each person seem like one part of a much larger system. By combining the visual order of the factory with the human labour that sustains it, Burtynsky draws attention to the enormous scale of modern food production.

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