

JOYCE WIELAND: HEART ON

For almost 40 years, Joyce Wieland (1930–1998) engaged with the issues of her time with singular audacity. She embraced the untidy elements of domesticity and drew from her own experiences. Using a rich range of materials and techniques, she explored female sexuality, civil rights, Canadian sovereignty, the threat of US imperialism, and ecological devastation.

Beginning in the mid-1950s, from Toronto to New York City and back, Wieland's drawings and paintings give way to sewn and stuffed plastic assemblages, experimental films, monumental quilts, and delicate embroideries. Wieland articulated urgent concerns with wit, passion, and generosity. She created a compelling vision of care and—ultimately—a call to action. The exhibition is organized by Art Gallery of Ontario and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

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Section 1 – Gallery 501

Myself

“I think being an artist is about following your own way, and having the courage to be who you are and what you are.”
—Joyce Wieland

Wieland made drawings all her life. It shaped and anchored her practice from the beginning. She found her subject matter early and close at hand in the intimacy of lived experience. “I must show in my work, what it is to love,” she wrote in her diary in 1956.

Works in this section—predominantly drawings—reveal a fascination with her own image, sexual awakening, and the entanglements of lovers. They were admired by fellow artists, and by influential Toronto art dealer Dorothy Cameron (1924–2000). Wieland first exhibited her drawings at Cameron’s Here and Now Gallery in 1960.

Myself

1958

oil on canvas

Collection of Margaret J. Break

Section 2 = Gallery 502

Heart-On

“Eventually, women’s concerns and my own femininity became my artist’s territory.” —Joyce Wieland

In 1960, Wieland was given temporary access to use a friend’s Toronto coach house as a studio. For the first time, she was able to produce energetic paintings in a large-scale format. She disrupted her fields of colour with cut-out pieces of fabric affixed to the stained canvas, or incised the paint with graffiti-like drawings. Her unique artistic vocabulary emerged. Aware of the challenges women faced in the art world, she unabashedly let the messiness of domesticity and the feminine experience seep into her practice. The works in this section earned Wieland institutional recognition.

Heart-on

1962

red electrical tape, chalk, crayon, ink, with

linen and wool cut-outs on unstretched linen

National Gallery of Canada, purchased 1973, 17129

Handtinting

1967

digital transfer of 16mm film (colour, silent, 6 min.)

Art Gallery of Ontario, purchase, 2024

Film elements digitally restored by the Cinémathèque québécoise.
Project supervision: Stéphanie Côté; Inspection of source
elements: Eva Létourneau; Sources digitization, colour correction,
and image restoration: MELS
© Cinémathèque québécoise

Wieland made this film using the outtakes of a documentary featuring a West Virginia job-training program intended to curb unemployment among disadvantaged youth. Wieland hand-tinted the film with dye and perforated the leader ends with quilting needles, drawing attention to the physical properties of the film itself. “It has mystery and rhythm and some repetitive portraits of some beautiful faces,” she said in a 1971 interview. “The editing and the girls are the subject of *Handtinting*. The editing and the so-called subject matter are equal.”

Section 3 = Gallery 502 and 509

Flick Pics

“I have been very aware of the fact that there is Art and there is Politics, and I have been working on putting them together in aesthetic terms for years.” —Joyce Wieland

While living in New York City in the mid-1960s, Wieland established her reputation as an avant-garde filmmaker and experimental visual artist. There is a distinct structure to what she called her “filmic paintings”: a grid of images akin to filmstrips or

storyboards. Sinking boats and crashing airplanes are two recurring motifs that appear in her work from this period. Her paintings, assemblages, and textiles included overt political content that reflected her interest in popular culture and social issues such as the Civil Rights movement, the war in Vietnam, and gender politics.

Flick Pics No. 4

1963

oil on canvas

Art Gallery of Ontario, gift of Morton and Carol Rapp, 2007
2007/429

Cooling Room II

1964

found objects, painted wooden case

National Gallery of Canada, purchased 1971, 16706

Wieland repurposed found objects to create sculptural stories. The title *Cooling Room II* derives from the stamp on a wooden box she likely scavenged from a neighbourhood cheese shop in Greenwich Village or along the Hudson River piers in New York City. “The animation of. . . the cup with accumulating lipstick on it [is] sort of reminiscent of being in a studio where there’s lots of coffee cups and this sort of thing happened every day,” she later commented. Alluding to the passage of time, beauty, love, and death, Wieland offers here a feminine *memento mori*.

Section 4 = Gallery 508

Stuffed Movie

“[P]lastic was so available; it was all around and it was in the air.”
—Joyce Wieland

Wieland produced 15 plastic assemblages which she stitched together using colourful pieces of PVC (polyvinyl chloride). She was among several artists who embraced plastic as a medium in the late 1960s, although she was aware it caused cancer. Wieland filled her assemblages—like time capsules—with images and items that reflected political issues, current events, and personal references. These works are a testament to the artist’s playful challenging of consumerist mass production and her foregrounding of women’s work.

We are grateful to the Canadian Conservation Institute for their scientific analysis of Wieland’s works in plastic.

Confedspread

1967

plastic, thread, found objects, cloth, batting

National Gallery of Canada, purchased 1968, 15458

Confedspread—a portmanteau of “Confederation” and “bedspread”—stands out among Wieland’s plastic works, with its large-scale and quilt-like construction. Created in anticipation of the Canadian Centennial in 1967, it reflects her growing interest in

Canadian identity during her time living in New York. Stuffed with quilt batting and featuring maple leaves in varying hues—the maple leaf symbol figured prominently on Canada’s new official flag, adopted in 1965—*Confedspread* interweaves politics, quilt-making, and abstraction to confront the complex, patchwork identity of Canada. The back of the work is one sheet of pink vinyl, visible from the front in areas.

Film Mandala

1966

cloth, thread, batting

quilting: Joan Stewart and Gladys Chambers

Art Gallery of Guelph, Macdonald Stewart Art Centre

Collection, gift of Doug MacPherson, 2006, MS2006.023

This quilt—one of Wieland’s first—creates a dialogue between craft, visual art, and film. Wieland intended it as an “homage to film and particularly, to 8mm film. . . . The light falls on all these lines which in a way are the proportion of 8mm film strips. It has to do with radiance.” Wieland consciously designed quilts—stitched by her sister Joan Stewart and others—to “go right into the whole feminine thing” and challenge the commercial and male-dominated New York art scene.

Section 5 = Gallery 510 and 505

Flag Arrangement

“All the art I’m doing or will be doing is about Canada.”

—Joyce Wieland

Living as an expatriate in New York City throughout the 1960s ignited Wieland’s political consciousness. She embedded her politics into her aesthetics, exploring Canadian identity, particularly in relation to the United States and Quebec. In 1972 she wrote: “Since 1967, all of my work has been about Canada, a country which has been largely sold out to the U.S. multinational corporations ... the American power structure determines the future of this country, by exploitation of our minds and resources.”

Before moving back to Toronto in late 1971, she created her most politically incisive works in a wide range of materials and techniques. She collaborated with craftswomen from across Canada in her commitment “to elevate and honour craft.”

Flag Arrangement

1970–1971

knitted wool

knitting: Valerie McMillin

Art Gallery of Ontario, gift of Toronto Star Newspapers Ltd., 2005

2005/20.1-.4

Wieland recruited Valerie McMillin, a champion knitter from Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, to knit a series of Canadian flags for her *True Patriot Love* exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada in 1971. She asked McMillin to use varying stitching techniques but the same number of stitches for each flag. This resulted in distinct sizes and shapes that distorted the maple leaf. The artist framed the works, wanting the transparent plastic sheet to “press into the knitting so that the knitting became the real subject of the actual labour of all the stitches.”

I Love Canada – J’aime le Canada

1970

cloth, thread, batting, metal

quilting and embroidery: Joan Stewart MacKenzie Art Gallery,
University of Regina Collection, 1972-21

Wieland believed that Canada had to extricate itself from US encroachment. Subverting the myth of a peaceful, tolerant, caring, and just Canada, the small, embroidered letters in the middle read: “Death to U.S. Technological Imperialism,” in both official languages.

Wieland’s progressive vision of Canadian society saw anglophones and francophones reconciled. She declared in a 1971 New York Times article: “I’m a Canadian. I believe in Canada. We should work for Canadian unity—English and French—as Canadians, not as anti-Americans. We should be more positive about ourselves.”

Reason over Passion

1968

cloth, thread, batting quilting: Joan Stewart
National Gallery of Canada, purchased 1970, 15924

Concerned about the 1960s race riots and escalating war in Vietnam, Wieland saw in newly elected prime minister Pierre Trudeau (1919–2000) an answer to the United States' increasingly violent and opportunistic imperialism. His words intrigued her: "For many years, I have been fighting for the triumph of reason over passion." In May 1968, Wieland and Michael Snow held a "quilt-in" in their Manhattan apartment, which brought together around 100 people— artists, filmmakers, friends—to produce the French-language version, which Wieland and Snow later gave to Trudeau.

Defend the Earth

1972

Egyptian cotton, embroidery thread, thread, batting
handwork: Joan Stewart, Quilting and Embroidery Associates
National Research Council Canada, Ottawa,
commissioned for the National Science Library

The National Research Council Canada commissioned Wieland to create a piece for their National Science Library building in Ottawa. Billowy flowers, puffy letters, and soft colours stand in stark contrast to the brutalist architecture and grey concrete of the building it has inhabited since 1972. Wieland described how she

addressed the work to the scientific community: “To give warning to students who go there to do research. Defend the earth against the god-damn chemicals.”

The *Heart On* exhibition marks the first time this work has been displayed outside of the National Science Library.

Section 6 = Gallery 505

The Bloom of Matter

“You work on your own myth from the very basic things you have around you.” —Joyce Wieland

The production of Wieland’s only feature-length film, *The Far Shore*, as well as its poster—the original drawing for which is on display here—gave rise to a series of coloured-pencil drawings and paintings that she called The Bloom of Matter. She explained, “I’m working now with little drawings of different female mythological characters. They are tiny, pale-coloured sketches done with coloured pencils. Half the storyboards from *The Far Shore* were done in the same way. In these new sketches, the women characters developed with animals, men, landscapes, and it started to become a kind of mythology. But they tend to be more spiritual. They’re full of light. They’re full of skies.”

Drawing for poster for *The Far Shore*

1976

graphite and coloured pencil on wove paper, collage on artist illustration board

Museum London, gift of Ralph and Rosemary Bull, London, Ontario, 1985, 85.A.91

For her feature film *The Far Shore* (1976), Wieland deviated from standard movie-poster formats and went against the grain of the male-dominated art and film world, making drawings with light-coloured pencils. She illustrated actor Céline Lomez, who played the character Eulalie, with a strong and determined gaze. Frank Moore, who played a character based on Canadian painter Tom Thomson (1877–1917), appears beneath Lomez in his canoe.

Nature Study (Bear and the Spirit of Canada)

1970–1971

bronze

Collection of Munro Ferguson

Section 7 = Gallery 505

The Arctic Belongs to Itself

“Those skies are unphotographable because of the subtleties in colour and light. I realized it would take years to understand Arctic light.” —Joyce Wieland

Wieland's interest in the Arctic arose during the mid-to-late 1960s. Her perspective on the region, while limited by her position as an anglophone in southern Canada, is rooted in cultural activism. She fiercely denounced capitalist forces pillaging the Arctic with no concern for its inhabitants and the resultant ecological devastation. Wieland wanted to both protect the Arctic from extraction and celebrate it for its beauty and vibrancy. The Arctic of Wieland's imagination is bountiful, full of colour and life, and under attack.

Barren Ground Caribou [located in gallery 500]

1977–1978

cloth, thread, batting

handwork: Joan Stewart, Quilting and Embroidery Associates
City of Toronto, Public Art and Monuments Collection

Wieland created her largest quilt as “an offering to nature . . . in the purely technological environment of a subway station.” Framed inside the Kendal Avenue entrance to the Spadina TTC station, it spans the width of the northbound and southbound tracks below. Wieland studied the caribou's anatomy and movement, sourcing photographs of herds moving across the land. “Let us remember these marvelous beasts before they are no more,” she wrote. This quilted fresco is an encounter between animals and humans, north and south, wonder and haste.

The *Heart On* exhibition marks the first time this work has been displayed outside of Spadina station.

Section 8 = Gallery 506 and 507

Experiment with Life

“From [The Bloom of Matter] drawings later came the paintings ... a different style of painting than I’d ever done. About nature again, about people, about struggles between men and women, about cataclysms. And a knowledge of a certain kind of sky I liked.”

—Joyce Wieland

After a hiatus from painting that lasted over a decade, Wieland returned to the medium in the 1980s, feeling “a terrible need to do it.” These paintings are among the last she created before Alzheimer’s disease took over her life. The works—which often feature the artist herself—are loaded allegories in which the forces of creation and destruction co-exist in a primordial eternal battle. Large in scale yet intimate, these romantic, fantastical scenes evoke distant and mythological lands, places that are simultaneously idyllic and tinged with brutality

Entrance to Nature

1988

canvas collage mounted on plywood, oil, glitter, wire, cardboard, staples, metal push pins

Collection of Sally Wright

Artist on Fire

1983

oil on canvas

The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, purchase, 1984, 1984WJ8

[Additional exhibition works beyond 5th floor:]

Gallery 227

Rat Life and Diet in North America

1968

digital transfer of 16mm film (colour, sound, 16 min.)

Purchase, 2024 © Cinémathèque québécoise

Film restored and transferred by Cinémathèque québécoise.

Project supervision: Stéphanie Côté; Inspection of source elements: Eva Létourneau; Image digitization, colour correction and restoration: MELS; Sound digitization: ONF/NFB; Sound restoration: Bruno Bélanger

Wieland created several experimental films in the mid-to-late 1960s. She noted in an interview: “*Rat Life and Diet in North America* is the first film I made that involved Canada as a subject and had any political reference. It is about coming back to Canada.” The film premiered at the Art Gallery of Ontario in November 1968 and screened at film festivals in the United States and Europe. It was also broadcast on television in Canada and abroad.

Grange park (seasonal outdoor installation)

Venus of Scarborough

1982

Revisited in Grange Park, 2025

soil, flowers

Joyce Wieland created *Venus of Scarborough* in the summer of 1982 for the *Contemporary Outdoor Sculpture* exhibition commemorating the 50th anniversary of The Guild Inn, near the Scarborough Bluffs. The work—a flowerbed sculpted to resemble a larger-than-life nude female form reclining on her back, arms folded under her head, locks of hair flowing about her face—embodies Wieland’s deep concerns for humanity and ecology, as well as her attunement to the cyclic patterns of nature. Venus is the Roman goddess of love, beauty, sex, fertility, and victory. Women’s experiences were an important theme for Wieland. The figure of Venus, and what she represents, resonates throughout her practice.