

What to see, do, hear and read in Toronto this February

Including an indie powerhouse's most emotional tour yet, an exhibition on reclaiming Indigenous culture and a new adaptation of a classic play by Anton Chekhov

BY TORONTO LIFE | FEBRUARY 1, 2024



Photo by Getty Images

A raw new album from an indie powerhouse

1 Fresh off a string of European concerts, indie's premier melodramatic singer-songwriter brings her latest batch of ballads to Toronto. Mitski's seventh full-length album, *The Land Is Inhospitable and So Are We*, includes the tracks "I Don't Like My Mind" and "My Love Mine All Mine," which have been regulars on Spotify's recommendation lists since they came out last September. The album, with its softer, mildly country vibe, presents a collection of lush, ennui-soaked tributes to the promises and contradictions of America—themes that are perhaps better enjoyed from this side of the border. *Massey Hall, February 10 to 12*

A quick-witted play about the cult of celebrity

2 Australian theatre is having a moment in Toronto. Last month, the AI-anxiety play *The Shadow Whose Prey the Hunter Becomes* ran at the Berkeley Street Theatre, and now another hit Aussie play is making its Canadian debut. Created by famed playwright Joanna Murray-

Smith, *Rockabye* follows an aging British pop star seeking to restore her former glory with a comeback album while in the midst of adopting a baby from Africa. The show was praised as an incisive take on modern-day celebrity worship when it debuted in 2009 at Melbourne's Sumner Theatre—and it may be even more relevant today. *January 26 to February 11, Factory Theatre*

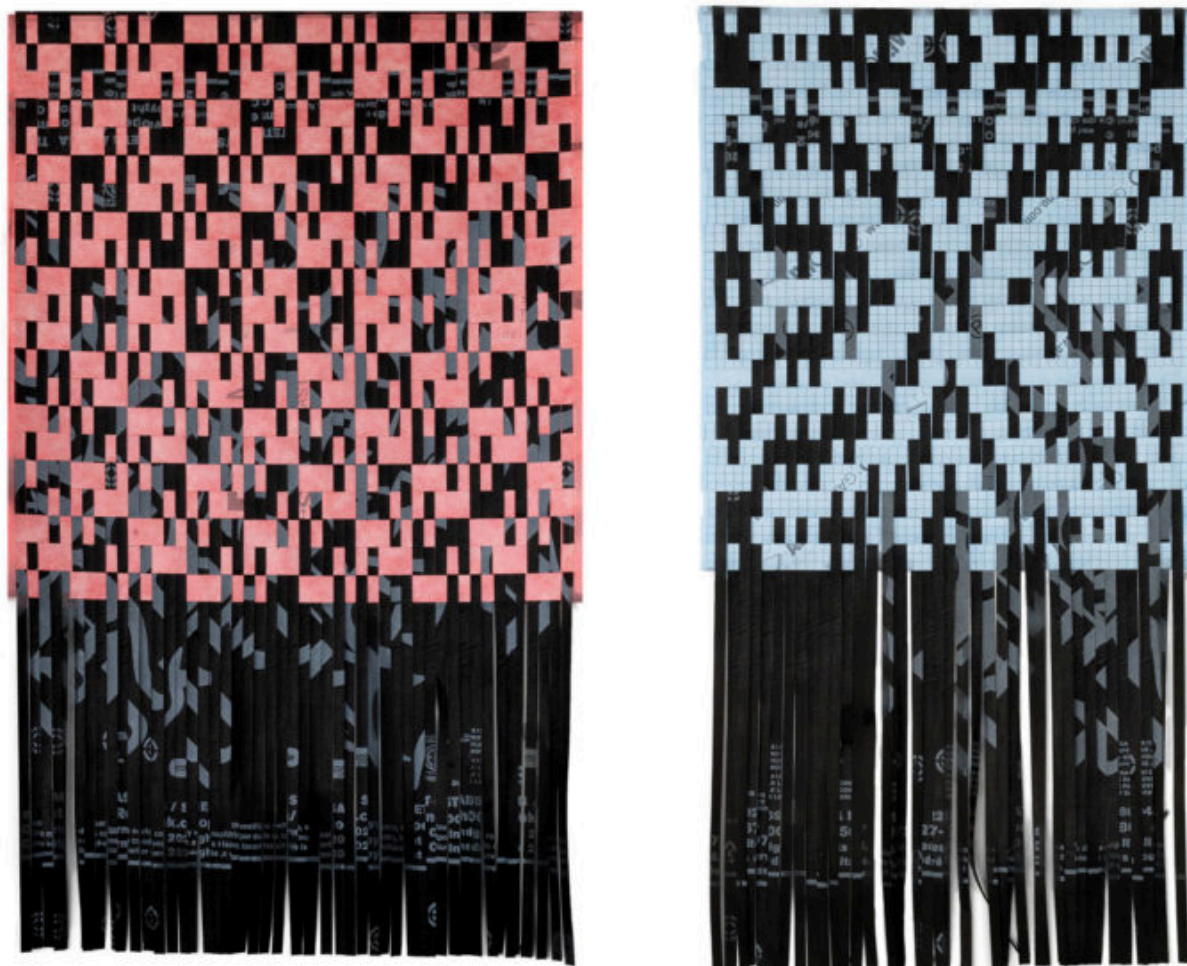


Photo courtesy of the artist

An exhibition about land, loss and cultural legacy

3 In her first solo exhibition at a Toronto gallery, *Pizandawac / The One Who Listens / Celui qui écoute*, Montreal-based Anishinaabe artist Caroline Monnet tackles themes of language, loss and reclamation by capturing the sound waves of words spoken in her ancestral language in layers of wood, imprinting the voices of her people onto physical objects. The exhibition's title, *Pizandawac*, is the traditional name of Monnet's family—a fitting tribute for a show that wrestles with the legacy of colonialism. *January 18 to March 23, Art Museum at the University of Toronto*



A graphic memoir that packs an emotional punch

4 Growing up isn't easy for anyone, but try being a gay kid in a hyper-religious immigrant family in the Toronto suburbs during the 1970s. That's the hand artist Maurice Vellekoop was dealt, and he played it well, becoming a prolific cartoonist and illustrator. He shares his journey in a new graphic memoir, *I'm So Glad We Had This Time Together*, which traces his life story from familial estrangement to personal discovery as a student at OCAD, including all the rough patches along the way. Vellekoop, known for his cheek, injects some fun into an at-times difficult tale. *Out February 27*

A winter edition of a beloved art fair

5 Valentine's day is just around the corner, and your special someone may be expecting a special something. Whether it's one-of-a-kind jewellery to show your love and appreciation or something less conventional, Toronto's artists and artisans have it covered. More than 85 of them are coming together at the Great Hall for this year's February edition of the Toronto Art Crawl. Expect paintings, photography, sculptures, fashion, homewares, skin-care products and more, plus a selection of food vendors so visitors can snack while they shop. Bonus: those who arrive early can snag a free swag bag. *February 11, The Great Hall*



Photo by Getty Images

A renowned Canadian band debuts an alter-ego

6 Montreal-born singer-songwriter Sam Roberts and his band are back on tour, this time for their eighth full-length album, *The Adventures of Ben Blank*. Released last October, the new LP tries on a *Sgt. Pepper*-style concept, featuring a mysterious fictional character, Blank, as the album's narrator. It's a challenging conceit for any artist, but with six Juno awards over a 20-year career, Roberts and his crew are up to the task. *February 9, History*

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A celebrity astrophysicist's latest lecture

7 Neil deGrasse Tyson has been talking about space for a long time, and as science gets more advanced at searching the stars, he's had to continually update his material. In the five years since he filmed his *StarTalk* TV series, the James Webb Space Telescope has transmitted some truly spectacular images of the cosmos—and a lot of juicy data. Tyson returns to the stage in this lecture-style talk to discuss the ever-evolving possibility of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe with a video presentation. The VIP package includes a private Q&A with Tyson plus a group photo and an autographed poster. *February 6, Meridian Hall*



Photo by Clive Barda

A 1920s opera with modern themes

8 This touching tale of love between a fox and a hunter may or may not make you cry (and no, it's not *The Fox and the Hound*). *The Cunning Little Vixen* is a three-act opera written by Czech composer Leoš Janáček in 1923, and this month, the Canadian Opera Company is staging its own production. Featuring Canadian soprano Jane Archibald as the titular vixen and conducted by COC music director Johannes Debus, it's both the story of a single fox and an allegory for humanity's increasingly fraught relationship with nature. *January 26 and 28; February 3, 8, 10, 14 and 16; Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts*

A classic Russian drama gets a captivating new adaptation

9 Step into a soaring Russian mansion with CAA Theatre's production of Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, a turn-of-the-century tragicomedy about a landowning family that has fallen on hard times. First performed by Crow's as a theatre-in-the-round production in 2022, it has now been adapted by set designers Julie Fox and Joshua Quinlan for a more traditional staging at the CAA. The expansive layout gives each character the chance to live within the space—an approach that's well suited to Chekhov's talents. The legendary playwright, notes Fox, was a master at observing human behaviour. Here, Fox and Quinlan tell us about how they built a set that does justice to his work. *February 2 to 25, CAA Theatre*



Photo by Dahlia Katz

1. A pile of firewood carries multiple meanings: the labour required to heat the house, a nod to the original outdoor setting of the first act and a symbol of Chekhov’s conservationist leanings. In *Uncle Vanya*, one character decries clearing forests for industry and commits to replanting his own.

2. In this pivotal scene, Serebryakov, a professor, presents a radical idea for the family’s struggling estate. “It’s a particular moment in Russia, with the emancipation of the serfs, where these minor gentry were suddenly losing sources of income and struggling with what to do,” explains Fox.

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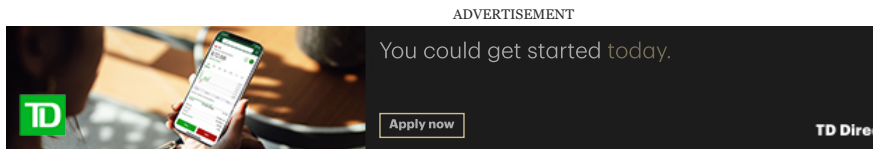
3. While most of the costumes were designed to evoke the 1890s setting, costume designer Ming Wong took occasional modern liberties, like dressing Serebryakov’s daughter Sonya—who puts in a good share of physical labour on the estate—in practical trousers.

4. Vanya has just pulled up this chair to the middle of the room to confront his brother-in-law (and the owner of the estate), Serebryakov. His seated position represents the power imbalance between him and Serebryakov, who stands to the left.

5. Fox describes the gramophone as “the period equivalent of a TV.” It’s the gathering place around which the family tells stories and listens to music. It also helps set the scene—there’s an Erik Satie piano piece playing when the audience enters the theatre.

6. A traditional Russian samovar sits on the centre table. “There’s a lot of eating and drinking, a lot of tea and alcohol,” says Fox of the play. The samovar was borrowed from Soulpepper Theatre.

7. Hazy sunbeams simulate the warmth of summer in Russia, which cranks up the tension between the play's characters. These rays, perfected by lighting designer Kimberly Purtell, were a special treat for Fox and Quinlan. "You need a lot of space beyond the set to create the effect of sunlight," says Fox. Luckily, CAA Theatre has that.



8. While the set shows only one part of the mansion, its designers wanted to make the rest of the house feel present. Some lines are delivered just off-stage, as if from a hallway leading to the main room. Here, French doors lead to the mansion's garden.

9. Columns, walls and windows stretch up into the rafters, emulating the soaring vaults of high European architecture. In the CAA production, the stage extends outward diagonally, projecting the ceiling over the audience.

10. The once-grand country estate has fallen into disrepair, as can be seen by the rotting floorboards.

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CULTURE

What to see, do, hear and read in Toronto this April

An evening of synth-driven indie rock, a Scottish fashion show, a multimedia exhibition of Indigenous art, and more

BY TORONTO LIFE | APRIL 1, 2024





Photo by Roberto Finizio/NurPhoto/Getty Images

A twee pop band's radiant return

1 Despite keeping a low profile, Scottish band Belle and Sebastian have earned a loyal following and remain beloved by fans after 12 albums and almost 30 years. Their return to the stage has been a long time coming: a planned North American tour was scheduled to stop in Toronto last spring, but the whole thing was cancelled when band member Stuart Murdoch fell ill. Now back in action, the group is passing through the city to promote their surprise 2023 album, *Late Developers*—an easy-listening mix of Belle and Sebastian's trademark whimsical synth-pop and indie-rock sound. *History, April 29*

A survey of the city's creative landscape

2 Like a rare flower, MOCA's celebration of local Toronto artists blooms just once every three years. As the only recurring institutional exhibition dedicated to artists from the GTA, it isn't one to miss. The show will take over three floors of the museum and exhibit a wide array of works from the 1960s to today. It features 25 artists, duos and collectives, including Timothy Yanick Hunter, Sukaina Kubba and Lotus Laurie Kang, across mediums ranging from sculpture to performance. This year's theme, "difference as a point of understanding and connection," couldn't be more on-brand for Toronto. *MOCA, March 22 to July 28*



A tale of family sacrifice and survival

3 After their mother's death, three estranged siblings find themselves in charge of her legacy: the Woking Phoenix, a Chinese restaurant in small-town Ontario. *Woking Phoenix*, a new play at Theatre Passe Muraille, serves up a tale of generational love, family sacrifice and food across two decades. It was created by the Silk Bath Collective, a collaboration between Toronto theatre makers Bessie Cheng, Aaron Jan and Gloria Mok. *Theatre Passe Muraille, April 12 to 27*

A conversation with a bestselling funny man

4 How does author and humourist David Sedaris spend a pandemic? Vacuuming and wondering how the acupuncturists are doing, it turns out. The writer's latest book, 2022's *Happy-Go-Lucky*, chronicles his experience before, during and after the pandemic—a period that coincided with the death of his father and his travels through a Covid-ravaged America. For one night, Sedaris will visit Massey Hall to share new stories, answer questions and sign books, offering the poignant and hilarious commentary he's known for on our unprecedented times. *Massey Hall, April 7*



Photo by Prince Williams/Getty Images

A rising songwriter tours her latest record

5 Up-and-coming R&B singer Mariah the Scientist seems to have a sweet spot for this city: her 2022 single “Christmas in Toronto” waxes poetic about waking up to a lover here before jetting off to Atlanta. Now touring Europe, the US and Canada for her third album, *To Be Eaten Alive*, the artist is returning for a show at the Danforth Music Hall. Let’s hope the good feelings are still there. *Danforth Music Hall, April 2*

A genre-bending show about a visionary artist

6 American composer Julius Eastman was a trailblazer of minimalist and experimental music who injected his identity as a queer Black man into his works—something of a radical act in 1970s New York. After his death in 1990, Eastman left behind a rich artistic legacy, which is now being celebrated in *Searching for Eastman*, a new four-act show that combines music, poetry, theatre and dance. Created by the Wind in the Leaves Collective and based on the writings of Toronto poet, playwright and performer Charles C. Smith, each act interprets one of Eastman’s compositions, including *Prelude to St. Joan*, *Stay On It* and *Gay Guerilla*. *Berkeley Street Theatre, April 4 to 7*

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A celebratory night of Caledonian culture

7 For the first time, globally acclaimed Scottish fashion show *Dressed to Kilt* is coming to Canada. Since being founded by Sean Connery and Geoffrey Scott Carroll in 2003, the annual celebration of Caledonian dress has become an international phenomenon, with stars like Mike Myers, Anne Hathaway and Joan Jett gracing its runways. This northern edition will feature fashions inspired by hunting, riding, hiking, skating and skiing, showcased by a slate of A-list models including soccer legend Christine Sinclair and the National Ballet of Canada's Guillaume Côté. *Liberty Grand, April 6*

A thrilling novel about choice and destiny

8 How much of who you are is baked into your DNA or inherited through generations of culture clashes, migration and trauma? It's a question that writers like E. J. Koh and Kyo Maclear have wrestled with in recent books that trace the lives of ancestors and their progeny. To this roster comes *Real Americans*, a new novel by *Goodbye, Vitamin* author Rachel Khong. The book follows a Y2K romance between a second-generation immigrant and a privileged East Coaster—and their son's present-day search for a father he never knew. *Out April 30*

A multimedia show with an Indigenous lens

9 For over 40 years, Brantford-based Mohawk artist Shelley Niro has been using photography, film, painting and sculpture to portray Indigenous women and girls as they are as opposed to how they're depicted in mainstream media, touching on themes of matriarchy, history and family relationships. Fresh off the heels of her new anthology, *500 Year Itch*, the artist is taking over Dundas West's Stephen Bulger Gallery in a solo multimedia exhibition called *Silent, Waiting, Moving, Loud*. We caught up with Niro to talk about her new show, self-representation in art, and how she recasts residential schools through an Indigenous lens. *Stephen Bulger Gallery, until April 27*

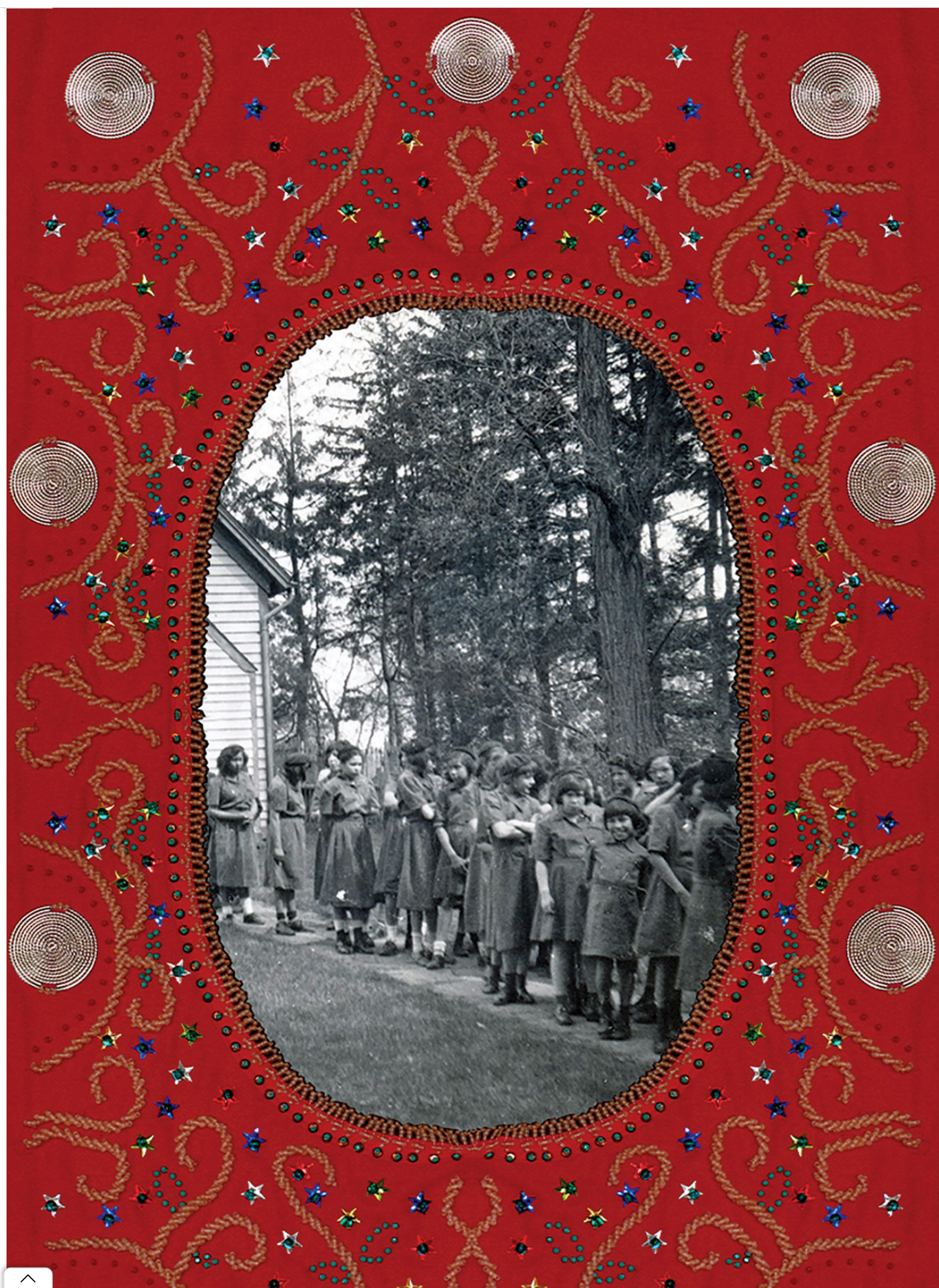


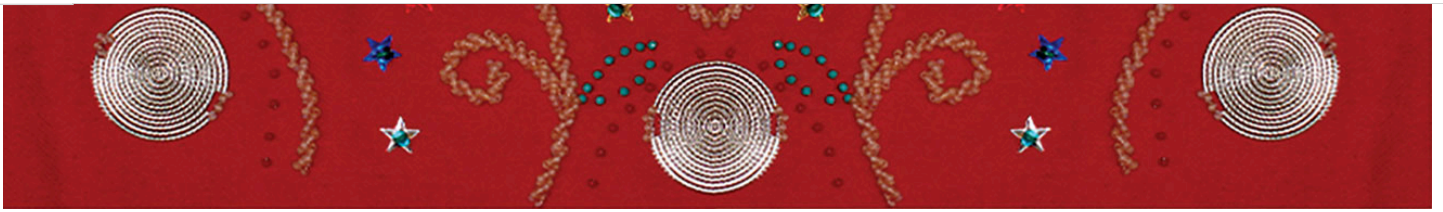
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Subject: “This is my granddaughter Raven when she was around 13. She was going to cut her long hair, so I made her pose for me first.”

Branches: “I got these branches from a friend who cut her bushes and was about to put them in the garbage. I spread them out on a white background and then inverted the colours.”

Moon: “I come from an ancient tribe that loves the moon, and I’m obsessed with it too. I enjoy taking photos of it, capturing it and almost holding it in my camera.”





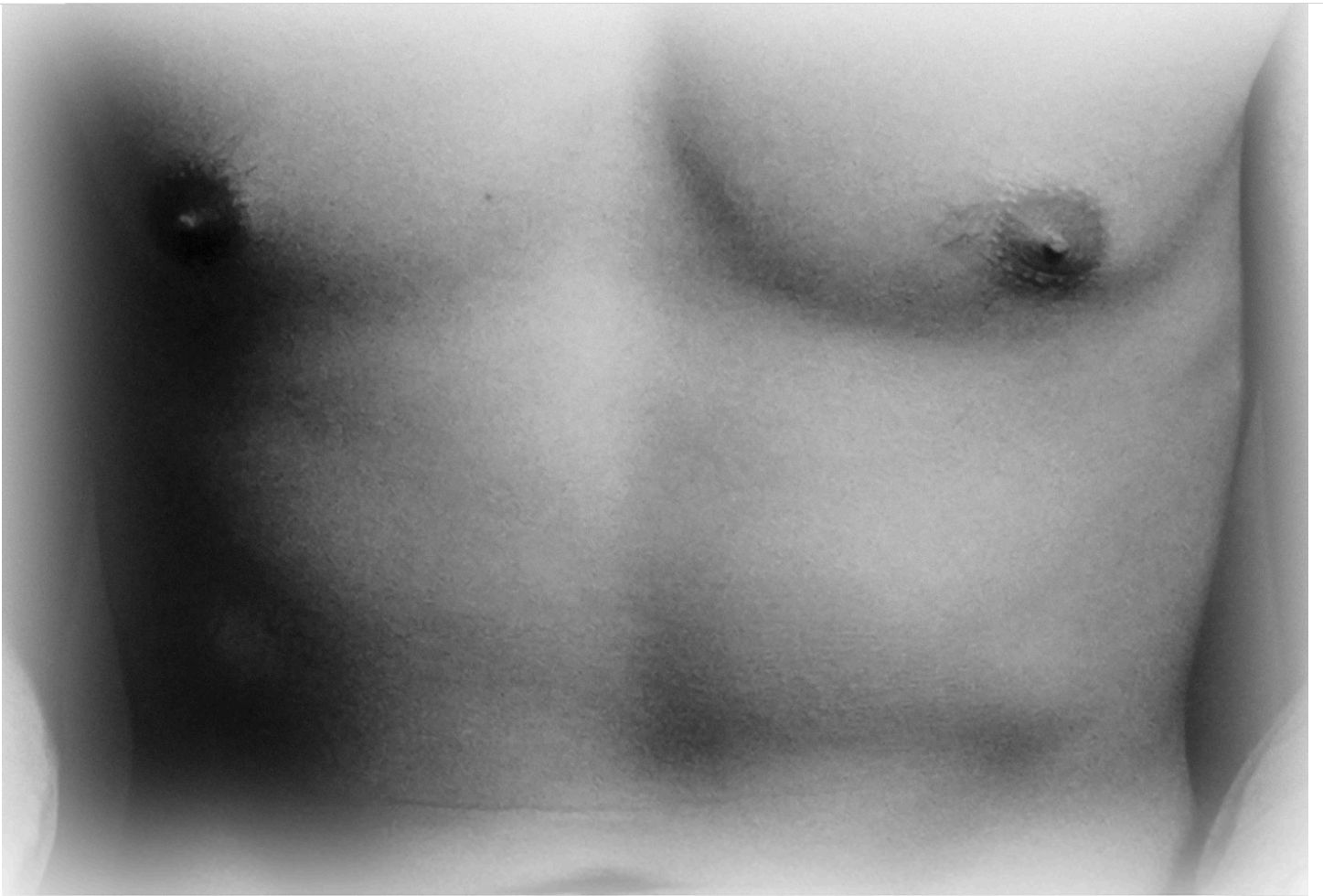
Setting: “This is Mohawk Chapel in Brantford, around 1940. These kids are coming out of the church in their uniforms, and the teacher is looking at them, making sure they’re standing in line. It’s disturbing to see these photographs of residential schools and how the kids are dressed and regimented. It’s a reminder of what Indian kids and families had to go through in that period. It’s like they’re in jail.”

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Girls: “We can never get tired of talking about how girls during this period were trained to be domestic help. It’s called a residential ‘school,’ but they didn’t learn anything besides how to make beds. Yet there’s one little girl looking at the camera with a big smile on her face. I think it’s such a strange photograph. Why is she so happy? But, at the same time, you don’t want to paint everyone as being sad, mistreated and abused.”

Beadwork frame: “I wanted the viewer to know they’re looking at this picture through Indigenous eyes. I made the frame really pretty, because what’s going on inside of it isn’t.”

Metal discs: “I go to consignment stores to buy things I can take apart and reuse. These discs came from a belt. They look like silver, which was an important material in Iroquois jewellery from the 1700s onward.”





Man: “This is a young man from Six Nations that I photographed about 20 years ago. His name is Chris White.”

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Background: “I did an installation called La Pieta that had different images of the Mohawk Valley and landscape. This piece condenses that work into one image: it has the body of a young man and the landscape, two things that are destroyed in times of war.”

River: “This is the Grand River in Ontario. It’s a contentious issue for Six Nations people. We were originally given six miles on both sides of the river, from the source to the mouth, but now we have hardly any of that. The rest has been squatted on, occupied and stolen.”