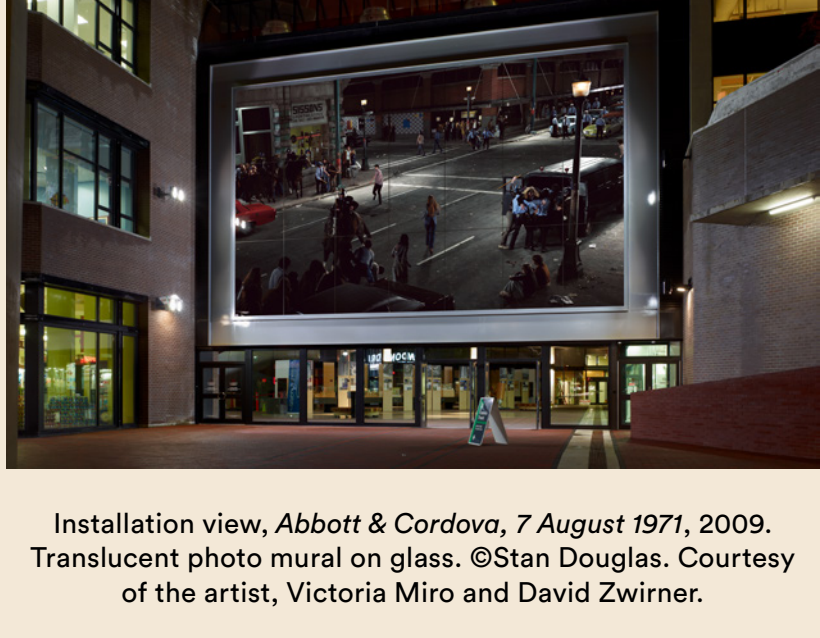


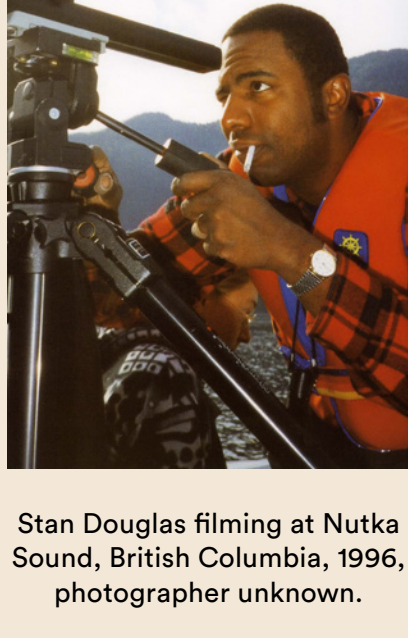
AUGUST 16, 2024

## THE CLOSE-UP: ABBOTT & CORDOVA 7 AUGUST 1971 BY STAN DOUGLAS

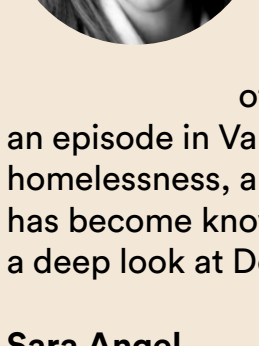
*The artist's contemporary depiction of a historic riot.*



Installation view, *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971*, 2009. Translucent photo mural on glass. ©Stan Douglas. Courtesy of the artist, Victoria Miro and David Zwirner.



Stan Douglas filming at Nutka Sound, British Columbia, 1996, photographer unknown.



On August 7, 1971, in Vancouver's Gastown area, police in riot gear attacked a peaceful pro-marijuana protest, [sparking chaos at Maple Tree Square](#). Almost forty years later, the renowned Canadian artist Stan Douglas (b.1960) created a large-scale photographic mural restaging the event as faithfully as possible. His two-storey-high work *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971*, 2009, located in the atrium of the redeveloped Woodward's Complex, shares the account of an episode in Vancouver history and its impact on public space, gentrification, homelessness, and police activity. This month was the anniversary of what has become known as the Gastown Riots. To mark the moment, we are taking a deep look at Douglas's epic work.

**Sara Angel**  
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

### THE GASTOWN RIOTS



The Gastown Riots, August 7, 1971, courtesy of the *Vancouver Sun*.

On August 7, 1971, two thousand people gathered at Vancouver's Maple Tree Square in Gastown for a "Smoke-In" to protest drug laws and raids. Seventy-nine participants were arrested as police on horseback charged them and beat them with batons. As [reported by the CBC](#), a subsequent inquiry headed by provincial Supreme Court justice Thomas Dohm declared the event a "police riot." It became a defining moment for the city: [As Douglas has stated](#), "The riot was a critical juncture in the history of the Downtown Eastside.... It affected civic attitudes toward the neighbourhood that would eventually be manifest in zoning and policing policies."

Learn more about [the Gastown Riots](#)

### STAGING THE MURAL



Stan Douglas staging *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971*, 2008, courtesy of Westbank Corp.

To create *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971*, Douglas extensively researched the Gastown Riots, including [reviewing archival photographs and interviews](#). He then built a set at the Pacific National Exhibition grounds to replicate the intersection in the title of his work, *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971*. It included weathered storefronts and dramatic lighting. Douglas cast a hundred actors as police officers and citizens. In the images above, traffic is stopped (left) and figures are corralled (right). Douglas's technical approach is similar to that of a Hollywood filmmaker (Vancouver is a frequent shooting location for film and TV). However, the artist's goal is to create a single potent work that synthesizes an abundance of still images.

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### HISTORIC RECREATIONS



Stan Douglas behind the scenes of *Penn Station's Half Century*, 2021, courtesy of *Montecristo Magazine*, photograph by Eavan Keraj.



Stan Douglas, *22 April 1924*, from *Penn Station's Half Century*, 2021, courtesy of UAP.

Douglas has been exhibiting his work since the early 1980s. Over the decades, his celebrated photography and film/video installation practice has often been based on historical re-enactment, as seen in *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971*—though sometimes using these techniques to depict fictional events—including carefully researched settings, props, and period dress. Take, for example, the nine distinct scenes comprising his *Penn Station's Half Century*, 2021, a [four-part mural commission marking the station's enormous expansion](#). The work involved a four-day shoot staging everyday moments from New York City's original Penn Station in its glory days of 1910 to 1963.

Learn more about [Penn Station's Half Century](#)

### WOODWARD'S BUILDING



Installation view, *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971*, 2009. Translucent photo mural on glass. ©Stan Douglas. Courtesy of the artist, Victoria Miro and David Zwirner.

*Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971* was commissioned by and is on permanent view at the Woodward's building, a mixed-use redevelopment project by Westbank that occupies almost a full city block of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, just steps from the intersection of Abbott and Cordova, where the Gastown Riots took place. The events of August 7, 1971, shaped the neighbourhood's trajectory. The area is now the nexus of the city's opioid crisis and of widespread gentrification. Long-time residents struggle with addiction and homelessness, alongside new real estate developments. While set in the past, the strife visible in Douglas's epic photograph is infused with contemporary conflicts.

Learn more about [the Woodward's development in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside](#)

### HISTORY PAINTING



Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Douglas and other artists in Vancouver such as [Jeff Wall](#) (b.1946) often approach photography as they would painting, working at a large scale and exploring their medium's capacity for storytelling, for example. Douglas's still and moving images reimagine the centuries-long legacy of history painting, where monumental canvases memorialize and mythologize key historical moments. Douglas's *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971* has all the chaotic drama and gravitas of this monumental work from three centuries ago, *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770, by Benjamin West (1738–1820). Like West, Douglas's depictions of historical events—whether major or minor—are shaped by the concerns, mores, and political contexts of his time.

Learn more about [The Death of General Wolfe](#) by Benjamin West

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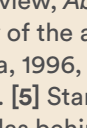
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