

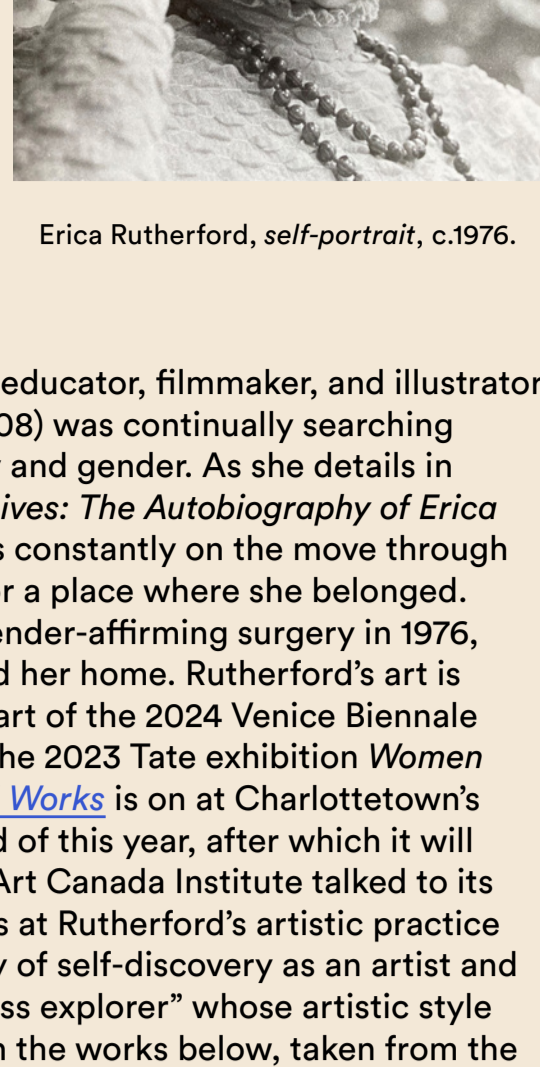
NOVEMBER 29, 2024

THE TRAILBLAZING TRANSGENDER P.E.I. ARTIST ERICA RUTHERFORD, A RESTLESS EXPLORER

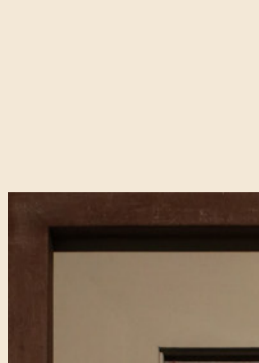
How the artist created work as a way of probing her own issues and her relationship to the world.



Erica Rutherford, *Earnscliffe, PEI*, 1978, Confederation Centre Art Gallery.



Erica Rutherford, *self-portrait*, c.1976.

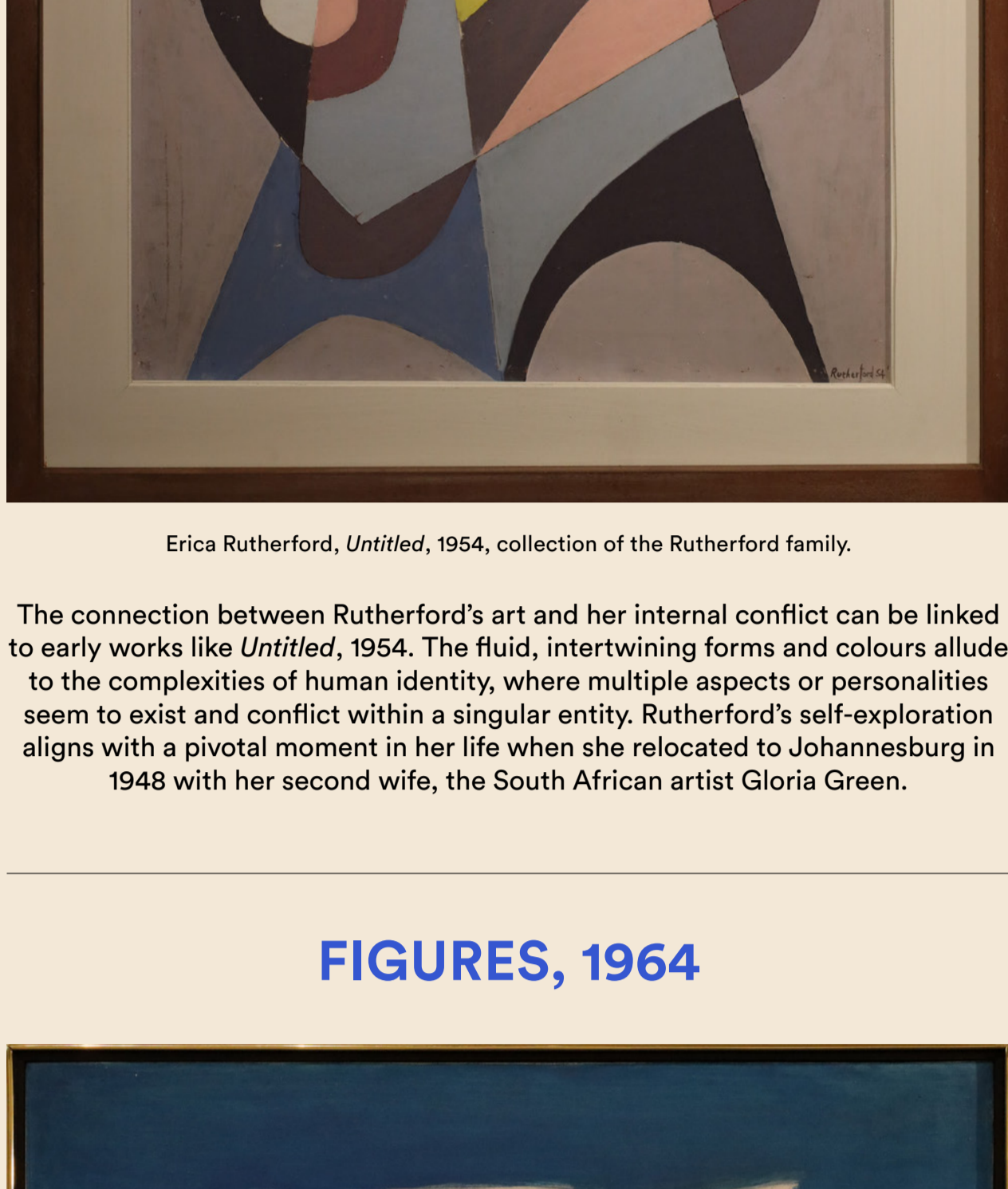


Born in Scotland, the artist, educator, filmmaker, and illustrator Erica Rutherford (1923–2008) was continually searching to understand her identity and gender. As she details in her autobiography, *Nine Lives: The Autobiography of Erica Rutherford* (1993), she was constantly on the move through much of her life, looking for a place where she belonged. In the years following her gender-affirming surgery in 1976, she made Prince Edward Island her home. Rutherford's art is the subject of international attention. It was part of the 2024 Venice Biennale exhibition, *Foreigners Everywhere*, as well as the 2023 Tate exhibition *Women in Revolt! Now Erica Rutherford: Her Lives and Works* is on at Charlottetown's Confederation Centre Art Gallery until the end of this year, after which it will travel to the National Gallery of Canada. The Art Canada Institute talked to its curator, Pan Wendt, about how the show looks at Rutherford's artistic practice and the ways in which it facilitated her journey of self-discovery as an artist and a woman. For Wendt, Rutherford was a "restless explorer" whose artistic style took many forms and evolutions, as outlined in the works below, taken from the compelling exhibition.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

UNTITLED, 1954



Erica Rutherford, *Untitled*, 1954, collection of the Rutherford family.

The connection between Rutherford's art and her internal conflict can be linked to early works like *Untitled*, 1954. The fluid, intertwining forms and colours allude to the complexities of human identity, where multiple aspects or personalities seem to exist and conflict within a singular entity. Rutherford's self-exploration aligns with a pivotal moment in her life when she relocated to Johannesburg in 1948 with her second wife, the South African artist Gloria Green.

FIGURES, 1964



Erica Rutherford, *Figures*, 1964, collection of the Rutherford family.

In her 1964 work *Figures*, Rutherford explores simplified forms that evoke inner reflection and showcase an evolving artistic practice focused on self-exploration. This development followed her 1959 move to the Spanish island of Ibiza, at the suggestion of her friend and fellow artist Douglas Portway (1922–1993). Embracing life as a full-time painter, Rutherford drew influence from Portway's textured surfaces and meditative compositions, as well as the principles of Abstract Expressionism, particularly its emphasis on gestural, non-representational forms and intuitive approaches.

RUBBER MAIDS, 1970, AND TOKYO TOUGHIES, 1971



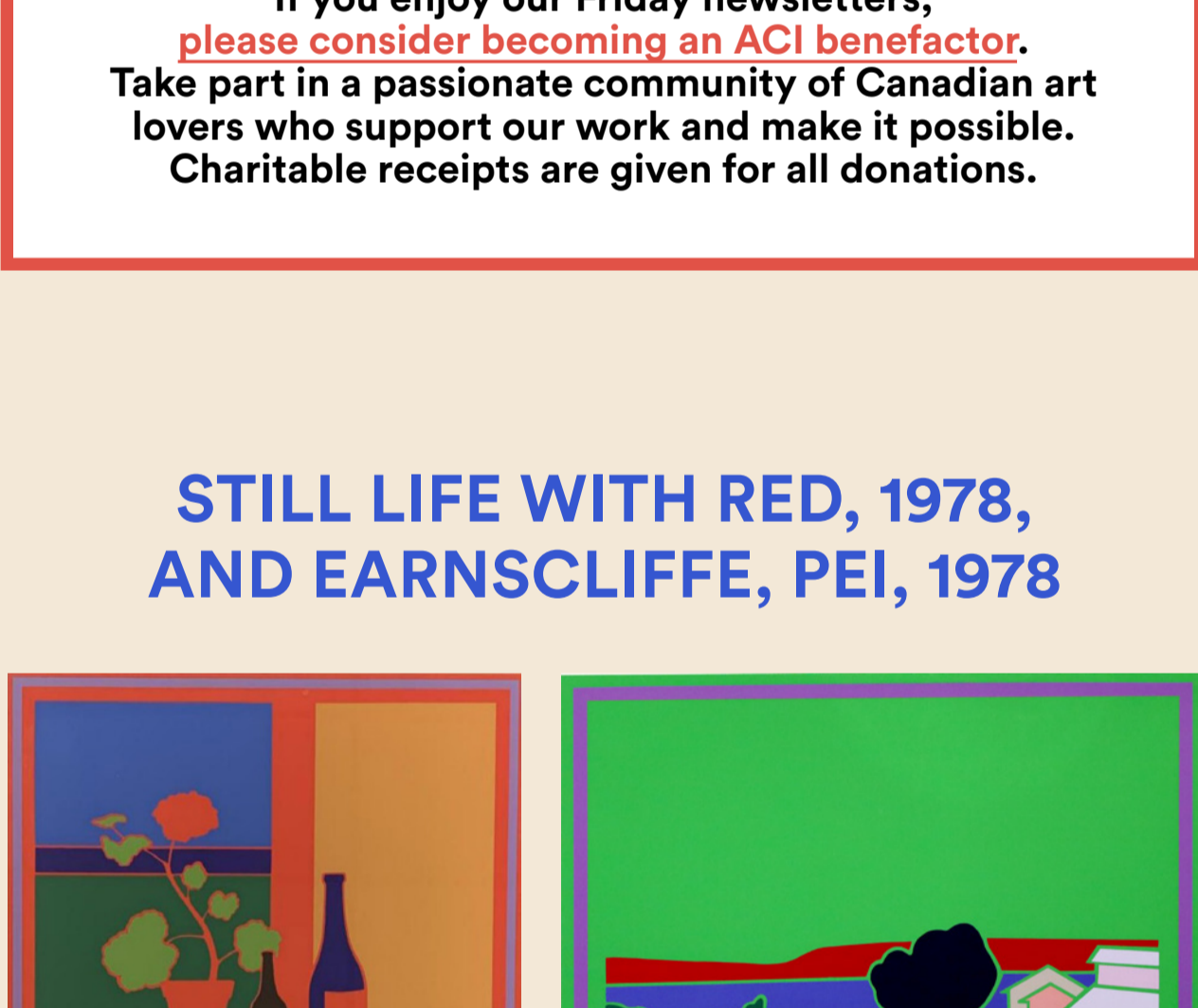
Erica Rutherford, *Rubber Maids*, 1970, courtesy of Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown.



Erica Rutherford, *Tokyo Toughies*, 1971, courtesy of Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown.

In 1968, Rutherford moved to the United States and began connecting with the American art world while teaching at various institutions. During this period, her painting style evolved dramatically, embracing the bold flat colours, simplified lines, and geometric forms associated with Pop art. Using photographs of herself, she experimented with portraits featuring figures often adorned in women's clothing but faceless and devoid of personalizing details. These works, which were included in the 2024 Venice Biennale—making Rutherford the first P.E.I. artist to show in the exhibition, were fuelled by her self-examination and journey towards embracing her life as a woman.

TWININGS, 1979

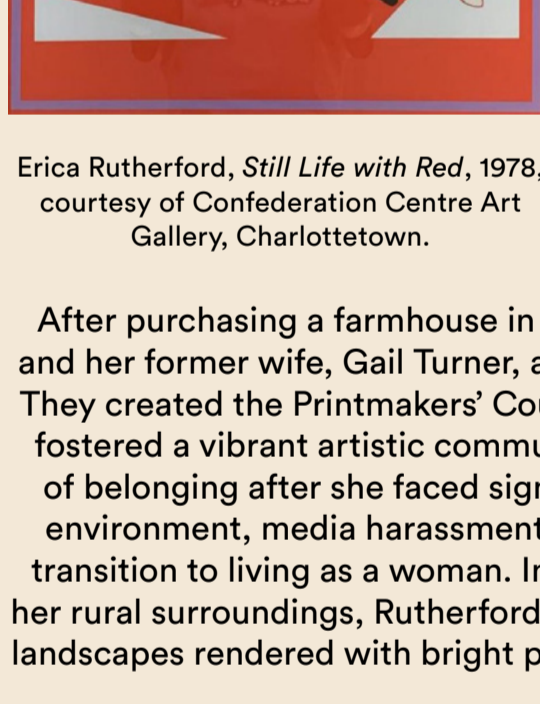


Erica Rutherford, *Twinings*, 1979, collection of the Rutherford family.

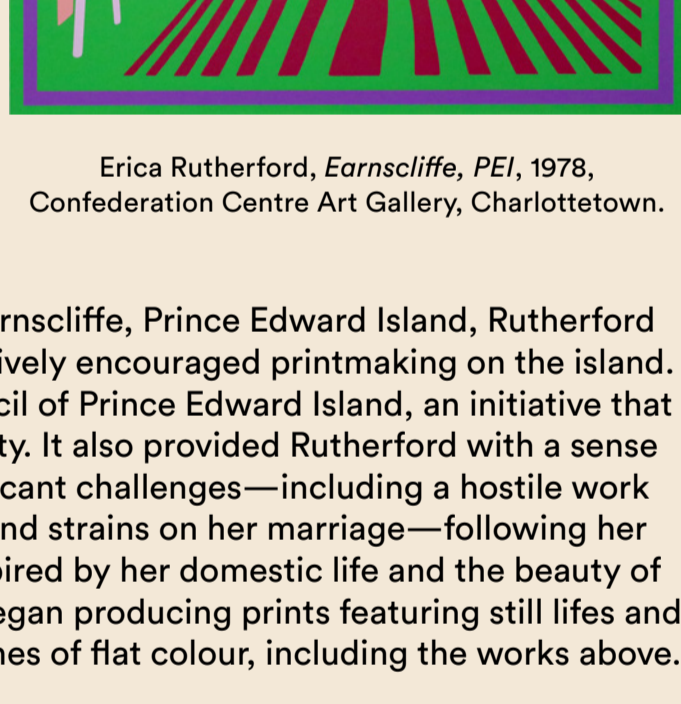
Rutherford's 1979 still life, *Twinings*, reflects a sense of belonging and comfort in domestic life. After moving to Prince Edward Island permanently in 1977, she began incorporating into her work traditionally "feminine" themes, such as domesticity and textile patterns, as evident in this piece's decorative gold-and-blue border. Although the painting's title might suggest a nod to the popular British tea brand, it more likely symbolizes themes of duality, intertwining, and connection. These are ideas that aligned with Rutherford's exploration of identity and the blending of different aspects of her personal and artistic life.

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STILL LIFE WITH RED, 1978, AND EARNSCLIFFE, PEI, 1978



Erica Rutherford, *Still Life with Red*, 1978, courtesy of Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown.



Erica Rutherford, *Earnscliffe, PEI*, 1978, Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown.

After purchasing a farmhouse in Earnscliffe, Prince Edward Island, Rutherford and her former wife, Gail Turner, actively encouraged printmaking on the island. They created the Printmakers' Council of Prince Edward Island, an initiative that fostered a vibrant artistic community. It also provided Rutherford with a sense of belonging after she faced significant challenges—including a hostile work environment, media harassment, and strains on her marriage—following her transition to living as a woman. Inspired by her domestic life and the beauty of her rural surroundings, Rutherford began producing prints featuring still lifes and landscapes rendered with bright planes of flat colour, including the works above.

THE STARTLED MODEL, 1997



Erica Rutherford, *The Startled Model*, 1997, courtesy of Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown.

The Startled Model, 1997, features a seated figure, feminized through clothing and attire, yet noticeably uncomfortable in her pose. The tension between characteristics that signify feminine or masculine traits is reiterated by the blank canvas behind the subject. Working from her likeness in photographs, Rutherford embraced an absence of detail in the painted self-portrait to underscore the complexities of transformation, illustrating how she navigates her journey towards femininity, as well as the interplay between internal identity and external presentation. *The Startled Model* not only reflects personal exploration but also provides a broader commentary on the roles and expectations placed upon women in society.

WHISPERS, 2000



Erica Rutherford, *Whispers*, 2000, Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown.

Whispers, 2000, is part of Rutherford's return to figuration in her series *The Human Comedy*. Drawing on her background in theatre, the works feature androgynous figures, animals, and strange hybrids set against dreamlike desert landscapes to explore the complexities of human existence. The bodies appear disconnected from their environment, with many of the humanoid figures wearing masks. The theatricality of the masks evokes the performative aspects of gender, while also reflecting on Rutherford's own journey of identity.

ERICA RUTHERFORD: HER LIVES AND WORKS



Installation view of *Erica Rutherford: Her Lives and Works*, Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown, 2024, photograph by Gerald Beaulieu.

The retrospective exhibition *Erica Rutherford: Her Lives and Works* at the Confederation Centre Art Gallery invites audiences to explore the investigation of identity through Rutherford's diverse body of work. Her art not only reflects her own experiences and individuality but also resonates with broader themes of belonging, self-expression, and transformation. Her journey, from her early work in different media to her gender transition and move to Prince Edward Island, deeply influenced her artistic practice. This exhibition highlights her significance in contemporary discussions about gender, identity, and Canadian art.

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Image Credits: [1, 9] Erica Rutherford, *Earnscliffe, PEI*, 1978, serigraph on paper, 66 x 56.5 cm. Collection of the Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown, Gift of Gail Rutherford, 2009. [2] Erica Rutherford, *self-portrait*, c.1976. Courtesy of Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown. [3] Erica Rutherford, *Untitled*, 1954, oil on board, 77 x 40 cm. Collection of the Rutherford Family. [4] Erica Rutherford, *Figures*, 1964, oil on canvas, 100.5 x 129 cm. Collection of the Rutherford Family. [5] Erica Rutherford, *Rubber Maids*, 1970, gouache on paper. Courtesy of Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown. [6] Erica Rutherford, *Tokyo Toughies*, 1971, serigraph, 50.2 x 51.1 cm. Courtesy of Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown. [7] Erica Rutherford, *Twinings*, 1979, oil on canvas, 109.5 x 120 cm. Collection of the Rutherford Family. [8] Erica Rutherford, *Still Life with Red*, 1978, serigraph, 69.9 x 54 cm. Courtesy of Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown. [10] Erica Rutherford, *The Startled Model*, 1997, lithograph on paper, 58 x 43 cm. Courtesy of Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown. [11] Erica Rutherford, *Whispers*, 2000, oil on canvas, 112 x 137.5 cm. Collection of the Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown, Purchased in Memory of Joseph Sherman, with funds from The Canada Council for The Arts, 2006 (CAG 2006.2). Courtesy of the Confederation Centre Art Gallery. [12] Installation view *Erica Rutherford: Her Lives and Works*, Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown, 2024. Photograph by Gerald Beaulieu. Courtesy of the Confederation Centre Art Gallery.