

Exhibition Review: *Erica Rutherford: Her Lives and Works*

Elizabeth Spence

MA, Public History / Graduate Diploma, Curatorial Studies
Carleton University, Ottawa, ON, Canada

Abstract

Erica Rutherford: Her Lives and Works, on display at the National Gallery of Canada from June 13 to October 13, 2025, unsettles boundaries of selfhood, nationality, gender, and sexuality. Rutherford was a multi-disciplinary, multi-national artist who lived according to her own values and desires, pursuing gender transition in the 1970s while continuously reshaping her artistic practice. The exhibition retrospects Rutherford's life and career from early experimentation, a film career in South Africa in the 1940s, to self-portraiture in the 1970s, to a series of children's illustrations of Prince Edward Island produced in the 1980s. Bringing visitors through Rutherford's many worlds, curator Pan Wendt presents Rutherford's story through her own words, quoting her in wall text and labels. The exhibition tells a story of fluidity, of transformation, identity, and a lifelong tension with belonging. The first solo exhibition of a transgender artist at the National Gallery, *Her Lives and Works* holds these tensions of Rutherford's life while foregrounding the beauty and humanity of her self-expression.

Biography

Elizabeth Spence (she/her) is an emerging curator and settler scholar in the Public History M.A. program and Curatorial Studies Diploma at Carleton University. She was raised in Katarokwi but lives and works on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Nation. After completing a B.A. in Honours History at the University of Ottawa in 2021, Spence has built an extensive career in Public History at Know History Historical Services. Her research interests include the intersections of carcerality and settler-colonialism, labour histories, critical museology, Canadian identities, and urban spatial stories in Canada.

Erica Rutherford: Her Lives and Works¹

Charlottetown Centre Art Gallery (8 June–5 January 2025)

National Gallery of Canada (13 June–13 October 2025)

The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery (22 November–9 March 2026)

Owens Art Gallery (30 May–13 September 2026)

Art Windsor-Essex (19 November–21 February 2027)

Art Gallery of Guelph (2 May–22 August 2027)

MSVU Art Gallery (11 September–27 November 2027)

In June 2025, the National Gallery of Canada welcomed the travelling exhibition *Erica Rutherford: Her Lives and Works*, advertised as its first solo retrospective of a Prince Edward Island artist. Yet, the exhibition curated by Pan Wendt of the Charlottetown Centre Art Gallery centres Rutherford’s multiplicity beyond boundaries and borders. Erica Rutherford (1923–2008) was a multinational and multidisciplinary artist whose works explore themes of identity and belonging through representations of dreams, landscapes, domesticity, and animals. She was also a woman of trans experience, and the first transgender artist to be the subject of a solo exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada.

Upon hearing of the exhibition, the plurality of its titular *lives* struck me with curiosity. I wondered how the exhibition would contend with Rutherford’s complexity as a person who both courageously transgressed the boundaries of her time and who lived and worked in Apartheid South Africa. As an emerging curator, I was also intrigued to see how the exhibit would aesthetically organize Rutherford’s diverse works and interpret their transness to a broad national audience. Presently, in a moment where trans lives are being violently marginalized on our continent, I feel that the celebration of Rutherford’s lives and works at a national gallery is itself a challenge, but one that must be handled with a critical museological eye to the political realities of transgender folks. Wendt has noted in interviews that curating the exhibition required extensive learning on his end, but that it was informed by trans theorist Eva Hayward and trans curatorial assistant Lee Richard.²

As I walk towards the exhibition space, I take note of the banners marking the entrance. A large banner of Rutherford’s 1997 *The Reunion* was occupied by strange and colourful human-animal beings in a barren world. A smaller banner of a Prince Edward Island landscape in

¹ National Gallery of Canada, “Erica Rutherford: Her Lives and Works,” National Gallery of Canada, accessed October 12, 2025, <https://www.gallery.ca/whats-on/exhibitions-and-galleries/erica-rutherford-her-lives-and-works>.

² Confederation Centre of the Arts, “Interview with Pan Wendt: Erica Rutherford: Her Lives and Works,” Confederation Centre of the Arts, accessed October 17, 2025, <https://confederationcentre.com/interview-with-pan-wendt-erica-rutherford-her-lives-and-works/>.

Rutherford's 70s pop-art style hangs next to the entry door. The contrasting combination of the two grounds the exhibition in Canada whilst pointing towards experimentation and hybridity.

Upon entering the exhibition, bold orange and burgundy text maps out a timeline of Rutherford's life on the gallery wall. I was immediately concerned by the 1976 timeline entry that marks the year simply with "Underwent gender affirmation surgery." Surgery is often a cisgender focus of fascination and objectification when telling trans stories. Would this exhibition tell Rutherford's gender story purely through the transformation of her body rather than through her multifaceted, expressed identities? An adjacent self-portrait photograph of Rutherford in the mirror and an introductory quote from her reassured me: "I have followed my own convictions in my art as my life and have worked towards values for their own sake."³ By frequently highlighting Rutherford's own words without additional interpretation, the exhibit allows Rutherford to represent herself and leaves space for the visitor to form their own relationship with her. The exhibition is therefore grounded in her perspective. I also noticed a small spot-the-image game for children in the form of a paper compass showing symbols to be found in the artwork. This toy expresses a subtle challenge to the popular notion that queer stories are not appropriate for children.

The following room explores Rutherford's childhood and early 60s artworks, presenting themes of uncertain beginnings and identity formation. The paintings and sculpture presented are abstract and diverse from one another, suggesting Rutherford's own self-exploration as an artist. The paintings "Magic Child" and "Baby Dear" expressed these tandem themes particularly well, described by Rutherford on the gallery label as "hermaphroditic" children painted "as in a dream," suggesting the subconscious roots of a trans identity forming. The following room was adjoined by a hallway of Rutherford's photography, which traces the changes in her gender presentation in a timeline of portraits and self-portraits.

The first photo of Erica Rutherford is accompanied by a description of her career as a "banana farmer" and filmmaker in South Africa. In this hallway, we can already begin to hear the South African jazz of Rutherford's film *African Jim*, almost haunting the exhibit. The adjacent screening room for *African Jim* is ultimately positive about Rutherford's South African film work. The interpretive text, written by film scholar Aboubakar Sanogo, suggests that the film has "colonialist overtones" but that it ultimately was a significant source of representation and "resistant Afro-modernity." Most visitors will likely not linger to watch the full 50-minute film and may miss some of its harmful inclusion of primitivist stereotypes of Black South Africans. This aspect of the exhibit left me with more questions about Rutherford's relationship with South Africa than answers, and I feel it fails to fully engage the visitor in a critical examination of the nuances of Rutherford's colonial life.

³ As quoted in the *Erica Rutherford: Her Lives and Works* exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada, October 2025.

The subsequent room is painted a shocking violet, aesthetically aligned with purples in the fetishistic pop-art figures of Rutherford's years in America, creating a vibrant, engrossing appeal. The 1970 painting "Rubber Maids" stands out as the only work hanging against a purple strip of dark eggplant paint. The description speaks to Rutherford's transgender experience during this time with a direct quote: "The clothing is a revelation, not a concealment. We all know what's underneath in spite of the myth which is perpetrated that there might be something unexpected."⁴ The faceless women of these paintings are compelling symbols of femininity through which one's own gender identity can be explored, daring the viewer to see something of themselves.

Leaving the purple chamber, I was greeted by a sunny, bright yellow gallery of Rutherford's pop-art Missouri and Prince Edward Island landscapes. This room is playful and joyful, full of storybook animals, domestic scenes, and imagery that will be familiar to Atlantic Canadians. The didactic text describes how Erica Rutherford, as a fully realized transgender woman, left the "hostile" American Midwest and found "peace" in PEI. The jubilant atmosphere is just as much a celebration of Canada as it is Rutherford, tying Canada with acceptance and identity-resolution. Informed by my maternal family's experiences in rural Prince Edward Island, I wondered if Rutherford had found peace through community, or through isolation.

The exhibition concludes with an evocative display of Rutherford's 1990s series *The Human Comedy*. These works depict animal-human hybrids in various states of closeness and hostility. They present a climatic point for themes of identity, belonging, and the subconscious in the exhibition, questioning the categories that divide beings. The paintings border on the grotesque and the uncanny, and might evoke affects of fear, humour, or disgust. The 1997 painting *The Death of Talia* representing the passing of Rutherford's cat particularly moved me. Unsettled, I read the gallery text, which points visitors to where these feelings might be channeled: "Our bodies and circumstances are not fixed by nature. The roles we play in the human comedy remain fluid and open-ended." Visitors are thus encouraged to turn difficult feelings inward to examine their own identities and outward to question the source of the social binaries they've inherited.

Erica Rutherford: Her Lives and Works ultimately triumphs aesthetically and as a retrospective, guiding the visitor through Erica's lives and works in tandem themes with complimenting colours and artistic groupings. Through Erica's own words and works, as contributed by her family, we come to connect with parts of her and perhaps see something of ourselves in her landscapes and figures. This exhibition is a crucial, intimate representation of transness. It is a call for transcendence of norms on a national level within our current time, in which violent adherence to gender binaries and human-nature boundaries threaten to crush worlds.

⁴ Ibid.

Bibliography

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