Stitched in Time: Passings

Helen Duffy: curator, consultant, editor, artist, mother and friend…….. by Jean Johnson. Volume 5 issue 3 2009

I met Helen in the 1970s at the Merton Gallery in Toronto. I admired her watercolour floral paintings, and as curator, invited Helen to exhibit her work which was accurate botanically and wonderfully alive. Our friendship grew through our passion for nature, our interpretation of it, and our love of the arts. Her works are in many collections, including the City of Toronto (1980).

Letter writing nurtured our friendship when Helen and Bob returned to England where they took up residence at ”Bramcote’, a cottage on the south shore at Lyme Regis, Dorset. ”I want to go out for a long walk since the sun has just emerged from the clouds and, after last night’s gale, the tide comes in like huge bales of Bruxelles lace.’

In 1995 Helen wrote:

“Come June, we’ll meet again at Crystal Lake for talk, swim, eat, drink, read, dream, sleep, walk, draw or paint, count falling stars, row the boat, listen to crickets and once in a while, a bird, not necessarily in this order.”

“Well over twenty years have passed since we floated in our new tin boat on the lake, looking at the stars, listening to frogs and paying no attention to the ravenous black flies.”

“Gardens love to be left alone for a while In order to let some plants go wild, rampant and imposing. Germaine Greer stated in a recent article that Gardening has replaced sex and is much more enjoyable. She has a point”.

“A friend gave me a Canadian Art subscription for Christmas, starting with

Helen 1977 from AGO "Artist With Their Works" binder,

HELEN MARIE DUFFY 1923-2008

“I hope that we both continue to look closely at grasses and the small buds, flowers, leaves and petals we carry during walks in the country so they stay in our memory”

Born in Switzerland, Helen studied art in England, where she met Bob Duffy, a Canadian journalist, and press attaché with the Canadian High Commission in London. They moved to Toronto where Bob continued his work, and Helen became involved in the local art scene.
the Group of 7 special issue. I love keeping in touch with Canadian painting and never warmed exactly to British art.”

“Bob’s vegetables have suddenly developed and we are ‘living off the land at the moment.”

“If I wouldn’t know that Crystal Lake still waits, practically unchanged for our forthcoming visit, I’d break out in tears or throw a tantrum”.

I’ve included recollections from friends and colleagues:

Pym Buitenhuis, Friend

“I went by Helen and Bob’s old house on Montclair today to refresh my memory of her. What a perfectly amazing house with a view down the street, so wonderfully situated and that to me was Helen. Helen was always just who she was no matter what environment she was in. This notion of being embedded is very strong when I think of Helen - she was deeply in this world and she ever so gently pushed everyone around her to come with her on her journey.

She had an ability to make everyone around her want to be better, to be more, to think harder, and to use more of their imagination, to draw from their inner resources to truly be with her and her nimble and remarkable mind. She and my mother would talk more richly about art than anyone I experienced my mother speaking with! She and my husband Jim (Lahey) disappeared into another dimension when speaking about painting. Again she had that remarkable ability to make someone want to be better to be with her!”

Kai Chan, Artist

Surely ‘Textiles into 3-D’ brought us together. It is her enthusiasm in my work
and life that established our friendship. She promoted my work whenever she could. When she moved back from England, I visited her several times in her apartment. Usually we had lunch with Bob. Afterwards she and I would take a walk in the ravine near her apartment, when she pointed out the unusual features. Unfortunately the last couple of time she was not able to take the walk because of her heart condition”

Mela Constantinidi, Director, the Ottawa Art Gallery

“I first met Helen in late 1973 or early 1974. I started working for the AGO Extension Services and took over the coordination of the exhibition ‘Textiles into 3D’ when Helen acted as guest curator. It was presented at YorkUniversity in the summer of 97. I was pretty green about textile art and artists, so Helen really became a great mentor as well as a friend. Later in the 70’s we worked together on The Laurentians: Painters in a Landscape which circulated provincially and was also presented at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris). . Helen was also hotly in demand through the AGO’s Artists with their Work (AWTW) (now abandoned) program,

Alan Elder, Curator, Canadian Museum of Civilization

My strongest recollection of Helen occurred when I was working at the Ontario Crafts Council in the mind-1980s. My niece had given me a toilet paper roll, cotton ball and pipe cleaner rabbit that she made at day care. I placed it proudly on my desk, but no one commented on it. No one, that is, until Helen came in (probably to talk about our plan to re-design the gallery). As soon as she saw it, she understood the confusion it would cause my visitors. She totally approved; for her, questioning was very important.

Stephen Hogbin, Artist

Canadian Art had a piece by Helen Duffy about an environmental artist which was one of the most perceptive commentaries I had read. It was not a long piece, just very thought provoking. The Tom Thomson Gallery was preparing a traveling exhibition of my painted reliefs and after discussions with the curator we agreed to approach Helen.

Helen agreed and visited my studio to discuss the work. Hugely sensitive to what I was trying to do, Helen asked many questions and contemplated everything at great length. I then started to see my work through her eyes which was a very real treat as people seldom have the ability to communicate what they experience. Also the visual experience is not always easy to put into words but Helen had a wonderful ability to see, experience deeply and to write about it in a language that was relevant and appropriate

Susan Jefferies, Curator

Helen Duffy was a very special person. I had seen her work at a friend’s house and had never forgotten the beauty of her drawings. When my husband had a special birthday some thirteen years ago, I decided to buy one for him. We were all in London at the time and we agreed to meet at his office so he could make the selection. Helen arrived with her survey of the flora on the months of the year inspired by plants in her garden in Lyme Regis. My husband selected “January” as some of his favourite British plants were in that watercolour. In retrospect, it seems so unfortunate that her talents were not truly appreciated and her work rarely exhibited. The striking thing for
me is that she was trying to capture the essence of plants, not as botanical specimen or as a decorative touch for the living room. To this end, she held them in her hand as a way of examining the life in them. Her control of the medium is extraordinary with a crispness not normally associated with watercolours

David H. Kaye, Artist and Owner, David Kaye Gallery

My first experience with Helen was when she was acting as the consultant for Textile into 3D. I remember her phoning just before Christmas telling me I had been accepted into the exhibition so that I could tell my parents the news when I was home for Christmas. That must have been December 1972. Those were exciting days in the fibre world. Helen was so good at supporting other artists that one could easily overlook that she did her own artwork. She was always so positive in her outlook and a supporter of my activities. I always enjoyed talking/meeting with Helen. She was such a wonderful character.

David Silcox Friend

Helen was a remarkable person who led an amazing life. She was curious and imaginative, creative and thoughtful, energetic and engaging; she was amicably provocative as anyone you could find. She was an accomplished artist herself and many of her friends were artists.

As a curator and artistic advisor, she contributed significantly to numerous exhibitions, writing for catalogues, choosing works of art, conferring with colleagues with her bright intelligence and sharp perceptions. She had an encyclopedic sense of history, a memory filled with humorous and telling anecdotes, a penchant for inviting unusual and innovative people into the life she shared with her husband Bob for nearly sixty years.

Helen spoke four languages, had a capacious repertoire of amusing stories, and loved to recommend references, analogies, parallels, and contrasts that most others would miss. She made friends easily, made people laugh easily, and encouraged talented individuals to be the best they could be. She will be greatly missed and fondly remembered by those whose life she touched in some ineffable and indelible way.

Katherine Dickerson On Helen Duffy

As to Helen and the Textiles into 3-D show, it would be an understatement to say that it was a major turning point in my career as a Textile Artist. Up to that time I had been weaving to support myself and family. Most of my work was more commercial in nature and smaller in scale. I had ideas that I wanted to realize. Helen came to visit and encouraged me to talk about these ideas and was very supportive. On top of that the honorarium that was given for the show was generous enough to be able to buy the materials I needed to do a piece of that scale. Even better, they gave a payment prior to the show which really directly supported the purchase of materials and the doing of a larger more experimental work.

The addition of Textile 3-D to the World Craft Conference in Toronto in 1974 was very important. I attended the conference and was able to speak with people about my Tree Stump. The influences of those contacts lasted for years.

Helen had a way of drawing out the best in people. She really knew how to listen and
would then ask provocative questions that challenged the direction of the conversation. She also knew a tremendous amount about what was happening in Textile, Especially in Europe. I had just moved from New York to Chicago and then to the West Coast of Vancouver Island. It was a joy to be able to talk to someone who knew of the same work and people that I knew of. At that time the weaving on Vancouver Island was quite traditional and I was missing stimuli. It was a joy working with her and it enriched my life greatly. It means a great deal that you are undertaking this project as a memorial to her. I do not think she got the recognition that she deserved during her life.

HELEN MARIE DUFFY 1923-2008

Jean Johnson C.M. friend and admirer of Helen Duffy

Photo credits:

Micheline Beauchemin : Born Longueuil, Quebec, October 24, 1929 - died in Quebec City on September 29 2009, She was a pioneer in textile arts, creating huge tapestries of acrylic and other new fabrics using both traditional and modern techniques. She won the Governor General's Award for art in 2006, the Saidye Bronfman Award in 1982 and the Prix Paul Émile-Borduas in 2005. to read more about her go to CBC website

Read more: http://www.cbc.ca/arts/artdesign/story/2009/10/01/micheline-beauchemin.html#ixzz0lbvxqeoV

We will publish an article in our next issue
Routing around trying to find a handle, an idea from which you can build a piece of art, a story, perhaps a magazine, and one asks questions of other people. Other people pass you on to other people who can point you in what they think is the appropriate direction, it may be more often than not a direction that coincides with their personal agenda. Occasionally it can be a frank unbiased informed response that is, encouraging yet censorious and probing, as was my personal experience of the late publisher of the now defunct *Artichoke* Magazine Paula Gustafson. In the spring of 2004 while attempting to craft a proposal for the extension of the services of the Textile Artist Designer Association and the expansion of its publication Surfacing Journal I picked up the telephone and call the west coast. Buoyed up by my years of reading *Artichoke* and things other people had said, I told her who I was, who I was working for, and what I was calling her for and she responded accordingly. She took me at face value answered my questions with authority and an ironic tone that recent funding cuts were inspiring, it was the first of what became a series of calls that ended abruptly.

I had an ally, a mentor, some one who I had hope to have on the other end of the line for years to come as I redeveloped the original idea we had spoke of into what is now fibreQuarterly On-Line. That unfortunately has not been the case. With the losing of Canada Council funding along with their absurdist reasons for doing it and having to face the shutting down of *Artichoke* along with health issues I wasn’t the slightest bit aware of, her death last July was like a punch in the stomach.

What is more absurd and typical of the Canadian Arts community was the fact that I hadn’t heard about it until Bettina Matzkuhn told me about her dying at the TSA Symposium while we were discussing the lack of textile arts coverage in Canada. During one of the conversation I had with Paula she told me that the largest increase in subscriptions from Canadian residence occurred after she had placed an quarter page advertisement in the American publication *Fiberarts Magazine*, (an ad that was cheaper then one in Canadian Art by the way.) There were more American than Canadian subscribers as a result of the ad and she expressed her thought that the new Canadians subscribed because the ad in an American publication had some how made *Artichoke* a more authentic publication and the advertisement was somehow an endorsement from America in spite of it being bought and paid for.
I can hear our perhaps sardonic snickering, we had been discussing how best to spend a limited advertising budget. That was what our relationship was about, practical information about cultural publishing and funding in Canada. She had expressed her concerns about the wisdom behind web based publishing and the technical learning curve that had an obvious generational gap. She did appreciate the wisdom of the cost saving, but we both agreed that there is nothing like a beautifully designed publication on good quality paper to bring a smile to the face. Talking with her was a Master Class in Canadian culture and publishing. I miss her encouragement and wisdom.

To read more about her and what other peoples thoughts and experiences of her where there is a memorial blog design her daughters Nisse Gustafson and Monica Schmutz and Michael Dymund, who for the last six years has been Paula's graphic designer, helping with not only the layout and graphics for Artichoke and several books, but who also put together the blogsite.

-jolewes-

http://paula-artichoke.blogspot.com/

*photo credit: Yukiko Onley

FYI the third volume of "Craft Perception and Practice" is in pre-production and should be available in the summer

Edited by Paula Gustafson, Nisse Gustafson, Amy Gogarty


Other Passing of note