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**EXTENSIONS: A PORTRAIT OF FORMATIVE EXPERIENCE IN ART**

**Debra Shymoniak**

**A Thesis**

**in**

**The Department**

**of**

**Art Education and Art Therapy**

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Art Education at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

**April 1993**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Extensions: A Portrait of Formative Experience in Art**

**Debra Shymoniak**

For this study I sought to understand the learning process in art by transposing myself back into my own memories of doing art as a child. I have produced a story based on my childhood memories of producing artwork, what I would call an "aesthetic exploration" of the lived experience. This approach highlighted the art learning process as a form of communication, a way of "talking" with visual images. I could have these visual exchanges with people, but also with non-human phenomenon such as pictures, imaginary friends, a sunbeam, and so on. It was the presence of an exchange, a dialogue, that worked to "extend" my experience, to bring out a previously unseen part of myself and incorporate it with some aspect of the environment.

To Ramzi

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although this thesis has been a very individual endeavour, several others have been important catalysts for its development. I owe thanks to my advisor, Elizabeth Sacca, for all her help, in particular for seeing my proposition as research, to Stan Horner for "letting it flow" where it wanted to flow, and to Judith Buzzell and Corrine Corry, for their affirming advice and support. Merl Klam and Richard LaChapelle also came in at an important time, giving my idea a "base," by connecting it to the notion of formative experience. David Pariser introduced me to the work of Joan Yochim, which later became the foundation of my research method. My husband's direct personal style and "conventional wisdom teachings" provided me with a new angle to my perception of the events concerned, helping to make my writing more clear. And, my creative writing teacher, Reg Sylvester, gave me some valuable tools for editing this work, especially with his advice about avoiding adjectives and adverbs.

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## INTRODUCTION

Before beginning this project, I had been wondering what it would be like if I could somehow place myself inside the mind of someone learning art for the first time. It had been a while since I had been in that situation and, with everything that came later, my first impressions were getting hard to distinguish. Since art had so long been a prominent aspect of my life, I found it difficult to tell what was considered common knowledge, and what would be new and interesting for a student. This lead me to question the nature of learning in art. Since success in art could not be measured by tests or performance, I wondered what, in the most practical sense, can go on in an art class that can leave people believing they have been enriched?

I was inspired to use writing as a way of researching this phenomenon after reading Joan Yochims' "Conversations and Postcards." In it Yochim talks about reading Virginia Woolf's A Sketch of the Past, and finding that many of the words and phrases that Woolf used to describe summers by the sea were those that she had searched for to convey the importance of her childhood places. As she read she made her own journal notations until she realized that she was engaging in a silent dialogue with Woolf. They were discussing similarities of place, features, activities, and feelings of summers spent in the country. She was drawn into Woolf's remembrances and invited her to share hers (1986, 65).

Yochim came to realize that Woolf's writing, her "inventorying and

stringing together of picturesque phrases" (65-66) was "an act of exploration" (68). Woolf writes: "I realize something I have never realized before . . . I felt I had made a discovery . . . perhaps this the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what . . . that behind the wool is hidden a pattern . . . that the whole world is a work of art" (Woolf 1976, 71). Conversing with Woolf caused Yochim to reevaluate art education research methods. She questions if she could "write, rewrite and find patterns of individual and group meanings hidden behind talk of everydayness in art classrooms...of mixing paints, painting still lifes, hanging reproductions and learning about primary colours?" (69). She concludes:

I suggest that we tell ourselves stories in order to know where we've been, to find ourselves and give ourselves identity and meaning. As Woolf pointed out, we explore and search for patterns and explanations. The excerpts recounted suggest that research concerns and questions might be discovered in autobiographical writings; that stories of particular places might serve as a focus for research or to unify research questions; that analysis of interactions with self and others in particular places might provide research answers; that research may be a personal adventure. . . . Literary formats and foci humanize research, make it alive and meaningful for readers, and provide concrete illustrations of concepts and theories so often abstract and seemingly insignificant to daily existence (Yochim 1986, 74-75).

In the same way that Woolf and Yochim observed places, I have chosen to use writing to observe the events of my education as seen through my mind as a child. I began this study by writing out what I could remember of making a particular painting in an art class that I took when I was fourteen. This painting, in particular, was an enigma for me: I seemed to have "learned

so much" doing it; yet, I could not explain, in a concrete way, what that was. I later continued the exploration to make an autobiography including some of my pre-school, elementary and adolescent art experiences with the hope of finding "a pattern" (Woolf 1976, 71) to formative experience in art.

Before beginning this study, the image reverberating in my mind was Rousseau's notion of the child as a blank slate: that the child is a "tabula rasa" for writing information upon. Although the philosophy is very old, it has been an attitude that I have grown up with: that the teacher knew everything, and the student knew hardly anything. We had to "listen to the teacher," "listen to our parents" but never do I recall anyone saying "listen to the child." When I thought about it, I couldn't seem to find the feeling that I was "written upon." There was a lot going on in there already. In fact, it all seemed to go in the opposite direction, that the external world was a blank slate for me and it was my thoughts that needed to find a place there.

The events that I have written about are based on real life. The names of and, in most cases, the identities of the people involved have been changed, since they were not crucial to the study. I have also changed the names of places. These recollections are my perceptions of how events happened, and may be very different from what actually happened. My descriptions are limited to a degree in that I have found it difficult to remember clearly much of the spoken language that occurred. The focus in this work is on physical happenings and my thoughts that accompanied them. The quality

and style of teaching was not a concern. This is not an evaluation the effectiveness of my education. My interest is how art education appears to the mind of the child.

## NOT AN ANGEL

### Some Early Memories of Drawing

I can remember just a little of my pre-school years. My mother said it was because life on the farm in those years was just too boring. My mom hated the farm, a point she made clear to me on a thousand or more occasions. We lived in a little four-room house that was always in a state of gradual construction before it entered a state of needing continuous repair. Dad was most often absent--or seemed so--as he worked on the oil rigs most of the year while my mother single-handedly managed the farm. We were new to the area so I never got acquainted with other kids that may have lived down the road, until I was much older. There was one older girl I met once, but I didn't like her. She locked me up in a granary one day when she was supposed to be babysitting me. Later I would do anything but stay with her, including sitting on a haystack all day while my parents did the haying. One time I somehow got a prong of a pitchfork right through my foot (or was it just a scratch that bled a lot), but I still wouldn't stay with her. The sibling that I constantly begged my mother for didn't come along until I was seven. By then the dream had already become anticlimactic. At seven, an infant sibling no longer meant a new playmate, just work changing diapers!

Reaching deep into my memory I see a scene that is faded, it is almost not there. I was sitting in the middle of the living room floor. A beam of light

from the west angled into the living room and brightened up an area by the door to my parents' bedroom. The scene intrigued me because it made a frame near to the floor, probably compatible with my height--or lack of it. There was something magical about suddenly noticing this wall from all the way across the living room, as if I had discovered a treasure!

The wall commanded me to mark it up. I do not know if I succeeded at this task right then or later in time. Walls seemed to be a logical place to draw. Although I later learned that drawing on the wall was naughty, those first times it was a necessity--even an obligation, or even an incredible act of charity! I drew circles with smiles and one or two or three spikes for hair. I worked quickly, not thinking about how to make the images themselves. It seemed as if the formula had been memorized beforehand, or stamped onto my brain by some other force. As soon as one was done I quickly forgot about it and began another. The empty feeling of the room would be suddenly dispelled when my mother would appear---horrified, screeching something about the not-supposed-to-ness of what I had done! This came as a shock, I was certain she would be as pleased as I was.

I was perplexed by the value my mother attributed to the cleanliness of the wall, but it didn't stop me. The job of drawing was still more important! My duty to draw remained the same, it just became more complicated.

I can remember drawing, or perhaps just imagining drawing on the headboard of my crib--where I slept until I was seven. There was a colour

painting of a bunny in the middle of the headboard. He was cute, fat and fluffy and had big, big eyes. He stood on his hind legs, wore a plaid jacket and carried some mysterious thing that was a cross between a spinning top and a fishing rod. The bunny's spinning-top-fishing-rod was a magical thing. The spinning part looked like it was about to turn into something but I couldn't figure out what. I thought about it for ages. I can feel how wide my eyes were when I would look at it, as if the transformation of the spinning object would occur at any moment! That top gave the bunny extra powers. Maybe the bunny would come alive and walk into my crib or the spinning top could turn him, or me, or my crib into something else altogether!

In my mind I see the bunny surrounded by all kinds of inky lines, getting built up and more cluttered and inky over time. I see things like spiky-haired women in triangular dresses, boxes to represent cars, geometric animals with stick legs--a mini-society built around the bunny rabbit who was its leader. However, this image also exists simultaneously with a shockingly clean headboard! I guess that my mother cleaned it when I wasn't looking. This memory divides a part of me into two: the part that likes to draw, the other that admires and respects clean headboards.

My mother finally realized that I could not be stopped completely, only rechannelled. I was supplied with paper: a writing pad. I don't recall having any crayons then. I used colour, though my palette consisted of one pen that writes red and one that writes blue. I can't remember drawing anything on the

writing pad. I do remember fingering the corners of the thin flimsy paper, feeling afraid to draw on it--afraid to mar the whiteness of the paper. I preferred to draw on things that had something already on it, or something that was interesting. One day, crawling between the studs of the undressed walls of our house, I found one of my drawings on a two-by-four. It was nice to find one of my drawings again, partly because I forgot I made it. Walls and the like had much more appeal for drawing.

One sunny afternoon I was rummaging through the lower cupboards in the kitchen. Dad was in the fields and mother was in a state of temporary invisibility, probably sleeping or working in the garden. The space around me was tranquil, needing something exciting as filler. As I dugged into the drawers I found my mother's "doctor book"--a layperson's resource book for dealing with everyday health problems. When I saw the book I felt it was placed there by destiny for my important work. The book was interesting because there were a whole bunch of faces on the cover. A little later in my childhood I would rediscover the book and try to find faces that resembled members of my family. Then I would imagine things about them, or draw on them. People were something I rarely saw in our isolated situation and I longed for them. These photo images of faces was the best substitute.

I opened the book to glossy photo illustrations of pink diseased bodies and body parts. Somehow a pen had magically appeared in my hand and I attacked, scribbling on the illustrations, on their glossy white backs, and all



the body becomes, or naturally is, sensitive in a peculiar way. Prominent among the offending substances are plant pollens; hair, dandruff, or emanations from animals, especially horses, cats, and dogs, various kinds of feathers; such foods as strawberries, oranges, eggs, fish, and shellfish; and especially among children, certain cereals and milk. Eating the offending food or inhaling or having skin contact with other offending substances causes swelling of the mucous membranes, skin, or perhaps other tissues. This swelling produces one or more of the characteristic symptoms, depending on the location of the affected tissue or tissues.

Allergy often "runs in families." While children may outgrow sensitivity to foods and perhaps some other substances, the tendency is for a person who has once become sensitive to a certain substance to remain so for life. Individual attacks, however, do not often last more than a few hours or a few days, unless exposure to the offending substance is repeated.

#### What Should Be Done

1. If possible, find out what the offending food or other substance is and avoid it. This may be easy, but to detect the offender sometimes calls for the aid of a physician and may require extensive, and possibly expensive, tests.
2. When an attack occurs, stop all food for 24 hours and take a tablespoonful of Epsom salts.
3. If there is itching, freely and frequently apply calamine lotion or a strong solution of baking soda.
4. If an attack is severe, call a physician. He may need to inject suprarenin or some other suitable remedy.

#### AMENORRHEA

(Absence of ~~Menses~~)

**Signs and Symptoms.** The one outstanding sign is absence of the monthly discharge. Along with it there

may be cramps or pains at the time when the period should regularly come, and a tendency to nervousness, but frequently there are no symptoms at all.

**Causes and Course.** Amenorrhea is normal in pregnancy. It may be due to the presence of some disease, such as typhoid fever, heart disease, tuberculosis, or any one of several others. It may be caused by obstruction of the cervical canal, malformation of the female organs, or an imperforate hymen. Rapid gain in weight or a heavy program of study may be accompanied by amenorrhea. Finally, frequently the cause is never discovered.

#### What Should Be Done

1. Try to learn the cause of the condition, and correct it, if possible.
2. Take a nourishing but easily digestible diet. (See pages 245-250.)
3. Take outdoor exercise every day.
4. Make a cold mitten friction every day except the days when the menstrual flow would normally come. (See pages 155, 156.)
5. Take a salt glow every week. (See pages 156, 157.)
6. Make sure of an ample amount of sleep.
7. In some cases, physicians can give or prescribe other useful treatments or remedies.
8. Surgery may cure the condition if it is due to an imperforate hymen or malformed female organs.

#### APPENDICITIS

**Signs and Symptoms.** In the typical case, general abdominal pain develops first. Later the pain becomes centred moderately low down on the right side. Vomiting is common at a fairly early stage. A moderate fever is usually present. In the most painful area the abdominal wall is likely to be rigid and very tender on pressure. If the blood cells are counted, that class of white blood cells characteristically

Figure 1. "Looking at them now, I am amazed by their simplicity."  
Page from Guardian of Health reprinted with permission from Joleen Yasa,  
(Boyse Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1952), 172.



Figure 2. "I was taller and stronger than the other person I drew...which was a boy!"

the injuries at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Near the centre of the burst the burns are often fatal. People may be seriously burned more than a mile away, while the heat can be felt on the bare face and hands at 4 or 5 miles.

To prevent flash burns, try to find a shelter where there is a wall, a high bank, or some other object between you and the bursting bomb. You can expect that the bomber will aim for the city's biggest collection of industrial buildings.

A little bit of solid material will provide flash protection even close to the explosion. Farther out, the thinnest sort of thing—even cotton cloth—will often do the trick.

If you work in the open, always wear full-length, loose-fitting, light coloured clothes in time of emergency. Never go around with your sleeves rolled up. Always wear a hat—the brim may save you a serious face burn.

#### WHAT ABOUT RADIOACTIVITY?

In all stories about atomic weapons, there is a great deal said about radioactivity.

Radioactivity is the only way, besides size, in which the effects of A or H bombs are different from ordinary bombs. But, with the exception of underwater or ground explosions, the radioactivity from atomic bursts is much less to be feared than blast and heat.

Radioactivity is not new or mysterious. In the form of cosmic rays from the sky, all of us have been continually bombarded by radiation every hour and day of our lives. We all have also breathed and eaten very small amounts of radioactive materials without even knowing it. For over half a century, detectors and scientists have experimented and worked with X rays and other penetrating forms of energy. Because of all this experience, we actually know

much more about radioactivity and what it does to people than we know about infantile paralysis, colds, or some other common diseases.

It is easy to understand how radioactivity works if we think of how sun light behaves.

In the northern part of the world, winter's slanting sun rays seldom cause sunburn, but the hotter rays of the summer sun often do. Still, a few moments in the midsummer sun will not give you a tan or sunburn. You have to stay in its hot rays for some time before you get a burn. What's more, bad sunburn on just the face and hands may hurt, but it won't seriously harm you. On the other hand, if it covers your whole body, it can make you very sick, or sometimes even cause death.

In the same way, the harm that can come to you from radioactivity will depend on the power of the rays and particles that strike you, on the length of time you are exposed to them, and on how much your body is exposed.

#### WHAT IS "INITIAL" RADIOACTIVITY?

Broadly speaking, atomic explosions produce two different kinds of radioactivity. First and most important in an air burst is an extremely powerful invisible burst of rays and particles thrown off at the time of explosion. This kind is called "initial" or explosive radioactivity. Its rays and particles fly out quickly, then promptly die. There is danger from them only for little more than a minute. The second type of radioactivity—impinging radioactivity—will be described later.

The injury range of the explosive radioactivity from a modern A bomb is a little over 1 mile if the bomb is exploded about 2,000 feet in the air. If it is exploded much higher, some of the radiation may not reach the ground, so the range may be less. If it is exploded much lower, the radiation also may not

Figure 3. "What were meant to be figures--though detailed and marvellous in my mind then--were only coiling scribbles!"

Page from Guardian of Health reprinted with permission from Joleen Yasa, (Boise Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1952), 44.

over the words! I was wholly a victim of circumstance, commanded by unknown forces! I remember my images as very detailed at the time that I drew them. Looking at them now, I am amazed by their simplicity. The detail I saw as a toddler did not exist! I worked quickly and without hardly thinking. Once, I portrayed myself as getting all the things that I wanted. I was taller and stronger than the other person I drew...which was a boy! My job was to "make my mark", to tame what stood out as "naughty". I drew so fast that I'd barely be finished drawing one picture when I'd be already turning the page and scribbling on the next one. Toward the end of the book, what were meant to be figures--though detailed and marvellous in my mind then--were only coiling scribbles! Once I had jumped through the book and reached the end, I slapped it shut. It seemed as if the whole thing had never really happened--like it was all a dream. I was slightly dizzy, but pleasantly so. Then, once again, I was calm, cool, indifferent. A load had been taken off.

With this act done, I thought I could be once again the perfect non-threatening little angel that I was required to be. Then my mother appeared, grabbed the doctor book and made an incredible fuss! But it didn't bother me as much as before. I was stronger then.

Ironically, the doctor book is still around. Out of date and falling apart, it managed to avoid the burning pile. I took a look at it a couple of summers ago, when I visited my parents. As I flipped through the pages, I was amazed how my mother still seemed upset--as if my spree of doctor-book destruction

happened only the day before! As I analyzed the possible psychological roots of her reaction, I smirked, proud as ever of having been naughty.

## HOW TO DRIVE YOUR TEACHER CRAZY

### Art in Elementary School

The school I went to in grades one and two was a cross between an old fashioned one-room school house and a modern school. The school was new-looking, but not very big. There were two grades and one teacher to a classroom. Not many people I know ever had to share their classroom with another grade. However, unlike my mother--who was in the same room with six or more other grades--I didn't have to walk two or three miles to school everyday. We had buses by then. I really liked the bus. I could sit quietly by the window, ignore everybody, and walk on the moon if I liked--in my imagination, of course. It got better when they closed down the school in Waskanawich, which was only three miles away, and we had to be bused to Aylmerville. But for the minor discomforts such as faint gas fumes and a bumpy ride, Aylmerville was a good ten miles of almost total oblivion.

Of course, on my first day of school my mother posed me in front of the door of our house and took about ten thousand pictures of me. In the pictures I don't look too thrilled about the whole thing. I wore a plain checkered cotton dress, a sweater buttoned at the top, white knee socks and white shoes with buckles. My smile was only a half a smile. I was squinting because the sun was in my eyes. My bangs were too short and crooked because of an episode I had with Mom's scissors. I was especially skinny and looked kind of

sick. Actually, I was sick, with tonsillitis and a half dozen other things related. After my photo session my mother escorted me to the end of the driveway to where the our neighbours, the Schumacher kids, were standing. My mother held my hand, talking to me in an encouraging but sort of sad voice.

Seeing the two Schumacher kids in broad daylight was like a revelation. Until then, the Schumacher kids were more like a concept than a reality. I knew there were lots of them. but most of them were already grown up and gone. It was difficult to determine how many were left. Also, since they were all bigger, I didn't get to play with them. I could only sit and look out our picture window and beyond the end of our driveway, contemplating the little square house like it was a vision in a dream. I was surprised when, on my first day of school, this mysterious tubby house produced two real kids! I thought they were giants, or too old to be in school! I noticed their bag lunches, feeling particularly smug about my new metal lunch box with a painting of a horse on one side and a Collie on the other. Later in time I would create a scene for my distraught mother, refusing to carry a lunch box. Bag lunches, would become more "cool" than box lunches. But on my first day of grade one this enormous, clunky metal lunch box was my pride and joy.

The Schumacher kids, a teenage boy and girl, joked about me and my first day of school, but I didn't pay much attention. I was too busy trying to act out a role I had never rehearsed before.

Clear memories arrived with school and the presence of many other

people in my life. I remember, when I opened my lunch box, how it stank with warm egg salad sandwich. I hated it and loved it. I loved it because the sensation of the smell was so clear. I hated it because I had to eat it. School lunches were a serious let-down of school life.

In my pre-school years, I learned that drawing had something to do with messiness and naughtiness. In grade one it all somehow got turned around, having something to do with being special, at least for a little while and under certain conditions. I can clearly recall the day when the teacher, a lady with horn-rimmed glasses and beehive hairdo, handed out a sheet of paper with something on it that looked like a giant smile. There was something written underneath, I couldn't read it but it told us to draw the fruit in the bowl. I licked my lips and the solution came to me in a flash. It was very simple. I needed to draw the top halves of the fruit because the bottom halves would be blocked by the bowl in front. I saw it like it had been stamped into my brain, seemingly already sweated over and solved by some intelligence--not necessarily my own! I drew a circular shape with a tiny circle near the top to make an orange. Beside it, I drew two rounded lines that met at the top in a curvy dip. I added to it a stem with a leaf to make it into an apple. The banana was an elongated form with a stem-like formation at one end. A line going through the middle suggested the sections of the peel. Grapes were a mass of circles and semi-circles with a stem poking out from behind. I was pretty satisfied to have found a challenge in dealing with the problem of the



bowl, and even happier to have found a solution. But I was stunned by the reaction of the teacher.

I thought I had done something bad at first. The teacher was very quiet, then she sighed and took me and my drawing to the front of the class. She showed us to the class and said, "look what Debbie did". It was a pretty tense moment. My fear soon turned to absolute egotistical gloating. All of a sudden I went from feeling like nothing to feeling like I was on top of the world as I said to myself that I would be an artist when I grew up.

Although I felt as smug as ever, I never really understood why the teacher made such a big deal of my drawing, that is, until I saw the drawing of one of my neighbours'. She drew the fruit really tiny and hovering way above the drawing of the bowl. It dawned on me that I made my picture look "real". The other girls' picture, which I found kind of interesting at first, began to look "wrong." That would be my new school survival tactic: make things look "real" and nobody can tell you did it wrong.

I was euphoric for several days, maybe even a week or more. However, my euphoria was shattered when I--the shy little kid who probably never even said a word at the beginning of the year--was caught talking too loud in class. But everybody was talking! Not just me! It just so happened that at the right moment I just happened to screech and the teacher choose me to stand in the corner! I was devastated. Walking to the corner I felt so low. With my face hidden by the wall, I pouted, trying so hard to hold back the big tears. I

thought my marvellous drawing even had the power to protect me from this, but it only made the fall hurt even more!

In general, I was a bad mingler. I didn't have a clue how it was done, or even a conception of mingling itself. I was a natural with cats and dogs. You just get right in there and play, tickle and tease. But people were different, they were a mystery. When recess came all the other kids fell together in small groups as if there was some kind of invisible string pulling them together. They seemed to be responding to some kind of code in each other. I didn't have "the code". I once sat beside some girls playing "Barbies" under a desk--not close enough to be intruding but close enough to be visible--hoping to be "pulled in". For some reason, the "effect" didn't happen.

Alas, a failure at "Barbies," I opted for mural work. There were two large blackboards in the classroom. The teacher tended to use the one in front. When all the other kids ran outside to play, I gravitated to the less-used blackboard. Sometimes, if the teacher just erased the front board I would draw there too, but only if I was feeling especially daring. I drew from border to border as if the blackboard was like a window view to a world on the other side. I usually drew undersea worlds, even though, until then, I had never seen an ocean in all my life! Perhaps not even a lake! The only things that I would have become familiar with in my pre-school years were trees, the dirt driveway, cows, pigs, puppies, rabbits and kittens. We didn't even have a T.V. then! How I could imagine fish, sharks, seaweed, lichens, undersea crevices

and caves I don't know. Maybe I got the idea from a storybook, but I don't recall having any at all. The undersea worlds just seemed to grow from inside me, as if I knew about them anyway. I liked doing them by myself too, but once in a while another kid would join me and draw fish or just scribble. It didn't bother me but no one ever stuck around long or tried to take over.

The first time the teacher made a big deal about my mural. She talked to the class about what I did and everybody turned their heads. I didn't let myself feel flattered; either I was getting used to stardom, or severely mistrusted it. Then she erased it. I think she thought that I would be satisfied with the compliment and that would be it. Instead, my murals became infestations. Whenever the teacher erased the blackboard completely, she'd return to find Atlantis. I thought she felt guilty about erasing such great works of art. Now I realize they might have been a nuisance to her more than anything. I liked it when my murals would stay up as long as possible, but I knew they were not permanent. I actually liked that effect. It made me feel more free, or rather, it simply gave me an excuse to make another one. And it saved me from another awesome encounter with "Barbies".

Probably the most important art landmark for just about any grade-oneer is plasticine! Whenever we finished our exercises in English or Math, or the teacher didn't know what to do with us she granted us a trip to the plasticine closet. If everyone finished at the same time, there was a stampede! As soon as the closet door was open, the smell of the plasticine would surround me

like a halo. It was fun to choose from the many different colours. One day I would choose pink, the other yellow, and so on--as if the colours could somehow make the plasticine feel different. Sometimes we would even mix the colours together, but that usually brought a scolding. I don't remember special instructions for working with plasticine. It was one of the most natural things that ever was! We would start softening the cool lumps with our fingers and something always came out. In fact, the possibilities of plasticine seemed unlimited. I'd never really think about what to do in advance. My forms would just come out because of the feel of the material and the mood of freedom that was synonymous with plasticine. I used to think that I produced some magnificent and complicated works in plasticine back then; but, looking through the hazy window of my memory, I see lop-sided spheres, coils thinning in places and happy-faced pancake-shapes that are typical of a grade-one. My imagination could see more complexity in my sculptures than my seven-year-old fingers could manage to make.

I try to recall any of the exercises I may have done to finally get the plasticine reward but my memory fails to go beyond the happy bubble of plasticine play. The exercises were forgettable but my memory of the plasticine closet I can recreate with all senses: the smell of the plasticine; the look of the closet all piled high with coloured, previously-used lumps; the sound of the oilcloths unsticking from each other; the feel and mild chemical smell of the plasticine as I made it warm and malleable. In fact, I don't

remember much about the A,B,C's, or math or much other stuff. My memory of plasticine is so clear, yet the things regarded as "real learning", like math or reading, are so faint. There were the rather unadventurous stories about Dick and Jane, or Tom and Mary, or whatever they were called. I remember the dog was called Spot, that I can remember. Although the children in our readers lacked a life of high adventure, I enjoyed learning new words along the way. As I used these new words, I would always be stunned by the appearance of hieroglyphics that didn't look like anything. Finally, I would somehow learn what it was and go on, feeling more smart than before. As I reflect further, the void begins to develop images, sounds and actions, like plants sprouting from the earth. One thing leads to another and I find myself taken back into my body back then: to the graduation from reader to reader; to the math lessons done in streaky squeaky felt pen on the overhead projector; to the music lessons with cymbals and triangles. Then comes the sounds of balls bouncing in the gym, the echoing voices in the corridors, the slam of the metal school doors...a memory of a long walk to the principal's office for. .I don't know what! My memories of other kinds of learning were held together in my mind by the happy plasticine!

The world got turned up-side-down at the end of grade two with talk of closing down Waskanawich school and busing us to Aylmerville. Some parents were for it and some were against it. Many saw their rural lifestyle disappearing with it. My parents were very vocal against it and I felt some of

that same militancy myself. Change was scary. There were a lot of questions and a lot of rumours. One bit of information I found pretty spectacular was that there were several classrooms for one grade! That was weird! Even for the grades five and six! In Waskanawich, even the grades five and six thrown together barely made a classroom. Anything higher than grade six went to the high school in Aylmerville anyway. I equated high school to something like retirement or even death and wouldn't have been surprised if they had shipped high school students to the planet Jupiter. High school was an unfathomable concept. Just the thought of high school students made me shiver. They must have been so big! They had to be monsters and could probably squish you in between their fingers if they felt like it! Being at a school with lots of grade sixes was a little scary; the thought of running into high school students on buses I equated to an encounter with aliens!

Alas, after a contemplative summer, Aylmerville Elementary School finally arrived with its pastel-coloured brick walls and hallways that seemed to go on forever. After all my thoughts about kids whose heads touched the ceiling, a most distinct first impression was the more or less equal heights of the heads in my part of the labyrinth. It was reassuring. I acquired a kind of anonymity, being not noticeably big nor noticeably small. I felt that "pull" into the social activities not so much as a pull but as an overwhelming wave that I couldn't get away from. There were so many kids you had to be a part of somebody's playing, if only by default or accident or by posing as an

interested spectator. Even if I wasn't playing with anybody in particular and just playing by myself, at least it felt like I was playing with other kids.

My grade three teacher was this elderly spinster who became a kind of idol for me. Miss Young had lots of wrinkly skin, white hair tied back in a bun and round wire-framed glasses whose lenses were so small I could hardly believe she could see through them. She was skinny and wore these dresses that looked like they could have come from the eighteen hundreds with their small floral patterns and lace bordered collars. She was pretty (in an old lady sort of way), delicate and British. At lunch time she would sit at her desk and eat boring lunches which she usually topped off with a dessert of mouldy cheese. There was something about the plainness, the orderedness, the contentedness of her life that I found charming. She had self-discipline that came to her naturally. She didn't seem to have a pet, nor did she seem to especially hate anybody. I remember several nice greeting smiles from her and even a pat or two on the shoulder, not for anything in particular--just to say "hi". She was clear too. She even made me understand math, of all things! And, she was organized. Every morning when we came in there was some kind of exercise to do in the upper right hand corner of the blackboard that was always sort of the same, but getting just a little bit harder every time. You knew it was going to be there every morning, so you gave up resisting. In fact, we used to talk about it on the bus, "what kind of exercise do you think Miss Young is going to give us this time?" In particular, I thought it was kind

of gutsy of her to be as old as she was and not married. In a way, it was tragic, but also admirable. I decided then that I would like to be a spinster when I grew up.

In elementary school, kids always used to ask me to do their title pages for them. Either I had an aura of "artsy vibes" or I just looked like a sucker. I didn't mind doing everybody's title pages for them. In fact, I admired their forthrightness for asking me. Maybe it was because I wasn't the type to ask anybody to do anything for me. It also made me feel useful, significant. Hands holding a sheet of plain refill paper would hover in mid-air in the aisles waiting for their turn for me to draw a picture upon them. "What's your paper about?" I would have to ask, and something would always pop into my head. The experience was a kind of flow of ideas that brought some sort of relief. Sometimes I wonder if I drew anything that was any good because I drew so fast, trying to get around to everybody who was waiting. I don't think it mattered terribly much if I drew anything good or not, it was just some sort of exchange to satisfy a social need. Someone had to be the artist, others felt that something, providence or lack of talent or just plain fear, excluded them from the privilege. Instead, they had to get their expressive needs met vicariously, through someone else.

Along with grade three came friends. There I met Jennifer. Jennifer and I were inseparable. This might have been why, in grades four and five, the teachers tried so hard to separate us. Even though we were put at



opposite ends of the open-area classroom, I was determined that we overcome the odds by communicating in a tapping code with staplers. However, in the end, the teachers won. Jenny and I drifted apart. Jenny made other friends, and I kind of stayed by myself. I never had any really close school friends like that again, until about grade nine. There was my neighbour, April, but she was a grade younger and I could only hang around with her outside of school.

There was another girl in grade three who I thought was kind of interesting. Her name was Zerelda. I never thought of her as pretty when I was a kid, but she was. She had a flawless oval face, dark eyes and long straight black hair. Her beauty was actually worth being jealous of, though I don't remember feeling anything of the sort. She didn't have any particular friend or clique that she belonged to, at least, not one in school. The other kids used to really pick on her. It might have been because she was Métis, or adopted, or something like that. It could have been too because of her personality. She didn't shrivel up or hide away like some of the other native kids. She was loud, bold and strong. She was so relentless in not fading away that she stood out like lightening. Perhaps we resented her because she wasn't acting the way native kids were supposed to act. She didn't keep to her place and that irritated us. She was different and a lot like the rest of us at the same time. Boy, she had to take a lot of crap! The kids would team up around her like a bunch of identical sheep and insult her for being adopted, or

call her a witch--Zerelda the witch! And yet, she seemed to always smile, or take it, or refuse to let it get to her. In a way, being a child of a noble nuclear family, I was a part of that group that picked on her. I didn't have the guts--or perhaps the vocabulary--to call her names. I just stood behind the protecting barrier of "the group" as it did its thing. But I was on the opposing side mostly because I didn't know where else to be--but maybe we were all like that. I could identify with the other white kids of the typical upbringing. I was like them. Also, we probably saw her strength as kind of scary. Some part of us wondered how she could stand being so different and not eventually be reduced to dribble--so we tried all the harder to knock her down.

One day, divided from the protection of "the group" by the recess buzzer, I found myself alone in the cloak room with Zerelda. I was scared and she sensed it. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't run away because that would be chicken. I couldn't walk directly into the classroom because she might stop me or hit me. I thought, for sure, she was going to get some revenge on me. Instead, Zerelda smiled at me. Her hand came forward with something in it. It was a piece of jewellery. It was a brooch with a huge black stone in the middle surrounded by silver arabesques. The brooch looked so beautiful, no doubt made of priceless gems (of the drugstore variety)! Zerelda said it was a lucky stone or a magic stone (or something like that) that was passed onto her from her grandmother. I stared at the stone, searching for its inner mystery, thinking about shipwrecks, undersea treasures, long ago battles

between cowboys and Indians, and such. Zerelda then became less of a witch and more of an enchantress. The stone inspired such adventure in my imagination that I wanted to ask her if I could keep it. As if she had heard my thoughts, the spell was broken and Zerelda reclaimed her stone. She disappeared into the classroom and the way was clear. I didn't join the others in picking on her since then. Somehow, she had become something familiar.

Art lessons in grade three and four were not given official status. We got our art-making needs met, more or less, by drawing title pages for our reports, or just by drawing when we had some spare time. In that framework, I found much inspiration in copying and tracing. We were always told not to trace but a lot of kids did it anyway, probably because we couldn't think of anything else to do that the teachers would like. I liked to copy because it was more challenging. I wanted to see if I could make a picture that looked as much like a tracing as possible. I remember drawing the crest of the R.C.M.P. for the title page of my report. The longer I worked on the copy the more I would become transfixed, until I would almost seem to "become" every curve and bend in the lines of every overlapping leaf of the crest. I also remember tracing an image of Pegasus, the flying horse. I really had this thing for things with wings. I was envious of things that could fly, that could just suddenly take off from the cluttered and complicated world and move about freely, without thinking of limits. I used to always think that if I wasn't a girl, I would have liked to have been a seagull.

In grade four I made a colouring book for a poor underprivileged kid in Biafra, or some place like that. I can't remember what inspired me to do it or if the project was an assignment or just pretend; but, for me, it became most serious. I got a hold of some nice heavy white paper and something that marked big and black. I sketched in my images first with pencil and then went over the lines with the thing that wrote big and black. All the images that I drew were linear and had huge clean spaces to fill in with solid colour by the imagined recipient of my colouring book. One image that still remains in my mind is one of a swan swimming on the water. I enjoyed drawing the graceful curve of the swan's neck and then turning the line back for the tail and then down to meet the surface of the water. An arc with semi-circles and straight lines was the wing. I remember a teddy bear, a composition of simple round and rounded squarish shapes. All the time that I drew, I imagined the joy the recipient would be feeling when he or she would fill in those lines with colour. When I finally finished the colouring book--which took days--I handed it to my teacher. She flipped through the pages and placed the book in the second drawer of her desk.

I doubted even then that the colouring book made it to Africa. I liked it so much that I thought about asking for it back so I could colour in it myself. I never did get around to it, though I thought about it a lot. I had a sense that it sat and sat and sat, probably until the end of the year until it got thrown out.

When the level of the heads rose to their maximum height for

elementary school, we graduated to having art classes in a special room with a different teacher other than our home-room teacher. The art room was an area in the centre of the maze of hallways that had been converted from an open outdoor space, probably during the time I was in grade three and four.

Basically, they poured cement for the floor and installed sky-lights for the ceiling. I remember walking by it as part of a long, hand-holding snake and seeing the place under construction. That would be our new art room, the teacher said. I thought the room looked unfinished. It was not like other real rooms, but I guess it was a pretty good idea for an art room. It didn't matter if it got damaged, or mucked up as much. But even so, the teacher still made a big fuss about clean-up! Anyway, because it was different, it had that nice quality of a refuge, like my chalkboard undersea worlds did. And it was colourful. That was mostly because there were all these jars of paint and piles of coloured paper sitting on the shelves.

A lot of the things we did in that steel and glass room were to do with gluing popsicle sticks and pine cones, following patterns and so on. To me, it wasn't real art, but I'm not exactly sure what I would have thought what real art really was. What was nice, though, was that there were so many different kinds of things to work with so that you didn't get bored. I can hardly remember anything we did in that class, but one thing I do remember is making a plaster relief cast of a horse's head. We were given rubber moulds for making reliefs. We got to choose one we liked to work with. I didn't like

any of the moulds we were given, nor was I interested in horses, but I choose the horse head because I thought my friend April might like it. She was crazy about horses, and I thought, for sure, she would appreciate it as a gift.

It was exciting to return to class sometime after pouring the moulds to see if and how they turned out. But, aside from the first "ahh" that comes when the rubber comes off, I wasn't particularly enthralled. It wasn't really what I wanted, even though I had no idea what that was! I painted the horse's head a sickly yellow and orange and the background a plain green. I didn't have a good feel for "horse colours." When I showed it to April she scowled. There was something wrong with the horse's anatomy or something. April knew every bone and every muscle that went into making a horse! The relief ended up remaining mine. My parents hung it up in the living room for a while, beside the warping cardboard reproduction of a scene from Venice.

There was one class that I do remember that I considered to be a "real art lesson." A woman who had studied art in university came in to give us a lesson. It was a bit of a big deal. She seemed to be the possessor of mysterious wisdom--the wisdom of artists! She was quiet and shy, but what she showed us really impressed me. She talked to us about complimentary colours then she showed us the trick with the after-image that changes its colour to the complimentary. She had us look at an image--a boat. Either the boat was red and the background was green or vice versa. She told us to stare at the boat and when she said the word we were supposed to look

quickly to a white sheet beside it. Not many kids saw the afterimage of the boat, let alone saw it change colour, but I did! While the rest of the kids just looked confused, I wanted to jump up and down and say "I saw it, I saw it!" But I kept it to myself. I remember it, that's one thing for sure! I couldn't figure out what it had to do with painting or drawing, but it was certainly exciting enough.

It was in this art room with this art teacher that I became teachers' pet numero uno! I didn't necessarily volunteer for the role. I hated being the teacher's pet! When you are teacher's pet you get the feeling that if you say or do one not-nice thing your teacher's back will break in two! Or, she'll have a heart attack and die! And her death will be on your conscience for the rest of your life! As I grew older I began to think life would be much easier if I were a bad kid, which was a tendency that definitely came to fruition in high school.

My grade five and six art teacher, Mrs. Drysdale, was always so sweet. She wasn't that much taller than us. She had a tiny head and a petite frame. Her hair was mousy brown and cut in a perfect pixie. Sometimes she would wear things that were just a tiny bit on the hippy side, like flowered shirts and dangly belts, but never anything shocking. She had these twinkly eyes and you never heard her raise her voice to a momentous pitch, like some of the other teachers did when they were mad. Her sweetness carried her through most situations quite gracefully, except for one with "you-know-who". She usually became especially sweet whenever I came around, because I was "the

artist." She often gave me the privilege of doing special projects, like drawing an angel or a Santa Claus for the Christmas display. I didn't mind her asking me to do these things, because it enabled my work to be out in public. But I would cringe at the way she was so nice to me! I felt doomed to always be a nice kid, or my little angelic teacher might shrivel. And I didn't always feel like I was a nice kid. Just like everybody else, I too had the urge to be destructive and unruly!

One time, before Christmas, Mrs Drysdale announced that our assignment for the day was to produce something for the children's Christmas stamp contest. Mrs. Drysdale had high hopes for me, and indicated, with a proud nod and a twinkle, that she thought I had a good chance of winning. I emitted an image from my innate store of images: a Christchild in his cradle full of straw laying under a star with giant pointed rays. The Christchild was in the lower right hand corner of the page and the star was in the upper left. In between the two forms was a large area of black representing night. Initially, I visualized the image to be made of solid colour. For some reason, however, I coloured it in with crayons, maybe because crayons were the only things available. I didn't think the crayons really worked, especially for the large area of black in the drawing. Before I finished the drawing, Mrs. Drysdale had already begun praising it.

When we were all finished Mrs. Drysdale showed us stamps made from last years' winners in the same type of contest. When I saw the images with



their bright solid colours--most of which were painted--I suddenly saw in my mind's eye what I wanted to do! I decided that I would paint in my problematic black area with poster paint! That way it would be solid, no paper would be showing through. There would be no scratchy crayon marks; it would be more like real black night!

I told Mrs. Drysdale about my important plan and she turned white. She tried to convince me that my drawing was good as it was. I firmly disagreed, complaining about the scratchy look of the crayon marks. Without hesitation--and to Mrs. Drysdale's horror--I retrieved some black poster paint from the art closet and painted in the whole sky with black.

The trouble was that the big black area made the crayon-coloured Christchild and star look small and pale. Also, next to my neat, carefully controlled lines, the paint job looked wild and messy. I was just a big black blob! When Mrs. Drysdale saw what I had done, I could swear she came as close to cursing as she would ever be able to. The special twinkle she had for me began to fade. I then decided I should perhaps continue with other colours of poster paint over the whole thing, but the intention was somehow halted.

Of course, I didn't win the contest. In fact, one day, after class, I found out about the destiny of my picture in a pile of stamp contest pictures. I looked through the lot, noticing that most of the pictures were unfinished, or just plain lousy. Mine was in it. I realized that this was the "rejection pile,"--

work that would not even be entered.

Mrs. Drysdale could've ended up in hospital from her disappointment in me but I don't think I would have noticed. Come to think of it, there is a faint voice reminding me that she, in fact, did end up in hospital around that time, for some thing or another, and we didn't have art lessons for a while. But...that wasn't my problem. I wasn't the teacher's pet anymore.

## THE GHOSTS OF THE AYLMERVILLE ART CLUB

### Four Paintings from my Adolescence

When I discovered that my town had an art club it was an exciting event. A village festival was going on at the time, and the art club was holding its annual exhibition as a part of the celebration. Our entire elementary school was taken down to the Old School to see it.

We were excited about the change of routine. Big yellow schoolbuses chugged out into the streets in the middle of the day, lined up in front of the school, filled up with kids and then farted down to the centre of town to the old Aylmerville High. The Old School was a big blocky brick building that looked like a castle, the kind not often seen in "new-looking" Alberta. It held art club classes, meetings and community activities and such; but, at night, when the lights were out, it looked dreary. It was an unspoken fact that the Old School was haunted.

The day of our visit the interior of the Old School was full of light and colour. The hallways and stairwells echoed with noisy kid sounds. Guided by poles and ropes, we moved in long slow lines through the hallways and rooms covered with paintings from the floor boards to the ceiling. I remember seeing a lot of green, as if it was summer inside the building. It contrasted to the outside, where it was bare dry spring.

I was looking for one painting in particular. There were rumours that a painting of one of our classmates--whose mother was a member of the art club--was in the show. I was curious to see what someone I knew looked like

in a painting. When I finally found it I was, at first, disappointed. She didn't look the way I thought she would look. She was in her bathing suit and scrunched up inside an inner tube floating on the water. I wasn't used to seeing my classmate in anything but school clothes. Also, the painting was kind of blurry, and really, the girl could have been just about anyone with long brown hair! But I looked again, and again. I started to think about things: about the fuzzied details of her face, about her, about summers and the lake. Then, I started to get used to the picture, eventually thinking that it could not have been done any other way.

While I was in junior high school, the author of this particular work came to our art class. She was poking around like a dealer looking for something to buy. Knowing that she was in the art club, I was determined to make a drawing to get her attention. I choose an extremely complicated image of a man on a bicycle from a magazine advertisement--as if a faithful copy of complex detail would make the best impression. In school, art was more like gym: the more you sweated, the more likely you would succeed.

Alas, the desired effect had been reached and the art teacher and the art club member were stewing over my drawing. That was satisfying enough. Some time later I received a phone call and was invited to become a member of the Aylmerville Art Club.

I walked into our first class, apprehensive. I was relieved that it was more like a meeting than a class. I wasn't ready to paint a picture in front of

all these people that night. Minutes from the previous meeting were read and discussed. They talked about the structure of the classes, the materials and the payment. I felt like falling asleep, that is, until I heard how much it would cost! It was meagre sum of about sixty dollars, but, to me, then, it was a lot! Living on the farm, I never had to spend that much on anything. I thought, for sure, my Father would have a fit! I was distraught. The members tried to calm me down.

Finally, I gathered all my courage and the members' arguments and took them home to mother. I had begun to defend myself to the limit, but it appeared that my mother had already decided I would take them. I couldn't understand why! My help was certainly needed on the farm, I thought. When I asked her, she nodded her head and continued whatever she was doing. Father provided his consent by ignoring the whole thing. Alas, I found a miracle cure for one of the major problems of adolescence--throw yourself into higher learning, and you can get out of feeding pigs!

### **My First Painting**

I came to my first class with the art club with some "basic tools" that were suggested to me in the first meeting: an 18" x 24" piece of particle board, a square-tipped brush, a round-tipped brush, a plastic Tupperware lid for a palette, tubes of primary colours, and black and white. Seated before the

white gessoed particle board, I was scared. I was concerned with not doing anything that was not "right". At the same time, I had to use tools that I was not accustomed to. The manner of representing what was before me--a still life of cat-tails--was a little elusive. At the other end of the room my teacher was chatting with a group of students. Phyllis was tall and lean, dressed in a lumber-jack's shirt and faded blue jeans. She had grey hair cut into a short "tomboy" cut. Her face looked serious and her voice was low. She was an older person, probably in her late fifties or early sixties, but her dress, her attitude and her stance was young. She looked like a person who wouldn't take aging seriously, nor bullshit from anyone.

With some burnt umber on my round-tipped brush I drew an outline of the mouth of the jug. I painted very slowly, waiting for the teacher to tell me I was doing it all wrong or--perhaps even--all right! The other students seemed to know what they were doing. They seemed naturally inspired. I wasn't sure what I was doing! I just had to do something.

Once I had actually finished a line drawing I began to paint the jug a solid grey. It seemed that just when I found myself finally doing "something" the teacher danced to my easel, picked up my brush and put a stroke of red on my jug. For a split second I thought that she had trouble seeing; or rather, something in her head--or mine--was not working right. The jug was not red, it was a solid greyish colour! I felt presented with a confusing riddle to solve as the teacher walked away, having reeked a slight bit of havoc in my sense of

reality. After that I decided that, in spite of the fact that it was illogical, just about any colour would be permitted. Trying to be hip, I added some blue to my jug.

The cat-tails and their foliage were a problem. There were so many blades of dried grass: curled ones, intertwined ones, twisted ones, broken ones. I thought how I could surely be there for hours trying to paint every one! And they were all this boring pale ochre! I avoided the problem for a while and, instead, dealt with the easiest part--the cat-tail flower. I made several wide strokes with brown. I thought the solution was simple and appropriate; however, the teacher soon reappeared and added short strokes over top of my long plain ones. I could have been upset by this, I suppose, but I was too puzzled by what I perceived as an unnecessary layer of paint, and a rather crude one at that!

When I had painted in all the cat-tails that I could see, I began to deal with the leaves with short strokes of pale yellow. Again, when it seemed that I was doing the most sensible thing, my teacher came along and grabbed the brush. She filled the brush with pure yellow, held it to the board for a couple of seconds, and then made a long curly stroke half way across the board! Again, I thought her consciousness misinterpreted the scene before us. There were no curls of that kind in the still life! I then followed the example of the curly leaves, having assumed that that was what I was supposed to do.



Figure 4. "There were no curls of that kind in the still life!"



I had thought that once I filled in the remaining area of the jug with colour that I was done with it. There was another little surprise in store for me when the teacher came to my easel again and started mixing muddy greys and greens on my palette. As she mixed she seemed to drool, as if she was making a delicious recipe! She filled the brush with the new yucky colour and dragged it on its side across the painting board. I was shocked! It made me think of shit! Surely such ugly, unlively colours were not in keeping with the notion of beauty expected in artwork! As the teacher continued with the scumbling, she mumbled about a lot of things. She said something to the effect that this would make the jug more "jug-like". I also became aware that the duller colours would make the other brighter colours stand out.

The scumbling seemed strange at first. It wasn't nice-looking. In spite of that, it involved technical innovations with the paint. When I did the scumbling myself, I felt especially "artist-like."

I was relieved when Phyllis suggested that I add some red over the scumbling. I had feared that clean bright colours had become passé. Later, she suggested a black contour line on the rims of the jug to add to the "jug-like character." I found it silly to be incorporating what I considered to be the "first part" of the painting into the last steps. Also, the line didn't exist in "reality". Also, to my amazement, I was told to outline only a part--and not all--of the jug!

When I discovered the background of the painting, I was in a crisis.

After adding so many swirls of colour for leaves, I had completely overlooked the area behind the still life! Spots of thinly painted gesso stuck out in between the zillions of curls and strokes! The background should have been done first! I thought how putting the background in later would have been quite a squeeze. I whined to my teacher. The problem turned out to be not so serious. Phyllis dipped my brush in some red and started to fill in the small spaces with dabs of red and green, representing the background in the same way as the leaves. I saw Phyllis' move as just a way of appeasing me, because I had forgot to put in a solid colour for the background. The whole thing had been done "incorrectly," I thought, but there was not much else left to do.

When I began to fill in all of the spaces with red and green--still trying to make the background as solid as possible--my teacher came around again and cautioned me. Boy, were her suggestions getting weirder and weirder! Were there no rules? All of a sudden, she talked of restraint. Without picking up my brush, she introduced me to the notion of selectively adding in form and colour to suit the composition of the painting. It was alright to leave some parts white but I should not just "leave" them---a totally ridiculous concept, at least, until I got used to it. Parts of the painting are painted with white on white. Then she suggested I stand back and analyze for myself what should go where, according to the visual harmony of the painting. Doing that, I felt audacious, as if I would be the last person to judge the success of my own

painting!

The part of the painting that was rendered only by me was the doll in the lower right-hand corner. I do not remember painting it. It somehow developed in between all my stewing. A woman from the senior group, Mabel, came around and commented on it. She felt that there was something special about the doll. She said why but I just couldn't understand her. I recognized her words as English, but they were put together in a way that was very foreign to me. It was something to do with the perspective. I looked at the doll again, as if I had never seen it before. It was just a bunch of strokes, but, if you looked at it a certain way, it did sort of look like a doll leaning against the jug. Before this comment, I thought of this part of the image as merely "filler", as if the only important parts of the painting were the parts that my teacher and I battled over.

I have always thought of this painting as my first painting. In fact, I am surprised, as I recall the process of making it, how much was done by the hand of my teacher! At the same time, the wild yellow swirls, especially, please me because they remind me of her--an independent, bold and slightly eccentric woman who was just a bit out of place in conservative Aylmerville. At the same time, the yellow swirls also remind me of myself then, young and fresh and without quick and easy formulas for visual representation. During my art studies that would follow, I would look at this piece and long to relive the adventure I had making it.

### The Lady and the Scarecrow

Pulling this painting out of its wrappings of newspapers and a green garbage bag, the faint aura of its original environment-- the senior painting studio in the Old School--came out as well. It was accompanied by a memory of an odour, too weak to be identified. It might have been oil paint or just dust and mildew, or the combined smells of the objects of the room's permanent still life collection: mannequins, dried flowers, decaying rubber toys and plastic fruit. A hazy image of the building's worn wooden walls came out as well. More distinct were the floorboards, the corners and the window frames. As I try to fill in the missing spaces, I recall how this room was often so full of things: noise and "important" activities like art club meetings and modelling sessions. Even though this sense of "hub-ness" comes to mind, on the day I painted this work, the room was empty and quiet.

This was "free time", when the building was open for those who wanted to paint in the studio outside of class time. Huffing and puffing, I climbed the long stairwell to the second floor. Arriving at the top of the stairs, I squinted at the sun that had sneaked into the room unauthorized. I paused briefly to take in the scene, conscious of my paint-spotted "artsy" shoulder bag hanging over my shoulder. It gave me a bohemian image, I thought.

It was strange to see sunlight inside the building. I was used to coming to classes at night. The trees outside the window were black shadows in the sun, instead of pale, florescent-lit arms on a background of black. The studio was so jolly and bright that it was disturbing.

The only woman in the room was Mabel. I was worried about being there alone with Mabel. She was unconventional, therefore unpredictable. She was barely taller than my shoulders (although I was the youngest member of the group, I was pretty much the tallest!). She had a wide face, and a squarish body. Although most of her features were soft, her eyes were especially dark and serious-looking. Sometimes, when she was thinking or working, her eyebrows would wrinkle up and form a "v" in the middle of her forehead. She had a bob hairdo that she was always flipping out of her eyes. Sometimes she wore reading glasses, which I thought made her look important.

Mabel tended to get negative criticism from the townsfolk for her "messy" paintings. Back then, I quietly shared this disapproval. Later, after I left Aylmerville and finished university, I judged Mabel to be one of the most powerful painters of the group. I was disappointed when I learned that she had given up on art.

As I entered, Mabel turned around and smiled, evidently glad to see me. I think she was as relieved as I was not to be stuck in this haunted old building all alone.

Still a junior painter, I felt privileged to be in the studio of the senior painting students. This studio was a strange separate world, containing secrets that only the senior painting students had access to. Also, having so much more in it than the very bare junior painting room, it had an air of permanence, and of territory. It was like a sanctuary.

I paused to rest. I had a short conversation with Mabel. Even though she made me uneasy, I liked how she talked to me like a fellow artist. Our age differences didn't seem to matter. What was important was that we both shared a love of art. Eventually, I found my place at an easel facing the mannequins in the corner of the room. All my materials--my few tubes of acrylic paint, a yogurt container of water, my brushes and a plastic Tupperware lid--I placed on a table at my side. Squeezing some paint onto the Tupperware lid, I was conscious of what I perceived as my inability to work with colour. If I had come a year or two earlier to the club, I would have learned about colour wheels and colour mixing. There were many colour wheels "hanging around" the room, reminding me of what I had missed. I wanted so much to do a colour wheel!

The mannequins, which was actually a mannequin and a scarecrow, were the most natural thing for me to paint. They looked the most human of all the objects in the room. The mannequins had been around the studios almost forever! They were the subject matter of many art club paintings, even showing up in some of the exhibitions before my time. Sometimes they were



Figure 4. "The mannequins had been around the studios forever!"

in one corner of the room, at other times they were in another. The scarecrow, made of wires and cloth and stuffed with newspapers, was always crooked over his broken-down tricycle. He stayed in our beginning painting room by himself for a short while, but he was most often with his lady friend. The lady mannequin had a pretty face with big faded painted eyes and lips and a delicate, chipped nose. She wore plastic flowers in her hair and a dust-covered blue trench coat that hung limp from her shoulders without arms. I never saw anyone move the mannequins, they just seemed to appear in different places as a result of the ebb and flow of students and easels. I fancied them to move on their own--at night when no one was around--choosing the place where they next wanted to be painted.

With a black contour line, I began with the eyes and nose of the lady mannequin. Then I filled in the lines of her face with white. The leaves on her head I made green and her hair brown. I was so pleased with my early results that I thought it a shame the painting couldn't be finished right then. My pace slowed, then came to a complete stop. Just then, Mabel came over to me, smiled, and offered suggestions.

"Try some red here...blue there," she said. Not seeing any other alternative, I went along. I trusted she knew some secret of painting that would make it all work out in the end. I now realize she may have been brainstorming, having found someone responsive to her suggestions. She proposed the area of yellow on the cheek and asked me what I thought about



it. I was shocked, but I didn't let it show, at least, so I thought. Instead--to camouflage my anxiety--I quickly did as she suggested.

The face of the mannequin was done so nicely that I didn't want to go any further, for fear of not doing as well in other parts of the painting. As I became more reluctant, Mabel became more and more involved. I remember little of Mabel's painting and realize that she might have even spent more time helping me with mine than doing her own.

With each new section that did not live up to my expectations, I became more and more frustrated. The chest and the breast of the mannequin did not look realistic enough. I couldn't handle the colour and the brush in the way that I wanted to to make shading. It looked crude. I wanted it to look smooth. I couldn't keep my colours from mixing together on the board. They kept getting dirty.

I painted the mannequin's coat solid dark blue. It was boring. It was something I had to deal with to cover the surface of the painting board. I became confused trying to make shading, and, at the same time, the many folds in the coat's material. I kept trying to make it look "coat-like," and it was looking more and more like a blob of blue.

I wanted to leave out the scarecrow. I never thought to ask or try. If I would have left him out, however, I would have been left with the dilemma of deciding what to put in his place. I wanted to represent him with the same kind of facility as I did the mannequin, but he had his own way of being

represented.

The face of the old man is composed of several layers of attempts. Mabei suggested the separate areas of yellow and white, assuring me, that it was all "O.K." Then I thought about it and decided that it didn't matter, as I had already ruined my painting! When I came to the old man's hat I encountered my shading problem again. I tried to make a three-dimensional image but what came out instead were these short choppy, muddy strokes. I painted one side of the old man's shirt all yellow. Before going over to the other side, my neighbour suggested that it should be another colour--for the sake of the composition of the painting, whatever that meant! I realize now that "composition", like God or love, was one of those things that was mentioned a lot, but never clearly defined.

Mabel suggested most of the bold and bright colours that are in the left side of the shirt. I would have never thought of such "wild" ideas on my own. The old man was a hodge-podge and a mess! I decided that I just wouldn't look at that part as much.

As I filled in the flowers with colour, I was relieved. This was safe territory. The flowers presented no major problems and they could be painted just about any colour without looking strange. With not too many strokes I managed to capture the feeling of flowers. I could be fairly "loose" and still make something that looked like something.

Finally, I came around to my old mentor, the background! There was a shelf behind the mannequins filled with clutter. I thought how it would have been difficult to represent what I saw. It would have required a lot of detailed work, and I didn't think it would've worked with the bold choppy character of the painting. It was at this stage that Mabel's comments offered some real reprieve. She suggested the wine bottle from the shelf to put behind the mannequins. At first, the idea did not make sense. Why just a wine bottle, there? I later learned that it had no particular "meaning." Its particular visual qualities would be useful to fill in a space that needed something. I was relieved, as if the wine bottle would somehow become a "sinful" statement in my painting. As I painted the bottle in on the left side of the painting, I wondered why it should be in that squished space, instead of on the other side, where there was more room. Being under-aged, I remember feeling excited about painting a wine bottle. I felt so mature, and, that I was living a little bit on the wild side.

I was perplexed by the empty space to the right of the mannequins. Some sort of object had to be there too, I thought. I would not have been comfortable with just flat colour, though, neither did I want to paint a shelf full of detail--it would have detracted from the objects in the foreground. Chewing on my paintbrush, I watched as Mabel pointed to a painting leaning against the shelf on the other side of the still-life collection. It was a painting of a veiled woman. Mabel's hand waved across my painting as she suggested that

it could work well there.

I was as still as a stone, but inside, I was squirming. I thought it was silly to put a painting in a painting! You just didn't do that! Also, it wasn't behind the mannequins, in reality. I did the job, looking back at Mabel now and then. I had hoped that she would eventually see how silly the idea was. Eventually, I grew to like it. I enjoyed copying something and seeing the similarity between the original painting and my representation of it. It was easy to paint, the representation was already simplified for me. There were no messy strokes or clumsy mixing jobs, just solid colours.

The only part that I found difficult was the face of the veiled figure. First I produced a kind of happy-face, and it looked ridiculous! We were both in agreement, it was definitely a problem. Mabel suggested instead the solid areas of colour--an abstraction of the features of the face. The idea that I didn't have to try to represent what was before me in every detail was a new one. Before that, I would have considered it just an easy way out.

Mabel and I spent a lot of time trying to decide what to put in the rest of the background. We stood in front of my painting throwing out ideas--everything from patterns to colours. Finally the bright sun in the room persuaded us that it should be yellow. For this my colours and strokes behaved. I did this part more boldly, more freely. I was relieved that something was finally easy to do.

When I was finished, I leaned the painting against one of the windows. Mabel and I quietly appreciated it. The mannequins looked on, the dimness of the room giving their faces a mysterious new vitality. We sighed, both satisfied with the endeavour. Deep down, we were glad our work was done before sundown, before anything supernatural started coming out of the walls. Then we packed up our supplies and Mabel and I and the sun left all at the same time.

### **"Signed Anonymous"**

It was a veritable "event", almost a party. We were going to paint old Mrs. Stevenson--the over ninety-year old founder of our club! She was a Scottish immigrant. She was short and round, and always smiling. When she spoke--which wasn't often--her tongue still rolled in the Scottish way. She was like the queen of the club, with the members always rushing to help her sit up, sit down, walk or talk.

Everybody was in a good mood, except me. I had forgotten to bring a gessoed particle board for the class. Iris noticed my dilemma and took me to the art club storage closet to find a board. Of all the artists in the club, I had the most affinity for Iris. She was the closest to my age. She wore big aviator-style wire-framed glasses and her long brown hair was almost always tied back into a tight pony-tail. She had started to take painting the same time that I did

so we often shared our moments of doubt with each other--but I still looked up to her as if she knew so much more than I.

The storage closet was an amazing place. It was like a tomb of some demi-god who liked colour and dried plants. Iris rummaged through the mess, knocking things over. There was practically no floor space for walking on. Finally, her hand reached into a space in a pile of paintings leaning against a wall and pulled out an abstraction of tropical birds. The painting had no signature, and didn't seem to be done in the hand of anyone in the room, except possibly Mabel's. It was painted on the rough side of the particle board; the good side was clean and white and ready for painting on. We commented on how the painting was interesting, and kind of nice. Then Iris flipped it over and proclaimed it mine.

Finally, we were all packed together in a circle around the little old lady sitting at the centre. She hardly moved. She seemed to be as permanent in the room as the mannequins. I thought it was a joke that I would be in on this, judging myself totally incapable of portraiture. I had few expectations of producing something recognizable. Portraiture, to my mind, was for those with something akin to a mathematical mind--for those who could make automatic calculations so that the eye or the nose would end up in the right place. I didn't expect to turn up with anything more than mud.

Everybody quieted down. Everyone was in a trance: squinting, staring and applying those first careful strokes. I started working with different shades



Figure 5. "I saw the face of old Mrs Stevenson emerge!"

of brown and ochre, matching shadows with the different tones. I worked quickly and easily, as I was not taking the situation too seriously. Then, finally, standing back from the mess of brush strokes, I saw the face of old Mrs. Stevenson emerge!

One of the other painters walked by and squealed, "Look what Debbie's doing". Then, it seemed like everyone in the room came over to look at my rendition of Mrs. Stevenson, commenting on how much it looked like her. Then everybody started looking at everyone else's version.

With the hub-bub, Mrs. Stevenson was invited to take a look at all the paintings in progress. She was aided out of her chair and guided ever so slowly around the room. She walked like an aging empress, nobly and trembling slightly. She came to my easel, smiled wider and nodded. Her thick glasses centered on me, as if they were distinguishing me for the first time.

With my new status as a portrait artist, Phyllis took responsibility for my progress. I wished I had just kept going, before realizing I had anything that looked like something. Suddenly, there were numerous problems to deal with. Mrs. Stevenson's face was too dark. My teacher suggested a thin wash of white to tone it down. I was worried about the lack of detail in Mrs. Stevenson's blouse. It would be hard to paint "impressionistically" like the face. I couldn't just paint the blouse a solid colour! I fumbled with the lace, finding it too fine and detailed for the loose strokes of the face. I painted the lace in the same manner as the face. It looked more like fur than lace! I was



frustrated. My teacher picked up my brush and started drawing thin curly lines at the edge of the lace. We had a small argument about whether such delicate lines were appropriate for such a loose painting. I was irritable, and, after a while, Phyllis left me to work on my own.

I did not consider this painting a "beautiful" painting, but it was important that it resembled Mrs. Stevenson. I didn't really like browns and ochres, in fact, they were my most unfavorable colours! In spite of my protestations, everything in our household was gold or brown--from our curtains, to my mother's clothes, to my dad's suit, the car, even the marigolds in front of the picture window! I was sick of gold and brown!

When I was in university, I kept the painting of Mrs. Stevenson (winner of an honourable mention in a regional art exhibition) in my apartment. During one of my defiant moods, I turned the "gold and brown" face of Mrs. Stevenson to the wall, showing the rough side with the colourful birds. If I think about it now, the painting of the parrots--with bold strokes of pure colour--was much more like what would be my later painting style. The side with Mrs. Stevenson was more suited to the Aylmerville adolescent who needed to make things look "real." It seemed as if this mysterious unclaimed painting had no real living owner, as if it was offered by an unearthly being for my growth; or, it was actually "mine," produced by me in a kind of reverse-time dimension.

I kept wondering when someone would come along and claim or just comment about their painting of the tropical birds, but no-one ever did.

### The Narrow Escape

Looking at this painting of a curly-haired girl sitting in an old rocking chair, I get a tiny pang of remorse. I can feel the Old School, how cold it was without the heat on. I can hear the faint "ding" of an old rusty bell. I am also brought back to my later adolescence and the many long hours I spent in my private "space"--a corner of the basement partitioned off by holey bedspreads stapled to the floor beams above. I decorated the walls with patchwork quilts and my Mexican blanket. For furniture, I had the couch from the old house, a box with plywood on top for a desk and a rocker given to me by my Grandmother. I would often rock myself into a frenzy on my grandmother's rocker while looking at a painting in process or just day-dreaming. The cushions that my grandmother kept embroidering over the years tended to gather there, as well as lots of junky ornaments. I can feel the coldness of the unfinished basement of our new house, as if it has become a permanent part of my physical self. I can envision the concentration of light coming through the small basement window, straining to brighten up the place. Upstairs was a modern three bedroom home with carpet and all the modern conveniences, but I wasn't interested. Even though the basement was dreary, I needed a territory of my own.



Figure 7. "I can feel the Old School, how cold it was without the heat on."

I was sixteen when I painted this portrait of my classmate, Amy. Amy came from the city and was never really happy about living in Aylmerville. For her, it was unbearably dull. I found her fascinating. She seemed to come from a world that was so different, and possess important insight--the kind that never really came to light for me during the time that I knew her.

I had the key to the Old School by that time. I could go in anytime and work, though I didn't dare go by myself because of "the ghost". One night, after a basketball game, I persuaded Amy to come to the studio so I could paint her portrait.

Turning the key, I pushed the big wooden door open. The inside was various shades of grey. Here and there the floors and walls were lit by rhombuses of florescent light. We flicked an old light switches at the bottom of the stairs. It sounded like sticks breaking. Then the sound echoed, taking some time to vibrate through the whole school. I guided my friend up the stairs to the studios. We giggled and chuckled. It was probably the only time I acted like an adolescent and not an "art club member" in that building. I think we were acting so silly because something was making us nervous.

I was proud to show Amy my "other world". I showed her the coffee room where we talked about art, art, art! Then I showed her the senior her painting studio with all its serene statues and still life. Displaying my artistic manners, I guided Amy to a chair to where she could pose. I took out my paints, brushes and Tupperware lid. Amy tried many different poses until I

approved of one. She was not terribly impressed with the whole event. I couldn't understand why.

I began drawing the face with a contour line. As I worked, I perceived ghostly images of all of the art club members surrounding me. They were supportive without having to say anything, they just were there, tapping away at their canvasses with their brushes, standing back, squinting, measuring, analysing, joking, commenting, gossiping and giving me motivation. Even though I was still in that "era", the nostalgia was already beginning to set in. I put on a smile. The face was turning out well...sort of.

I felt competent, but the feeling was weak, and faded soon. The sweater and then the hands were beginning to look like hanging amorphous blobs! I turned, searching for some sort of validation, but there was no one else in the room but my classmate. I kept trying to do the hands over and over, but the amorphous blobs became only slightly more distinct.

Amy started shifting. I said it was O.K. to move a little bit, though I really wished she would sit still. This is why one eye in the painting is looking up and the other is looking down. My attempts to get the hands to at least seem anatomically correct were futile. I realized how there were so many things I did not know how to do. Painting became tedious. Some moments I had insight into what to do, at others, I was lost. Things weren't coming out as easily as they did the other times. Amy fidgeted more. Something about that night just wasn't right.

I filled in all the spaces and considered the work done, for the time being. I commented to my friend that it was not good. I said I would have to work quite a bit more. I was tired. Amy, still giddy, made some comments to cheer me up. She was only being polite.

Amy and I left behind the portrait and my paints and wandered to the other rooms, flicking on the lights and exploring. We were like eight-year-olds in search of play. But the school was empty and creepy. Playing wasn't coming easily.

Amy mentioned that it seemed there should be ghosts in this place. I said that there was always a rumour of something to that effect. It seemed, as soon as the word ghost was mentioned, something in the walls started moving.

We walked into the coffee room. We looked up and saw a rope hanging down from a tiny hole in the ceiling. It looked like a noose. I wondered why I never noticed it before. "What's that?" Amy asked. Quickly setting aside the possibility that it was some terrible omen, I figured that it was probably a bell chord. I doubted that there was actually a bell at the other end of it. "Let's try" Amy squealed. I was amazed. I wondered where she gathered the nerve to even think of such a thing! I started to work on damage-control, trying to extract the idea from Amy's brain. It was too late. If something happened, someone complained, I would be in big trouble! The members wouldn't trust me any more; they might even take away my key!

Perhaps, more importantly, I didn't want to disappoint them. I didn't want them to think I was an irresponsible adolescent, like all the rest! Worst of all, what would happen if we disturbed the dead souls living in the school's attic! And **THAT** was **REALLY** scary!

Amy dragged a chair to the rope, climbed on it, grabbed the rope, and then swayed down.

We heard a muffled "ding, ding" through the ceiling. I was relieved. Then my relief turned to disappointment. After all that, and we only got a dull ding! Searching for our thrill, we opened a window, and alas, there was our monumental "DONG"! It sounded like the sky was breaking! I thought how people would be wondering what was going on. I thought that maybe someone would send out the police, or the fire-fighters, or the army on us! Maybe the people in their houses thought it was "the ghost".

I had thought that, after hearing how loud the bell was, Amy would be scared and quit. Instead, she wanted to ring it again and again! I scolded her, but, inwardly, I was tempted to take a turn.

Amy pulled at the bell a second time. I stood by, guiltily watching. We ran to the window. In a perverse way, I was beginning to enjoy myself. For a few moments I completely forgot about ghosts. We ran back to ring it again. Before Amy touched the rope a third time, she hesitated. A few inches away from the rope, she pulled her hand back. Then I too felt that something was different. We looked around, as if someone or something had just joined us.

It seemed that it was not just one entity that we had woke with our bell-ringing, but several dozen! They were restless and angry and seemed to be growing out from the walls and the ceiling. We didn't even have to say anything to each other. We just ran for our coats!

It seemed that this mass of souls was going to speak, or suddenly become visible in some ugly form; or, that our situations would invert and we would be the ones sleeping in the Old School's walls. I threw my paints in my bag but left the painting behind to dry. I shut the lights off and we ran down the stairs, nearly in hysterics. I shut the front door and locked it as quickly as I could, as if creepy ghoulish fingers would, at any moment, reach past the door and grab us. We ran down the street until the school was at a good distance. Then we walked, briskly.

We took refuge in the town burger joint, up the hill from the Old School. We sat in a stall, looked pale, and didn't talk for a while. For the first time I developed an appreciation for modern, garish and rattly things that were inside the cafe. Undignified and unsophisticated, they represented life to me. I glanced down at the Old School. It was a big black lump sitting behind a couple of tiny street lights. The windows of the partially-lighted facade were all black. The trees all around the school were leafless and dead. As much as I didn't want to see it, for the first time, the Old School looked unwelcoming. The sense of excitement that I used to associate with art classes just wasn't



there anymore. I had started longing for what went before, though I couldn't figure out how it was different.

The End

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Sir Herbert Read, claims that "we have to recognize expression as a form of communication, or at least an attempt to communicate." (Read 1958, 166). In my recollection of childhood art experiences there often appeared another, sometimes "invisible" entity that was the inspiration, the reason for, and/or the recipient of my art. In other words, there was a kind of exchange with something or someone happening, the result of which was artwork. Sometimes that entity included an actual person, sometimes something abstract such as an imaginary friend. Sometimes it was only an image, an idea or a sensation that I interacted with. It usually had "character." It was not "blank" or "empty." It was not neutral; but rather, it was something that had some quality, function or purpose that was interesting. That other entity usually possessed "personality", allowing for interaction. It was as if, in my art making, I was "talking" to something, except the language was not verbal, but visual.

James Sully's reflections on the nature of childhood in Children's Ways, written at the end of the last century, contains a poetic description of an interaction that a child might engage in when noticing certain phenomena:

Even in infancy we may detect in the movements of the arms, the admiring cooing sounds, this greeting of nature's beauty as of something kindred. In the home interior it is commonly some bit of bright light, especially when it is in movement, which first charms the eye of the novice; the dancing fire-flame, for example, the play of the sunlight on a bit of glass or a gilded frame, the great globe of the lamp just created. In some cases it is a patch of bright colour or gay pattern on the mother's dress which calls forth a full vocal welcome

in the shape of baby "talking". In the out-of-door scene, too, it is the glitter of the running water, or a meadow all white with daisies, which captivates the glance. Light, the symbol of life's joy, seems to be the first language in which the spirit of beauty speaks to a child (Sully 1897, 151-152).

With words such as "talking" and "language," the Sully quote portrays the communicative aspect of visual experience. This need for "talking," is such an instinctive tendency that young children will do it even if there is no-one human there to talk to. It is as if there is somebody else always present to validate and appreciate the child's sometimes incomprehensible gestures--as if the mother is always present admiring and paying attention to her child. But now, the child has internalized her and is in the process of integrating her into his/her environment. Winnicott (1971) describes how this process develops from early infancy and continues on to adulthood, and is inherent in creative activity.

According to Winnicott, the "good enough mother" must adapt almost exactly to the infant's needs so that the infant becomes capable of illusion, ie. that he/she can procure satisfaction (the breast) when he/she needs it (is hungry). When the child can begin to rely on this capacity for illusion, the mother's adaptation gradually lessens, according to the infant's growing ability to account for failure of adaptation and to tolerate the results of frustration. Coping with this lack of adaptation, the child begins to see reality, that there is a world beyond the child's hallucinatory world of perfectly responding objects. The child, however, would not be able to adjust to for the ways in which the

world fails him or her if not for nearly perfect adaptation of the "good enough mother" in the beginning.

From birth onward our health is dependent on the successful reconciliation of between what is objectively perceived and what is subjectively conceived of. If we are not started off well by the mother, the discrepancy between the two can prevent successful adaptation. The transitional object and the transitional phenomenon, usually a blanket or a cuddly toy, are used in early stages of illusion to accommodate the strain between the baby's burgeoning capacity for illusion and an object that is perceived by others as external to baby. If an adult insists that we accept the objectivity of his or her subjective phenomena we determine him or her to be mad. However, as adults we can enjoy the personal intermediate area between subjectivity and objective perception without making claims, by acknowledging one another's overlapping intermediate areas as members of a group in art, religion or philosophy (Winnicott 1971, 10-14).

The sunbeam in my first recollection had subjective and objective aspects. It was visible but it also possessed a kind of voice, a voice begging me to mark up the wall that it was shining on. This new dimension (which included the "inaudible" voice of the sunbeam) was both real, because I perceived it to be so, and not-real, for no one else likely heard, or rather, "felt" the sunbeam speak. The voice of the sunbeam was "the intermediate area between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived" (Winnicott

1971, 3). The resulting artwork was "real enough" to make my mother very upset. It was the ephemeral voice of the sunbeam that brought my "inner reality and the external life" (Winnicott 1971, 2) into a relationship.

Even in 1897, seventy-four years before Winnicott's Playing and Reality, James Sully talks about the child's use of an "object" in play:

What he [or she] [the child] does want is some semblance of a living companion. Whatever his [or her] play he [or she] needs somebody, if only as a listener to his make-believe; and when his [or her] imagination cannot rise to an invisible auditor, he [or she] will talk to such unpromising things as a sponge in the bath, a fire-shovel, or a clothes-prop in the garden. In more active sorts of play, where something has to be done, he [or she] will commonly want a living companion (Sully 1897, 17).

Using Sully's terms, the "listener in his make-believe" can be the very reason that the constructive activity of play occurs; or rather, "the listener" and "play" spontaneously appear as a pair. Without the "sponge in the bath, a fire-shovel, or a clothes-prop in the garden" the act of relating to the real world would be a gap too large to bridge if the child could not somehow melt his or her fanciful world of inner experience into something that truly exists, if even in an odd way.

Sully also talks about children's application of illusion as part of the eventual understanding of what is real:

All the imaginative play of children seems, so far as we can understand it, to have about it something of illusion. This fact of the full sincere acceptance of the play-world as for the moment the real one, is illustrated in the child's jealous insistence that everything shall for the time pass over from the every-day world into the new one (Sully 1897, 22).

In contemplating the nature of an infant's early experience Stan Horner describes how Winnicott's theory has special relevance to educators "because it focuses on the central territory of learning, ie. the relationship between the individual potential and the 'good enough' environment" (1986, 34). He states that "as educators we can see that the relationship between the student's inner image and the realizability of it in the real world is at the heart of the learning process." (1986, 35).

According to Horner the role of the teacher is an extension of the role of the parent. Like the mother, the teacher "stands in for our inability to stand out--to stand outside of our fixed viewpoint of always being rooted inside our bodies, between our ears and behind our eyes" (1987, 51). He says that "at the root of this concept of teacher emerges our psychological survival need for an "other" with whom to dialogue. To "know thyself", then, is to know an "other" who can mirror/monitor reflections of what we already are but did not know, and/or who can mentor/model revelations of what we might become" (1987, 51).

My First Painting, painted mostly by the hand of another, remained in memory as a special achievement. If the image of a Christchild that I "emitted from my innate store of images" for the Christmas stamp contest was "me"; then, "my first painting" was more "me" than I could have ever imagined! The teacher's involvement somehow managed to extend and enlarge my own

experience, without taking me away from the idea that the expression was my own.

The activity that occurs in this intermediary space between subjective life and the objective world, in childhood and adulthood, Winnicott calls playing. Playing, he asserts, "belongs to health . . . leads to group relationships . . . can be a form of communication . . ." (1971, 41). "The thing about playing is always the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects. This is the precariousness of magic itself, magic that arises in intimacy, in a relationship that is being found to be reliable." (Winnicott 1971, 47) In My First Painting, it appears that my teacher had no particular plan or formula for me to follow, but rather, she had a unique response for each step. I was often flabbergasted by what seemed to be constant contradictions in my overly simplistic childhood belief system, though, at the same time, I never dared doubt her expert guidance. In the end, the work was "mine"--even though I did not always hold the brush. The shocking challenges that my teacher offered made my memory of doing this work "magic" (Winnicott 1971, 47), lacking the "quick and easy formulas for visual representation" that I would later depend upon. "The exciting precariousness of play belongs to the interplay in the child's mind of that which is subjective (near-hallucination) and that which is objectively perceived (actual, or shared reality)" (Winnicott 1971, 52).

Stan Horner describes how we can dialogue with ourselves:

To teach ourselves . . . we need to role-play a person/persona that is already a readymade container for us to enter--someone or some configuration that we know. This way we can set up potentially reflecting/revealing scenarios, enter into the mid-world that exists between them and us, and the feedback that is of our own making is ours to perceive within whatever range of experience we have acquired (1987, 52)

While drawing title pages for my classmates, an activity that "brought some sort of relief," the subjects of the other students' papers were what Horner calls the "readymade containers" (1986, 35) in the dialogue. The plasticine work evolved naturally from a fascination of the properties of the material; the forms I made were a response to the interesting properties and limitations of the plasticine. While making the colouring book for a child in the Third World, I imagined how my recipient would feel colouring in the shapes that I drew. That child did not really have to exist to make the project worthwhile. He/she did exist, in a metaphysical form, within the context of the project. Before drawing my undersea worlds something "invited me" to "fill up" the blackboard with fish. This was a substitute for a desire to interact with someone during recess, but, more directly, it was probably a response to the green-blue water-like appearance of the blackboard once it was wiped, especially, if it was wiped clean with a wet cloth. I occupied a "double-reality" that was under the sea (in my imagination) and in a classroom at the same time. The two met in something concrete. Even when I copied images, it was less like "copying" and more like "communing" with the image, as if by intensely observing and following the lines I would somehow find something



that I hadn't seen before. I was entering new information into my repertoire. Like the blackboard it provided me with a "mirror" (Horner 1987, 51), as a way of seeing more of myself, then seeing the world through myself. Viewing the child winners from the Christmas stamp contest from the previous year brought an instant reaction, though no words entered my mind. I simply responded visually to what I had experienced visually, somehow "knowing" more than I did before. There was more value, more excitement in the experience of seeing the work of another than my quick and automatic, "thoughtless" (one-sided) production that brought praise from the teacher.

My cast of a stencil of a horse's head I found uninspiring simply because the dialogue was closed. I was looking at it as an inconsequential outsider. This Horner calls "teacher art" (1987, 54-55), stencils, colour-in number painting and the fill-in/how-to TV demonstrations that prevent the "joining of inner and outer reality" (Winnicott 1971, 13). I produced it as would a labourer on an assembly line. Nevertheless, my instinctive need for "reflecting/revealing scenarios" (Horner 1987, 52) created a "ready-made container" (Horner 1987, 52)--my girlfriend who liked horses for whom I made the work as a gift. Interestingly, the dialogue was so essential that I was willing to choose the horse cast "for my friend" even though I had little interest in the subject.

In my pre-school years my mother offered me paper to draw on, which she believed a remedy to ruined walls. What would seem a likely trick did not

work, because that "'other' with whom to dialogue" (Horner, 1987, 51) was missing. The paper did not initiate a response. It was not an active member in the dialogue. The paper was not effective as a means to "catch" or "contain" my outpourings, as an exasperated parent might easily assume. The paper was simply a means of recording a communication between me and another entity. It was not, in this case, an essential element in the act of communication. In contrast, my interaction with the bunny rabbit on my crib was a dynamic form of communication, producing many sorts of fantasy worlds in my imagination, though I did not always draw as a result. The drawings that I vaguely remember having produced were related to the inspiration of the bunny rabbit. He was the leader of the world of cars and stick people around him. As well, visual communication did not end with the production, but--as in the case of finding my own drawing on the studs of the walls and feeling pleased--my own images were able to communicate back to me!

In my encounter with Zerelda in the cloakroom, the charismatic black stone that she showed me served as a kind of "double transitional zone," to extend Winnicott's idea. The fantasy that it inspired in me brought Zerelda closer. Looking at the stone procured that "intermediate area of experiencing" (Winnicott 1971, 2) that brought me out of my inner world and partly into the external reality of Zerelda and vice versa. With very few words, Zerelda had become "familiar"--through the new dimension created between us--though I

still knew no more facts about her and her life than I did before.

In my last recollection I painted a portrait of a friend who had little experience with art. Unlike my art club friends, she was not familiar with the language needed to participate in an art dialogue, or she was not willing to. Because we were alone, there was no one else to fulfil that role. Eventually, during the empty experience of trying to perform, I stagnated and became bored. The act of painting became hard work, because it was one-sided. It was limited because I remained so much inside my own world and did not link up with some aspect of the outside world. However, we both initiated an unusual dialogue--through our imaginations or the supernatural--with a ghost. The new "area of experiencing" (Winnicott 1971, 2) that developed led to a very real rushed getaway. It brought along with it a new and different appreciation of life, one that was not "real for us" before.

I have noticed traces of dialogue in the motions of my toddler, in his babbling and "waving bye bye" to telephone poles outside the bedroom window; in his offering of a handful of boiled peas to the light fixture above his head; in his calling to a carnation in a vase on the table that he suddenly realizes has been watching him sort, play and eat. Once, when I let him look at a photo of himself, he stared and smiled at the "baby." Then, as if he had to answer a question that the picture had asked him, he picked up a pen that was lying on the floor and tried to scribble on it (before it flew back to the top of the very high bookshelf). Similar to the adventure with the bunny on my

crib, he pointed to, chatted with and then wanted to draw over a picture of a teddy-bear on his diaper pail. When I give him watercolour paints, he insists I paint along side him on the paper. If I put down my brush and just watch, he quickly puts the brush back in my hand so that I will keep working. He wants me to "keep him company" on the paper, or to provide him with something interesting to paint over with his big circular scribbles. My neighbour's three-year-old interacted with his grandmother's colour T.V. screen by scribbling on it in indelible felt pen. To his family it was an ingenious act of defiance, though it might have been simply a need to respond to colours, movements and images that, for some reason, would not let him remain indifferent. The same three-year-old, playing with an imaginary object in his hand, cries when his cousin takes the imaginary object from him. Their grandmother--thinking she had found an expedient solution to the problem--takes the imaginary object back and gives it to its original owner, only to cause the cousin to start crying. The grandmother is left in a bind, holding an non-existent object and listening to the very real experience of two children crying. This is a poignant example of how illusion is important in relating, and how "relating" is so important as to transcend and change "concrete" reality.

In an interview that I had with Mark Prent on his formative experiences, he describes letters that he received from his grandmother as memorable. She included drawings of still life and horses "on the letter and in the letter, in the margins and things like that" (Prent, 1989). She would also sometimes

send completed paintings and drawings to him and his mother. In addition to the literal exchange, Mark Prent also communicated with his grandmother on a visual level. The excitement of the dialogue was, possibly, partly due to the "getting to know" but not fully knowing this relative whom he never really met. Although she offered much of herself in her letters, some parts of her were always beyond the young Mark Prent's perception. He would have to draw on the ideas in his own psyche to bridge the gap between him and his "other" (Horner 1987, 51).

This dialogical exercise could have been the basis for an important turning point later in Prent's life that resulted in his signature style. Through most of his art training Prent had always been confident producing what he called "very pretty images" (Prent, 1989). A perceptive teacher warned him that he would fail his sculpture class if he did not put more effort into his work. He vacillated for a while as he explored the imagery of Francis Bacon and Bosch. Believing that he could always work well with his hands, he was determined to succeed at sculpture. One day, after buying a World War I gas mask in an army supply store on McGill street, he realized he was late for his sculpture class. He had to bring the gas mask with him. In the class it occurred to him that, since the mask was made of rubber, he could pour plaster into the mask, peel it off and have "an instant image that wasn't so abstract that you couldn't identify with it" (Prent, 1989). He uses the words "discovery" and "magical" (Prent, 1989) to describe the turning point, which is in keeping with Winnicott's

notion of play.

Since then, he maintains the same method of working. He finds and buys objects that interest him, and saves them until he is inspired to incorporate them with the figure or to use them in some sculptural sense (Prent 1989). Interestingly, Mark Prent's macabre and comical images do not come out of his head, "via direct route". Rather, he responds to objects that interest him--objects that challenge his psyche in some sense--bringing out a part of himself that he is not yet aware of. Through an evolving give and take process with odd objects, he produces images that "have a life of their own", independent of the artist, and the found objects that inspired them.

Peter Kraus, painter and installation artist whose work has a haunting air of concentration camps, admits that his art is often triggered by documents, poems, impressions, feelings that "corresponded to something that . . . opens things that are inside you." (Kraus, 1989). As with Mark Prent, his artwork has two parents: something from the external world, and something that is felt in the psyche.

Video artist Nell Tenhaff mentions the idea communication as pivotal in her development as an artist. Interested in the notion of working with a machine, she had been producing artwork on the photocopier. However, she eventually found the photocopy machine too limited, that it "doesn't allow for any talking about any sort of human/technological interaction because it's such a dumb machine." (Tenhaaf 1989) However, this exposure lead her to working

with "smarter machines" which she connects with working with "issues of communications," with "not so much how to make an image differently and degenerate the image etc. etc. but how to transmit art as information." She goes on to say that she was captivated by the idea, which prompted her to become involved with people using videotext. Participating in a federal government field trial on Teladon Equipment, she started to produce packages which got posted on their database services and which other people could access. She explains, "I had a fun period where I'd get feedback from someone who'd say, 'Oh, I called up your, your package on my terminal and I saw your work.' And it was a great feeling. I loved that feel of a whole other way of going about it" (Tenhaaf 1989). It is interesting that a medium that has been associated by many with a depersonalized technological society, should, at least in this case, have a central concept that is interpersonal.

Photographer Gabor Szilazi reveals the interactive aspect of his artwork describing how he finds photographing the middle class challenging:

I'm trying to concentrate on the person and I don't want to sound interesting---that I'm trying to bring out character, because you can't do this, that's impossible. But I'm very much interested in a one-to-one relationship with the subject. Just a conversation, looking at each other (Szilazi 1989).

For Szilazi, making art is like a coffee-break. It is not something he does "for its own sake" (Read 1958, 167); but rather, it is a way of finding out the latest news.

Talking about her use of media, super-realist painter, Mary Pratt,

explains that when she does the face of a figure she has to "make sure nobody's home, that I'm not expecting company, and I just play!" (Pratt 1989). It is as if her figure's face is a living presence requiring her undivided attention and consideration. Although Mary Pratt has admitted that the work she does is "involved with the superficial" (Catalogue statement, Some Canadian Women Artists 1975, 55) she relates a very intimate encounter with her work in the following passage:

But you know, to do the whole body and then to find you couldn't do the eyes right would be ridiculous! It's almost as if the person then is alive. I feel a responsibility to that person once the eyes are looking at me." (Pratt 1989).

Mary Pratt doesn't just paint what she sees. Her art also "sees" her, and challenges her to work carefully. It is as if the "life" of her subject matter is the justification for her meticulous attention to detail.

Talking about her scepticism of theory, Joyce Weiland demonstrates the dialogical nature of viewing art. She states that she doesn't "...want more theory, I want someone who can write about my work and get turned on..." (Freedman 1987, 78). Like good conversation, interacting with art cannot be pre-mediated. Weiland states, "I don't know what the hell theory has to do with seeing" (Scott 1987, 59). Perhaps she suggests how theory can act as a barrier to seeing, can restrain the viewer from being involved with a piece with the senses, with thought and emotion--all those components of our own "inner realities," to use Winnicott's term. In so many words Weiland is proclaiming the importance of dialogue, and how theory, coming as if from a "third" party,



has potential to inhibit one's involvement with a piece of art. To Weiland, it is more important to "connect" with the art--at any level--than it is to imitate a manner approved of by an expert.

Multi-media artist, Corinne Corry, describes the role of art in her life as if it was a kind of language, as a "naming activity":

I think art is a material research. Art is a discipline that allows me to investigate the world, it's a speculative activity, it allows me, it gives me a way of understanding the world that I wouldn't have access to otherwise. There are many other disciplines, for instance philosophy and that gives you a way to speculate about the world. All of the scientific disciplines give you ways of speculating and naming the world and that's what art does for me. It gives me and it's through the form that I'm able to achieve that, whether the form be conceptual, video, paint. It gives me a way of naming the world, understanding the world and creating the world in my own image. (laughter) Just to give it a slightly religious tone (Corry 1989).

I find it interesting that Corry uses the phrase, "the world in my own image" as if to say that through her research style exploration of the world she is putting together an image of herself. This is probably what we all are doing in all our activities, since we cannot step outside ourselves "to have a proper look" (Horner 1987, 49). "It is interesting to discover how expression is not an outpouring for its own sake, or the necessary correlate of perception: it is essentially 'an overture demanding response from others'" (Read 1958, 167).

The notion of a dialogue occurring in art teaching and learning is particularly relevant to formative experience, the term that was the justification for this project. Often when we remember experiences, it is usually in the context of being with others, or other interesting things. Others tend to

heighten our awareness of the moment, or validate, or rather, "earmark" that particular moment in time, to help us out beyond the "inner reality" (Winnicott 1971, 2). The subject of the learning appears to be not so important as the action, the presence of some sort of exchange: "What matters then is the mode of expression, not the content; not the 'what' but the 'how'" (Lowenfeld 1947, 4). It could be that dialogue is the fundamental ingredient of an art experience that is formative.

I find it amazing how we are all, in a way, "doomed" to our separate inner worlds, and how participating in the "common experience" (Winnicott 1971, 14) can require a constant and deliberate effort. The content that is passed on can be a marker, a way of registering or labelling the interaction--the interaction being the fundamental aspect of psychic survival. We just "need to talk." Art and the teaching of art should be dynamic, with reflection, re-reflection and transformation constantly going on. There is no end to what one can learn, it just keeps on going.

I now realize that to determine the outcome of a student's artwork would be like telling him or her how to talk, thus preventing the "magic" (Winnicott 1971, 47) from happening. Something with a very specific outcome, such as "teacher art" (Horner 1987, 55), can give the child a sense of competence at having completed something attractive to please adults; however, the child is excluded from the thought processes that are "educational." It amounts to an act of obedience. No one gets the chance to know, or even needs to know

how the exercise is understood in the child's mind. I am now convinced that to mould the child to fit a certain pre-determined result would amount to an "overpowering of the soul," as Lowenfeld's claims (1947, 2). It eliminates the dialogue; it "flies in the face of the artist in the child and the child in the artist" (Horner 1987, 55). Dialogue is not one giving orders and the other taking them. At the same time, to leave students to their devices, to provide materials and leave them on their own, also does not allow for dialogue, unless they happen to notice something around them that inspires. When two people are based in different fields, the dialogue is strained. The teacher's involvement can be instrumental, by "introducing" the student to someone or something to "talk" to, and then responding empathically to the students' production--a kind of "weaving" together of different perceptions and points of view. It seems there has to be a certain element of freedom in an art class, but not so much that one drowns in it. In fact, any kind of "substance and structure" (Eisner 1988, 185), if presented non-judgementally, can increase the range for individual exploration.

Instead of the "tabula rasa," I now see the process of learning and development of a child to be like a growing and unfolding plant or flower. The flower is genetically programmed to turn out a certain way and to grow to a certain size. Whether or not the flower arrives to its maximum potential depends on the nourishment it receives. However, the nourishment has to be what that particular kind of flower needs and in the right amounts. One cannot

change the flower's regular diet in the hope that it will turn out pink instead of yellow. With the child, experiences that stimulate and enhance dialogue are like nourishment for the child's creative potential, potential which is unique to each child, and even, pre-determined to some extent. The teacher has to find something to introduce to the student that corresponds to "things that are inside" (Kraus 1989) to make him or her grow. One cannot just "decide" how a child will learn to express him or herself. Just as the flower has to get the right kind of nourishment, with the child "we have to pinch him [or her] to search for his [or her] sensitivities which lead to expression (Lowenfeld 1982, 5). There are a lot of things that can promote dialogue, from an explanation of the technique of Pointillism to the discovery of a freshly-made snowbank--as long as they stimulate the students and leave room for responses that are significant to them as individuals.

One initial concern in re-examining my art education was my remembrance of My First Painting as being a positive experience, one I had always longed to relive. Because my teacher painted much of the painting herself, it seemed to conflict with Lowenfeld's famous dictum: "Don't impose your own images on a child!" (Lowenfeld 1947, 3). I realize now that the two were not the same. When my teacher painted on my work, she was not aiming toward a specific ideal, she was not trying to "paint my painting for me." In fact, she was doing the opposite. She was trying to draw me outside of my safe shell. Her "wild yellow swirls" were not expectations; rather, they were

like branches that she set out for me to" grow more leaves on." They were presented non-judgementally, and I had to work with them, in an active way, with all the components of my conscious and sub-conscious mind. They were like an ambiguous riddle that I had to solve in a way that was meaningful to me. My special doll in the lower right hand corner was part of my "new self" that the art lesson helped me to discover. Perhaps the opposite effect might have been achieved if she had said something like, "don't be so skimpy on the paint for those leaves." In such an instance, the dialogue would be shut down completely because I would have become conscious of my "own insufficiencies" (Lowenfeld 1947, 5). The same self-doubt would have resulted had she never become involved with my work at all.

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