

FOCUS



Victoria's monthly magazine of people, ideas and culture October 2007

Darlene Gait

First Nations artist
listens to her dreams

The Malahat Review
turns 40. Yikes!

Long journey to justice:
the Maa-nulth treaty

Gene Miller states the
case for new blood at City Hall

the
arts...**Darlene Gait: listening to her dreams**

LINDA ROGERS

This Esquimalt Nation artist's work is inspired by nature and her Coast Salish heritage

I arrive a day early for my meeting with Darlene Gait at her new One Moon Gallery on the Esquimalt Reserve. It is a sunny afternoon, so I explore the beautiful cove in front of the Bighouse and band office. Seagulls scold mother eagles circling the water's edge with their young, teaching them how to hunt. On the beach, stone benches circle a fire. The peace is palpable.

A day later, Darlene and I meet in the parking lot. When she takes me into the gallery she opened in April 2007, I am struck at first by the mingling scents of cedar and artist's materials. Even though I know I am imagining the smell of oil paint, as Darlene works in acrylic and takes prints from her originals, memory insists.

She gives me a tour of the work on her walls. The limited-edition giclée prints on canvas or archival paper are to scale with the paintings which, she says, are almost indistinguishable from the originals. "I learned that some reds are not easily reproduced, but

otherwise the colour is very faithful." By reproducing her technically accomplished dream works at the source, the painter has control. I think of other artists, in particular Salvador Dali, whose print works have been desecrated by sloppy reproduction.

Converting paint to print is an important statement. It democratizes Gait's highly individual style. She wants her work, which hangs in ordinary homes as well as galleries like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Guggenheim Gallery and the Smithsonian Museum, to be accessible.

"I was destined to be an artist," she says, "even though my father was concerned that I might not be able to earn a living." Darlene's other aptitudes, for science and archeology, are manifested in her astonishingly accurate detail and her respect for antiquity. Her father's anxiety has been answered in her ability to maintain artistic integrity in the marketplace.

"My two sisters and my brother have followed

their dreams as well. We were taught self-respect and respect for our Native heritage."

Upstairs from the One Moon Gallery is her parents' new home. Because her father is of European ancestry and her mother is from the Esquimalt Nation, Gait grew up feeling as if she were straddling continents. Now they are at home together: her family, her Nation and her work, a co-existence which is her model for the world.

Married after completing high school in Errington and a mother before the end of her second decade, Gait has had to struggle. Left on her own with a child to raise, she worked at jobs that put food on the table, painting at night when her first son, Justin, now going to film school, was asleep.

"Those were hard years, but I persevered, teaching myself technique and listening to my dreams."

Gait explains that she works from text rather than image. A voice will speak to her. It may



PHOTO: TONY BOUNSALL



"ETERNAL LOVE" DARLENE GAIT, 10 X 14 INCHES, ACRYLIC ON PAPER

be embedded in memory or suggested by objects in the phenomenal world. Transferring words into visual images is her way of storytelling. And those stories are very powerful. Taking traditional emblems, such as animals with supernatural associations, she transfers their power into contemporary moments, often the narratives of children coming to terms with history. In one painting, her youngest son, Jonah, sits with a book on the steps of the Legislature in Victoria, absorbing the information that his ancestors once lived on land now covered with fussy Victorian architecture.

When Gait met and married her current husband, Mark, who had already collected some of her work—falling in love with the art before he'd met the artist—she studied and later embraced the Bahá'í faith. The serenity that comes from the practice of meditation is evident in her peaceful transformations of dream into reality.

Despite the vividness of her colour and the clarity of her line, there is no harshness in the idealized natural world she creates. The transformational power that allowed her aboriginal ancestors to move in and out of the spirit realm is apparent in the images she selects to tell her stories: animals with grace and wisdom, children with genetic memory, and landscapes that are one with plant and animal life.

I glance at a painting of eagles soaring past a mountain top. "Is that from a dream?" I ask. "No," she laughs, "I actually went there. I am not afraid of adventure. The scientist in me wants to experience and record the real world."

"BALANCE" DARLENE GAIT, 22 X 30 INCHES, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS



"RAVEN DANCER" DARLENE GAIT, 25 X 68 INCHES, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS



I quote what W. O. Mitchell said of writing novels: “The details are true, their sum is fiction.” Gait is very exact in reproducing the natural world. She could be a botanist. The effect of her technique, however, is anything but static. It grows with the spirit, just as she hopes the human race will evolve to living as one family on the planet.

The Bahá’ís, like her mother’s matrilineal culture, teach the equality of women. Gait says she has overcome the “fear of success” that afflicts many women. That fear, and some Native criticism of her work as “not traditional,” made her early years difficult. “It especially hurt when I watched a Cowichan mother’s dismissive refusal of her child’s request for one of my small prints.” Meditation and the support of her husband have helped her to accept and maintain her vision.

Evolution versus tradition is a perennial argument among aboriginal artists, some of whom feel the only way to heal the traumas of history is to adhere to the past. Darlene says, “We deserve to be more than just the same. It needs to be OK to move ahead.”

Gait’s paintings, and her illustrations for children’s stories published by Orca Books, are the emissaries she sends out into a troubled world. She will be happy if she can help to facilitate a reconciliation of her two solitudes, Native and non-Native. Her work, her gallery and her beautiful presence, the Earth Mother Goddess in many of her paintings, are evidence of hope.

Darlene’s work can be viewed at the One Moon Art Gallery at 1192 Kosapsun Crescent, off Admirals, Esquimalt Nation. The Gallery is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. On Oct 20 and 21, the gallery and Esquimalt Longhouse will host The Spirit of Fall, featuring Native arts, crafts and dance performances, as well as a mini pow wow. 294-6388 for info or www.onemoon.ca.



Linda Rogers is working on the second and third books of her Victoria trilogy. The first, *The Empress Letters*, will be featured in *Focus*’ November edition.