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## ENTERTAINMENT LOCAL

Art As I See It

# A 'down-to-earth' artist



By Arlene Laskey

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"Fenced In" original woodcut print by Ralph Heather

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Last Thursday, Ralph Heather was one of seven artists preparing to give a slide talk as part of Glenyrst Art Gallery of Brant's popular 7x7@7 events.

It was an exciting occasion for him - another "first" in a year of firsts. He is also enjoying the experience of having his first professionally curated - and Ontario Arts Council supported - "solo show" at Waterford's Old Town Hall.

It is the "down-to-earth" nature of his current body of work, "Rural Detours," that made Ralph Heather a natural to call on when Glenhyrst's executive director/curator Marcia Lea assembled a group of artists for the April 18 event.

The "grounded" wood cut processes he uses and the rural subject matter he honours complement - as did those of the other presenting artists - the themes established by Glenhyrst's featured conceptual artist Mary Abma.

Abma's four related bodies of work honour the natural world we are ever more apt to disregard. Her "In My Own Back Yard" is on display until early May.

While Abma focused on her own suburban yard, Heather has ventured further afield to find inspiration.

His travels through the southwestern Ontario countryside we inhabit have offered much for this artist to contemplate and to be moved by so as to feel the need to record.

This broader territory of rolling countryside offers this artist unlimited inspiration.

Its ancient woodlots, ramshackle outbuildings falling into decay, sky scraping ancient trees sheltering solid century homes made with the stone and timber, which early settlers cleared and used, abandoned farm implements and even a personally meaningful "retired" Massey Harris tractor provide starting points for approachable works..

The sites and subjects Heather has explored and honoured may be discovered by studying the series of original hand-pulled woodcut prints and etchings currently on exhibit at the Old Town Hall at 76 Main St. S.

Tastefully curated by Kathryn Hogg, the exhibit marks a significant developmental stage for this Paris printmaker who, for the past few years, has been making his personal art the central focus of his life.

While Heather's slide talk at Glenhyrst was his first formal "artist's talk," he's wasted no time in following it with another speaking event.

On Sunday at 1 p.m., he will welcome visitors to join him for a walking tour of his Old Town Hall exhibit.

Having the artist as guide will allow additional insights into just why and how these mostly black-and-white works were brought into being.

This artist, like all artists, is on a creative journey. It started with early exposure to the work of the masters of Impressionism. Heather says it was the energy of their brushstrokes that excited him.

Now, many years later, as he carves slabs of wood to create the relief image on the blocks that he later inks, it is that sense of energy that he hopes his chisel strokes will embed.

Only after he presses fine paper onto the block, passes it through his printer's press, pulls each original print away from the block and finally examines each, can he assess the success of his intention.

Like many who wish the life of an artist, Heather had to defer answering that call.

Like many others, he earned a living within an arts-related occupation, spending many years as a successful graphic designer. It is only now, after decades of interest and an ever-increasing sense of a call to action, that he can assess the nature, scope and success of his personal creative journey.

I have overheard discussions about when it is appropriate to use the terms "art" and "artist."

What makes something worthy of being called "art?" What qualifies someone to be called an "artist?"

Is Ralph now an artist?

He is serious and committed to excellence in his practice. Education, training and practice - and a growing exhibition history, and recognition by gallerists and other artists and arts organizations - would suggest that he is.

What makes something art? There are many possible answers - certain qualities we might agree on.

Nonetheless, it must be conceded that what was, at a certain time considered not worth a second look, might later be celebrated. And someone who dies having sold only one work in a lifetime might be lionized by future generations.

Works by the Group of Seven were deemed scandalous in the early 1920s and Vincent Van Gogh sold only one painting, so the business of making an assessment of merit can be a bit tricky.

But, as for what makes something "art," we might consider whether what is made is made well. That addresses the question of skill.

Skill is acquired through practise. Much is currently made of the "10,000 hours" of experience deemed essential to attain mastery, no

matter the skill set being developed.

When examining the form of any artwork, a viewer may seek signs of care and skill in the execution.

Training may help. Heather has spent "a lifetime in and around the visual arts." He acknowledges the significance of his studies at Sheridan College, Dundas Valley School of Art, the Print Studio and particularly the significance of the mentorship of master printer Robert Creighton.

As well as how the work is made, there is the more important question of how it affects the viewer.

This second question relates to the content of the work and how it is presented. Are form and content so completely welded as to impact the viewer in a meaningful way?

Is the work out of the ordinary? Is it "original?"

I suggest that it is only when what is created is somehow different, memorable, arresting as a truthful expression of its maker's thoughts and feelings and intentions, that it rises above mere illustration to enter the realm of art.

With reference to Heather's prints in his current exhibit, there were two in particular that I still revisit with my mind's eye. These works for me exhibited that union of form and content which makes certain works more impactful than others.

The first was, I believe, called "The Pillars."

It was a tall image dominated by the overarching presence of two ancient trees sheltering the well built stone block home of some long departed farmer, framing its entrance and inviting contemplation of what has been, of the meaning of "home", the concepts of "shelter" and "security".

This image came into my experience by the feelings it evoked because of how Ralph felt about the place he found and photographed and how he folded that feeling into the process of its making.

The second image I return to in memory is called "Fenced In."

Its uniqueness lies in the way the artist has filled the picture plane. It is a large print with a very close up view of a section of rough grained wooden fence boards against which three shaggy-coated sheep press themselves toward us.

Their presence, partly obscured by the restraints of the boards which hem them in is powerful, their energy palpable.

This work perhaps signals a new direction for the artist. Its content is resonant and raises questions about what it means to be "fenced in".

The "specialness" that makes such work memorable is, I believe, essential to calling what has been created "art."

As for how one becomes an "artist" and whether it is possible to determine when one has "made it", there may be, as I have suggested, a need for awareness of the creative journey, and the signposts one may pass along the way.

Qualities of the artistic temperament include massive curiosity, a desire to explore new ways of making, a joy in testing new approaches, an experimental attitude, a tenacity about finding solutions and a nature that is passionate about creating.

Characteristic of the creative journey are certain stages.

There is the call to action which many feel but may not, of necessity, be able to answer wholeheartedly.

It is a sad fact that the majority of the people who call themselves artists earn well under \$10,000 a year from their endeavours. No wonder many defer devoting their energies to art making until retirement.

It takes real tenacity and courage and a willingness to live on less to commit to art making from youth onward.

The creative journey is marked by tests and doubts and times of getting lost and feeling uncertain and frustrated.

Some hold that it is those trials which allow discoveries essential to the emergence of the highly personal ways of being and doing that signal the finding of one's own artistic voice.

It may be that while one feels most lost that one's true path may be found.

Joseph Campbell said that if you see footprints on the path you are following, you'd better get off it. That path belongs to someone else. It is not your own.

Finding of one's own true path is, I believe, essential to becoming a true artist.

It can be lonely at times but, as with the hero's journey, often a significant "helper" will appear. Heather's mentor Robert Creighton is just such a guide for him.

Our guides may be found among the living or in the writings of those artists who have gone before but may nonetheless provide words of inspiration and encouragement.

It is important to connect with others who are also following creative paths. Our fellow journeyers may belong to formal associations wherein we may find support and understanding.

Heather, like many artists has made formal affiliations which can provide support as he continues his creative journey.

He is a member of the Brant Studio Tour collective, the Glenhyrst Art Gallery of Brant (where he serves on the board of directors), the Brantford Arts Block, Hamilton Artists Inc., Hamilton Printmakers Association and Canadian Association of Professional Artists.

Bear some of these thoughts in mind as you consider what is "art" and who is an "artist."

Go to Waterford to see Heather's exhibit. See his, and as much other art as you can cram into your eyes, then spend some time in reflecting on what has impressed you and why.

Heather says his work is about the feelings he gets from the rural detours he takes.

Until May 2, viewers can assess for themselves to what degree this printmaker has captured the energy of the land and what it supports by studying the 19 woodcuts and three metal etchings that comprise this elegant exhibit.

Arlene Laskey is an artist, art educator and art appreciator who lives and works in Brantford.

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