

Q&A with Donna-Lee Elke – Always Coming Home

Learn more about the current exhibit at the Saskatoon Public Library from a transcript of the Q&A our Special Collections Librarian, Stevie Horn, had with the artist, Donna-Lee Elke.

Stevie: I am here today with artist Donna-Lee Elke. She has a show up currently in the gallery at the Francis Morrison Central Library. Even though the gallery is currently closed we are going to be sharing your artwork online, and part of that is this interview today! The show is called Always Coming Home. So how would you describe this show?

Donna-Lee: *The title Always Coming Home comes from a book that I liked from the eighties—Ursula Le Guin’s Always Coming Home. I was fascinated by the meaning behind that title. Those three words seem to say that we are always coming home. We are not going home, we are not returning, but rather we are in the process of always coming, all of the time.*

When I came to Saskatoon in 2018, I had a lot of questions about returning to a place that I had left when I was in my early twenties. Whether I could, and whether it was the right place for me and my husband. As a consequence, a couple of years ago I just started writing some memory stories and out of it came this show: prose poems about the experiences I had in the 50s and 60s when I was growing up here, as well as, the line drawing and color that, in an abstract way, represented that text. It became about coming home, both to yourself and to land and geographic area you left behind.

Stevie: And you can definitely see that in the artwork – the circle coming back to your home place, or back to your starting place. The circle features very heavily in these artworks, as does the text and the very clean lines. When you look at these works you see a very clean sort of simplicity to them. So I am wondering what were your influences in this series, in coming up with this very clean approach to circling around to home?

Donna-Lee: *Well when you put it that way, I know that none of us has a clean path to coming home. Our paths take us here and there and it probably isn’t until the day we die that we may realize the full circle of our life. But I’ve always been fascinated by the Asian philosophies and artwork, both of which have a lot of simplicity to them, both of which use the circle as an important symbol of life force and returning and continuity. The philosophies of Taoism and Buddhism are to me, very simple and clean. And I love working with white space on paper. In these pieces I tried to leave as much white space as possible, letting the simplicity of the prose poem and the simplicity of the line and the simplicity of the beautiful paper all kind of go together. But the influence is primarily from an Asian perspective. Plus Agnes Martin a Saskatchewan-born artist (a very well acclaimed artist). Her pieces too are minimalist, and have the simplicity of line on white.*

Stevie: So the things that really stand out in these pieces are, first of all, the text. What made you decide to employ text? You were talking about writing down some of your memories as you went through this personal journey home. But the transition from writing things down to actually employing it as part of artwork, what made you decide to do that?

Donna-Lee: *I'd written my entire life. I'd been journaling since my early twenties. So I write every day. Never thinking that the art and the text would necessarily mingle. But with this particular series they seemed to go hand-in-hand. Unusual. I have never done this before, and the only textual artwork I remembered was the protest work of the 70's and 80's with feminism and then of course now too with many of the different groups. However, this work isn't protest. This show is about memory, gentle memories of growing up in Saskatchewan. For me it was a coming together of my writing and my painting into one thing. Which was very exciting at the first moment it happened. And I do have a philosophical belief that if we look hard enough, all the elements of our life do come together as a whole, for everybody. Each one of us.*

Stevie: What are some other new things that you were experimenting with in this series? Aside from the text element.

Donna-Lee: *Well, I used to work primarily on canvas and board, with a lot of texture. And no white space whatsoever. Lots of color, lots of movement.*

Stevie: So very different.

Donna-Lee: *Very different. The last couple of years I have been working more on white paper and with more white space. But this was a strong departure from what I was doing.*

Stevie: And the choice to leave the works unframed and hanging them on the black background—that's also, I would imagine, a bit of a departure from the canvas and board approach.

Donna-Lee: *Yeah. There were a couple of reasons, pragmatic ones. It's very expensive to frame large pieces of paper and also I would like to take this show on the road, and that becomes a problem with glass and frame. And I wanted to keep everything very simple. And so coming up with this black paper behind each piece not only kept it simple, but it also made it almost like going back to school, when you drew on paper and your teacher hung it up on the board. It kept that kind of concept to it as well.*

Stevie: Of course, hanging the show has been a little bit different from hanging other shows in that you had to go in and hang in a gallery that is actually closed. So we are showing all of this online, and what I am wondering is what are some of the challenges of adapting a show to an online forum, and what are some of the things you are looking forward to about being able to share things to this online audience?

Donna-Lee: *Well the challenge is continual as we were hanging. I love the idea of doing this, and really glad we are doing it this way, because we are going to be able to bring an audience to this show that we can't because of COVID. And even if COVID wasn't here, people who wouldn't necessarily be able to come to the gallery and see the exhibit.*

Stevie: This is true – there are a lot of people who can't make it in to the library.

Donna-Lee: *However, as I was actually hanging it, it was hard to remember that this was going to be a virtual show. So even the way I would normally hang pieces and place quotes & bio & my artist's statements in little frames ... that didn't really translate virtually. It worked if someone was standing in the gallery and walking around. But for the virtual tour we had to think of it a little bit differently. It's been good to explore and I am sure there is lots more to learn about this sort of exhibiting. However, the fact that we are able to be available to so many more people, I think, is wonderful.*

Stevie: So how do you see viewers as interacting with the artwork now in an online forum? It is going to be a little bit different from when viewers can come in and speak with you on opening night. What do you see viewers as bringing to the artwork in this different sort of way?

Donna-Lee: *That's a good question, Stevie, and probably we won't know until it happens and we get some responses from viewers about how they felt in looking at an art show in this way. The nice thing about this particular film is that they are going to be able to have the general view of the gallery but also Michael is going to be able to hone in on each piece. Then viewer can take as much time as they would like to look at each piece. Plus they will have the audio aspect as I read the poem to them while they view so they are listening to the text as well as reading it and looking at the color and the lines. So in moving to a virtual tour and re-thinking how we are showing the work, it actually becomes a new piece of art. It'll be interesting to see how people react. . . I am looking forward to hearing responses.*

Stevie: And we will be putting contact information where you can send your feedback about the show on the webpage. Another question I have is what was your creative process like for this series? Was it you wrote the things that you wanted, or you found the quotations that you wanted to use and then you made the artwork around that, or did you create the artwork and then sort of add text later? How did that go?

Donna-Lee: *All of the above! The process was very much the same as when I worked with canvas or board and I'm looking at colors and its all extremely abstract. I pull things from here, I pull things from there. One day it fits, one day it doesn't. In some cases I started with the writing and then the artwork came out of it. In some cases I had this idea for representing a story and the writing came later. The quotes were from books I happened to be reading in that year of making this. As the text/poems came to me I would write them into a journal specifically set*

aside for this series. This was much different from my natural or normal way of working which is: look at a blank canvas and start throwing on the paint, letting it emerge as it does and needs to do.

Stevie: So it was a bit more planned in a way.

Donna-Lee: *Yeah. Which was kind of hard for me to reconcile, because I don't usually work that way.*

Stevie: When you look at the pieces, you notice that marks are being made in a number of different way. There's very crisp fine edges, to these longer brush strokes to the circles that you see throughout. What do the variety of the marks on the paper represent?

Donna-Lee: *I love that term: mark-making ... an all inclusive term for any marks made on a piece of paper or canvas or board. So I like the fact that you are using that word. Over the last several years I have started to add these sort of marks, symbols actually, to my acrylic works as well. They are always evolving. But there are some generalities. Generally speaking, the rectangles represent culture, the towns, the structure. The circles represent life and movement. The straight inked lines, prairie forest/trees, the grid of the farmland ... sometimes grasses. The brush and penned curved lines relate to the circle; speaking of life and connection and flow, between people and objects and ideas and memories. The placement of these lines just kind of grew out of my hand on paper with a pen.*

Stevie: So what do you see as the connection between the old and the new with this series?

Donna-Lee: *The old and new of my artwork?*

Stevie: Yes.

Donna-Lee: *The one thing that's been a constant in many of the pieces that I've painted is a sense of stillness and calm and meditation. I think that is one thing that comes through with this too. Through the white space and the curvilinear lines. With older work more so through the placement of perceived horizons. As well, the use of colour and movement captured through brushstroke has always been part of my work. And the use of texture, beginning with the fibre work and continuing through, even upon these works on paper ... AND the desire on my part to draw the viewer into the work, to draw them near to make them feel they wish to touch the piece ... to make connection ... that has always been a focus for my work.*

Stevie: Of course your work is very abstract, and I am wondering if that has always been the way you've produced art? Have you always worked in abstraction, and if so, why is that your preferred approach?

Donna-Lee: *I'm a very conceptual person, so abstraction works for me that way. When I first started painting I was in a class at the Vancouver academy of art, and you had to look at a postcard and reproduce it, or a lemon and reproduce it. And I*

just couldn't. I would draw a lemon and I would need to put a line in someplace that made it look weird. I just couldn't stand it to look like the photograph. I think it's just who I am that I move into abstraction. I have done figure drawing and I did really enjoy that, from a live model. I spent several years in groups just drawing from life. However I then used these drawings to make a series called The Secret Garden. 26 coloured pencil and ink pieces on paper that showed women in contemplation, in their boudoir ... done in simple line and taken to the most basic elements of the figure. Abstraction just continually comes through with me. But not landscapes. I did a few of trees, and that was fine, if I could turn them into blocks of color, without the leaves, or petal and such.

Stevie: So what else can you tell me about your personal art history and your development as an artist over the course of your career?

Donna-Lee: *Well, I consider myself self-taught. I had a wonderful friend years ago, and a beautiful artist, who came to visit me at a cottage and said "you just need to get a great big canvas and start throwing paint at it." And I looked at her like, "Oh, yeah, really?". At that point I was weaving on a floor loom, great big rectangles. Lots of colour and texture. However, once I began to throw paint on the weavings ... I thought, guess I better get that canvas! And start throwing paint at it! And it worked, for me. I didn't take a lot of classes, I just did a lot of exploring. I read a lot of art history. Continued to read my conceptual and philosophical books about art and life. Continued to write. Rented studios around other artists. But I'm pretty much self-taught. Saskatchewan born.*

Stevie: What is the importance of "A Room With A Door" to a woman's pursuit of any creative work?

Donna-Lee: *Yes, that's obviously a take on Virginia Wolfe's A Room With A View. I was fortunate to, throughout my life, have a door on my room. Even as a child I had my own room. I could go in and draw or write and they knew not to disturb, unless it was dinnertime. And over the years I have always been fortunate to have a room with a door. I think that privacy gave me the space where I could create whatever I wanted to. Years ago I was living in a pretty affluent little community, and all these women were drawing or writing or crocheting or whatever they wanted to do that was creative. But they would only take some little part of the laundry room or some little part of an extra bedroom while their husband had an office with a door. And I thought, why don't you take some space? We all need our space and I think most women don't take that space, especially when it comes to their own personal development and creativity. And that is why I say a room with a door is really important. A little room, a large room but with a door. The door is important.*

Stevie: Yes, it is important to make space for yourself.

Donna-Lee: *And physical space. We can say "well, I'll go inside [myself] and I can meditate and pray" or whatever, and that is important too – but, physical space is I think very important, especially for the creative process.*

Stevie: So what are your plans for creating things next in your own creative space?

Donna-Lee: *Well, I am very excited to get this hung. I wound up at a big sale on canvases, I bought a bunch of them, so I want to return to canvas work. And I was out on my brother's farm yesterday and the Fall color is just overwhelming. The oranges and the yellows and the reds and the greens. I want to get to my canvas, hopefully next week, and start throwing paint. And see what happens.*

Stevie: That will be fantastic!

Donna-Lee: *Thank you!*

Stevie: Well thank you for sitting with me and answering these questions!