

Peggy McGivern

By Peter Stravlo- March 16, 2003



You might call Peggy McGivern the Accidental Expressionist. Although she resists any attempts at classification for herself, “I have trouble even filling out forms and surveys because I don’t seem to fit into ‘their categories,’” her body of work clearly falls under an expressionist definition. Bold color juxtapositions, distorted but recognizable images often outlined for contrast, the distorted images evoke a serious humor, a serendipity that reflects her instinctive approach to life. All of her works at first glance can have a funny, almost comical appearance. Some might be of everyday scenes, some with fantastical elements: floating objects such as cows, dolphins, or houses; whole cities on the branch of a tree; buildings at impossible angles. Yet when you begin looking within the humorous shapes you find emotional incongruities bringing to mind moments of reflection: a crowd of people surrounding a car turns out to be a funeral; a woman sitting by a doorway with her two children might just be homeless; the funny yellow bus looks gay but, could just as easily be escaping the large city in the background as returning to it.

These vagaries expressed are consistent with the way she has approached life. As she tells her story she never stops painting. Clearly her talent leads her in many directions.

She seems the kind of person that would be almost impossible to keep up with. A divorced mother with two young children, she moved to Sale, a small town outside of industrial Manchester, England, in the early eighties. Self taught she had always painted, as did generations of women in her family before her. It was ‘in Sale that she sold her first pieces and began to seriously define herself through her art.

In these early pieces, mainly watercolors, the colors are less bold and reflect the gray cloudiness and drabness of the English coastline. In “First Glimpse”, depicting her two children picking up objects off the beach, you can see the warmth of a mother’s love, the bond that develops between a single parent and her children when they are poor and their

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dependence on each other for survival strengthens their loyalty and shared love. The colors are muted and soft: greyish sky and waistcoats; cream skin, surf and sand. Blonde siblings at home in their play with each other. The gray mists and the objects washed up on shore are all the playground of their togetherness. Or in "Fiddle Lesson" depicting an adolescent girl playing a violin, sitting on a bench with a young boy in English school uniform. The boy's legs are kicking beneath the bench. The pair are comfortable and at ease with each other yet, there is a tension, a pensiveness of uncertainty in both their expressions: not quite smiling, everything all tans and dark browns, lanky and dangling, casual shapes in uniform. But the uncertainty doesn't derive, as you might normally expect, from the awkwardness inherent in learning to play a musical instrument. There is a resignation of the moment, yet the two youths are all potential, this will not be the end of the story.

In the mid-eighties Peggy returned to the United States with her children. She eventually settled in Tulsa, OK, almost by accident. Here she continues to pursue the style that helps define who she is. She begins to achieve startling vividness of color with her watercolors. She also begins to work in series, as she has done continuously since. Her green mutt "Eric The Dog" gains notoriety, eventually adorning city buses. In this period Peggy's style becomes more cemented, her works are now easily identifiable by anyone who knows her. There is a sensuousness to the emotional images.

At a special exhibition of award winners for Tulsa's annual Mayfest Art Festival the staff had to cordon off one of Peggy's pieces, "Fledglings of Arroyo Hondo II," made of paper formed into a ragged bowl shape. Inside were two women in black and white striped body suits dancing amongst the boulders of a New Mexico canyon. The Mayfest staff had become frustrated because "people just can't keep their hand off of it. It's as if they have to touch it."

Now the realism in her work is fading as the images that matter to Peggy become larger. There are no straight lines in life. Pastels and acrylics start to replace watercolor. Black and gold lines appear, outlining for emphasis. With no Formal training, no academic theory to inform, an expressionism is developing in her



body of work, expressions of her own emotional self. You can see the confidence as an artist growing. Yet the uncertainty inherent in everyday experience reveals itself. Now the pieces have a humorous appeal, evident in the curved lines and exaggerated features. Feelings of being in motion are created by the use of color in small patches and parallels of lines. Places and things are easily recognizable as what they are: a person; car; building; tree; etc. But this is Peggy's reality, an expression of the way she sees the world. Emotion takes precedence over rational structure. Composition is informed by shape and color. The logos is personal and subjective. The purpose of the art is to express and exorcise Peggy's vision. In her art, unlike life, she has to answer only to herself.



By 1990 Peggy's children had grown up and were off on their own. She moved to Denver to be close to her parents before they died. Her relationship with her parents had been strained in her early adulthood due to her parents' alcoholism. This probably contributed to her willingness to venture away from her family despite being single with two young children. Peggy insists that the motion and emotion inherent in her work is simply a reflection of her life. Listening to her tell her story, I can

see that she is always trying something new, never satisfied, always a new direction.



In Denver Peggy became a Vista Volunteer and began working with the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless. She created a mural to heighten public awareness of homelessness for Hope Week at the Colorado State Capitol in Denver. After a year of volunteer work she opened Genre Artisans Centre, on the edge of a traditionally rough area called Five Points near downtown Denver. A fantastic conduit for her creative energies, Genre evolved over nine years and two expansions, the first space being only about six hundred square feet, into a cooperative gallery promoting emerging Colorado artists, a custom frame shop, and a coffee house serving breakfasts and lunches. Genre became a magnet for new artists, many of whom had never shown their work in public before. In

1992 Westword Magazine voted Genre Denver's "Best Art Boost To A Neighborhood." This period, despite the demands of running a business, was a very prolific one for Peggy. As well as producing her usual wall-hung paintings she created hand painted furniture, clothing and sculptures, often from natural and found objects that she modified, then would sell out of Genre. She participated in the Empowerment Program where she would conduct painting workshops for women and girls who were in prison, gangs, or have HIV or AIDS. Peggy would get sponsors to donate materials, and then work with the women and girls to learn to open up and express their feelings by painting. Genre would then sponsor exhibits to sell the work. The monies would be split between the artists and the Empowerment Program. Peggy also created the CHAIRity Ball. She would recruit artists to donate pieces with a chair theme: painted chairs, wall paintings etc, Genre would sponsor an annual black tie gala where the pieces would be sold. All the proceeds went to The Gathering Place, a day center for women, mothers and children that provides food, clothing, job training and counseling. Peggy also created a network of restaurants, office buildings and coffee houses that would display Genre's artists' work on a rotating basis.



It is this type of creative energy that permeates her work. For Peggy McGivern, creativity equals happiness. She says, "The purpose is in the doing." She shows us all a serious whimsical lesson.

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Peggy's most recent work centers around her "Crow Woman" and "Checkered Past" series. Elements of one series can often be seen in other series. In the "Crow Woman" pieces, Peggy explores her perception that there is a certain type of person, a Crow Woman. A Crow Woman could be either a man or a woman. The crow here symbolizes the special relationship the Crow Woman has with the world. The relationship is a natural one, it is not cultivated. You either are or are not a Crow Woman. A Crow



Woman is especially drawn to rocks. A Crow Woman's memory is olfactory and image driven. There is a common bond with crows, horses, cows and elephants. A Crow Woman is intuitive and spiritual. For a Crow Woman how you feel is more meaningful than any factual logic. Love conquers practicality. Any Crow Woman can immediately tell if you are a crow woman. A Crow Woman's life is magical but not fiction. A Crow Woman sees Angels and Shamans in many mundane objects. For example, when you break open a piece of rotted wood, typically angels and shamans manifest themselves in the, shapes created.

For the early Crow Woman pieces, women are often larger than life, on a pedestal if you will, royal matrons. In "Crow Teachings" we see five women in flowing robes, mountains close and looming as the horizon. Each with their own crow, they could be of all races. The colors show earth: brown and yellow, muted green and orangey rust. The shapes are big hipped like ancient fertility figurines that have after millennia been given up by mother earth. The women and crows are interactive, speaking and communing. One of the elderly women seems to be telling a younger woman something of import. A secret seems to exist between them. Yet it is a universal secret. This is no Ya Ya Sisterhood.

In "Rainy Day At The Vatican" we see five nuns lined up on a

stairway, They are contemplative, looking at something outside our view. The action is taking place between them and something we cannot see or possibly even fathom.

One nun is holding an umbrella with her head in her other hand. Above her on the steps is the one nun with a crow on her shoulder. Is she the only crow woman of the group? Are crow women so rare? Or do nuns represent the stoic wisdom and independence of a crow woman? Are all nuns crow women? Do Crow Women by nature embody an innocence, a symbolic virginity, a pureness of spirit that remains virginal despite the cruelties and crassness

of the non-Crow world?

As the series progresses the women become more commonplace. Four pieces that go together are “The Companion”, “The Listener”, “The Joker”, and “The Impostor”. In each of these we see a single woman smiling. No matronly flowing robes, these women are individuals. Not archetypes but, real with individual personalities. Each are sitting in comfortable chairs with their crow. In “The Companion” the Crow Woman and her crow sit contentedly over a cup of tea. The woman is thin with gray hair and stylish glasses and hat. The green wallpaper in the background sports a brown tree limb pattern. In “The Listener” a smiling woman with yellow hair sits in a casual loose yellow shirt and socks with green sweat-like pants and open towed sandals on a red couch. Her crow entertains her. The purple wallpaper has a limb pattern similar the “The Companion” but, with red and yellow buds and blossoms. Her large smile is that of enjoying a conversation with a friend. In “The Joker” a stylishly dressed woman sits in a comfortable red chair, legs elegantly crossed, her long thin green shape and smile laughing with her crow on the back of the chair. Here the pinkish wallpaper background has limbs with greenish blue buds. The fourth piece of this group is “The Impostor”. Again the woman is sitting with her crow but, this time the crow is actually a cat masquerading as a crow. The cat has a black cone, a false beak, strapped to her face. The woman’s lips are pursed in botox smile, staring absently ahead, the cat looking away in another direction. There is no interaction here. A portion of the chairs back is a red somewhat out of place with the rest of the color scheme. The ‘limbs’ on the wallpaper are fuller with leaves. There are blue ‘buds’ that don’t seem to be related to the plants of the wallpaper. Just blue spots filling up space on the canvas. Seeing the farce makes you smile. It’s silly to try and be a crow woman. It’s silly to try and be something you are not. Expression is of the self. There’s nothing wrong with not being a crow woman. The piece is a humorous jab at everyone non-Crow and Crow alike.

In the later “Crow Woman” pieces we see the contexts become ever less formal. For instance, in “Waiting” we see a middle aged woman sitting on the streetcurb, cigarette in hand, weaning blue jeans, t-shirt and sunglasses, chin resting on her other hand, the contemplative figure in all her glorious everydayness. The crows are all in the background, one of them flying away down an alley or

through a doorway. This crow flying away, small in the distance, becomes a motif of the later pieces. The crows recede. They are no longer a focal point in the picture. The Crow Woman has gone through complete process in Peggy’s mind, from multi-cultural archetype to everyday woman with distinct personality.



The series seems to culminate in “Generations of Crows” in which Peggy’s mother stands contentedly next to Peggy’s grandmother, both petting or herding sheep. Peggy’s mother has staff in hand, green hills and sea behind, all acknowledgments of her family’s shepherding past in Kilbroney, Ireland. And, of course, a solitary crow flying away, small in the upper background. Peggy’s mothers as individual and all important archetypes. Women independent yet communal and natural. The crow in Crow Woman always there but, the woman in Crow Woman now standing more on her own, comfortable in her own feathers.

Today Peggy continues to explore herself in her most recent series “Checkered Past”. Here the earth as checkerboard floor or farmland rises up to become people, clothing, trees, cities. In several pieces heads become homes like castles, complete with moats, gates and walls, all fantastical symbols of the contradictions that are our emotional and rational selves. The pattern of the checker board is the contrast of public and private, juxtaposition within the self. Home appears as allegory for the stages of our lives; childhood, adolescence, and ongoing our homes reflect who we are at any given moment, always changing, like the curves of a limb, seemingly static yet always growing. Where one usually associates home with stability for Peggy we are always in flux, motion and emotion.

Through her paintings Peggy McGivern continues to make us smile and think simply by exposing herself. One cannot help but believe this is both natural and therapeutic for Peggy McGivern. As she hones her craft she explores herself-, purges, embraces and moves on to further explorations. As one friend said of her, “She don’t stop, she just change position.”

Peggy McGivern’s work can be found at Abend Gallery, Denver, CO; Lucas Gallery, Telluride, CO; and The Collection, Telluride, CO.