

conversations while walking: Megan Elisabeth Bice, December 16, 1949 - June 6, 2019.

Conversations while walking and words shared while sitting on the front steps of the verandah.

Blue grey paint. Cream coloured brick.

In 1958, our family moved next door to the Bice family's Wellington Street home where I had the very good fortune to become Megan's neighbour. Usually, we met and sat talking on the bottom two steps. It was a wooden verandah. At eight years old, we had both accelerated and were about to begin grade five; Megan, at Knollwood Park and myself, at Ryerson public schools, respectively.

I realize now that Megan has had a series of meaningful connections with her neighbours. Carol Cooper, a friend from her graduate years at the University of London where Megan attended the Courtauld Institute of Art, writes about just this sort of lifetime connection-making at work. She recalls that they were in different programs:

We were both staying at William Goodenough House, the residence for post graduate women students. We were in the same annex, she on the floor below me. We met on the stairs and got chatting We used to walk to a coffee place a few blocks away ... [or] visit each other in our rooms for a coffee break. We all worked very hard so there was not too much time for socializing After [graduate school] we all went our separate ways. Megan was the glue that held us all together [in part, with her annual Christmas cards.]¹

Megan's academic rigour is well known. She was educated in History and Literature at Western, at the University of Toronto, and at The Courtauld Institute where she received an MA in the History of Modern Art in 1974. Her thesis was entitled *Francis Bacon and the image of the extreme situation*.

I have noticed that Megan often used parallels – the exhibition and the book of *Isaacs Seen*,² her independent collaborative curatorial project comprising three separate related exhibition sites – the University of Toronto Art Centre, the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at Hart House, and the Textile Museum of Canada that ran through the summer of 2005 in Toronto. Freed from institutional constraints, she expanded what and how to see

¹ Carol Cooper, email message to Kevin Bice, March 7, 2016.

² Donnalù Wigmore, ed., *Isaacs Seen: 50 Years on the Art Front, a Gallery Scrapbook* (Toronto, Ontario: Hart House, University of Toronto; University of Toronto Art Centre; Textile Museum of Canada; Art Gallery of Ontario, 2005), Exhibition catalogue.

what Av Isaacs saw and gathered for his viewers to see – the exciting experimentation of the art scene from the late 1950s through the 1980s.

Megan concludes her introduction to *Isaacs Seen* with the insight: “[Exhibition and book] can only begin to describe, with an assemblage of images, objects, and words, the people, complexities, trials, tribulations and triumphs of fifty years in the art world.”³ Then she cites the familiar lines of John Donne “‘no man is an island [but] a part of the main.’”⁴ She writes: “One can only surmise the outcome without that particular ‘island’ of The Isaacs Gallery, in that particular ‘main’ of Toronto and Canada during the last half of the twentieth century.”⁵

The reference tells us much about Megan's strategies as a curator and writer. Her work is firmly grounded in modernist approaches and practices in the visual arts. However, the processes of curatorial collaboration she engages offer several standpoints for viewing bodies of work and richer possibilities for interpretation – meaning - making – are introduced in this way. For example, she examines the unlikely pairing of installations by Mark Gomes and Stephen Cruise, where both works are dissimilar in imagery and materials. Despite these differences, she adds, “the installations ... called up associations and relationships of the human presence ...”⁶ In fact, the strategy of critically pairing the two works makes this insight possible. Another pairing was critical in 2001: this time, *Places of Their Own: Carr, O'Keefe, Kahlo* curated by Megan and paired with the book of the same title written by Sharyn Udall,⁷ collaborator and friend, was an overwhelming success. The exhibition broke all attendance records to date at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection.

An artist-in-residence at the McMichael during the winter of 1995, Andy Fabo served as a panelist for the public forum: *Four Responses to the Loss of Canadian Culture Through AIDS*. He speaks about Megan's presence there:

Under [her] direction the McMichael had become much more vital. She began fostering shows of contemporary indigenous artists like Gerald McMaster and Mary Anne Barkhouse and Michael Belmore that parted from the more “anthropological” version of indigenous art like Norval Morrisseau's and she

³ Ibid, 6.

⁴ Ibid, 6.

⁵ Ibid, 6.

⁶ Ibid, 6.

⁷ Sharyn Rohlfson Udall, *Carr, O'Keefe, Kahlo: Places of Their Own* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2000).

collected their work. She showed contemporary artists like John McEwen and mounted the work *Babylon* in the driveway. All of this caused conflict with the McMichaels and she held her ground in a very quiet understated way.⁸

As a curator and writer, Megan deliberately sought freedom of expression and freedom from censorship for artists and writers, and herself. She broke with conventional genres of art writing like the essay and introduced a new “scrapbook” form that holds diverse forms of writing, photographs, and objects, images and words. Her texts often carry fragments of poetry. Clearly she possessed a ready knowledge of Modern American and Renaissance poetry and poetic theory. Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was a favourite. In “Time, Place and People” from *The Informing Spirit* from 1994,⁹ she used Whitman's words to reinforce connections she made between two very different sites of artistic activity, the communities of New Mexico and British Columbia. She wrote, “It was a time of revolution and revolutionary fervour in new ways of seeing and interpreting the world around. The philosophies and, consequently, the artistic styles were intertwined with ‘the spirit of the land.’ ”¹⁰

Megan possessed a shrewd memory, a keen intellect and a very dry wit. She had a deep concern for the well-being of her friends and family. She loved to paint. And, she carried herself with extraordinary style, a gift from her mother.

An image lingers with me of Megan, one evening at dusk, the summer of our tenth or eleventh year. She was dancing with a lavender blue semi-transparent scarf that trailed in arcs behind her. Barefoot and barely dressed in her nightgown, she was the wispy figure in flight of Isadora Duncan.

Janice Andreae

Wednesday, June 12, 2019

⁸ Andy Fabo, email message to Janice Andreae, June 12, 2019.

⁹ Megan Bice, “Time, Place and People,” in Megan Bice and Sharyn Rohlfson Udall, *The Informing Spirit: Art of the American Southwest and West Coast Canada, 1925-1945* (Kleinburg, Ontario: McMichael Canadian Art Collection and the Taylor Museum for Southwestern Studies, Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, 1994), Exhibition catalogue, 47-94.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 88.

Works Cited

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