

Surreal Saskatchewan

Organization of Saskatchewan Arts Councils Visual Arts Exhibition – Arts on the Move

Curated by Belinda Harrow

Monique Blom (North Saskatoon SK)

Trea Jensen (Eastend SK)

Vlade Marasovic (Admiral SK)

Sharon Strand Sigfuson (Hudson Bay SK)

Jean E. Sonmor (Wolseley SK)

Leesa Streifler (Regina SK)

Surreal Saskatchewan is a group exhibition that presents an alternative vision of life on the prairies.

Unnerving and often unexpected this exhibition reflects the uneasy life of those who make their home in Saskatchewan. Monique Blom, Trea Jensen, Vlade Marasovic, Sharon Strand Sigfuson, Jean E. Sonmor, and Leesa Streifler have created paintings that transport the viewer into alternative dream-like worlds. Worlds where prehistoric skeletal step-bison roam the plains, menacing jesters torment, rainbow hills emerge from still waters, children and women transform into animals, and life cycles into death.

Pink glowing skies and rainbow hills protrude from calm seas in the dreamscape paintings of Vlade Marasovic. Otherworldly and utopian, these peaceful landscapes maintain elements of both the familiar and the foreign. Devoid of animal or human presence, they appear unspoiled and uninjured. Working completely from his imagination, Marasovic draws from memories of his Croatian homeland, travels and more recent experience of living in southern Saskatchewan. The rocky coastlines of his homeland have merged with the dominant horizon line and vast skies of the prairies to become idyllic and untouched fantastical lands.

In the paintings of Monique Blom glittering layers of gold leaf, birch veneer, and floral patterns combine with illustrative images of animals and children to create an eerie dream-like world. The nostalgia of the mid-century modern colours and wallpaper-like pattern transport the viewer to an earlier time, a time

of childhood imagination where beanstalks sprout dogs, hens lay golden eggs, and goats germinate plants upon their backs. Like all good fairy tales there is an ominous threat lurking just below the surface, as Blom's animals seem to behave in ways contrary to their nature. The unusual interactions between fauna and flora evoke thoughts of genetic modification, monoculture, and industrial agriculture transforming the nostalgic fanciful images into a cautionary tale.

In the landscapes of Trea Jensen her home of Eastend Saskatchewan is both subject and inspiration. Her paintings venture into the past and transport the viewer to a mystical world where prehistoric animal skeletons inhabit the sky and land – reminding us of the long history that has existed on the prairies before grain elevators and train tracks marked the horizon. Abstract symbols layered over the land and turbulent skies speak to a shared historic knowledge; past, present and future exist in the same moment and we are reminded that the cycle of life and death is continuous.

The cycle of life is also considered in the paintings of Jean Sonmor. The carefully rendered paintings of rhubarb *feature* both the bloom of springtime growth and decay of late autumn harvest. The exquisite botanical studies draw us in to consider life, death and continual movement of the seasons. Looking to the landscape outside her back door, Sonmor's garden served as inspiration for her painting. The rhubarb burial wreathes serving as memorials to the changing seasons.

Sharon Strand Sigfuson's *The Jester Series* is a group of self-portraits that were created as a consequence of learning her husband was suffering from terminal cancer. *The Jester's Grasp* the first in the series, completed before her husband's death, illustrates a lack of control and overpowering sense of fear. Following the death, Strand Sigfuson created the remaining works in the series. The jester continues to control, as she grasps onto her paint brush and tries to maintain her identity. Over time emotions calm, acceptance is gained and power returns, concluding with *The Long and Weary Road* in which control of

the jester is taken back by the artist. Heart wrenchingly honest, these autobiographical paintings document the overwhelming experience of loss. *Puzzle Piece in a Saskatchewan Corn Patch* presents the viewer with what at first glance appears to be a traditional family portrait, however, on closer inspection something feels a little out of place. The women all share physical similarity and in fact are the same woman, a self-portrait of Strand Sigfuson over time. All of her life's experiences collected together, eleven pieces combining to form an image of a whole person.

The paintings of Leesa Streifler explore themes of illness, aging, and body image, sharing Strand Sigfuson's autobiographical nature. Using bold colours and confident brush strokes the paintings explore relationships between humans and animals. In the painting *With Her* the dog and woman are transparent, demonstrating the similarities of both species and the connection between pet and owner, in this case Streifler's beloved standard poodle, Daisy. *Deer/Woman* features a figure in a transformative state. It is unclear whether the woman is evolving into a deer, or whether the deer is becoming human, or if the hybrid is the final result. There is a sense of admiration for animals in Streifler's work, a confidence of form that is not found in the fragmented often dejected female subjects.

Raw and revealing, the artists in *Surreal Saskatchewan* express their identity and connection to the land through painting. Every picture tells a story and nothing is as it seems. Teeter-tottering between light and dark, joyful and despairing, the art works of *Surreal Saskatchewan* reflects the true complexities of prairie life.